



Cultural Differences and Their Impact on Belt and Road Policy Implementation in Latin America: The Case of Infrastructure Cooperation

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Abstract

Since its launch in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded into Latin America, offering new prospects for infrastructure cooperation. However, cultural differences between Chinese and Latin American stakeholders have posed significant challenges to both policy coordination and project execution. This study applies cross-cultural theoretical frameworks to examine how linguistic barriers, decision-making structures, and legal-regulatory environments influence the implementation of infrastructure projects. Through selected case studies, it reveals how misaligned communication styles and institutional expectations can hinder cooperation, reduce efficiency, and affect long-term stakeholder trust. To address these challenges, the paper proposes two strategic approaches: promoting cultural adaptation through bilingual communication and community engagement, and improving organizational responsiveness by decentralizing management and aligning with local governance norms. The findings suggest that cultural integration is essential to the success of infrastructure initiatives under the BRI. By embedding intercultural awareness into project planning and execution, stakeholders can foster more effective, inclusive, and sustainable cooperation between China and Latin America.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative; cross-cultural communication; cultural differences; infrastructure development

1. Introduction

Since its introduction in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a core strategy for promoting global infrastructure development and economic cooperation. Originally focused on the Eurasian continent, the BRI has gradually expanded to include Latin America, where the demand for infrastructure modernization and regional connectivity aligns well with China's development agenda. Rich in natural resources and market potential, Latin America has emerged as a key partner in the initiative, particularly in sectors such as transportation, energy, and urban construction.

Between 2005 and 2020, China invested in over 130 infrastructure projects across Latin America, amounting to more than USD 94 billion and generating hundreds of thousands of jobs. Projects like the Chancay Port in Peru and the Belgrano Sur railway in Argentina have significantly improved local logistics networks and regional development. These efforts symbolize the broader success of South-South cooperation under the BRI framework.

However, despite growing engagement, deep-seated cultural differences remain a critical obstacle to effective policy coordination and project implementation. Differences in values, communication styles, decision-making practices,

and social norms have often led to misunderstandings, reduced efficiency, and even project delays. Addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring the long-term viability and mutual benefit of China-Latin America cooperation. This study explores how such cultural differences impact BRI infrastructure initiatives and proposes adaptive strategies to foster more effective cross-cultural collaboration. This research aims to bridge theoretical insights and practical case analysis to inform future collaborative practices.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The impact of cultural differences on international cooperation has been widely explored through interdisciplinary lenses. Tylor (1871) provided a foundational definition of culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society,” which has laid the groundwork for much of the subsequent research on intercultural dynamics. Building on this, Johanson and Vahlne (1977) demonstrated that greater cultural distance increases information asymmetry, raises transaction costs, and heightens the risk of failure in international business expansion. Renn and Rohmann (2000) highlighted how national variations in cultural risk perception and adaptive capacity can shape the outcomes of cross-cultural interactions. Similarly, Aririguzoh (2022) argues that successful intercultural communication depends on the mutual recognition and respect of cultural backgrounds, as understanding such differences is key to interpreting others’ values and behaviors. These frameworks offer a particularly insightful lens through which to understand the dynamics of China–Latin America cooperation, where cultural distance affects not only interpersonal communication but also the effectiveness of joint policy implementation.

2.1 Cultural Dimensions

Geert Hofstede (1980) developed one of the most influential models for comparing national cultures. Based on survey data from IBM employees in over 50 countries, he proposed six dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. These dimensions describe value systems that influence how societies structure authority, evaluate risk, define achievement, and relate to time. For example, societies with higher power distance may favor centralized decision-making, while others with lower power distance often emphasize participatory governance and decentralized coordination.

Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) project, led by House et al. (2004), expanded Hofstede’s framework by examining the relationship between culture, leadership, and organizational performance. Introducing nine cultural dimensions, the study shows how values shape not only personal preferences but also institutional dynamics. GLOBE findings are particularly relevant to international infrastructure partnerships, where mismatched leadership norms can hinder collaboration.

