

*Southeast Asia*  
BEYOND BORDERS  
AND BOUNDARIES

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# INTRODUCTION

Ho Khai Leong

Southeast Asia may not appear to have much in common, as it is composed of many disparate countries, peoples, cultures, languages, histories and governments. Look deeper, however, and one will see that their central concerns of political stability, the wellbeing of their residents, maintaining good diplomatic ties with each other, and sustained economic development are the same. The papers presented at the International Conference on Southeast Asian studies organized and held by Wenzao Ursuline University of Foreign Languages' Center for Southeast Asia Languages Teaching (CSEALT) in Taiwan on 27-28 October 2017 emphasized these common points of interest. Through the theme "Borders, Boundaries and Beyond," various academics at the conference sought to delve into all these issues in specific Southeast Asian countries. A selection of these presentations is compiled in this volume. Collectively, they form 10 chapters highlighting the different Southeast Asian countries' respective commitment to the wellbeing of the diverse communities of the region.

The book opens with William Case's chapter on the effects of globalization's international reversal and its China-led surge in Southeast Asia, specifically Malaysia. Although globalization has eroded borders and boundaries, it has bred grave social inequalities alongside general economic growth in the rich world so much so that there is considerable backlash against it. In contrast, Case notes that in developing Southeast Asian countries where social inequalities are less acutely felt, China has taken the lead in driving globalization in the region by exerting its power and influence. Through an analysis of China's selection of Malaysia as the hub of its Maritime Silk Road as well as the emphasis of new infusions and projects in Kuala Lumpur's developmental and patronage dynamic, he observes the ways in which China-funded developmental projects in Malaysia will bring the country short-term economic benefits and long-term debt.

Chin Yee Whah continues the theme of China-Malaysia relations, albeit on a smaller scale, with special focus on the presence of female migrants from China peddl-



ing goods in the Chinese-dominant community of Sibü in Sarawak, East Malaysia. By examining the social structures of local Sibü society, the peddlers' network, the so-called relaxed Sarawak immigration department, and the low cost of travel, he seeks to understand the peddlers' ability to conduct business successfully across long distances.

The next chapter by Baiq Wardhani and Vinsensio Dugis remains within the geographical location of East Malaysia, as they consider on the case of Sebatik, an outlying island off the eastern coast of Borneo, which is divided between Malaysia and Indonesia by an internationally demarcated border. In considering the socio-economic development in Sebatik Island, fluid identity of its inhabitants, and the Indonesian central government's attempts to improve the lot of its citizens while maintaining its political sovereignty and trade ties with Malaysia, they outline the paradoxical bilateral/diplomatic, national and societal conditions arising from the porous nature of the intensively interactive relationship of two nations' citizens on the island.

While Wardhani and Dugis highlight the relatively peaceable ties between the peoples of Indonesia and Malaysia on the divided island of Sebatik, it would be erroneous to assume that relations between Malaysia's central government in Kuala Lumpur and other nations have always been equally amicable. Soon Thean Bee calls readers' awareness to the fact that the People's Republic of China and Malaysia had rather fraught relations in the past due to China's support of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and most ethnic Chinese in Malaysia failing to register for Malaysian citizenship up to the 1960s. He illustrates how the incumbent ruling Malaysian government of the day, desperate to secure its majority in parliament in the 1969 General Election, had sought to garner the vote of the ethnic Chinese in the country by establishing formal diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.

Serving as a reminder that the welfare of a country's population is as important as its relations with other countries, Emile Kok-Kheng Yeoh and Zhang Yemo investigate Malaysia's environmental policy on land. With references to Taiwan's New Southbound Policy and the development of different environmental policies in other ASEAN countries, Yeoh and Zhang look at the ways through which Malaysian environmental policies on land have prompted overall sustainable economic and regional development as well as cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Cooperation at the basic level is about reaching out to others and engaging with them in a manner that emphasizes the two parties' commonalities. Ying-kit Chan's chapter on the impact of Singapore's *Lianhe Zaobao* newspaper in China looks at this informal interaction between Singapore and the People's Republic of China. In tracing the history of the Chinese-language *Lianhe Zaobao* in Singapore where the ethnic



Chinese form a majority of the population, and its subsequent desire to reach an audience with whom it shares a common cultural and linguistic heritage, Ying examines the ways in which this newspaper's reports on events in China, Taiwan, Southeast Asia have managed – to some extent – shape Singapore's diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.

Closer ties and sustainable economic development are some of the hallmarks of successful diplomatic cooperation. John Walsh's chapter on the Border Economic Zones (BEZs) linking China with Myanmar, Lao PDR and Vietnam explores into the ways in which these BEZs create sustainable economic and regional development and collaboration. He examines Myanmar, Lao PDR and Vietnam's differing economic systems along their borders with China to better understand how they fit into China's One Belt and Road policy. In documenting the varying types and scales of economic activities taking place in the border regions of these three countries, and analyzing their meaning and significance, he demonstrates how the region can be brought closer together through the building of physical infrastructure.

The next contribution in this compilation turns the spotlight on the Philippines' dedication to economic emigration. Jorge V. Tigno's chapter not only outlines how labor migration from the Philippines is fostered by a well-entrenched set of public and private institutions and the glaring absence of viable alternative socio-economic opportunities, he also analyzes the extent to which the country and its government have looked upon its overseas migrants and migration as a life-saving mechanism for many Filipinos. He concludes by forwarding the argument that there is an incompatibility between the state policy orientation of the overseas employment program and its actual conduct.

Regional cooperation in Southeast Asia lies at the heart of Vincent Rollet's piece on the regional responses to communicable diseases in Southeast Asia. He details the nature of ASEAN responses as an organization and individual member states to zoonoses, the main challenges they face, and the ways in which they seek and respond to international cooperation.

Nguyen Thanh Trung closes this volume by examining Vietnam's regional alignments in ASEAN. Utilizing the neo-liberal perspective, he investigates Vietnam's many reasons for joining ASEAN and other ASEAN-centric institutions from 1995 to the present. In so doing, he shows how Vietnam's post-Cold War policy emphasizes a more proactive consolidation of ASEAN unity and centrality in the face of a rapidly rising China as it strives to serve its security interests and sovereignty claims in South China Sea. While Vietnam appears to have vested interest in strengthening ASEAN institutions' capacity to monitor partners within and without the organization, Nyugen stresses that the country's ability to look beyond South China

Sea issues in rallying regional support is proof of its genuine dedication to the improvement of ASEAN's functions.

Through the different Southeast Asian nations' common central concerns of political stability, the wellbeing of their residents, maintenance of good diplomatic ties and sustained economic development, the chapters of this compilation invite readers to reflect upon the nature of the borders and boundaries in the region. It is hoped that upon doing so, readers will be able to look beyond them to see Southeast Asian countries as both individual states as well as a regionally cooperative entity.

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