

Cultural Diplomacy and China's Image in Southeast Asia: Managing Bilateral Relations through Soft Power

Xinyue Ma

Graduate Institute of Politics, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan, 106923, China

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy; Soft Power; Geopolitical Tensions; China-Southeast Asia Relations

Abstract: This research explores China's use of Cultural Diplomacy as a Soft Power measure to ensure its image is well-managed and sustains good diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian countries, especially during geo-political tension. Based on Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, the study aims to identify the positive effects of cultural diplomacy in the form of Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges, and cultural festivals to shape the public's attitude positively. Utilising historical and contemporary texts, official documentation, surveys, and scholarly literature, the study builds an analytical framework for evaluating how cultural diplomacy works, what occurs in the short and long term, and how it interplays with other modes of diplomacy. These studies reveal that China's cultural diplomacy can temporarily enhance its image and may well do so through the dissemination of educational programs as well as cultural exchanges with Southeast Asian people. However, such outcomes are not easily achieved, and the continuation of these initiatives over the long term depends on people's consistent interest in such issues as well as the incorporation of these initiatives within broader diplomatic approaches. Vietnam and the Philippines, with their conflicts over the South China Sea's sovereignty, escalate significant challenges to cultural diplomacy since animosities may trace themselves back to their long-standing political heritage. However, in countries with no hostility to China, cultural diplomacy has been proven to help form a positive image of the country in other countries.

1. Introduction

China's emerging global power status over the recent past has been associated with significant processes of identity reconstruction in international politics. This can be seen most visibly in Southeast Asia, where China's geostrategic designs collide with the world's increasingly sophisticated approaches to sustaining harmonious and friendly relations with neighbors [15](Lum et al., 2013). Southeast Asia, an ancient and essential trade region strategically located along the sea routes and integral to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), reinforces Chinese responsibilities in managing political diplomacy while simultaneously controlling its image in the face of tensions. This image management is essential to cultural diplomacy, a tool that relies on cultural, educational, and historical resources to promote goodwill, understanding, and prevention of strife in diplomacy.

The problem is that Southeast Asia differs from China in terms of political systems, historical

issues between countries, and territorial claims in the South China Sea conflict. A case in point is the South China Sea disputes, which have sparked tensions between China and several regional countries, including Vietnam and the Philippines [3](Center for Preventive Action, 2024). While China lays down its stakes in the Asia-Pacific, it must also present itself as a friendly and aggressive regional player in equal measure. This is where cultural diplomacy comes in handy.

Cultural diplomacy remains essential to China's soft power, defined as utilizing cultural assets to change the foreign population's consciousness and develop or stabilize interstate relations. For instance, China has been using cultural attractiveness techniques like establishing the Confucius Institute, cultural events, student exchange programs, and media diplomacy to create a positive image in the long run since there is cultural and historical affinity. The current study seeks to identify how China employs cultural diplomacy to maintain its national branding and remain a 'good friend' to Southeast Asian countries, especially during diplomatic friction. Therefore, the emphasis will be on delving into the fluctuations of China's short-term image and the causes of such changes, and evaluating how China has built a new paradigm for boosting bilateral good friendship image.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Case Study Approach

This research, therefore, employs a qualitative research strategy, using a case study to assess how China uses cultural diplomacy to secure its image in Southeast Asia, where conflicts are rife. In an attempt to discover similarities and differences in the impact of cultural diplomacy for three selected countries of South East Asia: Vietnam, The Philippines, and Indonesia, this paper aims to outline the role of cultural diplomacy in shaping Chinese image in different political and societal surroundings [26](Shuto, 2018). These countries have different levels of engagement with China, accompanied by lines of collaboration and rivalry for influence based on shared and disputed history, territorial disputes, and economic power.

2.1.1. Vietnam

Vietnam shares its border with China, and their relationship is complex, integrating mutual collaboration and rivalry. Despite both countries being socialist republics and having cultural similarities due to Confucianism and historical connections, their relationship is often influenced by territorial disputes linked to the South China Sea [29](Thanh Hai, 2021). The Chinese attempts at positively influencing the perception of the Vietnamese have been mainly through cultural diplomacy that hails historical and ideological similarities; however, a great deal of mistrust exists between China and Vietnam.

2.1.2. Philippines

In the Philippine context, cultural diplomacy is the balancing of historical animosities and the more recent security threats and confrontations with China in the South China Sea. Although tensions have been between the countries, evidenced by the 2016 international tribunal ruling that rebuked China's sovereignty over this nation's waters, Beijing has, over the years, campaigned to cultivate a better image through soft power diplomacy, which entails offering scholarships, cultural troupes, education [9](ICG, 2024).

2.1.3. Indonesia

It is crucial because Indonesia has an unclear stance concerning China, which is more antagonistic than China's relations with Vietnam and the Philippines. Indonesia is not as directly implicated in territorial disputes in the South China Sea [28](Sugiarto et al. Raharjo, 2024). However, Indonesia is concerned with the emerging China domination in the region using economic avenues such as the BRI. Educational exchanges and Confucianism have been the main propaganda tools of Chinese soft power in Indonesia so as not to offend political sensibilities.

