

# Language and Culture in the Baltic States from Perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative: An Introduction

**Yang Gexin**

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University

Yuhangtang Rd. 866, Xihu District, Hangzhou, 310058, China

Email: ygx80080@163.com

**Abstract** China's historical recognition of the Baltic States' independence has paved the way for stable and positive relations, further strengthened by the Belt and Road Initiative. Due to the unique geographical position of the three countries and their own national conditions, the political cooperation and trade cooperation between the three countries and China are faced with some internal and external constraints. Under such circumstances, China is bound to encounter many language problems in the carrying out of the Belt and Road Initiative. If these problems are not properly understood and properly solved, they will to some extent bring some negative impacts to the construction of the Belt and Road. Therefore, we should fully recognize the role and status of language in the construction of the Belt and Road, when planning and formulating relevant language strategies. In this context, *Forum for World Literature Studies* organizes a special issue, "Studies of Languages and Culture in the Baltic States from the Belt and Road Initiative," to delve into the aspects of languages and culture in the Baltic states and their influences on language policy and economic development and cultural exchange.

**Keywords** the Baltic States; the Belt and Road Initiative; cultural exchange; language policy

**Author** Yang Gexin, Ph.D. is Professor of English in the School of International Studies at Zhejiang University (Hangzhou 310002, Chian). His research interests include ethical literary criticism and British and American romantic literature (Email: ygx80080@163.com)<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This research is one part of The Special Program of Zhejiang University "Studies on the Languages and Cultures in the Baltic Countries" supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities.

China was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of the three Baltic States. Over the years, despite all the ups and downs in the development of relations between China and the three countries, they have always maintained a stable and positive trend. With the further deepening of China's opening up to the outside world and the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, a new trend has begun to emerge in China's relations with the three countries.<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in the establishment of cooperation mechanisms between China and the three countries. First, the three countries have joined the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (commonly known as the "17+1" mechanism) initiated by China and the Central and Eastern European countries, and have carried out a series of cooperation within the relevant mechanism. Secondly, the three countries signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation on the Silk Road Economic Belt with China, officially becoming countries along the Silk Road Economic Belt. Third, China signed a series of agreements with each of the three countries. These agreements started from the different demands of the three countries and carried out bilateral cooperation according to their respective needs. These documents have become the legal basis for cooperation between China and the three countries in the new era, from multilateral to bilateral, from regional cooperation to bilateral cooperation, fully reflecting the consensus between China and the three countries, which plays a positive role in the further development of political, economic and cultural cooperation between China and the three countries. For the three countries, China has become one of the most important trading partners outside the EU.

Although the relations between China and the three countries have made great progress, there are still some shortcomings. Due to the unique geographical position of the three countries and their own national conditions, the political cooperation and trade cooperation between the three countries and China are faced with some internal and external constraints. Under such circumstances, we believe that the development of people-to-people and cultural exchanges between China and the three countries is an important aspect to break the bottleneck in the development of China-three countries relations. Bilateral or multilateral cultural exchanges will not only further increase mutual understanding, eliminate stereotypes and achieve effective communication, which will lead to consensus on a range of related issues. Deepen cooperation and promote further development of relations between China and the three countries.

First of all, we must adhere to the principle of "harmony in diversity." Harmony in diversity is an important part of Chinese traditional culture, which

---

1 See [http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/gzdt/201510/t20151022\\_755473.html](http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/gzdt/201510/t20151022_755473.html) (accessed: 09 /09/2023).

emphasizes seeking common ground while reserving minor differences. For China and the three countries, different geographical conditions, different national growth experiences and their unique survival circumstances lead to different values and methodologies. In this case, there may be different views on the same issue, and disagreements and contradictions may arise. Therefore, in cultural exchanges, China and the three countries should reach mutual understanding and mutual trust on the basis of in-depth understanding of each other's concepts and internal cultural psychology of the nation.

In terms of cultural exchanges, cultural differences are obvious, which happens to arouse the interest of people in other countries. Though these existing differences or customs often bring surprise or rejection, the purpose of cultural exchanges is to make others see the meaning behind the superficial differences. The cultural exchange we emphasize is not only to show the exotic customs through the differences of surface culture, but also to suggest the rationality of the existence of behavior and institutional culture, and finally to achieve the compatibility of conceptual culture. The essence of "harmony in diversity" is to achieve mutual harmony and common prosperity through the common experience of mankind. By adhering to the principle of harmony, China and the three countries can understand and accept each other's culture more pragmatically and calmly, and perceive the rational core of each other's culture, thus making it easier to reach consensus in bilateral and multilateral exchanges.

