

THE DRAGON'S SMILE:

CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN GEORGIA



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Civic IDEA

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Introduction

“ *In view of their friendly relations and huge potential of cooperation in the people-to-people and cultural fields, the two sides agreed to enhance their cultural cooperation. They will encourage citizens to visit each other’s countries and strengthen cooperation in **tourism, health, youth, and sports**. In addition, they will also enhance their exchanges in the areas of **film, press and public diplomacy**.* ”

Article 3.2 of the [China-Georgia Strategic Partnership Agreement](#)

One of the key areas of cooperation under the Sino-Georgian Strategic Partnership Agreement, [signed](#) on July 31, 2023, is culture. While this may initially appear innocuous, it carries significant political implications for the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The development of cultural relations with partner countries serves as a vital instrument for enhancing China’s soft power and extending its influence. In particular, efforts to promote awareness of Chinese culture often obscure the PRC’s underlying strategic objectives, which include:

- Cultivating a favorable perception of China among the local population of partner countries;
- Disseminating the PRC’s perspectives on international relations and governance;
- Counterbalancing and diminishing Western influence, particularly in response to the dominance of Western cultural heritage;
- Engaging the Chinese diaspora globally by involving them in cultural events to strengthen their ties with the PRC;
- Reinforcing national security and the “One China” policy by embedding cultural narratives and clichés related to Taiwan, Tibet, and the South China Sea in cultural events and programs.

Given these considerations, Western democracies are well aware of the PRC’s strategic approach to foreign policy, prompting them to exercise caution in all aspects of their engagement with Beijing, including cultural cooperation. However, in practice, the “Georgian Dream” government disregards international experience when aligning with the PRC. Consequently, the measures undertaken in this domain fail to align with Georgia’s strategic national security interests.

Since 2017, Civic IDEA has examined the influence of the People’s Republic of China across Georgia’s economic, political, educational, media, and civil sectors. At present, we present a new report focusing on an aspect of Sino-Georgian cooperation that has hitherto remained outside our scope of analysis—namely, the soft power influence of Chinese culture in Georgia.

The Timeline of Sino-Georgian Cultural Relations (2020-2024)

- 2020 / Dec 18. ○ Georgia's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Archil Kalandia, **met** with the Director General of the Department of International Exchanges and Cooperation of China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Both parties agreed to collaborate in the fields of culture and tourism.
- 2021 ○ The Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Youth of Georgia and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China **signed** a cooperation agreement for the period 2021–2025.
- 2022 / Sep. ○ The Chair of Georgia's Culture Committee, Eliso Bolkvadze, **met** with the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of China to Georgia, Zhou Qian. The discussions emphasized the significance of cultural diplomacy, and both sides agreed to organize joint events.
- 2023 / Sep 17. ○ The National Archives hosted the opening ceremony of the Chinese Film Festival, **organized** with the support of the PRC Embassy, the Chinese Film Administration, and Georgia's Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Youth.
- 2023 ○ During a visit to Georgia, a delegation from the Chinese Film Administration **met** with representatives of the Georgian National Film Center.
- 2023 / Sep 25. ○ As part of a working visit, a delegation from the Chinese Film Administration **visited** Georgia's Ministry of Culture.
- 2024 / Jun 14. ○ The Chair of the Culture Committee, Eliso Bolkvadze, **met** with the Director General of the Foreign Affairs Department of Shandong Province. The meeting underscored the role of cultural cooperation in strengthening people-to-people ties.
- 2024 / Jun 28. ○ Representatives of the Culture Committee of the Georgian Parliament **held** discussions with a governmental delegation from Jiangsu Province and members of the Chinese business sector to explore prospects for cultural collaboration.
- 2024 / Aug 13. ○ Charge d'Affaires a.i. of the Chinese Embassy in Georgia, Xu Haizheng, **met** with the Chair of the Sports Committee of the Georgian Parliament, Irakli Medzmarishvili. Both sides exchanged views on Sino-Georgian sports cooperation and agreed to organize joint training programs across various sports disciplines.
- 2025 / Nov 15-17 ○ Deputy Minister of Education, Science, and Youth of Georgia, Ms. Tamar Makharashvili, **participated** in the "World Chinese Language Conference" held in Beijing.

