

THE “PAUK PHAW” NARRATIVE AND CHINA’S RELATIONS WITH MYANMAR SINCE THE 1950S

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ABSTRACT

The term “Pauk Phaw” has been the most common frame used by China’s state media to describe the friendship or solidarity between China and Myanmar. However, existing literature has not yet critically analysed this narrative in terms of its changing themes and relevant contents in different historical contexts. This article therefore presents a systematic analysis of China’s Pauk Phaw narrative since the 1950s. The article examines 701 entries of media reports containing the Pauk Phaw narrative that appeared in China’s state newspaper, the People’s Daily from 1956 to 2018. To locate the factors contributing to different themes and contents of China’s Pauk Phaw narrative, we apply the framework of state identities and interests proposed by Alexander Wendt in Social Theory of International Politics (1999) to our analysis. The article analyses the political life of the narrative in four periods: (1) from 1956 to early 1967; (2) from mid-1967 to 1976; (3) from 1977 to 1999; and (4) from 2000 to 2018. The results of our analysis demonstrate that the themes and contents of China’s Pauk Phaw narrative have been shaped by China’s conception of its state identities and interests in different historical contexts.

As China interacts with other states in regional and international structures and as its domestic conditions change over time, it forms corresponding conceptions of its state identities and interests. These conceptions have also informed China’s approach to China-Myanmar relations and have thus shaped the contemporary themes and contents of the Pauk Phaw narrative. Therefore, the narrative has been an essential instrument for China in its strategies and practices to promote China-Myanmar amicability, especially in the changing contexts of China-ASEAN relations.

Keywords: Pauk Phaw, China-Myanmar relations, state identity, Belt and Road Initiative, ASEAN

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Second World War, states have often promoted political discourses focusing on inter-state cooperation. A particularly well-known example is the rhetoric of “Bruderstaaten” (“brother states”) and “socialist friendship,” which articulated the Soviet vision of amicable relations among the socialist states of Eastern Europe against the backdrop of historical animosities and bipolar geopolitics. The power of such discursive practices helped to shape the dynamism of national and international politics at the time. An Asian example is found in the use of the Burmese term “Pauk Phaw” (“fraternal friendship”) to describe the ties between Myanmar and China.¹ The term originated in the early 1950s when newly independent Myanmar and the young People’s Republic of China launched a new phase in the relationship between the two countries. Myanmar understandings of Pauk Phaw emphasised the power asymmetry between a big and a small brother. For China, by contrast, Pauk Phaw (transliterated as 胞波 [bāo bō]) stands for a narrative of traditional familial friendship that draws on an ancient myth. The Chinese side has continued to use the concept in its Sinicised form and still employs it today to characterise its relationship with Myanmar even though the restoration of Chinese power since the 1980s has amplified the power asymmetry of which the smaller neighbour has always been keenly aware.

This article examines China’s uses of Pauk Phaw narratives against the backdrop of China’s changing policy orientation in China-Myanmar relations and the regional and global political developments from 1956 to 2018. We argue that the notion of Pauk Phaw has been constructed and reconstructed by China to promote China-Myanmar relations over time according to its conceptions of state identities and interests that register on the national and international

levels. We also attempt to identify what domestic and international factors have contributed to the varying themes of the Pauk Phaw narrative since 1956.

Our analytical framework draws on the concept of state identities and interests proposed by Alexander Wendt (1999), which allows interpreting China's varied usage of the Pauk Phaw narrative in different historical periods of China-Myanmar relations. According to Wendt (1999), there are four types of state identity: (1) the corporate identity dealing with the internal organisation of the state; (2) the type identity referring to regime type or form of state; (3) the role identity that is defined by the state's position in relation to other states or international organisations; and (4) the collective identity that denotes the unity of the state and its counterparts. Under the same framework, four categories of state interests are proposed by him, namely (1) survival, (2) autonomy, (3) economic well-being and (4) collective self-esteem (Wendt 1999: 233). Domestic and international conditions shape state identities and interests and the relative weight of domestic and international factors may vary over time.

This framework helps us understand what domestic and international factors elicit particular conceptions of China's state identities and interests, which in turn propel China's utilisation of the Pauk Phaw narrative. Meanwhile, we also pay attention to the spatial scales, to wit the international, national, regional or local levels of concerns, on which China's conception of its state identities and interests throughout the four periods are focused.

Our analysis is based on the Chinese's state print media, which are vital for examining the stance of China and its perspectives in using the Pauk Phaw narrative for maintaining its relations with Myanmar. We collected our data from publicly accessible archives of the *People's Daily*, the Chinese daily newspaper of the Communist Party of China, and use *Peking Review* (*Beijing Review*), the weekly English counterpart of the *People's Daily* as the reference for translation. We have examined in total of 701 news items from the *People's Daily* that contain “胞波” and then analysed the content that directly elaborates on the Pauk Phaw relationship. We have coded these reports according to the themes and assigned them as either leading themes or supporting themes based on their internal correlations. Then we explore the linkage between these themes and China's state identities and interests in different historical periods, thus explaining the denotation of and motivation for China's Pauk Phaw narrative.

So far there is a limited number of scholarships contributing to the understanding of China's Pauk Phaw narrative. In the first group of scholarship, Pauk Phaw is quoted in the analysis of China-Myanmar interstate relations to

describe the amicability prevailing between the two sides (e.g., Ganesan 2005: 37, 2011: 106; Haacke 2011; Min Zin 2012; Khine Tun 2016; Han 2017) without detailed explanation of the meaning or the historical background of the term. The second group interprets the Pauk Phaw narrative from an anthropological perspective to emphasise the integration and friendly interactions between locals and Chinese migrants in Myanmar that helped popularise this Burmese word (e.g., Tong 2015; Fan 2015a, 2015b). The third group analyses the Pauk Phaw narrative against the chronology of China-Myanmar relations (e.g., Maung Aung Myoe 2011; Fan 2015a, 2015b). However, this strand in the literature does not pay much attention to the nuanced changes in the denotation of Pauk Phaw and its corresponding historical contexts. Taking into consideration the enduring popularity of the term in China’s state narrative, especially at the present, and the various historical contexts of China-Myanmar relations in which the phrase is used, we suggest that a critical study of the narrative as used by China contributes to furthering the understanding of China’s policies orientation in China-Myanmar relations.

