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How is the China Pakistan Media  
Collaboration Booming Under CPEC?



# HOW IS THE CHINA PAKISTAN MEDIA COLLABORATION BOOMING UNDER CPEC?

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## Abstract

*This discussion paper aims to investigate three questions; how has media engagement between China and Pakistan taken shape under the CPEC canopy? Second, how is it transforming Pakistan's mediascape and cinematic interactions? Third, how is 'Islamic' Pakistan and 'Communist' China's cultural cohabitation evolving? This paper argues that media collaboration emerging through CPEC shows resilience of China-Pakistan ties and that it is an expression of Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) broader vision of expanding China's culture and soft power across the 'silk road'.*

*Key words: BRI, CPEC, Media Forum, Islamic culture, Chinese marriage, Karakoram Highway*

## Introduction

Media collaboration can and does play a critical role in deepening diplomatic ties and building and sustaining defence and strategic relationship as the case of China and Pakistan exemplifies. The two have been co-operating over this narrative building since the early 1960's. Both countries buttressed a news exchange agreement in 1964 between the premier news agencies of the two countries, Xinhua (China) and Associated Press of Pakistan. This partnership developed along with the strategic objectives shared by both

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countries and in the mid-1980s, several TV programs were jointly produced as part of the Karakoram Highway<sup>1</sup> promotion. One television program depicting this road partnership called 'Affection on the Highway' was especially made for promoting a message of friendship between the people of both countries.

The events of 9/11 redefined US-Pakistan strategic relations and yet most western media especially the Associated Press in the United States, continued to portray Pakistan negatively. On the other hand it also transformed China- Pakistan media collaboration. Xinhua news presented Pakistan's role in the War on Terror in a decidedly different way, praising Pakistan's efforts in fighting against and curbing global terrorism (Yousaf, 2015). However, the seismic shift in media collaboration between the two countries occurred after Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Pakistan in 2015 and offered the country 64 billion dollars in investment under China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC website). This discussion paper aims to investigate three questions; how has media engagement between China and Pakistan taken shape under the CPEC canopy? Second, how is it transforming Pakistan's mediascape and cinematic interactions? Third, how is 'Islamic' Pakistan and 'Communist' China's cultural cohabitation evolving? This paper would argue that media collaboration emerging through CPEC shows resilience of China-Pakistan ties and that it is an expression of Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) broader vision of expanding China's culture and soft power across the 'silk road'.

## **How is the Media shaping CPEC and BRI?**

China's pledge to collaborate on media exchange with BRI countries is a core part of the overall strategy and reveals Beijing's desire to increase China's soft power. With this vision China has been heavily investing in the media industry in BRI member countries for over a decade (Thussu, 2018), (Marsh, 2018). This official policy to seek public approval for long-term projects in BRI member countries was shared for the first time by the Communist Party in 2007. The idea was presented as China building its 'soft power', complementing its rapidly growing economic and military strength. Since then, the party has been allocating an annual budget of \$10bn for this purpose. This is perhaps a policy tool borrowed from the United States where, along with its hard power, people from other countries are also attracted by its culture, products and values ("China is spending", 2017). As an ancient civilization with a long history, China has prioritised exhibiting its art, architecture, food and medicine for beaming its soft power (Qingguo, 2010).

The time-tested relationship between Pakistan and China was diplomatically established on May 21, 1951. But the two countries enjoyed trade relations for centuries when Chinese traders travelled through western India on their business trips to the Middle East,

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<sup>1</sup> The Karakoram Highway is a road built by China and Pakistan connecting both countries. Construction of the road started in 1959 and opened to the public in 1979, after 20 years of construction. 810 Pakistani and 200 Chinese workers lost their lives.

Europe and the rest of the world. This is referred to as the ancient Silk Route, which has been renamed as the Belt and Road Initiative, with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor at its core (Awan, 2020).

Disseminating Chinese culture to countries where the Chinese political system has been criticised could be challenging for Beijing, but that is not the case in Pakistan. China is already an incredibly popular country amongst Pakistanis. According to a Pew survey conducted in 2014, 78 per cent of Pakistanis viewed China favourably, compared to the 14 per cent of Pakistanis who looked positively upon the United States. In recent years while the U.S presidents have made rare and censorious visits to Pakistan and more frequent favourable visits to India and Afghanistan, Chinese premiers have prioritized Pakistani state visits over other South Asian countries. While American presidents have been extremely critical about Pakistan on most international platforms, Chinese presidents have expressed their deep affection for Pakistan. For example, when President Xi Jinping made his first visit to Pakistan, he wrote in an article published in Pakistani papers: “This will be my first trip to Pakistan, but I feel as if I am going to visit the home of my own brother, the relationship between our two countries has flourished like a tree growing tall and strong (Tharoor, 2015).

