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# CHINA'S WATER DIPLOMACY: XISHUANGBANNA CASE STUDY<sup>1</sup>

**Richard Grünwald – Caicai Geng – Wenling Wang\***

## **ABSTRACT**

Xishuangbanna presents one of eight China's Autonomous Prefectures in Yunnan Province and an important trans-Asian hub at the Myanmar-Laos borders. Apart from rich ethnic diversity and a well-preserved tropical ecosystem, it is also the only place from where China shares the actual hydrological water data with downstream countries on the Mekong River since November 2020. As a part of China's water diplomacy, Xishuangbanna presents both a geostrategic instrument and a fountain of inspiration for non-traditional regional cooperation. In the presented study, we used the constructivist discourse analysis to re-interpret the "Lancang-Mekong Spirit", a narrative emphasising the community of shared destiny, common interests and solidarity among Mekong countries. Data has been collected from the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation and Conflict Database, which records over 3000 water-related events in the Mekong River Basin between 1990 to 2023. While emphasizing the historical, geographic and political proximity with other Mekong countries positively facilitate China's foreign policy image in Southeast Asia, the success of the China's water diplomacy may be limited without accountable inclusion of Yunnan Province specifics. The findings can be

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replicable in other case studies on China's non-traditional foreign policy strategies.

**Key words:** Xishuangbanna, Lancang-Mekong Spirit, China Foreign Policy, Water Diplomacy, Geopolitics, Citizen Science

## **Introduction**

China's water diplomacy presents one of the foreign policy tools for addressing transboundary water issues (Zhang – Li, 2020). So far, China's water diplomacy has been mainly interpreted in terms of dam development and water data sharing (Grünwald – Wang – Feng, 2022, Freeman, 2017). Yet, less attention is paid to the role of the Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture in China's water diplomacy, a small borderline region between China, Myanmar and Laos that transformed from a popular tourist hotspot (Lu, 2021, Yang – Wall, 2008) into a geostrategic gateway in Southeast Asia (Hanson, 2019, Hansen – Svaverud, 2018). While Xishuangbanna benefits from geographical and historical proximity with neighbouring countries, we claim that Xishuangbanna is both a geostrategic instrument of China's water diplomacy and a fountain of inspiration for non-traditional regional cooperation.

The purpose of this paper is to examine what is the role of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in China's foreign policy and discuss various challenges for deepening China's regional collaboration with Mekong countries. First, we briefly outlined China's foreign policy strategies and described the evolution of the China's water cooperation in the Mekong River Basin. Second, we analysed Xishuangbanna's geopolitical aspects and clarified the source of ongoing Mekong water disputes. Third, we reviewed China's political rhetoric towards non-traditional water cooperation. For this purpose, we used the constructivist discourse analysis and re-interpreted the Lancang-Mekong Spirit, a narrative emphasising the community of shared destiny, common interests and solidarity among Mekong countries. The data were collected upon the multi-content analysis of official and secondary sources regarding the Xishuangbanna's water-related events and double-checked with the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation and Conflict Database (LMCCD), a comprehensive compendium of water-related events between six Mekong states in the last 32 years (1990-2022).

## **1. China's foreign policy and water diplomacy**

China's water diplomacy presents one of the subsections of China's foreign policy, which facilitates the water dialogue and enlarges various benefits of the

shared waters (Keskinen – Salminen – Haapala, 2021, Kittikhoun – Staubli, 2018, Biba, 2018). Unlike China's Peace and Development Strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other economically-driven initiatives advancing China's influence in foreign countries (e.g., Deepak, 2018, Zhao 2016), China's water diplomacy is more open to non-traditional cooperation (Grünwald – Wang – Feng, 2022, Gauttam – Singh – Kaur, 2020, Grünwald, 2020). This trait can be demonstrated on the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), an intergovernmental initiative introduced by China in November 2014 (MOFA PRC, 2014). Followed by the Sanya Declaration, which was adopted during the 1st LMC Leaders' Meeting in March 2016 (LMC, 2016), China's ambitions went from tacit proclamations to tangible actions (MOFA PRC, 2020a). Apart from re-considering the Chinese development projects (Wei, 2017) and strengthening regional collaboration (Middleton – Allouche, 2016), China's government began sharing more hydrological data (LMWCIP, 2020a) and highlighting the importance of the Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture in terms of food security (XBG, 2018) and water security<sup>2</sup> (MRC, 2019). This approach is called the *Lancang-Mekong Spirit*, which emphasizes the historical legacy and pragmatism of the Mekong water cooperation (Kittikhoun – Staubli, 2018, Backer, 2007).

