

Sino–Central Asian Heritage Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative: Drivers, Agents, and Issues¹

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Abstract

The article reviews the argument that China's civil society is less effective in generating soft power than states where civil society operates freely. Over the years, China has become aware of the centrality of civil society in diplomacy and devised cooperative frameworks to increase its attractiveness based on its unique understanding of the concept as an attainable policy outcome. The article contributes to this literature by exploring how the country conducts activities under the framework of people-to-people diplomacy, a priority of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The study presents a case study analysis of China's people-to-people exchanges with Central Asia in the heritage sector. This article presents some preliminary empirical evidence on how Chinese civil society operates to maximise the chances of representing China positively to Central Asian audiences. The study also argues for two principles to underlie efforts in heritage cooperation - i.e. shared identity and reliance on one-sided interpretations of shared historical experiences.

Keywords: People-to-People Exchanges, Heritage Diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative, China, Central Asia

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China, Soft Power, and People-to-People Exchanges: A Critical Introduction

China's donations of health equipment worldwide on the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic have been framed as an attempt to pursue a health-centred soft power strategy aimed at restoring the country's international reputation after the city of Wuhan was identified as the original site of the virus outbreak (Kowalski 2021). Labelled "mask diplomacy",¹ it was the latest in various global activities that scholars have connected to the country's efforts to generate soft power.²

Soft power is a valuable tool for countries worldwide as it relies on generating attraction and persuasion rather than "coercion or payments" (Nye 2004: x) to "[m]ake others want what you want" (Nye 2021: 94). Joseph Nye's conceptualisation has been an interesting concept for China's decision-makers and scholars to command in practice,³ as soft power shows a path toward China's rise to global power status that enables the country not to negotiate between pursuing its national interests and preserving a reputation as a peaceful and responsible great power (*fuzeren daguo*) with its foreign partners.⁴ As recently argued by Richard Q. Turcsanyi and Eva Kachlikova (2020: 61), China understands soft power as "much more straightforward and instrumental" compared to Western countries, considering it an achievable policy outcome.⁵

Soft power entered Chinese political discourse in 2007 at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party (CPC),⁶ when then Secretary-General Hu Jintao emphasised the need for China to invest more in cultural soft power (*wenhua ruan shili*), pointing to a specific dimension of soft power.⁷ Seven years later, at the 12th Politburo Collective Study Session, Xi Jinping presented a similar argument, stating that China should "make efforts to show the unique charm of Chinese culture to increase the country's cultural soft power".⁸

Although culture is seemingly predominant in the country's soft power performance, Chinese scholars identified two other alternative drivers.⁹ In addition to culture (understood as being rooted in China's morally driven traditional culture), a political and a development-model camp respectively argued for soft power either to be inspired by political considerations or the country's economic model. As Maria Repnikova (2022) notices, these three theorisations are only artificially dissimilar. On the one hand, proponents of the politics-at-the-centre approach contend that culture is actually a tool in China's charm offensive. On the other, Chinese studies on soft power have generally connected the three theorisations. In sum, the cultural aspect remains prominent, contrary to Nye's broader understanding of the concept.

As different conceptualisations of Chinese soft power have been long debated among scholars, so has China's ability to generate soft power successfully, with academics generally leaning toward the idea that the country struggles to exercise soft power because of domestic constraints.¹⁰ To understand this point in-full, the three founding elements of soft power identified by Igor Bakalov (2020) need to be considered. First, scholars agree that soft power aims to change the attitude of foreign audiences and, therefore, "what the target thinks [...] is a crucial aspect of soft power" (Nye 2021: 2).

Second, soft power functions over a prolonged timeframe, making it more suitable for pursuing general rather than specific objectives; and third, soft power relies on civil societies to operate as the primary agents of the soft power agenda.¹¹ While the first two elements are consistent with China's approach to soft power, the full expression of the latter is hindered by the country's regime, as authoritarian governments are deemed to be incapable of "free[ing] the vast talents of their civil societies" (Nye 2021: 9). This condition implies that China's centralised control over civil society and the construction of narratives and imaginaries transmitted to the outside world makes it impossible for China to exploit the full potential of its soft power. Examples of this limitation are artists like Ai Weiwei or Badiucao. The inability to express their criticism toward the CPC freely prevents them from acting as China's soft power generators (Gill and Huang 2006).

Chinese authorities have, over time, developed an awareness of the centrality of civil societies in diplomacy. One only has to think back to the Maoist tradition of putting the people at the centre of China's foreign relations and the knowledge and expertise the country has developed under communism in engaging foreign communities through the work of Chinese nationals.¹² This practice has recently institutionalised in the form of people-to-people diplomacy (*minjian waijiao*).¹³ Before presenting this argument forward, it is necessary to specify what this work understands as civil society, especially in light of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese state and the control of its civil society.¹⁴ Drawing from Jude Howell (2011: 159-60), civil society is here defined as "independent citizen[s] organizing around shared concerns and interests" in a manner that distinguishes them "from the state and the market, though in practice the boundaries [...] are blurred and messy". These uncertain boundaries encompass what B. Michael Frolic (1997) had identified as the second domain of civil society in China that he calls "state-led civil society" - i.e. state-created organisations that coordinate state activity in specific sectors of the economy and society. The study understands people-to-people diplomacy as a variant of Frolic's state-led civil society, which coordinates outward state activities. The Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter, BRI - *Yi dai Yi lu*) is a case in point, with people-to-people exchanges being listed as a pillar of the initiative. When launching the project in 2013 from the halls of Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, Xi stressed that "to have productive [...] cooperation, we need the support of our peoples" (Xi 2017, 319), imitating Mao-era cooperation and recognising the importance of civil society engagement to the BRI at its earliest stage.¹⁵ As China understands soft power as a policy outcome, people-to-people diplomacy should be understood as the attempt to generate soft power by presenting foreign communities with certain narratives and imaginaries vehiculated by top-down civil networks, agencies, and individuals (e.g. Schneider 2021).¹⁶

