

Dunhuang's Importance in China's Diplomacy

-- An Identity That Stands with Time

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Abstract: Dunhuang is important in China's political strategy. It has been holding an essential place since the development of the Silk Road where it serves as a geographical hinge for cultural exchange and communication. In contemporary politics, Dunhuang remains important and has positively promoted China's image with the help of modern technology. This paper uses constructivism to approach Dunhuang's role in China's diplomacy exploring Dunhuang's value throughout time. It suggests that as the representation of diplomatic cultural values, Dunhuang has become part of China's identity helping China to consolidate and express China's diplomatic attitude.

Keywords: Dunhuang, Silk Road, China's diplomacy, Cultural diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative, identity theory.

1. Introduction

China as a rising power in the international political community has drawn a lot of attention both domestic and international. It is fundamentally different from the western countries thus making different political actors intrigued about it. When China introduced Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the world, questions were asked but more curiosity arises. As BRI is a diplomatic project that developed from the ancient Silk Road, many started to explore the mysterious Dunhuang which is a milestone famous for its multicultural attractions. Most importantly, despite the fact the original Silk road is different from when it started, Dunhuang remains to be a central place in China's cultural promotion. Therefore, this paper wishes to explore the reasons for Dunhuang's importance to China's diplomacy. It would start by explaining the concepts and ideologies that would be used to explore Dunhuang. This paper takes identity theory in constructivism aiming to argue that Dunhuang is important to China's diplomacy not only because it is a crucial landmark but also because it represents key values that comprise China's identity. Dunhuang also helps to consolidate China's international image.

2. Theories and Ideologies

2.1. Symbolism

Symbolism is an important element for consolidating national identity. National identity is important for making diplomatic policy decisions. It provides stable explanations for a state's behaviour as they "are the basis of interests" [1]. States act for their interests and thus state would act according to its identity. Identities argued by Mikail and Aytakin, are a representation of collective "socially shared beliefs" [2]. Chinese identity is hence the beliefs that are shared by the Chinese public and China as a state would also act from these beliefs. However, national identity can be incomprehensible and conceptual for the public to recognise. Symbolism is an "objectification of the state" and "provides an instrument for making the state sensible and for experiencing states, inter-state relations and international politics." [3]. Symbols can

bring an abstract state identity to concrete understandings. These understandings thus can be represented through a certain object or anything that can be read as a symbol.

2.2. Symbolism in Diplomacy

Symbolism is important to diplomacy. In Faizullaev's words, diplomacy relies on symbolism for two reasons "the nature of the state" and "the essence of diplomatic representation" [3]. When a state engages in international diplomacy, it acts as a sole actor that first needs to have a firm identity which is to say that the actor needs to have clear and stable principles and values for its actions. The second reason is to say, for the other actors in the international community who are not familiar with a state's national value, also need concrete symbols to help them to anchor their comprehension of that state's identity. This suggests that symbols can serve two purposes, one is to consolidate a state's identity that is formed by the domestic and the other is to express that identity to the international community.

2.3. Cultural Symbolism and Diplomacy

As state identity drives state actions and decision makings that includes making diplomatic policies, a cultural symbol would be important for a state's diplomacy. For example, cultural diplomacy as one of the diplomacy strategies would be a good example to illustrate this. Despite the debate on the relationship between 'cultural diplomacy' 'soft power' and 'public diplomacy' and the definition of contemporary cultural diplomacy has not reached a commonly recognised agreement, cultural diplomacy includes the practice of exchange of cultural values as a way to express state identity [4]. In this case, a stable cultural symbol can help a state to deliver its national identity and be a valuable asset in communicating cultural values. Moreover, the culture associated with symbolism would be the "high-context cultures" where the historical and traditional elements are essential [3]. This ensures that cultural symbols would be great for consolidating the national identity as a country's tradition and history would be known to its public. Therefore, a cultural symbol rooted in history and traditions that is recognised by a state's public would be an important element for a state's identity and its identity expression internationally.

