

# *People-to-People Exchanges between China and Southeast Asia: The Role of Non-State Agents in Remaking Connections across the Global South\**

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## **Abstract**

International politics has undergone significant changes before and after COVID-19 in 2020, with geopolitical competition intensifying. In contrast, China and Southeast Asia relations have continuously strengthened. Exchange and cooperation between China and Southeast Asia in various sectors—such as culture, education, religion, health, and academia—show a clear and robust growth trend. The development of civil exchanges between China and Southeast Asia is not only a strengthening of cross-border interactions but also a revival of traditional cosmology. This development has transcended conventional understanding of international relations (IR) and has attracted increasing academic attention. These people-to-people exchanges have fostered diverse unofficial transnational networks, reinforced the

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foundation of China-Southeast Asia relations, provided a practical arena for non-state actors in international relations within one distinctive regional context, and demonstrated how regional cooperation can be advanced and deepened at the individual level. This special issue explores various dimensions of civil exchange, highlighting the positive impact of civil society beyond state power on China-Southeast Asia relations. It also presents important case studies and theoretical insights that could enhance research methodologies in area studies and IR, contributes to the emerging and flourishing “Global South IR,” and provides valuable perspectives for scholars and policymakers.

## **1. Deep Linking: People-to-People Exchanges between China and Southeast Asia in the Context of the Global South**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, world politics has undergone significant changes, and China's relations with neighboring countries have entered a new stage. Among these, the relationship between China and Southeast Asian countries stands out from rhetoric to reality of the Global South. Since 2019, China and ASEAN have been each other's largest trading partners for five consecutive years. In 2024, China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand mutually exempted each other from visa requirements, while visa procedures with other countries became increasingly streamlined, extensively promoting bilateral economic, trade, and people-to-people exchanges between China and Southeast Asia. Civil exchanges between China and Southeast Asia, characterized by their unique features, are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

Firstly, bilateral and multilateral cooperation. China and Southeast Asian countries promote people-to-people exchanges through bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs, such as cultural, educational, and scientific and technological cooperation under the China-ASEAN (10+1) Cooperation Framework, as well as humanistic exchanges under the Belt and Road Initiative. Secondly, cultural and educational exchanges. China and Southeast Asian countries regularly organize cultural exchange activities, such as cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and performances, etc., to enhance mutual understanding. In the field of education, scholarship quotas are being expanded, academic exchange programs are increasing, and university exchange visits are being promoted. As a result, more Southeast Asian students are studying in China, while Chinese students are also pursuing studies in Southeast Asian countries. The third is