

# CHINA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA TODAY

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## Abstract

*Cultural diplomacy is a priority in China's overall foreign policy toward Southeast Asia - the geostrategic area has a direct influence on the goal of "great revival of the Chinese nation" by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The process of implementing cultural diplomacy through cultural economic connection, promoting cultural communication, and strengthening cooperation in the cultural education of China has both contributed to deepen the relationship of cooperation and present the intention of strategic competition with major countries and increasing China's influence in the region.*

**Keywords:** China, Southeast Asia, Diplomacy, Culture

### I. Questioning

A cultural diplomacy is a form of diplomacy that adopts a cultural tool to establish, maintain, and develop foreign relations to achieve the fundamental interests of the nation, including development, security, and influence. In a broader sense, cultural diplomacy can include the introduction of achievements of the science and technique, arts, and social sciences not only of countries but also of groups of countries or international organizations. In the age of globalization and with the emergence of the trend of "dialogue instead of confrontation", cultural diplomacy is considered as one of the three main pillars of diplomacy, besides political diplomacy and economic diplomacy. The diplomacy of a country is often influenced by the national culture, diplomatic culture, and skills of the diplomats themselves, which are also factors affecting the process of planning and enforcing a country's policy on cultural diplomacy.

Promoting cultural soft power in general and cultural diplomacy, in particular, has become China's top priority in its rise to global power. For Southeast Asia - a neighborhood of geostrategic value, closely relating to China's goals of security, development, and influence, is also an area within the sphere of traditional influence of Chinese culture, the implementation of cultural diplomacy has regularly, continuously carried out by China and is part of the whole new big country policy, through culture and by culture to maintain influence, proceeding to dominate the strategic space in the South on the path of "peaceful rise", realizing the goal of "great revival of the Chinese nation".

### II. Overview of references

Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong [4], presented the theoretical system relating to the concept of "soft power", "cultural soft power"; the process of building the "friendly, kind, cooperative, responsible image of Chinese, from which to take advantage of the people's sympathy and trust; at the same time contribute to improving competitiveness with cultural soft power big countries, reconstructing a new East Asian cultural belt, expanding the influence of cultural soft power to the world, persistently striving to become "the socialist cultural powerhouse", towards the goal of realizing "the Chinese dream". The author also analyzes and interprets the behavior of China to spread its cultural soft power to East Asian countries, contributing to the realization of its ambition to become a "cultural powerhouse".

Yang Yue [12], analyzed and clarified the content of China's cultural diplomacy in a new era, took "Xi Jinping's ideology on diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in the new era" and "Promotion of building new international relations and building a common community of human destiny" as the foundation of cultural diplomacy development in the new era. According to the author, China has taken the directing principles of civilized exchange to overcome civilized barriers, learning from each other about civilization beyond civilized conflict and coexisting civilization beyond civilization superiority as its guiding principle, actively participating in global cultural governance and building a harmonious and coexisting human cultural community.

Jingwei [7], presented the necessity of building a cultural diplomacy strategy in the process of competing with major countries, the role of cultural diplomacy as a soft power to increase influence in the process of peaceful rise, establishing and promoting people-to-people exchanges between countries to strengthen friendly, cooperative and developing relation, and seeking national benefits through cultural cooperation. The author also points out the necessity of changing cultural diplomacy tactics to adapt to the new era, taking advantage of the information means and modern media in cultural diplomacy.

Ling Shuo Lin Hao [8], analyzed the historical and geographic factors influencing the formulation and implementation of China's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia, emphasizing legal commitments in China's multilateral cultural foreign affairs with ASEAN. In addition, China's implementation of the "Belt and Road" strategy with Southeast Asia as the starting point has raised the need to strengthen cultural diplomacy, along with expanding the field of cooperation at the governmental and local level in terms of education, cultural media, and cultural economy. ASEAN's establishment of a socio-cultural community along with China's implementation of the initiative "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road" originating in Southeast Asia has opened a new era of their role and influence in the region.

