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Rising China and *Xinyimin* in Southeast Asia: A Webinar Series (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 7-8 December 2020)

Since the period of rapid development in the People's Republic of China after the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, the world is experiencing a new wave of Chinese migration. Loosely defined as Chinese people who are outside of China to conduct business, work, or study, or join their family overseas, these new Chinese migrants – also known as *xinyimin* 新移民 – have had a profound impact on their host countries that are encountering a rising China. Their influence on local societies, economies, and politics is further complicated by Beijing's dynamic policy towards the Chinese overseas in general and towards the *xinyimin* in particular.

Dr. Leo Suryadinata organized a four-part series of Webinars on “Rising China and New Chinese Migrants in Southeast Asia” at the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore on 7 and 8 December 2020. This project was supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), Germany. Eleven scholars, including Professor Leo Suryadinata, were involved in these webinar series. The papers presented in the webinar series would be revised and eventually published. Below are some descriptions of the webinar presentations.

First Webinar

The webinar entitled “Understanding China's New Migrants and the Politics of Chinese Language in Southeast Asia” was the opening session of a four-part series on “Rising China and New Chinese Migrants in Southeast Asia.” Professor Suryadinata was the first speaker who presented his views on new Chinese migrants in the region, and analysed the differences between them

and older generations of migrants. These *xinyimin* form new communities and have close links with China. China as a rising major power has also attempted its influence in SEA through economic activities (such as One Belt One Road Initiative, BRI) and soft power (Such as Confucius Institutes) and blurring the distinction between Huaqiao and Huaren, he also examined the impact of *xinyimin* on local societies, including nation-building process.

The second speaker, Dr. Neo Peng Fu, is a senior lecturer at the National Institute of Education (NIE, Singapore) and Director of the Confucius Institute at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). He spoke on the topic of “Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia,” arguing that the presence of Confucius Institutes (CIs) in SEA, altogether 40, are a recent phenomenon and represents the new type of teaching Mandarin in the region. He noted that the CIs have been providing language training, teachers’ training and vocational training for Southeast Asians regardless of ethnicity which are different from previously established Chinese schools that only catered for ethnic Chinese students. CIs have been partnerships undertaken between local and Chinese universities, overseen by the CI headquarters in China, with the aim to teach the Chinese language outside of China. He offers detailed examples regarding CIs in some countries which met the demands for Chinese language classes. He argued that there has been general support for the CI initiative despite some negative attention from several countries.

Dr Neo reported that attendees of CIs have benefited from gaining Mandarin competency, especially since China is fast becoming one of the largest trading partners of ASEAN. At the same time, he noted the view that CIs enhance China’s pre-dominance in Southeast Asia by nurturing a pool of Mandarin speakers who facilitate China’s entry into the region. He also highlighted the positive contributions of these CIs in offering scholarships as an opportunity to pursue further studies overseas, a privilege still beyond the reach of many in the region.

Second Webinar

The second webinar is on “New Chinese Migrants and China: Challenges, Opportunities and Local Perceptions” which featured the insights of Ms Teresita Ang-See (founder of Kaisa Para Sa Kunlaran and independent scholar), Dr Johannes Herlijanto (University of Pelita Harapan) and Dr Vannarith Chheang (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute).

Ms. Teresita Ang spoke on “*Xinyimin* in the Philippines: Challenges and Opportunities”. She argued that the issue of influx of new Chinese migrants to the Philippines has been contentious for the last two decades. The problem has escalated during the incumbency of the new president Rodrigo Duterte who was seen to favor influx of Philippine offshore gaming operations (POGO) workers. Improvement of relations brought much welcome increase in investments and infrastructure development. But the negative impact of the

huge increase in the increase in the number of POGO and blue-collar workers in construction and small-time retail trade businessmen, has been problematic.

She further maintained that amidst these challenges, Chinese businessmen and investors established different organizations as a new norm of social networking and connecting with government agencies. Many hometown associations likewise organized new chambers of commerce in response to China's directive to organize such under the One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI). These organizations seem to exist parallel to the well-established local Chinese associations, creating dualism in Philippine Chinese society.

