

# THE RISE OF CHINA AND LOCAL ETHNIC CHINESE IN CAMBODIA<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study attempts to determine the impact of the rise of China and its increased presence in Cambodia on the local ethnic Chinese (LEC) community. The author conducted individual interviews with informants including the permanent secretary of a local Chinese association, the manager of a Chinese daily newspaper and the headmaster of a Chinese-medium school to understand their views. The study found that there was little interaction between the LEC and new migrants (NMs) from the People's Republic of China (PRC), as the LEC association and Chinese school focused mainly on serving the interests of the LEC community while the NM community has grown self-sufficient with their own organizations. It also found that the increased presence of NMs and capital from the PRC in Cambodia did not cause LEC to become more China-oriented. The main recipient of the soft

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power diplomacy of PRC's One Belt and One Road initiative were Khmer-speaking populace, regardless of their ethnic origin.

**Keywords:** *Chinese Cambodians, new Chinese migrants, One Belt and One Road*

## The Rise of China and Local Ethnic Chinese (LEC) in Cambodia

The tightening of relationship between Cambodia and China under Hun Sen's rule along with the massive influx of people and capital from the People's Republic of China (PRC) into Cambodia that resulted from it has been a focus of keen interest by media and scholars alike for quite some time. Many studies have approached this phenomenon from economic and military points of view. For instance, Chheang (2017) pointed out that PRC filled Cambodia's need for performance legitimacy and countervailing force against its immediate neighbors. However, not many have studied this strengthening of Sino-Cambodian relationship from the perspective of the local ethnic Chinese (LEC) community in Cambodia.

On the other hand, there have been studies that focused on the impact of PRC's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and changes in its overseas Chinese policy. Suryadinata (2017) pointed out that, under OBOR, PRC now included even the individuals of Chinese birth or descent but without Chinese nationality within the target of its overseas Chinese policy. Previously, PRC had

maintained its principle adopted after Zhou Enlai attended the Bandung Conference in 1955 and formally engraved in the PRC nationality law of 1980, namely that once a Chinese national obtains a foreign citizenship, he or she ceases to be a Chinese national, which also means that he or she is no longer the object of PRC's overseas Chinese policy.

This study attempts to determine, therefore, the influence of China's rise on the LEC community in Cambodia. Has the revival of ethnic Chineseness in Cambodia since the 1990s and the more recent strengthening of relations between the two countries really resulted in turning the LEC Cambodians so China-oriented, or is it somewhat more nuanced? Who are the main recipients of the impacts of PRC's soft power diplomacy? These are the questions this study attempts to understand through the perspectives of the LEC.

## Definition of terms

There is a variety of ways for conceptualizing the phenomenon of Chinese diaspora. It has been common however, to use *Chinese overseas* (haiwai huaren) as a blanket term that encompasses both those individuals outside of China who retain their Chinese nationality and those who became citizens of the countries they reside in either through birth or naturalization (Wang, 2004). Within Chinese overseas, the term *overseas Chinese* (huaqiao) has often been used to denote those who are Chinese citizens but have settled down in a foreign country. Huaren, on the other hand,

usually means those who do not have Chinese nationality but manifest signs of Chineseness, often through language use, customs, and value system. The term *huayi* has been used somewhat ambiguously: While it is often used to denote people of Chinese descent who have lost consciousness of Chineseness, it is sometimes also used analogously to *Huaren*, as can be seen in PRC's issuance of *huayi cards* to *huaren* residents within China.

For the purpose of this study, I will use the term local ethnic Chinese or LEC to cover both the *huaren* and *huayi* above. In other words, I will use LEC to differentiate the people of Chinese descent who have already been in Cambodia since before the 1990s from new migrants (*xin yimin*) or NMs, who started arriving en masse in post-UNTAC Cambodia from the PRC. One reason for using LEC as a generic term inclusive of both *huaren* and *huayi* in the conventional sense is the peculiar historical background of the Chinese diaspora in Cambodia. Until Lon Nol's rule (1970-75), the Chinese community in Cambodia ~~was~~ had been thriving, and the majority of the population in the capital Phnom Penh was said to be ethnic Chinese. However, a persecution of Chinese ensued, and it culminated in a genocidal attempt by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge to eradicate the entire Chinese population from Cambodia. Through this experience, many people of Chinese descent learned to Khmerize themselves as much as they could, either in pretention or in actuality. Although there has been a massive revival of Chineseness among LEC Cambodians after the arrival of peace in the early 1990s, it is often difficult to demarcate clearly between

