

# **China's economic offensive and its discontent in Southeast Asia**

## **A crucial case study of Sino-Myanmar relations**

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### **Abstract**

Although the rise of an economically powerful China benefits many developing countries, many worry about China's surging regional and global influences, especially in Southeast Asia. It is true that China rises fast but how successfully does it translate its rising power into actual political influences remains a question. In this study I answer the questions by examining a crucial case of Sino-Myanmar relationship. Because Myanmar relies heavily on China, it is one of the most likely case to be heavily influenced by China. If, however, Myanmar was less cooperative under such imbalanced relationship, then China's actual influence may be exaggerated. I use Composite Index of Economic Influence (CIEI) which country does Myanmar depend on the most in terms of economic interdependence. CIEI indicates that Myanmar relies on China the most and cannot be easily replaced in the short term. Given such high interdependent relationship, however, evidences show that since Myanmar started political reform in 2011, its behaviors begins to deviate from China's positions in issues of human rights and building nuclear-free world. Furthermore China's influence is not well-received by local communities due to its exploitative economic adventure. Such fierce contradiction peaked in China's investments in Myitsone dam and Letpadaung copper mine. Both cases encounters more discordance of political systems with its partners and conflicts with local people. As a consequence, China's soft footprints does not appear as strong and welcome as perceived. The power from interdependent relationship requires political and social cohesion to take hold.

## **1. Introduction**

Many people worry about the rise of China, especially when its rise is accompanied with surging economic power that seems to be well received by many countries. Such presence silently has slipped into its neighborhood and the developing world, such as Southeast Asian countries. China coins it as its peaceful rise that relies mostly on its soft power. In this book, it is called China's soft footprints. Although it causes widespread concerns, we know relatively little about how effective does China's soft footprints translate into actual political influences. Can a strong interdependent relationship be built further to elevate Beijing's political influence in the region? Does the region become more cooperative with and obedient to China's requests? Does local people welcome economic opportunities provided by China? In this study I seek to answer these questions by examining Sino-Myanmar relationship. This relationship constitutes a crucial case as a comparative study because it is probably the most interdependent bilateral relationship among China and ten Southeast Asian countries. Because of such high-level connections, Myanmar should be influenced by China easily and responds to what it asks. If this is not true, then the argument of China strong soft footprints in Southeast Asia requires alternative explanations.

To conduct a valid test, I first discuss exiting literature pertaining to China's soft footprints in the next section. In the third section, I discuss the foundation of a crucial case research design and why the case of Sino-Myanmar relationship is a valid case. In the fourth section I investigate Sino-Myanmar economic relationship and confirm whether Myanmar indeed depends heavily on China's economic resources. If that is the case, I further investigate the degree of interdependency and compare it with other Myanmar's major partners. After verifying the validity of the case study, in section five I compare the perceptions toward global affairs between both countries to see how cooperative they are in international collaboration. In addition, I look at China's investment projects and how are they perceived and responded by Myanmar government and local communities. These empirical evidences illustrate the effectiveness of China's soft footprints. Section six concludes.

## **2. Economic offensive and influence**

Perhaps the most relevant argument that links China's soft footprints to Southeast Asia is Joseph Nye's soft power. The core of the soft power is the ability to influence through one's attraction instead of coercion or payments. He then identified that the

three main sources of soft power could be a country's culture, political values and foreign policies (Nye, 2004). Although he touched upon the relevance of commercial instruments, he treated them as useful intermediaries for creating soft power. For example, more personal contacts or exchanges through cross-border economic activities between China and its Southeast Asian counterparts would make the former more easily to create attraction and then exerts influences on the latter. In other words, it is the chances of improving attraction through commercial activities, rather than the amount of commercial activities themselves, make economic incentives matter in discussing China's soft power. Many works provided evidences that China's ways of doing business and the experience of economic developments are more desirable and popular than western countries in Southeast Asia. China's external economic incentives, such as foreign direct investments or foreign aid, feature less restrictions and conditions and they seem to be more willing to share knowledge (Kurlantzick, 2007). In addition, Beijing's successful story in separating market economy from democracy is particularly attractive to developing countries, which more or less remain non-democracies (Wibowo, 2009). Such line of argument depicts the attractive nature of China's economic resources. In a nutshell, the deepening of bilateral economic relationship creates more opportunities for exchanging each other's views and experiences, which can be beneficial to generate attraction. And such attraction can be further developed into actual influence.

Since this book revolves around the idea "footprints", it makes more sense to discuss sunk economic involvement than merely attraction because a footprint is a concrete trace left behind by someone. Therefore it is necessary to relax the idea of cultural attraction and creates a more direct link between economic incentives and influence in this book. The theory of commercial liberalism considered that a dyad of countries can promote mutual communication between various kinds of actors by deeper economic engagements. With such tight economic bond, cooperative political behaviors are more likely to realize (Mansfield and Pollins, 2001; Stein, 1993). Economic interdependence, in others' views, would create mutual economic benefits; thus domestic actors would urge governments to maintain stable and cooperative conditions that foster further economic interests (Hirschman, 1977). Should the interdependence becomes unbalanced, however, the more dependent state might be more likely to be influenced by the less dependent one, especially when the latter threatens to cut the supply of economic resources or stop buying goods from the former (Chen, 2014; Keohane and Nye, 1977). Such line of argument considered that economic incentives can be both attractive and coercive on the way of generating influences. In short, compared with a dyad of low economic interdependence, a dyad of higher

economic exchanges are more likely to act more cooperative with each other. In addition, the less dependent country might be more capable to generate influences. One should observe less political discordance under such situation.

