

East Asia's Soft Power Competition in Southeast Asia: A Case  
Study of Public Diplomacy Efforts in Promoting Japanese,  
Chinese, and Korean Language Learning in Thailand since the  
2000s



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การแข่งขันด้าน Soft Power ของประเทศในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ออกใน  
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และภาษาเกาหลีในประเทศไทยตั้งแต่ทศวรรษ ๒๐๐๐



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**Nala Han : East Asia's Soft Power Competition in Southeast Asia: A Case Study of Public Diplomacy Efforts in Promoting Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Language Learning in Thailand since the 2000s.**  
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Japan and China are major superpowers in Asia with historically and economically close relations to Southeast Asia, while Korea remained relatively invisible until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The different historical ties of these three countries with Southeast Asia have resulted in different approaches to the region. This study examines how Japan, China, and Korea have expanded their presence in Southeast Asia, focusing on their use of soft power. Soft power, a concept introduced by Joseph Nye Jr. in the 1990s, has become essential in understanding the power dynamics of the international community.

The research specifically looks at the efforts of the three East Asian governments in promoting language learning in Thailand since the 2000s. The Japan Foundation, the Confucius Institute, and the Korean Education Center, run by the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean governments, are observed to understand the current state and methodology used to promote their respective languages in Thailand. In particular, comparing the status of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean language education in Thailand is meaningful because of the country's significance for all three languages. The number of

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## Chapter1. Introduction

### Rationale

As a Korean majoring in Southeast Asian studies, I have always been interested in how the Republic of Korea (herein after Korea) is evaluated and its position in Southeast Asia. Witnessing the tremendous geopolitical, economic, and cultural influence exerted by Japan and the People's Republic of China (herein after China)—East Asian superpowers as well as Korea's nearest neighbors—on the whole Southeast Asian region, I have become increasingly curious about where Korea stands in terms of the dynamics between Southeast Asia and East Asian countries.

Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye Jr., has been crucial in understanding international relations since the 1990s. According to Nye, soft power refers to a government's or an entity's ability to persuade others to share its goals and collaborate willingly rather than through coercion (Nye, 2004). Soft power extends beyond governments to corporations, institutions, NGOs, and transnational terrorist networks. However, integrating soft power into government strategy is more complex than it may seem. The outcomes of soft power depend on the target and the time taken to achieve them, and they require complete government control over the instruments used (Nye, 2011).

At the national level, soft power comprises three primary resources: culture, political values, and foreign policies. Nevertheless, economic and military resources can also contribute to soft power. Public diplomacy refers to a country's efforts to enhance its soft power by utilizing cultural, knowledge, policy, and other resources. Many countries adopt this approach to increase their influence and attractiveness on the

global stage.

In his approach to public diplomacy, Nye (2011) stressed the significance of a two-way communication process, which involves treating the public as equal participants in the exchange of ideas and information. Nye also introduced the concept of "smart power," which combines both soft and hard power. Public diplomacy is a vital component of smart power, but it requires an understanding of credibility, self-criticism, and the role of civil society in generating soft power. When public diplomacy becomes propaganda, it fails to persuade and can diminish soft power. Therefore, it is crucial to maintain a two-way communication process, as soft power relies heavily on understanding the perspectives of others (Nye, 2021).

Japan, China, and Korea have all acknowledged the significance of soft power, each at different times. Japan began actively promoting cultural diplomacy in the 1970s, before the term soft power was even coined, after seeing the United States and European countries utilize culture as a tool for diplomacy. In this context, Japan recognized that long-lasting and stable international relations should not be approached solely through political and economic interests and that cultural and people-to-people exchanges would contribute to better mutual understanding. Recognizing the importance of cultural and people-to-people exchanges also led to the establishment of the Japan Foundation (JF) and the birth of the Fukuda Doctrine in 1977.

In China, although there has been a discourse on soft power since the 1990s, it was in the 2000s that soft power policies were implemented in earnest. President Hu Jintao was the first to mention culture promotion as part of soft power at the national

leadership level in 2007. Since then, China has used its 5,000-year history and culture to boost its soft power domestically and globally. This effort aims to combat the "China Threat Theory" that has emerged due to the country's swift economic growth.

In Korea, the private sector was the first to recognize the potential of Korean culture in the late 1990s. This recognition was particularly evident with the rise of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), specifically K-Pop, which gained popularity worldwide. The Korean government has actively leveraged the K-Wave to enhance its soft power and promote the country's identity through various policies.

Promoting learning a country's language is one of these efforts and a powerful tool to enhance soft power and expand a country's influence since it is an effective way to encourage cross-border communication and cultural exchange. It enables individuals to converse with people from diverse cultures and comprehend their viewpoints. Moreover, learning a foreign language offers a profound insight into the culture and values of the language speakers, which promotes mutual trust and respect between nations (Wilkinson, 2013). As a result, language education is a tool for enhancing an individual's soft power by fostering cross-cultural understanding and communication.

The three East Asian countries (Japan, China, and Korea) and the Southeast Asian region have been engaged in regular consultations since 1998, primarily through the multilateral consultative body, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) + 3. Japan, China, and Korea also continue to cooperate closely with individual Southeast Asian countries at different levels.

Through the February 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, Japan ushered in a new era of foreign policy with respect to Southeast Asia. After the Fukuda Doctrine, which emphasized

regional peace, cultural and social exchanges, as well as equal, cooperative relations, Japan's status, which was seen as an economic invasion in Southeast Asia, was markedly changed.

China is currently the most important partner in Southeast Asian foreign relations. However, its access to Southeast Asia still poses threats, including economic expansion, large-scale immigration to continental Southeast Asian countries, and territorial disputes (Cho et al., 2011).

Unlike Japan and China, which have historically developed lasting relations with Southeast Asia, exchanges between Korea and Southeast Asia were minimal until the 19th century. However, Korea–Southeast Asia relations developed rapidly in a short period, making ASEAN the second-largest trading partner and investment destination for Korea<sup>1</sup>. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea, n.d.)

Through this research, I aim to examine how Japan, China, and Korea have been expanding their presence in the Southeast Asian region based on the different relations they have had with Southeast Asia. In particular, I will focus on their efforts in promoting their respective language learning as a means of public diplomacy to create soft power in Thailand since the 2000s.

In Thailand, all three languages are listed as second foreign languages for university entrance exams, meaning that teaching the three languages is already active in Thai secondary education. Learning Japanese, Chinese, and Korean are prevalent, as

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Korea International Trade Association, China is Korea's biggest trading partner, with a total trade value of \$305.5 billion in 2021, followed by ASEAN at \$176.5 billion. Meanwhile, the United States is the top investment destination for Korea, with a total investment of \$58.9 billion from 2019 to 2021, followed by ASEAN at \$29.3 billion, as reported by the Korea Eximbank.

evidenced by nearly 70% of all second foreign language test takers choosing these three languages. Thailand has the second-highest Japanese learners in Southeast Asia and the fifth-highest in the world. Furthermore, Chinese has been taught at every level of education in Thailand and is the only foreign language incorporated into all levels of education, in addition to English. Also, Thailand has the highest number of Korean learners enrolled in secondary education in the world.

I will especially observe the current state and methodology applied by the language education institutions in Thailand—the Japan Foundation (JF), the Confucius Institute (CI), and the Korean Education Center (KEC)—run by the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean governments to promote their respective languages. The JF, Bangkok, was established in 1974 and had almost half-century of history. Thailand has the most CIs in Southeast Asia; 16 CIs out of 40 in the region have been established within Thai universities in collaboration with Chinese partner universities. Of the 86 professional Korean teachers sent by the Korean Ministry of Education to different parts of the world, 58 have been sent to Thailand under the supervision of KEC.

### **Research Objectives**

- 1) To analyze the three East Asian countries' soft power approach to Thailand and the Southeast Asian region in the 21st century based on their different historical backgrounds with the region
- 2) To identify and compare the different strategies employed by the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean governments in their public diplomacy efforts to promote their respective languages in Thailand, with a particular focus on their government language institutions (i.e., the Japan Foundation, the Confucius Institute, and the Korean

Education Center), and to analyze the similarities and differences among the three countries

3) To analyze how the three East Asian governments try to engage language learning with other public diplomacy tools to maximize soft power in the long term.

### **Research Hypothesis**

1) The three East Asian countries have established different historical relations with Southeast Asia, which made these countries formulate different approaches to Southeast Asia in wielding soft power in the 21st century.

2) All three East Asian countries have utilized promoting their language as an important instrument of their public diplomacy to create soft power in Thailand in the 21st century through main language education institutions. However, the strategies employed by the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean governments in promoting their respective languages in Thailand vary as the systems, policies, and roles of their institutions (the Japan Foundation (JF), the Confucius Institute (CI), and the Korean Education Center (KEC)) differ.

3) Three East Asian governments' efforts to combine language learning with other public diplomacy resources are more effective in producing long-term soft power influence than language learning programs alone. Japan, China, and Korea all seek to create synergies by linking language learning to exchange programs, government scholarships, and study abroad programs in their respective countries.

### **Research Methodology**

The proposed research will employ a qualitative approach and will rely on textual

analysis of primary sources such as academic texts, journals, statistics, and surveys pertaining to soft power; East Asia–Southeast Asia relations; and Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language education, as well as secondary sources such as scholarly articles on these topics. If circumstances permit, the proposed research will include interviews with key officials from each language institute (i.e., the JF, the CI, and the KEC) to obtain additional valuable information.

### **Literature Review**

The following literature review is structured according to the tentative outline of the thesis. It gives a brief overview of some of the significant publications that each chapter will draw on. As such, it is not an exhaustive account of the sources used. Instead, it reflects essential points that the literature offers on the issues addressed in each chapter, excluding the thesis's introduction and the conclusion.

#### ***1) Soft Power, Public Diplomacy and Language Learning***

The thesis starts by outlining the definition of soft power and public diplomacy in the discussion of regional power dynamics. Coined by Joseph S. Nye Jr. in the 1980s, soft power denotes one's ability to influence others without coercion or financial incentive. Nye posits that soft power arises from the appeal of a nation's culture, political ideals, and policies, allowing the said nation to achieve its goals without military force (Nye, 2004). Whereas hard power—characterized by military and economic influence—has long served as the basis of international exchange and diplomacy, soft power has become a mainstay of international competition especially since the 2000s.

According to Nye, public diplomacy is a government's approach or efforts to generate soft power, although it is difficult for a government to wield soft power directly. Nye



emphasizes that there are three stages of public diplomacy, from direct government information to long-term cultural relationships, and that the third stage of sustained relationship development is achieved through scholarship, people-to-people exchanges, and training (Nye. 2011).

Language has long been regarded as a key element of soft power. In his book "The Future of Power" Nye draws connections between a nation's language and culture, arguing that to teach a foreigner your language is to simultaneously teach them your culture and values (Nye, 2011). In the book, Nye highlights the anecdote that in the late 19th century, after losing the Franco-Prussian War, France created the Alliance Francaise to popularize its culture and improve its national standing. This anecdote provides a glimpse into the creation of soft power through the emphasis on language.

## ***2) Historical Relations between the Three East Asian countries and Southeast Asia and the Three East Asian Countries' Soft Power Approach to Southeast Asia***

To understand the individual historical relations that Japan, China, and Korea have had with the Southeast Asian region and to understand how these historical relations have led to the different soft power approaches that Japan, China, and Korea have adopted toward the region, the following literature was studied.

### **a. Japan – Southeast Asia Relations since the 20th Century and Japan's Soft Power Approach to Southeast Asia**

Japan's relationship with Southeast Asia has been a topic of interest for scholars and policymakers alike since the end of the Second World War. The Fukuda Doctrine in 1977, that emphasized the importance of mutual respect and equality in Japan's

relationships with Southeast Asian countries laid the foundation for Japan's diplomatic approach to Southeast Asia.

In recent years, Japan's foreign relations with Southeast Asia have continued to evolve, and Japan has increasingly employed soft power to enhance its influence in the region. Lam (2012) explores the historical and contemporary dimensions of Japan's relations with Southeast Asia, examining the various factors that have shaped the relationship, including economic cooperation, political and security ties, and cultural exchange.

Freer (2018) notes that Japan's approach to Southeast Asia has been characterized by a combination of hard and soft power, with Japan seeking to balance its economic and strategic interests with a commitment to regional stability and development. Singh's (2021) article focuses on Japan-Southeast Asia relations in the context of US-China competition in East Asia arguing that Japan's soft power approach has been essential in enhancing its influence in the region particularly in areas such as infrastructure development and disaster relief.

**b. China – Southeast Asia Relations since the 20th Century and China's Soft Power Approach to Southeast Asia**

China's relationship with Southeast Asia has undergone significant changes since the 20th century.

Kitamura et al. (2022) examine the historical and contemporary dimensions of East Asia-Southeast Asia relations, emphasizing the importance of presence and connectedness in shaping the relationship. The authors note that China's growth in Southeast Asia has been driven by various economic and strategic factors, including

China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Diokno et al. (2019) focus specifically on China's footprints in Southeast Asia, examining that China's soft power approach has been vital in economic cooperation and infrastructure development.

Zheng (2019) examines China's soft power construction in Southeast Asia since the 21st century and points out that China's soft power approach has been driven by a desire to enhance its international influence and legitimacy and has been particularly effective in culture and education.

**c. Korea – Southeast Asia Relations since the 20th Century and Korea’s Soft Power Approach to Southeast Asia**

Yoon and Chulasiriwongs (2005) examine the historical dimensions of Korea's relationship with Southeast Asia, emphasizing the importance of cultural exchange and economic cooperation. The authors note that while Korea's relationship with Southeast Asia has been shaped by various factors, and cultural exchange has played a vital role in enhancing mutual understanding between the two regions.

Steinberg's (2010) focuses on Korea's changing roles in Southeast Asia, examining how to enhance its influence and relations with the region. The authors argue that Korea's soft power approach has been a key tool in this process, particularly in cultural exchange and economic cooperation.

**3) *Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Language Learning in Thailand***

**a. Japanese language learning in Thailand**

With rapid economic growth in the 1970s, Japan began focusing on cultural diplomacy to improve its image as a militaristic nation, and in 1972, the Japan Foundation (JF) was established and carried out exchange and cooperation projects, focusing culture, language, and dialogue. Japanese language education abroad has also been further strengthened through the establishment and activities of the JF.

