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MULTILATERAL FORMATS OF CULTURAL AND HUMANITARIAN COOPERATION BETWEEN CENTRAL ASIA AND CHINA (THE CASE OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE)

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Abstract. For thousands of years, relations between the countries of Central Asia and China have been characterized by close cooperation based on global coexistence. Cultural and humanitarian interactions and trade relations developed between Central Asian countries and China. Central Asia and China, as part of the Asian continent, have deep cultural roots that enrich their multilateral cooperation. Over the past decade, one of the important areas of cooperation between the countries of Central Asia and China has become the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). Such a multilateral history of interaction between the Central Asian countries and China goes back thousands of years, forming strong multilateral relations that are passed down from generation to generation. In recent decades, despite changes in the international situation, the five Central Asian States - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan — continue to strengthen multilateral cooperation with China, maintaining stable and positive development of interaction. The multilateral format of such a partnership serves as a solid foundation for China's relations with its neighbors and contributes to strengthening centuries-old friendship and mutual trust, combining efforts for sustainable development and stability in the region. The multilateral format of cultural interaction promotes dialogue and cooperation in the field of trade, investment, and infrastructure development. Regular events and initiatives in the cultural and humanitarian sphere between the countries have formed an effective platform that strengthens partnerships and mutual understanding, contributing to stability in the Central Asian region.

This article analyzes the multilateral format of cultural and humanitarian cooperation between the countries of Central Asia and China within the framework of the BRI over the past 10 years. The article focuses on educational and language programs, as well as other forms of partnership between the 5 Central Asian countries and China, as well as interpersonal relations as an important element of this cooperation. The author draws attention to the political and legal basis of the multi-party format and believes that the introduction of multilateral legal norms and agreements will strengthen cultural cooperation, ensuring its sustainable and independent development.

Key words: Central Asia, China, culture, education, Chinese language, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Confucius Institutes, Luban workshops

Introduction

The history of Central Asia's interaction with China spans thousands of years, forming a valuable relationship that has endured for generations. In recent decades, despite the changing international environment, five Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - have continued to deepen their mutual trust with China, maintaining a stable and healthy momentum. This partnership has successfully laid the groundwork for China's relations with its neighbors, contributing to the ongoing narrative of their millennia-old history.

The current relationship between Central Asian countries and China is shaped by political, economic, geographic, security and cultural as well humanitarian exchange factors. These elements form the basis of China's sound policy towards all Central Asian countries. Geographically, Central Asian nations and China are neighbors; for the countries of Central Asia, China represents a significant outlet to the sea, while these nations can help China establish extensive inland communications to Europe and West Asia.

In the realm of politics, the nations of Central Asia and China have long standing ties. Currently, China and Central Asia hold similar positions on many national and international issues, and advantageous political relationship have been formed among these nations. In regard to economics, the countries of Central Asia and China have complementary advantages that open the possibility of extensive mutual cooperation. For China, the vast energy resources, metals, raw materials and other commodities, as well as the market comprised of 80 million population of Central Asia is very important. At the same time, China's consumer, industrial and agricultural products and markets hold a significant attraction for the nations of Central Asia.

In terms of security, the five nations of Central Asia and China share numerous common interests. The issue of ethnic separatism, religious extremism and the threat coming from transnational crime, regional conflict and terrorism are mutual concerns. Maintaining the long-term stability of Central Asian region and bordering western areas of China benefits everyone [1].

Although there have been cultural and humanitarian exchanges and trade between Central Asia and China for thousands of years, it was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Central Asian nations that mutually beneficial and equal relationship was established among the countries. Over the course of past decade, sound foundations have been laid to build strategic cooperation in these areas in the twenty-first century between Central Asia and China. Both Central Asian countries and China are on the Asian continent and traditionally been dubbed as Eastern countries sharing cultural heritages. Yet, while China does not have a lasting quite strong religious tradition, all Central Asian nations historically have been part of the Islamic civilization [2].