If we treat China's economic offensive as one of the key dimensions of its soft footprints in Southeast Asia, one should take into account of both rationales. Beijing can adopt its authoritative policy-making process and abundant economic resources to foster deeper trade relationship, provide attractive foreign direct investment (FDI), make large and generous loans, and give financial aid to its Southeast Asian counterparts. Greater personal and economic exchanges can be facilitated, which is beneficial to elevate China's attraction in the region. In addition, higher economic interdependence can be made at the expense of other powers' economic relationship in the region. Since China is the less dependent party in most case, its influence in the region can be improved through either attractive or coercive instruments. Should this argument be true, one should observe empirically that China's images in the region improves as it pours more economic incentives to the region. At the micro-level, grassroots people and private sectors such as local communities and domestic industries should welcome China's large-scale presence. At the macro-level, Southeast Asian governments' policies should be more cooperative in favor of China. They should act more in line with each other as economic relationship deepens. In the following sections, I will test whether China's strong presence is a truth, a question, or a myth by examining Sino-Myanmar economic relationship and its political effects.

### **3. A crucial case research design**

To test the effect of China's economic offensive in Southeast Asia, I use a crucial-case method that investigates the most likely case of Sino-Myanmar economic relationship (Eckstein, 1975; Gerring, 2007; Howson and Urbach, 1989). Although the use of single case to test a theory, or an argument, might be risky, it can be very illustrative if the case reaches the criteria of being crucial. The case can be seen as the most difficult one to confirm or disconfirm the theory. When the theory is confirmed or disconfirmed by this difficult case, other cases should fit better or worse to the theoretical prediction. To select the pertinent case, two approaches can be applied. The first is to select the least likely case that to confirm a theory, or an argument. Except for the dimension focused in the theory, if other less relevant dimensions in the case are the least supportive to the theory but the case fits into the theory, then this least-likely case confirm the validity of that theory. For example, if we want to argue that China's

economic offensive is active and indeed causes some influences to the region, then one can select a Southeast Asian country that is inimical to China in many aspects but experiences a high economic exchanges with China. If this country, which seems unlikely to follow what China said due to bitter relationship, nevertheless, treats China's economic engagement as attractive and is very responsive to Beijing, then this case confirm the argument of China's successful economic offensive in the region. Vietnam might be an appropriate case.

The second approach selects the most likely case to assess whether the theory, or argument, is disconfirmed. Except for the dimensions of theoretical interests, other dimensions of the case are supportive to the prediction of theory. Under such setting, if the case eventually fails to follow the theoretical prediction, then the theory is disconfirmed because other less likely cases should be even more unlikely to be fully explained. This approach is treated as more powerful than the least likely case (Gerring, 2007, pp. 237-238). For example, the most likely case for the argument of China's successful economic offensive can be a country that is highly connected to China in aspects other than economic dimension, such as security partnership. If the case shows that its society resents China's presence and the government's policies are in discordance with China, then the argument for China's economic offensive should be disconfirmed, or at least remains doubtful. In such situation, one should then look for alternative explanations.

To test the argument that China's economic incentives poured into Southeast Asia generate significant influences in the region (Ba, 2003; Kurlantzick, 2007, pp. 84-107; Lohman, 2010; Wibowo, 2009), I select a single crucial case of Sino-Myanmar relationship to test its validity. This is the most-likely case for China to achieve successful economic diplomacy due to several reasons. Regardless of bilateral economic relationship, which is the core of the argument of interest, at least three dimensions make Myanmar a crucial case. First, Myanmar and China share an interdependent security relationship. While Myanmar was isolated due to its repressive regime, it seeks China's support for its regime survival from external powers. Probably the most important principle abide by China is the non-intervention policy, which shield the regime in Naypyidaw more than any others. In strategic aspect, China has been building ports facilities for Myanmar, which is strategically important for China to enter Indian Ocean. In addition China becomes the most important supplier of military equipment and training to Myanmar (Swanström, 2012). Second, China may be the staunchest international ally to the military junta in Naypyidaw. From 2006 to 2011, China continuously voted "no" to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)

resolutions that condemned Myanmar's poor human right records.<sup>1</sup> It also vetoed United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that requested Myanmar to release political prisoners and end its military attacks and human rights abuses against ethnic minorities (United Nations, 2007). In fact, among ten Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar's votes in UNGA is the second closest to China.<sup>2</sup> The most similar one is Vietnam, albeit both countries are historically hostile to each other. This represents a very high level of common stances in global affairs between Myanmar and China. Third, both regimes are autocracies. As Nye (2004, p. page x) mentioned "when our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced." The common preferences of repressive policies shared by both autocratic regime, such as imprisoning political foes, quelling the press or suppressing the minority's social movements, may create mutual attraction resulting from the sense of legitimacy and supports.

Due the three factors discussed above, Myanmar should be the easiest target in Southeast Asia to be influenced by China given the same degree of economic incentives. Thus in Myanmar's case, one should observe Naypyidaw's outright tilting to China if Beijing speed up its economic offensive in the region. In this most likely crucial case, if instead Myanmar does not seem to be cooperative to China's positions, then the argument of China's increasing influence by means of economic incentives is disconfirmed. Alternative explanations or possible intervening variables should be presented. In the empirical sections below, I will use the crucial case of Sino-Myanmar relationship to test whether one should buy the asserted China's effective economic offensive in its Southeast Asian neighborhood.

## **4. A Solid Interdependent Relationship**

Recognizing that Myanmar depends heavily on China's supports for its military regime survival, in this section I investigate their bilateral economic relationship, the main exploratory variable.

### **4.1 China's surging economic offensive in Myanmar**

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<sup>1</sup> The UN Resolution Symbol for UNGA resolutions regarding Myanmar's human rights are A/RES/65/241, A/RES/64/238, A/RES/63/245, A/RES/62/222, and A/RES/61/232. They can be reached at <http://www.un.org/en/ga/documents/voting.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> The affinity score developed by Strezhnev and Voeten (2013) seeks to approximate voting similarity between each dyad in the UNGA. I use the variable "s3un" that "1" means both countries vote the same in all resolutions while "0" means they vote differently in all cases. China-Myanmar dyad scores an average of 0.963 from 2003 to 2011 and China-Vietnam dyad gets 0.966.

