



## The Application of Thai Language Teaching as China's Soft Power in Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces under the Belt and Road Initiative

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### Abstract

China proposes the Belt and Road Initiative to strengthen the interconnection between China and neighboring countries on the changeable world situation. Studying the neighboring languages, it's one of the essential ways to strengthen China's soft power in neighboring countries, especially for the Thai language. However, there is a small number of research papers about China implementing its soft power policy. Therefore, this research paper aims to study why and how China implements Thai language teaching as soft power to increase its influence under the One Belt One Road Initiative. This research is conducted with qualitative research, which is conducted by document analysis. Official documents are analyzed. This research result shows that China strengthens its soft power by popularizing Thai language teaching in two southern provinces of China, namely Yunnan and Guangxi, due to their geographical location which is closed to Thailand. The specific strengthening soft power measure is expanding the Thai language teaching from a few universities to offering the Thai language major or Thai language as the second major in many universities in Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces.

**Keywords:** *Belt and Road Initiative, Thai language teaching, soft power*

### 1. Introduction

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed a jointly building initiative, the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (referred to as the "Belt and Road") with neighboring countries during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia. The related countries responded positively. Under the guidance of this initiative, China and countries along the Belt and Road have cooperated through specific projects. The areas of cooperation include interconnection, industrial investment, resource development, economic and trade cooperation, financial cooperation, and cultural exchanges.

The cooperation in various fields between China and the countries along the route is inseparable from language and communication. Language and communication not only promote exchanges and cooperation between China and countries along the route in politics, economy, trade, and transportation but also promote cultural exchange and communication support. A language is an important tool for developing the "Belt and Road" and the people-to-people bond (Zhang, 2016). Teaching language plays a vital role in this. At present, the main types of two-way language training are mainly used. Specifically, there are two types of promotion of Chinese to countries along the route and learning the main languages of countries along the route. The "Belt and Road" is the practice of building a community with a shared future for humanity. China and the countries along the route will jointly build the "Belt and Road," which provides not only Chinese language learning opportunities for the people of the countries along the route but also teaches the native languages of the countries along the route to understand the local society for Chinese, aimed to strengthen the cooperation between the "Belt and Road" countries. More Chinese learning local language and culture from the countries along the route will help China develop soft power in that country.

Thailand is an important country for constructing the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road." Because Thailand is the geographic center of Southeast Asia, it borders Laos and Myanmar in the north, Yunnan and Guangxi provinces in the south of China located nearby, and Malaysia in the south. It is China's pathway to Singapore and Indonesia. In 2016, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-Ocha of Thailand proposed the "Thailand 4.0" strategy to connect with the "Belt and Road." The two countries' geographical and strategic advantages have increased the demand for Thai language talent in China. In the Southern Part of China, Chinese people who can speak and understand the Thai language are beneficial, because they can



communicate and learn Thai culture easily. Meanwhile, they can share Chinese culture and tell Chinese stories to Thai people in the Thai language, which helps spread Chinese culture and stories in Thailand.

Soft power refers to the ability to achieve goals using attraction rather than coercion or inducement. This attraction specifically stems from a country's culture, political philosophy, and foreign policy (Nye & Ma, 2013). Soft power has different specific forms. The British Council has long been considered a global leader in the instrumental use of culture as a means of diplomacy and foreign policy (Lanca, 2019). It's an institution that focuses on researching soft power in the U.K. In the Belt and Road initiative, China uses teaching Thai language policy in Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces to popularize Thai language talents in China. Thai language talents in China can work in Thailand and share Chinese stories and culture with Thai people. It not only meets the job description requirement itself but also enhances China's soft power through Thai language talents sharing Chinese culture and stories with the Thai people.

