

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

ASEAN–China Dynamics in Building a Shared Future

In this Special Section of the journal, we publish several papers presented at the ACSF International Conference 2025, held on November 15, 2025, at the Ibis Kuala Lumpur City Centre, that apply deliberate approaches to increase trust and collaboration between ASEAN states and China. The conference, co-organized by the Tun Tan Cheng Lock Institute of Social Studies, the ASEAN Research Centre for a Community with Shared Future (ACSF) from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Institute of Community with Shared Future from the Communication University of China, and the Institute of Social Economic Research from Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology, provided an important platform for academic discussion on regional connectivity.

The six papers in this Special Section provide different perspectives on the theme of shared future, allowing us to reflect on how this very important concept, which has always been difficult to define, can be better understood by considering the application of the principles of peace, sovereignty, inclusiveness, and shared governance in these six examples.

The need for a holistic approach to simulate reflection on shared future issues is presented in the first paper in this Special Section by Peng Bo, offering a vital perspective on the specific theme of "ASEAN–China Dynamics in Building a Shared Future" by introducing a Bilateral-Regional Nested Strategic Alignment Model. The author meticulously demonstrates how a bilateral relationship, namely the collaboration between China and Malaysia, may be effectively integrated within the larger ASEAN Community Vision 2045 framework. This study focuses on the practical implementation of the elusive concept of a "shared future" from three perspectives: (i) Value alignment: It makes clear the value compatibility between China's modernisation, Malaysia's "MADANI" concept, and ASEAN's regional goals, and it builds a shared future on peaceful, stable, and people-centered development; (ii) Co-governance and inclusiveness: This model respects strategic regulations and promotes regional inclusiveness by integrating SMEs into larger supply chains; and (iii) Practical application: Cases like the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) show how hard connectivity can be turned into a tangible tool to improve the region's long-term economic resilience. Ultimately, this study is an ideal opening piece for this Special Section, demonstrating that localised partnerships can serve as a stabilising anchor for achieving a resilient, dynamic, and integrated regional vision.

Chin Yee Mun continues this thematic inquiry by shifting the analytical focus from structural frameworks to philosophical paradigms, providing an illuminating critique of Western-centric international relations models. The author questions the widespread realism and liberalism paradigms that have historically governed global diplomacy, claiming that their instrumentalist, power-centric foundations frequently reinforce unipolarity and systematic inequality rather than genuine partnership. In response, the paper advocates a paradigm shift toward "Humanistic Diplomacy," which precisely aligns with the key tenets of ASEAN-China's shared future. This strategy redefines national security by prioritising human dignity, mutual respect, and collaborative progress over competitive supremacy. It contends that true security is gained not by unilateral isolation or military deterrence, but rather by cultivating a secure, wealthy regional neighbourhood. Using Malaysia and China's strong bilateral relationship as a key case study, Chin

Yee Mun eloquently demonstrates how two nations may manage sensitive historical disagreements and modern geopolitical friction when their connections are founded on humanistic ideals. This paper provides a core intellectual architecture for the Special Section, demonstrating that a shared future necessitates not only policy alignment, but also a completely rebuilt philosophical approach to international cooperation.

The theme of "ASEAN–China Dynamics in Building a Shared Future" is enhanced by Zhang Yanqiu and Fang Huojian's analysis of international communication, a crucial but sometimes misinterpreted aspect of regional interaction. Moving beyond typical Western critiques that limit Chinese media presence to just official propaganda, the authors adopt an institutional approach to analyse how China organises its media and public communication strategies across Southeast Asia and the larger Global South. The study emphasises how China's international communication acts as a key global "contra-flow," presenting alternative narratives of development, connection, and collaborative growth that align with the Global South's objectives. By examining this structural shift, the article illustrates that creating a shared future necessitates an equal communication structure. It emphasises the need of inclusive and localised media strategies that recognise regional diversity, demonstrating how mutual trust and neighbourhood diplomacy may be fostered when regional interests are truly aligned within the media environment.

Ng Danny Wee-Kiat et al. discuss human capital development and educational collaboration in STEM within the "ASEAN–China Dynamics in Building a Shared Future." The authors argue that true regional integration in Industry 4.0 hinges on developing a tech-savvy workforce, not just infrastructure. They propose an outreach framework for university-school STEM engagement in Malaysia that combines hands-on biomedical and mechatronics activities, addressing educational barriers and enhancing workforce competencies like digital literacy and problem-solving. The study also emphasises the role of educational institutions in fostering innovation ecosystems essential for green and digital transitions, highlighting the need for inclusive STEM education to achieve long-term regional resilience and prosperity.

Taufiq Tanasaldy and Tan Sing Pei lead the Special Section's investigation of a shared future amid the complex realities of domestic government, with an emphasis on subnational ethnic politics and center-periphery interactions. The authors use a comparative study of federal bargaining in Sarawak (Malaysia) and decentralised competition in West Kalimantan (Indonesia) to show how localised, historical ethnicity and institutional paths impact political stability. While the previous papers have addressed international diplomacy and external dynamics, this article emphasises that a sustainable, inclusive, and peaceful "shared future" across the ASEAN-China landscape is primarily reliant on individual member states' internal cohesion and resilient governance. This study adds a critical domestic perspective to the broader regional framework by exposing Southeast Asian cultures' dynamic, locally entrenched structures.

Rounding out this Special Section, Yew Wong Chin brings the concept of a shared future to a truly grassroots, cross-border level by investigating indigenous resilience and cultural sovereignty. Moving beyond macro-level state diplomacy, the author introduces the "Ancestral Bridge" framework, establishing a comparative dialogue between Malaysia's Orang Asli (particularly the Semai) and the Bulang people of Yunnan, China. The author demonstrates how these communities deal with the pressures of modern globalization, environmental degradation, and cultural assimilation by reclaiming their identities as active agents of their own futures. The study suggests practical approaches to a shared cultural future beyond borders, such as transnational knowledge-sharing networks and youth-led digital preservation projects for traditional ecological practices like agro-forestry. By shedding light on these shared human

struggles and indigenous wisdom, the study effectively emphasises that a truly inclusive ASEAN-China shared future must embrace and protect the region's diverse, non-dominant cultural heritages that constitute its true identity.

FROM MACRO-DIPLOMACY TO GRASSROOTS RESILIENCE

Collectively, the six essays deconstruct the concept of a "shared future" as a purely abstract or top-down diplomatic slogan, rebuilding it as a multidimensional, concrete, and truly inclusive framework. A shared future is considered in this collection of research as a nested ecosystem spanning state-level strategic frameworks to grassroots cultural preservation, rather than just macroeconomic alignment. The collection sees a shared future as a continuous, collaborative practice of mutual growth that aligns international policy with local human dignity.

In my role as guest editor, I hope that readers will move past simplistic views of ASEAN-China relations and develop a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of how a shared future is actually negotiated. Ultimately, I hope readers understand that creating a shared future necessitates adopting a multi-layered strategy that respects subnational governance realities, aligns high-level state principles, and raises non-dominant cultural perspectives across national boundaries.

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