Comparing the United States and China’s Foreign Aid to Education in Southeast Asia

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Abstract. The United States and China have been providing educational aid to Southeast Asia. While the U.S. foreign aid is comprehensive and focuses on technology, China’s aid is more selective and focuses on education. This paper aims to compare educational aid obtained from the two countries in Southeast Asia and analyze the motives behind their assistance. The comparison between the United States and China’s aid provides a broader picture of their influence on the region.

1 Introduction

Since the Second World War, foreign aid has evolved from an initial focus on economics and development. As the world has continued to develop and become more connected, countries have become more powerful and economically influential. However, some countries are not as economically successful, and they need assistance to fund their education and other needs. In Southeast Asia, the two countries that have provided significant aid are the United States and China. Scholarly research has mainly focused on the U.S. history of aid, and scholars have also studied specific aid programs and agencies. Chen Ying’s research emphasizes their measures of education and identifies some of the successes and failures of U.S. aid. On the other hand, research on China’s foreign aid to Southeast Asia tends to focus on China’s economic aid, such as infrastructure and technology. The comparison between the United States and China’s aid provides a broader picture of their influence on the region.

The paper compares educational aid obtained from the United States and China in Southeast Asia and analyzes the motives behind their assistance. On the one hand, research on the United States focuses on the assistance to Southeast Asia, as the U.S. Peace Corps and USAID have implemented programs and agencies. On the other hand, research on China’s assistance to Southeast Asia, as the Belt and Road Initiative and 18 + 1 China-ASEAN cooperation, is less scattered. On the one hand, apart from exploring the U.S. history of aid, scholars have also studied specific aid programs and agencies. The comparison between the United States and China’s aid provides a broader picture of their influence on the region.

Due to the lengthy history of the U.S. providing aid to Southeast Asia, the research on China’s foreign aid to Southeast Asia is relatively less scattered. On the one hand, the U.S. foreign aid is more comprehensive and focuses on technology, while China’s aid is more selective and focuses on education. The comparison between the United States and China’s aid provides a broader picture of their influence on the region.

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countries in Southeast Asia and will offer some information regarding future political and economic changes that will occur within the region. The latter is possible because financial aid often affects recipients’ loyalty, resulting in an increased likelihood that they will adhere to the economic and political strategies implemented by the donors. Due to the above reasons, this topic is of practical significance.

2 The U.S. Foreign Aid to Education in Southeast Asia

2.1. Statistics

Southeast Asia is one of the regions that receive the least amount of funding from the United States. Figure 1 shows the amount of financial aid that the country disbursed in 2022. It shows that the country spent the largest amount of money in Sub-Saharan Africa; while East Asia and Oceania received the least amount of money. Particularly, the available data indicates that Southeast Asia in the category of East Asia and Oceania, received a total of 3% of aid from the United States.

Fig. 1. The data of U.S. financial aid by region in 2022 [7].

Further information indicates that the financial aid supplied by the United States is often intended for different sectors, as shown in figure 2. It shows that in 2022 the country spends significant amounts of money on funding associated with conflict, peace, and security in the selected region, while basic education is one of the least funded. The data shows that the country does not consider basic education as a key issue. On the contrary, it dedicates a significant portion of its financial aid towards other areas, such as health and response to emergencies. The analyzed statistical data indicates that the United States supplies Southeast Asia with over one billion dollars; however, less than 0.44% is dedicated towards basic education.

Fig. 2. The data of the division of funding from the United States to Southeast Asia [7].

Figure 3 shows the division of funding related to education from the United States to Southeast Asia in 2022. The data allows for the dominance of basic education, followed by higher education, in U.S. assistance related to education in Southeast Asia in 2022. It can be concluded from figure 3 that the U.S. educational assistance devoted to Southeast Asia in 2022 is roughly 82.93 million dollars.

Fig. 3. The data of U.S. funding allocations for education in Southeast Asia in 2022 [7].

2.2. The U.S. Modalities of Foreign Aid to Education

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is the first and major program that the country uses when providing funding to the targeted countries, including Southeast Asia. As an independent agency, its main purpose is to ensure that all the funding that it receives ends up performing the intended duties, including education.

The specific assistance activities implemented can be summarized in three areas. Firstly, in terms of vocational education assistance, a prominent program is the USAID Lower Mekong Initiative Connecting the Mekong through Education and Training (USAID–LMI COMET). Beginning in 2014, the five-year project is a workforce development program that aims at assisting universities and vocational centers in adapting their curricula and teaching methods to better meet the needs of the private sector, thus increasing the number of skilled workers in high-growth industries and maximizing internship opportunities for young students in the Lower Mekong, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam [8].

