

The Cultural Challenge of Chinese International Companies Exporting to the Malaysian Market Under the Belt and Road Initiative

Loo Yew Liang, Xu Yutao

New Era University College

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.910000577>

Received: 26 October 2025; Accepted: 31 October 2025; Published: 18 November 2025

ABSTRACT

Since the Belt and Road Initiative was proposed in 2013, it has been a contemporary research topic for scholars from different countries. The Belt and Road Initiative is a new way for China to put more effort into reforming the economy. The experiment offers China a new way of thinking about development. It is also a sustainable way of promoting global co-development. The paper focused on Malaysia within the ASEAN countries and it will influence the process of economic development in Asia and even globally, especially the cultural challenges impact Malaysia's export volume, with a focus on Chinese international trade enterprises. Therefore, studying the factor of cultural challenge affecting economic and trade activities between China and Malaysia has a positive impact on the development of trade in the Belt and Road Initiative. This research seeks to reconfirm whether the culture has an impact on the export volume of Chinese international trading firms. The study employed the stratified sampling method to select senior managers, middle managers and sales team leader responsible for export business in import and export trading companies in Guangdong Province as respondents. In this research, questionnaires were collected using the platform 'Question Star'. The data was collected from these practitioners with extensive experience in importing and exporting. The data was analyzed using SPSS version 26 software after the questionnaire was completed. Based on the results of the analyses, this study concludes that the Malaysian culture showed an impact on the export volume of Chinese trading firms. The export volume of Chinese companies is positively affected if the culture changes in a trade-friendly way. Ultimately, the study suggests that responding to cultural challenges gently not only promotes export trade but also reduces conflict.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Cultural challenge, Export volume

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Belt and Road Initiative has helped China to penetrate deeply into the world economic system. It has broadened and deepened the need for openness. It also reinforces the need for mutual benefit between Asia, Europe and Africa, as well as other business partners. The Belt and Road Initiative has been running for more than ten years now and has made significant progress. From 2013 to 2021, China's trade in goods with countries along the Belt and Road reached a cumulative total of \$11 trillion. With an average annual growth rate of 7.1%,

its share in the total value of foreign trade increased from 25% to 29.7% over the same period. In particular, China's trade in goods with countries along the Belt and Road reached \$1.8 trillion by 2021. It reached a nine-year high in terms of recorded trade volume. It was up 32.6 % on the previous year.

ASEAN is the region where China's trade with countries along the Belt and Road is most concentrated. China's trade with ASEAN amounted to \$878.21 billion. The total trade represented 48.9% of total merchandise trade of China with countries along the routes and 34.8% of total merchandise trade of China with countries building the routes. China's exports to ASEAN amounted to \$ 483.69 billion, an increase of 26.1 % over the previous year. China's imports into ASEAN amounted to \$ 394.51 billion, an increase of 31.3% over the previous year (Yan, 2022).

As a result of the growth in trade links between China and ASEAN. Malaysia, one of the ASEAN countries, has been chosen as the subject of the study since both its historical origins and the fact that it has now achieved record trade figures justify the openness to trade that the Belt and Road Initiative seeks to achieve. Historical evidence from the past and real trade data from the present show that integration into the trend of economic globalization is beneficial for the country's development. National development is positively impacted by economic cooperation. However, economic globalization has resulted in many cultural differences between different ethnic groups. The Belt and Road Initiative cannot afford to overlook cultural issues. After all, the initiative covers a wide range of ethnic groups. Different ethnic groups have different cultures. Chinese companies engage in international trade, the challenges posed by these cultural differences cannot be ignored. Cultural challenges can also be a cause of international incidents.

