
**PAKISTAN-CHINA RELATIONS AND GROWING BILATERAL
CULTURAL EXCHANGES & COOPERATION ¹**

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ABSTRACT

Since the signing of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) agreement, there has been a significant increase in cultural exchanges between Pakistan and China. This includes a surge in educational exchanges, with hundreds of Pakistani students pursuing higher studies in China annually, and a noteworthy number of Chinese students studying in Pakistan. Numerous China Study Centers, Chinese Language Centers, and Confucius Institutes have been established in Pakistan, while Pakistan Study Centers and Urdu departments are operational in several Chinese universities. Translation of Urdu literature into Chinese and Chinese literature into Urdu is also underway. Furthermore, there have been reports of intermarriages between Chinese and Pakistani couples. However, despite the intense focus on the economic and defense aspects of CPEC, the cultural dimension, which is crucial to the bilateral relationship, has not received adequate attention. This study endeavors to address this gap in the academic literature by examining the extent and significance of the cultural cooperation between Pakistan and China. Additionally, the study aims to identify measures that can further enhance the mutual benefits of this cultural cooperation for the people and the two countries.

Keywords: Cultural Ties, CPEC, Pak-China Relations, China Study & Language Centers, Pakistan Study Centers, Confucius Institutes.

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INTRODUCTION

The famous sentence about the Pakistan-China friendship goes, “It is sweeter than the sweetest honey, deeper than the deepest sea in the world, and is higher than the highest peak in the world”. This sentence, often used by government officials from both countries, is the focus of a paper examining the friendship's historical background. The paper aims to determine how true this statement holds in the case of the friendship between the two countries. It's widely known that the relationship between countries relies on mutual interests or a 'win-win situation'. The paper highlights the mutual interests of Pakistan and China that have bound these two countries together since the 1950s. This study specifically concentrates on Pakistan-China relations, focusing on their cultural ties since the Pakistani initiation of the diplomatic mission in Beijing. The paper aims to fill a gap in research, as most studies often focus on defense or economic aspects, neglecting the importance of cultural cooperation in Pakistan-China relations. Before delving into the cultural ties between Pakistan and China, the paper discusses the fundamentally different political systems of the two countries. Pakistan is an 'Islamic Republic,' while China is a Communist country. Despite these ideological differences, the paper delves into the historical context of Pakistan-China relations and how their cultural ties have been strengthened, particularly with the signing of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The study also analyzes the cultural ties in terms of tourism, specifically religious, cultural, and educational tourism, as well as the impact of intermarriages between Chinese and Pakistani couples on cultural ties. To better understand the cultural cooperation between Pakistan and China, it's important to acknowledge the distinct political systems of both countries. Despite their differences, the paper explores how these countries have maintained a friendship since the 1950s, and it delves into the political history of both countries to provide insight into their relationship.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The government and state apparatus of Pakistan and China both commemorate the strong relations between their countries. Despite frequent visits and interactions between the people of both nations, there remains a reliance on security and economic factors in the

people-to-people relationship. This study aims to address why this is the case and also explores whether the current state-centric cultural connections are sustainable. In light of these inquiries, the study aims to recommend effective ways to enhance the cultural ties between the people of Pakistan and China.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes qualitative research methods to explore the cultural connections between Pakistan and China. By drawing on secondary sources such as previous research studies, government reports, and newspaper/magazine articles, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate cultural ties between these two countries.

HISTORICAL CULTURAL EXCHANGES AND CONNECTIONS

When it comes to diplomatic relations between Pakistan and China, Pakistan acknowledged China on 9th January 1950 and later opened its diplomatic mission in Beijing in 1951 (Khan, 2011:12). The politics and governance of the 1950s were marked by continuous turmoil, with frequent changes in government. Pakistan's signing of defense and anti-communism pacts with the US raised suspicions in the eyes of the Chinese government. Prime Minister Muhammad Ali Bogra reassured Chou En-Lai at the Bandung Conference in April 1955 that the pacts with the USA would not harm Pak-China friendship, emphasizing that Pakistan's motive was solely to gain military and defense support to protect its borders against potential Indian aggression. However, the initial period of Ayub Khan's regime was not favorable for Pakistan-China relations. During the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict, President Ayub refrained from taking any aggressive measures against India and did not exploit the situation to enhance Pakistan's position in Kashmir. He even hoped for a joint Indo-Pakistan defense plan for the subcontinent as late as March 1962. Ayub Khan's concerns about the increasing pressure from the Soviet Union and China and the need to align India's and Pakistan's armies in the right direction were evident, emphasizing the urgency of resolving the Kashmir question.

