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DR PARAMA SINHA PALIT  
INDIA'S EFFORTS TO FEND OFF  
CHINESE ACADEMIC 'INFLUENCE'

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Statue of St. Francis Xavier, Basilica of Bom Jesus which consecrated in May 1605, Old Goa, India.  
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Mark Ulyseas  
Publisher/Editor  
[markulyseas@liveencounters.net](mailto:markulyseas@liveencounters.net)

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## CONTRIBUTORS

DR PARAMA SINHA PALIT

DR NAMRATA GOSWAMI

DR ASHOK SHARMA

DR BIBHU PRASAD ROUTRAY

MARK ULYSEAS

DO BICH THUY



Dr Parama Sinha Palit is Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. She was a Cooperative Monitoring Center (CMC) Fellow with the Sandia National Laboratories, the US Department of Energy and a Consultant with the CRDF Global, USA. She is also the author of the 'Analysing China's Soft Power Strategy and Comparative Indian Initiatives'. The views expressed are entirely personal to the author and does not reflect, in any way, those of the organisation she is affiliated with.

\* [The blog reflects findings from a detailed research report, 'China's "influence operations" in academia, Confucius Institutes and Soft Power: Strategic Responses of India, Bangladesh and Nepal' done by the author for the Sandia National Laboratory, Department of Energy, US, in 2021.]

## DR PARAMA SINHA PALIT

### INDIA'S EFFORTS TO FEND OFF CHINESE ACADEMIC 'INFLUENCE' \*

China's intent to re-shape the Western-led international system, along with its revisionist tendencies over the last decade or so, has raised both concern and apprehension within the international community. In particular, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) attempts to undermine academic freedom in foreign universities, employing both state and nonstate agents under its control, have recently emerged as a primary threat to academic institutions worldwide. The Party's penetration of civil society and use of foreign nationals (including academics) for influence operations has been unprecedented. Beijing's efforts to develop overseas influence have included shaping the narrative of a 'discourse power' via a more forceful version of soft power, whereby the Party is seeking to train foreign academic community on 'sensitive' issues like Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong *from a Chinese perspective*. China's pressure tactics, including intimidation, have also been increasingly employed to harass and coax senior academics and students, perceived to be critical of the Party or prone to discussing 'sensitive' topics, towards more accommodating views. Fully understanding and countering these operations and activities will be challenging for most of the world's major democracies.

Additionally, Confucius Institutes (CIs) affiliated with foreign universities – designed as China's cultural ambassadors under Beijing's soft power strategy – are now employed to advance the CCP's political interests abroad. The institutes, initially mandated to promote Chinese cultural exports across the world through specific focus on Mandarin language and cultural engagements, have gradually begun assuming propagandist roles, underpinning their connect with the Chinese state's influence-embedding machinery. Mature democracies with academic freedom and cultures of free flowing debates and discussions on sensitive issues of global and national importance have expressed concern over the interference of CIs in their university campuses and have become increasingly suspicious of their mandate.



Dr Parama Sinha Palit



India, though, provides an example of a country ‘ahead of the curve’ in responding to Chinese influence in its academia. In 2013, five years before the Doklam border standoff, an article titled ‘Chinese Intelligence: From a Party Outfit to Cyber Warriors’ highlighted efforts by China’s Ministry of State Security to penetrate Indian government agencies and higher education. This article underscored India’s inherent strategic distrust of China’s motives and ambitions. Such distrust stems from India’s historical suspicion of China and may have helped better prepare New Delhi to protect its academia from an aggressive CCP influence.

For example, the United States (US) designated the CI US Center (CIUS) a ‘foreign mission’ of the Chinese government and identified it for its role as ‘an entity advancing Beijing’s global propaganda and malign influence campaign on US campuses and K-12 classrooms’. Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom (UK) have been similarly encountering problems with the CIs. Posing as ‘[extensions of the Chinese government that censor certain topics and perspectives in course materials on political grounds, and use hiring practices that take political loyalty into consideration](#)’, CIs in most of the developed world are seen to be threatening the global academia.

The reliance of Western universities on incoming Chinese students and Chinese research funding has facilitated Beijing’s imposition of its agenda on these campuses. At the same time, CIs – visibly prominent in the US, Australia, Canada, the UK, and Germany – act as a propaganda arm of the CCP. CIs in these countries, do not hesitate to censure certain topics deemed counter to the Party’s interests. The CCP also resorts to punitive actions such as [blacklisting](#) faculty who discuss sensitive issues while [retaliating with countersanctions](#) when they refuse to comply. There have also been several instances when Chinese nationals, posing as university researchers in foreign universities, have [stolen sensitive technology](#) to share with Chinese companies like the Huawei, which has deep ties with the Party. The chairman of Harvard’s chemistry department, charged with lying about a lucrative relationship with a Chinese talent recruitment program, was also [arrested](#) by FBI agents in his office. Another preferred method of intelligence gathering by China has been through joint research centres or funding research projects. Beijing had [15,623 such collaborations in 2019](#) with UK, making China, Britain’s biggest research partner after the US and Germany, and the fastest growing partnership.

India, though, provides an example of a country ‘[ahead of the curve](#)’ in responding to Chinese influence in its academia. In 2013, five years before the [Doklam border standoff](#), an [article](#) titled ‘Chinese Intelligence: From a Party Outfit to Cyber Warriors’ highlighted efforts by China’s Ministry of State Security to penetrate Indian government agencies and higher education. This article underscored India’s inherent strategic distrust of China’s motives and ambitions. Such distrust stems from India’s historical suspicion of China and may have helped better prepare New Delhi to protect its academia from an aggressive CCP influence.

The Galwan crisis now not only shapes India’s new strategic perspective in which Beijing is considered a clear and an abiding adversary but it also establishes the Line of Actual Control (LAC) as violence-prone even with demilitarization efforts. Their bilateral relationship has declined to such an extent that China’s soft power tools, especially education, now face an intense scrutiny in India. The Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of External Affairs have both cautioned Indian colleges and universities against any kind of academic cooperation with Chinese counterparts without prior government permission. Restrictions have also been applied to existing agreements, which cannot become operational until both the Ministries approve them.

Beginning with the 1962 war with China to recent tensions like Doklam in 2017 and the [Galwan crisis](#) in 2020 – which also marked the deadliest incident in 45 years – a history of conflict between India and China has deepened mistrust between the two countries. While during the Doklam stand-off, the [security establishment had discovered](#) the Chinese-owned UC Browser filtering certain news on Android handsets in India to shape perceptions and outcomes, the Galwan showcased Beijing’s use of ‘[unorthodox weapons](#)’. Both are typical examples of Digital Age classic information warfare which will only become more visible and deadlier in the future. There were also [evidences](#) suggesting that contents, critical of China, were being taken down on one of the banned apps while other repressive incidents during the stand-off were being toned down to present a distinct narrative in line with the CCP’s agenda. The Galwan crisis now not only shapes [India’s new strategic perspective](#) in which Beijing is considered a clear and an abiding adversary but it also establishes the Line of Actual Control (LAC) as violence-prone even with demilitarization efforts. Their bilateral relationship has declined to such an extent that China’s soft power tools, especially education, now face an [intense scrutiny](#) in India. The Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of External Affairs have both cautioned Indian colleges and universities [against any kind of academic cooperation with Chinese counterparts](#) without prior government permission. Restrictions have also been applied to existing agreements, which cannot become operational until both the Ministries approve them. The restrictive regulations cover educational exchange programs, agreements, Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs), and joint announcements of intent with Chinese institutions at both private and publicly-funded Indian universities.

New Delhi’s strategic discomfort with Beijing and suspicion of its over-ambitious neighbour has conditioned India’s perception of China since the India-China war in 1962. These perceptions have driven India’s policies and strategies towards its big neighbour. In a clear departure from the rest of the world, India has always been reluctant to host CIs since the time they were launched in South Korea in 2004. While a fair amount of progress was made to establish the institute in India’s leading university, the Jawaharlal Nehru university (JNU) in New Delhi, it could never take off due to some issues on both sides. Notwithstanding India’s reservations in hosting CIs in India, subsequently a few did come up while cultural exchanges and economic collaboration remained a priority for every Indian government in power. Post-Doklam and Galwan, the scepticism has only returned and become more acute.



It is not the Indian academia alone which has been witnessing government scrutiny and includes the telecommunications industry as well. India has not allowed Huawei Technologies and ZTE to participate in the country's 5G rollout trials. Given that the objective of the trials was to test 5G phones and devices, as well as the technology's application in areas such as tele-medicine, tele-education, augmented/virtual reality and drone-based agricultural monitoring, excluding the Chinese companies was deemed critical to keep them safe and away from Chinese snooping.

In fact, the author's interviews revealed that most Indian academics and scholars are reluctant to discuss CIs, especially in official interactions. This could be due to several reasons. First, the [close monitoring of CIs](#) and other Centres on China by the government has made them unappealing subjects of discussion. Furthermore, the current environment of mistrust towards China is clearly impacting the inclination of academics to talk about these Chinese state-backed institutes. Finally, discussion on China and CIs is not widely welcomed by the academic community, who fear that these interactions might produce unnecessary controversies, complicating the situation even further for them, since state scrutiny has been upped post-2020.

Post-Galwan standoff, India's National Education Policy, administered by the Ministry of Education, was also contemplating [to remove Mandarin](#) from the list of suggested languages for students. The government had sent [letters](#) to at least five institutions that offer Chinese language training programs, asking them to send all details of collaboration since 2017, including the few functioning CIs in India, which have now obviously come under the radar. Interestingly, Chinese language programs in certain universities, with no links to *Hanban*, also received these letters. The heightened scrutiny is a clear spin-off from recent military clashes that have exacerbated anti-China sentiments in India. In fact, several Indian academics are even eager to pressure the Indian government to close CIs in India since they are now increasingly being seen as surveillance tools of the Chinese government.

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Western nations like Australia and Germany, while struggling to keep Beijing from interfering in their education systems, are devising ways to deal more effectively with China. India can collaborate with Australia, Germany, and the others that feel similarly threatened by China's academic intrusion. Individual researchers and scholars in India and many other countries, including the West, could be mutually encouraged to alert universities and think-tanks to potential reputational risks and other costs of cooperating with China.

While the Indian government, supported by many academics, have demonstrated their reservations and highlighted their concern regarding Chinese presence in the Indian academia and future higher education collaborations with their Chinese counterparts, its penetration might be difficult to stall. Given the international prestige of Chinese universities, Indian students will continue to flock to China for pursuing higher education. To address this, the Indian government needs to re-focus on strengthening its own higher education system by making universities world-class and offering wider choices for study. While India's reliance on Chinese funding in education is low, there are ways in which such funding still finds a way through. This discreet funding tendency by Beijing, like in many other countries, will require India to implement more stringent laws, while ensuring more funding transparency.

Western nations like Australia and Germany, while struggling to keep Beijing from interfering in their education systems, are [devising ways](#) to deal more effectively with China. India can collaborate with Australia, Germany, and the others that feel similarly threatened by China's academic intrusion. Individual researchers and scholars in India and many other countries, including the West, could be mutually encouraged to alert universities and think-tanks to potential reputational risks and other costs of cooperating with China. In addition to exchanging notes about their experiences, they could also help individual academics and institutions in their respective countries to develop new policies to deal with censorship and self-censorship. Similarly, it might also be worthwhile to reach out to the rest of the world, particularly Asia, to engage Chinese language teachers and faculty from outside the mainland. In fact, their Chinese history and language-teaching skills might be employed to nurture local academic understanding of the Middle Kingdom and its cultural, social and institutional practices. Knowing China well is a must to counter China effectively.





