

An Ethnographic Study of Cross-Cultural Relations between China and Pakistan under the Umbrella of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

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Abstract

Cultural exchange between Pakistani and Chinese citizens increased after the launch of CPEC. Cooperation and understanding between the governments extended to collaboration and acceptance among the people. And people-to-people relations between the two sides strengthened. Students, artists, sportspersons, businesspeople, professionals, and workers travelled and developed a rapport with locals. A detailed study of the Sahiwal coal power plant and nearby villages, comprising data collection through fieldwork, shows that despite cultural diversity, managers and workers from both sides accepted the cultural diversity and worked for mutual benefit. People working at the power plant exchanged material and non-material cultures with each other that helped them manage cultural diversity. And they strengthened cross-cultural relations, for their exchanges were rewarding and mutually beneficial.

Keywords

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor – cultural diversity – material culture – non-material culture – people-to-people relations – cross-cultural relations

1 Introduction

Chinese female models appearing in Pakistani advertisements was unprecedented a decade ago. Never in the past was it possible for Chinese actors to play leading roles in Pakistani films. Nor were TV programmes and dramas, translated from Chinese into Urdu, broadcast on Pakistan's national channel (PTV) ever before. Nor did cricketers from China participate in a professional league organised by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB). For cultural differences between the two societies—Chinese and Pakistani—were several, ranging from arts to literature to sports, and only a few attempts were made in the past to assuage these differences.

Earlier, in 1950s and 1960s, governments in China and Pakistan had tried to enhance people-to-people contacts to increase understanding and assuage cultural barriers. But these attempts were only partially successful and made little difference. (The momentum of the early 1960s did not continue either.) The second wave, beginning after the announcement of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), however, met the expectations and succeeded to an unprecedented level. Its success made evident that six-and-a-half decades of interaction and cooperation had paid off, and they underpinned a comprehensive partnership emphasising cross-cultural relations (moving beyond security-centric relations).

Cross-cultural relations between China and Pakistan date back to 1951. Pakistan was one of the first countries to recognise the PRC and establish diplomatic relations with it. Both sides maintained close relations with each other (BBC, 2010). Their leadership exchanged high-level visits and signed several agreements. Their support for each other in national, regional, and international matters was evident. China supported Pakistan in economic, trade, and military affairs (Jiang, 2011) and Pakistan provided it with access to the world, shared technology, and helped it establish relations with the Islamic world (Yunus, 2015).

In the early 1970s, Pakistan became a trustworthy link between China and the US and helped both sides normalise their relations. It also coordinated Chinese and American efforts during the period of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Sino-Pakistan partnership flourished likewise in diplomatic and economic dimensions. Chinese attempts to provide diplomatic cover to its ally in the UN and other regional and global forums and economic agreements where China provided funds and expertise to Pakistan contributed to their all-weather friendship. An overlooked aspect of the friendship, however, was cross-cultural relations that could not flourish, despite the long history and conducive backdrop, abreast with strategic, diplomatic, and economic aspects.

The first serious attempt, during the second wave, to emphasise cross-cultural relations was made in May 2011 when Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani visited China. Gilani's visit opened a new chapter of friendship and indicated that even with different ideologies and cultural diversity, relations between China and Pakistan had the potential to broaden and prosper (Yousafa et al., 2018). The announcement of CPEC, officially by Xi Jinping in 2013, added to the progress made, for both sides stressed to continue people-to-people relations under the CPEC (West, 2018). Building on the gains, several government organisations were developed under the CPEC to promote cultural exchange programmes at the local level (Khan et al., 2016) and help build confidence in people-to-people relations (Ahmar, 2014).

CPEC bolstered cultural exchanges between China and Pakistan in the form of art, literature, education, language, and food. Existing modes for promoting interaction such as learning language, sharing food, educational exchanges, and cross-border marriages (Wolf, 2016) were likewise reinforced. Agreements were signed on cooperation in education, technology transfer, and the media. Thousands of Pakistani students were offered scholarships in China by the PRC central and provincial authorities. (In 2017, approximately 20,000 Pakistani students were pursuing higher education in China.) Not only did Pakistanis—and their dependents in a handful of cases—travel to China, but students, artists, professionals, and sportspersons from China also travelled to Pakistan.