Due to Myanmar's repression of domestic opposition parties, U.S. government implemented economic sanctions in May 1997. In 1998 the military junta-led State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) secured political power and later refused to transfer political power to National League for Democracy (NLD), which was led by Aung San Suu Kyi and won majority seats in the 1990 general election. The repression had drawn higher international collaboration of economic sanctions against Myanmar. In 2003 the law *Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act* was signed and implemented by Washington that banned Myanmar's exports to U.S. The law also prohibited the exportation or re-exportation, directly or indirectly, to Myanmar of financial services from the U.S. The sanctions further blocked targeted persons' proprieties in U.S. (Office of Foreign Assets Control, 2014).

As shown in table 1, total Myanmar-U.S. bilateral trade plummeted during 2003 to 2004, from US\$303 million to US\$13 million. UK followed suit albeit only reflected 1 year later with smaller scale. While Washington urged boycotting international trade with Myanmar, its traditional Asia-Pacific allies did not answer. Australia did not seem to be affected much by U.S. Thailand and Singapore, which are the most important ASEAN trading partner to Myanmar, increased its trade with military regime. Myanmar's total intra-ASEAN trade volume improved from US\$3,920.7 million in 2004 to US\$15 billion in 2011 (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2013, p. 56). Outside ASEAN, China, India, Japan and South Korea speeded up their bilateral trade with Myanmar where China became the single most important trading partner, surpassing Thailand in 2011. During the year, as the data collected by a private institute suggests,<sup>3</sup> a 21.3% of total Myanmar's exports went to China, which made it Myanmar's second largest exporting outlet. Thailand remained the largest exporting destination. In addition, China accounted for 31.8% of Myanmar's total imports, the single largest partner. It means that its domestic consumption relied heavily on products or services importing from China. Although Japan and India also expanded their trade relationship with Myanmar, but the scales were not comparable to China's. The data indicates that although U.S.-led global economic sanction had hampered a certain level of trade relationship between Myanmar and its key western partners, the gap was filled by Asian countries with China, Thailand, Singapore, Japan and South Korea and India surged as the major trading partners to the military junta.

*Table 1. Myanmar's major trading partners, 1991-2013 (US\$ million)<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, please refer to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, which is developed by The MIT Media Lab Macro Connections group and can be accessed at <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/>.

<sup>4</sup> Time series data comes from three sources, which may encounter slight discrepancy but is consistent in cross-sectional comparison. Data from 1991 to 2009 is retrieved from Barbieri, Keshk, and Pollins

Year	China	Thai.	SG	Japan	ROK	India	USA	AU	UK
1991	420.7	4.2	384.9	140.2	36.5	55.5	55.5	6.5	20.9
1992	416.2	0.0	396.9	153.4	40.3	108.7	46.1	28.0	26.3
1993	521.9	0.0	479.5	181.5	60.6	133.1	63.7	16.6	45.6
1994	548.8	31.7	570.6	150.3	72.8	146.8	84.8	10.2	43.1
1995	829.2	40.2	912.4	267.4	108.2	183.8	104.6	11.4	41.9
1996	710.7	0.0	1003.8	382.7	161.9	198.9	151.4	19.2	58.3
1997	700.1	0.0	950.2	331.1	167.3	262.5	145.4	27.8	59.6
1998	647.8	0.0	621.3	294.9	176.9	224.7	210.0	21.1	51.8
1999	653.7	548.1	559.5	304.9	221.5	208.6	257.7	21.6	51.7
2000	798.0	810.9	589.4	334.9	340.9	232.0	505.8	23.1	88.5
2001	777.2	1199.5	577.9	307.4	305.9	256.2	514.5	33.8	111.1
2002	1027.0	1270.2	683.6	237.2	214.0	424.3	391.5	20.7	108.7
2003	1242.7	1393.0	799.8	276.5	231.7	485.4	303.0	19.8	110.9
2004	1321.6	2019.2	788.0	295.7	208.3	515.2	12.7	35.7	139.2
2005	1386.1	2562.6	764.5	304.3	188.3	615.9	5.8	46.0	83.2
2006	1673.9	3185.7	689.1	362.3	232.7	761.2	8.4	46.2	56.5
2007	2438.8	3370.0	917.0	490.1	401.9	994.2	9.5	52.5	69.5
2008	3017.8	5239.9	1503.0	524.7	384.5	1153.5	11.8	49.4	68.6
2009	3314.8	4497.5	1096.1	562.5	525.1	1426.0	7.8	73.1	55.9
2010	3349.8	3795.1	1398.9	451.2	378.0	1388.3	27.5	80.4	47.6
2011	5052.3	4515.0	3058.9	822.4	666.8	1371.4	293.1	n.a.	43.7
2012	4984.8	4697.4	2826.8	1498.2	624.0	1320.3	122.8	n.a.	42.0
2103	6930.7	5195.2	3273.3	1655.0	1494.2	1362.6	97.5	n.a.	67.7

Note: China's statistics is the sum of Mainland China and Hong Kong

If we further dissect the top import and export goods, as shown in table 2, Myanmar's key exporting goods are natural resources and crops. China was a key importers, especially the precious stones and rough wood. On the other hand, most Myanmar's top imports were vehicles or processed industrial materials. China's top exports to Myanmar, such as motorcycles, delivery trucks, large construction vehicles, or refined petroleum, were those required by domestic transportation and manufacturing industries. Since western countries implemented ban on importation, including critical instruments for economic development, China's role as a key supplier of those goods becomes crucial to Myanmar's economic development. In sum, China is not also important to Myanmar as a key trading partner. The exports sustain

(2009); data of 2010 is retrieved from United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database; data of 2011 to 2013 is from Myanmar's official statistics, [https://www.mnped.gov.mm/html\\_file/foreign\\_trade/s09MA0201.htm](https://www.mnped.gov.mm/html_file/foreign_trade/s09MA0201.htm).

