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**Belt and Road Initiative: An Assessment of Socio-Cultural Impacts****Kinza Khalid**

Masters in Philosophy, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

kinza.r526726@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

The article examines the socio-cultural effects of the BRI in the period of 2013-2026. People-to-people linkage and language policy, vocational training, labour encounter, media projection, heritage diplomacy and identity politics have been given a more nuanced but thin treatment when compared with infrastructure finance and debt, which have been the focus of the official narratives and academic discourses. Based on soft-power and geocultural-power theory, on China's white paper on BRI from 2023, on membership estimates from independent sources (150 states), and on published fieldwork in Pakistan, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, East Africa and the Western Balkans, the paper concludes that the BRI is a cultural project and a social disruption at the same time. Despite shrinking in the West, pedagogical tools such as Confucius Institutes, scholarships to China via the Silk Road, Luban Workshops and agreements for the recognition of degrees have increased the spread of mandarinitization and mobility in the Global South. While reducing in the West, the extension of mandarin literacy and mobility in the Global South has been fostered by pedagogical instruments like Confucius Institutes, Silk Road scholarships, Luban Workshops and degree-recognition agreements. Interactions between Chinese labor camps and host communities yield mixed results: access and intercultural interaction on one side, enculturation and labor replacement, anti-Chinese protest on the other. Heritage diplomacy is nothing new, it is the Silk Roads in a new guise, and a train station with its accompanying mural and tour, as well as training journalists or local inhabitants for neighborhood conversation, represent another cultural form of anxiety. That culture is not just an ornamental accessory to ports and railways is not being assessed. What the BRI succeeds or fails to achieve in the societies in which it is implemented is the socio-cultural change.

Keywords: Belt And Road Initiative; Socio-Cultural Impacts; People-To-People Connectivity; Confucius Institutes; Luban Workshop; CPEC; Labour Migration; Startimes; Heritage Diplomacy; Identity

1. Introduction:

When Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic Belt in Astana in September 2013, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in Jakarta a month later, the initiative was presented as a programme of connectivity who's fifth "pillar," after policy, facilities, trade and finance, would be people-to-people bonds. That fifth pillar was not an afterthought in Chinese official doctrine. It was the social foundation without which, Beijing argued, steel and fiber would not hold. A decade on, the cultural claim is no longer a slogan. By June 2023 Beijing reported more than two

hundred cooperation agreements with more than 150 countries and thirty international organisation; cultural and tourism documents with 144 partners; 313 Confucius Institutes and 315 Confucius Classrooms in 132 partner countries; agreements on the mutual recognition of higher-education degrees with forty-five states; and more than a thousand sister-city pairings (State Council Information Office, 2023). Independent compilers at Griffith University's Green Finance and Development Center counted 150 states with active BRI memoranda by December 2025 and record Chinese engagement across eighty-nine of them in that year (Nedopil, 2026). These numbers describe a geography that now includes most of the world's population. They do not, by themselves, describe what happens to language, work, neighbourhood, worship, marriage and identity when a Chinese railway camp, a Confucius classroom, a vocational workshop or a heritage festival arrives in a host society.

The historical packaging matters as much as the organisational chart. By naming a twenty-first-century infrastructure programme after the Silk Roads, Chinese public diplomacy inherited a story that European, Central Asian and Chinese historians had already made famous, and that UNESCO had already certified as world heritage. Frankopan's popular history of the "new Silk Roads" captured a wider mood in which Eurasia, rather than the trans-Atlantic world, appeared again as the hinge of prosperity and risk (Frankopan, 2018). Mações treated the Belt and Road as the sketch of a Chinese world order whose cultural grammar would have to travel with its capital (Mações, 2018). Ferdinand located the same turn in Xi Jinping's "China dream" and in a westward reorientation of Chinese foreign policy after the coastal-export decades (Ferdinand, 2016). Economy's account of a "third revolution" inside the Chinese state is useful here because it reminds the reader that the BRI is not only an overseas programme. It is the external face of a more personalised, more ideological domestic order that expects culture, party and capital to move together (Economy, 2018). The socio-cultural question is therefore not whether Beijing talks about civilisation. It is whether host societies recognise themselves in that talk, and what they do when they do not.

Soft power, in Nye's original formulation, is the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). The BRI complicates that distinction because the same project that lays fibre and rail also ships workers, curricula, television serials, journalists' fellowships and a story about civilisational friendship. Winter has called this "geocultural power": the strategic use of Silk Road heritage to naturalise contemporary Chinese influence as the revival of an older, peaceful connectivity (Winter, 2019). Rolland warned early that the initiative's political and strategic implications would not remain confined to logistics (Rolland, 2017). Miller, writing from the ground along Asian corridors, described the same process as an "Asian dream" whose local bargains over land, labour and language would decide whether the dream looked like partnership or empire (Miller, 2017). This article takes these cautions as a research agenda. It's a question about the changes in socio-cultural life in partner countries that have been created by BRI, rather than about the construction of ports. The five official connectivity, namely, policy, facilities, trade, finance and people-to-people, are typically presented as equal. In practice: budgeted, contracted and counted: fifth is announced. This article is an upside-down version of that focus. The other four are regarded as the machine that reconfigures people-to-people

bonds, while the former is the thing to be reconfigured. If that's not the case, it's still a railway. If not, it's still a railway. If it does, it is a socio-cultural event and that is an event that is being assessed here. This is the answer, which was worked out in three analytical parts that impacts exist, these impacts are uneven and politically contested. While Western campuses closed Confucius Institutes, South-South ties have become more robust in the field of educational exchange and language learning. Vocational workshops are "Chinese technical standards" attached to local labour markets. Skills transfer and social enclosure have been created in labour camps. Chinese frames have gone into the African living rooms through the media. Heritage diplomacy has provided Beijing with a welcome history, and host publics with a language of pride, fear and negotiating. Culture is not the "leftovers" of the BRI. It is one of the operating systems it runs on.

