Journal of Liberty and International Affairs | Volume 9 · Number 2 · 2023 | eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com

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(*) Corresponding author
Peer review method: Double-blind
Original scientific article
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2392022m
Received: 17.02.2023 · Revised: 20.03.2023 · Accepted: 24.04.2023 · Published: 10.07.2023

THE IMPACT OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY ON THAILAND'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

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Abstract: *This study uses the theory of collective memory in international politics to examine the connection between collective memory and foreign policy to investigate why the Belt and Road Initiative has witnessed slow progress in Thailand. Qualitative data were gathered from various sources, including books, newspapers, journals, policy documents, and textbooks. The study concludes that cooperation between states is essential for achieving shared objectives but is contingent upon establishing mutual trust. Collective memories that one country maintains concerning another country can influence mutual understanding and trust, becoming ingrained even if the situation responsible for the memories changes or no longer exists. In the case of Thailand and China, the Thai government's push for the high-speed rail project faced criticism and concerns due to the public's deep-seated fears and distrust of China, the result of historical events and past experiences. This paper's findings highlight the state's role in creating collective memory and otherness, recognizing that external variables such as major power activities play a significant role.*

Keywords: *Belt and Road Initiative; Thailand; China; Collective Memory; Foreign Policy*

INTRODUCTION

Thailand's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is longstanding, with the two governments announcing a "Long Term Plan for Development of Relationship between China and Thailand" in 2013. Subsequent years have seen further agreements, including a Memorandum of Understanding for Jointly Promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative being signed in 2017 (China ASEAN Studies 2020). That agreement and others like it concentrate on building energy networks connecting China with ASEAN countries via Laos and Malaysia and improving cross-border transportation systems. Despite a warm embrace of the Chinese initiative, there have been some signs of caution from the Thai government. In 2016, Prayut Chanocha, Thailand's prime minister, canceled an agreement that would have connected Bangkok to Kunming (China) via Nong Khai (Thailand) and Laos (Chang, Deng, and Hwang 2019). Negotiations resumed shortly after that cancellation, and a new contract was ultimately reached.

The new agreement between Thailand and China stipulated that Thailand would finance the construction of a high-speed railway system, with China providing technology and expertise. However, the construction of the high-speed rail project has been met with substantial delays - seemingly intentional - leading to China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, issuing a stern warning on his trip to Thailand in 2022. Meanwhile, to even out its relationship with China, Thailand has asked other countries, such as Japan, to assist with developing high-speed rail initiatives. This

included inviting Japan to have a part in connecting northern Thailand and Bangkok, which has piqued the interest of analysts trying to discern what motivates Thailand's actions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much discussion has concerned the delays in implementing China's BRI project, particularly the high-speed rail project. One group of commentators attributes the delays to Thailand's internal politics, with a second group considering the issue from an international political perspective.

Kuik (2022) cited intrinsic factors as a major factor contributing to the progress of BRI projects, conferring the Thai elite's balancing act between performance legitimation and particularistic justification, which have resulted in protracted negotiations. The former demands that Thailand establishes closer links with China to obtain diplomatic and developmental benefits while continuing to appear independent from the West, with the latter requiring that they protect the country's sovereignty and autonomy. Sawasdipakdi (2021) supports Kuik's assessment that internal politics have influenced the development of the BRI project in Thailand. She also notes the ongoing conflict between two sociopolitical coalitions, one backing Prayth Chanocha's government and another that supports former leader Thaksin Shinawatra. Both camps have regularly amended the building plan to maintain public approval, contributing to the delays discussed.

Meanwhile, the literature attributing Thailand's delays to efforts to balance power to preserve its national interests in the international system (Buckley and Raymond 2020) believes that Thailand and other ASEAN countries cooperate with China to obtain the consequent economic grains (Soong 2021). However, they also understand that external factors, such as competition between the world's great powers, have influenced how cooperation has been implemented (Uddin and Kwun-Sun Lau 2023). For Charoensri (2020), becoming caught up in superpower rivalries made Thailand an unwilling partner in the BRI project. In this context, the Thai government adopted a longstanding policy of "bending with the wind" to obtain benefits from all the parties competing in Southeast Asia, including China, Japan, and the US.

