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REPORT

By Member of the Dissertation Committee on the

Dissertation of

GAO WENJING on the theme:

**“The Role of PRC International Cultural Relations
in the Implementation of the Belt and Road
Initiative”**

**Submitted in conformity with the requirements for
the candidate degree in historical sciences**

**Specialisation 5.6.7 – History of International
Relations and Foreign Policy**

Having read the doctoral dissertation of Gao Wenjing in the English-language version, pages 322-612, I am ready to offer a series of observations and draw conclusions concerning the academic quality of the work. The thesis concerns the evolution and development of international cultural relations linked to the Belt and Road initiative from a historical and a contemporary perspective. The topic is at the intersection of several different academic disciplines, which includes among others international relations, cultural and economic diplomacy, place branding, culture and identity studies. This thesis is very informative, easy to follow and the text written in an easy to digest format. A very rich set of literature and data from Chinese, Russian and English-language sources are used to illuminate the historical and contemporary use of culture in developing international relations in China's foreign policy, which is reflected in a rather extensive reference list at the end of the thesis.



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This thesis in general is a significant achievement of academic endeavour that is well considered and executed by Gao Wenjing of this relatively under theorized discipline and understudied topic. The structure of the thesis is logical and maintains a good flow for the reader. Furthermore, the actual topic, which are all very well described and justified in the very beginning of the thesis. However, theory, method and approach are insufficiently articulated and justified for the reader, seemingly in an unclear and scattered configuration. Furthermore, another theory and approach, such as constructivism in international relations and a content analysis method, would have contributed much more towards realising the stated research purpose of the thesis. The thesis makes use of a very remarkable empirical data set (official speeches and documents) in presenting the data to support statements made. The thesis displays a balanced and well-considered format and approach to realising the aims and goals that are stated.

In addition to the doctoral thesis, Gao Wenjing has a modest tally of three published scientific articles and an unknown participation in scientific events. In all, the thesis is composed of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and bibliography. The thesis goes very deeply in to the issues, objectives and goals raised in the course of the introduction, from a largely empirical point of view. The first chapter concerns a historical overview of the Great Silk Road, with an emphasis on cultural and civilizational components, which sets the scene for the following two chapters. Chapter two concerns China's foreign cultural policy at its different territorial and institutional levels in promoting the Belt and Road initiative. In chapter three, a detailed account of China's cultural ties with



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various countries connected to the Belt and Road project are provided. Finally, the conclusion gives a good summary of the lessons and knowledge that is contained throughout the work.

There are some other minor points of weakness in the thesis that can be highlighted to allow the author to learn in the future career to help them improve what is a promising start in original research and academic writing. So these points should be taken in the spirit of an intended constructive criticism of an academic work of good standard. These remarks and comments do not appear in any specific order. There is some room for the improvement of the quality of the English language translation of the thesis text. This is most likely connected to the quality of the translation that was provided. For example on page 336 Peking University and Beijing University are used on the same page, it is likely that Beijing is the correct current name for the University. Sometimes, typos occur, such as on page 337, where “(SCIC)” appears, this should be CSIS. Some inaccuracies occur, such as on page 426 with the reference to “in the 21st century, the USSR provided ...” which should read the 20th century. On page 344 “civilized countries” is used, when civilizational would be more appropriate. Some recent academic literature has also been missed by the candidate such as Professor Stephen Rowley’s “European Perceptions of China and Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative.”



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There are lengthy tracts of text throughout the thesis that seem to be little more than quoted empirical facts and stated opinions of experts, but without any further analysis or interpretation by the candidate. Although, towards the ends of sections and chapters, the candidate's analysis and interpretation was offered. Having said this, the analysis and interpretation lacked connections to the existing state of the art academic literature on the topic or a firm connection to the systematic use of theoretical or methodological tools. As such, this oversight creates a problem in situating the contribution made by this thesis to advancing the current state of theoretical and empirical knowledge on the topics addressed. This is exemplified when attempting to answer the following question on the greater and wider significance of this diligently researched and written thesis work. What are the main theoretical and conceptual conclusions and contributions to the current state of the art knowledge from this case study?

In summary, the thesis covers a relatively understudied topic and undertheorized subject within the wider field of cultural diplomacy and how it evolves over time and circumstances in the context of global processes and trends. The strengths of the work far outweigh the weaknesses of it. This work contributes to a deeper conceptual and empirical understanding of the nature and practice of contemporary cultural diplomacy within the context of great power competition via geo-economic mechanisms. Given the current global geopolitical transformations that are underway, the thesis is extremely timely in helping to understand the contribution of international cultural relations.



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The dissertation meets the basic requirements established by Order No. 11181/1 of 19 November 2021, "On the Procedure for Awarding Academic Degrees at Saint Petersburg State University," the candidate Gao Wenjing deserves the award of the scientific degree of Candidate of Historical Sciences in the speciality 5.6.7. – History of International Relations and Foreign Policy. Clause 11 of the aforementioned Order by the author of the thesis is not broken.

26.05.2022

Member of the Dissertation Council

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden, Associate Professor Greg Simons



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