However, Japanese language education in Thailand began before the establishment of the JF. According to Kakazu (2010), Japanese language education was first introduced to Thailand in 1947 when the Mattayom Wat Borpitpimuk School started an introductory Japanese course at the secondary level. In 1981, Japanese language was officially adopted at the Thai secondary education level as a second foreign language on the national curriculum. Since then, Japanese language courses at both secondary and tertiary levels have grown considerably (Kakazu, 2010).

Since then Japanese language learning has become increasingly popular in Thailand, and scholars have examined the role of Japanese language education as a tool for promoting soft power in the country. Carminati (2020) compares the soft power strategies of China and Japan in Thailand in terms of education and language. The author suggests that Japan is no longer seen as a “top study destination” as global competition increases. However, there is still high demand for the Japanese language, especially among the elites who could share positive stories about Japan, making it a clear example of soft power dynamics at its best.

#### **b. Chinese language learning in Thailand**

Chinese language learning in Thailand should be focused on the role of Confucius Institutes and China's soft power strategies.

Trisanawadee (2020) examines China's cultural diplomacy towards ASEAN countries, including Thailand, through Confucius Institutes. The study finds that Confucius Institutes serve as a platform for promoting the Chinese language and culture, enhancing China's soft power, and strengthening its relationships with ASEAN countries.

Zhou (2021) investigates the role of Confucius Institutes in Sino-Thai relations and highlights how the Institutes are an effective tool for China's soft power projection. The study reveals that Confucius Institutes have contributed to promoting the Chinese language in Thailand and helped build a favorable image of China among the Thai people.

Bao (2017) examines the relationship between nationalism and soft power in the context of Chinese language programs in Thailand. The study reveals that Chinese language learning in Thailand is closely linked to China's soft power strategies and its efforts to promote a positive image of China and Chinese culture.

### **c. Korean language learning in Thailand**

While many studies on Korean language education in Thailand have been published in Korean by Korean scholars, there are relatively few studies in English. One of the studies by Korean scholars is Jung's study titled "The Korean Wave and Korean Language Education in Thailand".

Jung explains various backgrounds as to why the Korean language craze could have occurred in Thailand. The first is the influence of the Korean Wave, such as the popularity of K-Pop, the second is the increase in demand for Thai workers who can

speak Korean as Korean companies enter Thailand, and the third is the increase in the number of Thai workers who wish to work in Korea. Lastly, opportunities to encounter Korean culture in various Thai mass media increased, resulting in the influx of diverse Korean entertainment genres such as dramas, cartoons, songs, movies, novels, and games. (Jung, 2007)

On the other hand, Punplub and Krisdathanont (2019) explore the motivations of Thai students and working-age people in selecting to study the Korean language. Their study reveals that the most common reason for learning the Korean language is the desire to communicate with Koreans, followed by the intention to work in Korea or with Korean companies. The study also shows that the Korean language is perceived as an essential tool for acquiring knowledge about Korean culture and society.

### **Significance of the Research**

1) Previous studies have primarily compared the soft power between Japan and China, with little attention given to Korea, a rising cultural powerhouse. Therefore, this research aims to comprehensively understand the soft power competition among the three East Asian countries in Southeast Asia.

2) While there have been numerous studies on the acquisition of East Asian languages in Thailand, there is a lack of comparative research that simultaneously examines the current state of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean language learning. This study aims to contribute to understanding East Asian language education in Thailand by offering a comparative analysis.

3) This study focuses on language as an essential tool of public diplomacy to generate soft power. It aims to analyze the policies, systems, and roles of educational

institutions operated by the governments of Japan, China, and Korea. By doing so, it hopes to diagnose whether the three countries are increasingly competing for soft power through language education in Thailand. This study is expected to be the first of its kind.



## **Chapter 2. The Historical Relations between East Asian and Southeast Asian countries since the 20th Century and the Three East Asian Countries' Soft Power Approach to Southeast Asia**

### **Southeast Asia–East Asia Relations**

Due to the diverse and complex nature of the region, as well as the varying circumstances of each of the ten countries, it is challenging to make generalizations about diplomacy in Southeast Asia. However, common characteristics could be identified that have persisted in the region's diplomacy since the 20th century. Southeast Asian countries pursued their interests through flexible foreign policies against major powers during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods (Lee, 2022). Dr. Tej Bunnag, a distinguished diplomat who previously served as Thailand's Minister of Foreign Affairs, discusses the concept of flexibility as a critical aspect of Thai diplomacy in the book *Thai Diplomacy: In Conversation with Tej Bunnag*.

*“In your opinion, what are the characteristics of Thai diplomacy?”*

*“In one word: “flexibility”. In other words, as a small power, we cannot afford to hold rigid views on the problems of the world. At the end of the First World War, at the Congress of Versailles, Siam participated and was categorized as a “Power with limited interests”, therefore we have to be flexible in dealing with the world. This has been the character of Thai diplomacy since the middle of the 19th century or what I would call modern times. (Chinvanno, 2021)”*

During the Cold War, they secured their interests and autonomy by demonstrating their negotiating ability and flexibility between the gaps in the balance of power and the confrontation between the big powers. During the post-Cold War era, Southeast Asia sought to resolve the power vacuum created by the collapse of the Cold War within the framework of multilateral cooperation. This led to the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Southeast Asian nations



attempted to manage security and economic issues through a multilateral system of cooperation led by ASEAN. (Lee, 2022)

Multilateral cooperation among the three East Asian countries of Japan, China, and Korea and 10 Southeast Asian countries has also been formed through ASEAN. The ASEAN Plus Three (APT), a consultative body between ASEAN and three East Asian countries— Japan, China and Korea—was proposed in the form of a regional cooperation initiative in 1997, which has since functioned as a multilateral cooperation process connecting Northeast and Southeast Asia. Since then, cooperation between Northeast and Southeast Asia expanded to multilateral cooperation among 16 countries, including ten ASEAN countries, three East Asian countries (Japan, China and Korea), Australia, New Zealand, and India with the launch of the East Asia Summit in 2005. (EAS Unit ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.)

ASEAN is a hub for many multilateral organizations and meetings in the Asia-Pacific area. These include the APT, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting Plus, and the East Asian Summit, with Japan, China, and Korea as members. (Freer, 2018)

The three East Asian countries, Japan, China, and Korea, have been working together within the ASEAN-led multilateral order because the Southeast Asian region is important to them in various ways. Japan recognized early on that Southeast Asia represented "Golden opportunities," as the "Golden Friendship, Golden Opportunities" is the catchphrase for the 50th anniversary of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation that will be celebrated in 2023. ASEAN is an economically dynamic market with a population of approximately 664 million and a

growing GDP of \$3.3 trillion. China has been ASEAN's largest trading partner since 2009, recording a bilateral trade of USD 669.2 billion in 2021. While Japan ranked fourth with USD 240.4 billion, Korea ranked fifth with USD 189.6 billion, and ASEAN is the second largest trading partner for both Japan and Korea. (As of 2021, all statistics are from the "ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2022")

It is necessary to briefly review Southeast Asia–Japan, Southeast Asia–China, and Southeast Asia–Korea relations to obtain a more detailed understanding of the regional relationship between Southeast and East Asia.

In the case of Japan and China, they have historically maintained close ties with the Southeast Asian region and have received both criticism and support from the region. For these two East Asian superpowers, Southeast Asia is a strategically important region in terms of trade, people-to-people exchanges, and energy transportation (Sun, 2012). Given the region's importance, the approach of both countries to Southeast Asia in the decades following World War II has focused on renewing the past negative image of their relationship with the region.

Southeast Asian countries valued nationalism, noninterference, and equality due to their historical experience of being dominated by bigger powers, such as East Asia, Western Europe, and the United States (Sun, 2012). However, until the 1970s, China and Japan did not focus on these factors in establishing relations with Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, through the February 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, Japan ushered in a turning point in its foreign policy toward Southeast Asia. After the Fukuda Doctrine, which emphasized regional peace, cultural and social exchanges, and equal, cooperative relations, Japan's position, which was seen as an economic invader of Southeast Asia,

was changed.

On the other hand, China has actively used multilateralism to dispel suspicions from Southeast Asian countries stemming from history and to win their favor. To this end, China signed a partnership agreement with ASEAN in 1997, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2003, and the China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2001.

Relations with China are currently the most important factor in Southeast Asian foreign relations. However, China's access to Southeast Asia still poses a threat. These threats include China's economic expansion, large-scale Chinese immigration to continental Southeast Asian countries, and territorial disputes between China and Southeast Asia over several islands in the South China Sea (Cho et al., 2011).

Unlike China and Japan, which have historically developed lasting relations with Southeast Asia, exchanges between Korea and Southeast Asia were insignificant until the 19th century; thus, Korea–Southeast Asia relations were irregular and only at the level of sporadically occurring “contact” (Cho, 2019). In other words, compared with China and Japan, Korea does not have a familiar or negative image formed through the history of its relations with Southeast Asia. The absence of a specific image also meant that Korea was tasked with increasing its visibility in Southeast Asia.

However, Korea–Southeast Asia relations developed rapidly in a short period, starting with the establishment of partial dialogue between Korea and ASEAN in 1989. Then, Korea established full dialogue with ASEAN in 1991, the partnership was elevated to the summit level in 1997, and both sides established the strategic partnership in 2010. For Korea, ASEAN is currently its second-largest trading partner and investment

destination.

### **The State of East Asian Countries' Soft Power**

Before delving into the soft power strategies of the three East Asian countries toward the Southeast Asian region, it is crucial to examine how Japan, China, and Korea are currently rated objectively in terms of soft power.

The Soft Power 30 Index, which ranks the top 30 countries in soft power, was published by Portland Communications and the USC Center on Public Diplomacy. Out of the four Asian countries that made the list, Japan, China, and Korea were included, with Singapore being the only Southeast Asian country. Japan holds the highest soft power ranking of the three countries, followed by Korea and China. Japan was ranked between fifth to eighth during 2016 and 2019, Korea moved up one spot each year from 22nd in 2016 to 19th in 2019, and China was ranked between 25th and 28th during 2016 and 2019 (*Soft Power 30*, n.d.).

*“The Soft Power 30 index is compiled through objective and subjective data (international polling). Objective data comprises six categories: government, engagement, enterprise, education, digital, and culture. International polling includes seven categories such as foreign Policy, friendliness, culture, tech-product, and Cuisine.”*

Meanwhile, the Global Soft Power Index, published by Brand Finance, a brand valuation and strategy consultancy firm, ranks the soft power of three East Asian countries in the order of Japan, China, and Korea. From 2020–2023, out of 120 countries, Japan has maintained its top five rankings, fluctuating between second and fifth place, China is ranked between fourth and eighth place, and Korea is ranked 11th and 15th (*Brandirectory*, n.d.).

While Japan is the highest-ranked country in both indexes, China and Korea are ranked differently in the two indexes, likely due to the different methodologies and scope of the surveys. In particular, while China maintains its top ranking in the Global Soft Power Index with high scores in the Influence and Business & Trade dimensions out of 11 categories, it ranks relatively low in the Soft Power 30 index with low scores in the Government sub-index in areas of individual freedoms and liberties, as well as in the Digital sub-index in areas of the lack of an official online presence on Facebook, an overall low number of internet users and secure internet servers (*China - Soft Power, 2019*). In contrast, Korea scores relatively low in the Influence and Business & Trade dimensions of the Global Soft Power Index, but it ranks higher than China in the Soft Power 30 Index, with relatively high scores in the Digital and Enterprise sub-indexes (*Korea - Soft Power, 2019*).

The State of Southeast Asia 2023 Survey Report, published by the ASEAN Studies Center at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, reveals how Southeast Asian countries perceive Japan, China, and Korea. The survey of 1,308 Southeast Asians from different affiliation categories shows that 59.9% of respondents chose China as the region's most important economic power. However, 64.5% of the respondents are concerned about China's growing regional economic influence, while 35.5% welcome it. China also tops the list of countries with the most political and strategic influence, with 41.5% of respondents selecting it (Leng, 2023).

Meanwhile, Japan is the most trusted significant power, chosen by 54.5% of respondents. It remains the most trusted country in Southeast Asia for the Perception of Trust category for the fifth consecutive year. Japan's reputation as a responsible

stakeholder that respects and champions international law was cited as the most common reason for trust. Japan was also the most preferred country to visit, with 27.3% of the vote (Leng, 2023).

Of the three East Asian countries, Korea had the weakest presence in the survey, with only 1% of the votes for economic power, 1.7% for political and strategic influence, and 7.2% for the most preferred country to visit (Leng, 2023). This could be due to the survey's focus on geopolitical developments rather than soft power.

A survey conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018 among the citizens of ten ASEAN countries also has a section on Southeast Asian countries' perceptions of Japan. When asked which of the following countries (regions) has contributed to the development of ASEAN over the last 50 years (multiple responses were allowed), Japan was chosen by 65% (first place), China by 47% (second place), and Korea by 27% (fourth place) (*Opinion Poll on Japan in ASEAN Countries*, 2019).

In a 2009 survey conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs among citizens of six Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam), the question "For ASEAN countries, which of the following is currently considered an important partner?" was answered with 30% for China (first place), 28% for Japan (second place), and 2% for Korea (fifth place) (*Opinion Poll on Japan in Six ASEAN Countries*, 2008)

The results from 2009 and 2018 reveal that China and Japan are still essential to the region, while the perception of Korea among Southeast Asians increased significantly in 2018 compared to 2009.

### **Southeast Asia in the Discussion of East Asian Countries' Soft Power**

What differentiates Southeast Asia from other regions, such as the Americas, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, and why is it necessary to study the region in relation to East Asia's soft power competition?

First, the Southeast Asian region is geographically close to China, Japan, and Korea. As a result, the region has established a very close relationship with the East Asian countries in historical, geopolitical, economic, and cultural exchanges. East Asia and Southeast Asia have long been developing diverse and intimate relationships from both hard and soft power perspectives.

Second, for the analysis of East Asia's soft power, it is necessary to target regions that are influenced by soft power (e.g., Africa and Southeast Asia) rather than regions that focus more on exercising soft power (e.g., the USA and Europe). According to the Soft Power 30 Report published by Portland and the Global Soft Power Index published by Brand Finance, the regions with the highest rankings in the Soft Power Index are the US, Europe, and East Asia. In this regard, Southeast Asia and Africa are considered regions influenced by other countries' soft power rather than regions with strong soft power influence.

