

The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in a Chinese Reality TV Program: A Case Study of Divas Hit the Road 5: Silk Road Season

Zhenhua Yang¹, and Pat Kotchapakdee²

Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Thailand

Corresponding author. E-mail: zhenhua.y@kkumail.com¹, patko@kku.ac.th²

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Abstract

This article examines how cultural diplomacy is mediated through Chinese popular entertainment by analyzing Divas Hit the Road 5: Silk Road Season in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Responding to the limited attention given to reality television in cultural diplomacy and soft power studies, the research asks what cultural-diplomatic roles the program performs and how these roles are realized through narrative representation and audience interpretation. The study adopts a qualitative case-study design that combines content analysis, discourse analysis, and online ethnography. The empirical materials include the twelve publicly released main episodes of the season, purposively selected scenes involving intercultural contact, labor participation, cultural learning, and conflict resolution, as well as publicly visible audience comments and discussion threads from Weibo, Douyin/TikTok, and related short-video platforms collected around the program's broadcast and circulation period. The analysis employed a thematic coding procedure to compare visual frames, narration, participant interaction, subtitles, promotional discourse, and audience responses. The findings show that the program performs three interrelated roles: cultural mediation, by translating macro-level BRI and Silk Road narratives into everyday human experiences; intercultural relationship-building, by staging processes of adaptation, humility, empathy, and identity negotiation; and informal public diplomacy, by allowing entertainment narratives and audience participation to circulate soft-power meanings in a less official and more affective form. The study contributes to media and cultural-diplomacy scholarship by showing how reality television may operate as an informal, mediated, and audience-co-created diplomatic space. However, because the research is based on a single case and publicly available online discourse, its conclusions should be understood as interpretive rather than as a direct measurement of diplomatic effects.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy; reality television; soft power; Belt and Road Initiative; intercultural communication

Introduction

In the context of accelerated globalization and digital media, cultural diplomacy has shifted from formal state-led exchange toward mediated, platform-based, and entertainment-oriented communication (Hassan & Batool Is, 2024). While cultural institutes, exhibitions, and official visits remain important, films, streaming platforms, television programs, and social media now also shape national images and intercultural perceptions (Lee & Ji, 2024). This shift requires attention to popular media texts that translate national narratives into everyday emotional experiences.

Nye (1990)'s concept of soft power provides a foundational framework for understanding this shift. Soft power refers to influence through attraction rather than coercion, drawing on culture, values, and legitimacy (De Martino, 2020). In digital culture, this attraction is increasingly co-created by media institutions, celebrities, platforms, and audiences. Entertainment media is therefore important because it works through identification, pleasure, and affect rather than direct persuasion (Jin, 2024).

For China, cultural diplomacy has become a central component of international engagement (Zhu, 2022). Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), cultural exchange and people-to-people connectivity have been framed as foundations of long-term cooperation (Wang & Chai, 2026). Yet policy ideas such as mutual learning and shared development can remain abstract when communicated only through official channels. Popular media can connect these ideas with recognizable situations, emotions, and interpersonal encounters.

Within this context, Chinese media productions have been encouraged to "tell China's stories well" and present a multidimensional national image. Although news and documentaries remain important, entertainment genres—especially reality television—have gained prominence because they combine narrative flexibility, celebrity visibility, platform circulation, and online discussion. Reality television can make cultural narratives personally relatable rather than explicitly political.

Divas Hit the Road is a representative case. Produced by Hunan Satellite TV and Mango TV, the program has developed into an influential Chinese travel reality format since 2014. Each season follows Chinese celebrities as they travel abroad, complete tasks, manage relationships, and interact with local communities. Its combination of travel, labor, celebrity performance, conflict,

and emotional storytelling makes it useful for examining how cultural–diplomatic meanings are embedded in entertainment.

The fifth season, *Divas Hit the Road 5: Silk Road Season*, is particularly relevant because its routes and themes are explicitly connected with the Silk Road. Unlike earlier seasons centered mainly on tourism and personal growth, this season foregrounds historical continuity, cultural exchange, and international cooperation. It therefore offers a clear case for examining the relationship between the narrative of reality television and BRI–related cultural diplomacy.

