

The Belt and Road Initiative: China's Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

China announced the Belt and Road Initiative project in 2013. China has been practicing cultural exchanges with BRI neighboring countries through BRI Project. This paper analyzed how China used cultural diplomacy as a soft power with BRI countries through BRI. Findings of this study pointed out that China carried out BRI project as an important role to raise its image and influence and to become a powerful country. The aim of this paper is to know the knowledge of BRI. In doing this research, the analytical study method is used.

Keywords: China, BRI, Neighboring Countries, Culture, Cooperation

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or One Belt, One Road (OBOR) is a project launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping to develop the neighboring countries and improve global connectivity. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is about improving the physical infrastructure along land corridors. The initiative is focused by China on creating networks for a more efficient and productive free flow of the cultural exchange, trade as well as further integration of international markets both physically and digitally. Then, since the BRI was announced in 2013, China carried out the cultural exchanges under the BRI framework. Cultural exchanges are vital for enhancing mutual understanding and friendship between China and BRI countries. It focuses on Asia, Europe and Africa.

Aim

The aim of this research is to analyze how China used cultural diplomacy as a soft power with BRI countries through BRI.

Research Questions

1. Did China overwhelm the BRI countries in the cultural diplomacy as a soft power?
2. How is China reached the outcome from BRI?

Material and Methods

Data were collected from the documents and various articles from internet websites. An analytical study method was used in doing this research.

Literature Review

Many authors have already written on China's Belt and Road Initiative. There are 8400 articles such as books and research papers on BRI in China. Some of them are the article "The Belt and Road Initiative and its Implication on Myanmar" written by Dr Mi Mi Kyi (2019), "Transportation and the Belt and Road Initiative" written by Nicolas de Loisy (2019) and "The Belt and Road Initiative: What will China offer the world in its Rise" written by Professor Wang Yiewei (2015). These articles have mentioned the economic exchanges between China and BRI neighboring countries through BRI, the clarifies the Confusion statistical tables of the entire BRI project and the opinions of various Myanmar personal such as businessman and politicians. This paper analyzed China's cultural diplomacy used as soft power with BRI neighboring countries through BRI and raising of China's image and influence. It also discussed China's strategy in foreign policy.

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Findings and Discussion

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The "Belt" refers to economic and overland transport links across China to Central Asia and Europe. The "Road" is a network of maritime routes connecting regions through Chinese sea ports. President Xi announced the plans for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road at the 2013 summit of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations in Indonesia.²

After Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Indonesia in September and October of 2013, he raised the initiative of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (hereinafter referred to as the Belt and Road, or B&R). Then, the Chinese government set up the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative with an administrative office under the National Development and Reform Commission. BRI includes efforts to strengthen hard infrastructure, soft infrastructure and cultural ties.³

The Belt and Road Initiative aims for strengthening physical and infrastructure connectivity among countries along the Silk Road, for fostering policy coordination and connectivity cooperation, for unimpeded trade and investment, for cooperation to get clean and green environment to achieve sustainable development and for promoting people-to-people bond through exchange of culture, tourism, education, and digital connectivity. It is an ambitious project that focuses on improving connectivity and cooperation among multiple countries spread across the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe.⁴

Countries of BRI

It comprises over 50 countries along the "belt" and the "road." They include: Asia: Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Mongolia, Maldives, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, the Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, Israel and Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan. Africa: Kenya, Sudan, Egypt and Djibouti. Europe: Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Serbia, Romania, Moldova, Germany, the Netherlands.⁵

Culture Exchanges

The Belt and Road Initiative is not just about trade and investment but also cultural exchanges. Xiang Zhaolun, vice-minister of the Ministry of Culture, said at a news conference on the sidelines of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China that China was more than 300 official cooperative deals and action plans on cultural exchange with participating nations and cultural exchange is good relationship policies with its neighbor. China implemented the cultural exchange by enhancing its soft power strategy to raise China's image.⁶

² Belt and Road Initiative

³ History of Belt and Road Initiative

<<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=history+of+Belt+and+road+initiatives>>

⁴ Press Release on Working Visit of the State Counselor to the People's Republic of China, April 30, 2019,

<<https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/?q=news/30/04/2019/id-17494>>

⁵ "One Belt-One Road Initiative and MYANMAR" Connectivity: Synergy Issue and Potentialities

<<http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/one-belt-one-road-initiative-myanmar-connectivity-synergy-issue-potentialities/>>

⁶ Belt and Road Initiative is also about cultural exchanges, official says, October 20, 2017,

<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpnationalcongress/2017-10/20/content_33492115.htm>