2.2. Data Collection

This research will, therefore, use both primary and secondary data to uncover China's cultural diplomacy in the Southeast Asia region. These are government documents, speeches by Chinese and SE Asia leaders, and polls and public opinion surveys. These are the policy briefs, press statements, and reports of organizations like ASEAN, which surface China's diplomacy and the consequences that identify cultural promotions. For instance, policy briefs by authorities and ASEAN documents contain crucial information on how China registers cultural diplomacy in international relations as a subspecies of regional diplomacy [7][30](Huang, 2024; Yu, 2024). These speeches provide background information on how China and Southeast Asian nations view cultural diplomacy in explaining the assimilation of China's soft power.

Opinion polls ranging from Pew Global Research to ASEAN-related studies can also gauge how the average Southeast Asian feels about China. It depicts shifts in perception in response to specific cultural diplomacy activities, such as establishing the Confucius Institute or political sore points, such as the dispute of South China Sea [21](Pew Research Center, 2014). For example, surveys conducted before or after educational exchange activities or cultural celebrations give a quantified understanding of what Southeast Asian populations perceive of China's soft power and cultural diplomacy, thus giving a quantitative analysis of their success.

Secondary sources are scholarly articles and expert papers covering the topic of China's cultural diplomacy approaches. Researchers like Joseph Nye offer the theoretical background to soft power, insisting that cultural capital defines international relations [19](Nye, 2004). Some academic think tanks that presented quantitative data and a theoretical framework, thus culminating in how cultural diplomacy affects the public's perception of Southeast Asia, include the East Asia Institute and Lowy Institute. Along with the primary sources, these secondary sources help create a basis for comprehending China's cultural diplomacy and its potential influence on the sociopolitical structure of the world.

3. Literature Review

In most cases, cultural diplomacy has been pivotal to international relations since nations increasingly rely on soft power strategies to enhance their global image. China has been conveying its images through cultural diplomacy through cultural attractions such as the Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges, and cultural and educational relations with Southeast Asian countries. This section seeks to examine the existing literature on China's cultural diplomacy, emphasizing Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia in analyzing the efficacy of China's cultural diplomacy in strengthening its bilateral friendly relations in the region.

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power education provides the theoretical underpinning of this study on China's cultural diplomacy. Soft power is a kind of power that deals with the practice of attracting people gently and without force to do a particular thing, mainly using cultural and political values and treaties [19](Nye, 2004). In this regard, China has applied cultural diplomacy as

a soft power instrument to improve its image in Southeast Asia, a region fraught with tensions and conflicts. For instance, introducing the Confucius institutes and exchange programs conducive to Southeast Asian students is Nye's assertion of creating attraction by the wheel of culture and education that peddles China as a friendly and constructive neighbor.

Some of the specificities of China's soft power strategy are worth highlighting. The role of Confucius Institutes in China's soft power strategy is particularly noteworthy. These are learning institutions that were set in different Southeast Asian countries to popularize Chinese language and culture as well as strengthen educational and cultural connections[12] (Lesego, 2021). In the opinion of Nur Mutia and de Archellie (2023), based on the data obtained, Confucius Institutes have become the primary tool of Chinese soft power in considered countries like Indonesia, where they have managed to enroll Chinese language and culture enthusiasts among students and professionals [18]. These institutes are part of China's more extensive strategy of cultivating friendly ties with the future leaders of the Southeast Asian region whose images of China may have been positively shaped by their experiences in those institutes.

However, political tensions, such as the historical and territorial disputes between Vietnam and the Philippines, significantly challenge China's cultural diplomacy. Vietnam is another Southeast Asian country where China seeks to create a positive image based on shared cultural and ideological perspectives; however, historical animosity and the dispute in the South China Sea hinder that process. Selezneva (2021) established that although some groups of people have a positive outlook towards China, such as those who have interacted with China in formal exchange programs, most people distrust China because of past hostilities and geo-political factors[25]. Likewise, the 2016 arbitration that threw out China's claims in the South China Sea still looms large over China's cultural diplomacy[23]. Despite the current Chinese government's pushes for increased cultural exchange through the granting of scholarships and hosting of cultural fairs and festivals, the Philippine public is still polarized, and there are still numerous Filipinos with a prejudicial attitude against the Chinese.

On the other hand, Indonesia proved to be more accommodating to China's approach to cultural diplomacy. In that sense, while Vietnam and the Philippines are actively involved in a territorial controversy with China, Indonesia, in contrast to them, could be considered a more suitable target for a cultural attack. With the help of the Confucius Institutes as well as Chinese cultural festivals in Indonesia over the years, perceptions towards China have been positively impacted in Indonesia, especially for people in both educational and business purposes in China, including the young generation, as remarked by Peng, 2024[20]. Nonetheless, issues about China's cultural diplomacy in Indonesia emerge, linked to its increasing soft power economic influence, such as the BRI. Some Indonesians are wary of China's lending power as they suppose it may erode Indonesia's sovereignty.

Therefore, the cultural diplomacy of China in the Southeast Asian region is an exercise that takes place within a strategic context and pictures informed by historical enmities and issues of territoriality, which often restricts the freedom of soft power instrumentality. Nevertheless, where institutions such as Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges, and cultural festivals have been tried and tested, they have become helpful in regions like Indonesia. However, they pose massive challenges in areas affiliated with conflicts like Vietnam and the Philippines. Therefore, for cultural diplomacy to have a longer-lasting effect on the international level, it must be coordinated with other political and economic tools that may influence the existing negative tendencies and conflicts.