2. Literature review

Scholarship on the BRI has moved through three overlapping waves. The first treated the initiative as grand strategy: a Eurasian order-building project, a maritime geopolitical bet, or a signature of Xi Jinping's personalized foreign policy. Callahan located the Belt and Road in a "new Eurasian order" whose cultural as well as material maps Beijing was redrawing (Callahan, 2016). Blanchard and Flint examined the Maritime Silk Road as geopolitics in a literal, spatial sense (Blanchard & Flint, 2017). Zhao read the programme as the burden of great-power status expressed through state-led globalization (Zhao, 2020). This wave established that the BRI is political. It said less about classrooms, work camps, satellite dishes or neighborhood talk. Its virtue was scale. Its vice was that people appeared mainly as populations to be connected, not as speakers, worshippers, workers and viewers with their own cultural projects.

A second wave opened the cultural file more directly. Shambaugh's 'suspicious baseline' of big spending, thin attraction (2015), and d'Hooghe's mapping of the institutional machinery of China's public diplomacy, such as language institutes which later became BRI instruments (2015), are both relevant. Hartig's analysis of the Confucius Institutes is the most rigorous paper that has appeared since the start of the brand on Chinese language education to date, as well as the academic-freedom debates that ensued in the west (Hartig, 2015). A polemical formulation, or a real fear, of the independence of the host campus, is Sahlins' phrase for some of these institutes, written from within American anthropology (Sahlins, 2015). Summers was able to demonstrate that the rhetoric of the 'New Silk Roads' was already being generated by Chinese provinces and cities beyond the centre, an important point, given how the centre exports culture (Summers, 2016). In their study of Chinese One Belt One Road narratives, Sidaway & Woon deconstructed the imperial and geopolitical dimensions within these narratives (Sidaway & Woon, 2017). On the theme of the 16+1 format in Central and Eastern Europe, Vangeli claimed that symbolic power is as significant as finance, meaning its ability to set the terms of conversation. The cultural argument was then enunciated in its most systematic form by Winter in the monograph he had published in the winter. The cultural argument was then formulated in the most systematic way in the winter monograph by Winter, who called heritage, museums and the UNESCO Silk Roads listing tools of geo-cultural power. In the popular press, Hillman recorded the day-to-day

activities of the “project of the century” from the construction site, not in communiqués (Hillman, 2020).

Before the BRI brand, there was already cultural and labour literature on Africa, and the BRI brand is now part of that file - whether or not every project is branded BRI. Alden's synthesis of China in Africa, in which he prefigures the current debates on the subject, already discussed the migration, image, and elite courtship in parallel, as equal elements of the process of China in Africa (Alden, 2007). While challenging a number of myths regarding Chinese aid, Brautigam also stated that the social bargain on African soil would not get “ahead of itself” based on Beijing's rhetoric, but needed to be explored (Brautigam, 2009). Lee's ethnography of Chinese investment in Zambia revealed two capitalisms: Chinese and global-private, as well as two kinds of workers living the difference; in compounds, canteens and strike repertoires (Lee, 2017). In the process, Benabdallah repositioned the focus from money to knowledge networks: training, professional associations and the creation of an African elite China-literate (Benabdallah, 2020). The studies of these African societies are important for BRI socio-cultural assessment, as they provide the continuous longest record of Chinese workers, managers and media in non-Chinese publics. They also caution against considering “Africa” as one reception context. Nairobi is not Kitwe and a Standard Gauge Railway camp is not a Confucius Classroom.

A third wave, still growing, insists on the view from the ground along the named corridors. Jones and Zeng rejected the image of a coherent grand strategy and urged analysis of a fragmented Chinese state acting through provinces, SOEs and policy banks (Jones & Zeng, 2019). Oliveira and colleagues collected grounded studies that treat corridors as lived places rather than lines on a map (Oliveira et al., 2020). Rippa's borderland work on western China shows how “connectivity” is also a technology of control at the Chinese edge of the Belt (Rippa, 2020). Hofman asked, of Chinese farms in Tajikistan, whether politics or profits were in the driving seat, and found a social world of managers, villagers and land that official Silk Road prose does not describe (Hofman, 2016). Clarke asked whether the BRI is a new grand strategy at all, and how Xinjiang sits inside it (Clarke, 2017). On the Pakistan corridor, Small's geopolitics of the China–Pakistan axis remains the necessary preface to any cultural reading of CPEC (Small, 2015). Kanwal and colleagues measured local residents' support as a function of perceived benefit (Kanwal et al., 2019). Sun and colleagues linked CPEC infrastructure to community well-being and socio-cultural change (Sun et al., 2020). Aman and colleagues tested social, cultural and educational pathways to quality of life along the same corridor (Aman et al., 2022). Laruelle's edited volume remains the essential Central Asian counterpart, documenting both opportunity and Sinophobia (Laruelle, 2018). The present article sits in this third wave. It treats official cultural statistics as claims to be weighed against community studies, labour reports, media ethnographies and opinion surveys, not as proof that people-to-people bonds have been achieved.