Cricketers from China, for instance, participated in the PSL 2017 edition. (Earlier, the PCB, in collaboration with Asian Cricket Council (ACC), had sent Rashid Khan to train young cricketers in China.) Chinese actors performed in Pakistani films and TV ads. Their appearance indicated the dawn of a new era in bilateral relations—a new mode of interaction had become a reality. But this rapid progress was possible only because both governments were interested in promoting people-to-people relations (Siddiqi, 2019). They encouraged non-government entities and enterprises to expand. Their logic was simple: A trade route would help exchange ideas, values, and material and non-material culture (Huang, 2018; Nabi, 2018).

Nonetheless, what surprised the observers was the rapport between the two people. How did, with diverse cultures, Pakistan and China rapidly promote cross-cultural relations after the beginning of CPEC? And how did they manage cultural diversities? We use social exchange theory to answer the above questions. The social exchange theory is useful to analyse benefits at individual and group levels. We argue that “with local benefits, people from both countries share cross-cultural relations and manage their diversities.”

2 Anthropological Approaches to Studying Cultural Relations and Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory explains the exchange of cultural norms, values, assets, and interests between individuals and groups with mutual benefits (Ap, 1992). Homans calls social exchange an exchange of goods, material as well as non-material, such as the symbols of approval or prestige (Homans, 1958). In his later writings, social exchange is seen "as an exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons and groups" (Ibid., 1974). Blau calls it a voluntary action of individuals and groups that motivate them to exchange relations and, in return, they also expect the benefit (Blau, 1964). Simply put, both individuals and groups benefit from social exchange.

Engaging in exchanging social relations creates a pattern of trust that facilitates close relations between individuals and groups. When two parties and groups meet each other's personal goals, they create a balanced, reciprocal, and interdependent relationship (Molm, 2003). An exchange between two sides becomes a point of pivotal importance for scholars focusing on exchanges at a broader level. A handful of scholars, for instance, have used the social exchange theory to interpret social exchange between individuals and groups benefitting from each other (Ali et al., 2017; Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958, 1974; Lee et al., 2010; Molm, 2003). Lee et al. (2010) have used it to explain how the perceived impact influences the local community for cross-cultural exchange. Ali et al. (2017) have used it in the context of transport and infrastructure development.

Given its use, for this study, the social exchange theory is useful to explain gains and losses under the CPEC project. People from both sides held a view that CPEC would have a positive impact on the cross-cultural relations. They were interested in benefitting from the project in the long-term. Their logic was simple: Pakistan and China can benefit at both individual and state levels, and they can promote cross-cultural relations despite diverse cultural backgrounds. However, of the five approaches of social exchange theory—organisational, systematic social, cultural critical, sociological phenomenology, and semiotic—this study focuses only on the first two.

To study cross-cultural relations from an anthropological aspect, we use the organisational approach of social exchange theory to analyse the impact of cross-cultural relations and the factors that help people from both sides interact with each other—throughout the development of CPEC. The systematic social approach is used to analyse the transfer of social, cultural, and material elements between the people from both sides. These two approaches complement each other. And, together, they help explain Sino-Pakistani cultural exchange and cooperation.

3 Results

CPEC, one of the flagship projects of China's BRI (Ranjan, 2015), has strengthened Sino-Pakistani friendship over the years (Zhu, 2017). Despite diverse cultures, people from both sides became close to each other and mutually accepted diversity. Cooperation between them increased, which helped deepen their collaboration in infrastructure development, technological advancement, economic growth, culture, and politics. CPEC's impact was evident at both state and individual levels—success at the former depended on the progress at the latter. An important reason for the success was the commitment of both governments. Government officials from China and Pakistan provided people with opportunities to interact and exchange their values. (It was nonetheless difficult for them, for people from both sides held dear their cultural values and norms and practiced them in their daily lives.) Yet, it was not limited to officials; leadership at the highest levels, such as Premiers from China and Pakistan, also emphasised the need for interaction, understanding, and cooperation.