huaren and huayi. It is normal for city dwellers in Cambodia to trace certain Chinese lineage with vastly varying degree of the retention of Chineseness (Inamura, 2011). What has become more prominent since the early 1990s, rather, is the contrast between the LEC community on the one hand, and NMs from the PRC on the other, which is more pronounced than the one between LEC and “pure” Khmers.

## Method

The main data of this study was gathered through field work conducted in September 2018. It included personal interviews, text-based data, and linguistic landscape observations. The interviews were conducted with the permanent secretary of the Federation of Khmer Chinese in Cambodia (FKCC, Jianhua lishi zonghui), who was also the manager of Jian Hua Daily, a local Chinese-language newspaper, as well as the principal of the Association of Chinese Teochew in Cambodia Toun Fa Chinese School (Duanhua, TFCS), the largest-scale Chinese elementary and secondary school in Southeast Asia. (Inamura, 2011; Suryadinata, 2017). I also spoke with an owner of a Chinese-medium kindergarten in Phnom Penh. I conducted these interviews in Mandarin. Interviews were also conducted in English with the Khmer principal of an English-medium elementary and secondary school. The informants also included ordinary citizens of ethnic Khmer and Chinese backgrounds from the cities of Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville and Siem Reap. Many of these interviews were done

through my Khmer-speaking colleague. I also gathered locally published Chinese-language newspapers and textbooks. These newspapers are operated by and issued with LEC capital, but their targeted readership include both the LEC community and NMs. In addition, physical and linguistic landscapes of the three Cambodian cities were observed.

Being an attempt to determine the impact of the rise of China on LEC community through the perspective of LEC individuals, this study does not claim to be an exhaustive empirical research, nor are the experiences of informants of this study generalizable to the LEC community as a whole.

### **Impact of the rise of China on LEC-NM relations**

The increased influence and visibility of the PRC and NMs in Cambodia have had a paradoxical effect of pushing the LEC community further toward Khmerization, while still maintaining its advantage of having Chinese backgrounds. LEC's interest in maintaining Chineseness is increasingly for utilitarian reasons, rather than the passing down of their ancestral heritage.

### **LEC and NM organizations**

The main target of the works of associations, schools and LEC media is increasingly within the LEC communities, and their links and interactions with the PRC government and NMs seem to be becoming less prominent than they used to be during the period right after the opening up of post-UNTAC Cambodia. When the

LEC organizations retain links with the PRC, it is mainly for the benefit of the LEC communities. Although the LEC associations such as FKCC still function as a bridge between visiting Chinese delegations and high-ranking Cambodian officials, now that the presence of Chinese capital and NMs has become much more prominent in Cambodia, the NM communities have become more self-sufficient, and no longer require connections and services provided by the LEC associations.

One evidence of this is the increased strength of NM associations and the relative lack of interactions between them and the LEC associations. In downtown Phnom Penh, I spotted many signboards for NM associations. Those are usually called chambers of commerce, for example, Fujian General Chinese Chamber of Commerce (Fujian zong shanghai). Through a telephone conversation with a leader of Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Cambodia (CCCC), which is an overarching organization of the chambers of commerce representing different parts of China, I understood that NMs already had a strong presence in Cambodia; and there even were separate organizations for various types of businesses operated by NMs. According to Goto (2011), CCCC is not a member of FKCC and, having been established under the auspices of the Chinese embassy, it has a close relationship with the PRC government. Another notable difference from the LEC groups is the wide range of places of origin in China. This is in contrast to the LEC organizations under FKCC, which bear the names of five traditional regional groups originating from

southern China, namely Teochew, Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, and Hainanese. In contrast, NM organizations cover all over China including central and northern China, and not necessarily related to the languages their members speak as Mandarin functions as the lingua franca. For example, there are “Association Development of Commerce Jiangxi in the Cambodia (sic)” and many other such organizations. According to the FKCC official I interviewed, there certainly are some nominal relations between FKCC and such NM organizations, but substantial interactions are few and far between, because the latter have already established strong ties with the Cambodian government.