President Xi Jinping stated at the “Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference in 2013 that China’s neighbors had extremely significant strategic value and further stated that China wanted to improve relations between China and its neighbors, strengthening economic ties and deepening security cooperation. Besides, President Xi highlighted the need to strengthen publicity, enhance cultural educational and scientific exchanges. Based on President Xi’s speech, China’s image promoted in Asian, Africa and Europe through the BRI and China used the cultural diplomacy as a part of its foreign policy strategy to establish good relationship policies with its neighbor.⁷

China and other B&R countries hosted culture exchanges such as arts festivals, film festivals, music festivals, cultural relics exhibitions, book fairs, education exchange and scholarly, language center and Confucius center, radio, film and television programs, and translating and introducing each other's media programs. In 2008, China in promoting its image showcased the cultural aspect of China to the world through the Beijing Olympics and equally in 2010 through the Shanghai Expo, etc. This continued through the encouragement of the use of cultural diplomacy through its soft power tools throughout a series of cultural exchanges such as the Silk Road International Arts Festival, the Marine Silk Road International Arts Festival and the Silk Road (Dunhuang) International Cultural Expo in different countries to promote cultural communication among the BRI countries.⁸

The Silk Road International League of Theaters, Silk Road International Museum Alliance, Network of Silk Road Arts Festivals, Silk Road International Library Alliance, and Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries have been established. China set up 17 Chinese culture centers in B&R countries. An international dragon boat festival was held in the Chinese New Year, with over 200 paddlers of 24 teams from several countries including China, Egypt, the United States, Australia, the Philippines and Singapore.

China and the Belt and Road (B&R) countries carried out diplomatic activities and cultural exchanges of various forms in wide fields over the past five years. Therefore, they enhanced the mutual understanding and recognition and laying a solid cultural foundation for furthering the initiative. China maintained close cultural communication with the countries along the Belt and Road in the spirit of openness and inclusiveness. This year's Shanghai International Film Festival saw the Belt and Road Film Festival Alliance in Shanghai. China and BRI countries published the alliance manifesto in this festival including plans to enhance information and film sharing, exchanging filmmakers and industry experts, and to start more joint projects with the coalition. In addition, the first Belt and Road Week was held with 154 films from 49 countries along the Belt and Road during the festival.⁹

China expanded cooperation with other B&R countries in tourism. China hosted activities with CEE countries, ASEAN countries, Russia, Nepal, Greece, Egypt, and South Africa to celebrate the cultures of B&R countries in different years, and developed about a dozen cultural exchange brands such as the "Silk Road Tour". China held joint year of tourism with many other B&R countries, initiating cooperation mechanisms such as the Silk Road Tourism Promotion Union, Maritime Silk Road Tourism Promotion Alliance, and Tea Road

⁷ Xi, J.P. (2013) Important Speech of Xi Jinping at Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference. 2013. China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development, October 30, 2013, <http://www.cciced.net/cciceden/NEWSCENTER/LatestEnvironmentalandDevelopmentNews/201310/t20131030_82626.html>

⁸ Wu, X.B. (2017) Culture an Essential Piece for Belt and Road Initiative. The China Post, May 13, 2017, <<http://www.chinapost.com.tw/China/China-business/2017/5/13/497280/P2/culture-an.html>>

⁹ Belt and Road Initiative yields fruitful results in the cultural arena, August 28, 2018, <<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201808/28/WS5b850dfaa310add14f3883b5.html>>

International Tourism Alliance. China cooperated more in protecting historical and cultural heritage, providing foreign aid in cultural relic's protection, and promoting joint archaeological activities and exchanges between museums. China signed cooperation agreements on the protection of cultural heritage with Indonesia, Myanmar, Serbia and Singapore. The Routes Network of Chang'an-Tian Shan Corridor became a UNESCO World Heritage site.

China signed mutual visa exemption agreements for different types of passport with 57 B&R countries, and concluded 19 agreements or arrangements to streamline visa application procedures with 15 countries. In 2018, outbound Chinese tourists numbered 150 million, and inbound foreign tourists numbered 30.54 million. Russia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Mongolia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore were the main sources of tourists for China. Tourism developed in cultural exchanges between the two sides. Li Jinzao, China's vice minister of culture and tourism said that around 70 percent of the global tourism was from international tourism along the Belt and Road.

The Chinese Government set up Scholarship Silk Road Program and China signed agreements with 24 B&R countries on the mutual recognition of higher education degrees. In 2017, 38,700 students from other B&R countries studied in China on scholarships provided by the Chinese government. Other B&R scholarships were provided in the Hong Kong and Macao SARs. The Chinese Academy of Sciences offered scholarships in Master's and Doctorate programs to other B&R countries, and ran science and technology training courses which trained some 5,000 students from other B&R countries.¹⁰

China transferred the social customs, language, and beliefs among BRI countries. China's influence filtered through the import of Chinese cultural values in the Asian region by providing extensive training for Asian language teachers, sending more Chinese native speakers to work in schools in the Asian region. China supported language training in many countries in Asia and over the years the numbers of language training center and Confucius institutes were opened. For example, in Malaysia increased the private language school enrollment in Chinese classes. In the Pakistan-China Institute in Islamabad launched a basic Chinese language course to be delivered via video conferencing to develop their Chinese language skills. China opened 153 Confucius Institutes and 149 Confucius Classrooms in 54 B&R countries. In 2014 Confucius Institutes were 480 around the world teaching Chinese language and culture.¹¹ This shows the increasing of cultural awareness of China's culture.