4 Methodology

This study uses qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse cross-cultural relations under the umbrella of the CPEC project. We have used a mixed-method approach and based this study on in-depth analysis and semi-structured interviews to collect data. The respondents were engaged and interviewed from August 2018 to March 2019. The field data was collected from the Sahiwal coal power plant and nearby communities (*Chak*)¹—72/4, 73/4, 65/4, 75/4, Yousafwala, and Qadirabad, Sahiwal district of Pakistan's Punjab Province. (The Sahiwal power plant is a coal-powered electricity generation plant that is one of the mega projects of CPEC.)

We have used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Data was collected from Pakistani (n= 150) and Chinese (n= 60) respondents. Pakistani respondents included labourers, engineers, and residents of nearby communities, while Chinese respondents were engineers, managers, and labourers (see the graphic and tabular illustration below). Official concerns were considered, however. A survey questionnaire was developed and distributed among the

¹ These are the number of villages. These numbers were allotted to each village by the British administration. Most of these villages, aka chaks, were established by the British in early 20th century, with the advent of canal system in most of districts in Punjab.

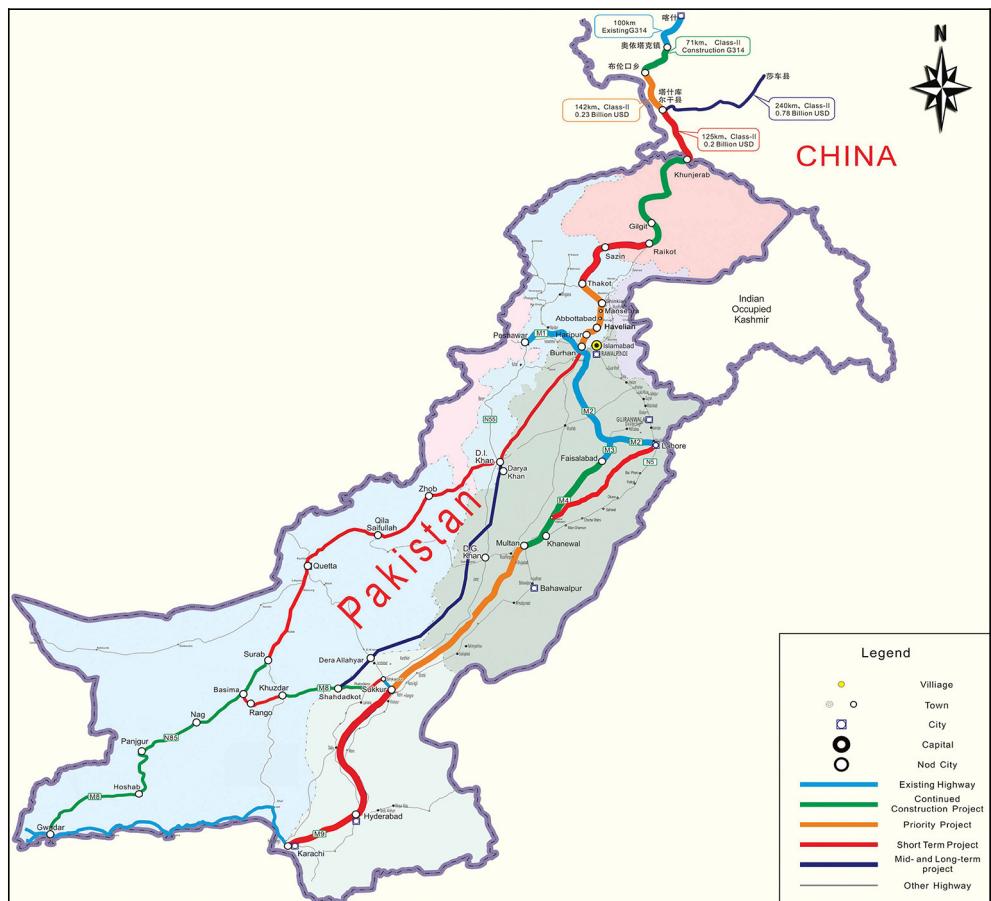


FIGURE 1 Overview of CPEC highways

MINISTRY OF PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM, GOVERNMENT OF PAKISTAN (2016)

respondents. Once data was collected from survey questionnaires, we gathered data from the questionnaires—that included open-ended and closed-ended questions—focus group discussions, and individual case studies.

