Interview – Selina Ho

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Selina Ho is Associate Professor in International Affairs and Co-Director of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. She researches Chinese politics and foreign policy, with a focus on how China wields power and influence via infrastructure and water disputes in Southeast Asia and South Asia. Selina is the author of *Thirsty Cities: Social Contracts and Public Goods Provision in China and India* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), co-author of *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (University of California Press, 2020), and co-editor of The Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations (2020). She has published widely in peer-reviewed journals, including *International Affairs*, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, among others.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

As a student of China's foreign policy, the most interesting debate and research for me was China's arrival on the world stage and how it manages relations, not just with the United States but also with its neighbours, specifically in Southeast Asia and South Asia.

China's Belt and Road Initiative raises important questions: What does using infrastructure as a form of power mean? What kinds of leadership do China exercise in the river basins it shares with its downstream neighbours? What are the variations in China's behaviour and approach as it manages its relations with its neighbours? These and other questions are consequential both theoretically and empirically.

The literature on hegemony has focused primarily on the United States and the West — the ideas of unipolarity and empire. There is little understanding of how China exercises hegemony and what instruments and strategies it deploys. Most focus has been on Chinese coercion, but it is only one possible strategy.

China's rise provides rich ground for adding a different perspective to the existing hegemony literature. Moreover, infrastructure and water politics are significant economic and security issues but are among the most neglected in international politics. They are widely studied in sociology, anthropology, geography, and even environment science and engineering, thus providing fertile ground for cross-disciplinary research and collaboration.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Being born and bred in Singapore and of Chinese ethnicity, China is an intellectual curiosity. I started being interested in China's history and then in its role in international politics, particularly in Southeast Asia.

However, it was my teachers that have shaped the direction of my research. My supervisor for my doctoral studies at The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Professor David M. Lampton, influenced how I think about China. Through his work and from attending his classes and later becoming his tutorial assistant, I learnt the complexities of the Chinese state — the challenges that Chinese leaders face domestically and externally and the fragmented bureaucratic machinery that formulates and implements policies. Mike's influence led me to believe that a scholar of Chinese foreign policy must not focus only on China's foreign policy and the domestic

impulses that drive and motivate foreign policy.

Professor Francis Fukuyama was also my graduate school teacher and a member of my dissertation committee. It was through Frank that I learnt to think about big issues and ask big questions. He was interested in institutions and order, which continue to influence my research today.

Regarding world events, I have experienced the end of the Cold War, the birth of the US unipolar order, and how it played out in Asia. In the region, the US was considered a benevolent hegemon, so it is difficult to witness the more recent developments in US domestic and foreign policies. At the same time, I have seen China's rise through the 1990s and 2000s.

These events influenced my interest, leading me to research the power transition currently occurring, particularly focusing on China's role in Asia and the world. This passion ultimately shaped my career. I am driven by the need to objectively study Chinese power, influence, and challenges. Through research, I aim to accurately assess how China exercises hegemony in the region, including both the positive and negative aspects.

In your book *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia*, you explore China's use of railroads to exert influence. Could you elaborate on the strategic importance of these rail projects for China's regional ambitions?

These rail projects bring Southeast Asia closer to China economically, politically, and strategically. China becomes the strategic hub as connectivity binds it to Southeast Asian countries' markets and resources, societies, and politics. Economic relations have strategic implications, since interdependency and dependency influence Southeast Asian countries' foreign, and sometimes domestic, policies.

What is also clear in our book is that Southeast Asian countries exercise significant agency in their negotiations with China as well as during the implementation phase of the project. Southeast Asian countries want connectivity but on their own terms. If, during negotiations, China did not meet their expectations, they would look for alternatives or rely on themselves, as is the case with Thailand. Our study also demonstrates that local governments are particularly powerful in the project's implementation phase — they can drag their feet, resist, challenge and employ other tactics until they are satisfied with the responses, whether from their national governments or from Chinese companies, to their demands.

In *Thirsty Cities: Social Contracts and Public Goods Provision in China and India*, you compare water provision in urban centres in both countries. Can you explain why China outperforms India in providing this public good, despite the academic literature suggesting that democratic systems tend to be more effective than authoritarian ones in this regard?

In *Thirsty Cities*, I developed a social contract theory of public goods provision to explain the differences in public goods provision, such as water provision in cities, between China and India. I argue that leaders and policymakers are driven by their social contract with their people and citizens to provide certain goods.

Conventional wisdom says that a government's ability to extract from, respond to, and control society is often attributed to the strength of its formal bureaucratic institutions. Public goods provision is often attributed to regime type, state capacity and level of economic development. *Thirsty Cities* shifts the focus from formal institutions towards the ideational and social basis of state power. I attributed the Chinese state's ability to provide public goods to the performance-based social contract it has with its people, while India's social contract was populist and based on elections.

States are driven by a logic of appropriateness that stems from the type of social contracts they have with their people to provide different varieties of goods. Because China needs to provide public goods while India needs to provide elections to maintain their social contracts with their people, China ends up providing a higher level of public goods to its people.

What are the most pressing challenges and opportunities in the current China-India relationship?

Their border dispute is the key challenge in their relationship. The standoff in Doklam and clashes in the Galwan Valley indicate how volatile the situation continues to be, despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping's efforts to improve their relationship after taking office in their respective countries. Another key challenge is their respective relationships with the United States. There seems to be a China-India reset now, but the fundamental conflicts between them remain unresolved.

There have been many missed opportunities in China-India relations in the past, but I hope they will work together on climate change, global public health, and other global challenges. They have strong incentives to do so, given that these are existential issues and they are the most populous countries in the world.

Based on your research, what policy advice would you suggest to Southeast Asian nations in managing their relationships with China?

Southeast Asian nations need to work together and build resilience within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN provides a platform and vehicle for all ten nations to engage with external powers and discuss their differences and disputes. It is an invaluable resource as the region navigates US-China rivalry, and ensures that the region is not dominated by a single powerful state. There is a need to achieve common ground (even if there are differences in national interests) and work with China to rapidly conclude a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea.

You recently published, along with Terence Lee, a research article on Southeast Asian elite perceptions of a China-led regional order. What were the major findings?

Our article is based on a survey of elites from six Southeast Asian nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand). We have chosen these countries because they are considered "hard cases" — countries with an independent foreign policy or allies of the United States. The survey indicates that although most elites view China as influential and have a cultural affinity with it, they do not perceive China as having the legitimacy to lead the region. They do not identify with China's political values and the normative order it propounds.

Instead, they consider ASEAN the most influential in the region, above China and the US, and prefer that ASEAN leads the region. There is also evidence of a collective ASEAN identity, as most respondents (more than 80%) indicated that their country identifies with ASEAN the most. Our findings are significant for Chinese influence in the region and globally. If China hopes to exercise global leadership, it must first convince its neighbours that it has the right to lead the region.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

These are exciting times for young scholars of international relations. It is the perfect time to bridge the fields of comparative politics and international relations. For some time now, and especially among the younger generation of international relations scholars, we have understood the domestic imperatives of foreign policy. This link has never been more evident than it is today — how domestic drivers, such as leaders and public opinion, can constrain or drive foreign policy. I would encourage young scholars to explore these rich grounds for research, be concerned about the world, and produce knowledge that would accumulatively contribute to society and, hopefully, make the world a better place.