

Mukdahan – Suvannakhet Sister Cities: the study of cultural factors that affect the appropriateness of the Sister City relationship-building policy between border towns in the Mekong sub-region

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**Abstract**

**Background:** Since 1990, Asian Development Bank has funded the initiation of the economic cooperation among the six Greater Mekong countries, including Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, under the policy of “The Greater Mekong Sub-regional Economic Cooperation: GMS-EC”. This policy has resulted in various forms of cooperation in the region. Another important framework is the Ayeyawady - Chao Phraya - Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) which aims to bridge the economic development gaps or differences and creates sustainable cooperation between member countries. Under the cooperation frameworks with that aim in mind, many projects have been implemented and one of them is the development of the relationship between different countries in the form of Sister Cities, which is an international city twinning that aims to achieve a mutual development goal.

**Objective:** To present an explanation for the appropriateness of the relationship-building policy at city level in the form of Sister Cities between border cities in the Mekong sub-region. This article will use the Sister Cities of Thailand's Mukdahan and Savannakhet of Lao People's Democratic Republic, which are two border cities in the Mekong sub-region as a case study.

*Results: cultural factors were important factors that made Sister City relationship-building policy appropriate for the area. This was because when people shared the same identity, they would also feel that they shared a common fate and had the ability to determine their shared value. This identity came from cultural factors, and these cultural factors are the foundations that led to the success of the implementation of the relationship-building policy that aimed to enhance better understanding between cities, which would in turn, resulted in economic, social and cultural cooperation.*

**Keyword:** Mukdahan – Suvannakhet, sister city, cultural factors

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## Introduction

The Sister Cities have been widely established in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. It can be seen that Thailand has established Sister Cities with the neighboring countries including Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. Sisters Cities between Thailand and Laos are, for example, Savannakhet - Mukdahan, Ton Pheung – Chiang San, Huay Sai - Chiang Khong, Tha khak - Nakhon Phanom, Pakse - Ubon Ratchathani, Muang Ngern – Huay Kon, and Vientiane - Nongkhai.

The widespread implementation of Sister City policy in the Mekong sub-region occurring under the influence of

cooperation framework on economic development has linked the explanation for the appropriateness of the policy with external factors, namely, the economic factors. For example, the trend of economic integration at regional or global level through the concept of Transnationalism under globalization process and this process of globalization has triggered the flow or movement of 5 factors with no fixed pattern or continuity, namely, the flow of people (Ethnoscape), media (Mediascape), technology (Technoscape), capital (Financialscape), and ideas (Ideoscape). This back and forth movement of the five factors has resulted in

the deteriorialization or dissolution of boundary between the two states, societies or cultures.

The dissolution or lessening of state boundary has led to a change of cross-border control under new trade strategy that develops new strategies to support free trade and enables the private sector to carry out smooth economic activities, while ensuring that the cross-border flows of people, goods and information are more convenient and complying with free trade principles of the new era. This strategy aims to maintain the authority of the state under a stream of the aforementioned global trend. The attempt to support free trade in the Mekong sub-region subsequently leads to the establishment of Sister Cities which is seen as an appropriate policy in the area.

However, for the Mekong sub-region which is the group of countries in Southeast Asia, the explanation for the appropriateness of the Sister City policy that linked with economic factor may ignore the common historical and cultural characteristics which are the important fundamentals that coexist in the border

town of the Mekong sub-region. This uniqueness in the border cities of Southeast Asia, where each country hold Nation State characteristic, were drawn and determined by the West through the lines and the boundaries of the sovereign during colonization period.

