

## **Chinese Images as Perceived by Neighbouring Countries – a Benign but Assertive Hegemon: Survey Research of Online-newspapers in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam**

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### **Abstract**

Within the globalising world in which so many people have perceived the effects of a mighty and strong East Wind, or Easternisation, it is hard to deny the significance of China, specifically in terms of economics and security. As a mighty country, Chinese domination can easily be observed within her small, southern neighbouring countries: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, or CLMV. This observation is drawn from news presented in CLMV online newspapers over the past 3-5 years.

This survey-research is aimed at determining to what extent and how the CLMV have perceived Chinese activities; how image(s) viewed here as reflections of such perceptions were illustrated; and what factors were behind such perception(s). A constructivist approach is employed due to its strength in illuminating the significance of the dynamic social-learning process presented as covering online-news consumption. CLMV perceptions of Chinese images is constructed and that it can be altered or destroyed according to the changing perceptions as that appear within this research.

In summary, the conclusive image of the Chinese can be viewed as a benign but assertive hegemon. Yet the level of perception regarding Chinese assertiveness varies and depends on the level of Chinese activities taking place within each country concerning economic dependence and development. Cambodia and Laos show greater compliance with Chinese assertiveness compared with Myanmar and Vietnam.

**Keywords:** *image/perception, China, CLMV countries, Constructivism, International Political Economy, Hegemony.*

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### **1. Introduction**

The movements of the 'Big Dragon' are too important to be missed, whether by its small, southern neighbouring countries or by the West. The latter has cast its hopeful eyes on Beijing's movements and performance, particularly in economic terms, as there might be helpful resources amid the world's current economic crisis, though Beijing's leaders have retained their opposing political ideology. Expectations from the West have risen since the third quarter of 2010, when China's economic performance was evaluated as having surpassed that of Japan, specifically in terms of gross domestic product (GDP: US\$1.337 trillion compared with \$1.288 trillion). China's economic outcome expresses a stunning success story. In just three decades since opening its eastern coastal cities, something that began in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping, the economic size of Asia's 'Mighty Dragon' has grown 90-fold. Consecutive growth for two decades has helped Beijing prosper with \$3.2 trillion in foreign reserves plus overseas assets worth some \$2 trillion. This prosperity has caused an uncomfortable expectation that China's economic strength, in terms of being a major importing country, might surpass that of America in 2014, and that its economic size might grow larger than that of America by 2018 (Economic Focus, 2011).

China's performance contrasts greatly with conditions in the Euro Zone, particularly in those economies closely tied to Greece's uncertain economic fate. Within the engaged group comprising Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, the US, the UK, Ireland and Germany, the average debt-to-GDP ratio in 2011 was 332.3 per cent. Ireland seized first place at 1,093 per cent, followed by the UK at 436 per cent. Spain took third place at 284 per cent. The average public-debt-to-GDP ratio was 102.22 per cent. Greece occupied the champion's seat at 166 per cent, followed by Ireland at 109 per cent and Portugal at 106 per cent (Chalermpuntusak, 2012b). The intractable public debt crisis, despite Germany's disbursement of 500 billion euros to crisis-prone economies such as Greece and Spain, has accentuated the significance and expectations placed on China's political-economic decisions (Flanders, 2012 & Coy, 2012) as to whether its

decisions aim toward the Euro Zone or the ‘Mighty Dragon’s’ small, southern neighbours. These countries, which are the main focus of this research, have also been affected by the Euro Zone crisis through their potentially diminishing export markets. Adding to their uneasiness has been China’s retrospective inclination to limit GDP growth to 7.5 per cent as announced at the People’s National Congress in March 2012 (Chalermpruntusak, 2012a). The decision aimed at decreasing internal difficulties, e.g., income inequality and fairness, but it raised concern from those economies that had placed hope on the trend of Chinese economic growth, which had been expected to be 8.5 per cent for 2012-2013. With that expectation, the West believed Beijing would join hands to lessen the Euro Zone public debt crisis and help sustain annual global economic growth at 3-4 per cent (Hatzius, 2012).