Ayub Khan held the belief that collaboration among Pakistan, India, and other regional countries was crucial to safeguard the

subcontinent. He was initially reluctant to support China due to its communist ideology and did not want to oppose India. However, Ayub Khan's foreign policy took a turn when the US and Britain provided unconditional military support to India against China. This action by the major world powers frustrated Pakistan, prompting Ayub Khan to shift his foreign policy towards China and India. During Ayub Khan's regime, several significant agreements were signed between China and Pakistan because of this shift. For instance, talks initiated in Peking on October 12, 1962, led to an "Agreement in Principle" on December 28, 1962, regarding the border location in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. Additionally, on January 5, 1963, the first Sino-Pakistani Trade Agreement was signed in Karachi, facilitating the exchange of Chinese manufactured goods for Pakistani cotton, jute, and leather goods. Finally, on March 2, 1963, a Boundary Agreement was signed, calling for the establishment of a Joint Boundary Demarcation Commission, by Pakistan's pro-Chinese Foreign Minister Z. A. Bhutto and Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi (Pringsheim, 1965:172).

In 1963, the Air Transportation Agreement was signed, enabling the Karachi-Dacca-Canton-Shanghai air service to commence operations in April 1964. During the 1965 Indo-Pak War, the US and Britain ceased aid to both countries, while China extended full support to Pakistan due to their common opposition to India. Additionally, under the leadership of Ayub Khan, construction of the Karakoram Highway was initiated. This positive rapport between the two countries endured beyond Ayub's regime. Pakistan supported China in attaining a Permanent Security Council seat at the United Nations in 1971 and facilitated China's observer status in the South Asian Regional Cooperation Organization (SAARC). In return, China backed Pakistan on the Kashmir issue at the United Nations and supported Pakistan's observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The collaboration continued to prosper during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's presidency and prime ministership in the 1970s. Subsequent administrations, including those of General Zia-ul-Haq, Benazir Bhutto, and Mian Nawaz Sharif, further strengthened the relationship through various significant projects such as the Islamabad Sports Complex, Chashma Nuclear Power Plant, and others (Zaki, 2010:47).

Pakistan-China relations have continued to grow, despite the events of 9/11 and Pakistan's alignment with the US during the War on

Terror under the Musharraf regime. It was during this time that both countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2006. Subsequently, during a civilian government led by Asif Ali Zardari, the relationship was further strengthened through the initiation of a youth exchange program. Under this program, from 2009 to 2011, one hundred Pakistani youths visited China, and 424 Pakistani students were awarded educational scholarships to enhance educational and cultural ties between the two nations (Gui & Arif, 2016:187).

CPEC AND THE CULTURAL TIES

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) stands as a key undertaking of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which commenced in 2013. Two years following the BRI launch, Chinese President Xi Jinping formally included the CPEC as part of the initiative in 2015. Initially projected at \$46 billion, the investment for the CPEC was later adjusted to \$62 billion. The primary aim of the CPEC, particularly for China, is to establish a connection between the Gwadar and Karachi ports in Pakistan and China's Xinjiang province, which shares borders with Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. Within Pakistan, the CPEC spans from Gwadar in Balochistan, traversing through Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, concluding at the Khunjerab Pass on the Pakistan-China border. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) offers mutual benefits. While Pakistan stands to address its energy and economic challenges through this ambitious project, China gains a secure and efficient route for oil transportation. Presently, 83% of Chinese petroleum is transported via the lengthy Malacca Strait, which is perceived as risky in the long run due to its vulnerability to geopolitical tensions. By contrast, CPEC offers a reliable and direct path that not only enhances safety but also reduces shipping costs and transit time for China, making it a strategically advantageous solution for both countries.