This article, thus, would like to present an explanation for the appropriateness of the relationship-building policy at city level in the form of Sister Cities between border cities in the Mekong sub-region. It is argued that the economic factors and the economic integration at regional and global levels may not solely explain the appropriateness of the implementation of such policy in the area. There are also cultural factors that are important and these cultural factors make the Sister City policy appropriate for the area. This article will use the Sister Cities of Thailand's Mukdahan and Savannakhet of Lao People's Democratic Republic, which are two border cities in the Mekong sub-region as a case study. The next paragraph will describe a Sister City framework and determine cultural factors presented in the province of Mukdahan

and Savannakhet, as well as evaluate how these cultural factors make Sister City relationship-building policy appropriate for the area.

### **Conceptual Framework of Sister City relationship-building policy**

The Sister City relationship-building policy is a conceptual framework influenced by the concept of Town Twinning in the West. Such concept tries to promote cultural and commercial ties between towns or cities which share some common features such as the geography, politics, society, or culture. However, the two cities are not necessarily located near each other, or located in different countries.

The earliest form of Town Twinning was between the German city of Paderborn and the French city of Le Mans in 836. Moreover, Keighley, West Yorkshire, England had a "Sister City" arrangement with Suresnes and Puteaux, France starting in 1905, whereas, Saddleworth in South Australia with the Saddleworth Parish of the United Kingdom in 1941 (The City of Inverness Town Twinning Committee,

2012). However, the concept became concrete practice in Europe since 1951 and in America since 1956. The reason behind this concrete practice of Town Twinning was the establishment of the so-called Council of European Municipalities and Regions in Europe and the Sister Cities International in the United States of America, which were the organizations responsible for promoting such concept. This resulted in the prevalence of Town Twinning which could be seen as citizen diplomacy in many areas.

However, the emergence of the two organizations that are responsible for promoting the concept of Town Twinning in Europe and America have resulted in diverse applications and practices of the Town Twinning. For example, in Europe the term "Twin Cities" was used to refer to such concept while "Sister Cities" was used in North America. Nevertheless, in practice, the two terms have no significant differences.

On the one hand, twin cities, a form of town twinning in Europe, was defined in 1951 by Jean Bereth, one of the founders of the Council of European

Municipalities and Regions, as a matchup of two cities which aimed to operate under a common practice, promote closer relationship ties (Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 2012). However, city twinning would have to depend on each city's characteristic, for example, the geography, main economic activities, local cultural activities or sports. It can be said that city twinning in Europe emphasized the differences between the two cities; therefore, Twin Cities in Europe did not necessarily have similar cultures.

On the other hand, the term "Sister Cities" was used to describe a form of town twinning in North America, Asia and Australia. The term was originated in the USA. during President Eisenhower's historic September 11–12, 1956 White House conference on citizen diplomacy, the Post World War II climate when American People wished for Freedom and world peace. President Eisenhower rhetorically stated that "the establishment of Sister Cities will make the world population realize and understand the new challenges as well as achieve the solutions to some of the world problem". This was the core of

citizen diplomacy which consequently led Civic Committee to develop many projects based on the Sister City concept during 1950s and 1960s.

However, the term Twin Cities is used in the USA to describe the cities which are geographically and economically connected. Moreover, it is often referred to town twinning of major metropolitan areas such as Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA. These Twin Cities do not necessarily have the same population or size, but they must be able to geographically and potentially help each other to grow and develop other kinds of cooperation. For example, Twin Cities may lead to the development of infrastructure projects such as road building, improvement of transportation or other inter-city assistance. Therefore, Sister Cities as a cooperative agreement between countries or cities in geographically distinct areas to establish special relationship and ties (Kanokwan Manorom, Pianwadee Srisuphan and Sakulphan Phothijak, 2011).

In the USA, the purpose or goal of Sister City concept in the early period focused on establishing peace and

harmony, as a result of social and economic reconstruction after World War II. In Europe, on the other hand, Twin City concept focused on cultural exchange. Therefore, the relationship building in the form of Twin Cities in Europe highlighted the differences and they did not necessarily have similar culture. Moreover, Twin Cities can be town twinning of more than 2 cities. However, during the post World War II, the establishment of Twin Cities in Europe appeared to focus on cooperation in building peace and harmony, namely, the relationship-building between Coventry, England and the Dresden, Germany, which was seriously damaged from the Second World War.