China’s changed economic policy also signals its disinclination to increase imports. Not only that, it indicates Beijing might export less capital, which raises questions as to whether the Chinese still plan to tilt toward the West or will lean elsewhere. Further questions arose over Hu Jintao’s handover of his supreme power to the country’s fifth-generation leadership, with rumours suggesting that the political transition would not be smooth due to a power struggle. Sacking Bo Xilai, a high-ranking member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and governor of Chongqing, whose success included the development of Dalian, a highly prosperous special municipality in the mid-West region, was an infamous case in point (Simpson, 2012). The Bo Xilai incident also dragged the name of Zhou Yongkang into the public. Hu Jintao, as CCP chairperson, was asked in an open letter written by military veterans to sack Zhou as a high-ranking officer, whose main responsibility was to oversee ‘internal security’ but who had overlooked the Xilai scandal. Worse still, rumours had it that Zhou was also embroiled in an attempt to hatch an aborted coup (Bristow, 2012; Grammaticas, 2012a-b). It was the same Zhou who had toured the small, southern neighbours to tighten military and security relationships between China and its neighbours. This information indicates that it is indeed hard to deny China’s significance when the East wind blows strongly, not to mention its impact upon its neighbours’ well-being, which depends on whether that wind is a cool, refreshing breeze or a strong gust.

## **2. Research questions, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology**

The above economic phenomena and the way news regarding related movements has been presented have raised the question of whether China’s significant status has had any effects upon its small, southern neighbours. If so, to what extent and how have these effects been perceived and accepted by those countries whose socio-politico-economic levels of development differ from those in China? This research aims at scrutinising *to what extent and how Chinese influences have been perceived, evaluated, and presented within societies of those neighbours* that are continental members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). To focus more on the influences that might be derived directly from China’s presence, be they positively or negatively felt, this project places attention on four countries: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV).

The preliminary understanding before conducting this project was that CLMV were inclined to depend highly on China in many respects, particularly as a vast exporting market and as a main source of capital for investment. Beyond those factors are many alterations, specifically in terms of trade and general developments, as well as questions as to what extent and how news and information regarding China and the Chinese have been presented and perceived. Though CLMV are small states, their strategic geo-politic and geo-economic locations can respond well to China’s plans aimed at connecting logistic networks from Indian-Ocean-rim countries to its southwest, meaning they would link to its networks of western logistic lines that are expected to connect China with Eurasia. These huge geographical areas are vital to China not only in terms of stockpiling and transmitting essential resources, i.e., oil and rare earths, but also in terms of directly connecting China with Europe (Yang, 2006).

What this project, focused on China image(s), would like to discover and present is to what extent and how information regarding China and the Chinese, which can be accessed online, have been presented in CLMV societies and what aspects, be they economic, social or political, are more prominent. Reckoning on this information could help us pave the way to understanding and initially evaluating ‘China’s image(s)’ when the winds of Easternisation blow strongly. Tracing back methods through historical relationships between China and CLMV is an essential means, by having socio-cultural aspects as a key stance.

Understanding CLMV's social-learning processes regarding China and the Chinese as socially mediating spaces for perceiving and presenting the way CLMV societies regard China's image(s) is important: idea and perception are inseparable from the mentioned social-learning processes. By accepting the reckoning on China's image(s), one cannot avoid these matters; hence, the research questions are set to find out:

- 1) whether there is a singular image of China among the CLMV: if so, what does it look like; if not, what kind of images have been perceived;
- 2) the images found from the first group of questions incline to which direction: positive or negative, and;
- 3) to what extent and how have the discovered images been constructed, and what ideas and phenomena have had their share in constructing the discovered images.

Understanding the way perceptions are constructed via media, CLMV online newspapers for this project, is one way to comprehend the publicly socialising processes, not only for those interested in the affairs of China and the Chinese, that nurture the constructed images. This process, regarded as part and parcel of perception and image construction in the public sphere, is essential to fertilising and nurturing good relations among the concerned parties. Following this logic, it is no surprise that Xinhua, China's main news agency, cooperates with the Vietnam News Agency (VNA) to exchange and produce news and information for broadcast in each other's country with counterpart audiences in mind.

Constructivism is a theoretical foundation employed here due to its strong point of accepting that human beings are vital in constructing/destroying social reality through conscious realization that social institutions and structures derive from human intentions and actions. Peter L. Berge and Thomas Luckman (1966/1967) argue that any existing condition is not so stable that it cannot be changed. In other words, those who regard social conditions as static are those who want to preserve a status quo. For them, ideas and any kind of social actions are not social realities. On the contrary, they are initiated by the social construction of reality. All kinds of social structures and institutions affect the way social agencies frame their ideas and understand and perceive social actions and realities. This project intends to pay attention to CLMV social perceptions and understandings toward China and the Chinese. By regarding CLMV online newspapers and social media as social agencies, this research project highlights the significance of content derived from news and information presented via online newspapers as the main sources for observing the ways CLMV societies perceive and comprehend China's images.