Dr. Namrata Goswami is an independent scholar on space policy and Great Power Politics. Recently, she has been invited to teach at the Thunderbird School of Global Management, Arizona State University for their Executive Masters in Global Management, Space course. She is a consultant for [Space Fund Intelligence](#) and a guest lecturer at the seminar on “India Today: Economics, Politics, Innovation & Sustainability”, Emory University. She was subject matter expert in international affairs with Futures Laboratory, Alabama. She worked as [Research Fellow](#) at MP-Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi; a [visiting Fellow](#) at Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Norway; La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia; [University of Heidelberg](#), Germany; Jennings-Randolph Senior Fellow, United States Institute of Peace; and was a Fulbright Senior Fellowship Awardee. She was awarded the Minerva grant by Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense to study great power competition in outer space. In April 2019, Dr. Goswami [testified](#) before the U.S-China Economic and Security Review Commission on China’s space program. Her co-authored book, *Scramble for the Skies: The Great Power Competition to Control the Resources of Outer Space* was published 2020 by Lexington Press; Rowman and Littlefield. Her book on *The Naga Ethnic Movement for a Separate Homeland* was published in 2020 by Oxford University Press. She has published widely to include in *The Diplomat*, the Economic Times, *The Washington Post*, *Ad Astra*, *Asia Policy*, *Live Encounters Magazine*, *Cairo Review*. She was invited in November 2019 to share about her life and her work at a [Tedx event held](#) at the [Rosa Parks Museum](#), Montgomery, Alabama. She is currently working on two academic book projects, one on *China’s Grand Strategy and Notions of Territoriality* and the other on *Spacepower Theory and Practice: Case Studies of U.S. China, India, Russia and Japan*.

## DR NAMRATA GOSWAMI

### CHINA-RUSSIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: NO SURPRISES THERE!

Great powers compete for influence in shaping the international system to their advantage. Critically, they care about strategic ‘areas of influence’ especially in their neighborhood and act when such strategic interests are threatened, to the detriment of their neighborhood. Their grand strategy is about regional hegemony and international influence. We can observe such behavior play out when it comes to the U.S. and its own strategic neighborhood (read Canada, Cuba, Mexico).<sup>1</sup> We witnessed such behavior when it came to Russia’s annexation of the Crimea in 2014,<sup>2</sup> and currently, during Russia’s ongoing invasion of neighboring Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> China has clearly stated that the South China Sea (SCS) and Taiwan are its core strategic interests and any interference by external others will provoke a military response. The Chinese position on Taiwan was forcibly asserted by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, on May 23, 2022 as a response to U.S. President Joe Biden stating during a press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida that same day in Tokyo that the U.S. is militarily committed to come to Taiwan’s aide if China attempts to invade the island. Wenbin stated that “the island of Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and the Taiwan question is purely China’s domestic affairs, which allows no interference from foreign forces. And China has no room to make any compromise in questions that relate to its core interests [emphasis added] on territory integrity and sovereignty.”<sup>4</sup> China holds a similar position on the SCS.<sup>5</sup> Critically, for purposes of this analysis, China and Russia has committed to secure and support each other’s core and legitimate interests.<sup>6</sup>

Namrata Goswami



So, when did the China-Russia strategic relationship get priority? It started with President Xi Jinping's speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations on March 23, 2013. In that speech, President Xi highlighted the critical importance of Russia as a strategic partner. This meant that, under Xi, Russia became a strategic priority and that China would "steadfastly develop its comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination with Russia".<sup>13</sup> Xi stated that "the China-Russia relationship is one of the most important in the world and also the best one between major powers."

Both China and Russia are nuclear weapon states; Russia possesses the largest nuclear stockpile in the world with 6, 257 nuclear warheads;<sup>7</sup> China has about 350 nuclear warheads. It is important to keep that in mind because the possession of nuclear weapons does limit options in the offence/defense strategic bargain. Both China and Russia are revisionist great powers, in that they have declared intent of grabbing new territory they claim as theirs historically, despite the majority population of those territories having their own sovereign governments and independent democratic governance structures.

### China-Russia Strategic Partnership

Keeping that background in mind, let us analyze the China-Russia strategic partnership to include their February 2022 joint statement signed during Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Beijing.<sup>8</sup> Most analysis of the China-Russia strategic partnership tends to underplay its strategic significance;<sup>9</sup> or that this is a transactional and opportunistic partnership with no real substance behind it.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, such analysis can be misleading and offer little in terms of explanation of how this partnership has come about, and how will it play out during and after the Ukrainian crisis, to include in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) of which both China and Russia are permanent members with veto power. For factual assessment purposes, it is pertinent to state that China has abstained on United Nations Security Council (UNSC)<sup>11</sup> or voted against United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To quote from UN News, "Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Syria, Vietnam, were among those who voted against. Those abstaining, included India, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Pakistan, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Cambodia."<sup>12</sup>

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Photograph courtesy AP.



A high-level and strong China-Russia relationship is not only in the interests of both countries, but also serves as an important guarantee of international strategic balance [Read vis-à-vis the United States] and world peace and stability.”<sup>14</sup> This was followed by China and Russia signing a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement that resulted in not only Heads of State meetings but also institutionalized creation of a China-Russia strategic partnership across various levels of government and society. <sup>15</sup> Russia is China’s largest neighbor. Moreover, in July 2001, China and Russia signed the *Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation*, that committed to respect each other’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and avoid any third-party alliance structure that undermines the national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of either nation. Russia committed to recognize Taiwan as part of China.<sup>16</sup> In 2013, China and Russia signed agreements on oil and gas supply, nuclear energy, power and coal. In 2014, Russia registered its support for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and in May 2015, China and Russia issued a *Joint Statement on Cooperation on Joint Silk Road Economic Belt and Eurasian Economic Union Projects*.<sup>17</sup> Presidents Xi and Putin visited each other’s countries several times, and Putin participated in the BRI forums held in Beijing in 2017 and 2019. China and Russia committed to codevelop the civilian airliner called CR929-600 as a challenge to Boeing and Airbus.<sup>18</sup> In the military sphere, China and Russia upgraded their military cooperation, held several joint exercises, and China purchased Russia’s S-400 air defense system as well as the Sukhoi 35 aircrafts.<sup>19</sup> Russia stood by China during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>20</sup> In March 2021, China-Russia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to explore the Moon together and establish a lunar research base.<sup>21</sup> It would be to China’s strategic benefit if Russia exits the International Space Station (ISS) and instead decides to collaborate with China on space development.

The strategic rationale for this China-Russia strategic partnership lay on several pillars. Foremost amongst them being as under: -

- 1) Regime Types
- 2) Importance of Legitimacy
- 3) Great Power Influence and anti-West
- 4) Political Identity and International Economic Influence

In the military sphere, China and Russia upgraded their military cooperation, held several joint exercises, and China purchased Russia’s S-400 air defense system as well as the Sukhoi 35 aircrafts.<sup>19</sup> Russia stood by China during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>20</sup> In March 2021, China-Russia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to explore the Moon together and establish a lunar research base.<sup>21</sup> It would be to China’s strategic benefit if Russia exits the International Space Station (ISS) and instead decides to collaborate with China on space development.

### 1. Regime Types

China and Russia are authoritarian type regimes with a single party dominating their political system. Both President Xi and President Putin have extended their terms as Presidents of their respective countries (Xi is President for life) and Putin, based on a referendum in 2020, is in leadership position till 2036. Both countries insist on claiming back territories, viewed as located in their sphere of influence. Both advocate similar values of core interests, and supporting each other’s core and legitimate interests. They argue for an international order where the West is not in the lead; in their joint statement issued in February 2022, they stated as such: -

The sides oppose further enlargement of NATO and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches, to respect the sovereignty, security and interests of other countries, the diversity of their civilizational, cultural and historical backgrounds, and to exercise a fair and objective attitude towards the peaceful development of other States. The sides stand against the formation of closed bloc structures and opposing camps in the Asia-Pacific region and remain highly vigilant about the negative impact of the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy on peace and stability in the region.<sup>22</sup>

### 2. Importance of Legitimacy

China and Russia’s strategic partnership is aimed at legitimacy building as well. One can gauge this from the importance of Russia recognizing the BRI and China supporting Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union. Both President Xi and President Putin engaged each other several times including with high level state visits. Putin chose to engage Xi just before the February 24, 2022 military invasion of Ukraine. This legitimacy is aimed at building partnership across the globe, to include Asia, Africa and Latin America and influencing state behavior at the level of the United Nations.

### 3. Great Power Influence and anti-West

China and Russia view themselves as Great Powers, outside of Western influence and strategic realm. They view the West as working against their strategic interests, and outside their civilizational sense of who they are. By building upon their strategic partnership, both China and Russia aim to



As Russia's military continues its operations in Ukraine, and the West continues to support Ukraine with weapons and aid, and by sanctioning Russia, China and Russia will look to further strengthen their strategic ties even more so now given the strategic tensions between the U.S. and China over the Indo-Pacific. China would work to benefit from bargaining for discounted Russian oil and gas, an energy supply China badly needs.

build a matrix of Great Power influence they both benefit them and in the long-term tie them to each other's core interests. More importantly, they both aim to develop an international system where their values are projected and where political authority is drawn from political systems, other than western values like democracy and electoral representation.

#### 4. Political Identity and International Economic Influence

China and Russia aim to establish a political identity that creates an alternative framework to western liberal democracy. One of the most important facets of creating such a political identity is to dominate in economic necessities; think Chinese exports of ventilators and medical grade masks during the Covid 19 pandemic, and Russia's dominance of oil and gas exports to Europe and the world. If China and Russia can dominate future supply chains, not just in essential items like food and medicine but oil and gas, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, computer chips, semiconductors, space-based infrastructure, they create an enormous amount of influence as can be seen from the bargaining power of Russia in regard to gas and oil and China in regard to rare earth minerals or medical supplies. In this regard, China has identified leadership in space, AI and futuristic technologies as key to building its political identity. After the West utilized economic sanctions, including banning Russia from using the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), China is utilizing its Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) established 2015 which processes payments in yuan, and Russia is offering its System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) established in 2014 as a means of payment. China's CIPS has about 1280 participating financial institutions and has its own messaging system. If Chinese yuan's usage as processing currency increases, the value of the U.S. dollar is speculated to fall thereby creating inflation risks in the U.S.<sup>23</sup>

As Russia's military continues its operations in Ukraine, and the West continues to support Ukraine with weapons and aid, and by sanctioning Russia, China and Russia will look to further strengthen their strategic ties even more so now given the strategic tensions between the U.S. and China over the Indo-Pacific. China would work to benefit from bargaining for discounted Russian oil and gas, an energy supply China badly needs. In fact, as per a Reuters report, China has increased its oil import from Russia during the Ukrainian conflict, "China's seaborne Russian oil imports will jump to a near-record 1.1 million barrels per day (bpd) in May [2022], up from 750,000 bpd in the first



First pipeline built to supply gas to China. Image courtesy Gazprom.



It is therefore useful to examine the strategic logic and intent of the China-Russia relationship both historically and from the perspective of today, and realize that the relationship has stood the test of time, including during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and China’s role, both in the United Nations in particular and through its diplomatic and media efforts, in offering its implicit and explicit support to Russia.

quarter and 800,000 bpd in 2021, according to an estimate by Vortexa Analytics.”<sup>24</sup> Consequently, such moves create an alternative economic system as well as blunt the impact of western sanctions on the Russian economy.

In conclusion, the China-Russia strategic partnership gained momentum since 2001 after they signed the *Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation* and has been further upgraded during the Presidencies of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. For Xi, the China dream, reclaiming China’s lost territories and advancing the China-Russia strategic partnership have been a strategic priority since 2013. The strategic intent of the relationship is evident in the speeches and joint statements given and signed by Xi and Putin; to further shared values, develop an alternative international system with China and Russia leading, and to ensure the limited influence of a U.S. led world order. The intended strategic goal of the China-Russia strategic partnership is to make the U.S. uncomfortable with this development. And it appears to have had that intended effect. An April 28, 2022 Pew Research survey of American attitudes towards the China-Russia relationship showed that majority of those surveyed viewed the relationship as a serious concern for the U.S.

Alongside the specific concern about the China-Russia relationship is a sense that China is a world superpower. About two-thirds (66%) of U.S. adults say China’s influence on the world stage has grown stronger in recent years. More Americans now also describe China as the world’s leading economic power... China’s power and influence is also seen as a growing threat to the U.S. Today, two-thirds describe China as a major threat – up 5 percentage points since 2020 and 23 points since the question was first asked in 2013. Notably, despite the conflict in Ukraine, this is similar to the share who describe Russia’s power and influence as a major threat (64%) to the U.S.<sup>25</sup>

It is therefore useful to examine the strategic logic and intent of the China-Russia relationship both historically and from the perspective of today, and realize that the relationship has stood the test of time, including during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and China’s role, both in the United Nations in particular and through its diplomatic and media efforts, in offering its implicit and explicit support to Russia. Explaining the factors that support the strategic rationale of the China-Russia relationship can help in informing sound policy analysis.