At present, the Sister City relationship-building policy often focuses on town twinning to promote economic development, tourism, city publicity, education, cultures and sport activities. A more obvious example includes Exchange students program and Educational assistance from more developed countries. Furthermore, the official twinning of the cities is usually established through the signing of an agreement between the local

governments or conducted through international organizations which are responsible for promoting intercity activities. The unofficial town twinning often involves the matchup of two tourist cities.

Building a Sister/Twin City relationship between Thailand and other countries has been first established more than 20 years ago. The evidence of the official Sister/Twin City relationship presented in the Memorandum of agreement between Chiang Mai of Thailand and Uozu, Toyama of Japan on August 8, 1989. The primary purpose of this signing was to seek out mutual collaboration in accordance with changing economic and social situation at both regional and international level in order to make each country more dependent on each other. On January 10, 2006, a draft of standard rules and regulations on the establishment of Sister Cities was created and by October 5, 2006, Thailand has signed 40 official memorandums of cooperation (Royal Thai Embassy in Lao PDR, 2012).

In summary, the concept of Sister City relationship-building is a conceptual

framework that aims to promote mutual understanding between cities and countries. City twinning resembles friendship and partnership which has been more successful in terms of the relationship building between cities, rather than establishing political relations between countries. The most important role of this concept is to promote "citizen diplomacy", education, culture, sports, trade, tourism, as well as Exchanges student program which gives people of the two countries the opportunity to learn more about each other and to develop together.

**The cultural factors of Mukdahan and Savannakhet that affect the appropriateness of the establishment of a Sister City relationship policy.**

Mukdahan is one of the 77 provinces of Thailand. It was separated from Nakhon Phanom province in 1982. Savannakhet, on the other hand, is one of the 17 districts of the Lao PDR. The origin of the name "Savannakhet" is still debatable, some said that during the French colonial, French government chose the name "Suvannakhet" which meant

golden land or abundant land. However, the word "Suvan" and "Savan" sounded very similar and most people understood the meaning of the "Savan" more than "Suvan" and thought that they had the same meaning. Later on, the state consented to an official name of Savannakhet (Suppachai Singyaboot, 2003).

The relationship between the two communities reflected shared culture, society and ways of life. Although this was unwritten, unlike the history of feudal government and the ruling class, the story of this relationship was told through the word of mouth, and presented in form of symbols that reflected the shared memories, friendship, kinship, beliefs, ways of life, as well as conflicts.

**Common Cultural Characteristics based on historical fundamentals.**

The legend of the two communities along the river clearly showed a strong bond and long-lasting relationships of the people in this area. Both communities shared similar traditional religious beliefs and culture, including, the

beliefs in Ghost, Brahmin and Buddhism, which not only reflected in architecture, sculpture and traditional rituals, but also appeared in the myth of various ethnic communities along the Mekong river. These beliefs did not only exhibit in Thailand or Lao PDR, but also appeared in other countries and ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. For example, many ethnic groups along the Mekong River in Southeast Asia believed that "Tan" was a spirit or god that generates natural disaster as well as natural abundance. Bottle Gourd was another myth related to the origin of different ethnic groups in Southeast Asia including Lao, Tai, Mon-Khamare hill-tribe Khmu, Vietnamese, as well as Whites and Chinese (Pranee Wongthes, 2000). It can be seen that each local community shared similar myths. Even now, based on these beliefs and legend, agriculturalists in Mukdahan and Savannakhet still have Rocket Festival to ask for more rain from the "Tan".

