

## **The Dynamic of Economic changes in Kengtung, Shan State, Republic of the Union of Myanmar**

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### **Abstract**

Kengtung is the major city in Shan State of Myanmar, this city plays an important role in economic and political aspect in Myanmar for a very long time. Nowadays globalization, Modernization and ASEAN economic integration causing Kengtung to urban and high economic growth such as economic growth from free trade policies that opening the opportunities for foreign investors to freely investment, change from traditional products marketing to industrial goods, located in international trade route: R3B border trade business between Thailand – Myanmar – China as well as implementing Myanmar tourism promotion policy. These are change Kengtung to a major economic city in the region and it is worth keeping an eye on economic and social development in Kengtung's future. This article has the substance to present the effect of socio-economic development in Kengtung in term of political, social and economic aspects including the future possibility to help ASEAN Economic Community to formulate economic policies, both of trade and investment as well as other economic aspects that effected to the relationship between Thailand and Myanmar.

**Keywords:** ASEAN Economic Community, Economic Development in Kengtung, Kengtung, Myanmar

### **Introduction**

After the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) from the development of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN that consist of ten member countries in Southeast Asia; Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippine, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia which promotes intergovernmental cooperation and facilitate economic, trade and investment to encourage AEC become to a single market and production base as well as freer movement of goods, services, investment and free flow of skilled labour among member countries. To support AEC plan, all country has prepared for all aspects and promote the goals of AEC to the global community as well as the expectation of AEC as a significant economic regional integration in the world. (Anon Sedkraingrai, 2015)

However, Myanmar or The Republic of Union of Myanmar has prepared for trading and foreign investment which supported AEC in all aspects; especially the concept of "Every Road to Myanmar". Since Myanmar political reforms from military government to democracy including released Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi and open door

policy to promote free trade agenda, as a result Myanmar has rapid development as well as economic significance by improving Myanmar's trade and investment strategy that lead Myanmar to stand firmly on the global stage. The decision to join in ASEAN is the important step of member countries; the belief of regional integration is to get the stability inside the country. When comparing Myanmar with others ASEAN member in terms of natural resources, cheap labour including location which Myanmar located between China and India that both countries have a great economic influence in Asia. According to these factors Myanmar is suitable country for investment, however political instability problem in Myanmar has not been seriously developed. From 2008 Myanmar pushed for the political reform to democracy and forming the government by election in 2015, as a result Myanmar given the positive changes and rapid developments in the country including join in ASEAN. (Luecha Karnmuang, 2017)

After the political reform, the government under president U Thein Sein has the economic development policy that aims to 1) Reform the economic system to a real marketing system 2) Focus on develop internal economic that help to reduce inequality, poverty and rural development 3) Macroeconomic Reforms both of trade-investment and banking 4) Accelerate to upgrade industrial sector base on agricultural sector 5) Small and medium enterprises promotion 6) Increase foreign direct investment motivation in Myanmar and set up Special Economic Zones in many areas. (Royal Thai embassy, Yangon, Myanmar, 2012) Analyst predict that Myanmar economic tendency will improve after the complete of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) which expected to expand Myanmar GDP to 7.8 per year from import and direct investment in Myanmar that lead to the demand of products and raw materials increases which major imported from China and neighboring countries. (The Secretariat of the House of Representatives, 2016) The dimensions of change are affected in Myanmar. From economic data in 2014-2015, Myanmar GDP expands to 7.8 percent and tends to increases according to the analyst prediction. (Department of International Trade Promotion, 2015)

However, Myanmar is a big country that has many important trade and investment cities, each one are unique and play a different role for example; Naypyidaw (capital city), Yangon, Mandalay, Myawaddy, Tachileik especially Kengtung; is a town in Shan State, located in northern part of Myanmar. Kengtung located on R3B<sup>1</sup> route that connect between Thailand Myanmar and China, this reason led Kengtung to become the important economic city as well as Southeast Asia economic strategy route

