

# A Study of China-ASEAN Higher Education Exchange & Cooperation in the Background of China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership

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**Abstract—**Political security, economic & trade cooperation and people-to-people exchange & cooperation are the three pillars in ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership, among which education, especially higher education, plays an important role in providing talent and intellectual support as well as connecting peoples from different cultures and enhancing mutual understanding and trust. Thus, making a review of the establishment, implement and development of relevant national policies, collecting and analyzing some demonstrative cases and finally putting forward recommendations in the perspective of sustainable development will be proved worthwhile in the follow-up construction of China-ASEAN 3+X Framework and implementation of China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Vision 2030.

**Keywords:** *China-ASEAN strategic partnership, China-ASEAN higher education exchange & cooperation, national policies, cooperation mechanism, demonstrative cases*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 2003, China became the first country to establish a strategic partnership with ASEAN. *The Joint Declaration on China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity* (hereafter CASP) signed in Bali

marked the beginning of a new historical stage in the fast-growing relations between the two sides[1]. In the *Joint Statement of 19th ASEAN-China Summit to Commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the Establishment of Dialogue Relations, 2016*[2], the Chinese government pointed out that People-to-People Exchange & Cooperation (hereafter PPEC) has since officially become the third pillar to constitute the framework of relations between the two sides following the other two pillars--political security and economic & trade cooperation. In 2018, the *China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Vision 2030* was released, reaffirming that "encouraging PPEC, enhancing mutual understanding and deepening friendship"[3] is an important way to build a higher level of CASP.

Over past decades, China-ASEAN have engaged in all-round, multi-tiered and wide-ranging cooperation which has delivered bountiful outcomes, with the 2+7 cooperation framework being upgraded to the 3+X framework and a leap in the ties from quantity to quality. China-ASEAN relationship now enjoys tremendous vitality and bright prospects.

China and ASEAN countries are connected by mountains and rivers. This natural geographical feature has completely surpassed its physical existence in the long history of human development. A Lao researcher

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once said that “if we look beyond the borders between Laos, Burma, Thailand and China along the Mekong River from a cultural point of view, we will surely find that the peoples and the governments in the regions have ever had a close relationship with one another. In their eyes, the Mekong River is not a dividing line, but a connecting lifeline.”[4] In fact, ASEAN countries are the most populous areas of overseas Chinese in the world and there are nearly 20 ethnic groups in China living on the other side of the border in almost all the ASEAN countries, who have a strong sense of cultural identity including similar cultures, languages and customs.

Higher Education Exchange & Cooperation (hereafter HEEC) is an important form as well as main content of China-ASEAN cultural exchange & cooperation. In July 2016, the Ministry of Education of China (hereafter MoE) issued *Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, Education Action*, which suggested that the countries along the Route should join hands, strengthen cooperation and play an active role of HEEC in CASP[5]. Facts have shown that in the past 25 years, HEEC has provided strong talent and intellectual support for the Golden Decade of CASP. In the following “Diamond Decade” of CASP, HEEC should give more energetic play of its unique service function to help converting theoretical knowledge into real productivity, thus promoting social, economic and cultural development.

Hence, by focusing on the HEEC in the background of CASP, reviewing the establishment, implementation and development of relevant national policies with the remarkable events as the clues and analyzing some specific cases, the paper proves that effective HEEC will improve the quality and enhance the level and scale of PPEC in the sustainable development of CASP.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ever since nearly 40 years ago when China and ASEAN formed dialogue relations in 1991 to the time when *Vision 2030* was released in 2018, PPEC has been continuously indispensable part of the ever upgrading and closer relation of the two sides. As a core to PPEC, China-ASEAN HEEC has been experiencing big changes and takes ever brand-new versions. Keeping track of the

development, the related studies have achieved fruitful accomplishments. Researchers, taking macro and micro perspectives, discuss diversified topics concerning China-ASEAN HEEC.