The following parts of this article is divided into three main sections. The first introduces the different usages of the Pauk Phaw narrative in China and Myanmar, thus problematising China’s frequent use of the term. In the second part, we present our research findings regarding the Pauk Phaw narrative in the *People’s Daily* in four periods, namely: (1) from 1956 to early 1967; (2) from mid-1967 to 1976; (3) from 1977 to 1999; and (4) from 2000 to 2018. In the first period of our analysis, China’s Pauk Phaw narrative is informed by China’s state-building imperatives immediately following its independence and the onset of Cold War bipolarity, while in the second phase the narrative is framed by the course of China’s domestic communist revolution. The Pauk Phaw narrative in the third phase is propelled by China’s recalibration of state-building imperatives to domestic stability and to improving its international relations. The narrative in the last period is marked by China’s more proactive regional and international policy as the state aspires to a “peaceful rise.”

CONTESTING THE PAUK PHAW NARRATIVE IN CHINA AND MYANMAR

Pauk Phaw is the Roman transliteration of the Burmese word for “kinsfolk” or “cousin” (Steinberg 2010: 49; Narayanan 2010: 259; Maung Aung Myoe 2011: 8). Recent scholarship on Myanmar has suggested that the phrase was introduced into the local vocabulary in the postcolonial period (Egretau and

Jagan, 2013: 262; Egreteau 2015: 115–116). In the second half of the 1950s, Myanmar began to promote Pauk Phaw with reference to the close connection between China and Myanmar (e.g., Reid and Zheng 2006: 100; Maung Aung Myoe 2011: 13; 2016: 7, 284; Min Zin 2010; 2012; Han 2017: 2).

In China, the Burmese word “Pauk Phaw” is transliterated into Chinese as “胞波” [bāo bō]. The selection of the Chinese letter 胞 [bāo] as the equivalent of “Pauk” is felicitous. 胞 [bāo] in Chinese refers to close kinship, brotherhood or comradeship, evoking affectionate imagery of consanguinity. By using this term, China—in its efforts to draw Myanmar closer—depicts its neighbour as a close, reliable partner, a family member as it were.

Chinese leaders and state media use the term Pauk Phaw to highlight China’s attempts at cultivating cultural and political relations with Myanmar. By contrast, for Myanmar’s leaders, the word connotes a hierarchical relationship or power asymmetry between the old brother, China, and the younger one, Myanmar (Maung Aung Myoe 2011; Min Zin 2010). Put differently, Myanmar leaders used the term Pauk Phaw for carefully managing relations with its much more powerful neighbour. In Myanmar’s state media such as *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, reports related to China-Myanmar relations are often characterised by a neutral tone.

Accordingly, the divergence in state media usages of Pauk Phaw engenders different popular usages of the term among the peoples. Whereas in China, Pauk Phaw currently receives wide media publicity and recognition, the phrase gets much less media and popular attention in its place of origin. Even though the word was widely used by people in Myanmar to refer to Chinese migrants before the 1940s (Tong 2010: 150; Fan 2015a, 2015b), the modern usage in the country departs from the original meaning of the phrase. Among the general public of Myanmar, Pauk Phaw now means nothing more than “friend” or “acquaintance” and is no longer a frequent phrase (Song Xue and Hein Khaing, personal messages to the authors, 4 May 2018).

Interestingly, it is often claimed by both the state and the popular media in China that Pauk Phaw has a mystic and ancient origin and that Pauk Phaw means more than merely “friends.” Pauk Phaw is purported to originate from a myth in Myanmar about the peoples of Myanmar and China being the children of the same parents, namely the dragon princess and the sun god (e.g., *People’s Daily* 2007; Song and Yang 2017; Khin Maung Nyunt 2016). Moreover, China portrayed Pauk Phaw relationship as time-honoured amicability between the people of China and Myanmar (e.g., Yang and Wang 2016; Zhuang 2016; 2017a; 2018; *People’s Daily* 2016). In comparison, Pauk Phaw is more consistently utilised in China’s state narrative of China-Myanmar relations, whereas state media in Myanmar use the term inconsistently.

Hence, we argue that China’s Pauk Phaw narrative is sustained not by the reciprocal response from Myanmar, in the form of a conversation, but by China’s intent to popularise the term. In the following sections, we attempt to enunciate how China’s different conceptions of its state identities and interests inform its usage of the Pauk Phaw narrative. To this end, we offer our analysis of China’s Pauk Phaw narrative against the historical backgrounds of four periods in China-Myanmar relations from 1956.

THE PAUK PHAW NARRATIVE AND CHINA’S RELATIONS WITH MYANMAR

In this section, we divide China’s Pauk Phaw narrative into four periods, namely: (1) from 1956 to early 1967; (2) from mid-1967 to 1976; (3) from 1977 to the 1990s; and (4) from 2000 to 2018. The rationale behind this framework stems from China’s conceptions of its state identities and interests in different historical contexts that have shaped its policy orientation in China-Myanmar relations since 1956.

Origins and Peak of the Pauk Phaw Narrative (1956 to Early 1967)

In this period, China’s Pauk Phaw narrative was constructed based on the country’s conception of its corporate and role identities and its focus on survival and autonomy. After the People’s Republic of China had been established in 1949, Myanmar—at that time referred to as the Union of Burma—became the first non-communist country to recognise the new regime in Beijing and to sever its diplomatic ties with the Kuomintang government in Taiwan. On 8 June 1950, China and Myanmar established their official diplomatic relations. Myanmar also supported China’s *Five Principles of Coexistence* when Premier Zhou Enlai first proposed the treaty in 1953. This supportive stance adopted by Myanmar contributed to the interstate amicability that characterised the period spanning 1956 and early 1967. Subsequently, the Pauk Phaw narrative emerged from frequent and friendly interstate communications.