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<sup>1</sup> R3B route project has been constructing for international transportation between Thailand – Myanmar – China including trade and investment strategic route in ASEAN from the cooperation between Thailand – Myanmar – Laos - South China and Asian Development Bank (ADB). This project set the development paths to combine the route in this region consist of (1) R3A route between Thailand – Laos – China from Chiang Khong district in Chiang Rai province, Thailand to Bokeo province in Laos connect to Boten and Kunming, China at the end. (2) R3B route between Thailand – Myanmar – China that start from Maesai district in Chiang Rai province, Thailand to Tachileik in Myanmar pass Kengtung to Myanmar and China border in Taluo city and converge R3A route at Jinghong totally distance 380 kilometers. If R3B project are complete, it will extends the economic development in broadly (Suriyon Thunkitjanukij and Pattarachit Choopmol Gozzoli, 2013)

and political border city (Office of Industrial Economics, 2017). Such changes cannot deny that has influence to the way of life in Kengtung. This article would like to present the influence of political and economic change in Myanmar that effected to Kengtung city especially in term of ethnic, trade, transportation, trading network that are connect the dimension of people's interaction (Dujrudee Kongsuwan and Samerchai Poonswan, 2018) by review the relevance research and academics literature about economic change in Kentung Shan State, Myanmar to collect data as well as analyze the economic tendency and international relation development in Kengtung that will affected to economic sustainability in ASEAN in the future.

### **The Important of Kengtung**

Kengtung (Kyaing tong) located in Shan State (Chan State) that is the biggest state in Myanmar which a city with trade and political significance strategy of upper South East Asia. Kengtung is Tai Khun and Tai Yai city regarded as a very prosperous city the same as Lanna Chiang Mai, Thailand and Jinghong of Xishuangbanna. From the history Kentung used to be part of Thailand in World war II that the government of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram send the troops to seize Kengtung and Muaang Pan that belong to Siam from the occupy of England with help from Japan which claims that there are the similar history and ethnicity. Moreover, Thai troops also attack Taunggyi in Myanmar and Xishuangbanna but Thailand not gives a direct rule to these cities. Japan help to combine Kengtung and Muaang Pan to be part of Thailand and set a Unified former Thai Territories but after Japan lost the war, Thailand sign the contract called "the Formal Agreement for The Termination of The State of War Between Siam and Allies" lead to the end of Unified former Thai Territories occupation, after that England combine these lands to be part of Myanmar (campus-star, 2017). Kengtung has a diverse ethnic population living together; most of them are Tai Khun, Tai Yai and Myanmar as well as a lot of minority such as Akha, Padaung, Lahu, Lau etc. From the data in 2016, there are 6 million populations in Shan State which 4 hundred thousand in Kengtung (Office of Industrial Economics, 2017).

In term of economic dimension, Kengtung was trading center as well as products exchange point of Chinese and Tai Yai merchants in the past which they can go to the southern part to Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mawlamyine and to the west to Theinni (Hsenwi), Hsipaw and Mandalay, Kengtung and merchant groups were prosperous from these traditional trade route. In 19 century, England want to open trade route to south China by deliver staff to survey the route and country which recorded the story of this journey to each city in term of society and culture very precisely such as the traveling from Mawlamyine to Chiang Mai takes 17 days, from Chiang Mai to Kengtung takes 15 days and from Kengtung to Jinghong takes 5 days. During the World War II, Kengtung was a province of Kingdom of Thailand and the government has built the route to Kengtung, making the communication easier until now it has been defined as a trade route in Economic Quadrangle project between China-Myanmar-Thailand-Laos that makes the econimic prosperity in this region (Food Intelligence Center, 2015).

### **Economic Change in Kengtung**

However, this article presents the dimension of economic change in Kengtung. According to reviewing the research and related literature found that there are many reasons why these changes have occurred as follows;

#### **1) The Political reform in Union of Myanmar**

Political changes in Myanmar is the significant point that has widely impact on various changes in the country. Since 2010, after Myanmar has the first election in 20 years that is the process of democratization according to the direction of world politics. As a result, Myanmar has transformed the country and made a great change in all aspects not only the international political dimension that shown to the world as a democratic country but in economic dimension Myanmar shows the symbol and a concept based on “Capitalism” system that more appears in the city and Myanmar businesses. More than a decades, world societies know Myanmar through Western media perspectives as a former British colony and a country with a military dictatorial government as well as serious violation of human right and minorities issues. Myanmar is a big country which has populations about 60 million and enormous of natural resources that is in demand of many countries both of Asia and Western but the strict regime of dictatorial government in the past blocked the opportunities of that countries to enter and gain benefits. So, such a political reform resulting in pressure to Myanmar to open their country causing Myanmar change the whole of country especially in economic dimension to become an emerging economic country that many countries are acknowledged these changes and see Myanmar as a new treasure that have to make a relationship urgently.

