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HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS**

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**Wai Yan Phyo Naing**

**Evolution of Myanmar's Policy Towards China (1988-2020)**

**SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION**

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## **Research context**

The current situation in the world, the increasing role of China and the growing tensions in its struggle with the US for influence in Southeast Asia placed China and Myanmar's relations at the center of political interests in both the Eastern and Western political worlds. The history of bilateral relations between Myanmar and China head back to ancient times, because, for centuries, Myanmar (Burma) had strategic importance in the Southeast Asia region. The position of Myanmar in its relations with the West largely depends on the Western World-Chinese confrontation in the region.

Myanmar's Constitution of 1974 stated, that it would pursue an independent foreign policy. Following the military taking power in 1988 and forming the SLORC government, the military declared that the Tatmadaw government would continue to pursue an independent foreign policy. However, the Western countries barred Myanmar from trying to return to the world community. For many years, Myanmar was internationally isolated and was in confrontation with Western countries. This situation led to a significant dependence on China, which became its leading economic partner. The two countries' relations were not limited to the economic aspect, although, this factor was dominant. During all these years, the Myanmar-China relations were determined by the strategic interests of China, but they also depended on the position of political elites and political regimes in Myanmar and how they viewed Southeast Asia's future and relations with the Western world.

Relations with China were of paramount importance for Myanmar. China had a tremendous political influence on the processes taking place in the country and was the leading trading partner of Myanmar. However, during Myanmar's 2011 democratic transition, President Thein Sein's government rapidly expanded relations with the US and European countries. The intensification of Myanmar's contacts with Russia and India, as well as with the Western countries since 2015, also makes it crucial to investigate the dynamics of Myanmar's policy towards China and identify problem areas in relations that may affect the future political and economic situation in Myanmar.

## **Hypothesis**

Due to Myanmar's dependence on China, Myanmar has always been considered a subordinate actor in Myanmar-China relations, following China's geopolitical interests. However, different political regimes, which were in power in Myanmar, contributed to the transformation of Myanmar-China relations in the course of their policy evolution.

Therefore, the **Research Question** could be the following:

How and why did the evolution of the political situation in Myanmar (SPDC, USDP and NLD) become a factor in shaping Myanmar-China relations?

In order to answer this question, the author has set the following **objectives**:

1. Investigating the establishment of the relationship right after the independence of Burma.

2. Demonstrating the beginning of a new period of relations (*Pauk-Phaw*) with China after the military coup in Myanmar in 1988.
3. Investigating the main reasons for the transformation of Myanmar's policy towards China over the three decades.
4. Explaining the criteria of dividing of Myanmar's policy towards China in 1988-2020 into four periods.
5. Demonstrating the specifics of political and military relations of two countries in each period.
6. Exploring the important key points in economic relations between the two countries and the reaction of the Myanmar society to these events.
7. Clarifying the position of Myanmar's political elites on the development of Myanmar-Sino relations.

### **Chronological Framework**

The author structures his research on a chronological order. The thesis is divided into four parts depending on what political forces were in power in Myanmar and how they had positioned themselves in relations with China, highlighting the political agenda of Myanmar elites, military and economic cooperation with China. As a result, all objectives indicated by the author will be considered in each part.

1) In 1988, after a military coup, Myanmar-China relations indicated the growing intensity of bilateral visits and the evolution of their relations. The new period – “*Pauk-Phaw*” – began in Myanmar-China relations.

2) At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the institutionalization of political relations began, and a number of bilateral treaties, reflecting the formalization of the two countries' ties, were signed. At that time, the Tatmadaw government began to openly support the policy of its northern neighbor, demonstrating the complete endorsement of the “One China Policy”. Therefore, the beginning of the 21st century can be regarded as a new important stage in relations between Myanmar and China.

3) In November 2010, the military government held general elections and transferred the power to the victorious USDP. The USDP government implemented domestic political reforms. It had also sought to reduce its dependence on China and expand ties with the West. China also reconsidered its policy toward Myanmar and started a parallel approach to bilateral relations.

4) In March 2016, the National League for Democracy Party (NLD) came to power in Myanmar. The NLD tried to implement a new approach in Myanmar-China relations while significantly expanding ties with the West.

The study concludes with elections in Myanmar in November 2020. As a result of this election, the NLD government returned to power, but its activities were interrupted by the February 2021 military coup, which is beyond the scope of this study.

## **Methodology & Methods of the Research**

The thesis is based on the principle of historicism. The identification and study of the specifics of the historical process in different periods make it possible to reveal in the most detailed way of the essential characteristics of the evolution of Myanmar's foreign policy. This means to study the relations between China and Myanmar within the historical context, to analyze the development of the bilateral relations depending on the change of political regime in Myanmar, to demonstrate the correlation between the specific situation in Myanmar and the dynamics of China's economic and investment policies, to show the priority of economic relations and their dependence on political and social ties.

Specialized methods of historical research are used as part of the application of this principle:

### **1. Historical-narrative method:**

The use of the narrative method is necessary to collect facts, establish the main patterns and identify cause-and-effect relationships in the process of transforming the country's foreign policy trends;

### **2. Historical-comparative method:**

Based on the primary sources, the author compares the specifics Myanmar's foreign policy in the context of the changing political situation in the country, highlights its main characteristics and features, emphasizes on key similarities and differences in the transformation of the foreign policy due to different initial historical circumstances and economic conditions.

### **3. Specialized methods:**

Within the framework of this work, the method of content analysis is used for the evaluation of foreign policy programs, documents of political parties, documents of a personal nature, and the mass media, which makes it possible not only to highlight the key trends in Myanmar's foreign policy but also to analyze in details of its mechanisms and tools, as well as the role of political leaders of Myanmar in shaping its relations with China.

Analyzing Myanmar's foreign policy towards China is impossible without an interdisciplinary approach. Taking into account a wide range of studies at the intersection of history, international relations, economics, political science, sociology, law, and even marketing, can significantly improve the accuracy of the analytical component.

## **Literature Review**

Myanmar's policy on China has attracted the attention of scholars, historians, and researchers of international relations practically from the moment of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, starting from the late 1980s, since the first studies appeared, and to this day, the interpretations of this topic contradict each other.

In general, different groups of researchers or think-tanks, studying the problem, can be classified as follows:

1. Groups of historians and experts in international relations, who work in Myanmar;
2. Chinese scientists, who work in China;

3. Western scientists, as well as Chinese and Myanmar scientists, who work in foreign, primarily, Western universities;
4. Asian scientists, who work and research in Asian universities.
5. Russian historiography.

These groups differ by the evaluation of the periods in the history of Myanmar and by their approach to the characteristics of these periods, which correspond to the global political events in the country:

1. since 1988 to 2011: the military government era;
2. since 2011 to 2015: Myanmar democratic reform period;
3. since 2015 to 2020: The National League for Democracy's government time.

**Myanmar Historiography.** Following the course of its domestic policy after gaining independence, the socialist government of Myanmar closed the country from the outside world, it also carried out censorship on the national press. Therefore, the author had difficulty finding published studies of that period in Myanmar language. Those researches that were published were written under strict government control. The style and character of Myanmar historiography of that period can be demonstrated with one quote from Thein Pe Myint, who had written, that “China’s leaders often expressed that they were confident in China-Burma relations and it would be developed in the future under General Ne Win’s leadership when he came into the power by founding the Union Revolutionary Council.”<sup>1</sup>

Scholars, who had to escape from the regime and work in foreign universities, received more independence in studying this topic, than local academics and demonstrated the more critical point of view in their works. In all, most of them coincided in their opinions with those who remained inside the country and agreed that the Burma-China relationship was in a well-built position during General Ne Win’s government until 1988. Myanmar scholars, both from local and international schools, criticized China for the desire of the Chinese community of Burma to introduce the chairman Mao’s ideas into the local society in 1967, which led to anti-Chinese protests. Also, they highlighted that Beijing controlled and influenced the Burmese Communist Party until it collapsed later in 1989<sup>2</sup>. Aung Kin, researcher at the Singapore