It does not mean, however, that the function of the LEC associations as a bridge between Cambodia and PRC has become completely obsolete. Just during the interview, I witnessed a busload of visitors from a regional government in Guangdong province to the FKCC headquarters. The meeting between FKCC officials and those visitors was reported on Jian Hua Daily the next day. And just several days before the interview, a high-ranking official from Chaozhou in Guangdong province met with Prime Minister Hun Sen through the brokerage of FKCC.

### **LEC and the Cambodian government**

As an organization, FKCC serves and represents the interests of the LEC community, and according to the FKCC informant, the Cambodian government needs the organization. For instance, in the case of facilitating meetings between Chinese visitors and high-



ranking Cambodian government officials, the Cambodian government needs FKCC for strengthening ties with the PRC. Furthermore, he said that the public service FKCC offers, including education and rescue work, is valued by the Cambodian government. Reflecting this cordial relationship with the government, the informant stated that the law enforced in 2015, which limits the activities of non-governmental organizations is not affecting FKCC at all.

### Chinese education

**Elementary and secondary education.** Chinese schools clearly focus on educating local children, both LEC and Khmer, and have little direct connections with NMs or the PRC, except in importing teachers and receiving help with teaching materials. According to the principal of Toun Fa Chinese School (TFCS), the vast majority of pupils are locals, and there is a significant number of non-Chinese Khmer pupils among them, whose parents opted for Chinese education in the hope of obtaining better employment prospects as Mandarin speakers. Indeed, it has even been reported that children of Cambodian government officials with non-Chinese ethnic backgrounds study at TFCS (Kawase, 2017). Whether Chinese or Khmer, the majority of the parents speak neither Mandarin nor any other Chinese language, because many of them grew up during the period when Chinese education was prohibited or shortly thereafter.

Very few NM children go to TFCS. The principal explained that NMs usually do not bring their children with them to Cambodia, and if they do, they prefer to send them to international schools for expatriates in Phnom Penh, in the hope of sending them to universities in the West or China in the future. With a curriculum that caters for local children, TFCS is not an attractive option for NMs.

It is clear from the curriculum that TFCS, like other Chinese schools in Cambodia, is focusing on the local market. TFCS places much importance on bridging to the local Khmer curriculum. The principal stated that students attend at least four hours a week of Khmer public-school subjects, taught by part-time Khmer teachers from nearby public schools. It reflects the fact that the majority of graduates hope to further their studies in public universities in Cambodia. Since on average only seven to eight students aim to enter universities in China per year, it is natural that most students focus more on subjects taught in Khmer than in Chinese. They can even take the Cambodian baccalaureate in Chinese and study Chinese at a university in Cambodia. The KFCC informant disclosed that there even is a plan to open a local Chinese-medium university, the first of its kind in Southeast Asia.

At home, the primary family language for of the pupils is Khmer. Even in families in which both parents are of Chinese descent, it is rare that Mandarin or Chinese dialects are spoken in any significant manner at home, as the LEC understood during the Pol Pot era how devastating the potential consequences of

excessively emphasizing Chineseness could be. It can be seen from here that those LEC are quite profoundly Khmerized, and regard Chinese education in a purely utilitarian light, rather than a means for maintaining and passing on Chinese culture and traditions.

It is, by no means, that the increased presence of the PRC in Cambodia did not have much impact on local Chinese schools aside from the fact that they were allowed to reopen in the first place. One area in which Chinese schools in Cambodia is benefiting from Cambodia's renewed closeness with the PRC is in the development of teaching materials. FKCC used to utilize textbooks prepared by the United Chinese Committees Association of Malaysia (Dong zong) and the United Chinese School Teachers Association of Malaysia (Jiao zong) in the secondary level. However, more recently, it has adopted original teaching materials prepared by Jinan University in China. Even the textbooks for the primary level, which used to be prepared locally, have now been replaced with those produced jointly with Jinan University and published by FKCC. These materials illustrate the increased familiarity between the two countries where the contents of the Chinese textbook for the primary level refer to cultures, histories and geographical names of both China and Cambodia.