Since prehistory, many communities across Southeast Asia, especially those along the Mekong River, including the southern Yunnan province of

China, the Mekong River mouth, the Au canal, and the Ping, Chee, Mun River Basin, believed that there were sacred animals such as snakes, mermaids and Naga, living in the underworld of the Mekong River. These animals were believed to create natural abundance, as well as drought and disasters. In addition, it is believed that the Naga were their ancestors (Suchit, Wongthes. 2003). Since Naga was often associated with native ethnic group in Southeast Asia along the Mekong River (Srisak Walipodom, 1990) Its story thus, clearly existed in the history of native communities in Southeast Asia, as well as in the areas of Mukdahan and Savannakhet.

However, the history of various communities in Southeast Asian was mostly unwritten. The history was passed on as legends through word of mouth, which could create discrepancy or errors in the details including location and the people's name, the prominent example would be the similarity of the Legend of Suwankhomkham City and the Urangkhathat Legend. After the information was gathered and the stories were

recorded in writing, it could be seen that their plots were similar and contained the story of Naga, as much as the story of Buddhism, which was an imported religion from India. Later on, Buddhism became more influential than old belief of Naga. The Urangkhatat Legend told a story of Buddha who came to Mekong sub region and performed miracle by defeating the group of Nagas with supernatural power who refused to pay him respect. This event symbolized the socio-cultural revolution of the communities in Mekong sub region when tribal people who formerly believed in spirit turned to believe in Buddhism.

When Buddhism came to have more influence on the social culture of the Mekong sub region, it also created unity between communities on both sides of the Mekong River. They shared the same religious prophets and religious place, namely, the Buddhist monastery of the Savannakhet, Phra That Ing Hang and Chayaphum temple in city of Kaysone Phomvihane., Chayaphum temple was built around same time as Ban Tha Hae community, and it was meant to be the center of the community where Buddhist

ceremonies such as Boon Pa Wate ceremony, Rocket festival or Visakha Bucha of the community of the Lao Loom were hold. The history of Phra That Ing Hang may not clearly show the close relationship between Mukdahan and Savannakhet despite their similar Buddhist myths and beliefs, especially the belief that Phra That Pagoda contained the holy relics. Many communities and tribes along the Mekong River made “Phra That” their sacred place, such as Phra That Ya Kru, Phra That Cheng Chum, Phra That Phu Phek, Phra Phra That Na Dun, Phra That Si Khottaboon and Phra That Phu Chom Si (Sutin Sanongphan, 2000).

Moreover, the historical characteristics of Mukdahan-Savannakhet community: they shared the long history and legend. The people migrated from Vientiane leading by Lord Chandrasuriyawongse, settled down and built their homeland at Ban Luang Phonsim, the Ing-Hang Stupa, currently situated in the Savanakhet. Lord Chanthakinnaree later ruled the community, and expanded the territory along the Mekong River. At Huay

BangMuk, he built Sri Mongkhon temple (Sri Mongkhon is now in Mukdahan Province). There was a story that at mid night, there was a transparent and glittering object emerge from the top of the seven sugar palm trees and floated over the Mekong River banks, Lord Chanthakinnaree then named such object "Keo Mukdahan" or the Pearl Crystal" and thus called the city "Mukdahan" (Pises Jearchanphong, 1994). This story implies the shared history of both communities along the river banks. Other communities also shared similar history as Mukdahan-Savannakhet one.

#### **Common cultural characteristics based on customary tradition**

"Heat" means customary tradition which has been strictly practiced in the Larn Chang community. "Heat Sib Song" was a traditional monthly ritual of all 12 months regarding religion and agricultural lifestyle (Piyachat Sintusaard, 1997). "Kong" meant morality or convention, as well as ethical ways of life of the people believing in Buddhism. Kong can be divided into two types; convention for the ruled – villagers, family, spouses, parents, children; and

convention for the ruler - the king. It was seen as a doctrine or social norms that people follow, and meant to control people's behaviors. However, it had no penalties or punishment if people fail to comply with but they will be "Ka Lam" or offended by the society (Piyachat Sintusaard,1997). "Heat-Sib Song Kong-Sib Si" or Kong" or "Heat. - Kong " was, therefore, a very important practice in the Mekong sub region. For example, during the Buddhist lent, which was a very important religious ceremony, the people of Mukdahan or Savannakhet would have to return to their hometown to participate in this ceremony their jobs if the employers did not let them go home, which could lead to unemployment issue in Northeast region, especially in the area connected to Lao PDR. Furthermore, the "Heat" was a ritual that occurred in every month (Adisorn Semyam, 2011).