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<sup>1</sup>သိန်းဖေမြင့်၊ မော်စီတုံးတရုတ်ပြည်နှင့် မြန်မာ့အချုပ်အခြာအာဏာ၊ နံ့သာတိုက်၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၁၉၆၇၊ စာမျက်နှာ ၁၄။ [Thein Pe Myint, *Mao Zedong Tayoke Pyi Nint Myanmar A Choke A Char Arnar* (Mao Zedong' China and Myanmar's Sovereignty)], Yangon, Nantthar Press, 1967. Also see in ကြည်ညွှန်း၊ ချစ်ကြည်ရေး။ ခေတ်လေးခေတ်တရုတ်မြန်မာဆက်ဆံရေး၊ မိုးနတ်စာပေ၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၁၉၇၆၊ စာမျက်နှာ ၁၆၀။ [Kyi Nyunt (Chit Kyi Yay). *Khit Lay Khit Tayoke-Myanmar Satsanyay* (China-Myanmar Relations in Four Eras)], Yangon, Moe Nat Press, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the works of the scholars of the national school: သိန်းဖေမြင့်၊ မော်စီတုံးတရုတ်ပြည်နှင့် မြန်မာ့အချုပ်အခြာအာဏာ၊ နံ့သာတိုက်၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၁၉၆၇၊ စာမျက်နှာ ၈၄။ ကြည်ညွှန်း၊ ချစ်ကြည်ရေး။ ခေတ်လေးခေတ်တရုတ်မြန်မာဆက်ဆံရေး၊ မိုးနတ်စာပေ၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၁၉၇၆၊ စာမျက်နှာ ၃၆၈။ ဆင်ဖြူကျွန်းသန်းထွန်း၊ မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံခြားဆက်ဆံရေးများ၊ Quality Publishing House၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၂၀၁၉၊ စာမျက်နှာ ၁၁၈။

Institute of Southeast Asian studies (ISEAS), posted, that “Burma’s relations with China are the best example of its determination to maintain good relations and avoid conflicts.”<sup>3</sup>

The Military government halted critical academic works on its politics and international relations, thus, the scholars in Myanmar did not have a chance to publish their research results. This can be the explanation to why there were difficulties to find local works on Myanmar-China relationship until 2012. On the contrary, a number of books and articles of Myanmar scholars appeared in the international think-tanks and academic schools, first of all in the ISEAS shortly after 1988. Among them, Mya Maung was the first Myanmar scholar, who wrote a number of academic works on Myanmar-Sino relations.<sup>4</sup> He explained that “since 1988, to ensure its grip on political power, the junta has cleverly established what the Burmese called a *Swe Myo Pauk Phaw*, (relatives born-together), relationship with China for economic and military support”<sup>5</sup>. His disciples in the ISEAS, Tin Maung Maung Than and Maung Aung Myoe, even in the early 2000-s, followed his ideas that “a military coup continued to enjoy friendly relations with China for half a decade”<sup>6</sup>.

After 2011, during the period of democratization, the first Myanmar President, removed the names of all Myanmar scholars from the blacklist and invited them and political activists, who escaped the previous regime and lived in other countries, to come back to Myanmar. Therefore, Tin Maung Maung Than came back to the country and gave public lectures and helped as a political consultant to the newly established government. Min Zin, who had to escape from the Military junta because he actively participated in the democracy movement as a high school student activist, also came back to Myanmar in 2016. Later, he founded and became the Executive Director of the Institute for Strategy and Policy - Myanmar. At the same time, the studies in Myanmar language began to reappear in Myanmar.<sup>7</sup>

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(Sinphyukyun Than Htun. Myanmar’s Foreign Policy. Quality Publishing House, Yangon, 2019, P. 118) and international ones: Aung Kin. Burma in 1979: Socialism with Foreign Aid and Strict Neutrality. Southeast Asian Affairs, 1980, P. 111 & 120; Aung Kin. Burma in 1982: On the Road to Recovery. Southeast Asian Affairs, 1983, P. 96 & 98; Thant Myint-U, Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia: Where China Meets India. London, Faber & Faber, 2011, P. 51; Hnin Yi. Myanmar’s Policy Toward the Rising China Since 1989. RCAPS Working Paper Series “Dojo”, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, 2013, P. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Aung Kin. Burma in 1979: Socialism with Foreign Aid and Strict Neutrality. Southeast Asian Affairs, 1980, P. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Mya Maung. On the road to Mandalay: A Case Study of the Sinonization of Upper Burma. Asian Survey, Vol. 34, No. 5, May 1994; Mya Maung. The Burmese Approach to Development: Economic growth without democratization. Journal of Asian Economics, Vol. 7, Issue 1, 1996; Mya Maung. Burma’s Economic Performance under Military Rule: An Assessment. Asian Survey, Vol. 37, No. 6, 1997, P. 503-524.

<sup>5</sup> Mya Maung. On the road to Mandalay... P.449.

<sup>6</sup> Tin Maung Maung Than, Myanmar And China: A Special Relationship? ISEAS-Yusof Isak Institute, Southeast Asian Affairs, 2003, P. 192; Maung Aung Myoe, In The Name of Pauk-Phaw: Myanmar’s China Policy Since 1948. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2011, P. 58; Maung Aung Myoe, The Logic of Myanmar’s China Policy. Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, 2016, P. 291.

<sup>7</sup> ဒေါက်တာရန်မျိုးသိမ်း၊ တရုတ်-မြန်မာ-အမေရိကန် ဆက်ဆံရေး၊ နှစ်ကာလများ စာပေ၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ဒီဇင်ဘာ ၂၀၁၃။ [Yan Myoe Thein. *Tayoke-Myanmar-American Sat San Yay* China-Myanmar-USA Relations)], Nit Kar La

Myanmar researchers started to examine the relations between China and Myanmar in connection with the process of democratization of Myanmar. However, there were no critical academic works between 2011 and mid-2013. It can be presumed, that Myanmar scholars were waiting for the results of the transition period from the military government to the civilian government. Hnin Yi, who started working at the Department of International Relations of East Yangon University, appeared to be the first person to study the democratization process in Myanmar and to conclude, that there were changes in Sino-Myanmar relations. “In political terms, China did not expect the rapid political reforms in Myanmar although there are close political and economic ties between Myanmar and China”, - she wrote<sup>8</sup>. The statement that the new government wanted to move out from the Beijing protectorate and tried to reconnect with the Western world united the majority of Myanmar scholars.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, only Maung Aung Myoe highlighted the expansion of anti-Chinese sentiments in the local Myanmar community, pointing out that “the Myanmar government has thoroughly exploited the existing anti-China sentiment to its best effect. China has a serious image problem in Myanmar. The anti-China sentiment, or a negative attitude towards China, can be observed at both societal and state levels, and it is particularly strong in the former”.<sup>10</sup>

During these years, the research topics of Myanmar academics expanded – they began to study in detail the key points of Sino-Myanmar relations. One of them was the *Myitsone* Hydropower Dam project, the suspension of which, according to Min Zin, “signaled a change in attitude toward China’s role in Burma, but not a break in relations”.<sup>11</sup> Followed by Min Zin, the majority of Myanmar articles approved the Thein Sein's decision on the *Myitsone* project, however, no one demonstrated the advantages of Chinese mega projects for the

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Myar Publication, December 2013; ဆင်ဖြူကျွန်း သန်းထွန်း၊ မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံခြားဆက်ဆံရေးများ၊ Quality Publishing House၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၂၀၁၉။ [Sin Phyu Kyun Than Htun. *Myanma Naing Ngn Char Sat San Yay Myar* (Myanmar's Foreign Policies)]. Yangon, Quality Publishing House, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Hnin Yi. Myanmar’s Policy Toward the Rising China... P. 18.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Tun, Aung. Why now? The making of modern Burma: Drivers of democratization. Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, 2013, P. 46; Maung Aung Myoe, Myanmar’s China Policy since 2011: Determinants and Directions. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2015, P. 28 & 51; Chaw Chaw Sein. Myanmar Foreign Policy under New Government: Changes & Prospects. World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte Ltd, 2016, P. 8; Saw Tha Wah. Explaining Myanmar’s Foreign Policy Behavior: Domestic and International Factors. Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 2016, P. 11; ဆင်ဖြူကျွန်း သန်းထွန်း၊ မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံခြားဆက်ဆံရေးများ၊ Quality Publishing House၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၂၀၁၉။ Sin Phyu Kyun Than Htun. Myanmar's Foreign Policies (*Myanma Naing Ngn Char Sat San Yay Myar*), Yangon, Quality Publishing House, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Maung Aung Myoe. Myanmar’s China Policy..., P. 28 & 51; Maung Aung Myoe, The Logic of Myanmar’s China Policy... P. 296.