Another area in which the closer relationship with the PRC has had an impact on is in the recruitment of teachers. FKCC estimates that a total of 1,200 extra Chinese teachers are needed in Chinese schools all over Cambodia, and the PRC has recently agreed to dispatch 223 teachers to the country. Aside from teachers from

China who visit TFCS on temporary basis, TFCS is likely to benefit also from this scheme. The PRC government is also granting scholarship to 200 LEC and Khmer students who are studying at Chinese schools.

**Kindergartens.** Across Phnom Penh, signboards in practically monolingual in simplified Chinese for “international” kindergartens were observable. I spoke with an owner of one such kindergarten in downtown Phnom Penh. She was an NM from mainland China and spoke in Mandarin. She said that the children in her kindergarten were mostly from NM families whose parents wanted basic education in Mandarin Chinese, but also hoped to have a head start in English. There were very few local Khmer or Chinese children, although the kindergarten later added a banner written in Khmer underneath the Chinese sign. However, the kindergarten also offered night classes in conversational Chinese for Khmer-speaking general public.

**International schools.** Chinese-medium schools like TFCS and public schools are not the only choice for the children of LEC Cambodian families. Signboards and school buses belonging to so-called international schools were ubiquitous in all three Cambodian cities I visited. Those are not schools for expatriate children that adopt such international curricula as the international baccalaureate, but locally run schools in which part of the classes are offered in the English medium. Many of such schools advertised prospects for further studies in Singapore and Thailand. I visited one such private international school in Phnom

Penh, where I interviewed the headmaster. The site was a branch of a school that had 21 locations throughout Phnom Penh and had approximately 30,000 pupils altogether. This particular campus had 1,800 students in its K-12 programs. Even though there is no survey of the pupils' ethnic origins, it is safe to presume that a sizeable proportion of them are ethnic Chinese, given the general ethnic composition of the socioeconomic class in Phnom Penh to which many of the pupils' families belong. The fee is approximately \$100 per month, and secondary pupils receive 20 hours of tuition per week. About 30% of the pupils attend public schools in addition to coming to this school six days a week. The school offers Khmer classes in the morning, taught mainly by part-time teachers from public schools, and English-medium classes in the afternoon. About 40% of the pupils enter the local university affiliated with the group where faculty members are recruited from Singapore and India, while some others choose to further their studies in Singapore or English-medium universities in neighboring Thailand. As in the case of Indonesia where ethnic Chinese are spearheading the Englishization of private education, the LEC community in Cambodia also seems to be playing an important role in the popularity of English-medium schools.

### Chinese media

At the time of the field trip, there were five major paper-based Chinese dailies. My informant at FKCC was also the manager of Jian Hua Daily, one of the Chinese daily newspapers. All but one of

the papers are LEC-owned. Another important daily, the Huashang Daily, is owned by Pung Kheav Se, an executive director of Canada Bank.

All of the Chinese dailies now use simplified Chinese characters promoted by the PRC, although Inamura (2011) reported that they used traditional Chinese characters in the late 1990s. Although the stories reported in those LEC-owned newspapers are mainly local news and visits of Chinese delegations, many of the classified advertisements apparently target Chinese nationals, indicating that NMs are included in the target readership.

The only paper-based daily operated by NMs is Jinbian Wanbao, an evening daily, issued by Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Cambodia, a blanket organization of NM associations. One reason of for the small number of NM newspapers in Cambodia is that NMs rely on the internet for getting news, networking, and gaining information on potential business partners in China. There are many such websites, and Jinbian Wanbao itself relies heavily on online presence, the server for which is located in mainland China. On the other hand, the LEC readership of Chinese-language media are mainly those who received education before the 1970s when the Chinese education was banned. This explains this phenomenon in which most paper-based Chinese media are LEC-centered while NM ones are mostly web-based.