Soft Power from a Chinese Perspective

The concept of soft power, originally developed within Western academic discourse, was formally recognized as a key element of Chinese national policy in 2007. On October 15 of that year, during the 17th Party Congress, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Hu Jintao, **identified** cultural development as a fundamental component of China's soft power. In the same speech, he stated:

“ We must vigorously develop the cultural industry... create a thriving cultural market and enhance the industry's international competitiveness. ”

The enhancement of soft power has remained a central priority in the PRC's foreign policy under Xi Jinping's leadership. Since 2013, Xi has repeatedly underscored the importance of expanding China's cultural influence on the global stage. At the 2014 Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, he **emphasized**:

“ We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world. ”

Notably, one of the key objectives **outlined** in the PRC's long-term national development goals for 2035 is **the advancement of Chinese soft power and cultural influence**.

“ The Chinese Communist Party's strategic roadmap explicitly prioritizes strengthening China's global presence in various domains, including media, science, the film industry, literature, and the arts. ”

According to Brand Finance's **Global Soft Power Index 2024**, China ranked third in soft power rankings, having improved its overall score by 6.2 points. In this regard, China stands as the fastest-growing soft power nation in the world.

Sino-Georgian Cooperation in the Cultural Sphere

Amid the Georgian Dream government's increasingly pro-Chinese rhetoric, Sino-Georgian cooperation in certain cultural sectors has notably intensified. Given the current political climate in Georgia, efforts to deepen cultural ties between the two countries can be interpreted as part of a broader strategy to expand Chinese influence. This process aims to foster positive perceptions of the PRC among the Georgian population and shape public expectations accordingly.

On September 17, 2023, the Chinese Film Festival was held in Tbilisi, organized by the Chinese Embassy in Georgia, the China Film Administration, and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth of Georgia. The event was attended by Chinese Ambassador Zhou Qian, Chairperson of the Culture Committee of the Georgian Parliament Eliso Bolkvadze, Deputy Minister of Culture, Sports, and Youth Irakli Giviashvili, as well as representatives of Chinese companies operating in Georgia. Notably, in their addresses, officials underscored the importance of cultural cooperation. Deputy Minister Giviashvili, for instance, reaffirmed the Ministry of Culture’s commitment to fostering deeper cultural exchanges between Georgia and China.



Since 2023, Sino-Georgian cooperation has also expanded into the theatrical arts. On August 31, 2024, the first-ever Georgian-Chinese theatrical collaboration was staged in Shanghai—a new interpretation of Hamlet, featuring actors from both Georgia and China.



Additionally, on August 24, 2024, a joint concert was held in Beijing, bringing together the Georgian ensemble “Geo Folk Tour” and the Chinese ensemble “Glintwine”. According to the Embassy of Georgia in China, “Geo Folk Tour” has maintained active collaboration with Chinese musicians for several years.

„Georgia-China – A Third of a Century“

The mission of enhancing Chinese soft power in Georgia is not solely pursued by actors affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) but is also actively supported by representatives of the “Georgian Dream” Party. In light of the current political situation, December 2024 saw the release of a documentary film, [Georgia-China – A Third of a Century](#), produced by Georgian MP Irakli Mezurishvili. The film explores various aspects of Sino-Georgian relations, including political and diplomatic ties, as well as economic and cultural cooperation. The overarching narrative suggests that its primary objective is to portray China as a “trusted partner” and to foster pro-Chinese sentiment among the Georgian public.

The documentary features prominent figures such as Chinese Ambassador Zhou Qian, Georgian Dream Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgian Ambassador to the PRC Paata Kalandadze, and First Deputy Speaker of Parliament Giorgi Volski. Against a backdrop of footage captured in China, these individuals discuss the significance of bilateral cooperation, tourism, trade, and Chinese investments in Georgia.

A particularly notable segment of the film focuses on the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Project. Despite official statements indicating that negotiations with the prospective Chinese partner remain ongoing, the documentary presents Anaklia Port as a key symbol of Sino-Georgian cooperation and a fulfillment of the aspirations of Anaklia’s residents. For instance, at one point in the film, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze states:

“ We are connected with China through various important projects; however, I would like to highlight one. This is the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Project, which will be implemented with Chinese partners. ”

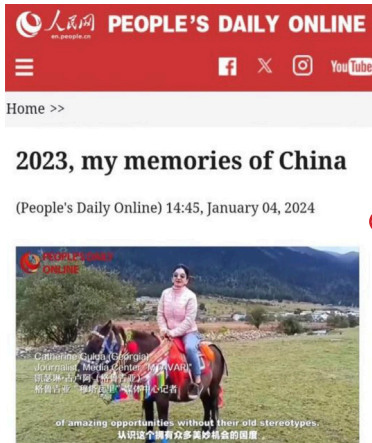
Popularization of China in the Media Sector

Since the establishment of the Sino-Georgian Strategic Partnership, the media organization Mediacentre Mtavari has played an active role in promoting Chinese culture in Georgia. Between 2023 and 2025, the organization’s journalist and [sole owner](#), Ekaterine Gulua, produced over 600 reports on China. Notably, on the very day the Sino-Georgian Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed, Gulua announced on her social media account that she would be traveling to China for a year, citing the country’s emerging opportunities for Georgia.

