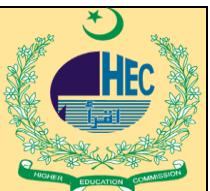




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Cultural Diplomacy in China's Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

Diplomacy is no longer constrained by the parameters of traditional political negotiation and economic involvement in the complex world of international relations, as it has evolved to adopt culture as a strategic aspect of international influence. This transformation can be seen in foreign policy of China as well as it has been incorporating cultural diplomacy in its overall soft power policy to enhance its influence in the world and to further its geopolitical interests. This article discusses how China uses culture as a foreign policy tool to propagate a message of harmony, cooperation and modernization. The main objective of this article is to highlight how cultural diplomacy works as a form of persuasion, legitimacy-making and image-building for China. Drawing on the ideas of constructivism and soft power theory and based on a qualitative and interpretive methodology, the article utilizes academic sources alongside governmental documents and official discourse to show how culture is used as a means of communication and as a policy tool. It is suggested that cultural diplomacy is a part of China's foreign policy, aimed at projecting a positive image, bolstering international presence, and presenting an alternative vision of the international engagement. It also touches upon how emerging powers use cultural instruments to reorganize the hierarchies of the world, redefine the principles of international legitimacy, and gain power in a globalized world.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, China's Foreign Policy, Soft Power, Confucius Institutes, Global Perception, Constructivism, image making

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy in the modern international politics is one of the most powerful and indispensable tools for implementing a country's foreign policy strategy, particularly for those countries that aim to be among the prominent states in a more interconnected and competitive world. According to Gumenyuk et al. (2021), cultural diplomacy is one of the most influential and significant means of implementing a state's foreign policy strategy that claims a significant role in global politics. This chapter aims to highlight the strategic logic, conceptual foundations, and operational mechanisms through which cultural diplomacy is embedded in China's foreign policy.

This article sees cultural diplomacy not as a symbolic or supporting gesture but as something strategic in statecraft, working to affect global audiences and narratives and gain lasting foreign policy ends through lure and not threats. The rising process of digitalization of society and global information flows have not only made cultural diplomacy visible but also dynamic, effective, and subject to technological changes (Gumenyuk et al., 2021).

In addition, cultural diplomacy helps the government influence foreign audiences in the long run as a good reserve to gain support for its policies. As a result of the erosion of boundaries

between domestic and foreign publics during the digital age, cultural diplomacy is an important front upon which nation-states could exercise soft power, participate in public, and build positive national identities.

The changing nature of the role played by cultural diplomacy (CD) in international relations is a rich and complex field of study. As Grincheva (2023) notes, cultural diplomacy has increasingly become as a separate discipline in the academic field, capturing attention particularly in the past two decades. Although its formal expression started in the Cold War era, cultural diplomacy in modern times goes beyond state-centric diplomacy and involves a variety of actors, resources, and platforms that establish the dialogue and promote mutual understanding.

Cultural diplomacy has evolved from courtly conversations and elite diplomacy to the masses, especially through institutions, education, and digital platforms (Grincheva, 2023). This evolution reflects China's drive, whereby the Confucius Institutes, international media platforms, and global educational programs have emerged as pillars of China's diplomatic edifice.

At its core, cultural diplomacy is a soft tool of influence and a structured component of the national strategy used to shape global narratives and enhance geopolitical standing. As Grincheva emphasizes, cultural diplomacy is a means for emerging states to craft, communicate, and share their national identities in the global arena (p. 2).

This article aims to highlight how cultural diplomacy has evolved from a Cold War ideological instrument to a multidimensional policy domain by critically engaging with contemporary scholarship and case material. This transformation is particularly salient in China's global outreach strategy. Through this lens, we examine the role of cultural messaging, people-to-people exchanges, and language diplomacy in advancing China's foreign policy interests.

Conceptualizing Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy (CD) lacks a universally agreed-upon definition despite its increasing prominence in practice and scholarship. Grincheva (2023) explains that although cultural exchanges and influences have existed for centuries, the strategic use of culture as a policy tool began to take shape in the 19th century, particularly after the Congress of Vienna in 1815. This marked the transition of cultural exchange from elite courtly interactions to broader public engagement.

The first formal definition of cultural diplomacy was provided by the U.S. Department of State in 1959, which described it as "the direct and enduring contact between people of different nations to help create a better climate of international trust and understanding in which official relations can operate." Since then, CD has evolved into a recognized instrument of soft power and international engagement, often overlapping with other terms such as cultural relations, cultural exchange, international cultural cooperation, and foreign cultural policy.

However, as noted by Cummings (2003) and Isar (2017), the scope of CD remains contested, with definitions ranging from narrowly interest-driven state initiatives to broader people-to-people interactions guided by shared values and ideals. Scholars like Clarke (2020) and Cull (2019) further emphasize the terminological diversity across national contexts. For instance, while the U.S. uses cultural diplomacy, the UK favors cultural relations, Japan prefers cultural exchange, and France uses exterior cultural action.

