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## COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND ASEAN STATES WITHIN THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: EDUCATION, CULTURE, AND TOURISM

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**Abstract.** The Belt and road initiative, launched by China in 2013, has not only fostered the expansion of economic and political ties but also served as a catalyst for intensified cultural and humanitarian cooperation between the peoples of China and the ASEAN member states. The considerable potential for enhanced interaction is largely attributed to the inherent geographical proximity of these states. This article identifies and examines the distinctive characteristics of cultural and people-to-people interactions across three principal domains: education, culture, and tourism. Particular attention is paid to analysing successful initiatives and practices that contribute to deepening mutual understanding and respect between China and ASEAN members. These include cultural festivals, joint university alliances, cultural tourism weeks, and tourism initiatives. The author concludes that ASEAN states' participation in the Belt and road initiative has enhanced the ties between China and these nations in the realms of education, culture, and tourism, thereby reinforcing regional interconnectedness and laying a solid foundation for friendship between their peoples.

**Keywords:** cultural exchange; humanitarian cooperation; China; ASEAN; Belt and road initiative.

## СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО В СФЕРЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ, КУЛЬТУРЫ И ТУРИЗМА МЕЖДУ КИТАЕМ И ГОСУДАРСТВАМИ АСЕАН В РАМКАХ ИНИЦИАТИВЫ «ОДИН ПОЯС, ОДИН ПУТЬ»

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**Аннотация.** Инициатива «Один пояс, один путь», выдвинутая Китаем в 2013 г., не только создала условия для расширения экономических и политических связей, но и послужила основой для активизации культурно-гуманитарного сотрудничества между Китаем и странами АСЕАН. Большой потенциал взаимодействия обусловлен естественной географической близостью стран. В настоящем исследовании выявлены и охарактеризованы особенности развития культурно-гуманитарного сотрудничества по трем основным направлениям (образование, культура и туризм). Отдельно проанализированы мероприятия и практики, к которым относятся культурные фестивали, недели культурного туризма, туристические инициативы и университетские альянсы, способствующие укреплению взаимопонимания между Китаем и государствами АСЕАН. Сделан вывод о том, что участие стран АСЕАН в инициативе «Один пояс, один путь» позволило углубить связи между ними и Китаем в сферах образования, культуры и туризма, что поспособствовало не только укреплению региональных связей, но и заложило прочный фундамент дружбы народов этих стран.

**Ключевые слова:** культурный обмен; гуманитарное сотрудничество; Китай; АСЕАН; инициатива «Один пояс, один путь».

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## Introduction

In 2013, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist party of China (CPC) Central Committee, unveiled the Belt and road initiative (BRI), a global cooperation framework signifying a new era of Chinese openness to the outside world. ASEAN nations have become significant participants in this initiative. Facilitating the dissemination and exchange of national cultures

is a cornerstone for developing people-to-people connections and constructing a community of shared future for mankind. Cultural exchanges have not only served to deepen amicable relations between neighbouring countries but have also contributed to establishing collaborative ventures and invigorating exchanges across diverse fields.

## Materials and methods

This article aims to identify and delineate the characteristics of cultural and humanitarian cooperation between China and ASEAN states within the BRI framework. To achieve this objective, pertinent policy documents were reviewed, and practical collaboration in the areas of education, culture, and tourism was examined. Academic works in Chinese, English, and Russian were used in the preparation of this article.

The material for this research draws mainly on the works of some scholars. Huang Lili and Lu Yongjiu summarised the decade of people-to-people collaboration between China and ASEAN following the launch of the Belt and road initiative [1]. Lu Jianren highlighted the numerous mechanisms for cultural and people-to-people exchange established by China and ASEAN, with particular emphasis on media partnerships in the cultural domain, educational forums, and conferences related to

tourism [2]. Zhang Bin identified challenges in cultural and people-to-people exchanges between China and ASEAN, proposing potential solutions [3]. Wen Zhihong investigated the role of Confucius institutes and tourism cooperation between China and ASEAN member states [4]. Yang Tijun examined educational collaboration between China and ASEAN within the context of the Belt and road initiative [5]. N. V. Kondratskaya analysed educational cooperation between China and ASEAN nations from 2000 to 2020 [6]. K. G. Muratshina examined China's cultural activities in ASEAN countries following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic [7]. He Jing explored the potential of tourism in China and ASEAN states [8]. This research also utilises materials published by official government bodies of ASEAN nations and China, as well as information from news agency websites.

