



## EXPLORING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)

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*This is a research paper of the project for the Study of Intercultural Communication among Countries alongside the BRI, supported by the Langfang Normal University. (Project Number: A02010105)*

### **Abstract**

*This research investigates the pivotal role of intercultural communication in the successful implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Introduced in 2013, the BRI aims to foster connectivity between Asia, Africa, and Europe through land and maritime networks, with the objective of promoting regional integration, augmenting trade, and stimulating economic growth. Given its comprehensive nature encompassing infrastructure development across various sectors such as ports, roads, railways, airports, power plants, and telecommunication networks, intercultural communication has emerged as a critical component for achieving the BRI's objectives. By fostering political trust, eradicating prejudice, overcoming barriers, and fostering regional integration, intercultural communication has assumed significant importance within the BRI framework. China, as the driving*



*force behind the BRI, has recognized the value of cultural exchange in fostering mutual understanding and trust, evident in the establishment of cultural centers and institutes, including the Confucius Institutes, in participating countries. These centers and institutes facilitate language classes, cultural events, and other activities aimed at promoting a nuanced understanding of Chinese culture. This research aims to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with intercultural communication within the context of the BRI and proposes effective strategies for managing them. Employing an extensive literature review and qualitative research methods, this study gathers data and offers insights into intercultural communication challenges and best practices. The research findings underscore the crucial role played by intercultural communication in facilitating the successful implementation of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.*

**Keywords:** China, Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), Intercultural Relations.

## 1. Introduction

Intercultural communication has become a crucial topic of academic discussion in today's globalized world, where people from different cultural backgrounds come together to interact, work, and live. With the increasing importance of cross-border relationships, the significance of effective communication between cultures has gained momentum. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the One Belt One Road (OBOR), is a massive investment program to connect countries along the ancient Silk Road through infrastructure and trade networks. BRI is a symbol of the increasing interdependence of countries and highlights the importance of intercultural communication in fostering successful relationships. Effective intercultural communication plays a crucial role in the success of the BRI. (Gao, 2021)

China's BRI initiative aims to improve the physical infrastructure within the region. China has initiated projects to create networks for a more efficient and productive free flow of cultural exchange and trade. In addition, it aims to integrate the global markets physically and digitally. Since the initiative of BRI, China has been conducting cultural exchanges under the framework of BRI. Cultural exchange initiatives play a significant role in promoting mutual understanding between China and BRI's member nations. (Gao, 2018)

BRI seeks win-win cooperation by strengthening policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. Promoting people-to-people bonds and intercultural communication is considered one of the main goals under the framework of BRI. One aspect of the BRI is promoting cultural exchange between participating countries. China has emphasized the importance of cultural exchange to build mutual understanding and trust and has established several cultural centers and institutes, such



as the Confucius Institutes, in participating countries. These centers and institutes offer language classes, cultural events, and other activities to promote an understanding of Chinese culture. (Chen, 2021)

Promoting people-to-people is the social foundation of the BRI Programme. The past eight decades have seen cooperative programs initiated by the countries along the routes, which include programs on culture, tourism, education, think tanks, poverty reduction, and epidemic control, all of which have brought their people closer. Under BRI, China's participating nations have initiated programs that include the year of culture, art, film, and music festivals, book fairs, joint archaeological research, and a bid for world heritage inscription. (China Today, 2022).

The BRI has encouraged cultural exchange through tourism. As BRI infrastructure projects help to improve transportation connectivity, it is expected to increase the number of tourists visiting participating countries, fostering people-to-people exchange. Critics, however, argue that the BRI is not only an economic development strategy but also an extension of China's soft power, which can influence other countries' politics, culture, and economy. Overall, the BRI aims to promote economic development and cultural exchange, but its impact and effectiveness are still a subject of ongoing debate and research. (Chen, 2020)

This research addresses the main research questions: What is intercultural communication? What is the importance of intercultural communication in successfully implementing BRI projects in the region? The research reviews the existing literature and attempts to fill the highlighted gap. Besides, this research provides policy recommendations that would help in the successful implementation of BRI.

