Research on the Impact of Cultural Identity on the Participation of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: As an important "bridge and link" connecting China and Southeast Asian countries, the cultural identity of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia plays a key role in fields such as production capacity cooperation, unimpeded trade, and people-to-people bonds under the Belt and Road Initiative. Focusing on the cultural identity of this group, this paper systematically sorts out the formation background and manifestations of their cultural identity through literature research, case analysis, and cross-cultural comparison methods. It further conducts an in-depth analysis of the dual impacts of cultural identity on their participation in the Belt and Road construction — on one hand, it reduces cooperation costs and promotes project implementation through language mutual understanding, value alignment, and kinship networks; on the other hand, issues such as "blurred cultural identity" and "intensified localization tendency" among some groups restrict the depth of participation. Based on this, the paper puts forward countermeasures and suggestions to stimulate the enthusiasm of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia to participate in the Belt and Road construction from the perspectives of strengthening the construction of cultural exchange platforms, optimizing the policy support system, and promoting the cultural inheritance of the new generation of overseas Chinese. It aims to provide theoretical reference and practical paths for deepening pragmatic cooperation between China and Southeast Asian countries and building a closer community with a shared future.

Keywords: cultural identity; overseas Chinese in southeast Asia; the Belt and Road Initiative; people-to-people bonds; cross-cultural cooperation

1. Introduction

Since its proposal, the Belt and Road Initiative has always adhered to the principle of "extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits". While promoting infrastructure connectivity and deepening economic and trade cooperation between China and countries along the route, it also attaches great importance to people-to-people bonds as the foundation of construction[1]. As a key node of the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road", Southeast Asia is not only an important partner for China's foreign economic and trade cooperation, but also one of the regions with the most concentrated overseas Chinese population in the world. Statistics show that about 70% of the world's overseas Chinese live in Southeast Asia, with a total of over 40 million. Due to their historical migration background, this group not only retains the genes of traditional Chinese culture (such as Confucian ethics, clan concepts, and linguistic customs) but also deeply integrates into the local social and cultural system, forming a "bicultural" or "multicultural" identity trait. As a core element defining group identity and influencing behavioral choices, cultural identity is directly related to the cognitive attitude, participation willingness, and action logic of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia towards the Belt and Road Initiative. On one hand, a deep identification with Chinese culture enables them to become "natural intermediaries" for communication between China and Southeast Asian countries, helping to avoid cultural barriers and resolve cooperation risks. On the other hand, if cultural identity weakens or deviates, it may lead to blurred role positioning of overseas Chinese in Belt and Road projects, and even make it difficult for them to play a bridging role. However, existing studies mostly focus on the historical changes of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia or the economic cooperation effects of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the discussion on the influence mechanism of "cultural identity" as an implicit variable is insufficient. Based on this, this paper, focusing on the current situation of cultural identity of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, systematically analyzes its specific impacts on their participation in the Belt and Road construction, and then puts forward targeted countermeasures. It aims to provide academic support for fully activating the resource advantages of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and promoting the high-quality development of the Belt and Road construction in Southeast Asia[2].

2. Overview of the Cultural Identity of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia

2.1 Formation Background of Cultural Identity of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia

The cultural identity of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia is not static, but a dynamic system gradually formed through historical migration, regional integration, and era changes. Its formation background can be summarized into three core dimensions:

2.1.1 Cultural inheritance foundation in historical migration

The migration history of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia can be traced back to the Tang and Song dynasties, with large-scale migration concentrated from the Ming and Qing dynasties to modern times. Due to wars, famines, or trade needs, people from China's southeast coastal areas (such as Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan) successively migrated to Southeast Asia[3]. During the migration process, overseas Chinese groups maintained the inheritance of Chinese culture through clan organizations (such as ancestral halls and guild halls), private school education (teaching Chinese characters and Confucian classics), and folk activities (Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, etc.), forming a cultural background of "taking root locally but not forgetting the origin" and laying the foundation for the continuation of cultural identity[4].