Based on these considerations, the article seeks answers to the questions about how China has employed people-to-people diplomacy to generate soft power in the context

of the BRI, investigating the role played by culture in the country's foreign policy. The article conducts a preliminary analysis of China's BRI-related people-to-people diplomacy in Central Asia by looking at instances of heritage cooperation. The first section discusses China and Central Asia relations, arguing for mounting criticism and sinophobia at the level of Central Asian local communities have spurred China's interest in fostering people-to-people diplomacy in the region. Chinese efforts in heritage cooperation are presented and compared in the subsequent sections by examining institutional documents on two specific initiatives. The conclusion discusses the findings, arguing that common identities and one-sided sinocentric interpretations of shared history have been central to China's heritage collaborations with Central Asia. The section also presents the contributions and limitations of the study to scholarly discussions on Chinese soft power and people-to-people diplomacy.

Supporting the BRI in Central Asia through the People

The connection between China's BRI and the five Central Asian countries (i.e. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) is widely known,¹⁷ as much as the anecdote of President Xi choosing Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University to announce the launch of the BRI to the world continues to be included in the majority of scholarly works on *Yi dai Yi lu*. Other than identifying some critical events and positive historical figures characterising China's relations with Central Asia,¹⁸ Xi's speech makes the point that the relationship between the country and the region was, at the time, facing a "golden opportunity of growth" (*nande jiyu*) (Xi 2017, 316).

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Xi's 2013 statement was (and remains) consistent with one of the significant points raised by Chinese strategists and politicians when referring to Central Asia. The absence of territorial disputes with the country's neighbours in the area – a notable exception compared with China's situation with the rest of the neighbourhood¹⁹ – earned Central Asia the characterisation of the "most generous gift given to the modern Chinese by the heavens" (Miller 2019: 264).²⁰ In the Chinese view, expanding relations based on settled borders increased the potential for developing stable, durable ties, further stimulating the country's willingness to secure Central Asia's commodities, particularly energy resources (Liao 2021). Today, China acquires more than fifty per cent of Kazakhstan's yearly crude petroleum exports while having almost a monopoly (99 per cent) over Turkmenistan's oil.²¹ Holding a share of Central Asian energy exports has been a priority for China since the early nineties. The country was industrialising at such a rapid pace that enormous amounts of energy resources were required to support modernisation.²² Therefore, diversifying energy imports by consolidating Beijing's role as a buyer in Central Asia fell within China's energy security agenda (*nengyuan anquan*) (Zhao 2008). In addition, Chinese observers also identified Central Asia as politically more similar than other areas in Beijing's neighbourhood, mainly in light of the nature of its regimes (Sharshenova and Crawford 2017).²³ Since most of Central Asia has been ruled by

authoritarian governments since independence,²⁴ China calculated that changes in the leadership or the political baseline of Central Asian nations would occur during longer timeframes than in multiparty electoral democracies, heightening expectations for regime continuity.²⁵ As Central Asia is ruled by one-party or de facto one-party regimes, national policy planning was also more compatible with Beijing's domestic approach. This "compatibility", for instance, has facilitated the successful coordination between specific BRI projects in Kazakhstan and Nur-Sultan's wide-scale national economic development plan (Indeo 2020).²⁶

Besides these considerations, almost two decades of multilateral cooperation with Central Asia have also equipped China with the necessary skills and expertise to navigate Central Asian politics effectively (Kavalski 2010; Seiwert 2021). In particular, the country's experience in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (hereafter SCO) and related frameworks had presented Beijing with the opportunity to benefit from Russia's historical ties with Central Asian states and develop stable bilateral relations before launching initiatives as ambitious as the BRI (Aris 2011; Proń 2021).²⁷

Nonetheless, it should be noted that Central Asia's geographic position connecting East Asia and Europe remained a prominent argument for determining China's interest in the regional development of the BRI (e.g. Garcia 2021). Among others, one of the significant benefits recognised to the conceptualisation of Central Asia as a BRI commercial route was that the region would have offered Chinese exports multimodal ways to bypass the Malacca Straits and reach Western European markets (Casarini 2016). Looking at the data on BRI investments in Central Asia between 2014 and 2021, China's emphasis on the region's historical function as an energy and connection hub transpires. For example, since the BRI launch, seventy per cent of investments in Central Asia have been devoted to energy projects. In comparison, the transport sector has acquired twenty per cent of BRI construction contracts, second only to energy which amounts to fifty per cent of China's total deals.²⁸ Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are the two countries that have received the most funding from China, although all Central Asian nations have been somewhat engaged in the initiative.²⁹

The extent of BRI projects in Central Asia has proven to be problematic for host communities. How China generally administers BRI projects abroad has separated Chinese enterprises and workers from local populations.³⁰ As several authors have noted, this detachment has spread criticism toward China and even anti-Chinese sentiments throughout the region (e.g. Peyrouse 2016; Irgengioro 2021). Anti-Chinese protests have erupted cyclically in major Central Asian cities, with Kazakhstan – where most of China's wide-scale and long-term projects are located³¹ – being particularly prone to expressing dissent against the presence of the country's enterprises and workers.³² As put by Sebastien Peyrouse (2016: 18), "the 'Chinese question' is becoming increasingly central to political debate in Central Asia [...] the majority opinion is that China remains

a challenge for Central Asia, including on those issues that are presently regarded as having been resolved".³³