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Dr Ashok Sharma is a Visiting Fellow at the [Australian National University](#) at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, the Coral Bell School of Asia-Pacific Affairs; an Academic Fellow of the [Australia-India Institute](#) at the University of Melbourne; a Visiting Fellow at the University of [New South Wales Canberra](#) at the Australian Defence Force Academy; an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Institute for Governance & Policy Analysis, [University of Canberra](#); and the Deputy Chair of the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, Auckland Branch.

## DR ASHOK SHARMA

### THE US, INDIA AND THE QUAD: A COLLECTIVE APPROACH FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC SECURITY

President Joe Biden's first trip to Asia in mid-May 2022, which included stops in South Korea and Japan, as well as participation in the Quad leaders meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan, and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Australia, aimed at reinvigorating US ties with allies and partners, has once again emphasised the importance of the Indo-Pacific.

Over the past two decades, the world's commercial, military, and strategic operations have shifted from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, a region that stretches from the Pacific coast to the Indian Ocean. However, the Indo-Pacific region, critical for global prosperity and security in the twenty-first century, has been confronted with its biggest security challenge: a powerful China, which has been asserting its economic and military power to dislodge the US primacy which ensured stability in the region for the post-World War II period. The Indo-Pacific area, which is critical for global wealth and security in the twenty-first century, has influenced all of the region's major powers to reformulate their strategy in the Indo-Pacific.



Ashok Sharma



India has emerged as a significant power in the Indo-Pacific strategy, both strategically and economically. In addition to its strategic importance, India, considered to be the only country to match the manufacturing scale of China, has become important in the developed countries' efforts towards a resilient global supply chain and reduce the dependency on China. One of the significant developments on this has been the US-India strategic partnership, the most powerful bilateral Indo-Pacific strategy. The COVID-19 outbreak has heightened the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, which is escalating into an intense and protracted conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific has evolved into a contested space for great power competition, and the region is approaching a pivotal decade that carries both significant opportunity and historic challenges for the Indo-Pacific. The United States, as the region's pre-eminent power, has taken a collective approach to deal with the economic and security threats posed by China, in which India, with its growing military power and potentially the only country to match China's manufacturing scale, has become a significant. What emerges from the foregoing is an understanding of the security challenges posed by an economically and militarily assertive China, as well as the US and Indian Indo-Pacific strategies in the context of the re-emergence of the Quad – the US, India, Japan, and Australia – to counter China's authoritarian push for Indo-Pacific stability and security.

### **The Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific: An Assertive China**

The Indo-Pacific is the hub of global economic activity, military spending, and strategic competition.<sup>1</sup> The Indo-Pacific now houses more than half of the world's population, over two-thirds of the global economy, and seven of the world's largest defence powers. The US pre-eminence provided the stability in the Indo-Pacific as evident in its security alliances with major powers in the region including Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), the Philippines, and Thailand in the post-World War II period.

However, over the past decade and a half, the stability and security of the Indo-Pacific has been facing challenges. Today, the Indo-Pacific is the most contentious region, with China's economically and militarily assertiveness, as well as its authoritarian push to dominate the region, posing the greatest threat. Beijing's intent to dominate the region began to unravel with the building of artificial island in the South China Sea, arrival of Xi Jinping's One Belt One Road (OBOR), economic statecraft and debt diplomacy, and finally Beijing's diplomatic, economic and military assertiveness in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak further exposed China's geopolitical intent in the region.

Though China's geopolitical ambitions for supremacy extend across the globe, they are most visible in the Indo-Pacific region. From Australia's economic coercion to the deadly clash with India along the Line of Actual Control, to increasing pressure on Taiwan and bullying of neighbours in the East and South China Seas, displays China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific.

China is also eroding human rights and international law, particularly freedom of navigation, as well as other principles that have contributed to the Indo-Pacific's security and prosperity.

### **The US Indo-Pacific Strategy: Free and Open Indo-Pacific and the Quad**

The Indo-Pacific's security and stability require the participation of like-minded democratic nations in a concerted effort to create a free and open Indo-Pacific. The region's expanding economic and military importance has heightened the need to collaborate on a range of security challenges, including the China challenge. The United States' recent initiatives on Indo-Pacific strategies which includes the bilateral security ties with allies and partners, trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS), and particularly the development of the Quad, the most powerful Indo-Pacific strategy, are intended to preserve international law and norms, from human rights to freedom of navigation, and to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific.<sup>2</sup>

The US Indo-Pacific strategy has mostly focused on engaging with like-minded democracies in the Indo-Pacific, particularly with its allies Australia, Japan, and South Korea, as well as developing a strong and deepening strategic partnership with India.<sup>3</sup> Though the US Indo-Pacific strategy had been evolving under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, it was made official under President Donald Trump with the launch of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP). The term FOIP refers to the US's balancing, or even containment, strategy in dealing with an assertive China that could pose serious threats to the US-led liberal international order. The terms 'Indo-Pacific' and the development on the Quad have been vigorously opposed by China.

India has emerged as a significant power in the Indo-Pacific strategy, both strategically and economically. In addition to its strategic importance, India, considered to be the only country to match the manufacturing scale of China, has become important in the developed countries' efforts towards a resilient global supply chain and reduce the dependency on China. One of the significant developments on this has been the US-India strategic partnership, the most powerful bilateral Indo-Pacific strategy. The COVID-19 outbreak has heightened the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, which is escalating into an intense and protracted conflict in the Indo-Pacific.



India's Indo-Pacific strategy has evolved. Its Look East policy, which was cemented during the 1990s and 2000s and gradually defined India's economic and political engagement in the Indo-Pacific, has garnered significant attention and is being pursued with vigour by the Modi Government through the Act East policy. Growing strategic alliances with Indo-Pacific nations, primarily the United States, Japan, Australia, South Korea, Vietnam, and Thailand, are an essential feature of India's Indo-Pacific strategy, which is based on shared democratic values and security concerns.

Similarly, the deadly clash in the Galwan Valley during the outbreak has intensified the strategic competition between India and China. Since the beginning of the 21st century, both Asian giants, with their expanding economic and military prowess, have intensified their international engagements in pursuit of their great power aspirations, and are strong competitors in a world of global economic rebalancing and global power shifts.<sup>4</sup> Parallel to this has been the US engagement of India since the end of the Cold War. This took an unprecedented transformation during the George W. Bush administration since the beginning of the 21st century.<sup>5</sup> Since then the US-India relationship has been steadily growing and it has been called as the "defining partnership of the twenty-first century." Both democracies now interact on over fifty platforms, and the India-US relationship has been elevated to the US-India Comprehensive Global Partnership, which is evident in all sectors, including political and economic, as well as defence and security. A number of factors have played a role in this transformation, but the biggest factor has been the balance of power amidst the unfolding geo-strategic and geo-economic challenge posed by China.

### India's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Act East and the Quad

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is driven by its national interests, the security threat posed by China, and its growing closeness with the US to thwart the authoritarian moves of China, and the global commons including the protection of the Sea Lanes of Communications, and the stability in the Indo-Pacific. India's relationship with China continues to be stuck in a legacy of mistrust and conflicting. The long-standing border disputes, recent standoffs on the border, and the deadly clash in the Galwan Valley in 2020, have the potential to spill over into the Indo-Pacific, where both India and China have significant economic and strategic interests.<sup>6</sup> India has been pushed to expand in the Indo-Pacific due to China's String of Pearls strategy, and its growing presence in the Indian Ocean region through OBOR.

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<https://insiderpaper.com/quad-us-japan-australia-india-meet-to-deepen-bulwark-against-china/>



The strategic partnership between the Indo-Pacific nations is a key to stability and security in the region. Defence and deterrence, diplomacy, accommodation, and cooperation are critical in addressing economic and security challenges, as well as ensuring strategic stability, economic growth, and thwarting the region's most serious security threat: China's military assertiveness and intent to dominate the Indo-Pacific. India has emerged as a prominent player in the Indo-Pacific strategies of like-minded democratic countries, which will continue to take shape through diplomatic, economic, and defence cooperation.

In addition, India’s growing strategic partnerships with the Quad members are significant. India’s strategic partnership with the US is robust and growing. PM Modi and President Biden reiterated their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific during their most recent virtual summit. India's expanding strategic partnership with Japan and Australia, in addition to the United States, are crucial milestones in addressing Indo-Pacific security challenges. Some recent developments in India's relations with Australia are noteworthy. Significant developments include the elevation of the India-Australia relationship from a bilateral Strategic Partnership signed in 2009 to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in June 2020,<sup>7</sup> the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement and a Defence Science and Technology Arrangement between India and Australia, India's signing of the 2+2 dialogue with Australia, and the Indian and Australian forces joining the Quad Malabar defence exercise in November 2020.<sup>8</sup>

The Quad has emerged as the most potent Indo-Paciifc strategy and since its inception in 2007 India has been a key player. Following China's labelling of the Quad as an anti-China coalition, the Quad retreated to the backstage. The Quad has re-emerged as a formidable bulwark against China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific in recent years. The Quad is no longer confined to the military dimension, has been taking steps to address a range of security issues such as cyber security, clean energy, global warming, and pandemic containment. In recent summit level meetings, the Quad has taken advances towards economic issues, with a substantial move towards a resilient supply chain in the Indo-Pacific.

The strategic partnership between the Indo-Pacific nations is a key to stability and security in the region. Defence and deterrence, diplomacy, accommodation, and cooperation are critical in addressing economic and security challenges, as well as ensuring strategic stability, economic growth, and thwarting the region's most serious security threat: China's military assertiveness and intent to dominate the Indo-Pacific. India has emerged as a prominent player in the Indo-Pacific strategies of like-minded democratic countries, which will continue to take shape through diplomatic, economic, and defence cooperation.

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Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray held the position of Visiting Professor and Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) chair, India Studies at Murdoch University, Perth between July-December 2017. He served as a Deputy Director in the National Security Council Secretariat, Government of India and Director of the Institute for Conflict Management (ICM)'s Database & Documentation Centre, Guwahati, Assam. He was a Visiting Fellow at the South Asia programme of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore between 2010 and 2012. Routray specialises in decision-making, governance, counter-terrorism, force modernisation, intelligence reforms, foreign policy and dissent articulation issues in South and South East Asia. His writings, based on his projects and extensive field based research in Indian conflict theatres of the Northeastern states and the left-wing extremism affected areas, have appeared in a wide range of academic as well as policy journals, websites, and magazines. This article republished by permission of [www.mantraya.org](http://www.mantraya.org)

## BIBHU PRASAD ROUTRAY

### BALOCH INSURGENCY: PAKISTAN'S MOMENT OF RECKONING

#### Abstract

*Baloch insurgency is on a resurgence and its widened targets include CPEC projects as well as Chinese nationals in Pakistan. The Pakistani security establishment is under pressure from Beijing to respond decisively to the killing of three Chinese nationals on the premises of the Karachi University on 26 April. And yet, neither a quick military operation, as part of the strategy of annihilation nor an attention diversion tactic in the form of punishment to a few perpetrators of the attack would suffice. A comprehensive solution to the insurgency needs to be found.*

#### The Attack

Three Chinese tutors were among the four people who lost their lives in a suicide terrorist attack at one of the entrances to the Karachi University on 26 April 2022. A female suicide bomber, identified as Shari Baloch, carried out the blast as the van carrying the victims approached the location, in the proximity of the Confucius Institute in the university. On 29 April, an editorial in the Pakistani newspaper Dawn termed the incident as part of a 'new wave of terrorism' in the country. It said, "While the attacks are mostly aimed at our border regions by religiously-motivated terrorist groups based in Afghanistan, there are frequent reminders that Baloch militancy, too, is on the rise." [1]

Terming these terror attacks as a wave could be an exaggeration. What is, however, true is that Baloch insurgents are indeed becoming selective in their target selection, which unmistakably includes the Chinese nationals in the country. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a US\$60 billion spoke on Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which passes through the Balochistan province and is accused of being an instrument of exploitation, has become a rallying point for the militants.