Problem Statement

The great vision of the Belt and Road Initiative and its tremendous contribution to economic development prompted this research to study the locational factors that attract Chinese companies to export to the Malaysian market. Cooperation will inevitably lead to economic development. However, there are also issues that need to be addressed. Cultural differences are one such issue. As stated in the previous section, cultural challenges are an objective reality. The way in which they are responded to is a choice that can be made by both sides. Both sides are facing challenges and must decide whether to take an aggressive or a moderate approach. In the current economic climate, confrontation would be unwise. Therefore, the topic of how to gently accept the challenges brought about by cultural differences is worthy of study. Not only does accepting cultural challenges in a gentle manner yield the highest economic benefits, it also contributes to the goal of economic recovery needed today. A lack of familiarity with each other's cultures can create challenges that hinder export trade. However, if they can adapt, culture can help to facilitate export trade. Understanding local culture can help businesses secure opportunities that align with local customs. Therefore, overcoming cultural challenges can greatly assist export trade and economic recovery. Recognizing culture can promote trade liberalization.

Therefore, the promotion of trade openness would be a positive choice for both China and Malaysia. It is also important to note that another example of trade liberalization is the establishment of Special Economic Zones in China. Following the establishment of the Special Economic Zones, China has gained a deeper understanding

of economic liberalization. Not only was it profitable in terms of trade, but it also taught the national government the importance of open-up the economy (Ge, 1999). Therefore, China's current Belt and Road Initiative has laid the foundation for its determination to open-up. To get a clearer picture of how exports can be boosted and how that works. It seems that today's practical needs will benefit from this research. In addition, greater trade openness would not only encourage product innovation but also improve product quality. It would have a significant impact in terms of spillover effects. In particular, the performance of knowledge spillovers will be more significant (Liang, et al, 2024). Exporting a product from another country allows the importing company to learn about the technology contained in the product.

In the normal course of trade, both countries can learn about each other's environment, culture and institutions. In this way, it serves as a basis for reforms to support the development of trade in the longer term. Familiarity with the respective environments, cultures and institutions of both countries helps to reduce the frictions that arise from trade. In addition, it can be deepened according to the level of familiarity, allowing companies to gain better insights into the products which consumers need or business models which are more suitable for localization.

Significance Of The Study

This research focuses on the extent to which cultural challenges impact export volumes. It helps to bridge the gap in our understanding of the impact of culture on the economy under the Belt and Road Initiative. It also provides a theoretical framework for understanding cultural challenges within the Belt and Road region. By analyzing the cultural challenges faced by Chinese export companies in the Malaysian market, the study can summarize how companies can better respond to such challenges based on the results of the analysis. Furthermore, this research aims to summarize a set of methodologies for addressing cultural challenges. These methodologies can guide companies more effectively through cultural challenges. The methodologies also help them to avoid unnecessary losses. This process will also help Chinese companies become familiar with the cultural environment of the Belt and Road Initiative region, which will also facilitate understanding of the cultural environment of other Belt and Road countries. Ultimately, this will achieve the goal of increasing export volume and improving corporate profits.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a plan that encourages Chinese businesses to expand and compete in international markets. This will enhance the overall performance of the Chinese economy. Growth in nearby countries will also be affected by China's economic growth (Villafuerte et al, 2016). Malaysia, which is the subject of this research. It is a member of ASEAN. As a result, it is very attractive for Chinese companies to export to the emerging market of Malaysia. The results of this research can be useful for companies in terms of micro-level understanding of Malaysia. A better understanding of Malaysia's culture is used to help companies better adapt their operations and launch products in overseas markets. At the same time, Malaysia is one of the many partner countries of the Belt and Road Initiative. Malaysia has unique characteristics whereby they all have huge cultural differences. This research examines how Chinese export companies have overcome cultural challenges, drawing on their experiences to address similar issues in other Belt and Road countries.

Underpinning Theories

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Since the countries around the Belt and Road have different nationalities, this research also introduces Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions. Hofstede's cultural dimension theory is the most respected idea in today's studies of managing different cultures and researching how cultures interact. This theory helps researchers learn about the different cultures of countries along the Belt and Road so they can get past cultural obstacles (Hofstede, 2019; Yu, 2011). There are examples of impacts on a wide range of products (Fu & Lee, 2008). The Belt and Road route includes at least four civilizations and nearly 100 countries and languages. Each country is different in terms of its environment, religious beliefs, language, ethnicity and institutions. If trade with these countries is to be established, it is necessary to familiarize ourselves with each other's cultures in order to increase awareness. Reducing cultural distance is conducive to international trade (Chen, 2017). Hofstede's cultural dimension theory also has already been used extensively in many cases of cross-cultural business or management (Li, 2009).