China deeply cooperated with BRI countries in health and medicine. Since the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, China signed 56 agreements on cooperation in the health sector with countries such as Mongolia and Afghanistan, international organizations such as the World Health Organization, and NGOs such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In August 2017 the Belt and Road High-Level Meeting for Health Cooperation: Towards a Health Silk Road was held in Beijing. China carried out cooperation on the prevention and control of AIDS, malaria, dengue, flu, and tuberculosis with Lancang-Mekong countries; on the prevention and control of plague with Central Asian countries; and on the prevention and control of polio with Western Asian countries. China dispatched ophthalmology teams to Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Sri Lanka to carry out the "Brightness Action" program, and short-term medical teams to island countries such as Fiji,

¹⁰ Belt and Road Initiative achieves closer people-to-people ties, April 24, 2019, <<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/24/WS5cc00024a3104842260b80fc.htm>>

¹¹ Winter, T. (2016) One Belt One Road Heritage Cultural Diplomacy and the Silk Road. Tribune Content Agency. The Diplomat. <<https://tribunecontentagency.com/article/one-belt-one-road-one-heritage-cultural-diplomacy-and-the-silk-road/>>

Tonga, Micronesia, and Vanuatu in the Pacific. It established traditional Chinese medicine centers in 35 B&R countries, and 43 international TCM cooperation bases.

China continued to make effort in disaster relief, assistance, and poverty alleviation. Since the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, China provided RMB2 billion in emergency food assistance to developing countries participating in the initiative and US\$1 billion to the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund. China worked with relevant countries to jointly implement the Belt and Road South-South Cooperation Initiative on Climate Change. China implemented 100 Happy Home Projects, 100 Anti-Poverty Projects, and 100 Health Recovery Projects. China participated in 8 joint programs for the protection of cultural relics with 6 countries, and 15 joint archaeological activities with 12 countries. China provided Laos and other countries with seismic monitoring equipment. China initiated 24 cooperation programs with civil society organizations in Cambodia and Nepal to improve the lives of local people.¹²

China tried to join exhibitions, conferences, seminars, workshops on cultural exchanges. In May 2017, the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing. The forum produced 279 deliverables, involving 76 major items in five key areas. China held the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation from 24th to 29th April 2019 in Beijing and attended by over 5000 high-level delegates from over 150 countries including 37 Heads of State and Government and representatives from international organizations to achieve high-quality cooperation under the win-win partnership of the Belt and Road Initiative.

During the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, China launched a cooperation initiative on "Accelerating the Sustainable Development Goals for Children through Shared Development" in B&R countries with the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). Civil society organizations in China started the "Silk Road Community Building" program to promote cooperation between civil society organizations in all B&R countries to improve people's lives. China continued to provide affordable support and assistance to other developing countries under the initiative.

China held the first conference of the Belt and Road Initiative Tax Administration Cooperation Forum and the Belt and Road Initiative Tax Cooperation Conference (BRITCC) in May 2018, which published the "Astana Proposal by BRITCC Participating Jurisdictions for Enhancing Cooperation in Tax Matters". The Chinese government signed cultural exchange and cooperation agreements with the governments of Niger, Pakistan, Namibia, Nigeria, Mauritius and Guinea. China and BRI partner countries jointly implemented the Belt and Road publications promotion library program and the Belt and Road copyright transaction project.¹³

In 2018, they held the annual summary meeting for cultural exchange programs and opened a Chinese traditional painting exhibition in the China Cultural Center in Fiji. A Fijian government delegation in Beijing attended the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. The Asian Civilization dialogue conference held under the theme of exchanges and mutual learning among Asian civilizations.¹⁴

¹² *The BRI progress, contributions and prospects.*

<<https://www.chinadailyhk.com/articles/77/188/203/1555988281660.html>>

¹³ China lists outcome of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation

<<http://mizzima.com/article/china-lists-outcome-second-belt-and-road-forum-international-cooperation>>

¹⁴ Interview: China's BRI offers opportunities for cultural exchanges: curator, May 9, 2019,

<http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/09/c_138045965.htm>

China provided deeper exchanges between peoples from different countries, cultures and historical backgrounds. China government allowed people, regardless of their ethnicities, cultures, social systems and religions, to communicate, blend and connect with each other from a new height, in joint efforts to build a global community of shared future. China through the Belt and Road Initiative encouraged exchanges among political parties, youth organizations, civil society organizations, think tanks, women's associations, and local authorities.

