

# **MYANMAR-CHINA COOPERATION IN SOCIAL SECTOR SINCE 2011**

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## **Abstract**

Myanmar-China relations were rooted in history and the two countries maintained cordial relations throughout successive governments in Myanmar. China has continued its cooperation in Myanmar when Myanmar has been transitioned democratically since 2011. Along with reforms, Myanmar upgraded its policies for development cooperation and assistance in line with international standard. China extended social cooperation although it mostly focused on economic related relations in the past decades. Based on the background, the paper aims to explore China's cooperation to Myanmar especially in education, humanitarian and public health sectors since 2011. This paper focuses on the question that what extent Chinese cooperation affects Myanmar social sector development particularly in such three areas. It examines Chinese activities in scholarship program, provision of school facilities, disaster relief and public health emergency assistance in the Covid-19 pandemic in Myanmar.

**Keywords:** Assistance, Cooperation, Myanmar- China relations, Education, Humanitarian, Public Health, Development

## **Introduction**

Myanmar-China relations officially started in 1949 after the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded. Myanmar was the first country which recognized the PRC government. Since 1950s, they have shared the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. China has been Myanmar's immediate neighbor, and big brother, based on good neighborliness and Pauk-Phaw friendship. It has been one of the top economic partners for decades. Its diplomatic support and economic ties contributed to overcome some barriers for development when Myanmar was isolated by international community after 1988. Both countries emphasized government-to-government relations but there was a changing trend in their relationship after 2011. They reviewed their cooperation approach and extended social cooperation in education, culture, public health to enhance people-to-people contacts.

Meanwhile, Myanmar government outlined more systematic approach and policy on development cooperation amid reforms. Based on the background, the objective of the paper is to explore China's cooperation to social sector especially in education, humanitarian and public health sectors of Myanmar from 2011 to 2020. This paper explores to what extent Chinese cooperation affects in these three areas after 2011. It is mainly approached by the analytical and qualitative method using both primary and secondary sources.

## **Myanmar-China Relations since 2011**

Myanmar and China have had interactions among people throughout their long history. China has been a major trading partner, investor and donor of Myanmar for decades. Myanmar's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government led to diversify its foreign relations and normalized relations with western countries. It seemed to make balancing options in its foreign relations, particularly with China and the United States (US). It maintained friendly ties with China while tried to limit over-dependence on China. Myanmar has continued to keep

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the *Pauk-Phaw* relationship with China. In fact, the stand actually serves essence of Myanmar's foreign policy.

Under the USDP government, Myanmar-China relations were built on "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" in May 2011. However, after the suspension of the Myitsone Dam and other three projects, the relationship seemed to face with delicate interactions. China approached more with public diplomacy. It engaged more with new actors such as semi-officials, civil society organizations (CSOs), ethnic groups and non-state actors in Myanmar. Moreover, it started party to party relations between Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and different parties in Myanmar. In fact, it used dual track diplomacy for its role under democratic transition reforms in Myanmar while balancing the US and India in the region. Chinese government emphasized on people-to people-contact with people and community in Myanmar. Consequently, Chinese companies supported local people's welfare through providing free public health care services, building schools and compensating local villages for its projects.

Under the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, their bilateral relations continued based on "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence", and good neighborhood policy. Leaders of Myanmar government paid diplomatic visits and exchanged views on cooperation in various sectors. Myanmar also participated in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by concluding various agreements in both BRI Summits in 2017 and 2019. Chinese President, Mr. Xi Jing Ping, stated that China is ready to build a new type of international relations to promote high quality development of the BRI and Myanmar is one of the strategic countries for China's BRI projects. In January, 2020, Chinese President, Mr. Xi Jing Ping, visited Myanmar and proved their strategic partnership at the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of diplomatic relations between two countries. Closer cooperation for development and BRI related investment showed their pleasant relations. After the Covid-19 broke out worldwide, China played active role in fighting the pandemic especially in Asian countries. Media and various scholars criticized as China's vaccine diplomacy, a kind of soft power influence throughout the world.