2.1.2 Cultural adaptation in the process of localization

After arriving in Southeast Asia, overseas Chinese groups needed to adapt to the local political system, social structure, and cultural environment, thus starting the process of "localization" adaptation. For example, in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, overseas Chinese had to learn local languages (such as Malay and Indonesian) to integrate into daily production and life. At the religious level, some overseas Chinese believed in Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity under local influence, forming a belief pattern of "integration of Chinese culture and local religions". In terms of customs, integration phenomena such as "Chinese wedding customs + local etiquette" and "Chinese cuisine + Southeast Asian spices" are common. This adaptation is not "cultural substitution" but "cultural integration" with Chinese culture as the core, making the cultural identity of overseas Chinese have dual characteristics of "Chineseness" and "localization"[5].

2.2 Strengthening of cultural identity under globalization and China's development

Since the 21st century, the acceleration of globalization has promoted cultural exchanges, and China's rapid economic development and enhanced international influence have provided new impetus for the strengthening of cultural identity of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. On one hand, Chinese cultural products such as film and television works (e.g., costume dramas, documentaries), online literature, and short videos have entered Southeast Asia through new media platforms, awakening the memory and identification of overseas Chinese groups with Chinese culture. On the other hand, economic and trade cooperation between China and Southeast Asia (such as cross-border e-commerce and tourism) has been frequent. Overseas Chinese groups have become the main force of cooperation due to their linguistic and cultural advantages. While gaining economic benefits, they have further perceived the practical value of Chinese culture, promoting the transformation of cultural identity from "emotional identity" to "interest identity + emotional identity".

2.3 Manifestations of Cultural Identity of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia

Combined with the historical background and realistic situation of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, their cultural identity mainly presents three interrelated forms, and the proportion of different forms in the group varies by country and generation.

2.3.1 Core cultural identity

This type of identity takes "Chinese culture as the core", and the group is mostly older generations of overseas Chinese or those who have received a deep education in traditional Chinese culture. They are proficient in Chinese (dialects or Mandarin), adhere to Confucian ethics (such as "filial piety to parents and respect for elders" and "treating others with sincerity"), actively participate in Chinese community activities, and hold a strong emotional identity with China's history, culture, and development. In the Belt and Road construction, this group often takes the initiative to assume the role of "bridge". For example, in projects such as the China-Laos Railway and China-Thailand Railway, overseas Chinese with core identity have promoted the smooth implementation of projects by coordinating the relations between Chinese enterprises and local communities.

2.3.2 Integrated cultural identity

This is the most common form of identity among overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia currently, characterized by "integration of Chinese culture and local culture", mainly concentrated in the middle-aged overseas Chinese group. They not only recognize the values of Chinese culture (such as attaching importance to family and education) but also respect

local cultural customs. They will not only participate in traditional Chinese festivals but also celebrate local festivals (such as Thailand's Songkran Festival and Malaysia's Eid al-Fitr). Linguistically, most of them are multilingual users of "Chinese + local language + English". The group with integrated identity has the advantage of "two-way communication" in Belt and Road cooperation. They can not only understand the business philosophy of Chinese enterprises but also accurately grasp local market demand and policy orientation, making them the "backbone force" in cross-border trade and production capacity cooperation.

3. The Impact of Cultural Identity on the Participation of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in the Belt and Road Construction

3.1 Positive Impacts: Reducing Cooperation Costs, Promoting Project Implementation and People-to-People Bonds

3.1.1 Reducing cross-cultural cooperation costs and improving cooperation efficiency

The "cultural commonalities" brought by cultural identity are the key to reducing cooperation costs. For overseas Chinese groups with core and integrated identities, their proficiency in Chinese and understanding of Chinese business models (such as "relationship marketing" and "long-term cooperation orientation") can effectively avoid "cultural barriers" in cooperation between Chinese enterprises and Southeast Asian countries. For example, in Southeast Asian cross-border e-commerce cooperation, overseas Chinese merchants can not only understand the product standards and pricing logic of Chinese suppliers but also explain the "Chinese characteristics" of products (such as Hanfu and Chinese-style household appliances) to local consumers, avoiding communication misunderstandings caused by cultural differences. In engineering construction projects, overseas Chinese managers can coordinate conflicts between Chinese enterprise employees and local workers through "Confucian-style communication" (emphasizing human feelings and euphemistic expression), reducing management costs and improving project progress efficiency.