Therefore, as discussed above, if to say that Dunhuang is important in China's diplomacy it has to fulfil several criteria. First, Dunhuang needs to have cultural and historical meanings in order to be considered as China's cultural symbol. It also has to be a stable part of China's identity and it needs to compose and represent certain values recognised by China to deliver China's image internationally.

3. The Traditional Understanding of Dunhuang

3.1. Dunhuang – A Cultural Symbol of China

Dunhuang is more than a geographical location in some remote desert in China. For China, Dunhuang is valuable in many aspects including historical and traditional serving as a cultural symbol. The silk road has existed for over two thousand years exchanging culture, and language and making the trade with other countries. The long history made Dunhuang an element that was constantly present and stable for China. It made it possible for China to communicate with other civilisations on “various aspects including material, principle, spirit and psychology” [5]. For example, Xuanzang went through Dunhuang for his legendary journey toward India [6]. This is communication between China and India where Dunhuang serve as part of the communication. However, just being part of the silk road does not grant Dunhuang such a special place in Chinese culture. It is the art and previous document collections contained within it that made Dunhuang unique not only in China but also in the international community. Using Xunzang's case as an example, the international communications between China and India left many historical religious documents including Buddhism's work found in Dunhuang [7]. There're also collections of documents written in various languages and artwork that are influenced by both China and Western culture in Dunhuang [8]. Mogao Grottoes, in particular, “provided valuable information for studying ancient Chinese politics, economy, cultural, religion, ethnic relationships and international trade” [7]. Dunhuang thus is a place that carried a lot of historical and cultural values for Chinese people. As carries a nation's common history and culture, Dunhuang can be considered a cultural symbol of China.

3.2. Dunhuang and the Silk Road Spirit

Dunhuang as a key part of the silk road is “the city that can most represent Silk Road's spirit and core cultural values”[8]. The idea of Silk Road and the Silk Road studies can be complicated to explore, and the purpose of the paper would only be to discuss the silk road from China's point of view. The values represented by Dunhuang can be summarised in four aspects, “international, open, inclusive and friendly” [8]. These four values are embedded in the Silk Road. And even the name “silk road” was originally developed by a German scholar as China did not have an exact terminology for this long trade route it has been using for centuries-long [9]. Dunhuang is the place for international communication and exchange that is based on mutual equality and respect. In other words, Dunhuang is “fluid, expanding, connecting and breathing” [10]. It is fluid in the sense that the cultural exchange has been constant like the water running in the river. As mentioned above, Dunhuang has been an important place for cultural and business exchange in the last 2000 years and still now. It is also expanding and connecting in the sense that China started to build relationships with other countries

connecting slow from nearby to afar through the silk road. Dunhuang is breathing as it is also the most important hinge for the silk road [8]. Therefore, Dunhuang would be a place that represents the international welcoming attitude of China serving as a national symbol.

3.3. Dunhuang as China's identity

To be part of China's identity, Dunhuang and the silk road also need to be part of public awareness and beliefs. China, unfortunately, was quite slow when exploring the Silk Road Studies. As mentioned above, the naming of this trade route was not made by a Chinese scholar. It was only until 1972 that the terminology of “silk road” was published and explained by Chinese journal articles [9]. It was only then the silk road and Dunhuang raised public attention and started to spread in the Chinese society. This was an important step for constructing China's identity as it was then that China started to create and build its own research of Dunhuang Studies and Silk Road Studies. One of the important developments in diplomatic practice is the development of evolutionary information and communication technologies (ICTs) which also helped to contribute to people's awareness of Dunhuang. Documentations, stories, films and information can be carried and delivered in various media. In particular, TV programmes on this topic were booming. For instance, iQiyi made a reality show on Dunhuang helping the young generation to understand and be interested in traditional culture [7]. Increasing the awareness of the Silk Road and Dunhuang not only helps the public to explore the history and tradition interwoven in Chinese culture but also helps to consolidate China's national identity. People would be confident in their culture and history when they started to explore and comprehend it whereas Dunhuang would be the representation of such confidence [7]. The underlying assumption is that only a culture that is strong and deep enough can communicate and exchange with others. Otherwise, it would be challenged and lost through history. Therefore, Dunhuang is a cultural symbol that can represent China's values and consolidate the state identity which China needs in diplomatic practices.