This semantic diversity complicates the field's theoretical coherence. As Ang, Isar, and Mar (2015) note, the definition of cultural diplomacy is almost as varied as the number of countries that claim to use it. Thus, while CD is increasingly institutionalized and strategically mobilized, it

continues to straddle boundaries between international relations, public policy, arts, education, and communications, resisting confinement to a single academic discipline.

As practiced by the European Union, cultural diplomacy exemplifies its evolving definition and expanding scope as a tool of international engagement. Holoborodko, Gerasymova, and Shevchenko (2024) highlight that cultural diplomacy within EU foreign policy integrates direct and indirect public diplomacy strategies to promote shared values, political identity, and cohesion among member and partner states. Rather than being confined to artistic or heritage exchange, the EU's approach involves comprehensive cultural programs, education, and community-building mechanisms that extend to external relations and candidate countries such as Ukraine.

Because cultural diplomacy is used in many ways, it helps form different values, identities, and integration strategies worldwide. Cultural diplomacy works well when seen as a mainstay of foreign policy instead of just an extra cultural approach. When considered as part of creating a strong narrative and spreading values across borders, it highlights how complex and established modern cultural diplomacy can be, covering many fields and gaining more value around the globe.

Distinction between cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and soft power

While the three are closely related, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and soft power need to be understood as having different yet cooperative roles in the modern system of international relations. In this context, cultural diplomacy becomes an important element of soft power. It works to systematically boost understanding and friendship by highlighting a country's culture and traditions. Usually, cultural diplomacy focuses on long-term work, people, and building connections. Raj (2024) points out that culture spreads through tools such as educational exchanges, arts, literature, and international work between nations. He emphasizes that it works through educational exchanges, arts and media, literature, and international cultural collaborations, serving as a subtle yet powerful instrument of influence.

Cultural diplomacy involves strategically promoting a country's cultural heritage, language, values, and traditions to foster goodwill and cross-cultural understanding. It is generally long-term, people-centric, and relationship-driven. Public diplomacy, on the other hand, encompasses a broader, more direct form of engagement by which governments communicate with foreign publics to explain policies, build trust, and maintain a favorable international image. It often involves digital platforms, embassy outreach, and official communication channels. According to Ravi Raj (2024), public diplomacy enables governments to bypass traditional diplomatic pathways and engage foreign audiences directly, especially in times of crisis or tension.

While cultural diplomacy is often integrated into public diplomacy, the latter is more policy-focused and immediate, often serving as a tool for strategic narrative-building and real-time image management. The distinction lies in their operational styles: soft power is the broader goal, cultural diplomacy is the cultural vehicle, and public diplomacy is the communication strategy. Understanding these differences is crucial for analyzing how modern states, especially rising powers like China, orchestrate their foreign policy messaging through coordinated soft power campaigns (Relations & Raj, 2024).

The article by Zanella, Neves Junior, and Silva (2024) critically delineates the conceptual boundaries between cultural diplomacy and soft power. According to the authors, cultural diplomacy is fundamentally rooted in state-led or intentional activities, focusing on disseminating a nation's cultural symbols, arts, and values to foster international understanding and goodwill. In contrast, as conceptualized by Nye, soft power centers not merely on

disseminating cultural products but on the inducement of behavioral change in foreign publics through attraction rather than coercion (Zanella et al., 2024).

Soft Power, Constructivism, and Nation Branding

Power in international relations is traditionally seen as a state's ability to influence others to achieve desired outcomes. Nye asserted that soft power allows people to influence others by attraction and persuasion rather than by using force or money. The term soft power contrasts with hard power by using attractions from culture and values to bring about changes, unlike military or economic strength. He observed that global influence stems from a state's capacity to inspire and persuade. He notes that sometimes people influence others by ideas and attraction that set the agenda for others or get them to want what you want (Nye, 2021).

Seven (2024) offers a nuanced theoretical treatment of soft power, tracing its evolution and proposing a refined framework for analyzing its applications at the subnational level, particularly in the case of cities. Drawing upon Joseph Nye's foundational work, Sevin notes that soft power is defined as "the ability to achieve outcomes through attraction rather than coercion (p. 107)" and that this attraction stems from resources like culture, values, and foreign policy. However, he also highlights the conceptual ambiguity in Nye's original definition and the ongoing debate over the distinction between intended and unintended attraction. This ambiguity has led scholars such as Ohnesorge and Hayden to propose operational models, dividing soft power into passive (possessed) and active (mobilized) dimensions—an approach Sevin integrates into his broader framework.

Nicholas J. Cull (2022) critically extends Joseph Nye's soft power theory by exploring its transformation in the post-Cold War and post-pandemic context. He argues that while soft power originally emerged as the ideological backbone of public diplomacy, particularly for liberal democracies after the Cold War, the 21st-century geopolitical climate has reoriented this discourse toward what he terms "reputational security (p. 18)." According to Cull, reputation is not just a tool for influence but a strategic asset essential for a state's survival and international standing. This notion builds on constructivist thinking, where identity, perception, and image are socially constructed and politically consequential.

Cull's argument is particularly significant in the current age of great power competition and global crises, where state legitimacy is increasingly linked to how the foreign public views it. Thus, cultural and public diplomacy are no longer optional soft tools but core to the effectiveness of national security and foreign policy. His contribution deepens the theoretical conversation by highlighting the shift from attraction for influence to reputation for resilience, making soft power a persuasion mechanism and a form of strategic self-preservation in an unstable world order (Cull, 2022).