Third, Southeast Asia is a region where the soft power influence of the three East Asian countries is exercised in a relatively balanced way. While Japan, China, and Korea rank high in the global soft power index, there are differences in rankings by country. Even apart from these differences, it is important to avoid regions where a specific country's soft power influence is more prominent than other countries for a more balanced approach. For instance, in the case of Africa, China's influence has

been prominent through development assistance and economic support, implying that a study on Southeast Asia would be more reasonable than one on Africa.

Lastly, this study aims to target regions where the influence of cultural resources of soft power is particularly prominent among various aspects of soft power—economic, cultural, human capital, diplomatic, and political. Therefore, the Southeast Asian region, which maintains close cultural relationships with Japan, China, and Korea, is the most suitable area for this study.

### **Japan–Southeast Asia Relations since the 20th Century and Japan’s Soft Power Approach to Southeast Asia**

In the 20th century, Japan's relations with Southeast Asia experienced many ups and downs. Early in the 20th century, Japan encouraged Southeast Asian nations to join the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Some nations saw Japan as a savior that might protect them from Western imperialism, and these nations that saw Japan as a potential ally in the 1930s were utterly disappointed by its militaristic and imperialistic policies. From the early 1940s until the end of World War II, Japan colonized most of Southeast Asia, including French Indochina, British Burma, the Dutch East Indies, and British Malaya. Japan's relations with Southeast Asia are still impacted by its past expansionist policies and militaristic aspirations in the region.

Although its colonial past caused tension in Japan's post-World War II relations with Southeast Asia, the country was aware of the region's strategic and economic importance as early as the 1950s. As a result, Japan first concentrated on economic cooperation and official development assistance (ODA) to improve its ties with Southeast Asia. However, because of their memory of past colonization, Southeast



Asian nations were wary of Japan's expanding economic influence in the region. Anti-Japanese movements were sparked by concerns that Japan's colonization of the region by military force would be repeated in the 1970s because of its economic dominance.

In 1977, the then-prime minister of Japan, Takeo Fukuda, proclaimed the Fukuda doctrine in Manila, defining it as a shift from earlier Japanese policies toward Southeast Asia and using descriptors like "heart-to-heart" and "equal partnership." The Fukuda doctrine improved Japan's standing in the region and changed its reputation from a fearsome samurai state or a rapacious merchant state to a peace-fostering, alms-giving, and community-building state (Lam, 2012). The Fukuda concept has since been the established foundation for Japan's relations with Southeast Asia.

In August 1977, in Manila, Fukuda summarized his speech as follows:

*“First, Japan, a nation committed to peace, rejects the role of a military power and on that basis is resolved to contribute to the peace and prosperity of Southeast Asia and of the world community.”*

*“Second, Japan, as a true friend of the countries of Southeast Asia, will do its best for consolidating the relationship of mutual confidence and trust based on "heart-to-heart" understanding with these countries, in wide-ranging fields covering not only political and economic areas but also social and cultural areas.”*

*“Third, Japan will be an equal partner of ASEAN and its member countries, and cooperate positively with them in their own efforts to strengthen their solidarity and resilience, together with other nations of the like mind outside the region, while aiming at fostering a relationship based on mutual understanding with the nations of Indochina, and will thus contribute to the*

*building of peace and prosperity throughout Southeast Asia (SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER TAKEO FUKUDA (Fukuda Doctrine Speech) - “the World and Japan” Database, 1977).”*

In the early stages of cooperation, Japan's relationship with Southeast Asia was overly focused on economic cooperation, particularly in ODA and investment. Since the 1990s, Japan's desire to move away from its limited status as an economic power and ODA donor has led it to cautiously expand cooperation with Southeast Asia in political and security affairs. As a result, not only individual Southeast Asian countries but also ASEAN as a diplomatic community began to accept Japan's political role, despite longstanding suspicions in Southeast Asian countries stemming from Japan's militaristic past. Consequently, Japan established itself as a significant ASEAN partner in economic and broader strategic spheres.

However, Japan's presence in the region was undoubtedly diminished in the late 1990s by China's growing influence in Southeast Asia. Since then, China's assertive diplomacy has somewhat overshadowed Japan's role in Southeast Asia (Er & Teo, 2011).

Japan has been making continuous efforts at the national level to improve its image, such as actively promoting cultural diplomacy since the 1970s, integrating the concept of soft power into policy in the 1990s, and promoting the “Cool Japan” strategy in the 2000s. Southeast Asian nations continued to be cautious and apprehensive of Japan's militaristic past even as the relationship between the two regions grew more complex and intimate, as evidenced by the history of Japan and Southeast Asia. In light of these circumstances, Japan began to realize and advocate for the value of cultural diplomacy in the 1970s. The importance of cultural diplomacy is outlined in the

following passage from the 1973 Japanese Diplomatic Bluebook.

*To assure lasting peace and friendly relations with other countries, it is essential for Japan to have a correct understanding of foreign countries and their people and to inform them of Japan's culture, history, traditions and national character for better mutual understanding. It will be impossible to create lasting and stable international relations only through bargaining over political and economic interests. Cultural as well as personnel exchanges will promote correct mutual understanding, give breadth and depth to the nation's diplomacy and enhance a lasting sense of solidarity within the international community (BASIC ISSUES OF JAPAN'S DIPLOMACY, n.d.).*

The Fukuda Doctrine of 1977, which pioneered Japan's diplomacy with Southeast Asia, also made several points emphasizing the value of cultural exchanges, as follows:

*There is no need for me to stress the important role cultural exchange plays in deepening mutual understanding and appreciation, heart-to-heart and person-to-person, between the peoples of Southeast Asia and Japan (SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER TAKEO FUKUDA (Fukuda Doctrine Speech) - "the World and Japan" Database, 1977).*

The term "soft power" had not yet been coined in the 1970s, and although the term "public diplomacy" had been used by the United States in 1965, it had not yet gained widespread international acceptance. During this time, Japan noticed how the U.S. and European nations used culture as a diplomatic tool, so they established the Japan Foundation in 1972 to encourage research on Japan. They also introduced exchange programs with ASEAN countries, including the Southeast Asia Youth Ship initiative. "The Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program" (formerly known as the Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Program) is an international youth relations activity

started in 1974 through the collaboration of Japan and ASEAN nations (Thi-in, 2018).

In the meantime, when the Japanese economy experienced a protracted recession in the middle of the 1990s, Japan became aware of the limits of its hard power and started implementing several initiatives to strengthen its soft power.

ODA can be considered the most effective means to strengthen Japan's soft power in Southeast Asia. Japan, as the largest ODA donor among ASEAN countries, is expanding the scope of its support from infrastructure and energy development-oriented ODA provision policies to human resource development and medical care.

In today's approach to international development cooperation, it is essential that donor countries refrain from using ODA as a tool for gaining favor with recipient countries. However, in the historical context of when Japan began providing aid to Southeast Asia, expanding Japan's influence through international development assistance was an effective strategy. The Fukuda Doctrine was announced at an opportune time for Southeast Asia, given that communists were approaching throughout Southeast Asia, and Britain announced its withdrawal from East of Suez with its intention to withdraw troops from Singapore and Malaysia. Also, the US, through the Nixon Doctrine, asked all Asian allies to assume responsibility for their respective domestic security needs (Sukegawa, 2022). During this time of turmoil, Japan began providing ODA. Until recently, five of Japan's top ten bilateral ODA recipients were ASEAN members (i.e., the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar) (OECD, n.d.).

Japan is also focusing on expanding its soft power influence through people-to-people exchanges with Southeast Asian countries, which can also be proven from its promotion of exchanges among the young generations to further foster mutual

understanding as one of the five principles of its diplomacy with ASEAN (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2013).

According to the State of Southeast Asia 2023 Survey Report released by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Japan has had a very successful position in Southeast Asia, achieving the top ranking in the "Perceptions of Trust" category for five consecutive years (Seah et al., 2023). A poll of ASEAN nationals performed by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018 provides further evidence of Japan's favorable image in Southeast Asia. Multiple responses were allowed when asking which nations had contributed to the growth of ASEAN over the previous 50 years. In this regard, Japan received 65% of the votes, followed by China (47%), the US (35%), and Korea (28%), indicating that Southeast Asians believe Japan to be the non-ASEAN nation that has made the greatest contributions to the development of the region (*Opinion Poll on Japan in ASEAN Countries*, 2019).

### **China–Southeast Asia Relations since the 20th Century and China’s Soft Power Approach to Southeast Asia**

For more than 2,000 years, China and Southeast Asia have had strong communication, as their relations can be traced back to at least 150 BCE. Both regions shaped their relations through maritime trading relationships, political interactions, Chinese overland expansion, and commerce in Southeast Asia (Wade & Chin, 2018).

Diokno et al. (2019) have divided the modern relationship between China and Southeast Asia into four distinct periods: the hostile phase, from 1950 to the 1970s; the opening-up phase, from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s; the transformation phase, from the 1990s to 2012; and the phase of growing assertiveness of China in

Southeast Asia since 2013. (Diokno et al., 2019)

Only three Southeast Asian nations—Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar—had formal diplomatic relations with China in the 1950s, and other nations in the region tried to be more circumspect in their interactions with China out of concern that it might support regional communist movements (Diokno et al., 2019)

During its Third Session in 1979, the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) implemented the opening-up policy to unlock China's potential to become Asia's strongest and most dominant power (De Freitas, 2019). By the early 1990s, all Southeast Asian countries, Singapore and Brunei being the last two, established diplomatic relations with China.

While the Fukuda Doctrine—represented by the heart-to-heart approach—was used by Japan to describe its policy toward Southeast Asia, Chinese Premier Li Peng's four "Opening Up" diplomatic principles, proposed during his 1989 visit to Bangkok, could be used to explain China's new policy toward the region. These four guiding principles—peaceful coexistence despite differences in social and political systems, anti-hegemonism, furthering the development of economic ties, and continuing support for regional cooperation and ASEAN initiatives— have functioned to ease tensions and apprehension (Baviera, 1999).

Tensions in the region have increased as a result of China's aggressive diplomacy toward Southeast Asia since 2013 (Moulton, 2022). China has been engaging in more active diplomacy with Southeast Asia as a result of its efforts to achieve domestic economic development. Some regard this as a benign byproduct of China's economic objectives, while others see it as a more significant shift in Southeast Asia's

orientation (Vaughn & Morrison, 2006).

Recognition of the importance of soft power began to emerge in the mid-2000s when Chinese leadership began using the term soft power. President and party General Secretary Hu Jintao stressed the importance of culture as a source of national creativity, cohesiveness, and overall power in his keynote address to the CCP's Seventeenth Congress in 2007. According to him, the Party should "enhance culture as part of our country's soft power to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests" (China Today, n.d.).

Since then, it is widely known that China has been actively using soft power to restore its image worldwide. China's general soft power strategies include promoting its long history and cultural traditions, spreading the Chinese language through Confucius Institutes (CIs), strengthening propaganda for China through the expansion of overseas media, and encouraging educational exchanges by inviting international students to China (Nye, 2011). The world's leading experts on soft power also cite China's soft power strategy as 1) using public diplomacy to extend its propaganda template globally and 2) investing heavily in broadcasting and newspapers, as it has done in transforming Xinhua and China Central Television (CCTV) into global media outlets (*Is China's Soft Power Strategy Working? | ChinaPower Project*, 2016)

Through the CIs spread across the globe, China promotes Chinese language instruction and cultural initiatives as one of its primary soft power-building tools. China has also been anxious to welcome international students to study there. International students attending Chinese universities expanded quickly from 1,236 in 1978 to 238,184 in 2009, and the number had doubled by 2018 reaching 492,185 (Qi,

2021).

In this regard, which strategy is China's soft power policy in Southeast Asia focused on? According to the Congressional Research Service Report published by the US Congress, economic factors, not cultural or political ones, account for China's expanding soft power in Southeast Asia. China's position as a significant provider of international trade, investment, and aid has increased its influence over decision-makers in Southeast Asian nations (Lum et al., 2008). This perspective can be explained by the fact that China has been increasing its presence in the region since the late 1990s, focusing on cooperation in the economic field, including the signing of the FTA. It is also worth recalling that China's support efforts during the 1997 Asian economic crisis, including its offer of financial assistance to Thailand, export credits to Indonesia, and a fixed exchange rate regime for the RMB, marked a turning point in China's presence in Southeast Asia (Er & Teo, 2011).

Southeast Asia is an important location for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is related to its aspirations for soft power in the region. One of the five strategies of the BRI is "connecting people," a strategy to use soft power to foster an environment that will be favorable for China and the Belt and Road to succeed. China has designated Southeast Asia as a strategic priority for its efforts. According to several Chinese sources, Beijing has high expectations for the BRI's performance in Southeast Asia (Xue, 2017). According to the Five Connectivity Index, Southeast Asia is thought to have the best chance of "jointly build[ing] BRI" compared to other regions (Beijing Daxue Yidai Yilu Wutong Zhishu Yanjiu Ketizu, 2016).

Under the "connecting people" element of the five principles of the BRI, China also



focuses on people-to-people exchanges in education with countries in the Southeast Asian region. China's draft medium-to-long-term education reform and development plan (2010–2020) includes an initiative to increase the number of international students studying in China to 500,000 by 2020 (Global Times, 2011). The number of international students in China has more than doubled from 230,000 in 2009 to 492,185 in 2018, close to the above target, and five Southeast Asian countries (Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, and Malaysia) are among the top 15 countries of origin for international students in 2018 (Ministry of Education of China, 2019). In particular, the fact that the Mekong countries<sup>2</sup> of Thailand (28,608), Laos (14,645), and Vietnam (11,299) accounted for 11% of the total number of international students indicates that China has a strong interest in people-to-people exchanges with the Mekong countries in the Southeast Asian region, which is the frontline of the BRI initiative.

Additionally, in Southeast Asia, China highlights "shared Asian values" and positions itself as a development role model and the origin of ancient culture. The Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia has also long played an essential role in the region's society, culture, and economy. Additionally, China offers financial incentives and emphasizes that it is a trustworthy member of the international community and does not represent a military or economic threat to other nations (Lum et al., 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Ministry of Education only discloses the number of students from the top 15 countries studying in China. As Cambodia is not among the top 15, the number of Cambodian students in China is not disclosed.