CPEC encompasses a wide range of projects including energy, transportation infrastructure, various Gwadar projects, industrial cooperation and Special Economic Zones (SEZs), as well as social and economic development projects. While some of these endeavors have been finalized, others are still in progress or being considered. As CPEC is a long-term initiative spanning until 2030, successive

governments in Pakistan are committed to ensuring the timely completion of these tasks. In addition to the projects, cultural cooperation is a pivotal aspect of CPEC, promoting and strengthening people-to-people relations between Pakistan and China.

Despite both being ancient civilizations, there are significant differences between the cultures of China and Pakistan. The majority of people in Pakistan are Muslims, while in China, there are diverse belief systems such as Buddhism, and Taoism, and a large population of non-believers/atheists. Beyond religion, the cultural and traditional practices of both countries have not been closely aligned. Nevertheless, scholars from both countries have been actively researching potential cultural connections between the two.

Pakistan is a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which aims to protect the rights of Muslims worldwide. However, Pakistan has not been successful in fostering cultural cooperation with the Muslim population in China, including the Uighur Muslim-majority province of Xinjiang, due to various reasons. Although there is a significant Muslim population in China, there are distinct differences in belief systems within the country. For instance, the majority of Muslims in China are Hui Muslims, totaling about 10.5 million and constituting a significant Muslim minority in the country (Aneja, 2019). The Hui Muslims in China are treated well by the government because they have integrated into the Han Chinese mainstream, the largest ethnic group in China. In contrast, the Uighur population has not integrated due to various factors. It is noteworthy that rather than fostering cooperation between Pakistan and the Uighur and other Muslim minorities of China, relations between both countries were strained due to the presence of a Chinese Muslim separatist group in Pakistan. China has concerns related to Xinjiang, home to a large Uighur population, which has a history of ethnic unrest. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a separatist group, relocated to Afghanistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union and then sought refuge in Pakistani tribal areas alongside Al Qaeda and other militants following the US and NATO military intervention in late 2001 (Khan, 2011:16).

The Chinese government has taken strong measures against the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang province due to their opposition to the government's policy of integrating with the Han Chinese. Xinjiang,

China's largest province, is rich in mineral resources, including significant uranium deposits, and has been the site of almost all of China's nuclear weapons tests (Khan, 2011:71). The issue of how China treats its citizens is considered an internal matter, with Pakistan, representing Muslims, facing pressure from Western countries and others to speak out against the persecution of Uighur Muslims in China. Pakistan has consistently maintained that it is the prerogative of the Chinese government to handle its internal affairs, and Pakistan will not support any separatist or militant groups. However, despite these assurances, an unfortunate incident occurred in July 2011 when an armed attack, reportedly carried out by militants of ETIM, resulted in the loss of six lives. The official Chinese news agency, Xinhua, mentioned that the ETIM militants had been trained in Pakistan before entering Xinjiang (Khan, 2011:71). This event significantly strained the relationship between Pakistan and China.

Despite various challenges, Pakistan and China maintain strong relations, including deep cultural ties. Cultural cooperation includes initiatives such as opening religious and cultural tourist sites, youth exchange programs, establishing Confucius/Chinese/Urdu language centres, and employment opportunities. Education plays a crucial role in fostering cultural ties, with a significant number of Pakistani students pursuing education in China and Chinese students enrolling in Pakistani universities. Additionally, Chinese engineers and labourers working in Pakistan actively contribute to cultural cooperation. Both governments have been organizing different events and visits to both countries. For example, to honor the 65th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations between Pakistan and China in 2016, a series of events had been planned with great enthusiasm and grandeur. These events included the visit of Party Secretary Zhang Chunxiang to Islamabad, Karachi, and Gwader, the exchange of messages between the leadership of both countries, high-level visits between military and parliamentary officials, cultural events, seminars, documentaries and talk shows, issuance of special postage stamps, Chinese film week, and a cultural festival. These events aimed to celebrate Pakistan and China's deep and diverse relationship. Likewise, the China-Pakistan Children's Cultural Festival, a collaborative effort of the Overseas Chinese Association of Pakistan, the Chinese Language Education Association in Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Educational and Cultural

Center, and the China-Pakistan Youth Solidarity Initiative, took place to commemorate the 73rd anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries in June 2024. It is important to further explore and discuss the diverse ways in which these two countries engage in cultural cooperation.