### III. Research Methods

In this article, I use the historical and logical method to analyze China's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia, namely: Factors that influence the process of planning and implementing cultural diplomacy, objectives, and the process of implementing cultural diplomacy. This approach allows the author, from historical events and happenings, to draw characteristics of foreign cultural behavior in process of specific geopolitical time and space. The data in this study are from published scientific and political documents to prove the issues of the position and role of cultural diplomacy in China's foreign policy, the process of implementing China's cultural foreign activities in Southeast Asia through the multilateral cooperation mechanism with ASEAN and bilateral diplomacy with each country in the region.

### IV. Results of research

#### 1. Factors influencing China's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia today

##### 1.1 *Geo-historical proximity facilitates China's deployment of cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia.*

Southeast Asia is China's neighbor. For the Southeast Asia mainland sub-region, China shares its land border with Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar across two provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi with a border length of nearly 3,889 km. At sea, China is bordered by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia via the South China Sea. Geographic proximity defines the possibility of mutual influence on security, economy, and culture between China and Southeast Asia, while creates a favorable environment for the two sides to exchange and cooperate for mutual development as well as the potential risk of interest conflict. The proximity factor is one of the first reasons China has stepped up cultural diplomacy in this strategic area. "As economic and trade exchanges between China and ASEAN countries continue to go into depth, cultural exchanges and cooperation between the two sides are also being upgraded, constantly enhancing mutual learning between civilizations and promoting people-to-people exchange" [9].

Historically, between China and Southeast Asian countries, there has existed a diplomatic relationship in many fields. The cultures of the two sides have many similarities, both belonging to "the chopsticks civilization", influenced by Buddhism. Especially Confucianism has a strong influence on the spiritual life of Southeast Asian countries. These are very favorable conditions for China to promote "cultural" soft power. China also left many historical marks, facilitating the implementation of a policy of taking culture as a starting point for the process of bilateral cooperation and linkage. According to Wu Hengcan, president of the Malaysian-Han Cultural Center: "Historically, Master Yi Jing of the Tang dynasty has recorded vivid scenes of sea trading and receiving what they need in many different regions of Southeast Asia; Minh dynasty's Trinh Hoa fleet left a peaceful coexistence in Southeast Asia ... Until today, when the silk road on the sea is mentioned again, many Southeast Asians will have to respect" [8].

##### 1.2 *The requirements of the "Belt and Road" strategy implemented by China need the support of cultural diplomacy.*

Cultural diplomacy is a diplomatic activity carried out by a sovereign country, using culture as the basic means of propagating a unique culture and shaping a national image. As one of the cradles of human civilization, Chinese culture is always widely pervasive, able to effectively promote diplomatic activity, helping to dispel negative perceptions about the rising process of China and build its new positive friendly image. At present, the role of Chinese culture in promoting exchanges between different civilizations is increasingly clear, the impact is growing, and the integration with diplomacy is more and more extensive. Cultural diplomacy and cultural diffusion have become two tools to help China's image reach the world, serve China's unique big country foreign policy and build a "Belt and Road", heighten degree of cultural openness, and contribute to enhancing the country's cultural soft power [11].

China has always considered Southeast Asia as a priority of neighboring foreign policy. They have integrated the concept of familiar, sincere, beneficial, and tolerant neighbor diplomacy into cultural diplomacy, promoting the uniqueness of cultural diplomacy, bringing up the level of neighbor cultural exchange and cooperation. China's "Belt and Road" strategy requires "the exchange of civilizations to overcome the barriers of civilizations, learning from each other to overcome their civilizations conflicts and civilizations' coexistence to transcend civilizations' superiority, fostering mutual understanding, respect and trust among nations to build a joint community for humanity in the future" [11]. The establishment of the Community by ASEAN in 2015 and the implementation of "the Blueprint of ASEAN Social and Cultural Community (ASCC) 2025" coincides with

China's implementation of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road - rising from Southeast Asia" is a strategic opportunity for China, through culture and cultural diplomacy to increase influence in this area.

### **1.3. The trend of cultural strategic competition among big countries in Southeast Asia today**

Currently, cultural competition is emerging in the strategic competitive landscape of big countries in Southeast Asia. The United States - through the Bureau of Culture and Education (ECA) implements initiatives that support cultural understanding by protecting Cultural Heritage globally, providing educational resources for those interested in American literature and the English language. ECA is known for its leading cultural-educational exchange programs such as the "Fulbright Program", "International Visitor Leadership Program" [5]. In Southeast Asia, in 2013, the United States launched the "Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI)" - a US government project aimed at enhancing leadership development and connecting in Southeast Asia through many programs such as exchange of culture and education; strengthening US-Southeast Asian relations; building ASEAN community focuses on important topics that are of interest to young people such as citizen participation, environmental and natural resource management, business-spirit, and economic development.