<sup>11</sup> Min Zin. The Opening in Burma: The Democrats’ Opportunity. *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2012, P. 107.

Myanmar future infrastructure.<sup>12</sup> Another important issue was China's role in the Myanmar peace process or national reconciliation. Yan Myo Thein discussed, that "the peaceful situation of *Kachin* and Northern *Shan* States is directly relating to the safety of China's oil and gas pipeline, development of border trade".<sup>13</sup> Maung Aung Myoe and Sinphyukyun Than Htun also produced their views on China's position in the Myanmar peace process.<sup>14</sup> However, it is still necessary to study the details of the influence of Beijing in Myanmar ethnic armed groups. Another issue of the primary interests of Myanmar's scholars was the new Myanmar government position between China and the Western World.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, no one proposed the redevelopment of the relationship with China in strategic ways.

The position of NLD government regarding China was studied by Maung Aung Myoe, who emphasized that the "Myanmar government is fully aware that China holds the key to the success of the peace process in Myanmar, and it is essential and crucial to maintaining good relations with China."<sup>16</sup> As Maung Aung Myoe, Carole Ann Chit Tha and Khin Khin Kyaw Kyee also pointed out "Beijing's people to people diplomacy" in Sino-Myanmar relations<sup>17</sup>. Despite the presence of these researches, there is a number of issues for the Myanmar scholars to be studied, among them, economic relations and situation with the of Chinese projects in NLD government time.

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<sup>12</sup>See, for example, Hnin Yi. Myanmar's Policy Toward the Rising China... P. 18; Chaw Chaw Sein. Myanmar's Perspective of "One Belt, One Road". Internal Document of Silk Road Forum, 2015, P. 2; ဆင်ဖြူကျွန်း သန်းထွန်း၊ မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံခြားဆက်ဆံရေးများ၊ Quality Publishing House၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၂၀၁၉။ Sin Phyu Kyun Than Htun. Myanmar's Foreign Policies (*Myanma Naing Ngn Char Sat San Yay Myar*), Yangon, Quality Publishing House, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> ဒေါက်တာရန်မျိုးသိမ်း၊ တရုတ်-မြန်မာ-အမေရိကန် ဆက်ဆံရေး၊ နှစ်ကာလများ စာပေ၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ဒီဇင်ဘာ ၂၀၁၃။ [Yan Myoe Thein. *Tayoke-Myanmar-American Sat San Yay* (China-Myanmar-USA Relations)]. Nit Kar La Myar Publication, December 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Maung Aung Myoe. The Logic of Myanmar's China Policy. Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, 2016, P. 296; ဆင်ဖြူကျွန်း သန်းထွန်း၊ မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံခြားဆက်ဆံရေးများ၊ Quality Publishing House၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၂၀၁၉။ [Sin Phyu Kyun Than Htun. *Myanma Naing Ngn Char Sat San Yay Myar* (Myanmar's Foreign Policies). Yangon, Quality Publishing House, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Among them are: Maung Aung Myoe, The Logic of Myanmar's China Policy...; Chaw Chaw Sein. Myanmar Foreign Policy under New Government: Changes & Prospects. World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte Ltd, 2016; Saw Tha Wah. Explaining Myanmar's Foreign Policy Behavior: Domestic and International Factors. Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 2016; ဆင်ဖြူကျွန်း သန်းထွန်း၊ မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံခြားဆက်ဆံရေးများ၊ Quality Publishing House၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၂၀၁၉။

<sup>16</sup> Maung Aung Myoe. The NLD and Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Not New, but Different. Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2017, P. 100.

<sup>17</sup> Chit Tha Carole Ann. Myanmar-China Relations: Historical Development and Strengthening Public Policy. The First Myanmar-China Think Tank Dialogue, Yunnan, China, 2017, P. 5 & 6; Khin Khin Kyaw Kyee. China's Multi-layered Engagement Strategy and Myanmar's Reality: The Best Fit for Beijing's Preferences. Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar, Working Paper No.1, February 2018, P. 61.



***Chinese Scholars' Position.*** Regarding the beginning of Myanmar-China state relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the Chinese scholars coincided with their Myanmar colleges, demonstrating that the ties between two countries were stable after General Ne Win came to power, but, they studied the bilateral ties only from China's perspective. The author studied only those works of Chinese authors that were available in English. It should be emphasized, that most of them belonged to Chinese scholars who worked outside of mainland China, and in this case their position largely coincided with the position of the Western academic community. Since the first work of Xiaolin Guo<sup>18</sup> until a series of investigations of Hongwei Fan, they did not pay attention to the "1967 anti-Chinese riots" and the "relationship between Beijing and the Burmese Communist Party (BCP)." Otherwise, they studied bilateral relations from China's perspective, assuming that "Sino-Burmese ties in this period were characterized by the decline of Burma's status in Chinese foreign relations; Beijing paid less attention to Rangoon... Isolated and economically backward Burma, which had adopted a closed-door policy, was not important to China."<sup>19</sup>

Chinese scholars paid more attention to government-to-government relations, Beijing's security and energy concern, and position of Myanmar between China and the international community (especially between the US and the Southeast and South Asia regions), and two countries economic ties. As first, Lixin Geng explained China's perspective on the ties between the countries the following way: "China is a positive rather than a negative factor in ensuring stable Sino-Myanmar relations. Though China has remained a staunch ally since 1988, it is concerned about Myanmar's long-term political and social stability because of a failing economy and lack of political legitimacy."<sup>20</sup>

Beijing was never satisfied with Myanmar leaders' politics: when Myanmar moved to the new political era in 2011 and promoted democracy in the country, Chinese researchers began to state their concern on the two countries' situation. Qingsi Li, professor from Renmin University of China, made the most persuasive argument compared with her other colleagues – she claimed, that "in 2007, the UN drafted a resolution that condemned Myanmar's human rights violations, which if it had not been vetoed by China, would have enabled international humanitarian organizations to operate without restriction and begin a political dialogue with all stakeholders. So, thanks to the Chinese government help that enabled the Myanmar military government to weather the storm during the most difficult times, and China has been

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<sup>18</sup> Xiaolin Guo: *Towards Resolution: China in the Myanmar Issue*. Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2007, P. 36.

<sup>19</sup> Hongwei Fun & Steinberg David, *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence*. NIAS-Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2012, P. 151.

<sup>20</sup> Lixin Geng, *Sino-Myanmar Relations: Analysis and Prospects*. The Cultural Mandala. The Center for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies, Bond University, Vol 17, No.2, 2007, P. 3.

on quite good terms with the Myanmar military government.”<sup>21</sup> Some scholars even argued that without China, Myanmar could not reach the current stage.<sup>22</sup>

The “Western-Chinese” scholars presumed, that Myanmar could try to get rid of the Chinese protectorate after the Military government’s period. Zhao Hong demonstrated, that “in reality, Myanmar’s military leaders are apparently fully aware of the potential dangers of being too close to China. From the early 1990s, Myanmar has decided to adopt a ‘counter hedging’ strategy and moved to diversify its diplomacy in an attempt to reduce its dependence on China: allowing itself to be courted by India and other big countries, as is evidenced by the changing structures of its foreign trade and investments”.<sup>23</sup> Following Zhao, other Chinese scholars insisted on the necessity of the political openness of Myanmar towards the international community<sup>24</sup>. However, there are no critical studies from Chinese school about their businesses, investments and their socio-cultural integrating between Chinese and Myanmar local people.