## Linguistic landscape

The observation of language use in street signs also revealed the further blending of LECs with local Khmer society and the influx of NMs who are self-sufficient with little contacts with Khmers. Use of traditional Chinese alongside Khmer and English was representative of localized LEC or Khmer-owned businesses, while NM presence was signified by signs practically monolingual in simplified Chinese, sometimes accompanied by pinyin transliterations, despite the law regulating all public signs should have Khmer in the most conspicuous position (Dara, 2018).

**Phnom Penh.** In downtown Phnom Penh, most medium- to large-scale commercial establishments had signs trilingually in Khmer, English, and traditional Chinese. Those shops also typically had Chinese-style altars for deities and couplets written in traditional Chinese. These were very common even in locally owned shops that seemed to have no Chinese backgrounds at all. Since the majority of city-dwellers in pre-DK Cambodia were Chinese, these customs have been accepted widely by the business sector in Cambodia in general. Most younger generation Cambodians, Chinese or otherwise, cannot decipher the meanings of those messages in Chinese.

However, it was also observable that some businesses had signs in simplified Chinese as well as Khmer. Those were recognizable as NM-owned establishments. On Diamond Island, one area of Phnom Penh where there is a large presence of NMs, there were many signs written only in simplified Chinese, sometimes even



accompanied by transliterations in pinyin. This shows that those shops do not consider locals or non-NMs to be part of their clientele. It can be understood from here that the NM presence is large enough for it to be economically independent and self-sufficient, without the need to rely on non-NM customers. Indeed, one of the restaurants I visited had its menu written monolingually in simplified Chinese.

**Sihanoukville.** In the resort city of Sihanoukville, where 90% of the businesses are Chinese-owned, signs written in simplified Chinese were extremely common, and those sometimes had no Khmer or English written at all, which is against the law (Dara, 2018; Pisei, 2019). It was almost reminiscent of being in China. Many of the products those signs advertised were targeted at customers from northern China, which is not the traditional homeland of LEC. The only places where I saw traditional Chinese signs and couplets were clearly Khmer-owned with little trace of Chineseness otherwise. There were many high-rise resort hotels under construction along the beach, and they mostly had signs of government-related construction companies from the PRC, written monolingually in simplified Chinese.

**Siem Reap.** Even though a large proportion of visitors to this tourist center is from China, many of the shop signs were in English, reflecting a history of international tourism that had existed long before the influx of Chinese tourists started. Throughout my stay in Cambodia, here only was I often solicited by street vendors and tricycle drivers in Japanese. In all other



Cambodian locations, the main language of peddling was Mandarin. However, here too it was possible to observe the presence of NM businesses.

### Ordinary LEC citizens

During my field work, I also spoke with LEC citizens who were small- to medium-scale business owners. While some of them had benefitted from their Mandarin ability in doing business with NMs, they also said that they shunned from Sihanoukville about which they complained of the presence of “too many” NMs. They claimed that the security situation in Sihanoukville, which had been a favorite resort town for them in the past, has worsened since the arrival of NMs and Chinese tourists en masse; so much so that they advised me not to go there, or be extremely careful if I really had to. Judging from this episode, although LECs initially benefitted from their Chinese backgrounds, now they have little contact with them and even regard NM presence as a threat, or at least not benefitting directly from China’s strong presence in Cambodia in recent years.

### Impact of OBOR

OBOR involves both investing in large-scale projects in infrastructure and spreading of soft power through promotion of Chinese language and culture. The main recipients of the benefits of the former are the general public including both Khmers and NM contractors and construction workers. The ones benefitting

from the latter, on the other hand, include both Khmer general public and LECs.

### Investment projects

The main beneficiaries of contracting of infrastructure projects are NMs and Chinese citizens who are associated with Cambodian operations of PRC's state-owned companies. Pal (2014) explained that local operations of Chinese state firms conducted needs analyses of infrastructure projects and proposed them to Cambodian government authorities. Many such projects were financed with bilateral aid from the PRC. Once agreed upon, they would then find NM subcontractors, who in turn hire Khmer and NM workers, at the same time recruiting more highly skilled workers directly from China. Pal specifically mentioned that his interviewee deliberately avoided dealing with local (including LEC) companies, because she had had run into payment problems with them in the past, and specialized in collaborating with Chinese state-owned firms. Chheang (2017) pointed out that Cambodian workers were limited to unskilled low-level labor, and local companies did not benefit from spill-over effects of Chinese investments, such as technology transfer and increased international visibility. As in the cases of nearby countries like Malaysia, LEC-owned firms not only do not benefit from the Chinese investments, they may even suffer from increased competition from both PRC and NM companies as a result of Chinese investment (Ngeow & Tan, 2018).