This article examines the multilateral approach to cultural and humanitarian cooperation between China and Central Asia, emphasizing their geographical diversity, shared economic interests, and mutual concerns for regional stability and security. This multilateral format is crucial for strengthening political, economic, and cultural connections, fostering a more sustainable and mutually beneficial foundation for long-term partnerships. By engaging in collaborative efforts, both regions can enhance their ties and address common challenges, paving the way for greater cooperation and development.

Description of materials and methods

To analyze the multilateral format of cultural and humanitarian cooperation between China and Central Asian countries, the author utilized various theoretical concepts and methodological approaches.

Joseph S. Nye's theory of "soft power" has shed light on how China employs cultural tools to influence political sentiment and enhance its relationships in the region. This concept suggests that cultural exchanges, educational programs, and humanitarian initiatives play a crucial role in shaping a positive image of China, thereby fostering stronger diplomatic ties with Central Asian countries.

In the framework of multilateral cooperation between Central Asia and China, cultural diplomacy plays a vital role as a component of soft power. By fostering cultural exchanges, educational programs, and shared cultural events, China strengthens its ties with Central Asian nations. This active engagement in cultural diplomacy helps create a positive image of China and attracts these countries to pursue mutually beneficial cooperation.

In studying this issue, the author draws on the theory of regionalism, which posits that neighboring countries can form stable ties to enhance economic, political, and cultural cooperation. Within the context of China-Central Asia relations, regionalism theory elucidates how countries establish integration mechanisms, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to promote sustainable development in the region. This regional economic integration fosters economic interdependence and strengthens cultural connections. Through cultural and humanitarian projects and exchanges, states in the region cultivate a common understanding and coordinate actions across cultural, political, and social spheres.

To explore the topic, an interdisciplinary approach was employed in the study of cultural and humanitarian cooperation. This approach utilizes various disciplines, including international relations, cultural studies, sociology, and economics, to assess the multifaceted aspects of cooperation between China and Central Asia. By integrating political, cultural, and economic dimensions, this method enhances our understanding of the factors influencing cultural exchanges and humanitarian programs.

Statistical analysis is utilized to quantify the effects of cooperation, including metrics such as the number of students participating in educational exchanges, the frequency of cultural events, the attendance at cultural programs, and the economic impact of cultural projects. This data offers valuable insights into the multilateral interactions within the cultural sphere of the region and China.

The article utilizes a qualitative analysis emphasizing inductive thinking processes linked to the dynamics of relationships between observed phenomena while employing scientific logic. The qualitative method aims to cultivate sensitivity to the problems encountered, explain the realities associated with exploring theories from below, and deepen the understanding of one or more phenomena being studied. Qualitative research is interpretive in nature, involving researchers who are directly engaged in ongoing interactions with informants throughout the research process [3].

Primary sources include the speeches of officials from the Central Asian republics and China. By closely examining these documents, I aim to uncover what cultural and humanitarian relationships mean to the elites of Central Asia and China, as well as the significance they attribute to these concepts.

Results

Multilateral cultural and humanitarian cooperation between Central Asian countries and China is a crucial element in shaping a new regional order. This collaboration fosters mutual understanding, trust, and friendship among peoples, while also supporting the region's sustainable development.

The China-Central Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum is an annual event that unites representatives from China and Central Asian countries to discuss and develop cultural projects. Within this framework, agreements are established to support exchanges in art, education, and media. These forums strengthen cultural ties and serve as a platform for exploring further initiatives aimed at preserving cultural heritage, promoting languages, and enhancing mutual understanding among peoples.

Confucius Institutes (孔子学院) are another key component of cultural cooperation between Central Asian countries and China. At present, there are thirteen Confucius Institutes in Central Asian region: five in Kazakhstan (including the one based at Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages), four in Kyrgyzstan, and two each in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as twenty-four Confucius classrooms. In fact, Chinese has become the second most preferred foreign language after English in Central Asia.