Dr Bibhu Prasad Routray



In February, BLA cadres attempted to attack security forces' camps in Balochistan's Panjgur and Naushki, both of which were repulsed. While the military's media wing said that a lone soldier and four terrorists were killed in these two separate attacks, the BLA claimed that more than 100 soldiers have perished.

The Pakistani state's approach to Baloch insurgency is essentially force centric and has done little to address the factors that feed dissent. With intense pressure from the Chinese to bring the perpetrators to task, the approach could become further skewed.

### No Longer a low-intensity conflict

For a number of years, the Pakistani establishment has treated the Baloch insurgency as a low-intensity conflict confined mostly to Balochistan, the country's largest province by territory. But that seems to have changed, as a spate of attacks that have taken place in 2022 demonstrate. On 20 January, an explosion ripped through a busy Lahore business district, killing three persons and injuring over 20. The Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA) claimed responsibility for the attack. On the night of 25-26 January, 10 soldiers lost their lives in an attack on a Frontier Corps (FC) check post in the Kech district carried out by the BLA. Two days after the attack, three Levies Force personnel along with a Bugti clan elder were killed martyred in twin bomb blasts in the Sui area of Dera Bugti. On 30 January, 17 people, including two policemen, were injured in a grenade attack in Dera Allahyar town of Jaffarabad district. In February, BLA cadres attempted to attack security forces' camps in Balochistan's Panjgur and Naushki, both of which were repulsed. While the military's media wing said that a lone soldier and four terrorists were killed in these two separate attacks, the BLA claimed that more than 100 soldiers have perished.[2] Among the factors that explain the surge in violence is a gradual move toward consolidation of what was previously a dissipated insurgency. Over the years, insurgent groups have either merged or have formed tactical alliances to put up a united fight against the Pakistani state. For instance, the BNA which claimed responsibility for the attack in Lahore had come into existence in early January 2022, with the merger of the United Baloch Army (UBA) and the Baloch Republic Army (BRA). In 2018, the BLA merged with the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) and BRA to form Baloch Raji Ajohi Sangar (BRSA), or Baloch Nationalist Freedom Movement. Two years later, in June 2020, BRSA formed an alliance with a Sindhi militant group known as the Sindudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA). The BNA has affirmed that it is a part of the BRSA. These mergers and alliance formations have seemingly demonstrated the willingness of different tribes to put their differences at rest. The BNA represented the 'coming together of the Marri and Bugti, two of Balochistan's largest tribes that historically have not always seen eye to eye'[3]. Strategically, this coming together of disparate Baloch groups could be leading to a restructuring of the insurgency.



Map of Balochistan (also written as Baluchistan) and Pakistan. Source: Wikipedia



Not only has it beefed up the numbers of the insurgents under a common banner and with common objectives, but it may also have facilitated fine-tuning of the tactics. There is a possibility that the insurgents have a number of suicide attackers available to them. Whereas fidayeen (suicide) attacks have remained a preferred mode for the BLA in the past couple of years, the deployment of a woman suicide bomber in the attack on the Karachi University premises has added a new dimension. Given the success it has achieved, such a strategy could be repeated in the coming months.

### Targeting the Chinese

Baloch insurgency's hostility towards China in general and the CPEC, in particular, is not a secret. The CPEC, which runs through the restive Balochistan province, has clearly added a new purpose to the Baloch separatist insurgency, which has been battling the Pakistani state for years. The separatists accuse both Beijing and the Pakistani government of unfairly exploiting Balochistan's natural resources. The BLA says it attacks Chinese nationals because Beijing ignored warnings not to enter deals and agreements regarding Balochistan before the province had been 'liberated'. [4] The June 2020 alliance between the SRA and the BRSA aims to "liberate" both Sindh and Balochistan and target the CPEC. The BNA too shares the same objectives. The group has claimed that it was formed to "expand Baloch national resistance movement against the Pakistani military's fascism" and also to intensify attacks against both "Pakistan state and its partners (e.g. China)." In 2018, the BLA expanded its operations and attacked the Chinese Consulate in Karachi, but failed to enter the compound. In April 2021, a suicide attack at a luxury hotel hosting the Chinese ambassador in Quetta killed four people and injured dozens. The ambassador was unhurt in the attack. Following the Karachi University attack, the BLA has warned of more deadly attacks on Chinese targets. BLA Spokesman Jeeyand Baloch, in a statement, threatened China with "even harsher" attacks unless the country halted its "exploitation projects" and "occupying of the Pakistani state." Prior to the 26 April incident, in 2018, Karachi police had foiled an attack on the Chinese consulate. In 2020, a similar attack had been foiled at the Pakistan Stock Exchange where the Chinese have major investments. The targeted attacks demonstrate that the anti-China position on the Baloch insurgency has moved far beyond the rhetoric phase. The increasingly emboldened insurgents are not only peeved with the Chinese investments but have attained the capacity to carry out these types of operations. Their targets include the CPEC projects which enjoy security cover, and also the unprotected Chinese nationals like the teachers in the Confucius Academy in Karachi.

What Beijing could be privately pushing for is a joint strategy of annihilation, similar to the one it implements against the Uyghurs. However, while such a strategy has been quite successful in keeping the Uyghur insurgency under control in Xinjiang, the Pakistani military's capacity to implement a similar strategy in Balochistan is clearly in doubt. Token and diversionary gestures to please Beijing either in the form of an investigation and few arrests, blaming a foreign intelligence agency, or undertaking a quick military operation against the BLA would suffice.

### The Response

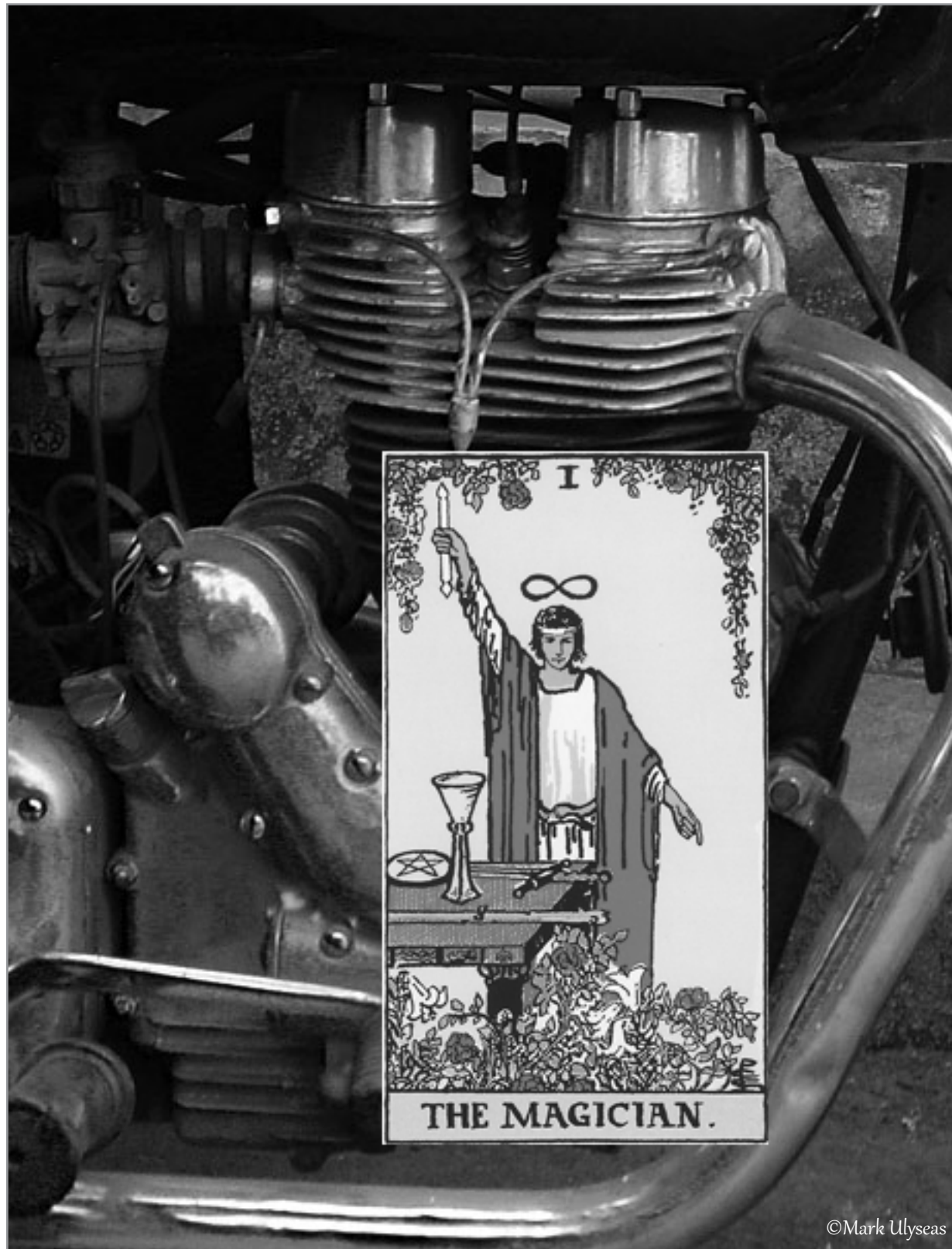
In the past, the Pakistani military has typically relied on force-centric operations to weaken the Baloch insurgent groups, after every major attack. This time, the pace and intensity of the response are being determined by Beijing. The Chinese foreign ministry has asserted that 'Blood of Chinese people cannot be shed in vain'. Four demands communicated to the Pakistani side by the Chinese include (i) conduct of a thorough investigation into the incident, (ii) apprehension and punishment to the perpetrators 'to the full extent of the law', (iii) initiation of measures to ensure the safety of Chinese citizens in Pakistan, and (iv) prevention of such incidents from recurring. [5] Quite understandably, Islamabad has little option other than fulfilling some of these demands.

Two of these demands can be acceded to with some degree of success. However, fulfilling the last two demands—providing security to the thousands of Chinese personnel working on CPEC projects and others like the victims of the Karachi University attack—would invariably require a comprehensive approach to end the insurgency. The approach has to include, to the extent possible, negotiating with the insurgents to address some of their grievances regarding the CPEC. Needless to say, neither the Pakistani military has any competence or interest in this nor have the Chinese any patience for it. What Beijing could be privately pushing for is a joint strategy of annihilation, similar to the one it implements against the Uyghurs. However, while such a strategy has been quite successful in keeping the Uyghur insurgency under control in Xinjiang, the Pakistani military's capacity to implement a similar strategy in Balochistan is clearly in doubt. Token and diversionary gestures to please Beijing either in the form of an investigation and few arrests, blaming a foreign intelligence agency, or undertaking a quick military operation against the BLA would suffice.

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Mark Ulyseas has served time in advertising as copywriter and creative director selling people things they didn't need, a ghost writer for some years, columnist of a newspaper, a freelance journalist and photo-grapher. In 2009 he created *Live Encounters Magazine*, in Bali, Indonesia. It is a not for profit (adfree) free online magazine featuring leading academics, writers, poets, activists of all hues etc. from around the world. March 2016 saw the launch of its sister publication *Live Encounters Poetry*, which was relaunched as *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* in March 2017. In February 2019 the third publication was launched, *LE Children Poetry & Writing* (now renamed *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers*). In August 2020 the fourth publication, *Live Encounters Books*, was launched. He has edited, designed and produced all of *Live Encounters'* 246 publications (till June 2022). Mark's philosophy is that knowledge must be free and shared freely to empower all towards enlightenment. He is the author of three books: *RAINY – My friend & Philosopher*, *Seductive Avatars of Maya – Anthology of Dystopian Lives* and *In Gethsemane: Transcripts of a Journey*. <https://liveencounters.net/mark-ulyseas/>  
<https://www.amazon.com/Mark-Ulyseas/e/B01FUUQVBG>



Excerpt from - *In Gethsemane, Transcripts of a Journey* by Mark Ulyseas available at  
<https://www.amazon.com/Mark-Ulyseas/e/B01FUUQVBG>

## MARK ULYSEAS

### KARMA MECHANICS

*Bali, Indonesia*

Somewhere on this isle, nestling in the cracks and crevices of society are the karma mechanics, aspiring avatars of the likes of Osho, Maharishi Yogi and their kind. They carry the weight of mankind's troubles on their shoulders. And this is odd because no one has asked them to do so. Nor, in my opinion, are they qualified in even the remotest sense of the word.