胞波 (Pauk Phaw) made its debut in the *People’s Daily* on 15 December 1956 when Premier Zhou Enlai visited Myanmar. Before 胞波 (Pauk Phaw) was officially used, China’s state media had endorsed narratives of 亲戚关系 (“fraternal ties of kinship”) (e.g., *People’s Daily* 1954a; 1954b). From December 1956, “Pauk Phaw” and “fraternal ties” were used in the *People’s Daily* as mutually constitutive and interchangeable components of China’s state narrative regarding China-Myanmar intimacy. A total of 298 reports

included the Pauk Phaw narrative in the newspaper through 1967, the years 1960 and 1961 seeing the most frequent use in the period under study.

Seven themes dominated the Pauk Phaw narrative in this period, namely border demarcation, peaceful coexistence, geographical contiguity, the close relation among border residents, enduring historical amicability, state independence and bilateral cooperation. The two leading themes were the demarcation of the China-Myanmar boundary and the peaceful coexistence between the two states. China's state media reported the peaceful settlement of China-Myanmar boundary in 1960 as reinforcing the traditional Pauk Phaw relationship between the two peoples (e.g., *People's Daily* 1960c; 1960d; *Peking Review* 1960b: 11, 1960c: 27–28; 1960d: 11, 37–39; 1960e: 27–28; 1960f: 37–39), and the Pauk Phaw friendship contributed to the peaceful settlement of border issues (e.g., *People's Daily* 1966a). At the same time, the Pauk Phaw friendship was regarded as the foundation, “the traditional friendship,” for the peaceful coexistence, “the new friendship,” between the two countries (e.g., *People's Daily* 1957a). Besides, the China-Myanmar Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression signed in 1960 was viewed as an illustration of the Pauk Phaw friendship (e.g., *People's Daily* 1960a, 1965a).

Three main supporting themes in this period were the geographical contiguity, the intimacy among border residents in the China-Myanmar border area and the enduring historical amicability between the peoples of two countries. Geographical connectivity was extensively used in China's state narrative of the Pauk Phaw friendship as the condition that contributed to the lasting intimacy between the peoples of the two countries. During his state visit to Myanmar, Chinese Deputy Premier Luo Ruiqing spoke to the citizens in Moulmein that the Salween River linked the two countries and continuously transmitted the “Pauk Phaw affection between the two peoples”; “it is impossible to move the mountain and sever the river, therefore to destruct the friendship between our two peoples,” he said (*People's Daily* 1961b). In another example, when visiting Myanmar in April 1963, Chairman Liu Shaoqi was quoted as saying that “China and Myanmar are linked by mountains and rivers, and our peoples are intimately linked as Pauk Phaw kinsmen” (*People's Daily* 1963a).

The intimacy among border residents often appeared together with the narrative of geographical contiguity. For instance, during the celebration of the finalisation of the *China-Myanmar Boundary Treaty* in Beijing in 1960, Premier Zhou Enlai stated in a public address that China and Myanmar shared a long boundary, the border residents had sustained a lasting amicability, and “the Pauk Phaw friendship originated in time-immemorial” (*People's Daily*

1960e). Myanmar’s Shan State governor was reported to have observed that “Shan State is contiguous with the People’s Republic of China, and it (or its people) is the Pauk Phaw of Chinese people” when receiving the visiting Chinese Deputy Premier Chen Yi and Luo Ruiqing in January 1961 (*People’s Daily* 1961d). The *People’s Daily* pointed out the shared ethnicity and culture among border residents to accentuate the Pauk Phaw friendship (e.g., *People’s Daily* 1956a; 1962; 1963b).

The enduring amicability between both peoples, not only the border residents, was yet another prevalent theme in the Pauk Phaw narrative. The *People’s Daily* reiterated that the appellation of Pauk Phaw attested to the longevity of folk amity between the peoples of the two countries (e.g., *People’s Daily* 1956b; 1956c; 1957b; 1961a) and that the Pauk Phaw friendship had lasted for thousands of years (e.g., *People’s Daily* 1960c; 1965b).

Additionally, there were two less common supporting themes during this period. The sixth theme was state independence or liberation from imperialism and colonialism. The state’s independence from external oppression was reported to reinforce Pauk Phaw friendship (e.g., *People’s Daily* 1960b; 1961a; 1963a; 1965c; *Peking Review* 1960a: 16) and the imperialism and colonialism impeded the formation of China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw affinity (e.g., *People’s Daily* 1961a; 1961c). Moreover, the last theme of the Pauk Phaw narrative before mid-1967 was bilateral cooperation, such as economic cooperation exemplified by projects with Chinese assistance agreed in the *China-Myanmar Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation* (e.g., *People’s Daily* 1964c; 1967a) and cultural cooperation (e.g., *People’s Daily* 1961e; 1966a).

Both domestic and international contexts elicited these themes in the narrative of Pauk Phaw friendship. After the end of the Second World War, the United States actively launched a series of consistent moves to contain communist encroachment in Southeast Asia (Herring 2008: 634; Tarling 2010: 83). United States-backed Kuomintang regiments known as the Yunnan Anti-Communist National Salvation Army, which operated in northern Myanmar from approximately 1950 to 1961, were perceived as a threat to the communist regime and territorial integrity of the state. Simultaneously, a simmering rift between China and the Soviet Union posed a new challenge to China’s sovereignty and territorial security.