Japan, through the Japan Foundation (JF), carries out projects to promote Japanese culture and arts in various forms around the world, promote and provide support for Japanese language education and research on Japan [10]. These projects create a positive image of Japan abroad, encourage a greater understanding of Japan and promote pro-Japan individuals and groups for the future. Currently, the Japan Foundation Asia Center of Japan is implementing "Project WA: Towards an Interactive Asia through Combination and Harmony" with the main pillars of supporting Japanese language education and projects of art and culture exchange. The program "NIHONGO (Japanese Language) - a core project to support Japanese language education, a total of 519 tutors were sent to secondary education institutions in 10 countries in Southeast Asia, implementing the exchange program through the introduction of Japanese culture as well as Japanese language education. Obviously, without promoting cultural diplomacy, China will be slower than the US and Japan - two countries with strategic interests in Southeast Asia - in building an image and expanding their regional influence.

## **2. Contents of China's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia today**

### **2.1. Objective**

China's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia aims to limit the influence of big countries (especially the US and Japan), coordinate and support other activities to realize successfully the socio-economic development strategy. "The central government considers raising cultural openness as an important measure for extensive reform and proposes actively absorbing and learning all outstanding cultural achievements from abroad, introducing resources, technology and management experience which are conducive to the development of the country's culture" [11]. Besides, China seeks to increase cultural influence in Southeast Asia to realize its goal of becoming a pole in the new world order. "Cultural diplomacy will contribute more to raising the level of cultural openness, promoting the "going out" of Chinese culture and enhancing the country's cultural soft power" [11]. The spread of Chinese culture will create a kind of power that will further increase international competitiveness, strategic competition with big countries in the region.

### **2.2. Process of implementation**

Defining "an important part of China and ASEAN in building a joint-destiny community is the relationship between people and people. When people are close to each other, it will determine the practical effect of high-level consensus into a social reality". China has subtly and comprehensively increased its cultural influence on many levels, forming a "tripod" of Cultural Economy, Cultural Communication, and Cultural Education to create momentum for the wave of Chinese culture spills into Southeast Asia. China's "mesmerizing offensive" is turning culture into a kind of power, creating a "responsible" "friendly" China image in Southeast Asia. The process of implementing Chinese cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia can be generalized on several main points as follows:

#### *- Integrating economic cooperation with cultural promotion to achieve dual goals*

Recognizing the core of China-ASEAN relations is based on economic cooperation. Through forms of investment, aid, infrastructure construction, labor export, and tourism development, China has increased its comprehensive cultural influence on many levels, contributing to cultural appeal, thereby promoting awareness of support for China in ASEAN. A comprehensive economic network to facilitate the spread of Chinese culture was deployed. The China - ASEAN Expo (CAEXPO) - one of the largest international trade fairs now held annually - started in 2004, in Guangxi (China). The display of a wide range of Chinese cultural products from calligraphy, sculpture, ceramics to cuisine, fashion, and diverse cultural and sports programs are held concurrently with CAEXPO, contributing to promoting economic, trade, and people-to-people exchanges, increasing investment opportunities with good wishes for friendly cooperation between China and ASEAN.

In economic-cultural activities, China has taken advantage of an attractive culture to invest in the business, both ensuring economic benefits and increasing the influence of Chinese culture in Southeast Asia. The statistics in 2019 show that, if the total import and export turnover of Chinese cultural products is 111.45 billion USD, up 8.9% over the same period, then the export of Chinese cultural products to ASEAN grew to

47.4% [6]. Tourism cooperation is also a channel to strengthen China's cultural soft power in Southeast Asia, creating a win-win situation while increasing the attractiveness of Chinese culture. "Rely on China's admiration for the attractiveness of the ancient culture by which the typical "Asian values" were born; Relying on the invisible power of the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, China has won many economic benefits and create momentum for overflowing of the cultural wave through the export of cultural products and promotion of commercial communication to countries in the region" [3].

