

# Cultural Diplomacy in ASEAN: Collaborative Efforts

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**Abstract**—The new 21<sup>st</sup> century has altered the political constellation amongst actor of international relations. Yet, one thing is certain that today's world cannot be separated from diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy offers an alternative solution to address the complexity of international relations by employing culture as the foundation of soft power. Unlike the conventional diplomacy which depends on formal and official state actors, the modern concept of diplomacy allows room for participation from non-state actors. This paper tries to apply the modern concept of cultural diplomacy to a regional organization. It argued that cultural diplomacy will be a suitable tool for ASEAN in invigorating the passion towards a regional integration. Further descriptive analysis on the type of cultural diplomacy that takes place in ASEAN will be given using the three schools of thought by focusing on the role of state and non-state actors.

**Index Terms**—ASEAN, culture, diplomacy, soft power.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The historical milestone of diplomacy study dates back to the Westphalian system in which the formalization of diplomatic conduct took place in the aftermath of the nations gathering in Osnabruck and Munster. Back then, diplomacy was inherent to state sovereignty and was conducted exclusively by states officials. However, the changing of world politics causes diplomacy to no longer strictly belong to the realm of state officials as it can be employed by various non-state actors.

The discourse on the correlation between culture and diplomacy has existed since the early of civilization. However, the study of International Relations has put less attention on the existence of culture, comparing to the political and economic perspectives. Originally cultural diplomacy refers to the potential of cultural expression through exchanges of ideas and information amongst people in order to increase their mutual understanding [1]. It reached its golden age during the Cold war era, and come to demise along with the United States victory. However cultural diplomacy has re-gained its importance during the wake of contemporary world politics and since then became a suitable instrument of maneuvers in the ever-changing relationships of modern states. *“Far from being on the verge of a new order the world has entered a period of great disorder. In facing these new dangers, a re-examination of old priorities is needed. Cultural diplomacy, in the widest sense, has increased in importance, whereas traditional diplomacy and military power ... are of limited use in coping with most of these dangers”* [2].

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Cultural diplomacy is not limited to relations between states but expanded involving the public masses. This paper tries to analyze the cultural diplomacy activities that have been carried out by ASEAN. ASEAN is chosen based on its goal to establish an ASEAN Community. Being different than the aim of conventional diplomacy that creates public perception between states, ASEAN cultural diplomacy offers a new approach in creating a perception amongst people of regional member states to a regional identity. In this light ASEAN brings a new attention to the relatively new if not unexplored realm of cultural diplomacy related to a regional building.

## II. APPLIED CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

The use of culture diplomacy between power-holders prior to Westphalian system can be traced back as early as the Bronze age. *‘It is argued that cultural diplomacy has been a norm for human's intent upon civilization’* [3]. Diplomacy during that time became a prominent way to nurture, maintain and preserve civilization in contrast to the waging war characteristic that places civilization on the verge of destruction. This simplistic mechanism emphasizing on relations between culture has been altered with the introduction of the nation states in which cultural diplomacy was conducted amongst sovereigns, although mainly informal prior to the WW I [4]. Later on, the post-Westphalian system of diplomacy was directed largely amongst nation-states giving birth to French's Universalism of ‘The Sun King’ and United States’ ‘City of the Hill’.

Thereupon, states across the region have adopted cultural approaches into their foreign policies. VOKS, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries became the tool for Soviet government to sponsor relations with pro-Soviet cultural groups. In western European such movements were pioneered by the French through the establishment of Alliance France in 1883, stressing the importance of language to connect France and the rest of the world. Italy founded the Dante Alighieri Society in 1889 to promote Italian culture. Meanwhile Germany created the Goethe Institute and the UK government decided to use British Council as its extended arms. Similar trend also spread into Asia. China took the road to cultural diplomacy in order to easing the strained diplomatic tension; especially apparent in its relation with Japan. Japan too employed cultural diplomacy as part of its national policy through Japan Foundation and International House of Japan as a way to engage its ASEAN counterparts.

## III. DEFINING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Defining what constitutes cultural diplomacy is proven to be difficult. This term is often used ‘interchangeably’ with propaganda, public diplomacy and cultural exchange [5].