Thus, Myanmar was regarded by Beijing as a crucial link in its chain of defence against external threats. While the neutralist Myanmar leadership adopted the Pauk Phaw narrative (Maung Aung Myoe 2011: 12; Steinberg and Fan 2012: 10–27) to maintain a “balance of relationship” (Huang 2015)

in response to changes in China's policy towards the country, China's leaders appropriated the narrative in their attempts to keep the United States and Soviet hostility to its regime and territory at bay.

Consequently, the geopolitical uncertainty in the region as shaped by the onset of the Cold War contributed to China's conception of its state identities and interests, and this conception led China to opt for and to actively promote the Pauk Phaw narrative. In other words, two main factors shaped China's ways of framing its Pauk Phaw narrative: first, China's attempts in inserting itself as an emerging Asian Communist republic into the bipolar international system of the Cold War, and second, its struggles to maintain this state identity for survival in the volatile Asian and international Cold War politics.

In sum, among the seven themes of the Pauk Phaw narrative from 1956 to 1967, border demarcation and peaceful coexistence took centre stage. They exemplified the significance of sovereign and territorial security within the framework of China's corporate and role identities and focus on survival and autonomy. Indeed, the mutually constitutive and reinforcing imperatives of demarcating the boundary and creating a peaceful environment were at the core of China's initial state-building programme and generated the discursive space for the supporting themes of the narrative. Following this logic, the themes of geographical contiguity, the intimacy among border residents, enduring historical amicability, state independence and bilateral cooperation buttressed the two leading themes of peaceful coexistence and peaceful border demarcation by representing the China-Myanmar relationship as being supported by natural, historical and popular bonds.

After the Pauk Phaw friendship had brought about the successful border demarcation between China and Myanmar and other transborder exchanges, China's Cultural Revolution cast a shadow on relations with Myanmar in the years from 1967 to 1976.

Pauk Phaw in Years of Bilateral Crisis and Its Aftermath (1967 to 1976)

From mid-1967 to 1976, China's Pauk Phaw narrative was transformed and then reconstructed following the transition in the state leadership's conception of China's state identities and interests that substantially influenced China's foreign policy. The period was characterised by the Cultural Revolution in China and ended with Mao Zedong's death in 1976. During this decade, the political life of the Pauk Phaw narrative in China suffered drastic ups and downs as China went through the most turbulent years in its domestic politics and foreign relations.

The beginning of this period witnessed a rupture in China-Myanmar relations as anti-Chinese riots broke out in Myanmar in June of 1967. As a result, the number of reports containing the Pauk Phaw narrative fell dramatically to just 17 items, and its meaning was modified. Whereas in February 1967 the *People’s Daily* (1967a) extolled the China-aided projects in Myanmar as symbols of China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw, in July of that year the newspaper used Pauk Phaw in its reprimand of General Ne Win’s military government for allowing anti-Chinese atrocities and conspiracies with “United States imperialism” and “Soviet revisionism” (e.g., *Peking Review* 1967a; 1967b: 20). The *People’s Daily* denounced General Ne Win for being the “Chiang Kai-shek of Myanmar” and the “Pauk Phaw of China’s Khrushchev”—namely Chairman Liu Shaoqi who was criticised during the Cultural Revolution—claiming that the two leaders were “partners-in-crime” and their Pauk Phaw friendship was the relationship of “a supreme master and a disciple” (*People’s Daily* 1967b; *Peking Review* 1967c: 14). Another issue of the *People’s Daily* claimed that the Pauk Phaw friendship between the peoples of the two countries would continue regardless of Ne Win government’s animosity towards China and the Chinese people (*People’s Daily* 1967c; *Peking Review* 1967c). To sum up, in 1967 feelings of animosity overshadowed the Pauk Phaw narrative with its implication amity and kinship. From 1968 to 1971, the Pauk Phaw narrative disappeared entirely from the *People’s Daily*.

As China started to mend fences with Myanmar in the early 1970s, the Pauk Phaw narrative that denoted China-Myanmar amicability reappeared in the *People’s Daily* in 1972, and its frequency reached a peak for the period in 1975. Nonetheless, reports containing the Pauk Phaw narrative were far fewer compared with the previous period before June 1967. Central themes in this short period were identical to those in the earlier period, including the geographical contiguity, bilateral cooperation mainly in cultural activities, enduring historical amicability between the peoples of the two countries, peaceful coexistence and state independence, as were their concomitant denotations. The conflicts between Myanmar and China caused by the riots of 1967 led China to highlight the themes of promoting bilateral cooperation and peaceful coexistence and at the same time to keep other themes in their supportive capacity.

Significantly, the zenith of China and Myanmar’s bilateral cooperation and peaceful coexistence came in late 1975. On 12 November 1975, on the occasion of President Ne Win’s visit to China, the *People’s Daily* published an article authored by the *Xinhua News* under the title “Myanmar Government Upholds Non-Alignment Policy, China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw Friendship

Grows Incessantly” (缅甸政府坚持独立和不结盟政策 中缅两国的胞波友谊不断获得发展). The piece highlighted that the Myanmar government supported the UN Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order and the corresponding Programme of Action on 1 May 1974. The article stated further that “both China and Myanmar [were] developing countries that belong[ed] to the Third World,” and “the peoples of the two countries [had] sustained mutual support and compassion in their struggles against imperialism and colonialism.” In addition, the two countries were reported to have engaged in “amicable cooperation in international issues.” China’s unremitting support of Myanmar’s Non-Alignment Policy and Myanmar’s support of China’s claim to Taiwan and China’s admission to the United Nations were invoked as symbols of a growing China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw friendship (*Xinhua News* 1975). This article was the most politically charged expression of China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw friendship in this period and was indicative of the transition in China’s policy towards Myanmar after the long years of estrangement. On the one hand, the developments in China and Myanmar relations in 1975 demonstrated the deepening of the two countries’ bilateral cooperation and peaceful coexistences. On the other hand, the progress in bilateral relations led to new accents in China’s use of the Pauk Phaw narrative. Two new supporting themes emerged in the 1975 article, namely the mutual support and compassion in the struggles against imperialism and colonialism and friendly cooperation in international issues. They highlighted the significance of Myanmar to China’s international standing. Specifically, these two supporting themes were indicative of the international dimension of China’s calculus regarding its relations with Myanmar.

