

## Special Issue

# Rethinking Chinese Entrepreneurship and Business in Southeast Asia: An Introduction

**Chang-Yau Hoon\* and Ying-Kit Chan\*\***

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Chinese entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia have begun to attract scholarly attention since the 1980s for their minority status vis-à-vis native entrepreneurs (Wu, 1983), business success (Mackie, 1992), role in Southeast Asia capitalist transformation (McVey, 1992) and the so-called “bamboo networks” (Weidenbaum & Hughes, 1996). Much of this scholarship has contributed to the myth that the economic success of these ethnic Chinese capitalists was primarily attributable to a set of exclusive and monolithic cultural values and work ethics. However, the Asian Financial Crisis of 1998–1999 and the resultant domino collapse of many ethnic Chinese enterprises presented a brutal confrontation of the (self-)Orientalised and essentialised notions of Chinese culture and ethnic network in the success of Southeast Asian Chinese capitalists.

In the aftermath of the economic crisis, scholars such as Gomez & Hsiao (2001) criticized the generalisation of the experience of Southeast Asian Chinese entrepreneurs and advocated for a critical consideration of the diversity of these capitals, including their histories, cultures (clans, languages/dialects and heritage), level of assimilation into host society, mode of capital accumulation and entrepreneurial dynamism. In a similar fashion, Wee & Chan (2006) rejected the primordialist/culturalist view of an “economic miracle” created by diasporic Chinese in Southeast Asia. Instead of purporting an ethnically-based Chinese capitalism, they proposed an analysis of the cultural economy of regionalisation and constructions of Chineseness, taking into account the specific historical, geographical, economic, political and socio-cultural contexts. Another contribution that aims to demystify the business success of Southeast Asian capitalists was Menkhoff and Solvay’s (2002) edited book, *Chinese Entrepreneurship and Asian Business Networks*, which deployed rich

empirical research data to assess the role, characteristics and challenges of Chinese entrepreneurship and business networks in Southeast Asia. As with Wee & Chan (2006), this volume rejects the simplistic explanatory framework based on culture and ethnicity, and contends that Chinese network capitalism is contingent upon time, place, institutional frameworks, market forces and political economy.

Indeed, ethnic Chinese capitalism in Southeast Asia is not static but is subject to contextual change and transformations, which cannot be sufficiently explained by any set of cultural norms. Renewed studies on this phenomenon reveal that ethnic Chinese capitalism contains an interpenetration of ethnic elements and a variety of non-ethnic capitalist practices and organising principles (Yeung, 2006). Perhaps a more effective approach to studying Chinese entrepreneurs in the region is to delve into individual case studies rather than taking the category of “Southeast Asian Chinese capitalists” as a unit of analysis. Jakobsen’s (2015) work on Chinese entrepreneurship in Malaysia is particularly successful in this regard. Examining the agentic experience of Chinese Malaysian entrepreneurs navigating the treacherous waters of the discriminatory affirmative action policy, Jakobsen examined inter-ethnic business practices within the wider context of the relationship between local, national and global economies.

In more recent years, with the rise of China and the development of the ASEAN Economic Community, the focus on Chinese capitalism has shifted from ethnic, cultural and/or area-specific focus to a regional perspective on the bilateral economic and trade relationship between China and ASEAN. As China’s largest trade partner, ASEAN has actively engaged China in multilateral organisations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, ASEAN+3, ASEAN-China Dialogue, and China-ASEAN Free Trade Area. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – a colossal global infrastructure development project – announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013 is fated to play an important role in driving the economy of Southeast Asia. The new developments on China’s BRI in Southeast Asia have raised questions on the changing geopolitical dynamics in the region with encroaching Chinese economic interests. In light of this, the interests on Southeast Asian Chinese capitalism have shifted to their creative responses to the BRI, including its facilitating role and strategies to cope with the emerging force of new mainland Chinese capitalism in the region (Santasombat, 2019; Chan & Hoon, 2023).

This special issue bears two key themes. First, despite China’s rise as a regional or even global power, the relationship between China and Southeast Asia is not dominated by the former, and the special issue restores agency to Southeast Asia by exploring how ideas, institutions, and individuals there interpret, accommodate, and even capitalise on China’s increasing presence in the region. Kaili Zhao and Chang-Yau Hoon explore how Brunei has benefited economically from China’s rise despite ongoing challenges of their co-operation, including the negative press and labour controversies surrounding Chinese investments in the country. Aranya Siriphon and Jiangyu Li examine how the

“transnational entrepreneurial practices” of emigrant Chinese businesses in Chiang Mai, Thailand, enabled them to take advantage and yet break free of the Chinese state’s control in their dealings with Chinese, Thai, and other counterparts. By explaining how Chinese film businesses in postwar Thailand imported films from Hong Kong and co-operated with major production companies such as Shaw Brothers Studio, Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt demonstrates that Sino-Thai businesses could circumvent the isolationism of Maoist China and popularise Chinese-language films during the politically contentious Cold War period.

The second theme of this special issue is the role of religion in Chinese entrepreneurship. Syuan-yuan Chiou analyses how a Chinese gang leader of dubious origins became a famous Muslim preacher who built his business empire of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, while Ying-kit Chan studies the growth of the Tangs department store in Singapore through the life of its Christian founder C. K. Tang, who appeared less inspired by the so-called Confucian values to which Chinese merchants of his time had professedly subscribed. Jui-Aik Tan, Kian-Aun Law, and Yet-Mee Lim argue that Confucian values have assumed a religious dimension as supposedly professional and rational managers of Chinese businesses identify them with positive performance. Amid the global economic and geopolitical shifts taking place now, it is hoped that this special issue will inspire a rethinking of Chinese entrepreneurship and business in Southeast Asia to consider the agentic role of Chinese capitalists and the role of non-Chinese religion or values in shaping Chinese capitalism.

\* Dr. Chang-Yau Hoon [云昌耀] is Professor, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei Darussalam. Email: changyau.hoon@ubd.edu.bn

\*\* Dr. Ying-Kit Chan [陈英杰] is Assistant Professor, Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore. Email: chscyk@nus.edu.sg

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