Since 1353, Mukdahan and Savannakhet has been part of "Larn Chang Society" which was a large society with complex regime. Many tribes treated their beliefs in Buddhism, spirit and "Heat - Kong" as their rules and behavioral

framework in order to systematically live together (Piyachat Sintusaard, 1997). These became the cultural heritage that portrayed in many traditions of the two areas, for example, new house ceremony, which the senior male would be moving in first then the owners of the house would bring their belongings and move in later. (Sutin Sanongphan, 2000). Although, there are laws and regulations to control people's behavior today, the "Heat-Sib Song Kong-Sib Si" still has social organization mechanism in Mukdahan and Savannakhet, and this mechanism has adapted to the changing social contexts as time goes by (Sutin Sanongphan, 2000).

Since the two communities shared similar informal histories including Naga belief, religious belief (Buddhism), "Phra That" (Buddha Relics) and "Tan" belief. (Piyachat Sintusaard, 1997), their folk legends were also similar, for example, The Legend of Urangkhatat, the legend of King Burichan Uay Luay, the Legend of Merchant Chantapanitsa, Legend of Usa-Barot. Moreover, the "Legend of Nong Han City", "Nong Han Lom" or "King Padaeng Narng Ai", which perceived Nong Han as a

spiritual water source for the society and tribal people, in the same way as Phra That Panom (Sutin Sanongphan, 2000). Different tribal groups shared the resources from the rivers, swamps, canal and lakes as they would go hunting and fishing together. Moreover, they exchanged their cultures through narrative (Sutin Sanongphan, 2000). Many people from Mukdahan and Savannakhet believed that the accidents occurred during and after the construction of the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge was a result of the disturbed Naga, the sacred and mythical animal in the legend.

As can be seen that the people in the Northeast of Thailand and Lao people have similar culture, for example, their staple food is sticky rice, their speaking languages or language tones are very similar, they have similar narrative (Sutin Sanongphan, 2000) and they both eat pickled fish (Piyachat Sintusaard, 1997). Moreover, Mukdahan and Savannakhet have a common folklores such as King Hung Khun Juang, Katchanamkumman, King Bae, King Lin Tong, Nang Tang on, King Kulu Nang aua, King Padang Nang Ai, as well as scriptures, medical textbook,

and folk play, namely, "Paya", which people improvise poems in response to one another (Sutin Sanongphan, 2000).

**The common cultural characteristics of Mukdahan and Savannakhet that affect the appropriateness of the Sister City relationship-building policy**

The common history and culture of Mukdahan and Savannakhet, reflected the special characteristics of border towns in Southeast Asia. Before colonialism, Southeast Asia was not familiar with the concept of "border". They never knew how to set boundaries or think about "territory" and had no idea about territorial waters, territorial sky and sovereignty. Moreover, the people in Southeast Asia have had reverence for the Holy Spirit following their ancestor's belief and they would pay homage to the sacred objects or places, regardless of their locations or territory. It can be argued that before colonialism, the prominent concepts in Southeast Asia were "Cultural Community" and "Cultural boundary" of which culture directed the use of power of the people in the area. These concepts were completely different from

modern concept of Nation State, which required important components such as the whole population, territory and sovereignty over the territory. Many states in Southeast Asia, thus, adhered to this modern concept of Nation State, and used it to "reborn" from their Western colonizers who drew the boundary line between the states in the region in order to divide resources among colonizers during the colonial time.