The ups and downs of China and Myanmar relations in this period clearly show how the transition in China’s conception of its state identities and interests shaped different themes and the relevant content of the Pauk Phaw narrative. Early years of this period witnessed a decline in the use of the term Pauk Phaw in China’s official discourses mainly due to the 1967 anti-Chinese riots in Myanmar that led to the nadir in bilateral ties. However, this rupture was not the direct product of bilateral exchanges but the collateral effect of China’s communist propaganda as part of its revolutionary pursuit of international communist legitimacy and leadership in competition with the Soviet Union, targeting mainly the Southeast Asian countries (Ford 2010: 212; Sutter 2010: 149; Mitter 2013; Garver 2016: 129). In sum, from mid-1967 towards the end of 1960s, China’s conception of its type identity and role identity shifted focus. It now centred on becoming a leader among communist countries and on pursuing the domestic and international legitimacy of its

communist leadership. At the same time, China’s policies were guided by a quest for the triumph in a “people’s war” as an expression of collective self-esteem.

As the Cultural Revolution was winding down after 1969 and the domestic economy suffered stagnation, China refocused on the domestic political and economic order, to which end a peaceful surrounding was needed. In 1972, China established formal relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China. The administration of United States President Richard Nixon recognised the regime in Beijing as the legitimate government of China (Garver 2016: 289–293). The People’s Republic was interested in abandoning its isolationist foreign policy as it needed external economic support in the face of constant threats from the Soviet Union (Sutter 2012: 62). The further economic development of China bore out this rationale underlying the country’s rapprochement with the United States and its more general departure from its previous isolationist and confrontational approach during the height of the Cold War (Kraus 2012: 84; Mitter 2013; Shambaugh 2013: 39). As the communist regime gained China’s seat in the United Nations, the People’s Republic came to play a central role in the organisation and developed friendly relationships with many other countries.

The shift in China’s international policy put China-Myanmar relations back on a smooth track. The restatement of the Pauk Phaw narrative from 1972 and the article in the *People’s Daily* of 12 November 1975 faithfully reflected this transition in China’s policy trajectory in China-Myanmar relations. Thus, in the 1970s, China’s conception of its type identity and role identity as informed by its previous communist revolution gradually gave way to its conception of corporate identity marked by its reorientation to domestic political and economic stability. At the same time, the new conception of its role identity as an internationally acknowledged state gained more gravity in its foreign policy. Hence, economic well-being and international collective self-esteem were the core state interests in the latter years of this period.

Accordingly, narratives under the leading themes of bilateral cooperation and peaceful coexistence, together with their supporting themes such as geographical contiguity, enduring historical amicability between the peoples of two countries and state independence, mutual support and compassion in the struggles against external oppression and amicable cooperation in international issues, all reflected China’s intent to normalise its relations with Myanmar for both domestic and international ends. These narratives demonstrated that in this period, China’s conception of its corporate and role identity alongside its interests of domestic economic well-being and international collective self-esteem framed its foreign relations trajectory in the 1970s.

Furthermore, our observation of the Pauk Phaw narrative during the entire period is in line with the argument advanced by some political scientists that China had not developed a region-specific foreign policy and that its relations with the United States and the Soviet Union continued to dictate its foreign policy until the end of the Cold War (Yahuda 2004: 124–128; Yu 2005: 228; Li 2009: 17). The fact that the Pauk Phaw narrative only returned in China's state media following the China-United States rapprochement and the narrative's linkage with China's struggle against the oppression of the big powers and China's international foothold demonstrated the persistent dominance of the international power structure in China's conception of its state identity and interests, which shaped its policies towards Myanmar. Nonetheless, the Pauk Phaw narrative was revitalised in this period by China's endeavour for economic recovery and solid international standing, and its dynamism remained robust in the following two decades.

Pauk Phaw and China's Path towards Prosperity (1977 to 1999)

From 1977 to 1999, China's Pauk Phaw narrative was informed by China's conception of its corporate identity and state interests of economic well-being. There were in total of 183 pieces of news that incorporated the Pauk Phaw narrative in the *People's Daily* from 1977 to 1999. The large volume of news report demonstrated the vigorous recovery of the Pauk Phaw narrative in China's state media. Its frequency hit a peak in 1977. Leading themes in this period were a combination of the principal issues related to the narrative in both the first and second periods of our study. Hence, the most prevalent themes in this period were: the enduring historical amicability between the peoples of two countries; geographical contiguity; bilateral cooperation mainly in economic and cultural realms; peaceful coexistence; intimacy among border residents; state independence from imperialism; and colonialism and border demarcation. The narrative was also discursively linked to the mutual support and compassion not only in the struggles against imperialism and colonialism but also to global affairs and friendly cooperation in international issues. Leading themes of this period were similar to those of the previous period, namely the theme of bilateral cooperation in both the regional and international arena and peaceful coexistence.

Four new supporting themes emerged in this period, namely the strength of China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw friendship, the common interests of the two countries, the transborder economy between Yunnan Province and Myanmar, and regional peace. As to the first supporting theme, the China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw friendship was portrayed as having survived "historical challenges"

(e.g., *People’s Daily* 1987; 1988) and changes in international politics (e.g., *People’s Daily* 1996a). The second one was the common interests of the two countries. For instance, in his cable to the newly elected Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Fifth People’s Congress of China Ye Jianying, Myanmar’s President Ne Win conveyed his congratulation to the successful completion of the first plenary session of the People’s Congress of China in March 1978. The President also mentioned that “the Pauk Phaw friendship between [the] two countries and [their] peoples [would] be developed and reinforced for [their] common interests” (*People’s Daily* 1978). In the *China-Myanmar Joint Communique* issued in January 1996 when President Than Shwe visited China stated that the furthering of the traditional Pauk Phaw friendship was in concord with the common wish and benefit of both peoples (*People’s Daily* 1996b).