Rather than using official statements, *Divas Hit the Road 5* embeds diplomatic themes in everyday experiences such as labor participation, cultural learning, language barriers, hospitality, and interpersonal cooperation. These scenes transform abstract policy concepts into relatable stories (Zhang, 2025). The program’s circulation on short–form video platforms and social media further extends these meanings as audiences comment on and reinterpret intercultural encounters. Existing scholarship on cultural diplomacy has mainly examined state–led initiatives, institutional actors, policy frameworks, museums, performance events, and international broadcasting (Teckchandani, 2026). Media studies have also examined reality television, but often as commercial entertainment rather than as informal diplomacy (Jenner, 2024). The gap lies in explaining how reality television mediates cultural–diplomatic narratives, how audiences interpret them, and how such participation contributes to soft power.

Accordingly, this article asks: What roles does *Divas Hit the Road 5: Silk Road Season* play in cultural diplomacy, and how are these roles realized through media narratives and audience reception? By answering this question, the study contributes to media diplomacy, cultural policy, and intercultural communication, while also offering practical insight for people–centered cultural communication.

Research Objectives

Focusing on the analytical concept of “role,” this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify and conceptualize the key roles performed by *Divas Hit the Road 5: Silk Road Season* within the framework of cultural diplomacy.
2. To analyze how these roles contribute to international understanding and intercultural communication through media representation, narrative strategies, and audience engagement.

3. To examine how the program functions as an informal yet effective instrument of China's cultural diplomacy and soft power in the contemporary global media environment.

Literature Review

The transformation of cultural diplomacy from state-led initiatives to media-driven practices has attracted growing attention. Traditional research emphasizes cultural institutes, exhibitions, visits, and institutional exchange programs (Bérubé et al., 2026), while soft power scholarship explains attraction through culture, values, and legitimacy (Nye, 1990). Recent work on platforms and transnational entertainment complicates this state-centered model (Jin, 2024; Lee & Ji, 2024). However, the informal, affective, and participatory mechanisms of entertainment-based diplomacy remain underexplored.

In the context of China's BRI, cultural diplomacy emphasizes people-to-people connectivity and non-state participation (Zhang & Yao, 2025). Studies of international broadcasting explain national branding through professional media narratives (Zhu, 2022), while research on variety shows and digital reception highlights audience interpretation (Zhang, 2025; Yao, 2025). Yet the relationship among cultural diplomacy, reality television, and audience reception is still insufficiently systematized. This study addresses that gap by treating *Divas Hit the Road 5* as a mediated site where soft power, intercultural identity, and entertainment-based public diplomacy intersect.

Theoretical framework

To address the research objectives, this study adopts an integrated theoretical framework. Soft power explains the attraction-based logic of influence; framing theory explains how the program selects and emphasizes meanings; intercultural identity theory explains adaptation and identity negotiation; structural functionalism explains broader social functions; and communication/globalization theories explain cross-platform circulation.

Framing Theory: Framing theory explains how the media selects, organizes, and emphasizes aspects of reality. Here, it is used to analyze how the program foregrounds friendship, perseverance, humility, and respect while backgrounding political tension. Nye (1990) is used for soft power, not as the source of framing theory; framing is treated as the mechanism through which attraction becomes narratively accessible.

Intercultural Identity Theory: This theory conceptualizes intercultural encounters as ongoing processes of stress, adaptation, negotiation, and growth. It provides the lens for examining how Chinese participants navigate uncertainty, language barriers, unfamiliar work routines, and cultural shock, and how these experiences are transformed into empathy and self-reflection through interaction with local residents (Kim, 2007). It is also useful for interpreting audience comments in which viewers compare their own cultural assumptions with the intercultural situations represented on screen.

Structural Functionalism: This perspective is applied to understand the broader social and diplomatic functions of entertainment media. Rather than asking only what the program explicitly says, this perspective asks what social functions it performs within the wider media ecology. It helps explain how the program normalizes China's presence in global cultural spaces, reinforces values that align with peaceful international engagement, and makes cooperation appear achievable at the interpersonal level (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993).