Secondly, cultural exchanges are an important way to promote global cooperation which follows the principle of reciprocity and mutual benefit.<sup>1</sup> Cultural exchanges not only promote mutual understanding between people, but also bring about the corresponding results, achieving reasonable and effective profit distribution, so as to create a solid material foundation for cultural exchanges. Adhering to the principle of reciprocity and mutual benefit can avoid using culture as a soft power to pursue cultural hegemony and cultural centralism, so that countries of different sizes can achieve peaceful coexistence and common development.

Finally, we should adhere to the principle of diversified cooperation. The concept of culture is rich and diverse. It is necessary to make cultural exchange more interesting and attractive in ways that are popular with the public. In this case, it is necessary to take conceptual culture as the core, integrating it into material culture and behavioral culture through the variety of cooperation.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Thomas L. Ijgen, editor, *Hard Power, Soft Power, and the Future of Transatlantic Relations*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006.

In accordance with these three principles, in the practice of cultural exchange and cooperation between China and the Baltic countries, the first step is to strengthen top-level design to push the institutional construction and effective policy formulation. Second, it is necessary to build a platform and carrier for cultural exchanges with innovation, enhancing the intrinsic quality and external attractiveness of cultural linkages, and promoting the sustainable development of cultural industry. Third, give full play to their respective educational advantages, cultivating elite talents who understand each other's culture and national conditions through combining language education with professional education so as to promote the understanding and friendship between the people and the country.

China is bound to encounter many language problems in the carrying out of the Belt and Road Initiative. If these problems are not properly understood and properly solved, they will to some extent bring some negative impacts to the construction of the Belt and Road. Therefore, we should fully recognize the role and status of language in the construction of the Belt and Road, when planning and formulating relevant language strategies according to the characteristics of language and language education and then train, develop and make good use of relevant language strategists and language talents from a long-term and overall perspective. In this context, *Forum for World Literature Studies* organizes a special issue, "Studies on Languages and Cultures in the Baltic States from the Belt and Road Initiative," to delve into the aspects of language and culture in the Baltic states and their influences on language policy and economic development and cultural exchange.

The first article of the special issue titled "Estonian Language Policy: A Perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative," offers a comprehensive examination of Estonia's intricate language policy within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Central to this exploration is Estonia's unwavering commitment to preserving its national language and cultural identity while simultaneously addressing the challenges posed by linguistic diversity, particularly with regard to the Russian-speaking minority within its borders. The article carefully traces the historical evolution of Estonia's language policies, analyzing their profound impact on critical facets of the nation's identity, integration efforts, educational system, and cultural heritage preservation and highlighting the striking relevance of Estonia's language policy within the broader context of the Belt and Road Initiative. It underscores the pivotal role of language as a vehicle for global connectivity and international cooperation, emphasizing the significant lessons that Estonia's language policies can offer to nations participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, especially those grappling with intricate issues related to linguistic diversity.

“The Voice of Latgale,” a periodical published from 1946 to 1985, holds a significant place in the history of Latvian exile literature and culture. This publication serves as a unique window into the world of Latvian émigrés during a tumultuous period in history, when Latvia faced the challenges of World War II and subsequent Soviet occupation, leading to the displacement of many Latvians who sought refuge in various countries. Amidst this backdrop of uncertainty and change, religion emerged as a vital cultural and social anchor for Latvian émigré communities. It became a repository of faith and cultural traditions, allowing Latvians abroad to maintain their sense of identity and continuity in the face of adversity.

Oksana Kovzele & Ilze Kacane in their article delves into the pages of “The Voice of Latgale” and explores its coverage of Christian holidays within the Latvian exile community. It sheds light on how these holidays were celebrated and how they served as a means of preserving and passing down religious and cultural traditions. These holidays were not merely religious observances; they represented a unique blend of faith, cultural heritage, and resilience. This exploration of Christian holidays in “The Voice of Latgale” offers a glimpse into the enduring spirit and cultural resilience of the Latvian diaspora during a critical chapter in their history. It also provides a deeper understanding of the significance of religion and culture for Latvian émigrés and their efforts to maintain their identity and solidarity during a period of profound displacement.