The karma mechanics are people lost in a brave new world, clutching at straws in the wind. The straws being the bits and pieces of eastern religious instruction they have collected on their brief journey from side-shows in their own countries to the daunting Asian Diasporas that have art, culture and religion compressed over the ages into layers like sedimentary rock formations.

Effigy at a cremation, Bali. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas. No relation to Karma Mechanics.



They are akin to the untrained motor mechanics that miraculously appear on an Indian road when a car breaks down. Knowledge of the workings of the engine is irrelevant. Fiddling till the engine regains life is all that is needed. Money changes hands and everyone is happy. Life goes on oblivious to the density of the mental capacity that has just been displayed!

I have had the honour of meeting a few of these karma mechanics who can fix anything from a leaking aura to the more complex problem of the 're-alignment' of someone's spiritual engine that has been derailed and needs to get back onto the magnetic lines of the Universe.

Many of us may recall that inspiring book by Robert M Pirsig – *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*; the travels of a motorcyclist and the philosophical discussions that transpired along the way. The karma mechanics call this a cult book and therefore unworthy to be read. And when I spoke recently to Joe, a mechanic, of Carlos Castaneda, the silence-hung heavy in the air and the only sound that could be heard was one of ignorance. Fortunately for him it was broken by an elderly expat from New York who winked at me and whispered in my ear 'magic mushrooms.' We shall not delve into the Yaqui way of life. Not now, for we still need to cruise through the world of the mechanics to understand the tools of their trade.

Joe told me that the tools he uses are tarot cards, mind readings, silent sittings, synchronising one's chakras with the help of yoga and more importantly teaching one the ways of the Buddha. Apparently, Buddha is in fashion not Cat Stevens who converted to Islam. Often one encounters mechanics massaging drinks at restaurants some aptly called Buddha something or the other, loudly beginning a sentence with 'the Buddha says' while sinking their teeth into a rack of succulent pork ribs. But don't let these visual impressions dissuade you from using their services. I have it from reliable sources that Joe has fixed the leaking aura of a friend of mine. It so happened that she heard it dripping in the night like droplets of water hitting the base of an empty bucket. Not a good sound when one is lost to the world. And how he did this, no one is saying.

And then another buddy of mine, Dave told me that he had been guilty of many past sins before he arrived on the isle. After he met Joe, the bad karma that he had carried with him in his hold all had been dispensed with through a series of give and take. He gave money to Joe and Joe took it, besides of course counselling him to commit good acts in the present continuous.

Apparently, Buddha is in fashion not Cat Stevens who converted to Islam. Often one encounters mechanics massaging drinks at restaurants some aptly called Buddha something or the other, loudly beginning a sentence with 'the Buddha says' while sinking their teeth into a rack of succulent pork ribs. But don't let these visual impressions dissuade you from using their services. I have it from reliable sources that Joe has fixed the leaking aura of a friend of mine. It so happened that she heard it dripping in the night like droplets of water hitting the base of an empty bucket. Not a good sound when one is lost to the world. And how he did this, no one is saying.

*"Herman Kuhn quoting from Tattvarthasutra describes karma as – a mechanism that makes us thoroughly experience the themes of our life until we gained optimal knowledge from them and until our emotional attachment to these themes falls off."*

Now where is Joe when I need him to explain Kuhn's observations? Last I heard he was on a visa run.

There are other mechanics some who have gained much respectability through a pragmatic approach to karma problem solving. Janice is a fine lady from a European country who has settled comfortably in Bali providing 'karmic advice' to lost souls who approach her out of guilt – the result of their unseemly past. She has given them crystals to wear, specially blessed stones and advice on the specific colours of clothes to don for designated days of the week, the Full Moon and some phases of the moon being an exception. She is a one-woman service station that appears to be consistently effective in the overhauling of run-down spiritual engines of weary travellers. Word on the street has it that she offers a money back guarantee for unsatisfied customers. This is a good business practice however what if one returns as a dog in another life how will one collect the refund?

Karma mechanics have mastered the art of trivial pursuit through acts that obfuscate the real issues at hand. They fiddle with the soul engines of hapless people who arrive at their doorstep seeking reconciliation with the universe for a misspent life. But as we all know everything is relative and so is our religious make up. For example, if one is a Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist or Jain the Law of Karma will apply.

But in the case of a Christian what does one do? How does the Law of Karma apply to him or her? Didn't Christ die on the cross for the sins committed by humanity? And what about Heaven and Hell? Where do these two fit in, in the grand scheme of the Universe?

And there are those among us who have still to study the Koran to know what is said about all this in the world of Islam.

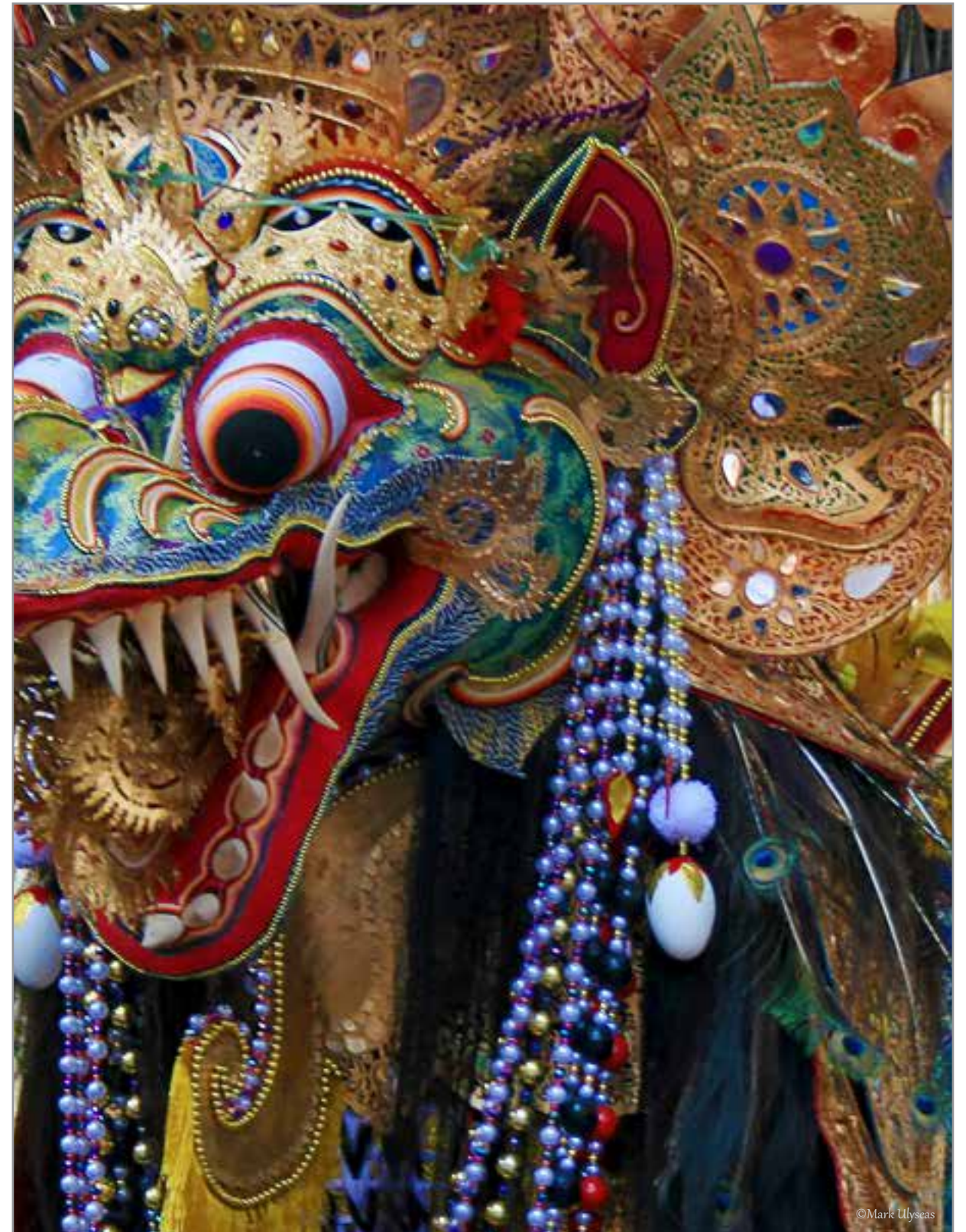
The truth is plain to see. The karma mechanics are not really trained mechanics in every sense of the word. They are, like many of us, lost in a contradictory world that defies definition.



So to confuse you further, dear readers, here is a quote –

*Buddhism relates Karma directly to motives behind an action. Motivation usually makes the difference between “good” and “bad,” but included in the motivation is also the aspect of ignorance; so, a well-intended action from a deluded mind can easily be “bad” in the sense that it creates unpleasant results for the “actor.”*

Next time you need a tune up of your aura or re-alignment of your wheels of fortune walk into the friendly neighbourhood karma mechanic’s workshop but ensure that the money back guarantee is cashable in this lifetime.



Naga Banda, Bali. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas. No relation to Karma Mechanics.





Do Bich Thuy was born in 1975 in Ha Giang, Vietnam. After graduating from the Academy of Journalism and Communication in 1997, she wrote for the Military Arts and Literature magazine, where she served as the Deputy Editor. Most of her works are about ethnic minorities and mountainous areas in Vietnam, where she was born. She enjoys writing short stories, essays and novels. She has published 21 books including 6 novels. She has won many writing awards in Vietnam such as: The First prize in the short story contest of Military Arts and Literature magazine in 1999, The First prize in novels of the Association of Literature and Arts of Vietnamese Ethnic Minorities in 2013, The First Prize in Literature and Art of the Capital city in 2014. This story is about the H'Mong, an ethnic group living in the northern mountainous region of Vietnam. Every one of them knows how to play this music instrument and couples often play it to confess their love for each other.

*Tiếng đàn môi sau bờ rào đá (The Sound of the Jaw Harp behind the Stone Fence)* is translated from Vietnamese by Nguyen Thuy Hoa, a journalist. She has been working for *The Voice of Việt Nam* since 1993. Presently, she is Head of VOV International corporation department.

## DO BICH THUY

### THE SOUND OF THE JAW HARP BEHIND THE STONE FENCE

After setting up the hut on the new upland plot that was given to him by his friend, the old man Chúng brought a few small pots, and rice, salt, oil for lighting, and one of the dogs for guarding the house. When his wife asked him if he was going to leave and never come back or why he had brought along so many things, he said that he had to cross the river to go back home, it was also far away, so he had to stay sometimes. In fact, he himself knew it was just a reason, if he was away too often, his house would be like a house without earthen walls, nothing to shelter from the rain and resist from the wind. Not to mention recently, sometimes, some houses in the village have goats and pigs stolen, even cows. The wooden gate to the house has been there since the time of his grandparents, never changed, bolted but just to trick the eye, as a strong person can push it lightly and it will pop right open. It's not that he doesn't know how to take care of the house, it's not that he goes out every day to have wine and meat, alone. At this time, he found it very difficult to stay in his house, like it was about to rain but it could not rain for several days. Looking at the figure of his daughter, May, sitting and cutting white caladium for the pigs, he feels that time goes by so quickly, his son Trai is also taller than the long knife in the corner of the house. He only has to take care of his two children for a few more years, then they will leave the nest like birds, and at that time he will no longer need to think about life or death, being full or hungry, being rich or poor. His wife must have thought the same...

Do Bich Thuy





Nguyen Thuy Hoa

After Chủng had gone to the farmland, the first few days the house was too empty. In the evening, May went to sleep with the Old mother (*Old mother: not biological mother, but the father's first wife*). Usually, until May fell asleep mother came in. Every day, mother had to go around to check the gate, extinguish all the coals in the stove, tie the dog near the horse stable. When the Old mother came in, May hugged her tightly. Her body was almost as hot as the stove, the Old mother said.