Like other areas in the world, Central Asia is also sensitive to the "China threat theories" (e.g. Broomfield 2003; Deng 2008; Brown 2021), especially as local communities perceive Chinese activities as damaging to Central Asia. China has increased its efforts toward people-to-people diplomacy to deal with the challenges posed by growing criticism and sinophobia to engage directly with civil societies and build a reputation for the country that would be considered attractive by Central Asian audiences, weakening the notion that China is a threat.³⁴ Chinese scholars have recognised a detachment between how Central Asian governments and civil societies perceived China, stressing that "how Central Asian countries view and whether they actively participate in the construction of the 'Belt and Road' will greatly affect the prospects of the initiative" (Qin and Li 2018: 61), directly connecting *minjian waijiao* to the broader efforts for the BRI.³⁵

With activities aimed at building a positive attitude toward China going hand-in-hand with BRI projects, the country's focus on people-to-people diplomacy has invested the Central Asian region, registering the need to be further deepened and innovated (Qin and Li 2018). For instance, Central Asia has scored among the first areas of origin for foreign exchange students in China (Li 2018). Another example is Beijing's success in establishing cultural institutes throughout the region, constituting a network of reference points where a favourable reputation of China is reiterated and transmitted to local audiences. To date, China has 13 active Confucius Institutes in Central Asia, the first of which has operated for almost twenty years.³⁶

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Although scholars have studied the application of China's people-to-people diplomacy in Central Asia by primarily examining the education sector (e.g., Li 2018; Aliyev 2019), the country's efforts to engage civil societies in the region have encompassed different sectors as the limited success of exclusively relying on the transmission of China's traditional culture emerged (Qin and Li 2018).³⁷

Based on these considerations, this research aims to contribute to answering the following questions: how does China's people-to-people diplomacy operate to support the country's soft power? How is Chinese civil society employed in the country's soft power performance? Understanding the centrality of culture in China's soft power agenda, the article presents a study on heritage cooperation. The research articulates in a comparative case approach, investigating two China-designed heritage cooperation initiatives to analyse similarities, differences, and common patterns. Document analysis has been selected as the methodology to analyse documentary evidence on the two initiatives. Data includes the whole universe of documents related to the initiatives' institutional structure and workings and news pieces compiled by the two initiatives on their activities. Data has been primarily collected from the initiatives' respective websites, while summaries on specific exhibitions have been collected from the involved museums' websites.

Heritage-based Activities under the BRI

With 56 UNESCO World Heritage sites, China today rivals Italy's traditional role as the global cultural superpower.³⁸ With culture acquiring centrality in the country's diplomacy (e.g. Li 2008; Nye 2012; Lai and Lu 2012),³⁹ building an internationally recognised sectoral reputation remains essential to supporting China's foreign policy efforts. In a 2016 speech, Xi argued that "Chinese culture is both historical and contemporary, belonging both to the Chinese nation and the whole world" (Xi 2017: 381), noting a prominent outer dimension of the country's cultural policy.

This process has been acknowledged in the literature by the seminal volume by Tim Winter (2019; 2021), where the idea of China as a "geocultural power" is presented.⁴⁰ The concept refers to the country's "strategic mobilisation of select aspects of culture, religion and history" (Lin et al. 2021: 4) for constructing a grand narrative to support its geopolitical ambition and infrastructural plans in Central Asia. Through this process, China has been understood as developing alternative interpretations of Eurasian history and memory to those presented by other regional powers, especially Russia (Dadabaev 2018; Jiménez-Tovar and Lavička 2020).

Developing a self-representation of China based on its traditional culture and one-sided sinocentric interpretations of history has therefore found a practical application in international cooperative frameworks,⁴¹ especially those placing cultural heritage at the centre. Heritage is a helpful material reminder of the characteristics with which China aims to present itself to the world (Sciorati 2022). Heritage also connects the country with the partners with whom China shares particular historical moments, establishing complex networks (Exnerová 2020). The BRI itself is rooted in this belief, linking countries and people worldwide by singling out a shared historical period (i.e., the Silk Roads) presented in the most favourable light to promote activities legitimised by this one-sided sinocentric interpretation of shared history. While a pervasive element in the Chinese narratives on the historical Silk Roads is the socio-economic benefits shared by those involved in the commercial routes, the competition, numerous wars, and conflicts cyclically fought between nations, tribes, and local populations for control of these historical routes are often absent from the country's discourse.⁴² Conversely, these events have a place in the historical recounts of Central Asian nations.

Central Asia has been particularly susceptible to the China-constructed nexus between history, culture, heritage, and diplomacy. The Chinese construction of a discourse on China and Central Asian countries as sharing the identity of Silk Road nations ensured the amplification of this idea in the region's domestic discourses.⁴³ The 2014 nomination of the Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor to UNESCO World Heritage status, jointly promoted by China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, exemplifies this dynamic, with China relying on shared heritage sites to act as reminders of sinocentric positive historical connections (Sciorati 2022).

Comparing Heritage Initiatives

Under the BRI, this nexus has been articulated in initiatives that advance the people-to-people dimension of China's diplomacy consistently with the country's agenda, complementing the promotion of the government-to-government interactions that had characterised previous forms of engagement.⁴⁴ Two initiatives, in particular, remain at the backbone of China's diplomatic efforts in the heritage domain in Central Asia under the BRI. These are the International Alliance of Museums of the Silk Road (hereafter IAMS; *Sichou zhilu guoji bowuguan lianmeng*) and the Belt and Road Cultural Heritage Global Alliance (hereafter BRCHGA; *"Yi dai Yi lu" wenhua yichan guoji hezuo lianmeng*). IAMS was established in Beijing in May 2017 with the support of China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the country's State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH),⁴⁵ while BRCHGA was launched exactly two years later in the city of Xi'an under the banner of the Northwestern Polytechnical University (NPU) and the support of the Shaanxi Provincial Bureaus of Cultural Relics and Education.⁴⁶ Although the statutes of both initiatives stress their non-governmental nature, IAMS and BRCHGA maintain ties with China's central or local administrations.⁴⁷ However, these initiatives operate within civil society and are managed by non-governmental bodies.⁴⁸ In particular, the Shaanxi province has, under the BRI, established a position as a prominent sub-national actor in China's heritage diplomacy, following Xi's recommendation that the province should operate as an international agent of China's cultural diplomacy (*wenhua wajiao*) (Xi 2017). Shaanxi's provincial capital, Xi'an, has mainly acquired centrality (Zhu and Maags 2020).⁴⁹