We used judgmental sampling to collect data from the *Chaks* and the power plant. (The rationale for using this technique was to interview those prospective respondents who were directly or indirectly associated with the project.) And then we asked close-ended and open-ended questions to the respondents. Later, focus group discussions were conducted to collect data from Chinese and Pakistani respondents who were able to communicate with each other in one language. It helped find the commonalities and diversities between both cultures. Discussions with the respondents were carried out in English, Chinese,

and Urdu. (Surprisingly, some of the respondents showed a better understanding of the other culture and expressed their feelings succinctly.) The case study method was only used to know about different individuals' life stories, experiences, and ideas.

We also gathered data from respondents who were working in a different profession (different from their own). For instance, a few engineers were working as language interpreters. It was important to know the perception of people who switched their professions. Every [professional] respondent had a unique experience of exchange of culture. (All—engineers, teachers, labourers, and language interpreters—had different experiences.) The rationale for involving female respondents in the research was to know about the perception of females regarding cultural exchange at the local level.

Table 1 shows detailed demographic information of the samples and respondents' demographic distribution. The first part of the table shows gender-wise distribution: 78.5% of respondents were males and 21.4% were females. (The respondents were selected from both sides. The reason for selecting them was to get the real picture of cultural exchange between the two peoples.) Among the male respondents, 26.19% were Chinese citizens (working as engineers, consultants, and labourers) and 52.3% were Pakistani citizens (working as engineers, labourers, workers, teachers, and language translators). Among females, 2.38% were Chinese citizens (working in the administration). No Pakistani female was working at the plant. All Pakistani females interviewed were residents of nearby *Chaks*. 21.42% of Pakistani females were interviewed in the locale to get information about how Chinese culture influenced the household and children.

As the table shows, the respondents represented diverse age groups. It was significant, for people from different age groups had different perceptions of the exchange of material and non-material cultures. 21.42% were in the age range of 19–29 years (Age group 1, AG1). Most of these respondents were involved in learning the Chinese language. As expected, a majority were also assisting the Chinese as translators. The translators were earning more than skilled workers—more than engineers, in some cases. The Chinese nationals from this age group were interested in learning Urdu from their coworkers. Five Chinese citizens, from AG1, were married to Pakistani girls. Overall, most of the respondents from AG1 were engineers. They were interested in learning each other's languages. They were exchanging food and culture and discussing religions without being fundamentalist. They were open to adopting material and non-material elements from the other side.

Most of the respondents (33.3%) were in the age range of 29–39 years (AG2). Most of Pakistanis in AG2 were working as labourers; some were working as

TABLE 1 Demographic information of the sample (n= 210)

	Respondents		Percentage	
Gender				
Male		165		78.57%
Female		45		21.42%
Nationalities				
Pakistani	110	52.38%	40	19.04%
Chinese	55	26.19%	5	2.38%
Age				
19–29		45		21.42%
29–39		70		33.33%
39–49		55		26.19%
49–59		40		19.04%
Areas				
<i>Chak 73/4</i>		20		9.52%
<i>Chak 72/4</i>		20		9.52%
<i>Chak 65/4</i>		20		9.52%
<i>Chak 75/4</i>		20		9.52%
Yousafwala		20		9.52%
Qadirabad		20		9.52%
Sahiwal coal power plant		90		42.85%
Professionals				
Male engineers		30		14.28%
Male language translators		10		4.76%
Male labourers		70		33.33%
Male farmers		40		19.04%
Male teachers		20		9.52%
Female teachers		10		4.76%
Housewives		20		9.52%
Maids		10		4.76%

FIELD DATA 2018–2019

engineers. The Chinese respondents were working in administration sections of the plant. Respondents from AG2 were less flexible as compared to those of AG1. Chinese respondents were a little rigid to openly discussing matters and were less flexible than their younger compatriots. 26.19% of respondents were in the age range of 39–49 years (AG3), and 19.04% were in the age range of 49–59 years (AG4). Most of the respondents from both age groups were working as labourers. Labourers from both countries earned less than [their compatriot] respondents from the above groups. (Even Chinese labourers cooked food for themselves.) During breaks, they were involved in learning each other's language to have a friendly environment.