Tonight May went to bed late, partly because the house was empty and even more deserted - Trại brought the horse to fetch the breed, the Old mother went to visit the sick children of Chu's family - partly because outside, behind the stone fence, there was a sudden melody of a jaw harp and it was resounding like forever. That jaw harp sound she heard several times in the markets, always chasing behind her, May went fast, it followed quickly, May went slow, it went slowly. Now it dared to follow right to her house. Several times May stood up, wanted to go to the door, but her legs kept shaking then she sat down again and again. The scarf she was embroidering had few wrong lines, the needle stabbed her finger several times. At last, May could keep her feet despite the sound of the jaw harp, she poured water on the fire and entered the bedroom. The sound of the jaw harp still lingered outside before it went away. The sound of horse footsteps also faltered. Riding a horse means that one came from far away. Travelling a long way and standing for a long time in the fog may cause sickness.

She lay in bed but could not sleep. Upstairs, the mother cat carried her cubs (her kittens) back and forth, rummaging through the corn pile. The house did not have enough people, the wind blows from one gable to the other, it's tiring to the ears. Closing her eyes and then opening them, May tried not to look at the large wooden trunk looming in the corner of the room. In that trunk, the Old mother kept a very beautiful dress, embroidered with seven colors like a rainbow, and she said that when May gets married, she will let her take it. However, just last night, May woke up early and saw mother opening the trunk, taking out that dress. Is she going to wear such a beautiful dress and where? The wedding season was over, relatives probably won't have any wedding. Where does she go? Or is the Old mother planning to go to the twenty-seventh fair (\*)? If so... what then, May? Is it because her father left home and stays in the farm? Or is it because Dad knows that the Old mother plans to go to the fair in March this year, is that the reason why he left house?





Photograph © Nguyen Viet Hung (Lekima).



She didn't think much when her father brought salt and rice to the other side of Nho Que river, but now when she thinks about it, there is something unusual, unlike when men from other families make tents in the fields to tend to goats, cows, and watch the mischievous monkeys who come from the forest to destroy the farm. The more she thinks, the more confused she gets, and the harder it is to sleep. Suddenly May feels worried, not sure what she is worried about, but it is like someone lit a fire in her stomach. Under the porch, the dew drops on the thatched roof falling into the dry stone pond, sounding louder and louder, like sporadic rain.

This year, it is colder than usual, and the cold came later. It would lead to long-term cold, till March and April, when it has bright sun but is still cold. Peach blossoms and pear blossoms bloom after Tet, everyone said that this year, the festival “fifth of May” (lunar calendar) will lose joy. But the “fifth of May” has not come yet, when the weather changes, people suffer and suffer because after sowing corn and rice seeds in the soil, farmers are waiting and still have not seen any leaves, any germination. The soil is getting drier and drier. In the new rocky fields, the soil is flattened, they need to wait for seeds to sprout leaves before applying more fertilizer. But despite those worries, the twenty-seventh festival won't be less fun than previous years.

There is the sound of a dog groaning, its tail thrashing against the earthen wall. Old man Chún came back. The Old Mother, who arrived home a little while before, opened the door, whispering:

- Back so early? Why not let the sun rise, the dew melt to reduce the cold.

- Yeah... - His voice was hoarse. – I thought that. But there are a few people from Xin Cai who came down early, hitchhiking on the boat so I came with them. Is there anything to do at home?

- Still the same, only the barn doors are about to break. When you have time, please fix them.

- Okay, I'll fix them today.

Everything in this house is old. So are the stables. His father built it from ironwood long time ago, since his youngest son was not born yet.

It's been decades. He doesn't remember how many generations of horses were there, now it's broken and needs to be repaired.

As dawn arrived, Chún walked around the house, looked carefully at the stables, and then brought a knife to fix it. His wife followed him out to see if he needed anything. He was working as told her:

- Old mother, this year spring came late, many people will go to the twenty-seventh market, so we should brew some corn wine to sell.

- You don't have to brew, it's still full. Before the New Year, the Sung family asked to brew a few pots for them to welcome a new daughter-in-law, but then their relatives gave them a lot so they haven't use it.

- Then you load it on horseback and bring it there to sell.

There was something different in his voice, she felt. Homemade wine can be kept for as long as he wants, the longer it stays, the better it tastes. And from now to next New Year, there are still many occasions to use corn wine, why was he urging her to sell it now. She kept looking at him, but he was still working, as if he didn't notice, like he just accidentally mentioned going to the market to sell wine. Everyone knows that wine is brought to the twenty-seventh market so that sellers and buyers can drink together. Drink, drink then get drunk, the buyer might not remember to pay, but if he remembers, and has only a few *dong* in the pocket, even not enough to buy a bag of salt, you can take it out and pay, it will be OK. The market is on the twenty-seventh, but since the twenty-first, the twenty-second it has been sporadic with people and wine. All year long bowing in the fields, bowing for corn and peas, and bowing at home for pigs and chickens, there is no time to relax. Not being occupied by children at the market people are free to play and drink alcohol. Men forget knives, forget crossbows, women forget bran pans, forget chopsticks, no one laughs or reproaches.

There are indeed many things that are difficult to say out loud between Chún and his wife. It's all because of one person who just came, then left before Tet. That one should have gone away, but no, and they even promised to come back in spring. If the promise is kept, that person will come back soon.



A month before Tet, on the day Old Mother and May made Khảo cake, there was a guest at home. That was mother Hoa. When May opened the gate, May recognized mother Hoa immediately, but mother Hoa kept looking at May, looking without blinking. May didn't think herself grown up and changed so was difficult to recognize. At that moment, May turned away immediately and went as if she was running into the house, ignoring mother Hoa, who was dragging a large bag on the ground behind her. May suddenly felt hot, and her knees trembled. Something like a strange wind has come, it will blow everything in the house, nothing will stay in its place anymore. Why did mother Hoa suddenly come back, why hasn't she gone away? May and her sibling were about to forget the old story, do they have to remember it again?

Mother Hoa entered the house, bowed to her father, who was sitting at the table drinking water. May's father looked out:

- Ah... back home again!

- Yes... – mother Hoa mumbled, her head lowered even further, her hands were fidgeting with the two bag straps placed in front of her.

- What did you come back for? - Father asked as if without asking.

- I... I just went to visit. See how everyone is.

- How? It's nothing. Adults grow old, children grow up...

Dad talked as if no one was listening right in front of him. Dad called May, called Trai. Only Trai came in, and May was at the top, as if she didn't hear father's call.

The Old mother came out and told her to bring wet firewood from the stables to put on the stove for drying, whispered into May's ear and said as if scolding:

- You should not be like that, daughter. It's mother Hoa, but not a stranger on the road. It's been a long time since she came home, but you still don't forget her, right?

May turned to answer the Old mother:

- I remember, better than you, old mother. Remember all. Even remember when the cow was being led away..

- Oh, don't mention the old story again. What should be remembered remember, what should be forgotten must be forgotten. Yesterday it rained, the stream water was muddy, but not forever. So is human...

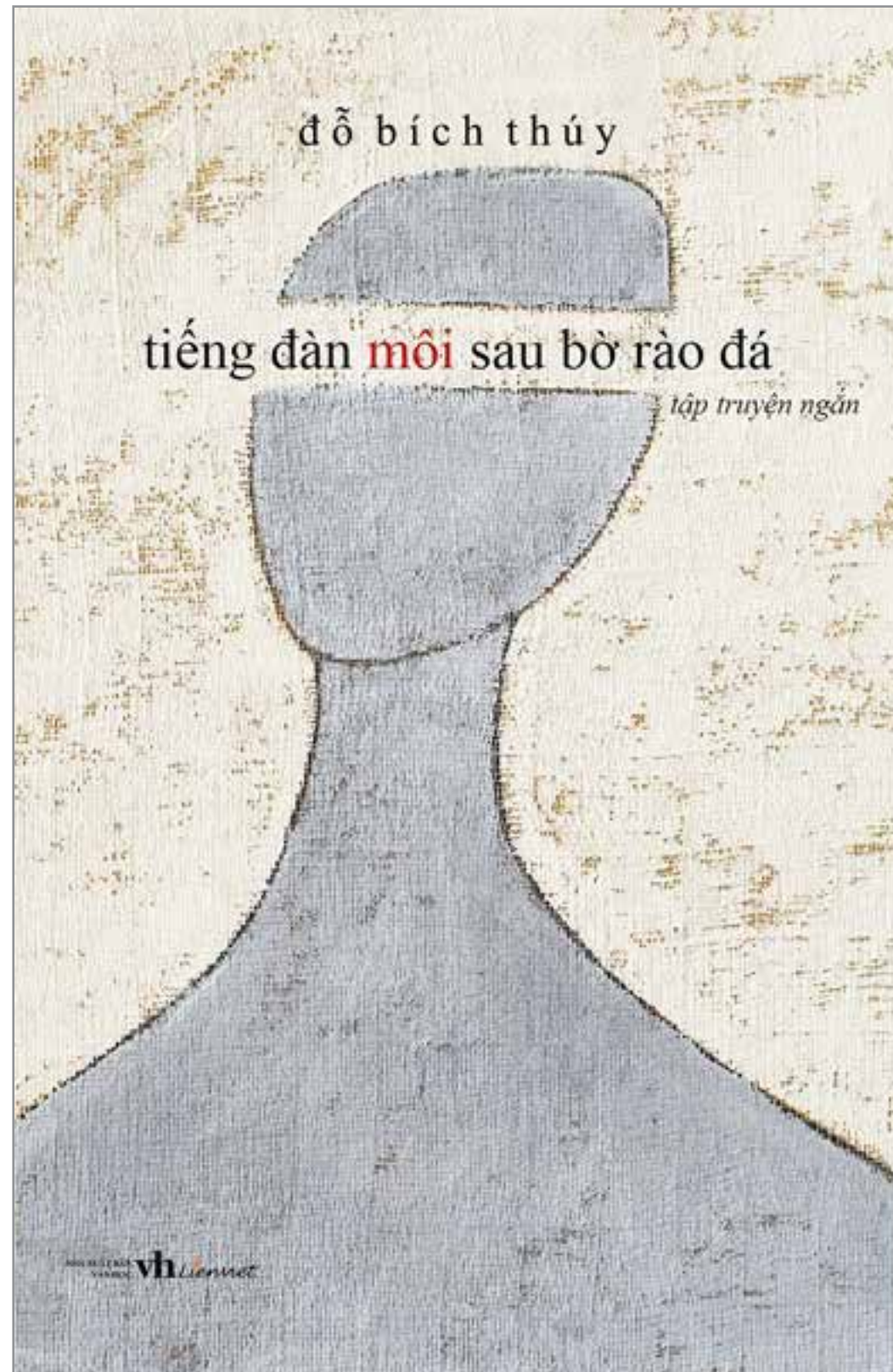
No matter what the Old mother said, May could not force herself to forget. May ran in and out, rushing to bring all the wet firewood outside the stables and piled them nearly up to the kitchen's attic behind the stove. A stick of firewood felled into the boiling bran pan. No one helped. Sweat broke out on May's face, her dress covered in dirt. Trai stood at the door, looking at her from above and said:

- Are you a four- or five-year-old child?

May pursed her lips. Trai's body is really big but his thoughts are small, now he dared to speak with that voice to his sister. May pulled her hand away from him, pushed the wet firewood to the back of the stove, picked up the stick in the bran pan and stirred it up hardly.

Old Mother has been Chủng's wife for more than twenty years. In that time, the whole area has known how beautiful Ms Mao was, and so were her manners, as no one in the village dared to admit that they could embroider and weave cloth as fast and as beautiful as her. In this area, only Chủng's family had enough money, rice, and wine for the wedding dowry requested by Mao's parents of the one who wanted to marry her, so Mao became Chung's bride. Before the wedding day, all night the sound of horse paws fidgeting outside the stone fence kept Mao awake. At dawn, the horse left, and a moment later the sound of jaw harp resounded from the back of the canyon. The sound of the jaw harp seemed from very far away. Mao got up, looked through the small window, as small as her two hands, saw that it was foggy outside, full foggy in the yard and the garden, that she couldn't see anything from the house to the fence. The sound of the jaw harp from far away was like an arrow that pierced the dense fog and rushed to her. The jaw harp sounded sad, reproachful. Mao cried quietly, from that day on Mao never heard the sound of the jaw harp played for her again.