### **Myanmar's Approach and Policy for Cooperation Since 2011**

Since 2011, Myanmar has been in democratic transition and its domestic reforms were carried in four parts. Democratic reforms were carried out in political, economic, social and administrative sectors. Along with democratic reforms in 2011, the USDP government renewed development policies which were based on national development plans and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It designed short-term and long-term development plans for growth, stability and progress of social sector. The Government planned to improve development gap between urban and rural areas. Especially priorities were focused on public health and education in rural areas. The country reintegrated international community with extensive exchanges of diplomatic visits and meetings with various leaders especially with western countries. As a result, its international cooperation resumed actively and Myanmar government started to adjust foreign cooperation approach in line with changing reforms.

In 2012, President U Thein Sein chaired the Planning Commission and announced "Five Year Short- Term Plan" from 2012 to 2016. In June, 2012, the Government established three coordination bodies; the Foreign Aid Management Central Committee, Foreign Aid and Grant Management Working Committee and the National Economic and Social Advisory Council. In December, 2012, the First Myanmar Development Cooperation Forum was held and the "Naypyitaw Accord for Effective Development Cooperation" was accepted. The Forum proved

Myanmar's consideration on cooperating with donor countries and international organizations in accordance with the five principles of the Paris Declaration. At the forum, participants confirmed that the national ownership of the development process is fundamental and effective development cooperation has become essential.

In 2013, the Framework for Economic and Social Reform (FESR) was initiated and it highlighted that partnership with donors is important. It was a policy tool of the government to realize both the short-term and long-term potentials of Myanmar. It aimed to bridge the first 5-year plan of the larger 20-year strategy to make national policies more focus on the SDGs. In 2015, the Aid Information Management System (AIMS) was formed. Under the NLD government, the Development Assistance Cooperation Unit (DACU) was established. DACU took responsibilities for systematic management of development assistance which was needed to be effective, efficient, coordinated and nationally focused implementation. The Government discouraged the aid brokering, and encouraged budget support, which promoted to ensure alignment of development assistance with national and sectorial plans. At the same time, it boosted the project-based assistance, and prioritized innovative approaches to service delivery that has potential for wider partnership with government entities.

The first Myanmar Development Assistance Policy (DAP) was adopted in 2018 to guide the assistance delivery, highlighting sectors for priority investments and strengthening effective and inclusive partnerships in development. In 2020, the second DAP was issued, and established on the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) which encourages development assistance to be in line with Myanmar's national planning and budgeting process, results-driven, innovative, mutual accountable, transparent and commitment for effective and inclusive partnerships. As a host country, Myanmar practiced national cooperation and assistance guidelines which were based on international guidelines.

### **Chinese Cooperation in Education, Humanitarian and Public Health Sector**

Myanmar- China official cooperation started when China gave a loan commitment to Myanmar in 1961 under the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement. In 1978, China emphasized on domestic economic development. In 1990s, it emerged as the leading supporter to Myanmar successive governments. Myanmar also needed its supports under sanctions and economic development. During the mid-1990s, China used foreign cooperation and assistance programs as a strategy to access the natural resources from developing countries. China announced that its cooperation was no string attached but seemed to be complemented with its national interests such as the recipient's strategic location, rich in natural resources, recognition of One China Policy at the international community and preferred the undemocratic states. China supported Myanmar successive governments diplomatically and economically. Its cooperation was given based on its "Eight Principles of Foreign Aid." Its cooperation mostly focused on loan, grants and development projects in economic and business areas for industry, infrastructure development, transportation and energy from 1988 to 2011.

Myanmar and China have exchanged social relations particularly in cultural sector since 69 AD. Historical evidences showed that exchanges of artists from ancient kingdoms of Myanmar visited China to perform music, acrobatic and magic shows. Their social relations up to 1990s were based on cultural exchanges including cultural shows, youth exchange, sports, language training, and concerts. The visits of Buddha's sacred tooth relics in 1955, 1994, 1996 and 2011 highlighted the special milestone in their cultural relations. Due to China's renew

policy on Myanmar, its cooperation in cultural sector expanded with exchanges between journalists, writers, artists and youths. At the same time, broader cooperation in social sector was emphasized on education, public health and humanitarian sectors.