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IAMS and BRCHGA have wider geographic scopes than Central Asia. However, both initiatives have acquired a solid Central Asian imprint, with the former counting eight Central Asian institutions as members and the latter listing the participation of Central Asia's three principal economies - i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.⁵⁰ The composition of IAMS' members, in particular, shows a forty per cent participation from Central Asia compared with the rest of the Asian continent and singles out the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which is granted a vice-presidential-level position following the decision of the Alliance's first Executive Council.⁵¹ According to the IAMS Statute, the Executive Council acts as the Alliance's directorial organ. It comprises the President, the Secretary-General, and the Vice Presidents for a maximum of 21 members.⁵² At the time of the nomination, the Executive Council was solely composed of Chinese institutions - namely, the Director and Deputy Director of the National Museum of China (NMC) is the President and Secretary General positions and the Secretary General of the Chinese Museum Association, the Director of the China National Silk Museum, the Director of the Fujian Museum and the Director of the Tang West Market Museum as Vice Presidents.⁵³ Moreover, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have participated actively in most of the activities organised by Chinese IAMS members.⁵⁴

According to data on the foreign cultural institutions targeted by BRCHGA, the initiative generally focuses on "college and universities, museums, cultural heritage research institutions and other units in countries along the Belt and Road".⁵⁵ In practical terms, this interest in cultural institutions became apparent in the first (and, so far, sole) official meeting of BRCHGA's executive council held in virtual form in November 2019, which was attended only by universities, research centres with expertise in cultural heritage, and museums around the world.⁵⁶ In contrast with BRCHGA, IAMS offers more details about its members, which, despite the initiative's mandate specifically targeting museums, also include a wide array of culture-related institutions, such as universities, research institutes, libraries, and cultural associations.⁵⁷

IAMS and BRCHGA have similar aims, sharing the general objective of advancing heritage cooperation between Silk Road countries in different domains.⁵⁸ The mission statements of both initiatives, though, openly emphasise their link to critical characteristics of China's people-to-people diplomacy and *ruan shili* strategy. IAMS generally argues for "forging a bond of friendships for all people on the Silk Road".⁵⁹ At the same time, BRCHGA incorporates linguistic constructions typical of Chinese political discourse stating its aim to "innovate new models of people-to-people and cultural exchanges, promote international cooperation and people-to-people bonds among countries and regions along the 'Belt and Road', and contribute to building a community with a shared future for mankind".⁶⁰ This phrasing of the initiative's mission is remarkably similar to that employed by Xi on several occasions, above all his 2013 speech.⁶¹ This evidence suggests a political role for the two initiatives and their openly-stated non-governmental goals.

Although the two initiatives present their work as a collaboration between civil societies from different countries on equal terms, China's imprint remains prominent. In terms of structure, both IAMS and BRCHGA have their secretariats located within Chinese institutions – namely, the NMC and the Cultural Relics Department of NPU, respectively. Secretariats are central nodes in the life of the two initiatives, being tasked with handling funding, finances, and planning in addition to day-to-day administration.⁶² Moreover, the Chinese institutions that host the secretariats also act as the major funders of the initiatives. Being located at the NPU, BRCHGA operates with funds from the Ministries of Industry and Education. At the same time, IAMS, whose secretariat is at the NMC, is mainly connected to the Ministry of Cultural Relics. However, it should be noted that the IAMS statute signals a more balanced financing policy, with member institutions contributing to funding the activities they promote.⁶³

In terms of management, while BRCHGA is organised around an executive council comprising representatives from foreign partners, IAMS has a more complex structure composed of Chinese institutions and a limited number of foreign members.⁶⁴ At the domestic level, the role of the Chinese Museum Association (*Zhongguo bowuguan xiehui*),⁶⁵ a not-for-profit organisation established in the early 1980s, operating under

the "professional guidance and supervision" of the SACH and the Ministry of Civil Affairs remains prominent.⁶⁶

As mentioned, IAMS and BRCHGA have similar mission statements, aiming to foster cooperation in the heritage sector among Silk Road countries. Since their establishment, IAMS has concluded a broad range of activities, while BRCHGA has presented a limited portfolio, arguably because of the limits imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on global mobility.⁶⁷

In the last five years, IAMS has remained active, increasing the number of its members and creating several occasions for dialogue between Chinese and foreign members, even during the acutest phases of the health crisis.⁶⁸ IAMS activities can be categorised into three major groups: institutional meetings, museum exhibitions, and professional exchanges. While the first category comprises the annual conferences and executive council meetings mandated by the initiative's statute, the second and third categories are connected to people-centred exchanges between heritage professionals of different countries.⁶⁹

Between 2018 and 2021, IAMS hosted seven institutional meetings – five executive council meetings and two conferences. Apart from the meetings held in 2020 and 2021 via video link because of the restrictions on international mobility imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the meetings took place in various locations in China.⁷⁰ During the meetings, the executive council primarily approved changes in its composition, accepted new members in the alliance, adopted institutional documents, memorandums, and agreements, and set the priorities for the initiative's annual work.⁷¹ For instance, the 2019 Meeting of the Executive Council approved the appointment of Liu Wanming 刘万鸣 – newly nominated Deputy Director of the National Museum of China – as IAMS Secretary General.⁷² In February 2021, a virtual meeting of the council was explicitly held to approve the Fiji Museum's IAMS membership.⁷³ Lastly, the executive council approved the 2020 Memorandum of Understanding between the NMC and the National Museum in Belgrade.⁷⁴

Kazakhstan is the only foreign member to co-host an exhibition with a Chinese institution under IAMS. The showcase led to closed-door meetings between Chinese heritage professionals and representatives from Kazakhstan's Academy of National Arts, and the participation in an exclusive professional exchange and training programme in China designed explicitly for Kazakh heritage workers.⁷⁵ The exhibition diversified exchanges between China and Kazakhstan, consistently with Beijing's people-centred soft power performance.