Tiếng đàn môi sau bờ rào đá- The sound of the jaw harp behind the stone fence.  
Available at: <https://tiki.vn/tieng-dan-moi-sau-bo-rao-da-p89763867.html>

One year, then two years, three years after the wedding day, Mao and her husband still had not had children. At first, her husband's family ran to find a doctor, then they gave up. Father-in-law and mother-in-law passed away one after the other. They loved their daughter-in-law like their daughter, so they could not open their mouth to tell the son to find a new wife, even though Chúng was their only son.

Many times Mao told her husband to let Mao go back to her mother's house, then Chúng should get a new wife, but he didn't listen to her. Chúng had to keep Mao like keeping a door in his house. Chúng knew he could not find anywhere a woman who could replace Mao.

Every time he went away he tried to finish the work quickly to get back home. He was afraid that Mao would be sad and lonely, afraid that Mao with half of a blanket, lying on half of a cold bed, could not sleep.

That year, the village built the road to High Mountain, every family must have a person contributing to carry the stone and soil. Every day Mao woke up early to cook sticky rice and grilled chicken for her husband to eat, and packed them for his lunch. But day by day, the road was getting farther and farther away, Chúng could not go home after finishing work, and had to bring rice to the construction site to cook with other people. Every few days, he returned. He always encouraged Mao to live alone for a few more days, the road was almost finished. The road connecting several communes would be completed not sooner than by the end of the dry season.

The large house had been without Chúng for so long that it felt cold. On the day Chúng returned, Mao was sick, and had not eaten anything for several days.

Chúng did not come alone. Following him, there was another from the road-building team. That was a girl a few years younger than Mao, from the lowlands.

Mao quietly moved her belongings to the room of her late mother-in-law. The room was regularly cleaned by Mao, but it seemed like an abandoned space because no one lived there. When Mao brought her own trunk she carried with her from the day she came to her husband's house, Chúng stood at the door of the room, reaching out his hands as if to hold Mao back.



Mao looked into his eyes. Chúngh couldn't stand Mao's eyes and turned his face away to let Mao out. That night Chúngh was sitting by the stove, sharpening a knife, until it was very late he did not go to sleep. Mao also did not go to bed after cleaning the house, but brought a bunch of white caladium out and started cutting. Neither said anything, only the sound of knives hitting white caladium was resounded. Mao stood up, poured the white caladium into the bran pan (cooking for pig), bent down to push the wooden logs deep into the fire.

Chúngh touched Mao's dress and asked her to sit down next to him. But after the two were sitting next to each other for a while, Chúngh kept sharpening the knife, cutting even on his finger, and blood oozed out. He moved the painful finger to his mouth. He did not know how to start. Mao was still staring at the fire, the firelight reflected on Mao's face red, suddenly Chúngh felt scared of Mao, it would be better if Mao said something out loud to him.

From that day on, there were three people in the house. Three people sleep in three beds, in three corners of the house. The three of them rarely talked to each other, Mao was in the kitchen, Hoa was in the house, Chúngh was in the garden, and they only gathered during meal times. Every night there were creaking from the three beds. Waking up early or getting up late, all three of them had dark circles under their eyes. It was so hard to live like that, what about when they all got sick? One night, Chúngh got up, went to the door of the right chamber, the door was locked, fastened inside, Chúngh stood for a long time, coughing softly, but the door was still closed, and there was not a sound from the woman in this room. At that time, from the left chamber suddenly he heard a cry. The cry of a person lying face down on the pillow. The door to that room was not locked, only half-closed. It was cold, but sweat was pouring out of Chúngh's face...

After little May was born, Hoa kept staying and didn't leave out as Chúngh told Mao. But it was true that Hoa was not used to farming, she did not know how to plant beans, cultivate beans, she couldn't even set the fire for stoves. May was two months old when mother Hoa left May at home with her Old mother Mao and went down to the town to open a stall selling canvas shoes, she came back home occasionally.

May was as small as a kitten. From early morning to late night, she was always lying in a sling hanging on the Old mother's back. How many times May sucked the Old mother's breasts, chewing and making her breasts to bleed because she wanted milk.

May was two years old, still could not climb over their threshold, her mother Hoa gave birth to Trai. Little brother sat in the sling, taking May's place on Mao's back, and again chewed the Old mother's breasts, which had never had milk.

Mother Hoa came back less and less, each time it was only for a while, barely with time to eat and then go again. Every time Hoa came back, she always brought for May and Trai a big bag of colored candy, shoes and clothes. But every time, daughter and son brought out the candy and poured it into the horse's trough. They did not wear those clothes, they got used to the clothes woven by their Old mother. The clothes that Hoa brought back were kept in the wooden box.

When May was eleven years old, Trai was nine years old, their mother Hoa came home for the last time and then left. At that time, Hoa ate dinner and then spent the night with her children. May's father had not returned from hunting, May and brother went to bed early, woke up the next morning and did not see Hoa anywhere. The Old mother said mother Hoa left very early, immediately got up, opened the door and left. At that night, the plow ox was stolen, someone took the barn latch off the barn door and led it away. They had only one ox to plow, if the ox was lost, a person had to replace it. It was almost noon that day when Chúngh came back from hunting, May hugged her father's leg and told him about mother Hoa's return and the story of the stolen ox.

Her father Chúngh and Old mother Mao did not say anything to each other. May's father did not sleep for several nights, only sat drinking dry wine on the porch, surrounded by big and small puppies lying on each other.

That year's crop, and the next one, May's parents had to manually hoe the soil in the farm because they had no ox for plowing. The Old mother's hands had more callouses, and each callus was as thick as a burnt piece in a bran pot. Every night, the Old mother rubbed the children's backs with those callus-covered hands to help them sleep easily.

Mother Hoa was gone for many days and months, and everyone thought that she would never come back. Chúngh sometimes went down to the town and did not see Hoa sitting there selling goods. That amount of days was enough for the children to grow up, and when they were nearly adults she came back. Is it like a person who goes on and on but can't reach where she needs to go, now has no strength left, then goes back to find a place to rest?



Her return stirred up a family, which was as peaceful as a bird's nest on a high tree before her arrival. What Hoa had said Chúng didn't remember, because he didn't want to listen to it, so whatever she said he did not care, only when Hoa asked to take May and Trai down to visit her home village and have a New Year's festival with her family and relatives, he yelled. He said the house is not a wild guava garden, where anyone who wants to can come and pick the fruits, like herding cows.

It was too difficult to talk to him, so mother Hoa came to the Old mother asking for help. After one night, when he woke up, he saw that Mao's eyes were sunken, her hands holding the bran pot were shaking as if she has just had a cold. He kept waiting to see if she would say anything to him, but she remained silent for a long time, keeping her head down, and she didn't look up.

The Old mother avoided his eyes, he avoided the eyes of mother Hoa. Hoa was still as beautiful as a pear blossoming flower on a warm day. Hoa is only a few years younger than the Old mother, but she looks like the daughter of the Old mother. Sometimes Hoa looked at him, as if she wanted to burn his face. When Hoa lifted up her pants to wash her feet, revealing that her calf muscle was rounder than May's, he tried to push away all the strange thoughts that were about to come to his mind. Hoa went back to sleep in the left chamber, without any need for anyone to tell her that. Since the day Hoa left, Chúng slept alone there. The Old mother used the excuse of sleeping on the other side room with children, and did not move things back.

He sat down to drink dry wine again. The back of his shirt was cold. Behind him is the door of the left chamber, half ajar, in front of him is a lamp that has run out of oil, the flame already has the burning smell of the wick.

Hoa tried but could not talk to May. May avoided her birth mother. May told her father that mother Hoa was just like a wild animal that got lost in their house, when she doesn't want to stay anymore, she leaves. May knew, always behind her, next to her, her mother's eyes were always looking at her. Trai was different from May, he agreed to talk to mother Hoa. May has the feeling of hatred towards Trai, and the two siblings did not talk to each other. May always sees the two hands of old mothers, as dry as two bent branches, full of calluses as thick as burnt pieces in the bran pan, in front of her eyes.

Just until mother Hoa took her bag away and was about to leave, May looked directly at her once, for the first time since her mother returned. And May was startled, suddenly feeling a sharp pain in her chest. Hoa's eyes - the eyes that Old Mother always said were the things for others to see and recognize May - those eyes were as red as blood, her eyelids were swollen, and her cheeks were pale white. But May still did not say a word to mother Hoa, May's mouth seemed to be sewn tightly shut.

May turned her face away, avoiding mother Hoa's eyes, May could not afford to look any longer. Mother Hoa left, and within a moment she was nowhere to be seen among the shriveled cornfields that had just been harvested. May ran away from the house, running towards the stream located deep in the forest. The Old Mother was washing there, drying wet clothes on the big rocks by the stream bank. May ran down, fell on the Old mother, and burst into tears.

- Gone... gone, Old mother! That mother Hoa...

Old mother hugged May. The cold spring water hit the ledge, splashing the skirts of mother and daughter. The old mother sighed softly...

May had met that one. One evening, she was sitting in the house, listening to the jaw harp sound calling and urging. May dared to step one foot out of the gate. He came down from High Mountain, very young, just one or two years older than May, but May was just as tall as his shoulder. Under the dim moonlight, May could not see his face clearly, but she could clearly feel his fiery eyes looking at her. The first night, May only dared to stand there for a while, shivering, and rushed into the house. May was afraid that if she stood any longer, she would fall. Gradually, less afraid, May stood for a while, one night she stood until the dew fell and wet her scarf, she went to the house. Now, May has accepted to go to the twenty-seventh fair with him.

Tomorrow Chủ will wait for May at the fork in the road, from the junction to the market there is still a long way to go, it will be dark by the time they get there. May could not sleep all night. May deliberately went to bed late, and she was waiting for a very long time but didn't hear the rooster. May lied to the Old mother that her friend Ly invited May to her house to make cakes, the Old mother did not say anything, only told her when going to other people's houses, remember to greet the elderly people and do not to go to bed before the elderly like at home.



At dawn May led the horse out. The black horse seemed to understand May, obediently letting May put the saddle on its back.

May was so scared, afraid of meeting someone who knew her in the village, if people told her parents, they would scold her for lying. But although she was afraid, she kept going anyway. If you have someone with you, what are you afraid of? Unexpectedly at the market, May met three, four girlfriends from the same village, each of whom went with a strange boy. Seeing each other, none of them said anything. They just pretended not to know each other, turned away and smiled.

At night, a young man lit a big bonfire in the middle of the ground for the throwing cotton ball game, then everyone contributed any food they had and shared together. May and her boyfriend also tied the horse in a corner and went out there to sit with them. There were more and more people around the fire, all young boys and girls. Now there was no shame anymore. The girls' cheeks were red, but because of the firelight. Everyone was the same, nothing to be ashamed of.

The next morning, right on the twenty-seventh of March, the red sun rose from the forest. Chử pulled May's hand to the side where people were sitting in a long line, with wine in big cans in front of them. But only elderly were sitting drinking for a long time, young people stopped by for a while and then found another place to sit, where they would be less visible.

They sat down at a wine store, he hadn't said anything to the seller, suddenly May pulled Chử up:

- Go! Let's go away. Hurry up.

While saying that, May pulled Chử away, like they were running, away from the wine store, as quickly as possible. May had just seen it, May didn't see it wrong, May definitely did not mistake, the person wearing a rainbow-colored dress there was the Old mother. The Old mother was sitting behind the wine jar, her face was red. And the man sitting near by, was that the Old mother's friend? The one who swore never play the jaw harp again since the day her mother became a bride, was that him?

May pulled Chử away, while Chử looked at May, looking at her for a long time and could not say anything. Chử's family has only a father and a son. Chử's mother died from illness when he was small, and he could only learn to walk on the doorstep.

At the age of six, Chử was taught to play jaw harp by his father, at the age of ten, Chử followed his father to the upland farm. Knowing his story, May's friend joked, telling her that it was good to become his bride, because Chu plays the jaw harp even better than his father, and May won't have to pamper mother-in-law...