## **Formation of CPEC Media Forums**

The two countries have partnered to create a CPEC media plan in order to manage news and narratives and counter fake news around CPEC. For this purpose, they have created joint CPEC annual media forums where issues around CPEC media policies are prioritised and reviewed. So far six forums have been held, as detailed below.

In November 2015, the first CPEC Media Forum was held in Islamabad where setting the platform for cooperation and collaboration between media agencies of the two countries was prioritised. The second CPEC media forum was held on 20th of May 2016 in Beijing organised by the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, China Economic Net and the Pakistan- China Institute. Continued work on the initial plan was the main focus of this forum (CPEC media forum website, 2019). The third CPEC media forum was held in Islamabad on 27 November 2017. During this meeting it was decided that the media of both countries should encourage direct reporting instead of relying on second hand news especially around CPEC projects. The fourth CPEC media forum was held in November 2018 in Beijing. Increased collaboration between the two countries for greater people to people connectivity and information exchange was set as a priority for this meeting. The event featured a discussion on the importance of learning each other’s language, to better understand the histories and cultures of the two countries, to dispel misunderstandings that are exacerbated by gaps in information and language barriers (“4th CPEC Media Forum”, 2018). During the fifth CPEC media Forum held in 2019, the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Yao Jing, rebuffed American criticism of CPEC and argued CPEC

had already provided more than 75,000 direct jobs for local Pakistanis, while around 2.3 million jobs were expected to be generated by 2030. He is famously quoted for saying in that forum “I will be more happy to see more investment coming from the United States in Pakistan.” The sixth Forum was held virtually in November 2020 where in-depth exchanges and discussions on topics including the opportunities for digital media and media as an engine for high-quality development of CPEC took place. During this meeting a desire to negate international negative propaganda against CPEC was expressed.

It is interesting to note that both the US and China have been vying to seek partnerships with Pakistani media, however, the two have adopted different tactics and appear to have varying motives as well. For example, the United States has made attempts to influence Pakistan’s domestic news outlets in the past. Efforts to gain public approval for drone strikes and media narratives promoting Sufi Islam while engaging with the Pakistani private media houses were part of the post 9/11 American strategies. Americans were also interested in stories about Pakistani military operations focusing on Taliban dominated parts of Pakistan like Wana and Swat. For this reason, unlike the Chinese, the Americans often kept in touch (although discreetly) with key private media houses and influential journalists. Najam Sethi, a senior Pakistani journalist, explains the contrast between Chinese and American engagement with the Pakistani media very well. He says:

“The Chinese are not interested in Pakistani media like the Americans. The Americans invited Pakistani journalists and they were interested in media and journalistic freedom; we don’t have Chinese contacting us.” (Conference for Media Freedom, 2020)\*

## **BRI’s Digital Silk Road: Pakistan East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) cable**

China has greatly aided Pakistan by boosting its digital infrastructure. The Pakistani media benefits immensely from rapidly progressing sophisticated digital infrastructure, which has been built with the help of the Chinese. Digitisation of Pakistan has been the initial and core step towards CPEC’s long-term media strategy. As a second step, with the help of China, Pakistan has set up the Pakistan & East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) cable in the Indian Ocean which is eventually intended to link Pakistan’s technological sector and its telecom companies with Indian ocean countries from Africa to Hong Kong.

The PEACE cable is often referred to as China’s digital silk road. The early phase included an overhaul of Pakistan’s structural communications framework. While planning took place from November 2013 to December 2015, the implementation stage for this digital structural transformation started in 2016 when an upgraded fibre optic cable network was laid across Pakistan, which connects China to Pakistan and beyond. The final

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\*Quote by Najam Sethi, Virtual conference on Media Freedom and the Commonwealth, (2020, Nov18)

conclusion of the digital transformation is expected in 2030(Haque & Siddiqui, 2019).

PEACE is a joint venture between Huawei Technologies and Tropic Science Co., Ltd. (Tropic Science). This new high tech cable has an estimated capacity of over 60 Tb. In its first phase, PEACE has developed a 6,200km network connecting Pakistan in Gwadar and Karachi with Djibouti, Somalia, and Kenya. It will eventually reach South Africa and Egypt. According to sources, Pakistan's leading cellular provider Jazz and Internet service provider (ISP) Cybernet have been named as partners of the PEACE cable in Pakistan (Khunshan, 2020).

Pakistan's telecom industry is also expected to receive a technologically advanced modern submarine cable system from China, which will have two landing routes in Karachi and Gwadar. The submarine cable will provide a land cable route to Europe via Africa. China is set to lay the final stretch of a cross-border fiber optic cable in Pakistan that will create the Digital Silk Road, serving the geostrategic interests of both countries. It will connect to a submarine cable in the Arabian Sea to service countries participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Europe. The Hengtong Group, one of China's leading fiber-optic and power cable makers, is heading a consortium of telecom companies from Africa, Pakistan and Hong Kong to install the Pakistan East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) cable in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean (PEACE website). According to Telegeography<sup>2</sup>, at present, seven submarine cables, four of which come out of India, serve Pakistan. The (PEACE) cable is expected to help reduce Pakistan's exposure to internet outages from damaged submarine cables and providing a safety firewall against cyber attacks with this additional route for internet connectivity (Haq, 2021).

