**ABSTRACT**

**of the dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
in the specialty "6D020200 – International Relations"
by Aigerim Ustemirova Orazymbetovna
on the topic:
“The Multivector Format of Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation between Central Asian States and China within the Framework of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’”**

**Relevance of the Research Theme.** The relevance of the research topic is determined by a combination of political, economic, and cultural-civilizational factors that define a new quality of international cooperation in the Eurasian space under the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by the People's Republic of China.

Firstly, the sustained economic growth of the People's Republic of China confirms its status as one of the world’s largest economies. China seeks access to the resources and markets of neighboring countries, including those in Central Asia, by strengthening ties with them. In this regard, the development of multilateral diplomacy constitutes a strategically advantageous approach for China. Despite the importance of this subject, the volume of fundamental research remains limited, particularly in terms of exploring the forms of multilateral interaction among states.

Secondly, cultural diplomacy is receiving increasing attention in contemporary international relations as a tool of "soft power." Within the framework of the BRI, the cultural and humanitarian dimension emerges as a significant sphere of mutual engagement among states. The Belt and Road Initiative is not limited to economics and infrastructure but also encompasses sustainable humanitarian ties, including academic exchanges, youth programs, and cultural partnerships. Accordingly, the study of this dimension is of great relevance, as it contributes to shaping a new model of international interaction based not on ideological dominance, but on respect for cultural diversity.

Thirdly, Central Asia possesses a unique historical and cultural heritage, and its importance as a key region in the implementation of the BRI megaproject continues to grow. During the period of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, interaction between China and the countries of the region was limited due to historical circumstances. In the 21st century—particularly within the framework of the historical continuity of the Silk Road concept—there is a noticeable revival and renewal of humanitarian ties. In this context, the multilateral format involving the participation of several countries in institutionally formalized international projects opens up new horizons for regional integration and demands scholarly analysis.

Fourthly, the growth of China's cultural authority and the expansion of its global influence are accompanied by the increasing activities of Confucius Institutes aimed at promoting the Chinese language and culture abroad. This phenomenon receives mixed assessments: on the one hand, as a tool of cultural rapprochement; on the other, as a means of ideological influence and "cultural projection" by the PRC. Under the conditions of increasing cross-border mobility and cultural globalization, there arises a need for academic analysis of the mechanisms, formats, and risks of cultural and humanitarian interaction, alongside asymmetric issues of national identity, language policy, and cultural exchange.

Fifthly, Central Asia has become a geopolitical "playing field" for major external actors such as China, the United States, Russia, Turkey, and the European Union. In this context, the cultural and humanitarian dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) assumes particular significance as a domain of soft competition and a means of fostering sustainable mutual trust among nations. Currently, Central Asia is emerging as one of the key shapers of the regional cultural landscape, requiring in-depth scholarly understanding.

Thus, the selected dissertation topic possesses high academic and practical significance. It allows for the cultural and humanitarian dimension of the BRI to be viewed as an important tool in shaping a new humanitarian space across Eurasia and serves as a basis for forecasting the prospects and risks of multilateral interaction in the context of a transforming international order.

**Object of the Research:** Multilateral Forms of Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation between the Central Asian States and the People's Republic of China within the Framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

**Subject of the Research:** The strategic features of cultural and humanitarian relations between Central Asia and the People's Republic of China, as well as the processes of their formation and institutionalization within the political and diplomatic context.

**Research Aim:** A comprehensive analysis of the forms, directions, and mechanisms of multilateral cultural and humanitarian relations between the Central Asian countries and the People's Republic of China within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the identification of potential threats and prospects. To achieve this goal, the following **objectives** are proposed:

* Analysis of the theoretical foundations and concepts of cultural and

humanitarian relations in international relations;

* Systematization of methodological approaches to the study of cultural and

humanitarian cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative;

* Evaluation of the evolution of China’s cultural strategy toward the Central

Asian countries;

* Analysis of the dynamics of China’s cultural strategy within the Belt and

Road Initiative in relation to Central Asia;

* Differentiation of institutional forms of cultural and humanitarian

cooperation between Central Asian countries and China under the BRI;

* Identification of the role of international organizations in shaping the

humanitarian dimension of cooperation between China and the Central Asian states;

* Identification of problems and risks associated with the asymmetry of

humanitarian interaction within the Belt and Road Initiative;

* Determination of the future of cultural and humanitarian relations under the

framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

**Degree of Research on the Topic** Multilateral cultural and humanitarian cooperation within the framework of China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) is emerging as a new, yet rapidly developing area of research in the field of international relations. Studies conducted in China, the West, and Central Asian countries have resulted in the formation of complementary multi-level scientific and institutional linkages.

