

The Study of Southeast Asian Languages in China: Provincial Location and the University Teaching Goals

Dr. Wong Wei Chin

Assistant Professor- General Education Office, BNU-HKBU United International College
weichinwong@uic.edu.hk

Wang Xun

Undergraduate- Government and International Relations, BNU-HKBU United International College
wangxun21@outlook.com

ABSTRACT

The study of Southeast Asian languages has received growing attention in China since the official launch of China's "Belt and Road Initiative" in 2013. In 2018, there are more than a hundred of Southeast Asian language programs may be found in 56 institutions across China. Graduates from these programs, as according to the Ministry of Education of China, will play a crucial role in facilitating interactions among governmental branches between China and many Southeast Asian countries. Despite the fact that the majority of Southeast Asian language programs have been developed since the 2000s, surprisingly little work has been published to address the current operational development of the Southeast Asian language programs. In which provinces we can find the majority of Southeast Asian language programs? What are the incentives and challenges of developing Southeast Asian language programs in certain Chinese provinces? In order to better understand the diverse developments of the Southeast Asian language programs, this paper examines how and why provincial locations may affect the institutional intended teaching and learning outcomes of the Southeast Asian language courses in contemporary China.

Keywords: Southeast Asian languages, Language Programs, Chinese Provinces and Municipalities, Teaching Goals.

1. Introduction

As China moves toward a market system after the "reforms and opening-up" policy since the late 1970s, the institutionalization of foreign policy-making has been accelerated for multilateral cooperation with all adjacent regions. Among the neighboring regions, Southeast Asia is fabulous not just with its economic resources, it is also one of the few regions where ethnic Chinese residents are the second largest ethnic minority and constitute about 16 million of Chinese population outside China (Wong, W., 2018). Given the close historical and geographical connections between China and Southeast Asia, in 2018 there are more than a hundred of Southeast Asian language programs may be found in Chinese universities across twelve provinces and municipalities in China.

A number of scholars, focusing on the establishment of the Southeast Asian languages programs in China, have noted that many of these Southeast Asian language programs occurred in response to the development of China's national strategies toward the Southeast Asian countries since the early 2000s (Chen, H., 2007; Park, S., 2013; Tang S. & Zhang J., 2007). The process for setting up Southeast Asian language programs began since November 4, 2002, when the "Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Co-Operation between ASEAN and the People's Republic of China" was signed in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to accommodate the following objectives: (1) to strengthen and enhance economic, trade and investment cooperation between the parties; (2) progressively liberalize and promote trade in goods and services; (3) to develop appropriate measures for closer economic cooperation between China and Southeast Asian countries; and (4) to facilitate the more effective economic integration among China and the Southeast Asian communities (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2002). The formation of the free trade area between China and ASEAN members of 2002, as according to Chen, provided the major impetus for the teaching and learning of Southeast Asian languages in China (Chen, H., 2007). Many of the Southeast Asian countries began to send their undergraduate students to study Chinese language in China, while a number of undergraduate Southeast Asian language programs were established to recruit Chinese students in nine universities across Mainland China, including Peking University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Communication University of China, Guangxi University for Nationalities, Yunnan Nationalities University, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, and Shanghai International Studies

University, People's Liberation Army University of Foreign Languages and the University of International Business and Economics. Nine of these institutions have been considered as the most pioneering units that offer Southeast Asian language trainings in China, of which include Thai, Vietnamese, Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Melayu, Burmese, Lao, Khmer, and Filipino.

In 2013, the idea of "One Belt, One Road" emerged to build a maritime Silk Road and landed Silk Road to connect over 60 participant countries in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, North Africa, and Europe. Although the term "One Belt, One Road" has been replaced by the "Belt and Road Initiative" since March 2015 in China's official documents, but its main objective for creating routes of cultural interactions and mutual connectivity among various civilizations between China and the participant countries has remained unchanged (The State Council of China, 2015). The teaching and learning of Southeast Asian languages are thereby facilitated by the growing attention of governmental demands and foreign affairs (Wang, X. & Zhao S., 2017). Today, there are more than a hundred of Southeast Asian language programs may be found in 56 institutions across 12 provinces and municipalities in China, including Beijing, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, Jilin, Shandong, Shanghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Tianjin, Yunnan and Zhejiang, as shown in the following Figure 1.