The exhibition was entitled *Silk Road Arts: Selected Paintings of Chang'an* (*Silu yi yun – Chang'an huatan xuan cui* 丝路艺韵 – 长安画坛选粹) and was held in Kazakhstan's cultural capital of Almaty from 27 September to 9 October 2019. It was jointly organised by the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Xi'an Tang West Market Museum (*Datang Xishi bowuguan*). The showcase comprised sixty oil paintings

and several ink paintings and aimed at showing to a Kazakh audience the legacy of China's traditional art and culture in the works of the country's contemporary artists.⁷⁶ The exhibition was the sole overseas exhibition in a series of art shows organised by the Xi'an Tang West Market Museum to celebrate the 7th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China.⁷⁷ It aimed to "promote art exchanges and cooperation between China and foreign countries along the Silk Road" (*Tuidong sichou zhilu Zhongwai yishu jiaoliu hezuo*), "tell the story of the new Silk Road in the new era" (*Jianghao xin shidai xia de xin silu gushi*), and "work together to build a community with a shared future for the Chinese and Kazakh people" (*Gongtong wei goujian zhong ha renmin mingyun gongtongti er nuli*).⁷⁸

Silk Road Arts makes a case for IAMS heritage collaboration serving China's goals to establish people-to-people bonds and transmit a favourable representation of China to local communities. Although the exhibition was organised under the banner of a Silk Road-focused heritage cooperation initiative, *Silk Road Arts* has a limited connection to the historical Silk Road. Indeed, the reference contained in the title works as a container contextualising the artwork displayed, which was exclusively connected to China's national heritage. As the Marketing and Public Relations Committee of China's Society of Museums (*Zhongguo bowuguan xiehui sichang tiguang yu gonggong guanxi zhuan ye weiyuanhui*) put it, during *Silk Road Arts*, "the Xi'an Tang West Market Museum entered Kazakhstan's Central State Museum".⁷⁹

The case of the *Silk Road Arts* exhibition suggests that China expected activities in the context of IAMS to increase the country's attractiveness to Central Asian audiences, serving the country's *ruan shili* strategy by spreading a specific brand of Chinese culture. Moreover, the country aimed for heritage activities to diversify cooperative frameworks between Chinese and foreign civil societies, putting into practice the conventional conceptualisation of soft power as state-directed cultural influence. Analysing how these frameworks are organised shows China's operationalisation of culture, which considers *ruan shili* as an attainable policy outcome. China is discursively and visually central in heritage cooperation and maintains the principal role in determining the strategy and activities in the initiative. This practice ascribes heritage cooperation initiatives like IAMS and BRCGHA to the vast array of civil society networks, agencies, and initiatives led by the Chinese government to generate soft power through people-to-people exchanges. In both initiatives, civil society is at the frontline but remains under the direct supervision of China's government. The emphasis both initiatives place on the Silk Road identity shared by their members – via the arbitrary reference to the historical Silk Road or the BRI – suggests that China systematically presents one-sided interpretations of a shared Silk Road history to ground its soft power performance.

These activities are seemingly detached from state-pursued political goals and establish cooperative frameworks that are more easily internalised by target audiences. By forging emotional bonds between transnational networks of people, state-led civil

society thus attempts to reduce sinophobia and optimise the state's overall soft power performance.

Conclusions

The article has examined some instances of Chinese soft power in Central Asia, focusing on cultural heritage cooperation. This sector has been investigated from the perspective of China's people-to-people diplomacy, looking at two heritage cooperation initiatives to contribute to academic discussions on the connection between *ruan shili* and civil society as well as on the role of culture in supporting Chinese "charm offensive" (Kurlantzick 2008).

Scholars generally agree on the centrality of Chinese culture in the country's soft power agenda (e.g. Li 2008; Nye 2012; Lai and Lu 2012), identifying in the state's direction over its civil society a limitation to the country's ability to generate soft power effectively (e.g. Gill and Huang 2006; Nye 2021). This article offered new empirical evidence to these debates by examining two cases of civil society engagement in the heritage sector and pointing to the fact that a central aspect of these top-down frameworks is that they have tended to diversify their outward activities to maximise China's image-building with local communities.

An aspect detected in these frameworks of heritage cooperation transpiring from the examination of the two case studies presented is China's reliance on characteristics specific to target countries to generate soft power, going against the conceptualisation of China's *ruan shili* as *one-size-fits-all*. China's heritage cooperation under these two frameworks has used the discursive construction on a common Silk Road identity and targeted countries based on specific characteristics rather than following a generalised strategy. For instance, the two initiatives analysed have allowed membership worldwide but have, so far, limited their engagement activities to nations with which China shares a robust Silk Road identity.⁸⁰ This tendency is also empirically shown by the organisational structure of IAMS and BRCGHA: for example, the activities carried out outside China have been limited to Silk Road countries like Serbia and Kazakhstan, and the two initiatives have acquired an evident Central Asian imprint through membership and collaborations.