For China’s academic community, the Myanmar-China relations during 2011-2015 were the most difficult issues to interpret. Therefore, the majority of scholarly articles from China’s school tried to explain that China still played a significant role in Myanmar, despite of the fact of the suspension of *Myitsone* Hydropower Dam Project and other steps of the transitional government of Myanmar. Analyzing the events of 2011-2012, in 2012, Li Chenyan, Director of Center for Myanmar Studies of Yunnan University, stated, that “the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership between China and Myanmar is non-aligned and not against any third country. China is Myanmar’s most important partner, but not the only one”. He insisted that, in spite of the minor discrepancies, “the Strategic Partnership shall focus on strengthening political and security cooperation, deepening economic and development cooperation, enhancing socio-cultural cooperation, and expanding non-government exchanges. ...All those are the characteristics of the strategic partnership between China and Myanmar as well”.<sup>25</sup>

Following his position, that “China–Myanmar comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership should be viewed within China’s foreign policy strategy and the China–ASEAN cooperative framework”<sup>26</sup>, Chinese scholars viewed the bilateral relations from the Chinese perspective, not taking into account Myanmar’s position and interest. They also argued the Beijing's role in establishing stable trading routes over the border and in the Myanmar national

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<sup>21</sup> Qingsi Li. North Myanmar Minority Issues & Its Impact on China-Myanmar Relations. Conference Report, International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, 2015, P. 2.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, in: Siu Sue M. & Youyi Zhang. From Impediment to Adaptation: Chinese Investments in Myanmar’s New Regulatory Environment. *Journal of Current Southeast Asia Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2017, P. 73.

<sup>23</sup> Hong Zhao, China and India: Competing for Good Relations with Myanmar. *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Institute for National Security Strategy, Vol. 22, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2008, P. 187.

<sup>24</sup> Ren Xiao. Positioning Norm, Principle and Interest in Chinese Foreign Policy. The Case of Myanmar Issue. *East Asia*, September 2011, P. 233.

<sup>25</sup> Li Chenyan, China-Myanmar Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership: A Regional Threat? *The Journal of Current Southeast Asia Affairs*, 2012, P. 62, 64, 69.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* P. 65, 69.

reconciliation process. At the same time, they denied Myanmar scholars arguments on China's influence on Myanmar ethnic arms groups.<sup>27</sup>

Following the position of centering on Chinese interests, during the last years, the Chinese scholars studied Sino-Myanmar relations regarding with Chinese "One Belt-One Road" project.<sup>28</sup> One of the latest works on the topic, published at the beginning of 2021, was the article of Mohamad Zreik from Central China Normal University. He is of Lebanese origin, but represents the position of the official Chinese historiography. Studying foreign policy of China, he declared that the China's foreign policy towards Myanmar served as a role model in international relations<sup>29</sup>.

**Western Historiography.** The scientific works of the representatives of Western academic community appeared much earlier than the studies of their Myanmar and Chinese colleagues<sup>30</sup>. They researched Sino-Myanmar relations, connecting them with role of Myanmar in the international community. For the period of the establishment of Sino-Myanmar relations in 1962-1988, they centered on government-to-government relationship, after 1967, connecting it the Chinese cultural revolution, and on anti-Chinese riots<sup>31</sup>.

There are only two issues that Western scholars paid much more attention to than their Myanmar and Chinese colleagues. The rivalry of the two ideological systems during the years of the Cold War caused the increased interest in the relationship between Beijing and the Burmese Communist Party and the Burma position between China and the international community, putting it into the Cold War competition between China, the Soviet Union and the U.S.<sup>32</sup>. Brian Crozier emphasized, that "from statements made by the BCP delegation in

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<sup>27</sup> Qingsi Li. North Myanmar Minority Issues... P. 6 & 8; Enze Han. Geopolitics, Ethnic Conflicts along the Border, and Chinese Foreign Policy Changes toward Myanmar. *Asian Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2017, P. 13 & 18.

<sup>28</sup> Wu Liu & Jiajun Liu. Myanmar's Situation Under NLD Governance and China-Myanmar Co-construction OBOR. Rong W., Zhu C. (eds) *Annual Report on the Development of the Indian Ocean Region*, 2017, P. 308 & 321.

<sup>29</sup> Zreik M. China's foreign policy towards Myanmar: a role model in international relations. *The EUrASEANs: Journal on global socio-economic dynamics*, No 2 (27), 2021. P. 7-17.

<sup>30</sup> The exception is the work of Thein Pe Myint.

<sup>31</sup> Deshpande G. P. Is China Losing Friends Willfully? *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 3, No. 1/2, 1968, P. 39; Holmes R. A., *Burma's Foreign Policy Toward China Since 1962*. Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia, Vol. 45, No. 2, 1972, P. 242; Pettman R., *China in Burma's Foreign Policy*. Contemporary China Press, Australian National University Press Canberra, No. 7, 1973, P. 44; Holmes R. A., *China-Burma Relations since the Rife*. *Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 8, 1972, P. 694 & 699; Wayne B. *Chinese Relations with Burma and Indonesia*. *Asian Survey*, University of California Press, Vol. 15, No. 6, 1975, P. 475; Taylor R. H., *Burma's Foreign Relations Since the Third Indochina Conflict*. Southeast Asian Affairs, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 1983, P. 104; Wayne B. *Chinese Policy toward Burma and Indonesia: A Post-Mao Perspective*. *Asian Survey*, Vol. 25, No. 9, 1985, P. 979; Seekins D. M. *Burma-China Relations: Playing with Fires*. *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 6, 1997, P. 528. After 1997, there are no research works on the 1967 anti-Chinese sentiments in Burma in the Western historiography.

<sup>32</sup> Badgley J. H., *Burma's China Crisis: The Choices Ahead*. *Asian Survey*, University of California Press, Vol. 7, No. 11, 1967, P. 753 & 759; Cook A. C. P., *Burma: The Era of Ne Win*. *The World Today*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 26, No. 6, 1970, P. 263; Holmes R. A. *China-Burma Relations since the*

Rangoon in September 1963 it is clear that the BCP is now unmistakably a Peking-orientated party”.<sup>33</sup>

The period of the Military government attracted the attention of Western scholars more, than other researchers. The point of Western interest were state-level relations, sociocultural relations, bilateral trades, two countries’ arms deals, drugs trading in the border area, Beijing’s interests and its projects in Myanmar, security and energy concern, Myanmar between China and the international community, migration and cross-border issue and China between Myanmar’s ethnic armed forces and the peace process<sup>34</sup>. Nevertheless, they have not analyzed the Western sanctions that reinforced a close alliance between China and Myanmar. Furthermore, there was no accurate figures and numbers on arms trading since the two countries never released news on military ties. So far, however, they did not discuss that China was selling arms to Myanmar ethnic armed forces.<sup>35</sup>

Western scholars did not neglect two countries’ migration and cross-border issue. Donal M. Seekins specified, that “Chinese economic influence spreads south to Mandalay... the commercial centre of the old royal city has become a high-priced “Chinatown” while local Burmese, too poor to afford rising property prices, have been forced to move to the city's outskirts”.<sup>36</sup> The research findings by other Western scholars gave similar results in this specific issue.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, very few studies examined Chinese migration after 2015.<sup>38</sup> Alistair D.B. Cook dedicated his research to the details of the political situation and political

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Rife... P. 692; Wayne B. Chinese Relations with Burma and Indonesia... P. 485 & 486; Anand J. P. China Mends Fences with Burma. *China Report*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1977, P. 24 and 27.

<sup>33</sup> Crozier B., *The Communist Struggle for Power in Burma*. *The World Today*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1964, P. 107.

<sup>34</sup> Wayne B. Chinese Policy toward Democratization Movements: Burma and the Philippines, *Asian Survey*, University of California Press, Vol. 30, No. 11, 1990; James H., Myanmar’s International Relations Strategy: The Search for Security, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 26, No. 3, December 2004, P. 534 & 535; Wilson T., Foreign Policy as a Political Tool: Myanmar 2003-2006. Myanmar: The state, community and the environment, AUN Press, 2007, P. 87; Haacke J., The Nature and Management of Myanmar’s Alignment with China: The SLORC/SPDC Years. *The Journal of Current Southeast Asia Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2011, P. 121; Reilly J., A Norm-Taker or a Norm-Maker? Chinese aid in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 12, No. 73, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Wayne B. Burma, China and the U.S.A. *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 2, 2004, P. 267; Kemenade van W. China, India and the coming ‘Transition’ in Burma. *Clingendael Institute*, 2008, P. 174; Swanstrom N., *Sino-Myanmar Relations: Security and Beyond*. Institute for Security and Development Policy, Asia Paper, June 2012, P. 19.