3. Problem statement

The research problem is that there is not enough evidence to support the social impact of the BRI, even though its cultural machinery is so big. Volume was impact for official documents inventory agreements, institutes, festivals, workshops, and sister cities. Ports and loans or dual

use facilities are accounted for in strategic studies like culture is decoration. When they do exist, community studies are corridor specific and are not always presented in a comparative light. Although overlapping, the Chinese institutional repertoires of African media studies and Central Asian migration studies or Pakistani CPEC surveys rarely talk to each other. But it can tell you how many Confucius Classrooms are located in BRI states and how many kilometers of CPEC road have been poured but, with the same degree of certainty, it cannot tell you what those instruments do to the language hierarchy, marriage market, religious practice, local media, vocational identity or to the everyday dignity of host and migrant workers.

World Bank corridor economics simplified the calculation of trade and transport benefits assuming such risks as social disruption were leftover parameters (World Bank, 2019). That remaining is the focus of this paper. In the absence of a socio-cultural evaluation, policy conversation is stuck at two extremes: one from Beijing, which sees the BRI as a gift of civilization; and one from Washington, which sees it as a debt-and-influence trap. Another group, host societies, do not reside in either pole. They reside in the vicinity of a Mandarin evening class, a fenced Chinese compound, a new bus to the district hospital, a satellite dish broadcasting Chinese serial, and a rumor about land and jobs all along the same street. It's not that the issue of culture has been completely overlooked. It is that culture has been either fetishized as the bonding that has already taken place, or demonized as propaganda; that it is neither one nor the other that accounts for the same Confucius Institute being a jobs programme in Bangkok, a security file in Michigan, and a rebranded successor in Prague. A comparative socio-cultural evaluation makes no more a luxury chapter at the end of an infrastructure study, but a necessary component. The only means to read the BRI as it is lived.

4. Objectives

1. To examine BRI educational and linguistic instruments Confucius Institutes, scholarships, Luban Workshops, and degree pacts and their uneven geography between West and Global South.
2. To analyze everyday social encounters around labour camps, construction sites, and corridor towns in CPEC, Kazakhstan, Laos, and Indonesia.
3. To evaluate heritage diplomacy, media projection, and identity politics as the symbolic layer through which BRI projects are interpreted or resisted.

5. Research Questions:

1. How have BRI educational and language instruments rearranged linguistic capital and student mobility, and why welcomed in some regions but reversed in others?
2. How do Chinese labour deployment and corridor construction reshape social relations and cultural boundaries, and when do encounters produce integration rather than protest?
3. How do Silk Road heritage diplomacy and media recode identity in partner societies, and where does this generate hybridity, anxiety, or mobilization?

6. Methodology

This is a qualitative, document-based assessment. It does not claim original ethnography. It triangulates three corpora. The first is official and quasi-official: the 2023 State Council white

paper on the BRI as a pillar of a “global community of shared future,” Education Action Plan materials, Luban Workshop tallies published through Chinese state media, and the cultural statistics those texts advertise. The second is independent quantification: Nedopil’s 2025 investment report, World Bank corridor economics, the U.S. Government Accountability Office’s count of Confucius Institute closures, the ISEAS State of Southeast Asia elite survey, and the Lowy Asia Power Index cultural-influence scores. The third is published fieldwork and investigative reporting on labour, media and community: China Labor Watch’s survey of Chinese workers on BRI sites, Chen’s ethnography of the Laos railway, Franceschini’s study of Chinese and Cambodian construction labour, Kassenova on migration to Kazakhstan, Lee on Chinese capital in Zambia, Wissenbach and Wang on the Kenyan railway, Nantulya and Mboya on Chinese media in Africa, and the CPEC community surveys of Kanwal, Sun, Aman and, most recently, Khan and colleagues, who collected 527 valid questionnaires in Gilgit-Baltistan and modelled attitudes with structural equation techniques (Khan et al., 2025).

Analytical categories are taken from Nye’s attraction/coercion distinction, winter’s geo-cultural power, Benabdallah’s knowledge networks, and the grounded-studies insistence that corridors are social spaces. Each claim is tagged to a single source in author–date form; clusters of citations are avoided so that the reader can see which document is doing which work. Comparison is structured rather than encyclopedic. Pakistan, as the flagship terrestrial corridor, supplies the densest community-survey record. Central Asia supplies the densest record of popular Sinophobia and agricultural encounter. Southeast Asia supplies the densest record of Confucius Institute reception among diaspora and non-diaspora publics. East Africa supplies the densest record of Chinese media infrastructure and of a flagship railway’s social bargain. These are not a sample of convenience. They are the places where the socio-cultural file is thick enough to be assessed rather than guessed.

