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Editorial: Political dynamics of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia: participation and policy

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Political dynamics of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia: participation and policy

The political and economic landscape of Southeast Asia has long been shaped by the significant contributions of ethnic Chinese communities. Historically connected through extensive business and cultural networks, these communities, of approximately 30 million people, have played a pivotal role in the region's political and economic development. In attempts to study and understand the behaviors of these groups, the concept of *bamboo network* arose as a possible all-encompassing framework for interactions in Southeast Asia. Albeit its broader approach might facilitate general overviews and studies, it lacks specific consideration for unique aspects such as ethnic cleavages, the role of the state, or the societal realities that shaped the relationship between each group in their respective host societies and which make them unique in their own right. For instance, it can sometimes inadvertently overlook terminology aspects, such as the distinction between *huáqiáo*, an overseas Chinese citizen, or *huáren*, ethnic Chinese people who reside outside of China.

In this sense, the papers gathered in this Research Topic aim to go beyond this concept, by highlighting the importance of how unique theoretical and analytical frameworks are essential to the study and understanding of these groups. Three of the papers focus on Chinese communities in three distinct Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines), sharing the overreaching aspects of political participation and policy-making, under the scope of different thematics and fields of study. By analyzing them, the reader can observe the myriad of distinct approaches, which can be applied or adapted to different contexts and topics, further avoiding falling into generalizations and preventing limitations on conclusions and interpretations.

The importance of these studies is strengthened considering China's contemporary relationship with these communities. The reengagement of China with Southeast Asia in the 1990s was followed by an expansion of its diaspora policy established in the late 1970's. As consequence, interactions with said communities increased steadily through the 2000's. Under Xi Jinping, and the ambitious goals of initiatives such as the "Chinese Dream" and the Belt and Road Initiative, policy actions toward engaging with these networks

have increased and the role of overseas Chinese has been elevated in public discourse. Furthermore, the integration of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office into the United Front Work Department, in 2018, of how China might shape these networks, and steer them, through varied means, toward its regional strategic goals.

In essence, this Research Topic aims to deepen our understanding of the political engagement of ethnic Chinese communities within Southeast Asia and their consequential role in shaping regional foreign policies. Furthermore, it aims to serve as a helpful compendium to be used toward the advancement of approaches on the study of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. For this purpose, the four articles featured in this collection provide a multi-disciplinary look at the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the broader cultural-philosophical frameworks that govern Chinese identity.

Borges and Costa examined the contemporary influence of Malaysian-Chinese on Sino-Malaysian relations, resorting to an original analytical framework assessing the symbiotic relationship between passive influence, active influence and the wider dynamics of the bamboo network. They concluded that the Malaysian Chinese had an important influence in contemporary Sino-Malaysian relations, by providing influence platforms beyond standard state relations. This influence was particularly noticeable in the post-Belt and Road Initiative period, with the authors stressing that local Malaysian Chinese organizations have been in the leading front of contemporary interactions.

Continuing on the trend of local organization and community engagement, Nurjaman and Pinto investigated the implementation of local deliberative democracy in Indonesia, seeking to assess how community participation shapes democratic development in a developing-country context. The study concluded that the case of Malang City evidenced that normative principles of deliberation democracy reached varying degrees of success in terms of inclusion, reciprocity and reason-giving. The case of Malang City operates in a vertical interaction between socio-political hierarchies entrenched in informal networks and reinforces the necessity of a deliberative theory that considers and confronts varying historical contexts, local political economies, cultural logics and religious authority structures.

Wong analyzed how Chinese-Filipino political actors participate in crucial national security and law enforcement matters, via a historical-ethnographic study of the "iron fist policy" of Delfin Telan Ting, the former Mayor of Tuguegarao City (1988–1998; 2007–2013). Resorting to the innovative approach of "assimilative integration," defending the compatibility of the social-cultural process of multi-ethnic interactions with the national state-building process. The study concluded that the role of Chinese-Filipinos was instrumental toward national security development in the Philippine frontier.

Focusing on the transversal aspect of Confucian culture in this topic, Cappelletti examined the role of Confucian ritual (*li* 礼) as a normative and strategic mode of governance in China's domestic and foreign policy. Through the tracing of historical continuities in contemporary initiative such as the Belt and Road Initiative and in the case studies of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Southeast Asia, the author demonstrated how ritual functions as a means of governance. Cappelleti's innovative approach decolonizes traditional Western IR theory and calls for a rethinking of China's political grounded on its own cultural traditions.

In conclusion, these contributions reinforced the notion that the political dynamics of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia are essential for the study of the region. This Research Topic demonstrated the varied approaches to the study of these communities, and how the understanding of their broader historical and cultural realities arise as key aspects to advance our knowledge of this field. We hope that this provides a robust foundation for scholars and policy-makers for the development of future studies.

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