## **2. Literature Review**

According to Ingrid (2012), cross-cultural relations refer to the interactions and communication between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds. These interactions can occur in various settings, such as the workplace, educational institutions, or social and community contexts. Cross-cultural relations examine how culture influences communication, behavior, and understanding between individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds. It also explores how culture can build understanding and foster positive relationships between people from different cultures. The study of cross-cultural relations is interdisciplinary, drawing on perspectives and methods from sociology, anthropology, psychology, and communication studies.

Hall (2002) is an American anthropologist and intercultural communication expert who is known for his work on the cultural dimensions of communication and the concept of "high-



context" and "low-context" cultures. Hofstede (1984) developed the concept of "cultural dimensions" and identified five key dimensions influencing cultural differences: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, and long-term orientation. Trompenaars (20024) developed the concept of "cultural dimensions." They identified seven key dimensions that influence cultural differences: universalism-particularism, individualism-communitarianism, specific-diffuse, neutral-emotional, achievement-ascriptive, inner-directed-outer-directed, and time orientation.

The existing literature on the BRI has focused on several key areas, including the initiative's economic impact. Thürer et al. (2020) analyzed the geopolitical implications of China's increased global influence and the environmental and social impact of BRI projects. Intercultural communication strengthens integral to convergence among civilizations. Culture has become an extensively recognized international management field of scholarly discussion. A study by Philipsen (2003) reveals that since the 1980s, when international business became widely popular, mass culture ideas also became prominent. A study by Hurn (2013) concludes that in the past, in the east and west, business was primarily characterized by economic interactions.

Zhang et al. (2020) discuss the economic aspect of BRI. He believes that the BRI has been seen as a way for China to boost its economic growth and exports and promote economic development in participating countries. Studies have shown that the BRI has the potential to increase trade and investment flows between participating countries, as well as to promote regional integration. However, some research has also highlighted potential risks, such as high debt levels in participating countries and a lack of transparency in project financing.

Flint & Zho (2020) analyze the Geopolitical aspect of BRI and believe that the BRI has been viewed as a way for China to increase its global influence and challenge the existing world order. Some scholars argue that the BRI is part of a larger strategy for China to become a dominant global power. In contrast, others suggest that it is primarily an economic initiative with little strategic significance.

Teo (2019) discussed the environmental and social impact, and it has been argued that BRI projects have the potential to bring significant benefits, such as improved access to infrastructure and services. However, there are also concerns that BRI projects could lead to negative impacts such as displacement of local communities, destruction of sensitive ecosystems, and increased dependence on fossil fuels.

Van (2005) has analyzed the culture from a religious perspective and concludes that Islam is a fundamental element of culture that mirrors the characteristics of cultural life in the Arab world. The area also incorporates many other religions. He further reveals that the region of the



middle east is the origin of the three monotheistic religions, which competed for strength and influence throughout history. In another study, Cleveland (2018) analyzed the Coptic Christians found in Egypt. Likewise, there are also groups of Arab Jews living in Morocco, Yemen, and Iraq. (Cleveland, 2018)

The existing literature suggests that the BRI has the potential to bring significant economic and infrastructure benefits to participating countries. Further research is needed to fully understand the initiative's long-term impacts and identify ways to ensure that BRI projects are sustainable and inclusive, especially the role of intercultural communication in the success of BRI.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The research design for this study is a qualitative research method with secondary sources. This approach is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the topic, providing a rich and detailed understanding of the subject matter. The data for this study has been collected using secondary sources, such as academic journals, books, and online articles. These sources have been selected based on their relevance to the research topic and credibility. The data collected has been analyzed using a content analysis approach. This method involves reading and interpreting the data to identify patterns and themes. The data has been coded and categorized based on the research questions and objectives.

### **4. Discussion and Results**

#### **The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a development strategy and framework proposed by the Chinese government to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure projects. The initiative, also known as the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) project, was first announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI includes two main components: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The Silk Road Economic Belt connects Asia, Europe, and Africa through land-based infrastructure projects, including highways, railways, and pipelines. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road focuses on connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa through a network of ports and shipping lanes. The BRI is designed to promote economic development and trade between the participating countries. The initiative aims to create new economic opportunities and improve connectivity between countries, ultimately leading to increased economic growth and prosperity. (Wang et al., 2020) As of March 2022, over 146 countries and international organizations have participated in the BRI. See Table 1