The third theme was an extension of the previous one of bilateral economic cooperation and geographical intimacy. The transborder economy linking Yunnan Province with Myanmar was mentioned in the *People’s Daily* twice as a constructive factor in the Pauk Phaw friendship (e.g., *People’s Daily* 1992; 1997). While in the first period of the Pauk Phaw narrative, the *People’s Daily* mainly focused on the social and cultural connectivity in the border area for promoting peaceful coexistence and peaceful border demarcation, now economic linkages through transborder trade were added to the portfolio of transborder connectivity as border trade had been instrumentalised to promote China’s domestic economic growth.

The fourth theme was regional peace. In his cable of congratulation to the newly elected President of Myanmar San Yu, Ye Jianying, as the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the People’s Congress of China, said that “with the care and commitment of former President Ne Win and Chinese leaders, amicable China-Myanmar cooperation and the Pauk Phaw friendship between [the] peoples [of the two countries] continu[ed] to be amplified and developed,” which not only served the “fundamental benefit” of both sides, but also contributed to “the peace and stability of Southeast Asia” (*People’s Daily* 1981).

Whereas the leading themes indicated the strategic weight of Myanmar in China’s foreign relations as consistent with the previous period, the four supporting themes of this period specifically demonstrated the recalibration and rescaling of China’s policy trajectory in China-Myanmar relations, which was increasingly domestically oriented and region-specific. China’s conception of its state identities and interests as created by domestic, regional and international conditions contributed to this change. At the national level,

China had successfully achieved its goal of establishing the communist regime under a revolutionary party and began to move to the next step of promoting the country's development-orientation plans in the late 1970s. The implementation of the *Reform and Opening-up Policy* by the end of 1978, which was designed by China's second generation of leadership with Deng Xiaoping at its helm, indicated the reorientation of the communist regime towards national economic development. This reorientation led to a more accommodating foreign policy stance in China. Beijing now adopted an independent foreign policy that aimed at maintaining equal distance from the United States and Soviet Union (Shambaugh 2013: 40) and at promoting regional stability. The Twelfth Communist Party of China National Congress in 1982 attached the highest priority to national economic development (Li 2014; Wang 2013: 123). Accordingly, Deng Xiaoping's leadership took a two-pronged approach to China's foreign policy, "pursuing peace and development" and "opposing hegemonism" (Sutter 2012: 141) with an emphasis on the former. Furthermore, the Chinese government viewed a peaceful neighbourhood as a prerequisite for national development (Li 2009: 19)—an outlook that would serve as the foundation of China's regional strategy for decades to come (Zhang and Tang 2005).

At the regional and international levels, the further weakening of Cold War bipolarity in the Asia-Pacific region allowed China to seek stronger ties with states on its periphery (Wang 1998: 58–63; Sutter 2010: 149, 208; Fan 2012a). Simultaneously, the normalisation of the Sino-Soviet relationship further expanded China's strategic opportunities in the Asia-Pacific. Another favourable condition was the increasing economic integration and interdependence in Southeast Asia and East Asia after the Cold War, which is best illustrated by the collective efforts made by Asian countries to reconnect with China after the 1989 United States imposed sanctions on the country after the Beijing regime had suppressed the Tiananmen Square protests (Shambaugh 2005: 26; 2013: 41). The relaxed regional political environment allowed China to cultivate more comprehensive cooperation with countries in the region, which led to the establishment of the ASEAN-China Joint Cooperation Committee in 1997 and to China's active participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (Katsumata 2009: 101–110; Hughes 2010). As to China-Myanmar relations, in particular, closer bilateral ties were further facilitated by the Western economic sanctions imposed on Myanmar and China respectively in 1988 and 1989 (Maung Aung Myoe 2011), creating an economic interdependence between the two countries.

Against the contexts of these new regional and international developments, China maintained its close ties with Myanmar for domestic and international benefits. At the same time, while the themes of the Pauk Phaw narrative in this period were similar to those of the previous two periods, we observe that the narrative was informed by China’s domestic economic imperatives and China’s accommodating periphery strategy that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, rendering the narrative more regionally oriented.

In sum, from 1977 to 1999, the Pauk Phaw narrative reflected China’s conception of its corporate identity and state interests in promoting its national economic well-being. At the same time, various themes of the narrative underpinned a more specific regional orientation in China’s foreign relations. These themes included the strength of the Pauk Phaw friendship, shared interests, transborder trade and regional peace in particular reinforced the regional and local dimension of the narrative while China’s emerging periphery diplomacy.

The Pauk Phaw Narrative in the New Millennium (2000 to 2018)

This period demonstrates how after the 50 years of its political career in promoting China-Myanmar relations, the power of the Pauk Phaw narrative was still significant and served China’s changing conceptions of its state identity and state interests. In particular, the narrative in this period was influenced by China’s corporate and role identity together with its state interests of domestic economic well-being and internationally-recognised collective self-esteem as a rising power of the 21st century. In the first two decades of the century, the Pauk Phaw narrative appeared in 203 newspaper articles published in the *People’s Daily*, its main themes remaining unchanged from the previous three periods. Hence, related issues included: geographical contiguity; enduring historical amicability between the peoples of two countries; bilateral cooperation in political; economic and cultural realms; peaceful coexistence; intimacy among border residents; mutual support and compassion; common interests; the strength of the China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw friendship; regional peace; transborder economy; and amicable cooperation in international as well as regional issues. Among these themes, bilateral cooperation and peaceful coexistence took once more the lead.