Communication and Globalization Theories: These are used to assess the transnational circulation of the program's meanings. They help explain how messages produced by a Chinese television institution are reinterpreted on online platforms, in short-form video clips, through hashtags, and in audience discussions. In this framework, soft power is not viewed as a one-way state message but as a communicative process co-created by media producers, participants, platforms, and audiences in the digital age (Cornali & Tirocchi, 2012).

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative design to explore how cultural diplomacy is embedded and negotiated within narrative structure and audience reception. Qualitative methodology is appropriate because cultural diplomacy operates through meaning, symbolism, emotion, and discourse rather than only measurable variables. The corpus consisted of the twelve publicly released main episodes of *Divas Hit the Road 5*, with closer analysis of scenes involving intercultural contact, labor participation, cultural learning, local cooperation, conflict negotiation, and audience discussion.

The research combines case study analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, and online ethnography. First, the season was reviewed to identify recurring narrative situations. Second, relevant scenes were selected for content and discourse analysis. Third, online audience

responses were examined to understand reception. This triangulation allows the program to be analyzed from production, textual, and audience perspectives.

Case Selection and Research Scope

Divas Hit the Road 5 was selected for its representativeness, thematic relevance, and socio-political context. The season links a popular travel reality format with the discourse of the Silk Road and BRI, which emphasizes connectivity, cultural exchange, and people-to-people communication. The unit of analysis included episodes, scenes, tasks, participant interaction, narration, subtitles, promotional discourse, and selected public audience comments.

Unlike earlier seasons focused mainly on travel and celebrity interaction, the Silk Road Season highlights labor, historical memory, cultural learning, and cooperation. Sampling was purposive: scenes were included when they contained local interaction, cultural practice, Silk Road references, adaptation, or strong online discussion. Scenes centered only on domestic celebrity conflict were excluded. These criteria kept the analysis aligned with cultural diplomacy.

Content Analysis

Content analysis identified themes, narrative patterns, and representational strategies related to cultural diplomacy. The analysis focused on imagery, episode structure, task design, interaction, setting, and emotional sequencing. Codes were grouped into narrative codes, such as labor and hospitality, visual codes, such as close-ups and shared meals, and diplomatic role codes, including cultural mediation, relationship-building, and informal public diplomacy.

By coding scenes of intercultural contact, this method shows how cooperation, mutual understanding, and shared development are made concrete. The process moved from open coding of repeated scenes and expressions to axial coding of broader themes and selective coding into the three diplomatic roles. Repeated review across episodes strengthened interpretive consistency.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis was applied to spoken dialogue, narration, subtitles, task descriptions, and official promotional texts associated with the program. This method enables an examination of how language, framing devices, and narrative emphasis construct particular meanings around China's international engagement. For example, expressions of gratitude, learning, endurance, friendship, and mutual assistance were examined alongside visual representations of local communities and Chinese participants. The analysis also considered what was backgrounded, such as direct political debate, policy terminology, and asymmetrical power relations.

Drawing on Framing Theory, the analysis focuses on how certain values—such as friendship, perseverance, respect, modesty, and cooperation—are foregrounded, while political tensions or asymmetries are backgrounded or neutralized. Through discourse analysis, the study uncovers how entertainment media subtly rearticulate diplomatic narratives in a depoliticized and emotionally accessible form. This step was especially important for distinguishing cultural diplomacy as a mediated narrative process from explicit propaganda or formal policy communication.

Online Ethnography and Audience Reception

To complement textual analysis, this study uses online ethnography to examine audience interpretation. Public comments, hashtags, short-video remixes, and discussion threads from Weibo and Douyin/TikTok were observed during the broadcast and circulation period. Comments were screened for relevance to cultural encounter, national image, emotional identification, local culture, or perceptions of China's international engagement; irrelevant celebrity gossip and identifiable private information were excluded.

Online ethnography treats viewers as co-creators of meaning rather than passive recipients. Audience responses were not used to claim measurable diplomatic impact, but as interpretive evidence of empathy, pride, curiosity, or critique. Ethical considerations were addressed by using only publicly available content, paraphrasing representative responses, and focusing on aggregated reception patterns.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework operates at three levels. At the textual level, framing theory explains scene construction and meaning selection. At the interactional level, intercultural identity theory explains the negotiation of difference. At the social level, structural functionalism and globalization-oriented communication theory explain the circulation and accumulation of soft power. This design links theory with the empirical analysis.

