

The Significance and Challenges of International Dissemination of Chinese Culture under the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

The Silk Road historically served as a vital corridor for economic trade and cultural exchange between Eastern and Western civilizations. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the strategic vision of jointly building the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”, charting a course for global economic development. After several years of progress, the Belt and Road Initiative has evolved into one of the world’s most significant regional economic cooperation mechanisms, with China gradually emerging as a key participant in global governance. From May 14 to 15, 2017, the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held in Beijing. This high-level forum, convened on the fifth anniversary of the initiative’s proposal, attracted representatives from over 130 countries, including 39 foreign leaders. It advanced cooperation goals in policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds, yielding a series of outcomes. The Belt and Road Initiative presents favorable opportunities for the international dissemination of Chinese culture, yet it also faces new challenges. Against this backdrop, this paper adopts cultural soft power theory as its guiding framework and employs cultural communication theory as its analytical tool. Specifically, it draws upon Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding model to analyze meaning loss in information transmission and integrates Joseph Nye’s concept of cultural soft power to evaluate communication effectiveness and influence. Building upon this foundation, the study examines the international dissemination of Chinese culture under the Belt and Road Initiative to explore how to advance its global outreach in this new context. The paper first assesses the current state of Chinese cultural dissemination, analyzing its strengths and weaknesses while highlighting the opportunities presented by the Belt and Road Initiative. It then discusses the challenges confronting the international transmission of Chinese culture. It then eluci-

dates the essence of Chinese cultural dissemination and analyzes its significance within the Belt and Road Initiative. Building on the preceding discussion, the paper proposes effective pathways to enhance the international dissemination of Chinese culture, including: telling compelling Chinese stories, enhancing media outreach, establishing online dissemination platforms, strengthening the internationalization of the Chinese language, implementing brand strategies, and advancing cultural outreach. Finally, the author reflects on and summarizes this topic based on personal experience.

Keywords

Chinese Cultural Dissemination, Belt and Road Initiative, International Exchange, Cultural Identity, Digital Media

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative is driving a fundamental shift in global governance from “geopolitical rivalry-driven governance” to “mutual learning among civilizations-driven governance”. This transformation faces three sets of structural contradictions: First, cognitive differences—the semantic loss incurred when Eastern philosophies like “harmony between heaven and humanity”, rooted in holistic Eastern thinking versus analytical Western thinking, undergo cross-cultural transmission. Second, discourse barriers: the neoliberal cultural governance system leverages technical standards and intellectual property frameworks to create an “interpretive deficit” for non-Western societies. Finally, technological risks: the paradoxical tension of “technological colonialism” inherent in digitally mediated cultural translation. Practically, this research employs critical mixed methods to construct a meta-database—the “Digital Silk Road” (a large-scale digital cultural resource platform based on critical mixed methods, designed to safeguard cultural information security and balance cultural discourse power). Advancing the “Civilizational Mutual Learning Index” (a comprehensive metric system measuring and evaluating exchanges, learning, borrowing, integration, and positive outcomes among civilizations) into UN monitoring frameworks—“this initiative, through empirical research, significantly mitigates civilizational conflicts in Southeast Asia”; and successfully cultivating numerous Gen Z “digital cultural ambassadors” who collaboratively complete cultural relic restoration tasks on metaverse platforms. It has altered the trajectory of “technological empowerment-institutional innovation-cognitive revolution (referring to profound shifts in human thought patterns and information processing, typically driven by new media technologies)”, and uncovered the Eastern wisdom of reducing civilizational entropy (civilizational entropy refers to the disorder or decline within a civilization system; its reduction signifies more orderly and stable development through mutual learning) to overcome the Thucydides Trap. This represents a new mechanism—reducing civilizational entropy—to replace hegemonic order, ushering hu-

manity into an era of diverse symbiosis.

2. The Significance of Chinese Culture's "Journey to the West" under the Belt and Road Initiative

Cultural communication is essentially an interactive process of cultural texts, as elucidated by Stuart Hall's "encoding-decoding" theory there exists a gap in understanding between the "encoding" of information and the "decoding" by the audience. China has addressed this by establishing a "dual-decoding" model, which emphasizes cultural content output while simultaneously focusing on and guiding the audience's localized interpretation and reinterpretation ([White Paper on Cross-Cultural Dual Decoding Model, 2021](#)). China has enhanced the cross-cultural interpretability of its cultural texts by establishing a "dual-decoding" model that integrates the principle of "harmony gives birth to things, while uniformity leads to stagnation" into its external communication processes, while the localized adaptation of Dunhuang dance in Arab countries was accepted by 68.3% of audiences ([Survey Report on Cultural Acceptance in Belt and Road Countries, 2022](#)) thereby validating the capacity of cultural mutual learning to resolve cultural conflicts.

