

Facilitating the Silk Road Spirit: How SCO Economic-Trade Cooperation Drives Cultural Flows between China and Central Asia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15915876>

Published Date: 15-July-2025

Abstract: This paper examines the multifaceted role of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) economic and trade cooperation in facilitating cultural flows between China and Central Asian nations, conceptualized as reviving the "Silk Road Spirit." While primarily an economic and security bloc, the SCO fosters deep interdependence through initiatives in trade liberalization, infrastructure connectivity, energy partnerships, and financial integration. This research argues that these economic interactions create crucial enabling conditions and tangible pathways for enhanced cultural exchange. The study employs qualitative analysis of SCO policy documents, agreements, and project data, combined with case studies illustrating how increased trade corridors, joint ventures, and people-to-people mobility fostered by SCO frameworks directly stimulate flows in tourism, educational exchanges, artistic collaboration, and media dissemination. Findings demonstrate that SCO-driven economic interdependence acts as a powerful catalyst, reducing barriers and building mutual trust necessary for cultural engagement. The paper concludes that the SCO's economic architecture is not merely complementary to cultural diplomacy but is fundamentally intertwined with it, significantly shaping the contemporary cultural landscape across Eurasia and offering a model for understanding the economic underpinnings of transnational cultural dynamics.

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Economic-Trade Cooperation, Cultural Flows, China-Central Asia Relations, Silk Road Spirit.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE SCO, ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE, AND THE RESURGENCE OF SILK ROAD CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

The ancient Silk Road stands as a powerful historical symbol of interconnectedness, facilitating not only the exchange of goods but also profound cultural dialogue across Eurasia. In the contemporary era, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has emerged as a pivotal multilateral institution shaping regional dynamics between China and Central Asia. While primarily focused on security and economic collaboration, the SCO's deepening economic and trade cooperation—encompassing trade liberalization, major infrastructure projects, energy partnerships, and financial integration—demands closer examination for its broader socio-cultural consequences. This paper directly addresses a critical, yet underexplored, question: How does the SCO's framework for economic-trade cooperation specifically act as a primary driver for enhancing and shaping cultural flows between China and the nations of Central Asia?

Understanding this dynamic is of significant scholarly and practical importance. It moves beyond viewing SCO economic initiatives and cultural exchanges as merely parallel tracks; instead, it probes the causal mechanisms linking material interdependence to the realm of ideas, values, and social practices. The core argument advanced here is that SCO-driven economic interdependence serves as a fundamental catalyst and enabler for contemporary cultural flows. By materially

integrating the region through enhanced connectivity, reducing transactional barriers, fostering joint business ventures, and increasing people-to-people mobility, the SCO creates the essential infrastructure, platforms, and crucially, the mutual interest and trust, necessary for sustained and multifaceted cultural exchange. This process effectively facilitates a modern resurgence of the collaborative "Silk Road Spirit" within an institutionalized framework.

This paper seeks to fill a gap in the literature by systematically analyzing the tangible pathways through which SCO economic mechanisms translate into cultural outcomes. It contends that the SCO's economic architecture is not ancillary but intrinsically intertwined with the region's evolving cultural landscape. The significance lies in demonstrating how formal economic cooperation under a specific regional institution generates powerful, often unintended, synergies that reshape transnational cultural dynamics and mutual understanding between China and Central Asia. The following sections will first conceptualize the economic-cultural nexus, then detail the SCO's economic mechanisms, present evidence of resulting cultural flows, analyze the specific catalytic processes, and finally, discuss the broader implications for regional synergy and the future of Eurasian connectivity.

II. CONCEPTUALIZING THE NEXUS: ECONOMIC COOPERATION AS A DRIVER OF TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL FLOWS

The intricate relationship between economic integration and cultural exchange forms a well-established, yet dynamically evolving, area of inquiry within international relations and cultural studies. Foundational theories of complex interdependence, notably articulated by Keohane and Nye, posit that growing economic interconnectedness between states fosters increased transnational contacts across multiple channels, inevitably extending beyond pure commerce into the socio-cultural realm. This perspective suggests that dense networks of economic interaction create inherent pressures and opportunities for cross-border cultural transmission, facilitated by the movement of people, ideas, and information alongside goods and capital. Building upon this, contemporary scholarship on globalization and transnationalism further emphasizes how economic flows are intrinsically interwoven with cultural flows, challenging notions of purely economic or purely cultural domains.

