

BOOK REVIEW

Chineseness and the Cold War: Contested Cultures and Diaspora in Southeast Asia and- Hong Kong

Edited By Jeremy E. Taylor and Lanjun Xu

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CHINESENESS AND THE COLD WAR

**CONTESTED CULTURES AND DIASPORA IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA AND HONG KONG**

*Edited by
Jeremy E. Taylor and Lanjun Xu*



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Comparing academic books related to the Cold War as TV series, it is undeniable that most of them are mainstream Euro-centric TV series which commonly narrate the dramatic power and ideological struggle between the US-led Free World camp versus the communist Soviet Union's (USSR) and its allies. The climax scene will inevitably capture the thrilling situations such as the Containment policy of the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), and the dramas will end up with the episode of the losing of protagonists like the Fall of Berlin Wall (1989) or the Collapse of the Soviet Unions (1991).

Shifting Perspectives: From Euro-Centric to Sino-Centric

Deviating from that mainstream and rethinking the Cold War within Asian historical contexts, *Chineseness and the Cold War: Contested Cultures and Diaspora in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong*, edited by Jeremy E. Taylor and Lanjun Xu, can be recognized as an extraordinary TV series which offers a significant shift from the traditional Euro-centric perspectives on Cold War studies. Instead, it provides a groundbreaking Sino-centric viewpoint that explores the complex and contested notions of “Chineseness” in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong during the Cold War period.

Apart from focusing on geopolitical or military confrontations as usual, this book delves into the cultural and social dimensions of the Cold War, specifically through the lens of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. It also explores how “Chineseness” was a contested and dynamic identity influenced by the ideological battles of the time.

To understand dynamics of the “Chineseness”, this book in-

vestigates how cultural artifacts and institutions, such as films, sports, literature, and religious activities - the so-called “Chinese cultural Cold War”, became arenas of ideological conflict. Analogous to TV series, this edited book has 3 sections of the main plots which are divided into 9 chapters of various case studies from Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. The main theme of the book is to illustrate how different ideas about Chinese identity were pivotal ideological factors in the region from three perspectives - Chineseness and “New China” in Cold War Southeast Asia, Anti-communist Chineseness in Cold War Asia, and Border-crossing “Chineseness” in Asia.

Sino-centric cultural approach: Compare with Matthew Phillips' *Thailand in the Cold War*

The methodologies of this edited book, *Chineseness and the Cold War*, remind me of the interesting book by Matthew Phillips *Thailand in the Cold War* (2016). The main point of Matthew Phillips' book is that while Thailand's political leadership was keen to maintain the country's independence and establish its credentials as staunchly anti-communist, Thailand was closely embedded in the US camp. The similarity between these two books is how they analyze the Cold War in Asian contexts by examining socio-cultural aspects, not conventional methods like politics or military. The importance of localization and what is the national identity, such as Malayan identity and Thainess, is the main focus for both books.

While *Chineseness and the Cold War* explores how cultural aspects like cinemas and music became battlegrounds for ideological influence among the Chinese diaspora, Phillips' work discusses how Thai culture was influenced by and responded to American and communist ideologies, which shaped the notions of 'Thainess' until today. These contexts help us understand the broader regional dynamics that influenced the experiences of the overseas Chinese in neighboring countries. Also, comparing the cultural and ideological strategies in Thailand with those detailed in *Chineseness and the Cold War* can provide the analysis of how different Southeast Asian nations navigated the Cold War.

Conclusion: Shaping “Chineseness” and rethinking the Cold War in Asian Contexts

Chineseness and the Cold War: Contested Cultures and Diaspora in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong is a vital contribution to Cold War studies with a culturally rich perspective that deviates from traditional Euro-centric narratives. The concept of “Chineseness” during the Cold War, which was defined and redefined alongside the changes of geopolitics, cannot be seen from a monolithic view. It was shaped by various cultural, political, and social forces, as the diverse experiences of Chinese communities in Singapore, Malaya, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

Ultimately, the Cold War’s ideological battles were not just between Western powers and the Soviet Union, but also involved the situations in Asian countries. Likewise, the Cold War also impacted decolonization, nation-state building, and the concepts of who ‘we’ are in Southeast Asia. Therefore, this book is one of the recommended ‘TV Series’ for anyone who wants to learn about the new dimension of how cultures can influence and be influenced by the notions of ‘Chineseness’ in Southeast Asia during the Cold War.

Bibliography

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