4. Analytical Framework

This research proposes an analytical structure that defines the components of the study on

Chinese cultural diplomacy in SE Asia and distinguishes between the instruments of impact and the transient and sustained outcomes of cultural diplomacy and its correlation with other types of diplomacy. This framework was developed to establish how soft power Chinese affairs operate beneath international relations, especially during bilateral conflicts. As a result of disaggregating and assessing each aspect of cultural diplomacy, the framework enables a more nuanced analysis of the significance of cultural diplomacy in favorably portraying China in the region.

The first of the analytical tools relies on identifying the processes by which cultural diplomacy affects the people. China's cultural diplomacy does have educational exchanges, language promotion, and cultural festivals as its functions. All these mechanisms are quite different in how they are used to build positive attitudes towards China among Southeast Asian people. They are essential to developing long-lasting relations between China and Southeast Asian countries, such as educational exchanges. China has alumni with first-hand experience of the Chinese culture, language, and society through scholarships and student exchange programs [4](Cui, 2022). Such people bring positive perceptions of China back to their homesteads, where they may occupy critical political, economic, or social stations. Therefore, cultural and diplomatic practice in education and exchanges helps to nurture another constituency that is considerably more than superficial cultural diplomacy.

The second way is through language promotion, and the primary tool widely used is the establishment of Confucius Institutes. Operated as language schools and cultural outreach centres, Confucius Institutes contribute to disseminating the Chinese language and promoting Chinese culture among Southeast Asian peoples. As these institutes push for Mandarin as an asset to spur economic and diplomatic relations, they impact the perception of China as a cultural and economic giant [18] (Nur Mutia & de Archellie, 2023). Possessing Confucius Institutes in different Southeast Asian nations shows China's interest and intent to strengthen cultural relations and foster sustainable relations, apart from being a soft-power projection.

Intermittent interaction through cultural festivals and shared art performances creates this framework's third type of influence. By such an event, China wants to showcase the cultural history of China and its cultured nation. Entertainment in terms of art, music, and film festivals is an ideal way to encourage people of Southeast Asian nations to take a non-political approach towards China and its culture. Significantly, China does not lose cultural interaction during the manifestation of geo-political animosity – these festivals help preserve cultural contact. Since they emphasize social-cultural similarities and connections, such events help minimize animosity that other factors, such as political and physical division of the regions in question, might occasion.

The analytical framework's second aspect divides cultural diplomacy's effects into immediate and long-term. Whereas specific events, for example, cultural fairs or events involving celebrities, may produce noticeable shifts in how people think instantly, their lasting outcomes require continued involvement. In general, short-term positive changes in the Chinese image can be seen following specific events like the opening of a new Confucius Institute or an education exchange agreement [4](Cui, 2022). These events foster short-term positive evaluations of China and among those applicants directly benefitting from the programs.

However, merely engaging in cultural diplomacy has some limitations due to the complexity of the culture, and it needs to be done correctly and for an extended period. Language and culture programs such as Confucius Institutes and exchange programs foster long-term cognitive transformation due to the sustainable relations created between China and the Southeast Asian states [13](Li & King, 2024). These programs enhance cultural appreciation and create lasting positive attitudes since they create familiarity with the Chinese culture. The framework's structure ensures that the long-term causality is considered by emphasizing the effects of continued cultural diplomacy on bilateral relations.

Finally, the last dimension analyses the correlation between cultural diplomacy and other forms, such as economic and political diplomacy. It is used with other strategies, usually applied alongside economic frameworks, like the BRI or political measures [21] (Pew Research Center, 2014). This framework looks at how cultural diplomacy can either support or offset the more forceful forms of diplomacy measures. For instance, whenever conflicts over territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea escalate, Beijing takes up its cultural diplomacy to avoid worsening relations. Along with economic cooperation, the spun cultural exchange also makes China a cultural partner, further strengthening the belief that China's rise will benefit the region.

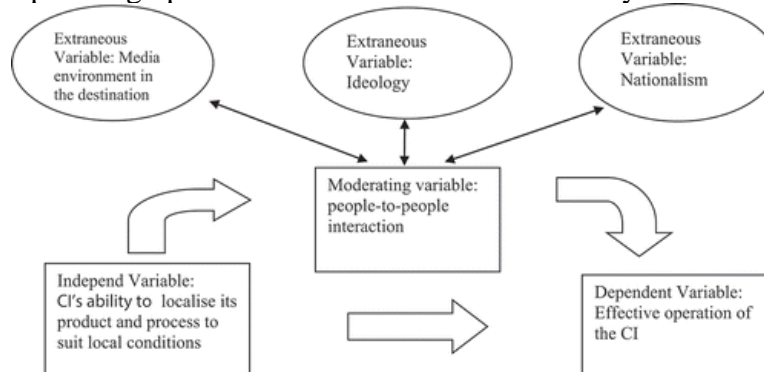
5. Theory and Calculation

5.1. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy in International Relations

In conceptualising China's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia, soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye, is indispensable. Soft power refers to strengthen your status by utilizing the ability to 'persuade others to do what you desire without coercion,' relying on things like culture, political values as well as policies [23] (Sayama, 2016). For China, soft power plays a significant role in Southeast Asia because of the historical animosities, current controversies in the region, and economic rivalry, which make soft power strategies likely to incite resistance rather than collaboration.