Coming up with the limitations, only a small sample of local press in Urdu, Russian, Lao, Swahili and Arabic are represented when compared to English academic/policy writing. Official cultural statistics are performance documents. Community surveys are not uniform: more developed in CPEC and Kenya than in the Western Balkans, West Africa or the South Pacific. Wherever possible, information is reported in Chinese-language sources that are produced for domestic audiences. The article thus gives preference to source-tagged figures over synthetic global figures, and to the research literature in the English language over the more prevalent, but less readily available, literature in other languages. The synthesis of CPEC cultural exchange by Anwar et al., 2024 is not used as a template for cultural exchange in the region, but rather as a regional check. As with the figures for the number of Confucius Institutes (CIs), the numbers of foreign workers, and the number of students enrolled at Luban Workshop, there are discrepancies between the official figures and the figures provided by the independent sources, and both sets of figures are reported and neither is averaged out.

7. Education, language and people-to-people infrastructure

The most mobile cultural technology in the BRI is the classroom. Beijing’s Education Action Plan had pledged to send each other degrees, scholarships, and to make the corridors thicker. In mid-2023, the white paper stated that it had reached agreements with forty-five countries involved,

and established a rich network of Confucius institutes and classrooms. The Ministry of Education announced ten thousand new government scholarship seats under a new special channel, Silk Road Scholarship, for students from countries involved in the project in 2015 (Shih et al., 2022). It is a more modest claim than the official language of civilizational learning (Pu, 2025), for Pu's 2025 study of participating economies shows that this educational architecture is linked with better human-capital indicators with cultures already in a position to trade cultural products, and to exchange students. Measurable direction of travel is still possible. The number of international students going to China over a two-year period has bounced back to more than two hundred thousand, though not at the pre-pandemic level, and the profile of the student body is moving south, with students attracted to the country by scholarships, low tuition and the logical advantage of learning Mandarin in a trading bloc dominated by China (East Asia Forum, 2025). In this register, people-to-people connectivity isn't friendship, in general. It is the creation of linguistic and credentialed elites who go through Chinese institutions.

The university is flanked by a second, lesser-known infrastructure, the Luban Workshop, named after Lu Ban's, an ancient Chinese worker, and established to spread Chinese vocational skills in the fields of railway transportation, electromechanics, smart manufacturing and new-energy vehicles. That thirty-three workshops were set up in twenty-nine countries in Asia, Africa and Europe; that some 20,000 persons had been qualified and more than 35,000 had undergone skills training; and that over 2,200 local teaching staff had been prepared (China Daily, 2024). In later counts on alliances, there were still more projects accredited, especially from Africa and Central Asia. The social-cultural values during the workshop are not the brand. It is the export of Chinese norms of work in the recipient labour market. It is the import of Chinese norms of work in the recipient labour market. A trained Kenyan or Pakistani technician, using Chinese teacher-training methods, with Chinese textbooks, is not only more marketable on a railway constructed by the Chinese, but is trained in the Chinese way, and trained with Chinese textbooks. She is a bearer of a convention. The Luban Workshop is the vocational equivalent, to the effect of Hartig's Confucius Institutes which aimed to bolster university standing, but not that of the trades that keep the corridors running (Hartig, 2015).

Table 1. Selected official people-to-people tallies, BRI, to mid-2023 unless noted

Instrument	Official count	Source
BRI cooperation agreements	200+ with 150+ states and 30 organisations	SCIO, 2023
Cultural and tourism documents	144 partner countries	SCIO, 2023
Confucius Institutes / Classrooms	313 / 315 in 132 partners	SCIO, 2023
Degree-recognition agreements	45 participating countries	SCIO, 2023
Sister-city pairings	1,000+ with 60+ partners	SCIO, 2023
Luban Workshops	33 in 29 countries (Nov. 2024)	China Daily, 2024
Luban qualifications / skills training	20,000 / 35,000 people	China Daily, 2024

Active (independent)	BRI	memoranda	150 states by Dec. 2025	Nedopil, 2026
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The production is geographically divided. In the U.S. the Confucius Institute network has been broken up. The Government Accountability Office reported that, in 2019, there were approximately one hundred institutes at American colleges, but only less than five remained in 2023, and over half of the schools they surveyed said that their decision to dropout was driven by the fear of losing federal funding (U.S. GAO, 2023). Closures in Australia, and political pressure in the United Kingdom, went hand in hand; and Sahlins's polemic provided a language of academic capture that could be referred to by legislators. But in Central and Eastern Europe, the observers see that many "closed" institutes are simply renamed, not closed (China Observers, 2024). What matters is not the Western shutdown itself but the important socio-cultural fact. It is the parallel emergence of areas of the globe where China is a development partner, rather than a peer competitor. According to East Asia Forum there are 44 institutes in Latin America and 61 in Africa providing language training and a pathway to Chinese universities. In the Indo-Pacific, CSIS identifies forty-one institutes in Southeast Asia, including sixteen in Thailand, and believes host governments consider Mandarin literacy as an employment policy, rather than as a loyalty test (CSIS, 2023). Some thirty million of the estimated forty million ethnic-Chinese diaspora in the world are in Southeast Asia, with there being Confucius programming in these areas, which doubles up as a cultural centre for people whose heritage languages are not Putonghua, but rather southern Chinese dialects. Thus, the same instrument is used for different social work in Michigan, Nairobi and Bangkok.

