



## **Analysis of China-related Public Opinion of ASEAN Countries under the Background of “Belt and Road”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

With the in-depth implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, ASEAN countries, as important partners under this framework, have increasingly become an important part of China-ASEAN relations under this strategic framework. The public opinion of ASEAN countries not only reflects the attitude of the region towards China’s economy, politics and culture, but also profoundly affects China’s diplomatic strategy and international image in Southeast Asia. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the changing trend and motivation of China-related public opinion of ASEAN countries under the background of “Belt and Road”, and to explore the influence of public opinion change on China-ASEAN cooperation, China’s international image and global power relations. The China-related public opinions of ASEAN countries are characterized by diversification, emotionalization and distinct nationalism, and both positive and negative public opinions coexist, showing a complex public opinion ecology. The main reasons for the change of public opinion include China’s foreign policy, the achievements of economic cooperation, the deepening of cultural exchanges, and the intensification of security-sensitive issues. Under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, China should optimize its foreign policy, enhance mutual trust and cooperation with ASEAN, and provide theoretical support and practical guidance for realizing common regional prosperity.

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## **Introduction**

With the deepening of economic globalization, regional cooperation has become an important driving force to promote the economic development of various countries. Among them, the “Belt and Road Initiative” has aroused widespread concern around the world since it was put forward. The initiative aims to strengthen economic

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cooperation and cultural exchanges between countries along the route through policy communication, facility connectivity, smooth trade, financial intermediation and popular support, and jointly build a community of interests, destiny and responsibility with political mutual trust, economic integration and cultural tolerance. As an important participant in the Belt and Road Initiative, ASEAN's position and role in regional cooperation cannot be ignored. ASEAN countries' cognition, evaluation and attitude towards China are not only influenced by China's economic development and foreign policy, but also deeply influenced by regional security, national culture and historical background (Shen, 2024). Therefore, it is of great significance not only to understand the cooperative relationship between China and ASEAN, but also to promote the development of bilateral cooperation in a deeper and broader field to analyze the changing trend, characteristics and influence of public opinion about China in ASEAN countries.

## **1. The current situation and characteristics of China-related public opinion in ASEAN countries**

ASEAN is one of the most important regional international organizations in the world, and its foreign policy and speech have an important influence on regional and even global politics. Especially in China, as an important partner of the world's second largest economy and ASEAN, the cooperative relationship between China and ASEAN has gradually deepened in recent years, especially under the impetus of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (Ren, 2024), the two sides have frequent interactions in the fields of trade, infrastructure construction and cultural exchanges. However, behind this close cooperation, China-related public opinion has gradually become an important issue in the diplomatic relations between the two sides. How countries handle their relations with China will not only affect bilateral relations, but also have a far-reaching impact on the overall situation in the region. The China-related public opinions of ASEAN countries are diversified, including cooperative and constructive contents, as well as complicated political and security factors (Fan, 2024).

### **1.1 Positive public opinion based on economic cooperation**

In recent years, the economic cooperation between China and ASEAN has gradually deepened and become an important part of bilateral relations. The economic interaction between ASEAN and China is not only reflected in the fields of trade and investment, but also involves infrastructure construction, energy cooperation and agricultural development. China's Belt and Road Initiative, as an important framework to promote this cooperation, has further promoted the economic interconnection between ASEAN countries and China (Liu et al, 2024). With the development of economic cooperation, the positive public opinion about China has gradually increased in ASEAN countries, especially in the economic field. Public opinion generally believes that such cooperation will help promote regional economic integration and social development.

The economic cooperation between ASEAN and China has a long history, and the cooperation in various fields has gradually deepened in recent years. Since the establishment of dialogue between China and ASEAN in 1991, the economic cooperation between the two sides has developed steadily. In particular, the establishment of a free trade area between ASEAN and China in 2003 injected new impetus into the economic cooperation between the two countries. According to statistics, the trade volume between China and ASEAN has reached US\$ 684.8 billion in 2020, accounting for nearly 30% of the total global trade of ASEAN. Since then, ASEAN has become China's largest trading partner, and China is the third largest source of investment for ASEAN. China's investment in Southeast Asia is also increasing, especially in infrastructure construction and energy field, which has promoted the process of economic modernization in Southeast Asia. The main goal of the "Belt and Road Initiative" is to promote the economic development of countries along the route by strengthening infrastructure construction, promoting international trade circulation and enhancing economic interconnection. In the ASEAN region, China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative has received wide response. ASEAN countries have benefited a lot from this initiative, especially in the field of infrastructure construction. In the public opinion of ASEAN countries, the positive comments on China's investment and economic cooperation are mainly reflected in the field of infrastructure construction. Southeast Asia is a region where developing countries are concentrated in the world, and its infrastructure is relatively backward. Many countries have demand for roads, railways and electricity (He, 2012). With its capital, technology and engineering experience, China has provided a large number of infrastructure projects to ASEAN countries through the Belt and Road Initiative.

