

‘Soft Cooperation’: The Necessity of Strengthening Cultural Cooperation between Russia and China

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the growing but underdeveloped role of cultural cooperation in Sino-Russian relations, arguing that it is essential for deepening political trust and enhancing economic collaboration. While political and economic ties between China and Russia are robust, cultural exchange remains limited. The article explores how mutual understanding through cultural initiatives can break down barriers, boost public engagement, and complement strategic objectives like the Belt and Road Initiative and Eurasian partnerships. It also assesses current efforts and future prospects in fostering meaningful people-to-people and institutional exchanges.

Keywords: Sino-Russian relations, cultural cooperation, Belt and Road initiative, economic collaboration, diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

China and Russia are each other's largest neighbours and have established close cooperation over the course of a century of dialogue. In 2013, the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative made cooperation between the two countries more concrete and diverse by expanding energy trade and setting economic corridors.⁷⁴ The two sides have reached comprehensive cooperation in the fields of energy, economy and trade, transportation, humanities, infrastructure and other fields, and have achieved a series of important results. Russia is an active supporter, important participant and major partner of the Belt and Road Initiative and is also an important object for China to achieve political mutual trust.⁷⁵

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⁷⁴ Jane Golley and Adam Ingle. 'The Belt and Road Initiative: How to win friends and influence people.' In *Prosperity*, edited by Jane Golley and Linda Jaivin, 42–60 (Canberra: ANU Press, 2018)

⁷⁵ 'Interview with Li Hui, Chinese Ambassador to Russia 访中国驻俄罗斯大使李辉.' *Official website of the Chinese Embassy in Russia 中国驻俄罗斯大使馆官网*, 22 Apr.2019. Accessed Sep 20, 2024. www.ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/gdtp/201904.

China and Russia have formed a “comprehensive strategic collaborative partnership for the new era” at the political level and are experiencing the “best period” in the development of political relations between the two countries.⁷⁶ In terms of economic cooperation, a growing number of enterprises and products from both countries are entering each other's markets, and the total volume of bilateral trade imports and exports has been rising steadily, exceeding the 100 billion US dollar mark for three consecutive years and heading towards the goal of 200 billion US dollars.⁷⁷

As part of bilateral cooperation, cultural cooperation has not received the attention it deserves in Sino-Russian relations. Although in recent years, under the leadership of the two governments, cultural exchanges between China and Russia have become more frequent, the scale of exchanges and cooperation has continued to expand, and series of ‘theme year’ events have been held.⁷⁸ However, compared with political and economic cooperation, bilateral cultural cooperation requires more mutual understanding, longer-term cooperation and broader public participation.

Using cultural cooperation to further develop political and economic cooperations between China and Russia is not only a chance to be seized, but also necessary for the comprehensive development of relations between the two countries. This article will discuss the necessity of strengthening cultural cooperation between China and Russia from three aspects: cultural cooperation enhances political mutual trust, cultural cooperation promotes economic and trade cooperation, and the current situation and prospects of cultural exchanges between the two countries.

I. CULTURAL COOPERATION ENHANCES POLITICAL TRUST

Political mutual trust is a term that has been repeatedly mentioned in the development of Sino-Russian relations, and it is an important part of political cooperation in Sino-Russian relations. The foundation of mutual trust lies first in the fact that the two countries share common pursuits and interests in international

⁷⁶ Allison Graham, ‘China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making,’ The National Interest, December 14, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-and-russia-strategic-alliance-making-38727>.

⁷⁷Rong Bao 暴蓉, Li Zongjuan 李宗娟, and Cao Guangwei 曹广伟. 《‘Yidai Yilu’ kuangjia xia Zhong’E jingmao hezuo zhuangkuang fenxi》‘一带一路’框架下中俄经贸合作状况分析 (Analysis of Sino-Russian Economic and Trade Cooperation under the Framework of the Belt and Road) . *Shangye jingji* 商业经济 (Business and Economy), 09(2020):87-90+128.

⁷⁸ Guanghui Shi, 石光辉. ‘中俄举办过哪些‘年’ ’ ‘what ‘years’ have China and Russia held,’ *PLA Daily*, March 23, 2013.

affairs. At the same time, this mutual trust is also based on a good understanding between the two sides. Contemporary China and Russia have many areas of common understanding, such as supporting each other's independent exploration of national construction and the flexibility to adjust their own economic policies. The importance of cultural cooperation, an area that cannot be fully expressed in figures, is often overlooked in terms of enhancing political mutual trust.

Culture is a very broad concept that is often interpreted in various ways. Broadly speaking, culture refers to the sum of human wealth formed through participation in society, including both the material and spiritual aspects.⁷⁹ Culture in the narrower sense refers to the complex of shared experience, shared perceptions and shared values.⁸⁰ History, content and stories are the characteristics of cultural expression. They represent the traditional customs, habits, behaviours, thinking and religious beliefs of a country or region, and reflect the differences between regions. It is precisely because of the differences in culture that closer cultural cooperation is particularly important in enhancing mutual trust between the two countries. There are two reasons to support this viewpoint.