But as for attraction, it has its limits and Beijing and its critics don't like to be made uncomfortable by that. The 2023 ISEAS State of Southeast Asia poll revealed that 25.2 per cent of regional elite respondents would send themselves or their child to a United States university, while 5.4 per cent would send their child to a Chinese university. Although the weights for trade and investment increased, the score for cultural influence in China's Asia Power Index decreased in 2023 (Lowy Institute, 2023). These numbers are not evidence against the educational pillar; they are evidence for it. The opportunity structures are reshaped in mandarin classes and mandarin scholarships. On the current evidence, they have not on present evidence taken over the prestige hierarchy of Western higher education from the very elites that BRI diplomacy most wishes to reach. Here is Javed's take on cultural diplomacy in the BRI: "Education, media and the arts" are used together, but "education together" is read separately, and "learning a language for work" is different from "political identification" (Javed & colleagues, 2024). In Kazakhstan, while China is a practical destination, it is not a prestige destination as defined in the United States or Europe, as scholarship pipelines and commercial agencies push students towards China's universities. The socio-cultural yield is a technical band that is bilingual, and not a converted political class. The ledger is complicated by returnees. If a student has been in Wuhan or Tianjin for four years, he doesn't return home just as a simple ambassador. She brings home a language, a network, a credential and a cache of language about food and surveillance and friendship and racism and libraries and winter, some admiring, some bitter. Benabdallah's description of knowledge

networks is correct: China is now a typical node in the African and Asian professional formation but networks carry ambivalence as well as loyalty. The BRI's educational pillar continues to exist after the scholarship period thanks to the micro-institutions that include alumni associations and WeChat groups as well as marriage to a classmate. In the white papers, they are virtually imperceptible and in the minds of students, they make the difference between Mandarin as a career language and Mandarin as a souvenir. Three figures here: Pakistan's returned CPEC employees, Kenya's railway workers who have trained in China, and the Chinese students who have come to Kazakhstan's universities to learn its language. All of them, in one way or another, are people whose cultural capital has been re-arranged, but whose politics remains intact, unbought. That is the educational product of the initiative.

Pakistan is a similar example at corridor level. Alongside a labour market where Chinese project managers work daily is a Mandarin teaching market that has grown in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore and along the CPEC axis, and a Confucius programming market along with a number of bilateral university pacts. Anwar and colleagues report greater cultural contact and deeper people to people interaction but are not saying that Pakistan's linguistic hierarchy has been toppled. English is the language of prestige for the elite in Pakistan, Urdu is the national language and regional languages are the language of home. With Mandarin as third or fourth code, it is attached to a given political economy. So there's no failure. It is the way language really passes on. The conclusion in Section 1 is therefore twice. The BRI has created an actual educational, vocational and linguistic infrastructure in the Global South, and that is the most successful socio-cultural export of the BRI. It hasn't turned that infrastructure into "soft power" yet — and in the West it's now a liability Beijing's moving around with its efforts going south.

A last educational observation is about not learning. Confucius Institutes and Luban Workshops export language, craft and a curated China; they do not export a curriculum, with host histories as its centre of gravity. Students do not learn Chinese, but neither are they welcomed as equals as civilizational nodes to teach Gilgit or Gwadar in the same classroom. The Chinese technicians teach Kenyan signs; they are not requested to rework Mombasa's Indian Ocean world. This imbalance is the social-cultural cost of a project talking about learning from each other and focusing learning power in one direction. Where there is mutual recognition of degrees, it is a bureaucratic balancing act. It's not the cultural one yet. Without host knowledge in the same workshop as host students, there will be no people-to-people connectivity and it is only polite to call it a one-way school.

8. Labour, community encounter and social strain

If classrooms are the BRI's polished cultural face, work camps are its unpolished social fact. China's Ministry of Commerce recorded 592,000 Chinese workers overseas in 2021; unofficial totals, including those on tourist visas or nested in subcontracting chains, are widely believed to be higher. China Labor Watch's investigation of BRI labour regimes found workers hired through convoluted subcontracting, isolated from host societies, often without valid visas, and in conditions that in some cases met International Labour Organization definitions of forced labour (China Labor Watch, 2022). In a survey of 333 Chinese workers in Indonesia, only 27.6 per cent held valid work visas. Passport retention, restricted movement and delayed wages appear

across sites from nickel parks in Sulawesi to railway alignments in Laos. Franceschini's ethnography of Chinese and Cambodian construction workers in Sihanoukville showed how the two workforces can occupy the same city while remaining, in his phrase, as far apart as earth and sky (Franceschini, 2020). Socio-cultural impact here is not a metaphor. It is the production of parallel social worlds: a Chinese compound with its own cooks, clinics, WeChat groups and satellite television, and a host neighbourhood that sees the compound as both payroll and exclusion.

Host communities notice who builds, and who is hired. The Council on Foreign Relations summarised a pattern in which Chinese firms facing delays replace protesting local workers with imported Chinese crews, and in which embassies have at times treated labour complaint as a public-relations problem rather than a rights problem (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Chen's account of the Boten–Vientiane railway is the most vivid ethnographic statement of that pattern: Lao workers walking off sites over unpaid wages, Chinese replacements flown in, and a landscape of young men in adjacent villages who refuse railway work because "the Chinese didn't pay" (Chen, 2021). The United States Institute of Peace, looking at security rather than ethnography, counted at least 619 overseas Chinese workers killed in violent attacks between 2006 and 2016, a grim index of how quickly labour compounds can become political targets (USIP, 2018). In Kazakhstan, Kassenova documents a different but related social form: Chinese migrants concentrating as self-sufficient minorities, with few mixed marriages and a closed circuit of capital accumulation, against a public memory of protests that fused factory transfers, land, Xinjiang and job theft into a single anti-Chinese frame (Kassenova, 2022). Laruelle's Central Asian volume had already shown that Sinophobia is not a fringe sentiment in the region; it is a recurrent popular vocabulary into which BRI projects are inserted. Hofman's work on Chinese farms in Tajikistan adds an agrarian chapter to the same story: land, managers and villagers in a social relation that official Silk Road prose never names (Hofman, 2016). Everyday encounter, in short, does not automatically produce the people-to-people bonds that communiqués announce. It produces boundary work.