Notably, neither of the two approaches provides any substantial explanation for how public opinion has affected Thai policy towards China. According to mainstream research, Thai political attitudes toward China are generally positive, as evidenced by the results of the Asian Barometer's Attitude Survey, with the 2016 iteration suggesting that Thais believe China has greater influence in Thailand and Asia than the US (Bukh 2020; Xi and Primiano 2020).

In contrast, components of that survey of Thai people's attitudes toward Chinese people in a social and cultural sense have exposed negative views. According to Li (2019), Thais tend to have a negative perspective of Chinese tourists, an observation reinforced by Rungruang (2018), who argued that the negative sentiment creates a significant barrier to closer diplomatic relations between the two nations. Elsewhere, Han and Khemanitthathai (2022) have identified the Thai nationalism leveraged in Cold War foreign policy and by the government during the state transformation period as the source of negativity toward Chinese people and Chineseness.

It is undeniable that negative attitudes toward Chinese people or Chineseness impact the image of the Chinese government (Baum and Potter 2008), with these sentiments inevitably

becoming a factor in decision-making and the development of foreign policy, even affecting the policymakers themselves.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

A broad sentiment of negativity among Thai citizens has emerged as we explore the extant literature to understand why the BRI has seen sluggish development in Thailand. In this study, we examine how Thai attitudes toward Chinese people and Chinese foreign policy developed and who played a key role in shaping them. The research findings could serve as valuable references for understanding collective memories and their impact on international cooperation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research utilizes qualitative research, data sources including the literature on Thai-China history, policy, and law, regulations implemented by the Thai government concerning China, newspapers and articles regarding the BRI, and textbooks used in Thai secondary schools. This paper employs the theory of collective memory in international politics to analyze how collective memory is produced to show that the Thai government's perplexing cooperation with China on the BRI project is due to the Thai people's collective memories of past interactions with China. According to Dian (2017), there are four frameworks for understanding collective memory: instrumentalism, historical determinism, cultural approach, and interpretive approach.

Table 1 summarizes the main factors contributing to collective memory according to each approach.

Table 1: Dian's Four Approaches to Understanding Collective Memory (Source: Adapted from Dian 2017)

Approaches	Main Factors Responsible for Collective Memory
Instrumentalism	The narrative created by the government and elites to achieve certain goals.
Historical Determinism	Major events experienced by people together.
Cultural Approach	Cultural and social environment.
Interpretive Approach	Combination of all the factors above.

Instrumentalism suggests that governments and elites construct a narrative illustrating history to control and legitimize their power. This narrative can be strongly enforced on individuals and become a part of their realities. Meanwhile, historical determinism argues that collective worldviews are formed through events that people have collectively experienced. Longer lasting and more intense events produce lasting memories for the subjects. Next, the cultural approach focuses on how people absorb culture to understand past events better. One must examine a society's cultural and social environment to grasp its collective memory truly. Finally, the interpretive approach combines all three approaches and provides a framework for explaining collective memory's emergence. To Dian (2017), collective memory can emerge from government rhetoric, socialization, and memories of important national events.

Using the approaches above, this study inspects the collective memories of Thais associated with key periods in the relationship between Thailand and China. After examining the process by which collective memories are created, the paper discusses the impact of collective memories on the implementation of Thai foreign policy toward China, particularly regarding their participation in the BRI.

RESULTS

The history of relations between Thailand and China can be divided into four distinct periods: (1) the Imperial era; (2) the Thai nation-building period; (3) the early and middle Cold War years; and (4) the period after the establishment of diplomatic relations. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of important events in relations between the two countries during each period. Each period has left its collective memories that have shaped the Thai people's perceptions of China and influenced the Thai government's foreign policy.