Research Results

Based on qualitative analysis of *Divas Hit the Road 5*, this study identifies three interrelated roles in cultural diplomacy. These roles emerge through narrative design, discourse, emotional storytelling, and audience participation. Rather than functioning as explicit diplomatic communication, the program embeds diplomatic meanings in everyday experiences and forms of entertainment, so its influence is subtle, affective, and interpretive.

The three roles identified—cultural mediation, intercultural relationship-building, and informal public diplomacy—should be understood as analytical categories rather than isolated functions. Together, they illustrate how popular reality television contributes to the production, circulation, and normalization of cultural diplomacy in the contemporary global media environment. The evidence for these roles is drawn from repeated patterns in episode tasks, participant behavior, visual framing, spoken discourse, and online audience responses, rather than from a single scene or a single audience comment.

Cultural Mediation: Translating Macro-Level Narratives into Everyday Cultural Experience

The first role is cultural mediation, which involves translating abstract political, economic, and historical narratives into concrete, emotionally engaging experiences (Knöchelmann, 2025). In BRI discourse, ideas such as infrastructure, connectivity, and cooperation can appear distant or ideological (Yang & Gorp, 2021). The program reduces this distance by placing celebrities in ordinary situations of work, travel, language negotiation, and cultural learning.

Divas Hit the Road 5 reframes narratives about the Silk Road and the BRI through micro-level stories. Instead of focusing on policy achievements, it foregrounds labor, daily routines, cooperation, and emotional challenge. Scenes in which participants learn local customs, complete tasks, or rely on local residents make international cooperation visible as a lived experience.

From the perspective of Framing Theory, the program emphasizes human connection, shared hardship, and emotional growth. Close-up shots of faces, bodily labor, gestures of help, shared meals, and exhaustion reinforce emotional realism. Audience responses often highlighted warmth, curiosity, and communication difficulty, suggesting that diplomatic meaning was received affectively rather than through policy language.

Cultural mediation also operates temporally by connecting historical imagination with contemporary experience. References to Silk Road history, local traditions, and shared heritage are woven into present-day interactions, creating a sense of historical continuity without explicit political messaging. For instance, when the program places contemporary travel, local craft, food, architecture, or music within the symbolic geography of the Silk Road, it encourages viewers to understand cross-border relations as long-standing cultural exchange rather than as a purely modern geopolitical project.

In this sense, Divas Hit the Road 5 functions as a mediating interface between policy discourse and popular understanding. By translating macro narratives into everyday cultural experiences, the program lowers cognitive and emotional barriers to engagement, thereby enhancing the accessibility and acceptability of cultural diplomacy narratives. The evidence indicates that cultural mediation works not through direct explanation of the BRI but through repeated narrative scenes in which cooperation, vulnerability, learning, and mutual respect become visible and emotionally memorable.

Intercultural Relationship-Building: Mediated Interaction and Identity Negotiation

The second major role identified in this study is intercultural relationship-building. Throughout the series, Chinese participants engage in repeated interactions with local residents across different cultural, linguistic, and social contexts. These interactions are not presented as seamless or idealized encounters; rather, moments of misunderstanding, discomfort, unfamiliar rules, and communication difficulty are explicitly included in the narrative. This inclusion is significant because it prevents intercultural exchange from appearing artificially harmonious and instead presents relationship-building as a gradual process of adaptation.

According to Intercultural Identity Theory, these encounters can be understood as processes of stress, adaptation, and growth. Participants face unfamiliar norms, communication barriers, food practices, or work routines, but gradually develop empathy through cooperation. Scenes involving translation, local guidance, hospitality, and shared labor show that intercultural understanding depends on mutual assistance rather than one-sided cultural display.

Importantly, Chinese participants are not positioned as cultural authorities. They are often shown as learners who depend on local knowledge. This reduces hierarchy and models humility. Paraphrased audience responses praised participants' patience, respect for local practices, and willingness to admit unfamiliarity, indicating that viewers recognized humility as an intercultural value.