### **Korea–Southeast Asia Relations since the 20th Century and Korea’s Soft Power Approach to Southeast Asia**

Unlike China and Japan, which have historical relations with Southeast Asia, relations between Korea and Southeast Asia were marginal until the 19th century; thus, Korea–Southeast Asia relations were irregular and only at the level of sporadically occurring "contact" (Cho, 2019). Up until the emergence of the Joseon Dynasty, Korean foreign relations focused on relations with neighboring countries, including China, as Korea historically had yet to focus on maritime exchanges (Cho, 2019). In other words, compared to China and Japan, Korea has neither a familiar nor negative image formed through the history of its relations with Southeast Asia. The absence of a specific image also meant Korea was tasked with increasing its visibility in Southeast Asia.

However, since the 20th century, exchanges between Korea and Southeast Asia have become more frequent. It is interesting to note that Korea and Southeast Asian countries share many similarities in their modern histories. Both experienced colonization by foreign powers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, followed by nationalist movements and gaining independence in the 1940s and early 1950s. In addition, Korea and Southeast Asian countries have experienced a period of military rule and dictatorship after World War II and another period of great pain in establishing national political ideologies and identities.

In the mid-20th century, the war led to cooperation and exchange between Korea and some countries in Southeast Asia. Thailand was the second country, after the US, to send troops to the Korean War, sending 6,326 troops from 1950 to 1953, which gave the Korean government a solid reason to believe that Thailand was a strong ally. Thailand was not the only Southeast Asian country participating in the Korean War.

The Philippines also sent 7,420 soldiers, 112 of whom were killed. President Fidel Ramos, who served as the Philippines' president from 1992 to 1998, was also a veteran of the Korean War.

However, Korea–Southeast Asia relations developed rapidly, starting with the establishment of partial dialogue between Korea and ASEAN in 1989. Then, Korea established full dialogue with ASEAN in 1991, the partnership was elevated to the summit level in 1997, and both sides established the strategic partnership in 2010. It has been over 30 years since Korea established full dialogue with ASEAN in 1991. Since then, Korea has made various efforts to promote its policies and diplomatic relations with the region. However, it is still being determined whether Korea has solidified its position as a middle power in the region due to the lack of a consistent policy in this regard, as different administrations had different perspectives in recognizing the region's importance.

Bae (2020) points out that the ideational distance between ASEAN and Korean political leaders regarding an approach to regional identity and security has been a significant constraint on an institutionalized and consistent commitment to building political and security cooperation platforms between ASEAN and Korea (Bae, 2020). Korea has been putting effort into strengthening its partnership with the Southeast Asia region under the ASEAN framework. However, as the position of Korean leadership on ASEAN has continued to change, it was difficult to establish itself as a trustworthy partner not only in the area of economic cooperation but also in political and security cooperation.

For example, the Moon Jae-in government tried opening a new era with Southeast

Asia under the "New Southern Policy (NSP)," which demonstrates the Korean government's strong will to give unprecedented diplomatic priority to ASEAN by upgrading its bilateral relations to the same level as Korea with the four major countries that engage with the Korean Peninsula: the US, China, Japan, and Russia. However, since the new administration's inauguration in 2022, the previous government's NSP has not been mentioned or carried forward by the new government.

In this regard, it is evident that Southeast Asia has responded positively to increased engagement with Seoul, perspectives of Korea as a significant actor are mainly confined to the economic domain and capacity-building, and Southeast Asian countries do not envision a role for Korea in the management of their geostrategic challenges (Teo et al., 2016).

Korean culture has gained global recognition and popularity in recent years, particularly in the entertainment industry. This growing popularity is thanks to the success of K-pop groups like BTS and Blackpink, the film "Parasite" winning the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and the popularity of Netflix's "The Squid Game." Korean content continues to grow in popularity on Netflix, with several shows ranking in the top ten worldwide in 2022 and 2023. While most of Netflix's top ten shows are from the US, Korean and Spanish shows are the only non-English language shows to make the rankings. In Southeast Asia, Korean content is the most popular on Netflix. It has ranked the number one TV show in all six Southeast Asian countries where ratings are available in 2023 (*TOP 10 on Netflix in the World in 2023* • *FlixPatrol*, n.d.).

The Thai Netflix top ten rankings reveal that Korean content is highly popular in

Thailand. In 2022, seven out of the top ten TV shows in Thailand were Korean, and by 2023, all of the top ten shows were Korean dramas, except for two Thai dramas that ranked third and fourth (*TOP 10 on Netflix in the Thailand in 2023 • FlixPatrol*, n.d.). Overall, Korean entertainment has become a significant player in the cultural soft power discourse worldwide.

During Professor Joseph Nye's speech at the Global Financial Conference held in Seoul in May 2022, he explained Korea's three major soft power resources as (1) culture (e.g., K-pop), (2) political and social values (e.g., democracy), and (3) rational economic and diplomatic policies. In addition, he emphasized that Korea is recognized globally as an attractive country in terms of values and policies as well as cultural content, such as BTS and Korean food, compared to China, which is gradually becoming less attractive to its neighbors due to its strengthening its authoritarian politics (Hwang, 2022).

Southeast Asia is the starting point of the Korean Wave and the region in which the influence of the Korean Wave is greatest. Considering Southeast Asia's rapid economic growth, young population, and potential for continued future growth, Korea considers it the region where the influence of its culture can be most sustained. As pointed out by Professor Nye, although Korea can be attractive in terms of value policy, the influence of its soft power in Southeast Asia appears to be limited to the field of culture and entertainment.

### **The Three Countries' Relations with Southeast Asia and Their Soft Power Approach to the Region**

The countries of Japan, China, and Korea have each had unique historical connections

with Southeast Asia. Japan was the first nation to acknowledge Southeast Asia's strategic and economic significance. Despite experiencing some ups and downs in their relationship during World War II and the post-war era, Japan learned what kind of bilateral ties were favored by Southeast Asian countries. This understanding enabled Japan to establish a heart-to-heart policy via the Fukuda Doctrine, emphasizing equal partnerships. Japan's approach towards Southeast Asia has primarily been based on economic power through ODA and investment. Still, its soft power approach has expanded to include Japanese culture and political values.

China has strong historical and geographical connections with Southeast Asia. In 1989, Chinese Premier Li Peng's Four Principles of Opening Up Diplomacy introduced a Chinese version of the Fukuda Doctrine. In the early 1990s, China established diplomatic relations with all ASEAN countries. However, China's diplomatic approach has been viewed as overly aggressive by some Southeast Asian nations, and issues such as the South China Sea dispute need to be addressed. China has been actively promoting its culture since 2007, following President Hu Jintao's endorsement to enhance its soft power. This promotion includes showcasing China's rich history and culture, expanding Chinese language education through Confucius Institutes, and utilizing the Chinese diaspora to spread cultural awareness.

Compared to Japan and China, Korea has had less historical interaction with Southeast Asia, resulting in a relatively weak presence in the region. It is mainly because, during the early to mid-20th century, Korea had to focus more on domestic political situations sometimes caused by superpowers, resulting in a similar history to Southeast Asian countries during the same period. However, Korea has made progress

in establishing democracy and achieving rapid economic growth. Since establishing a full dialogue with ASEAN in 1991, relations with Southeast Asia have developed steadily. As a result, ASEAN is now Korea's second-largest trading partner and investment destination, with 10 million Koreans visiting the region annually. Despite this, Korea has yet to define its own Fukuda Doctrine and has been inconsistent in its foreign policy and recognition of Southeast Asia's importance. The popularity of the Korean Wave in Southeast Asia has grown significantly since the 2000s and expanded beyond K-Pop to include Korean dramas, fashion, cosmetics, and food, especially with the rise of Over-the-Top services like Netflix since the pandemic. However, Korea's position in Southeast Asia is mainly centered on entertainment-related aspects of Korean culture.



### **Chapter 3. Japanese, Chinese, and Korean governments' Efforts in the Promotion of Language Learning as a Means of Public Diplomacy to Create Soft Power in Thailand since the 2000s**

#### **Language Learning as a Means of Public Diplomacy**

Language is the basis of cultural, economic, scientific, and academic systems. Therefore, it has been part of the foreign strategy of major countries whose native languages are positioned as intangible assets in contemporary international relations where soft power is emphasized. It is widely known that global powers have spread institutes (e.g., the British Council, CI, Alliance Française, and the Goethe Institute) around the world, encouraging interest in their native languages and providing educational opportunities.

Many countries have employed public diplomacy to share education and knowledge with foreign populations, focusing on spreading language and culture to targeted countries. This approach utilizes soft power to bolster a country's appeal and enhance its brand power and competitiveness (Beon & Jung, 2018; Hill, 2016). By offering language education initiatives in other countries, a nation can promote the universality of its culture and foster greater understanding and recognition. (Eom et al., 2019) It has been suggested by Modebadze (2013) that language not only reflects but also shapes the fundamental values upheld by a given culture.

The Japanese government has laid the groundwork to ensure a more proactive approach to public diplomacy. According to the Diplomatic Bluebook 2022, the Japanese government is implanting strategic communications based on the three-pillar approach: (1) Making further efforts to disseminate Japan's policies, initiatives, and positions; (2) Sharing Japan's rich and diverse attractions; and (3) Expanding the



circle of people with a great affinity toward or knowledge of Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022). Efforts to expand Japanese language education are a critical component of the third pillar. The JF was established in 1972 under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote cultural exchanges and the Japanese language. It is now an independent administrative institution that administers the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT).

What is remarkable about China's public diplomacy policy is that the leadership has recognized its importance and made it a national goal. Since President Hu Jintao became the first high-level official to mention public diplomacy, President Xi Jinping has consistently emphasized its importance. While China does not have a long history of implementing public diplomacy, its rapid progress has been driven by this leadership's recognition of its importance.

Hartig (2015) categorizes China's public diplomacy efforts into three main objectives: (1) to explain China to the world, (2) to create a favorable image of China, and (3) to achieve national interests. In particular, the purpose of explaining China to the world is seen as a result of the West's misunderstanding and misconception of China, which develops into prejudice and escalates into hostility, leading to the China Threat Theory. The importance of culture has been emphasized in the mainstream discourse on China's public diplomacy.

Korea does not have a long history of public diplomacy. However, since designating 2010 as the Year of Public Diplomacy, the country has implemented various efforts to revitalize its public diplomacy policy. In 2010, public diplomacy was established by the Korean government as one of the three axes governing the country's diplomatic

relations, alongside state and economic diplomacy. Since then, the Korean government has carried out all-around efforts to maintain public diplomacy funds and reinforce relations between ministerial departments, thereby establishing the Public Diplomacy Act in August of 2017 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, n.d.).

“Expanding favorable conditions for Korean language education and Korean studies abroad” is one of the three main objectives of Korean public diplomacy, which is promoted as a critical task to “position Korea as a powerhouse for science, technology, and culture” and shows that Korea is promoting the expansion of Korean language education as one of the essential means of public diplomacy.

The Current State of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Learning in Thailand

Comparing the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean language education in Thailand is very useful in comparing the different approaches of three East Asian countries to implementing language education as a means of public diplomacy.

First of all, all three languages are listed as second foreign languages for the Thai university entrance examination, the Professional and Academic Aptitude Test (PAT).

Therefore, teaching the three languages is already active in Thai secondary education.

The top three languages among the 2022 PAT second language test takers were Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, with Chinese chosen by 7,470 out of 21,485 test takers, Korean by 3,770, and Japanese by 3,672 (Bangkok Post, 2022). While Pali, French, German, and Arabic are additional second language options, 70% of all test takers chose a language from these three East Asian countries as their foreign language for the college entrance exam.

Japan has had close economic ties with Thailand economically, including in trade and investment, which led to the establishment of many Japanese companies in Thailand. According to the Thailand Board of Investment Statistics, from 2015 to 2021, excluding 2020, Japan was Thailand's number one country for direct investment (Bank of Thailand, 2022). Moreover, Japan's strong economic presence in Thailand means that being fluent in Japanese can prove a valuable competitive advantage in the Thai job market.

According to the "Survey Report on Japanese Language Education Abroad" published by the JF in 2018, there are 659 Japanese institutions, 2,047 Japanese teachers, and 184,962 Japanese learners in Thailand (The Japan Foundation, 2020). Thailand ranked fifth in the world and second in Southeast Asia after Indonesia on the number of Japanese learners in 2018.

In Thailand, the Chinese language has been included at every level of education for more than four decades. Among 19 second or foreign languages taught in Thailand, English, and Chinese are the only foreign languages incorporated into all levels of education. Moreover, as highlighted earlier in this paper, Thailand and China have historically maintained close bilateral relations, with vast numbers of Chinese descendants having settled in Thailand.

Thailand is the most important Southeast Asian country in Korean language education. In the 2000s, interest in Korean culture expanded in Thailand due to the influence of the Korean Wave, increasing the number of Korean language learners. As a result, the number of Korean learners in Thailand is the largest in the world. About 46,596 of the 159,864 elementary and secondary school Korean language learners worldwide

studied Korean in Thailand in 2021 (Korean Education Center in Thailand, 2022).

### **East Asian Governments' Language Education Efforts and Their Language Institutions in Thailand**

Japanese, Chinese, and Korean language education in Thailand is led by three educational institutions from these three countries: the JF's Bangkok office, CIs, and the Korean Education Center.

#### **Japanese Language Education and the Japan Foundation, Bangkok**

The teaching of Japanese language in Thailand has a long history dating back to the pre-World War II era. As early as 1938, the Bangkok Japanese Language School had already been established. Before World War II, the Japanese government aimed to promote Japanese culture and language in Thailand through its cultural propagation policy. This led to the development of Japanese language education in Thailand, establishing a strong cultural relationship between the two countries. However, during the war period (1941-1945), Japanese language education was enforced due to Japan's political and economic influence. After Japan's defeat, Thailand's interest in studying the Japanese language declined. (Sangiri, 2021)

Since 1951, Japan's economy began to recover, resulting in renewed interest in Japanese language education in Thailand. Initially, Japanese language education was primarily offered at universities, specifically in Bangkok, with Thammasat University and Chulalongkorn University introducing Japanese language courses in the mid-1960s. Over time, other universities began to offer Japanese language courses as well. In 1981, Japanese was officially recognized as a second foreign language option for high school students. In 2001, changes were made to Japan's primary education

curriculum, allowing Japanese language courses to be taught in middle school. In 2010, the "WORLD-CLASS STANDARD SCHOOL" (WCSS) policy was introduced for secondary schools, which allowed students to study a second language in all classes, including the sciences. This policy significantly expanded Japanese education in secondary schools.