3.1.2 Relying on kinship and community networks to assist project implementation

The cultural identity of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia is often closely linked to "clan networks" and "Chinese communities". Groups with core identity are mostly active in organizations such as Chinese chambers of commerce and clan associations, which are not only carriers of Chinese cultural inheritance but also platforms for resource integration. In Belt and Road projects, overseas Chinese groups can provide localized support for Chinese enterprises through these networks. For example, in the Malaysia East Coast Rail Link project, the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM) used its influence to assist Chinese enterprises in understanding local land policies and environmental protection requirements, connecting local building materials suppliers and labor resources, and helping the project overcome "localization obstacles". In the construction of the Thailand Rayong Industrial Park, the Kasikornbank (founded by overseas Chinese) provided cross-border financial services for Chinese enterprises, solving the problem of fund settlement and helping Chinese enterprises "take root locally".

3.1.3 Promoting people-to-people bonds and creating a good atmosphere for cooperation

The Belt and Road construction is not only economic cooperation but also a process of people-to-people bonds. Due to cultural identity, overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia have a natural affinity for China's development concepts (such as "a community with a shared future for mankind") and cultural values, and can become "propagandists" and "practitioners" of people-to-people bonds. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Southeast Asian Chinese communities organized "aid to China for epidemic prevention" activities, and also introduced China's epidemic prevention experience (such as cabin hospitals and vaccination plans) to local governments and people. In the field of cultural exchanges, activities such as "Chinese Culture Festival" and "Chinese Bridge" led by overseas Chinese groups show the diversity of Chinese culture (such as Peking Opera, calligraphy, and traditional Chinese medicine) to Southeast Asian people, reducing "cognitive biases" towards China and creating a social atmosphere of "mutual trust and mutual learning" for Belt and Road cooperation.

3.2 Negative Impacts: Restricting Participation Depth and Intensifying Cooperation Risks

3.2.1 Blurred cultural identity leading to confused role positioning

Some groups with integrated identity have the problem of "blurred cultural identity" — they are worried that being overly close to China will be regarded as "outsiders" by the local society, and at the same time, they are afraid that complete localization will lose the advantages of "overseas Chinese identity". This contradictory mentality leads to confused role positioning in their participation in Belt and Road cooperation. For example, in the Indonesia Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway project, some Indonesian overseas Chinese engineers adopted a "neutral attitude" in the docking of technical

standards for fear of being questioned by local colleagues for "favoring Chinese enterprises". They neither took the initiative to feedback the details of local technical specifications to Chinese enterprises nor explained the technical advantages of China's high-speed rail to the local team, resulting in low efficiency of technical docking. In cross-border trade, some overseas Chinese merchants deliberately weaken the "Chinese attributes" of products due to "identity anxiety", and even package "Made in China" as "locally produced", which instead reduces the market recognition of products and restricts the depth of cooperation.

3.2.2 Marginal identity of the new generation intensifying participation gap

With the passage of time, the new generation of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia (groups with marginal identity) has gradually become the main force of society. However, their weak understanding of Chinese culture and weak emotional ties with China have led to an "intergenerational gap" in the participation of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in the Belt and Road construction. On one hand, due to their unfamiliarity with Chinese language and culture, the new generation of overseas Chinese is difficult to enter the localized teams of Chinese enterprises and cannot provide effective cultural support for Chinese enterprises. On the other hand, some new generations of overseas Chinese have misunderstandings about Chinese enterprise projects under the influence of local "anti-China public opinion" (such as the historical memory of anti-Chinese sentiment in some countries and negative reports by Western media), and even participate in "anti-Chinese enterprise" protests. For example, in 2022, some Indonesian overseas Chinese youth participated in demonstrations against the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway project due to the misunderstanding that "the project will seize local jobs". Although the issue was eventually resolved through communication, it also exposed the negative impact of groups with marginal identity on Belt and Road cooperation.