Intercultural relationship-building is further extended beyond on-screen interactions through audience participation. Analysis of online audience responses reveals that viewers actively engage with the program's intercultural narratives by expressing emotional identification, admiration, or self-reflection. Some comments emphasized that cultural differences became less intimidating when shown through ordinary meals, work, greetings, and small acts of help. Other

responses connected the program to personal travel experiences or expressed curiosity about the countries and communities represented in the episodes.

Online ethnography further shows that audiences do not passively consume intercultural representations. Through comments, hashtags, and short-video clips, viewers reinterpret emotional or humorous moments and circulate them beyond the original broadcast. This participatory dynamic extends relationship-building from on-screen interaction to a wider mediated dialogue.

As a result, *Divas Hit the Road 5* contributes to intercultural relationship-building not only by depicting interaction, but by facilitating processes of mediated identity negotiation among both participants and audiences. The program does not eliminate cultural differences; rather, it frames differences as manageable through patience, embodied participation, and emotional reciprocity. This finding directly supports the research objective of explaining how media representation and audience engagement contribute to international understanding.

Informal Public Diplomacy: Affective Communication and Soft Power Accumulation

The third role is informal public diplomacy. Public diplomacy traditionally refers to state efforts to influence foreign publics through communication and cultural exchange (Doncel-Martín & Elías, 2025), but contemporary public diplomacy also operates through non-state actors, celebrities, platforms, and affective narratives (Crilley & Saunders, 2025). The program is therefore an informal space where diplomatic meanings become familiar.

Unlike official diplomacy, informal public diplomacy relies on emotion, narrative persuasion, and cultural familiarity (McGowan, 2025). *Divas Hit the Road 5* embeds diplomatic meanings in entertainment scenes of authenticity and interpersonal connection. Audience responses often used everyday language such as warmth, mutual help, cultural beauty, and attractive travel routes rather than formal diplomatic vocabulary.

From a Structural Functionalist perspective, the program fulfills latent social functions. It normalizes China's presence in global cultural spaces, reinforces values of cooperation and mutual respect, and encourages audiences to imagine international cooperation at the interpersonal level. These functions operate indirectly: the program entertains while also shaping perceptions of cross-cultural engagement.

Soft power accumulates here through repeated exposure to emotionally resonant narratives rather than direct persuasion. By presenting China's international engagement as people-centered, the program fosters familiarity and emotional affinity. Nevertheless, its diplomatic role should be understood as mediated potential, since it may also project an idealized image of cultural harmony.

Furthermore, the entertainment format allows diplomatic meanings to circulate across platforms and borders. Clips, memes, hashtags, and short videos derived from the program are widely shared on social media, extending its reach beyond the original broadcast audience. These fragments often highlight humorous misunderstandings, emotional reconciliation, local scenery, and acts of cross-cultural assistance. Such transmedia circulation enhances the program's diplomatic relevance by embedding its narratives within everyday digital practices and encouraging audiences to become secondary distributors of cultural meaning.

Together, these findings show that *Divas Hit the Road 5* functions as informal public diplomacy, complementing traditional efforts. Its key contribution lies not in direct persuasion, but in making international engagement appear ordinary, relational, emotionally credible, and open to audience co-creation.

Discussion

The findings show that reality television can function as a mediated site of cultural diplomacy rather than merely as entertainment. Cultural mediation supports soft power scholarship by demonstrating that attraction is produced through both ordinary interpersonal experience and national culture (Nye, 1990; De Martino, 2020). Compared with official broadcasting, reality television works through vulnerability, humor, uncertainty, and emotional transformation. The finding on intercultural relationship-building is consistent with intercultural identity theory because the program presents stress, adaptation, and growth as part of cross-cultural encounter (Kim, 2007), but it also extends this view by showing that audiences participate in identity negotiation through comments, clips, and affective responses. The finding on informal public diplomacy supports recent discussions of affective and non-state public diplomacy (Crilley & Saunders, 2025; McGowan, 2025). However, the interpretation must remain critical. The program may encourage mutual understanding, but it can also simplify structural inequalities or contested interpretations of China's international engagement. Therefore, this study does not claim direct

change in foreign opinion; it argues that the program creates a mediated environment in which soft-power meanings can be produced, circulated, and negotiated.