As part of her coverage of China, Gulua traveled extensively across various Chinese regions and cities, engaging with local officials, including governors and mayors. Her reporting encompassed not only cultural topics but also informative broadcasts on China’s parliamentary system, international forums, and conferences held under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In March 2024, she attended the 14th National People’s Congress, where she met a Chinese journalist. In an interview with GD today, she [remarked](#):

“The Belt and Road Initiative is our future.” Gulua’s active engagement drew the attention of several Chinese media outlets, including the People’s Daily.

In early January 2025, Mediacentre Mtavari published an [article](#) on its website in which Gulua reflected extensively on her experiences in China. She emphasized cultural similarities between Georgia and China, noting that travels had profoundly changed her perspective, leading her to describe China as a “new heaven.”



Interestingly, in the same article, Gulua [asserted](#) that “all the programs implemented by the People’s Republic of China are beneficial.” Accordingly, several key questions remain unanswered: Who financed her travels to China? Was her trip and reporting initiative commissioned by a third party? No publicly available sources provide definitive answers to these inquiries. Nonetheless, Gulua has publicly expressed her intention to continue traveling in China, documenting her experiences in a series of travel diaries, which she ultimately plans to compile into a book titled “Modern China.”

Museum of Chakvi



In the aforementioned documentary film Georgia-China – A Third of a Century particular attention is given to a Chinese figure, Lao John Jao. According to the film, Lao John Jao was the first person to introduce “tea culture” to Georgia and lived near Batumi until 1920. Interestingly, in 2018, [reports](#) emerged in Georgia about plans to produce a film about Lao John Jao; however, no further updates on the project have been made public.

In 2024, Zaur Akhvlediani, Head of the Cultural Heritage Protection Agency of Adjara, [announced](#) that a home museum dedicated to Lao John Jao would be established in Chakvi by 2025. In April 2024, representatives of the agency traveled to Beijing, where they met with Chinese partners and reached an agreement on the museum’s development. As part of the agreement, the People’s Republic of China will equip the museum with digital and LED technology. For the rehabilitation of the museum, the Georgian state allocated 910,000 GEL.

Furthermore, on March 15, 2024, Georgian Ambassador to China Paata Kalandadze met with Professor David Liu Hao of Peking University, a descendant of Lao John Jao. During the meeting, they discussed the museum's establishment and the broader prospects for Sino-Georgian cultural cooperation.



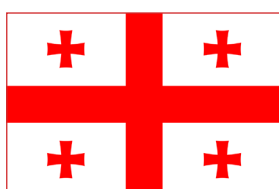
Cooperation in the Field of Tourism

One of the key mechanisms for expanding Chinese influence is the enhancement of people-to-people exchanges. In the context of political relations, agreements reached at the governmental level have facilitated increased tourist exchanges between Georgia and China.

A significant milestone in this regard was reached on September 11, 2023, when a preferential visa regime was introduced for citizens of the People's Republic of China. Several months later, on May 28, 2024, China reciprocated by introducing a visa-free regime for Georgian citizens.

This decision initially generated high expectations within the Georgian tourism industry, as many anticipated a substantial increase in the number of Chinese tourists, which was expected to contribute to the sector's development. Consequently, the majority of the Georgian population viewed the visa-free regime with China as a positive development.

Following the implementation of the visa-free regime, the number of Chinese tourists in Georgia increased by 83.4%. According to data published by the Georgian National Tourism Administration, 48,304 Chinese tourists visited Georgia in 2023, whereas by 2024, this number had reached 88,583. However, despite this significant increase, representatives of local tourism companies report that the economic benefits have not aligned with their initial expectations.



Specifically, after the visa-free regime was introduced, several Chinese companies entered the Georgian tourism market, organizing tours exclusively for Chinese citizens and providing comprehensive services, including Chinese-speaking tour guides. In 2024 alone, 105 Chinese companies were registered in Georgia's tourism sector. As a result, many Georgian tourism industry representatives feel they have been marginalized in relation to Chinese tourists, describing their role as that of an "outsider" in the market.