China emphasizes a significant boost in government scholarships for Central Asian students in their application for degree studies and short-term fellowship programs, as well as in the increasing number of places within the well-known International Chinese Language Teachers Scholarship. As a result, Confucius Institutes which along with their Confucius Institute Scholarship coordinate the afore-mentioned International Chinese Language Teachers Scholarship, enhanced their activities in sending Central Asian students and teachers to China, in particular within the short-term programs. According to available data from China's Ministry of Education, about five hundred thousand students from 196 countries studied in China in 2018 while Kazakhstan was the tenth largest nation of origin with around twelve thousand students.

Confucian institutions play a vital role in promoting Chinese culture and language throughout Central Asia. At major universities in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, these institutes organize a variety of educational programs, cultural events, and Chinese language courses, while also supporting research initiatives. This approach not only enhances local residents' understanding of Chinese culture but also fosters scientific collaboration, creating valuable opportunities for the exchange of teachers and students.

China provides scholarships for students from Central Asia to study at its universities, fostering long-term cultural and professional connections. These programs facilitate knowledge sharing and help cultivate positive perceptions of China among the region's future leaders. The Silk Road Scholarship program specifically supports Central Asian students at top Chinese institutions, enhancing cultural understanding and promoting professional collaboration. Furthermore, various academic exchange initiatives allow students and teachers to engage deeply with each other's cultures and traditions.

The Luban workshop is a globally renowned brand in vocational education initiated by China, which has led in implementation and promotion. Named after Lu Ban (鲁班, 507-444 BC), who is regarded as the father of Chinese carpentry, the workshops goal is to train technical professionals worldwide by mixing academic education with practical training. It is aimed at high-level nurture of technical professionals who are in pressing demand for Central Asia's economic and social progress. A growing number of Luban workshops have been set up in countries participating in Belt and Road Initiative. The program is a tangible measure to improve exchanges in vocational education between Central Asian countries and China under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Kazakhstan alone houses two Luban workshops, based at Serikbayev East Kazakhstan Technical University (Oskemen) and at Gumilyov Eurasian National University (the workshop is under construction in Astana) [4]. The facility allows Kazakhstani students to study advanced automotive technologies applying modern Chinese equipment. The initial phase offers training to over 400 students in transportation technology and equipment, with four practical training sections: vehicle fuel systems, vehicle maintenance, new (alternative) energy vehicles and intelligent connected vehicles.

In fact, China opened its first Central Asian Luban workshop in Tajikistan in 2022 [5]. Tajikistan Luban Workshop spans 1,138 square meters and offers majors in engineering measurement technologies and urban heating application. It covers two practice centers - one green and one smart - for ongoing student projects, and is equipped with an online classroom and 377 sets of teaching equipment.

Plans have been announced to establish Luban workshops in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well. China has opened over two dozen Luban workshops around the world, which are described as official Beijing's "calling card for professional education."

Multilateral cooperation in joint scientific research, tourist routes, and media projects enhances cultural understanding among the peoples of the region. This collaboration is essential for strengthening regional integration and creating a conducive environment for cooperation in other areas. Additionally, these cultural ties help mitigate political tensions and foster constructive relationships between countries.

Discussion

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sometimes called as the New Silk Road, is one of the most ambitious projects ever conceived. Announced in 2013 by President Xi Jinping during his visit to Kazakhstan, the collection of development and investment initiatives was originally set to link East Asia and Europe by the means of tangible and intangible presence. The original Silk Road rose during China's Han Dynasty (206-220 BC) and forged trade networks throughout the five Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, as well as Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Thus, Central Asia was the

epicenter of one of the initial waves of globalization, linking eastern and western markets, spurring great wealth, and intermixing religious and cultural traditions [6].

While currently, under the New Silk Road project (Belt and Road Initiative) China and Central Asian countries have reached “three comprehensive coverages”: total coverage of comprehensive strategic partnerships, total coverage of practicing the community with a shared future for mankind on the level bilateral relationship, and total coverage of signing cooperation documents for jointly developing the Belt and Road Initiative. According to the data, by the end of 2023, the trade volume between the five Central Asian nations and China reached \$89.4 billion, a surge of 27% from 2022 [7]. Within the framework of the BRI, many significant cooperative projects in infrastructure, energy, and agriculture have been realized, such as the Kapshagay photovoltaic power station in Almaty (Kazakhstan) and the modernization project of the Shymkent Oil Refinery (Kazakhstan). In Tajikistan, a series of major large-scale cooperation projects like the Dushanbe No.2 power plant have generated impetus for the nation’s social and economic development and improvement of local living standards. In Uzbekistan, The Olympic City project is in full swing in Uzbekistan being built by China.