Myanmar's industrial development and infrastructure building. Looking at this way, China emerged as the most important trading partner to the military junta over the past decade.

*Table 2. Top trading goods of Myanmar and Sino-Myanmar trades in 2010*

Rank	MY exports	MY to CN	MY imports	CN to MY
1	petroleum gas	precious stones	construction vehicles	motorcycles
2	dried legumes	rough wood	motorcycles	iron structures
3	rough wood	iron ore	delivery trucks	delivery trucks
4	rubber	rubber	palm oil	refined petroleum
5	precious stones	manganese ore	iron structures	synthetic fabrics
6	crustaceans	dried legumes	refined petroleum	construction vehicles

Source: See footnote 3

Now let's turn to the dimension of FDI, as in table 3, before international sanctions started to harm Myanmar in early 2000s, China was not a major direct investor to Myanmar. Back then western countries and Japan were the main investors. In 2004, China's FDI to Myanmar constituted only 1.9% of total global investment. China was not qualified as a major investor. After western countries adopted economic sanctions against the repressive regime since early 2000s, however, China began to invest substantially and became the largest investor to Myanmar in 2011 (Bloomberg Businessweek, 2011). In 2012 China's FDI accounted for 33.4% of total worldwide direct investment. From 2004 to 2011, total FDI volume from China, including Hong Kong, amounted to about US\$2.13 billion, which is the single largest investor to Myanmar. It was followed by Asia's newly industrialized economies' (NIEs) US\$1.18 billion and European Union's (EU) US\$841.4 million (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2013, p. 137). In terms of FDI stock, the cumulative amounts of FDI in a given year, China merely represented 0.4% of total sunk investments in 2004. As China speeded up economic engagement starting in 2007, its share of FDI stock has surged rapidly. In 2012 the number increased to 26.0%. According to ASEAN-Japan Centre, China's FDI stock from 1988 to 2011 amounted to US\$13.9 billion, including 33 approved investment projects.<sup>5</sup> The size was the largest, followed by Thailand. Top western FDI stock during the same period were UK, France and U.S., but they only invested US\$2,660 million, US\$469 million and US\$243.6 million respectively. Japan and India invested less and merely amounted to US\$211.9 million and US\$189 million. All these indicate that China's FDI undoubtedly has become the most important and lucrative resources to support Myanmar's economy and military junta's political

<sup>5</sup> Data is available at ASEAN-Japan Centre, <http://www.asean.or.jp/en/asean/know/statistics/5.html>.

survival.

*Table 3. Myanmar's inward FDI from the world and China (US\$ million)*

Year	FDI to Myanmar			FDI stock in Myanmar		
	China	World	%	China	World	%
2000	2.3	258.3	0.9	n.a.	3211	n.a.
2001	2.3	210.3	1.1	n.a.	3305	n.a.
2002	16.8	152.1	11.0	n.a.	3735	n.a.
2003	n.a.	251.5	n.a.	10.22	4393	0.2
2004	4.1	213.5	1.9	20.18	4815	0.4
2005	11.5	234.9	4.9	23.59	4686	0.5
2006	12.6	275.8	4.6	163.12	5191	3.1
2007	92.3	709.9	13.0	261.77	6088	4.3
2008	232.5	863.9	26.9	499.71	6809	7.3
2009	376.7	1079.0	34.9	929.88	7958	11.7
2010	875.6	901.1	97.2	1946.75	8752	22.2
2011	217.8	1000.6	21.8	2181.52	9667	22.6
2012	749.0	2243.0	33.4	3093.72	11910	26.0

Sources: Data of China's FDI (stock) to Myanmar is from *Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment* published by the Ministry of Commerce of People's Republic of China, while total global inward FDI is from the World Bank and total global inward FDI stock is from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.<sup>6</sup>

If we break down Myanmar's inward FDI by sector, almost all investments concentrated on extractive industries. From 2005 to 2011, approved investments in oil, gas and mining sectors amounted to 47.7% of total investments while electricity/hydropower sectors attracted 51.4%, a total of 99.1% (Bissinger, 2012, p. 41). In 2010 alone, 13 investments in power, oil and gas, and mining industries were approved. They constituted a proportion of 99.6% of total investments.<sup>7</sup> Of those investments, a large portion of investments in extractive industries comes from China that seeks to develop and control the natural resources, such as oil, natural gas, and hydro-power. According to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) definition of balance of payments, FDI is defined as investments that have lasting influence on the management of foreign assets, where investors have over a 10% share in decision-making power in certain foreign enterprises (Chen, 2014). In such perspective, one

<sup>6</sup> Statistics from different sources may encounter discrepancy although I try to make data as consistent as possible for higher validity.

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 5.

might concludes that China had become the most influential investors that is capable of exerting greater controls on crucial infrastructure projects in Myanmar.

