

## **Transnational Sites of China's Cultural Diplomacy: Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East and Europe Compared (1<sup>st</sup> Edition), edited by Jarmila Ptáčková, Ondřej Klimeš, and Gary Rawnsley, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 274pp., \$120.16 (Hardcover), ISBN 9789811555916**

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Given the advancement of its massive infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative, China's global impact has attracted international attention and raised concerns regarding its economic and political dominance. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed China's strong national capacity for mobilization in public health and its increasing assertiveness on international media in terms of telling its stories. Against this background, an in-depth examination of China's cultural diplomacy (CCD)—a prominent means of boosting Chinese soft power—seems imperative, although the topic is not uncommon in the literature on China's foreign policy and public diplomacy. *Transnational Sites of China's Cultural Diplomacy: Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East, and Europe Compared* analyzes CCD under various historical and geographic contexts. The edited volume answers a basic question: How is contemporary cultural diplomacy formulated and practiced by the People's Republic of China?

The nine chapters of the book cover multiple regions, including Central Asia, Malaysia, the Arab countries, and Berlin. Although the chapters pose different research questions and adopt diverse research methods, all aim to explain CCD through practice. The volume is a commendable source for the history of CCD in the aforementioned regions as some of the

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studies review the cultural relations between China and the target region/country. Moreover, the book refrains from overemphasizing the relationship between China's soft power and cultural diplomacy. Instead, the studies connect CCD directly with Chinese policy and political (and economic) objectives. Although a few critical aspects of CCD, such as it being an instrument for a new form of cultural imperialism/colonialism, propaganda, and censorship, are mentioned, the text primarily concentrates on China's foreign policy, the target countries' domestic environments, and the transnational nature of communication and relationship building. In terms of methodology, the studies mainly employ historical analyses, document analyses, and interviews. For instance, Chapters 3 and 4 collect primary data from observations and interviews on CCD. Regarding content, several chapters emphasize policy, whereas others discuss cultural diplomatic processes. Chapters 3 and 7 focus on the Chinese policy for creating linkages between China and Central Asia as well as Arab countries; Chapter 9 describes the channels of the Chinese documentary as institutions of cultural diplomacy.

The volume opens with Gary Rawnsley's conceptual chapter on cultural diplomacy, where he clarifies the relationship of CCD with soft power, cultural relations, and Chinese foreign policy. Subsequently, the remaining chapters explain how China uses culture as a tool for its foreign policy and address several crucial themes of CCD. First, all the authors introduce the sources of China's soft power in terms of culture, which includes education, arts, performances, history, documentaries, economy, and trade. As mentioned earlier, the last chapter by Gary Rawnsley, Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, and Ming Yu presents a new and overlooked approach to CCD: the co-production of documentaries. Second, although the Chinese government plays a major role in initiating and managing CCD, other nongovernmental actors, particularly the Chinese diaspora, constitute a chief force in enhancing people-to-people ties. In Chapter 3, Ondrej Klimeš suggests that China regards Xinjiang and its Muslims as potential mediators of Sino-Central Asian ties. Third, historical connections, in addition to social and human capital, have been an asset of CCD. According to Vera Exnerov and Jakub Hrubý, CCD emphasizes the notion of the Silk Road and Zheng He's voyage to increase its credibility through natural associations. The volume itself is based on the background of the Belt and Road Initiative, which emphasizes this historical premise. Fourth, CCD is only a partially top-down process. Local organizations and interests also act as drivers. As Vera Exnerov and Jens Damm argue in Chapter 4 and 8 respectively, CCD is not only a state-driven process but also one wherein local and foreign actors converge around cultural ideas and contribute to cultural relations. Fifth, the Confucius Institutes have been an important force of Chinese presence in several countries. In Chapter 6 and 7, respectively, Tomáš Petru and Jarmila Ptáčková posit that political impact is not the sole objective of the CCD; rather, the motives of cultural diplomacy also include economic cooperation and foreign investment.

Despite the comparative approach indicated by the title of the volume, the chapters present diversified approaches and agendas, making it difficult to assess them with a unified paradigm. Several chapters seek to provide an overview of the CCD in a particular region

(Chapter 5) or field (Chapter 9); others demonstrate a more theoretical purpose by establishing a new model of transnationalism in cultural diplomacy (Chapter 4) or introducing new variables of nonstate, local actors as drivers of cultural diplomacy (Chapter 8). Thus, the comparison remains superficial. Having the chapters *speak* to one another or having the authors dovetail their research would have been preferable. Furthermore, the volume would be better served with a concluding chapter that summarizes the findings and revisits the contributions of each chapter. In several instances, the discussions lean toward Chinese foreign policy instead of CCD. However, the two do not carry the same weight: a gap exists between Chinese policy and cultural diplomacy in actuality. As Jarmila Ptáčková notes in her chapter, the policy to establish Chinese–Arab relations in Ningxia was more of a rhetoric and less of a reality.

In general, this book constitutes an excellent endeavor to elucidate the subject of CCD and details Chinese policy and practice with respect to different regions and areas. Both the general public and students interested in CCD or Chinese foreign policy will be well served as the audience of this volume as it covers the aspects of policy and practice of CCD. In the future, conducting further studies on post-COVID-19 CCD as well as investigating the practice of CCD under the Chinese policy of the Belt and Road Initiative from different geopolitical perspectives would be valuable.

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Di Wu is an Assistant Professor at Tongji University in China. She obtained her PhD in International Relations from American University, Washington, DC. Her research lies at the intersection of foreign policy and strategic communication with a geographic interest in China, East Asia, and US–China relations. Wu has published works on soft power, public diplomacy, media, and US–China relations. Her first book explores foreign policy and public diplomacy with a focus on American practice toward China. Her other publications include “China’s public diplomatic networks on the Ebola issue in West Africa: Issues management in a network society” and “Assessing resource transactions in partnership networks: US 100,000 strong network of public diplomacy,” both of which appear in *Public Relations Review*. In addition, she has contributed the following book chapters: “Chinese Political Leadership Transition: An Overview and Assessment” in *East Asian Studies in The Perspective of Regional Integration*; “Power Relations in Development Communication and Public Diplomacy: U.S. and Chinese Practices in Afghanistan” in *Communicating National Image through Development and Diplomacy: The Politics of Foreign Aid*; and “Country Image in Public Diplomacy” (with Jay Wang) in *Bridging Disciplinary Perspectives on the Formation and Effects of Country Image, Reputation, Brand, And Identity*.