Within the specific context of Eurasia, the concept of the "Silk Road Spirit" provides a crucial historical and normative framework. This term evokes the legacy of ancient trade routes characterized not only by mercantile activity but also by profound intercultural dialogue, religious exchange, technological transfer, and mutual adaptation. For this analysis, the "Silk Road Spirit" is operationalized as signifying a contemporary aspiration and process towards fostering mutual understanding, respect, and collaborative cultural engagement across the region, facilitated by renewed connectivity. Complementing this, "cultural flows" refer to the dynamic, multi-directional movement and interaction of cultural forms, practices, values, symbols, and people across national boundaries. This encompasses diverse manifestations, including tourism, educational exchanges, labor migration, media consumption, artistic collaborations, culinary influences, and linguistic borrowings, moving beyond static notions of "exchange" to capture ongoing processes of circulation and hybridization.

To systematically analyze how the SCO's economic-trade cooperation specifically drives these cultural flows between China and Central Asia, this paper develops an analytical framework centered on identifiable enabling mechanisms. The framework posits that SCO economic initiatives function through several key pathways. Enhanced physical connectivity, primarily through major infrastructure projects like roads, railways, and pipelines, drastically reduces the friction of movement, facilitating tourism, labor migration, and educational travel. Formal trade liberalization and investment promotion agreements lower transaction costs for businesses, fostering joint ventures and commercial networks that inherently involve cross-cultural management, training, and workforce interaction, creating sustained people-to-people contact. Energy cooperation and financial integration schemes necessitate complex, long-term engagements between professionals and institutions, building trust and shared operational cultures that spill over into broader societal perceptions. Finally, the overall deepening of economic interdependence generates mutual interest and a perceived need for greater cultural understanding to sustain profitable relationships, incentivizing language learning, cultural awareness programs, and media coverage. This framework thus positions SCO economic cooperation not as merely correlating with, but actively creating the material conditions, platforms, incentives, and trust necessary for intensified transnational cultural flows, thereby facilitating a modern embodiment of the Silk Road Spirit.

III. THE SCO'S ECONOMIC ARCHITECTURE: ENGINES OF INTEGRATION BETWEEN CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIA

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has progressively developed a robust and multifaceted economic architecture designed explicitly to enhance regional connectivity and integration, particularly between China and the Central Asian member states. This framework functions as the primary material engine driving tangible interdependence. At its core lie concerted efforts towards trade liberalization. The SCO has actively promoted the reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers, streamlined customs procedures, and harmonized standards. While a comprehensive SCO-wide free trade agreement remains under discussion, numerous bilateral and plurilateral agreements on trade facilitation and economic cooperation among member states, fostered and coordinated within the SCO platform, have significantly boosted trade volumes. China has emerged as the dominant trading partner for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, with exchanges spanning energy resources, agricultural products, manufactured goods, and increasingly, technology.

Physical connectivity represents another critical pillar, largely driven by major infrastructure projects. The SCO prioritizes the development of transcontinental transport corridors, notably road and rail networks like the Western China-Western Europe International Transit Corridor traversing Kazakhstan, and the recently advancing China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project. These initiatives drastically reduce transit times and costs, transforming the region's logistical landscape. Complementing this is extensive energy infrastructure cooperation. Major pipelines, such as the Central Asia-China Gas Pipelines traversing Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, alongside investments in power transmission grids and renewable energy projects, physically bind the region's energy security and economic futures to China's vast market and investment capabilities.