Dr Herlijanto spoke on the elites' perceptions of new Chinese migrants in Indonesia. He argued that bilateral relations were enhanced in post-2000. During President Yudhoyono's term, strategic partnerships were signed and there was an increase in not only Chinese economic investments into Indonesia, but also in cultural exchange through the setting up of Confucius institutes. He noted that negative attitudes towards the new Chinese migrants began after the launch of BRI in 2013 which saw an increase in number of migrants who worked for Chinese companies.

These new migrants were perceived as competitors for Indonesian workers. Dr Herlijanto shared that Indonesian elites harboured suspicions that the new migrants were military personnel seeking to infiltrate Indonesia. Additionally, there were concerns about potential demographic changes with the rise in the number of new migrants. He further argued that the stance of the government has been taken on reassurance overtones — that the Chinese new migrants were not a threat to the Indonesian economy or sovereignty. He pointed out that the perception of Chinese new migrants among Indonesian elites (and the public to an extent) were far more negative during President Jokowi's term compared to President Yudhoyono's term.

Finally, Dr Chheang explored the Cambodian view of China and the Chinese language. He argued that language has been a key source of China's soft power in the country. Based on his survey conducted on Cambodians who have learned the Chinese language, Dr Chheang found that the driving forces of learning Chinese were familial relations, personal interest, and the usefulness of the language for employment and business opportunities. The survey respondents' perception of new Chinese migration was both positive and negative. On the positive front, they stated contribution to local economy and prospects for economic investment. However, the negative results include local perceptions that the new migrants did not know much about Cambodian culture and there was also concern about Chinese investment contributing to adverse impacts through the gambling industry or social and environmental degradation. He also shared other results from the survey regarding the respondents' perception towards the Chinese government and the state of bilateral relations between China and Cambodia.

Third Webinar

This webinar entitled “Nationalism, National Sovereignty and the Presence of *Xinyimin* in Southeast Asia,” featured the insights of Professor Danny Wong Tze Ken (University of Malaya) Dr Tan Teng Phee (former curator, Sun Yat-Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall in Singapore) and Dr Andrew Ong (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute).

Professor Wong presented on the topic “*The Xinyimin Presence in Malaysia: A New Transnational Experience.*” He began by explaining the difference between old migrants and new migrants, and the reasons why a different analytical lens is necessary for the latter group as existing scholarship that have been aimed at integration may not be relevant in the current landscape of the rise of China in the global world order. He identified the BRI, as the starting point of the influx of new Chinese migrants – in particular students and professionals – to Malaysia. He also drew attention to the “Malaysia My Second Home” programme, introduced in 1987, which has contributed to the “anti-China” narrative and perceived rise in property prices in major cities across the country. He observed that the relationship between Malaysians and *xinyimin* is vastly different compared the relationship between Malaysians and the local Chinese. He commented that this phenomenon will continue to have bearing on Malaysia-China relations and Malaysia’s nation-building process.

Dr Tan shared about the impacts of *xinyimin* in Singapore. He suggested that *xinyimin* were attracted to Singapore’s open immigration policy, economic and education opportunities, stable political system and society, and prospects of enhancing quality of life. Dr Tan said that there have been local grievances against the *xinyimin*, such as competition for jobs, local politicians showing favouritism towards the *xinyimin* and the dilution of Singapore’s national identity. He is of the view that the primary challenge for the *xinyimin* in Singapore has been cultural integration. As a cultural bridge between Singaporeans and the *xinyimin*, there have been several new immigrant organizations such as the Hua Yuan Association and the Tianjin Association. He also noted that there have also been state efforts to help new migrants integrate with local society via organizations such as the People’s Association and the National Integration Council.

In the final presentation, Dr Ong explored entrepreneurial excursion of Chinese migrants at the peripheral regions of Myanmar. With a focus on the Wa region which is a self-administered division of the Shan state, he reported that Myanmar exports rubber, tin, sugarcane to China. Together with United Wa State Army elites, the Chinese also run hotels, restaurants, casino, tin mining, and rubber plantations. Dr Ong pinpointed ease of movement in autonomous regions such as the Wa state as an attraction for new migrants to reach Myanmar without documents, and for them to stay without commitment until they see potential for further movement. He suggested that Burmese state sovereignty

may become fractured as Chinese presence provides revenue for insurgent or autonomous groups. Additionally, insurgent or autonomous groups may become integrated into the Burmese economy with the help of Chinese capital.

