

Between National Identification and Transnational Mobility: Southeast Asian Chinese Respond to the Belt and Road Initiative

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Since it was first proposed by Xi Jinping in the late 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative has constituted China's defining strategy in engaging with the outside world, especially in the 70-plus countries alongside the two routes connecting China with Europe and Africa. As the main pathway for the Maritime Silk Road and China's major economic partner, Southeast Asia--where the great majority of the Chinese diaspora reside--occupies a significant place in the new initiative. In view of China's growing clouts and the fact that economic relations are inevitably intertwined with the nations' social transformations, there are important ramifications with the implementation of the BRI for the region and its Chinese diaspora. How should one interpret the BRI in the context of diaspora engagement? As one of the most economically influential groups in the region, how do the Chinese communities react to the opportunities and challenges associated with the BRI? What are the roles of ethnic capital, nationalism and transnationalism in the unfolding of the BRI? How do Chinese diaspora confront with the seemingly conflicting logics between transnational mobility and national identifications? What are the theoretical implications, if any, of the Southeast Asian experiences for deciphering new patterns of Chinese transnationalism and diaspora engagement? This paper attempts to provide some preliminary answers to these questions.