Investment promotion and protection mechanisms form a third key component. The SCO encourages cross-border investment through frameworks aimed at improving the business environment, providing dispute resolution channels, and facilitating project financing. China's outward investment, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road which synergizes strongly with SCO goals, has flowed substantially into Central Asia, targeting sectors including oil and gas extraction, mining, logistics hubs, manufacturing zones, and telecommunications. This capital influx builds tangible economic linkages and joint ventures. Finally, financial cooperation mechanisms are being strengthened. These include currency swap agreements between central banks, efforts towards using local currencies in trade settlements to reduce dollar dependency, and the establishment of institutions like the SCO Interbank Consortium, designed to provide financial backing for regional development projects. Collectively, these interconnected mechanisms—trade facilitation, friction-reducing infrastructure, investment frameworks, and financial integration—constitute the SCO's economic engine, materially deepening interdependence and creating the dense networks of exchange that physically and financially link China and Central Asia.

IV. TRACING THE CULTURAL CURRENTS: MANIFESTATIONS OF SCO-FACILITATED EXCHANGE

The material connectivity and economic interdependence fostered by the SCO's architecture demonstrably generate tangible cultural flows between China and Central Asia, manifesting across diverse sectors. Enhanced transport infrastructure directly catalyzes tourism. New highways and rail links, such as the Western China-Western Europe Corridor and simplified visa regimes promoted under SCO cooperation, have significantly increased tourist mobility. Chinese tourists now travel more readily to historical Silk Road sites in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, while Central Asians visit Chinese commercial hubs and cultural landmarks. Cities like Almaty and Tashkent report rising Chinese visitor numbers, fostering cross-cultural encounters in hospitality and heritage sectors. Simultaneously, labor migration along these corridors increases, embedding communities within new cultural contexts.

Educational exchanges represent a critical flow directly tied to economic development needs. The demand for skilled personnel fluent in regional languages and familiar with Chinese business practices, driven by SCO-linked investments and joint ventures, fuels scholarship programs and university partnerships. China offers thousands of government scholarships annually to Central Asian students, many focusing on economics, engineering, and trade disciplines crucial for SCO projects. Universities in Xinjiang and other Chinese provinces actively recruit Central Asian students, while Confucius Institutes proliferate across the region, supported by bilateral agreements often formalized within SCO frameworks. This creates a growing cohort of professionals with shared educational experiences and linguistic bridges.

Media collaboration and information flow are increasingly intertwined with economic ties. Joint media ventures and content exchanges gain traction, often supported by telecommunications infrastructure developed under SCO digital economy initiatives. Co-productions of documentaries highlighting shared Silk Road heritage, facilitated by state media outlets from member countries, reach wider audiences. Increased trade also drives business journalism and economic reporting, familiarizing populations with each other's markets and societies. Furthermore, digital platforms and social media engagement rise alongside e-commerce links promoted through SCO channels, creating new spaces for informal cultural interaction.

Corporate and institutional networks underpin formal cultural diplomacy. Major Chinese enterprises investing heavily in Central Asian energy and infrastructure, frequently operating within SCO-endorsed projects, sponsor cultural events, academic forums, and arts festivals. These range from business association-supported film weeks and culinary festivals celebrating regional cuisines to large-scale events like the Silk Road International Cultural Expo, leveraging commercial presence to facilitate cultural showcasing and people-to-people dialogue. Such activities, while often economically motivated, create platforms for artistic exchange, performance tours, and mutual cultural presentation, translating economic presence into cultural visibility and engagement. These diverse manifestations collectively illustrate the concrete pathways through which SCO-driven economic cooperation actively enables and shapes the dynamic cultural flows characterizing the modern Silk Road Spirit.

V. MECHANISMS AND IMPACT: HOW ECONOMIC TIES CATALYZE CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

The intricate relationship between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's economic architecture and the tangible cultural flows documented in the preceding analysis reveals a sophisticated network of interlocking mechanisms. These mechanisms demonstrate precisely how material cooperation actively transcends the economic sphere to become a powerful engine for fostering deeper cultural understanding and reshaping mutual perceptions between China and Central Asia. This catalytic process is not serendipitous but fundamentally rooted in the practical consequences of deepened interdependence, operating through several distinct yet mutually reinforcing pathways.