4. Countermeasures to Strengthen the Role of Cultural Identity and Improve the Effectiveness of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in Participating in the Belt and Road Construction

4.1 Promote the Integrated Inheritance of Chinese Culture and Local Culture to Resolve Identity Ambiguity and Intergenerational Gap

4.1.1 Optimize the cultural education content for the new generation of overseas Chinese

Cooperate with educational institutions in China and Southeast Asian countries to develop integrated educational courses of "Chinese culture + local culture". For example, integrate Southeast Asian history and culture (such as the connection between Zheng He's voyages to the Western Seas and Southeast Asia, and the contributions of overseas Chinese to Southeast Asian development) into Chinese language teaching, and add localized cases to traditional cultural courses (such as "the application of Confucian ethics in Southeast Asian enterprise management" and "the integrated innovation of Chinese cuisine and Southeast Asian spices"). This allows the new generation of overseas Chinese to perceive the value of Chinese culture and recognize their own "local identity" in learning, resolving the dilemma of "blurred identity". At the same time, use new media platforms (such as TikTok and Facebook) to launch short video courses, and spread Chinese culture in an "interesting" form (such as animations and sitcoms) to attract the attention of the new generation of overseas Chinese.

4.1.2 Support the development of "bicultural" folk activities

Encourage Southeast Asian Chinese communities to hold "integrated" folk activities, such as joint celebrations of "Spring Festival + Songkran Festival" and cultural markets of "Mid-Autumn Festival + Eid al-Fitr", allowing Chinese culture and local culture to collide and integrate in activities. China can provide financial and resource support through institutions such as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, such as dispatching intangible cultural heritage inheritors to participate in activities and providing props for Chinese cultural exhibitions. This not only strengthens the cultural identity of overseas Chinese groups but also conveys the concept of "cultural mutual learning" to the local society, reducing the "sense of exclusion" towards overseas Chinese groups.

4.2 Improve the Policy Support System to Reduce Cooperation Risks and Costs

4.2.1 Establish a special service mechanism for "overseas Chinese participation in the Belt and Road Initiative"

The Chinese government can cooperate with Chinese chambers of commerce and overseas Chinese affairs departments in Southeast Asian countries to establish a special service platform, providing "policy consultation, legal support, and resource docking" services for overseas Chinese groups participating in Belt and Road cooperation. For example, the platform can regularly release the cooperation needs of Chinese enterprises in Southeast Asia (such as project investment promotion and talent recruitment) to match cooperation opportunities for overseas Chinese groups. It can provide "China-Southeast Asia

legal comparison and interpretation" services to help overseas Chinese groups avoid legal risks in cross-border cooperation. It can also establish an "overseas Chinese cooperation rights protection hotline" to provide timely legal assistance when overseas Chinese groups encounter unfair treatment in cooperation.

4.2.2 Optimize the localization cooperation strategies of Chinese enterprises

Guide Chinese enterprises to respect "cultural differences" and avoid "Sinocentrism" when cooperating with overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. For example, in project management, encourage Chinese enterprises to involve overseas Chinese managers in decision-making and fully listen to their suggestions on local culture and markets. In corporate culture building, integrate "bicultural" elements (such as retaining the Chinese enterprise trait of "emphasizing efficiency" and adding the Southeast Asian cultural trait of "emphasizing human feelings") to enhance the sense of belonging of overseas Chinese employees and local employees. At the same time, Chinese enterprises can regularly carry out "cross-cultural training" to help employees understand the cultural customs of Southeast Asia and the cultural identity characteristics of overseas Chinese groups, reducing cooperation conflicts caused by cultural misunderstandings.

5. Conclusion

Through the research on the relationship between cultural identity and the participation of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in the Belt and Road construction, this paper draws the following core conclusions: Firstly, the cultural identity of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia is the result of the joint action of historical migration, localization adaptation, and China's development. It presents three forms: "core type", "integrated type", and "marginal type", and different forms of identity have significant differences in the attitudes and behaviors of their participation in the Belt and Road construction. Secondly, the impact of cultural identity on the participation of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia in the Belt and Road construction is dual — on the positive side, it can reduce cooperation costs, assist project implementation, and promote people-to-people bonds; on the negative side, it may restrict the depth of participation due to identity ambiguity, intergenerational gaps, and cultural conflicts. Thirdly, to fully activate the "bridge and link" role of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, efforts need to be made from three dimensions: "integrated cultural inheritance", "improved policy support", and "built exchange platforms", not only strengthening the positive value of Chinese cultural identity but also resolving the contradictions and risks brought by cultural identity.

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