In China, the humanitarian dimension of the initiative is being systematically explored. Leading academic institutions such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Renmin University, and Fudan University are critically analyzing the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy and the strategy of “soft power.” Chinese scholars such as Deng Hao, Xiao Bin, Tian Shu, and others focus on cultural integration, the role of Confucius Institutes, and the regional impact of educational and student exchange programs.

Western academic circles, particularly research centers like the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), examine China’s information policy and its implications for academic freedom from a critical perspective. These studies allow for a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of China’s cultural strategies in enhancing its global image.

In the post-Soviet space, particularly in Russia and Central Asia, scholarly interest in the BRI is growing. Russian scholars such as S.G. Luzyanin and A.A. Maslov analyze the geopolitical and ideological dimensions of the initiative. In Central Asia, cultural and humanitarian themes are emerging as a new field of inquiry, as evidenced by the research of scholars from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

In Kazakhstan, academic interest in the topic is particularly pronounced. Leading research institutions and scholars—such as T.V. Kaukenova, K.Sh. Khafizova, A. Dalelkhan, E.A. Kerimbaev, E. Baidarov, L.R. Karataeva, G.Sh. Satubaldina, A.A. Ermekbaev, T.K. Kasenova, A.M. Amrebaev, B.O. Baisuatova, L.K. Yergaliyeva, G. Birimkulova, K.Ch. Baisultanova, M.A. Omarova, and others—have extensively examined the cultural diplomacy, language policy, education, tourism, diaspora relations, and media influence aspects of the initiative. The past decade has witnessed a significant increase in foundational studies and scientific projects in this area.

Overall, the study of cultural and humanitarian cooperation under the BRI is becoming a critical direction for interdisciplinary research in international relations, regional security, intercultural communication, and public diplomacy.

**Research Materials** The materials for this research are based on a comprehensive set of official diplomatic documents and statements, scholarly research and expert analyses, analytical reports from Think Tanks, statistical and economic data, media materials and analytical reviews that characterize the multilateral relations between China and the Central Asian states.

**Theoretical and Methodological Basic of the Research.** This research is grounded in several key theoretical frameworks aimed at explaining the development of cultural and humanitarian diplomacy as a tool to enhance cooperation between Central Asian states and China, promote shared values, and address global challenges. The study draws upon theories of soft power (J. Nye), public diplomacy, intercultural dialogue, constructivism, and normative power (I. Manners). Additionally, theories of transnationalism and cultural hegemony (A. Gramsci) are employed to analyze the roles of non-state actors and dominant cultural forces in international diplomacy.

Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft power” is particularly pertinent in this dissertation, as it reveals that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) utilizes not only economic instruments but also cultural and humanitarian channels that align with soft power strategies. China seeks to shape a favorable image in Central Asia by promoting its language, culture, and educational programs through Confucius Institutes and scholarships. This theoretical approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of how cultural initiatives contribute to the formation of a positive perception of China.

Collectively, these theories serve as valuable analytical tools for understanding the strategic use of cultural and humanitarian activities in diplomacy between China and Central Asia.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, the research integrates multiple methods. These include historical-cultural analysis, critical-cultural analysis, comparative analysis, geopolitical analysis, institutional analysis, discourse analysis, empirical research, scenario forecasting, institutional mapping, and sociological surveys. Each method offers unique insights and enables the exploration of various dimensions of the BRI megaproject.

Through a combination of these methodologies, the study provides a holistic examination of the forms, mechanisms, and directions of multilateral cultural-humanitarian cooperation between China and Central Asian countries, as well as the associated risks and prospects.