Six—of seven locations where data was collected—were nearby *Chaks* and one was the plant because the Chinese respondents were interviewed in the plant; their residential colony was adjacent to the plant. Chinese nationals working at the plant were not allowed to go outside without security. Pakistan's armed forces maintained a strict security protocol for them. Because the Chinese lived in the colony, 90 respondents were from the power plant. Sixty among them were Chinese nationals and 30 were Pakistanis. A judgmental sampling technique was used to select respondents in *Chaks*. Only those prospective male and female respondents were selected who were, directly or indirectly, affiliated with the plant.

An important consideration during the collection of data, from Pakistani and Chinese respondents, was keeping a profession and age distribution balance. This balance helped get diverse information about cross-cultural relations. For instance, 14.28% of the respondents were engineers. Among them, eight engineers were not from the nearby *Chaks*. They were from other cities of Pakistan, and they were living with the Chinese in the colony. (Other Pakistani engineers belonged to the *Chaks*.) Ten Chinese engineers were working at the plant alongside Pakistani engineers. They were young and flexible to exchange with their Pakistani counterparts. Some other respondents, especially translators, were also close to the Chinese. 4.67% of Pakistani male respondents were working as language translators. They all belonged to the *Chaks*. They were earning more than many of their compatriots. Although some were only school graduates, they could speak and write the Chinese language. They were closer to the Chinese and had a better understanding of their culture.

An important group selected for the study was of former farmers who worked on lands or farms before the construction of the plant. Because the plant was built on the lands they worked on, they had to switch their professions. They began working at the plant as labourers. Their ratio among respondents was 19.04%. Their perception of the power plant was mixed. Some of them were happy for the new exchange, but some considered the plant a threat

to their culture. 9.52% of the male respondents were working as schoolteachers, but they were also working [part time] at the plant. Among Pakistani female respondents, 4.67% were teachers, 9.52% were housewives, and 9.52% were working as maids. They were affiliated with the power plant, for their husbands were working over there. They had their logic for not working alongside their husbands because they thought that there was no work for Pakistani females in the power plant.

5 Cultural Diversity

Chinese and Pakistani cultures differ from each other in several aspects. Both have strong roots underpinned by existence spanning centuries (Khursheed et al., 2019). The differences are evident from ideologies, ethics, and styles; the differences in art, food, religion, crafts, and festivals are palpable. The two sides nonetheless have overcome the differences to nurture their friendship. (Both are attributed to a “community of common destiny” by their leadership.) Overcoming the differences, however, did not mean that they ultimately routed them. During interviews, the respondents shared their experiences and underlined the differences. Some differences were rather evident.

For instance, the difference between religions and the importance of religion in social lives was palpable. It was arguably the most important difference for Pakistani respondents. (Religion shapes culture in Pakistan; social activities, traditions, and customs are centred around it. It shapes values, culture, and ways of thinking and behaving (Imtiaz, 2011).) Because 97% of Pakistanis are Muslims and the majority consider Islam as the most important aspect of their lives, about 80% of Pakistani respondents were not satisfied with the beliefs of the people of the other side. (The ratio among Chinese respondents was also high.) And this trend was not getting better either (Khan et al., 2016). A Pakistani respondent complained that the Chinese did not build a mosque where they worked. Local labourers who worked alongside them faced problems, for they could not go home to offer prayers during the break.

The Chinese respondents viewed religion and religious ideologies differently. Four respondents believed that Confucianism contributed to the improvement of individuals and the world. Their views did not represent that of the majority. Most of the Chinese respondents were not sensitive regarding their religious activities and ceremonies. A Chinese respondent stated, “There is no supernatural power in the world. You should believe in yourself and conquer the world.” Another respondent, Wang Xiang, said, “Only human beings are favourable for other human beings”.

Respondents from both sides also differed in communication and the style of greetings. Pakistanis started conversations with *Assalam o Alaikum* (peace be upon you). Respondents from all age groups met each other with the same style of greetings. Males meeting males shook hands or hugged; females followed the same practice. (Male and female respondents did not shake hands partly because they lived in rural areas.) Conversely, the Chinese started conversations with *Nihao* (Hello). During the data collection, it was evident that they had changed some of their habits to adapt to local practices. A Chinese respondent, 38, told that "eye contact should be avoided with the Pakistani workers, it is considered impolite or rude." Another respondent, 29, underlined that people from both sides used each other's gestures and styles for communication.

