

## New Silk Roads

### Shifting the Register to China

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*Whether we like it or not China's discursive register is now an insistent intervention on that of a previously (perceived) dominant "West."*—Paul Gladston<sup>1</sup>

This study attempts to reintegrate cultural focus into the study of China's New Silk Roads (NSR), which has up until now been primarily focused upon political and economic implications of this massive international project, also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). There is an understudied official "pillar" to the New Silk Roads, officially titled people-to-people connectivity (*mínxīn xiāngtōng* 民心相通), meaning literally to connect the hearts and minds and of people with the hearts and minds of other people. We will analyze how this cultural component works, what it means, and why it's essential for the other four pillars of NSR to function in the long term (Yaling 2019).

When China successfully cultivates people-to-people (P2P) connectivity within its partner regions, such as with Pakistan, Kenya, or Kazakhstan, it is able to have a relatively strong hand in cultural imaginaries being generated. Outside of New Silk Road partner regions, however, China is less effective at controlling the narrative. In Western Europe, the UK, and in the US, for example, representations of the New Silk Roads are often derogatory and pessimistic, focused on geopolitics and geoeconomics and generally dismissive of win-win models of global governance.

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1 Paul Gladston, in an email correspondence with Sophia Kidd, April 5 2021, cf: Gladston (2020).

China's opponents, known as "dragon-slayers," focus on questions of human rights, alleging and arguing that China is either abusing its regional sovereignty, as in Xinjiang and Tibet, or altogether not entitled to that sovereignty, as with Taiwan and Hong Kong. In the past, China did not have much of a voice in many of the world's top councils, such as the United Nations and World Trade Organization; a situation which has changed much. Although China still has no presence in top councils such as the Quad nations and G7, where developed liberal-order nations consolidate power and consensus, China has created its own organizations, such as the Shanghai Company Organization (SCO), and increased its role in regional organizations such as ASEAN. These platforms give China a greater voice by which its rebuttals of liberal-order accusations of human-rights and other abuses can be heard. This voice is also projected through greater channels of cultural power that are cultivated through cultural and creative industry development (such as movies, newspapers, social media, technology, and sports) as well as cultural diplomacy (both official and "back-door") throughout New Silk Road regions and beyond.

This paper focuses on cultural power, which influences the way foreign audiences think about China and also influences *the frameworks of thought* in which China is contextualized, i.e., the *register* of China discourse. This cultural power does not arise in a vacuum. Rather, it is *shifted away* and out of the hands of Western social science and cultural studies discourse, as well as away from the representations produced by Western cultural and creative industries (such as Hollywood, *The Guardian*, Meta, and Twitter). This cultural power consists of the ability to shift the register of the "China conversation" ever so slightly so as to encourage foreign audiences to think about Chinese cultural values as something that can inform their own world view in a beneficial way.

The structure of this paper will dwell first upon the notion of "cultural imaginaries" before discussing the problem of "cultural discount" as something which operates against the "cultural imaginary" of China's New Silk Roads. We then set forth a typology of New Silk Road people-to-people connectivity, consisting of top-down complementary, grassroots complementary, grassroots supplementary, and combinant people-to-people connectivities. I then discuss combinant P2P (which essentially combines public-sector cultural policy with private-sector grassroots initiatives) as an ideal form of people-to-people connectivity that China has developed within China, but has not yet developed outside of China (which, I suggest, accounts for a lot of the international pushback against China and the New Silk Roads). I give examples of combinant P2P within China's borders, and as I have not found a precedent for this combinatory P2P outside of China, I suggest a possible site and a basic outline for such a model in Rey Tehran, Iran, providing context of that site's historical and local cultural conditions to illustrate needs for cultural infrastructure and economic diversification.