## Culture

In 2005, China and ASEAN signed a Memorandum of understanding on cultural cooperation at the 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of ministers of culture in the "10 + 3" format (ASEAN, China, Japan, and South Korea). This agreement, the first of its kind between China and a regional organisation, opened a new chapter in cultural exchange and collaboration between China and ASEAN member states. The memorandum stipulates that participating nations should promote and support the protection of cultural heritage, cultivate human resources within the cultural sector, and strengthen cooperation between cultural institutions<sup>1</sup>.

During the 12<sup>th</sup> Asia arts festival in October 2011, a decision was made in China to establish a mechanism for meetings between Chinese and ASEAN culture ministers, aiming to enhance the competitiveness of the cultural sector at the regional level<sup>2</sup>. The inaugural meeting of China – ASEAN culture ministers took place in Singapore in May 2012. In his opening address, Singapore's minister for information, communications and

arts, Yaacob Ibrahim, described the meeting as a platform for fostering cultural and artistic exchanges, capable of facilitating cooperation in the cultural sphere with dialogue partners<sup>3</sup>. These meetings, held biennially since then, provide a crucial forum for China and ASEAN to discuss the outcomes of cultural exchange and collaborative endeavours.

The document called "Vision for China – ASEAN strategic partnership – 2030", released in 2018, identifies people-to-people and cultural exchanges, cooperation in political and security affairs, and economic collaboration as the three pillars of the strategic partnership between the two sides. Within the context of successfully implementing national initiatives, particularly the BRI, the document emphasises the intention of both parties to sustain interpersonal and cultural exchanges and cooperation, alongside promoting youth exchanges in the domains of language, culture, arts, and cultural heritage<sup>4</sup>. The publicly released "10 + 3" cooperation plans stress

<sup>1</sup>Memorandum of understanding on cultural cooperation between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the ASEAN member states [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.asean-cn.org/uploadfile/2016/0518/20160518074039996.pdf> (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>2</sup>China and ASEAN reached a consensus on establishing a mechanism for meetings of ministers of culture [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.singapore-china.org/media/11101001.shtml> (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>3</sup>The first China – ASEAN ministers of culture meeting opened in Singapore on the 24<sup>th</sup> [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2012-05/24/content\\_2144442.htm](https://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2012-05/24/content_2144442.htm) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>4</sup>Vision for the China – ASEAN strategic partnership – 2030 [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/1179\\_674909/201811/t20181115\\_7947869.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/201811/t20181115_7947869.shtml) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

the importance of fostering cultural exchange, encompassing the regular organisation of cultural festivals, film festivals, and art exhibitions. They also advocate for promoting interaction between practitioners within governmental departments responsible for cultural affairs, as well as providing mutual assistance and developing collaboration in the protection, preservation, and restoration of intangible cultural and historical heritage, etc.

Since the inception of the BRI, exchange and cooperation between China and ASEAN nations in the realm of cultural heritage have consistently expanded. Prominent cultural and museum institutions, such as the Palace Museum and the National Museum of China, have forged close collaborative relationships with museums across ASEAN countries. They have actively conducted cultural and creative exhibitions, advanced scholarly exchanges, and facilitated professional training. For instance, to strengthen China – ASEAN interactions, the Palace Museum and the National heritage board of Singapore jointly launched the China – ASEAN Museum senior management exchange programme in August 2017<sup>5</sup>. In 2019, the vice president of the Palace Museum visited Cambodia, the Philippines, and Indonesia to share expertise in cultural heritage preservation, as well as museum operational and management practices. These visits entailed engagements with cultural and museum institutions and organisations dedicated to safeguarding world cultural heritage sites in those countries<sup>6</sup>. China and the countries along the BRI route are undertaking collaborative archaeological projects and actively promoting initiatives focused on the restoration and preservation of the Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia and the ancient city of Bagan in Myanmar. These exchanges not only solidify amicable interaction between Chinese and ASEAN museums but also unlock new avenues and directions for future bilateral cooperation.

