

Evolving from a marginal territory to a radiation centre

I RECENTLY came across an article in National Geographic on June 13, 2023, introducing the 'Burma Road' in Yunnan (not to be confused with the one in Penang). During World War II, a remarkable feat was achieved by a legion of 200,000 Chinese labourers who constructed this famous 717-mile truck road by hands. Carved through challenging terrain, the Burma Road allowed essential supplies of equipment, food and medicine to enter China through Yunnan from British-ruled Burma.

While I have visited China a few times, I have yet to explore the Yunnan Province. However, Yunnan has always fascinated me through various historical books, novels and computer games, which vividly depict the province's breathtaking mountains, formidable landscapes, mysterious forests, mighty rivers and diverse cultures.

With over 60 languages and dialects, Yunnan possesses an 'exotic' cultural tapestry distinct from other parts of China.

Fun fact: Many Malaysians are familiar with the story of Cheng Ho (Zheng He), but probably few are aware that he was originally from Yunnan.

I noticed striking resemblances between the hinterland of Yunnan and that of Borneo, particularly North Kalimantan. Their topography is shaped by extensive mountain ranges, with diverse ethnic groups coexist across international boundaries.

For instance, the Hmong people in Lào Cai, Vietnam have ancestral connections with the Bai Miao and Qing Miao communities in Yunnan.

Similarly, the inland regions of North Kalimantan, characterised by a rugged central mountain spine that loosely delineates the border with Malaysia, are inhabited by the Lun Bawang-Lun Dayeh populations in the intersection of Sarawak, Sabah and North



Exploring Sustainable Development

with Dr Goh Chun Sheng

Kalimantan, as well as the Murut-Dayak Agabag group in Pagalungan and the Lumbis area.

There are 'transnational societies' based on kinships and historical linkages that extend deeply across the border.

Yunnan's evolution
Despite being rich in natural resources, Yunnan remained underdeveloped until relatively recent times, owing to its geographical separation that posed challenges for central government control. It was long considered a marginalised territory, often associated with notions of being wild and entrenched in 'black magic', according to 'mainstream' Chinese perceptions.

Things have undergone rapid changes in the past three decades. At the turn of the 21st century, China implemented its Great Western Development strategy, aimed at addressing geographical disparities in the western 'frontier' regions.

This strategy was a response to increasing inequality and the marginalisation of remote areas in the hinterland. Its focus was on enhancing transportation, telecommunication, and energy infrastructure to attract foreign investment.

Yunnan, recognised as a crucial border region, experienced a significant surge in international trade, reaching billions of US dollars as a result of this policy.

Subsequently, the province was designated as China's 'bridgehead', strategically positioned gateways for expanding outward.



This aerial photo shows the 289m Baihetan Hydropower Station in Zhaotong, in China's south-western Yunnan Province. Hydropower plays a major role in Yunnan's transformation – as at end of 2022, the province possessed an installed hydropower capacity of 81 GW, second only to Sichuan. — AFP photo

Collaborations between government entities and private enterprises propelled the province's economic activities beyond national borders, penetrating markets in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region and beyond.

With the introduction of China's Belt and Road Initiative, Yunnan's role shifted from being a gateway to a 'radiation centre', where investment, trade and energy emanate outward, while associated benefits progressively strengthen the core.

In this context, Yunnan serves as a pivotal point for advancing various geo-economic objectives.

Hydropower plays a major role in this transformation. As at end of 2022, Yunnan possessed an installed hydropower capacity of 81 GW, second only to Sichuan.

It exported a substantial amount of hydropower to coastal provinces, primarily Guangdong, totalling 144 TWh of electricity in 2022, as reported by inewsweek.cn.

Furthermore, hydropower expansion extends beyond Yunnan, with China making significant investments in numerous hydropower projects across the Greater Mekong Sub-Region.

North Kalimantan's trajectory

It is premature to predict if North Kalimantan, an

Indonesian 'frontier' region, will follow the path of Yunnan, but there are intriguing indications that prompt comparisons.

Firstly, Indonesia's strong commitment to the 'development from the periphery' policy demonstrates its determination to proactively leverage regional interactions with its neighbours – trade, mobility, investments – in order to accelerate its own development.

The province has witnessed extensive road construction activities, particularly in the border districts. The case of Yunnan illustrates that such a trajectory can lead to outward economic expansion.

Secondly, the focal point of the province's development trajectory lies in the mega hydropower projects that aim for a total capacity of over 10 GW with Chinese technologies and capital.

This impressive capacity surpasses the expected energy requirements of Nusantara and the 'green' industrial zone in Tanah Kuning, potentially positioning the province as an electricity exporter akin to Yunnan.

If Nusantara would be realised, North Kalimantan would naturally become Indonesia's gateway to Malaysia.