In cultural diplomacy, Núria Codina Solà and McMartin (2022) highlight that the strategic use of soft power remains paramount, aligning closely with Joseph Nye's (2004) foundational concept of influencing others through attraction rather than coercion. As the article highlights, cultural prizes and intellectual cooperation initiatives are significant tools for projecting soft power, blending political values with cultural dissemination. The European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) exemplifies this approach by promoting shared European values—such as unity, diversity, and intercultural dialogue—through the supranational consecration of emerging literary talents. These cultural instruments are not merely celebratory but are deeply imbricated within political strategies designed to foster a cohesive European identity. Furthermore, the institutional emphasis on diversity, inclusion, and transnational narratives reflects a constructivist perspective, where cultural initiatives construct and reinforce shared values and collective memory. Thus, soft power and constructivism together underpin the EU's

efforts to reposition itself as a normative power in international relations through cultural diplomacy (Núria Codina Solà & McMartin, 2022).

Relevance Of Cultural Diplomacy in Contemporary International Relations

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as a central pillar in modern international relations, functioning as a conduit for fostering mutual understanding, enhancing national image, and influencing foreign public opinion. As defined by Kimani (2023), it involves the exchange of ideas, values, and traditions to strengthen relationships and align cultural initiatives with foreign policy goals, thereby exercising soft power through attraction rather than coercion. In today's globalized and media-saturated world, cultural diplomacy is increasingly strategic in shaping international perceptions. Kimani emphasizes that cultural understanding contributes to improved political relations and favorable views of a country's foreign policy. However, countries now use tools such as art exhibitions, educational exchanges, and digital campaigns to play with the emotions of foreign audiences.

Besides, cultural diplomacy has now gone beyond government-arranged services. Civil society actors and digital platforms have increased their scope and influence, bringing them closer to the present age (Kimani, 2023). He further describes its role in peacebuilding, where it becomes a forum for dialogue and reconciliation, especially in conflict-prone areas (p. 3).

Notwithstanding cultural stereotyping and misinterpretation of strategy, Kimani's findings validate that cultural diplomacy still helps the public perceive a country's foreign policy positively in various geopolitical contexts.

However, effective communication and culture-related understanding are the keys to fruitful international relations in the modern, globalized, and interdependent world. According to Shahmerdanova (2024), translation is not a mere technical exercise but a strategic diplomatic tool that helps to create mutual understanding, bridge cultural gaps, and promote intercultural dialogue. Translation improves the states' capability of accurately and deeply projecting their cultural narratives and fortifies states' soft power outreach (Shahmerdanova, 2024). She explains that miscommunication or cultural misunderstanding can help to destroy a diplomatic endeavor quite sharply, especially in an emotional or political climate.

Cultural diplomacy, therefore, has gained unprecedented significance because it not only ensures the transfer of culture but also guarantees the causative and correct interpretation of political values, ideologies, and policy intentions in the international field (Shahmerdanova, 2024). In this manner, cultural diplomacy, with the help of translation and cultural mediation, is vital in nurturing mutual respect and maintaining long-term political relationships as well as global cooperation (Shahmerdanova, 2025).

Historical Evolution of China's Cultural Diplomacy

The historical legacy of the Silk Roads forms a foundational pillar of China's cultural diplomacy, both in the ancient imperial era and its contemporary foreign policy strategies. As Fengqi Qian (2021) argues, the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) has strategically deployed the Silk Roads' heritage as a narrative platform to legitimize and promote its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Silk Roads, historically representing commerce, cultural exchange, and political tribute, are reframed in China's official discourse to project ideals of peace, connectivity, and cosmopolitanism aligned with China's rise as a global power (Qian, 2021). Through a qualitative discourse analysis of official speeches, heritage projects like the World Heritage nomination for the Maritime Silk Routes (MSR), and media narratives, Qian reveals how the CPC reconstructs the Silk Road's memory to link the country's ancient grandeur to contemporary aspirations for national rejuvenation (Qian, 2021).

This state-endorsed historical narrative is not merely a celebration of the past; it is an active tool of soft power, showcasing China as a civilizational leader promoting harmony and shared prosperity. The reinterpretation of the Silk Roads thus aligns with the CPC's broader goals of enhancing China's global image and advancing geopolitical interests through cultural diplomacy (Qian, 2021). In this manner, the Silk Roads act both as a symbol of China's historical interconnectedness and as a carefully constructed modern instrument of cultural diplomacy to reinforce China's leadership in the international system.

The revival of the Silk Road under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reflects a modern reimagining of ancient cultural diplomacy practices rooted in the imperial period. Tim Winter (2021) introduces the concept of geo-cultural diplomacy to explain how China strategically draws upon historical narratives of the Silk Roads to construct frameworks of international cooperation that blend peaceful, harmonious values with national strategic interests (Winter, 2021). By invoking the historical memory of the Silk Roads, China positions itself as both a custodian of ancient civilizational exchange and a leader in shaping a new international order where cultural symbolism and geopolitical ambition are intertwined. Winter argues that through narratives emphasizing connectivity, shared heritage, and cultural revival, China seeks to foster regional alliances and legitimize its growing influence within Eurasia and beyond (Winter, 2021).