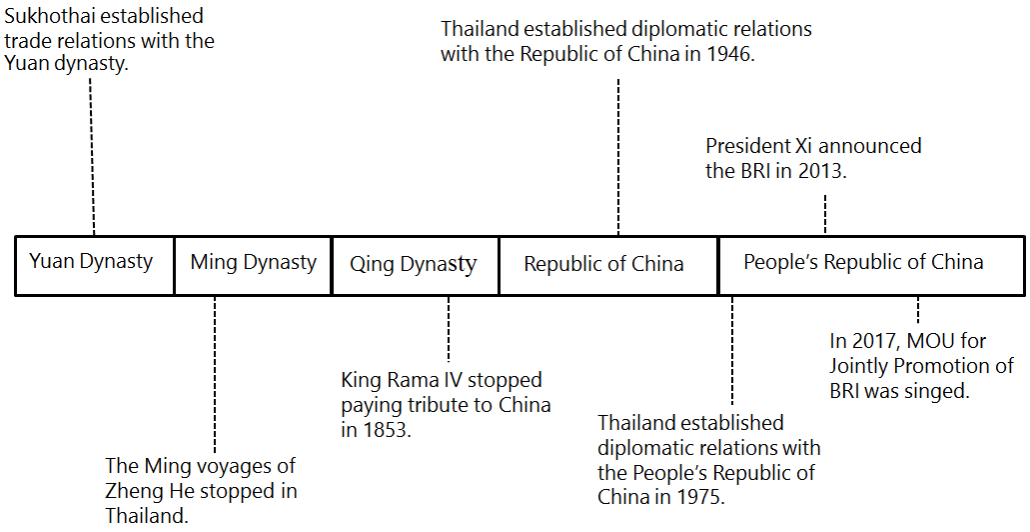


Figure 1: Timeline of Thai-Chinese Relations (Source: Author's Illustration)

The Imperial Era

At first, the relationship between China and Thailand was based upon trading, which, in modern times, began during Thailand's Sukhothai period (1238-1463) and the Yuan Dynasty in China (1271-1368). At that time, the main imports were silk and porcelain, products valued by the Sukhothai upper class (Saengnuson 2016). This early trading stage did not greatly impact Thailand's social, economic, and cultural systems because business thinking was limited to those with power and influence. China's Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), corresponding to Thailand's late Ayutthaya period (1351-1767) and early Rattanakosin period (1782-1932), saw immense growth in trade between the two countries. Initially, this took the form of a tribute system, which required Thailand to provide offerings to the Emperor of China in order for commerce to be

permitted, with China demanding the schedule for gift-giving, originally every three years before moving to an annual basis (Department of Fine Arts of Thailand 1978, 65-67). The arrangement exemplified China's authority over numerous countries in Asia at that time.

Under the reign of Thailand's King Rama IV, the tribute system was abolished in 1853, marking a shift in the dynamics of international trade in Southeast Asia due to the increased Western presence. King Rama IV explained his decision to cut ties with China as follows: "China is in chaos, not a superpower as in the past (…) I decided not to pay any more tribute" (as cited in Department of Fine Arts of Thailand 1978, 67). In addition to the decline of Chinese power in the region, King Rama IV described the tribute system as a Chinese scam. In this sense, although Thais had understood the tribute as facilitating trade, China viewed Thailand as a tribute state and treated it accordingly: "The King of Beijing received the royal letter, and the Thai ambassador (…) accepted it as if it [Thailand were] a colonial country [Thailand] had been deceived (...) When the King realized this, he repented, and no more tribute was sent to Beijing" (as cited in Moolsilpa 2015, 83).

Thai elites, including the Thai monarch, subsequently introduced various discourses explaining the Thai tribute system to China as an economically advantageous practice, recognizing China's deception and treatment of Thailand as a colony (Moolsilpa 2015). These arguments made it apparent to the public that Thailand was not a Chinese vassal or subjugated to Qing Dynasty control.