Sukkaew and Sodsuk (2013) found that Thailand has many benefits from China's soft power policy. Such as the opportunities for Chinese language education and culture exchange. Tungkeunkunt (2016) argued that increasing Chinese influence in Thailand is primarily driven by the historical background of Sino-Thai relations, Thailand's economic interests, and the role of ethnic Chinese communities in Thailand. However, most research in this field focuses on China's traditional soft power, for example, Chinese culture and language teaching for foreigners. Hu (2020) argued that in the "Belt and Road," the flow of culture (symbols) is completely multi-directional. There are not only Chinese cultures flowing to countries along the route, but also cultures of other countries flowing to China. In the "Belt and Road" context, a Chinese study of other countries' languages also plays an important role in strengthening soft power. There are many research papers about China implementing its soft power policy in the Thai language teaching perspective. Therefore, this research paper aims to study why and how China implements Thai language teaching as soft power to increase its influence under the One Belt One Road Initiative.

## 2. Objectives

- 1) To study the reason why China implements Thai language teaching as soft power under the One Belt One Road Initiative
- 2) To study how China implements Thai language teaching as soft power under the One Belt One Road Initiative

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1 Methodology

This article is a qualitative research paper, conducted by document analysis. The type of research method is interpretive analysis. The process involves collecting three official documents and interpreting them to understand their meaning. Then, analyze why and how China implements Thai language teaching in the two Provinces as a soft power under Belt and Road Initiative.

In two months, the researchers collect related documents about Belt and Road policies and Thai language teaching information from websites, then select three official documents to interpret. Because the three documents elaborate on the measures to popularize Thai language teaching in China. The three documents are as follows

3.1.1 the vision and actions of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. It scopes Guangxi and Yunnan provinces to be the research's region in the context of Belt and Road.

3.1.2 The action plan for the educational serving of Guangxi Development (2010-2012). It mentioned the Language talent training plan in Guangxi provinces.

3.1.3 The decision of reforming and developing higher education in Yunnan province (Yunfa 2008 No. 17). There are Yunnan promoting teaching ASEAN Language methods in the official document.

From the above Thai language teaching policies under the belt and road context, researchers argue that this is a new way to increase China's soft power in Thailand. Foreign language policies are a vital factor to evaluate soft power in a country, this research uses soft power theory to design research questions and guide the scope. Thus, the researchers also conducted the interpretive analysis with soft power theory.



### 3.2 Theory and literature review

The countries in the region of Belt and Road normally have plentiful corporations in economic development. There are complex communication problems needed to solve. To solve these problems, language is a tool to realize people-to-people communication, which can help people from different backgrounds jointly overcome regional communication problems. Thus, the “Belt and Road” strategy is based on the people-to-people communication concept, paying more attention to the construction of soft power in the region.

In 1990, Joseph Nye, a professor at Harvard University took the United States as an example. Under the complex and changeable international relations environment, through a comparative analysis using traditional economic capabilities and military resources as evaluation indicators, he found that the existing traditional strength is no longer sufficient to explain and cope with the current situation and unpredictable phenomenon, so the concept of soft power was first proposed in the article “Bound to Lead: The changing nature of American power” (Nye, 1991).

Soft power refers to achieving goals using attraction rather than coercion or inducement. This attraction specifically stems from a country’s culture, political philosophy, and foreign policy (Nye & Ma, 2013). Generally, the economy and military are traditional hard power, but they can also be attributed to soft power. However, scholars have also enthusiastically discussed the boundaries of soft power. Yang and Chen (2015) pointed out that soft power also derives from economic power and policy support. For example, the phenomenon of the Chinese language craze that has emerged in the world in recent years is mainly due to China’s growing economic strength. But in soft power theory, soft power comes from a country’s attractive culture, political values recognized at home and abroad, and a strong foreign policy. Nye and Ma (2013) believe that strength is the ability to influence the behavior of others and achieve one’s own goals. There are many ways to influence the behavior of others: you can threaten and coerce, you can also use profit temptation, or by attracting and wooing to make the others consistent with your goals. Soft power, on the other hand, synchronizes the opponent with its own goals by attracting and wooing. This attracting and wooing usually relies on the ability to shape people’s preferences. It is not the threat of traditional military coercion and economic sanctions but is based on culture, values, foreign policies, and other means to softly attract each other.