During the Maoist era, China's cultural diplomacy was deeply entwined with revolutionary ideology and international solidarity movements. As Minami (2022) explains, the People's Republic of China (PRC) employed propaganda and mass mobilization to project Maoist ideals globally, positioning itself as a leader of Third World resistance against Western imperialism. Cultural tools such as revolutionary posters, theater performances, political songs, and international youth exchanges were used to build ideological alliances and present the image of China as the vanguard of global anti-colonial struggle.

Through such efforts, China, under Mao, crafted a transnational cultural identity rooted in socialist solidarity, class struggle, and revolutionary zeal. Maoist China's approach to cultural diplomacy during the Cold War period marked the beginning of its concerted efforts to build international alliances beyond formal state-to-state relations. As Matthew Galway (2021) illustrates, even before receiving formal diplomatic recognition, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leveraged friendship associations, ideological allies, and cultural mediators to project its image and expand its global reach (Galway, 2021).

Galway concludes that Maoist cultural diplomacy laid important foundations for China's later institutionalized diplomatic efforts, positioning culture as a critical tool for ideological influence, solidarity-building, and international recognition when China's official diplomatic network was still limited (Galway, 2021).

The period of Reform and Opening-Up initiated under Deng Xiaoping in 1978 marked a profound transformation in China's approach to cultural diplomacy. Moving away from the ideologically rigid outreach of the Maoist era, China adopted a more strategic and institutionally driven form of cultural engagement. A key symbol of this shift was the National Museum of China, which was pivotal in crafting and projecting a new image of the Chinese state to domestic and international audiences. As the article "The Historical Role of the National Museum of China" points out, this museum has played an important role in China's history by helping to preserve and share cultural artifacts and information with people in China and worldwide (Zhang & Musa, 2023).

This period saw the Chinese government starting to use museums and other cultural centers in their diplomatic work, displaying their history and culture to show how they have grown and

changed over time. Exhibitions were set up with two main goals: to help Chinese people learn about their heritage and to show that China is open to sharing and learning from other cultures worldwide. In this way, cultural diplomacy during Deng Xiaoping changed from trying to convince other countries with ideas to talking more openly and working on China's reputation worldwide, helping to get more investment and showing that the government's actions were accepted and recognized. (Zhang & Musa, 2023)

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has elevated cultural diplomacy as a key pillar of its foreign policy, framing it within the discourse of "cultural confidence" and pursuing a global narrative aligned with Chinese values and identity. As Wang (2024) observes, the establishment and operation of China Cultural Centers (CCCs) administered by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism represent a strategic attempt to institutionalize China's cultural presence abroad. Unlike the more controversial Confucius Institutes, CCCs have thus far remained largely uncontroversial in host countries, in part due to their focus on non-political cultural activities such as exhibitions, language classes, and heritage promotion (Wang, 2024).

These centers serve as instruments of China's broader soft power campaign, particularly under Xi Jinping's vision of strengthening cultural confidence (wenhuazixin) and reshaping the global information environment. As Wang notes, although CCCs are closely connected to the Chinese state apparatus, they aim to build goodwill through carefully curated cultural programming that reinforces China's image as a benevolent, civilizational actor (Wang, 2024). However, their relative lack of controversy does not necessarily imply effectiveness; the article suggests that their impact remains limited and difficult to measure, especially compared to the global footprint of Confucius Institutes.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China's cultural diplomacy has taken on an explicitly nationalist tone, deeply intertwined with the concept of cultural confidence. As Jason Cong Lin (2023) argues, Xi has strategically politicized culture to support a nationalist agenda that reframes China's global image away from narratives of historical weakness, such as the sick man of Asia—toward that of a rejuvenated great power. Lin's analysis of government discourse reveals that the Xi administration downplays national humiliation and foregrounds themes of national pride, rejuvenation, and strength, which are deployed domestically and internationally as part of China's cultural narrative.

This cultural nationalism is not merely rhetorical. It plays a central role in China's external cultural diplomacy, reinforcing Xi's call for a strong discourse system capable of competing with Western values. Cultural symbols, historical reinterpretations, and state-sponsored international cultural exchanges are increasingly used to project the image of a unified, confident, and morally superior China. According to Lin, this shift reflects a growing effort by the Chinese Communist Party to shape global narratives in a way that aligns with the "China Dream" and Xi's broader agenda of reclaiming China's rightful place on the world stage (Lin, 2023).

Internationally, Xi's cultural nationalism integrates with a broader diplomatic narrative that emphasizes multilateralism, cooperation, and peaceful development. Rather than overt assertiveness, China under Xi projects its rise as beneficial to the global order, using cultural tools to portray itself as a civilizational force for good. Being in this position, China can reach out further worldwide without pleasing nationalists at home. By embedding cultural nationalism within a cooperative foreign policy framework, Xi's administration has refined cultural diplomacy into a soft power strategy that seeks international acceptance and internal cohesion (Izaguirre Pechirra, 2024).