As expected, the understood difference between Pakistani and Chinese was of language. However, surprisingly, it became evident during the fieldwork that the co-workers did not consider it a problem. Virtually all Chinese and Pakistani nationals could partially speak or understand each other's languages, Chinese and Urdu. A Pakistani respondent, who could speak some words of Chinese, told that he learned those from his "Chinese brothers". Although there were at least 10 professional translators available, the Chinese workers were able to partially speak and understand Urdu (and in some cases Punjabi). The interaction with people working at the power plant showed that the language difference was assuaged.

A significant, dynamic difference between the two people was cultural. Chinese and Pakistani respondents viewed marriage differently. During a focus group discussion engaging 10 Pakistanis, respondents mostly viewed marriage beyond a relationship of two individuals and defined it in a cultural and religious context. On a question about Chinese males marrying Pakistani women, they had mixed reactions—half of them showed resentment. (Five Chinese had married Pakistani girls; two of the girls were residents of Chak 73/4.) A Chinese respondent, married to a Pakistani girl, told that he was enjoying life with his wife. They were learning from each other. All they needed was the willingness to accept and adapt.

6 Exchange of Material and Non-material Cultures between China and Pakistan

Cultural exchanges between Pakistan and China are both material and non-material. They exchange products, commodities, resources, ideas, and values. As for the former, China has brought a significant infrastructure of transport and industries in Pakistan under the umbrella of CPEC. It has introduced

new forms of technology to Pakistanis—such innovation impacts the people (Toppa, 2018). Although Chinese investments are ubiquitous in Pakistan, one of the best locales to observe the exchange of cultures is the Sahiwal power plant where Chinese and Pakistani nationals spend up to nine hours a day together.

During the research, it was evident that the power plant had brought the two sides closer. Many Chinese came to Pakistan to work. Chinese respondents believed that they “introduced innovation to Pakistan in the form of the plant.” It was observed that they used the Chinese working style, methods, products, and tools to run the plant. They followed laws and techniques followed in the PRC and introduced their Pakistani coworkers to those aspects. A Pakistani respondent said, “Chinese people use good professional skills to achieve their goals. I have also adopted their style and work ethics.” Another respondent appreciated his Chinese coworkers because of their safety-first approach. He said, “They have fixed the size of the bucket that laborers pick and deliver. We get a break for two and a half hours that increases our efficiency. But if we work for extra hours, we are paid for our extra time.”

On the other hand, Chinese workers were inspired by the social behaviour ethics of their Pakistani coworkers. A Chinese respondent was surprised to see workers replacing their fellows suffering from any ailment as well as taking care of them. Also, they were fond of Pakistani food and spices. During interviews, a Chinese respondent said, “We are in love with *Chicken Biryani* (rice made with chicken) and *Chapati* (made with wheat flour) with chicken.” Another respondent added, “Pakistanis are very hospitable people. Even if their salary packages are low, they are always ready to feed their Chinese coworkers respectably.” Two female respondents, working in the administration section, happily shared their experiences. They received dresses, food, and sweets from wives of their Pakistani coworkers. They had never met them due to security reasons, but, they told, they could feel their attachment to them.

A Pakistani worker at the plant said, “They [the Chinese] always share their food and introduce Chinese food to us. Although we do not like their food very much, I am happy that they like us and share their recipes with us.” A female respondent whose husband worked at the plant narrated her story. Although she was not happy with his income, the behaviour of Chinese nationals was good with her husband. “When they have their festivals, they send their ‘moon cake’ for us. Although I do not like it, my children eat it. They also give him a bonus on their festivals.” The acceptability for the Chinese material culture including food was evident beyond the plant. There was a visible change in Sahiwal, too. A handful of restaurants had opened that served Chinese food.