A second flag for which the Asian evidence can be read is provided by East Africa. Wissenbach and Wang's research on the Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway revealed a project that was as much a part of Kenyan elite politics as of Chinese engineering, and local contractors, ethnic bargains and a public debate on who would ride and who would pay (Wissenbach & Wang, 2017). Based on a survey of 132 leading experts and interviews with 91 stakeholders, the latter conducted by Zhu et al. (2023) noted that trade, connectivity and cross-country opportunity were among the issues that affected communities cared about, as well as the usual grievances of local hiring, displacement, and the isolation of the Chinese camp. So the "win-win" brochure and the "debt trap" headline is not an alternative to asking "who eats in which canteen?" (Brautigam, 2009). While not in the narrow sense of being a BRI case, Lee's Zambian ethnography is the deepest and most compelling description of how Chinese managers and African workers create a common place, workplace and cultural frontier: different strike traditions, different notions of overtime, different theories of what a compound is for (Lee, 2017). The socio-cultural phenomenon that you see in many places starting with Kitwe to Mombasa to Vientiane is not a slogan of "China

exploits Africa". It's the surrounding of daily life around a project so big it can't be overlooked and too socially closed to be lived in.

The same enclosure in urban form is evident in cities that attract Chinese capital, but where there is no single flagship railway. Now, Khmer street life had been replaced by the Mandarin signage and gated towers and the night-time activity in Sihanoukville was one that was not easy for the locals to live with, but could be served by. As the casino bubble burst, the cultural ruins have been left behind: the unfinished buildings, a shrunken vernacular on the seafront, and a sense of having belonged in one's own town. A subdued version is seen at African trading cities. Wholesale stores, medical clinics, restaurants, become commonplace in urban markets all over from Lagos to Nairobi, and their contact is commercial, not diplomatic. This presence of the trader is the more than any cultural season in the embassies that is the way many Africans meet China. The BRI-brand may or may not cover that presence. The brand is not a major consideration for a socio-cultural assessment. It is the shop and the compound that transform the street.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the labour-and-community file is shallower, not so many projects, and more heated politics. As much as it is a railway construction story, the Budapest-Belgrade railway line is also a European argument about procurement, transparency and identity, the old 16+1 format. No Chinese workers come to host publics in Hungary and Serbia to the extent as to a Lao village or a Kenyan camp, but China as a political sign. The finding itself is a socio-cultural finding. In places where there are fewer Chinese bodies, there is still plenty of Chinese meaning, provided by the home media, opposition parties and Brussels, in addition to Beijing. In Europe, the BRI is, therefore, not so much about compounds as about the stories that Europe tells itself about its decline, about its sovereignty and the East. In that context, it makes sense for Italy to leave later: its membership was always more symbolic than substantive and was easier to withdraw when it became too expensive.

The CPEC literature is the thickest at community level and as such is the objective test of the optimistic hypothesis for Pakistan. The Small's preface is the geopolitics of the axis, that is, CPEC is not a surprise dropped on an unprepared public, it is the newest page in a long security-and-development relationship, wherein cultural intimacies and suspicions had already been forged (Small, 2015). Sun et al. (2020) found that although infrastructure improvement along the roadway corridor was related to perceived wellbeing, it was also related to cultural and environmental unease that would not disappear even if roads were improved. According to Kanwal et al. (2019), in situations of local support needs, there is a need to show that there is benefit to be gained from the support otherwise there is no blank cheque. Aman and colleagues found cultural and educational pathways to corridor development that can improve residents' quality of life when they are engaged (Aman et al. 2022). The most recent quantitative statement is Khan and colleagues' 2025 survey of 527 residents in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan: perceived economic and social-cultural benefits drove positive attitudes, environmental concerns did the opposite, and attitudes were predictive of both passive and active attitudes. The mean scores were lower and more spread across social-cultural impact than economic impact which is exactly what one should be seeing with a socio-cultural assessment. While almost forty-five per cent of respondents said the family income level had improved, support was also very strong and there

was also a concern about disruption to local culture, noise and the need to protect heritage sites and livelihoods.

At the sea side of this corridor, Gwadar has focused the strain. The fishing communities have protested the construction of ports, security barriers and rumours about the population in the region as they believe it is not being included in the investment packages of CPEC. It's not as though all grievances are substantiated. This is because a port is a cultural reality: it changes who can or cannot walk which shoreline, who speaks which language in which office, and which future is permitted for a coastal town. A useful parallel from the Chinese side of the Karakoram is that infrastructure that appears as an opening in a ministry appears as sorting and control on the ground (Rippa, 2020). The Pakistani evidence thus repudiates both caricatures. CPEC is not a cultural occupation, it is not a culturally neutral public good. It is a negotiated social transaction where communities agree to environmental costs and threats to cultural diversity for access and income, and where they are willing to provide such costs and threats is where they are asked. Alden's "who is developing whom on whose terms" is a question that remains unchanged when it makes its way to Gwadar and Gilgit (Alden, 2007).