The Georgian Embassy in China frequently holds meetings with representatives of Chinese tourism companies to strengthen Sino-Georgian tourism cooperation. For instance, the Georgian ambassador has engaged in discussions with various key stakeholders, including the President of the China Association of Travel Services, as well as executives from Jilin Tiantian Hua Sheng Air Service Co. Ltd., Beijing Tianchang Business Travel Agency, China Xinhai International Travel Service Co. Ltd., and Shaanxi Tourism Group. These meetings aim to enhance tourism exchanges between the two countries. However, as statistical data suggest, the primary beneficiaries of increased Sino-Georgian tourism cooperation appear to be Chinese companies rather than Georgian stakeholders.

China-Georgia Sister Cities/Regions

One of the key instruments for strengthening China’s “soft power” is the deepening of cooperation between cities and regions of both countries. Over the past five years, significant steps have been taken in this direction:

- 2021 / Dec 25. ○ Batumi and Sanya **signed** a cooperation agreement, outlining collaboration in tourism, trade, education, culture, and sports.
- 2022 / May 06. ○ Kutaisi and Xi’an **signed** a document formalizing cooperation in trade, tourism, education, culture, and sports.
- 2022 / May 08. ○ As part of an event celebrating the holiday of “Kutaisoba”, the Chinese ambassador **met** with a delegation from Kutaisi’s sister city, Nanchang, along with the State Representative in Imereti, Zviad Shalamberidze.
- 2023 / Sep 08-11. ○ The State Representative in Imereti and the Governor of Guizhou Province **signed** a cooperation agreement covering trade, tourism, agriculture, and education.
- 2024 / Sep 09. ○ The Deputy State Representative in Imereti and the Vice-Governor of Guizhou Province **signed** the Agreement on the Establishment of a Friendship Region/Province Relationship between the Imereti Region of Georgia and the Guizhou Province of the People’s Republic of China.

In this context, it is worth noting that the Culture Committee of the Georgian Parliament has been actively engaging with representatives of the regions of the PRC:

- 2024 / Jun 14. ○ The Chair of the Culture Committee, Eliso Bolkvadze, **met** with a delegation from Shandong Province, China.
- 2024 / Jun 28. ○ Committee members **met** with a governmental delegation from Jiangsu to discuss prospects for deepening cultural relations between the two countries.

Georgia-China Friendship Association



One of the earliest initiatives aimed at deepening Sino-Georgian cultural ties was spearheaded by Georgian businessman Vano Chkhartishvili. In 2016, Chkhartishvili [established](#) the Georgia-China Economic and Cultural Development Center, followed by the creation of the Georgian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Through the joint efforts of these two organizations, the Georgia-China Friendship Association (GCFA) was founded. That same year, prominent Chinese business executive Zang Jianjun was appointed honorary president of the association. Zang, formerly the executive director of CEFC China Energy,¹ currently [serves](#) as the executive director of AnAn International Ltd².

According to the GCFA's official website, its [mission](#) is to strengthen economic, scientific, commercial, educational, social, and cultural relations between Georgia and China. Notably, the association maintained active cooperation with a Chinese company, CEFC, focusing on [analyzing](#) investment opportunities in Georgia for CEFC, fostering connections with representatives of the Chinese business sector, and developing tourism relations between the two countries.

The association's website [lists](#) David Ebralidze as the general director and Ivane Chkhartishvili as its president. Interestingly, Chkhartishvili was the individual who was involved in a controversial case related to the Poti Free Industrial Zone.³

The association established formal ties with organizations and individuals affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party. On November 16, 2016, President Ivane Chkhartishvili [signed](#) a Memorandum of Understanding with CEFC China Energy Company Ltd., committing both parties to promote joint Chinese projects in Georgia. Less than a year after its founding, on March 17, 2017, the association [signed](#) a Memorandum of Cooperation with one of China's largest governmental organizations, the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries.