TOURISM

Three primary categories of tourism foster cultural exchange between Pakistan and China under CPEC. These categories encompass religious, educational, and cultural tourism. All three types of tourism have the potential to enhance cultural collaboration, as culture is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group” (Definition of culture, 2023). It is worth noting that according to this definition, culture comprises customary beliefs, religious beliefs, and material traits. When it comes to tourism, visiting religious sites plays a significant role. Pakistan, with its rich historical heritage including the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley and Gandhara, attracts tourists from all over the world. Given that Buddhism is a major religion in China, the Buddhist sites in Pakistan have the potential to attract Chinese Buddhists, researchers, scholars, and travelers. Notably, the provinces of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan are home to significant Buddhist relics, arts, and sculptures. For instance, Taxila in Punjab is a key center of the Gandhara civilization, boasting over fifty archaeological sites, which include some of the most important sites such as the Dhamarajika Stupa and Monastery, Bhir Mound, Sirkap, Jandial Temple, and Jaulian Monastery (Kuraishi & Hyder, 2017:15).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is home to the ruins of Takht-i-Bahi, a Buddhist monastery located northeast of Mardan. The site includes a main stupa court, a votive stupa court, a group of three stupas, the monastic quadrangle with meditation cells, a conference hall, covered stepped passageways and other secular buildings (Kuraishi & Hyder, 2017:15). In addition to the Buddhist sites, China is also home to a significant Muslim population, including Muslims from Xinjiang province and the Hui Muslims. If the situation in Xinjiang province stabilizes, it would be advantageous for the province's Muslims to visit Islamic sites in Pakistan, especially considering that

the distance between Xinjiang and Gilgit-Baltistan and other areas of Pakistan will decrease due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Educational tourism is also an important aspect in this context, alongside religious tourism.

EDUCATIONAL TOURISM AND EXCHANGE

Educational tourism significantly contributes to the exchange of culture between diverse or similar cultures. Various programs, such as student exchange initiatives, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Youth Camp, and the enrollment of Pakistani students in Chinese universities for undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programs, as well as to learn the Chinese language, are key to this cultural exchange. Similarly, a considerable number of Chinese students are studying at Pakistani universities, including the National University of Modern Languages (NUML) in Islamabad and other institutions in the country. While it was reported that approximately 28,000 Pakistani students were enrolled in November 2021 (Shabbir, 2021), a significant number of them were unable to return to China due to the Coronavirus pandemic. However, in a recent development, both Islamabad and Beijing have agreed to facilitate the return of Pakistani students to Chinese universities, pending the COVID-19 situation in China.

Despite the language barrier between countries, Pakistani educational institutes primarily use English as the medium of instruction, unlike China, where the government prefers Chinese from school to university. Nevertheless, it's encouraging that most Pakistani students learn Chinese before starting their degrees. The promotion of regional cooperation relies heavily on socio-cultural collaboration. The longstanding partnership between China and Pakistan is deeply rooted in the mutual understanding of their cultures, traditions, and languages. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is widely regarded as a catalyst for social and cultural development in Pakistan. In Islamabad, a Pakistan-China Friendship Center was established in 2010, and in China, the Chinese government has set up four Pakistan Study Centers. The Sindh government announced in 2011 that Chinese would become a compulsory subject starting from September 6th, 2013, and allocated Rs.625 million in 2012 for Chinese language instruction.

Furthermore, in August 2008, Beijing and Islamabad signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to establish the Pakistan-China University of Engineering, Science, and Technology. Additionally, the National University of Modern Languages in Islamabad inaugurated a Confucius Institute in 2005. The socio-cultural ties between Pakistan and China have made significant progress in recent years (Sheng et al., 2022:9).

The number of Pakistani students enrolled in Chinese universities surpasses the number of Chinese students enrolled in Pakistani universities. This phenomenon can be attributed to various factors. As the world's second-largest economy after the US, China's economic prowess far exceeds that of Pakistan. Consequently, Pakistan cannot be expected to match China in providing scholarships to the same extent. China's opening up after the 1978 reforms did not immediately result in hosting students from various parts of the world. It was only after the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that China began offering scholarships and admitting self-financed students from around the globe. Thankfully, owing to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) being a flagship project of BRI, China has awarded a significant number of scholarships and accommodated numerous Pakistani students in its universities. Despite being a developing country, Pakistan has demonstrated its friendship with China by establishing various China Study, Confucius, and Chinese Language Centers in the country. The teaching of the Chinese language began around 1980 at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML) in Islamabad. In 2005, NUML also established the first Confucius Institute in Pakistan and the first in the Muslim world at that time (Gui & Arif, 2016:189).