As to the relevant national policies and top-level cooperation framework, the researchers proposed that it's the time to update and renew some of them in order to better orientate and provide guidelines and standards or regulations for the implementation of the further cooperation to abide by[6]. As to the cooperation mechanism, the researchers claimed that China-ASEAN HEEC is too public welfare-orientated and the overall framework for the cooperation action has a large room to be updated. For example, the mechanism for cross-border quality assessment, mutual recognition of qualification certification and academic degrees prove to be an obstacle to the progress of the cooperation[7]. As to the running of overseas Chinese universities, the researchers proposed that considering the fact that there are great differences in the higher education competitiveness in ASEAN countries, the cooperation concerning diversified aspects of field, level, and mode should be modified by different options[8]. As to the educational service trade, the researchers found that China and ASEAN has achieved rapid development in the education services trade. But there are still problems such as lacking of guiding principles or sufficient supply as well as asymmetric or unbalanced students flow in geographical distribution[9]. As to the vocational education cooperation, the researchers concluded that cooperation in vocational education between China and ASEAN has achieved certain results while facing difficulties, such as being in shortage of policy support, regulatory management, the challenge of cultural and legal integration[10].

The literature review shows that relevant researchers have fully realized that China-ASEAN HEEC has witnessed great progress and yielded great achievements while being aware of a number of difficulties and problems to be overcome and solved. However, there still exist some gaps in the relevant studies. Firstly, there requires a deeper understanding of the indispensable role PPEC plays in CASP and follow-up in-depth work by the researchers. Secondly,

there lacks a systematic and analytical review of the development of HEEC in CASP, especially in the background of the “3+X Framework” and Vision 2030, and finally there is a badly need of demonstrative case studies, aiming to virtually assess the real situation as well the challenges and opportunities HEEC faces nowadays and will welcome in the future.

Therefore this paper, by mainly applying literature searches & review, data collection from the official website of MoE, citation of news reports, documentaries and articles quoted from official websites of ASEAN-China Center as well as relevant universities in China, makes a critical review, analysis and evaluation of the nearly 40 years development of HEEC in CASP and carries out case studies of HEEC platforms construction, cultivation of personnel of less commonly taught language and joint educational programs. This paper will be not only an important supplement to the previous academic researches, but also an valuable reference for the future studies in its small way.

### III. A REVIEW OF NATIONAL POLICIES CONCERNING CHINA-ASEAN HEEC

China-ASEAN HEEC has gone through three historical stages[11]: the period of exploration before 1991, the period of consolidation from 1991 to 2010 and the period of sustainable growth from 2016 to the present.

*A. Before the establishment of the formal dialogue in 1991, China-ASEAN HEEC being in a groping and experimental stage.*

HEEC at this time mainly took the form of agreements in the field of science, technology and culture, such as *Cultural Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines* in 1979, *Cultural Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic* in 1989 and etc. The above agreements or annual plans basically included inviting and sending small-scale educational delegations to carry out short-term academic visits to colleges and universities with the purpose to investigate the real intention of cooperation as well as hard and soft equipment or

facilities required for further cooperation.

*B. Since 1997 when China resuming or establishing diplomatic relations with all ASEAN countries, China-ASEAN HEEC has entered a comprehensive development.*

In 2005, China and ASEAN member countries signed the *Memorandum of Understanding on Cultural Cooperation between the Governments of the People's Republic of China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations*, which agreed to encourage and support “exchange and cooperation in the fields of archaeological and cultural heritage, traditional and contemporary art”[12]. In 2009, *Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Governments of Members of ASEAN on the Establishment of the ASEAN-China Centre* was signed, which illustrates the objectives of the center as "strengthening PPEC, public awareness and mutual understanding through cultural and educational exchanges "[13].

*C. Since 2016 when the second China-ASEAN Ministers of Education Round Table being held, China-ASEAN HEEC has been making substantial achievements.*

The second round table of China-ASEAN Ministers of Education held in 2016 approved the *Joint Communiqué on the China-ASEAN Plan of Action on Education Cooperation (2016-2020)*[14]. This is the first five-year action plan for education exchange and cooperation between China and ASEAN, which covers the exchange & cooperation on elementary education, higher education, vocational education, student exchanges, think tank and so on.