Thus, the colonial expansion of Western powers in China and Southeast Asia led to a shift in Thai foreign policy toward China and the production of discourse on reducing Chinese influence in Thailand. By shifting trade away from China, the Thai elite prevented Western powers from undermining Thai sovereignty by leveraging its status as a Chinese tribute state. Nonetheless, these actions by Thailand inevitably negatively impacted the collective Thai image of China, with the discourse produced by the Thai ruling class creating a feeling of distrust among Thais toward China.

The Thai Nation-Building Period

Thailand changed its ruling structure under King Rama V in 1868, with suspicion of China remaining steadfast. To secure the nation from colonization by Western powers, King Rama V worked diligently to transform Thailand into a nation-state, establishing an absolute monarchy as its main system of government. Meanwhile, in China, Sun Yat-sen's nationalist movement was beginning to gain ground and had ambitions of overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and establishing a republican regime.

King Rama V was aware of the potential spread of revolutionary ideas from China to Thailand. He feared such ideas could lead to political instability and unrest in his kingdom. During China's National Movement, many Chinese people fled and sought refuge in Thailand, increasing Thailand's Chinese population. As a result, the Thai government implemented various measures to control them. For example, Chinese immigrants were required to register with the government, and their political activities were monitored (Sawasnatee and Tai 2013).

The Thai monarch's anxiety regarding Sun Yat-sen's nationalist movement became apparent in his reaction to news of the Chinese leader's arrival in Thailand in June 1903. King

Rama V instructed the Ministry of Metropolitan to launch an inspection to ascertain whether Chinese immigrants in Thailand would support the movement in China. During Sun Yat-sen's 20-day stay, representatives from the Ministry of municipal affairs encountered him at least six times (Murashima 2013).

King Rama VI, or King Vajiravudh, who reigned from 1910 to 1925, adopted a more anti-Chinese nationalist stance than his predecessor. To retain control over Chinese nationals in the country, he enacted certain regulations, hampering freedom of movement for immigrants, monitoring their political activities and disallowing any participation in political associations, pushing for assimilation into Thai customs via the expanded use of the local language in educational and government operations, and introducing legislation that provided preferential treatment to ethnic Thais over Chinese immigrants in economics, trading, and education (Buruspat 1974).

In addition, King Rama VI published articles and books that promoted Thainess and criticized Chineseness, especially regarding the economic exploitation that he considered characteristic of the Chinese people. He named the Chinese the Jews of the Orient (Wongsurawat 2016). It is worth mentioning that King Rama VI's anti-Chinese nationalist policies and actions led to resentment and conflicts between the Thai people and Chinese immigrants.

In 1932, Thailand shifted from an absolute monarchy to a democracy. The Republic of China, led by the Chinese Kuomintang Party, attempted to establish ties with the new Thai government by sending congratulations. However, the new Thai government chose to ignore these Chinese attempts at diplomacy (Kruarattikan 2022). The relationship between China and Thailand further deteriorated during the 1938-1945 period, potentially due to the focus of Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhramon's nationalist movements, which involved manipulating the old rhetoric about Chinese economic exploitation to encourage a sense of identity and solidarity among Thais while furthering the alienating the Chinese. In this context, Chinese schools were shut down, and Chinese newspapers, printing houses, and associations were raided, with hundreds arrested in connection to these repressive measures (Buruspat 1974). Furthermore, Thailand pledged allegiance to Japan during World War II, officially recognizing Wang Ching-Wei's puppet government as the true rulers of China in 1943.

When World War II ended, Thailand altered its policy toward China. On January 23, 1946, diplomatic relations were established between the two nations, a prudent decision by Thai officials that likely represented an attempt to avoid any negative repercussions associated with siding with Japan. However, this did not mean that the Thai government, particularly its political elite, was less suspicious of China.

The Thai elite, particularly the monarch, fostered a negative image of China during the transformation period. Chinese nationalist movements were seen as disruptive, with Thailand's monarch lauded for protecting the country's sovereignty and ushering in stability and wealth. Moreover, during this time, collective memories of Chinese economic exploitation became firmly rooted and grew in the Thai collective consciousness.