It is obvious that China by digitizing Pakistan is preparing the country to be part of a digitally connected BRI network with the wider world. The technological boost, which has been offered by the Chinese has already transformed Pakistan's media sector. From being basic and functional, the Pakistani media industry is fast becoming technologically sophisticated with the help of the Chinese.

## **Print, Electronic Media and Cinema: Emerging Trends**

Since the signing of the official agreements on media collaboration, positive coverage of CPEC stories in print media and elements showcasing Chinese culture have started to appear on radio and television in Pakistan. The main newspapers in Pakistan have usually portrayed China positively in the past and that continues especially after the government's official push to favourably back CPEC projects. According to a recent research, Pakistan's two leading Urdu newspapers 'Daily Jang' and 'Daily Express' tend to pre-

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<sup>2</sup> A Washington-based telecommunications market research company

sent the CPEC favourably. This claim is backed by evidence-based statistics, which indicate that 73% of the overall news portrayed the CPEC positively, of which 42.3% were published in the “Daily Jang” and 30.7% in the “Daily Express”. Over all in these issues, only 27% of the news portrayed the CPEC negatively (Nazir, et. al, 2020).

At the same time, the birth of the Chinese print media in Pakistan is a new trend. The Chinese weekly newspaper Huashang, was launched in 2017 in Islamabad, starting with a publication of 5000 copies every week. It hit 60,000 readers by its twenty-first edition. The newspaper’s title in Chinese language means ‘Hua’ for flower and ‘Shang’ for business, the literal meaning of Huashang is “Pure Business” (“‘Huashang’ first-ever”, 2017). Huashang newspaper aims to promote business and commercial cooperation between China and Pakistan. This weekly is distributed across major cities and CPEC project sites across Pakistan and generally presents an optimistic picture of the society and country. It regularly features on state broadcaster CCTV’s programs on the Belt and Road initiative, and interviews with Chinese workers on CPEC living in Pakistan.

Chinese companies like Infoshare, a Shanghai-based company, have also launched a number of Chinese-focused media ventures in Pakistan which include a glossy tabloid that charges roughly \$1,000 for a full page advertisement, a Chinese-language run courier service, and a smartphone app that will allow Chinese-speakers to order food from Pakistani restaurants (Hashim, 2017).

Recent notable examples of the Chinese presence in television and radio include an advertisement of the biggest masala brand showing a Chinese couple cooking Pakistani food, a 36-episode television series called Beijing Youth on-air on Pakistani State Television and a film entitled “Chalay Thay Saath”, depicting a cross-border love story between a Chinese man and a Pakistani woman. The two countries also run a 24 hour “Dosti” (Friendship) radio channel, which includes an hourly “Learn Chinese” show in its programming (Pratik, 2018). According to local newspapers, the Pakistani audience has received the Chinese drama serial “The Legend of Fuyao” very well. It is believed that the catchy storyline and the female lead character in the story, who experiences all kinds of hardships and starts her adventures in foreign lands, is especially appreciated by young Pakistani women (“Chinese drama”, 2018).

The Pakistani film industry is also enjoying support from the Chinese. Pakistani cinema suffered a severe blow under General Zia-ul-Haq’s regime (1977-1988) when the military dictator declared that cinema, theatre and performing arts were against Islamic values and imposed heavy censorship on all these media forums. During the time, the country’s television sector still survived while the cinema industry got crippled. It was only recently that a new life has been blown into the Pakistani cinema. Still extremely amateur, this sector is desperately seeking funding, collaborative film productions, and domestic and international audiences. Recent Pakistani governments have been backing the revival



of this sector in order to counter the wave of domestic Islamization and to increase Pakistan's soft power. Since China is aiming for similar objectives through film and cinema, collaboration in film production and increasing film audiences seems to work well for both countries.

This was obvious when Pakistani films were provided a significant platform at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Film Festival in China that took place from June 13 till June 17, 2018 in Qingdao, China. The festival, co-hosted by the State film Administration and Shandong provincial government aimed to promote co-operation and exchange between (SCO) member states. The 2018 festival, the first of its kind, screened around 55 movies from SCO countries including five Pakistani films. The Pakistani films screened at the festival were *Chalay Thay Saath*, *Bin Roye*, *Jawani Phir Nahi Ani*, *Parchi* and *Punjab Nahi Jaungi* (Shabbir, 2018).