How to attract? What to attract? How to strengthen the country’s soft power has become an in-depth question for scholars in related fields. Nye and Ma (2013) believe that cultural symbols, foreign languages, traditional culture, and related values can generate soft power. Language is an important means of enhancing soft power. Whether it is in national culture, political values, or foreign policy, it plays an important role. If a country wants to attract people from other countries to form a centripetal force on its, the country can’t do without language and communication. For a country, promoting the study of its language in a foreign country is one thing, but what is more important is that it also needs to study a foreign language. This will ensure the understanding of parties bilaterally and multilaterally. By using a foreign language to tell other countries about China and its story, China can effectively deliver the Chinese core value, and share Chinese tradition and customs to build soft power in people to people level.

In the Belt and Road initiative, China does not only promote the hard power in the economic development of China and the countries along the route but also pays more attention to the construction of its soft power, especially using language as a tool and cross-cultural communication as the main method. It not only actively promotes Chinese learning in other countries but also pays attention to actively learning the local languages of the countries along the route. Through the Chinese people who master the local language, Chinese culture, values, and foreign policies will be promoted to another country. At the same time, the excellent culture, values, and policy concepts of the countries along the route of the Belt and Road have also been transformed in China. It’s a two-way culture exchange, which helps improve the soft power of China and the countries along the way. Under the impetus of soft power, the people-to-people bond will be realized, and a community of destiny in the true sense will be built. Hu (2020) argued that in the “Belt and Road,” the flow of culture (symbols) is completely multi-directional. There are not only Chinese cultures flowing to countries along the route, but also cultures of other countries flowing to China. China has never used the “Belt and Road” to carry out so-called “cultural expansion.” Conversely, the multi-



directional flow of culture is more conducive to the people-to-people bond of the Belt and Road initiative. Among them, the flow of cultures from various countries to China is also inseparable from the learning and use of other countries' languages by Chinese people.

To truly build the soft power through language communication, the relevant policies of the Belt and Road also support learning other countries' languages in China. However, in past research, when studying the field of soft power, there was more focus on Chinese teaching to other countries' people, instead of studying other countries' local languages for Chinese. Based on soft power theory and research gap, this research will study the reason why China implements Thai language teaching as soft power under the Belt and Road Initiative. Meanwhile, this study will analyze how China implements Thai language teaching as soft power under the Belt and Road Initiative.

#### 4. Results

##### *4.1 the reason why China implements the Thai language teaching policy as soft power under Belt and Road Initiative*

Due to geographical advantages and the support of strategic policies in Yunnan and Guangxi provinces, Thai language teaching has become an important way to spread Chinese soft power in Thailand. Yunnan and Guangxi provinces have the land bordering ASEAN. Thailand is the central country in the ASEAN region. Geographical advantages make China and Thailand very close in all aspects. Language exchange has become a very important part of Belt and Road foreign policies. Promoting more Yunnan and Guangxi Chinese to learn the Thai language has become an important means to enhance the country's soft power in the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Belt and Road strategy has set a positioning for relevant provinces in China. Specifically, Yunnan and Guangxi provinces, which are bordering Southeast Asian territories, are used as popular places for Thai language teaching in China. In terms of geographical conditions, Yunnan borders Myanmar and Laos, Guangxi borders Vietnam. Thailand is at the center of Southeast Asia, benefiting from the advantages of geographic relations, the Chinese who are good at the Thai language can get more opportunities to work in multinational companies. At the same time, according to the "Visions and Actions to Promote the Joint Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," Yunnan is positioned as a radiating center facing South and Southeast Asia, and Guangxi is positioned as in the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Silk Road economy are important gateways for the connection of opportunities.