However, despite China's determination to facilitate transboundary water cooperation, there is a persistent lack of effective communication, incomplete datasets from Upper-Lancang hydro-meteorological stations, and delayed water notifications (Grünwald – Wang – Feng, 2022, MRC, 2021, Biba, 2018). In addition, due to the existing territorial disputes, unsettled compliance with the international water law and unprecedented economic growth, many observers raise concerns about the actual benefits of the LMC (Biba 2021, Deka 2021, Matthews – Motta, 2017). On the other hand, considering China's strong willingness to secure the LMC early harvest projects during the coronavirus pandemic (MOFA PRC, 2020b, 2020c) and scientific mindset towards politicisation of mainstream dams (Grünwald – Feng – Wang, 2021), the LMC already presents a step forward in China's foreign policy. To prove that, we used the constructivist discourse analysis (Fox – Sneddon, 2019) and re-interpreted four key values of the Lancang-Mekong Spirit such as shared future, shared prosperity, shared burden and solidarity. While there can be found several articles discussing the geopolitical impact of the Yunnan Province on Southeast Asia

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<sup>2</sup> Water Splashing festival represents a religious event celebrating the Dai New Year during which Chinese hydropower dams release more water to support water flow in downstream countries.

(e.g., Rousseau – Habich –Sobiegalla, 2021, Henning et al., 2016), there are virtually no research papers on Xishuangbanna.

## **2. Present and future of the Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture**

### **2.1 Brief overview**

Xishuangbanna is a small mountainous area located in Southwest China. The prefecture is divided into three counties – Jinghong (景洪), Mengla (勐腊) and Menghai (勐海), which host over 1,3 million people (XBG, 2022a). Until the 1990s, the Xishuangbanna was highly underdeveloped and served as a military buffer zone during the Cold War. The situation changed in the early 1990s when the Mohan-Boten economic cooperation zone, a joint intergovernmental initiative facilitating China-Laos cross-border trade (Wang, 2018, XG, 2015). Followed by the Lancang-Mekong Navigation Channel Improvement Project (JCCCN, 2015), Yunnan hydropower development (Henning et al. 2016), eco-tourism (Bergman, 1998) and other BRI projects, the Xishuangbanna evolved into a critical geostrategic hub in Southeast Asia. However, due to the geographical proximity with the Golden Triangle<sup>3</sup>, many Chinese multi-stakeholders have been reported for supporting the ethnic rebels (Steinberg – Wan, 2012), and financing controversial infrastructure projects (Sims, 2017, Molle – Foran – Käkönen, 2009: 130) and undermining the effectiveness of China-Myanmar peaceful talks (Sun, 2017).

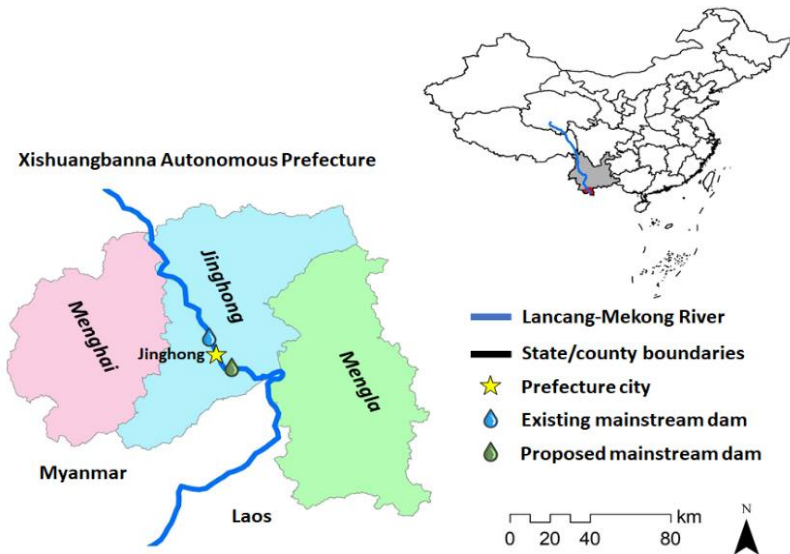
On the other hand, it was mainly the physical access (Li, 2007) and poverty alleviation campaigns (Sturgeon, 2012) along with former chairman Hu Jintao's ecological civilisation framework (Zeng, 2019) and other China's foreign policies that promoted eco-tourism safety and sustainability (Grünwald – Kouřil, 2018). Another unique aspect presents the water resources management and Xishuangbanna's indigenous water practices. Compared to the China's Confucian perspective ensuring equilibrium through the infrastructure projects such as mainstream dams, dykes and irrigation canals, the Xishuangbanna's