As for the exchange of non-material culture, people from both sides involved in transferring norms, dress patterns, and ideas with each other under the

umbrella of CPEC. Economic ties thus strengthened social ties and people-to-people relations. CPEC, in this regard, also played a significant role in strengthening friendship between the two nations (Daily, 2019). In 2015, the University of Agricultural Faisalabad opened a Chinese language institute (the first Confucius Institute in Punjab) and attracted a considerable number of students. The institute was launched in collaboration with Xinjiang Agricultural University (XAU). Several students passed their Chinese Language Comprehension Exam (HSK) from the institute, which enhanced their chances of getting admission and scholarship in Chinese universities.

During the collection of data, we found many cases where Chinese and Pakistanis were learning each other's languages. A Chinese respondent was happy to learn Urdu and other local languages, mainly Punjabi. He spoke Urdu during the focus group discussion. Another Chinese respondent, living in Sahiwal since 2013, called his experiences exciting. He visited people in Yousafwala and Qadirabad, contrary to the advice of security guards. He said that before arriving in Pakistan, he had no idea that Pakistani females did not meet strangers. Initially, he wanted to meet females, but he understood the reason later. After that, he ate local food in his Pakistani friends' *baithak* (guest room) without meeting their women. He often attended village weddings and celebrated local and religious festivals with them. He said, "I have visited mosques twice with my friends. Now, I meet their wives and children whom I also teach Chinese. They all wish to visit China."

A Pakistani respondent, 45, shared his story. He said that religious differences did not disturb working relations between Chinese and Pakistani. "The Chinese are not religious people, but the best thing is that they respect our religion. We indeed have no mosque in the plant. But they never humiliate our religion." During the focus group discussion, a Pakistani participant said that he and his Pakistani coworkers knew that the Chinese exchanged gifts on their festivals. He said, "We are not rich, but we give them small gifts on their rituals that make them happy." Another Pakistani added, "We do not like their eating patterns because they can eat all *halal* and *haram* (allowed and prohibited in Islam) food. But when they are with us, they do not eat *haram* things and respect our beliefs."

One of the most important aspects of non-material exchange was marriages between Pakistani and Chinese nationals. Before the CPEC, these marriages were limited to Pakistani male students marrying Chinese girls. Most of the couples lived in China or other countries and earned together. CPEC, however, changed the arrangement. Many Chinese males, working in Pakistan in different projects, married Pakistani girls and lived with them in the country. (Recent news about Chinese males involved in smuggling Pakistani girls to China (with

help of Pakistani agents) in the guise of marrying them had not emerged then.) All five Chinese respondents, working at Sahiwal power plant, who were married to Pakistani girls were living happily. A Chinese male and his Pakistani wife affirmed this in an interview.

The husband said, "I sent my proposal to her parents with help of a Pakistani. I know it is considered not good to propose a girl. He managed all the things. All local ceremonies were celebrated in a traditional style. He arranged a wedding party as per Pakistani marriage traditions." After their marriage, he was able to communicate with her parents in Urdu. The wife added, "We also arranged a ceremony in China with his parents. They were welcoming." Also, she said that she learned basic Chinese to communicate with her husband's parents. Despite cultural differences, she considered her life "a happy married life." All they needed was respect for each other's norms, values, and traditions.

As for values, the Chinese were careful. Although they consumed alcohol with food, they did not serve alcohol to their Pakistani coworkers while celebrating Chinese festivals. Pakistani workers were also friendly and appreciated their efforts. For instance, three of the Pakistani respondents (one female and two males), who had studied in China on Chinese government scholarships, told that their experiences with their Chinese hosts were memorable. They all belonged to lower-middle-class religious families. One of the males said, "Chinese students helped us in administration issues, and they also solved our study-related problems. When we went out with our Chinese friends, they took care of the food. They always ordered *halal* food for us."

7 Discussion and Conclusion

Social exchange theory sees the benefits of both sides. When two sides benefit from the transfer of culture, especially the locals, their cooperation would increase. For instance, Pakistani and Chinese citizens worked together at the Sahiwal coal power plant and enhanced understanding of each other's cultures. Despite differences, their coexistence helped them strengthen cross-cultural relations and overcome hindrances. Social exchange theory explains this cooperation in terms of mutual benefit. As the above data shows, religion was arguably the most significant difference between the two sides. It did not impact the lives of Chinese, but it shaped the lives of their Pakistani coworkers. Yet, Pakistanis, working at the plant, cooperated with Chinese coworkers for the sake of economic benefits.