China also supported Pakistani cinema at its Silk Road International Film Festival (SRIFF), which took place in Fuzhou, China. Pakistan participated for the first time with the film *Teefa in Trouble*, produced by the famous Pakistani actor Ali Zafar. It is reported that Mr. Zafar is working with Chinese film industry leaders to chalk out a strategy for a joint framework, pitching for expanding multilateral film cooperation with the China Film Co-Production Corporation (Hyatt, 2018).

More recently, a Pakistani film called *Parwaz Hai Junoon*, a film about the military produced collaboratively by Momina and Duraid Films and Hum Films, was screened in China with the help of the Pakistan embassy. This was the first Pakistani film to be screened in China after 40 years (Waqas, 2020).

## Mobile Business, Chinese Apps and Pakistani youth

China is emerging as a big influencer in the sphere of social media in Pakistan. There are three ways in which China is achieving this. Firstly, China is manufacturing cheap mobile sets, which are affordable to the middle and working classes in Pakistan. Secondly, China has managed to buy the biggest mobile service provider in Pakistan (Zong) and thirdly, Chinese apps like TikTok are increasingly popular for leisure while Weibu and Wechat are also commonly used for CPEC joint business ventures in Pakistan.

The Chinese started heavily investing in Pakistan's mobile sector in 2007, when China Mobile Communications Corp., the world's biggest wireless carrier, agreed to buy the Pakistani operator Paktel Ltd for \$284 million from Millicom International Cellular. At the time, Paktel was losing money and China Mobile tried to save it by rebranding and re-launching the wireless carrier with additional investment in equipment and marketing in a bid to turn the company around. At the time Paktel was the fifth-largest mobile operator in Pakistan with 1.5 million subscribers when around 160 million people used mobile

phones (Jonas & Goldfarb, 2007).

Ten years later, rebranded as CMPAK and popularly known as Zong, the company reported more than 31 million customers in Pakistan in 2018, accounting for about 21 per cent of the market with 8 million 4G subscribers, ranking first in the industry. It is reported that CMPak is providing information technology solutions for 194 Chinese firms in Pakistan, including 160,000 individual clients. CMPak also carried out co-operation with China Three Gorges Corporation, China Huaneng Group, China State Construction Engineering Corporation and other Chinese enterprises to provide high-speed Wi-Fi services for their bases and projects in Pakistan. In November 2016, the company co-operated with Pakistan's western province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) on its "Medicare Card" program, covering 56 per cent of its population. A total of 1.8 million families there received a Zong SIM for free and enjoyed the mobile cash transfer services. CMPak also made an agreement with DoctHERs, a novel digital healthcare platform that connects female doctors to patients in real-time through its telemedicine centres. Currently there are nine telemedicine clinics across Pakistan, equipped with Zong's fastest 4G Mobile Broadband devices. In 2017, over 6,000 patients were treated at these facilities. CMPak has also taken the lead in setting up five basic stations and is providing 4G signals to Chinese workers who were experiencing difficulty in keeping in touch with their families back in China from remote areas in Pakistan (Wei, 2018).

As indicated earlier, with an increasingly wired Pakistan, it is Chinese apps like TikTok and Bigo, which have become immensely influential. According to the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, TikTok has reported 20 million monthly active users in Pakistan, while it was the third most downloaded app after WhatsApp and Facebook in 2020. TikTok, owned by China-based ByteDance, has become hugely popular in a short period of time by encouraging young users to post brief videos. The app was briefly blocked in October 2020 by Pakistan's telecom regulator for failing to filter out "immoral and indecent" content but reinstated shortly afterwards (Shahzad, 2020). Other Chinese apps like Wechat and Weibu still remain popular for most Chinese living in Pakistan. The Pakistani business community is regularly encouraged to make use of these apps for better understanding of the Chinese culture and cash payments made in Chinese money.

Bigo is a Chinese live-streaming app with a cult following in Pakistan. A subsidiary of Chinese tech giant JOYY Inc., Bigo has been operating in South and Southeast Asia since 2016. The app allows customers to tap into any live-stream on its platform by geography. Its 400 million users are mostly concentrated in the global south in countries such as India, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. In Asia, Bigo often comes pre-installed on the relatively cheap Chinese smart phones readily available in these markets. Apps like Bigo and TikTok have given the neglected masses ability to archive their own histories, cultures and subcultures through oral tradition, performance and short videos. They feel the confidence that comes with being seen

by others just like them (Khan, 2020).

## **Solidifying Relations through Language, Culture and Educational Exchanges**

In February 2018, Pakistan and China signed a joint agreement for mutual cultural promotion (Wasif, 2018). According to the signed memo both countries committed themselves to cooperate in the fields of culture, art, education and sports. The multi-pronged approach is directed towards familiarizing Pakistanis with Chinese heritage and lifestyle. China and Pakistani governments are achieving this by opening Confucius Institutes in Pakistan's main cities, inviting large numbers of Pakistani students to Chinese universities and introducing mandarin language at a large scale in Pakistani universities and private language schools.