Cultural Challenge

Western scholars have often tried to define culture. However, due to the breadth and depth of culture, there is no single consensus. The term "culture" encompasses characteristics such as behavior, ethnicity, language, religion, stereotypes, etc (Feldberga & Griķe, 2015). Culture is a collective characteristic that distinguishes different groups of people. Culture shows and affects what people believe, value, how they behave, and what they need (Hofstede 1984). Culture consists of beliefs and values that are shared and handed down from one generation to another by various groups, communities, and religions (Guiso, et al, 2009). On the basis of the above main views, it is possible to see that there are cultural differences between China and Malaysia. Some researchers have noted that the cultural distance between China and Malaysia is still very large in relative terms (Chen et al, 2023). If Chinese companies want to expand their businesses in Malaysia, they should understand the problems that cultural differences can cause for their work. The Belt and Road Initiative is focused on improving trade between countries, which helps people share their cultures and understand each other better. This will create a base for long-lasting growth in the future (Mobley, 2019). Although there are many challenges in exporting to culturally different markets, it is not unacceptable for Malaysia. In diplomatic terms, Malaysia has been a good partner for China. Malaysia introduced China to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Southeast Asia (TAC) system. Malaysia has reacted well to China's plans like the Belt and Road Initiative and the RECP, believing that teamwork is a better way to succeed together than fighting. Therefore, when faced with cultural conflict, adapting to each other promotes cultural integration. This has a positive impact on bilateral trade between the two countries (Sheth, 2006). To promote cultural exchange between the two nations in order to create a unified cultural space. More acceptance of different cultures will help Chinese companies sell their products better abroad. (Pekovic & Rolland, 2016). To resolve conflicts and promote integration through cultural exchange. Help people from different cultural backgrounds understand each other and then promote mutual cooperation for common development (Luo, 2021). Cultural challenges are an objective reality. However, if both parties are familiar with each other's cultural backgrounds, these obstacles will be reduced.

Export volume and Cultural Challenge

When a company decides to invest in a new market, it needs to consider the cultural distance involved. Cultural distance is the starting point for many studies that explore the relationship between culture and the international economy. The bigger the differences between cultures, the more likely cultural challenges will happen (Srivastava & Dhir, 2020) or barriers to trade (Liu et al., 2020). The popular perception is that companies are more likely to invest in a market with a small cultural distance. This is because cultural differences can lead to large differences in product preferences between countries, which can increase the costs of exporting and reduce companies' profits (White & TAdesse, 2008). So Chinese companies tend to invest in countries with similar cultures (Contractor et al, 2020). There will be less resistance to trade with a similar cultural base. For example, if a French company exports goods to other EU countries, the importing country does not force it to produce a quality control certificate (Pekovic & Rolland, 2016). Some scholars have examined the data on cultural variables of 174 sovereign states using the gravity model. It has been discovered that when the people involved in a trade are from similar cultures, the chances of the deal being successful are higher.

Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions can be used to discuss the Chinese and Malaysian cultural contexts. When it comes to the Belt and Road Initiative, the governments of both countries are the driving forces behind cooperation. The topdown management model used in both countries shows that they have a high level of power distance index. The higher power distance index in both countries also supports the promotion of international cooperation. Concurrently, China and Malaysia are highly similar in terms of collectivism. China has been influenced by traditional culture as well as modern communism. That indicates that Chinese society is strongly collectivist. The religion of Malaysia is Islam. The teachings of Islam place great emphasis on the importance of the family. Muslims need to stabilize and preserve the family home. Such teachings have also led to a strong sense of collectivism in Malaysian society. Although the same cultural dimensions exist in both countries, there are also differences. These differences arise in the dimensions of masculinity and femininity. Individual achievement is highly valued in Chinese society, which leads to a more competitive environment. It can be concluded that China will become more masculinity. On the other hand, Malaysia has a good welfare system and a greater focus on quality of life. When analyzed in terms of Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions, both China and Malaysia have similarities and differences. As long as there are more similarities in cultural backgrounds, international trade will be beneficial. Based on the current analysis, it can be concluded that Malaysia and China have similar cultures. It is beneficial for Chinese companies exporting to the Malaysian market.

