



Research Report

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Committee: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

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Issue: The question of the Sinicization of South-East Asian minorities



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Forum: Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN)

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Introduction

In the post-Maoist era, China has rapidly accelerated its economic relations with the Southeast Asian nations as opposed to the previous strategy focussing on Afro-Sino relations. Since opening up, China's economy has grown by astronomic proportions. It is estimated that China's economy will already have become the largest economy in the world by 2028. With the rise of China as an economic superpower, it goes without saying that the country's rise has not gone unnoticed in Southeast Asia, with almost 20% of the imports in the ASEAN countries coming from China and Southeast Asia being China's largest trade partner, accounting for 15% of its total trade. Therefore, China is the biggest trade partner of the ASEAN countries outside of the ASEAN. China's economic rise is also felt in Southeast Asia through the support of China to the countries, especially the lesser economically developed ones such as Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, through foreign aid. Lastly, China's economic supremacy in Asia leads to much foreign investment in the region, through foreign direct investment (FDI), with China accounting for 40% of the inflow of FDI into Southeast Asia in 2019.

Furthermore, the Federation of American Scientists has also concluded that China is exercising other forms of "soft power" in Southeast Asia, relating to multifaceted areas such as diplomacy, culture and the aforementioned topics of trade, foreign aid and foreign investment. In a 2008 report submitted to the US Congress, the federation outlines China's relations to the region and concludes with certainty that China is exerting soft power over Southeast Asia and that the United States' hegemony in the region is being challenged by China, on cultural and political levels, which is visible in public attitudes to the two countries, though both have received somewhat of a PR hit since the covid-19 pandemic.

Concluding, this Research Report seeks to outline and explain China's economic, cultural and immigration-related relations to Southeast Asia and how China influences Southeast Asian nations' norms, practices and values and insofar the process of Sinicization is taking place in Southeast Asia.



Definition of Key Terms

Soft Power

Joseph Nye Jr. coined this term in the 1980s in his book. He described it as “the power of countries to influence other countries to get the outcomes you want”. In contemporary usage, it also implies the use of non-militaristic means, in contrast to hard power.

Hard power

A form of power characterized by Joseph Nye as “the ability to use carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will”. This form of power includes examples such as economic sanctions, military invasion and other forms of coercion.

Sinicization

The process of adopting Chinese culture, values or language among other areas by ethnic groups and nationalities not originally of Chinese descent. A process that has been happening among several societies for many dynasties in China's history both inside China's provinces as outside of China, such as Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations right now.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

A foreign direct investment (FDI) is a type of investment defined by the investment of a company into another company in another country. It generally happens when a company or investor acquires assets in a foreign country. An example of this is that Apple, which is located in the United States, has invested half a billion dollars to boost its work in China.

General Overview

Historically, Sinicization has happened in multiple forms. In the beginning, it was mostly non-Chinese ethnic groups migrating to and settling in China. Examples of this include ethnic groups of Turkic background and nomadic cultures such as the Xiongnu and Xianbei. These groups, among others, would settle in China and adopt



and integrate into Chinese culture over time. Other historic examples show that Sinicization has happened through the migration of ethnic Chinese to other parts of China, thereby sinicizing the ethnic groups that had already been living there. In later dynasties, there have also been examples of Sinicization due to actions taken by leaders, teaching Chinese values in school and sinicizing names in regions. This is the first time it has been recorded to have happened outside of China as well, during the Nguyen dynasty in Vietnam, where multiple ethnic minorities were sinicized through clothing, philosophy and names.

Current Sinicization is mostly occurring in China itself, but with China's growing influence, Southeast Asia is becoming subject to Sinicization as well. Within China, Sinicization is mostly centered around religion in Xinjiang and Tibet, where the Chinese government has implemented measures to ensure the coexistence of the already existing cultures and religions in the provinces and the values of socialism. Outside of China, the focus is not so much on religion as it is on economic influence.

In Southeast Asia, Sinicization is hard to pinpoint. However, Sinicizations happens in one way through a policy of wielding power through admiration of China. However, this is bound to happen with the rise of any world superpower, as it happened with the United States, the Soviet Union and is now happening with China. A 2017 study published in the Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies similarly concluded that China has in fact suppressed the process of Sinicization.

The same study, however, pointed to the relation between the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and Sinicization. As the funding arm of the initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has been established. The OBOR initiative was initiated by President Xi Jinping as an economic initiative to create a new Silk Road between China and the rest of the world. Part of the initiative is the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), connecting Southeast Asia with Europe through the South China Sea. It is understood that the AIIB functions as the funding arm of the OBOR initiative, with the goal of accelerate China's economic growth. The function of this bank can also be interpreted to expedite Sinicization in Southeast Asia, as the bank has been the main theme of an expo specifically designated to improve and strengthen Chinese-ASEAN relations.