What, then, produces integration rather than enclosure? The community studies converge on a short and unromantic list. Local hire that is real rather than ceremonial. Camps that buy food in the market rather than flying it in. Language help that runs both ways, so that a Pakistani or Kenyan supervisor can be understood in the site office. Complaint mechanisms that do not terminate in deportation. Visible benefits that arrive before the rumor mill fills the gap a clinic door that opens, a road that actually shortens a school run, a fishing access that is not fenced off for security. Gilgit-Baltistan respondents supported CPEC more strongly when they had been asked and when they could name a gain. Lao villagers opted out when they could not name a wage. The contrast is the paper's second research question in miniature. Integration is not a civilizational gift. It is a labour and municipal practice, and it is scarce.

9. Heritage diplomacy, media and identity

The BRI's deepest cultural claim is historical. By naming contemporary infrastructure after the Silk Roads, Beijing inherits a UNESCO-certified past. The Chang'an–Tianshan Corridor was inscribed as World Heritage in 2014, giving a multilateral seal to a route system that Chinese public diplomacy now presents as the ancestor of the Belt (UNESCO, 2014). Winter's argument is that this is not nostalgia. It is geo-cultural power: a usable antiquity that frames Chinese overseas presence as restoration rather than intrusion (Winter, 2019). Sister cities, the Silk Road International League of Theaters, museum alliances, Dunhuang expositions and tea-road tourism fairs operationalize that frame as a calendar of events. Official tallies of 144 cultural and tourism agreements are, in this light, less a measure of friendship than a measure of how thoroughly the heritage script has been institutionalised. Host governments, especially those with their own Silk Road or maritime histories, often welcome the script because it internationalizes their sites and their tourist boards. The socio-cultural risk is that living communities along those routes Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Pashtun, Swahili coastal, or Himalayan become extras in a story written elsewhere. Clarke's question about Xinjiang and grand strategy is, among other things, a question

about whose Silk Road is being revived, and whose is being secured out of the picture (Clarke, 2017).

Media is the normal way of carrying that story and its rebuttals. The corridors have now been accompanied by the Chinese state media outlets, language cooperation and short video platforms, providing a "printer-interpreted" BRI: win-win, connectivity, shared future to the local audiences. In the briefing of China's approach to Africa's media space published by the NGO in 2024, Nantulya's team has made a good inventory: Xinhua has thirty-seven bureaus across the continent, more than any other agency; StarTimes is the second-largest digital-television player in Africa, and at any given moment a slice of the desk might be on a fellowship in Beijing; in Kenya alone some five hundred journalists and staff work for Chinese media newsroom managers complain (Nantulya, 2024). In Mboya's study of StarTimes in Kenya, he sees how infrastructure, inexpensive decoders and adroitly selected Chinese serials can come together to create something that is not called propaganda on the electronic programme guide. Beijing is a normal and even generous partner in the professional world; journalists trained in China, content-sharing agreements, this is where Benabdallah's larger claim that knowledge networks exist comes to life. This has been the case whenever local news is less than robust. If it's solid where it is, if there is no social media to regulate it, it can be annihilated in a flash by a single labour fight or an environmental spill.

The built environment and the media diet go together on the journey of identity effects. In certain towns of the CPEC, people have expressed a sense of a broader attachment to China as well, and to the "global self" with the influx of roads and visitors. In certain Central Asian and Southeast Asian contexts, the presence of the Chinese is coded as a demographic and linguistic threat, even if it is few in number, due to the visibility of the compound and the fact that the Chinese language spoken on the crane is not the street language of the region. Consent does not equal hybridity: Mandarin profusion in market discourse, Chinese restaurants as consumption of status, mixed work crews that do, sometimes, eat together, kung-fu films and mobile phone brands as ordinary youth culture. Vangeli's ideas on the symbolic power of Central and Eastern Europe travel: its power is not the same as its power to close or end the conversation (Vangeli, 2018). Javed's account of cultural diplomacy sees media as one of the fields of education and arts; the present assessment sees media as the field in which the instruments collide. A Luban graduate, who watches StarTimes, works under a Chinese supervisor and attends a Silk Road festival is not three separate case studies. She is one of the socio-cultural lives.

Identity politics is a personal affair, in registers to which official BRI prose does not much venture: those of religion and of family. Chinese work camps that do not provide space for people to pray at their own time or offer halal food and meals and Friday closure become small theatres of disrespect, even if it was not a cultural offence. The conflict is different in a Buddhist or Christian environment: Sunday labor, relocation of cemeteries, a stupa or a church obstructing a right-of-way, but the conflict is the same: a project calendar in conflict with a sacred calendar. If there are any mixed marriages, they are sufficiently uncommon to be significant news and politicised enough to be rumours. This is a warning from Kassenova, who finds that mixed unions don't happen very often in Kazakhstan, and that they are often instrumental. On the other hand, a lack

of marriage is not a sign of hostility, it may simply be a sign of a two year construction posting is not a life. There's nothing called being honest about romance. It is if host and migrant can share a street without a fence.