Efforts to pinpoint an exact definition from scholars have been done, yet the evolving world politics requires the constant redefinition of this term.

The US Department of State defines cultural diplomacy as a *'direct and enduring contact between people of different nations [in which designed to] help create a better climate of international trust and understanding in which official relations can operate'*. Borrowing the experience of Cold War many of United States research centres argues that the term of cultural diplomacy refers to a *'dimensional meaning linked to political manipulation and subordination, and it has also been relegated to the backseat of diplomatic interaction'*. During that time the definition of cultural diplomacy was highly associated with propaganda policy. It received more negative connotation referring as the *'manipulation of cultural material and personnel for propaganda purposes'* [6]. Some argue that cultural diplomacy constitutes public diplomacy and is used to explain diplomatic behaviour intended to reach out to people through cultural elements, although few opt to differentiate them. However this paper treats cultural diplomacy interchangeably with public diplomacy due to the inherent similar characteristics. Additionally their similarity is prevalent related to the modes of conduct (vehicle) as both talk about *the development of lasting relationship with key individuals over many years or even decades through scholarship, exchanges, training, conferences, seminars and access to media channels'* [7]. In essence, cultural diplomacy is a set of *'national policy designed to support the export of representative sample of that nation's culture in order to further the objectives of foreign policy'* [8]. It can be interpreted as *'any policies designed to encourage public opinion to influence a foreign government and its attitudes towards the sender'* only it emphasizes the use of culture as its main modal and naturally allows for wider participations [9].

The vehicles of a cultural diplomacy employed cultural production as its main manifestation. It comprises of the promotion of states culture using educational exchange modes, arts and popular culture such as literature, music and film. Many of these vehicles of cultural diplomacy remain its primacy in the modern time. However, some significant changes occur with regard to the questions of *'who is the agent of cultural diplomacy?'* The adaptation towards new environment of world politics forces cultural diplomacy to adjust itself into a broader way; involving both state and non-state actors such as (but not limited to) private organizations, academicians, philanthropists, missionaries and artists in exporting the cultural missions.

#### IV. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: A SOFT POWER

Power has always been the back bone of state's interest, and they struggle to attain it. However power is scarce in a sense that it is difficult to possess. Power that comes from military supremacy or economic achievements would require high investment and is often at odds with national characteristic and capabilities to provide environment that enables the creation of power.

In his notion Joseph Nye stated that the primacy of either military or economic power solely is inadequate to ensure

the 'state survival' in the contemporary world politics. He goes emphasizing the need of a new concept in dealing with the changing fora in which he called as smart power. Smart power is the *'combination of the hard power of coercion and payment with the soft power of persuasion and attraction'*. [10] Yet, he argues that just combining the two types of power would not necessarily grant the preferred outcomes. While hard power is fairly visible, soft power depends on the credibility of the states. With soft power *'what target thinks is particularly important, and the target matter as much as the agents'* this implies that what is being perceived by target will determine the capacity of soft power [11]. Since *'attraction and persuasions are socially constructed'*, soft power will not take effect in the absence of two-way relationship [11].

Cultural diplomacy is a prime example of 'soft power' [12]. Culture, especially that is attractive to other, is one of the important sources of soft power [13]. Cultural diplomacy offers something that political, economic and especially military diplomacy cannot offer; the ability to persuade through culture, values and ideas and not coerce through a military, political or economic might. Even though cultural diplomacy can't be measured quantitatively, it has the capability to operate in the world where power is so diffuse and interdependency is the working ethic.

There are several main strengths of cultural diplomacy; a. Cultural diplomacy is a two-way connection instead of unilateral forces. Thus, it allows environment for dialogues that lead to trust-building b. Cultural diplomacy can increase understanding between people and culture as it caters the interest of the recipients and c. Cultural diplomacy operates in the long-term time. It can connect people from conflicting parties even in time of negative diplomatic relations. Therefore, it may serve as the only viable solution when tension and conflict persist [14].

