

Characteristics and trends of Myanmar's current perceptions of China

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Since the acceleration of democratic transition after the inauguration of U Thein Sein's government in March 2011, Myanmar society has become increasingly diversified and perceptions of China by different entities has become more complicated. The negative perception of China by Myanmar civil society has had an especially poor impact on Sino-Myanmar relations. China and Myanmar are both trying to guide public opinion by enhancing interaction in directions that would promote less negative views by Myanmar society. However, it will take more time for Myanmar society to form an objective perception of China.

In the past 64 years since establishing diplomatic relations with China, Myanmar has always had a relatively complex perception of China. On the one hand, like other small and medium-sized countries harboring concerns about big powers, Myanmar has been suspicious and alert toward China. On the other hand, friendly perceptions of China have, on the whole, prevailed. China is the only country referred to as "pawkpau" in the Burmese language. Since the inauguration of the Thein Sein government in March 2011, however, the vigorous push for democratic reform and social diversification has led to an increasingly diverse perception of China within the Myanmar society. Negative perceptions of China have increased rapidly among the average people, negatively affecting Sino-Myanmar relations.

Myanmar Politicians: Increased Concern But Relatively Positive and Rational

Compared with the previous military government, popular perceptions of China under the Thein Sein government have changed, exhibiting increasing concern about China's rapid development. In general, however, the government's perception of China has remained relatively more positive and rational. On the one hand, high-level officials see China as a big neighbor, important to Myanmar's development as a source of capital investment, technology, development experience and a vast market. Many senior officials have expressed the importance they attach to Sino-Myanmar relations and their appreciation for China's support to Myanmar's development. For example, China was the first country President U Thein Sein visited after his inauguration and during the three plus years of his government, he has made more formal visits to China (six), than to the U.S. and Japan. Furthermore, in 2014, other senior officials, such as speaker of the lower house and USDP chairman U Shwe Mann, Vice President U Nyan Tun and Commander of the Air Force Khin Aung Min have also visited China. These activities have promoted senior-level interactions between China and Myanmar to a all-time peak.

On the other hand, there are people in political circles who are concerned about China's rapid rise. Some of them even call China a "superpower" or believe that China is becoming a "superpower". Moreover, Myanmar's new leadership believes that the former military government was overly dependent on China, resulting in a disproportionately heavy Chinese influence on Myanmar. China is Myanmar's largest foreigner investor and trading partner. FDI from China (including Hong Kong and Macao) has exceeded 20 billion USD, about half of Myanmar's total FDI. The Thein Sein government apparently wishes to eliminate its overdependence on China. Compared with the government, the Myanmar's main opposition parties have vastly different

perceptions of China. Due to the rapid democratization process, Myanmar now has about 70 political parties and they are all very active. Currently, SPDC is the largest party in the parliament, followed by NLD. In total, they occupy 80% of the seats in the parliament. Other opposition parties are small and middle-sized. The perception of China by the opposition parties has some positive elements (mainly within NLD), but because most of the opposition parties have little or incomplete knowledge about China, misunderstanding and even extreme anti-China sentiments do exist. This is first of all because very few members of the opposition parties have visited China and their understanding of China is limited. Their perception of China is often times influenced by negative domestic and Western media coverage of China and it is difficult for them to access complete and objective information. This is because, with the exception of local overseas Chinese, most Burmese do not understand Chinese language, while Myanmar elite speak good English and like to read Western news. Secondly, this is because Myanmar has been pursuing democratic reform for only three years. People who have been ruled by military government for a long time do not fully understand Western democratic ideas and rules. This leads to extreme thoughts in Myanmar about China, such as “anti-military and anti-China equal democracy”. Therefore, they target cooperative projects signed between the former military government and China as being non-transparent and detrimental to the environment. In order to prepare for the 2015 elections, some of the small and middle-sized opposition parties are catering to this extreme public opinion to expand their influence and support base. Some opposition parties repeatedly raise requests in parliament to re-examine large cooperative projects signed between China and the former government.

The NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi is the largest and most influential opposition party in Myanmar. Although Aung San Suu Kyi participated in the protest against the Myitsone dam, a large cooperative project between China and Myanmar, and some NLD members have participated in demonstrations against the Letpadaung copper mine, a signature joint venture between the two countries, Aung San Suu Kyi’s personal view of China is basically positive. Her mother was an old friend of the Chinese people and had friendly ties with old-generation Chinese leaders, Zhou Enlai and Deng Yingchao. Her family has kept the gifts from Premier Zhou Enlai. Aung San Suu Kyi sees China as Myanmar’s important neighbor and believes Myanmar must have friendly relations with China. She has met with the Chinese ambassador to Myanmar and other Chinese officials many times and has publicly and repeatedly stated that she wishes to visit China as early as possible and exchange views with the Chinese people.

In the second half of 2012, some Myanmar extremists launched a protest against the Sino-Myanmar Letpadaung joint venture on the grounds of insufficient compensation for land and damage to the local environment. They attacked the mine’s operating zone, forced suspension of operations and made the company accept investigation. The investigation commission led by Aung San Suu Kyi conducted scientific research and field research, and released its report in mid-March, 2013. The report stated that the copper mine project did not have major problems and should resume after increasing land compensation and improving environmental protection measures. After the report’s release, Aung San Suu Kyi visited the copper mine to pacify the local people. She called upon them not to continue the protest and not to damage the interests of foreign investors from China and other countries. Otherwise, Myanmar would lose its international credibility and scare away investors.

Furthermore, some small and middle-sized political parties, such as the ethnic democratic parties led by Rakhine National Development Party, have strong democratic and nationalist sentiments. These parties try to expand their influence by opposing military and Chinese investments. They criticize large bilateral cooperative projects, such as the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines and the Myitsone dam, for lacking transparency and damaging the environment. The coalition of ethnic democratic parties led by the Rakhine National Development Party has proposed three pieces of legislation in the national parliament to re-examine the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipeline project. They even led the effort to organize related protests and demonstrations. This type of rhetoric and

activity has affected Myanmar society, raising the level of hostility in civil society's perception of China.

Civil Society: Noticeable Rise in Negative Public Perception of China

Since 2011, with acceleration of the democratization process, the government has loosened its supervision and management of society, giving rise to new social freedoms in Myanmar. People are now free to demonstrate and to express their opinions. They can express reasonable demands as well vent dissatisfaction with the government. As a consequence, long-suppressed public grudges against the government have surfaced. In this broader context, negative views of China in Myanmar society have apparently increased during the past two years and become increasingly public. This has, in turn, had a fairly large negative impact on the Myanmar government's decision-making regarding China and on Sino-Myanmar relations. It is completely different from the military government's absolute domination of policy-making toward China and represents an unprecedented new element in Sino-Myanmar relations.

Generally speaking, negative views of China in Myanmar society focus on two issues. First, since the beginning of democratic reform, because many people associate China with close relations to the former military government, discontent with the military government has been redirected toward China by people with ulterior motives. Second, most of the 20 billion USD China (including Hong Kong and Macao) has invested in Myanmar has been concentrated in hydropower, oil and gas, mining and other extractive industries. Despite the benefits, many people in the society see Chinese investment as having major negative impact, including land grabbing, dislocation of people, immigration and pollution. Some extremists accuse Chinese companies of looting Myanmar resources and not sufficiently meeting their corporate social responsibilities.