2.2 Cultural Values

Shalom Schwartz (2012) identified ten basic human values—such as conformity, benevolence, and achievement—that differ in importance across cultures. These values influence perceptions of justice, legitimacy, and social responsibility. In some societies, there is a stronger public expectation for transparency and participatory governance, while others prioritize centralized coordination and cohesive national strategies. These differing value orientations directly affect project governance models and their social acceptance.

2.3 Cultural Factors

In multicultural contexts, differences in customs, social norms, and time perception play a vital role in shaping international cooperation. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) emphasized the significance of cultural habits and business conduct, especially in transnational companies and global partnerships. Hall (1983) also highlighted how cultural perceptions of time, such as scheduling, flexibility, and pacing, can impact the efficiency of intercultural communication.

3. Case Analysis

In the context of BRI cooperation between China and Latin America, cultural differences have emerged as critical

factors influencing the planning, negotiation, and execution of infrastructure projects. This section presents three representative case studies that illustrate the cultural frictions encountered and the strategies adopted to manage them effectively.

3.1 Language Barriers and Team Building: The Case of the Talca-Chillán Highway, Chile

In international infrastructure projects under the BRI, language remains one of the most persistent obstacles to effective team collaboration. In the early stages of cross-border construction projects, communication challenges can slow progress, increase management costs, and create misunderstandings between foreign and local staff. Beyond its functional role, language also carries cultural identity, and a lack of mutual understanding may hinder the development of trust between project stakeholders.

The Talca-Chillán section of Chile's highway Route 5 provides a valuable example of how such challenges can be addressed. In this project, China Railway Siyuan Survey and Design Group actively prioritized cultural and linguistic integration as part of its management strategy. The team did not merely rely on translators or one-way communication but engaged directly with local customs and social expectations. They participated in community events, celebrated regional holidays alongside local staff, and held regular team-building activities designed to promote interpersonal understanding.

These measures strengthened interpersonal relationships and improved operational coordination. Over time, the local workforce reported increased comfort and engagement, which contributed to a more cohesive and motivated team environment. The case illustrates that investing in bilingual capacity and cultural adaptation—not only in leadership but also among frontline staff—is essential for building long-term trust. It also highlights how language, as both a tool and a symbol, plays a central role in shaping the success of cross-cultural infrastructure collaboration.

3.2 Power Distance and Decision-making Styles: The Case of San Antonio Port, Chile

Beyond individual-level communication, project governance also depends on how deeply cultural norms are embedded in institutional decision-making. The San Antonio Port expansion in Chile reflects the challenges that can arise from differences in administrative structures and cultural preferences in decision-making. The project was initiated under a bilateral framework and initially followed a centralized management approach. This model emphasized timely execution, coordinated oversight, and hierarchical efficiency—features commonly seen in infrastructure planning processes in East Asian contexts.

In contrast, Chile's governance emphasizes decentralized coordination, local autonomy, and public participation. During the early phases of the project, differing expectations regarding consultation and stakeholder inclusion became apparent. Chilean institutional procedures typically involve formalized channels for involving civil society actors, including labor unions and local community representatives, particularly in projects with environmental and logistical implications.

Recognizing this divergence, the project team adjusted its coordination strategy. Expanded engagement efforts were launched, including the establishment of dialogue mechanisms and joint technical review sessions. These adaptations facilitated better alignment with Chilean procedural norms and strengthened mutual understanding among the involved parties.

This case shows that aligning communication and coordination practices with local governance norms is essential for effective international cooperation. Institutional compatibility, alongside technical planning, fosters sustainable partnerships and smoother project execution in culturally diverse settings.

3.3 Legal and Regulatory Challenges: The Case of the Chucás Hydropower Project, Costa Rica

In cross-border infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, legal and regulatory differences between China and Latin American countries have become a recurring source of risk, particularly in areas such as taxation, environmental protection, labor standards, and construction norms. These differences stem from variations in legal systems and administrative practices across regions. When local laws—especially those concerning environmental and community participation—are not fully understood or respected, projects may encounter delays, legal penalties, or even suspension orders. Moreover, non-compliance can raise costs, affect sustainability, and jeopardize contract fulfillment.