China's unique positioning in global cultural diplomacy

Since Xi Jinping became president, China's unique style of dealing with the world has changed and is now referred to as Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics. As Smith (2021) noted, this concept has redefined the boundaries of legitimate state action by expanding China's diplomatic ambitions and self-ascribed role in global governance. With the help of new political strategies, the doctrine leads the country to pursue active foreign activities that seek to revise international rules, involve itself in ideological disputes with the West, and have a bigger role on the world stage.

Being assertive is more than China's rising economic situation and military role; it also aligns with China's way of defining itself culturally and ideologically as a "civilizational state." Here, cultural diplomacy acts importantly as a soft power form that shares Chinese values, shares its story around the globe, and secures leadership outside its borders and traditional diplomacy. Chinese leaders now use culture as an important tool in diplomacy, explaining how China's rise as a normative power brings greater peace and prosperity to the world.

The framework of "Major Country Diplomacy" thus enables China to leverage cultural initiatives such as Confucius Institutes, global media platforms, and educational exchanges not only to enhance its international image but also to legitimize its role as a global agenda-setter, particularly in the non-Western world. These evolving dynamics place China in a unique position within the landscape of global cultural diplomacy, where it increasingly defines its foreign policy through hard and soft dimensions of influence (Smith, 2021).

China's distinct approach to cultural diplomacy lies in its state-directed model, where international broadcasting is used as a strategic tool for nation branding. As Zhu (2022) explains, this model combines traditional cultural heritage, political ideology, and controlled media narratives to shape China's image abroad, distinguishing it from Western soft power models that rely more heavily on civil society and cultural industries. Institutions like CGTN Documentary are tasked with balancing political narratives and market-driven appeal, aiming to construct a unified national identity that resonates globally while maintaining ideological discipline at home.

Zhu highlights that since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2012, cultural diplomacy has become more assertive and centralized, especially through initiatives like great external publicity (Da Wai Xuan). These strategies position China as a normative and cultural power, projecting its values through curated content that reflects national pride, harmony, and traditional aesthetics. Cultural products such as *A Bite of China* and *The Tale of Chinese Medicine* demonstrate how emotional narratives, lifestyle themes, and Confucian values are carefully crafted to foster international appeal while adhering to state-directed storytelling.

Moreover, China's efforts through CGTN and similar media are meant to inform global audiences and recompose a contemporary national discourse rooted in historical legitimacy and soft power projection. This reflects China's ambition to reposition itself as a rising power and civilizational state with the cultural authority to lead international narratives. Despite global skepticism, China's emphasis on cultural confidence, as described by Xi Jinping, marks a strategic departure from passive cultural outreach to an active, centralized, and globally targeted diplomacy (Zhu, 2022).

Institutional Mechanisms and Instruments of China's Cultural Diplomacy

Confucius Institutes (CIs) represent a central institutional pillar in China's global cultural diplomacy strategy. Promoting the Chinese language, culture, and values in their host countries is a main task for these organizations, which also helps boost the nation's diplomacy. In their study, Zhu (2022) introduces the idea of "transformational governance" to understand the development of CIs' governance and institutions when facing global problems. According to the

authors, Confucius Institutes are governed using a hybrid form of global cultural governance, in which official state policies are mixed with academic and community activities at the local level. Top-down messages impact the setting up of CIs. However, daily operations are shaped mainly by considerations at the local level, such as making things run smoothly and reliably. This dual-layered governance structure enables Confucius Institutes to maintain flexibility and adaptability in diverse international contexts while advancing China's diplomatic narratives. Additionally, unlike some claims that centralized control and different beliefs interfere, universities, educators, and civil society in China have joined forces, helping to bring more local understanding to cultural diplomacy practice (Zhu, 2022).

By studying this issue, we can see that the CI serves purposes aside from propaganda and sits at the junction of education, cultural policy, and foreign relations. The study highlights the shift away from Confucius Institutes' traditional roles, allowing the organization to endure, promote China's reputation, and face legitimacy problems in a complicated world order.

China's state-led media is pivotal in shaping its international image and advancing its soft power objectives. Platforms such as CGTN (China Global Television Network), CCTV, and China Daily have been strategically developed to communicate China's perspectives and cultural narratives to global audiences. They depict a China that seeks peace and global partnership, and values teamwork, peacefulness, and the sharing of benefits. This aligns with Xi Jinping's wider goals related to national culture, as the media spreads information and helps the government win public trust and influence its image to others (Lin, 2023).

Particularly, the CGTN Documentary channel embodies China's effort to reframe its national identity by broadcasting documentaries highlighting Chinese culture, technological achievements, and harmonious development stories. The programming schedule is designed not merely for entertainment but as a tool for narrative building. As noted by internal sources, CGTN is focused on delivering outputs with great captures of China's culture and traditions that the audience finds relatable. Through these curated portrayals, Chinese media cultivates a global identity that reflects pride in civilization while promoting national values abroad.