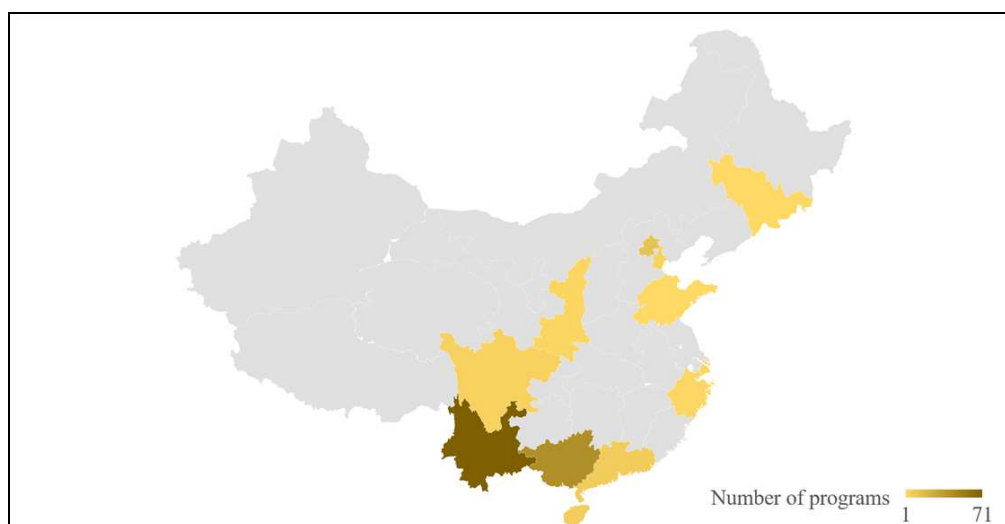


Figure 1: The Distribution of Southeast Asian Languages Programs in China

Like many other countries in East Asia, however, the study of Southeast Asian languages in China does not gain much popular attention owing to its subordinated position in relation to the condescending English language attitude toward other cultures (Hayami, Y., 2006). The progress and development of current Southeast Asian language programs has thus remaining unexplored due to a common tendency to neglect Southeast Asian languages in China. In order to get a clearer picture about the diverse developments of current Southeast Asian language programs in China, we analyze in which provinces we can find the majority of Southeast Asian language programs, and the process by which provincial locations may affect the university teaching and learning outcomes of the Southeast Asian language courses in contemporary China.

2. Research Methodology and Data Analysis

2.1 Data-Collection

The data for the present research have been collected since July 2018 by studying database of China's Ministry of Education and the official websites of each Southeast Asian language program in China. The data collection consists of four parts. Part one comprises questions on the provincial location and distribution of the higher education institutions that presently offer Southeast Asian language programs in China, and part two is a comparison between the different Southeast Asian languages currently taught in China. The assessment of language ability in the course settings is the major concern of part three, while part four focuses on the information of operational level, i.e. the background of students and faculty

members, class size, types of trainings etc. One issue needs to be pointed out is that the incomplete answers mainly lie in part four due to the restrictions to obtain information about class enrolment and teaching staffs from most of the universities. Although phone interviews were conducted in early April 2019, but our inquiries with respect to class situations have not yet been fully answered, which explain why the following findings do not offer information about the class sizes, students and teaching staffs.

2.2 Data Processing

This paper divides the Southeast Asian language programs based on its provincial location into four regions, characterized with the “East”, “South”, “North”, and the “Central” regions of China. The East consists of Shandong province, Zhejiang province, and the municipality of Shanghai, and they are the coastal provinces where we can find significant Chinese trading ports and prosperous economic growth. The South includes Hainan Island, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan province, as they are four of the southernmost provinces of China and the closest to Southeast Asian countries. Jilin province, Tianjin, and Beijing comprise the North; while the Central consists of two inland provinces, Sichuan and Shaanxi, as they are surrounded by many other Chinese provinces from all different directions.