At the Conference on dialogue of Asian civilisations held in Beijing in May 2019, Xi Jinping declared China's readiness to collaborate with other nations in implementing the programme of mutual translation and publication of Asian classics and the Asia film and television exchange and cooperation programme. These initiatives aim to facilitate deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's cultures and establish a platform for exchange and mutual understanding to showcase

the splendour of diverse civilisations<sup>7</sup>. Since the launch of the Asian classics mutual translation and publication programme, China has signed memoranda of understanding on mutual translation and publication of classics with Singapore, Laos, Vietnam, and other ASEAN member states.

Collaborative efforts on translation and publication programmes enable countries to disseminate their cultures more effectively, broaden the horizons of readers, and facilitate exchanges and mutual learning between civilisations both within and beyond the region. This cooperation not only holds significant cultural value but also establishes a firm foundation for deepening relations between China and ASEAN member states.

The inaugural China – ASEAN television week, held in September 2019 under the theme “Sharing new opportunities for television development along the Belt and road”, has emerged as another crucial platform for fostering intercultural understanding and strengthening bonds of friendship. The event provided a forum for discussing pathways for television broadcasting development, sharing research findings on industry advancements, and jointly promoting novel products, technologies, and applications. It fostered comprehensive collaboration between China and the ASEAN television industry in the realms of policy, platforms, technology, and other areas, aiming for mutual benefits and win-win outcomes<sup>8</sup>.

On 6 September 2023, the concept paper “2024: China – ASEAN year of people-to-people exchanges” was unveiled. The designated year of exchanges aims to enhance interpersonal and cultural connections, deepen mutual understanding between peoples, promote interaction between civilisations, further strengthen the comprehensive strategic partnership, and jointly construct a peaceful, stable, prosperous, and shared home. Both sides expressed their intention to actively support initiatives and projects undertaken by governmental bodies of China and ASEAN nations, non-governmental organisations, business communities, and academic circles interested in advancing exchanges and expanding cooperation across various domains<sup>9</sup>.

Under the Belt and road initiative, cultural cooperation has significantly strengthened mutual trust between China and ASEAN, facilitated the advancement of socioeconomic collaboration, and injected fresh impetus into the development of bilateral relations.

<sup>5</sup>Notice on organising the China – ASEAN Museum senior management exchange programme [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.chinamuseum.org.cn/detail.html?id=11&contentId=9148> (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>6</sup>Developing the museum cultural industry to stimulate regional cooperation and development vitality [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.hncis.org/newsdetail/906.html> (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>7</sup>Keynote speech by Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony of the Conference on dialogue of Asian civilisations [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zyxw/201905/t20190515\\_346483.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zyxw/201905/t20190515_346483.shtml) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>8</sup>The 1<sup>st</sup> China – ASEAN television week officially opens [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.ctaa.org.cn/content-10199.aspx> (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>9</sup>Conceptual document for the 2024 year of people-to-people exchanges between China and ASEAN [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq\\_676201/gjhdqzz\\_681964/lhg\\_682518/zywj\\_682530/202309/t20230906\\_11139361.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gjhdqzz_681964/lhg_682518/zywj_682530/202309/t20230906_11139361.shtml) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).



## Education

Strengthening cooperation in the realm of education has also become a significant avenue for expanding people-to-people contacts between China and ASEAN nations. China is vigorously expanding educational ties with countries in the region through diverse joint initiatives [6, p. 92]. Even before the introduction of the Belt and road initiative, both sides actively engaged in collaboration focused on talent cultivation and educational exchanges. Notably, the ASEAN – China Education cooperation week has been held annually since 2008. Following the launch of the BRI, China and ASEAN countries have concluded a series of agreements on educational cooperation, leading to the gradual refinement of the interaction mechanism between the two sides. In 2013, the department of education of Yunnan Province in China and the Laos government signed three memoranda of understanding on educational cooperation<sup>10</sup>. China concluded a Memorandum of cooperation and exchange in education with Singapore in 2015<sup>11</sup>. The governments of China and the Philippines exchanged a Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in higher education in 2019<sup>12</sup>. In 2024, China and Malaysia signed a Memorandum of understanding on higher education collaboration<sup>13</sup>.