Compared with the themes of previous periods, five nuanced developments are worth our attention. First of all, under the leading theme of bilateral cooperation and peaceful coexistence, the Pauk Phaw narrative explicitly showed China’s greater recognition of the significance of common

interests and mutuality in state-led initiatives of cooperation in various realms between China and Myanmar. During his visit to Myanmar in January 2007, Li Tieying, the Deputy Chairman of the Standing Committee of the 10th People's Congress of China, was quoted as saying that “China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw friendship [had] become increasingly deeper since the establishment of China-Myanmar diplomatic ties 50 years ago,” which was exemplified by the “mutual trust in politics, reciprocity in economic relations and the mutual support and compassion in fundamental issues of respective core state interests” (Zhang 2007).

In a report in the *People's Daily* about China's aid to Myanmar in the Cyclone Nargis crisis, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi also referred to the “mutual support and assistance has been an enduring practice” of the peoples of China and Myanmar, who were linked by Pauk Phaw fraternity (*Xinhua News* 2008). In March 2009, Li Changchun, a Permanent Member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China received Than Shwe, Chairman of Myanmar's State Peace and Development Council. On this occasion, Li suggested that China and Myanmar reciprocated “understanding and support to each other regarding key issues of concern,” which enriched the connotation of Pauk Phaw affections (Zhang and Qian 2009). Political trust between the two countries also became a token of Pauk Phaw friendship (e.g., Zhang 2007; Zhang and Qian 2009).

Similarly, when receiving Myanmar's Speaker of the House of Representatives U Win Myint in September 2017, the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the 12th People's Congress of China, Zhang Dejiang, pointed out that “the Pauk Phaw affections between our peoples [were] the foundation for the long-term healthy development of China-Myanmar bilateral ties,” and therefore the legislature of both countries should work on the promotion of communication and local cooperation in culture, education, media and youth activities through their institutional advantages in reaching out to the people, generating positive pulses to the amicable cooperation of the two countries (Hou 2017).

Secondly, the issue of transborder economy in the theme of bilateral cooperation in the Pauk Phaw narrative was explicitly incorporated into state and local developmental projects. At the state level, the Belt and Road Initiative, along with its regional components such as the China-Myanmar Oil and Gas Pipeline and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, came to play a key role in China's conceptualisation of the Pauk Phaw friendship (e.g., Yu and Sun 2012; Yang et al. 2017; *People's Daily* 2018). At the local level, Yunnan Province's Economic Bridgehead Strategy, announced in 2011 by

the State Council of China, was incorporated into the narrative of Pauk Phaw (e.g., Zhang, Xu and Hu 2012).

Thirdly, for the first time in the realm of bilateral cooperation, China introduced the formation of concerted programs by sub-state and non-state institutional actors in China for the promotion of the Pauk Phaw friendship between the peoples of China and Myanmar. Initiatives included the China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw Scholarship, offered by the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation to students in Myanmar (e.g., Che and Huang 2018a); *Experiencing China: A Tour of China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw Fraternity*, proposed by the Information Office of the State Council of China; and the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar (e.g., Lu 2014; Yang 2014). Another initiative was the Vision Recovery Project, which aimed at offering free treatment to cataract patients in Myanmar—a component of the Promotion of China-Myanmar Pauk Phaw Affections Programme. The project was variously conducted by the China Friendship Foundation for Peace and Development, the Yunnan Province Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the Yunnan Province Friendship Foundation for Nongovernmental Exchanges and the Yunnan Province Nongovernmental Network for International Exchanges in cooperation with professional eye surgeons in Yunnan Province (e.g., Ji 2012; Zhuang 2017b; Zhuang and Lu 2017; Che and Huang 2018b). These sub-state and non-state initiatives under the theme of bilateral cooperation suggest that institutional actors in China were keenly aware of the importance of public and people-to-people diplomacy in promoting China-Myanmar amicability. Moreover, China’s initiatives and aid given to Myanmar revealed the recognition of certain sustainable-development ideas in the promotion of Pauk Phaw relations with Myanmar.

Fourthly, two aspects of change arose in creating and sustaining a collective identity in China-Myanmar relations due to the advancement in China-Myanmar bilateral cooperation both at the state and local levels, namely the absence of the supporting themes of “state independence” and “oppression of external/imperialist threat.” The language of state interdependence superseded the idea of “state independence” through strengthening China-Myanmar common interests and bilateral cooperation. Suggesting shared external threats no longer worked for fostering solidarity between the two countries in this era. While the theme of mutual support and compassion was still popular, its connection with the struggles against external oppression such as imperialism and colonialism was replaced by its connections with shared interests and bilateral cooperation as the identifiers of solidarity between China and Myanmar. This new phenomenon represents the success of the Pauk Phaw

narrative in securing more contemporary and reciprocal sources of solidarity between the two countries. Moreover, it can be construed as China's response to the critiques of its current foreign policy. Some scholars see imperialist tendencies in this policy, e.g., in the Belt and Road Initiative (e.g., Sidaway and Chih 2017; Summers 2016; Yu 2017). This point must have certainly played a role in the disappearance of the threat of imperialism and colonialism from the Pauk Phaw narrative. One plausible explanation is that China wanted to adhere and maintain the idea of "peace and development" introduced by Deng Xiaoping for implementing China's diplomatic relations in the benefits of country's domestic and international economic development and well-being (see the following paragraph on the significance of this idea).

The last development in the Pauk Phaw narrative of this period was the introduction of a new supporting theme. China's redesigned diplomatic strategies in its bilateral relations with Myanmar constructively contributed to the coining of new phrases used in the context of the Pauk Phaw relation. These creations included "Good Neighbourliness and Amity" (睦邻友好) (e.g., *Xinhua News* 2000; Wang and Guan 2005), "Periphery Diplomacy" (周边外交) (e.g., *Xinhua News* 2010), "Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation" (全面战略合作) (e.g., Hao and Huo 2016), and "Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit and Inclusiveness" (亲诚惠容) (e.g., *Xinhua News* 2018).