Development aid givers might control another source of influence on the receivers. Due to different calculation and definition by different countries or international organizations, macroeconomic data for China-Myanmar aid relationship is less clear.<sup>8</sup> However, several research indicated that China is a major donor to Myanmar. For example, China in 1970s and 1980s had offered interest-free loans that contributed to the building of power plants and light industries, such as textile factories. After mid 2000s the aid projects became more diversified. China assisted several huge national projects, such as building hydroelectric dam, international conference center and help Myanmar to hold the 2013 Southeast Asian Games. Whether such projects can be counted as official aid or not, Beijing has indeed offered generous deals to Naypyidaw. In return, China seeks that their productive investments can one day bring back strategic assets and goods that China need for its domestic economic development. Therefore, China's aid to Myanmar is sometimes treated as an act of strategic intentions, rather than altruistic. Regardless of China's intentions, Myanmar governments relied heavily on concessional loans and free financial transfers. Since China is the largest trading partner and investor, as well as an important funder, one should expect China's economic offensive to be effective and influential. Plus that international society was blocking Myanmar's external economic activities, Beijing's influence on Naypyidaw should extremely powerful.

#### **4.2 Composite index of economic influence (CIEI)**

China-Myanmar bilateral economic ties suggests a strong interdependent relationship, but how relatively stronger is it when compared with other countries. As mentioned above, China's soft footprint in Myanmar can be embodied by the facilitation of greater personal and economic exchanges. To evaluate its relative status of interdependent relationship with other major players in Myanmar, I develop the Composite Index of Economic Influence (CIEI), which captures a country's relative interdependent status. The way to calculate to index is similar to the well-known Composite Index of National Capability (CINC), which calculates the average of proportions a country possesses in six dimensions relevant to material power (Singer,

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<sup>8</sup> Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) uses the term official development aid (ODA), which is defined more strictly that only includes official concessional deals on development project. Literature regarding China's development aid around the world, however, defines in a more vague way, that sometimes also include unofficial infrastructure investments or low-interest loans. For example see Song and Wu (2013).

Bremer, and Stuckey, 1972). CIEI is composed of four dimensions that include a country's proportion of Myanmar's total trade volume, total inward FDI, total external debts owed, and total foreign visitors. A country's CIEI is the average of four dimensional proportions. A high CIEI indicates that Myanmar trades more with, secures more investments from, owes more to and engages more personal exchanges with a certain country. All four dimensions are relevant to economic influences from and cultural exchanges with outside, which constitute the core of economic interdependent relationship.

*Table 4. Myanmar's CIEI ranking in 2010 and 2013<sup>9</sup>*

#	Country	2013					2010				
		CIEI	TD	FDI	DEBT	VIS	CIEI	TD	FDI	DEBT	VIS
1	China	28.4	27.6	54.0	21.0	11.0	28.1	25.5	50.1	21.0	15.8
2	Thailand	15.5	26.0	20.6	0.0	15.5	19.4	34.6	23.7	0.0	19.2
3	Japan	14.9	8.3	0.6	43.0	7.6	13.3	4.3	0.5	43.0	5.2
4	Singapore	6.1	15.7	4.1	0.0	4.4	4.2	8.4	4.5	0.0	3.9
5	S. Korea	4.0	3.5	6.5	0.0	6.1	4.4	4.0	7.3	0.0	6.1
6	India	2.5	7.3	0.4	0.0	2.3	3.7	11.0	0.5	0.0	3.2
7	Malaysia	2.3	2.5	2.2	0.0	4.4	2.6	2.9	2.4	0.0	5.2
8	UK	2.1	0.2	1.7	2.6	3.7	3.0	0.4	6.6	2.6	2.4
9	U.S.	1.8	0.7	0.5	0.0	6.0	1.5	0.1	0.6	0.0	5.3

Note: TD, FDI, DEBT, and VIS represent total trade, inward FDI, external debt, and foreign visitors

In 2010, for example, China accounted for 25.5% of Myanmar's total trade with the world, 50.1% of total foreign investment to Myanmar, 21% of Myanmar's total external debts and 15.8% of total foreign visitors to Myanmar. Averaging these four figures, China's CIEI in 2010 equals 28.1. It means that in average, China secured around 28.4% of meaningful assets on which Myanmar depends from the world. However, there is no intention to treat CIEI as a mathematical tools for calculating

<sup>9</sup> China's trade data includes Hong Kong and UK's investment data includes British Virgin Island and Bermuda Island. Please refer to footnote 5 for Trade data; for FDI data, see data published by Myanmar's Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, which can be accessed at <http://www.mnped.gov.mm>; for tourism statistics, see data published by Myanmar's Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, which can be accessed at <http://www.myanmartourism.org/>. The estimate of Myanmar's external debt is subject to the problem of data availability. I rely mainly on Hulova's (2013) analysis, which estimated Myanmar's debts owed to China, Japan and Paris Club members. Hulova estimated that Paris Club members, excluding Japan, were owed 24% of Myanmar's external debts. Financial Times reported that nine Paris Club members were Myanmar's creditors, which including UK (Robinson, 2013). Therefore, I estimates UK's debt's share using the average of nine Paris Club members. For other countries, no information available indicated other countries amounted to more than 1% of Myanmar's external debt; therefore I used 0.0 to estimate other countries' proportions of debts.

absolute relative influence. For example, one should not divide China's CIEI (28.1) in 2010 by U.S.'s (1.5) and argues that Myanmar depends 18.7 times more on China than U.S. It merely shows that Beijing is much more important to Myanmar than Washington in terms of external economic relationship.

In table 4, it shows that China not only demonstrates ambitious economic offensive in Myanmar, it also successfully outperforms other Myanmar's major partners. Comparing CIEI of 2010 and 2013, China remains the single most influential country followed by Thailand and Japan while the latter is catching up to the former. To Myanmar, its neighbor and regional powers, such as Japan, South Korea and India, are more interdependently important than their western counterparts. Although U.S.'s CIEI improved in 2013, its size of the gap with Asian countries remains huge. From the above evidences, one cannot deny China's great potential of influences in Myanmar. For those who treats softer instruments or economic interdependency as critical to the nature of power, China is undoubtedly the single most influential, if not dominating, country to Myanmar and its contribution to economic development should be welcome by grassroots people of Myanmar. For these factors, China's soft footprint should be powerful, influential and intertwined with Myanmar. As a consequence, we should expect to observe Myanmar's irresistible all-out obedience and cooperation with what China asks. In the next section, I investigate the validity of such expectation.