<sup>36</sup> Seekins D. M., *Burma-China Relations: Playing with Fires*. *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 6, 1997, P. 530.

<sup>37</sup> Le Bail H. & Tournier A., *From Kunming to Mandalay: The New “Burma Road”*: Developments Along the Sino-Myanmar Border Since 1988. *The Institut Francais des Relations Internationales*, March 2010, P. 20; Tea B., *China and Myanmar: Strategic Interests, Strategies and The Road Ahead*. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, India, September 2010, P. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Farrelly N. & Olinga-Shannon S. *Establishing Contemporary Chinese in Myanmar*, Trends in Southeast Asia. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Publishing, Singapore, 2015, P. 14; Rippa A. *Mong La: Business as Usual in the China-Myanmar Borderlands*, *Cross-Currents*. *East Asian History and Culture Review*, No. 19, 2016, P. 249;

relations with China during the Transition period (2011-2015)<sup>39</sup> in Myanmar and Isabel Hilton appeared on bilateral trade in 2013<sup>40</sup>.

The majority of the Western scholars centered their scientific attention on the geopolitical interests of China and investigated the bilateral relations from the Chinese perspective. Thus, Niklas Swanstrom insisted that “China’s security interests can be divided into 1) maintaining access to the Indian Ocean to counter Indian militarization; 2) countering encirclement of China; 3) stabilizing the Chinese border to Myanmar; and 4) preventing the spillover of Myanmar-internal conflicts into China... Regarding further engagement with Myanmar in security terms, China has shown interest in utilizing Myanmar as a future springboard to the Indian Ocean.”<sup>41</sup>

The Western researchers studied the *Myitsone* case connecting with Myanmar position between China and Western World in their academic works. As a US expert on International Affairs, Sutter highlighted that “Myanmar remained wary of Chinese influence was seen in the regime’s seeking support from India, ASEAN nations, and even the United States, by its crackdown on pro-China armed groups along the Sino–Burmese border who had in previous decades provided insurgents directed by China against the Rangoon government, and by suspending an unpopular several billion-dollar Chinese dam project.”<sup>42</sup> However, like Sutter, the majority of scholarly articles did not study the US and EU support in anti-*Myitsone* campaign.<sup>43</sup>

Western researchers investigated the Beijing position concerning Myanmar ethnic armed organizations and the peace process. Donald Seekins emphasized that “Rebels who make peace with Rangoon have been allowed to keep their arms and profit from the increasingly active trade across the Burma-China border.”<sup>44</sup> Like Seekins, another two academics indicated related interpretations. However, there was only Wayne Bert who investigated China’s connection with Myanmar Democracy activists especially with National League for Democracy (NLD) in 1990<sup>45</sup>. The majority of Western schools, as usual centered

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<sup>39</sup> Cook A. D. B., Myanmar’s China Policy: Agendas, Strategies and Challenges. *China Report*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2012, P.269-281.

<sup>40</sup> Hilton I., *China in Myanmar: Implications for The Future*. Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, October 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Swanstrom N., *Sino-Myanmar Relations: Security and Beyond...* P. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Sutter R., Myanmar in Contemporary Chinese Foreign Policy – Strengthening Common Ground, Managing Differences. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 1, March 2012, P. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Bünthe, M. & Jöm Dosch. Myanmar: Political Reforms and the Recalibration of External Relations. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2015, P. 12 & 15; Stone C. ‘Losing’ Burma: Chinese-Burmese Relations in the Post-Reform Era. M.A diss, University of Southern California, 2015, P. 20; Kiik L., Nationalism and Anti-Ethno-Politics: Why “Chinese Development” Failed at Myanmar’s Myitsone Dam. *The Journal of Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 57, No. 3, June 2016, P. 394; Lina A. & Lanteigne M. New Actors and Innovative Approaches to Peacebuilding: The Case of Myanmar. Call C., de Coning C. (eds) *Rising Powers and Peacebuilding, Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. August 2017, P. 194.

<sup>44</sup> Seekins D. M., Burma-China Relations: Playing with Fires. *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 6, 1997, P. 536.

<sup>45</sup> Wayne B. Chinese Policy toward Democratization Movements... P. 1074.

on China's role in Myanmar's peace process, arguing that "the Chinese government has positioned itself to become a prominent player in the peace talks in Myanmar", there were only few of them who studied the role of NLD in the peace process in the second half of 2010s, and up today there is no critical research on the rivalry between Beijing-backed ethnic groups and Western-backed.<sup>46</sup>

Among a number of recent investigations deals with economic bilateral relations, it is important to cite Andrzej Bolesta, who argued that "the economic interaction between Myanmar and China has a long history, which is the result of geographic proximity as well as geopolitical positioning. In the long term, China has been Myanmar's main trading partner and its main investor. Despite General Thein Sein's government's attempts to diversify international trade routes and foreign investment sources, China, the second-largest economy and a global superpower will remain an important economic partner."<sup>47</sup>

***View of Asian scholars on Myanmar-China relations.*** A large number of studies have been published by scientists from different countries of Asia, which is quite understandable, since they touched on a topic related to the situation in their region and related to the role of their own country in Asia. First of all, these were scholars from India and Japan. Baladas Ghoshal, who was the Director of the Society for Indian Ocean Studies (Delhi), centered his scientific interests in the political relations between China and Myanmar<sup>48</sup>. J. Mohan Malik, who graduated from New Delhi University, went to China and studied Chinese language to research China's strategy towards India and wrote a number of works on Sino-Myanmar strategic relations, demonstrating that "closer Sino-Myanmar ties are now seen as of great significance to the national security of China".<sup>49</sup>

As for the ***Russian historiography***, the author could not examine it profoundly since the author has limited knowledge of Russian language. However, the contribution of Russian historiography to the studies of Myanmar's history and political processes is extremely important. There is a group of eminent scholars who aim their research on Myanmar's history. Among them are Prof. Aida Simonya, Prof. Alexey Kirichenko, and, especially, Prof. Ksenia Efremova who dedicated her studies to the political processes in contemporary Myanmar and relations between Myanmar and Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Lanteigne M., 'The Rock that can't be moved': China's revised Geostrategies in Myanmar. *Journal of Pacific Review*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2019, P. 49; Clapp P., *The Intersection of Investment and Conflict in Myanmar*. United States Institute of Peace, February 28, 2020, P. 15.

<sup>47</sup> Bolesta A., *Myanmar-China Peculiar Relationship: Trade, Investments and Model of development*. *Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2018, P. 34.

<sup>48</sup> Baladas Ghoshal. *Trends in China-Burma Relations*. *China Report*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1994, P. 187-202.

<sup>49</sup> Mohan Malik J. *Myanmar's Role in Regional Security: Pawn or Pivot?* *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Vol. 19, No. 1, June 1997, P. 53 & 69. See also: Mohan Malik J. *Myanmar's Role in China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative*. *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 111, December 2017, P. 367.

<sup>50</sup> Efremova K. *Russia's turn to the East: Implications for Myanmar and Southeast Asia*. *Myanmar Affairs*, P. 239-253. No. 11, 2019; Efremova K. *Myanmar at the Crossroads: A Rules-Based Democracy or a Game without Rules?* In: Ksenia Efremova's Blog, Russian International Affairs Council, 19 October 2020; Efremova K. *Normative Power ASEAN? Globalization of Asian Values and Its Limits*. *Journal of International*

## **Evaluation of Primary Sources**

To answer the research question, the author evaluated a wide range of primary sources, which were in English and Burmese languages, that made it possible to introduce into academic practice a large group of documents, most of which are in the original Burmese language.

All primary sources can be divided into the following groups:

### **1. Official Documents:**

- Governmental Documents
- Constitution and Laws
- Political Documents (which included Memorandums of political parties and speeches of political and state leaders)
- Social and non-governmental organizations' documents
- Documents of International Organizations (UN, ASEAN, WFO etc)
- Diplomatic documents

### **2. Private documents**

- Memories
- Autobiographies
- Interviews

### **3. Newspapers and other media**

### **4. Statistics**

Official and private documents, as well as media and statistics, were exposed to external and internal criticism. By using documents of government organizations (Myanmar and China's MFA) and of political parties of China and Myanmar, it became possible to compare the strategies in building relations between the two states; documents of international organizations allowed to explore the international historical context in which these relations developed and to inscribe the history of the two countries in the global political, economic and cultural cultures processes. On the other hand, documents of non-governmental organizations revealed the attitude of society to the policies pursued by the Government of Myanmar in a particular historical period.

