



## **ASEAN-CHINA RELATIONS: THE NEXT FIFTEEN YEARS**

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ASEAN and China celebrated 15 years of relations with their first commemorative summit in November 2006. Barely three months later, China lifted its ties with the region further with a ground-breaking trade agreement in services signed at the joint summit with ASEAN in Cebu in January. This trade in services agreement (TIS), which followed closely an earlier agreement on trade in goods signed in 2004, was no doubt a milestone. It marked China's increasingly confident push for a free trade area with ASEAN, which if realised, could create one of the largest zones of prosperity in the world.

There is therefore much to celebrate, for ASEAN and China have achieved much in these one-and-a-half decades. This achievement is even greater when compared to ASEAN's relations with China in the preceding 15 years. The two sides were ideologically and politically divided. ASEAN perceived China to be supporting communist parties within their countries to ferment revolution. This made for an antagonistic relationship. It was the end of the Cold War and the success of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening (*gaige kaifang*) policies that made possible a new era in ASEAN-China relations.

Southeast Asia's relations with China however precede the founding of ASEAN in 1967 by two millennia, when the early kingdoms of the region had to work out their relations with a long series of imperial courts of China. The social memories underlying Southeast Asia's long relationship with China, and China's memories of its relations with these kingdoms of the South Seas fundamentally shape ASEAN relations with China today and will continue to do so into the future.

### **The role of social memories**

Southeast Asia's two millennia of social memories of China are of a large and dominant empire that mostly exerted a benign influence on the region. A series of early kingdoms found it beneficial to send missions offering gifts to the Chinese courts in return for the opportunity to trade at China's ports and receive in return gifts from the Chinese court that may outweigh the value of their gifts to the Chinese emperor. In the Chinese dynastic records these missions were considered 'tribute missions' and their gifts or merchandise considered 'tribute' to the emperor. Their letters were translated as 'memorials' of submission to the emperor as part of the *heqin* system of 'harmonious relationship' that assumed the superiority of the Chinese emperor and the inferiority of the ruler offering 'tribute'. But it is doubtful that the envoys of these early Southeast Asian kingdoms to the Chinese courts knew, or cared very much how their gifts were catalogued by the court officials. All they wanted was the opportunity to trade and receive in return for their gifts prized Chinese commodities such as silk and porcelains, and if the requirement to secure these privileges was to go through motions and actions which symbolized submission, then it was smart business practice to do

so.

However, a number of early Southeast Asian kingdoms, in particular Dai Viet, remember well an imperial China that was assertive and aggressive. The Vietnamese remember in their museums today some 900 years of Chinese colonialism from the time of the Han dynasty to the Five Dynasties. But like their neighbours, the newly independent Vietnamese kingdom recognized the benefits of good relations with China, and sent their first mission to the Sung court on 19 August 973, shortly after gaining their independence.

It was the Yuan that has left indelible memories among Southeast Asians of Chinese assertiveness and expansionism, when Mongol forces conquered the ancient kingdom of Nanchao and dispatched expeditionary forces to discipline the rulers of Dai Viet, Champa, Bagan and Java for not being sufficiently submissive to the Great Khan as not only an emperor of China, but a world conqueror. The succeeding Ming is remembered as a powerful and magnificent dynasty that reiterated the traditional practice of *heqin* or harmonious relations with the South Seas kingdoms, who were encouraged to send 'tribute' to the Ming court. The seven voyages of Admiral Zheng-he (or Cheng Ho) was supposed to assure the South Seas kingdoms of Ming goodwill and desire for 'harmonious relations' symbolized by their offering of tribute. It is these deep and often unconscious memories of relating to a largely benign China which can occasionally be assertive and expansive that shapes ASEAN perceptions of China today.

### **China's historical perspective**

Is China also viewing ASEAN through its equally long and even stronger social memories? Chinese policies and actions in supporting Southeast Asian communist parties during the Cold War to launch and sustain wars of national liberation confirmed old memories of an assertive China determined to make Southeast Asia submissive to it. China after Mao however suggests a China that is prepared to be one among equals (as China was during the Song dynasty) and negotiates a 'harmonious relationship' with its neighbours on that basis. Or, are China's memories of its relations with its South Seas neighbours shifting as China rises to economic preponderance with a 9% average GDP annual growth? Is China as a rising economic power recalling deeper social memories of a more hierarchic practice of 'harmonious relationship' implemented by the Ming and Qing, which is epitomized by the Emperor Qianlong's dismissal of Lord George Macartney's 1793 mission to China?

In hindsight, the Emperor Qianlong could afford to dismiss Lord Macartney because looking out from Beijing, China under the Qing was the 'central heart' (*zhongxin*) of the region. Second, Qing military expeditions had pacified China's frontiers and extended its borders far west, thus assuring China's security and stability. Third, England was far away and there was no benefit in China accepting Lord Macartney's 'tribute' and having to reciprocate with more favours. Are these deep memories rising in China's social memories as China rises, and recognises that it continues to need secure frontiers and a stable external environment if it aspired to be the new *zhongxin* of the region?

### **China's Smiling Diplomacy**

China's 'smiling diplomacy', as seen in its accession to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and agreement to a code of conduct in the South China Sea, are arguably a re-enactment of its old social memories of a secure and stable external environment as a precondition for China's rise and Southeast Asian memories of a rising China presaging the prosperity of the region, as in pre-colonial times. The on-going negotiations for a ASEAN-China free trade area will probably conclude with China giving to ASEAN more than it

receives -- as its imperial courts did in reciprocating 'tribute' from the South Seas countries.

It is these different memories of China's perceptions and attitudes towards Southeast Asia in the past that will shape ASEAN's relations with China. Is China's desire for a 'harmonious relationship' with ASEAN driven by memories of the economics of the comparative advantage of 'tribute' trade with its neighbours, when it was one among equals? Or, is China's understanding of a 'harmonious relationship' driven by memories of a hierarchy of power that assures China's security? ASEAN policies towards China will in part be driven by what it perceives to be China's social memories influencing its policies towards ASEAN.

It is these different social memories and resultant histories that ASEAN and China have of relating to each other that needs to be reviewed and perhaps negotiated and mediated lest they lead to misperceptions and misunderstanding of each other, undermining ASEAN-China relations in the next 15 years. Both ASEAN and China will need to make the effort and time to be more communicative and be prepared to discuss their social memories of each other and the historical assumptions that underpins these memories. Both ASEAN and China need to rethink their memories and rewrite their histories.

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