## **5. Growing Divergence between China and Myanmar**

To investigate Sino-Myanmar relationship, I observe the level of similarity regarding their perspectives on global affairs by comparing their voting behaviors in UNGA. It is followed by investigating how China's presence is perceived by local people in Myanmar.

### **5.1 Climbing official discrepancy on global perspective**

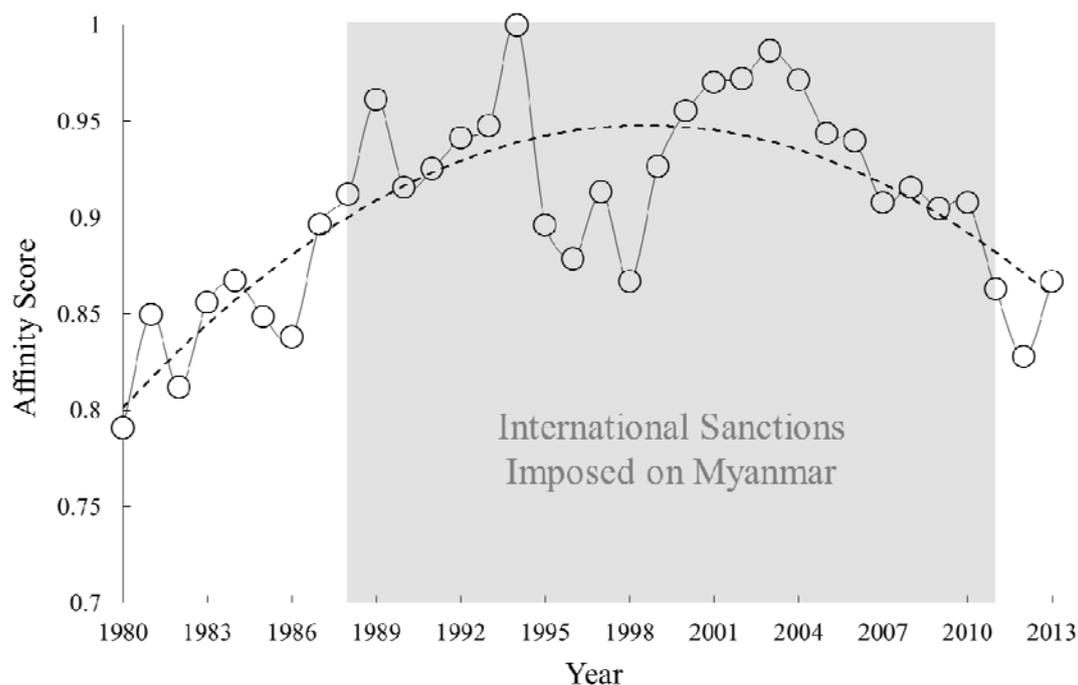
The affinity score by calculating a dyad's voting behaviors in UNGA captures the similarity between two countries regarding their perspectives toward global affairs.<sup>10</sup> Higher voting similarity indicates higher chances of cooperation between a pair of countries. As figure 1 shows, Sino-Myanmar affinity score seems to follow an inverse U-shaped curve from 1980 to 2013. When the international society imposed economic sanction on Myanmar when the military junta violently cracked down on the 8888

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<sup>10</sup> See footnote 2.

nationwide popular pro-democracy protests in 1988, China and Myanmar acted more in concert in UNGA. Before 1988 and after 2010 as Myanmar began to open up to the outside world, both countries were less coherent in UNGA.

Figure 1. Sino-Myanmar Affinity Score, 1980-2013



If we further trace China and Myanmar’s voting behaviors in UNGA resolutions they disagree, Myanmar deviate more from the role as an obedient partner since 2011 in at least in two aspects: human rights and nuclear-weapon-free world. From 2006 to 2011, or 61<sup>st</sup> to 66<sup>th</sup> Sessions, UNGA continuously voted on six resolution, titled “Situation of human rights in Myanmar”, which strongly condemned systematic violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of the people of Myanmar.<sup>11</sup> Without a doubt, China stood side-by-side with the military junta with voting “No” in all six resolutions. China and Myanmar are also staunch allies for blocking human rights related UNGA resolution on Iran and Syria. Voting on “Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, China has voted “No” together with Myanmar. However, starting in the 67<sup>th</sup> session of 2012, the Myanmar representative chose not to participate in the voting. For the resolutions that strongly condemned Syrian government’s human rights violations, titled “Situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic”, China abstained from voting while Myanmar voted “No” in the 66<sup>th</sup> Session in 2011. In the following two year, attitudes toward Syria’s human rights problems further split between China and Myanmar. In the following two years, China

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 1.

rejected the resolution by voted “No” while Myanmar changed from rejection to no comment by not participating the vote. Interestingly, Myanmar’s representatives showed up to vote on 11 other resolutions discussed on the same day. The resolution in the 68<sup>th</sup> Session was approved by 127 countries and rejected by 13 while only 6 countries did not participate. Of those 13 countries, many of them are China’s staunchest authoritarian allies, such as Belarus, North Korea, Cuba, Iran, Uzbekistan, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. They often criticized that UN’s actions and resolutions for human rights issues interferes in other countries’ domestic affairs.