Another aspect identified in the analysis is the centrality of sinocentric interpretations of history and shared historical memories to support soft power performance. Heritage maintains a solid connection to history and shared memory, making this sector particularly apt to support cooperation based on this aspect. Central Asia's identity-building discourse – highly reliant on the historical Silk Road – has been used to enhance heritage cooperation. Drawing from China's historical interpretations, the image of a favourably shared Sino–Central Asian history has been transmitted in heritage activities by presenting specific brands of Chinese culture to contrast criticism and anti-Chinese sentiments and support BRI projects. As Qin and Li argue (2018), China's people-to-

people diplomacy in Central Asia has considered that soft power is not a one-way process but an interaction between cultures.

The study has been primarily limited by the narrow number of activities conducted in the heritage sector. The analysis does not allow for generalisations of China's soft power strategy under the BRI. However, the study has identified practices in China's engagement through its state-led civil society that adds on our understanding of how the country uses culture and history to generate soft power, starting to paint a more complex picture of China's operationalisation of the concept.

Future studies need further conduct cross-regional or cross-sectoral research to detail the use of these practices in other world regions and sectors of engagement. Another limitation of the analysis has been its focus on Chinese civil society as the primary agent, treating target audiences as passive recipients. This choice was made because the article aimed to investigate how state-led civil society is used as a tool of China's soft power performance rather than arguing for or against its success. Future research needs to consider the reception of China's people-to-people activities by target audience.

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Notes:

- 1 - China's foreign aid in the health sector during COVID-19 was given several labels, among others, the EU High Representative Josep Borrell identified it as the "politics of generosity". See *The Coronavirus Pandemic and the New World It Is Creating*, "EEAS", 23 March 2020, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 2 - An extensive literature is being developed on Chinese soft power. Among the most cited works, see Callahan and Barabantseva (2012), Lai and Lu (2012), and Shambaugh (2015). See also the recent seminal work by Repnikova (2022).
- 3 - In Nye (2021), the author offers some evidence of the Chinese interests in understanding how soft power can be generated.
- 4 - This article follows standard pinyin transliteration. China's foreign partners would consider negatively the use of coercive tools and reconsider the country's reputation as a peaceful power. See Jones Lee and Hameiri Shahar, *Debunking the Myth of "Debt-Trap Diplomacy": How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative*, "Chatham House", 19 August 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 5 - Conversely, Nye believes that states cannot purposely control the generation of soft power. See, e.g., Nye (2004).
- 6 - For a comprehensive analysis, see Riva (2018).
- 7 - See Hu Jintao, *Hu Jintao's Report at the 17th National Congress* [胡锦涛在党的十七大上的报告], 15 October 2017, <https://fuwu.12371.cn/2012/06/11/ART11339412115437623.shtml> (last accessed on 5 July 2023). Nye (1990) indicates culture, ideology and institutions as dimensions of soft power.
- 8 - *Xi Jinping: Build a Socialist Cultural Power and Focus on Improving the Country's Cultural Soft Power* [习近平: 建设社会主义文化强国 着力提高国家文化软实力], "People's Daily", 1 January 2014, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0101/c64094-23995307.html> (last accessed on 5 July 2023). On the nexus between Chinese soft power and culture, see e.g. Aukia (2014).
- 9 - This paragraph draws from the arguments presented by Onnis (2021), Repnikova (2022) and Riva (2016).
- 10 - As discussed in the following paragraphs, Nye presents a sceptical view of China's ability to generate soft power. See, e.g., Nye (2021).
- 11 - In Bakalov's review (2020), civil societies are recognised as major soft power agents.
- 12 - On this point, see Hunter (2009), Ceccagno and Graziani (2016), and Graziani (2017) for extensive case studies.
- 13 - Scholars also identify people-to-people diplomacy with the terms people-to-people exchanges or people-to-people bonds (*minjian jiaoliu*). The term public diplomacy is instead translated as *gongtong waijiao*.
- 14 - On the question of whether civil society exists in China, see the discussion by Qiaoan (2021).
- 15 - The speech is centred on people, consistently with the Maoist understanding of people as primary carriers of China's representation overseas.
- 16 - It should be noted that the limits of China's top-down approach to soft power have been discussed by Chinese scholars as well. See, e.g., Qin and Li (2018).
- 17 - For a discussion on the alternative concept of Greater Central Asia, see Clarke (2013).
- 18 - Among these, classic historical figures like diplomat Zhang Qian remain prominent.
- 19 - The settlement of China-Central Asia borders resulted from President Jiang Zemin's diplomatic efforts in the 1990s. On this point, see Song (2016).
- 20 - The best-known translation of this quote by Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen presents Central Asia as a "piece of cake" instead of a "golden opportunity". As Miller (2019) notes, the translation is colourful but inaccurate and this article therefore proposes a more literal version.
- 21 - *China*, "Observatory of Economic Complexity", <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/chn> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 22 - On China's development and industrialisation, see the seminal work on Deng Xiaoping by Vogel (2013).
- 23 - A notable exception is Central Asia's "colour revolutions" (*yanse geming*) and issues of violent succession. For an example, see He and Zhao (2005) and Qin and Li (2018).
- 24 - Kyrgyzstan's political development has been an exception for Central Asia. For a discussion, see Juraev