While emphasising ideas as inter-subjective social construction makes constructivism compelling for this project, it is not a totally new social invention, specifically tracing-back a history of thoughts, albeit a Western inclination, and the way social science has been studied. Yet Karl Marx (1960) laid out a firm foundation with Friedrich Engels. For Marx, ideas could not be separated from their surroundings: ideas are both socially constituted and constituting. Following this logic, it is hard to understand ideas without understanding the social structures hosting them and their consequences. Social structures, in this regard, are comprehended as intricately interwoven social spaces constructed and nurtured by interactively economic, political and socio-cultural dimensions. These social spaces are a fertile ground for constructing agents' perceptions. Comprehending social conditions that initiated and/or constructed the ideas, Marx emphasises, is necessary to maximise the changing potentiality derived from them. The emphasis placed on the utility of ideas, in both Marxist and Marxian senses, generates the concept of the 'philosophy of praxis' (Gramsci, 2003: 343-357).

Ideas presented through CLMV online newspapers, this project argues, reflect not only the changing social structure leaning toward CLMV's economic dependence on China economic dependence on the CLMV, particularly trade and direct investments, but also signify that CLMV's internally structural changes in all aspects have their share in constructing the ideas and images about China. Resentful news and information are also presented to illustrate that the dominating China and Chinese are not beyond reproach. Expressions of local resentment and even protests are already part and parcel of socially constructed images. The protest against the Chinese-sponsored Myitsone Dam project is a case in point.

In other words, constructivism highlights the significance of the social-learning processes as interactive social spaces in which social comprehension and construction/destruction are not only taking place but also interwoven. Only within such spaces can one observe to what extent and how historically socio-cultural relationships have been tried. The observable results can offer a clue as to whether the past,

chequered relationships between China and CLMV will persist. Myanmar and Vietnam, guarding their relationships with China for economic and strategic reasons, are especially interesting in this regard within this project's limited time-frame. This project illustrates that understanding economic necessities without their political contexts or *vice versa* is futile, specifically for those who want to have a clearer view depicted in the dynamic relationships between China and CLMV.

Although social reality, meaning the Chinese domination toward CLMV economic structures, is alterable, changes don't come easily. The existing picture illustrates that material success and capital accumulation driven by Chinese economic power have been accepted as social reality in CLMV's ways of life. It has also been embedded in the way CLMV citizens view themselves and their societies, whether or not they realise it. What should be kept in mind, according to Margaret S. Archer (1988, 1995), is that there is no guarantee of successful change at either phenomenal or structural levels. More likely, agents' attempts to change socially engaging action end up reproducing some phenomena at best, or parts of existing social structures at worst. Archer notes that agents' comprehension regarding existing conditions is crucial here, specifically socio-cultural aspects that have been long rooted in people's ways of life. Following this logic, it is no surprise that perceptions highly favouring economic success are likely to be reproduced in CLMV societies when news and information presented via online newspapers and other sources are taken into consideration.

This interactive social space is fertile ground for observing and analysing China's image through the eyes of CLMV societies. *By which means and how they will be observed and studied?* Regarding matters under study, attention must be paid to the way languages are used. For this project, usage appeared in written form. Language as appearing in CLMV online newspapers and related sources are understood here as presenting inter-subjective meanings (Beiler, 2001) that guide us to comprehend agents' ideas and perceptions: they are *ipso facto* deciphering keys. In addition, languages are also mediated and referential sources to which agents turn when they want to define their interests (Jacobson, 1995). Viewed in this fashion, languages are programmatic beliefs as Sheri Berman (1998: chapter 2) calls them. Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes (1997) propose the phrase 'symbolic technologies' to signify that in order to understand ideas, in terms of expressive language usage, we need to know their qualities through a broader set of linguistic and symbolic practices. For them, ideas can be studied in two related ways. On the one hand, the mechanism generating meanings should receive more attention; on the other hand, we should carefully scrutinise directive power as appears in language usage, whether apparently observed, that constructs social realities.

In summary, this project observes ideas expressed through language usage regarding China's image and the Chinese as has appeared in CLMV online newspapers and related sources. Sources outside CLMV that are interested in China and regional affairs are also investigated to add what might be lacking from CLMV sources. To learn whether there is any inter-subjective meaning regarding China's image, contents from these sources were compared and contrasted on two levels.