## 1 Evoking Cultural Imaginaries

The Ancient Silk Road evokes a compelling geocultural imaginary.<sup>2</sup> Images of merchants riding atop camels loaded down with wares, travelling into the sunset or from beneath a rising sun, make us curious about a world we may imagine as slower-paced, less homogenous, and somehow more beautiful than the one we live in today. Layers of Silk Road historical “sedimentation” allude earliest to millennia of trade throughout Afro-Eurasia prior to Confucius in China or Jesus Christ in Christian regions. Another layer arises out of the Chinese Han dynasties (213 BCE–220 CE), which saw Buddhism travel along the Silk Road from India to China, around the same time that Christianity climbed out of Northeast Africa and Western Asia into the Caucasus, Europe, and Central Asia. Then there is a later, more extensive and carefully documented layer appearing in the Chinese Tang dynasty (613 CE–920 CE). Already well-established and documented, the geocultural imaginary evoked by China’s New Silk Roads (NSR) tends to be more palatable to our cultural sensibilities than “One Belt One Road” or “Belt and Road Initiative,” which we usually learn of in the context of geopolitics. Perhaps this explains China’s increasingly frequent use of New Silk Roads to refer to OBOR/BRI in media both within and outside of China.

These New Silk Roads, however, are not so imaginary. Indeed, they constitute a massive project building policy, facilities, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity throughout Afro-Eurasia (Miller 2019). These five priorities, or “pillars,” as they are often translated in the literature, are officially known as: policy coordination (*zhèngcè gōutōng* 政策沟通), facilities connectivity (*shèshī liántōng* 设施联通), unimpeded trade (*màoyì chāngtōng* 贸易畅通), financial integration (*zījīn tōngróng* 资金通融), and people-to-people connectivity (Pinyin and Chinese characters given above).

The first four pillars involve newsworthy subjects concerning major finance institutions, famous politicians, military positioning, and shipping channels. The final pillar, however—that of people-to-people connectivity—is not as newsworthy, considered “soft news,” and is often relegated to the arts and culture sections of newspapers and websites. Whereas positive reports of China’s cultural influence upon the world rarely make news headlines, negative reports tend to be considered more newsworthy. Of course, this is not one-sided.

China’s own major media outlets represent the West in similar ways. The ecology of cultural influence, however, is not the same. While official Chinese media outlets may malign the influence of Western culture and markets, Hollywood

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<sup>2</sup> “Geocultural power” is cultural power on a global scale, as understood in Winter (2019). This emphasis upon cultural power displaces a hard/soft power axis.

movies will top China's box office charts. While American, Korean, British, and Italian television shows will show up in the main feed of streaming television services, the same is not the case with Western box offices and streaming services. This points to what we discuss below in our discussion of "cultural discount" (*wénhuà zhékòu* 文化折扣), which sees the value of a nation's cultural product "discounted" once it is imported outside of its national borders.

## 2 Cultural Discount

People-to-people connectivity, when done effectively, has the power to bring domestic and local players into conversation with one another. When individuals connect on a cultural level in real time while, for example, talking about an artwork or discussing a character in a novel, there is a greater opportunity for nuance to arise. Nuanced cultural discussions have a greater chance of being unmediated by a dominant international discourse. There is more personal "skin" in the game, where the opinions of individuals, regardless of what the "official" view of Chinese art is, matter to the conversation at hand. Individuals taking part in cultural programming, such as a literary festival or an art exhibition, have more time and opportunity to think for themselves and are called upon to express their opinions and thoughts more openly. It is in these moments that true learning can occur, as open communication seeks channels through which to flow. When grassroots actors conceive and implement cultural programming like this, where dialogue and a spirit of criticality is fostered, the diversity of views serve to shift discourse away from the status quo.

If China were to optimize its people-to-people cultural programming in such a way as to allow these developments, then foreign audiences would be more open to learning about Chinese culture, even when the cultural values conveyed may challenge or even threaten their own cultural values. This would maximize the amount and quality of cultural information being absorbed, thereby decreasing the amount of "aesthetic footwork" foreign audiences feel burdened with when consuming a foreign cultural product. The concept of "aesthetic footwork" refers to the amount of work one has to do in order to understand the aesthetic framework, qualities, and characteristics of a cultural product such as an artwork, film, story, or even a video game. It is this heavy upfront investment of energy that foreign audiences tend to avoid. Thus, it takes a great deal of investiture on behalf of a source culture to find ways to entice foreign audiences to do this footwork in getting to know it. This is especially so when the foreign audience has an existing prejudice against or distrust of the source culture. The "othering" of Chinese culture, whether social or economic, devalues cultural product outside of China's borders.