However, the political reform in Myanmar resulted to the countries that used to announced sanction policy such as USA, Canada, Australia, Newzeland, Switzerland including European Union decide to relieve sanctions policy with Myanmar. USA as well as leader and minister from many countries continue to visit Myanmar to make a close relationship. In addition, developed countries like Japan offer help to Myanmar including Asian countries such as China, India and ASEAN turned towards Myanmar as a space to support the expand of investment and product market which high investment opportunities. According to the opening country, its clearly help economic growth in Myanmar as well as improving the quality of life of Myanmar population and enable to step up to play a role in world stage such as host the 27<sup>th</sup> SEA games in 2013 and appointed ASEAN chairmanship in 2014 which has proven the potential of Myanmar in world stage (Voice tv, 2013).

Political change is one of factor that drives Myanmar economic growth. It can be seen that after Myanmar release the opposition leader and political prisoners and allowing them to run for election, negotiate with minority groups and support them to participate in country development process, its show the Western to recognize Myanmar political development in democracy concept lead to relieve sanctions policy from many countries including many organizations began to provide economic and social assistance respectively. Although Myanmar still have violence in some area but the

government has taken step to resolve and allow foreign organization to investigate and help, as a result Myanmar in the present able to build credibility in the eyes of many countries about the progress of democratic reform.

## **2) Globalization and Modernization**

Cannot deny that globalization and Modernization are the main reason for economic change in Kengtung. Globalization has a broad scope of meanings and covers all dimensions caused by the interaction of humanity whether economic, social, political, legal, technology and communication including environmental system. Most of globalization of the economy mention about liberalism with the progress of communication including transportation technology resulting in the movement of goods, services and budget from the core countries of world development (Core countries) that means development countries in the western such as USA to developing countries (Semi-Periphery) and marginal countries or undeveloped countries (Periphery) respectively (Wanna Rattanapong and Anat Lakkanahatai, M.P.P.) or mention about international trade which international political and economic factors that drives the expanding of trade influence of strong countries to dominate weaker countries. Modernization is the process of evolution from traditional society to modern society in which individuals and institutions enter to the process of social change with complexity and high technology progress. When development spreads thoroughly, society around the world will have similar characteristic that is modern society with western culture and way of life, this change called the process of transition to modernity (Modernization), in addition, the social change from agricultural society to industrial society is inevitable. When society has more developed, society is not isolated but linked by the “world system” and agricultural societies began to interact with industrial society or modern society, it will accept for new social concept lead to development in accordance with that society as well as technology, new values, production model and way of life (Wiphawee Iemwarameth, M.P.P.)

However, the characteristics of globalization and economic modernization that affect to economic change in Kengtung start from creating political values information that is every country in the world have to govern in democratic as western style to avoid economic sanctions or used military force to liberate into democracy from other countries by ignoring the readiness or the way of life of people in those countries. When politics in democratic system dominated through the western information, people will choose the leader who has free trade idea or liberal concept or western economic capitalist to be a government by amend the laws to allow international companies to compete with local businesses which is weaker. Then, they have to rely on the western affected to change the economic values in Kengtung. Economic values is the exchange of goods and services with borderless world concept or free trade era as can be seen from Kengtung market in the present, it is a local market that sells various modern products such as industrial products from Thailand and China including handicraft from local communities by local wisdom production which show that Kengtung market is the

center of consumer products and distribution center of Shan state that openness to capitalism and modernity (Dujrudee Kongsuwan and Samerchai Poonswan, 2018).

In addition to the observation of economic change in Kengtung, it was found that in Kengtung city area there was the emergence of consumer goods store, telephone and electronics stores, hotel and restaurant businesses have more increased to support visitors and tourists (Phramaha Duangthip Pariyattidhari, 2014). As soon as Myanmar government opened the country, it is the positive sign to tourism around Myanmar border to be more active especially in Kengtung the capital of east Shan state that placed as a historical tourism center which older than 700 years from the history. Nowadays, there are a lot of pictures to present the tourism which has lot of Thai and foreign tourists who travel across the border between Tachilek and Kengtung more convenience, most of tourist are Thai, European and Chinese and expected that will increase at least 2 times because Myanmar government allow tourist to carry passport to enter in the country at the important border checkpoint as well as drafting the law to support foreign investment in Myanmar especially trade and tourism. Moreover, there have prepared for supporting in agricultural sectors and mine sources investment together. (Gpsteawthai, 2561)

### **3) Economic integration**

Economic integration according to regionalism is the one cause of economic changed in Kengtung since Myanmar joined in ASEAN community on 23 July 1997 in the midst of criticism about internal political and administrative problems but the Union of Myanmar is an important country in Southeast Asia in term of geographic which has borders gateway to China and India as the way to pass raw materials and products between regions as well as natural resources especially energy, which is an important factor in the industrial age and as consumer products market which is an exported product of countries in the region including low cost labor. According to all of these factors led Myanmar to play an important role and is needed in ASEAN countries to persuade Myanmar to become an ASEAN member (Office of the civil service commission, 2015).