Within civil society, some private media have frequently attacked China. In addition, a civil society organization with great political influence -- the rapidly rising "88 Generation" organization -- has become a main source of poison for Myanmar civil society's view of China. This organization consists of former exiles who returned to Myanmar. It operates around a group of democracy advocates who were suppressed by the military government in 1988 and consequently went into exile in the U.S. and Europe. They have returned to Myanmar during the past two years. They have been trying to expand their political popularity by using anti-military and anti-China rhetoric. Some of the key leaders of the "88 Generation" are very hostile to China and pursue extreme approaches, becoming Myanmar's anti-China pioneers. This organization has been the main instigator of opposition to the Letpadaung copper mine. Its leaders refused to participate in the investigative commission led by Aung San Suu Kyi and openly threatened to "kill all projects signed between China and the former military government." The extreme anti-China rhetoric and activity of the "88 Generation" will continue to contribute to the expansion of anti-China sentiment in Myanmar society, attracting more ill-informed people to follow suit in opposing China.

Many NGOs, activists, and private media bear a generally negative view of Chinese companies, although their views do not reflect the truth about Chinese investments in Myanmar. Chinese companies have made contributions to Myanmar's development and they have produced some projects of benefit to the people. There are several reasons for the negativity and misconceptions among Myanmar people regarding Chinese companies. First, some Chinese companies have indeed engaged in irresponsible or even illegal activities in Myanmar, such as bribery, displacement of local population, land grabbing, environmental damage and ignoring requests from local people. Also some illegal Chinese immigrants in Mandalay, Shan State and Kachin State are engaged in bad or illegal activity, such as land grabbing, monopolizing business opportunity, and illicit purchase of Myanmar national ID cards. This behavior has caused revulsion among local people. Second, while Chinese investors have accomplished many beneficial projects in Myanmar, they have not engaged

in effective public relations to inform the local people about them. For example, Chinese companies have provided local people with many job opportunities. They have offered higher compensation for land and helped build schools, hospitals, roads, bridges and water facilities. But they have tended to follow the principle of “action only, no propaganda” or “more action and less propaganda” and because many of their activities are unknown to the people, they have failed to improve their image with local society. Third, anti-China activists and organizations in Myanmar and in the West have made a point of chasing down negative information about local Chinese companies. They have purposely ignored goodwill activities by Chinese companies, labeling them instead with “environmental destruction, disruption of local life style, and resource grabbing.” They have thereby given rise to significant hostility toward Chinese companies among the Burmese people. In addition, because of the rapid liberalization of Myanmar media in the past two years, this sentiment has spread exponentially during that period. Because many media people have minimum experience and lack adequate professional qualifications, they have been easily influenced by the anti-China sentiment in Western media and have propagated negative stories about China in order to attract attention. Some of them have even used these opportunities to win media awards in the West.

Negative perceptions of China by many Burmese are blind and misled. For example, some Myanmar NGOs and elites are deeply influenced by the environmental protection ideals of post-modern Western industrial society. They endeavor to pursue economic development without paying any environmental or resource price and they hold foreign companies, including Chinese companies, to extremely stringent investment standards. Any land grabbing or pollution by these companies will be met with protests. The expansion of anti-China views in Myanmar society has resulted in frequent demonstrations against Chinese. It has had a major negative impact on Chinese investment projects in Myanmar and on bilateral economic ties. The Myitsone dam, Letpadaung copper mine, and the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines are all landmark projects for Sino-Myanmar economic and trade relations. Yet they have all met with hostility, demonstrations, and protests by the local population. In pushing for democratic reforms, President U Thein Sein claims that decision-making by his government will pay more respect to public opinion. Therefore, when Myanmar society protests and demonstrates against Chinese projects, the government is more concerned with pacifying the people and strengthening governance, thus subjecting its China policy to domestic public opinion and public misconceptions about China. It should be noted that since the beginning of this year, many private media in Myanmar have reached a crescendo of accusation against “Chinese projects (pipelines and hydropower stations) for looting Myanmar resources, damaging the environment and threatening Myanmar’s national security.” They have produced slanderous charges that the ancient capital of Mandalay is filled with illegal Chinese immigrants, who depress the livelihood of local Burmese and threaten the independence of the Myanmar nation and culture. This has led to a resurgence of anti-China sentiment in Myanmar society, resulting in the failure to resume work on the Myitsone dam, continuing protests against the Letpadaung copper mine, and the erection of numerous obstacles to multiple hydropower projects by Chinese companies in Myanmar. Chinese investment in Myanmar has been decreasing for almost three years. In 2013, total Chinese FDI was only 310 million USD. From January to July, 2014, Chinese investment in Myanmar dropped to a new historical low -- about 50 million USD. On July 18, Myanmar abandoned the Kunming-Kyaukphyau railway project in another blow to Sino-Myanmar economic and trade relations.