### 3 People-to-people Connectivity

People-to-people connectivity includes primarily six things: health assistance, humanitarian assistance, academic exchange, professional exchange, cultural exchange, and creative sector development, both domestic and international. In developing ways to think and talk about this pillar of the New Silk Roads, I have opted for “appropriating” and “translating” Kadir Jun Ayhan’s typology of people-to-people connectivity as a form of cultural diplomacy consisting of:

[...] intentional, political, and transboundary communication-based interactions between groups of people for public, rather than private interests that have or aim to have foreign policy implications. This definition excludes P2P interactions which are non-diplomatic, e.g. pure international exchanges which do not have political objectives or relevance to foreign policies, or anti-diplomatic, e.g. warfare activities.<sup>3</sup>

Ayhan’s typology is useful in providing a model which examines where the funding for cultural programming derives from while also looking at which level of society is conceiving of the programming, as well as who is implementing it. This is all I have taken from Ayhan’s model, however, choosing then to adapt the model to describe any people-to-people cultural programming that one public uses to communicate with another public. In this study, I am using Ayhan’s typology to describe people-to-people cultural programming that introduces Chinese culture to foreign audiences. Whereas Ayhan ignores “P2P interactions which are non-diplomatic,” I would suggest that all P2P interactions are, by their very nature of bringing foreign publics together, “diplomatic.” Ayhan also ignores “pure international exchanges which do not have political objectives or relevance to foreign policies.” I argue that all international exchanges have, to some extent, a political objective, whether on a purely political level or on economic or cultural levels.

Thus, in my typology, derived initially from Ayhan’s own, I include all of what China includes in its fifth cultural pillar, such as public goods, private sector cultural programming, and public–private partnerships “meshing” to educate and/or learn from domestic and foreign publics. Although Ayhan’s analysis does not fit our own exactly, the typology is very useful. In this analysis, people-to-people connections are classified into two categories, the first of which is directional, distinguishing top-down from grassroots (bottom-up) P2P programming. Top-down

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3 <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/typology-people-people-diplomacy#:~:text=I%20define%20people%2Dto%2Dpeople,to%20have%20foreign%20policy%20implications> (accessed 29 Jan. 2021). Kadir Jun Ayhan, “A Typology of People-to-People Diplomacy,” 2020.

P2P is designed as public policy initiatives meant to influence one or more target foreign populations; they are always funded by the government of the source culture, and they are always in alignment with the goals and objectives of policy makers in that culture. Grassroots P2P, then, is cultural programming conceived of by private individuals or private sector organizations of a source culture intended to influence a target foreign population. Ayhan's typology has two axes, and while its first axis of distinction is vertical (top-down or bottom-up/grassroots), the second axis is horizontal, or qualitative. Top-down P2P is always "complementary," that is, as we have mentioned, always in alignment with the cultural and policy priorities of the source culture. Grassroots P2P can either be "complementary," that is, in alignment, or it can be "supplementary"; in other words, it is *either* in alignment *or not* with the priorities of its source culture. Grassroots complementary P2P, then, is private-sector cultural programming which works to implement top-down government cultural priorities and is often funded by the government. Grassroots supplementary P2P, by contrast, is usually privately funded, allowing for a freedom to convey cultural values and priorities that are *or aren't* in alignment with their home culture's government. This last form of grassroots supplementary P2P often exists in cultural spaces where both cultural policy and infrastructure are relatively absent. Note that complementary and supplementary are not in opposition to one another. Supplementary P2P is not defined in relationship with top-down cultural programming. Supplementary P2P programming produces cultural messaging as relational, not necessarily oppositional, to top-down P2P cultural messaging. The last form of people-to-people cultural programming is something I have constructed entirely anew, and it involves a public-private composite effort between governments and private actors to create cultural programming which is allowed to exhibit a certain level of criticality towards the source culture's government but ultimately predisposes the minds of foreign audiences to an open-mindedness towards the source culture.