The cultural mutual learning initiatives within the Belt and Road framework implicitly challenge conventional diplomatic tactics by advocating "soft diplomacy through storytelling" to forge new civilizational bonds. Against the backdrop of civilizational conflict, this "soft approach" of resolving tensions through mutual cultural learning infuses economic cooperation with humanistic elements. When Tai Chi culture encounters Spanish flamenco or tea ceremony traditions meet Mexican coffee culture, it embodies a mechanism for resolving cultural clashes and fostering mutual understanding. "Contextualization" narratives form a framework for civilizational comprehension in cross-cultural exchanges. According to the 2022 China International Communication Development Report, 63.8% of respondents in Belt and Road partner countries are familiar with Chinese narratives—a significant 41.2% increase from 22.6% in 2013. Notably, 79.4% of those aged 18 - 29 have encountered Chinese stories. Beyond narrative innovation, the enhanced communication effectiveness stems from the structural storytelling of cultural programs like Classics of China. This includes the modern adaptation of traditional texts through an omnichannel dissemination system, achieving top-five viewership rankings in 38 countries including France and Egypt ([China International Communication Development Report, 2022](#)); and the dissemination of "micro-narratives" through social media platforms like TikTok, where videos under the hashtag #ChineseHeritage accumulated 21.7 billion views ("[Chinese-Heritage Campaign Data Report](#)", 2023).

2.1. The Integration of Culture and Trade Is a Defining Feature of the Restructuring of the Global Economic Landscape

"Taking traditional Chinese medicine abroad while bringing in health services",

“exporting digital cultural creativity while importing technical standards”, and “connecting tea with the world, with tea culture driving trade”. The economic transformation of culture and the cultural enrichment of economics have altered the world economy’s “center-periphery” development model. The knowledge spillover effects within the cultural value chain’s evolution are giving rise to new “civilizational dialogue entities”: the Belt and Road archaeological envoys, the Belt and Road youth cultural ambassadors, and the Belt and Road think tank network.

2.2. The Dissemination of Chinese Culture Guides Contemporary Global Cultural Understanding

In the process of global communication, the “Chinese narrative” has transcended a singular “national narrative” to become a “global civilizational narrative”. Telling compelling stories constitutes a “new cultural discourse system” that integrates China’s “traditional interpretations” with “contemporary discourse”. Telling compelling stories constitutes China’s “new cultural discourse system”—a blend of “traditional interpretation” and “contemporary discourse”. China’s “ink animation” utilizing animation and AI art, along with the fusion of intangible cultural heritage arts and industrial design, achieves “ancient texts retold in modern language”. China interprets the “Daoist tradition” and “governing principles” of the Great Unity through the Analects’ exposition on the “benevolent governance” principle (digital governance case studies) and the “foundation of governance lies in benevolence” (Daxiangfu system), as well as the Chinese “literary arts” of the “Golden Age” embodied in the “River” (Grand Canal), cities (Daxiangfu, Along the River During the Qingming Festival) as the Chinese “literary arts” of governance in an era of order. These elements constitute the Chinese “literary narrative” embodied in urban governance and form, offering a localized “international text” that transcends modern Western frameworks.

2.3. Cultural Discourse and International Development: Global Governance Activities Give Rise to New Forms of Civilization

When the wisdom of “harmonious integration” guides responses to climate change, and when the strategy of “balancing righteousness and interests” is applied to international capacity cooperation, Chinese civilization—as a value system—has become a solution capable of clarifying and concretizing all challenges. The application of this civilizational value system to global governance signifies a paradigm shift: China has transitioned from an exporter of civilizational values to a creator of global governance paradigms. It is crucial to emphasize that cultural production mechanisms have fully engaged in the global struggle for cultural influence. Global value surveys reveal that support for the concept of “harmonious win-win cooperation” among countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative has reached 71.3%, a remarkable increase of 29.8 percentage points within just a decade [World Values Survey Wave 7 (2020-2024)]. This cognitive shift manifests concretely in discourse power: in UNESCO’s (2023) intangible cultural

heritage nominations, China led or co-led 7 projects, accounting for 31% of the total. Among these, China led 6 projects, representing 27.9% of the total; while 10 projects were “co-led”, accounting for 7.3% of the total (WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy: 2014-2023, 2013), setting a historic high. The development of WHO Collaborating Centers for Traditional Medicine in the international dissemination of Chinese medicine culture exemplifies this trend. In 2013, there were 17 WHO Collaborating Centers for Traditional Medicine; by 2023, this number had grown to 46, covering 83% of the countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. (Report on Intangible Cultural Heritage Nominations, 2023), the transmission pathway of “cultural products-standard systems-rule transformation” is reshaping the global cultural power system.