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<sup>3</sup> An infamous organized crime hotspot between Myanmar, Laos and Thailand for drug smuggling, gambling, human trafficking, illegal wildlife trade and other illicit activities (Chouvy, 2013). Yet, unlike the Golden Triangle which experiences the lack of central control and great challenge for all border patrols, Xishuangbanna indicates significantly lower rate of criminal activity due to the high legal liability, advanced surveillance monitoring and information exchanges between law enforcement units in the borderlands (XBG, 2019, 2016).

Buddhist-Taoist approaches stress the need for environmental adaptation and reverence for all life (Ball, 2017: 293-294). Such features can be well-illustrated in the Dai water laws, Hani rice terraces and human-elephant preservation programs (XTBG, 2022, Hammond et al. 2015) that significantly differ from China's dam development, a main source of transboundary water dispute between China and downstream countries since 2003 (Grünwald – Wang – Feng, 2022). To address these concerns, China's government in April 2010 decided to postpone and cancel the construction of several hydropower dams in Xishuangbanna (Yeophantong, 2014). The Xishuangbanna's significance was also reiterated in November 2015 when the 1<sup>st</sup> Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Foreign Minister's Meeting was held symbolically in Jinghong city (LMC, 2015). In addition, similarly like Beijing, Kunming or Dali, the Xishuangbanna has long cultural history up to 3<sup>rd</sup> Century (Wu – Peng, 2014: 17). Combined with the colourful Buddhist architecture and strong religious atmosphere, the Xishuangbanna present an archetype for non-traditional cooperation.

**Figure 1:** Illustrative map of Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture



Source: adapted by authors

**Figure 2:** Jinghong city and Lancang-Mekong River



Source: photographed by the author, June 2019

## 2.2 China's water diplomacy with Xishuangbanna's traits

Xishuangbanna has a special status in China's water diplomacy. First, the LMC benefits from Xishuangbanna's complex ethnic identity and shared cultural history, which was much closer to Southeast Asia than China until 1949 (Sturgeon, 2012: 116). In fact, among 13 indigenous ethnic minorities living in Xishuangbanna, there are many transnational ethnic groups with similar traditions (Morton, 2013) which provides a solid basis for China's water diplomacy. Also, thanks to Xishuangbanna's historical background and cultural proximity, it fully aligns with the China's water diplomacy narrative stressing the *community of shared future* (LMC, 2016). Such efforts can be traced to various youth cultural exchange camps (Xinhua, 2019), educational scholarships (LMWCIP, 2020b), village chiefs forums (Zhang – Li, 2020) and other inter-cultural events. Second, the LMC uses the Xishuangbanna as a showcase of an exceptional pro-green development that could be replicated in other riparian states. Apart from the medialisation of wild elephants, tropical rainforests and rich biodiversity hotspots to attract tourists from all over the world (Hammond et al. 2015), it is the cash-crop-oriented agriculture, deforestation and other socio-economic challenges that negatively affect the basin development. While the *community of shared prosperity* narrative mainly highlights the need for feasible and meaningful solutions, it is common values and compatibility of national goals that overcome

different political systems and cultural animosities in the long term (Zeng, 2019).