In an era marked by shifting generations and evolving societal perspectives, there has been a growing fascination with the Soviet era, particularly in the realm of collective and individual memory. Literature, as one of the primary repositories of human experience, has played a pivotal role in shedding light on this tumultuous period. However, contemporary literature serves a dual purpose—it not only facilitates individual sense-making and identity formation but also encapsulates the very codes and symbols that defined an epoch. Karine Laganovska explores into the analysis of two novels: “Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee” by the German author Thomas Brussig and “Čeka, bumba & rokenrols” by the Latvian writer Pauls Bankovskis.

Through the lens of semiotics and phenomenological-hermeneutic methodology, Karine Laganovska aims to uncover the distinct approaches taken by these authors as they reflect on their memories of the Soviet period, seen from the perspective of childhood and youth. The analysis on the authors’ experiences and their interpretation of the “text of experience,” demonstrates how literature encodes cultural memory and provides invaluable insights into the human condition,

deepening our understanding of how literature serves as a conduit for both individual and collective memory, transcending time and space to offer profound insights into the human experience.

The trilogy “Out for a Million” by Vladimir Krymov, a writer born in Daugavpils, Latvia, offers a compelling exploration of marriage and family relations within the context of the Old Believers during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Russian Empire. Krymov’s work meticulously dissects the generational differences within the Old Believer community, with a distinct focus on the older generation, the middle generation, and the younger generation. Each generation grapples with unique challenges and evolving worldviews, influenced by the changing societal landscape, especially in metropolitan areas like Moscow and St. Petersburg. One of the central themes explored is the significance of marriage and family in preserving Old Believer identity and cultural values. The older generation upholds traditional family structures, characterized by hierarchy, strict roles, and a commitment to religious upbringing. For them, the family serves as a bastion of cultural preservation and identity. In this analysis, Žans Badins & Evita Badina offer a thought-provoking exploration of how marriage and family relations intersect with cultural and religious identity, making it a compelling and enlightening read for those interested in the dynamics of Old Believer communities and the broader social changes of the era.

Marite Opincane in her article explores the nostalgia for sailing ships and the sea in Joseph Conrad’s autobiographical fiction with the various research methods including biographical, historico-cultural, literary-historical, interpretational, and semiotic approaches. Conrad, a sailor in the British Navy, witnessed the detrimental effects of civilization and industrial development on the sea and ships. He had a deep connection to sailing ships and viewed them as beautiful and alive, in contrast to the impersonal and destructive nature of steamers. Conrad’s autobiographical fiction draws from his personal experiences and knowledge of the sea.

A notable feature of both Evdokimov and Ivanov is their birth in the Baltics, with Evdokimov being born in Ukraine but raised in Riga and Ivanov hailing from Tallinn. Both authors acquired citizenship through the naturalization process in their respective countries, Latvia and Estonia, marking a significant aspect of their biographies. It is crucial to acknowledge the diverse political, cultural, and linguistic landscapes that distinguish Estonia and Latvia. Through this exploration, Elina Vasiljeva discusses the specific features of contemporary Russian literature in the Baltic states, particularly in Latvia and Estonia. Focusing on the works of two authors, her article provides a comprehensive understanding of the intricate

dynamics of Russian-language literature in the Baltic region, revealing how it both reflects and shapes the cultural tapestry of Latvia and Estonia.

The Baltic States are renowned for their Baltic languages, which form a part of the wider Balto-Slavic language group. Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian, "the primary languages spoken in these countries, are some of the most ancient Indo-European languages still in use today" (Holst 269). Doing researches on the languages and cultures of the Baltic states is important for for a better understanding and appreciation of the rich history and heritage of these countries. It helps to preserve and promote their unique cultural traditions, languages, and literature. Additionally, studying the language and culture of the Baltic states can foster greater intercultural understanding and dialogue between different nations and regions. It also provides insights into the social, political, and economic dynamics of these countries, contributing to the fruitful collaboration and smooth progress of the Belt and Road Initiative.

### Works Cited

- Holst, J. "The Baltic Languages: An Overview." *The Oxford Handbook of the Baltic Sea*, edited by C. Ball & N. Müller. Oxford UP, 2019, pp. 269-284.
- Ilggen, Thomas L, ed. *Hard Power, Soft Power, and the Future of Transatlantic Relations*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006.
- [http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/gzdt/201510/t20151022\\_755473.html](http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/gzdt/201510/t20151022_755473.html) (accessed: 09 /09/2023).