Cultural diplomacy is a branch of soft power, and it is the process of capturing the hearts and minds of people of other countries using aspects of culture, including language, education, arts, and historical relationships (see Figure 1). China's cultural approaches in Southeast Asia include setting up Confucius Institutes, conducting Chinese cultural festivals, encouraging cultural exchanges in education, and spreading Chinese media and films [31](Zapata, 2023). Such initiatives are aimed not only at creating a positive image of China worldwide but also as a reaction to the messages portraying China as an invasive regional hegemon, especially with the conflict in the South China Sea.

Through positive cultural diplomacy, China has aimed to enhance its relations with its counterpart Southeast Asian nations by promoting its persona as a friendly and cooperative neighbour. This effort is essential since China has gradually started playing a more significant role in the region through investment and military power [22] (Saaida, 2023). Cultural diplomacy assists China in managing concerns over its rise and the consequences it imposes on Southeast Asian countries, as well as spreading optimism that China's rise is for everyone's benefit.



Note: Adapted from Liu, X. (2018). China's Cultural Diplomacy: A Great Leap Outward with Chinese Characteristics? Multiple Comparative Case Studies of the Confucius Institutes. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28(118), 646–661. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1557951>

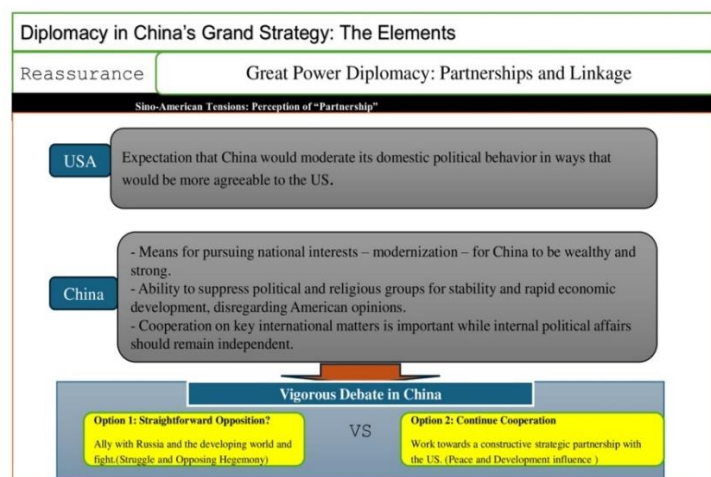
Figure 1: Chinese cultural diplomacy

5.2. Strategic Calculations behind China's Cultural Diplomacy

Therefore, Chinese soft power projection in Southeast Asia is not altruistic; it is a form of statecraft to obtain immediate and future goals (see Figure 2). In the short-run context, cultural diplomacy is an instrument for handling conflicts due to the stability of geo-political relations. For instance, during turmoil over the South China Sea territorial concerns, cultural diplomacy patterns have been augmented: holding cultural fests, promoting CI, and offering scholarships to Southeast Asian students [24] (Scobell et al., 2020). These actions are intended to change China's perception and encourage Southeast Asian nations to recall cultural and historical relatedness.

In the long term, it wants to build goodwill to form a conducive environment for achieving its regional strategic objectives. By inviting Southeast Asian students to study in China, engaging in language training, and sponsoring cultural activities, China aims to cultivate a batch of Southeast Asian leaders likelier to see China as a friend since they have been influenced by China's policy, language, and culture. This long-term strategy is seen in how China has placed Confucius Institutes in every Southeast Asian country [24] (Scobell et al., 2020). These institutions help to spread the Chinese language and culture while also being a way to cultivate stable relations with future leaders of Southeast Asia.

Using strategies in China's cultural diplomacy is also guided by intelligent power, which combines soft as well as hard power. Cultural diplomacy is one of the soft power mechanisms that China has actively used with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) economic project. Culture as well as Economic Interests: Through cultural diplomacy, together with providing economic assistance and financing infrastructure projects, China aims to be seen as both a cultural and economic benefactor to the countries of Southeast Asia [1](Bush, 2021). Such a two-pronged approach lets Beijing look like a kind-hearted power while at the same time benefitting from it economically and politically.



Note: Adapted from The Diplomatic Face of China's Grand Strategy: A Rising Power's Emerging Choice Avery Goldstein by Titaya Chewchinda. (2019). Slideplayer.com.
<https://slideplayer.com/slide/10922157/>

Figure 2: Diplomacy in China's Grand Strategy

5.3. Image Management and Soft Power in Bilateral Relations

Credibility is essential to power because it embodies a country's reputation, which is essential for achieving diplomatic goals. Image management relates to strategic attempts by states to build a positive image internationally using a variety of foreign instruments, including soft power and cultural relations, media diplomacy, and public diplomacy [5](Gautam et al., 2023). Image management is critical to Southeast Asia since the region is strategic and contentious, and sovereignty issues breed suspicion regarding China's motives.