The particular primary source is media materials (mainly the press of Myanmar and China), and public opinion polls reflecting the position of various social forces concerning the issues studied in a particular historical period. The author also paid special attention to the study of the Western media, which reflected the position of the Western countries on the events that took place in the Myanmar-China relation and also demonstrated an attempt to resist the strengthening of China's position in Myanmar. At the same time, one should keep in mind the political commitment of almost all mass media, which reflect not only the point of view of the journalists but of their owners or the political parties to which they belong to.

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Analytics, P. 93-106, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2021. Efremova K. Burma/Myanmar Studies in the USSR/Russia: Continuity and Change, Journal of Burma Studies, P. 227-259, Vol. 25, No. 2, December 2021.

It is important to emphasize that the military government, which has been in power since 1988, strictly prohibited the Myanmar media to criticize the political activities and actions of the government in the country during its tenure. In addition, a censorship center was set up to control local newspapers, magazines, and journals. Therefore, between 1988 and 2010, only government-run newspapers dominated in Myanmar media. The government newspapers were used as a record of the military government's daily activities, among them were the laws and other official documents published in state-run newspapers. Through these statements, the author documented the actions of the military government. However, the state-run newspapers were the only propaganda tool of the military government. In addition, according to the practices of dictatorial regimes, only the news, they wanted to reveal, were published in government newspapers.

For example, in June 2006, Myanmar state-run newspapers did not officially cover the visit of Vice-Senior General Maung Aye, the second leader of the *Tatmadaw* government, to China. However, the *Irrawaddy* magazine, published by Myanmar exile political activists, mentioned Maung Aye's visit.<sup>51</sup> The military government also came under international pressure since the September 2007 Saffron Revolution. Therefore, the Foreign Minister was sent to Beijing to seek for help. The matter was kept undisclosed in Myanmar state media. Though, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced Nyan Win's trip.<sup>52</sup> In addition, Aung Zaw, editor of the *Irrawaddy*, assumed that Myanmar Foreign Minister had reported to Beijing leaders that "destructive elements," supported by the West and exiled groups out to destabilize Burma and sabotage the "road map," were behind the rare protests and also had assured them that "disciplined democracy" would soon flourish in Burma".<sup>53</sup>

In June 2009, Myanmar state's newspaper covered China's Vice President Xi Jinping's trip to Naypyidaw and signing ceremony on the Memorandum of Agreement between Department of Hydropower Implementation and China Power Investment Corporation for the Development, Operation and Transfer of the Hydropower Projects in *Maikha* River, *Mailikha* River and Up-Stream of *Ayeyarwady* River – *Myitson* River Basins.<sup>54</sup> However, state-run

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<sup>51</sup> Intelligence (June 2006): Maung Aye's Secret Trip to China, *The Irrawaddy*, June 2006. URL: [https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=5818&page=2](https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=5818&page=2).

<sup>52</sup> State Councilor Tang Jiaxua Meets with Special Envoy of SPDC Chairman of Myanmar, 13. 09. 2007, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, URL: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zzjg\\_663340/yzs\\_663350/gjlb\\_663354/2747\\_663498/2749\\_663502/t363133.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_663354/2747_663498/2749_663502/t363133.shtml).

<sup>53</sup> Many First with China, *The Irrawaddy*, 14 September 2007. URL: [https://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion\\_story.php?art\\_id=8611](https://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=8611).

<sup>54</sup> နိုင်ငံတော် အေးချမ်းသာယာရေးနှင့် ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးကောင်စီ ဒုတိယဥက္ကဋ္ဌ ဒုတိယဗိုလ်ချုပ်မှူးကြီး မောင်အေး နှင့် တရုတ်ပြည်သူ့သမ္မတနိုင်ငံ ဒုတိယသမ္မတ မစ္စတာရှီကျင်းဖျင်တို့ တွေ့ဆုံဆွေးနွေး၊ ကြေးမုံသတင်းစာ၊ ၂၁ ဇွန်လ ၂၀၀၉။ [The Mirror Newspaper, *Naingngntaw Ayechantaryaryaynint Phwintphyoyaykaungsee DutiyaOakkahta Dutiya Bogyokemuugyi Maung Aye Nint Tayoke Pyithutamada Ningngn Dutiya Tamada Mitsatar Xi Jinping Doe Twaesoneswaynway* (Vice-Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, Vice Senior General Maung Aye meets Vice-President of the People's Republic of China Mr Xi Jinping) 21



media in both Myanmar and China did not report about the relocation of 60 villages near the project as a result of the project's implementation.<sup>55</sup>

As to the statistics, there were also significant discrepancies in the Myanmar-China data; this was due to the military government's trade policies and exchange rates. Between 1988 and 2010, the official exchange rate of the Myanmar government was 5.8 or 6 Kyats to 1 US dollar. By 2010, however, the unofficial foreign exchange market was trading at up to 1,000 Kyats per 1 US dollar. Therefore, the author assumes that China's statistics may be more accurate when studying Myanmar-China trade statistics. However, we should be aware, that governmental statistics could be manipulated for government's intentions to present what they wanted to demonstrate. On the other hand, it had not been easy to study the actual investment data in Myanmar statistics of Chinese investments in Myanmar. This was because government figures did not include statistics on private-sector investments, and many state-owned enterprises' investments in Myanmar and arms trade between the two armies.

The author also used the memories and biographies of political leaders who worked in *Tatmadaw* governments. These records provide an intimate glimpse into the two countries ties and personal point of view of those individuals. Among private sources there is a large group of sources in the Burmese language (interviews, memoirs, autobiographies), which demonstrate the reaction of the Myanmar society to the tensions that happened between two countries, and which have not been used by researchers to date. In particular, the biography of General Khin Nyunt, who served as Prime Minister in the military government, was studied for this thesis. In his book, Khin Nyunt wrote, "Myanmar became closer to China only because of US-led Western groups' sanctions. China did not get sympathy in Myanmar. The support of China was based on the long-term interests of Chinese government. As to the friendly relations established between the two countries at that time, on the Chinese side, there was no need to start a whistle on the benefits of trade routes, which were making significant profits."<sup>56</sup> Using Khin Nyunt's memories, the author was able to study the attitude of a military government leader towards China. However, we should be aware that personal documents may present only one, rather subjective viewpoint of the author.

In addition to the study of biographies, government records and media coverage, the author had also conducted several interviews with former government officials, government advisers, reporters, politicians and local people. They reveal the role of a particular person in the development of historical events that demonstrates the position of one or another political person on the key issues of the bilateral relations. As a result of the military government's

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June, 2009. URL: <https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/DocsMirror/Mirror2009-06-21.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> Dam Forces relocation of 60 villages, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), 26 August 2009. URL: <http://english.dvb.no/news/dam-forces-relocation-of-60-villages/2451>.

<sup>56</sup> မှော်ဝန်းသားဦးခင်ညွန့် (ဗိုလ်ချုပ်ကြီးဟောင်း)၊ ကြုံတွေ့ခဲ့ရ ကျွန်တော့်ဘဝအထွေထွေ၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ရွက်စိမ်းစာပေ၊ ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလ၊ ၂၀၁၅ ခုနှစ်၊ စာမျက်နှာ ၇၈။ [MawWinThar U Khin Nyunt(Former General), *KyuanTwaetKhatya KyantawBawa A Htwehtwe* (General Experiences of My life), Yangon, YwatSein Publishing, February 2015, P. 78.]

strict ban on political discussion in the country since 1988, most of the people interviewed by the author for this research are kept anonymous. The position of some Chinese government officials and government advisers are also used by the author as recorded in talk shows in media.<sup>57</sup>

A study of the primary sources demonstrates a number of limitations: 1. The *Tatmadaw* government dictatorially restricted political activities in Myanmar. Due to the strict ban on political issues, it was complicated to analyze the junta's relationship with China from 1999 to 2010 in Myanmar's local media. 2. Like Myanmar media, the Chinese ones never strongly commented on bilateral relations. 3. Very few people were interviewed for research papers due to their fear of political repression. 4. Every *Tatmadaw* government had a notable feature. The new government erased the history of the previous government in the official media and every record.<sup>58</sup> Surprisingly, this practice still continued, even, under the NLD government. As a result, only the current administration's actions could be documented through the government's official websites. 5. Myanmar under the military government was slower to modernize than other countries in the region. Therefore, it is not easy to find official statements of the Myanmar government before 2011 on the Internet. During the military government of 1988-2010, government documents were kept secret. In addition, access to information from within the country had been difficult due to the government's media and political controls.