The top five languages taught in public secondary schools in Thailand in 2018 were Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Malay, and Burmese. According to JF Survey Report 2018, Thailand ranks fifth globally in terms of Japanese language learners, boasting 184,962 learners, 2,047 teachers, and 659 educational institutions. The growth of Japanese language education in Thailand can be attributed to the long-standing presence of Japan Foundation (JF), Bangkok, in the country (The Japan Foundation, 2020).

JF, Bangkok is one of 25 overseas offices in 24 countries operated by JF under the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*The Japan Foundation - JF Worldwide*, n.d.). The distribution of JF's overseas offices indicates Japan's enthusiasm for promoting culture and Japanese language education in Southeast Asia. Of the organization's overseas offices in 24 countries, eight, or one-third, are operating in Southeast Asian countries. JF overseas offices are operating in all ten ASEAN member states except Brunei and Singapore. In addition, according to the Director of the Language Department at the JF's Bangkok Office<sup>3</sup>, the Jakarta and Bangkok offices are the first and second-largest in the world regarding staffing.

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<sup>3</sup> On May 10, 2023, an in-person interview was conducted with the Director of the Language Department, Japan Foundation, Bangkok, regarding Japanese language education at Japan Foundation.

In the early 1970s, when trade friction between Japan and the US was at its peak, the Japanese government sought ways to defuse the situation and soften Japan's image. In this context, the JF was established in 1972 to promote mutual understanding and foster cultural exchange. Similarly, JF opened a liaison office in Bangkok in 1974, a year after a significant boycott of Japanese goods in Thailand in 1973, to foster mutual understanding between the two nations through cultural exchange initiatives (Kakazu, 2010).

JF, Bangkok operates detailed programs in each of JF's three main areas: culture, language, and dialogue, based on the local context. According to the Director, JF's three focus areas are organically interconnected, with various cultural programs aimed primarily at promoting Japanese culture, followed by Japanese language learning-related projects for those whose interest in Japanese culture has motivated them to learn Japanese. Then, after learning Japanese, they could deepen their interest, leading to Japanese studies or academic exchanges. JF has effectively integrated culture, language education, and Japanese studies/international dialogue, ensuring that these areas are not isolated. It is important to note that one institution is responsible for promoting cultural activities and teaching the Japanese language. The introduction of JF's three business areas emphasizes the natural connection between these initiatives. (About the Japan Foundation, n.d.)

*Art and Cultural Exchange: Creating opportunities to encounter the values embodied in Japanese art and Japanese life*

*The Japan Foundation creates opportunities for encounters with Japanese art and culture, running programs for international contact between practitioners.*

*Japanese-Language Education Overseas: Increasing the number of people who speak Japanese increases the number of people who understand Japan*

*Students of Japanese gain understanding and appreciation of Japan in addition to knowledge of the language.*

*Japanese Studies and Intellectual Exchange: Combining a deeper understanding of Japan with an interest in learning about the world is key to resolving issues that we all share.*

*To encourage Japanese studies, the Japan Foundation supports institutions and academics around the world and assists networking.*

Japanese language education is one of the three pillars of JF, Bangkok's business, and given that the number of Japanese language learners in Thailand is 184,962, ranking fifth in the world (second in Southeast Asia), it can be seen that promoting language learning is one of the critical tasks of the JF, Bangkok office. JF Bangkok has been promoting Japanese language learning in Thailand for almost 50 years since its establishment in 1974. They offer various activities and projects, such as dispatching Japanese language specialists and teaching assistants (Nihongo Partners Program) to support Japanese language education in Thailand. They also create and provide Japanese learning materials, conduct online and offline Japanese language courses, administer JLPT, train Japanese language instructors, and organize Japanese language camps for Thai high school students.

When asked what language education activities JF, Bangkok is focusing on most among the various language education-related initiatives it is undertaking, the Director noted that while all initiatives are important, Japanese language education in secondary schools accounts for a large proportion of JF's work, given that 143,872 of

the 184,962 total Japanese language learners are secondary school students. In particular, given that more than 1,000 of the 1,300 Japanese language teachers are secondary school instructors, JF aims to improve the quality of education by enhancing their capacity. In this regard, between 2013 and 2018, JF, Bangkok, provided training for 200 Thai Japanese language teachers in collaboration with the Ministry of Education of Thailand. The program, titled "Japanese-language teacher training for public servants in Thai secondary education," successfully qualified the teachers placed in secondary schools (国際交流基金 - タイ (2020年度), n.d.).

Director stated that JF, Bangkok is an essential hub for Japanese language education in Thailand. Half of the 50 staff members currently employed at JF, Bangkok work in the language department. JF, Bangkok has the second-largest staff of any JF office worldwide, except for JF Jakarta, which has the largest staff of 100 people. Director also shared that 70-80% of JF's budget for overseas offices in Southeast and East Asia is allocated to language programs due to the high cost of dispatching Japanese teachers in these regions. JF sends eight specialists and around 50 Nihongo Partners annually to Thailand to provide Japanese language education.

*Nihongo Partners work as teaching assistants in middle and high schools across Asia, supporting Japanese teachers in their classes and promoting Japanese culture in the local community. Thailand received a total of 644 Nihongo Partners (About the Nihongo Partners Program, n.d.).*

Thanks to JF, Bangkok's efforts, the number of Japanese language learners in Thailand has been steadily increasing since the 2000s. Japanese language learners have increased 4.6 times in 20 years, from 39,822 in 1998 to 184,962 in 2018. The growth



rate was particularly steep between 2009 and 2015, from 78,802 in 2009, 129,616 in 2012, and 173,817 in 2015. The number more than doubled from 2009 to 2015. JF attributes this to increased job opportunities at Japanese companies due to the strong economic ties between the two countries, increased tourism by Thais to Japan due to the Visa Waiver Program in 2013, and the government's encouragement of second foreign language learning through the WCSS policy, which promotes the globalization of education in the Thai secondary curriculum (*Survey Report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2015*, 2017). On the other hand, the Director explained the motivation of Japanese language learners in Thailand from both the students' and parents' perspectives, stating that students often start learning Japanese out of curiosity and interest in Japanese pop culture such as anime and manga, while parents encourage their children to learn Japanese because it will help them in their future career, given the large number of Japanese companies in Thailand (5,856 Japanese companies in Thailand as of 2020, according to JETRO) (*Trend Survey of Japanese Companies in Thailand 2020*, 2021).

### **Chinese Language Education and the Confucius Institutes**

The CIs are arguably the most central element in discussing China's public diplomacy and Chinese language education abroad. The Chinese government has operated CIs and Confucius classrooms (CC) under the Chinese Ministry of Education to meet the growing demand for Chinese language learning and to effectively spread Chinese culture. CIs provide credit and non-credit language classes, support cultural activities, give Chinese language exams, and work with colleges and universities in the nation where they are situated; on the other hand, CCs are language institutes installed within a high school or a primary school in the host country (Hsiao & Yang, 2019). Since

being established in Seoul in 2004, the number of CIs has increased rapidly. Chen Baosheng, Chinese Minister of Education, mentioned the development of CIs around the world in his speech “China’s education: 40 Years of epic achievements” in December 2018 as follows:

*“The country has established 2,385 joint educational institutions and projects and eight high-level people-to-people exchange schemes through partnerships with over 180 countries or territories. It has built 533 Confucius Institutes and 1,140 Confucius classrooms across 150 countries or territories. And today, the number [of] Chinese speakers and learners outside of China has reached 100 million (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2018).”*

While the Chinese Minister of Education highlighted that more than 500 CIs had been established in more than 150 countries, CIs have not constantly expanded since their inception in 2004. Particularly in the United States and Europe, CIs have suffered many setbacks due to their inherent limitations—flagship initiatives designed to project China's new national image to the world (Pan, 2013). These flagship initiatives are essential to China's overseas propaganda framework (Mosher, 2012). The fact that they are subsidized and supervised by the Chinese government has sparked concerns that they can censor political discussions, restrict the free exchange of ideas (Sahlins, 2013), and undermine academic freedom and integrity. Many CIs in the US have closed in recent years, and as of June 2022, of the 118 CIs that once existed in the US, 104 were closed, and four are in the process of shutting down, according to a June 2022 report by the National Association of Scholars. (Peterson et al., 2022)

After the rejection of CIs in some countries or the decision to close them, there were changes in the organization responsible for CIs in China around the same time, and

the Chinese government reorganized the body responsible for CIs. The Office of Chinese Language Council International, often known as Hanban, the parent organization of CIs, changed its name to the Ministry of Education Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) in July 2020. The Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF), a subsidiary of the CLEC, was created to manage and finance the CIs and many of their replacements (Yang, 2022).

Though there is significant opposition to CIs in the US and Europe, they have been able to cruise and establish themselves in Asia, notably in Southeast Asia. This can be partly attributable to China's economic development and its reciprocal economic advantages to its neighbors. In addition, the Chinese government views Southeast Asia as strategically significant for the Silk Road Economic Belt project, and CIs quickly spread along the Southeast Asian Belt and Road corridor countries. According to the director of Singapore's only CI, there are 40 CIs in Southeast Asia: Thailand (16), Indonesia (eight), Malaysia (five), the Philippines (five), Cambodia (two), Laos (two), Singapore (one), and Vietnam (one) (Chheang, 2021).

Thailand has the most CIs among the 40 CIs in Southeast Asia and has emerged as an influential nation in the region, hosting 16 CIs and 21 CCs. Why has Thailand become the region's top choice for CIs travel? As Bao (2017) noted, the Thai government attempted to prevent schools from teaching Chinese as a part of its effort to eradicate a communist threat over most of the 20th century. However, Thailand realized it could profit from China's economic expansion provided it had a constructive relationship with China, which was developing into an economic superpower. Thailand's support for China's soft power strategy of promoting Chinese through CIs was prompted by

this knowledge. In 2006, the Thai Ministry of Education (MOE) and Hanban (Office of Chinese Language Council International) signed a cooperation framework for developing Chinese language teaching and learning in Thai higher education institutions in Bangkok, establishing 12 CIs and 11 CCs. In 2013, the two governments signed the “Vision and Plan for Development of Sino–Thai Relations,” which led to 16 CIs and 21 CCs throughout the country. (Zhou, 2021)

CIs are established as a partnership between a partner organization in China and a local organization in Thailand and follow a consistent format in their operations. The facilities, equipment, and buildings belong to the local Thai university. Each CI has a joint committee comprising two directors—one Thai and one Chinese—who are citizens of both nations. Hanban appoints and pays the Chinese director and instructors with a two- or four-year tenure after receiving their recommendations from a Chinese partner university. Hanban sets up Chinese volunteers, and although they are not paid, they are given a living allowance for an average of one year. Hanban also imports the textbooks used in CIs, which are effective communicators of Chinese culture. Therefore, Hanban has authority over the CI's finances, staffing, and curriculum (Kornphanat, 2016).

The CI has a few distinctive features in Thailand. First, there is little debate over the CI in Thai academics, in contrast to the US and Europe. Second, the first Maritime Silk Road CI in the world was established in Thailand. Third, the CI in Thailand is characterized by the involvement of the Chinese diaspora in multiple activities.

The first characteristic of CIs in Thailand is that CIs are not seen adversely or controversially in Thailand compared to the US and Europe. Critics from the West

claim that CIs suppress academic freedom and propagate an idealized view of Chinese history and culture. The CIs have been charged with employing stringent hiring standards and failing to adhere to Western political principles, like hiring language instructors and selecting training materials. Critics have also raised worries that Confucius Institutes might be used to surveil Chinese students going overseas to study. According to some critics, the institutes serve as instruments of Chinese soft power and pose a threat to academic and personal independence (Ornholt, 2022).

Even though CIs in the West are frequently attacked for disseminating propaganda and eroding academic freedom, research from the Center for Strategic and International Studies indicates that CIs in the Indo-Pacific can be a win-win partnership (Lee, 2023). During the interview with 26 scholars and journalists in Thailand with expertise in either China or Japan, when asked about the CI's political influence, most agreed that Thais are generally confident that external cultural influences will not dominate them, so controversies are limited (Carminati, 2020). Kornphanat (2016) explains why Thai academia embraces CIs, remains silent, and competes with one another for support from the Chinese government despite the controversial debates on CIs. Self-censorship and the legacy of the military dictatorship regime have become embedded in Thai academia, and academic freedom is not the foremost priority of Thai scholars. Thus, these self-censorship techniques will continue as long as China provides financial support since they benefit both parties, and there would also probably be no criticism of the subject of academic freedom. This approach and perception of CIs by Thai academics are reflected in a seminar by Mae Fah Luang University and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand on March 3, 2018, entitled "Strategies Engagement of the Confucius

Institutes in Thailand under Thailand 4.0." The speech, delivered by the President of Mae Fah Luang University, Associate Professor Dr. Vanchai Sirichana, represents the ideal CIs envisioned by the Chinese government.

*“The Confucius Institutes in Thailand made a clear and systematic connection between China and Thailand. At the beginning of their establishment, the Confucius Institutes themselves has been satisfying the demands of people from different countries and regions in the world for learning the Chinese language, enhancing the people’s understanding of the Chinese language and culture, strengthening educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, and deepening friendly relationships with other nations (Mae Fah Luang University, 2018).”*

However, despite the viewpoints mentioned earlier—such as the belief that Thailand is largely immune to foreign political and cultural influence and the academic community's lack of sensitivity to self-censorship as a result of its experience under the military junta—there are undoubtedly some within Thailand who are worried about the expanding impact of CIs and China's presence in Thailand. Zhou (2021) claims that the local Thai group is unsatisfied and afraid of the role of CIs and China's expanding influence. Additionally, some Thai intellectuals have underlined that the role of the institutes in Thailand, which are seen as nationalistic tools, may not have been sufficiently scrutinized (Carminati, 2020). Thammasat, a well-regarded university in Thailand with a strong social sciences program and a history of student activism, has not yet opened a CI due to these concerns. Thammasat was also offered a CI, which garnered deliberation by its Chinese Department in the Liberal Arts faculty, which decided to decline the offer due to concerns about potential effects on academic freedom and presentations or seminars on sensitive subjects. Small financial

assistance provided by China was not worth the potential for future issues and loss of autonomy to the institute's management (Trisanawadee, 2020).