Pakistan currently has Confucius Institutes in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Multan, Sargodha, Quetta and Peshawar. Some of these are fully functional and are set up in collaboration with local universities. Even though these institutes are mainly dedicated to the teaching of Mandarin, many activities at these institutes go beyond language classes and are set up to sensitise the Pakistani youth about the Chinese culture. For instance, workshops on learning to use chopsticks or mask painting are held. The institutes also celebrate the Chinese Lantern Festival and the Chinese New year. Most of these Institutes attract a large number of young Pakistani men and women who initially enrol to learn Mandarin but find the other activities thoroughly enjoyable ("Pak- China friendship", 2010).

Along with Confucius institutes, some of the top private universities in Pakistan are also focusing on Mandarin courses, CPEC and BRI studies. For example, the Suleman Dawood School of Business (SDSB), based at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), has explicitly stated its goal of developing human resources for top quality management of the CPEC. In 2016, the School set up a specialized centre, namely the China Pakistan Management Initiative (CPMI). The CPMI is working with organizations in China and Pakistan, including academic institutions, businesses, government departments and non-governmental organizations, to support the CPEC and other aspects of the BRI (Syed & Tariq, 2018).

The increased interest in CPEC studies in Pakistan's leading academic institutions like the Centre of Public Policy and Governance, at the FCCU and LUMS indicates that CPEC related topics and Mandarin language courses will help young Pakistanis get ahead in Pakistan's emerging CPEC related job market. Securing job positions is a huge incentive to learn Mandarin for many young Pakistanis. Most of them believe that learning Chinese will be an asset for their professional growth. This is suggested by the following quotes from some Pakistani students who are learning Mandarin:

“I chose to learn Chinese because this is the language of the future. I believe knowing Chinese will make me stand out and open up new opportunities,”

**“We see China as an economic power with the potential of becoming the next great superpower. I think learning Chinese is the best way to be part of the growing economy.”**

“Once there was the English language craze in Pakistan. Now we are witnessing a Chinese fever here”

With the rising demand to learn Chinese, there are also more than three dozen private Chinese language institutes, located in Pakistan’s major cities, mostly offering flexible class timings and home tutoring services. They cater to people who work and cannot afford to become full-time students. Sometimes, these private institutes offering Mandarin classes offer tailor-made programs for small businesses or companies (Hadid, 2018).

While home tutoring of Mandarin remains attractive for young Pakistani professionals, offering Mandarin at the school level is a new trend popular within Pakistan’s elite private school sector. A leading private school in Islamabad introduced Mandarin into the curriculum in 2009 for students from kindergarten to grade 5 and made it compulsory. Grades 5 to A Level students have the choice between learning German or Mandarin. The school employs both native Chinese teachers and Pakistanis who have learned the language as teachers. In the four campuses where Mandarin is offered, it is estimated that almost 1,500 to 2,000 students are learning the language (Sohail, 2017).

A notable increase of Pakistani students enrolled in Chinese universities is also a recent trend. According to Chinese Ministry of Education statistics, there were 19,000 Pakistani students in China in 2016, making them the 4th largest foreign student community in China. In 2017, some 5,081 students received Chinese government scholarship whereas others were studying at their own expense (Wazir, 2017) The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Cultural Communication Centre (CPEC CCC) under its ‘Talent Corridor’ scheme offers scholarships to 1,000 Pakistani students every year for vocational training in China (“1000 Pakistani students”, 2018).

A large section of the Pakistan’s educational system is developing in a manner compatible with the socio-economic transformation emerging from CPEC. Some notable examples include intensive training for teachers of Mandarin and funding for large groups of Pakistani teachers to go on short visits to China. The importance of mandarin training in Pakistan serves two purposes: job provision for mandarin speaking Pakistanis in CPEC projects and better communication with Chinese personal working in Pakistan. Overcoming the language barrier is most useful in collaborative CPEC projects such as the Sahiwal power plant, where 190 young Pakistani engineers trained in China were employed

for plant operations. Similarly, at the Port Qasim power plants in Sindh 104 engineers from China were working with Pakistanis on a five-month training program (Jacob, 2017). Mandarin language programs are not new in Pakistan. The Chinese language department at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML) was first formed in September 1970. At the time there were only about 13 students who took the course, which ballooned to 460 in 2017 (Bacha, 2017).