After 2011, Chinese cooperation for Myanmar included two ways as direct provision to Myanmar government and through local community and private sectors. Chinese government discussed cooperation programs with the ministries concerned of Myanmar and provided directly for implementation. Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also took part in social cooperation. Besides, Chinese social cooperation programs through business community were in the form of social responsibility for local community in project areas. Education, humanitarian and public health sectors to local communities were provided by Chinese firms in Myanmar.

### **(i) China's Cooperation in Education**

In the educational assistance sector, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) is providing scholarships to students from developing countries. Moreover, in 2013, the China Foundation and Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) team was sent to Myanmar which gave assistance in four areas; public health care and education, livelihood development and humanitarian aid, supporting non-profit organizations (NPO) partners and public advocacy. To combat poverty alleviation, education is the foundation and the CFPA found that higher education quality in Myanmar needed to extend students more public training classes for the future. The Chinese Embassy in Myanmar also offered facilities to schools and universities. It provided one thousand and five hundred computers to Yangon and Mandalay universities in 2013.

Under the CFPA Education Program, there are four running programs. They are Moving Forward Program, New Great Wall Scholarship Program, School Dormitory Building Program and Domestic Panda Pack Project and Small Package, Big Love Program. The first program is a development-oriented philanthropic project for the educational development for children in poverty-stricken areas and fair education in urban and rural areas through social care and development by cooperating with local education sectors such as primary schools in local areas. The second program is for high school and undergraduate students who have financial difficulties aiming to cultivate self-reliant talents. The third program is to improve schools' facilities in poverty-stricken areas and the last one is launched by the CFPA, China-Post and CCTV-6 under the guidance of State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development.

In 2015, the CFPA was officially registered as the international non-governmental organization (INGO) at the Myanmar Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA). Starting in 2016, the CFPA Myanmar has implemented Pauk-Phaw scholarship, Panda Pack, Computer Lab, China-Myanmar Friendship Scholarship and school infrastructure in twelve states and regions. In total, one thousand and three hundred students have received Pauk-Phaw scholarship till 2020 and each student received USD 300 per year. Starting in 2016, a pilot project was proposed and assisted fifty students from four universities in Yangon, six universities in Mandalay and two universities in Rakhine State.

Furthermore, the China-Myanmar Friendship Scholarship was given to high performing, low income five hundred and thirty-eight students in Myanmar as cooperation between the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar and the CFPA. Up to 2019, twenty schools throughout eight regions were given assistance, four hundred and seven students received scholarships and one hundred and seventy-six students with bursary under this project. The "Friends for Silk Road"

was founded in 2015 by China Foundation for Peace and Development (CFPD) and the Myanmar Alingyaung (Brightness) Foundation to improve Myanmar's education environment. Under this program, eighteen schools have been built and ten standard teaching buildings in ten rural schools were built in line with Myanmar MOE's standards.

In 2017, the Panda Pack Project has donated to 37,760 primary students in six states, including Shan, Rakhine, Kachin, Yangon, Bago and Sagaing regions. For 2019-2020 academic year, the CFPA Myanmar Office donated 100,000 school bags and stationaries to students in fifteen townships from Yangon. On 19<sup>th</sup> June, 2019, "Myanmar Love Package Project" by the CFPA was launched to promote quality education for Myanmar primary students in poverty-stricken and marginalized areas in cooperation with local partner, Shan State Women's Affairs Organization (SSWAO), in line with "Myanmar's Education for All" Campaign.

In 2016, the China-Myanmar Friendship Schools Program was launched in cooperation between Myanmar government and the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar. This program offered Myanmar graduate students to study in China and ten schools have been built. In 2019, the Lancang-Mekong, International Vocational Institute, was built by the collaboration between the Chinese companies and Myanmar University of Yunnan Province to improve the human resource's quality through training, maintain friendly relations from generation to generation by the more comprehensive cooperation. As part of Myanmar International Bicycle Project, the CFPA and Less Walk jointly donated one thousand bicycles to students in need in Myanmar for 2019-2020 academic year.