The document called “Proposals on improving the work of education opening-up in the new era”, published in April 2016 by the general office of the CPC Central Committee and the general office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, outlined key areas of focus for enhancing the quality of education and its openness to the outside world<sup>14</sup>. In July of the same year, the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China formulated the Joint development of the Belt and road education initiative. This document proposed expanding the scale and elevating the level of humanitarian exchanges, cultivating a substantial pool of professionals required for the implementation of the BRI, and deepening educational collaboration<sup>15</sup>. These policy measures demonstrate that China regards educational openness as a pivotal strategy for promoting the realisation of the BRI.

Following the 2<sup>nd</sup> China – ASEAN education ministers round table conference held in Guiyang in August 2016,

the Joint communiqué on the China – ASEAN education cooperation action plan in support of the ASEAN work plan on education 2016–2020 was adopted<sup>16</sup>. This inaugural five-year action plan aimed to invigorate educational exchanges and enhance collaboration between China and ASEAN, encompassing areas such as basic and higher education, vocational training, student exchanges, and partnerships between think tanks.

The Vision for China – ASEAN strategic partnership – 2030 highlights the significance of fostering exchanges and cooperation between the parties. The document calls for the utilisation of platforms such as the China – ASEAN education cooperation week to enhance educational innovation and academic exchanges<sup>17</sup>.

In February 2019, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council of the People’s Republic of China published the document “China’s education modernisation – 2035”. This document advocated for the development of a new model of educational openness, actively promoting educational initiatives within the BRI framework, strengthening cooperation with international and multilateral organisations, particularly UNESCO, and fostering the development of Confucius institutes and Confucius classrooms. The Joint statement on synergising the Belt and road initiative and the Master plan on ASEAN connectivity – 2025 released in 2019, proposed promoting synergistic development in regional education, youth, and human capital through the implementation of the China – ASEAN young leaders scholarship programme<sup>18</sup>. The publication of these documents reflects the importance China attaches to international cooperation and exchanges in the field of education, as well as its commitment to fostering transnational collaboration and exchanges in this domain.

Another significant development in China – ASEAN educational relations has been the conclusion of bilateral agreements on the mutual recognition of academic degrees with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and Laos.

Since the inception of the Belt and road initiative, the number of students from ASEAN countries studying

<sup>10</sup>Yunnan and Laos signed relevant provisions to promote exchanges and cooperation in education and other fields [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-10/12/content\\_2505555.htm](https://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-10/12/content_2505555.htm) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>11</sup>China and Singapore will sign the Memorandum of understanding on educational cooperation and exchange [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://m.news.cntv.cn/2015/11/06/ARTI1446795509353243.shtml> (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>12</sup>China and the Philippines exchanged a Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in higher education [Electronic resource]. URL: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_zzjg/huodong/201908/t20190830\\_396670.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_zzjg/huodong/201908/t20190830_396670.html) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>13</sup>Joint statement on building a China – Malaysia community with a shared future [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content\\_6958425.htm](https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content_6958425.htm) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>14</sup>Proposals on improving the work of education opening-up in the new era [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-04/29/content\\_5069311.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-04/29/content_5069311.htm) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>15</sup>Advancing the Joint development of the Belt and road education initiative [Electronic resource]. URL: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/s7068/201608/t20160811\\_274679.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/s7068/201608/t20160811_274679.html) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>16</sup>The 2<sup>nd</sup> China – ASEAN education ministers’ round table held [Electronic resource]. URL: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/moe\\_2082/zl\\_2016n/2016\\_zl42/201608/t20160803\\_273770.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/moe_2082/zl_2016n/2016_zl42/201608/t20160803_273770.html) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>17</sup>Vision for the China – ASEAN strategic partnership – 2030 [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/1179\\_674909/201811/t20181115\\_7947869.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/201811/t20181115_7947869.shtml) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>18</sup>ASEAN – China joint statement on synergising the Master plan on ASEAN connectivity (MPAC) – 2025 and the Belt and road initiative (BRI) [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Final-ASEAN-China-Joint-Statement-Synergising-the-MPAC-2025-and-the-BRI.pdf> (date of access: 15.04.2024).

in Chinese universities, research institutions, and other educational facilities has increased annually, rising from 68 418 in 2013 to 99 205 in 2018<sup>19</sup>.