Chinese Diaspora has also extended to Southeast Asia, with populations of Chinese descent in every ASEAN member state, most notably in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand and Indonesia and to a lesser extent in Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines. Cultural assimilation has happened in these countries to varying degrees. It cannot, therefore, be said that they have contributed to Sinicization, other than the fact that variants of Chinese cuisine have been birthed in these countries.



In Thailand, most citizens of Chinese have fully assimilated and even accepted Thai nationality. In the Philippines, on the other hand, the degree of assimilation varies intergenerationally, with older generations mostly keeping their Chinese identity and younger generations adapting more. Furthermore, in Myanmar most of Chinese descent have largely accepted the local culture, despite Chinese cultural aspects remaining present. In Vietnam, historical efforts to sinicize already made it so that Chinese and Vietnamese culture have many of the same aspects and this has made it so that Chinese people do not need to massively adapt to Vietnamese culture. Lastly, in Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore, the Chinese people largely live on their own and have kept most of their own cultural aspects.

Concluding, the only form of "Sinicization" that is present in Southeast Asia can be found in economic aspirations of China in Southeast Asia, through the MSR and the AIIB.

Major Parties Involved

China

Obviously, China is the major party involved with Sinicization in Southeast Asia, through the increase of economic activity in Southeast Asia with the MSR and the AIIB. With the rise of China on the world stage, it has become more economically significant for the ASEAN member states.

Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam

These ASEAN member states are most significant in this issue, as they are the biggest receivers of foreign aid from China in the region and are therefore most economically dependent on China and most vulnerable to Sinicization.

UNCTAD

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) is an intergovernmental body that is part of the United Nations Secretariat. One of its stated goal is to maximize the trade opportunities of developing countries. Seeing as China's OBOR initiative focuses primarily on developing nations, the UNCTAD could act as a major assisting body.

WTO

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is an intergovernmental organization that is the world's principal body for everything relating to trade, from regulating to facilitating trade between countries. Seeing as the process of Sinicization happens mostly through trade between China and Southeast Asia, the WTO plays a major role in this.



Timeline of Key Events

| Year/Date | Event |
|----------------|--|
| December 1978 | Deng Xiaoping becomes paramount leader of China, ushering in a new era of economic prosperity and collaboration in China. His opening up to foreign investors brought China to its current economic relations with the world |
| September 2013 | Xi Jinping, during a visit to Kazakhstan, unveils the plans for a new Silk Road to strengthen global economic development and cooperation for China's gain, which has led to the current wave of Sinicization in Southeast Asia. |
| 2017 | The OBOR initiative is officially incorporated into the Chinese constitution |
| 2019 - Present | The COVID-19 pandemic rages over the world, significantly hurting most economies in the world with an economic recession. Some ASEAN nations and China are among the few nations to maintain GDP growth in 2020.- |

Previous attempts to resolve the issue

The United Nations has not previously made any efforts in the area of Sinicization, whether it be to accelerate it or prevent it. Multiple, mostly allies of the United States, states have made plans opposing the Belt and Road plans and the United States has come with a counter-proposal itself. Other contemporary efforts to address Sinicization are simply not present and it is mostly accepted as a phenomenon.

Possible Solutions

Seeing as there are no contemporary efforts to address Sinicization, especially in the UN, it goes without saying that delegates need to address this, in whatever way they seem fit.

Obviously, there are multiple ways to address Sinicization as there is no one commonly accepted way to react to it. Multiple member states hold different views towards Sinicization and countries on one side might accept it while others will seek to prevent it as it goes against their policies.

Within the ASEAN, member states that want to accelerate or prevent Sinicization could seek to improve ASEAN relations and sign trade agreements with China or vice versa with the United States. They could furthermore lobby their own country's



interests to the other member states, believing that Sinicization either benefits or harms their country's own interests. This could open a dialogue within the association about their relation to China, simultaneously addressing Sinicization.

Furthermore, countries specifically wanting to prevent Sinicization could propose to pull out of the OBOR initiative and/or condemn it completely. Further action could be relating to sanctioning China. Vice versa, the member states could collectively, as the ASEAN, condemn the counter-proposal of the United States and urge the world to join China's initiative if Sinicization is not an issue for a majority of the member states

Appendix/Appendices

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