China organized training programs for the development of water resources for countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative and provided funding to 60 officials and technicians from countries along the Mekong River basin, including Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar, for training in postgraduate courses, including hydrology, water resources and hydropower. With the Belt and Road Initiative, the prospect for China's international cooperation on water conservancy would be increasingly broader. China awarded full scholarships to 150 people from BRI countries to earn master's degrees in China.¹⁵

In November 2018, the first China International Import Expo was held with countries, regions and international organizations and more than 3,600 enterprises from outside China. At the first Hongqiao International Economic Forum held at the expo, over 4,500 participants from governments, businesses, and academic and research institutions engaged in dialogue and exchanges and voiced their opinions. China also hosted many large-scale expositions such as the Silk Road International Exposition and the Investment and Trade Forum for Cooperation between East and West China, the China-ASEAN Expo, the China-Eurasia Expo, the China-Arab States Expo, the China-South Asia Expo, the China-Northeast Asia Expo, and the Western China International Fair. These events became important platforms for consultation and cooperation between China and other B&R countries.

China also involved people-to-people exchange in BRI. People-to-people exchange was the cultural foundation for building the Belt and Road. China displayed at an exhibition highlighting people-to-people exchanges over the five years of the Belt and Road Initiative in Seoul in September 2018. Under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, more than 37 Chinese cultural centers had been built in countries around the world at the end of 2018. China gave the lectures and trainings for scholars, experts and students getting together to exchange ideas at Chinese cultural centers worldwide to promote understandings among different peoples and cultures. The creative cultural products from the Palace Museum in Beijing displayed at the China Cultural Center in Bangkok on June 2, 2018.

Culture became an important support within China's strategy to secure its influence internationally, the One Belt and One Road Initiative strategy of fostering people to people connections. People to people contact raised their philosophy that developed and expanded a term of self-cultivation as well as others, in perspective of economic benefits, cultural and environmental awareness.¹⁶

China continued to carry out the Belt and Road Science, Technology and Innovation Cooperation Action Plan, and four major initiatives, namely the Science and Technology People-to-People Exchange Initiative, the Joint Laboratory Initiative, the Science Park Cooperation Initiative, and the Technology Transfer Initiative. China actively implemented the Belt and Road Initiative Talents Exchange Program. China built bridges for exchanges and mutual learning among different cultures, deepen cooperation in education, science, culture,

¹⁵ Training programs help BRI countries, April 27, 2019,

<<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/27/WS5cc391e3a3104842260b8a9d.html>>

¹⁶ Overseas Chinese cultural centers promote exchanges under BRI, April 30, 2019,

<<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/30/WS5cc7dcbfa3104842260b95a1.html>>

sports, tourism, health and archaeology, strengthen exchanges between parliaments, political parties and non-governmental organizations and exchanges between women, young people and people with disabilities in order to facilitate multi-faceted people-to-people exchanges.

BRI based on “win-win cooperation that promotes common development and includes cultural inclusiveness”. It is a push for Chinese dominance in global affairs with a China-centered trading network and cultural exchange. China Government and representatives from international organizations achieved high-quality cooperation under the win-win partnership of the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁷

China used BRI in the cultural diplomacy as a soft power. Therefore, the cultural diplomacy became the important role of China’s foreign policy. China practiced the cultural exchanges with BRI countries to maintain friendship and to raise its image and to become a powerful country. Besides, China has got the outcomes in education, technology, culture, health, sports, media and tourism. As China carried out exhibitions, conferences, seminars, workshops, forums and training programs on cultural exchanges through BRI, it was found that China built cultural diplomacy as soft power in BRI neighboring countries. China’s cultural diplomacy will be helpful to promote harmony and humanity among the BRI countries.

Conclusion

The Belt and Road Initiative is the brainchild of Chinese President Xi Jinping. China is building directly on this legacy through mutual cooperation, respect and trust towards Asia, Africa and Europe with the BRI. China’s cultural diplomacy is an international system. It was examined that Chinese soft power mainly relies on sources of the aspects of public diplomacy which is a form of cultural diplomacy. The image of China was promoted in Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative by means of the various characteristics of culture soft power. Through the use of cultural diplomacy as a soft power, it increased cultural awareness about China’s cultural traditions. BRI cultural exchange program had become an important support within China’s strategy for the ease of better communication between China and BRI neighbors.

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¹⁷ Working Together to Deliver a Brighter Future For Belt and Road Cooperation. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1658424.shtml>

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