Cultural differences can also help international trade in a good way. Some researchers have discovered that there is a U-shaped link between how different cultures are and the success of Chinese companies investing abroad. In other words, within a reasonable range, an increase in cultural distance will have a positive influence on the business performance of Chinese outward foreign direct investment firms. If the range is exceeded, the increase in cultural distance will lead to a decline in business performance (Yang et al, 2018). There was a similar point in the other research of trade in cultural goods. Cultural distance will encourage trade in cultural products if there is some cultural distance between two places, but it is not very great. However, trading cultural products becomes

difficult when the differences between cultures are too great. In the study of (Teng et al, 2020), it shows that China's cultural trade with countries on the "Belt and Road" has become more effective. The similar cultural backgrounds between these countries also greatly help improve this trade. Overall, cultural differences will eventually create resistance. This is also known as cultural challenge (Luo & Shenkar, 2011). This is an unavoidable challenge when working in a cross-cultural environment. Companies need to learn how to adapt to operate in different environments and how to promote cultural synergies in order to reduce friction (Ogliastri et al, 2023). The literature shows that companies' export performance is relating to the degree of cultural friction. The higher friction level, the more negative for firms' export performance (Li et al, 2019). This is because cultural differences can affect the way of operators thinking as well as the way they communication. This influence may cause the two parties to operate differently when it comes to doing business. And the different operation may hinder the normal operation of trade (Haarhaus & Liening, 2020; Patnaik et al, 2020). Therefore, cultural challenges are not irreconcilable. On the contrary, the challenges brought about by certain cultural differences will also be conducive to the conduct of trade.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a deductive research approach and employed a quantitative method to collect data from different level of managers of Chinese companies. For data analysis, SPSS version 26 was utilized to process and analyze the collected data. This research focuses on the volume exported by trading companies located in Guangdong Province, China. As Guangdong Province ranks first in China in terms of export volume in 2023, it also ranks first in terms of export volume to Malaysia. The method used in this study is stratified sampling which is more efficient and economical in dealing with neutral data (Ullah, et al., 2024). Therefore, companies engaged in export trade in Guangdong Province were selected as the sample group. The targeted respondents of this study were chosen from the senior and mid-level managers, along with the sales team leaders, working in the export departments of the companies.

The list of known respondents contains 4,296 companies, a number too large for this study and not necessarily conducive to research. Therefore, this research refers to the "Top 100 Guangdong Enterprises 2023" rankings published by the Guangdong Federation of Industry and Commerce. According to the list, 48 of them are performing relatively well in exporting. The total exports of the 48 companies amounted to approximately US\$109.339 billion, accounting for 14.32 % of the total exports of the whole Guangdong province (Southern Financial Observation., 2023). These 48 companies are considered to have a high level of expertise and representation in the field of export trade. Therefore, these 48 companies were selected as the target of the questionnaire distributed for this research. According to the study, when the sample size exceeds 10,000, the sample size required for analysis to have a 90%-95% confidence level is in the range of 264-370 (Adam, 2021). For each of the 48 companies, 7 questionnaires were distributed, making a total of 336 questionnaires. To meet the quantitative criteria required for the subsequent analyses, a total of 336 questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaire had to be given to three different groups of people in the company. However, there are differences in the staffing structure of each company. Before distributing the full scale of questionnaire, the study conducted a pilot test to validate its design.

