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People-to-People Bonds:
Cultural Exchanges Strengthening the China-Pakistan Community
of Shared Future



By Mr. Imran Bhatti, Member Board of Experts,
Pakistan Research Center for a Community with
Shared Future (PRCCSF), Islamabad

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Ask most people what holds Pakistan and China together, and you'll get the same answer every time: CPEC, ports, highways, power plants. Steel and cement. And sure, that's a big part of the story. Officials on both sides love to say the friendship is "higher than the mountains and deeper than the oceans," and it's become such a familiar line that it almost stops meaning anything. But there's another layer to this relationship that rarely makes it into press briefings — the slow, unglamorous work of ordinary people getting to know each other. Students sharing a dorm room. A Chinese engineer learning to eat with his hands because his Pakistani hosts insisted. A Karachi shopkeeper who's picked up enough Mandarin to haggle with tourists. None of it shows up in a trade balance, but it might be the part of this relationship that actually lasts.



It Takes More Than Concrete

CPEC projects have dominated the headlines for a decade now, and fairly so — they matter to Pakistan's economic future in ways that are hard to overstate. But here's the thing nobody likes to say out loud: pouring concrete together doesn't automatically make two peoples fond of each other. If anything, big infrastructure deals can breed quiet resentment when local communities feel like they're watching from the sidelines rather than actually taking part. What's kept that resentment from taking root, at least so far, is a much less visible layer of exchange running alongside the engineering — students, artists, doctors, ordinary families — the kind of contact that gives the partnership an actual face instead of just a balance sheet.

Every year, thousands of Pakistani students head to Chinese universities, chasing scholarships and increasingly solid academic reputations, but also just plain curiosity about a country that

reinvented itself in the space of one generation. Many come home with more than a diploma — they come back speaking decent Mandarin, with a WeChat contact list full of old classmates, and an understanding of Chinese life that no lecture could have given them. Fewer Chinese nationals make the reverse trip to live and work in Pakistan, but the ones who do often end up loving karahi, picking up a few Urdu phrases, and staying in touch with local friends long after their contracts end.

Learning Each Other's Words

If you want one measurable sign that this friendship has gotten more personal, look at language enrollment. Confucius Institutes have popped up on campuses across Pakistan, and Mandarin classes that used to draw a handful of hobbyists now sometimes have waiting lists. Going the other direction, Urdu courses and Pakistan-studies programs have found a small but genuine following in China — partly because businesses need staff who can operate in Pakistan, and partly, honestly, out of simple curiosity.



Learning a language never really stops at grammar drills. It drags you into literature, film, food, jokes — the stuff that makes a place feel familiar instead of foreign. A Pakistani student who's put in the hours on Mandarin can usually explain Pakistan to a Chinese classmate far better than any government pamphlet ever could, and the same goes in reverse. These are the unofficial ambassadors nobody appoints, and in quiet ways they probably do more for the relationship than a stack of joint communiqués.



Dramas, Vlogs, and the Pull of Pop Culture

Popular culture has turned out to be an oddly effective bridge. Chinese dramas dubbed into Urdu have built a genuine following in Pakistani living rooms, and Pakistani serials have started picking up curious Chinese viewers drawn to their emotional, family-heavy storylines. Joint film and documentary projects are still few and far between, but the ones that exist are starting to explore shared history and everyday life rather than just politics and pipelines.

Social media has sped all of this up. Pakistani vloggers who travel to China come back with videos on its cities, food, and gadgets, and Pakistani viewers who'd only ever associated China with trade deals suddenly find themselves genuinely curious. Chinese creators have started doing the same in reverse, filming Pakistan's mountains and its famously warm hospitality, and often admitting on camera that the country surprised them — friendlier, more diverse, less intimidating than they expected.

Sister Cities, Quiet Partnerships

Below the national level, sister-city agreements and provincial partnerships have been multiplying without much fanfare. They rarely make the news, but they create steady channels for cultural troupes, student groups, and professional associations to keep visiting each other. Local governments run cultural weeks, exhibitions, and food festivals that let ordinary residents — not just diplomats — actually taste a bit of the other country's culture.

These smaller exchanges matter precisely because they're not one-off events. A provincial delegation that comes back year after year builds familiarity that a single state visit never could. Officials who host each other repeatedly build the kind of rapport that smooths over friction before it turns into a formal dispute. Sister-city ties, in that sense, work as the connective tissue holding the bigger relationship together when politics gets bumpy.

Showing Up When It Counts

Some of the most memorable moments in this relationship haven't come from ribbon-cuttings but from disasters. Chinese medical teams that flew in after Pakistan's major earthquakes and floods, and again during COVID-19, left an impression that no statistic really captures.

Pakistanis still bring these episodes up unprompted, often describing them as proof that the friendship goes beyond convenient business arrangements into something closer to genuine solidarity.

The same holds in reverse — Pakistani rescue workers and medics who helped after disasters in China are remembered fondly in the communities they assisted. These memories of showing up for each other during hard times tend to stick in a way that formal statements never do, simply because they show character rather than just announcing it.

The Parts Nobody Likes to Mention

None of this should be dressed up as an uncomplicated success story, because it isn't one. Cultural exchange between two very different societies runs into friction, always. Language barriers are still real outside academic and diplomatic circles. Some Pakistani workers on Chinese-funded projects



have grumbled about limited contact with local communities, while Chinese nationals working in Pakistan often face genuine security concerns that make them understandably cautious about mixing socially. Add in the usual cultural misreadings, mismatched business etiquette, and the occasional bad-faith media story on either side, and years of goodwill can take a hit in a matter of days.

Pretending these problems don't exist won't make people-to-people ties any stronger — if anything, it does the opposite. What actually helps is investing in real security for people taking part in exchanges, pushing language training beyond elite universities, and building more room for informal, unscripted interaction instead of tightly choreographed official visits that leave no space for anyone to just talk.



What Actually Sticks

Trade corridors get renegotiated. Infrastructure ages. Political priorities shift with every new government. What tends to survive all that, generation after generation, is the weight of actual relationships — the Pakistani engineer who studied in Beijing and still messages his old classmates, the Chinese doctor who volunteered after an earthquake and still asks after the families she treated, the student in Lahore who taught herself Mandarin from watching dramas. Nobody puts these people on a stage. They're just quietly the reason the relationship has lasted this long.

If the China-Pakistan Community of Shared Future is going to mean anything decades from now, pipelines and power plants won't be what carries it. It'll be the slow accumulation of small human exchanges — a shared meal, a borrowed phrase, help offered without anyone keeping score. Treating those bonds as worth building on their own terms, rather than as a nice side effect of economic cooperation, might turn out to be the smarter bet either country ever makes.