On the first level, this project focused on comparing and contrasting news and information from CLMV national online newspapers and related sources from governmental and non-governmental media. Examples of the latter sources included *The Phnom Penh Post* and *The Saigon Times*, which emphasise economic and business reporting. Additionally, online sources operating outside CLMV, but energetically reporting on each CLMV nation or their activities in total, were also investigated. *The Irrawaddy* and *Shan Herald* are examples regarding Myanmar.

After discerning China's image in each country, the second level focused on comparing and contrasting the news and information internationally. Unfortunately, regional online sources were sometimes insufficient in depicting the total picture regarding China's image for all of CLMV, least of all CLMV national online news, which lacked presented information. In an attempt to illustrate the total picture, the scope of online sources was extended to cover more sources and to determine whether they receive governmental or private support. This extended group included sources covering regional news and information from Asian as well as Western countries. The extended sources from Asian countries included Xinhua, People's Daily, China Daily, Asia Times Online and Manager Online. Examples of Western sources were BBC, Reuters, Voice of America and The Diplomat.

Initially, this project was to study seven online newspapers: *New Light of Myanmar*, *The Irrawaddy*, *Vientiane Times*, *The Phnom Penh Post*, *Viet Nam News*, *Nhan Dan* and *The Saigon Times*. However, due to the lack of sufficient content, specifically regarding Laos and Myanmar, more online sources were added.

### **3. The Discovery: Being more than a benign hegemon in a conclusive understanding**

What was discovered after applying the chosen theoretical framework to content from online sources is not much different from what was anticipated before conducting this project: it is impossible to deny the greatly significant status of China and Chinese economic power. The analysis derived from the tracing-back investigation for 3-5 years, the project's defined timeframe, shows that China's dominating status has affected the perceptions of its small, southern neighbours. They have been worried that Beijing is inclined to take a role of regional hegemon that directs not only regional economies, but security, military, and strategic well-being as well.

A Gramscian hegemony was applied here to emphasise that gaining 'consent' is more prominent than applying 'coercion', albeit not denying that power is still at the heart of the relationship between China and CLMV. According to Antonio Gramsci (2003), coaxing for consent appears in the form of a broadly extensive co-operation constructed through the ways the victorious side wins the war of position. Only through such a win that spans over socio-economic and political aspects can a hegemon be created. China's hegemonic images seem to be led by constructing a commonly accepted ideology, but it is defined in a practical sense rather than as a dubious political term. It appeared as a widely accepted definition of interests, but the concept is not static as any alteration can occur along the interactive processes (Mouffe, 1979: 168-204, 1981: 219-234; Laclan, 1988: 249-257). China's attempt to find an appropriate distance in keeping a close relationship with Myanmar, thereby not affecting Chinese mega-investment projects, is a case in point. Following this perspective, the stalemate regarding the Myitsone Dam signifies that an acceptable solution is not beyond reach; accepted interests are negotiable as long as socialising processes are open.

Although the scope of this study was limited in terms of areas and time, the finding is persuasive regarding China's expansively hegemonic status. It is very likely to be so at the expense of Western international economic influence, particularly when taking into account the West's economic problems, e.g., sovereign-debt crisis and rapidly rising unemployment. Robber Cox's (1993: 62) idea on world hegemony is interestingly supplemental here. Cox argues that those who prefer holding hegemonic status must oversee and direct the global socio-political and economic structures. This alluring and compelling task facilitates various paths that the hegemon can construct, disperse and sustain coaxing and co-operative portions by, of course, aiming at gaining consent rather than enforcing coercion. International institutions and other co-operative mechanisms are fertile mixing cauldrons producing acceptably constructed norms that are persuasively understood as possessing universal characters. These mechanisms and their facilitators are destined to oversee and conduct states' behaviour and that of trans-national social movements in order to bind them to the domination of the existing mode of production. Those mechanisms have two main functions: on the one hand, they are means to greatly support the existing international system and structures; on the other hand, they must barricade social agencies, if need be, particularly when those agents resist the international system and structures. This logic is helpful in analysing China's image. It provides supplementary, thoughtful understanding to what extent CLMV have consented to China's hegemonic status and image. Even though news and information regarding China and the Chinese presented in the CLMV were not unquestioned, the hegemonic images are more accentuated when we perceive that the news and information were chosen by CLMV sources themselves.