Thus, the research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, grounded in socio-humanitarian theories, to uncover the complex nature of cultural diplomacy within the Belt and Road Initiative framework.

**Chronological Scope of the Research.** The Belt and Road Initiative was officially announced by China in 2013 and covers the period from that time to the present.

**Scientific Novelty of the Research.**

* For the first time, theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of

cultural and humanitarian relations in international relations within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative have been systematized and expanded in academic discourse, with a specific focus on the characteristics of Chinese cultural diplomacy and the perception of these processes by the Central Asian countries.

* The institutional features of the multilateral format of cultural and

humanitarian cooperation between China and the five Central Asian countries have been identified. For the first time, a comprehensive institutional map has been developed, illustrating the multilateral frameworks of cultural and humanitarian relations involving organizations such as UNESCO, the SCO, ISESCO, and the AIIB. This mapping has enabled the identification of levels of cooperation and mechanisms of influence within the China–Central Asia partnership.

* An independent analysis of the evolution of China’s cultural strategy toward

Central Asia has been carried out, and key shifts in the Chinese leadership’s approach to soft power have been identified. This has enabled a clarification of China’s interests, goals, and priorities in the implementation of the Belt and Road megaproject in the region.

* A systematic approach has been developed for analyzing cultural and

humanitarian cooperation within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a tool of strategic cultural diplomacy and soft power in Central Asia. For the first time, the study substantiates that the humanitarian dimension of the BRI has evolved into a long-term mechanism of cultural hegemony under conditions of geopolitical competition.

* The concept of "cultural-humanitarian protectionism" of Central Asian

countries has been introduced into academic discourse as a strategic response to the expansion of foreign cultural diplomacy. It substantiates the necessity of establishing parity-based formats of cultural-humanitarian interaction under conditions of increasing symbolic pressure from major powers.

* In addition to cultural barriers, institutional inconsistencies, and geopolitical

rivalries, the specific challenges and risks associated with cultural-humanitarian cooperation have been identified. Furthermore, practical recommendations have been formulated to mitigate these risks and enhance the effectiveness of mutual engagement.

* A prospective scenario for the development of cultural and humanitarian

relations between Central Asia and China has been developed, based on the analysis of current trends such as the new direction of cultural diplomacy in the context of digitalization, cross-border academic cooperation, and the emergence of cultural centers as instruments of influence.

**Key Propositions for Defense.**

1. The cultural-humanitarian dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

is formed at the intersection of several contemporary theoretical frameworks in the field of international relations, including soft power, public diplomacy, constructivism, intercultural dialogue, transnationalism, and cultural hegemony. This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical model that enables a comprehensive understanding of the nature and objectives of cultural-humanitarian diplomacy within the BRI framework, as well as an assessment of the risks, potential, and transformational effects of multilateral engagement in the humanitarian sphere.

1. The research methodology for studying cultural diplomacy within the Belt

and Road Initiative (BRI) is based on a synthesis of political science, cultural studies, and geopolitical analysis approaches. In this context, both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis—including comparative, content, institutional mapping, scenario forecasting, and sociological surveys—are integrated to understand contemporary forms of cultural-humanitarian cooperation between states under the conditions of the transformation of international relations.

1. The evolution of China’s cultural strategy demonstrates a shift from

symbolic forms of engagement to institutionalized and sustainable formats encompassing education, media, language, and culture. Confucius Institutes, scholarship programs, and joint academic platforms are considered key channels of influence. Today, cultural and humanitarian cooperation is seen as a strategic instrument for expanding China’s political and economic influence in Central Asia and as an expression of its soft power. This enables China to shape a favorable image, enhance cultural participation, and influence public opinion in the region.