Overall, the cultures of both sides are established. They have features of inheritance, acquisition, and functions and each values its norms, values, and

traditions. And they have unique characteristics. At Sahiwal, however, the coworkers did not cherish the concept of cultural superiority. (Or that the concept of cultural superiority could not hinder cooperation between the coworkers.) The negation of cultural superiority is possible when people respect each other, instead of being self-centered and blindly proud. And they tolerate the customs, norms, values, and beliefs of others. This practice was evident in the power plant. The coworkers not only respected each other's culture and traditions. Their willingness to accepting diversity and interest in learning was also evident. For instance, Pakistani workers were interested in learning the Chinese language.

Likewise, Chinese citizens also showed interest in learning Urdu. Compared to Chinese, Urdu is not an international language and its benefits are limited. They nonetheless learned it because it was helpful while working in Pakistan and it strengthened their professional standing. They were able to understand the environment better and interact with coworkers. (It would also help them become a favorite choice for companies that intend to work in Pakistan in future.) Thus, knowing about each other helped the coworkers exchange material and non-material culture. The impact of such an exchange would probably be long-term, especially in Pakistan, because people from diverse [economic, social, and religious] backgrounds and areas worked at the plant.

The above discussion underlines the relevance of social exchange theory in explaining the strengthening of cross-cultural relations between Pakistan and China. The two sides managed cross-cultural relations, despite diversities, after the beginning of the CPEC. They worked together to overcome the hurdles and bottlenecks in carrying out CPEC projects. Both benefitted from the CPEC (the Sahiwal power plant, in particular) economically and socially. It contributed to Pakistan's economy at both macro and micro levels, improved social life in the locale, and strengthened people-to-people relations. Pakistani and Chinese citizens interacted with each other and enhanced their mutual rapport, even though they did not know about each other's norms, values, traditions, and language.

The cross-cultural exchange and learning slowly made ways for the cultural levelling that would eventually decrease cultural and official hindrances. The interaction at the individual level increased likewise. That was important, too. For Pakistan and China, to benefit from the CPEC, people-to-people interaction was pivotal. The governments of both countries took several initiatives to enhance mutual awareness of both cultures. Government officials advanced physical and cultural connectivity to strengthen the bond of friendship. The innovations and technology also helped in this regard (so did the cross-cultural connectivity). Pakistan benefitted from Chinese technology, resources, and

skills. China, on the other hand, invested substantial sums of money in Pakistan that helped it economically and geopolitically.

The process of cultural exchange, however, took time. As the study of the Sahiwal power plant shows, people gradually understood each other and enhanced cooperation. Only after learning the differences, could they accept diversity. Thus, despite diverse cultural values, norms, and traditions, they cooperated and accommodated each other. Nonetheless, the cultural barriers in some areas such as religion, customs, and ideologies continued to exist. Given these barriers, there was some resistance among a handful of locals and their views did not change substantially. But the areas such as food, marriages, social view, gender view, and festivals witnessed most of the improvement.

Mutual trust increased between the people that helped the governments achieve their goals. In addition to Chinese citizens working in Pakistan, the presence of Pakistani students in China also helped enhance mutual understanding and acceptability. As discussed above, three of the respondents had studied in China. They also shared their experiences with family members and friends living in Pakistan. Also, some artists from both sides performed to showcase their culture and observe the other's culture. Both sides invited anthropologists and writers to express their thoughts on cultures along the Silk Road. Cultural shows such as dance events and musical performances were arranged frequently at the university level.

Simply put, the CPEC was an effort by the two governments in the beginning. But as time passed by, people from both sides took the lead and enhanced their cooperation, for it worked in their favour. They accepted diversity because it benefitted them. Working with the Chinese improved their [Pakistanis'] skills and trained them professionally. The Chinese, conversely, experienced the hospitality of locals who were willing to neglect their concerns and bitterness. State patronage might be a reason, but the mutual benefit was arguably the most important reason for improved cross-cultural relations. It is, therefore, conceivable, as social exchange theory suggests, that after the completion of CPEC projects, Chinese and Pakistani governments and people would be able to overcome cultural diversity, for their mutual benefit, further and their cross-cultural relations would be secure.

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