At the same time, the Belt and Road Initiative adopts a people-centered approach, focusing on job creation, poverty eradication, and the improvement of people’s well-being to ensure that the benefits of cooperation reach everyone [8]. Deeper collaboration is encouraged in areas such as public health, poverty reduction, disaster mitigation, science and technology, green development, education, arts, culture, and healthcare. Closer exchanges are promoted among think tanks, political parties, social organizations, women, youth, and sub-national communities. These efforts aim to create projects that address the needs of the people, thereby enhancing their sense of achievement and fulfillment.

Higher education, science, and technology are crucial sectors of the Belt and Road Initiative’s cultural diplomacy. Through the “Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative,” China aims to enhance educational interconnectivity and deepen collaboration on talent training and development to strengthen the overall impact of education [9]. In the post-pandemic period, China and the five Central Asian countries have prioritized education in their bilateral cooperation agenda. Within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and beyond, China has increased its involvement in the education sector by expanding the presence of Chinese universities, promoting joint education programs, widening the activities of Confucius Institutes, increasing the number of Chinese government scholarships, and establishing Luban workshops.

Neighboring Central Asian nations and China indeed interact like neighbors, further deepening mutual trust and sharing in adversity through trust and friendly relations. Currently, China and the five Central Asian countries have established around seventy pairs of sister provinces and cities, over ten Confucius Institutes have been established in Central Asia, and Luban Workshops have generated significant talent support for local development.

In fact, the reactivation of Beijing’s education diplomacy coincided with the overall trend of the internationalization wave at Central Asian universities.

Kazakhstan's government has been working on enhancing the competitiveness of local universities by means of opening branches of leading international universities both in major and regional cities. As known, Kyrgyzstan is very active in housing universities supported by the U.S. and Western entities. Uzbekistan which is currently undergoing wide-scale transformation is attracting foreign universities to the country (30 branches of foreign universities as of now) in order to train students at home rather than sending them overseas. Finally, Tajikistan is attempting to collaborate with international universities while giving preference to Russian and Chinese educational programs embracing their practical and academic attractiveness. Yet, despite its gradually evolving international cooperation in education sector, Turkmenistan remains a conservative player in its approaches.

The plans to implement a visa-free regime were first announced in April 2023 and was realized with the signing of the mutual agreement between the governments of China and Kazakhstan. Under this new agreement, citizens of both nations can enjoy visa-free travel for up to 30 days and covers different purposes, including tourism, medical tourism, international transportation, transit, and business activities [10].

The visa exemption agreement between Kazakhstan and China signifies a milestone in their bilateral relations and holds huge potential for further growth and collaboration in different fields. Both countries stand to benefit from the enhanced opportunities for investment, trade, and cultural exchange, reinforcing their strong long-standing partnership. The deepening cooperation between China and Kazakhstan in the tourism area is poised to foster closer economic relations, facilitate cultural exchange, and boost the number of visitors travelling between the two nations.

In this way, Beijing is emerging as one of the most powerful and influential players in Central Asia, and there is little that Russia or any other major player, such as the European Union (EU), can do about it. For the time being, both China and Russia share a compatible agenda and have been able to accommodate each other. However, in the long term, it is hard to ignore the potential threat that China's multidimensional rise and ever-increasing influence in Central Asia pose to Russia. Russian policymakers are likely becoming increasingly concerned about the speed with which China is narrowing the strategic gap between the two nations.

Nevertheless, neither Chinese nor English has yet managed to unseat the dominance of the Russian language in the region. Russia's media dominance, bolstered by the widespread popularity of Russian, along with the growing number of scholarships for Central Asians in Russian universities, strengthens its foothold in the region. As of 2024, around 60,000 Kazakh students were reported to be studying at Russian universities [11].

