

The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century

edited by Donald K. Emmerson, Walter H. Shorenstein

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Albeit from a predominately male perspective, 'The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia in the 21st century' offers timely insight and analysis into Southeast Asia's changing dynamics with China. From the injudicious title, 'The Deer and the Dragon' we are immediately tendered with the impression of unequal power relations—China the fiery dragon set against the petite, submissive deer, the ten Southeast Asian nations. This conjures up images of Southeast Asian nations possessing little choice but to submit to the dominant force. Encouragingly though, the editor Donald Emmerson swiftly persuades readers to not think of China- Southeast Asian relations in this way, rather he appeals to readers to explore alternative understandings of power dynamics that go beyond the Melian and Thucydidean thesis. Similarly, Emmerson reminds analysts not to make the blunder of attributing impotence and subservience to Southeast Asian nations, advocating that alternative brain over brawn and power resistance stories have prevailed throughout Southeast Asian history.

Equally as commanding, Emmerson also emphasizes the varied and asymmetrical nature of agency within mainland and maritime Southeast Asia's population of 657 million, spanning 13,000 sq. kilometres. The geography, population density, ethnic, and religious makeup, economies, proximity to China, historical and current hostilities and governance structures all play a role in the creation, scale and nature of power and agency employed. While China is confident in deciding what vegetables and flowers are grown in its backyard, the impoverished nations of Lao, Myanmar and Cambodia also possess their own motivations, intentions and agency. China after all is not the only player in the region and Southeast Asian nations have fostered resilience and strategies along the way.

Aptly then, 'The Deer and the Dragon explores the differing levels of agency that go beyond traditional narratives that wedge Southeast Asia nations between the US and China. With nuanced reflection authors delve into topics such as: 'who wins in the China-Cambodia relationship? Does China's high modernisation in Laos empower the economically exploited, socially subordinated and politically marginalized? Does Indonesia have a strategy towards China? Do all Southeast Asian nations perceive China in the same way?

The compilation is confusingly divided into seven themes: conceptions, perceptions, extensions, strategies, disparities, distances, and retrospection. The first conceptual chapter by Thomas Finger focuses on China's foreign policy stressing China's desire

to maintain more influence than other foreign powers in Southeast Asia. Anne Booth discusses China and ASEAN's economic relations, pointing to the stark disparities between China, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam's import and export relationships, accentuating that one third of Cambodia's imports came from China, while China only received three percent of Cambodia's exports. Contrastingly, John Ciorciari proposes pathways for the US administration to harness longer term partnerships, stronger governance and enhanced engagement with Southeast Asia to balance China. Jörn Dorsh and Shannon Cui discuss China's belt and road initiatives offering their judgement on an uncontested pax Sinica along China's maritime silk road.

Naturally, the way China and Southeast Asia view each other will vary according to their own drivers and objectives. Yun-Han Chu et al assert that America's influence has not dried up despite America's passiveness and China's heightened activity. Mingjiang Li stresses that China does not see Southeast Asia as a strategic backwater, nonetheless, recognises distrust exists on South China Sea issues and calls for exaggeration of tensions to be limited. Donald Emmerson and Yohanes Sulaiman discuss China's strategy in the South China Sea. Sulaiman focuses on the un-strategic nature of Indonesian foreign policy towards China. Seng Tan uses Australian strategist Hugh White's "China choice" hypothesis to enlighten readers on Singaporean choices, while Australian author Geoff Wade examines China's official relations with the overseas Chinese, examining how China uses persuasive powers in shaping overseas Chinese identification with the motherland.

Undoubtedly for me the highlight of the 'Deer and Dragon; were the, disparities and retrospections sections. These afforded intriguing and astute contributions on Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Daniel O Neil provided a detailed analysis of Cambodian leader Hun Sen's history of wrestling with multiple powerful nations finally placing all Cambodia's eggs in the 'Made in China' basket. Kearnin Sims refreshingly oozes compassion while delving into how and why vulnerable peoples are disadvantaged by China's high modernisation initiatives. Lastly, David Steinberg engages in constructive criticism of outsiders' misconceptions of Myanmar, using the concept of leveraging.

On final reflection, given the intricacy of China's rapid consolidation of human, commercial and infrastructural interconnectivity that ultimately touch on sovereign tensions, this rich compilation unearths multiple dimensions of China's geo-economic and geo-strategic intentions in Southeast Asia, while speaking to the dynamics of power and agency. For some nations, ambling with China is an attractive choice, for others brain over brawn will prevail. Thus, this book will be invaluable for scholars of Southeast Asia looking to understand China's past, future and present interactions with the region. I would like to leave with Kearnin Sims' simple but powerful words 'development is one thing, empowerment is another'. This reminds us that while examining China Southeast Asian engagement we should always keep in mind that we are outside observers and persist in being compassionate of those disproportionately affected on the inside.

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