*Table 5. China’s and Myanmar’s voting behaviors in UNGA*

Resolution	Session	61 <sup>st</sup>	62 <sup>nd</sup>	63 <sup>rd</sup>	64 <sup>th</sup>	65 <sup>th</sup>	66 <sup>th</sup>	67 <sup>th</sup>	68 <sup>th</sup>
	Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Nuclear-free	China	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	A	A	A
	Myanmar	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Iran’s HRs	China	N	N	N	N	N	A	N	N
	Myanmar	N	N	N	N	N	N	NP	NP
Syria’s HRs	China	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
	Myanmar	N	N	N	N	N	N	NP	NP

Note: Y, N, A, and NP represent a vote of yes, no, abstentions, and not participating

In the 66<sup>th</sup> General Assembly’s meeting when UNGA resolutions condemning Myanmar still existed, the representative of Myanmar made statements during the meeting that “accused its main sponsor, the European Union, of exploiting human rights for political purposes.” The representative also stated that its country was working hard to build a democratic society and deserved “kind understanding and sincere encouragements of the international community, rather than an unconstructive approach by adopting such a resolution” (United Nations General Assembly, 2011). Starting in the 67<sup>th</sup> Session of 2012 when international society saw political reform in Myanmar, representatives of UNGA put their voices down on Myanmar. The subsequent two resolutions was adopted unanimously without harsh criticism on Myanmar’s human rights. Later the UNGA discontinued further action on drafting resolutions. Myanmar’s UNGA representative commented during the meeting that the country “had reached out to the international community and engaged in bilateral dialogues with the United States, Japan and the European Union, based on the principles of cooperation and genuine dialogue. We (Myanmar) have opted for cooperation rather than confrontation” (United Nations General Assembly, 2013). Unlike other countries congratulated on Myanmar’s improvement, the representative of China said that “international community should let Myanmar choose its own path and refrain from adopting a

country-specific text” with acrimonious tone.

For the view on the nuclear-weapon-free world, China and Myanmar had voted exactly the same on the resolutions “Towards a nuclear-weapon-free world” since 1998. Both countries abstained in the first two years and then both agreed until 2010.<sup>12</sup> Starting from 2011, China had abstained on the resolutions, criticizing that Russian and the United States should reduce their nuclear weapons significantly before making requests to all other countries. China’s hesitation comes from their climbing demand on nuclear power for civilian, or even military, purposes in the future. Beijing’s changing position, however, was not shared by Naypyidaw, which continued to vote “Yes” to a nuclear-free world.

Above evidence shows that regarding human rights protection, Myanmar started to move away from China’s positions in 2012 even though China was the most crucial economic partner. It seems to approach a pro-human rights position supported by the democratic world. In addition, perspectives on nuclear power becomes more divergent. All these suggest that China’s soft footprints in Myanmar does not earn it an adamant ally at least in human rights and global nuclear development issues. Resorting to its economic influence, China cannot take Myanmar’s cooperation for granted anymore. After Myanmar pursued democratization, discrepancy between the two countries may rise in more global issues.

## **5.2 Suring China bashing in Myanmar’s society**

Aside from rising official discrepancy, discontent about China’s presence also rises in Myanmar’s society. Responding to local protests against China’s investment projects, President Thein Sein suspended the Myitsone Dam project in September 2011. In November 2012, local protests against China-backed Letpadaung copper mine led to temporary suspension of the project. Railway construction that linked Myanmar’s west coast with Kunming in southern China was stopped. On May 31, 2011, China Mobile and UK’s Vodafone announced to withdraw their joint bid for telecommunications licenses in Myanmar (Gronholt-Pedersen, 2013). Confronting these challenges, according to Myanmar’s official statistics, China’s direct investments, including Hong Kong, to Myanmar plummeted from US\$4.3 billion in 2011 to US\$488.1 million in 2012 and further to US\$176.0 million in 2013. China’s proportions subsequently dropped from 93.6% to 34.4% and 4.3%. In 2013, Singapore invested the most while

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<sup>12</sup> For the detail of the resolution, go to United Library website <http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/> and search “Towards a nuclear-weapon-free world”.

South Korea, Thailand, UK and Vietnam invested more than China. It is plausible to argue that strong Sino-Myanmar interdependent relationship, soft footprints, does not naturally increase China's soft power, the attraction. The magnification of quantitative involvements does not automatically translate into qualitative recognition. The problems may lie in the political reform in Myanmar and exploitative nature of China's projects.

In the Myitsone dam case, China Power Investment Corporation (CPIC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Myanmar's Ministry of Electric Power No. 1 in December 2006 regarding the intention of building the hydroelectric power plant. In May 2007 two countries concluded the agreement to build 7 dams with a total of US\$3.7 billion investment. The project was aimed to finish in 2017. CPIC will manage the project for fifty years and then pass to Myanmar. During the period under CPIC's franchise, 90% of electricity will go to China while Myanmar benefits from dividends and bonuses, free electricity and taxes. In February 2011, the then Prime Minister Thein Sein urged to speed up the project when he visited the construction site. Although the central government supported Myitsone project, local people in Kachin State, where the dam is located, opposed it from the first day the project started. Objections not only resulted from long-standing conflict between the ethnic Kachin people and the military government, but also from the environmental impact, threats to damage cultural sites and unequal distribution of interests. As local protests peaked, Myanmar's political situation started to change. In March 2011, Thein Sein was sworn in as the President of civilian government and the transfer of power from military junta was complete. In May thousands of political prisoners were released and the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed to leave Rangoon on a political visit to Thein Sein. These actions demonstrated Myanmar's intention to embrace a more open political regime. On November 11, 2011, U Zaw Min, Minister of Electric Power No. 1, still stated that both countries will continue the Myitsone project according to the contract. After 20 days, however, President Thein Sein announced the decision of suspending the project, stressing that the government has to address and relieve people's concerns because Myanmar government is now elected by the people (Li, 2011).