It was very late when May arrived home. The Old mother was sitting with her arms in front of the newly lit stove, urging May to get warm water to wash her hands and feet. The Old mother was wearing a dress at home but forgot to change the scarf. May sat down next to her. The Old mother told her that father took her mother Hoa to the district town, and they hadn't returned yet. Hoa just came up here yesterday afternoon. She came up again. Is it worth thinking about that? Why didn't Old mother say more? May hesitated:

- What do you think?... how?

- How should I do, are you going to tell me, my daughter? - The Old mother turned to look at May and then turned away, resting her chin on her knees, holding a wood stick in her hand and rubbing it against the burning stove, after a while she continued:

- Daughter, being a bride without being a mother is just like a stone supporting husband's house. After twenty, thirty years, until death, just a stone under the house's pillar...

After hearing what the Old mother said, tears started to fall from May's eyes. So, for twenty years, the Old mother has thought she is just a stone, doesn't the Old mother accept May and her brother as her children? Is the Old mother going to return them to mother Hoa like people borrow horses and then return them? After that, what is the Old mother going to do? Doesn't she want to go to another house to continue being a stone under a house pillar, at this age? May pulled the chair closer to the Old mother, not knowing what to say, her heart was aching as if someone had cut it with a sharp knife.

It was late at night and father still hasn't returned. Now the road is good, it only takes less than half a day to go back and forth, but why does it take him so long? No one told other, but both mother and daughter had the intention of waiting, waiting until the big firewood turned to ashes, they went to sleep. But just lying down for a while, dozing off to sleep, May heard the sound of a jaw harp.



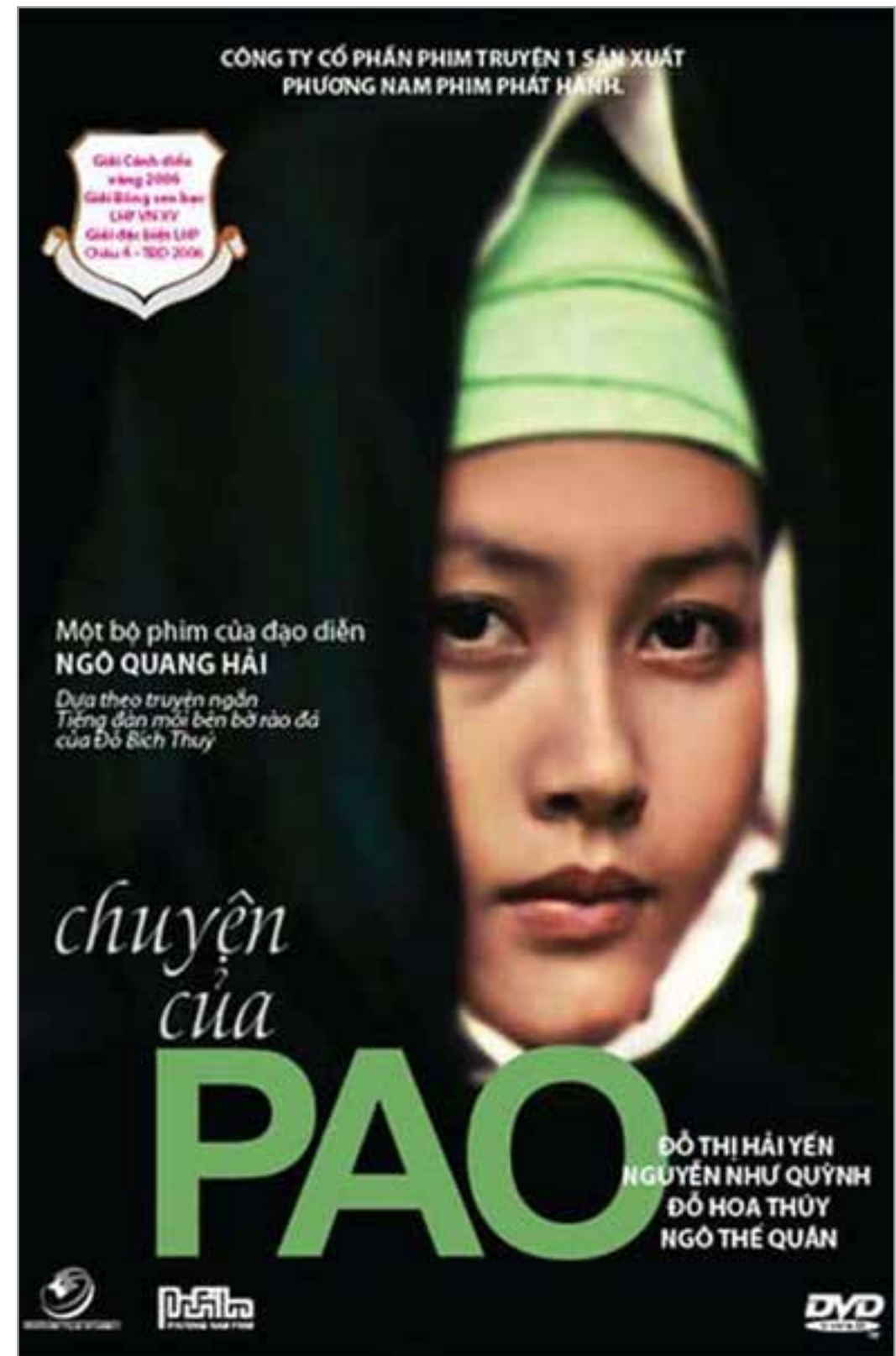
The sound was right outside the wooden gate, not at the front of the house like last time. May decided to ignore, they had just said goodbye to each other, the familiar smell of hair had not disappeared yet, and she was so sleepy. But that sound kept calling and calling. Tonight it had something different, longer, deeper, more hesitant, flowing over the thick and high stone fence, like a stream of water. Though many times she listened to it, May always felt nervous, her heart was pounding. Suddenly, the Old mother quietly got out of bed, she must have forgotten to tie the dog out in the stable before she went to sleep. Waiting for her mother to open the door, May also threw the blanket off. She intended to go out to tell Chử to go home. Tomorrow he had to work.

May walked fast like running out into the yard, her head hit the soybean hanging line. She was about to go out and then run in quickly again so that the Old mother would not notice. But as soon as she crossed the yard, May suddenly stopped. Right in front of May, just in two steps, was the Old mother. The Old Mother was standing with her back to May, her head down, the scarf was slipping over her shoulder. Her hand was clutching the wooden bar that holds the two gates...

May clung to the pear tree foot, trying to breathe softly. The waning crescent of moonlight was dim. The cold wind rushed out from the ravine, the few old pear leaves left fell, brushing the stone fence...

(\*) 27th March Market is a “love market”, held in the hillside village of Khau Vai, 500km north of Hanoi, in the high mountain reaches of Ha Giang Province. Khau Vai Love Market, where nothing is bought or sold, takes place once a year on 27 th March by the lunar calendar. Hundreds of ex-lovers from various hill tribes like Nung, Tay, San Chi, Lo Lo, Dzao, Giay and Hmong congregate here. It is a glorious time when ex-lovers are allowed to reconnect, date, sing, and play the syrinx, jaw harp...

\* Movie *Chuyện của Pao* (Story of Pao), received a Golden Kite Award (Vietnam's very own Oscars) for the best movie in 2006. Director, Ngo Quang Hai, was inspired by a simple but emotional story called *Tiếng đàn môi sau bờ rào đá* (The Jaw harp sound behind the stone fence) by famous writer *Do Bich Thuy* (*She is my friend*), which led him to adapt it for the screen. Pao's Story depicts the lives of remote ethnic Mong villagers and a young girl named Pao, who has two mothers a real mother and a step-mother. Her real mother leaves Pao and her brother when they are young babies to be raised by their stepmother. Pao's story leads us on a journey of discovery where we see the secrets of love and the strength of relationships between people in the countryside. The film contains some breath-taking primitive scenes in the mountainous provinces of Vietnam. We can see the complicated moods of Pao in her quest, demonstrated simply and slowly without much use of dialog. Pao's Story is Hai's first award-winning film and places him at the fore of original directors in Vietnam today.



Movie adaptation of *Tiếng đàn môi sau bờ rào đá* (*The Jaw harp sound behind the stone fence*) *Chuyện của Pao* (Story of Pao), received a Golden Kite Award (Vietnam's very own Oscars) for the best movie in 2006. Director, Ngo Quang Hai.

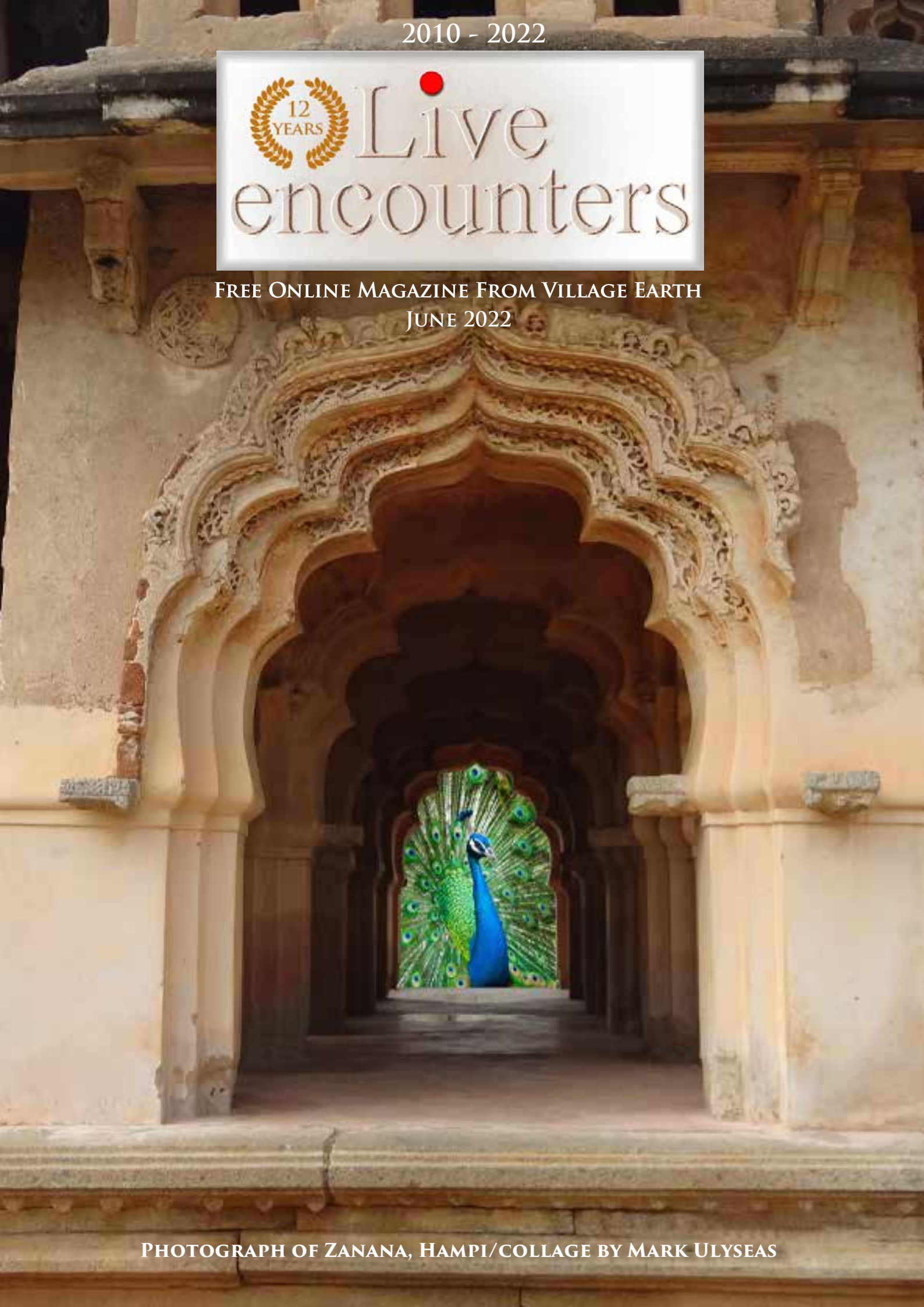


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PHOTOGRAPH OF ZANANA, HAMPI/COLLAGES BY MARK ULYSEAS