Cultural diplomacy is essential for managing China's image worldwide because China can identify itself as a peaceful country with a rich culture and eagerness to cooperate. While promoting China's cultural exports and forging cultural connections, China also aims to challenge those who portray it as an oppressive bully [5](Gautam et al., 2023). This is significant, especially in Vietnam and the Philippines, where territorial issues and historical conflicts have led to high scepticism of China amongst the masses.

At the same time, cultural diplomacy can moderate the consequences of China's assertiveness. For instance, when China adopted a more assertive approach in the South China Sea disputes, it ramped up cultural diplomacy to soften the public relations blowback [5](Gautam et al., 2023). This dual strategy benefits China in achieving its geo-political goals as it is couched under cooperation and goodwill. The effectiveness of China's cultural diplomacy regarding image management depends upon specific attributes, primarily the political environment of the host nation, the past animosities, and the extent of the people's awareness of China's cultural programs. If territorial issues dominate conflict perceptions, as in the case of Vietnam and the Philippines, cultural diplomacy can offer only short-term improvement of negative attitudes. However, in countries where diplomatic relations with China are not as tense as in some other nations, one can point at cultural diplomacy as capable of creating a favorable image.

5.4. Challenges of Cultural Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

Nevertheless, more than one can at least appraise the idea's existence; several issues may challenge China's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia. One of the significant causes of conflict is the belief that Beijing's cultural propaganda is an actual plot of domination. Cultural diplomacy in many SEA countries, especially those with territorial issues with China, is perceived with apprehension [10](Julia Luong Dinh et al., 2024). Some people view efforts of the Chinese government to advocate language learning and exchange as attempts to influence local elites and public opinion to benefit Beijing's strategic interests.

The other is the problem of substantial conventional barriers, making overcoming ancient animosities and preconceptions hard. In some states, such as Vietnam – the historical conflicts with China are still vivid; therefore, initiatives such as cultural diplomacy could be viewed as shallow and an attempt to shift the focus from more significant political questions [17](Müller et al., 2024). In countries like the Philippines, where China has dedicated much attention to building cultural bridges, public opinion remains polarised because of China's behaviour in the West Philippine Sea.

Furthermore, what hampers cultural diplomacy is that it is rarely an independent process but is overdetermined by global political processes. This approach can create goodwill and enhance understanding, which is evident in culture exchange programs and educational exchanges. However, such engagements may not solve significant issues defining world relations. Southeast Asia is an area where territorial issues and economic rivalry are significant sources of animosity; cultural diplomacy needs to be combined with other types of diplomacy that include economic partnership and conflict management if the results are to be sustainable.

6. Results

6.1. The Philippines Case Study

By examining the qualifications of China's cultural diplomacy efforts in the Philippines, we shall explore the potential and constraints of soft power in navigating bilateral relationships in times of crisis. Among the ASEAN members, the Philippines can be considered one of the most directly affected by the problems around the South China Sea, which means it has had a tense relationship with China. Another low point for both parties was reached in 2016 when the Permanent Court of Arbitration annulled China's extensive South China Sea jurisdiction [8](ICG, 2021). However, in cases where such tensions were present, China opted to employ cultural diplomacy to soothe its image before the Filipino population.

Various soft-power activities that China has undertaken in the Philippines include opening several Confucius Institutes throughout prominent cities in the Philippines to advance appreciation of the Chinese language and culture. These institutes have contributed significantly to enhancing cultural exchanges between the two countries, especially among the youth who are keen on learning the Chinese language as well as seeking education or employment opportunities in China. Further, some cultural festivals such as Chinese art, film, and music festivals have been staged in the Philippines to sell China.

Education and scholarship have also been part of China's cultural diplomacy in the Philippines, as manifested in this event. The desire to develop long-term positive relations has seen Chinese authorities offer scholarships to Filipino students to pursue their studies in China and may grow up to have a more favourable perception of China [11](Latief & Lefen, 2018). These educational exchanges have influenced the community as college students of Filipino descent who had a chance to study in Chinese educational institutions differ from their counterparts who ever had an opportunity to be in China and perceive China more positively than the latter.

However, more than all these endeavours are needed to end the ambiguity of China's image in the Philippines. Despite the positive shifts in attitude observed as part of cultural diplomacy efforts, which include short-term gains heightened among the youths and participants of cultural programs, a more fundamental assessment of China's capability remains influenced negatively by territorial claims over the South China Sea [27](Stevic, 2020). Polls taken in the years after the 2016 arbitration decision revealed that a majority of the Filipino population remained wary of China, especially regarding South China Sea issues.

Besides, it has also been observed that cultural diplomacy from China toward the Philippines has enjoyed lukewarm success due to these geo-political considerations. Though these cultural interactions have provided some positive impressions through the construction of Confucius Institutes, they have failed to offset the effect of China's militant actions in the South China Sea regions. The Philippines' recent decision to enhance military cooperation with the US, and more notably, naval exercises, demonstrate China's strategic presumption and, thus, fail to accept China's cultural diplomacy fully.

6.2. Vietnam Case Study

Due to historical bilateral relations, Vietnam remains among the most problematic countries for China's cultural diplomacy. Despite the cultural and ideological similarities in both being Confucianized societies and members of the socialist bloc, the bilateral China-Vietnam relationship is a volatile one due to border disputes and historical enmity that resulted from the 1979 China-Vietnam war. It indicates that despite cultural diplomacy efforts being made, historical hatred still festers with the Vietnamese public towards China, so it cannot make a lasting difference.