In 2014, the University of Karachi established a second Confucius Institute, joining the existing ones in Pakistan. These institutes primarily aim to promote the Chinese language and culture in the country. Additionally, the Punjab-Jiangsu Cultural Center, situated in Lahore, serves as a significant cultural link between Pakistan's Punjab province and China's Jiangsu province, both of which are twinned provinces. Similarly, the Sindh Government entered a MoU with the education department of China's Sichuan province in March 2015, leading to the offering of Chinese language

courses in Sindh. This initiative continued with the establishment of a Chinese language center at Cadet College Petaro. Furthermore, the Pakistan-China Institute (PCI), founded by Senator Mushahid Hussain Syed, actively contributes to strengthening the Pakistan-China friendship. The PCI regularly hosts Chinese art and cultural groups to foster greater awareness and understanding of China, its culture, history, and technological advancements (Gui & Arif, 2016, p. 193). China Radio International (CRI) launched the Dosti Channel FM-98 (Friendship Channel FM-98) in 2015 intending to enhance friendly exchange and cultural communication between the two countries.

CULTURAL TIES THROUGH THE CULTURAL TOURISM

As for cultural tourism, the conceptual definition of cultural tourism is “the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, intending to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs” (Kuraishi & Hyder, 2017:17), and the technical definition is “the movements of persons to specific cultural attractions, such as heritage sites, artistic and cultural manifestations, arts and drama outside their normal place of residence” (Kuraishi & Hyder, 2017:17). These definitions highlight the significance of cultural exchange through travel. Given its rich cultural tapestry, Pakistan offers numerous cultural heritage sites that can captivate Chinese tourists. Notably, the historical Indus Valley settlements, including Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, and Taxila, hold significant appeal as cradles of ancient civilizations. Similarly, China, being one of the world's oldest civilizations, draws Pakistani tourists to its historical sites. Notably, a substantial number of Pakistani students enrolled in Chinese universities visit these places and can inspire others in Pakistan to explore Chinese cultural sites. While China garners global attention and visitors from across the globe, the people of Pakistan are fortunate to have an abundance of cultural exchange opportunities with China.

LITERATURE AND LITERARY ACTIVITIES

The collaboration between Pakistan and China to strengthen cultural ties involves a significant focus on literature and literary

activities. The China Writers Association (CWA) and the Pakistan Academy of Letters have been instrumental in fostering this cooperation. Both organizations have facilitated the exchange of writers, enabling visits from Chinese writers to Pakistan and vice versa for decades. A positive indication of this collaboration is the translation of literature from both countries into Chinese and Urdu. Continuing this tradition, the Pakistan-China Literary Forum, themed “Literature Brings Two Peoples Closer”, took place in Beijing on May 25, 2021. According to Tie Ning, the head of the China Writers Association, the writers from both sides have had the opportunity to experience the rich civilizations and warm hospitality of both countries through visits to historical and cultural sites and engaging in face-to-face literary discussions (Yiming, 2021).

CONCLUSION

It's remarkable how, despite their distinct political landscapes, Pakistan and China have maintained strong and affable relations since the 1950s. While their connection has historically revolved around defense, the introduction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has shifted the focus towards a more people-centric relationship, particularly through tourism, cultural exchanges, and educational collaboration. Despite their cultural disparities, as two of the world's oldest civilizations, China and Pakistan share some common ground. For instance, Buddhism is a significant religion in China, and the various Buddhist sites in Pakistan have piqued the interest of Chinese tourists and followers of Buddhism. Moreover, the shared borders between the Xinjiang province of China and the Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan have contributed to cultural exchange. Educational partnerships are also making notable contributions to the strengthening of cultural ties and the overall relationship between the two countries. Furthermore, intermarriages are forging even deeper bonds that are likely to endure for generations. It's evident that cultural connections are playing a pivotal role in deepening the relationship between Pakistan and China, transcending the traditionally state-centric nature of their ties to encompass the active participation of their respective peoples.

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