The second is that the first CI, the Maritime Silk Road CI (MSRCI), was launched in Thailand, representing China's BRI policy. In 2015, the first MSRCI in the world was founded at Dhurakij Pundit University, and in 2017, another one was established at Phranaitkhon Rajabhat University. CIs in Thailand play an essential role in facilitating commercial activities and supporting the BRI, as some of the programs are tailored to the business community. After two MSRCIs were launched in Bangkok, introducing the BRI became the main objective of the CIs (Zhou, 2021).

Third, CIs in Thailand are characterized by the involvement of the Chinese diaspora in multiple activities. Of the estimated 40 million ethnic Chinese diaspora, roughly 30 million live in Southeast Asia. And among the ethnic Chinese diaspora, the overseas Chinese population in Thailand is 9,392,792 (2012), constituting approximately 11% of the entire population and making the Chinese diaspora in Thailand the largest Chinese population outside China (Tan, 2013). In this regard, CIs in Thailand provide language and cultural services for the local society and the Chinese diaspora in Thailand. Notably, many activities and programs organized by CIs are open to Thai audiences and exclusive to overseas Chinese communities. Various hometown groups, leaders from overseas Chinese associations, and entrepreneurs are invited to participate in various cultural activities. There are programs designed specifically for training overseas Chinese language teachers (Zhou, 2021). In addition, local overseas Chinese groups in Thailand contribute to the CIs' various activities by promoting Chinese culture and donating funds and teaching materials (Hsiao & Yang, 2019).

Unlike CIs, offered within a country's universities, CCs are within a country's secondary schools. Since the first CC in the world was established in 2006 at Thai Trimit High School in Bangkok, Thailand (Wang, 2019), 26 CCs have been established in Thailand. Some are located in prominent secondary schools in the country, such as Jeddah Palace School, Suankularb Wittayalai, Chitrolada, and Catholic Church school, referred to as "The cradle of Thai elites" (Zhou, 2021). The Chinese diaspora in Thailand also plays a vital role in developing and operating CCs, which is why many CCs have been established in Chinese schools in Thailand (Wang, 2019). Bing (2013) describes the current status of Thai language education in Thai CCs as follows.

*“CC at Chitralada School offers the language courses for 1,370 students at 30 classes in 15 grades as well as basic Chinese training to the school staff and Chinese Proficiency tests training. CC at Traimit Witthayalai School organizes the training courses for the local teachers frequently and has published 18 textbooks named ‘A Happy Trip to China’ with Chinese and Thai versions, which are adopted by thousands of students in the primary and middle schools in Bangkok. Srinakorn School offers language courses using multi-media system. The rest CCs have offered relative Chinese language teaching course as well. (Bing, 2013)”*

To gain insight into the operations of CIs in Thailand, I have examined the Confucius Institute of Chulalongkorn University (CICU), which includes an analysis of its personnel, primary business, and functioning. The CICU is one of sixteen CIs in Thailand, with six of them located in Bangkok. It was established in 2006 as a collaboration between two prestigious universities in Thailand and China, namely Chulalongkorn University and Peking University. Initially, Chulalongkorn University declined Hanban's CI proposal due to their Chinese language department's long-



standing operation of over 20 years. However, it is believed that Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, a Chulalongkorn University alumna, was influential in persuading them to establish the CICU (Shuto, 2018). According to reports, Thai universities emphasized the significance of collaborating with Chinese partner universities and increasing opportunities for globalization when competing to attract CIs. It also impacts a university's reputation and enrolment. Therefore, Chulalongkorn University insisted on partnering with Peking University when drawing CIs (Zhou, 2021).

The CICU has been operating for 17 years and has 12 Chinese teachers and three Thai staff. According to its Chinese Director<sup>4</sup>, the CICU's committee consists of a Chinese director from Peking University and a Thai director, Dean of the Faculty of Arts of Chulalongkorn University. There is a Board of Directors, which is supervising the operation of CICU. Presidents or Vice Presidents in charge of CI affairs of both universities are in the Board. According to the Director, Chulalongkorn University provides over 1,000 square meters of land in Chulalongkorn, which is used as the CICU office, Chulalongkorn Chinese Library, and Chinese Cultural Activities Center. In addition to the site, Chulalongkorn University provides three Thai staff members and assists the Chinese staff with their stay. Peking University provides a Chinese director and teachers and covers labor costs. PKU also provides about 100,000 USD per year for daily operation of CICU. There has been a shift in communication between the CICU and China following Hanban's transition to the CLEC and CIEF. In this regard, the CICU currently contacts Peking University to fulfill their requirements for sending teachers and acquiring educational resources. Peking University then

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<sup>4</sup> On May 16, 2023, an in-person interview was conducted with the Chinese Director of the Confucius Institute at Chulalongkorn University (CICU) regarding Chinese language education at CICU.

coordinates with the CLEC and CIEF to meet these needs.

Director has outlined the main activities of the CICU, which include Chinese language education, training for Thai Chinese teachers, HSK/HSKK test center operations, cultural activities, and the study in China program. The CICU offers a range of Chinese language courses through both regular and non-regular curricula, with approximately 3,000 students participating each year across its various programs. Additionally, the CICU provides Chinese language training to employees of the Thai Immigration Department and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation. Currently, the CICU sends Chinese language instructors to teach two courses at Chulalongkorn University's Chinese language faculty and three instructors to secondary schools in Bangkok to provide Chinese language courses. The CICU also organizes cultural activities, both independently and in collaboration with other organizations, such as the Lunar (Chinese) New Year celebration, The Second China-Thai Literature Translation and Publishing Forum, Chinese-Thai cultural practice for Chinese staff, a lecture on the 13th-century Chinese drama Love Style, and the China-Thai Friendship Badminton Tournament. Additionally, CICU's Study in China program is an important project that offers students with a certain level of Chinese language proficiency the opportunity to study abroad in China, with around 20 students selected each year.

The Chinese Director at CICU emphasized that Thailand has the highest number of CIs in the Southeast Asia region, mainly because the demand for the Chinese language in Thailand has increased significantly, and he believes that there are currently more than 1 million Chinese language learners in Thailand. The need for the

Chinese language has significantly increased since the Thai Ministry of Education implemented a policy to make Chinese language learning compulsory in Thai formal education institutions. In addition, the increasing number of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand has increased the demand for Chinese language learning among employees of Thai authorities—immigration, tourist police, and customs—who work with them. In addition, many families in the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia have been sending their children to study abroad, primarily to Western countries, but more recently to China, which has also increased interest in learning Chinese.

The Chinese Director explained that the only Silkroad CI in the world began as an initiative of a Thai monk with a broad vision, who, after traveling to China, realized the need to establish a Silkroad CI and convinced Hanban to launch the first Maritime Silkroad CI in 2015. The activities of Maritime Silkroad CIs are almost the same as those of other CIs in Thailand and do not have a different political nature or characteristic than other CIs.

### **Korean Language Education and the Korean Education Center**

The modern history of Korea is one of unprecedented success. Despite being the only divided country in the world, it became the first developing country to move to the group of developed economies according to the classification by The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and its rapid economic growth and fascinating culture have attracted much attention from around the world. In particular, the Korean cultural craze represented by the Korean Wave (Hallyu in Korean), which began in the late 1990s, has brought an unprecedented spotlight to Korea. Starting with K-pop music, Hallyu has gradually expanded to include Korean dramas, films,

fashion, beauty products, and cuisine. Southeast Asia is where Hallyu's influence has been the greatest since the 2000s. Among them, Thailand is a country where the power of Hallyu is so immense that it has the most significant number of Hallyu clubs and members in Southeast Asia. Over the last 20 years, the Korean Wave has significantly influenced Thailand, moving from being a cultural trend to a widely accepted social phenomenon. Korean eateries, which used to be limited to certain areas for Koreans, have increased in quantity and can now be located in major shopping centers and department stores. (Korea Foundation, 2023)

*“According to the Global Hallyu Status 2022 report published by the Korea Foundation (2023), there are 1,684 Hallyu-related clubs in 116 countries around the world with 178,825,261 members, of which there are 112 Hallyu clubs in Thailand with 16,841,110 members”*

The demand for Korean and Korean language learning has gradually increased, especially among young Thai people immersed in Korean culture (Thandee, n.d.). Thailand has now become the country with the highest number of Korean language learners in secondary education in the world. In 2022, there were 46,119 Korean language learners in 180 secondary schools in Thailand. This is the most significant number of secondary school learners globally, representing 27% of all worldwide secondary school learners (Korean Education Center, 2022). There has been a steep growth considering that in 2015, Korean language education was provided to 21,745 students in 70 schools. As mentioned earlier, Korean was first adopted as a subject for the PAT, a university entrance exam, in 2018, and by 2022, it was the language with the most test takers after Chinese, indicating the popularity of learning Korean in recent years (*Status of Korean Language Education in Thailand*, n.d.). It is also worth

noting that 19 universities in Thailand currently offer Korean language programs, either as a major (15 universities) or non-major (4 universities) option (Korean Education Center. (n.d.).

The history of Korean language education in Thailand can be divided into higher and secondary education. The development of the Korean language in higher education was first seen at Prince Songkhla University at Pattani campus, where Korean language education officially began in 1986 when the university adopted Korean as an elective course. Later, Korean was adopted as an elective course at Chulalongkorn University in 1991 and Burapa University in 1995 (Thandee, n.d.). Since then, Korean language education in universities has steadily expanded, and as of 2022, Korean language courses are available at 19 universities in Thailand, 15 with a major in Korean and four with a minor in Korean (Korean Education Center, n.d.). Meanwhile, in secondary education in Thailand, Korean language classes were first offered in 2009, followed by eight schools in 2010 and 42 schools in 2011 (Larprungrueng & Lee, 2020).

Since the late 1990s, the demand for Korean language learning abroad has increased with the increasing popularity of Korean culture. Since then, various projects have been promoted by the Korean government. Several government ministries are currently engaged in Korean language projects, and three ministries are mainly responsible for overseas Korean language education: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education (Korean Education Center), and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (King Sejong Institute (KSI)). In Thailand, the Korean Education Center, under the Ministry of Education, takes the lead in promoting Korean language

education in secondary education in Thailand. Besides KEC, Thailand has four KSIs - at the Korean Cultural Center and three universities (Kasem Bundit University, Mahasarakham University, and Chiang Mai University) - under the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MOCST) of Korea which are Korean language education organizations supported by the Korean government. In 2009, MOCST introduced the KSI co-branding strategy to create a consistent global brand for Korean language institutes. The KSI Foundation was established under the MOCST in 2012 to manage overseas Korean language education and culture promotion projects. KSI has experienced steady growth since its establishment in 2012, increasing from 13 locations in three countries in 2007 to an impressive 244 locations across 84 countries in 2022. Following the co-branding strategy mentioned above, KEC has registered as KSIs in Thailand. However, they operate independently as KEC and do not perform work under the KSI identity. The Korea Foundation, under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is also involved in Korean language education abroad. Still, its activities focus more on expanding Korean studies than the Korean language.

The KEC in Thailand opened in June 2012 and has been conducting various projects to promote Korean language learning in Thailand. One of their primary tasks includes administering and managing a Korean language proficiency test—the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK). The Korean Teacher Dispatch Program, which has sent roughly 50 native Korean instructors to teach Korean in Thai elementary and secondary schools each year since 2012, is one of the KEC's most successful initiatives in Thailand.

According to KEC Deputy Director<sup>5</sup>, in 2023, 58 of the 86 Korean teachers sent around the world were deployed to Thailand, which shows that the Korean government attaches great importance to Korean language education in Thai secondary schools. As the demand for and popularity of the Korean language increases, it is crucial to secure qualified Korean teachers. Thus, various projects are being promoted to strengthen the capacity of Korean teachers in Thailand and local Korean teachers. The Thai government is also keen on the development of Thai Korean teachers and has implemented a special training plan for them. During 2013–2017, the Thai Ministry of Education selected 35 trainees per year, comprising a total of 140 scholarship recipients. After three semesters of education in Thailand and one semester in Korea, they obtained Korean language teacher certificates and were appointed Korean language teachers in Thai secondary schools (Larprungrueng & Lee, 2020). As the Korean government supported the training of Thai Korean teachers in Korea, the project is an example of a successful collaboration between the two governments to advance Korean language education in Thailand.

Deputy Director noted that while Thai students' motivation to learn Korean often stems from their interest in Korean culture and Korea in general, their parents sometimes may be less willing to encourage Korean language learning for this reason. This assertion aligns with Professor Thandee's (n.d.) assessment that many Korean language students are learning the language more for personal fulfillment than to become proficient in it for the job. When there isn't enough employment that caters to

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<sup>5</sup> On April 5, 2023, an in-person interview was conducted with the Director and Deputy Director of the Korean Education Center (KEC) in Thailand regarding Korean language education at KEC, followed by an interview with the Deputy Director via email on May 9, May 24, and May 25, 2023, for additional details.

the Korean language to accommodate everyone specializing in it, it's unclear how Korean language learning will be sustained.

Recognizing the problem above, KEC has established a dedicated section on its website called Thai-Korean Job Linking to assist Korean language learners in Thailand with finding employment after language learning. This section also includes a bulletin board to connect Korean-speaking Thai workers with Korean companies in Thailand. In August 2022, KEC Thailand, Human Resources Development Korea Employment Permit System Center in Thailand, and the Korean-Thai Chamber of Commerce signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to take a more systematic approach to expanding employment opportunities for Korean language learners. The MOU aims to expand Korean language education in Thailand and provide a workforce with Korean language skills, which will contribute to the continued growth of Korean language learners in the long term.

### **Strategies, Similarities and Differences of the Three Institutions and Suggestions on Their Future Directions**

According to a survey conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018 among citizens of ten ASEAN countries, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean were the top three most desired second foreign languages to learn among Thai respondents, with 62%, 59%, and 35%, respectively (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019). The above survey results from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs are also consistent with the fact that Chinese, Korean, and Japanese were the most popular languages for the second language section of the 2022 PAT (Status of Korean Language Education in Thailand, n.d.). These three East Asian languages have gained popularity in



Thailand due to the importance of Japan, China, and Korea in various aspects such as economic, investment, cultural, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges.