However, the exact traditional practical Silk Road no longer exists in the 21st century. China has also experienced several political attitudes change over the past hundred years. As Dunhuang has such a long historical root, it would be interesting to see whether its role in contemporary China's diplomacy has changed or not especially. If Dunhuang remain to serve as a symbol for China, it would have adapted to the state's contemporary interests.

4. The Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative

4.1. Dunhuang and the new Silk Road

When discussing the diplomatic importance of the silk road, without doubt, one needs to talk about the contemporary silk road, the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) started in 2013. It is important to notice that while this is a fundamentally different route from the traditional silk road, BRI was built on a similar ideology. These two routes both aim to communicate, exchange and expand on international relations. Dunhuang, in this case, also can serve in a similar way. It is a public good that benefits society [5]. It is also argued that Dunhuang has relative the same topic, “international, open, inclusive and friendly” that fits the programme of BRI and it can act as a

memory stimulator for neighbouring countries who were participated or aware of the Silk Road [8]. It is an effective way of promoting China's identity. The BRI "activates silk road historical resources to realistic diplomatic resources" [5]. This is not to say that the BRI would be rebuilding on the Silk Road making new roads on the old routes. Rather, it is the values and silk spirits that are represented by Dunhuang that get reused and facilitated in the BRI programme. These values, as discussed above, include an open and welcoming attitude toward international cultural exchange and international trade. It is the same silk road values that Xi Jinping, president of China, stated in one of his speeches. He pointed out that the silk road values are "peaceful cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual winning" [11]. From these repeating cultural and political values, it is not hard to discover that Dunhuang is no longer a geographical place but completely a cultural symbol for China both historically and present.

4.2. Dunhuang and the International Community

Dunhuang is also important as it is part of China's image in contemporary diplomatic strategy helping the international community to understand China's identity in diplomatic activities. It is not ground-breaking to relate Dunhuang with China's image. Firstly, image is part of three types of symbolism in diplomacy concluded by Faizullaev [3]. A state's image is best delivered in the contemporary political environment due to the practice of ICTs. As "reality is always interpreted by policy-makers", therefore, a state policy could be a direct reflection of state image or what the state wants to be perceived as [12]. Dunhuang did not disappear in the BRI but rather remain to be an important symbol as discussed above thus making it an important part of China's identity. A state image is constructed by its behaviours and its behaviours are driven by its identities which are composed of collectively shared values. Therefore, if Dunhuang is a contemporary representation of China's collective cultural values it would be an important symbol that helps to understand China's diplomatic activities reflecting the motivators behind such choices and actions. It is where "diplomacy tends to operate with symbolically significant images that are related to the state and its policies" [3]. Many museums and exhibitions are created and published around Dunhuang and the Silk Road spirit it represents especially for the BRI [13]. These international cultural exchanges taking place at Dunhuang can help China to introduce its diplomatic values and principles to the world. In various ways, Dunhuang as a Chinese cultural symbol helps to consolidate and promote China's image in diplomatic activities.

5. Conclusion

Dunhuang holds an important place not only in the sense of its geographical location but also in its diplomatic values. Throughout history, it collected and explored many cultures, countries and languages. And even in the contemporary political world, the values and image it presented remain to be a strong positive asset for China's identity. This paper used constructivism and identity theory to illustrate the reasons behind Dunhuang's importance in China's diplomacy. It unpacked the values recognised by China represented through Dunhuang. The reason for Dunhuang's importance is not merely because Dunhuang serves as a cultural hinge for the

international community. It serves as a symbol of China's values embedded in the country's long traditions and history. This paper then explored Dunhuang's role specifically in contemporary diplomacy where the idea of the Silk Road is expanded and developed into the values and spirits that lay the foundation of the Belt and Road Initiative. In conclusion, the paper shows that Dunhuang as a cultural symbol for China helps the state to consolidate its identity both domestically and internationally, allowing the world to understand China's diplomatic activities. For future study, it would be interesting to explore Dunhuang's relationship with globalisation as Dunhuang is a representation of the traditional cultural value that may undertake collision with contemporary trends.

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