- S. (2012), *Back on Track?: Kyrgyz Authoritarianism after the Tulip Revolution*, "PONARS Eurasia", 23 July 2012, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/back-on-track-kyrgyz-authoritarianism-after-the-tulip-revolution/> (last accessed on 13 July 2022).
- 25 - The problems posed to the BRI by multi-party electoral regimes became especially prominent in China after the 2018 revision, re-negotiation, and eventual suspension of the East Coast Rail Link project in Malaysia by the newly elected government of Mahathir Mohamad. For an overview, see Alifah Zainuddin, *What Happened To China's BRI Projects in Malaysia?*, "The Diplomat", 5 October 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/what-happened-to-chinas-bri-projects-in-malaysia/> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 26 - On Kazakhstan's national development plan (i.e., Nurly Zhol) and the BRI, see, also, Saltybayev (2018).
- 27 - Before the SCO institutionalised in 2011, China had first engaged Central Asian countries and Russia through the Shanghai Five framework. See Aris (2011).
- 28 - Energy projects occupy about four of the six billion dollars invested by China in Central Asia. In terms of construction contracts, the transport sector alone has been worth five billion so far. For the full data, see *China Global Investment Tracker*, "American Enterprise Institute", <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 29 - Between 2014 and 2021, Kazakhstan received about 13 billion dollars from China, while Turkmenistan received about eight billion. See *China Global Investment Tracker*, "American Enterprise Institute", <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 30 - China usually exports the majority of materials, machinery, and workers to host countries to conduct BRI projects, limiting the use of local commodities and scarcely involving host communities. See Dollar David, *Understanding China's Belt and Road Infrastructure Projects in Africa*, "The Brookings Institution", September 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FP_20190930_china_bri_dollar.pdf (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 31 - *China Global Investment Tracker*, "American Enterprise Institute", <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 32 - See Umarov Temur, *What's Behind Protests Against China in Kazakhstan?*, "Carnegie Endowment for International Peace", 30 October 2019, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/80229> (last accessed on 5 July 2023). Protesters also raised their voices against internment camps in Xinjiang. On the situation in the Chinese autonomous region, see Smith Finley (2019).
- 33 - See Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012).
- 34 - On China's view on international reputation, see Kurlantzick (2008).
- 35 - Translation of the author. In Chinese, "中亚国家如何看待以及是否会积极参与'一带一路'的建设, 将在很大程度上影响该倡议的前景" (*Zhongya guojia ruhe kandai yiji shifou hui jiji canyu "Yi dai Yi lu" de jianshe, jiang zai hen da chengdu shang yingxiang gai changyi de qianjing*).
- 36 - The institute was launched in 2005 at the Tashkent State Oriental Institute in Uzbekistan. See Deng Xin and Zhang Quansheng (2019), "Opportunities and Challenges for the Sustainable Development of Confucius Institutes in Central Asia from the Perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative ["一带一路"视域下中亚地区孔子学院可持续发展的机遇与挑战]", *Confucius Institute Global Academic Network Information Database*, https://lib.cqvip.com/Qikan/Article/Detail?id=00002HUCK53G7JP167D06JP16JR&from=Qikan_Article_Detail (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 37 - Aliyev Nurlan, *China's Soft Power in Central Asia*, "CACI Analyst", 19 December 2019, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13599-chinas-soft-power-in-central-asia.html> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 38 - UNESCO, *World Heritage List*, "UNESCO World Heritage Centre", <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 39 - The literature on China's public diplomacy is extremely rich. For a detailed overview, see d'Hooghe (2015). On agency, see Schneider (2021).
- 40 - See, also, Winter Tim, *One Belt, One Road, One Heritage: Cultural Diplomacy and the Silk Road*, "The Diplomat", 29 March 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/one-belt-one-road-one-heritage-cultural-diplomacy-and-the-silk-road/> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 41 - See Ptáčková et al. (2021).
- 42 - The classic historical figure of Zhang Qian mentioned in note 18 makes a striking case. The Zhang Qian missions to Central Asia in the 2nd century BC are framed as a voyage of peace and cooperation in Chinese

- discourse, disregarding the military context within which the mission took place. See Benjamin (2018).
- 43 - As an example, see Nazarbayev (2008).
- 44 - *The Minister of Culture Published a Document on "Qiyushi": Culture First Builds the "Belt and Road* [文化部部长《求是》发文：文化先行建设“一带一路”], "Qiyushi", 5 May 2014, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0505/c1001-24975956.html> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 45 - *Statute of the International Alliance of Museums*, "IAMS", 24 November 2018, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/?c=rules&ta=index> (last accessed on 30 May 2022).
- 46 - *Presentation of the Belt and Road Cultural Heritage Global Alliance*, "NFU Institute of Culture and Heritage", 2019, <https://nich.nwpu.edu.cn/info/1043/1107.htm> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 47 - *Statute of the International Alliance of Museums*, "IAMS", 24 November 2018, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/?c=rules&ta=index> (last accessed on 30 May 2022) and *Statute of the Belt and Road Cultural Heritage Global Alliance*, "NFU Institute of Culture and Heritage", 2019, <https://nich.nwpu.edu.cn/info/1042/1112.htm> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 48 - *Ibid.*
- 49 - IAMS is headquartered at NMC, while BRCHA is administered by an interstate executive council composed of representatives from member states.
- 50 - *Presentation of the Belt and Road Cultural Heritage Global Alliance*, "NFU Institute of Culture and Heritage", 2019, <https://nich.nwpu.edu.cn/info/1043/1107.htm> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 51 - Azerbaijan, Myanmar, and Serbia also enjoy vice-presidential status. See *International Alliance of Museums of the Silk Road* [丝绸之路国际博物馆联盟], "IAMS", 2017, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/?c=news&ta=index&cid=7&page=15> (last accessed on 30 May 2022).
- 52 - The executive council currently counts only ten members. See *Statute of the International Alliance of Museums*, "IAMS", 24 November 2018, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/?c=rules&ta=index> (last accessed 5 July 2023).
- 53 - *International Alliance of Museums of the Silk Road* [丝绸之路国际博物馆联盟], "IAMS", 2017, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/?c=news&ta=index&cid=7&page=15> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 54 - *Newsletters*, "IAMS", <http://www.musesilkroad.com/en/index.php?c=news&ta=index&cid=8> (last accessed 5 July 2023).
- 55 - BRCGHA (2019), "The First Meeting of the First Executive Council of the Belt and Road Cultural Heritage Global Alliance Was Held Online", *NFU Institute of Culture and Heritage*, 2019, <https://nich.nwpu.edu.cn/info/1040/1113.htm> (last accessed on 2 November 2022).
- 56 - *Ibid.*
- 57 - *International Alliance of Museums of the Silk Road* [丝绸之路国际博物馆联盟], "IAMS", 2017, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/?c=news&ta=index&cid=7&page=15> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 58 - Neither of the two initiatives offers a formal definition of "Silk Road countries". This ambiguity allows China to target countries included under the banner of the old and the new Silk Roads.
- 59 - *International Alliance of Museums of the Silk Road* [丝绸之路国际博物馆联盟], "IAMS", 2017, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/?c=news&ta=index&cid=7&page=15> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 60 - BRCGHA (2019), "The First Meeting of the First Executive Council of the Belt and Road Cultural Heritage Global Alliance Was Held Online", *NFU Institute of Culture and Heritage*, 2019, <https://nich.nwpu.edu.cn/info/1040/1113.htm> (last accessed on 2 November 2022). To expand on the linguistic constructions of Chinese soft power, see Repnikova (2022). To contextualise the concept of "community with a shared future for mankind" (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*) under Xi, see Brown (2022).
- 61 - In his 2013 speech, for instance, Xi (2017) states: "We need to increase understanding between our people. Amity between the people holds the key to good relations between states. To have productive cooperation in the above-mentioned areas, we need the support of our people. We should encourage more friendly exchanges between our people to enhance mutual understanding and traditional friendship and build strong public support and a solid social foundation for regional cooperation" (318-19).
- 62 - *Statute of the International Alliance of Museums*, "IAMS", 24 November 2018, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/?c=rules&ta=index> (last accessed on 5 July 2023) and BRCGHA (2019), "Statute of the Belt and Road Cultural Heritage Global Alliance", *NFU Institute of Culture and Heritage*, <https://nich.nwpu.edu.cn/info/1042/1112.htm> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).
- 63 - *Statute of the International Alliance of Museums*, "IAMS", 24 November 2018, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/?c=rules&ta=index> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