It can be seen that after Myanmar has joined in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) there has been an agreement on the development of public utilities and transportation to support the economic growth in both of Myanmar and Shan State as well as expanding to neighboring countries border areas throughout the region with various framework of agreement such as Greater Mekong Sub region (GMS) which cooperate between 6 countries; Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and China with the purpose to encourage the expansion of industry, agriculture, trade, investment and services as well as to provide the employment and improve the living cost and transfer technology and education among them including efficient use of natural resources and help to increase the capacity and opportunity to compete in the world trade arena by monetary supported from Asian Development Bank (ADB) in the development of various basic public utilities especially transportation route including

electrical systems, telecommunications, environment, and law which directly affected to economic and social changed in Kengtung (Public administration Division, 2015).

### **Problem, Trend of change and Future challenges of Kengtung**

The changes that occurred in Kengtung resulting in many changes especially in the economy that has a tendency to improve and facilitate investment sector. Since 2010 political and economic reform in Myanmar has resulted in 3 main areas; first, political reform causes problems of instability and political conflicts especially with ethnic forces in Myanmar was declined. Second, the restoring relationship with western countries in better way resulting they return to invest in Myanmar and give the economic assistance. Third, the reforming of trade investment and financial regulations including to promote foreign investment policy that giving more confidence and possibility to the investors to invest in Myanmar. Nowadays, Directorate of Investment and Company Administration (DICA) legislate foreign investment laws by providing benefits and tax deductions to those who enter to invest in Myanmar such as tax deductions for 5 years, exemption or reduction income tax of profits from newly invest. In case of production to export will receive a reduction of income tax for 50% of export profits including tax exemption or reduction on the import of machinery and equipment that necessary for commercial production (Department of International Trade Promotion, 2015). From all of these three sides will cause to expand the investment both of public and private sectors, infrastructure development and the development of the country's fiscal and financial systems higher rate than the past that will affect to expand the internal market and consumption. In this section, the author would like to explain about the impact of economic development and changes in Kengtung as a whole that affects to local people in term of social conditions, the way of life and culture as well as trends and challenges that will occur in the future especially the tendency of the relationship between Kengtung and Thailand which has the details as followed;

### **Problems of economic change in Kengtung**

From reviewing the related literature and research can be seen that due to the political change in Myanmar including the integration of the ASEAN Community causing the change in Kengtung; the problem comes from social and cultural changes in Keng Tung, Shan State that able to summarize as followed; (Phramaha Duangthip Pariyattidhari, 2014)

Family problems found that the income is inconsistent with the expenses due to the economic changes, local workers have to work hard. The relationships in the family has less closely connected and increase divorced rates, children and the elderly are abandoned with nannies and nursing homes, children addicted to the internet and games, imitation behavior, drugs lead to the conflict and broken family.

Economic problems found that the focus on economic development and foreign investment to create prosperity in the country but Myanmar government is forgetting the poverty and inequality problem between rich and poor. After opening the country,

Myanmar changes in the better way but there is not guarantee of the security and stability in public sector because the rapid change does not relevance with the education system that still lack of development including the distribution of benefits from opening country are unequal resulting the rapid expansion of wealthy elite in Myanmar such as having Myanmar people with assets worth from \$ 30 million up to 40 people and is expected to increase to 68% to 307 people within year 2022, which is rich from real estate holdings while another 26% of the Myanmar people live in poverty 75% without electricity national income average 800 - 1,000 dollars per year, or around 24,000-30,000 baht (Rattachai Muangngam, 2017). For this reason, the wealth and benefits of economic growth in the future will gather in only a limited group of people. Moreover, there was a lack of work problem which is the number of work is not balanced with the number of people in the area as well as lack of working skills and the labor cost is still lower than the standard that is not enough to the cost of living caused to people in the area become to migrant workers and also found that local products are not modern therefore its unable to expand the market.

Social and cultural problems found that traditional houses and architectures in Kengtung are change to modern styles as well as the opinion and values become more materialism lead to traditional identity problems. From the old city, there was no urban planning and transportation management found that in the northeast of Kengtung is a newly built town during the British colonial period in Myanmar that the settlement of the new urban area has a systematic urban planning as well as all transportation routes are laid out in a straight line and symmetrical which support the expansion of the city in the future. For the electrical systems in Kengtung is instability due to the limit of electricity usage causing to the power failure at night. Moreover, Kengtung still lack of facilities especially mobile phone and internet (Pathumporn Keawkham, 2012). Nowadays, economic development in Kengtung brought more modernity into the city such as traffic, communication, liberalization of communication, smart phones and the internet which is a global trend to watch the direction about the effect to the society and culture of Kengtung.