Firstly, strengthening cultural cooperation can promote the establishment of positive cooperative relations between China and Russia at the government level. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Russia in 1991, the relations between the two countries had been improving in the 1990s, which had provided a solid foundation for the development of cultural exchange activities between China and Russia.⁸¹ The China-Russia Friendship Association, the China-Russia Committee for UNESCO and the China-Russia Committee for Education, Science, Culture and Health have been established one after another.⁸² Strengthening cultural cooperation can also enable the two governments to have a deeper understanding of each other's core interests, thereby providing solid and effective support in dealing with key issues. For example, Russia supports China's defence of national unity, and China supports Russia's

⁷⁹ Xiaoguang Bai 白晓光. 《Zhong'E wenhua chayi dui liangguo jingmao hezuo de yingxiang》中俄文化差异对两国经贸合作的影响 (Influence of Cultural Differences between China and Russia on Economic and Trade Cooperation of Both Sides). *Xiboliya Yanjiu* 西伯利亚研究 (Siberian Studies), 5(2012):30-33.

⁸⁰ George F. MacDonald, 'What Is Culture?' *The Journal of Museum Education* 16:1 (1991): 9-12.

⁸¹ Wishnick, Elizabeth. 'Russia and China', *Asian Survey* 41:5 (2001): 797.

⁸² Hongbo Zhao 赵洪波. 《Tisheng Zhong'E wenhua waijiao zhanlue de zaisikao》提升中俄文化外交战略的再思考 (Rethinking on the Elevation of Sino-Russia Cultural Diplomacy Strategy). *Dongbeiyi Luntan* 东北亚论坛 (Northeast Asia Forum), 06(2013):107-112, 127.

handling of its own internal affairs in its own way. This is the most important political foundation for the vigorous development of friendly relations between China and Russia.

Secondly, closer cultural cooperation can enable the two peoples to enhance mutual understanding and trust through cultural contact and exchange between the two countries, providing a good foundation for the two peoples to establish cooperative relations in other fields. Through mutual cultural understanding and acceptance, the two peoples can also help to realise various government cooperation plans, creating a beneficial cycle. The promotion of bilateral cultural exchange projects promoted by the Chinese and Russian governments can expand the scope of participation by the people of the two countries, increase the popularity of the projects, and gain more public recognition of cultural cooperation between the two countries, thereby enhancing mutual trust from the bottom up and shaping a positive national image among the people of the other country.

II. CULTURAL COOPERATION PROMOTES ECONOMIC COOPERATION

The cultural differences between the two countries mentioned in the previous section not only negatively impact on enhancement of political mutual trust but also lead to the existence of a ‘cultural barrier’ in economic cooperation between the two countries. Therefore, strengthening cultural cooperation is also necessary to enhance Sino-Russian economic cooperation.

Cultural exchange and cooperation not only allow for a fuller understanding of each other's history, culture, traditions and customs, and the elimination of cultural barriers where possible, but also allows for the identification of cultural commonalities and similar needs and preferences, leading to the establishment of a win-win economic cooperation mechanism. For example, there is a high degree of similarity between China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's proposed concept of ‘building partnerships in Eurasia’, especially in terms of economic and trade content.⁸³ Both initiatives advocate the development of Eurasian transport corridors, strengthening the process of trade and economic integration, removing barriers to economic exchange, and promoting regional interaction. This shows that China and Russia have more common aspirations than differences in terms of future economic development needs, and there is huge potential for cooperation.

⁸³ Sebastien Peyrouse, ‘The Evolution of Russia’s Views on the Belt and Road Initiative,’ *Asia Policy*, 24 (2017): 96–102.

The positive impact of close cultural cooperation on economic cooperation between the two countries is even more obvious when it comes to the market. Cultural understanding is inextricably linked to the market environment. The cultural environments of China and Russia are influenced by historical traditions and the current state of development, and each country displays different characteristics, that directly affect market demand in the two countries.

On a macro level, factors such as the investment environment rooted in the country's history and culture, administrative efficiency, the stability of economic policies, and the robustness of the legal and regulatory systems, and on a micro level, cultural tendencies in different countries and consumer preferences, all these factors can have a significant impact on an investor's choice of market. Cultural exchanges are conducive to understanding the market environment of other countries, enhancing market competitiveness and more accurately positioning market demand, thereby improving the level of bilateral economic cooperation.