At the heart of the accepted hegemonic images lay commonly shared interests, or at least as perceived, between China and CLMV. Without a doubt, they have been (and will be) trade, investment, and the potential of constructing a vast logistic network. It is inarguable that China's interests loom large, particularly in energy and resources security. Numerous hydroelectric projects, particularly in Kachin State, are cases in point. Of course, the 157-metre-high Myitsone Dam, with its capacity of 60,000 megawatts, is the biggest one. Protestors expressed their resentment and fears that their culture and way of life, along with the environment and ecological system in the construction zone, might be lost forever. Even so, it is hard to



deny that Beijing is effective at presenting its building interests, without illusion, as common interests vital to generate, nurture and sustain regional peace and stability. Although those concepts and the way this project was conducted are inclined to favour socio-cultural aspects, the research must accept that due to the limited apparent information regarding these aspects, it might be inappropriate to conclude that China explicitly applies soft power to guiding CLMV's acceptance of its hegemonic status and image.

The socio-cultural aspect viewed through the very long chequered, historical relationships between China and the CLMV is a crucial facilitating factor that helps to construct perceptions and images about China and the Chinese in CLMV societies. Actually, Beijing's new phase of good relations with Hanoi just started in the 1990s after the two nations kept each other at bay. Beijing's teaching war as a reaction after Hanoi overthrew the Khmer Rouge government, which had been under the aegis of Beijing in 1979, was their thorny memory. Ironically, recent conflicts regarding the East Sea (for Vietnam) or the South Sea (for China) urged their foreign ministers to establish their first hotline in 2012, albeit criticised as being merely symbolical.

The chequered pattern with Cambodia is more prominent. Historical records show that Cambodia (or Kampuchea at that time) was among the few friends China had when the red flag had not long risen above the 'gate of heavenly palace', or Tiananmen (天安門) square. King Narodom Sihanouk, the former monarch, who recently passed away in Beijing, was a significant leader who campaigned for Beijing's seat at the United Nations to replace that of Taiwan, patronised by Washington. Yet their relationship was strained when HengSamin and Hun Sentook power in Phnom Penh by ousting the Khmer Rouge. It was also well known that Hun Sen publicly and severely criticized Beijing's policies regarding East Asia and Cambodia in particular. For around two decades, Hun Sen could be viewed as Beijing's sworn-enemy. Yet a new story began when Beijing proved to be a generous friend-in-need whilst so many countries, ASEAN members included, showed reluctance in supporting HengSamrin and Hun Sen when it was likely that civil war might recur in 1997 (Long Kosal, 2009; Khan Somphirom, 2011)

As far as this project is concerned, China's hegemonic performance has not gone so smoothly that no resentful voices are heard within CLMV societies. Street-protests against China and the Chinese have arisen in Vietnam and Myanmar, albeit with little effect on relations between the countries. In summary, China's hegemonic role has been accepted by CLMV, albeit with some uncomfortable feelings even from Laotian people about security and safe-passage for transporting goods and travelling along the Mekong River after a tragic incident in late 2011 involving the slaughter of 13 Chinese nationals. Naw Kham, a man holding Myanmar nationality but originating from Shan State, and a drug-lord in the Golden Triangle, was handed over to be tried and subsequently sentenced to death in China by Vientiane authorities to soothe Chinese resentment and compensate for their loss (Southivongnorath, 2012). These issues are also linked to the well-being of the China-Myanmar relationship. China's image as perceived by CLMV societies studied here is that, in conclusive perception, China is a benign but assertive hegemon keen to protect its image and interests by presenting them as regional interests that should be accepted.

Beijing employs its own prosperity, driven by economic forces closely related to its military-technology strength, to direct its small, southern neighbours' perceptions of their significance to geo-politics and geo-economics. This project shows that by doing so, China accentuates its continually central status – little different from ancient times – as befits its name of the Middle Kingdom (中國 or 中国). Beijing increasingly asserts that its hegemonic status seems compatible with how Chinese scholars defied Western perceptions and organised global affairs. For those scholars, the Tian Xia (天下) system, the managing order under the sky direct from heavenly mandated Huangdi (黃帝), the son of heaven (天子), as the ancient Chinese emperors were called, might be more suitable appraisals (Yi, 2001, Zhang, 2010; Zhao, 2012)

The seamlessly interwoven geo-politics and geo-economics make CLMV pay great attention to the way they conduct their relationships with mighty China and vice-versa. There is no surprise, because of its significance, that news and information related to these relationships have mainly occupied reporting space for the 3-5 years under this study. The research found that anticipation paid on expected mutual gains has driven China and CLMV to accept and support the concept of comprehensive strategic co-operation by regarding each other as strategic partners. Beijing's direction to 'Go West' and its emphasis on a 'two-ocean policy' for the Indian and Pacific oceans have shed light onto CLMV, specifically Myanmar. It is

anticipated that Naypyidaw can provide the shortest routes connecting rapidly emerging Indian Ocean-based economies with China's inland areas, e.g., Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan, which are much poorer than eastern-coastal provinces. The security concept has been broadened to cover more than traditional ones accentuating matters directly related to military and political aspects.