The 10<sup>th</sup> exchange week, held in 2017, encompassed 50 events, including a series of humanitarian and cultural exchanges between China and ASEAN, as well as the China–ASEAN Education cooperation and talent exchange forum<sup>20</sup>. The theme of the 2023 education exchange week was “New vision for education cooperation for shared prosperity along the BRI”. This event not only facilitated educational exchanges but also broadened collaboration in science and technology, culture, healthcare, tourism, sports, and other sectors. Huai Jinpeng, Minister of education of the People’s Republic of China, emphasised the need to fully leverage the supportive, leading, and connective role of education to steer the BRI towards prosperity, innovation, and friendship, thereby contributing to regional peace and stability, and improving the livelihoods of local communities<sup>21</sup>. Statistics indicate that, between 2008 and 2023, the China–ASEAN education cooperation week hosted 484 events and witnessed the signing of 1879 cooperation agreements or memoranda of understanding<sup>22</sup>.

In the domain of education and vocational training, leading engineering universities from China and ASEAN jointly established the ASEAN – China engineering universities alliance in 2014. This alliance aims to achieve

consensus on the collaborative cultivation of high-calibre engineering personnel and promote cooperation in educational and scientific initiatives. As of December 2023, the alliance has expanded to include 26 universities from China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Myanmar<sup>23</sup>. Alliance members pool educational resources and research capabilities, providing robust support for the joint cultivation of highly skilled professionals who are competitive in the international market.

According to data released by the Centre for language education and cooperation (formerly known as Hanban), China dispatched over 14 000 Chinese language teachers to ASEAN nations between 2014 and 2020 [5, p. 42]. As of August 2024, 50 Confucius institutes and 16 Confucius classrooms were operational across ASEAN member states. These institutions serve as vital links for cultural exchange. Thailand boasts the highest number of Confucius institutes (17 institutes and 11 classrooms), followed by Indonesia (12 institutes), Malaysia (7 institutes and 1 classroom), the Philippines (5 institutes), Cambodia (4 institutes), Singapore (2 institutes and 1 classroom), Laos (2 institutes), Vietnam (1 institute), and Myanmar (3 classrooms)<sup>24</sup>.

These institutions provide extensive opportunities for local students and the general public to learn Chinese and serve as platforms for promoting Chinese culture.

## Tourism

Tourism plays a significant role in people-to-people exchanges between China and ASEAN member states. Firstly, the considerable potential for tourism cooperation between the two sides stems from their geographical proximity. China and ASEAN countries have long been major tourist markets and popular destinations for each other. The tourism sector not only plays a key role in the economic growth of each nation but also facilitates cultural exchange and fosters mutual understanding. In 2018, 31.6 million Chinese tourists visited ASEAN countries, while 25.4 million tourists from ASEAN travelled to China<sup>25</sup>.

Secondly, China and ASEAN have concluded several agreements aimed at strengthening dialogue and cooperation in the tourism sector. These instruments

promote policy and activity alignment, facilitating tourism exchanges.

Numerous specialised exhibitions and conferences dedicated to China–ASEAN tourism development are held, such as the China–ASEAN Expo on tourism and the BRI cultural tourism week. Given the promising prospects for tourism cooperation, the China–ASEAN Expo on tourism has been held annually in Guilin, since 2015. tourism authorities from all ten ASEAN countries participate, with each nation taking turns as the guest country<sup>26</sup>.

The inaugural BRI cultural tourism week was launched in Guiyang, in 2018. The Malaysian ambassador to China noted that tourism and cultural exchanges in recent years have positively impacted the people of both countries, laying a solid foundation for mutual

<sup>19</sup>2014 Brief statistical comparison of international students coming to China. Beijing : Dep. of int. cooperation and exchanges, 2014. P. 8–10 (in Chin.) ; 2018 Brief statistical comparison of international students coming to China. Beijing : Dep. of int. cooperation and exchanges, 2019. P. 5–6 (in Chin.).

<sup>20</sup>A decade of educational collaboration writes a new chapter for the Belt and road initiative [Electronic resource]. URL: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/moe\\_2082/zl\\_2017n/2017\\_zl38/201707/t20170728\\_310311.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/moe_2082/zl_2017n/2017_zl38/201707/t20170728_310311.html) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>21</sup>2023 China–ASEAN education exchange week showcases new developments in the Belt and road initiative [Electronic resource]. URL: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/s5147/202309/t20230905\\_1078246.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s5147/202309/t20230905_1078246.html) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>22</sup>The 2023 China – ASEAN education exchange week opened in Guizhou [Electronic resource]. URL: [http://www.scio.gov.cn/gxzl/ydy/26587/rwj/rwj\\_26595/202308/t20230830\\_766996.html](http://www.scio.gov.cn/gxzl/ydy/26587/rwj/rwj_26595/202308/t20230830_766996.html) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>23</sup>About ACNET – EngTech [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://acnet-engtech.tju.edu.cn/about/background/> (date of access: 15.04.2024).