This approach corresponds with the ideological goal of fostering a global conversation sympathetic to China's worldview. These state-run broadcasters follow editorial guidelines prioritizing national interests and policy objectives, acting as intermediaries between Chinese cultural diplomacy and foreign public opinion. Through the lens of cultural confidence, such media strategies reflect the Chinese Communist Party's desire to shape how China is perceived globally, not merely as an economic power, but as a culturally rich, responsible actor in world affairs (Lin, 2023).

Additionally, the formalization of the Great External Publicity policy (Da Wai Xuan) in 2016 further underscores China's commitment to media diplomacy. This state-driven framework institutionalized international broadcasting as a core diplomatic tool. These platforms are tasked with disseminating information, countering foreign narratives, and reinforcing the image of Chinese modernity, political stability, and civilizational continuity. As such, Chinese international media represents a sophisticated fusion of content production and national branding tailored to support foreign policy objectives and domestic ideological unity (Lin, 2023).

Cultural exchanges and people-to-people programs

People-to-people exchanges form a key dimension of China's cultural diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly within the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework. According to Shahid (2024), the effectiveness of these programs can be meaningfully evaluated through the lived experiences of Chinese professionals stationed in

Pakistan. These expatriates, who have worked in Pakistan since the formal initiation of CPEC in 2013, offer firsthand insights into the social realities of cultural exchange, ranging from interaction challenges to cross-cultural understanding in daily life. The interviews demonstrate that, although official statements mention stronger personal links, the reality involves language difficulties, differences in cultures and religions, and sometimes differing gender roles.

Essentially, the local experience points out that it is difficult to achieve the goals of cultural diplomacy in real life. Though state actions encourage cooperation, the degree of personal and cultural interaction is still different for all groups. Shahid emphasizes that individuals should be more involved in public policy discussions than simply reading what officials write. The research adds to our understanding of how social elements in BRI diplomacy, which are seen as less than economic and infrastructure construction, can serve as a power tool to promote familiarity and goodwill in the region and strengthen China's regional influence.

International education and scholarships

In addition to other tactics, China offers practical scholarships designed to draw and support talent in fields important to the country and demonstrate its helpful nature to the world. For example, the Free Teacher Education (FTE) scholarship assists teacher candidates in return for a service commitment. Zheng and Shi (2024) provide causal evidence regarding the academic outcomes of recipients by analyzing a large dataset from a top-tier Chinese university. Their findings suggest that, while the scholarship may attract academically capable students, it does not lead to consistent improvements in college performance, revealing a complex trade-off between recruitment incentives and sustained academic motivation.

Notably, the longitudinal decline in course performance observed among recipients signals that while scholarships function as effective tools for talent acquisition and cultural exchange, they may require redesign to sustain long-term academic excellence. In the context of cultural diplomacy, this illustrates the limitations of educational incentives as soft power instruments. Despite offering tangible opportunities, scholarships like the FTE must be accompanied by meaningful academic support and engagement frameworks to effectively cultivate global goodwill and capacity building, especially in partnerships with developing countries (Zheng & Shi, 2024).

Regional and Global Focus of China's Cultural Diplomacy

China's cultural diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region is deeply embedded in its larger geopolitical vision of regional community building. The notion of an Asia-Pacific Community with a Shared Future, promoted under Xi Jinping's leadership, encapsulates a regional strategy that blends diplomatic, economic, and cultural instruments to foster a collective identity among neighboring countries. Unlike traditional diplomacy focused on transactional statecraft, China's regional approach incorporates cultural resonance and civilizational appeal as central elements of influence (Ji, 2023).

One key mechanism of this approach is the promotion of shared values through regional platforms and cultural narratives. For instance, Chinese policymakers strategically mobilize the language of harmony, mutual benefit, and civilizational connectedness to reframe China's rise as a continuation of historical East Asian cooperation rather than a disruptive force. This is reflected in initiatives like the Belt and Road Forum for Asia-Pacific countries, cultural exhibitions, and think-tank dialogues designed to foster mutual cultural understanding and political trust. China's regional diplomacy often involves reviving historical references, including the ancient Silk Road, to show how different parts of the region are now more connected. By telling this story, Chinese officials highlight their positive role in the region and work to appear as harmless leaders of all the cultures there (Ji, 2023).

Moreover, showing China has an important regional and cultural role, Beijing's cultural diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region aims to encourage a united regional identity, allowing for diversity and helping it influence others. Education exchanges, Confucius Institutes, local Chinese New Year festivals, and community cultural activities in ASEAN are key tools in this diplomatic story. Such actions make a real difference, not only a symbolic one. They are part of bigger economic and security agreements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which helps countries work together and get along better. As a result, this strategy of nearby diplomacy highlights how China is moving from playing a geo-strategic balancing role to reinforcing its role as the cultural driver of regional progress and leadership in East Asia.

Cultural diplomacy across the region is now a main part of China's efforts to build strong relationships. During Xi Jinping's presidency, China relied on strategies of forming relationships and building networks to change the situation in the region and boost its impact on regional norms. Infrastructure-based connections include the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which binds China's vision of central Asia by connecting the country with neighboring countries via economic corridors.