Like the Mandarin courses, Chinese have co-existed with Pakistanis in major cities since the early 1970s. The first foreign food introduced to the Pakistanis was a local version of Chinese cuisine. Most cities, urban and semi urban are sprinkled with Chinese restaurants. With growing Chinese presence, some restaurants are showing more tolerance towards the Chinese culture. For example, even though alcohol is banned in Pakistan, a few Chinese restaurants sometimes turn a blind eye to customers drinking smuggled alcohol – there is little sign of hostility to the new arrivals from ordinary Pakistanis (“Thousands of Chinese”, 2017)

Up until recently, the Chinese have also been leaders in the business of beautification and personal grooming in Pakistan. Most middle and upper class Pakistani women would be glammed up in beauty parlours by Chinese women residing in Pakistan. Therefore, assuming that the Chinese culture is alien to most Pakistanis is perhaps misleading. These businesses thrived until the late 1990s. It was after 9/11 that many of the settled Chinese families had to flee because of the terrorist threat that they faced from militant groups in Pakistan. The situation was particularly bad in 2006 when the militants started to target Chinese workers in Islamabad. Most Chinese settlers chose to migrate out of Pakistan for security reasons. But this has changed after the official CPEC announcement. A fresh wave of Chinese settlers has come to Pakistan to work for CPEC projects. They reside in most major cities and with Pakistan’s improving security situation feel more at home. The following quote by a Chinese engineer in Lahore best describes this:

“When I was first appointed in Pakistan, I was afraid that the country was violent and there were terrorist attacks. So me with my colleagues mostly remained indoors but with time we have found Lahore to be a very vibrant, safe place... we Chinese particularly like the local food in Lahore... when we go to restaurants we are many times given extra-nice treatment. We are told treating the guests well is part of the Pakistani culture. I like it here now.”

As discussed, most urban Pakistanis are familiar with Chinese culture and in having to accommodate a sizable CPEC related Chinese work diaspora, increased familiarity and more acceptance for the Chinese way of life is becoming the new normal. This is endorsed by Safdar (2021), who argues that the Chinese are making inroads beyond Pakistan’s political elites with a broader array of local stakeholders in the country’s education, media, and energy sectors (Safdar, 2021).

## Religion, Market Economy and CPEC

Most analysis on CPEC claims that the Communist Chinese way of living is incompatible with the lifestyle of Muslim dominated Pakistan. But it seems that Islam and China are not only enjoying a comfortable co-existence in Pakistan but in some areas the cultural enmeshment of these seemingly divergent cultures is even thriving. There are reasons for this mutual acceptance. The main reason is economic. Secondly, China is fully involved in the economic rehabilitation of the militant heartlands of Pakistan<sup>3</sup> Thirdly; a significant number of marriages are taking place between Pakistani Muslims and Chinese professionals. Finally, the very vocal and influential Muslim clergy in Pakistan remain focused on fighting for the rights of Kashmir and Palestine. The antagonistic hate speech of some of the Muslim clerics continues to target India and the United States as infidels. The same clerics portray China in a favourable light by hailing it as a respectful place in Islam by quoting a Hadith by Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) where he encourages Muslims to go to China in order to seek knowledge. This way respect for China in Islam is reinforced. Many times these hard-line Muslim clerics choose to ignore the parts of Chinese culture, which are at odds with Islamic values like consumption of pork and alcohol beverages. The aim is to welcome the rising number of CPEC related Chinese work force arriving in Pakistan, which has increased considerably in previous years.

According to official sources, 60,000 Chinese were residing in Pakistan by 2017. The biggest concentration is believed to be in the three major cities of Karachi, Islamabad and Lahore. The non –official number is believed to be larger. Pakistan’s Ministry of Interior did not confirm the issuance of 27,000 visas to Chinese in 2016 or disclose the total number of visas issued in succeeding years (Subohi, 2018). The Pakistani government is determined to ensure that the metropolitan cities are made secure for the Chinese to reside without fear in Pakistan.

Despite the heightened security provided to CPEC related residential compounds for the Chinese community by the Pakistani government, there have been a couple of incidents involving attacks on Chinese nationals. On 24 May 2017, the Islamic State Group killed two kidnapped Chinese teachers in Balochistan and on 23 November 2018, the Chinese consulate was attacked in Karachi by a Baloch militant group killing 4 Pakistanis while the Chinese embassy staff remained safe. Both these terror related attacks on Chinese nationals were not large enough in scale to really threaten the viability of Chinese life or investment in the country (“Karachi attack”, 2018).

China is also ready to upgrade Pakistan’s tourism industry by heavily investing in the Taliban heartlands of the country. For example Pakistani local newspapers are report-

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<sup>3</sup> With the help of the Chinese, Phase 1 of the Swat Motorway project has been completed and the Dir Chitral expressway is under construction to benefit Khyber Pass Economic corridor (“CM woos” 2020) The Pakistani government is also backing the reconstruction of the iconic seventh century Buddha at Jahanabad Swat with the aim of building tourism in the Taliban infested region.



ing that ski resorts and five star hotels are being planned by the Pakistani and Chinese governments to attract tourists from all over the world to the Swat Valley<sup>4</sup> which is home to some of the world's oldest Buddha Statues and only a decade ago was a place high-jacked by the Taliban. If these plans go ahead, jobs will be provided to the most economically marginalised and underdeveloped parts of Pakistan.