Third, the LMC shows determination to *navigate through difficult times* (MOFA PRC, 2022a). This shared burden narrative not only refers to China's mask diplomacy (Gautam – Singh – Kaur, 2020) and ongoing COVID-19 economic recovery (MOFA PRC, 2020b, 2020c), but also to the waterway safety and meaningful water dialogue referencing on the occasional armed conflicts in the Golden Triangle (Erickson – Strange, 2014: 115-116) and Mekong Massacre in October 2011 (Grünwald – Kouřil, 2018, West, 2018). A similar behavioural change can also be identified in terms of the growing scientific interpellations (Grünwald – Wang – Feng, 2022, Grünwald – Feng – Wang, 2021), addressing data inconsistencies between water monitoring mechanisms (Mekong Institute, 2019) and conducting a joint study on changing patterns of the hydrological conditions (LMWCIP, 2022). The last key LMC aspects represent *mutual respect* and *solidarity*. While there are many similarities with China-Myanmar Pauk-Phaw cooperation (Tingshu – Meyer, 2020), China's neighbourhood policy (Takahara, 2012) and other strategic partnerships cementing the existing relations (Daza-Clark, 2020, Chheang, 2018), the LMC strives for the benefits beyond the river and reciprocity. Besides motivating the downstream countries to build collective leadership (SCPRC, 2020), facilitating tailor-made regional collaboration (Li – Li, 2019) and regaining trust through empathy towards downstream national aims (Busburat, 2018), it is the Xishuangbanna's understanding of water as more than commons or commodity (Ma, 2022) that embraces the LMC soft-power.

### **2.3 Challenges for China's non-traditional water diplomacy**

While Xishuangbanna has the potential to become a positive example of China's water diplomacy, several challenges need to be put into consideration. First, despite Xishuangbanna highly benefits from the historical legacy of the ancient Tea Horse Road<sup>4</sup> (Singley, 2010) and strong international ties with downstream countries<sup>5</sup> (Zeng, 2019), there is a cyclical pattern of “letting go” and “tightening up” reforms that stimulate the relations between central and local governments (Kostka – Nahm, 2017: 568). Such trend can be traced to

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<sup>4</sup> Since Tang dynasty (618-907), the Xishuangbanna's tea (so-called Puer tea) became world famous commodity facilitating the cross-border and global trade.

<sup>5</sup> Confederation of twelve political entities and four loosely associated Tai kingdoms in late 1200s – Kengtung Kingdom (today's Shan State in Myanmar), Lan Zhang Kingdom (today's north-western Laos), Lan Na kingdom (today's northern Thailand) and Sipsong Panna (today's Xishuangbanna in China).



marginalization of the citizen science knowledge over the politically acceptable botany and ecology<sup>6</sup> (Sturgeon, 2014: 383-384). However, despite the ambitions to internationalize Xishuangbanna's science, it was the politicization of the COVID-19 research and growing travel restrictions since early 2020 that often discourage foreign researchers from doing research in this area (Cohen, 2022).

Second, Xishuangbanna water infrastructure development is widely unacknowledged by foreign countries. Despite the plethora of Chinese literature regarding the transboundary environmental impacts on the sustainability of the Mekong River (Grünwald – Wang – Feng, 2022) and regular reports from the River Chief System (XBG, 2022b), most of the Chinese research inputs remain in Chinese, which inhibits water knowledge co-production. Besides the language barrier and underdeveloped scientific marketing<sup>7</sup>, there is an issue of trust towards Chinese statistics and growing speculations over Lower Lancang tributaries<sup>8</sup>. The water data in Asia are historically very sensitive (Gleick, 1993: 98), which is why the LMCWIP provides only basic water information from Yunjinghong (允景洪) and Man'an (曼安) hydro-meteorological stations (LMWCIP, 2020a). Although better water data transparency can be improved by closer collaboration between water monitoring mechanisms (notably the Mekong River Commission and Mekong Dam Monitor) and including Upper Lancang River Stations into the LMWCIP datasets, it is the centralised LMC model and precautionary political measures<sup>9</sup> that push back the Xishuangbanna's government and downstream countries from greater responsibility for the transboundary water governance.

Third, Xishuangbanna has a strong connection to land and nature that may not be fully compatible with the expansion of the LMC hard-power projects. Apart from extensive rubber plantations and other large-scale farmlands developed

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<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Thai Baan and other citizen science initiatives in downstream countries, the public engagement in the water dialogue is very limited.