Additionally, a study on the motivation of Thai university students to learn languages in East Asian countries found that L2 learning experience<sup>6</sup> scored the highest among Chinese learners, while culture/community interest scored the highest among Japanese and Korean learners (Yang & Chanyoo, 2022). In other words, Chinese learners were motivated by learning experiences, such as teachers, peers, curriculum, and experiences of success in learning, while Japanese and Korean learners were motivated by an interest in culture.

The popularity of East Asian languages as secondary foreign languages in Thailand is largely due to the language learning promotion policies of Japan, China, and Korea and the institutions implementing these policies in Thailand. Studying the similarities and differences among those institutions can help us understand their efforts to create soft power through language education.

The JF Overseas Office in Bangkok was founded in July 1974, two years after the establishment of JF in 1972. JF was created as an agency under Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the 1970s, focusing on promoting mutual understanding through cultural diplomacy. In March 2006, the first CI was established at Khon Kaen University in Thailand as a result of China's emphasis on cultural soft power since 2000. Since the establishment of the first CI, 11 were established in 2006, followed by

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<sup>6</sup> Dörnyei (2005; 2009) proposed a theory of the L2(second language) motivational self-system, which consists of three factors: the Ideal L2 self, the ought-to self, and the L2 learning experience. The L2 learning experience is related to the learner's immediate environment and experiences rather than an imagined future self, and the learning environment is influenced by learning factors around the learner, such as teachers, peers, curriculum, and successful learning experiences.

one each in 2009, 2014, 2015 (two), and 2017. In June 2012, KEC Thailand was established. Before its opening, the Korea Research Foundation and the Korea Foundation primarily aided Korean language education at universities by sending lecturers, providing materials, and training Thai professors (Jung, 2007). JF, Bangkok has been promoting the national language for 49 years, while CIs and KEC have been operating for 17 and 11 years, respectively.

These three entities have different overseeing organizations within their home countries and operate differently. JF is an overseas office of the Japan Foundation that falls under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. CI is run by the CLEC Foundation (previously known as Hanban) under the Ministry of Education of China. However, CI now communicates with Chinese partner universities instead of CLEC directly, which then Chinese partner universities communicate with CLEC. KEC is an organization created by the Korean Ministry of Education for Korean language education abroad and is affiliated with the Korean Embassy in Thailand. On the other hand, the King Sejong Institute is designated and financed by the King Sejong Institute Foundation, a part of the Korean Ministry of Culture.

These organizations differ in their approach to language education and cultural activities. JF and CIs offer a combination of language education and cultural programs that work together to promote interest in Japan and China, respectively. JF, Bangkok's three areas of focus—culture, language, and dialogue—are linked and work collaboratively to promote interest in Japan through cultural activities that might lead to the desire to learn Japanese and further Japanese studies and intellectual exchanges. CIs operate from 16 universities in Thailand, offering Chinese language courses and

facilitating cultural exchanges with partner universities in China. However, KEC focuses primarily on promoting Korean language learning in Thai secondary education and is not responsible for cultural events. The other King Sejong Institutes in Thailand combine Korean language education with cultural activities. In this regard, KEC is more similar to JF, Bangkok's language department regarding roles and field of activities. At the same time, King Sejong Institutes are similar to the CIs established within Thai universities, combining language education and cultural activities.

These three organizations share the responsibility of conducting officially recognized language proficiency exams. JF in Bangkok administers JLPT twice a year, while the CIs offer HSK several times annually, and KEC administers TOPIK three to four times a year. In 2022, 49,581 individuals took the JLPT exam, over 5,000 took the HSK exam at one of the 16 CIs (CICU), and 6,485 took the TOPIK exam.

Comparing the textbooks used by the three institutions is important because learners rely on them for personal study outside the classroom. Their organizational structure and interest in language learning can also impact their persistence in learning. JF Bangkok, CIs, and KECs have both similarities and differences in their approach to language learning textbooks. JF Bangkok provides a variety of standardized textbooks produced by JF Headquarters for different learning levels and purposes. CIs also use textbooks made by Chinese headquarters (Hanban in the past) that are translated into local languages (Hong & He, 2015). Additionally, KEC has prioritized textbook development and created its own textbook specifically for Thai learners in 2022. Although it is impossible to determine which textbooks are more effective for foreign

language learning, it is noteworthy that KEC has tried to cater more closely to Thai learners.

The three organizations vary in size. The language department has the largest staff among the three departments at JF, Bangkok, consisting of 25 people, half of JF, Bangkok's 50 staff. Although no information is available regarding the size of all 16 CIs, the CICU has 15 employees, including 12 Chinese and three Thai workers. KEC has three officers from the Korean Ministry of Education, 3 Korean staff, and 3 Thai staff, totaling nine people.

All three organizations aim to implement policies to promote national languages, provide support, and collaborate with related organizations, such as the Thai Ministry of Education. While JF, Bangkok and KEC offer Japanese and Korean language courses, such courses are not their primary focus. JF, Bangkok limits class sizes to a maximum of 120 students in six courses per semester, as they support Japanese language learning for non-profit purposes and wish to refrain from competing with the private language education market. KEC holds classes twice a year, divided into six levels of Korean proficiency, with approximately 300 students per year, focusing primarily on supporting policy aspects to promote the Korean language. On the other hand, CI plays a more active role in providing both regular and non-regular language courses, with over 3,000 students taking Chinese language classes annually through the CICU.

Meeting the rising demand for language learning is a significant challenge for all three organizations. Having an adequate number of language instructors is crucial to addressing this challenge. Hence, the organizations strive to dispatch native teachers

to Thailand and provide training and capacity-building opportunities for local Thai teachers.

JF, Bangkok offers two programs for Japanese teachers sent to Thailand from Japan: specialist dispatch and Nihongo Partners (Japanese teaching assistance). Eight specialists are sent annually through specialist dispatch, while Nihongo Partners sends around 30 people annually. According to JF Survey Report 2018, a total of 375 Partners (long-term dispatchers) have been dispatched from 2014 to 2019. There are 12 Chinese professors at the CICU alone, of which five are volunteer teachers who specialize in teaching Chinese. Currently, the KEC office has employed Korean teachers. Additionally, out of the 86 professional Korean teachers sent by the Korean Ministry of Education to different parts of the world, 58 have been sent to Thailand, reflecting the Ministry's commitment to improving Korean language education in Thailand.

Meeting the demand for East Asian languages in Thailand solely through deploying native instructors is difficult. Therefore, the three organizations are working towards increasing the number of local instructors in Thailand and enhancing their skills.

From 2013 to 2017, the Japanese-Language Teacher Training Project for Public Servants in Thai Secondary Education, led by JF in collaboration with the Thai Ministry of Education, effectively trained 200 instructors within the Thai secondary education system. The CICU has conducted training for university teachers in Chinese language departments and training for secondary school Chinese language teachers annually. Each year, the CICU trains approximately 200 teachers through its programs. Since 2007, the organization has conducted training programs for 2,000 Thai Chinese

teachers. The KEC offers the Korean Language Teacher Training Program, which includes 200 hours of training for 30 pre-service and in-service Korean language teachers. Additionally, high-performing teachers receive training visits to Korea. Currently, 122 individuals have completed the Korean language training program since 2021.

JF, Bangkok aims to promote Japanese language learning in Thailand through a strategic approach that relies on consistent and continuous policies built on its extensive experience in the field. JF is the only organization that compiles statistics on Japanese language learners, institutions, and teachers worldwide every three years, allowing them to observe the status and trends of Japanese language learning in different countries and over different periods. As the central tower for Japanese language education in Thailand, JF Bangkok maintains close cooperation with the Thai government, including the Ministry of Education, and promotes various projects such as dispatching Japanese specialists, providing Japanese textbooks, providing Japanese language courses, and implementing JLPT. JF Bangkok's primary business goal is to promote secondary school Japanese language learning, given that 78% of Japanese learners in Thailand are secondary school students. To achieve this, JF Bangkok works to strengthen the capacity of local Japanese language teachers through various training programs and works closely with the Thai Ministry of Education. By encouraging Japanese language learning in secondary education, JF Bangkok aims to secure long-term learners who may continue to use Japanese for higher education or employment. CIs in Thailand adopt a strategy of building connections with the country's elite and influential figures. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn is a notable example of CIs' cordial relations with the Thai elite. According

to Zhou (2021), the Princess has actively participated in various activities of CIs in Thailand, including attending the opening ceremonies of new CIs and significant CI cultural events due to her fascination with the Chinese language and culture. As highlighted by Shuto (2018), Princess Sirindhorn also played a vital role in establishing a CI at Chulalongkorn University. In addition, the Princess permitted her name to be used for the CI library at Chulalongkorn University, leading up to the establishment of Sirindorn Chinese Library. Dr. Han, the Director of CICU, stated that CICU offers Thai language courses to institutions like the Thai Immigration Office and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation, which demonstrates that CIs focus not only on teaching Chinese but also building relationships and networking with key institutions in Thailand. While JF and KEC operate independently, CIs work in collaboration with host country universities and partner universities in China. From the beginning, CIs prioritize strengthening connections with important institutions in the region where they are based through Chinese language education and cultural activities. CIs, located throughout Thailand, have implemented specific strategies to engage with local elites. According to Zhou (2021), CIs in Thailand have established relationships with high-ranking figures in politics, media, education, and culture. This approach allows CIs to establish connections with leaders and decision-makers in Thai society, which can lead to more visible and tangible results in expanding their influence in Thailand in the future.

KEC's main objective is to expand the popularity of learning the Korean language beyond secondary education in Thailand and to ensure its sustainability. Deputy Director emphasizes the importance of creating a cycle that includes learning Korean in secondary education, continuing to study the language in higher education through

study abroad opportunities in Korea, and ultimately obtaining Korean-related employment. This approach aims to prevent Korean language learning from being a short-term pursuit and to incentivize it as a valuable skill for building a career. KEC is also working to improve the quality of Korean language education in Thailand by enhancing the skills and capacities of Korean language instructors and developing better teaching materials. With 27% of the world's Korean language learners in secondary education taught in Thailand, KEC and the Korean Ministry of Education provide strategic support. The Korean government has sent 58 out of 86 Korean language teachers to Thailand to work in Thai secondary schools, indicating that Thailand is a priority country for promoting Korean language learning. Despite being a newer language education center compared to JF, Bangkok, and CIs in Thailand, KEC has developed a clear strategy to promote the benefits of learning Korean and address challenges in long-term language learning. With the widespread popularity of Korean cultural content in Thailand, many Thais already have some exposure to the Korean language. Establishing a system where learning Korean, initially sparked by an interest in Korean culture, can lead to career opportunities is expected to grow Korean language education.



## **Chapter 4. East Asian Governments' Strategies to Combine Language Promotion with Other Public Diplomacy Instruments to Maximize Soft Power**

### **Importance of Exchanges in the Discussion of Soft Power**

Educational exchanges such as government scholarships, study abroad programs, and intellectual exchanges can help create soft power by developing sustainable relationships with individuals in other countries. According to Joseph Nye's book "Future of Power," public diplomacy has three stages. The third stage, which is the most crucial, focuses on establishing enduring connections with significant individuals through methods like scholarships, exchanges, training, seminars, conferences, and media access. Nye (2011) notes that many of the 750,000 students who study in the US annually develop a fondness for the country as research has consistently shown that exchange students return home with a more positive view of the country in which they studied and the people with whom they interacted. For the US, it is an asset that 211 of the world's leaders received higher education in the US, and it indicates that educational exchanges can sometimes directly impact leadership decisions. Though people getting higher education in a foreign country may not all become the leaders of their country, they can still become academics or opinion leaders with a positive view of the country they studied. Moreover, cultural and educational exchanges mutually impact each other as time passes, increasing understanding of both countries. For instance, the American University in Beirut initially increased American soft power in Lebanon but later enhanced Lebanon's soft power in America (Nye, 2011).

### **State of people-to-people exchange between the Three East Countries and Thailand**

It is crucial to note Thailand's relationships with Japan, China, and Korea regarding people-to-people exchanges. In 2019, Thailand received 11 million Chinese visitors, 1.89 million Korean visitors, and 1.81 million Japanese visitors. (Mandarawata, 2022) China ranked first, Korea fourth, and Japan sixth regarding foreign visitors to Thailand. On the other hand, Japan is the most visited East Asian country by Thais, with the number of Thais visiting Japan increasing almost five times from 260,000 in 2012 to 1.31 million in 2019. (Japan Tourism Statistics, n.d.) The number of Thais visiting China remained between 600,000 and 800,000 between 2013 and 2018 (*Tourism in China - Wikipedia*, 2023), and the number of Thais visiting Korea remained between 400,000 and 600,000 during the same period. (*Tourgo Statistics*, n.d.)

Japan, China, and Korea are important to Thailand regarding people-to-people exchanges. China, with its 10 million annual tourists, constitutes the largest group of tourists in the country. As the leading industry in Thailand is tourism, it provides an apparent reason for Thais and related businesses to promote an understanding of China, including the Chinese language. In addition, Japan is the most preferred destination for Southeast Asians, and 1.3 million Thais visited Japan in 2019, making it the most visited of the three East Asian countries.

Japan has the largest number of long-term residents in Thailand, followed by a similar but slightly smaller number of Chinese, with Korea having the smallest number of long-term residents. According to the statistics, there are 78,431 Japanese (2022),

77,000 Chinese (2020), and 18,130 Koreans (2021) long-term residents in Thailand<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, as of 2017, 36,550 Japanese, 23,633 Chinese, and 6,035 Koreans lived in Thailand with work permits for professional and skilled occupations (OCHA, 2019).

### **Educational Exchanges**

According to Joseph Nye, building long-lasting relationships is crucial in public diplomacy as it can lead to positive perceptions of a country and a deeper understanding of its culture and society. Many countries have recognized this and made attracting international students and providing scholarships a vital aspect of their public diplomacy efforts. In 2010, the Chinese Ministry of Education launched the Study in China plan to attract 500,000 international students, including 150,000 degreed students, by 2020. With 492,185 international students in China in 2018, including 258,122 degreed students, China has almost achieved its goal. Korea and Thailand had the highest number of international students in China, with 50,600 and 28,608, respectively (Ministry of Education of China, 2019). Moreover, 12.8% (28,608) of international students in China received scholarships from the Chinese government.