While it remains speculative to anticipate that North Kalimantan (alongside

Nusantara) will evolve into a regional 'radiation centre', the mega projects and large-scale resource exploitation (including nickel shipped from Sulawesi and North Maluku), if realised, would undoubtedly reshape the dynamics of regional development.

Historically, the highland borderland communities often went unnoticed by rulers in lowland areas, enabling them to maintain their unique ways of life.

The absence of significant state intervention allowed for the development of their own systems of exchange, encompassing trade, migration and culture.

The opening up of the border region will create both new opportunities and pressures for the border communities.

One should take note of the climate vulnerability of Yunnan's model, which heavily relies on hydropower systems. Since the beginning of 2023, most parts of the province have experienced a significant lack of rainfall, resulting in a reduced utilisation rate of hydropower units to under 50 per cent.

In response to the shortage, Yunnan has implemented power rationing for primary aluminium smelters, which account for approximately 42 per cent of the electricity consumption in the province's manufacturing industry, according to S&P Global.

It is crucial, therefore, to investigate the impacts of climate change on hydropower generation, which may lead to serious disruptions to the economy.

The changes taking place in North Kalimantan present an opportunity for the region to re-evaluate potential cross-border collaborations, encompassing not only economic development but also environmental management.

However, decisions must be made with careful consideration, grounded in an honest and scientific assessment of the situation, rather than relying solely on imagination and speculation.

As emphasised in many other discussions, achieving an inclusive and sustainable development trajectory necessitates long-term planning that extends beyond short-term gains.

This holds true for Borneo as well.

Dr Goh Chun Sheng is a researcher at Harvard University. He studies sustainable development in Borneo, captivated by the myriad complexities and possibilities it holds. His book, 'Transforming Borneo: From Land Exploitation to Sustainable Development', was published by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore in March 2023.

Kuching Autistic Association raises RM300,000 from charity food fair

KUCHING: The Kuching Autistic Association (KAA) achieved its target of raising RM300,000 this year through its Charity Food Fair, which was held at the Association of Churches Sarawak Christian Ecumenical Worship Centre yesterday.

Organising chairperson Connie Yeo, who is a committee member of the association, said the amount raised was a new record for the association.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, we had never reached such a high figure and the highest we managed to raise was around RM250,000.

Therefore, we are very happy and grateful to the community and everyone involved, including those who contributed to make this...



Fahmi (right) speaks with Ng during a visit to the latter's house. — Bernama photo

KKD to discuss with Socso on contributions for journalists, stringers, assures minister

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...this fundraising event a success, she told reporters.

However, she was unable to provide the total amount of funds collected until all funds collected from ticket sales and cash sales had been confirmed by the association's treasurer.

"But, from our observation, the accumulated funds have already exceeded RM300,000," she said.

The fund raised will be used to support the operating costs of the association's Resource and Education Centre.

"We experience a deficit of RM750,000 for operating costs every year. Therefore, the funds collected will be used for the overall operating costs of the



Dr Sim (second right) presents a certificate of appreciation to Lions Club of Kuching Exora as one of the participating stalls set, as Yeo (third left) and others look on.

centre," she explained.

Besides the annual charity food fair, other events such as a charity run, art exhibitions and others would be held to raise funds.

There were 97 stalls set up during the food fair, which ran from 8am to noon, offering food and beverages, clothes, and crafts.

The organiser had also lined up performances to entertain the visitors.

Among the performers were representatives from KAA, Welfare Emas Folk Dance Group, My Dance Studio, Sarawak Amateur Gymnastics Association, Secret Dancers Club, Danceholic Studio, Super Vision Event Enterprise, Friendship

Park Dance Group and James Tay Ballroom.

Earlier, Deputy Sarawak Premier Dato Sri Dr Sim Kui Hian was present to officiate at the event, and he also took the opportunity to present certificates of appreciation to the participating stalls.

KAA president Dr Catherine Chen was among those present.

KAMPAR: The Communications and Digital Ministry (KKD) will hold discussions with the Social Security Organisation (Socso) and relevant parties regarding contributions for journalists, especially stringers (part-time journalists).

Minister Fahmi Fadzil said he had discussed the matter with KKD secretary-general Datuk Mohamad Fauzi Md Isa and hoped that contributions to Socso for the group could be made soon.

He said that the ministry needed to look into the issues faced by the stringers who were not working for organisations or media companies full-time.

There have been cases where stringers were involved in accidents that rendered them unable to work, but the cost of rehabilitation is quite high and is currently not covered by Socso.

"So there are some things that we want to look into and improve because stringers, in my opinion, complete the ecosystem for media practitioners and help a lot, so we want to look at what we can do to help more stringers," he told reporters here yesterday.

Earlier, he visited Ng Kan Seng, a freelance journalist who is currently unwell, at his house to deliver aid and show support to him. — Bernama