Although the economic cooperation between China and ASEAN has brought many positive public opinions, there are also some challenges and negative voices. With the rapid rise of China's economy, some ASEAN countries began to worry about over-reliance on China. Especially in some large-scale infrastructure projects, ASEAN countries rely on China to provide capital, technology and labor resources (Hong, 2019). Some public opinions believe that this dependence may lead to the excessive influence of external factors on their economies in the future, thus affecting the country's autonomy. Although ASEAN and China have deep economic and cooperative relations, there are also concerns in the public opinion of some countries that they are too dependent on China, especially in the context of China's increasing influence. The public opinion and media in some ASEAN countries may worry about China's excessive intervention in the region, or turn economic cooperation into political influence. The public opinion of ASEAN countries may be influenced by the pressure of external powers, expressing certain dissatisfaction or vigilance.

## **1.2 Regional security and political sensitive issues of negative public opinion**

Under the background of globalization, regional security and political issues have become an important focus of international public opinion, especially in Southeast Asia

and its surrounding areas. Due to complex geopolitical and historical issues, regional security and political issues are often in a sensitive and unstable state. Due to geopolitical competition, historical disputes, ethnic issues and big country games, the relationship between China and Southeast Asian countries has been tense and frayed to some extent for a long time. Public opinion plays a particularly important role in these sensitive issues. It not only affects the decision-making of policy makers, but also reflects people's attitudes and feelings towards national security, sovereignty and foreign policy. Sensitive issues of regional security and politics are often highly emotional. When it comes to national sovereignty, territorial disputes and other issues, public opinion tends to form opposition and intensify people's emotional response (Yuen, 2019). The South China Sea dispute is one of the most sensitive political and security issues between China and many countries in Southeast Asia. Since the 1960s, the division of the South China Sea and the competition for resources have become one of the most complicated and sensitive issues in Central and Southeast Asia. China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei all claim sovereignty over parts of the South China Sea, and the resources involved in the dispute include oil, natural gas, fisheries and other important resources. The South China Sea issue is not only the focus of regional security, but also the focus of global public opinion because it involves international shipping and maritime rights and interests. Disputes in the South China Sea have often become sensitive issues in regional public opinion, and to some extent, they have shaped the attitudes of countries towards China. Therefore, the media reports on these issues often have a strong nationalist color. This emotional public opinion reaction not only affects people's daily cognition, but also exerts pressure on the country's foreign policy and international negotiations.

### **1.3 Two-way public opinion of the soft power spread of cultural exchanges and cultural cooperation**

Today, with the acceleration of globalization, the competition between countries is not only reflected in hard power, but also in culture, values and ideas. As an invisible force in international relations, soft power has gradually become one of the important indicators to measure a country's comprehensive national strength. Through people-to-people exchanges and cultural cooperation, a country can effectively shape its international image, spread cultural values and enhance its international influence. China and ASEAN countries have a long history of communication, especially in cultural and non-governmental exchanges. The interaction between the two sides goes back to ancient times. From the ancient Silk Road to the modern maritime communication, the cultural ties between ASEAN countries and China are deeply rooted. In recent years, China has vigorously promoted cultural diplomacy and spread its soft power through various channels. Among them, the most representative is the "Confucius Institute" project in China, which aims to enhance people's awareness and interest in China culture through cultural and language education. In addition, the China government has also strengthened its influence in the global cultural field by holding international film festivals, cultural festivals and other large-scale cultural activities.

Under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has also actively promoted cultural cooperation with countries along the route, further promoting cultural exchanges and mutual understanding. The spread of China's traditional culture, especially Confucianism and excellent Chinese culture, has gradually enhanced China's soft power in the world through these cultural exchange projects.

