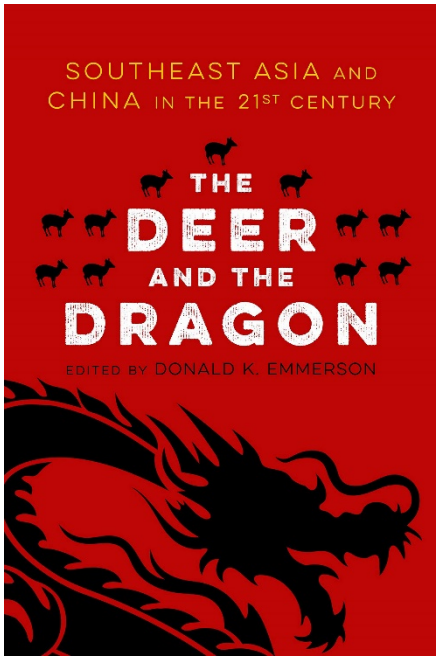


ChinaMade Review

Emmerson, Donald K. (ed.). 2020. *The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century*. (Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center).

Timothy Oakes, December 2020

As Tritto (2020) has argued regarding Indonesia's Jakarta-Bandung high speed railroad, China's overseas infrastructure projects must be understood as "embedded" (in the Polanyian sense). That is, they are subject to the social relations, politics, and cultural movements of the places in which they're being built. This would seemingly go without saying when considering project developments *within* China, where regional competition, local negotiation, and an incremental and experimental policy framework has always shaped project outcomes. That such factors would also be at play in shaping China's international projects should not be surprising. And yet, China's "going out" efforts – most spectacularly manifest in the Belt & Road Initiative – continue to inspire narratives of a monolithic, steamrolling Chinese infrastructure machine, a "China model" of development capable of building anything anywhere as quickly and cheaply as possible. The collective picture we get from *The Deer and the Dragon* – a comprehensive exploration of China's relations with Southeast Asia – suggests something quite different, less a single China model than many different models conditioned by the bilateral nature through which China engages its partner states. While this is not a book about infrastructure development itself, the volume helps us appreciate all of the factors – the "agency" of Southeast Asian societies – that embed these projects in ways that make their outcomes always impossible to predict.

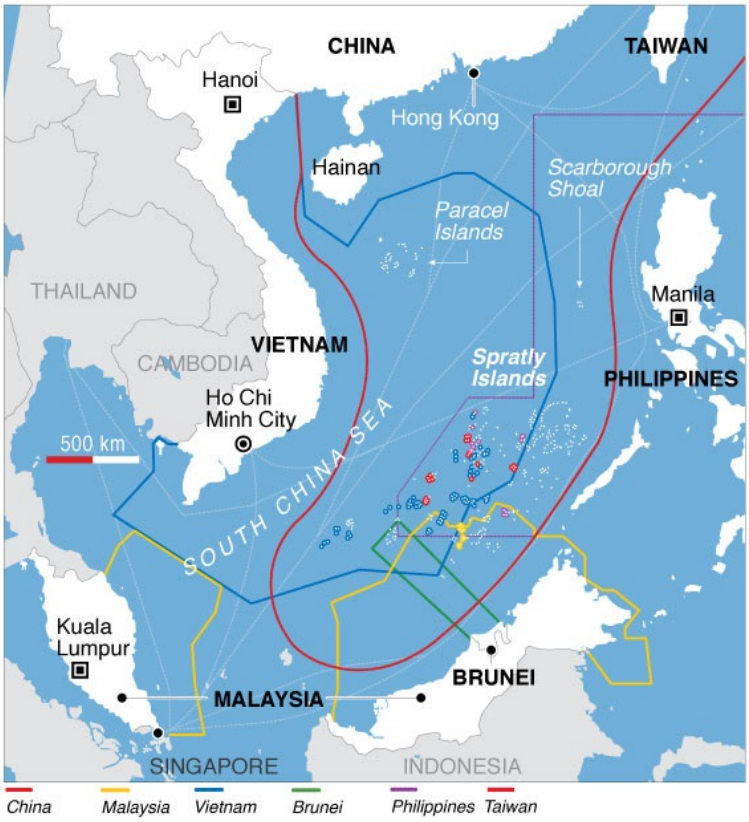
2020 was a banner year for policy-oriented books about China and Southeast Asia. In addition to the volume being reviewed here, at least three other major books were recently published: Lampton, Ho and Kuik's *Rivers of Iron*, Hiebert's *Under Beijing's Shadow*, and Shambaugh's *Where Great Powers Meet*. This may just be a coincidence of several distinct research projects emerging around the same time, projects that were perhaps seeded by the Obama Administration's 'pivot to Asia' in which US-Southeast Asian relations figured prominently. As critics in China were quick to point out, Obama's 'rebalancing' policy seemed aimed primarily at containing China's rise within the region, rather than simply bolstering US diplomacy in Southeast Asia. China's increasing presence in the region is probably more significant than Obama's short-lived pivot in explaining all of this emerging interest in Southeast Asia. At any rate, these books all came to print at the tail-end of an incoherent but nevertheless unmistakable reversal of US engagement in the region at the behest of the Trump Administration and its gutting of the US diplomatic mission. The US withdrawal from the region – most notably in Trump's rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership – offered China a unique opportunity, seemingly at just the right time, and in many ways Beijing capitalized. And yet for all the advantages China has enjoyed, things have not gone smoothly in