Simultaneously, the association strategy looks to build common ground by encouraging everyone to share similar goals and values and publicizing a more harmonious and inclusive way of living and growing together. This comes out in how China uses phrases like community with a shared future, saying the country is working with everyone else to create good things instead of pushing itself as the main power trying to control the world. Notably, cultural elements are embedded within this framework, ranging from Confucius Institutes to joint events and symbolic diplomacy, reinforcing civilizational closeness and reducing Western-aligned ideological resistance in the region (Loke & Guo, 2025).

These dual strategies enable China to build what scholars call coalitional hegemony a flexible and adaptive form of influence that depends on both material linkages and ideational alignment. This multifaceted approach not only enhances China's cultural and political legitimacy in the Asia-Pacific but also challenges the exclusivity of U.S.-led regional frameworks by cultivating a hybrid, multipolar regional identity aligned with Chinese values and interests (Loke & Guo, 2025).

Africa and Latin America: Cultural diplomacy as part of South-South cooperation

China's engagement with Africa and Latin America through its South-South cooperation diplomacy has played a pivotal role in redefining its cultural and political relationships with the Global South. As Mendes (2025) emphasized, the first two decades of the 21st century witnessed Beijing consolidating partnerships in Africa through economic investments and infrastructure development and via symbolic diplomacy grounded in principles of equality, mutual benefit, and non-interference). These principles, frequently highlighted in Chinese diplomatic discourse, serve as the normative basis for its broader cultural engagement with partner countries across the Southern Hemisphere.

This diplomatic approach includes the integration of cultural outreach, such as language institutes, media platforms, and people-to-people exchanges, into China's foreign policy strategy. In Africa, for example, cultural initiatives have paralleled infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), projecting a narrative of shared historical experiences and collective futures. Such efforts foster local legitimacy and soften perceptions of China's expanding geopolitical footprint by emphasizing mutual respect and co-development. The same pattern of engagement is visible in Latin America, where cultural diplomacy complements

Beijing's broader strategic and economic outreach, reflecting a continuity in China's South-South engagement model.

Moreover, the feedback from African officials and diplomats collected during Mendes's fieldwork underscores the strengths and challenges of China's model. While China is generally appreciated for its non-prescriptive and pragmatic approach, concerns around asymmetries in influence and representation remain (Mendes, 2025). Nevertheless, these cultural and diplomatic instruments remain essential in China's quest to construct a diversified and cooperative international image beyond the West.

China's engagement with Latin America and Africa reflects a paradigm shift in international cooperation marked by a South-South framework that diverges significantly from the OECD-centric aid model. As Vadell and Caria (2025) argue, China's multidimensional diplomacy—encompassing investments, humanitarian aid, and cultural collaboration—has proven particularly appealing to Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) partners due to its perceived flexibility and pragmatism.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China intensified its cultural and humanitarian outreach by donating medical supplies from state and corporate actors while strengthening subnational ties through city-to-city partnerships. These efforts were transactional and embedded in a broader solidarity and mutual development narrative. This South-South cooperation strategy presents a culturally grounded, politically non-interventionist model that challenges traditional Western development paradigms and reinforces China's soft power and global identity among developing regions (Vadell & Caria, 2025).

According to Mierzejewski and Matera (2025), the struggle between China and the United States during that time was about the definition of global human rights and the unification of beliefs in member countries. At the core of this strategic confrontation is normative security, whereby states seek to protect and promote their core values and ideologies through diplomatic engagement and narrative construction.

China's approach emphasizes collective rights, development-led governance, and non-interference principles it actively projects in contrast to liberal democratic norms championed by the West. By forging coalitions with developing nations and presenting itself as a defender of multilateralism and equality among states, China attempts to shift the ideological center of gravity within global governance institutions. This strategic alignment not only bolsters Beijing's diplomatic credibility but also legitimizes its global governance model on the global stage (Mierzejewski & Matera, 2025).

Such narrative-based diplomacy constitutes a key facet of China's cultural soft power toolkit, especially in the Global North, where ideological tensions are often acute. The capacity to reframe international norms around sovereignty, development, and civilizational plurality is thus pivotal to China's long-term strategic communication and normative ambitions.

In recent years, perceptions of China across Europe have undergone a significant transformation, shaped not only by tangible policy shifts but also by deeper strategic narratives that frame China as a systemic rival rather than a cooperative partner. Breslin and Mattlin (2025) argue that this reconfiguration has been catalyzed by underlying and precipitating causes, including the diffusion of securitized narratives that portray China's rise as inherently threatening. Central to this change is the diffusion of a dominant narrative that bundles together economic, political, and ideological concerns, often interpreting Chinese commercial activities, such as investment in strategic sectors, through the lens of geoeconomic statecraft rather than traditional economic reasoning (Breslin & Mattlin, 2025).

This narrative shift has been further amplified by the process of narrative diffusion, where think tanks, policy elites, and media discourses reinforce each other, constructing China as an actor with deliberate strategic intent to disrupt liberal democratic norms and global order. As such, even routine economic engagements by Chinese firms are increasingly securitized and viewed with suspicion. The result is a heightened perception that China's economic influence is not just about trade or investment but about creating dependencies that can be weaponized for political leverage. This framing, in turn, has conditioned European policy responses that are increasingly risk-averse and defensive.