New Knowledge from Research

This study contributes distinct but carefully bounded new knowledge to the intersection of media studies and international relations. The synthesized conceptual model can be stated as follows: BRI policy context and Silk Road symbolism → reality television narrative strategies → cultural mediation, intercultural relationship-building, and informal public diplomacy → audience emotional engagement and online co-creation → potential cultural soft power accumulation. This model shows that the program's diplomatic value lies in a mediated process rather than in direct political persuasion.

Expanding the Agents of Diplomacy: The study challenges a strictly state-centric view of cultural diplomacy by showing that reality television, celebrities, platforms, and audiences may function as informal participants in the co-creation of soft-power meanings. This contribution is stated cautiously because the study does not measure diplomatic effectiveness; instead, it identifies the mediated conditions under which entertainment content can acquire diplomatic significance.

Theoretical Integration: The study introduces an integrated analytical approach by connecting soft power, framing, intercultural identity, structural functionalism, and globalization-oriented communication. Framing explains how meanings are selected and emphasized; intercultural identity theory explains adaptation and empathy; structural functionalism explains the latent social function of entertainment; and communication/globalization perspectives explain transmedia circulation. This integration clarifies why reality television is not simply commercial filler but a structured environment for cultural negotiation.

Latent Diplomatic Functions: By applying Structural Functionalism, the research uncovers the specific latent social functions of entertainment media, such as normalizing a nation's global presence and shaping long-term international perceptions through affective, non-persuasive communication. The new knowledge is therefore not that all reality television is diplomatic, but that a reality program with explicit cross-cultural routes, emotionally framed encounters, and active audience circulation may function as an informal, mediated form of cultural diplomacy.

Conclusion

This study examined cultural diplomacy in *Divas Hit the Road 5: Silk Road Season*. Using a triangulated qualitative methodology, the study concludes that popular entertainment media may shape national images and intercultural understanding in a non-coercive way. The program performs three roles: cultural mediation, which translates BRI-related narratives into everyday experience; intercultural relationship-building, which models empathy, humility, adaptation, and identity negotiation; and informal public diplomacy, which uses emotional resonance and audience participation to circulate soft-power meanings. The study contributes theoretically by integrating framing, intercultural identity negotiation, and latent social function to explain entertainment-based cultural diplomacy. Practically, it suggests that cultural communication should emphasize reciprocity rather than direct persuasion. Its limitations are also clear: the study is based on a single case, relies on public online discourse rather than interviews, and cannot directly measure long-term diplomatic impact. Future research should compare more programs and examine audience reception through interviews, surveys, and cross-platform analysis.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, several practical suggestions and avenues for future research are proposed. These suggestions should be understood within the limits of a qualitative case study: they are intended to guide cultural-diplomacy practice and future academic inquiry rather than to claim universal effects.

For Policymakers: Cultural diplomacy strategies should increasingly leverage people-centered, entertainment-based media formats to supplement traditional diplomatic initiatives. Embedding cooperative narratives in popular media can implicitly enhance international understanding, especially when the narratives foreground humility, shared labor, local knowledge, and mutual respect. Policymakers should also recognize that audiences are active interpreters, so cultural diplomacy must allow space for dialogue rather than relying solely on one-way projection of national image.

For Media Producers: Future television productions aiming for international reach should prioritize emotional authenticity, mutual respect, and non-hierarchical cultural interactions. Showcasing vulnerability and a willingness to learn from local communities resonates strongly with audiences and supports long-term people-to-people connectivity. Producers should provide

clearer contextual information about local cultures while avoiding overly idealized representations that may weaken credibility.

For Future Research: Scholars should expand on this single-case study by conducting comparative analyses of reality television programs across national contexts or across multiple seasons. In-depth interviews, surveys, or focus groups could provide a more robust understanding of long-term audience interpretation beyond publicly available digital content. Investigating the role of platform algorithms in the transmedia circulation of such diplomatic narratives is also recommended.

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