In August 2008, the Provincial Party Committee and Government of Yunnan issued the "The decision of reforming and developing higher education of Yunnan province" (Yunfa, 2008) emphasizing that the provincial key colleges and universities are comprehensive Establish public basic courses and special courses related to international and regional cooperation such as international politics, economy, culture, and regional economic cooperation, neighboring country studies; other colleges and universities should combine their actual conditions and add language and cultural background courses related to Southeast Asia and South Asia. Provinces should Strengthen the teaching and research of the third languages, including the Thai language, and accelerate the training of the third language talents. Facing Southeast Asia and South Asia, accelerate the training of a large number of solid third languages and relatively extensive scientific and cultural knowledge that meet the needs of the construction of bridgeheads in the province. Professional, applied, and composite high-quality and innovative third language talents enable them to play a better role in foreign affairs, economics and trade, international cultural exchanges, foreign-related business management, press and publishing, education, scientific research, tourism, and international issues research (Department of Education of Yunnan Province in the People's Republic of China et al., 2012). The policy emphasizes the role of key provincial institutions and other institutions in cultivating third language talents. Meanwhile, it can be understood that the development goal of the third language talents is to develop a group of professional, applied, compound, and innovative high-quality third language talents. The talents should be able to play a role in the corporation of foreign affairs, economics and trade, international cultural exchanges, foreign-related business management, press and publishing, education, scientific research, tourism, and international issues research. In the context of the "One Belt,



One Road” strategy, Yunnan, as a radiating center for South and Southeast Asia, has received policy support for constructing the third language talents, especially the early policy of popularizing Thai languages by local universities.

On 20 September 2010, the Education Department of the People's Government of Guangxi issued the “The action plan for the education serving of Guangxi Development (2010-2012),” which mentioned the support ways for the Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Cooperation project. The specific contents are the following: Vigorously strengthen the modern service industry Talent training, strengthen the professional construction of modern information, logistics, finance, accounting, consulting, law, exhibition, tourism, and cultural media, expand its integration of resources with foreign languages, especially with the language majors of 10 ASEAN countries. implementing the credit system and Module teaching, implementing a compound talent training model of international cooperation, such as China-ASEAN student exchanges and mutual recognition of credits. Training quality talents with professional subject knowledge and an applicable foreign language to meet workforce needs, to promote the Pan-Beibu Gulf economy. Providing a large number of high-quality compound professionals for international industry workforce needs in the field of port, transportation, logistics, urban construction, tourism, investment, and cultural structure in the Beibu Gulf region (People's Government of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in the People's Republic of China, 2010). It is pointed out that Guangxi focuses on cultivating international talents who should be connected with the ASEAN countries' industry workforce markets. The industry market needs people who are good at one the subjects of logistics, finance, accounting, consulting, law, exhibition, tourism, or cultural media. Meanwhile, they also get the knowledge of a foreign language, especially the Thai language.

As has been mentioned above, due to the need for geographical communication, Thai language teaching in China has become a vital way for China to increase its soft power in Thailand. Yunnan and Guangxi provinces get the policy support from Belt and Road initiative to allow their colleges and universities to emphasize their Thai language teaching. This view is referred with Yang and Chen (2015) pointed out that soft power also derives from economic power and policy support. With increasing industrial cooperation between China and Thailand in the Belt and Road Initiative, demand for Chinese Thai language talents has been promoted in the market. Economic and policy factors based on geographical advantage make Yunnan and Guangxi provinces choose to popularize Thai languages to strengthen soft power in this region.

#### *4.2 How China implements Thai language teaching as soft power under Belt and Road Initiative*

China strengthens soft power by popularizing Thai language teaching. Before the implementation of the “Belt and Road” strategy, some colleges and universities in China had already opened the Thai language as one of the majors they were offering, but the number was relatively small, they only focused on training talents in diplomacy, journalism, and economics and trade. In the background of the “One Belt, One Road” strategy, a large number of universities and colleges in Yunnan and Guangxi have completed the establishment of Thai language majors or Thai language as a second major. Thai language teaching in Guangxi and Yunnan can cultivate Chinese people who not only can work in Thailand or China but also can share Chinese stories and culture with Thai people in the Thai language. This is a new direction to promote China's soft power in Thailand.