1. The institutional formats of humanitarian cooperation between China and

the Central Asian countries are diverse and include university alliances, cultural centers, exchange programs, and joint research laboratories. Furthermore, the involvement of non-state actors such as NGOs, universities, cultural centers, and associations has rendered them influential agents of cultural diplomacy. International organizations such as UNESCO, the SCO, and ISESCO play a role in legitimizing China's humanitarian engagement and reinforcing a multipolar approach to cultural diplomacy. This enables China to systematically establish itself within the region’s humanitarian landscape, thereby contributing to the facilitation of an equitable intercivilizational dialogue in international cultural relations. Through participation in multilateral initiatives, China strengthens its influence by shaping a sustainable humanitarian agenda.

1. The asymmetry in humanitarian relations between the People's Republic of

China and the Central Asian countries may manifest in risks of cultural expansion, the displacement of local values, and dependency on China's educational and informational resources. To mitigate these asymmetries, threats, and challenges in their relations with China, Central Asian states require a strategy of cultural-humanitarian protectionism. This approach should be considered an essential element of national security, adapted to contemporary conditions.

1. Confronted with the growing humanitarian influence of China, the Central

Asian states need to develop national models of cultural diplomacy aimed at protecting their cultural identities, enhancing their soft power, and establishing equitable humanitarian partnerships.

1. In the 21st century, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has transcended its

original framework as a transport-economic model and has become a mechanism of China’s cultural diplomacy at the level of humanitarian policy. This transformation supports the promotion of China’s ideological agenda and the strengthening of its strategic influence in Central Asia. In this context, the future of multilateral cultural and humanitarian cooperation between China and the Central Asian states within the framework of the BRI may evolve along three distinct scenarios.

**Theoretical Significance of the Research.**

* The dissertation clarifies the contemporary content of humanitarian

diplomacy and soft power theory within the evolving international relations system, contributing significantly to theoretical scholarship through a systematic analysis of the institutional mechanisms of cultural interaction.

* It explores the multilateral format and structure of cultural-humanitarian

cooperation between China and Central Asian states, enriching key concepts such as humanitarian diplomacy, cultural asymmetry, and transnational interaction with concrete academic definitions.

* By examining the humanitarian factor as a structural element of international

politics, the study evaluates the impact of cultural diplomacy on regional stability and integration using interdisciplinary methods, thereby enhancing the theoretical foundations of international relations, political science, and cultural studies.

Thus, this dissertation facilitates a deeper understanding of the cultural-humanitarian dimension as a vital vector of contemporary foreign policy and advances the academic comprehension of institutional cooperation within the BRI framework. It offers a robust theoretical and methodological foundation for future research on this topic.

**Practical Significance of the Research.** The findings and conclusions of this research can be utilized by state bodies engaged in humanitarian policy, cultural exchange, and academic cooperation with the PRC, as well as in diplomatic services and the activities of NGOs. Moreover, the results can inform the development of educational and cultural programs between universities, research institutions, and cultural centers in Central Asia and China.

These insights may also prove valuable in formulating humanitarian strategies for Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries within the Eurasian space and in anticipating cultural-humanitarian risks and challenges.

The dissertation materials can be employed in the design of academic courses on cultural diplomacy, international relations, and regional studies, as well as in the training of diplomats and professionals in international cooperation.

**Approbation of the thesis.** The dissertation research was reviewed by the Department of International Relations of the Faculty of Postgraduate Education at Abylai Khan Kazakh University of International Relations and World Languages and, by decision of the Academic Council, was recommended for defense. The main theoretical provisions, scientific findings, and conclusions of the dissertation were presented at three international academic conferences and published in the respective proceedings. In addition, the research results were published in the form of four scholarly articles in Kazakh, Russian, and English in national academic journals recommended by the Committee for Quality Assurance in the Sphere of Science and Higher Education under the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, one scientific article based on the dissertation topic was published in English in an international peer-reviewed journal indexed in the Scopus database and recognized by the global academic community.

**Structure and Volume of the thesis.** The dissertation is structured in accordance with the objectives and tasks of the research and is based on content logic that meets academic standards. The work comprises the following main sections: a list of symbols and abbreviations, an introduction, the main body consisting of three chapters, each chapter is subdivided into three sections, a conclusion, and a list of references. The content of the dissertation is enriched with visual and empirical materials. The research includes thirty illustrations and diagrams, results of an expert survey, a comprehensive institutional map, and three tables.