The association also operates a representative office in Hunan Province, China. On June 13-14, 2018, at the invitation of this office, the Deputy Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, Romeo Mikautadze, [visited](#) Hunan Province. During the visit, the Georgian delegation participated in the Georgia-Hunan Province Chinese Economy and Trade Development Conference and visited the association's Hunan office. At a meeting during this visit, the mayor of Changsha, Zheng Jianxin, emphasized the importance of the Hunan office in strengthening cooperative ties between Changsha and Poti. Additionally,

1. CEFC China Energy was one of the fastest-growing energy companies before being declared bankrupt by the Shanghai court in 2020. Notably, in 2017, the Georgian government sold a 75% stake in the Poti Free Industrial Zone to the company's local branch. Interestingly, former Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, was also employed by the same company. For further details about the Chinese involvement in the Poti Free Industrial Zone, see the report by Civic IDEA: "[Pandora's Box Opened: Bidzina Ivanishvili's Connections with Chinese Companies.](#)"

2. AnAn International Limited is a Singapore-based energy company.

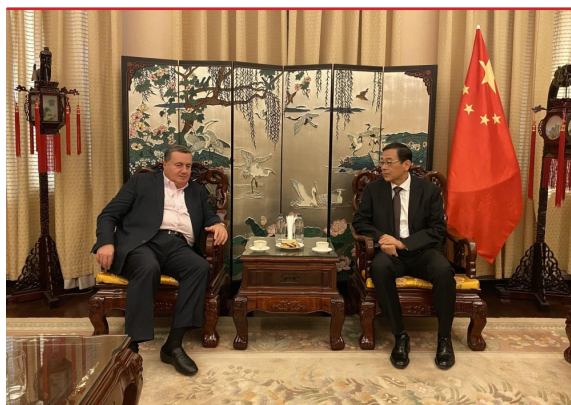
3. For further details on this topic, refer to Civic IDEA's report: "[Georgia's China Dream.](#)"

the Chinese Embassy in Georgia expressed its willingness to support the association's initiatives.

During the same period, from June 16-18, 2018, representatives of the Guangdong Public Diplomacy Association (GPDA) **visited** Tbilisi. As part of this visit, the Georgia-China Friendship Association signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with GPDA, aimed at enhancing cultural, educational, and investment collaboration between the two countries.

On March 29, 2019, at the association's invitation, the Vice-Governor of Hunan Province visited Georgia. During the visit, the Chinese delegation **met** with representatives of Georgia's Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure and acknowledged the contributions of Hunan Road & Bridge Construction Group Co. Ltd. in fostering bilateral cooperation. The vice governor of Hunan also met with the association's president, Ivane Chkhartishvili, highlighting his role in strengthening Sino-Georgian economic relations.

In May 2019, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi **visited** Georgia as part of an official diplomatic mission. During his visit, Wang met with Georgian government representatives and, at one of the meetings, expressed appreciation for Chkhartishvili's contributions to the development of bilateral cooperation. The association has had an active engagement with Chinese stakeholders, with its president, Chkhartishvili, regularly meeting with the Chinese Ambassador to Georgia.



It is also worth mentioning that Chkhartishvili is the founder of a non-governmental organization, **The Georgian Chanting Foundation**. Since its establishment, the foundation has been actively involved in various Sino-Georgian cultural events. In 2017, it co-financed an **event** commemorating the 25th anniversary of China-Georgia diplomatic relations alongside CEFC and the GCFA. The event concluded with a grand concert featuring performances by the Georgian State Academic Ensemble "Rustavi".

The close ties between the Georgia-China Friendship Association and PRC-affiliated companies and state agencies indicate that cultural cooperation with China extends beyond cultural exchange alone. As cultural ties strengthen, the number of agreements or deals between political and business entities also increases. Consequently, in recent years, the intensification of cultural relations with Beijing has directly correlated with the growing involvement of Chinese companies in Georgia's infrastructure and other economic projects.

Conclusion

In recent years, cultural relations have developed in parallel with the deepening of Sino-Georgian economic and political cooperation. Naturally, governmental collaboration in culture, the film industry, and other artistic fields is an expected trend. However, for a global power like the PRC, cultural cooperation serves a much broader strategic purpose.

The partnership between the Georgia-China Friendship Association and PRC-affiliated actors demonstrates that the deepening of cultural ties is closely intertwined with the business interests of specific groups. In this context, cultural cooperation can function as a mechanism to influence governmental decisions. Notably, the President of the GCFA, Ivane Chkhartishvili, played an active role in negotiations between the founder of CEFC, Ye Jianming, and the Georgian government. Therefore, all aspects of Sino-Georgian relations—including cultural cooperation—require close attention from Georgian society.

Given these considerations, there is a pressing need to raise awareness about soft power dynamics and the influence operations of the PRC in Georgia.

While the development of cultural cooperation between the two countries does not pose an immediate threat, international experience suggests that the People's Republic of China frequently leverages such ties to advance its economic interests. Consequently, actors and organizations in Georgia involved in cultural exchanges and initiatives with the PRC should remain informed about the potential risks associated with Chinese cultural expansion.



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