Beijing voiced resentment about the way Naypyidaw, Myanmar's capital, harshly suppressed the Kokang rebellion (or Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army: MNDAA) when Naypyidaw failed to encourage Kokang to join a newly established Border Guard Force (BGF). Laogai, the centre of Kokang's activities, was destroyed and China received an influx of refugees with no warning. The incident also discouraged Chinese economic groups from conducting business southward due to levels of uncertainty. Xi Jinping, a vice-president at the time, voiced China's concern when he visited Naypyidaw in 2009 that Beijing looked forward to seeing stability, national reconciliation and peaceful economic development in Myanmar (Saw Yan Naing, 2009; Tania Branigan). His statement caused a surprise since it could be regarded as the first time a Chinese top-ranking officer expressed human rights concerns.

This project also discovered that the online news and information under study emphasised Chinese economic activities above socio-cultural events. As anticipated, official and directly affiliated official sources accentuate the positive side of news and information regarding relationships between China and CLMV. The positively presented content included donations and loans (with zero or low-interest rate), specifically in Laos and Cambodia. These donations comprised military supplies to Phnom Penh and office supplies to Vientiane to equip Laos' new international convention centre for hosting the 2012 ASEM Summit, which was also financed by China. The latter cases were more concerned with CLMV's upgrading and development of infrastructure. The positive online sources were *Agency Kampuchea Press*, *Vientiane Times*, *Laos New Agency/KPL News*, *New Light of Myanmar*, *Viet Nam News*, and *Nhan Dan* (Theng, 2011; Pongkhao, 2012; Sophirom, 2012).

A positive depiction was not the only content discovered. Negative content could be found mainly from business and other alternative sources within and outside CLMV. Online sources in this group were *The Phnom Penh Post*, *The Saigon Times* and *The Irrawaddy*. The most highlighted negative content, even from Western sources, focused on the conflicts over the South China Sea between China and Vietnam and the protests against the Myitsone Dam project, worth \$3.6 billion, between Myanmar and China. Within this study's timeframe, the South China Sea conflict was prominent. Many incidents between 2010 and 2011 were claimed by both sides to have been started by the other side. The highlights of these incidents were: 1) Vietnamese fishing boats penetrated into Chinese naval territorial claims; 2) Chinese oil-exploring vessels violated Vietnamese claims over the Houg-Sa Islands (or Paracel Islands) and surrounding area; and 3) Chinese patrol boats fired on Vietnamese oil-exploring vessels near the Trung-Sa Islands (or Spratly Islands).

Apart from these conflicts, news and information reported various degrees of resentment from terms of economic co-operation perceived as unequal and lopsided. CLMV are experiencing trade deficits from an influx of cheap Chinese goods. Many were contaminated with hazardous substances, specifically melamine, formaldehyde and cadmium, and were found in dairy products, clothing and fake jewellery. Vietnamese sources are the loudest voices expressing concern (Hien Nguyen, 2008; Phi Tuan, 2010; Song Nghia, 2011). The situation has decreased demand for domestic goods, leading to the discouragement of domestically industrial development. Additionally, the situation has been attributed to lower potential competitiveness of CLMV goods in China; the more the CLMV lack opportunities and sufficient industrial investment, the less their products can penetrate the prosperous Chinese market. Online sources from Vietnam and Myanmar were prominent in presenting resentful content mainly regarding cross-border trades, e.g., Guangxi Province-Vietnam and Yunnan Province-Myanmar (Canh, 2012; Dung, 2012). Resentment in Myanmar has been easily felt in Mandalay, where the Chinese presence has been prominent and exclusive through construction of Chinese ghettos in the city's best locations. Not only have the locals been marginalised in terms of living space, their businesses have increasingly been monopolised. Jade markets and real estate are prominent cases in point.