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The Early and Middle Cold War Years

The Cold War saw a significant shift in international relations and significant adjustments in the alliances of nations. Thailand's relationship with China was particularly affected by the government's declaration of an alliance with the US. In 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party took power and renamed the nation the People's Republic of China, Thailand refused to recognize it at the UN. Again, relations between Thailand and China were based on the political interests of the Thai elite. By rallying around the US and joining the fight against communism, Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram established himself as a powerful anti-communist figure, further enhancing his reputation across Thailand. He used US support to sway the military, consolidating his rule and authority (Sawasnatee and Tai 2013) until Sarit Thanarat's military coup in 1957. A fierce nationalist campaign accompanied that coup. To combat communism, Sarit implemented harsh measures against Thailand's Chinese population, asserting the community's links with the Chinese government. Censorship, arrests, and detentions of suspected Communist Party members were among his repressive tactics, with the threat of deportation used to suppress disagreement. Propaganda and public education programs were established to generate anti-communist sentiment and denigrate the Communist Party (Srisomsab 2011), substantially damaging China's image by presenting it as a promoter of communism.

During the same period, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia saw an attempt to install a communist regime, leading to many refugees fleeing to Thailand. Images of their plight and the atrocities committed by supporters of the communist regimes were widely circulated in Thailand, causing great alarm. Inevitably, China, representing the communist threat, became a dread figure for those who cherished the Thai way of life. China's support for North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, combined with the perception of communist expansion and increased anti-communist sentiment, led to a drastic decline in the Thai view of China. Thus, the early and middle Cold War years could arguably represent the lowest point in Thailand's collective memory of China.

The Period after the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations

The prolonged Vietnam War and tensions between the USSR and China shifted Southeast Asia's geopolitical landscape. President Nixon's visit to China in 1972 and the planned withdrawal of US troops from the region prompted the Thai government to reassess its relationship with China. Seeking a powerful ally to counteract the increasing influence of the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia following successful regime changes in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the Thai government chose to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1975.

However, the Thai government remained wary in its dealings with the Chinese. Before traveling to China, then-Prime Minister M. R. Kukrit Pramoj reassured the public that he was only there to establish diplomatic ties and would not implement any Chinese policies in Thailand (Kruarattikan 2019). The statement reflected the fear of potential Chinese influence over Thailand, especially given the power void left across the region following the US withdrawal from Vietnam.

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In 1979, a pivotal moment took place in the relationship between Thailand and China when the latter deployed troops to its border in response to Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia. China's actions alleviated the Thai government's concerns about the threat of communism. Furthermore, Chinese diplomats endeavored to amend the unfavorable perspective of China by extending invitations to Thai royals, such as Queen Sirikit and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, leading to the 1980s symbolizing Chinese goodwill toward Thailand.

The Thai government was also removing memories of the discord between Thailand and China, as evidenced by the social studies curricula for junior and high school students. Instead of discussing the disputes during the Thai national transformation and Cold War period, Chinese immigrants were portrayed as having endured difficulties in their hometowns before seeking peace and prosperity beneath the protective rule of the Thai monarch (Sukata and Bunnag 2015). Narratives emphasized the peaceful coexistence of Thai and Chinese people in Thailand. These initiatives diminished fear, leading to the idea of the Chinese and Thai as "brothers" becoming more widespread among Thailand's elite and middle class.

Perceptions of China's economic flux, alongside its authoritative presence in Thailand, became clear during the 2000s, especially under Thaksin Shinawatra's administration. At this time, trade and investment arrangements between the two nations developed, considerably increasing bilateral trade and Chinese venture capital investments in Thailand. The two countries also combined forces to fight terrorism and other cross-border offenses and approved collaborations on infrastructure projects, including highways and power plants (Kongjieng 2020).