*- Promoting cultural communication to expand the coverage of "Chinese values" to Southeast Asia*

Cultural media is a way of sharp attack in Chinese cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia, through the use of the mass media to promote Chinese culture. China Radio International and Guangxi People's Radio co-established the Beibu Bay Radio (BBR) with a view to Southeast Asia, broadcasting in 5 languages: English, Thai, Vietnamese, Cantonese, and Mandarin Chinese. Currently, China has upgraded the "Chinese Cultural Network" to a website authorized to exchange cultures between China and abroad - including ASEAN countries. Opening the account "Chinese culture" on four major overseas social networking platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter to expand the influence of Chinese culture on the Internet. In August 2018, the Chinese Journal of Social Science and Literature announced the "ASEAN Cultural Green Book - ASEAN Cultural Development Report (2018)" - to introduce the cultural foundation and trend of ASEAN - one of the basic bridges built to promote people-to-people exchange.

Cultural cooperation between China and its ASEAN partners is expanding and gaining many positive results. The Government of Vietnam and China signed a memorandum of understanding on cultural industry cooperation. The Vietnam-China friendship has become an important foundation for cultural exchange between the two countries. Malaysia and China have launched a program of cultural cooperation through education, tourism, movie, and television. Thailand relies on two foundations of "One Belt, One Road" and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation to enhance multidisciplinary humanitarian exchanges with China. In Myanmar, the Yangon China Cultural Center has been completed. In the Philippines, the International Conference "the 600<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of King Suludong's Mission visiting China" has been fruitful. In Indonesia, the China-Indonesia Human Exchange Research Center was established. It can be seen that the continuous and diversified increase of Chinese cultural media is "making it more difficult for ASEAN countries to resist its strong power" [3].

*- Strengthen cooperation in education to deepen the influence of Chinese culture in Southeast Asia*

China is expanding its system of universities in Southeast Asia to increase its presence and influence. They have built four universities in Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand and opened 98 cooperative education programs. Xiamen University Malaysia is considered a model reflecting the vision of educational exports targeting Southeast Asia [2]. China also provides scholarships to students from countries to study in China, which gives priority to Southeast Asia. The ASEAN-China Young Leaders Scholarship Program (ACYLS) - an initiative of Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang endorsed by ASEAN Leaders at the 21<sup>st</sup> ASEAN-China Summit to be held in November 2018 in Singapore. Nearly 100 young people from the ASEAN countries have participated in master and doctor training programs as well as exchange programs and short-term training programs in China [1]. Since 2008, the event of China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week has developed into a high-level foundation and a solid bridge, positively contributing to the bilateral relationship.

China has adopted a strategy of promoting soft power by choosing Confucius as the name for the agency on spreading Chinese language and Chinese culture to the world. Previously, many researchers considered Confucius Institute as an institution to spread the essence of Han culture with the nucleus that is Confucius's "Harmony" Ideology in the region<sup>1</sup>. Currently, the Center for Language Training and Cooperation (the new name for the Confucius Institute) is becoming an institution to promote Chinese language and cultural influence. Promoting cooperation in education - a spearhead in "charming diplomacy" or "charming attack" on culture - on the one hand helping China benefit from the exploitation of cultural knowledge resources (similar to the case of the US, Australia ...), on the other hand, through education, generations of Southeast Asian people - first of all, the elites (which the ACYLS program aims to) have feelings of the friendly image to China, thereby establishing and expanding cultural influence over Southeast Asia. Partly China also wants to use culture and cultural influence to impact policies towards domestic and foreign affairs of the countries in the region in a direction that benefits China./.

## **V. Conclusion**

The culture has 5,000 years of history and its position as the second-largest economy in the world, is the root and basis for China to promote the implementation of "Cultural Diplomacy" to the world in general as well as Southeast Asia in particular. Currently, China "has proposed a series of new ideas, new strategies, and new implementations to enhance the country's cultural soft power, creating a strong impetus for comprehensively promoting foreign cultural work. At the same time, pointing out the strategic direction for the development and renewal of theory and practice of "unique Chinese cultural diplomacy" [11]. It can be seen that, although there are many limitations, the actual results also show that China has created many conditions for the wave of Chinese culture to flow into Southeast Asia, contributing to building "China" image "friendly", "responsibility" in the region. /.

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