In 2020, the CFPA Myanmar Office established a lab classroom with forty new brand computers to narrow the digital divide for the university students in Dagon University. Moreover, it provided Information and Communications Technology (ICT) education training on certified market-driven short courses with KMD Institute. Up to 2020, the CFPA Myanmar Office has raised funds and materials around USD 3.3 million, benefitting 78,276 people in Myanmar. After the political changes in Myanmar in 2021, China continued its education assistance by the Panda Project in Shan State to the local community directly from Alibaba Group.

## **(ii) China's Cooperation in Humanitarian Activities**

In humanitarian support sector, Chinese humanitarian assistance goes bilaterally rather than multilateral ways intending to strengthen relations with countries in Global South and Asia Pacific region, enhance China's image as a responsible state and for commercial and economic benefits. In humanitarian sector, China focused on disaster relief and rehabilitation, supports for internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees.

On 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2011, Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, Mr. Li Junhua, donated USD 50,000 cash to Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) for the relief and recovery efforts for the major earthquake in northeastern part of Myanmar. On 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2013, China assisted three hundred and fifty sets of integrated housing and one million USD in cash for the resettlement of homeless people and victims in quick-hit northern Myanmar. In February, 2014, the Red Cross Society of China provided 10,000 sets of humanitarian assistance boxes, with rice, cooking oil, emergency medicine and materials to the IDPs in the northernmost Kachin State.

Since 2015, the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar encouraged its companies for community assistance in flooding regions and gave commodities and equipment to local organizations. According to Chinese Ambassador, Mr. Chen Hai, Chinese humanitarian assistance is a part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). For 2015 Myanmar's floods, Chinese

assistance went through official government and non-governmental organizations. After Myanmar government announced the Emergency Relief Plan, Chinese government became the first government with quick aid to the flooding areas. The Chinese Ministry of Commerce, the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar and the Chinese People's Liberation Army provided official assistance to Myanmar government. Moreover, many Chinese non-governmental organizations such as Chinese-funded enterprises and the China-Myanmar Friendship Association delivered assistances. The China-Myanmar Friendship Association supported with China's Blue Sky Rescue Team as a first international rescue force for disaster relief work in Myanmar. It carried out the task in cooperation with rescue workers from Myanmar Army, Fire Brigade and Police Team.

China provided humanitarian support to refugees in both Myanmar and Bangladesh. In 2017, Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, Mr. Hong Liang, gave two hundred million kyats for Rakhine State as a government-to-government assistance. In September 2017, China sent two hundred prefabricated houses for displaced persons and donated USD 150,000 to the Myanmar Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement. In June and November, 2018, Chinese humanitarian assistance went to the IDPs in Kachin State. Likewise, China contributed one thousand units of Assembled Board Houses and two hundred million kyats for refugees. Sometimes, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) cooperated with Chinese government to give humanitarian assistance to civilians in Myanmar.

### **(iii) China's Cooperation in Public Health**

China's cooperation in public health became very significant during the Covid-19 pandemic in developing countries. This study will mainly focus China's cooperation on Covid-19 pandemic issue in Myanmar. On 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2020, the first Covid-19 case was detected in Myanmar and China started medical supports including training, provision of test kits, laboratory materials, masks, and gloves. In April, 2020, Myanmar government announced the Covid-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) to combat the consequences of Covid-19. At the same time, China sent medical teams through multilayered engagement framework from the Chinese government and its business community to Ministry of Health and Sports (MOHS) and military in Myanmar. Chinese private companies such as State Power Investment Corporation (SPIC), Yunnan Energy Investment Group (YEIG) and Union Resources and Engineering Company Limited (UREC) gave assistance for the combat of Covid-19 in Myanmar to different ministries. In addition, the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar provided assistance in kind and cash to the MOHS and Myanmar military. Moreover, Chinese provincial government and organizations along the border areas gave assistance to Myanmar friends.