#### V. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN ASEAN

ASEAN is on its way to achieve the ASEAN Community by the end of 2015. It composed of three pillars; the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASPC (ASEAN Political and Security Community) and ASSC (ASEAN Socio-Cultural Pillar) in which all of them are supposed to guide the integration processes of people in Southeast Asia region. The road towards a regional integration is not an easy one, especially since ASEAN member states poses a quite varied outlook in its political, economic and socio-cultural profiles. Yet, it doesn't discourage this region to push forward for a breakthrough achievement of its almost 5 decades of ASEAN history. A goal to achieve a community presupposes an emergence of shared regional identity and the first step to create this sense of we-feeling depends on the perception of public towards the regional identity [15]. After all, the integration that ASEAN seeks is resting on a people-centered ASEAN.

How can cultural diplomacy provide alternative booster for the integration movement in Southeast Asia? One particular important notion is that the strength of cultural diplomacy lies in its connection among human in which resonates to the idea of people-centered ASEAN. Here the role of cultural diplomacy can boost the integration process

by allowing a process of ASEAN culture socialization that in return would help to open up conducive environments to persuade and attract ASEAN people to the very idea of integration. By exposing ASEAN people into ASEAN culture, it is hoped that positive interaction will emerge, fostering further regional cooperation and relationship.

What kind of cultural diplomacy is at play in ASEAN today? There are three schools of thought that can be used in analyzing cultural diplomacy [16]. In essence this differentiation is based on the involvement of actors as the 'wielder' of cultural diplomacy. The first school sees cultural diplomacy as state-led activity. It uses the term propaganda and cultural diplomacy interchangeably and argues that culture is seen as 'an instrument of state policy'. The second school sees cultural diplomacy as an instrument to work at the exclusion of politic. It gravitates between both schools by offering a middle ground approaches, combining both state-actor and non-state actor. The last school sees that cultural diplomacy is beyond the realm of the state. It argues that cultural diplomacy entails either 'diplomatic activities by non-state actor' or 'promotion of a culture of a country by people' and is not confined by the state policies and interests.

This paper argues the second type of cultural diplomacy is currently adopted by ASEAN in its attempt to persuade and attract ASEAN people on the idea of regional integration. ASEAN delivers its mandates to two major components, the first and foremost is the delivery of cultural diplomacy sponsored by the member states of ASEAN and the second one is through the coordination of ASEAN bodies; either that of ASEAN Secretariat or ASEAN foundation.

Culture according to ASEAN Declaration of Cultural Heritage 2000 refers to the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, intellectual, emotional and material features that characterize a society or social group. It includes the arts and letters as well as human modes of life, value systems, creativity, knowledge systems, traditions and beliefs. It consists of (a) significant cultural values and concepts; (b) structures and artifacts: dwellings, buildings for worship, utility structures, works of visual arts, tools and implements, that are of a historical, aesthetic, or scientific significance; (c) sites and human habitats: human creations or combined human creations and nature, archaeological sites and sites of living human communities that are of outstanding value from a historical, aesthetic, anthropological or ecological viewpoint, or, because of its natural features, of considerable importance as habitat for the cultural survival and identity of particular living traditions; (d) oral or folk heritage: folkways, folklore, languages and literature, traditional arts and crafts, architecture, and the performing arts, games, indigenous knowledge systems and practices, myths, customs and beliefs, rituals and other living traditions; e) the written heritage; (f) popular cultural heritage: popular creativity in mass cultures (i.e. industrial or commercial cultures), popular forms of expression of outstanding aesthetic, anthropological and sociological values, including the music, dance, graphic arts, fashion, games and sports, industrial design, cinema, television, music video, video arts and cyber art in technologically-oriented urbanized communities.

ASEAN style of cultural diplomacy has been focusing mainly on culture and art performances. This is understandable since the region is the home of various cultural, religion and racial backgrounds with rich and varied natural resources. Additionally ASEAN cultural diplomacy tries to engage people of ASEAN through the discussion of ideas and capacity building by means of education empowerment.