Moreover, the EU wields a durable form of soft power in the Central Asian region. Despite the dominant presence of Russian media and Chinese cultural influence, the EU exerts a greater appeal and influence. A key aspect of this influence is its educational initiatives. Every year, around 1,000 Central Asian students choose to study at European universities through the Erasmus Mundus program, along with many others who participate in various programs financed by

individual EU member states. These educational exchanges serve as a powerful tool for cultural diplomacy, providing students with not only academic opportunities but also firsthand exposure to European values, institutions, and ways of life.

Conclusion

Beyond investing in various trade and infrastructure-related projects as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing is actively promoting cultural and humanitarian cooperation activities in Central Asian region. As part of cultural and humanitarian cooperation, China and Central Asian countries have been strengthening broad-scale education diplomacy. Local nations have aligned with China on most of BRI projects which are driven by cultural and connectivity goals as well as their own domestic concerns.

Cultural and humanitarian cooperation between Central Asia's five nations and China is emphasized on science, education, culture, tourism, media, and sports. These goals are in line with China's Global Civilization Initiative, which advocates for respect for the diversity of different civilizations while promoting prosperity and progress. Key areas of cooperation include student and academic exchanges, joint archaeological expeditions, sports competitions and collaborative projects aimed at preserving valuable cultural heritage.

In Central Asia, where Beijing is an established strategic partner, efforts to broaden educational cooperation have gained new momentum. The intensification of educational exchanges indicates that Central Asian countries and China are increasingly prioritizing the education sector. Many Chinese universities and cultural organizations have established research centers, as well as language and vocational programs.

People-to-people connections have always been the backbone of the long-term relationships and lasting friendships between Central Asian countries and China. Throughout history, individuals from both sides of the border have been closely linked by the renowned Silk Road. Accordingly, Kazakhstan, at the forefront of this cooperation, has implemented a visa-free entry regime for Chinese citizens, reflecting the level of mutual trust, good-neighborly relations, and respect between the two sides.

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ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ ЖӘНЕ ҚХР МӘДЕНИ -ГУМАНИТАРЛЫҚ ЫНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҒЫНЫҢ КӨПЖАҚТЫ ФОРМАТТАРЫ (БІР БЕЛДЕУ ЖӘНЕ БІР ЖОЛ БАСТАМАСЫ МЫСАЛЫНДА)

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Аңдатпа. Мыңдаған жылдар бойы Орталық Азия елдері мен Қытай арасындағы қарым-қатынас тығыз ынтымақтастықпен сипатталды. ОА елдері мен Қытай арасында мәдени және гуманитарлық өзара байланыс пен сауда қатынастары дамыды. Орталық Азия мен Қытай Азия континентінің бөлігі ретінде олардың көпжақты ынтымақтастығын байытатын терең мәдени тамырларға ие. Соңғы онжылдықта Орталық Азия елдері мен Қытай арасындағы өзара байланыстардың маңызды бағыттарының бірі "Бір белдеу-бір жол" бастамасы болды. Мұндай көпжақты Орталық Азия елдерінің Қытаймен өзара ынтымақтастықтың тарихы ұрпақтан-ұрпаққа жалғасып келе жатқан берік көпжақты қатынастарды қалыптастыра отырып, мыңдаған жылдарға созылады. Соңғы онжылдықтарда халықаралық жағдайдағы өзгерістерге қарамастан, Орталық Азияның бес мемлекеті — Қазақстан, Өзбекстан, Қырғызстан, Тәжікстан және Түрікменстан — өзара ынтымақтастықтың тұрақты және оң дамуын қолдай отырып, Қытаймен көпжақты ынтымақтастықты нығайтуды жалғастыруда. Мұндай серіктестіктің көпжақты форматы Қытайдың көршілерімен қарым-қатынасы үшін берік негіз болып табылады және аймақтағы тұрақты даму мен тұрақтылық үшін күш біріктіре отырып, ғасырлар бойғы достық пен өзара сенімді нығайтуға ықпал етеді. Мәдени өзара іс-қимылдың көпжақты форматы сауда, инвестициялар, инфрақұрылымды дамыту саласындағы диалог пен ынтымақтастыққа ықпал етеді. Елдер арасындағы мәдени-гуманитарлық саладағы тұрақты іс-шаралар мен бастамалар Орталық Азия өңіріндегі тұрақтылыққа ықпал ететін әріптестік байланыстар мен өзара түсіністікті нығайтатын тиімді платформаны қалыптастырды.