<sup>7</sup> The LMC research findings are predominantly interpreted by natural scientists. While the degree of scientific information for laic audience varies, it is the retrospective validation by third parties, closed-door consultations and scarce research commentaries in public media that limit the awareness over the LMC.

<sup>8</sup> In media, most of the speculations on Lower Lancang tributaries in Xishuangbanna are referring to Luosuo River (罗梭江) or Buyuan (补远江) River infrastructure projects.

<sup>9</sup> Unlike in western countries, China's government pay strong attention to the personal responsibility for the low-level political decisions, information accuracy, cross-institutional validation and following other strict bureaucratic procedures to ensure the hierarchy of command and consistency of China's foreign policy.

since the 1950s, which have resulted in increasing urban area temperature, pollution and decreasing relative humidity in Xishuangbanna (Ling et al. 2022, Sturgeon – Menzies – Schillo, 2014), it is the rapid urbanisation (Lu, 2021) and over-utilisation of natural resources (Yang – Wall, 2008) that put the Xishuangbanna's cultural value of holy forests<sup>10</sup> at stake. In addition, considering China's Ecological Civilization safeguarding the local ecosystems without reducing economic growth (Wen et al. 2012), there is a growing dilemma on how to calculate the value of the intangible cultural heritage (Zeng, 2019: 15) and how to deal with migrating elephants in Xishuangbanna (Campos-Arceiz et al. 2021). Therefore, without framing the core values of the Lancang-Mekong spirit of cooperation, the gilt of "Xishuangbanna" remain abstract.

### 3. Lancang-Mekong Spirit

#### 3.1 China's water diplomacy narratives

The Mekong River is often interpreted as a new geopolitical battleground between China and other foreign donors. Yet, it is also considered as the most successful example of international water cooperation between different political systems of all time (Wolf et al. 2007). In recent years, China's water diplomacy in the Mekong River Basin has been criticised for various reasons (Biba 2021, Deka 2021, Matthews – Motta, 2017). Yet, it is especially the LMC marketing that overshadows the positive achievements in transboundary water dialogue. So far, the LMWCIP has issued nine water notifications which were either delayed, too short or inconclusive (LMWCIP, 2020a). While part of the problem presents the insufficient number of LMC officers and China's bureaucratic rigidity, there is a multi-level ideational dispute between China's and Xishuangbanna's mindsets.

First, China's government prioritises solid development, strategic planning and tangible mutual benefits upon the concept of *face*<sup>11</sup> to ensure the *community of shared future* (MOFA PRC, 2022b). In contrast, the references to Xishuangbanna invoke the continuity of local traditions similar to downstream countries and spontaneous performance, an aspect that can hardly be achieved without pioneering new modes of cooperation (MOFA PRC, 2022a). Second, China's government built a *community of shared prosperity* by accelerating the

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<sup>10</sup> Many of the sacred forests, holly hills and other ritual places provide wildlife habitat and other ecosystem services beyond religious purposes.

<sup>11</sup> One of the most prominent moral concepts highlighting the mutual respect, reputation, social prestige and honour in inter-personal relationships.

speed of all-round development, sharing more hydrological data and legislatively anchoring the international water law, particularly the principle of reciprocity (Middleton – Devlaeminck, 2020). While this approach is highly valid by reflecting the pressure from the international community on timely water notifications, it is the degree of fulfilment and level of enjoyment from gaining new experience<sup>12</sup> that is more persuasive than any list of achievements. Third, China's government often describes itself as the guardian of the basin development who can *navigate [downstream countries] through difficult times*. While securing the LMC funds and providing medical supplies during the COVID-19 is admirable (MOFA PRC, 2020b, 2020c), it is the silence over the looming water crisis that feeds the uncertainty from the future (Grünwald – Wang – Feng, 2022). Xishuangbanna's philosophy, on the other hand, stresses the value of friendship, where any constructive advice and casual talk showing curiosity facilitates meaningful water dialogue and critical thinking outside of the box.