### 3.1 Top-down Complementary P2P

Examples of successful top-down complementary people-to-people programs in Belt and Road countries can be found in China's domestic education sector, which brings in large and diverse flows of intellectual and creative capital from Belt and Road countries, as well as from non-Belt and Road countries such as Western Europe, the UK, and the US. The demographics of foreign-exchange students have changed since the initiation of Xi Jinping's vision of the New Silk Roads as part of a "Community of Destiny" for humankind. At Sichuan University in Southwest China, for example, percentages of students coming from non-Belt and Road

regions have fallen, while students coming from Afro-Eurasia make up a larger percentage of the foreign student body. BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) University League and Double First Class University programs have been tasked with the mission to poise China for an optimized future in creative and tech sectors by 2050. Other projects more specifically targeted towards the Belt and Road include the university consortium of Maritime Silk Road, launched in Xiamen in October of 2018. This is an international university consortium, comprising over 60 universities from 17 countries and regions along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Members of this consortium include the University of Sheffield, Sorbonne University, the University of Melbourne, the Victoria University of Wellington, and Nanyang Technological University.<sup>4</sup>

China's foreign-exchange education sector, however, has met with challenges. Hanban/ Confucius Institute has recently rebranded as the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC, *zhōngwài yǔyán jiāoliú hézuò zhōngxīn* 中外语言交流合作中心). As of March 2021, there are still 51 Confucius Institutes in the US, with four more scheduled to close. 69 have closed down since 2014, most of these in the past two years. Many of them have closed due to conflict of interest, not being able to receive any federal dollars from the Department of Defense if there is a Confucius Institute on campus.<sup>5</sup> New people-to-people programs can be seen in CLEC programming, such as its "People-to-people Honorary" contest, which rewards and celebrates peoples' stories of cultural connection between China and other countries.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2 Grassroots Complementary P2P

Grassroots complementary P2P is organic cultural programming in sync with and aligned with top-down cultural programming, funded by top-down agencies and actors, but conceived of and often implemented by grassroots individuals and organizations. An example of complementary cultural P2P programming can be found in the EU–China Literary Festival, which has been financed by the

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4 This case study, as well as others discussed here in illustrating my typology for people-to-people connectivity, is largely excerpted from my book *Culture Paves the New Silk Roads* (2022).

5 [https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/how\\_many\\_confucius\\_institutes\\_are\\_in\\_the\\_united\\_states](https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/how_many_confucius_institutes_are_in_the_united_states) (accessed 20 Jan. 2024).

6 CIUS Center Annual Report mentions a "people-to-people" honorary contest for "people-to-people" stories: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vVIwo4oJz4> (accessed 10 Apr. 2022).

European Union and hosted by China. Peter Goff, scholar on China's publishing sector at Leeds University, conceived of the literary festival and presented his working model to Brussels in 2017, and then again in 2020. Peter Goff is also the founder and former owner of the Beijing, Suzhou, and Chengdu Bookworm Cafes, which hosted multiple annual iterations of the Bookworm International Literary Festival until the closure of the Bookworm Cafes in Suzhou and Chengdu prior to 2019, when Goff left China to pursue his PhD.

Another example of grassroots complementary P2P would be many of the large-scale art biennials and triennials throughout China. These are often conceived of by local actors who normally operate within the private sector, putting on smaller-scale exhibitions with private funding from real-estate or tech industry actors. The Chengdu Biennale, for example, has seen eight iterations between 2001 and 2023, and in each instance a private sector curator proposed the project to the Chengdu city government cultural agencies, whereupon they received funding for these projects. In this case, although the artists and artworks are selected by actors whose cultural priorities may not be aligned with New Silk Road domestic and international development, the Chengdu Biennale has been helpful in recent years to Chinese central and local governments in developing political, economic, and cultural projects such as the Twin-Cities project, which focuses on Chengdu and nearby Chongqing as forming a hub for China's New Silk Road development westward into Afro-Eurasia.

### 3.3 Grassroots Supplementary P2P

The Bookworm International Literary Festival, then, is an example of grassroots supplementary P2P connectivity. This literary festival, also conceived of by Peter Goff and curated by UK expat Catherine Platt, hosted writers from all over the world in Beijing, Suzhou, and Chengdu for workshops and book talks. The festival serves as a good example of cultural programming that arose in a dearth of Southwest China arts and culture infrastructure. Funded by various foreign embassies, international schools, and other domestic and international actors, the programming enjoyed unprecedented freedom, and the degree of diversity among both Chinese and international writers and artists present at the festivals was highly inclusive.