In the *Plan of Action*, China proposes to implement the China-ASEAN Talent Development Plan, providing 3,000 training vacancies for ASEAN in 2018, and strengthening cooperation in capacity-building in the fields of economy, trade, agriculture, science, education, health, public administration and transportation. At the same time, China stated that it would provide no less than 20,000 Chinese government scholarships to the ASEAN countries in following three years[15].

Since the 1980s, China-ASEAN HEEC has undergone nearly 40 years of development. From the very beginning when the relevant sides carefully fumbling the way to move forward to extensive and comprehensive cooperation nowadays, from the initial short-term visits of around 10 people to current large-scale exchange of high-level international students, from the beginning of a single cooperation framework to the current comprehensive platforms supported by policies, mechanisms and funds, China-ASEAN HEEC has entered a fast track of all-round development in a new era.

#### IV. A DEMONSTRATIVE CASE OF CHINA-ASEAN HEEC

Guided by national policies of CASP, China-ASEAN HEEC has surpassed the regional boundaries and developed beyond the educational systems of either side. By 2015, China have had more than 120,000 students studying in ASEAN countries, and ASEAN countries have had more than 72,000 students studying in China. According to statistics from the MoE, five of the top 15 countries who have most international students studying in China in 2018 are ASEAN countries, namely Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam and Malaysia[16]. Hence, this part will demonstrate some demonstrative cases of China-ASEAN HEEC.

##### A. Construction of HEEC Platforms

From 2008 to 2019, the "China-ASEAN Educational Exchange Week" have been successfully held for 12 sessions. It has become a high-end platform for China-ASEAN HEEC, and has built a solid bridge for mutual learning and win-win cooperation between the two sides. By this platform, institutions of higher education in China and ASEAN countries have jointly established a number of academic alliances of different natures, such as the China-ASEAN Alliance of Economic Universities, the China-ASEAN Alliance for Rail Traffic Education and Training, and the China-ASEAN Alliance for Tourism Education. In 2014, the *China-ASEAN Seminar on International Cooperation for Principals of Colleges and Universities* was held during the 7th China-ASEAN Educational Exchange Week. The nine top Chinese engineering universities and eight universities in

ASEAN countries signed the "*Joint Statement*" and announced the establishment of the "*China-ASEAN Alliance of Engineering Universities*". In December 2018, the South & Southeast Asian University Alliance was established in Kunming. A total of 87 presidents and university representatives from ASEAN universities and well-known universities in China participated in the meeting, with the number of member universities participating in the alliance reaching 107[17].

##### B. Cultivation of Personnel of less commonly taught language (LCTL)

Language education is ever the starting point for China-ASEAN HEEC, with the concept that "less commonly taught language (hereafter LCTL) education is actually big diplomacy". Statistics from the MoE shows that by 2016, Chinese universities had opened all ASEAN languages. Among them, Beijing Foreign Studies University has opened 23 official languages of the European Union and 10 official languages of ASEAN countries[18].

Bordering with ASEAN, Guangxi and Yunnan have taken use of their geographical advantages and seized the historical opportunity of CASP and made pilot sites in the cultivation of personnel of LCTL of ASEAN countries. For example, GuangXi University for Nationalities, as a national cultivation base for LCTL, has opened seven ASEAN countries' languages, namely Thai, Cambodian, Lao, Vietnamese, Burmese, Malay, and Indonesian[19].

Yunnan Province, which is positioned as bridgehead open to the Southeast Asia, signed the "*Agreement on Accelerating the Development of Education and Promoting the Strategic Construction of Bridgehead in Yunnan*"[20]with the MoE in 2011. The agreement mentioned that it would take three years to involve 100,000 students in learning or being trained LCTL. By the end of 2014, 43 universities in Yunnan Province had opened 62 LCTL majors.

##### C. Joint educational programs

Southeast Asia is the most concentrated area for China to run international schools outside its mainland. By the end of 2016, Chinese educational institutions had launched 38 cooperative programs in seven ASEAN

countries, covering all levels of education, with the exception of Cambodia and Brunei. Among the ASEAN countries, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand have launched 38 cooperative education programs in China, with higher education as the main level of education. At the same time, some Chinese universities have successfully run overseas education programs in ASEAN, such as Laos Suzhou University, Xiamen University Malaysia Branch, and Yunnan University of Finance and Economics, Bangkok Business School.