Secondly, regarding teacher volunteer activities, the Peace Corps plays a major role. Originating in the Kennedy era, this international voluntary organization assists countries other than the United States and sends trained and qualified United States citizens as volunteers to promote the development of the recipient country by inspiring the people of the recipient region to create a better life and by helping the educators of the region to develop new ways of solving educational problems [9]. As an independent organization, the Peace Corps’ educational activities differ from those of other United States aid agencies in that the Peace Corps works on a “person-to-person” basis, with volunteers interacting U.S. Embassy in Laos launched “Learn to Read” in 2019,
2.3. Characteristics of Foreign Aid to Education by the United States in Southeast Asia

The funding is intended to not only develop infrastructure within the region but also improve access to education. Moreover, the funding plays a critical role in ensuring that the countries have access to higher quality education through the purchase of equipment and books that they require.

3.2. China’s Modalities of Foreign Aid to Education

Statistics indicate Southeast Asia’s biggest providers of education assistance to ASEAN countries and has implemented the “China-ASEAN (AUN) Scholarship” program to support educational exchanges. China’s educational assistance to ASEAN falls into three main categories. The first is Chinese language instruction for foreigners in Southeast Asia. For example, the International Chinese Teacher Volunteer Program was established in 2016 and plays an essential role in the reform of Vietnam’s higher education system. With an emphasis on establishing core principles of academic freedom, meritocracy, transparency in the dynamics of aid and the flow of evaluation, which is summarized as “Collaborating, Learning and Adaptive” [12]. This reflects that the United States uses the “Progra Model” to guide the flow of aid in the region, focusing on countries where the country’s vast potential in education unwound.

3 China's Foreign Aid to Education in Southeast Asia

3.1. Statistics

Fig. 4. The data of the aid of China and other four agencies and recipient countries, indicating Southeast Asia’s biggest providers of education.

The following data in figure 4 from the Lowy Institute indicates Southeast Asia’s biggest providers of foreign aid to education in the region totaling $3.93 billion in 2021, occupying the third largest foreign aid donor to the region from 2015 to 2021.
3.3. Characteristics of Foreign Aid to Education by China in Southeast Asia

China’s international education assistance, resulting in insufficient synergy. China’s involvement in Southeast Asia has been on a relatively small scale. China and the United States have actively utilized their foreign aid systems to shape the second wave of economic exchanges. Besides, China’s assistance in Southeast Asia is still inadequate.

4. Comparison between U.S. and China’s Education Assistance in Southeast Asia

4.1. Descriptive Features

The Department of Foreign Aid, the Bureau of Education, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Ministry of International Education Assistance have long been divided among different provinces that provide educational assistance. This has led to a decent synergy between these departments. The second wave of economic exchanges between China and Southeast Asia has not been effectively synergized, and a new era of aid practice has yet to be formed. Another consequence is that the long-term government aid to Southeast Asia is still inadequate.

4.2. Material Consequences

Concerning principal motivations and determinants, the United States, as a member of the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), providing aid to a wide range of economic development in recipient countries and following the example of the Western aid model, as demonstrated in establishing the Assistance Committee (DAC), providing aid to a wide range of recipient countries, focusing on facilitating economic and social development. Moreover, the China-ASEAN Vocational Education and Training Centers were established in Guangxi and the "Luban Workshop" program was established in Tianjin, which trained technical talents and promoted local economic and social development. The third initiative of the "China Vocational Education and Training Centers" was set up in Guangxi and the "Luban Workshop" program was established in Tianjin, which trained technical talents and promoted local economic and social development.

4.3. Determinants and Principal Motivations

States, as a member of the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), providing aid to a wide range of recipient countries, focusing on facilitating economic and social development. The China-ASEAN Vocational Education and Training Centers were established in Guangxi and the "Luban Workshop" program was established in Tianjin, which trained technical talents and promoted local economic and social development. China’s lack of investment in Southeast Asia has become an emerging force in the international economic and social development.
5 Conclusion

The difference between aid norms and legitimate discourse in discussing foreign aid may not be fully considered. However, the fundamental difference stems from the influence over recipients’ governments. Both countries have actively utilized foreign aid to enhance their educational and economic levels. China's specific measures of assistance to education and China’s specific measures of assistance to education in Southeast Asia. Both countries promote the dissemination of their cultures in the region through institutions and educational programs (integrating basic, higher education) and scholarships. Regarding the motivation behind the programs (integration basic, higher education), China can learn from these lessons.

Conclusion

All in all, as an emerging donor, China has gradually increased educational assistance to Southeast Asia and development. The motivation behind these actions is justified by viewing market economy development justifying large scale overseas development investments. China's disclosure of aid information is weak considering various reasons such as the difficulty of operational guidance. China Overtook as Largest Provider of Development Money in South Asia.