BRI is a compromise of strengthening complex infrastructure and soft infrastructure and promoting cultural linkages. The BRI initiative aims to support and develop physical and infrastructural connectivity within the BRI participating countries to foster policy coordination and connectivity cooperation, unimpeded trade and investment, cooperation to sustain a clean and green environment to promote sustainable development and promoting intercultural ties through an exchange of culture, tourism, education, and digital connectivity. In addition, BRI is a striving initiative that aims to improve connectivity and cooperation amongst several nations spreading across Asia, Africa, and Europe. (Dossani et al, 2020)

**Table 1: Countries of Belt & Road Initiative (BRI)**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Countries</b>
Sub-Saharan African	43
Europe and Central Asia	35
East Asia and the Pacific	25
Latin America & Caribbean	20
Middle East & North Africa	18
South Asia	6
Total	147

Source: Green Finance & Development Center

Officially, BRI has “five goals”: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. See Figure 1 (Green Finance & Development Center) China's president in 2013 at the “Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference said that China’s neighbors had extremely significant strategic value and further stated that China wanted to improve relations between China and its neighbors, strengthening economic ties and deepening security cooperation." Besides, President Xi highlighted the significance of publicity and promoting cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges. As highlighted by the Chinese president, BRI plays a crucial role in promoting China's positive image in the region and beyond. China is employing cultural diplomacy to establish cordial and friendly ties with regional countries as part of its foreign policy goals. (Swaine, 2013)



*Figure 1 Belt & Road Initiative*

### **Enhancing Cultural Exchange Activities between China and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Partner Nations**

Recent years have witnessed increased diplomatic and cultural activities between China and BRI's participating countries. China has taken several steps to improve mutual understanding and set up a firm cultural foundation for promoting intercultural communication. China has maintained close cultural communication with BRI countries. "In 2018, Shanghai International Film Festival saw the Belt and Road Film Festival Alliance in Shanghai. China and BRI countries published the alliance manifesto at this festival, including plans to enhance information and film sharing, exchange filmmakers and industry experts, and start more joint projects with the coalition. In addition, the first Belt and Road Week was held with 154 films from 49 countries along the Belt and Road during the festival". (Belt & Road Initiative, 2018)

In recent years, China has set up various forums aimed at promoting intercultural communication, including "the Silk Road International League of Theaters, Silk Road International Museum Alliance, Network of Silk Road Arts Festivals, Silk Road International Library Alliance, and Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries." (International Alliance of Museum and Silk Road) In addition, China has signed mutual visa exemption agreements with many BRI nations for various types of passports, intending to streamline visa application procedures. Moreover, China has initiated a scholarship program and signed agreements with various BRI members on mutual recognition of higher education degrees. Other B&R scholarships were provided in the Hong Kong and Macao SARs. (Belt & Road Initiative, 2019)



Moreover, China has initiated activities on transferring social customs, language, and beliefs across the region by supporting language training and many BRI member countries. In recent years, many language training centers and Confucius institutes have been established to promote the Chinese language and intercultural communication. For example, there has been an increase in private language school enrollment in Chinese classes in Pakistan and Malaysia. (Winter, 2016)

In addition, China has taken steps to assist in disaster relief and poverty alleviation. As of 2019, China has granted about RMB 2 billion in emergency food assistance to developing countries participating in the and US\$1 billion to the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund. Additionally, it has encouraged and cooperated with regional countries to play their role implementation of the BRI South-South Cooperation Initiative on climate change. China has initiated about 100 happy home projects, 100 anti-poverty projects, and 100 projects on health. Additionally, it has contributed to about eight joint ventures to protect cultural relics with six BRI members and 15 joint archaeological activities with 12 countries. Apart from this, China has initiated 24 cooperation programs with civil society organizations in Cambodia and Nepal to improve living standards. (China Daily, 2019)

In May 2017, the inaugural Belt and Road Forum for international cooperation was held in Beijing, which yielded 279 deliverables, including 76 significant items across five key categories. Also, the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was hosted by China from April 24 to April in Beijing, in which over 5000 high-level delegates from over 150 countries, including heads of state and government and representatives from international organizations, participated. (Belt and Road Forum, 2019) Additionally, in collaboration with the United Nations International Children's Emergency, China has taken steps to accelerate activities for achieving Sustainable Development Goals for Children via Shared Development in BRI participating nations during the forum. (UNICEF).