In 1946, Peking University established the Thai language major (Peking University, 2010) Beijing Foreign Studies University opened the Thai language major in 1965, and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies opened the Thai language major in 1970. At the same time, the universities that offer Thai language majors include Guangxi University for Nationalities, Luoyang People's Liberation Army Institute of Foreign Languages, and Nanjing Jiefangjun Institute of International Relations. Thai language majors in this period mainly focused on training military and diplomatic talents, scientific researchers, and university teachers. Under the background of China's accession to the WTO in 2001, a large number of the third language talents are needed for economic and trade cooperation. In 2002, Shanghai International Studies University opened a Thai language major, and in 2008 Xi'an International Studies University opened the



Thai language major to mainly cultivate diplomatic, journalistic, and economic and trade Thai-speaking talents.

In the context of the implementation of the Belt and Road initiative, Guangxi and Yunnan, which are China's bridgeheads and radiation areas facing Southeast Asia, have formulated policies to cultivate the third language in Southeast Asia to solve the problem of the shortage of language talents in the countries along with the "Belt and Road" construction. Through the gradual opening of the third language courses in colleges and vocational colleges, especially Thai language majors, to realize the cultivation of talents in shortage of languages. Due to the policy support mentioned above, Yunnan and Guangxi opened Southeast Asian language majors in colleges and universities, especially starting with Thai majors at the undergraduate level, Yunnan University, which opened Thai majors in 2013, and Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, which opened Thai majors in level in 2011. Meanwhile, double majors and double degrees, including Thai, can be opened for undergraduate students. Colleges and universities with foreign language majors can take the lead in opening dual majors/multilingual majors to cultivate high-quality third language talents. At the same time, training modes such as 2+2 or 3+1 can be used. For non-English majors, students can choose the third language courses (Vietnamese, Laos, Burmese, Cambodian, Thai, etc.) instead of college English courses. The hours and credits are the same as college English courses (Department of Education of Yunnan Province in People's Republic of China et al, 2012). As vocational education reform has made new requirements for secondary vocational majors, it is necessary to train vocational talents who can serve the "Belt and Road" strategy. The Ministry of Education issued a catalog of vocational colleges in 2019 and added 46 majors. One of them is Business Thai Major according to document No. 122600 in the Business and Economics category (Ministry of Education of China, 2020). Since then, colleges and universities in Guangxi and Yunnan have been actively opening Thai language majors from undergraduate to vocational college levels, to cultivate Thai talents to strengthen the soft power of southern China in Southeast Asia.

At present, there are 19 vocational colleges and universities offering Thai language majors in Yunnan. Yunnan University for Nationalities provides a master's degree program in Thai, which aims to cultivate Thai language teachers in universities and research talents in regional scientific research institutions. It is also the only Thai major in Yunnan Province with a master's degree. Twelve universities establish the Thai language as a major and nine vocational colleges establish apply the Thai language as a major. Some universities combine courses in Thai with professional courses to develop students' language and professional knowledge. There are 20 vocational colleges and universities that offer Thai language majors in Guang xi. the colleges and universities currently provide Thai majors as well as higher education institutions and vocational colleges. Guangxi Nationalities University and Guangxi University offer Thai majors with master's and bachelor's degrees. seven undergraduate universities offer Thai language majors, and six vocational colleges offer Thai language majors (Belt and Road statics, 2015). In a word, the popularization of Thai language majors in Yunnan and Guangxi provinces has made the Thai language became an important tool for China to build soft power. China allows not only Chinese people to go abroad to communicate and communicate with Thai people in the Thai language but also allows Chinese who can speak the Thai language to become representatives of China, sharing Chinese stories and culture with Thai people.