These modifications and developments in the themes and related content of the Pauk Phaw narrative coincided with a transformation in China's conception of its state identities and interests. Though the pursuit of bilateral cooperation and a peaceful regional environment was its foreign policy priority, China showed a more proactive and assertive tendency in regulating its relations with countries on its periphery. This newly emergent policy trajectory was to a certain degree induced by the repercussion of the NATO's bombing the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by mistake during the Kosovo War in 1999. China's leaders considered the attack a serious challenge to the country's state identity and interests as expressed by the idea of "peace and development," which had been introduced and cultivated since Deng Xiaoping had come to power in the previous decade. The intervention in Kosovo prompted China to become more proactive in constructing an international security environment (Shambaugh 2005: 27). This security outlook focused on Asia, prioritising efforts to maintain "peace and development" in East and Southeast Asia. Against this backdrop, the Pauk Phaw narrative shifted to accentuate the concept of "peace and development" with Myanmar, which the Beijing regime had long seen as a country of geopolitical importance as it provided a land bridge from China to the Indian Ocean and Europe.

Subsequently, in the early 2000s, China began to champion a new state vision encapsulated by the terms “peaceful rise” and “peaceful development.” This new vision of state identity means promoting China as a responsible regional power that cooperates with its neighbours for mutual benefit. In this period, the country’s regional strategy has been characterised by proactivity. It gained considerable momentum when President Xi Jinping articulated his vision of the “Chinese dream” in response to the United States “pivot to Asia” championed by the Obama administration. At the same time, while maintaining stability in its periphery remained the top priority in China’s regional strategy for domestic economic purposes, China’s quest for foreign resources as well as access to foreign markets grew steadily. This new orientation of Chinese policies recognised that Southeast Asia in general and Myanmar in particular were of strategic significance to China’s future growth (Li and Song 2018; Xue 2018). At the same time, China showed more self-confidence in its foreign relations (Economy 2018: 189) and endeavoured to detach itself from the lingering victim mentality and memories of the “century of shame” (Gill 2005: 252). The shift in China’s promotion of bilateral cooperation and peaceful coexistence at the regional and international levels was evident in China’s initiatives. These included the launch the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation and China’s agreement to work together with ASEAN towards a common code of conduct in the South China Sea in 2018 after the long period of conflicts between China and other claimant countries. Together with these developments in China, the volatility of Myanmar’s foreign relations, caused by the persecution and expulsion of the Rohingya, generated favourable conditions for Beijing to cultivate closer bilateral ties.

Against this backdrop, Myanmar’s economic potential, its geopolitical importance, and its accession to ASEAN in 1997 contributed to an increasing weight of the country in China’s regional strategy, especially under the grand inter-regional One Belt, One Road Initiative. Accordingly, this condition boosts China’s efforts in promoting its Pauk Phaw narrative. These included locally situated common interests, transnational infrastructure projects, people-to-people communication and China’s regional diplomatic strategies, which ultimately also contributed to the disappearance of talks about imperial or colonial oppression in the Pauk Phaw narrative from 2000 to 2018.

Hence, we argue that this chain of factors induced a surge of regional and international aspiration in China which constituted the conception of its role identity as a regional and international power and its state interests of internationally acknowledged collective self-esteem. Changes in China’s conceptualisations of its roles diversified its uses and interpretations of the Pauk Phaw narrative in fostering and promoting its relations with Myanmar.

CONCLUSION

In our analysis of the four periods of China's Pauk Phaw narrative in the *People's Daily*, we observe that the narrative has formed an essential instrument of China's policy and strategy in regulating China-Myanmar relations. The themes and content of this narrative vary continuously according to China's conception of its state identities and interests as it interacts with other states in changing historical contexts. In addition, we observe that the spatial scale, on which the narrative focuses, ranges from the international to the local and varies in each historical period of our analysis.

The *People's Daily* used the Pauk Phaw narrative most frequently in the first period of our analysis, from 1956 to early 1967, owing to the density of amicable interstate communications for the consolidation of the communist regime and its territorial integrity. Hence, in the initial years of the Cold War, the imperatives of border demarcation and creating a peaceful environment reigned supreme in China's conception of its corporate and role identity, as well as in its conception of state interests of survival and autonomy.

The frequency of the narrative and its themes underwent drastic changes in the second period from June 1967 to 1976 due to the shift in China's conception of its state identity and interests as the quiet revolution unpacked and waned in parallel with the course of the Cold War together with changes in the Chinese state's leadership. Accordingly, the narrative was framed by the transition from China's conception of its type and role identity when communist triumph was at the core of its state interests to its conception of a corporate and role identity alongside its interests in domestic economic well-being and international collective self-esteem. In the third period from 1977 to 1999, use of the Pauk Phaw narrative gradually became more frequent again as China reoriented itself towards a corporate identity consistent with its interests of domestic economic well-being at a time when the intensity of the Cold War bipolarity was gradually subsiding, and China was in need domestic stability. The narrative in the last period from 2000 to 2018 was marked by an amplification of the positive momentum already emerging from the third period as China's state media tapped into more contemporary and reciprocal sources of China-Myanmar solidarity to promote the narrative. The diversification and modification of both themes and content of the narrative were elicited by the more proactive thrust in China's emerging regional strategies and international pursuits at a time when China's corporate and role identity and its interests in domestic economic well-being and internationally recognised collective self-esteem reigned supreme and conditioned its Pauk Phaw narrative.

These developments in the narrative, as we have observed, exemplify the practical nature of China’s diplomatic strategy which is framed by China’s different conceptions of state identity and interests that are formulated as China interacts with other states in different historical contexts.

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NOTES

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- 1 We use the country name “Myanmar” for the entire period since 1947 even though it was only in 1989 that the ruling military junta used it to replace the traditional “Burma.”

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