## **2. The Influence of China-related Public Opinions of ASEAN Countries under the Background of “Belt and Road”**

### **2.1 The impact on ASEAN countries**

China-related public opinion of ASEAN countries has had a significant impact on internal political, social and diplomatic relations. The positive factors of China-related public opinion have strengthened the cooperative relationship between China and ASEAN countries, especially in the fields of economy, cultural exchange and infrastructure construction. With the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, cooperation between China and ASEAN countries in transportation, energy, science and technology and other fields has achieved fruitful results. The positive attitude of public opinion towards these cooperation projects has enhanced people's sense of identity with China-ASEAN cooperation, thus promoting the further deepening of bilateral relations. By supporting the Belt and Road Initiative, many ASEAN countries have successfully promoted domestic economic growth and enhanced their international competitiveness. These positive public opinions have effectively consolidated the foundation of trust and cooperation between the two countries. However, in recent years, negative public opinion has gradually increased in some ASEAN countries. Especially on sensitive issues such as the South China Sea and border issues, the nationalist sentiment of some ASEAN countries has been stimulated, and public opinion often shows strong opposition. This kind of emotion may lead to people's misunderstanding and resistance to China, and then affect the cooperation attitude between the government and China (Jetin, 2018).

### **2.2 The impact on China**

China-related public opinion of ASEAN countries has had a far-reaching impact on China's diplomatic image and international status. Positive public opinion, especially in the field of economic cooperation, not only enhances China's influence in ASEAN countries, but also enhances China's soft power on the international stage. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, China has gradually changed the traditional impression of China as “tough” and “self-interested” by aiding in infrastructure construction and investment, and formed a certain image of cooperation and mutual benefit. The public opinion response of ASEAN countries has strengthened China's leading position in the region and enhanced the economic mutual trust and cultural identity between China and

its ASEAN partners (Chen, 2018). However, the existence of negative public opinion also challenges China's image. In some ASEAN countries, especially Viet Nam, the Philippines and other countries, due to historical issues and current territorial disputes, the negative sentiment towards China in public opinion is relatively prominent. Some public opinion regards China as an "aggressive" big country and is wary of China's economic expansion. This negative public opinion may make China's public diplomacy in some ASEAN countries face greater challenges and affect its soft power. In the relationship between China and Vietnam, China and the Philippines, the ups and downs of public opinion will often directly affect the communication and cooperation between governments, and even lead to fluctuations in bilateral relations.

### **2.3 The impact on international relations**

China-related public opinion of ASEAN countries has not only influenced the bilateral relations between China and ASEAN, but also played a role in broader international relations. With the promotion of the "Belt and Road Initiative", the relationship between China and ASEAN countries is gradually moving towards multi-level and multi-field comprehensive cooperation. This influence is not limited to bilateral relations, but also affects the interaction between China and other countries, especially big countries. Under the background of globalization and multiploidization, the public opinion of ASEAN countries reflects their complex attitudes towards the rise of China. From the perspective of international relations, the public opinion of ASEAN countries can influence the relations between China and western countries. In terms of economic cooperation, ASEAN countries often support China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative and take this opportunity to win more international resources. This kind of positive public opinion not only makes China gradually occupy an advantage in economy and culture, but also promotes the cooperative relations between China and Europe, Africa and other regions. However, negative public opinion may have a negative impact on China's diplomatic relations with other big countries. Especially under the influence of the United States and other western countries, some negative public opinions of ASEAN countries may aggravate the tension between China and the United States. Western countries may use ASEAN countries' doubts about China to further strengthen the "China threat theory" and exert political pressure on a global scale. This change of external public opinion will directly affect China's international strategic layout (Bi, 2021).

### **3. Conclusion**

The China-related public opinion of ASEAN countries presents diversified characteristics. This diversity is not only reflected in the differences of attitudes and opinions among countries towards China, but also in the content and form of public opinion. ASEAN countries have broad support and recognition in accepting China's economic cooperation and cultural exchanges, but there are also many objections and doubts on sensitive issues such as security issues and historical issues. Therefore, the

China-related public opinion of ASEAN countries presents a positive and negative situation, which reflects the complex political, cultural background and social feelings in this region. Positive public opinion will help promote China-ASEAN economic cooperation and cultural exchanges and promote mutual trust; However, negative public opinion may lead to misunderstanding and tension and affect the cooperation between the two sides in regional affairs. China's international image and soft power have also been reflected and tested in public opinion. Therefore, strengthening public opinion management and cultural diplomacy and enhancing the accuracy and effectiveness of external communication have become one of the important strategies for China to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN.

Generally speaking, the changes of China-related public opinion in ASEAN countries are an important factor in China-ASEAN relations. A deep understanding of these public opinion characteristics and their motivations is of great practical significance for promoting regional stability and development and promoting the in-depth implementation of the "Belt and Road Initiative". In the future, China can further improve its relations with ASEAN countries through accurate public opinion guidance, cultural diplomacy and strategic cooperation, enhance China's influence and soft power in the region, and promote the goal of common prosperity.

### **Conflict of interests**

The author has no conflicts of interest to report.

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