Culture, one of the aspects of China's soft power in Vietnam, has been upheld in promoting cultural values for both countries and exchanging education between the two nations. Chinese teaching centres in Vietnam can be seen as promoting the Chinese language and culture, and China has invested much time in Vietnamese students' scholarship programs and sent them to China to study [25](Selezneva, 2021). Moreover, cultural fairs reflecting the Chinese–Vietnamese friendly relations have been conducted to remind the historical relations between the two countries.

Nevertheless, all these efforts have yet to be very successful. Nevertheless, negative attitudes towards China dominate the Vietnamese population, even if some segments of that population, including young people who have experienced educational exchange with China, have more positive perceptions of China [25](Selezneva, 2021). Studies done among the Vietnamese people show that most Vietnamese citizens see China as a threat, albeit with conflicts arising in the South China Sea.

One of the most significant obstacles for China regarding its soft power activism in Vietnam is the historical background of the two states' bilateral relations. Historical enmity and more recent uncertainty about China's intentions regarding Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the South China Sea hinder cultural diplomacy efforts from taking root. Even though educational exchanges and cultural festivals have been marked with goodwill for some time, the broader structural forces mostly overshadow this and shape the bilateral relations in a particular way.

Furthermore, Vietnam's formation of strategic partnerships with other regional and extra-regional countries, especially with the United States, complicates China's attempt to soften its image through cultural diplomacy [25] (Selezneva, 2021). Vietnam's recent decision to enhance its military cooperation with the USA and conduct a naval exercise in the South China Sea indicates its strategic efforts to counterbalance China. In this regard, cultural diplomacy by itself cannot change Vietnam's strategic orientation or substantially alter Vietnamese people's perception of China.

6.3. Indonesia Case Study

Vietnam and the Philippines are traditionally hostile to China, while Indonesia can be considered more non-aligned and favorable to Chinese cultural diplomacy. As for Indonesia, it is not directly a party to the disputes in the South China Sea to the extent that Vietnam and the Philippines are. Unlike Vietnam and the Philippines, Indonesia has no historical conflict with China [16](Ma & Kang, 2023). Consequently, there has been more success in Chinese cultural diplomacy towards shaping the reception of Chinese culture in Indonesia via education and cultural relations.

China's cultural diplomacy in Indonesia mainly involves teaching the Chinese language through the Confucius Institutes and student exchange between Chinese and Indonesian Universities. Mandarin language courses in Indonesia's Confucius Institutes have attracted many young students who seek business or educational experiences in China [16](Ma & Kang, 2023). Further, China has been celebrating cultural festivals in Indonesia to promote the understanding of Chinese culture in arts and music films.

The brightest aspect of China's cultural diplomacy in Indonesia is maintaining a lasting partnership based on education exchanges. Indonesian students who go to China have a positive attitude toward China, and most get critical positions in governance, business, and academic institutions. In this way, the Chinese authorities have created many friends and like-minded individuals in Indonesia who see China as a significant business and cultural asset.

However, some reservations have been observed in cultural diplomacy between China and Indonesia: Confucius Institutes and educational exchanges have also contributed to a certain measure of friendly relations; however, the Chinese political economy's influence makes some sections of the Indonesian population uncomfortable, primarily through the Belt and Road Initiative

[20](Peng, 2024). The opponents oppose Chinese involvement, stating that Indonesian reliance on Chinese funding and investments, especially in the infrastructure sector, compromises Indonesian sovereignty.

Furthermore, there are questions about the long-term future of China's cultural diplomacy in Indonesia. Thus, even though the educational exchanges and cultural festivals positively affected the perception, they may need more impact to offset concerns over China's economic and political domination in the region. While Indonesia continues to experiment with the nature of its relationship with China, the effectiveness of China's cultural engagement will, again, be contingent on finding the right balance between cultural outreach and economic entrenchment to manage Indonesian suspicions.

7. Discussion

7.1. The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Bilateral Relations

The achievements of the case studies of this research show that cultural diplomacy has a significant yet relatively restrained function in managing China's image in Southeast Asia. Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia are the selected countries where China has used cultural diplomacy to soften people's attitudes toward it and create a favorable sentiment, particularly when bilateral relations have been slightly strained [2](Caruso, 2020). However, such efforts' impact depends on the nation's historical, political, and social realities.

However, in Vietnam and the Philippines, for example, where political enmity is marked by territorial claims to the disputed islands and historical tensions, the aims and objectives of cultural diplomacy aimed at creating a positive image of China have been meagre. Although educational exchange and cultural festivals have gone a long way to build positive fever among various groups and individuals in the two societies, they are not enough to eradicate the entrenched enmity that defines them [2](Caruso, 2020). However, the sentiment in both countries is still mixed, with people still harboring distrust towards China because of its actions in the South China Sea and the region.