In order to strengthen collaboration amongst the civil society organizations within BRI nations to uplift peoples living standard civil society organizations in China has initiated the "Silk Road Community Building" Programme. Under this plan, China has continued to offer affordable support to developing nations in the region. The "Astana Proposal by BRITCC Participating Jurisdictions for Enhancing Cooperation in Tax Matters" was published at the first conference of the Belt and Road Initiative Tax Administration Cooperation Forum and the Belt and Road Initiative Tax Cooperation Conference (BRITCC), which was held in China in May 2018. In addition, China has signed various agreements with Niger, Pakistan, Namibia, Nigeria, Mauritius, and Guinea governments. Moreover, China and BRI members jointly implement the Belt and Road publications promotion library program and the Belt and Road copyright transaction project. (Mizzima, 2019)





In 2018, the annual summary meeting cultural exchange programs were held, and a Chinese traditional painting exhibition was established at the China Cultural Center in Fiji. Also, the Fijian government delegation in Beijing participated in the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. The Asian Civilization dialogue conference was held under the theme of exchanges and mutual learning among Asian civilizations. (Xinhua net, 2019)

China has taken steps to organize training programs for the development of water resources for BRI members nations and provided financial assistance to officials from countries along the Mekong River basin, including Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar, for Training in postgraduate courses, including hydrology, water resources, and hydropower. With the Belt and Road Initiative, the prospect for China's international cooperation on water conservancy would be increasingly broader. Besides, China awarded full scholarships to 150 people from BRI countries to earn master's degrees in China. (China Daily, 2019)

In November 2018, China hosted the first China International Import Expo, featuring more than 36,000 firms from other regional countries and international organizations. Over 4,500 delegates from governments, businesses, academic institutions, and research organizations participated in the first Hongqiao International Economic Forum held at the expo. Many significant expositions were also held in China, including the Silk Road International Exposition, the Investment and Trade Forum for Cooperation between East and West China, the China-ASEAN Expo, the China-Eurasia Expo, the China-Arab States Expo, the China-South Asia Expo, the China-Northeast Asia Expo, and the Western China International Fair. These events were critical in promoting intercultural communication and collaboration between China and BRI member countries.

The repeople-to-people exchange is the cultural cornerstone for constructing the Belt and Road, and China participated in it. In September 2018, China participated in an exhibition in Seoul that highlighted intercultural exchanges over the first five years of the Belt and Road Initiative. By the end of 2018, more than 37 Chinese cultural centers had been established across the globe as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. To foster understanding between various peoples and cultures, China provided lectures and Training for academics, professionals, and students meeting in Chinese cultural centers around the world to exchange views. On June 2, 2018, the China Cultural Center in Bangkok hosted a display of artistic and cultural items from the Palace Museum in Beijing. Culture has become a significant support within China's strategy to secure its influence at the global level. Promoting people-to-people communication has significantly raised their philosophy and helped develop and expand a term of self-cultivation as well as others, in perspective of economic benefits and cultural and environmental awareness. (China Daily, 2019)



Beijing has continued to conduct the “Belt and Road Science, Technology and Innovation Cooperation Action Plan and four major initiatives, namely the Science and Technology People-to-People Exchange Initiative, the Joint Laboratory Initiative, the Science Park Cooperation Initiative, and the Technology Transfer Initiative.” Besides, China has actively worked on the Belt and Road Initiative Talents Exchange Program. China has built bridges for exchanges and mutual learning among different cultures and expanded cooperation in education, science, culture, sports, tourism, health, and archaeology. In addition, it has strengthened exchanges amongst the parliaments, political parties, and non-governmental organizations and exchanges between women, young people, and people. Also, it has extended assistance with disabilities to facilitate multi-faceted people-to-people exchanges.

BRI is based on “win-win cooperation that promotes common development and includes cultural inclusiveness.” It is a tool that helps China in furthering its strategic objectives. China has (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of China). Beijing is employing BRI in cultural diplomacy as soft power. Hence, cultural diplomacy has become essential to China's foreign policy. China is carrying out cultural exchange activities with the collaboration of BRI member nations to sustain a friendship, improve its image further, and promote its broader strategic goals. In addition, Beijing is involved in education, technology, culture, health, sports, media, and tourism. By conducting exhibitions, conferences, seminars, workshops, forums, and Training programs on cultural exchanges through BRI, China is engaged in building cultural diplomacy as soft power in BRI regional nations, which would help promote harmony and humanity within the region.