It can be seen that such changed are characteristics gradually, it is a natural adaptation process that helps society to survive continuously and long standing. The changes in various parts of society occurred in different time and affected to others part both of positive and negative side such as the rapid of population growth, urbanization, environmental, new inventions, cultural production, and social organization is more complicated causing inequality within society including changes that occur in daily life resulted to Kengtung society and culture develop from primitive society to modern society.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

Kengtung develop into a modern society including located on the R3B route help Kengtung to play an important trade role in the region as well as the advantages in the abundance of both natural resources and tourism resources, the buildings and



architecture in the city are charming and attractive if it lack of conservation or lack of suitable infrastructure management will cause of enormous damage to the important tourism places especially in Nong Tung area and when it is necessary to expand the infrastructure such as the road or transportation network will have a direct impact on the conservation of ancient sites that are the main tourist attractions of Kengtung (Suriyon Thunkitjanukij and Pattarachit Choopol Gozzoli , 2013)

However, although Myanmar and Kengtung economic is likely continuously growth and attracting foreign investment but from the author's perspective, it is found that Myanmar still faces three challenges that may affect domestic development as following;

First, Political instability; the future of Myanmar's politics remains unclear and predicted that although Myanmar has a new government from election, but military still maintain the political power. In addition, another political challenge is to resolve the conflicts with various ethnic groups to create political stability including open the opportunities for minority to participate in the formulation of national reform policies, If implemented efficiently will drive sustainable economic development, reduce poverty and economic inequality as well as raise the standard cost of living of Myanmar population.

Second, strengthening competitiveness; from the 2014 – 2015 Global Competitiveness Report, Myanmar is ranked 134<sup>th</sup> out of 144 countries. Analysts have commented that nowadays Myanmar is a country that uses natural resources, labor and agriculture to drive economic growth If Myanmar wants to move to Middle - Income Country Myanmar have to economic restructuring by strengthening the manufacturing and service sectors, and formulating strategies to improve the agricultural sector.

Third, obstacles and difficulties are in business investments. Although Myanmar government has tried to adjust the investment regulations but foreign investors still face to the difficulties in doing business such as land prices and office rents in the major economic cities are very high especially in Yangon, Mandalay. Moreover, Myanmar's economy still mainly uses cash and the electronic money system has not been developed to support the investors. Therefore Myanmar government have to focus on the investments in infrastructure development system, resolve the investment problems and obstacles including carry out economic reforms continuously (Manager online, 2012) to increase the confidence for foreign investors, set up a production base, international trade and expand the customer base which has purchasing power that is likely to increase in the future.

In term of relations with Thailand, there are continue to develop the relationship in the concept of “Sister City” between Chiang Mai and Kengtung that connected by car route. In the future, there will be joint development of air transportation systems by open the airlines with direct flights between Chiang Mai – Kengtung because it can connect to Lar city, China border more easily. The analyst believe that in the future, Kengtung is ready to be a tourist center because it has the potential along with the natural tourism and history attractions (Oknation, 2015). Moreover, Kengtung is Thai

products market, most of Myanmar people believe in quality and prefer to buy the same product again and believe in brand royalty if that products are favored in the market. In addition, Thai products that exported to Taunggyi also distributed to other major cities in Myanmar such as Mandalay and Naypyitaw. However, products from China are considered as an important competitor and will gain more market share, therefore Thailand should create Trade network or Trade Alliance with Shan state both of the public and private sectors in order to maintain and increase market share (Ministry of Commerce, 2017). There are still interesting businesses that Thailand interested to invest in Kengtung or Myanmar such as tourism and hotels, building material industry, textile and garment industry (Thailand Overseas Investment Center, 2016).

According to Myanmar become to a member of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the large of Myanmar market that is similar to Thai market allowing Thailand to use Myanmar and Kengtung as the gateway to export Thai products to the third countries including base for producing goods to export in the future. Moreover, the Plans for opening the Thai-Myanmar permanent border are increasing the distribution border trade to Myanmar market. Therefore, Thai entrepreneurs should expedite to learn the feasibility how to expand the business in Myanmar which will grow a lot in the future which is a good relationship trend between the two countries.

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