On the other hand, where relations are not imprinted with historical and territorial crises, such as in Indonesia, cultural diplomacy has been more influential in disseminating a favorable perception of China. Educational and cultural fairs have been fruitful in improving goodwill among young Indonesians, most of whom perceive China as a promising partner in trade and educational endeavors [2](Caruso, 2020). Nevertheless, like in any other country, people in Indonesia want China to stay strong economically in Indonesia and the rest of the African continent through its Belt and Road initiative, posing a problem to the long-success of Chinese cultural diplomacy.

Another important finding of this study is that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends on the external environment or setting under consideration. Where hatred and discord result from past questionable treatments and boundary disputes, cultural diplomacy can bring temporary respite and foster positive feelings toward one's country. However, it cannot be expected to change people's minds permanently. In these cases, cultural diplomacy should be incorporated with other types of diplomacy, such as political, military, and economic diplomacy, to be effective.

7.2. Challenges and Limitations of China's Cultural Diplomacy

Sometimes, China's cultural diplomacy attempts to influence the perception of the Southeast Asian population, garner some success, but are not devoid of challenges [6](Grincheva,2021). This has been most evident in one of the critical obstacles: the belief that China's soft power initiatives are a covert means of domination. The idea of cultural diplomacy is not well received, especially in many Southeast Asian countries that feel that China threatens their territorial integrity [14](Liu,

2018). One potential issue with China's promotion of language learning and cultural exchange initiatives is that these are meant to bring over local elites and change public opinion in China's favor. This perception is quite vivid in Vietnam and the Philippines, where the people still need to be more knowledgeable about Chinese goodwill despite many Chinese cultural diplomacy initiatives. In these countries, culture is regarded as a trick that masks real issues, such as political ones, territorial disputes or economic rivalry. Hence, although cultural diplomacy does help to improve the perception of China in the short run, it can only bring significant shifts in the masses' attitudes in the long run if the conflict at the systemic level is resolved.

The final issue that remains to be solved for China in trying to promote its cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia is the problem of historical enmity. This is true, especially in countries such as Vietnam, which still remembers the past conflict with China; hence, what appears as cultural diplomacy may end up being countered by past experiences [14](Liu, 2018). While educational exchanges and cultural festivals can do much to build goodwill, it has been seen that more is needed to overcome the underlying misconceptions that inform the general international relations between the two countries. Moreover, China's extent of success in the cultural diplomacy strategy is sometimes hampered by the underlying political relations in this region. This indicates that cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia must be complementary with traditional and other forms of diplomacy due to issues of sovereignty and economic rivalry. Cultural exchanges and educational programs are effective means of building goodwill. However, they often need to solve the problems that constitute the basis of the relations between the two countries.

In this regard, it is essential to note that there is the issue of the future stability of China's cultural diplomacy activities in Southeast Asia. Short-term impact may be achieved through such events as exchange programs, educational fairs, cultural festivals, and other friendly gestures enabling change in perception. However, these efforts may only be sustainable in changing public perception with continuous efforts and political diplomacy strategies [14](Liu, 2018). Take Indonesia, for instance. Public opinion towards China is generally positive; therefore, cultural diplomacy has positively influenced the image. Still, the perception of the rise of Chinese economic power through such projects as the Belt and Road Initiative threatens the sustainability of such moves.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, analyzing Chinese cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia is crucial in understanding the broader Chinese management strategy for its national image and sustaining friendly bilateral relations. Cooperation in culture and education has primarily been evident in the establishment of the Confucius Institutes, a celebration of cultural fairs, and exchange programs, which have positively promoted goodwill and enhanced China's soft power diplomacy in the region. However, these attempts depend on the general geo-political environment and have been less successful in the states where contentious nationalistic issues such as territorial and historical disputes prevail in relations.

Vietnam and the Philippines are two examples where territorial and historical Issues, especially over the South China Sea, have influenced public perception, and years of cultural diplomacy have only brought short-term gains for China in changing the perception of people in these countries. On the other hand, in Indonesia, which does not have hostile relations with China, cultural diplomacy has been much more effective in helping build a positive image among the younger generation. In the next stage, China's cultural diplomacy should evolve further and align with the diplomatic and economic strategic approaches to help avoid weaknesses in the relations with the Southeast Asian partners. By tackling the roots of geo-political rivalry and fostering sustainable bilateral cooperation through education and culture, China may develop a more holistic strategy for shaping its image

and preserving its clout in the region.