The Result of Pilot Test

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Result

Reliability Analysis of Pilot Test	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Export Volume	6	0.823
Cultural Challenge	5	0.805

This research involved the distribution of 336 questionnaires for data collection. In this research, 30 questionnaires were distributed and recovered as pilot samples according to the research program. The Cronbach's alpha in Table 1 shows that all four parts of the questions feedback were higher than 0.7. It also proves that the feedback from the questionnaires is all at a reliable level. And they all stay within the range of 0.8-0.9, which means that the reliability of the questionnaire is relatively good (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Table 2: Description of Variable

Sections	Sources	Measure
Export Volume	(Zhao & Zhao, 2014)	In the past year, the volume of exports of the enterprises has increased.
	(Liang, 2023)	With the vigorous implementation of the Belt and Road, enterprises have strengthened their confidence in the developing prospects of exporting.
		In the context of global trade, you believe that exports will be one of the driving forces behind the business in the future.
		ASEAN countries will be the first choice for companies to do business in the export market.
		The Belt and Road Initiative has made it easier for companies to export trade.
		Markets along the route have become more receptive to Chinese exports or services as a result of the Belt and Road Initiative.
Cultural Challenge	(Haarhaus, & Liening, 2020)	When selecting export destinations, preference is given to markets with a high degree of cultural similarity to the home country.
	(Ye et al., 2023)	Due to cultural differences, products may not be accepted by consumers in the exporting country.
	(Li et al., 2019)	Due to cultural similarities, export markets are more likely to identify with the product.
	(Sheth, 2006)	It is more conducive to product promotion to incorporate cultural factors recognized by local cultures into exported products.
	(Mukhtar, et al., 2022)	Mutual familiarity and understanding on the basis of different cultures can have a positive impact on the understanding of the local market for export.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Response Rate

A total of 336 questionnaires were distributed in this study. Due to the nature of electronic questionnaires, incomplete questionnaires are not collected. So, the questionnaires collected have been completed. So far, 331 questionnaires have been filled in and returned. 5 questionnaires have not been returned. So, the following analysis is based on 331 questionnaires.

Table 3: Profile of Respondent

Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	186	56.19%
Female	145	43.81%
Executive Level		
Senior manager	62	18.73%
Mid-level manager	236	71.30%
Export sales team leader	33	9.97%
The volume of exports of the company has increased		
Significant decline (more than -20%)	14	4.23%
Slight reduction (-20% ~ 5%)	43	12.99%
Basically flat (-5% ~ 5%)	69	20.85%
Slight increase (5% ~ 20%)	108	32.62%
Significant increase (more than 20%)	97	29.31%

Descriptive Analysis

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis of Variables

Variables	Mean	Coefficient of Variation (CV)
Export Volume	3.748	0.248
Cultural Challenge	3.740	0.245

A five-point Likert scale was used to design the questionnaire for this research. Export volume has a mean of 3.748 and a Coefficient of Variation of 0.248. Cultural challenge has a mean of 3.740 and a Coefficient of Variation of 0.245.

Reliability Analysis

Table 5: Reliability Analysis

Items	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Export Volume	6	0.894
Cultural Challenge	5	0.867

According to Table 5, Cronbach's Alpha of Export Volume is 0.894. The Cronbach's Alpha of Cultural Challenge is 0.867. The alpha values of all variables are greater than 0.6, indicating an acceptable level of reliability.

Validity Analysis

Table 6: Validity Analysis Result - KMO Test

Items	KMO Value
Export Volume	0.914
Cultural Challenge	0.873

Table 7: Validity Analysis Result - Bartlett's test of sphericity

Items		Value
Export Volume	approximate chi-square	997.741
	df	15
	P	0.000***
Cultural Challenge	approximate chi-square	719.513
	df	10
	P	0.000***

Note: ***, **, * represent 1%, 5% and 10% significance levels, respectively.

According to Table 6, the KMO values for export volume and cultural challenge are 0.914, 0.873 respectively. Each value is greater than 0.6 and is in the range of 0.8-0.9. This shows that there is a good correlation between the data. According to Table 7, the p-value of the responses to the export volume, cultural challenge component in the Bartlett's test of sphericity is less than 1%. This proves that each part of the data has a strong significance. Combining the results of the above two analyses, it can be concluded that the data obtained from this questionnaire survey are valid.