III. CURRENT SITUATION AND PROSPECTS OF CULTURAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN CHINA AND RUSSIA

Although cultural cooperation has a positive impact on strengthening political mutual trust between China and Russia and improving the level of economic cooperation between the two countries, compared with the close political cooperation between the two countries and the increasing trade volume over the years, cultural cooperation between China and Russia still has certain limitations. Cooperation between the two countries in the cultural field is still dominated by government-promoted projects, and there is not much interaction between the public and the commercial sectors. Although official endorsement increases the popularity of bilateral cultural cooperation to a certain extent, it still does not sufficiently guide public exchanges and has not formed an effective interactive mechanism. There is also a lag in following up on market cooperation, which has prevented the influence of cultural cooperation from being expanded, thus reducing the motivating effect on economic cooperation.⁸⁴

Both China and Russia attach insufficient importance to the promotion of each other's modern literary and artistic works in their respective countries. Cultural exchanges between the two countries were once close

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Wishneck, (2001): 811.

during the Soviet era, and a large amount of Soviet literature had a significant impact on Chinese youth and society at the time.⁸⁵ However, at the current stage, the literature of the two countries has not been fully translated and published. Chinese audiences rarely see modern Russian literary works, and they know very little about modern Russian books, movies, and music. At the same time, the knowledge of Russian audiences on Chinese literary field is also quite limited. The lack of understanding of each other's cultural development status by the peoples of the two countries is not conducive to exchanges between the peoples of the two countries, nor is it conducive to public market cooperation.

To deal with these limitations, the two countries have first increased bilateral cultural cooperation at the government level. However, unlike the previous more macroscopic intergovernmental cooperation, the focus in recent years has been on strengthening local cooperations which cultural cooperation is also one of the priorities. The two heads of state have designated 2018 and 2019 as the 'Year of China-Russia Local Cooperation and Exchange'.⁸⁶ The two sides will make full use of the intergovernmental and local cooperation mechanisms between the two countries to further explain economic policies and create a business-friendly environment. At the same time, they intend to stimulate the enthusiasm of enterprises in both countries to cooperate, and to drive more enterprises and people to join China-Russia cooperation to realise the potential of bilateral cooperation.

At the level of Sino-Russian public cultural cooperation, more specific cultural projects are being promoted, such as planning of tourist routes, co-production of film and television works, promotion of language schools and cultural publicity platforms.⁸⁷ Among these initiatives, the achievements of Sino-Russian cross-border e-commerce cooperation are particularly notable. About 90% of Russian cross-border goods come from China, and the Russian Post has increased the number and frequency of flights to China for this

⁸⁵ Bingshuang Han 韩冰霜. 《Zhong'E wenhua jiaoliu wenti yanjiu chutan》中俄文化交流问题研究初探 (A preliminary study on the issue of Sino-Russian cultural exchange). *Xiandai Jiaoji* 现代交际 (Modern Communication), 07(2015):59.

⁸⁶ 'Interview with Li Hui, Chinese Ambassador to Russia 访中国驻俄罗斯大使李辉.' *Official website of the Chinese Embassy in Russia* 中国驻俄罗斯大使馆官网, 22 Apr.2019. Accessed Sep 20, 2024. www.ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/gdtp/201904.

⁸⁷ Xiaoqian Sun 孙晓谦. 《Heilongjiang Sheng dui E lvyou jinianpin shichang kaifa wenti yanjiu》黑龙江省对俄旅游纪念品市场开发问题研究 (Research on the development of the Russian tourism souvenir market in Heilongjiang Province). *Xiboliya Yanjiu* 西伯利亚研究 (Siberian Studies), 1(2012):11-13.

purpose.⁸⁸ In China, more and more Russian goods such as flour, sausages, pickles, juice, cheese, honey and vodka, are becoming well-known to the public through cross-border e-commerce.⁸⁹ Close cultural cooperation can provide a broader channel of communication between the e-commerce platforms of the two countries, allowing China's e-commerce experience to help Russia develop its own e-commerce services, thereby improving the efficiency of cross-border e-commerce cooperation between the two countries.

CONCLUSION

Many limitations need to be broken through in the development of cultural cooperation between China and Russia for historical and cultural reasons. Nevertheless, relatively lagging cultural cooperation needs to be given more attention, which can not only enhance political mutual trust between China and Russia but also promote bilateral economic cooperation. More importantly, strengthening cultural exchanges between the two countries can promote a better understanding of each other's domestic situations and lay a good foundation for the subsequent comprehensive development of Sino-Russian relations. China and Russia should, under the guidance of the governments of both countries, be aware of the need to enhance cultural cooperation, to increase public participation, enrich the content of cooperation, give full play to the potential of cooperation, and thus form a mutually beneficial cycle with the political and economic cooperation between the two countries.

⁸⁸ Litao Tan 谭丽涛. 《‘Yidai Yilu’ changyi xia Zhong’E kuajing dianshang fazhan de tiaozhan yu celue》 ‘一带一路’倡议下中俄跨境电商发展的挑战与策略 (Challenges and strategies for the development of cross-border e-commerce between China and Russia under the Belt and Road Initiative). *Shangye Jingji Yanjiu* 商业经济研究 (Journal of Commercial Economics), 22(2020):149-152.

⁸⁹ Daye Chu, ‘30% More Chinese Tourists Expected to Visit Russian Capital in 2024: Moscow Tourism, Official - People’s Daily Online,’ People.cn, May 25, 2024, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2024/0525/c90000-20174073.html>.

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