Four, China's government demonstrates *mutual respect* and *solidarity* by enlarging the number of multi-stakeholders and compatible non-traditional cooperation sectors (LMECC, 2020). So far, the promotion of the people-to-people exchanges among LMC countries has been driven by various trans-Asian tourism plans (MOFA PRC, 2022c) and China's ecological civilisation visualising the future as a paradise without imminent threats and harmonious collaboration among nations (Hanson, 2019, Hansen – Svaverud, 2018). Yet, it is the compensation mechanisms occurred during the human-elephant conflicts (Li et al. 2018), joint infectious diseases preventions (Wen – Li – Li, 2020), a re-creation of the indigenous water practices (Ma, 2022, Hammond et al. 2015) and other Xishuangbanna's adaptation programs that transform any challenge into the new opportunity for grass-root development. Among other positive traits of China's water diplomacy belong the technical tours over Chinese mainstream dams (MRC, 2010), enhanced information sharing on regular basis (Grünwald – Feng – Wang, 2021) and numerous scholarships for downstream young water scientists (LMWCIP, 2021).

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<sup>12</sup> Xishuangbanna's traditional way of life of putting the convenience over time needs. While this slow life approach (慢生活) may not be fully suitable for highly progressive China's water diplomacy, it may extend the time for advancing ecological civilization and other vital China's foreign policy strategies.

### **3.2 Yunnan province specifics**

Our data show that China's water diplomacy is evolving. Yet, despite numerous LMC communication and technical shortcomings (Grünwald – Wang – Feng, 2022), it is questionable if Xishuangbanna model is fully replicable and desirable for China's foreign policy. First, Yunnan province experienced several cross-border incidents such as the Mekong Massacre in 2011 or Myanmar's accidental bombing of Lincang in 2015 (Lim, 2015) and transboundary water disputes over the water infrastructure projects (Grünwald – Wang – Feng, 2022). This includes the Lancang-Mekong Navigation Channel Improvement Project which was jointly postponed by China and Thailand in February 2020 due to the socio-economic feasibility and environmental concerns (Lim, 2020). Second, Yunnan's landlocked border status and cultural background is historically adapted to status quo rather than internationalization. In fact, many Yunnan communities may not even want to step out of their hometowns nor facilitate further cross-border collaboration despite Yunnan's geostrategic advantages that could boost China's foreign policy even more (Summers, 2019: 19). Finally, the COVID-19 travel restrictions proved how difficult is to ensure the mobility and border security. Despite the large part of the Yunnan province has fuzzy boundaries, the non-security cross-border cooperation has virtually frozen (Plümmer, 2022). This has significantly affected the Xishuangbanna and other popular spots such as Mohan-Boten economic cooperation zone and other economic corridor projects in Southeast Asia. Therefore, more research needs to be done to address the current dynamics of the post-COVID economic reconstruction and compare contemporary China's water diplomacy approaches in other international river basins.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

China's water diplomacy has made significant progress since 2016 (Grünwald, 2020). It evolved from promoting rapid infrastructure development and solely economic projects to creating a new information platform (LMWCIP) and taking self-reflection over the controversial joint projects (Lim, 2020, Yeophantong, 2014). Yet, the real dilemma for China's foreign policy presents the LMC performance and accountable inclusion of the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture into China's water diplomacy. As we demonstrated on the four values of the Lancang-Mekong Spirit, Xishuangbanna is both a geostrategic instrument of China's water diplomacy and a fountain of inspiration

for non-traditional regional cooperation. Yet, despite the vast opportunities of advancing China's water diplomacy via Xishuangbanna, there are many challenges that hold back the full potential of the LMC. Whereas a community of shared future and shared prosperity emphasize the need for careful planning and enlarging pie of mutual benefits, the vision for navigating through difficult times, as well as ensuring solidarity, highlight the intangible values and non-reciprocal way of thinking that are fully complementary with China's foreign policy values. Nevertheless, despite most of the media attention is paid to the actual impact of Chinese mainstream dams on the river (Grünwald – Wang – Feng, 2022), it is the unacknowledged development and cumulative environmental impacts of Xishuangbanna's agritourist-oriented economy that may serve as a new trigger for future water disputes. On the other hand, we believe that Xishuangbanna's authenticity, spontaneity, curiosity and joy for slow development may positively enhance the replicability of China's water diplomacy and improve China's foreign policy image beyond Southeast Asia.

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