As a result, the border areas in Southeast Asia, particularly in the area of the Mekong sub-region, shared common characteristics in terms of history and culture, as can be seen in Mukdahan of Thailand and Savannakhet of Lao PDR. The "Cultural Community" was one of these common characteristics before the areas were divided by the borderline of nation states.

If culture is a kind of value that has important implications on the prosperity of the society and humanity, and if culture is the social standard that is used to determine people ways of life and social civilization, then culture should also be able to create unity among the people in

the society. Therefore, culture could resemble the soil that nurtures unique ways of life of the people in each community, enhances the vision to the world, as well as create different cultural practice. Thus, it could be argued that "Cultural Community", which was perceived as common cultural characteristic of Mukdahan and Savannakhet, had an effect on people's lifestyle and was employed as a master key of living together in the community.

However, if the expression of the individual's identity in each society was presented through cultural forms, then culture would also define and create the concreteness of this "identity". Thus, the common cultural characteristics that Mukdahan and Savannakhet shared would appear to be the foundation of the identity that reflected the harmony and unity of the people in the area.

If the relationship-building policy in the form of Sister Cities between Mukdahan in Thailand and Savannakhet in the Lao PDR aimed to enhance better understanding between the two communities and create the basis for economic, social and cultural collaboration,

and if Mukdahan and Savannakhet shared a common cultural foundation which resulted in the identity that reflected harmony and unity of the people, then this identity would be a factors that well explained the appropriateness of the Sister City policy. This identity which was a result of common cultural factors would be a good foundation that enabled people in those areas to connect through thoughts, beliefs, traditions, rituals (i.e. the idea of kinship, Friend-Making (Pook Siew) Rituals, and "Heat Sib Song"), history and folk wisdom. These were the foundation that would bring the people in this area together, connected their idea of common fate and determined their shared values and the differences in values of the insiders and outsiders, as well as established the role and pattern of a relationship between people with the same and different identity.

Thus, an identity obtained as a result of shared cultural factors in Mukdahan and Savannakhet would be a foundation that helped enhancing close ties of the people in these areas. The feeling of harmony and shared fate would strengthen mutual understanding between

the cities which would in turn, lead to economic, social and cultural collaboration between countries. These were main purposes of the implementation of the Sister City relationship-building policy in Mukdahan and Savannakhet.

### Conclusion

If taking into account the Greater Mekong Sub-regional Economic Cooperation: GMS-EC, which was established in 1990, the explanation to the appropriateness of Sister City relationship-building policy would then relate to the economic factors and the economic integration at the regional and global level through the concept of Tran-nationalism under globalization process. However, for border town in the Mekong sub-region, the appropriateness of Sister City relationship-building policy could also be explained by cultural factors.

As Nation States in this region were established during colonial period when colonizers drew boundary line that determined the state territory and sovereignty, "Cultural community", the initial fundamental characteristic that border

towns shared, thus was separated by the Nation State framework. In other words, this framework focused mainly on territorial integrating power. Therefore, the cultural factors, which based on shared cultural community, could be seen as influential factors that clearly made Sister City relationship-building policy in border towns appropriate for the area.

Mukdahan in Thailand and Savannakhet of the Lao PDR are border towns in the Mekong Sub-region which have built a Sister City relationship. The two communities shared common cultural characteristics in terms of history, traditions, thoughts, beliefs and rituals. Moreover, these cultural characteristics resulted in identity that reflected harmony and unity of the people in the area.

All in all, cultural factors were important factors that made Sister City relationship-building policy appropriate for the area. This was because when people shared the same identity, they would also feel that they shared a common fate and had the ability to determine their shared value. This identity came from cultural factors, and these cultural factors are the

foundations that led to the success of the implementation of the relationship-building policy that aimed to enhance better understanding between cities, which would in turn, resulted in economic, social and cultural cooperation.

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