From the above mentioned, it turns out that China strengthens its soft power by popularizing Thai language teaching in Yunnan and Guangxi. In summary, the method to popularize Thai language teaching is setting Thai major and Thai major as a second major in university and vocational universities. Thai teaching courses mainly include Basic Thai, Thai Conversation, Thai Voice, Thai Reading, Thai Culture and Society, Thai-Chinese Translation, Thai Art and Business Thai, and so on. Before students graduate from university, they will get the opportunity to take an internship in Thailand. It's a credit course that every student must take. When the Chinese intern or work in Thailand, they share Chinese stories with Thai people in the Thai language to attract more Thai people to understand Chinese society and culture. In addition, Chinese students also can gain more understanding of Thai society and culture by listening to Thai stories spoken by Thai people in the Thai language, which allows mutual cultural understanding and trust to



be realized. Finally, from the people-to-people level achieve the goal of multi-directional culture flow between each other to strengthen Chinese soft power in this region.

## 5. Discussion

Researchers used qualitative research, conducted by document analysis. From reviewing the four official documents above, this paper finds out that various industries based on China-Thai geographical location create a lot of needs for labor who is language talent, in addition to the Belt and Road strategy, it makes Yunnan and Guangxi provinces become the region that trains Thai language talent. Yunnan and Guangxi governments issued specific Thai language teaching policies. China adjusted its foreign policy to develop its soft power in this region. This is consistent with the definition of soft power. Soft power refers to achieving goals using attraction rather than coercion or inducement. This attraction stems from a country's culture, political philosophy, and foreign policy (Nye & Ma, 2013). In Belt and Road context, China has adjusted its foreign policy, especially its policy of learning the third language in Yunnan and Guangxi, to cultivate the Chinese who can express themselves in foreign languages and share Chinese stories with foreign people. It's an indirect soft power way compared with traditional teaching Chinese to foreigners.

On the other hand, China strengthens its soft power by popularizing Thai language teaching in Guangxi and Yunnan provinces. The specific measure sets Thai and Thai majors as second majors in university and vocational universities. Thai teaching courses mainly include Basic Thai, Thai Conversation, Thai Voice, Thai Reading, Thai Culture and Society, Thai-Chinese Translation, Thai Art and Business Thai, and so on. There are internship courses in senior year. When Chinese intern or work in Thailand, they share Chinese stories with Thai people to attract more Thai people to understand Chinese society and culture; in addition, Chinese students also can gain more understanding of Thai society and culture through the Thai language, which allows mutual cultural understanding and trust be realized. This corresponds to Hu's (2020) argument that in the "Belt and Road," the flow of culture (symbols) is completely multi-directional. Not only are Chinese cultures flowing into countries along the route of the Belt and Road, but also cultures from other countries are flowing into China. However, previous Chinese soft power research mainly focused on Chinese language teaching to foreigners. A few research studies focus on the indirect soft power development way, such as Chinese people studying a third language. Thus, this paper focuses on the new way of strengthening soft power.

## 6. Conclusion

Due to the geographical proximity between China and Thailand, Yunnan and Guangxi have been positioned by Belt and Road Initiative as the radiating center for Southeast Asia, playing an important role in connecting China and route countries on Belt and Road. Cultural communication based on similar geographical conditions has become an important link in constructing soft power in the region. China does not only use Chinese as a communication tool but also attaches great importance to the learning of foreign languages in the countries along the route of the Belt and Road, especially the Thai Language. Thus, China has adopted the policy of popularizing Thai language teaching in Yunnan and Guangxi provinces, which aimed to share Chinese stories and culture through Chinese who can speak Thai to develop Chinese soft power.

Moreover, as the limitation of the document analysis method, it's not efficient to collect the data about Thai language teaching from teachers and student samples, which can provide more details about Thai language teaching and soft power in China. Future research should consider using in-depth interviews to collect more sources.

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