Another example is, a project in which 30 women were trained to be truck drivers by a joint venture between Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company (SECMC) and Hub Power Company (HUBCO) China digging up low-grade coal in Thar dessert is an example of how CPEC related projects are economically uplifting remote areas in Pakistan (Hassan, 2017). Before this, these women were only restricted to looking after household chores, family, children, cattle and earning a measly wage for making local handicrafts. Becoming a truck driver is a far better paid job, which they are eagerly taking up even if that means that they have to go against the wishes of the Muslim clerics. Even in patriarchal cultures, with male dominated households, women are taking up these jobs because they come from impoverished backgrounds. A better wage means improved living standards.

With these kind of economic opportunities on offer, most Pakistanis welcome the Chinese and their way of living while the hard-line Muslim clerics are also showing more signs of tolerance towards the Chinese culture.

Most importantly, it is the rising trend of co-work romances between Chinese professionals and Pakistani youth, which could bring a long-term cultural shift. A new phenomenon making headlines within the mainstream media is when the Chinese and Pakistanis marry each other. Often such stories are headlined as 'CPEC marriages'. When the first such marriage was reported, it was taken as a beginning of new bond between the divergent cultures. More than two-and-a-half dozen TV cameras captured the wedding and its festive moments, which were aired repeatedly. Social media also chipped in with cheer and sarcasm. There is a new cultural wave afoot in Pakistan. You visit the big cities, small towns and even the remote areas — the new faces that you will see these days are not Americans or Afghans, but Chinese. This transition has come about in less than half a decade, in the wake of CPEC (Fazil, 2018).

Social media is also playing a critical role in sustaining these marriages between the two considerably different ethnicities. As language creates a huge barrier, the popularly and prevalent Chinese mobile phone apps with the provision of a translation resolves the language issue. With such provisions romance blooms more easily and these helpful translating apps play a very important role in sustaining these marriages. The following

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<sup>4</sup> A Chinese star by the name of Maria Wu has a series of tourism promotion videos on discover Pakistan an official tourism channel launched by the Pakistani government in March 2021. The channel is broadcasting in HD – high definition to project the country's natural wonders internationally, in the best possible way. The TV channel aims to do so with original documentaries, coverage of tourism-related events and developments, and a morning show highlighting Pakistan's soft image (Zafeer, 2021)

quote from a Pakistani woman married to a Chinese man explains why these apps are instrumental in the working of a cross-cultural Sino Pak marriage.

“I was working in Islamabad when I met my Chinese husband. At the time my family was forcing me to marry an old already married man... they wanted to get rid of me. I am very happy with my Chinese Husband. He is young, handsome, very generous and kind. He looks after me. We communicate through the phone App right now but it will get better. I am learning Chinese cooking and he is learning Urdu”.

A Chinese woman married to a Pakistani man living in Lahore explained the importance of creating friendships with other Chinese women married to Pakistani men through social media. She said:

“I am quite happy with my Pakistani husband. We are good together but his family gives me problems at times. They complain I don't speak Urdu and don't say prayers but my husband is fine with me not knowing these things. There are many other Chinese women who are married to Pakistani husbands like me. We have now created a Whatsapp group where we complain about our mothers-in law in Chinese. This way we support each other and the good thing is nobody can understand what we have written in our messages... not even our husbands”.

Some marriages have been arranged between Chinese and Pakistanis through social media. For example, a Chinese girl who was working on a project in Pakistan found a girl for her brother, who lives in China, to marry. Her brother, Ai Khang Peng, liked the Pakistani girl, Nabila, and so, after both families agreed to it, they got married. Peng used Google Translate at his wedding to say he is very happy with the match. Nabila said she was also happy and that her family decided she would marry Peng (“This couple's arranged”, 2018).

Mainstream media has also drawn attention on the dark side of the CPEC marriage story where human trafficking gangs have been aggressively seeking out Christian girls for Chinese men, sometimes even cruising outside churches to ask for potential brides. They have been reported as coercing young Pakistani Christian women to be sold as brides. As in most parts of the world, the traffickers are targeting the most vulnerable religious minority group. This is very different from the CPEC marriages, which result from budding work romances. If that is how the marriage takes place, many lower and lower middle class Pakistani families offer their blessings because of the economic upward social mobility that the marriage match to a Chinese offers to their child and the entire family. These quotes from three Pakistani mothers from low-income families in Lahore explain this situation:



“My daughter who has shifted to China after her marriage complains about her Chinese mother –in –law, so what’s new. She would have had a problem with a Pakistani mother-in-law as well. The good thing is that she does not have to deal with the entire family there. Also, my Chinese son-in-law is very good - better than most men here. He is helping my son get a job in China. He also sometimes sends us money.”