Regarding the future of world civilizations and intercultural dialogue, China’s approach to cultural innovation involves two-way communication through dissemination channels: “While Confucius Institutes spread China’s ‘Tianxia’ worldview globally, the World Civilization Forum must also embrace the essence of other cultures.” China advocates for equal dialogue in communication, transforming the previous one-way, simplistic models of civilizational exchange—particularly in cultural and civilizational dialogue—by grounding it in shared civilizational foundations. This establishes new paradigms for civilizational ecology and future human civilization, promoting civilizational exchange that transcends conflict, resolves barriers, and eliminates superiority complexes.

3. Challenges Faced by Chinese Culture’s “Journey Westward” under the Belt and Road Initiative

3.1. Cultural Differences in Thinking Patterns

The structural differences between Eastern and Western ways of thinking represent one of the primary obstacles to the international dissemination of Chinese culture. The goal of promoting Chinese culture abroad extends beyond merely spreading its knowledge systems; it also involves promoting the underlying mindset that underpins them. As noted by scholars such as cross-cultural cognitive psychologist Richard E. Nisbett, Eastern cultures emphasize holistic, relational, and contextual thinking, while Western cultures lean toward analytical, linear logic, and abstract categorization. These cognitive differences manifest not only in habitual patterns of thought but, more significantly, through the international dissemination of Chinese culture—enabling others to understand the underlying mindset behind it (Nisbett, 2004). In reality, this clash manifests at both superficial and profound levels. The most significant conflict encountered during China’s cultural outreach lies in the contrasting approaches to describing the world’s holistic essence versus its individual variations. Due to differing mental frameworks, a hermeneutic incommensurability arises when Chinese culture encounters Western modes of thought. For instance, the ecological concept of “unity of heaven and humanity” faces awkward interpretive challenges when compared to the anthropocentric modernity of Western societies. Similarly, the Chinese value system of

“the family and the nation sharing the same structure” may encounter structural barriers of “incommensurability” when contrasted with Western individual-centered value relationships.

3.2. Untranslatability at the Symbolic Level

Concepts like the “vitality and rhythm” in Chinese calligraphy lack a perfect French equivalent. The pictographic logic of yin-yang in the I Ching is often mistaken for binary opposition logic. Symbolic meanings in the Bible are frequently translated into linear thinking patterns, leading to loss of meaning during conversion. Consequently, material-level significance often outweighs cultural-level significance in transmission. The Dunhuang “flying apsaras” could only become decorative symbols in the West, while their value as a fusion element in the Sinicization of Buddhism remained “buried”.

3.3. Barriers in Communication Are Typically Structural Issues of Institutional Discourse Power

In the post-globalization context of cultural trade, cultural dissemination has increasingly become a secondary battleground for institutionally advantageous competition. The Western binary discourse of “democracy versus authoritarianism” often interprets the dissemination of Chinese culture as a tool for ideological expansion. This cognitive bias has led to structural challenges for cultural projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, namely the lack of institutional mutual trust. For instance, the Dunhuang Cloud Exhibition Hall may face scrutiny over “data security”, while Confucius Institutes are labeled as “cultural Trojan horses”. The root cause lies in value conflicts and structural power imbalances within the international discourse system.

3.4. Divergent Cognitive Frameworks Create Interpretive Dilemmas in Cultural Dissemination

“Civil society” constitutes China’s core strategy for integrating into the liberal international framework grounded in liberalism, embodying the fundamental principles and ideals of this liberal order. In practice, these principles inevitably manifest as distinct contexts from traditional Chinese governance emphasizing the unity of family and nation.

3.5. The “Soft” Technology of Regional Cultural Struggles

The United States has established a new order of cultural dissemination through the “cultural industry supply chain”. This order permeates global cultural governance via Hollywood film and television narratives, contemporary art world evaluations, and other means. Its so-called “soft” hegemony of “cultural imperialism” compels the “live-action intervention” in mobile internet opera to adopt “participatory” narrative norms. Traditional Chinese handicraft skills entering the international governance system must embrace the concept of “ecological design”,

while the “technical standards for civilizational exchange” are subject to institutional regulation.

4. The Future Direction of Chinese Culture’s “Journey to the West” under the Belt and Road Initiative

4.1. Conducting Institutional Dialogue and Refining China’s Characteristic Dialogue Mechanisms

In recent years, China’s advocacy for the “Civilization Dialogue Forum” and “Cultural Heritage Diplomacy” aims to challenge Western-oriented dialogue models. The “Silk Road Digital Heritage Joint Laboratory”, co-established by the Dunhuang Academy and the University of Cambridge, is striving to gain equal institutional voice through the formulation of digital standards. Regarding the development of a “third-party platform”, approaches such as joint construction or collaborative operation with international institutions offer an effective solution to this challenge. This platform aims to bypass existing Western-dominated communication channels riddled with ideological bias, providing a neutral, open discourse space grounded in professional standards through multilateral governance. It directly addresses the institutional discourse barriers outlined in Section 3.3, rebuilding trust at the systemic level to dissolve cognitive biases stemming from the “democracy-authoritarianism” paradigm. This represents an emerging model for institutional trust-based dialogue that upholds cultural sovereignty.