### **Original scholarly research contributions to the subject field**

1) After summarizing the situation in the historiography, we can say that there is a huge generation gap for Myanmar local researchers on Sino-Myanmar relations. Even though there are some significant academic articles which were published in foreign schools, they cannot fill up the gap in the historiography. However, most of Myanmar academic works were based on the anti-Chinese mindset. As an outcome of the critical review on Myanmar scholars' articles, the author noticed that no one proposed to rehabilitate in two countries relationship in the win-win situation or strategic ways. Therefore, Myanmar scholars have to continue research for the Myanmar-China relations using different approaches apart from the Sinophobia.

2) Chinese historiography is richer, but Chinese scholars do not pay attention on every issue and, sometimes, they did not touch some specific case which could give negative impacts to Beijing's image. On the other hand, Chinese worked are written from the position on the great China perspective. They rarely pay attention to the interests of Myanmar.

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<sup>57</sup> For example: The Heat: China-Myanmar relations, CGTN America, 3:40, 20 April 2016. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQlk9AtfWCw&t=21s>.

<sup>58</sup> This was usually practiced by government officials when they were removed from office. In particular, it is about General Khin Nyunt, the Prime Minister of the military government, who was ousted in 2004. The military government removed all documents, photographs and historical records from all places he visited during his office. Significantly, in a painting featuring Khin Nyunt at a famous pagoda in Yangon, his face was replaced by someone else's.

3) Western scholars have studied the topic more intensively, but the majority of their works were focused on the Chinese influence in Myanmar and the balance of China and Western power in Myanmar.

4) Such confrontation allows the author to conclude that the discussion on Myanmar's policy towards China from 1988-2020 has not yet come to a complete one. The author offers his point of view on this issue, based on a large number of primary sources, including official documents, personal documents, media, and statistics, both in Burmese and English. Among these primary sources is a numerous group of new ones, mostly Burmese, which scholars have not previously used in their works. The majority of these primary sources are reliable and credible, which gives the author the right to conduct new research and the possibility to answer a research question.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The thesis consists of 4 chapters, which underline the four periods of Myanmar's policy towards China:

- The Military Coup in Burma of 1988 and the Establishment of *Pauk-Phaw* Policy towards China (1988-1998);
- The Development of Myanmar's Policy towards China at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (1999-2010);
- Democratic Reforms in Myanmar and Its Impact on Myanmar-China Relations (2011-2015);
- National League for Democracy Government and its Policy towards China (2016-2020).

1) The first chapter of the thesis deals with bilateral relations between 1988 and 1998. The new period – "*Pauk-Phaw*" – began in Myanmar-China relations. However, no agreements were signed during the Chinese Premier Li Peng's state visit to Myanmar in 1994. The accession of Myanmar to ASEAN in 1997 and Japan's return to economic support to Myanmar contributed to breaking the impasse of international isolation of Myanmar. All those factors could weaken the confident positions held by China in Myanmar, which forced Beijing to intensify and formalize its relations with the Tatmadaw government after 1999.

2) During the second period of the military government era (1999-2010), the US and European sanctions forced the Tatmadaw government to engage only with China. The "openness" (i.e. open response support of China by *Tatmadaw*) was demonstrated more and more often. The political rapprochement was accompanied by a strident increase in Chinese investments in Myanmar's economy and the incredible expansion of Chinese migrants in Myanmar. Therefore, China had implemented many of its projects in Myanmar. As a result of the development of bilateral relations, many Chinese migrants entered Myanmar. Attempts of Chinese migrants to dominate the local economy had caused tensions with the grassroots Burmese. In 1999-2010, significant progress in bilateral and economic relations started, which led to anti-Chinese sentiments that spread among the Burmese people.

3) The third chapter examines the 2011-2015 period. In March 2011, after the 2010 general election, a civilian government came to power in Myanmar, for the first time since 1988. The new civilian government started domestic political reforms. The processes of democratization in the country and local anti-China movements affected China's projects in Myanmar. The most vivid examples were the *Myitsonne* Hydropower Dam Project and *Latpadaungtaung* Copper Mine Project. As a result, Chinese investments and bilateral trade considerably declined. In addition, Myanmar's reforms helped boost relations with Western countries, including the United States.

4) China sought to improve relations with the National League for Democracy, which came to power in March 2016. The NLD government used the country's geostrategic position to attract Chinese investments. Myanmar served as an important land bridge for China to the Indian Ocean and an essential link between Southeast Asia and South Asia for China's Belt and Road Initiative. China mediated between ethnic arm groups and officials under the NLD government's national reconciliation and peace process. At the same time, dominant ethnic militias in the border areas made China to reactivate contacts with the Myanmar military, pursuing so-called parallel policy. Meanwhile, the Myanmar military stepped up relations with other countries in the region, including Russia, to balance China's influence.

### **The summary of the findings and conclusions**

Relations with China were of dominant importance for Myanmar. China had a tremendous political impact on the processes that took place in the country and was the leading trading partner of Myanmar. For many years, Myanmar was in international isolation and diplomatic confrontation with Western countries. This situation led to a significant dependence of Myanmar on China, which became its leading economic partner. During all these years, Myanmar-China relations were determined by the strategic interests of China in the region. Still, they also depended on the position of political elites and political regimes in Myanmar and on their views on Southeast Asia's future and relations with the West.

1) Basically, the period from 1988-1998 heralded a remarkable success in the SPDC's foreign policy in Sino-Myanmar relations. Assessing the dynamics of Sino-Myanmar ties throughout the SLORC and the early SPDC era, the growing intensity of bilateral visits and the evolution of their leaders' personal relations were noticeable. In spite of that, no bilateral agreement was signed during Li Peng's state visit in 1994. That situation symbolized the end of the first phase of the "Pauk-Phaw" relationship (1988-1998), which the author would characterize as a "serene" friendship, but not secured by any solid legal foundation, when such delicate issues as Myanmar's accession to ASEAN, the position of Myanmar on China's policy towards Taiwan, etc., were clarified. That was the stage of "forced rapprochement" between the two countries. Since both China and Myanmar were isolated, the *Tatmadaw* government was under harsh economic sanctions imposed by the US and the West.

2) Regular exchange of high-level visits became a characteristic feature of the foreign policy tradition in bilateral relations and was one of the most visible manifestations of a "Pauk-Phaw" relationship during the *Tatmadaw* government period, and it reached the highest point of its mutual understanding in the first decade of the 21st century. The new stage

can be termed as a “formalization of relations” when more than 20 agreements were signed between the two countries. The personal contacts developed intensively at the interstate level and at the level of high-ranking military officials. China’s military aid to Myanmar was one of the important areas of cooperation in the 1990s. Most of the military’s contacts were kept secret by the *Tatmadaw* government, which never announced how many and what types of military weapons were bought from China. At the same time, the Chinese side disclosed only some of the visits of its military leaders to Myanmar. Nevertheless, even partial information obtained from open sources allows the author to stress that between 2000 and 2010, the relationships between the two armies were mainly based on two countries’ governments cooperation.

The military cooperation was continually reinforced by political support: Myanmar repeatedly openly declared its support for the “One China Policy”, as evidenced by the statements of Myanmar’s political leaders and the texts of bilateral agreements; China provided international support to Myanmar in the UN. A study of the documents of the UN Security Council, especially the speeches of the Chinese Permanent Representative to the Security Council on the issues of Myanmar, convincingly proves that this was a political or even ideological rapprochement between two political regimes. Therefore, the SPDC always stressed the importance of Myanmar’s geopolitical position to China. Meanwhile, in local views, China has become a prominent supporter of the SPDC regime.