On 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020, the Chinese medical expert team including twelve members arrived Yangon and donated 5.3 tons of medical supplies to assist in Myanmar's combat to Covid-19. China's Covid-19 vaccine is called "Sinopharm" which is the most used vaccine in Myanmar. Moreover, the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar actively coordinated with Myanmar domestic medical experts in its battle of Covid-19. Furthermore, Chinese military medical team from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) provided assistance to Myanmar military to build a Covid-19 testing laboratory at the No.1 Defense Services General Hospital in Mingalardon Township, Yangon. As China has experiences of combatting the epidemic, it truly contributed a great effort to Myanmar for combating the spread of virus.

In 2021, China offered the vaccines and oxygen supply during the severe third wave of Covid-19 in Myanmar. On 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2021, Myanmar MOHS announced its cooperation of vaccine sharing program with China. In May, 2022, the Chinese Embassy stated that China donated Covid-19 vaccines and syringes which could help Myanmar to fill and boost the vaccination rate and the Chinese Covid-19 vaccines were used for the children from five to twelve years old. The mobile laboratory vehicles were supported and used at the border check points. To shape a shared future between the two countries, China has provided fifty-three million doses of Covid-19 vaccines, including test kits, medical supplies, medical equipment and other necessary things. Since the first outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, China is the first country which helped Myanmar in large amount to effectively control and prevents the spread of Covid-19. China's supports in prevention and control of Covid-19 are considerably affective and helpful based on the two countries' Pauk-Phaw friendship. Besides, the cooperation in public health sector is encouraged by President Mr. Xi Jing Ping's will to shape the China's Health Silk Road and for stronger bilateral relations.

### **Conclusion**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, cooperation is the main component of Chinese foreign policy as a soft power tool with two main interests, helping the recipient countries and shaping its image in the world profile. Like all forms of cooperation in international politics, cooperation between states is not simple but based on their own objectives. Naturally, cooperation especially with powerful states is always attached with strings to fulfill their foreign policy goals. Various sources commented that Chinese cooperation is likely to link on its national interests.

It can be analyzed that China-Myanmar relations has still continued to be motivated by economic, diplomatic, geostrategic and maritime interests after 2011. With Myanmar democratic reforms, China understood that it should extend to people to people relations rather than only government to government relations. Moreover, cooperation and social assistances were strongly encouraged to enhance people-to-people contact. Therefore, its cooperation level in social sector has improved since 2011 to promote its image in Myanmar for economic benefits. Simultaneously, Myanmar improved its development cooperation and policy which were based on SDGs and national development plans. It sets out its own regulations and principles founded on the GPEDC and the 2011 Busan Partnership and preferred nationally-owned, effective and efficient assistance.

If analyzed, the China- Myanmar cooperation in education, humanitarian and public health activities have become significant in social sector development. For the education sector, the CFPA is the main operating Chinese non- governmental agency which functions the programs, by working together with local partners and Myanmar government in line with Myanmar's "Education for All" process. Its supports focused on the school building and assisting the needy students in rural areas. Concerning with the humanitarian assistance, Myanmar government had already announced that providing the human needs is the ultimate responsibility of a state and delivering and allocating supports can be accomplished through the collaboration between the Myanmar government, local CSOs, NGOs and the Chinese enterprises, aligning with Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP) and fulfilling government's objectives according to 2018 and 2020 DAPs. These cooperation and provisions are through private or official procedure under the guidelines of the DAP Umbrella.

In reality, Chinese official assistance went mostly directly to government ministries. In Myanmar, controlling Covid-19 pandemic has become very crucial since its own public health infrastructure and human resource have been limited. To tackle the pandemic, China has assisted the Myanmar government in great efforts. Public health cooperation was motivated by a will to help its close partner in time of the pandemic. But there can be other possible objectives for its role to smooth its strategic aims and BRI projects, and improve its image at the international arena. It would argue that Chinese cooperation in education, humanitarian and health sectors is partially significant in Myanmar's progress in the past ten years although it is not fully covering overall development needs. Nevertheless, Chinese aid is a catalyst to Myanmar's social development to some extent with scholarships, school facilities, exchanges, disaster relief, supports for vulnerable people, and public health emergency assistance in the Covid-19 pandemic.

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