<sup>24</sup>Confucius institute [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://ci.cn/qql> (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>25</sup>Chinese tourists are the key to the recovery of ASEAN tourism [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://k.sina.cn/article\\_3974550866\\_ece6d552001012z30.html?from=travel](https://k.sina.cn/article_3974550866_ece6d552001012z30.html?from=travel) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

<sup>26</sup>The 2015 China – ASEAN Expo on tourism will be held in Guilin [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-04/10/content\\_2844598.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-04/10/content_2844598.htm) (date of access: 15.04.2024) (in Chin.).

understanding and trust between different cultures<sup>27</sup>. During the 2019 BRI cultural tourism week, the Guiyang Municipal Government of Guizhou Province, and the city of Penang in Malaysia, signed a Memorandum of understanding establishing friendly cooperative relations<sup>28</sup>. The signing of such cooperation agreements deepens the relationship between China and ASEAN in tourism and culture, opening up further opportunities for collaboration and development within the tourism industry.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant adverse impact on the international tourism industry. According to statistics, 28 million Chinese tourists visited ASEAN in 2019, accounting for 22 % of the total number of foreign tourists received by ASEAN that year. In 2020, only 4 million Chinese travellers visited ASEAN, with this figure plummeting to 234 000 in 2021<sup>29</sup>. The pandemic not only posed serious challenges to the tourism industries on both sides but also affected related supply chains and economic development.

In July 2021, Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China published the Belt and road 14<sup>th</sup> five-year action plan for culture and tourism development. The scope of China's cooperation with BRI participating nations is continuously expanding, with twelve priority tourism programmes established under

the BRI framework<sup>30</sup>. This document provides recommendations for planning and promoting cultural exchange and information dissemination among countries and regions along the BRI. The plan of action for comprehensive strategic partnership between China and ASEAN (2022–2025), released in 2022, highlights the need to facilitate personnel exchanges in the post-pandemic era to revitalise and develop the tourism industry<sup>31</sup>.

As of autumn 2024, all ASEAN countries except the Philippines have implemented varying degrees of visa facilitation measures for Chinese citizens, including visa-free entry, visa-on-arrival, and electronic visa issuance. Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia grant visa-free entry to Chinese nationals. Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, and Brunei permit Chinese citizens to apply for visas upon arrival. Myanmar issues electronic visas to Chinese citizens<sup>32</sup>. Following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, the Notice on further adjustments to visa and entry policies for foreigners coming to China, published by the Consular department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China on 14 March 2023, stated that, effective 15 March 2023, ASEAN tourist groups could enter Guilin, Guangxi Province, without a visa<sup>33</sup>. This visa-free policy has positively impacted the development of the tourism industry.

## Conclusions

This article examined the interaction between China and ASEAN member states in the cultural and humanitarian spheres. Since the launch of the BRI, an extensive legal and regulatory framework has been established to support bilateral exchanges and cooperation in culture, education, and tourism. Through concerted efforts, China and ASEAN have achieved significant progress in people-to-people exchanges. Successful examples of cooperation in the cultural domain include the organisation of cultural festivals, the China–ASEAN TV week, and the hosting of the China–ASEAN year of people-to-people exchanges. In the education sector, notable achievements include the China–ASEAN education cooperation week, the establishment of the

ASEAN–China engineering universities alliance, and the opening of Confucius institutes and classrooms. In tourism, the China–ASEAN Expo on tourism and the BRI cultural tourism Week stand out as successful collaborative initiatives.

The strengthening of people-to-people exchanges between China and ASEAN member states not only serves the mutual interests of both parties but also contributes to the construction of a peaceful, stable, and prosperous region. By fostering collaboration in the domains of culture, education, and tourism, China and ASEAN nations seek to promote mutual understanding, deepen amicable relations, and establish a solid foundation for shared development.

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