Southeast Asia. China's ambitions have been confronted by the social, political and cultural complexities of one of the world's most diverse regions. As *The Deer and the Dragon* makes clear, Southeast Asians have been quite resourceful in managing, and at times benefitting from, relations with their huge northern neighbor.

The Deer and the Dragon is a well-organized and engaging collection of chapters on "the nature, dynamics, and implications of inequality between China and the countries of Southeast Asia" (p. xxii). We are encouraged not to infer impotence and subservience from this inequality, however. The task of the book "is to acknowledge and explore the agency of Southeast Asians without recourse to deterministic underestimation on the one hand or to wishful exaggeration on the other" (p. 4). This task underlies the symbolism of the book's title: the diminutive yet sometimes clever mousedeer taking on the dragon. And while many of us have perhaps grown tired of the 'China-as-dragon' metaphor, Emmerson and his colleagues do not overplay the trope. These are clear-headed, nuanced, and well-written chapters on a wide variety of topics and perspectives related to China-SEA relations. Contributors are economists, political scientists, development experts, international relations scholars, and security experts. They come from Australia, Britain, China, Indonesia, Germany, Singapore, Taiwan, and the United States. As a whole, the volume offers more of a Southeast Asian than a Chinese perspective on the subject; the book gravitates toward rooting for the mousedeer.

We can begin to appreciate the inequality between China and Southeast Asia by considering the fact that, with a 2018 GDP of $13.41 trillion, China's economy is more than four times the size of all of Southeast Asia combined ($2.95 trillion). China's economic growth not only drives the economies of the region as a whole, but has become the world's economic driver as well. In 2016, Chu, Huang and Lu tell us (p. 91), China contributed an estimated 39% of that year's economic growth worldwide. Li (p. 118) adds that China's Southeast Asian FDI has grown twice as fast as overall rates of FDI from China to the rest of the world. This has led to claims in the popular media that China is simply overwhelming the region by virtue of its sheer size, turning Southeast Asia into something of an economic vassal. In her chapter on trade and investment, Booth finds that trade dependence between ASEAN and China has indeed grown, but she notes that trade has also greatly expanded among ASEAN members, and this latter trade accounts for the largest portion of overall trade growth in the region. Overall, the region has largely benefitted from trade with China; several countries maintain trade surpluses, and more FDI has flowed into the region than China itself has experienced. Booth suggests that, "it is not tenable to argue that China has managed to use trade or investment to subjugate Southeast Asia as a region" (p. 79).

Understandably, as Chu, Huang and Lu note in their chapter on Southeast Asian popular opinion surveys, China has come to be seen as the dominant power in the region, and in most Southeast Asian states, people see the influence of the US declining. They add, however, that most people welcome both the US and China as strong powers in the region; they want China for development, US for security (though not necessarily democracy). A stronger US presence is viewed, in part, as a necessary counterbalance to China's tendency toward divide-and-conquer tactics. As Emmerson notes in his introduction (p. 2), China thwarts the strategic autonomy of ASEAN "by using the diversity of its members to forestall the growth of a regional consensus against Beijing." The region's diversity makes China's tenacious bilateral diplomacy easier and, as a result, China's signature development project, the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), has been implemented within a largely bilateral framework of hub-and-spoke ties between Southeast Asian states and Beijing. As noted in Li's chapter, this has rendered ASEAN's own Master Plan on Connectivity, launched in 2016, largely ineffectual, despite China's own backing of the plan with a $10 million financial commitment. And bilateralism has muted any collective ASEAN response to China's actions in the South China Sea (SCS). In 2016 ASEAN remained tellingly silent following the ruling of



Map of disputed South China Sea claims. Wikimedia Commons.

the international arbitral court that China's SCS claims and conduct were at variance with international maritime law.