However, the fostering of positive collective memories of China during the 2000s came to an abrupt halt when tensions arose between Thaksin Shinawatra and Thailand's older conservative political factions. Thaksin sought to reform the country by implementing populist policies, which jeopardized the power that these opponents had long held, leading to military coups in 2006 and 2014 that aimed to reinstate the power of the older conservative political factions. The resulting military governments engaged in crusades against Thaksin's influence, with numerous anti-Thaksin politicians and think tanks expressing their disapproval of Thailand's close ties with Beijing (Sawasdipakdi 2021). The high-speed rail project became a symbol of this and was subsequently condemned, with Thai media outlets (e.g., Thairath, Manager, Neawna, and Thaipost) calling it an act of treason. Additionally, a resurgence of discussion occurred surrounding China's past, the current regime, and the economic exploitation of Thailand, producing conflicting opinions of the country in Thailand that persist.

DISCUSSION

Cooperation between states is essential for achieving shared objectives and addressing existing difficulties. However, the success of such collaborations is contingent upon mutual trust being established between the relevant parties (Risse 2000). The collective memories that countries have of other countries may have an impact on this. Positive impressions of other countries can increase mutual trust and understanding, strengthening collaboration.

Consideration of the Thai collective memory of events and interactions concerning China, it is apparent how international situations, especially those that introduce feelings of oppression and endangerment, prompt leaders to produce discourse to rally public sentiment against

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perceived threats. In this context, the narrative generated becomes ingrained within the nation's collective memories, and even if the situation that sparked those memories changes or those who once instigated the memories to lose power, the impact remains and continues to shape perspectives. Implementing foreign policy can become substantially more difficult if such memories are at odds with present-day conditions.

In the aftermath of the 2014 coup, Thailand's junta, which China helped gain international recognition of legitimacy by reinforcing the principle of non-interference (Cogan 2019), tried to push ahead with the high-speed rail project. However, the situation changed when the government encountered criticism and concerns over its dealings with China, particularly regarding the issue of sovereignty concerning the railway (Duangratana 2022). To address these domestic concerns, renegotiation with China was critical. Undeniably, this renegotiation was impacted by Thai collective memory, which provoked a wave of distrust and fear of China taking advantage of the country and threatening Thai independence. The collective memory related to the strategy that Prayut's supporters previously used in attacks on cooperation between China and Thaksin, a strategy that ultimately backfired, and deep-seated trepidation about China, which can be traced to the nation's creation and the Cold War.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms the state's role in creating collective memory and otherness within a society. Contrasting Dian's conclusions, it appears that such state discourse is triggered not only by the social, economic, and cultural context but also by external variables, particularly modifications to the international system due to the activities of major powers, activities including colonial pursuits, alliance forming, and the establishment of dichotomous systems. Creating narratives is typically done with the purpose of supporting the *status quo*: if alterations to the international system jeopardize the state, then signaling an enemy or instilling generalized fear is common; conversely, when changes help the status quo retain power, a positive narrative around different countries tends to be reproduced.

States have substantial control over how they portray their history, with the results of their conduct having an immense impact on a society's collective memory. However, these narratives often protect the interests of ruling regimes or powerful individuals.

Nonetheless, with rapidly growing access to reliable information, people can better challenge state-crafted narratives and introduce balance. This could include reduced hostility between governments, the formation of collaborative ventures such as those proposed by China, and greater public understanding. By adopting an independent perspective unimpeded by imposed narratives, countries can ultimately achieve more beneficial outcomes for their citizens.

The perceptions of the people of one country of other countries are critical to productive cooperation and advancing shared ambitions. The example of Thailand's collective memory of China emphasizes official narratives' sway on people's recollections, particularly when international relations are perceived to be under threat. Thailand represents an example that demonstrates that state narratives can have a powerful effect on people's recollections, especially when the state's survival is threatened, supporting the notion that politics plays an

important role in the formation of the narratives that constitute collective memory, with outside powers influencing how a state generates discourse within any given society.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
The College of Politics and Governance at Thailand's Mahasarakham University financially supported this study.

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