Future Trends: The Positive and Negative Will Coexist

In the next few years, if there are no major negative events in Sino-Myanmar relations, the political elite, especially the rational ones, will basically maintain a positive view of China (of course, the level of positivity will vary from time to time.) They will have objective views of China, Chinese investment in Myanmar and Sino-Myanmar relations, and in general will not bear extreme anti-China sentiment. China and Myanmar are neighbors with more than 2000 km of shared border.

China is Myanmar's largest neighbor, investor and trading partner. Since Western economies are still sluggish and Western investments are both cautious and rare in Myanmar, Chinese investment and markets are both very important and convenient for the long-term development of Myanmar. On the other hand, small and mid-sized political parties, NGOs and extremist advocates in Myanmar will continue to maintain their negative views about China and Chinese companies. Their scope will possibly expand and their level of influence will possibly deepen in coming years. Especially since the beginning of this year, many political parties, organizations and individuals are already preparing for the 2015 elections. They use criticism of Chinese projects to cater to the domestic anti-China sentiment in Myanmar. Of course, because of the multiplicity of factors involved, these negative perceptions of China in Myanmar civil society will eventually give way naturally to rational thinking.

On one hand, China has made multiple efforts to reduce negative perceptions of China within the Myanmar society. First, the Chinese government, businesses and academia attach great importance to the improving China's image in Myanmar. They have strengthened exchanges with the Myanmar government, the political opposition, NGOs, media and academics. For example, Chinese civil society organizations, such as the China NGO Network for International Exchanges, China Institute for International Studies, Sino-Myanmar Friendship Association and some large Chinese companies investing in Myanmar have significantly expanded exchanges with MDRI, led by the President's senior political adviser U Ko Ko Hlaing, the Myanmar-China Friendship Association, Myanmar media and NGOs. This has had a positive effect on improving popular Burmese perceptions of China. China-Myanmar Civil Exchange Roundtables were held in 2013 and 2014 and have become a key platform for improving civil society relations between China and Myanmar. Secondly, Chinese companies such as CNPC and CPI have become more conscious of mutually beneficial investment in Myanmar, emphasizing the needs of the Burmese people, carrying out their social responsibility, helping Myanmar to improve conditions for economic development, providing local people with a great number of job opportunities, increasing local income, and alleviating the problems of poverty and unemployment. This will lead Chinese investments to bring more benefit to Myanmar people, to build a "Common Destiny" between China and Myanmar that's aimed at joint development and prosperity, to improve the image of Chinese companies and to reduce misconceptions and hostility toward China among the Myanmar people.

On the other hand, wise political elites in Myanmar have also begun to comprehend the damage done by negative views of China among the Myanmar people and have begun consciously to lead civil society to form a correct attitude toward China. The Letpadaung copper mine investigative commission led by Aung San Suu Kyi conducted long-term field and scientific research and reached objective and fair conclusions about the project. They concluded that the project did not suffer insurmountable problems and should continue after improving land compensation and environmental protection policies. She even visited the mining area to pacify local people, arguing that the copper mine would benefit the local community and that random abandonment of foreign investment projects would damage Myanmar's credibility and forfeit future foreign investment, since the copper mine project was signed legally by the former military government. She requested that the demonstrators end their opposition and accept the project.

In brief, although negative views of China within Myanmar society will persist for the next few years, a multiplicity of positive factors will gradually cause these views to improve. The people of Myanmar will come to appreciate Myanmar's national interests and begin to approach Sino-Myanmar relations with more objective and rational eyes. This, of course, will take time.

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