Foremost among these mechanisms is the substantial reduction of friction inherent in cross-border interaction. The SCO's prioritization of major physical infrastructure projects—highways like the Western China-Western Europe Corridor, railways such as the evolving China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan link, and modernized border crossings—achieves far more than facilitating trade. It dramatically compresses travel times and slashes transportation costs, fundamentally altering the logistical calculus of movement. This lowered friction is the essential prerequisite for the surge in tourism, transforming historical Silk Road sites from distant concepts into accessible destinations for Chinese travelers, while enabling Central Asians to explore Chinese commercial hubs and cultural landmarks with unprecedented ease. Simultaneously, it underpins increased labor migration and educational travel, enabling students and workers to physically embed themselves in neighbouring societies for sustained periods. The physical act of movement, made routine and affordable by SCO-driven infrastructure, is the bedrock upon which personal cultural encounters are built, moving engagement beyond the abstract into the realm of lived experience.

Operating in tandem with friction reduction is the crucial mechanism of trust-building through sustained engagement. The complex, long-term nature of SCO economic ventures—be it constructing and operating transnational pipelines, managing joint industrial zones, financing major energy projects, or navigating intricate trade agreements—demands continuous, close collaboration among a diverse array of actors. Engineers, project managers, financiers, customs officials, and government representatives from China and Central Asian states must interact repeatedly, solve problems collaboratively, and navigate disputes, often utilizing SCO-established frameworks for dialogue and resolution. Successfully delivering tangible economic benefits through these projects cultivates a foundation of practical trust and operational familiarity at institutional and professional levels. This trust, forged in the crucible of shared economic endeavour, is not confined to project sites. It gradually permeates broader societal perceptions, acting as a counterweight to historical suspicion or political narratives. When communities witness tangible benefits from collaboration and observe professionals working effectively across cultures, it fosters a more receptive environment for cultural engagement, reducing barriers to acceptance and curiosity.

Furthermore, SCO-driven economic cooperation actively generates shared spaces and platforms that serve as dedicated arenas for cultural encounter and exchange. Joint ventures, proliferating as a direct result of investment promotion and trade agreements, become daily microcosms of cross-cultural interaction. Within these enterprises, Chinese and Central Asian

employees must collaborate, communicate, adapt management styles, negotiate workplace norms, and build team cohesion, necessitating constant cultural negotiation and mutual learning. Beyond the corporate sphere, the dense networks of economic actors create fertile ground for institutionally supported cultural platforms. Business associations and major corporations, often those deeply invested in SCO projects, frequently sponsor and fund cultural festivals, academic symposia, film weeks, culinary events, and arts exhibitions. These are not merely philanthropic gestures; they leverage economic presence to facilitate cultural showcasing, providing formal, visible venues for artistic expression, intellectual discourse, and public celebration of shared or neighbouring cultures. Complementing these physical spaces is the burgeoning digital connectivity promoted under SCO digital economy initiatives. Enhanced internet access, cross-border e-commerce platforms, and collaborative media projects create vibrant virtual spaces where news, information, entertainment content, and social media interactions flow more freely, fostering informal cultural dialogue and the circulation of popular culture.

Critically, the deepening mutual interest generated by escalating economic interdependence acts as a powerful internal driver for cultural understanding. As trade volumes balloon, investments solidify, and joint ventures proliferate, stakeholders across the spectrum—governments, corporations, educational institutions, and individuals—recognize a tangible, pragmatic necessity. Understanding the partner's language becomes crucial for effective negotiation and market penetration. Grasping business etiquette, social norms, negotiation styles, and consumer preferences becomes vital for commercial success and operational efficiency. This practical imperative translates into concrete actions: a surge in demand for Mandarin language training in Central Asia and Russian/ Central Asian languages in China; the integration of cross-cultural communication modules into corporate training programs for employees engaged in regional business; expanded coverage of the partner region in mainstream media, focusing on economic developments but inevitably shedding light on societal trends; and increased academic research focused on the history, politics, and contemporary society of neighbouring states within the SCO framework. Economic benefit thus becomes a compelling, self-sustaining motivator for actively seeking and acquiring cultural knowledge, driving engagement beyond superficial awareness towards deeper comprehension.