In this research, 10 Chinese Universities are selected with reference to the comprehensiveness of the Southeast Asian languages programs in which they currently offered, as shown in the following Table 1. For instance, in the South, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangxi University for Nationalities and Guangxi University of Foreign Languages are selected because they have provided up to seven Southeast Asian languages programs (i.e. Thai, Vietnamese, Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Melayu, Burmese, Lao, and Khmer), and their program modules cover the most wide-ranging teaching scope compared to many other institutions in South China.

Table 1: List of Selected Institutions and Language Programs

List of Institutions	Southeast Asian Language Programs
East	
Shanghai International Studies University (上海外国语大学)	Thai, Vietnamese, Bahasa Indonesia
Shandong Foreign Languages Vocational College (山东外国语职业学院)	Thai
South	
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (广东外语外贸大学)	Thai, Vietnamese, Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Melayu, Burmese, Lao, Khmer
Guangxi University for Nationalities (广西民族大学)	Thai, Vietnamese, Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Melayu, Burmese, Lao, Khmer
Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (广西外国语学院)	Thai, Vietnamese, Bahasa Indonesia, Burmese, Lao, Khmer
North	
Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学)	Thai, Vietnamese, Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Melayu, Burmese, Lao, Khmer, Filipino
Peking University (北京大学)	Thai, Vietnamese, Bahasa Indonesia, Burmese, Filipino
Tianjin Foreign Studies University (天津外国语学院)	Thai, Vietnamese, Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Melayu, Khmer

Central	
Xi'an International Studies University (西安外国语大学)	Thai, Bahasa Melayu, Filipino
Sichuan International Studies University (四川外国语大学)	Thai, Vietnamese

In general, the Southeast Asian language programs in China may be divided into two different categories: “undergraduate” and “vocational”, as shown in the following Figure 2 and 3. Among all the regions, Guangxi and Yunnan province in the South contain a considerable number of vocational programs. Although there are more Southeast Asian language programs may be found among universities in Yunnan- which have 22 vocational programs in total compared to 17 in Guangxi province- but Guangxi University of Foreign Languages is chosen in this research because it offers eight vocational programs, which is the highest in the South compared with two to three programs that offer in average by its counterparts at Yunnan province. Following the same principle, Shandong Foreign Languages Vocational College is selected and putting in Table 1 although it offers only one vocational program in the Eastern region. In other words, Shandong Foreign Languages Vocational College has been selected for the reason to better reflect the real situation of vocational program in the East, even though it offers only one Thai language course in this institution.

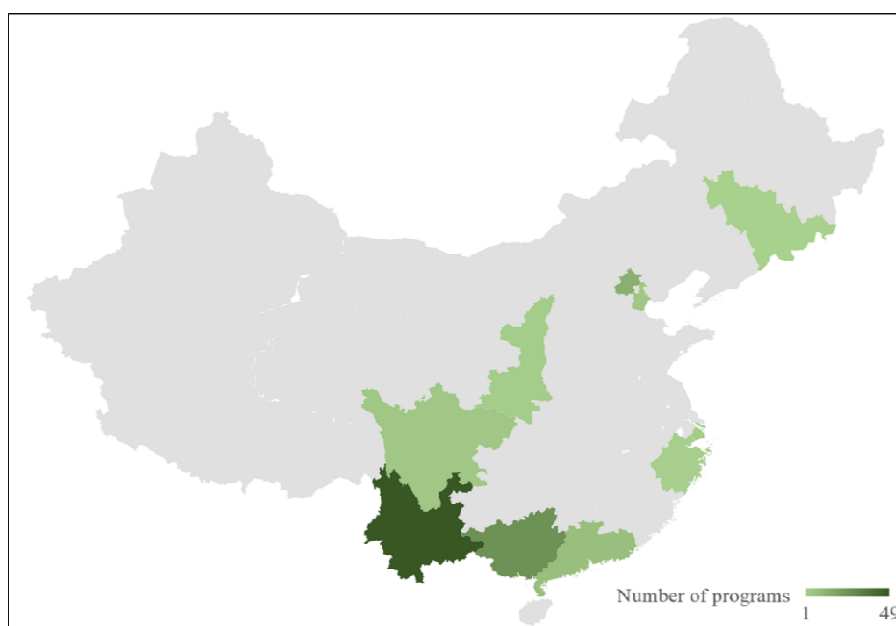


Figure 2: The Distribution of Undergraduate Southeast Asian Language Programs in China