The perceived economic dependence easily appeared in tourism and direct investments. Vietnamese online sources clearly report that Vietnam's tourism sector has catered to Chinese tourists for their flourishing income; it has pressed hard to expand direct flights to facilitate Chinese tourism as well as

encourage local staff to learn Chinese in order to serve important clients more efficiently (Dao, 2010). Cambodia placed expectations more on developing infrastructure for direct links to Angkor, the centre for Cambodian tourism and socio-cultural co-operation. In addition, Phnom Penh also anticipated that broadcasting Chinese with Khmer and English radio programmes within the Angkor region would entertain Chinese tourists, not to mention co-producing a documentary about Angkor and the Khmer people for broadcast in China. Though the Khmer ancient civilisation is alluring in its own right to tourists, Phnom Penh has tried to offer more attractions to Chinese investors and tourists by allowing the Botum Skor National Park to be transformed into an all-round entertainment centre, including casinos aiming at luring gamblers from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. This mega project entitled 'Angkor Wat on Sea', with a 99-year concession that's worth slightly less than the Myitsone Dam project, not only conflicted with the locals, but allegedly cost the life of a renowned forest conservator – ChutWutti, who was found dead in the operating area of a Chinese logging company, Timber Green (Hun & Nimul, 2011; Hun and Lim, 2011; Lim, 2012; Nimul, 2012; Prek, 2012; Thitara & Boyle, 2012a-b).

The Lao tourism sector has been on the same dependency track, but it chose a different kind of attraction to draw heavy-spending Chinese tourists: casinos, with the disastrous opening of the Golden City Casino. It was the first casino complex in the north that had been granted a 30-year concession with a possible extension to 99 years provided its operations went well. Unfortunately, nearly everything went wrong as criticism poured in from local and Chinese unofficial Internet sources. The former complained that the complex was a Chinese extra-territorial-rights area. Renmenbi, or yuan, was the only accepted currency as well as the Mandarin as the only accepted language, not to mention that every operation had to be along conducted in China's official time-zone. The latter Internet sources criticised Vientiane and Beijing for lacking efficiency and responsibility in dealing with floating corpses, which were understood to have been the bodies of murdered and missing Chinese gamblers who could not save their lives when their luck run out. Beijing responded to the pressure by various means, ranging from cutting off electricity transmitted from Mohan in Yunnan to the complex in Boten to closing the border-pass channels to re-checking the demarcation tablets along the 505-kilometre border it shares with Vientiane. Finally Golden City Casino, once a cash cow for the Boten special economic zone, was ordered shut by Vientiane authorities with Beijing's strong encouragement. At present, King Roman, an infamous casino complex owned and operated by the Jin Mu Mian, or Golden Kapok group, is Laos's biggest casino. Though it has been teeming with rumours about illegal and related activities, King Roman, with its glittering golden dome easily seen across the Mekong River in the Golden Triangle, remains a significant driving force of Vientiane's aspiration for prosperity in its northern economic zones, which are sometimes referred to as 'Laos-Vegas' areas. Laos's main reason is due to its lack of prominent international attractions, such as the renowned national beauties of Vietnam or the alluring ancient civilisations of Cambodia (Allen, 2009; Dwyer, 2011; Pongkhao, 2012b).

This project also found that CLMV have greatly depended on China for direct investments, such as infrastructure developments in terms of logistic networking and energy resources. These developments are expected to act as catalysts, boosting more small and medium projects to pour in from cross-border Chinese investors as has appeared in Vietnam. In Cambodia the investments were mostly linked to opening vast arable areas and industrial areas; together they are expected to be the driving engines of Cambodia's agricultural industries and businesses (Kunmakara, 2012; Sophirom, 2012). A vast, irrigated cultivation of a 25,000-hectare rice field is anticipated to serve export markets. The 57B route will help connect the area with Phnom Penh. From there, route 41 will link it to Oudong, an ancient capital of Kampuchea and a coastal area suitable for agriculture, commerce and industry (Nary & Peou, 2011; PhumPul & Nimal, 2011). These investments might not have been fruitful had Chinese funders paid less attention to building numerous bridges to connect Cambodia's interior regions of canals, swamps and marshes. A major construction project is the Chroy Changvar Bridge II, connecting Phnom Penh with route 6, part of a road network in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (Sophirom, 2011). In Myanmar, energy development projects are looming large, specifically the Myitsone project in the Kachin region, aimed at distributing the Irrawaddy's power into China's inland regions, particularly in the Western and the Southern areas. Yet this suspended project raises the question of whether Myanmar will depend less on China and try to increase its breathing room for negotiating with Beijing.