For Emmerson, the reality of the situation means that Southeast Asia's future depends on what individual states do and don't do in their relations with China. And yet most of the chapters demonstrate the overwhelming need for more cooperation among Southeast Asian states in order to develop a collective response. Sulaiman's chapter documents how Indonesia has failed to develop a coherent plan for dealing strategically with China. Indonesian diplomacy has been reactive rather than proactive and Jakarta remains unwilling to risk offending Beijing. O'Neill's chapter explores Cambodia's role as Beijing's proxy inside ASEAN regarding SCS claims. He examines individual Cambodian actors at the elite level and how they have personally benefitted, especially in financial terms, from their alignments with Beijing. This is most obviously the case with Hun Sen's immediate family with total assets estimated to range from $500 million to $4 billion (p. 256). This sort of "patron-clientelism" has emerged as a key tool in global China's approach to securing approval for its development projects abroad (see Byler 2020). Meanwhile Dosch and Cui's chapter explores the prospects for China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) in the region, something which remains mostly the subject of speculation. Whether China can ultimately rely on the same patron-client relations to see the MSR to fruition remains debatable. China promises huge investments in MSR, but it "has been slowed by its sheer scope and complexity, by the asymmetry on which it relies, and by the suspicions that its political connotations have engendered among China's would-be local hosts in Southeast Asia" (p. 343).

Several chapters, most notably Fingar's, explore Southeast Asia as a region understood as critical to China's security. This is a key area of tension among the region's states which, as Tan's chapter argues, prefer to pursue relations with China that benefit them commercially while looking to the US for their security (p. 198). Whether the US can meet this expectation is increasingly called into question. Cioriciari suggests that "the greatest near-term threat to the autonomy of ASEAN's northern tier may arise less from a spike in Chinese assertiveness than from isolationism in the United States" (p. 300). Meanwhile, however, Li reminds us that "there has been no strong evidence to suggest that Beijing is inclined" to pursue a sort-of "Monroe Doctrine with Chinese characteristics" (p. 113), that is, a declaration that Southeast Asia be recognized as an exclusive Chinese sphere of influence. This situation has ironically resulted from the difficulty of creating security alliances while also pursuing claims in the South China Sea.

There is much more in this volume than this brief review suggests. Emmerson's account of how China weaponizes the ambiguity surrounding its SCS claims is one of the best analyses of the issue I've read. Wade tempers claims that Beijing is marshalling a 'fifth column' of overseas Chinese in the region, but also suggests that some in Beijing are keen to pursue such a strategy. And Steinberg offers a useful case study of China's fitful developments in Myanmar. The broad picture is one of a region whose diversity defies neat and tidy generalities. Unfortunately, that appreciation for complexity has not translated into an equally nuanced picture of China itself, though this level of analysis admittedly falls beyond the volume's purview. China has largely been reduced to a Beijing-centric narrative. Li's chapter does offer some perspectives from Yunnan and Guangxi, but these are brief and are not reflected in the volume as a whole. China is treated in largely undifferentiated terms.

And despite conjuring the decidedly low-to-the-ground mousedeer to represent the surprising resilience of the region, there's little here on the local-level outcomes and impacts of China's presence in Southeast Asia, or about specific projects and how they have impacted everyday lives. Again, these seemingly fall outside of the volume's key objectives. But questions are raised. Li hints at the poor quality of China's investments in the region, but does not elaborate. Sims goes farthest in directing our attention to the local scale, focusing on the 'high modernist' nature of China's development projects in Laos and suggesting less the 'low quality' of such projects and more their failure to improve the lives of the poor. In many cases, he argues, they create more vulnerabilities and precariousness, while enriching those already in the upper echelons of society. Chinese development in Laos, characterized by top-down state planning and large-scale projects like hydropower and high speed rail, Sims argues, furthers the marginalization of the poor.

Ultimately, this story of community-level precariousness in the face of massive transformation remains to be told. To truly appreciate the story of the mousedeer and the dragon, a more grounded and local-scale perspective is still needed. *The Deer and the Dragon* offers an excellent context from which to appreciate why that is the case. My wish that it had drilled further down should be read less as a critique than a conclusion drawn from the volume's valuable insights and implications.

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