Breslin and Mattlin note that this trend marks a departure from earlier phases of unconditional engagement with China, typified by the post-global financial crisis years, toward a stance shaped by strategic caution, economic de-risking, and ideological boundary-setting (2025). This underscores the entrenchment of China as a normative other, where its growing presence in Europe is perceived less as an opportunity and more as a structural challenge to liberal internationalism. The authors highlight how assumptions of Chinese intentionality substantiated or not drive a circular logic that reinforces threat perceptions and justifies precautionary policy measures.

Thus, the European strategic response to China today is a matter of managing real-world risks and navigating the symbolic politics of narrative framing and ideological alignment. As Breslin and Mattlin observe, this shift in dominant perceptions has profound implications for China's cultural diplomacy, soft power, and its ability to maintain mutually beneficial relations with Western partners (Breslin & Mattlin, 2025).

Islamic World and the Middle East: Harmony, diversity, and anti-extremism narrative

In its outreach to the Islamic world, China has sought alignment with narratives of harmony, religious coexistence, and anti-extremism to counter international criticism of its domestic Muslim policies, particularly regarding Xinjiang. One strategic aspect of this approach has involved engaging with influential Islamic organizations in partner countries, such as Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Islamic organization. NU has been known for promoting tolerance, yet its stance is dynamic and varies with political and social conditions. Recent scholarship shows that NU's tolerance operates within specific ideological boundaries, favoring groups that do not challenge Islamic values or the Indonesian national framework (Aisah Putri Budiatri, 2025).

China leverages such local discourses through its cultural diplomacy, supporting narratives of moderated Islam, and shared civilizational respect. This helps establish common ground with actors like NU, positioning China as a country that respects Islamic traditions while promoting regional stability. The fluidity of NU's tolerance also underscores China's complexities in engaging Islamic civil societies, where state-level diplomacy must be complemented with nuanced people-to-people interactions that avoid ideological overreach (Aisah Putri Budiatri, 2025).

In engaging the Islamic world, China's cultural diplomacy emphasizes narratives of coexistence, anti-extremism, and religious moderation, often resonating with parallel reforms in the region. A compelling comparative case is Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whose efforts to reshape the kingdom's religious soft power offer critical insights into regional receptiveness to similar narratives. Bin Salman has moved to replace the kingdom's traditional ultra-conservative image with a portrayal of Islam as moderate, modern, and globally engaged. This transformation is strategic, intended to support economic diversification, and resonates with a youthful population demanding socio-cultural change. Although still anchored in

authoritarian governance, this reformist discourse underscores the compatibility of religious legitimacy with modernization and tolerance (Dorsey, 2024).

China leverages such shifts in Middle Eastern religious and cultural self-imaging to strengthen its mutual respect and non-interference narrative. The shared interest in promoting a depoliticized, state-friendly version of Islam creates a foundation for cooperative cultural diplomacy. By aligning with states like Saudi Arabia that seek to rebrand their Islamic identity for domestic reform and international legitimacy, China can reinforce its portrayal as a respectful and non-threatening partner to the Muslim world (Dorsey, 2024).

Conclusion

This article has explored cultural diplomacy's conceptual, historical, institutional, and regional dimensions as an instrumental pillar of China's foreign policy. Grounded in Joseph Nye's theory of soft power and enriched by constructivist perspectives, cultural diplomacy has evolved in Chinese practice from a Cold War-era ideological tool to a highly strategic mechanism of normative influence, identity projection, and geopolitical positioning. The chapter traced this evolution through multiple historical phases from ancient Silk Road exchanges and Maoist revolutionary outreach to the reformist pragmatism of Deng Xiaoping and the assertive "cultural confidence" under Xi Jinping. Each stage reflects the centrality of culture in China's statecraft and the recalibration of diplomatic tools to suit changing global contexts.

To carry out its cultural diplomacy, China's government relies on Confucius Institutes, government news outlets, cultural centers, scholarships, major events, and platforms that bring together people from both countries, expressing China as a united, modern, and helpful civilization. They help enhance China's image abroad and are in line with the Belt and Road Initiative and China's "Major Country Diplomacy." These tools are being used by China to give a boost to cultural diplomacy in foreign policy.

Within China, cultural diplomacy takes on different forms, tailored to its neighborhood countries' local customs, religious beliefs, and political situations. In interaction with Africa and Latin America, China relies on its solidarity principle and stays uninvolved in every country's affair. Likewise, countries in the Asia-Pacific are unified by common values and a common history. By supporting peaceful religious messages, China has shaped the values of religious groups in the Middle East and Islamic world. Based on research, the NU and Saudi Arabian scholars' partner with China through cultural diplomacy to remind them of their similarities and limitations and promote peace amid their many different beliefs. It suggests that China is conscious that people and cultures look to religion when making important decisions.

Putting everything together, this field addresses issues of identity, history, and strategy as it stands. Besides representing China, it helps the country deal with criticism, increase its recognition, and influence people worldwide to believe in its norms and beliefs. Particularly in Pakistan, the topics to be examined in this essay are most striking. China's diplomacy is apparent in dealings with government, society, and higher education through Confucius Institutes here. A study of these engagements can help show how China's culture affects other countries and what kind of sway it has.

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