Another excellent example of grassroots P2P is the Chengdu International Performance Art Festival, organized by performance artist Zhou Bin and other members of the Chengdu-based 719 Artists Alliance and other avant-garde curatorial entities operating in Chengdu. This festival, which began in 2008 and will see its next iteration in October 2024, is conceived by local artists and curators, hosting artists from



countries throughout the world. Performances are held in a combination of sites throughout Chengdu's fine arts sector, museums, and universities. The artists have enjoyed a relatively high degree of freedom, barring nudity and violence. Up-On festivals receive their greatest support in the form of grants from the Chengdu A4 Art Museum, which gives upwards of 70,000 RMB (just under USD \$10,000) annually to defray travel and materials costs for festival participants and artworks. A4 Art Museum's funding comes from real-estate developers who appreciate the value of cultural programming as a draw for creatives and wealth creators to the Luxelakes International Ecological City, on which one campus of the museum is built. Both the public and private sector see the value of funding arts infrastructure, by bringing high-value chain human resource capital to Chengdu and building wealth in the region. A4 Art Museum, a private sector museum, supports diverse cultural messaging and is highly inclusive, as is seen in its late-2019/2020 survey of Southwest China performance art, curated by well-known Chengdu-based curator Lan Qingwei. Lan Qingwei, in turn, is a student of renowned Chengdu-based Lu Peng, one of the forerunners of China's grassroots supplementary contemporary art programming who took contemporary Chinese art to the international art market in the early 1990s with the Guangzhou Biennale, a biennale operating on a new-to-China business model of private investment in the biennale by patrons who would receive artworks in return—artworks whose values would be discovered and built by the international biennale itself. It is important to note that grassroots P2P cannot necessarily be identified as part of the New Silk Roads people-to-people pillar, as nothing can be identified as such unless it is publicly funded. However, I want to suggest that the ultimate goal of New Silk Roads P2P is to create cultural exchanges with foreign audiences, and these programs go a long way toward achieving this goal. While Chinese authorities do not fund these projects, they are aware of them, they issue permits for them, and they turn an occasional blind eye to “culturally questionable material” presented as part of this programming.

### 3.4 Creating a New Category—Combinant P2P

So far, we have talked about government-conceived and -funded P2P programming, and we have seen that this is largely what we're talking about when we discuss New Silk Road people-to-people connectivity. The cultural programs that are implemented in Pakistan, Kenya, or Latin America work closely in tandem with the policy, infrastructure, trade, and finance of the New Silk Road's other four pillars in those regions. But what if it weren't that way? What if we were to see something like the EU–China literary festival, conceived and implemented by Peter Goff and his network of bookstore and café owners, but also like the

Bookworm Literary Festival in that there was a high degree of freedom to either say supportive or critically constructive things about Chinese culture? What if China were to put more cultural “boots” on the ground and get to know a target foreign public’s culture inside and out, getting to know the social, economic, and political issues being discussed in that culture while also coming to know who the influencers and gatekeepers of that culture were? What if China were then willing to spend large sums of money on introducing Chinese culture into a dialogue with the local culture in ways conceived of by local actors, paying local creative and service sector workers to implement the programming? This combinant form of P2P may be more effective than top-down complementary or even grassroots supplementary P2P at influencing foreign publics. I have developed a proposed model of what this might look like. This is purely conjecture: it doesn’t exist, and I have no evidence that it would work or what problems its implementation might discover. I merely develop it as a possibility for the case of illustration.

#### Proposed Combinant P2P outside of China: Rey Tehran, Iran

The 2019 Silk Cities conference hosted over 100 participants and 76 presentations, representing geographic areas as widespread as Chile, Cyprus, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Libya, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Peru, Spain, Syria, Vietnam, the UK, and the US.<sup>7</sup> Silk Cities is “an independent and bottom-up initiative” which provides urban profiles in the form of “Circles of Sustainability” (Arefian, Hossein, and Moeni 2020). These “circles” are infographics that divide a circle into four quadrants, which evaluate a city’s economics (production and resourcing, exchange and transfer, accounting and regulation, consumption and use, labor and welfare, technology and infrastructure, as well as wealth and distribution); politics (organization and governance, law and justice, communication and movement, representation and negotiation, security and accord, dialogue and recognition, ethics and accountability); ecology (materials and energy, water and air, flora and fauna, habitat and land, place and space, constructions and settlements, emission and waste); and culture (engagement and identity, performance and creativity, memory and projection, belief and meaning, gender and generations, enquiry and learning, wellbeing and health). It is also “an independent professional and academic initiative for contextual knowledge exchange, research and advocacy.”<sup>8</sup>

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7 <http://silk-cities.org/2019-post-conference>, “Silk Cities 2019: Reconstruction, Recovery and Resilience of Historic Cities and Societies” (accessed 31 Mar. 2021).