Fourth Webinar

The fourth webinar, which is the last one in the series is entitled “Chinese Culture and China’s Soft Power in Maritime Southeast Asia.” It featured the insights of Professor Lourdes M. Tanhueco-Nepomuceno (Confucius Institute, University of the Philippines), Dr Peter Chang (Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya), and Dr Ho Yi Kai (Confucius Institute, Nanyang Technological University). The speakers discussed the developments and consequences of China’s rising soft power across maritime Southeast Asia.

Professor Lourdes Tanhueco-Nepomuceno began her presentation by arguing that China’s global networks of Confucius Institutes in the Philippines may be regarded as a form of educational diplomacy. She emphasised that understanding China’s soft power in the Philippines is an important task given the escalating contested geopolitical claims around the South China Sea, in which the Philippines also has a stake, as well as the unfulfilled diplomatic promises between China, the United States and the Philippines. She argued that the effectiveness of this educational diplomacy will need more academic and policy attention. She reported that her current study investigates the perceptions of the Confucius Institute by University of the Philippines students. Her findings show that while these university students do not fully support the overall geopolitical actions by China, the education received at the Confucius Institution has helped to open alternative perspectives and views about their country’s relations with China and disputes such as the South China Sea dispute among the Filipino university students.

Dr Peter Chang’s presentation focused on the Xiamen University Malaysia campus and its potential for soft power. He argued that the establishment of the first Xiamen University overseas campus has been one of the many exemplars of China’s expanding soft power in Malaysia. He also noted that the establishment of Confucius Institutes in Malaysia is much more symbolic of the relationship between Malaysia and China rather than promoting the Chinese language, especially as the country already has a pre-existing vernacular Chinese school system. In contrast, the establishment of Xiamen University in Malaysia represents not just about China’s endeavour in opening up to the world (e.g., by accepting international students in their universities) but more importantly, stepping out to the world by shaping young minds beyond their national borders.

However, Dr Chang argued that understanding Xiamen University solely as a symbol of soft power represents a missed opportunity to critically examine Malaysia’s role in mediating China’s influence in its country. He

suggested that Xiamen University should not be understood as a conduit for China's soft power, but a two-way bridge that strengthens China-Malaysia relations. This could be evinced from the development of Malaysia-oriented courses in Xiamen University, such as the Malaysia Studies Programme that allows Chinese students at Xiamen University Malaysia to learn more about Malaysia. Apart from promoting bilateral ties between China and Malaysia, he suggested that Xiamen University also has potential to strengthen multi-lateral ties between China, Malaysia and the West, given the rising exposure to higher education in the West among Chinese Malaysian students.

Dr Ho Yi Kai's presentation entitled "China Dream and Singapore Heart" focused on the setting up and the work of the China's Cultural Centre (CCC) and the locally-established Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) in Singapore. In particular, he discussed how the introduction of the two centres into the island state has raised broader questions surrounding Singaporean Chinese identity in relation to Chinese identity. Nevertheless, he noted that the former was meant to reflect "China Dream" which meant to promote China's soft power, while the latter reflected "Singapore Heart" which aimed at building local Chinese culture and to cultivate bonds between Chinese and non-Chinese in Singapore.

Comparing the activities of these two centres, there were some similarities and more differences because two had different objectives. The CCC has strived to include several Singaporean members in its decision-making processes and board committees, he suggested more could be done to engage with the local non-Chinese to reach out to this demographic group. One of such ways is to develop outreach efforts that go beyond the current focus on Chinese arts to include other aspects of Chinese culture and history. In his analysis of the SCCC, he lauded the success of the permanent exhibition at the centre, but he noted that the question of "What is a Singaporean Chinese identity?" continues to linger. Moving forward, he suggested that the SCCC could consider introducing greater depth in their outreach efforts, as well as cross-sectoral partnerships with academic institutions and events. He concluded that rather than seeing the CCC and the SCCC in competition, these centres exist in complementation, for they are significant in catalysing critical questions about *xinyimin* and Chinese identity in Singapore.

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