## Soft power promotion

Although the goal of the PRC's effort to spread Chinese culture includes re-Sinification of Chinese overseas, the larger Khmer community is the main beneficiary of the soft power promotion as part of OBOR (Suryadinata, 2017). As was discussed earlier, China is sending many Chinese-language teachers to Cambodia. The vast majority of the students in such schools are from local Khmer-speaking backgrounds, with a significant number of non-Chinese Khmers. From Facebook pages of those schools, one can observe that many participants in Chinese speech contests and cultural competitions, many of which presumably are supported or even sponsored by the PRC, are overtly non-Chinese. Textbooks used in such schools are mostly produced locally by FKCC, with assistance from the PRC government, as those are the only ones officially sanctioned by the Cambodian government (Goto, 2011).

Major Chinese bookstores in Phnom Penh also exhibited evidence that the main target clientele were the local Khmer speakers. Chinese as a second language teaching materials written in English and published in the PRC dominated one such bookstore, where there also was a large selection of local educational books written monolingually in Khmer. Unlike Chinese internet cafes proliferating in the streets of the Cambodian capital, it was evident that such bookshops were not meant to serve the needs of NMs or the sizable expatriate community of PRC nationals, as they did not offer popular current publications in China, except those authored by PRC president Xi Jinping.

## Conclusion

Fieldwork and interviews suggested that the LEC society is no longer functioning as a bridge for NMs into the Cambodian society. The main focus of the LEC associations and schools is to serve the local LEC community, which has assimilated into the Khmer culture and has become predominantly Khmer-speaking. The NMs and expatriate community of PRC nationals have grown self-sufficient and already have strong links with the Cambodian government, and they do not need to rely on the brokerage of local Chinese anymore. Perhaps with the exception of Khmer-Chinese bilinguals employed in the lower echelons of Chinese corporations and infrastructure projects, it is possible for a Chinese corporation to rely entirely on China-born NMs. Today, it is possible for a NM to maintain his/her livelihood in Cambodia with little interaction with Khmers (Inamura, 2011).

The influx of the Chinese capital did not place the majority of the LEC in a privileged position. If anything, it has caused LEC-owned small businesses to face harsher competition coming from Chinese counterparts. While it is true that the flourishing of Chinese culture after a long period of persecution did contribute to the revitalization of Chinese identity among LEC, the recent wave of Chinese investment in Cambodia does not seem to be causing them to become more China-oriented.

The target of the soft power export to Cambodia that is accompanying the OBOR project seems to be mainly the local Khmer-speaking populace, with Chinese ancestry or otherwise.

A rise of anti-Chinese sentiment has surfaced when a Chinese-owned building under construction collapsed killing 28 workers in Sihanoukville in June 2019 (Turton & Sokummono, 2019). An expert regards the subsequent sacking of government officials as an attempt to appease the simmering anti-Chinese sentiment among the local populace (Lipes, 2019; H. Yamada, personal communication, June 26, 2019). Future research can closely observe this anti-Chinese sentiment and its impact on the LEC society in Cambodia.

Another development worth a researcher's attention would be the removal of illegal shop signs in Sihanoukville. As stated earlier, signs carrying no or incorrect Khmer scripts although illegal, were largely condoned at the time of this study. However, a crackdown has started in Sihanoukville of such signage (Dara, 2018). The official quoted in a news report stated that the problem was caused by the fact that signage-making businesses were also owned by PRC nationals and they did not have any Khmer employees to check if the Khmer script on signs was correct. The report also pointed out that the government department in charge of granting permissions for signage did not have any official who understood Chinese. This is perhaps an area where LEC can come in to mediate. It would be interesting for future research to look into whether LEC organizations or businesses will be called in to address this situation.

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