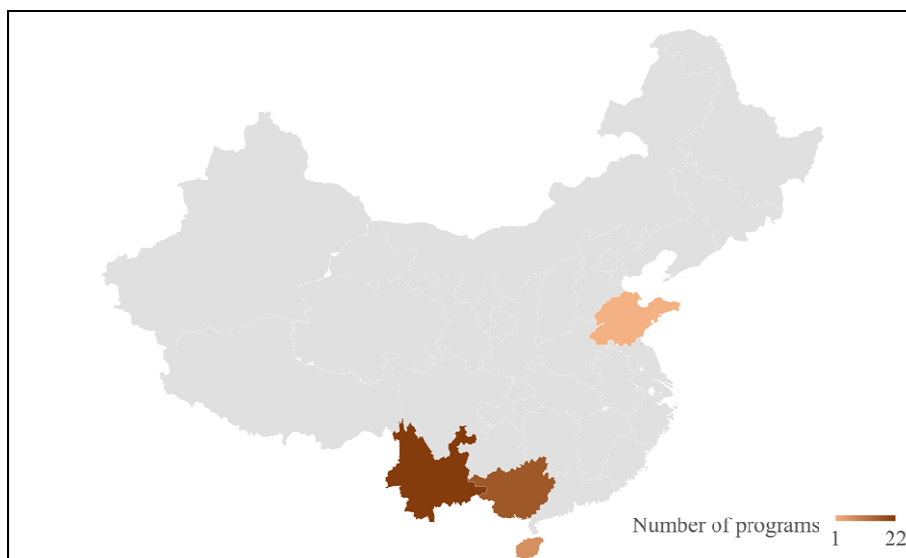


Figure 3: The Distribution of Vocational Southeast Asian Language Programs in China

3. Results and Analysis

The research reveals that there is a significant language course disparity between different provinces in China, as shown in Figure 4. Figure 4 illustrates that the majority of Southeast Asian languages are taught in universities located in the South and the North. Among all the provinces, Beijing provides the most comprehensive Southeast Asian language program modules that cover up to eight Southeast Asian national languages. In the East and the Central region, however, not more than four Southeast Asian languages are teaching in the universities, and languages such as Burmese, Lao, and Khmer are not yet available in the area.