Founded in July 2011, Laos Suzhou University is the first institution of higher learning established overseas by China, which has been approved and supported by the governments of China and Laos. The university has opened four majors: international economy & trade, international finance, Chinese, computer science & technology, aiming at cultivating elites and professionals who have an international vision, proficient in the Lao, Chinese and English languages, and with solid professional knowledge. At the same time, the university undertakes the functions of scientific research and social services, which helps promoting economic, cultural, and scientific & technological cooperation and exchanges between Laos and China. In 2016, the first 22 students graduating from the University received the Chinese-Lao double diplomas. According to one teacher of the university, "These graduates are not worried about finding jobs. In Laos, as long as you can speak Chinese, you would earn about 50 % more than other people with the equivalent degree[21]."

## V. PROSPECTS FOR CHINA-ASEAN HEEC

China-ASEAN HEEC has provided a strong personnel and intellect support for the CASP. In the process of promoting the China-ASEAN 3+X framework and realizing the 2030 vision, China-ASEAN HEEC faces new opportunities as well as challenges, favorable conditions as well as obstacles to progress. And this part will put forward the following recommendations.

### A. Further enhancing People-to-People Exchange & Cooperation

Considering the fact that ASEAN is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural regional organization, the Chinese

universities and research institutions should train more comprehensive talents to engage in cross language, ethnic and cultural study and research concerning ASEAN countries with the purpose of in-depth understanding of the local people, languages and customs. Meanwhile, special scholarships and research funds for humanities could be set up to provide opportunities to the international students and scholars from ASEAN to study in or visit China in order to help them deepen their understanding of Chinese culture and current national conditions and finally have the real intent to make their due contributions to the cultural exchanges and cooperation in the CASP.

### B. Improving the level of cooperation in running schools and facilitating the effective flow of teaching resources

Compared with the current economy volume of ASEAN taking up in the Belt and Road countries, the development of China-ASEAN HEEC is restrained by small number, narrow scale and low level. Besides, the approval procedures for personnel exchange among ASEAN countries are currently cumbersome, leading to ineffective flow of high-quality teaching resources. In view of the above situation, the Chinese government should further optimize the top-level design to provide clear policy guidance and necessary financial support for the HEEC; and ensure the feasible circulation of educational facilities in terms of standardizing and streamlining the administrative supervision and approval process.

### C. Cultivating comprehensive professional talent

With the further development of China-ASEAN all-round cooperation, the personnel of LCTL who possess little knowledge of professional fields actually lack competitive advantages in the international economic & trade cooperation. There are some teachers of LCTL once describing that their students "were welcome as "a favorite" and reserved by some foreign trade companies even before they graduate. Not long after their taking the job, however, they were found not capable of working properly and meeting the expectations of the company[22]."

Among all the measures to be taken to solve the above dilemmas, one is to cultivate a number of cross-border professional talents who are familiar with China affairs, have international perspectives, solid professional knowledge, good language capability and cultural communication skills, as well as professional academic attainments and rich practical experience[23]. Those people could go deep into the frontiers where political and economic exchanges, cultural communications and social interactions are happening every day, work as a bridge and a tie to coordinate, communicate and deal with related issues, and help to realize the transformation of single business or LCTL processional talents to compound processional talents.

## VI. CONCLUSION

History has taught us that PPEC is the bridge connecting peoples from different cultures, the channel for facilitating dialogues among civilizations and the basis for mutual understanding and trust. PPEC is more influential than political strategic partnership and more effective than economic & trade cooperation.

In the past decades, China-ASEAN HEEC has played its own part in CASP and has experienced remarkable progress in terms of more targeted national policies, more flexible mechanism, stronger financial support and other favorable conditions. However, opportunities go hand by hand with challenges. A lot of new challenges, difficulties and problems need to be faced with, overcome and solved in a new round of development of HEEC. HEEC in the background of CASP is a systematic, all-round and comprehensive gigantic project, which has involved and will still involve all the peoples, governmental and non-governmental sectors, academic or civil organizations. So let's join together, tap the potentials of all sources and make possible contributions to the CASP.

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