8 <https://silk-cities.org/about-silk-cities-2> (accessed 31 Mar. 2021).

Examining Tehran's Circle of Sustainability profile, one can see that there are ecological areas which are in highly unsatisfactory or critical condition. Tehran's best marks are in the culture category, indicating a wealth of creative capital and resources. This cultural capital could be used to diversify Tehran's economy, helping to overcome some of its challenges in the ecological quadrant. Let us look at some cultural history of Rey Tehran, as well as its importance in China's trade connectivity in the region, before suggesting how China's support of Rey Tehran's cultural heritage and creative sector could be mutually beneficial for Iranian and Chinese cultures. I will suggest how a combinant model of P2P as part of its New Silk Road development in the region could help Iran to diversify its economy while opening Iranian publics to learning more about Chinese culture.

### Ancient Rey

One of the main strongholds of the Seleucid Empire, Rey (also spelled Rayy), Iran is a very old political and cultural base of Ancient Persia. Rey has since been incorporated into the greater urban area of Tehran, Iran. Today it is the southeasternmost of 20 districts in Tehran. It suffered much during the invasions of Arabs, Mongols, and Turks. Important cultural relics include the Neolithic ruins at Chehme-Ali, the Rey Castle, and the Rashkan Castle, the latter of which was built during the Parthian era. Rey was culturally vibrant, with merchants, scholars, and poets being recorded in historical texts as having been associated with the city. In an older incarnation, the city was known as Rhages and was a sacred site for the almighty Ahura Mazda of the Zoroastrian faith. The city is situated between the Caspian Sea in the north and the Persian Gulf in the south, such that all trade traveling east–west contributed to the wealth of Rey. In the 1930s, archaeologist Eric Schmidt excavated the site of Rey. This is fortunate, as much of the area has been leveled by real estate developers in Tehran's suburban expansion from its own city center.<sup>9</sup>

### Rey Tehran Material Exchanges with China Today

Iran's Chabahar Port is part of China's "String of Pearls" threatening to encircle India. Besides Chabahar, other "pearls" include the South China Sea, Malacca, Lombok, and Hormuz. Also part of this strategy is China-owned Gwadar Port in Pakistan, as an important logistical hub in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. This corridor is vital to overcoming the Malacca dilemma being exacerbated recently

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<sup>9</sup> <https://oi.uchicago.edu/museum-exhibits/special-exhibits/daily-life-ornamented-medieval-persian-city-rayy> (accessed 14 Oct. 2020).

by the Quad (US, Australia, Japan, and India). If the Strait of Malacca were made impassable for Chinese shipping, this would pose an energy security risk for China by threatening trade routes (Aslan and Rashid 2020). In the meantime, India prefers to commence its North–South overland route from Chabahar Port, preferring it to Karachi in Pakistan for the closer distance of 800 kilometers. There is also competition for rare earth metals to be found in Afghanistan, a market China dominates at the moment; another reason for CPEC achieving advanced stages in not only energy, infrastructure, and security, but also in socio-economic programs. China’s relations with Tehran are important for not only North–South but also East–West transit into the Caucasus, Turkey, and Central and Eastern Europe. I suggest that China’s relationship with Iran could benefit the New Silk Roads not merely through maneuvering trade connectivity or infrastructure but by developing common cultural goals in the region, fostered by benevolent programming there. The costs of hard power, such as policy, economics, and military engagement, could be mitigated through expenditures in cultural power, through combinant P2P programming.

### My Proposal: Rey Tehran P2P Cultural Exchanges with China

Today, there is a movement to preserve the city of Tehran’s over 200 qanats dating back seven hundred years. A case is being made to repair and maintain the oldest, Mehgerd, by defining a conservation framework based on UNESCO’s 2011 Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscapes (HUL) (Zivar and Karimian 2020). Shiraz, nearly ten hours to the south of Rey Tehran, contains well-developed cultural heritage and tourism infrastructure, with boutique hotels in the Sang-e Siah historical district. Regeneration of historical districts in Iranian cities faces large swathes of urban decay due in part to real-estate boom structures left empty in failing districts and communities (Zadeh 2020).