Beijing's intentions for opening and connecting its inland areas are the main reasons Myanmar and Laos have been perceived as parts of China's strategic plans. Myanmar's connecting routes can reach areas along the Indian Ocean, while routes through Laos can reach Singapore and the Strait of Malacca via Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur. An interesting question is whether Laos, with its small population of less than 7 million, can employ its significant transit location to tangibly benefit from it. Otherwise, the same old story of being highly dependent on China, including the need for massive Chinese labour, might be repeated. Laos's experience from constructing its first SEA Games' main stadium and northern economic zones are cases in point, where only a handful of its population received direct benefits. It's an open question as to whether Laos could benefit from being a strategic transit point, or whether it is capable of only passing opportunities for regional connections to other countries (Xin, 2010; Woodman, 2011; Montlake, 2011; Toh, 2011).

In summary, while news and information on CLMV's and other online sources here emphasised the advantages of co-operation, resentful and conflictive content was also presented: specifically from non-governmental sources and others operating outside CLMV. The latter group's content was more qualitatively scrutinised. The ways it was presented offered crucial clues indicating to what extent and how Chinese and China's images have been perceived. According to the analysis, China has occupied an important role directing the well-being of CLMV by coaxing them to accept Beijing's definition of (regional) interests as part and parcel of their own. These commonly shared interests ranged widely from mutual economic benefits, natural resources and energy security to regional stability and peace. In total, China's image has been perceived as a benign but assertive hegemon conducting and directing the future of CLMV.

Even so, each individual CLMV shows shades of expression regarding China's benign nature. Their various levels of dependency concerning economics, military might and financial aid are their litmus tests. This project depicts Cambodia and Laos as somewhat more compliant with China's demands and conditions compared with Myanmar and Vietnam: China's images have ranged from extremely positive to slightly negative. They could be regarded as follows: a supporting sibling for Cambodia; an undeniable big brother for Laos; an unequal strategic partner for Myanmar; and an influentially assertive power for Vietnam.

#### 4. Post Scripts

The discoveries from this project regarding to what extent and how mainland ASEAN countries, excluding Thailand, have perceived China's image in conclusive term raises the question of Thailand's understanding and role within the complex equation of relationships between China and CLMV: does Thai society, from government officials to the general public, seriously perceive the nation's strategically advantageous geo-politics/geo-economics, as it sits astride the Indian and Pacific oceans? Apart from a superb location, expanding scrutinising points raises expectations that Thai consumer goods, with no tainted reputation or safety concerns, enjoying popularity as appeared in the infamous King Roman Casino's compound, may have more opportunities to build a commonly shared taste, at best, or at least enjoy a slight preference. This could happen only with wide, effective and strategic support from stakeholders, whether from government, private or people-oriented sectors. Wandering aimlessly without a complete strategy, as has been the case thus far, might cause disadvantages for Thailand. The point is whether Thais seriously decide whether and how to deploy their advantages without stirring up concern from China.

Laos and Myanmar might be helpful testing grounds since they each have tried to set an appropriate distance in coping with China. Even so, Thailand might be unable to smoothly accomplish what is anticipated unless it clearly understands its socio-cultural relationships with Laos and Myanmar. They are so dynamic that finding common patterns will not be as easy as might be expected. No matter how interesting these matters are, they are beyond the scope of this study.

What about Vietnam? It could be considered as the most precarious neighbour due to security matters over the South China Sea that are likely to be out of ASEAN's reach. Washington gave signs that its Pacific Fleet deployment has been adjusted in a southerly direction. Additionally, the first naval joint-exercise between Japan and India in June 2012 added an eye-catching scenario to the region. For Cambodia, it is the least likely place that Thailand can easily penetrate the tight-knitted relationship between a CLMV

nation and China. The Phreah Vihear incident is still a thorny matter and has blocked smooth relations between Bangkok and Phnom Penh. Additionally, with heavy Chinese investment in agriculture and industries aimed at exploiting vast, uncharted Cambodian arable land, it is likely Cambodia will become an effective rice-exporting country whose share of the prosperous Chinese market will grow at the expense of Thai rice-exporters.

Adjusting social reality, which has rapidly altered, within the frame of on-going relationships between Thailand and CLMV, specifically Cambodia, through various activities, particularly socio-cultural ones, might help smooth the way toward better understanding and co-operation. The upgrading of relations between China, Cambodia and Laos are good examples. Unfortunately, these interesting matters are also beyond the scope of this study.

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