Her friend and neighbour who wanted a Chinese match for her daughter said:

“I wish my daughter would be married to a Chinese man. They are good caretakers. They don’t want any dowry as well. But are ready to provide support to the family ”

When asked if it was taboo for a Muslim girl to get married to a non – Muslim Chinese man, the mother-in-law of the Chinese man said:

“Islam is not an issue in the marriage when we have a Chinese son-in-law...because he converts into Islam for the nikah ceremony to be wed to our daughter in front of our entire family. After that nobody can say she has married a non-Muslim“

This emerging cultural blending is in contrast with what has been the predictive mainstream expectation. What is obvious is through these marriage matches is that many Pakistanis, especially those from the economically deprived sections of society, are able to access better living and social conditions through a marital match with a Chinese. Going forward, Islam is accommodated around that economic benefit. This subtle shift is critical in understanding how and to what extent cultural mixing between China and Pakistan is happening.

## Conclusion

Most noteworthy analysis on CPEC has mainly focused on the economic and geo strategic implications of this new China –Pakistan partnership. For example Small (2015) sees CPEC and Pakistan playing a central part of China’s transition from regional power to a global one, describing Pakistan as the country lying at the heart of Beijing’s BRI plans (Small, 2015). Markey (2013) focuses more on the deep-sea port of Gwadar in South-west Pakistan, (the Flagship project of CPEC) and says that these new levels of friendship and a trustworthy Pakistan will be useful to China in many ways (Markey, 2013). Adeney& Boni (2021) have looked at Beijing’s initial engagement with the Pakistan Army and the Chinese more adaptive and accommodative strategy with the Pakistan’s ruling governments, especially through the creation of SEZs (Adeney& Boni, 2021). Small, Markey, and Adeney & Boni have largely highlighted the geo-political dimension of the

Sino-Pak collaboration. While it is important to investigate that aspect of CPEC, this paper describes the Sino-Pak official media commitments, which are part of the CPEC media strategy. It evaluates the cultural impact of these collaborations along with the growing Chinese presence in the country. Another significant finding of this research is that it challenges the conventional understanding that communism and Islam are likely to be at odds with each other or that any longstanding cultural differences are likely to restrict the potential of any enduring business and geo-strategic CPEC related partnerships between Pakistan and China. This research presents a different picture, media connectivity remains a strong pillar within the BRI and CPEC and both countries are driven towards achieving the goal of mutually enhanced cultural exchange for future Chinese and Pakistani generations. (Box) Moreover, while state-to-state media engagement is at play, this research shows that through the use of social media, the development of an English and Mandarin speaking Pakistani elite and an increasing number of CPEC marriages, the Chinese culture is already blending into the country's life and discourse.

\*Any errors of facts/omissions or interpretation are the sole responsibility of the author. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the CPPG.

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## Interviews

Interview with a Chinese engineer working on orange train project in Lahore (December 2018)

Interviews with Pakistani students learning Mandarin at the Confucius Institute in Lahore (December 2018 and July 2019)

Interview with a Pakistani woman married to Chinese man in Islamabad (July 2019)

Interview with a Chinese woman married to a Pakistani man in Lahore (July 2019)

Interview with a Chinese women Mandarin instructors in Lahore (July 2019)

Interview with a mother whose daughter is married to a Chinese man and shifted to China (February 2020)

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In 2017, the CPPG established its China Cell, which is dedicated to pursue research and academic collaboration on China-Pakistan US relations in the region in the context of a changing world order. Several research publications, conferences and policy dialogues have since been completed. This Discussion Paper is part of the effort to further our understanding of China, particularly with reference to people to people and cultural connections with Pakistan.

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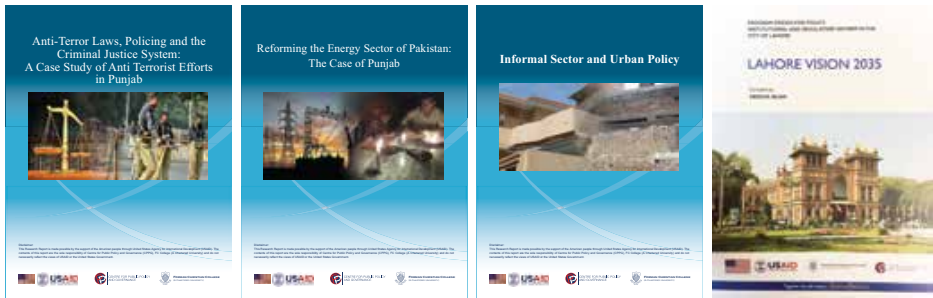


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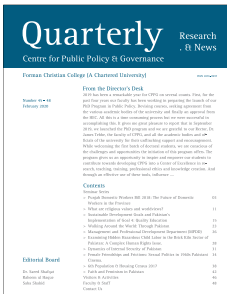
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