As China eases Iran away from India into more substantive Belt and Road planning and implementation, it could focus on fifth-pillar people-to-people connectivity. Research has shown how Iran struggles with its urban regeneration and cultural heritage preservation. In helping Tehran to vitalize its historical centers, China could foster the growth of not only heavy industrial parks but also creative clusters and tech incubation investment areas near cultural heritage sites. Public goods in the way of vocational training and educational exchange could ameliorate pressures in Iran while also creating opportunities to demonstrate Chinese cultural values and ideals in a way that encourages grassroots engagement.

UNESCO is on the table for funding Tehran’s creative economic sector; this will help the oil-dependent economy to diversify its portfolio. China can also participate by encouraging or providing incentives for entrepreneurs from the private sector, either from China or incubated in Iran to participate in the building of Iran’s

political, economic, and cultural capital. According to a research report out of Tehran (2013), its creative sector is concerned with establishing and diversifying educational centers, accredited universities, professors of universities, technology and information production, theatre halls, cinemas, music halls, traditional and modern art galleries, and museums (Gharagozlo 2013). This report also mentions the nine areas in which private entrepreneurs could partner with domestic and international institutions to fulfil common goals in building a creative city: attraction and maintenance of a creative class; constructing cultural buildings and monuments; cinemas, theaters, galleries, art studios, museums, and concert halls revitalizing urban areas by bringing in foot traffic and spatially defining spaces for a cultural demographic of “creatives”; promoting cultural tourism; calculating the economic benefits of art; thinking about the role of art in global branding of a city; and creating creative industries where there are none. The report gives more specific sectors: architecture, advertising, art and antique markets, crafts, fashion design, film and video, recreation software, music, dramatic arts, publishing, computer game software, and televisions. Its author points out that Tehran is exhibiting signs of what Richard Florida defines as a “creative city,” with festivals and fairs celebrating cultural heritage as well as contemporary science and technology (Florida 2004, Gharagozlo 2013).

Let us recall what was said above about the cultural quadrant of Tehran’s Circle of Sustainability. Let us imagine Iranian creative entrepreneurs working in small and medium-sized enterprises (SME), receiving Chinese government investments aimed to up-level Tehran’s workforce value by diversifying Iran’s economy, shifting away from oil dependency and towards a creative and services-based economy. In the examples given above of the Chengdu Up-On International Performance Art Festival and the Bookworm Literary Festival, there was enormous local and international support. In this case, we saw Chinese artists and writers leading interaction with other cultures, engaging in questions of cultural identity, performativity, creativity, memory, belief, meaning, gender, history, and learning. Imagine how much more this grassroots supplementary P2P could achieve if it had federal funding without ideological strings attached (thus transforming into combinant P2P). This is what I propose as the best way forward for China in developing New Silk Roads people-to-people connectivity.

#### **4 Conclusion**

I suggest that Chinese government actors responsible for allocating funding for P2P projects in Iran could consider spending less money on programming that teaches foreign audiences about itself (such as Chinese opera performances, Chinese traditional medicine schools, and media channels promoting Chinese

culture) and more money researching the needs I have outlined above concerning Tehran, to preserve its cultural heritage and to develop its creative and cultural sectors. I suggest that this could result in a more favorable view of Chinese presence in the region, culturally, economically, and politically. Top-down complementary P2P is easier to control, but it runs the risk of being shut down psychologically by foreign audiences who are unwilling or unable to do the “aesthetic footwork” needed to accept, understand, or be interested in Chinese culture. Many non-Chinese audiences require a degree of criticality that is absent in some top-down P2P cultural programming, which tends to be performative in its ultra-favorable presentation of its own value. Combinant P2P would be more difficult to control due its contributions from private individuals and organizations, both in conceiving and implementing the cultural programs. There would, however, be a critical feedback loop, whereby foreign publics would more willingly learn about Chinese culture, and Chinese government funding bodies would learn about how foreign publics view and interact with Chinese culture, which would also teach Chinese actors a good deal about the target culture, forming what we could identify as authentic international cultural exchange. This international closeness on a grass-roots level could foster an amicability between the publics of China and its NSR partner nations, which could go so far as to exert an upward influence upon the leaders of these regions, thus facilitating, expediting, and sustaining the other four pillars of the New Silk Roads.

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