Even at that period of the highest point of a “*Pauk-Phaw*” relationship, there was a political split within the Myanmar elite regarding the country’s international agenda: even at that time, some Myanmar military leaders tried to establish contacts with other regional and global powers. The dismissal of General Khin Nyunt, the Prime Minister of the military government, the main pro-Chinese lobbyist in the *Tatmadaw* government, in 2004, was clear evidence of the struggle between pro-Chinese and anti-Chinese elites within Myanmar’s military regime and the existence of a political group that advocated the desire to break out from China’s unlimited pressure and the expansion of the country’s foreign policy agenda.

Since it was nearly impossible for Myanmar to attract foreign capital at the beginning of the 21st century, China emerged as the top investor and trade partner in its economy. Later on, the bilateral trade turnover markedly increased. Local activists and international analysts feared that such a large amount of Chinese investments could lead to Myanmar sinking into debt. Still, Myanmar’s military leaders, who had been tapped by the harsh sanctions from the US and Europe, did not have a choice at that time but to accept Chinese investments.

3) During the Myanmar transition period (2011-2015), both sides were determined to sustain bilateral relations as it was under the previous *Tatmadaw* government’s time. The two countries’ leaders maintained the state-level visits during the first years of President Thein Sein’s administration. In domestic policy, Thein Sein announced a policy of reform. In the foreign policy course, contacts with other countries were established: the first steps of active relations with Russia were the attempts to find common ground with India and also the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States and Western countries. It was in these domestic and foreign political realities that the first crisis in Myanmar-China relations took place. The refusal to continue the Myitsone project and other Chinese projects were the

first cracks in relations between the two countries: it not only froze flourishing economic relations but also reduced the speed of political contact between the countries for the first time. Beijing acknowledged that Myanmar had correlated its political and international agenda, trying to demonstrate that the country was unfairly considered to be a “satellite state” of China.

The suspension of the Myitstone project and cooling of relations in 2011-2012 prompted Chinese leaders to reconsider their policies and adjust their Myanmar agenda. As a result, the Chinese government re-applied its old theory of parallel connections in the Myanmar-China ties. Therefore, Beijing began trying to forge closer ties with Myanmar’s local civil society organizations, influential politicians and political parties, expanding the circle of their political counterparts and strengthening relations with the opposition. In 2015, Beijing invited Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to visit China for the first time.

The development of Myanmar-China economic cooperation from 2011 to 2015 demonstrates that it depended a lot on the internal political situation in Myanmar. The unilateral suspension of the *Myitstone* project by the Myanmar government made Chinese investors to rethink expanding their investments in Myanmar. The decline of Chinese investments also affected Myanmar’s economic growth at that time.

4) The accession to power of the NLD became a new stage in relations between the two countries. The *Tatmadaw* accepted the election results and announced that it would work with the new NLD government. As a result, the military began a relationship with a civilian government for the first time in nearly 50 years. This situation has allowed China to pursue its so-called parallel policy while maintaining relations with the NLD government and with military leaders.

At that time, Myanmar-China relations were built more and more on a pragmatic basis. This was mainly evidenced by the significant number of agreements signed during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2020. By the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, China’s position in the world had changed radically. It definitely began taking leadership positions in Asia, turning into one of the world’s economic leaders. The leading role of China was manifested in the creation of such important geopolitical projects, like the “One Belt - One Road”, the transformation of the China-India-Bangladesh-Myanmar Economic Corridor into the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which markedly increased China’s strategic interest in Myanmar and its place in China’s comprehensive geopolitical plans. That was the main reason why China desperately needed peace in Myanmar. In addition, most Chinese projects were based on ethnic militias areas. Therefore, Beijing tried to influence simultaneously the government of Myanmar and ethnic armed groups.

In turn, the NLD’s government began actively developing contacts with the West, which reduced its political and economic dependence on China and allowed it to pursue a more independent policy. This also affected such an important area as military cooperation. The Myanmar military, who were previously completely ignored by the West, within the framework of the new democratic regime, also got the opportunity to reduce its dependence on China and expand its relations with India, Russia, and the West.

5) Myanmar business community welcomed the growing Chinese investments, but, at the same time, *Tatmadaw* generals and the Myanmar people feared increased Chinese influence in the country. It started in the 1990s as a result of increased economic cooperation and Chinese investments. Many Chinese migrants entered Myanmar at that time. Cultural differences and attempts of migrants to dominate the local economy, their attempts to create large ethnic enclaves in the border areas and large cities led to tensions between Chinese immigrants and local residents. Although the unrest was not public due to the repressions of the military government, there was discontent among the inhabitants of the country, which led to unrest and anti-Chinese protests in the late 1990s and caused a sharp increase in Sinophobia for many years to come. The anti-Chinese sentiment in 2011 was the reason that the population of Myanmar supported the refusal of the *Tatmadaw* government of the Chinese project to build the *Myitsonne* Dam hydropower project and of other Chinese projects. And even Aung San Suu Kyi, who was in opposition at that time and enjoyed great popularity among the population, could not convince the protesters. That is why China's projects need to be more transparent in the future. On the other hand, China's influence on Myanmar's ethnic militias needs to be carefully monitored, as Beijing's historic dual-track policies could become an obstacle to the peace process in Myanmar. Armed groups in the border areas could be used as intermediaries for China to gain advantages in relations with the government of Myanmar. Therefore, there are still many issues in relations between Myanmar and China that need to be resolved.

The general elections of November 2020 were won by the NLD government. Still, its activities were broken by the February 2021 military coup, which affected the foreign policy of Myanmar in general and changed the policy towards China in particular.

#### **Applied results of the research and research approbation:**

The main provisions and conclusions of the study were tested in the framework of Russian and International scientific and practical conferences:

- Problem of Historical Time for Contemporary Historians: Myanmar Colonial Past // Sixth International Conference "Eastern Perspective" HSE, School of Asian Studies, HSE, Moscow, May 2019.
- Contemporary Sino-Myanmar Relations: Dilemma of *Letpadaung Taung* Copper Mine Project // First International Conference: Globalization in Contemporary Asia, HSE, Moscow, December 2019.
- Contemporary Russia-Myanmar Ties: Opportunities from Myanmar's Reform Processes // International Conference: Russia and ASEAN in the Regional Dynamics, MGIMO, Russia, December 2020.
- *Kyauk-Phyu* Deep Seaport: China's Strategic Access to India Ocean and the Dilemma in Sino-Myanmar Relations // Second International Conference: "East and West in the New Transformation Phase: Asia Encountering the Challenges of Deglobalization", HSE, Moscow, December 2020.

- Sociocultural Integrating between Chinese Migrants and Myanmar Local // 3rd International Conference on Burma/ Myanmar Studies, Chaing Mai University, Thailand, March 2021.

The findings and conclusions of the research could be used in the teaching courses for bachelor and master students of the programs of Asian studies, International relations, and Regional studies.

#### **List of Publications Relevant to the Thesis**

- Wai Yan Phyto Naing, Volosyuk O.V. The Expansion of Chinese Business in Myanmar and Sino-Myanmar Relations (1988-1990) // RUDN Journal of World History. 2019. Vol. 11. № 4. P. 305-314. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8127-2019-11-4-305-314>.
- Wai Yan Phyto Naing. Contemporary Sino-Myanmar Relations: Dilemma of *Letpadaungtaung* Copper Mine Project // Regions in the Modern World: Globalization and Asia. Regional Studies. St. Petersburg: Aletheya, 2020. P. 89-100.
- Wai Yan Phyto Naing. The Evolution of Relations between Myanmar and China in the 1990s: Results and Assessments // Southeast Asia: Current Issues of Development. 2020. Vol. III. № 3 (48). P. 145–155. DOI:10.31696/2072-8271-2020-3-3-48-145-155.
- Wai Yan Phyto Naing. The Specificity of Myanmar's Relations with China in the Beginning of the XXI Century (2001-2010) // Southeast Asia: Current Issues of Development. 2020. Vol. III. № 4 (49). P. 145–153. DOI:10.31696/2072-8271-2020-3-4-49-145-153.
- Wai Yan Phyto Naing. The Dilemma of Sino-Myanmar Relations: The Case of Myitsone Hydropower Dam Project // Southeast Asia: Current Issues of Development. 2020. Vol. I. № 1 (46). P. 379–389. DOI:10.31696/2072-8271-2020-1-1-46-379-389.