The Chucás Hydropower Project in Costa Rica exemplifies such challenges. During its development, the project

faced frequent work stoppages, a highly complex legal environment, and stringent technical standards. These difficulties were rooted not only in Costa Rica's detailed regulatory system but also in the country's strong socio-cultural emphasis on environmental conservation and civic engagement. In response, the project team adopted a localized management strategy. This included proactive communication with government agencies and community organizations, as well as adjustments to align with local legal and cultural expectations. Key managerial and design positions were filled by Costa Rican professionals, facilitating integration into the domestic legal context.

This flexible, context-aware management approach enabled the project to overcome compliance barriers and cultural misalignment, ultimately ensuring steady progress and contractual success. The case highlights the importance of legal adaptability in international infrastructure ventures and reinforces the idea that regulatory alignment is as critical as technical and financial planning in guaranteeing long-term project success.

4. Strategies to Overcome Cultural Barriers

To improve the effectiveness of cross-cultural cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially in Latin American infrastructure projects, it is crucial to move beyond recognizing cultural differences toward implementing concrete, adaptive strategies. Drawing from empirical case analyses and cultural theory, this section proposes two strategic directions for overcoming key cultural challenges in China–Latin America cooperation: cultural adaptation and organizational restructuring.

4.1 Cultural Adaptation and Trust-building

Successful cross-cultural collaboration relies not only on technical execution but also on mutual cultural understanding. Chinese enterprises participating in Latin American infrastructure projects should prioritize cultural sensitivity training, including awareness of local customs, social norms, and communication styles. This cultural literacy serves as a foundation for building trust and preventing misunderstandings that could derail project timelines or public acceptance.

Recommended measures include the adoption of bilingual communication strategies, hiring local interpreters or culturally competent staff who understand regional gestures, etiquette, and symbolic meanings. Flexibility in adapting communication practices and day-to-day project routines to fit local expectations can also improve operational efficiency and stakeholder satisfaction. Additionally, improving legal compliance through the hiring of local legal advisors and senior managers helps ensure that projects align with host-country regulations and expectations. Strengthening long-term community relationships through transparent communication and inclusive local engagement is also vital to cultivating sustained local support. These efforts foster not only smoother implementation but also stronger stakeholder confidence and social license to operate.

4.2 Organizational Adaptation and Local Engagement

Structural mismatches in governance and decision-making processes are another common source of cultural friction. To address these issues, Chinese enterprises should consider localized and participatory management models that reflect host-country values of decentralization and inclusivity.

Practical recommendations include delegating selected decision-making authority to local project teams or forming joint committees that involve government officials, community representatives, and labor unions. Establishing formal two-way communication channels enables project teams to receive timely feedback from stakeholders, allowing for responsive and context-sensitive adjustments. Furthermore, adopting a “one region, one strategy” approach allows for flexible, tailored management that avoids overreliance on standardized models from China. By aligning organizational practices with local norms, project developers can improve adaptability, reduce operational risks, and enhance project sustainability.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant influence of cultural differences on policy formulation and project implementation within China–Latin America cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Drawing on established theoretical models and selected case studies, it demonstrates that divergences in values, communication styles, decision-making structures, and legal expectations can hinder cross-border collaboration and delay project execution. These cultural gaps manifest in both the policy sphere, which influences transparency, mutual trust, and public participation,

and the operational domain, where management styles and coordination practices diverge.

However, cultural barriers are not insurmountable. This study identifies two strategic pillars to foster more effective cooperation. First, cultural adaptation and trust-building should be prioritized through bilingual communication strategies, local hiring, legal compliance, and long-term community engagement. These efforts enhance mutual understanding and promote smoother stakeholder collaboration. Second, organizational adaptation is essential for improving responsiveness to local governance expectations. Chinese enterprises are encouraged to decentralize decision-making processes, incorporate feedback loops, and tailor management models to the socio-cultural context of each host country. Such adjustments can enhance local ownership, reduce friction, and improve project sustainability.

Cultural integration should be treated as a core component of international cooperation. With the right strategies in place, China–Latin America infrastructure partnerships can become more effective, inclusive, and durable across diverse settings. Building on these findings, future research may explore sector-specific challenges or incorporate quantitative data to strengthen these insights.

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