There is a register of the identity file, which is completed by tourism and food, which are perceived as friendship, but are not. When the Chinese tourists come, they rearrange the shop fronts, menus and languages along the corridors from Chiang Mai to Hunza. Hotels install kettle and slippers kits and WeChat payment; restaurants print mandarin; mountain valleys which were once undiscovered, are now selling products called untouched. But as pandemic closures and then political scares disrupted that flow, the cultural investment became a vessel of empty capacities, and an expectation of a successful town. Foodways also travel the other way round: Chinese restaurants become urban status, hot-pot is the student culture and the humbled diffusion of Chinese ingredients in African and Asian wet markets. There's nothing imperial about this. It's all about socio-cultural change. Silk Roads were always about goods, tastes and people, not only about states. The danger is that a tourist Silk Road will replace the working one. The Hunza valley dressed up for Chinese group tours is nothing like the valley which the respondents from Gilgit-Baltistan wanted to be protected.

Thus, the identity politics of the BRI should not be taken from rolls of membership. The departure of Italy in 2023, the sole remaining G7 nation that had both signed and then walked away, was explained in Rome as a “reappraisal of strategic alignment,” and it was also a cultural gesture aimed at China, the European audience of which was already sensitized to a view of China as a “systemic competitor.” The brand still has glamour as a development tool in the Global South, and that is why Confucius Institutes are still opening in the south, while they are closing in the north. In this respect, Callahan's “new Eurasian order” is culturally differentiated, and he distinguishes two types of thickness: on the one hand, the thickness among scholarship students, tour operators and contracting elites who have material reasons for living the official version; on the other, the thinners among host workers and neighbors, who evaluate the BRI based on the wages, noise, space for prayer, marriage gossip, and whether the door of the clinic is open for them; and the tactical thickness among a political class that adjusts to the prevailing electoral and geopolitical climate (Callahan, 2016). Heritage diplomacy attempts to bring them together in the one civilizational we. The evidence of the community tells of an incomplete fusion. The BRI has altered people's perceptions of what their region's past and future could be along the corridor. It has not made a decision for them in terms of who they are.

A last identity finding is generational. Older host residents often read Chinese presence through older scripts: colonial memory, Cold War non-alignment, bazaar competition, or a religious suspicion of the atheist compound. Younger residents, especially those with smartphones, scholarships or tourism jobs, read it through apps, serials, football boot-brands and the chance of a ticket out. Neither reading is the true BRI. The initiative's socio-cultural future will be decided by which reading thickens. If the compound remains sealed, the older script wins. If classrooms, shops and newsrooms become ordinary mixed spaces, the younger script has a chance—without guaranteeing affection, only familiarity. Familiarity is not love. It is, however, the condition under

which love or hate can be specific rather than mythical. That is as much as a socio-cultural assessment should promise, and it is more than a memorandum of understanding can deliver.

Conclusion

The Belt and Road Initiative is not only a construction programme, but also a socio-cultural event. It has established an actual educational, vocational and linguistic infrastructure in the Global South over a period of more than 13 years, introduced hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers to host employment markets, introduced Chinese television to the African living room, and revived the Silk Roads as a diplomatic language that museums, tourist boards and foreign ministries are able to speak fluently. It's not a simple "what did you do?" list. They've shifted who is taught the language and who is standing on the building site, who is playing the serial in the village and who's the past that can be used for a justification of the railway. They haven't, however, created the seamless people relationships that official prose says have been done. The language institutes, which were meant to be the calling card of the initiative, were shut down on western campuses. American universities continue to be the University of Choice for Southeast Asian elites. Work camps continue to be socially closed. A vocabulary of Sinophobia exists in the public discourses of Central Asia. Pakistani mountain and coastal communities host a corridor that creates income while they continue to be worried about culture, noise, fences and heritage. Kenyan railway towns balance hire with displacement. By design, the socio-cultural impact is mixed, for the BRI comes not only as a gift, but as an encampment.

A comparison across corridors is not only a way to define but to sharpen that mixture. The most successful export and the most geographically split is education: expanding where China is a development partner, contracting where China is a peer rival. The most regular source of strain is: compounds which do not sell in the bazaar will be read as labour even if there is an actual payroll. Media is underestimated tool: a decoder in a house in a rural place does quiet cultural work which a festival in a capital cannot. Heritage is the most elegant frame and the most exclusionary one, as a revived Silk Road, which does not mention living communities of the Uighur, Pashtun or Swahili, is a story about routes. All of these are non-conspiracy-type findings. They need only to see the world of big projects rearranging the world of everyday life, and everyday life having culture.

An evaluation that ended there would be meek. The more pointed conclusion is that socio-cultural outcomes are the most obvious measure of political sustainability of the initiative. Debt ratios, port throughput will be discussed in ministries. In classrooms, at the canteen, in the mosque, in the church, in the union hall, in newsrooms and local media, whether a host public will defend a project or ignore it or attack a compound will be determined. Culture as a festival calendar will never fail to surprise when it comes to protests. Policy based on the premise that all classrooms are a threat to security will fail to address the normal motivations for learning Mandarin. What's meant for the practical application of the partner states is that they are willing to negotiate, for example, language, labour share, vocational standards, heritage protection, media licensing and community consultation, as seriously as they do with loan terms. For researchers the relevance is to continue to measure living communities, and to read African media studies as one file rather than three: Central Asian migration studies and Pakistani corridor

surveys. How many memoranda were signed will not be the test of the success of Belt and Road. It will be decided on the basis of whether the societies that received it saw themselves as reflected in what they received.

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