Correlation

Table 8: Export Volume and Culture

		Export Volume	Culture
Export Volume	Spearman Correlation	1	0.774
	P	-	(0.000***)
	N	331	331
Cultural challenge	Spearman Correlation	0.774	1
	P	(0.000***)	-
	N	331	331

Note: ***, **, * represent 1%, 5% and 10% significance levels, respectively

Table 8 shows the correlation between export volume and culture. If $P < 0.05$ is satisfied, it proves that there is a correlation between the variables. According to the calculation results, there is a correlation between export volume and cultural challenge.

Hypothesis Testing Result

In this research, the hypotheses for the existence of a linear relationship were tested using linear regression (least squares) to verify the existence of a linear relationship. The results of hypothesis testing and the determination of whether the results are accepted are presented below. The cultural challenge has a positive impact on Chinese international trade companies exporting to the Malaysian market. The test gave a result of $\beta = 0.271$, $p = 0.000^{***}$ ($p < 0.05$), $t = 5.714$. All values meet the criteria for a linear relationship, so the hypothesis is accepted in this research.

CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis of this research is that culture has a positive impact on Chinese firms exporting to the Malaysian market. The conclusions from the analysis of the questionnaire are acceptable. This research verifies that in the export trade between China and Malaysia, culture has an impact on the export volume of Chinese firms. It is well known that there are various cultural differences in all the countries of South East Asia. It is mainly reflected in religious beliefs. There are different behaviors and ideas within a culture due to the nature of religion. Therefore, only by becoming familiar with the local culture can foreign investors make business decisions more suited to the local market. There is a preference for markets with similar cultures for Chinese companies facing unfamiliar markets. Thus, Malaysia is seen as a market with both familiar and unfamiliar cultures for Chinese companies to invest in. Companies that are familiar with the cultural beliefs of local consumers will be able to introduce goods that are more appropriate to the local area. Without a clear understanding of local cultural characteristics, it could lead to a negative outcome, such as stagnant merchandise. The more serious ones can touch on certain taboos of local consumers. Moreover, they can cause more serious social incidents leading to

huge losses. The exchange of cultures is not unilateral. The cultural distance between the two sides can be effectively bridged through two-way cultural exchanges. The Malaysian leader also made several references to strengthening people-to-people exchanges in education, culture and tourism between the two countries during his visit to China. The growing cultural exchanges between China and Malaysia will allow the people of both countries to become more familiar with each other's cultures. The reduction in the cultural distance between the two countries also makes it easier for Chinese companies to understand what Malaysian consumers want. Thus, to improve the export volume of enterprises to pull the profitability of enterprises according to the actual demand for the introduction of goods. In the past, the focus of much of the literature was on a business organization in one region. Taking a macro perspective to analyze how culture affects corporate behavior. Instead, this research focuses on a single country. This paper fills a research gap. It analyses the impact of culture on firms' export volumes from a micro perspective. This research also comes to the similar conclusion that Chinese trading companies' familiarity with the culture of the target market has a positive impact on its export volume.

Limitations and Recommendations for Improvement

The limitations of this paper are the survey method applied and it disallowed more subjective feelings gained or observed from the respondents related to the study. At the same time, the sample used was restricted. The targeted group of this survey is mainly Chinese international trade companies whereby other based of international trade companies from other countries are not within the scope of this research. In the analysis of the previous chapter, culture has a great deal of influence on the export trade. It is especially true for Chinese companies with a risk-averse tendency. Cultural differences can be an important indicator of risk assessment. Cultural differences are considered as potential the main cause of cultural challenges.

In accepting other cultures, culture-centrism must be countered. It is particularly true for companies involved in overseas trade. Culture-centrism means using one's own culture as the standard by which to judge the merits of other cultures. The culture of each country or region is shaped by different aspects of the local natural environment, ways of life, religious beliefs and so on. Hence, there is no possibility that one culture is superior to another. Therefore, when one goes to learn about other cultures, one should understand the differences between individuals of different cultures and the native culture. To establish gentle communication based on relative equality and to understand the connotations of different cultures will potentially contribute to effective cultural communication. Cultural communication is about learning to listen to the voices of different cultures, especially when a foreign company enters a market with an unfamiliar cultural environment and needs to understand the local culture in a calm way. It will enable the users to develop this market in a better way and offer the right products to the local consumers.

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