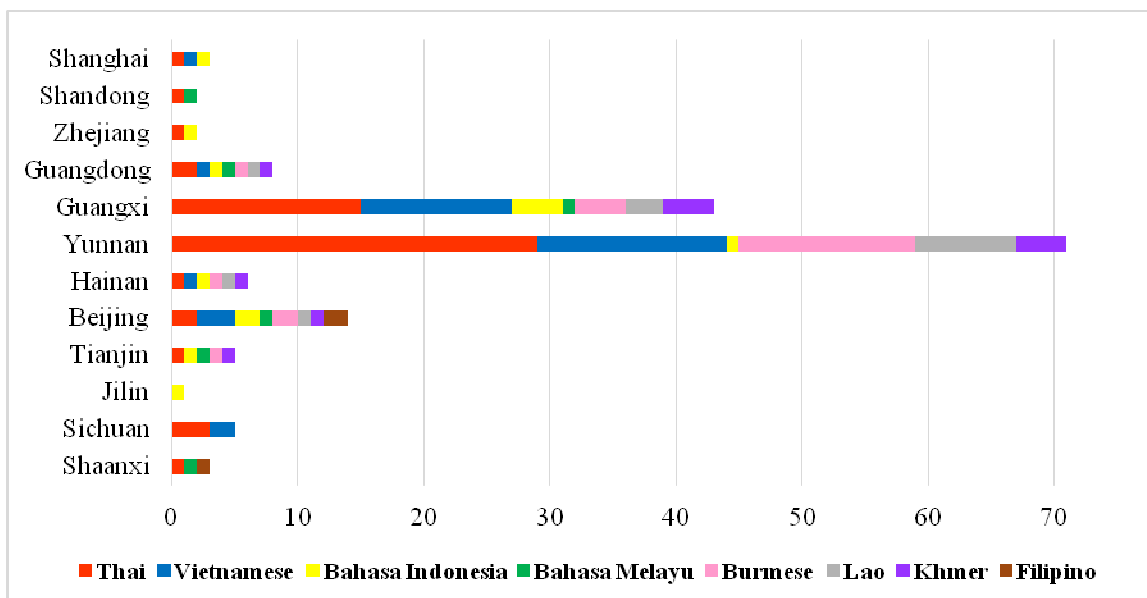


Figure 4: The Distribution of Southeast Asian Language Programs in China

According to Liu He-ping, an honorary Dean of Beijing Language and Culture University, language is a foundation of strengthening mutual connectivity between China and the foreign countries (Luo, X., 2017). Therefore, the studies of Southeast Asian languages are essential to Beijing as it plays an important diplomatic role at the worldwide level. As a diplomatic center, Beijing required Southeast Asian language

specialists to discuss foreign affairs and generate healthy diplomatic relations. Hence, in this context, it is crucial for Beijing to train and recruit their own talents to speak different Southeast Asian languages.

Compared to the North, the language training focus in the South, of which include both vocational and undergraduate Southeast Asian language programs in Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Hainan, is more practical-oriented and pay much attention on daily conversation skills. These Chinese provinces are much closer to Southeast Asian countries, and they have long generated regular interactions with each other in tourism, cultural and commercial sectors. Therefore, it is not inappropriate to say that the language module setting in the Southern region is largely affected by its geographical factor. As a result, students who are learning Southeast Asian languages in Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Hainan often obtain more occasional opportunities to practice their Southeast Asian language skills with neighboring countries.

How do Chinese universities normally assess the language and learning skills among their students? Based on our findings, the assessment of Southeast Asian language generally merits skills and progress the students made in the following aspects: the knowledge of specific Southeast Asian language of which the program have covered, English language ability, and the communication skills that shows students' ability to integrate a variety of information gathered using Chinese, English, and Southeast Asian language. The results of each category are listed in the following Table 2.

Table 2 also shows that the majority of Southeast Asian language programs offer in the East, South, and the North region require their graduates to master all four of the following skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills of English, Chinese, and the Southeast Asian language of which they enrolled. The majority of Southeast Asian language programs in the East, South, and the North usually demand their students to have undergone rigorous English language training before the graduation. This explains why each candidate must pass the College English Test Band 6 (CET- Band 6) as the basic requirement while learning Vietnamese, Bahasa Melayu, Lao, Khmer etc. in Guangdong province (National Education Examination Authority, 2019). As for the Southeast Asian language programs in the East, all candidates are required to achieve CET- Band 4, which ranked a bit lower than Band 6, after the students enrolled officially as an undergraduate of Thai and Vietnamese program. Similar to the East, students study Southeast Asian language in the North (i.e. Peking University) will not be granted a Bachelor's degree unless they get the certificate of CET- Band 4 before the graduation. In contrast, the assessment of English language proficiency is not mandatory to the Southeast Asian language programs offered in Central China. The language assessment applies only to those who learn Thai language in Central China, such as Sichuan and Shaanxi; while no institution require CET certificate before the graduation.

Table 2: University Intended Teaching Outcomes of Southeast Asian Language Programs