Бұл мақалада соңғы 10 жылдағы "Бір белдеу-бір жол" бастамасы аясында Орталық Азия елдері мен Қытай арасындағы мәдени және гуманитарлық ынтымақтастықтың көпжақты форматы талданады. Мақалада негізгі назар білім беру және тілдік бағдарламаларға, сондай-ақ ОА-нің 5 елі мен Қытай арасындағы серіктестіктің басқа нысандарына, сондай-ақ осы ынтымақтастықтың маңызды элементі ретінде тұлғааралық байланыстарға аударылады. Автор көпжақты форматтың саяси-құқықтық негізіне назар аударады және көпжақты құқықтық нормалар мен келісімдерді енгізу оның тұрақты және тәуелсіз дамуын қамтамасыз ете отырып, мәдени ынтымақтастықты нығайтуға мүмкіндік береді деп санайды.

Тірек сөздер: Орталық Азия, Қытай, мәдениет, білім беру, қытай тілі, "Белдеу және Жол" Бастамасы, Конфуций Институты, Лубан шеберханалары

МНОГОСТОРОННИЕ ФОРМАТЫ КУЛЬТУРНО- ГУМАНИТАРНОГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА ЦА И КНР (НА ПРИМЕРЕ ИНИЦИАТИВЫ ОДИН ПОЯС ОДИН ПУТЬ)

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Аннотация. На протяжении тысячелетий отношения между странами Центральной Азии и Китаем характеризовались тесным сотрудничеством, основанное на мировое сосуществование. Между старанами ЦА и Китаем развивались культурные и гуманитарные взаимодействия и торговые отношения. Центральная Азия и Китай, как часть азиатского

континента, имеют глубокие культурные корни, которые обогащают их многостороннее сотрудничество. За последнее десятилетие одним из важных направлений взаимодействия между странами Центральной Азии и Китаем стала инициатива «Один пояс — Один путь» (ОПОП). Такой многосторонний История взаимодействия стран Центральной Азии с Китаем насчитывает тысячи лет, формируя прочные многосторонние отношения, которые передаются из поколения в поколение. В последние десятилетия, несмотря на изменения в международной обстановке, пять государств Центральной Азии — Казахстан, Узбекистан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан и Туркменистан — продолжают укреплять многостороннее сотрудничество с Китаем, поддерживая стабильное и позитивное развитие взаимодействия. Многосторонний формат такого партнёрства служит прочной основой для отношений Китая с его соседями и способствует укреплению многовековой дружбы и взаимного доверия, объединяя усилия для устойчивого развития и стабильности в регионе. Многосторонний формат культурного взаимодействия способствует диалогу и сотрудничеству в области торговли, инвестиций, развития инфраструктуры. Регулярные мероприятия и инициативы в культурно-гуманитарной сфере между странами, сформировала эффективную платформу, укрепляющая партнёрские связи и взаимопонимание, способствующая стабильности в центральноазиатском регионе.

В данной статье анализируется многосторонний формат культурного и гуманитарного сотрудничества между странами Центральной Азии и Китаем в рамках ОПОП за последние 10 лет. Основное внимание в статье уделяется образовательным и языковым программам, также другим формам партнерства 5-ти стран ЦА и Китая, а также межличностным связям как важного элемента этого сотрудничества. Автор обращает внимание на политико-правовую основу многостороннего формата и полагает, что введение многосторонних правовых норм и соглашений позволит укрепить культурное сотрудничество, обеспечив его устойчивое и независимое развитие.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Китай, культура, образование, китайский язык, инициатива «Пояс и путь», Институты Конфуция, Любанская мастерская

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