From the Chinese side, several research attributes local discontent to at least three aspects. First, local inhabitants and ecosystem may be damaged by the dam construction at the time when Myanmar lacks effective environment regulations to control such risk. This concern is shared by most Kachin people. Second, local people consider the project as only beneficial to China and sacrificing local interests. The deal of 90% electricity export to China is an example. Third, many Chinese are suspicious of U.S.'s hands

behind local people's oppositions. In addition, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has been fighting against the government since 1962 and therefore does not trust government-backed projects. Political reforms in Myanmar result in the release of Aung San Suu Kyi who strongly opposes the project. The subsequent reduction of media controls allow media to report the problems of the project. People become much more capable of receiving knowledge of the negative impact caused by Myitsone project (Jiang, 2011; Li, 2011; Song and Wu, 2013; Wang, Zhao, and Gui, 2013; Zhang, 2012).

Similar situation occurred in the Letpadaung copper mine project, a joint venture of US\$1.65 billion by China's Wanbao Mining, a subsidiary of China North Industries Corporation, and Myanmar's Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings (UMEHL) run by the Myanmar's military. In order to attract foreign investments, Myanmar government grab lands from local people without appropriate compensation. Displaced people lost about 7,000 acres of land in 26 villages. Since June 2012, public protests continued to rise and peaked in November when protestors blocked the construction and forced the project to a temporary cease. The standoff between protestors and police occurred outside China's embassy in Yangon. On December 2, the authority formed an investigation committee chaired by Aung San Suu Kyi. The final report concluded that the project should continue (Liao, 2013). The official investigation certainly was not well received by protestors. Even when a popular political figure as Aung San Suu Kyi visited Letpadaung, furious local people criticized her involvement as she called for peaceful resolution and suggested that breaking an international contract would harm Myanmar's reputation. Sporadic protests continues that led the authority to open fire to villagers and detained several protestors (Mann, 2014; Son, 2013).

The cases of Myitsone and Letpadaung illustrate the discontent of China's soft footprints in Myanmar. Its significant presence succeeded under the rule of military regime, which is isolated and sanctioned by the international society. It left Beijing with higher leverage power when dealing with Naypyidaw. But the situation somehow changed as Myanmar intended to pursue democratization. Chinese companies used to rely on Myanmar's authority to put down local resentments during the military rule. Direct and open connections with local communities were missing. Scholar found out that most China's investments in Myanmar were in extractive sectors, which used more Chinese immigrant workers, as well as causing more damages to the environment. Benefits for local communities are limited. Most investments from Japan, however, put more resources in manufacturing sectors that rely heavily on local people. Such investments were more welcome for creating more job opportunities (Fuller, 2012). China's poor records in environmental protection and unequal distribution of interests

further alienated itself from local people. Such discrepancy will only widen as Myanmar democratizes itself and people have more information and ways to express discontent.

Myanmar's civilian government becomes more sensitive to the grassroots. It also acknowledges the importance of diverse external economic engagements for economic growth. China is no longer the only major power to please. Myanmar reaches out to India, Japan and U.S. For example, India has been executing several projects of infrastructure buildings that not only benefits local people, but also deepens connectivity of both sides. The projects include 160 kms Tamu-Kalewa road that contains seventy-one bridges, Rhi-Tiddim and Rhi-Falam road, and Yangon-Mandalay railway, upgrade of Sittwe port, and 1,360-kilometer highway project linking India, Myanmar and Thailand. Several Indian private companies are setting up branches or subsidiaries in Myanmar that are beneficial to bilateral trade, technological development and financing (Gupta, 2013, p. 88). For Japan, Tokyo pledged 800 million yen in foreign aid in 2011 and promised a further 1.6 billion yen during the parliamentary by-election held in 2012. Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko, during President Thein Sein's visiting Japan that asking for help, pledged another 1.65 billion yen aid deal. Both leaders assured that all funding will be directed to infrastructure building (Reilly, 2013, p. 153). The United State, after Myanmar's political reform, had lowered the level of economic sanction. U.S. President Barack Obama announced in May 2012 that Washington will lift certain financial and investment sanctions on Myanmar. In July 2012, the United States authorized exportation of U.S. financial services and permitted the first investment project in the past 15 years. In November 2012, U.S. authorized imports from Myanmar's goods and in February 2013, U.S. citizens were allowed to conduct transactions with four Myanmar's major financial institutions. (Perlez, 2012). U.S. State Department's former Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell, played an important role to help U.S. businessman win contracts to expand Yangon's international airport and to build roads between Yangon and Mandalay. His consulting team were bidding more infrastructure projects (Boot, 2013). It is evident that the balance of economic influence in Myanmar is shifting away from China.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper select Myanmar as a case to test whether China's soft footprints in Southeast Asia has successfully translated into actual influences. Because Myanmar

military junta used to depend heavily on China's supports for political survival and economic development, Naypyidaw could be very responsive to China's requests and acts in concert with it. And China's presence should be utterly welcome. This crucial case of Sino-Myanmar relationship, however, indicates differently. Although China is the most interdependent partner to Myanmar in almost all dimensions, the quantitative advantages does not translate into strong qualitative influences after Myanmar started political reform. Furthermore China's influence is not echoed by local communities due to its exploitative economic adventure. This study suggests that China's soft footprints failed to realize continuous influences in Myanmar continuously, let along its footprints in other less-dependent Southeast Asian countries. Currently China's economic footprints confronts problems of the discordance of political systems with other governments and extractive nature of its investments. These are what reduce the effectiveness of China's economic offensive around the world.

Theoretically speaking, this case casts doubts on the relationship between interdependent relationship and power. It shows that even though two countries are highly interdependent, we cannot take power by the less-dependent for granted. As this case shows, interdependent connection requires political and social cohesion for further strengthening. It somehow correspond to Nye's soft power that treats legitimacy as a facilitator to assuming soft power. The concern for political and economic legitimacy should be an important intervening variable whenever we try to analyze the concept of power.

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