### **The Significance of Intercultural Communication in the Achievement of Success for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

With the emergence of economic globalization, transnational and cross-cultural communication activities are speeding up, and there is a growing trend of people-to-people bonds. People having different cultural backgrounds interact with each other. The importance of cross-cultural communication has grown over the years. When it comes to BRI, it is vital for the successful implementation of BRI to actively carry out cross-cultural communication to help the many hundreds of cultures existing in more than 150 participating nations of BRI.

One of the critical goals of the BRI is to promote cross-cultural ties and cooperation among participating countries. This includes cultural exchange programs, tourism initiatives, and educational partnerships. These efforts are intended to foster mutual understanding and trust between different cultures and nations, which can, in turn, lead to increased economic and political cooperation. The BRI is an important opportunity for participating countries to share in China's economic growth and development. The initiative is expected to create new trade and investment opportunities and promote economic integration among participating countries.



Cross-cultural communication can play a crucial role by enhancing mutual political trust and breaking down barriers. This can lead to tremendous success for Chinese products and enterprises in the global market and further economic integration with participating countries. (Jamil, 2020)

The BRI plays a crucial role in the region's infrastructural development and in improving the participating nations' living standards. These development initiatives hold great significance for overall socio-economic development. China can cut overcapacity and promote economic transformation and progress by initiating the BRI project. As demonstrated by the past trans-regional economic cooperation, international economic cooperation is often affected by multiple factors like each country's culture, politics, and society. However, China, the BRI's leader, is taking more responsibility and rising to meet the challenges and ensure the success of the BRI. China has created a favorable environment to ensure that all the participating nations can integrate themselves into economic cooperation. In addition, given the fundamental differences in the cultures and beliefs of various nations, mutual exchanges and understanding between China and the BRI members need to be strengthened. These different cultures need to be respected and recognized. This will create a harmonious and friendly environment for promoting cross-cultural exchange. Undoubtedly, strengthening cross-cultural communication holds great significance for the success of the BRI.

Promoting cross-cultural communication is critical to understanding the choice of political systems between China and other BRI member countries and promoting political mutual trust between China and BRI participating nations. Even though there is cooperation between these nations, establishing mutual trust is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of BRI projects and its successful completion. George Holland Sabine, a famous American political scientist, once pointed out that: "Folk customs and habits can dominate everything. Although each country or region has different government composition and laws and regulations, the human civilization that has long originated, occurred, and developed in the region determines these things." (Lu, 2021) Strengthening cross-cultural communication has the potential to eradicate prejudice effectively, break down barriers, and promote integration. Historically, many trans-regional economic and trade compacts were based on cultural exchanges. BRI is a cultural exchange based on economic cooperation between participating nations. Unlike in the past, BRI is undertaken in the age of unparalleled globalization.

## **5. Conclusion**

The study concludes that Intercultural communication is crucial for the success of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as it involves collaboration and cooperation among countries with diverse cultural backgrounds. Effective communication is essential for building trust and understanding among the participating countries and overcoming potential cultural barriers. Without proper



intercultural communication, misunderstandings and miscommunications could lead to delays or even failure of projects. Intercultural communication skills help create a shared understanding of goals and expectations, leading to more efficient and effective collaboration. Additionally, intercultural communication helps to promote cultural exchange and understanding, which can foster positive relationships between participating countries. This can lead to increased cooperation and collaboration in other areas beyond the BRI, such as trade and investment. Overall, intercultural communication plays a vital role in ensuring the success of the BRI by facilitating effective collaboration and understanding among participating countries.

Cross-cultural communication is a critical aspect of the BRI and is essential for ensuring successful cooperation and collaboration among the participating countries. By providing language training, cultural sensitivity training, building trust, and setting up intercultural communication platforms, we can improve cross-cultural communication under the BRI and contribute to the success of this important international development initiative. China's initiatives for promoting intercultural communication is resulting positive outcomes. It has played crucial role in enhancing mutual understanding between China and BRI nations as well as strengthening collaboration between China and BRI members countries, thus leading to the effectiveness and ultimate success of the BRI project.



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