Program	Institution	SEA language	English	Chinese
Thai	Shanghai International Studies University (上海外国语大学)	√	√	
	Shandong Foreign Languages Vocational College (山东外国语职业学院)	√		
Vietnamese	Shanghai International Studies University (上海外国语大学)	√	√	
Bahasa Indonesia	Shanghai International Studies University (上海外国语大学)	√	√	
Thai	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (广东外语外贸大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University for Nationalities (广西民族大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (广西外国语学院)	√		
Vietnamese	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (广东外语外贸大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University for Nationalities (广西民族大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (广西外国语学院)	√		
Bahasa Indonesia	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (广东外语外贸大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University for Nationalities (广西民族大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (广西外国语学院)	√		
Bahasa Melayu	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (广东外语外贸大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University for Nationalities (广西民族大学)	√	√	
Burmese	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (广东外语外贸大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University for Nationalities (广西民族大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (广西外国语学院)	√		
Lao	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (广东外语外贸大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University for Nationalities (广西民族大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (广西外国语学院)	√		
Khmer	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (广东外语外贸大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University for Nationalities (广西民族大学)	√	√	
	Guangxi University of Foreign Languages (广西外国语学院)	√		
Thai	Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学)	√		√
	Peking University (北京大学)	√	√	√
	Tianjin Foreign Studies University (天津外国语大学)	√	√	
Vietnamese	Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学)	√		√
	Peking University (北京大学)	√	√	√
Bahasa Indonesia	Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学)	√		√
	Peking University (北京大学)	√	√	√
	Tianjin Foreign Studies University (天津外国语大学)	√	√	
Bahasa Melayu	Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学)	√	√	√
	Tianjin Foreign Studies University (天津外国语大学)	√	√	
Burmese	Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学)	√		√
	Peking University (北京大学)	√	√	√
	Tianjin Foreign Studies University (天津外国语大学)	√	√	
Lao	Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学)	√	√	
Khmer	Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学)	√		√
	Tianjin Foreign Studies University (天津外国语大学)	√	√	
Filipino	Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学)	√		
	Peking University (北京大学)	√	√	
Thai	Xi'an International Studies University (西安外国语大学)			
	Sichuan International Studies University (四川外国语大学)	√		
Vietnamese	Sichuan International Studies University (四川外国语大学)	√		
Bahasa Melayu	Xi'an International Studies University (西安外国语大学)			
Filipino	Xi'an International Studies University (西安外国语大学)			

4. Conclusion

4.1 Major Findings

Assuming that it is desirable and appropriate for Southeast Asian language courses to include intercultural communication training, we may gain a better understanding of the issues of how and why the university teaching and learning outcomes have been designed in response to its provincial location and intercultural encounters with neighboring Southeast Asian countries. By summarizing all the findings above, it is observed that the majority of Southeast Asian language programs in China can be found in the South, i.e. Yunnan, Guangxi, Guangdong, and Hainan; while the most wide-ranging language modules are presently offered by Peking University in Beijing. The reasons behind this phenomenon may either be an increase in demand for Southeast Asian language talents, i.e. diplomatic talents and government officers; or that there is a more regular contact on both cultural and commercial basis under the international scheme of Belt and Road Initiatives. To better accommodate with current diplomatic and economic purposes, the competence and intended teaching outcomes for the majority of Southeast Asian language programs are stressed more on the good command of English, Chinese, and Southeast Asian languages, in order to achieve a goal of endeavoring more younger generations to become a versatile bilingual or trilingual talent in China.

The intended learning outcomes of the Southeast Asian language programs, nevertheless, seems restricted by its provincial location. In overall, the prerequisite skills and requirement to enroll and passing the language assessment in the South are more difficult than the universities in the East and the North. As for the Southeast Asian language program in Central, such as Sichuan and Shaanxi, most of their students could be recruited without prerequisite requirement, and the English language skills and trainings are not mandatory in the modules. This is believed to be affected by the landlocked characteristic of Sichuan and Shaanxi in the Central as there is less opportunity to apply and practice Southeast Asian language skills compared to the other three Chinese regions.

4.2 Limitations of the Present Study and Suggestions for Future Research



Given the short time for data collection, the present study is limited in the following ways, which could be addressed in our future studies. First, the present study mainly depended on official online data and website information. Detailed research is needed to analyze the curriculum design, course materials and practical language trainings; and data can be collected from students who have received Southeast Asian language training in China. Second, the absence of some of the Southeast Asian languages should also be addressed, such as Tagalog, Hmong, and Tetum. Third, the effectiveness of Southeast Asian language training can be measured in terms of job opportunities and career wise.

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Authors' Backgrounds

	<p>Dr. Wong Wei Chin is an Assistant Professor in the General Education Office at the United International College, Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University. Her research and writings have focused on British colonial archives and migration history of Chinese laborers in colonial Southeast Asia. She is completing a book titled "Chinese Migration to Tanah Melayu: Interrelations between Chinese Secret Societies and the British Colonial Government in Nineteenth-Century Malaya".</p>
	<p>Wang Xun is an undergraduate student from the program of Government and International Relations, Division of Humanities & Social Sciences, Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University, United International College (UIC).</p>