In Japan, the term "soft power" was frequently used in political and academic circles in the 2000s. In 2009, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) emphasized the importance of enhancing Japan's soft power through diplomatic strategies and plans, such as Japanese language education, intellectual exchanges, and science and

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<sup>7</sup> Statistics on Japanese residents in Thailand are from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/thailand/data.html>). Statistics on Chinese residents are from the Yusof Ishak Institute article "2022/30 "New Chinese Migrants in Chiang Mai: Parallel Paths for Social Interaction and Cultural Adjustment" (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg>) Statistics on Korean residents are from the Embassy of Korea to Thailand ([https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/th-ko/brd/m\\_24591/view.do?seq=7&page=1](https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/th-ko/brd/m_24591/view.do?seq=7&page=1)).

technology (Fukushima, 2011). From 2000 to 2022, the number of international students in Japan increased from 64,011 to 231,146, with Chinese and Vietnamese students comprising more than 60% (Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), 2023). Thai students have remained steady at 3,000–4,000 since 2015. The Japanese government has consistently provided scholarships to 8,000 to 10,000 students yearly since 2000, despite the increase in international students.

Similarly, the number of international students in Korea has increased significantly in the past 20 years, from 12,314 in 2003 to 166,892 in 2022 (KEDI, 2022). Chinese and Vietnamese students also make up the majority of the international student population in Korea, with 67,439 and 37,940 students, respectively. Thai students accounted for 961 students, with 408 studying the Korean language. Furthermore, 2.4% of the total international students in Korea receive Korean government scholarships. According to the KEC Bangkok, 303 Thai students have studied in Korea under Korean government scholarships to date.

According to De Lima's (2007) analysis, there are three primary purposes for international educational exchanges in public diplomacy: (1) promoting mutual understanding, (2) creating a favorable image of the host country, and (3) garnering support for the host country's foreign policy. (De Lima, 2007) When discussing global educational programs, the most well-known initiative is the Fulbright scholarship offered in the United States. The Fulbright Program, led by the US government and joined by over 160 countries globally, was established in 1946, and since then, it has enabled more than 400,000 scholars, artists, teachers, professionals, and students to study, research, teach, exchange ideas, and address shared international issues. (The

Fulbright Program, n.d.) Similar to how the United States utilizes the Fulbright program to foster mutual understanding with over 160 countries and cultivate individuals who are friendly towards the U.S., Japan, China, and Korea also have government scholarship programs that play a significant role in their public diplomacy efforts, as they are dedicated to promoting international education and fostering mutual understanding through their scholarship programs. The Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholarship, Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) program, and Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program all offer opportunities for international students to study in these countries and become civilian diplomats to promote cultural exchange.

In Japan, public diplomacy is carried out by various agencies, including the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), the JF, and the Japan International Cooperation Center (JICE). JASSO is part of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), while the JF and JICE operate under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through these agencies, Japan has initiated various youth exchange programs such as Japan East Asia Network Exchanges for Students and Youths (JENESYS), Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET), Global Youth Exchange Program, Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Exchange Program, etc.

JASSO is an independent administrative institution that manages scholarship programs, support programs for international students, and student support programs. The aim is to develop creative individuals who will become future leaders of society and promote international understanding and exchange. Every year, the Japanese MEXT awards the scholarship to young Thai talents to study in Japan. Based on the

Outline of the Student Exchange System in Japan published by the Japanese MEXT in 2006, the objectives of academic exchanges are: (1) to promote mutual understanding between Japan and foreign countries and build human networks, (2) to nurture Japanese student with a global outlook and shape an open vibrant society, (3) to internationalize Japanese universities and increase their competitiveness, and (4) to make intellectual contribution to the international community. (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2007)

Additionally, JICE has been conducting Japan East Asia Network Exchanges for Students and Youths (JENESYS) program frequently. This one to two-week program provides opportunity for around 20 to 30 Thai university or High school students to visit Japan for doing exchange with their counterparts in Japan under different themes from ‘Exchange in Science and Technology’ to ‘Exchange for Monozukuri (Manufacturing) and Technology’. (Japan International Cooperation Center (JICE), n.d.)

Japan highly regards student exchange programs as a powerful means to foster mutual understanding and strengthen connections between countries. International students, including those from Thailand, have the potential to act as valuable ambassadors, thereby bolstering Japan's global prominence. (Mubah, 2019)

To achieve its goal to attract 500,000 international students by 2020, Chinese government has been providing many kinds of government scholarships and 28,608 students, 12.8% of the total international students, was benefitted from the Chinese government in China had a significant number of Thai students in 2018, with a total of 28,608, making it the second-largest international student population.

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation in Thailand has provided a list of scholarships available in China for which Thai students can apply. Those diverse scholarship programs by the Chinese government include the CSC, Chinese Provincial Government Scholarships, CI Scholarship, ANSO Scholarship, BRI Scholarship, and Chinese Government Scholarship - Silk Road Scholarship Program. The Chinese CSC Scholarship is the central scholarship the Chinese government offers that cover Chinese language certificates, undergraduate, master's, and doctoral studies. CI scholarship is for teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and it offers scholarships for short-term Chinese study, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. BRI scholarship was created after the "Belt and Road Initiative" was announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013. (ข้อมูลทุนการศึกษาในประเทศไทย  
(*Scholarship Information in China*), 2021)

There are scholarships available exclusively for students from ASEAN countries. The ASEAN-China Young Leaders Scholarship Program (ACYLS) aims to promote educational cooperation, academic exchanges, and people-to-people interactions between China and ASEAN countries. This initiative is in response to the call of the leaders of the People's Republic of China and the ASEAN Member States to build a closer community of shared futures by strengthening relationships through socio-cultural exchanges. The ACYLS project offers scholarships to young professionals from ASEAN countries for Masters or Ph.D. degrees, research programs, and training courses in China. The scholarship covers tuition, accommodation, airfare, medical insurance, and stipends. (Study in China, n.d.)

President Lee Myung-bak launched new foreign policy initiatives to improve Korea's

global image in 2008. He established the Presidential Council on Nation Branding and created the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program in 2009 to support foreign exchange students and improve the country's image among scholars. The National Institute for International Education manages the program. The GKS scholarship program is the biggest in funding and scope, serving a public diplomacy purpose. It has been improved and changed to align with the "new public diplomacy" concept, which includes collaboration, mutual understanding, trust, two-way communication, and engagement. (Bader, 2016)

The GKS program was designed with heavy influence from the Fulbright program, which is why the Korean government values the GKS alumni much. There have been 303 GKS scholars in Thailand, and the Korean Embassy in Thailand hosted a Study in Korea Alumni Night with KEC Thailand in August 2022. (*Study in Korea*, 2022) The Korean government continues to network with Thais who have studied in Korea, including GKS Scholars, to ensure they feel pride in being an international student in Korea.



## Chapter 5. Conclusion and Suggestions

The three East Asian countries, Japan, China, and Korea, have been keeping close ties with Southeast Asian countries in various spheres, such as politics, economy, society, and culture. Japan and China, the traditional superpowers of East Asia, have been recognized as sometimes threatening opponents and sometimes mutually beneficial partners to Southeast Asian countries, historically having established varied relationships with the region. Compared to them, Korea, which had relatively rare historical exchanges with Southeast Asia, is a latecomer, and its visibility in Southeast Asia is lower than the two countries. Unlike concerns about Japanese aggression or Chinese hegemonism, Korea is recognized in Southeast Asia as a country that has achieved successful economic development and admirable culture.

Since Joseph Nye's coinage of the term soft power and the growing perception that it is challenging to develop foreign relations solely through hard power, countries worldwide are secretly pursuing strategies to increase their soft power. These invisible efforts among countries are also revealed in the soft power competition structure of the three East Asian countries within the Southeast Asian region.

Japan declared a change in its diplomatic approach to Southeast Asia through the Fukuda Doctrine in the 1970s. Since then, it has been exerting a strong influence in Southeast Asia by providing ODA and investment, active business activities, the spread of Japanese culture in the 1990s, and the Cool Japan policy in the 2000s.

China is expanding its influence in Southeast Asia by taking advantage of geographical proximity, strong capital power through economic growth, and similarities in culture and identity through overseas Chinese in the region.

Meanwhile, Korea is strengthening its position in Southeast Asia based on its cultural competitiveness stemming from the massive popularity of the Korean Wave since the 2000s. In addition, the Korean government tried prioritizing Southeast Asia as a foreign policy priority through the New Southern Policy in 2017. Still, whether this policy can be consistently maintained under the new government is being determined.

Thailand is a Southeast Asian country with close ties with Japan, China, and Korea regarding economy, culture, and people-to-people exchanges. In particular, it is noteworthy that education in the three East Asian languages—Japanese, Chinese, and Korean—is very active in Thailand. In this regard, it ranks fifth in the number of Japanese learners worldwide and second in Southeast Asia after Indonesia. In Thailand, where there is a high demand for Japanese language learning due to the entry of many Japanese companies into Thailand, Japanese language education is centered on the activities of the JF. Chinese language education in Thailand is centered on CIs, as Thailand has the most significant number of CIs in Southeast Asia. CIs in Thailand are widely utilized for Chinese language education and cultural, business, and people-to-people exchanges. China's growing status as an economic superpower and Thailand's geopolitical importance in the BRI are intertwined. Thailand is also a noteworthy country for Korean language education. Korean language learners in Thai secondary schools account for 27% of Korean language learners worldwide. Learners are constantly increasing.

Since around 2010, the popularity of East Asian languages as second foreign languages in Thailand has surpassed that of French and other Western languages. The Deputy Director of the Office of the Basic Education Commission's (OBEC) Bureau

of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards reported that, in 2012, approximately 300,000 students at 700 OBEC schools studied Chinese, while 34,000 students at 175 schools learned Japanese. Additionally, 12,000 students took Korean, which has only been taught at OBEC schools for a few years (Nation, 2012).

Looking at the growth and decline of the number of learners of the three East Asian languages in Thailand over the past five years, it is observed that the number of learners of Korean has been steadily increasing, while the number of learners of Japanese and Chinese has been somewhat stagnant. This trend can be seen by looking at the number of test takers for the PAT second language test, an optional subject test for Thai university entrance exams, from 2018 to 2022. There are seven PAT second language options, with Chinese ranking first in the total number of test takers from 2018 to 2022. In this regard, there were 7,470 test takers, representing 34.77% of the total (21,485) taking the Chinese test in 2022. On the other hand, Japanese has consistently ranked third and fourth in real test takers from 2018 to 2022, with 3,672 test takers in 2022, representing 17.09% of all test takers. Meanwhile, Korean has seen a steady increase in test takers since it was first introduced as a PAT second language in 2018. The number of Korean test takers increased from 9.6% of the total in 2018 (4,087) to 17.55% of the total in 2022 (3,770), the most significant increase in the ratio of Korean test takers to total test takers over the five years. In particular, in 2022, the number of Korean test takers exceeded the number of Japanese test takers for the first time, ranking second after Chinese in terms of test takers.

The Korean language has experienced the most dramatic rise in popularity in Thailand due to many factors. Perhaps the most significant in this regard is the Korean Wave—

the explosion of international interest in Korean drama, movies, music, and fashion since the turn of the twenty-first century. This cultural content has become incredibly popular in Thailand and Southeast Asian countries, especially among youth.

One key factor in the stagnation of Japanese language education in Thailand is Japan's recent economic downturn and its ensuing lack of globally popular cultural content. Moreover, the rise of language education in Chinese and Korean across Thailand might have drawn students away from Japanese language instruction.

Various political controversies might have contributed to the stagnation in Chinese language instruction in recent years. Specifically, public discontent with the Confucius Institutes, the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests, and the expansion of the Milk Tea Alliance. With a widening awareness and concern over China's influence and politics across Thailand, public sentiment surrounding Chinese language education has recently seen a considerable shift.

Japan, China, and Korea's varied efforts to win the hearts and minds of Southeast Asians seem to be paying off to some extent. The Fukuda Doctrine successfully appealed to Southeast Asian nations using the term "heart-to-heart." Similarly, the three East Asian countries should promote their soft power by establishing equal relationships with the region. Japan and China's post-Cold War race to expand their spheres of influence in Southeast Asia is being joined by the somewhat smaller Korea, which is capitalizing on the recent surge in the popularity of modern culture. All three countries are working hard to win the hearts and minds of Southeast Asians, publicly stating that they will utilize their soft resources rather than their military or economic power. However, it is unnecessary to emphasize that all three countries are trying to

improve their soft power by gently attempting to win over their people. If a seducer declares in advance that he will seduce someone in a certain way, it is already unattractive. Although it is remarkable that the three countries recognized the importance of soft power early on and are working to achieve this goal, a quieter, more subtle approach would be more effective.

In particular, China ought to reduce the aggressiveness of its over-motivated approach and focus on what the other side wants. On the other hand, Japan must break out of its current image of being "stagnant" and re-frame itself as an incredible and powerful country. Additionally, while Korea enjoys widespread popularity for its mass cultural appeal, it remains to be seen how it will be perceived by leaders and decision-makers who are not the primary consumers of Korean cultural content. Furthermore, popular culture trends are ever-changing and unpredictable, making it difficult to predict how long K-culture's current popularity will endure. Therefore, there is a need to broaden the scope of Korea's appeal (i.e., a peace-loving democratic nation with rapid economic growth and high-tech industries).

Thailand has a strong diplomatic history. The popularity of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean languages as second languages in Thailand since the 2000s is partly due to the efforts of those governments but also due to Thailand's goal of globalizing its education. Rather than a blatant approach of promoting Japan, China, and Korea through their languages and using language learners as another soft power asset to expand their diplomatic, political, economic, security, and human influence in Thailand, it is necessary to look at how learning Japanese, Chinese, and Korean fulfills the needs and satisfaction of Thais. It would be beneficial for the governments

of Japan, China, and Korea to extend their support to Thai students pursuing higher education in their respective countries after completing their language studies. Creating a conducive environment for these students to make informed and healthy decisions about these nations should be a top priority.



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