com/?c=rules&ta=index (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

64 - The other foreign partners are identified in note 51. In addition to representatives of the NMC in presidential and secretary-general positions, staff and managers from the Chinese Museum Association, China National Silk Museum, Fujian Museum, and Xi'an Tang West Market Museum counterbalance the presence of foreign institutions in vice-presidential positions.

65 - On the association's history, work and formal ties to China's Communist leadership, see Liang J., *China Association of Museums and Its Academic Activities* [中国博物馆协会及其学术活动], "China's Museums", 2005, <http://cnki.sdll.cn:85/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?filename=CCRN200504007&dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFD2005> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

66 - See *Introduction*, 中国博物馆协会 [China Museums Association], 2022, <https://www.chinamuseum.org.cn/details.html?id=2&contentId=39> (last accessed on 5 July 2023). To grasp the full extent of China's heritage politics and their impact on domestic societies and the country's outward strategy, see, e.g., Zhu and Maags (2020).

67 - BRCHGA was launched in May 2019 a few months before the COVID-19 outbreak. For this reason, only selected activities conducted within the IAMS framework will be treated in-depth.

68 - *Chronicles*, "IAMS", <http://www.musesilkroad.com/en/index.php?c=news&ta=index&cid=43> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

69 - *Ibid.*

70 - The executive council met in November 2018 in Fujian province, in December 2019 at the NMC in Beijing, in December 2020, in February 2021 and in November 2021 via video-link. The conferences were held concomitant with the first and the fifth Executive Councils. See *Newsletters*, "IAMS", 2022, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/en/index.php?c=news&ta=index&cid=8> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

71 - *Statute of the International Alliance of Museums*, "IAMS", 24 November 2018, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/?c=rules&ta=index> (last accessed on 5 July 2023) and *Chronicles*, IAMS, 2022, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/en/index.php?c=news&ta=index&cid=43> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

72 - *Newsletters*, "IAMS", 2022, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/en/index.php?c=news&ta=index&cid=8> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

73 - *Ibid.*

74 - *Ibid.*

75 - Serbia has been the sole other member to host a IAMS exhibition so far. In contrast with Kazakhstan's, the event was not jointly organized with a Chinese institution but remained under the exclusive management of the National Museum in Belgrade. This approach is puzzling as the *Life in the Midst of Beauty: The World of a Chinese Scholar* exhibition presented to the Serbian audience a series of objects from the halls of the National Museum of China. See *Chronicles*, IAMS, 2022, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/en/index.php?c=news&ta=index&cid=43> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

76 - *Chronicles*, IAMS, 2022, <http://www.musesilkroad.com/en/index.php?c=news&ta=index&cid=43> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

77 - *Datang West City Museum Launches Multiple Exhibitions to Celebrate the 70th Birthday of the Motherland* [大唐西市博物馆推出多个展览庆祝祖国70华诞], "Phoenix New Media", 3 October 2019, http://sn.ifeng.com/a/20191003/7795619_0.shtml (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

78 - *Datang West Market Museum Enters Kazakhstan and Sets Sail for the Exhibition "Silk Road Artistic Rhythm - Selection of Chang'an Painting Circles"* [大唐西市博物馆走进哈萨克斯坦的"丝路艺韵 - 长安画坛选粹"展扬帆], "Datang Xishi Museum", 25 September 2019, http://www.dtxsmuseum.com/news_show.aspx?id=1174 (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

79 - Emphasis by the author. *Datang Xishi Museum's Exhibition of "the Charm of Silk Road Art: The Essence of Chang'an Painting World" Appeared in Kazakhstan*, "MPR", 27 September 2019, <http://www.chinampr.com/album/id/673.html> (last accessed on 5 July 2023).

80 - A notable exception of this trend is the inclusion of institutions located in Fiji and the United States.

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