Within the ASEAN Secretariat, cultural affairs are the responsibility of ASEAN Minister for Culture and Information (AMCI) under the leadership of ASEAN COCI (Committee on Culture and Information). Moreover these endeavors are supported by the ASEAN Foundation in which *'the Foundation and the ASEAN Secretariat shall play complementary roles to help achieve ASEAN's objectives in accordance with ASEAN's priorities'* under the framework of MOU on the Establishment of ASEAN Foundation art. IX. An interview session with Nia Kadin, the Head of Programme of the ASEAN Foundation found out that as a regional body, ASEAN has not yet owned specific regional cultural policies as each country has a unique culture of its own and adopts policies accordingly to their national interest. However, ASEAN has pursued activities on cultural diplomacy by focusing mainly on P-P interaction; involving grassroots societies. It is clearly stated in ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint that ASEAN Community must be build on a people-centered ASEAN. Additionally, ASEAN considers the importance of multilink cultural relationship involving both G-G and G-P cooperation in ensuring the dissemination of cultural values across the region. In its capacities to deliver cultural diplomacy activities, ASEAN is focusing on promotional events (seminars and performances) and capacity building carried out by various stakeholders. Some activities were conducted by collaboration between member states and ASEAN bodies. For example ASEAN Youth Camp (AYC) is organized by ASEAN COCI Sub-committee on Culture in cooperation with respective member states of ASEAN. It is an annual event intended to foster a stronger sense of community, especially amongst the young generation through cultural exchanges and capacity building. As delivered by Singapore Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong during interview session with media in 2013, he stated that "Our youths must have a greater awareness of their interlinked destinies within this region, for they will be the future captains to steer the direction of ASEAN and secure its place in the world". Similar collaboration can also be found in events such as the ASEAN Cultural Week, ASEAN Best Performing Arts, or the ASEAN Cultural Show and Exhibition. State-led cultural diplomacy activities are very apparent especially during the Indonesian Chairmanship last 2011. ASEAN Fair and ASEAN Jazz Festival are few of its attempts to re-emphasizing the important face of ASEAN cultural diversity. These events, supported by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia, do not only offer entertainment through arts, but they also facilitate the exchange of interest and socialization process amongst ASEAN citizenships.

The involvement of private entities on ASEAN cultural diplomacy is viable during the ASEAN Today programme.

"ASEAN Today" is a monthly, half-hour TV program on Southeast Asia produced by Metro TV, an Indonesian TV channel. The program is hosted in Jakarta with rotating co-host from each ASEAN country. This programme supported by the ASEAN Secretariat, ASEAN Indonesia, and AirAsia as their main stakeholders. Additionally, the ASEAN Puppetry programme aims to promote ASEAN's Cultural Heritage through Puppetry Symposium, Dialogues and Festivals. This event is organized by the ASEAN Puppetry Association (APA) and funded by the ASEAN Foundation through the Japan-ASEAN Solidarity Fund. The project also supports the preservation of ASEAN cultural heritage and the promotion of ASEAN identity through fostering greater awareness of the region's diverse culture and heritage as mentioned by the the ASEAN Charter Articles. 1.9 and 1.14)

It is apparent that the majority of ASEAN cultural diplomacy activities have been executed mostly under the state's framework, either through activities led by individual member states or joint programmes with ASEAN bodies. The involvement of non-state actor is limited, and if conducted it is usually done alongside official partnership.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In its development, the definition of cultural diplomacy has expanded incorporating new characteristics. Cultural diplomacy used to be employed by a specific state towards other state. However with regard to the mushrooming existence of non-state actors and the decreasing state's capability in handling the interlinked world problems, it has allowed for the utilization of such approach to diplomacy by non-state actors.

The case of ASEAN Cultural Diplomacy is rather different from conventional states diplomacy as it allows rooms for collaborations between state and non-state actors. If Nye argues that cultural diplomacy works best applied by non-state actors due to its relative distant position from economic and political agenda, in case of ASEAN it has proved that states-led cultural diplomacy has the ability to persuade and attract more people.

This does not mean that the non-state actors occupied less effective role in its widespread, especially considering the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN Foundation have incorporating academicians, students, artist, and civil societies on board. However, their individual movement is quite limited, comparing to states-led activities.

In the coming years we can expect the wave of ASEAN cultural diplomacy led by the public, but until the public is

ready to ride the wave, the role of regional bodies and states will still occupy the front stage of ASEAN cultural diplomacy.

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