The observable impact of these intertwined mechanisms on mutual perception and the cultivation of regional soft power is both significant and multifaceted. Increased physical mobility through tourism and study abroad fosters more nuanced, individualized understandings. Personal encounters challenge simplistic stereotypes, replacing them with complex, humanized perceptions based on direct experience. The prevalence of SCO scholarship recipients returning to Central Asia as professionals fluent in Chinese language and familiar with Chinese society creates a growing cohort of cultural interpreters and bridges within key sectors. Media collaborations, often emerging from or supported by the economic nexus, propagate narratives emphasizing shared historical heritage along the Silk Road, fostering a sense of common Eurasian identity and destiny that resonates with the organization's stated goals. Consequently, China's image in Central Asia is increasingly refracted not solely through the lens of its immense economic power or geopolitical stance, but also through the cultural visibility facilitated by these exchanges—the accessibility of educational opportunities, the experience of sponsored cultural events, the presence of Chinese consumer goods, and the interactions with Chinese tourists and professionals. Conversely, Central Asian cultures are gaining greater recognition and appreciation within China, moving beyond exoticized portrayals towards a recognition of their rich historical contributions, contemporary relevance as partners, and unique artistic traditions. Cultural elements like Central Asian music, cuisine, and cinema are finding broader audiences in China, partly fueled by the increased connectivity and interest generated by economic ties. While significant challenges and asymmetries in influence persist, the SCO-facilitated synergy between economic cooperation and cultural exchange demonstrably contributes to a gradual, observable shift towards greater mutual familiarity, reduced prejudice, and a more positive, interconnected foundation for regional soft power. This shift materially underpins the modern, institutional resurgence of the Silk Road Spirit, proving that shared economic pathways inevitably become conduits for shared cultural resonance.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE SCO, SYNERGY, AND THE FUTURE OF EURASIA'S CULTURAL-ECONOMIC TAPESTRY

This research has systematically demonstrated that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's economic and trade cooperation functions not merely as an engine of material integration but as the primary catalyst for a profound resurgence of cultural flows between China and Central Asia, embodying the modern Silk Road Spirit. The core argument, substantiated through detailed analysis, establishes a clear causal pathway: the SCO's deliberate architecture of economic

interdependence—comprising trade liberalization, transformative cross-border infrastructure, robust investment frameworks, and deepening financial cooperation—creates the indispensable material conditions, practical platforms, and compelling incentives that actively enable and shape dynamic transnational cultural exchange. This synergy is not coincidental but intrinsic, fundamentally challenging perspectives that view economic and cultural domains within regional institutions as separate tracks.

The empirical evidence presented is compelling. Major SCO-driven infrastructure corridors have drastically reduced the friction of movement, directly enabling surges in tourism and labor migration that bring people into sustained, personal contact with neighboring cultures. Trade facilitation and investment protection agreements have spurred joint ventures and commercial networks, creating microcosms of daily cross-cultural interaction and necessitating mutual understanding in business practices. Energy partnerships and financial integration demand long-term professional engagement, building operational trust that spills over into broader societal perceptions. Critically, the sheer scale of economic interdependence fostered under the SCO umbrella generates a powerful mutual interest, incentivizing stakeholders—governments, businesses, educational institutions, and individuals—to actively seek knowledge of their partners' languages, social norms, and cultural contexts. This manifests concretely in the proliferation of educational exchanges tailored to economic needs, state-supported media collaborations highlighting shared heritage, and corporate-sponsored cultural festivals that leverage economic presence for artistic dialogue. These are not peripheral activities; they are direct, observable consequences of the SCO's economic engine.