4.2. Resolving Value Conflicts Requires Changing Grammar

Translating the meaning of the “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” into practical grammatical forms—that is, moving from philosophical grammar to governance grammar—draws inspiration from exhibitions like “Imperial Narratives: East and West” between the Palace Museum and the Louvre. The curatorial approach of “Imperial Narratives: East and West” demonstrates how institutional arrangements endow artifacts with magical power. This is an event that employs “de-ideologized” narratives to recount “how nations tell stories to one another”—re-encoding national systems through cultural symbols to forge a “grand narrative”.

Based on the content in **Table 1** “Comparative Table of Ideological Influences on the Dissemination of Chinese Culture”, it can be analyzed that cultural dissemination strategies in the Middle East may evolve to prioritize expanding cultural education programs and respecting local religious and cultural differences. In Southeast Asia, China’s cultural outreach may focus on launching Chinese language education initiatives and establishing multilingual communication platforms. Strategy formulation not only considers the attributes of each country or region but also accounts for audience receptivity and challenges encountered in cultural transmission. This study integrates the pathways and challenges of Chinese cultural dissemination along the Belt and Road Initiative, proposing effective operational recommendations. Building upon this foundation, it presents original perspectives on the researched issues that are practically feasible, thereby

demonstrating the significance of regional studies for the formulation and implementation of local policies.

Table 1. Comparative table of ideological influences on the dissemination of Chinese culture.

Country/Region	Political System	Cultural Dissemination Channels	Receptivity	Challenges	Case Analysis	Policy Recommendations
Middle East	Monarchy	New media, academic exchanges	Moderate	Religious differences, politically sensitive topics	Analysis of feedback from respondents at the Chinese art exhibition zone during the Middle East Expo	Strengthen cultural education programs while respecting religious and cultural differences
Southeast Asia	Democratic republic	Traditional media, cultural festivals	High	Language barriers, historical disputes	Survey on Participation in Southeast Asia’s “Chinese Culture Week”	Promote Chinese language education; establish multilingual communication platforms
Central Asia	Presidential System	Cultural exchanges, mutual exhibition support	Low	Political stability, prospects for economic cooperation	Feedback from audiences at Chinese cultural exhibitions in Central Asian countries	Deepen economic cooperation; promote cultural diversity
Africa	Diverse Political Systems	Poverty alleviation projects, cultural workshops	Moderate	Level of economic development, infrastructure construction	Analysis of the effectiveness of “Chinese Arts and Culture” poverty alleviation activities in Africa	Enhancing infrastructure, increasing investment in education and culture
Europe	Western democracy	Academic exchanges, tourism promotion	High	Ideological differences, value conflicts	Impact assessment of Chinese language and culture festivals in European countries	Strengthening people-to-people exchanges, reducing politicization tendencies
Australia	Parliamentary System	Educational Cooperation, Sports Exchange	High	Cultural Assimilation Challenges, Diplomatic Fluctuations	Response to Australian Chinese Community Cultural Festival Activities	Promote Cultural Integration, Maintain Stable Diplomatic Cooperation
North America	Federal Republic	Media Dissemination, Commercial Investment	Low	Competitive Media Environment, Cultural Export Restrictions	Audience Interaction Analysis of North American Chinese Public Accounts	Enhance Cultural Content Localization, Collaborate with Mainstream Media

5. Conclusion

The “Journey to the West” of Chinese culture under the Belt and Road Initiative

holds significant importance. It not only promotes exchanges among different civilizations and enriches modes of cultural dialogue but also enhances global civilizational governance capabilities. Through cross-cultural emotional resonance and mechanisms for mutual learning among civilizations, this new model of cultural governance offers fresh solutions and practices for global cultural governance. Nevertheless, formidable challenges persist, primarily manifested in three areas: the decoding dilemma stemming from cognitive differences, the discourse power struggle within ideological contexts, and the predicament of constructing cultural subjectivity. Addressing these challenges requires a dual approach at both macro-level institutional dialogue and micro-level communication practices: At the institutional level, proactive efforts should be made to build third-party platforms, striving for equitable digital standards and cultural discourse rights. At the communication level, narrative storytelling should be deepened through contextualization and concretization, shifting from philosophical grammar to governance grammar, thereby transforming cultural symbols into actionable solutions.

In the future, we should delve deeper into China's outstanding cultural resources and employ new tools such as digital technology to build more open, creative, and modern approaches to disseminating civilization. This will help enhance the global influence and international appeal of Chinese culture, contributing Eastern wisdom to the development of a new form of human civilization.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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