References

- [1] Bush, J. (2021). *China's Soft Power in the Belt and Road Initiative Context: Three Case Studies*. <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1440&context=hcoltheses>
- [2] Caruso, D. (2020). China's soft power and cultural diplomacy. *The educational engagement in Africa*. 10, 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.13128/cambio-8510>
- [3] Centre for Preventive Action. (2024, April 30). *Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea*. Global Conflict Tracker; Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>
- [4] Cui, P. (2022). The Role of Confucius Institutes in China-France Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 10(12), 498–509. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2022.1012034>
- [5] Gautam, P., Singh, B. P., Singh, S., Shankar Lal Bika, & Tiwari, R. P. (2023). Education as a soft power resource: A systematic review. *Heliyon*, 10(1), 736–738. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e23736>
- [6] Grincheva, N. (2021). Cultural diplomacy under the “digital lockdown”: pandemic challenges and opportunities in museum diplomacy. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-021-00237-z>
- [7] Huang L. (2024, May 6). *China's Digital Public Diplomacy towards ASEAN Countries: How Beijing Frames the South China Sea Issue*. USC Center on Public Diplomacy. <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/china%E2%80%99s-digital-public-diplomacy-towards-asean-countries-how-beijing-frames-south-china-sea>
- [8] ICG. (2021, December 2). *The Philippines' Dilemma: How to Manage Tensions in the South China Sea*. International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/316-philippines-dilemma-how-manage-tensions-south-china-sea>
- [9] ICG. (2024, May 23). *Philippines: Calming Tensions in the South China Sea* | Crisis Group. [www.crisisgroup.org. https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/philippines-south-china-sea/philippines-calming-tensions-south-china-sea](https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/philippines-south-china-sea/philippines-calming-tensions-south-china-sea)
- [10] Julia Luong Dinh, Ha Hai Hoang, & Thuy, T. (2024). China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia through the Belt & Road Initiative and Vietnam's Reception. *Asian Perspective*, 48(2), 301–326. <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2024.a928618>
- [11] Latief, R., & Lefen, L. (2018). Analysis of Chinese Government Scholarship for International Students Using Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP). *Sustainability*, 10(7), 2112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10072112>
- [12] Lesego Alicia Keimetswe. (2021). The Role of Confucius Institutes in Shaping China's National Image in Botswana: Case of CI Students. 19(1), 120–144. <https://doi.org/10.2478/scr-2021-0005>
- [13] Li, S., & King, K. (2024, August 24). *The Rise, Decline, and Possible Resurrection of China's Confucius Institutes*. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/the-rise-decline-and-possible-resurrection-of-chinas-confucius-institutes/>
- [14] Liu, X. (2018). China's Cultural Diplomacy: A Great Leap Outward with Chinese Characteristics? Multiple Comparative Case Studies of the Confucius Institutes. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28(118), 646–661. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1557951>
- [15] Lum, T., Morrison, W. M., & Vaughn, B. (2013). China's “soft power” in Southeast Asia. *ResearchGate*; unknown. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/293121708_China
- [16] Ma, X., & Kang, D. C. (2023). Why Vietnam is not Balancing China: Vietnamese Security Priorities and the Dynamics in Sino-Vietnam Relations. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2023.16>
- [17] Müller, S., Brazys, S., & Dukalskis, A. (2024). Discourse wars and “mask diplomacy”: China's global image management in times of crisis. *Political Research Exchange*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736x.2024.2337632>
- [18] Nur Mutia, R. T., & de Archellie, R. (2023). Reassessing China's Soft Power in Indonesia: A Critical Overview on China's Cultural Soft Power. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2178585>
- [19] Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*. In Google Books. *PublicAffairs*. https://books.google.com/books/about/Soft_Power.html?id=hTBxIMnpMloC
- [20] Peng, Q. (2024). Confucius Institute's Role in Chinese Language Development in Indonesia: A Site Study at the State University of Malang. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12(02), 31–46. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.122003>
- [21] Pew Research Center. (2014, July 14). *How Countries View China*. Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/07/14/chapter-2-chinas-image/>
- [22] Saaida, M. B. E. (2023). The Role of Soft Power in Contemporary Diplomacy. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, 4(4), 3119–3130. <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.4.423.36302>
- [23] Sayama, O. (2016). *China's Approach to Soft Power Seeking a Balance between Nationalism, Legitimacy, and International Influence*. https://static.rusi.org/201603_op_chinas_soft_power.pdf
- [24] Scobell, A., Burke, E., Iii, C., Ohlandt, C., Warner, E., & Williams, J. (2020). *China's Grand Strategy Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition*. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/

RR2798/RAND_RR2798.pdf

- [25] Selezneva, N. V. (2021). *Learning Chinese in Vietnam: The Role of the Confucius Institute. The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 5(4), 71–86. <https://doi.org/10.54631/vs.2021.54-71-86>
- [26] Shuto, M. (2018). *Patterns and views of China's public diplomacy in ASEAN countries: focusing on Confucius Institutes. Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 7(2), 124–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2018.1553227>
- [27] Stevic, L. (2020, June 3). *The Evolution of Chinese Cultural Diplomacy and its impact on the BiH perception of the Belt and Road...* ResearchGate; unknown. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343040394_The_Evolution_of_Chinese_Cultural_Diplomacy_and_its_impact_on_the_BiH_perception_of_the_Belt_and_Road_Initiative_and_China_CEE_Cooperation
- [28] Sugiarto Pramono, & Wahyu Arif Raharjo. (2024). *Indonesia's Role in the Rise of East Asia amid China's Ascendancy. Nation State/Nation State*, 6(2), 139–157. <https://doi.org/10.24076/nsjis.v6i2.1324>
- [29] Thanh Hai, D. (2021). *Vietnam and China: ideological bedfellows, strange dreamers. Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 10(2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2021.1932018>
- [30] Yu, H. (2024). *China-ASEAN Cooperation under the BRI. Asia in Transition*, pp. 43–68. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-9633-9_3
- [31] Zapata, X. (2023). *China's Cultural Diplomacy in a New Era of Multilateralism if-Edition Culture and Foreign Policy*. https://opus.bsz-bw.de/ifa/files/959/ifa-2023_zapata_china-cd-multilateralism_EN.pdf