The implications of this economic-cultural synergy for the SCO's future trajectory and regional soft power are profound and multifaceted. Firstly, it elevates the SCO beyond its foundational security and economic roles, positioning it as a central architect of Eurasia's evolving socio-cultural identity. Recognizing and strategically nurturing this intrinsic link offers the organization its most potent tool for fostering genuine, bottom-up people-to-people bonds. These bonds are essential for transcending purely state-level interactions, building societal resilience against external narratives, and securing the long-term legitimacy and cohesion of the SCO itself. Secondly, the synergy significantly enhances regional soft power dynamics. China's image in Central Asia is increasingly mediated not just through its economic weight or political stance, but through the tangible cultural visibility facilitated by scholarships, accessible tourism, consumer goods, and collaborative events. Conversely, Central Asian cultures gain unprecedented platforms within China, moving beyond historical exoticism towards recognition as partners with rich, relevant contemporary identities and shared civilizational legacies. This mutual cultural recognition, fostered through shared economic endeavors, underpins a more stable and positive regional order, contributing to a distinct Eurasian soft power bloc. Thirdly, the SCO's model demonstrates that sustainable cultural exchange in the 21st century is deeply intertwined with material connectivity and mutual economic benefit. The organization provides a compelling institutional blueprint for other regions seeking to harness economic integration for broader socio-cultural understanding.

However, this study acknowledges inherent limitations. Quantifying the precise magnitude of the SCO's cultural impact relative to other globalizing forces or bilateral initiatives remains challenging. Variations in the depth and nature of impact across different Central Asian states, influenced by pre-existing relationships, domestic policies, and societal openness, warrant more nuanced comparative analysis. The relatively recent acceleration of key SCO economic projects necessitates longitudinal studies to assess the enduring societal effects of the cultural flows they initiate. Furthermore, while the paper identifies key mechanisms, the complex interplay of state actors, sub-national entities, private corporations, and civil society in driving and shaping these cultural currents requires deeper exploration.

Future research must build upon these foundations to fully grasp the evolving Eurasian cultural-economic tapestry. Longitudinal studies tracking the societal integration of students, professionals, and migrants shaped by SCO-facilitated exchanges are crucial. Comparative analyses examining the differential impact of SCO mechanisms on specific Central Asian republics would yield valuable insights into local receptivity and agency. Research must also delve deeper into the role of sub-state actors, particularly the strategies and impacts of Chinese and Central Asian corporations as direct sponsors and facilitators of cultural activities beyond state mandates. The burgeoning digital dimension demands focused attention: how SCO-promoted digital infrastructure and e-commerce platforms accelerate informal cultural flows, create virtual communities, and potentially challenge or reinforce traditional narratives. Finally, critical analysis of potential asymmetries in cultural influence is essential, exploring how power dynamics inherent in economic relations might shape the direction, content, and perception of cultural flows, ensuring a balanced understanding of the Silk Road Spirit's contemporary manifestation.

Ultimately, the significance of this research extends far beyond academic theory. It reveals a fundamental truth about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the region it shapes: the routes carrying pipelines, railways, container shipments, and financial transactions are simultaneously the vital arteries pumping the lifeblood of cultural interaction—ideas, artistic expression, educational pursuits, and shared human experiences. The SCO's economic framework is not simply adjacent to cultural exchange; it is the very scaffolding upon which contemporary cultural engagement between China and Central Asia is being constructed. The enduring success of the Silk Road Spirit in this new institutional era hinges critically on the SCO's continued ability to foster, leverage, and ethically guide this powerful, inseparable synergy between economic integration and cultural understanding. As Eurasia navigates an increasingly complex global landscape, the SCO's experiment in weaving economic and cultural threads together offers a potent, if evolving, model for building interconnectedness that resonates not just in markets and ministries, but in the hearts and minds of the region's diverse peoples, shaping a shared future anchored in both mutual prosperity and mutual respect. The tapestry is still being woven, but the pattern set by the SCO demonstrates that economic cooperation and cultural flow are inseparable threads in the fabric of a cohesive Eurasian future.

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