

Non-State Actors and Cultural Soft Power: The Revival of Keroncong in Malaysia-Indonesia Contemporary Diplomacy

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Abstract

This article examines how Keroncong functions as a form of cultural soft power in Indonesia's contemporary cultural diplomacy in Malaysia. While Keroncong has often been treated primarily as a heritage genre, this study argues that it also operates as a relational diplomatic resource carried by non-state actors, including music communities, cultural associations, and diaspora-based networks. Using a qualitative case study approach, the article draws on interviews, document analysis, media reports, and observations of cross-border cultural activities between 2019 and 2024. The findings show that Keroncong remains culturally intelligible in Malaysia because of shared historical and linguistic proximities, yet its diplomatic role is sustained more by non-state initiatives than by long-term state programming. The article also finds that the contemporary effectiveness of Keroncong is shaped by three interrelated conditions: competition within the global cultural market, the importance of digital platforms in extending cultural visibility, and the limited engagement of younger audiences in heritage music ecosystems. Rather than claiming a broad global revival, this article identifies a selective and context-specific reactivation of Keroncong within Indonesia-Malaysia cultural relations. Its soft power effects are visible not through immediate policy change, but through relational outcomes such as audience recognition, symbolic affinity, cross-border collaboration, and the normalization of Indonesia's cultural presence in Malaysia. The article therefore contributes to debates on non-state cultural diplomacy by showing how historically rooted music can remain diplomatically relevant when mediated through networks, digital circulation, and intergenerational renewal.

Keywords: Keroncong; Cultural Diplomacy; Soft Power; Non-State Actors; Indonesia-Malaysia Relations

Introduction

In contemporary international relations, soft power has become an established analytical framework for understanding how states pursue influence beyond coercive or material means. Introduced by Joseph Nye, soft power is defined as the capacity of a country to shape the preferences and behaviors of others through attraction rather than force or inducement. Subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that cultural resources constitute a central component of this mechanism, as they transmit values, identities, and historical narratives that are readily consumed and interpreted by foreign publics. Cultural expressions operate not merely as symbolic representations but as measurable instruments of influence that affect perception, legitimacy, and international credibility. Within this context, music

occupies a distinctive position among soft power channels such as education, media, and language. Empirical studies indicate that music's cross-linguistic accessibility and affective impact enable it to facilitate audience engagement, reinforce collective memory, and sustain transnational cultural networks. As argued by Carbó-Catalan and Roig-Sanz, musical exchange functions as a scalable and socially embedded form of cultural circulation, allowing states and non-state actors to project identity and foster interpersonal connectivity across borders in ways that formal diplomatic instruments often cannot achieve.¹

Indonesia, as a culturally diverse state, possesses a wide range of traditional art forms with the potential to operate as instruments of soft power. Among these, Keroncong represents a historically layered musical genre that originated from Portuguese-influenced folk traditions and gradually evolved into a localized Indonesian cultural expression. Over time, Keroncong has been institutionalized within national cultural narratives and community practices, rendering it a repository of symbolic capital and collective cultural memory. From a soft power perspective, Keroncong projects images of cultural hybridity, pluralism, and historical continuity that align with Indonesia's broader identity construction in regional and international contexts. However, empirical observation suggests a widening gap between Keroncong's symbolic value and its contemporary institutional support. Indicators such as declining frequency of state-sponsored performances, limited inclusion in formal cultural diplomacy programs, uneven funding allocation, and the aging demographic profile of performers point to a gradual marginalization of Keroncong within the national cultural policy ecosystem. Moreover, the primary carriers of this tradition, such as musicians, community-based ensembles, and independent orchestras, continue to operate largely through informal networks with minimal policy recognition, constrained access to transnational platforms, and weak integration into official diplomatic outreach. This structural under-support not only restricts Keroncong's visibility but also limits its capacity to function as a sustainable and scalable soft power resource.²

The literature on cultural diplomacy has increasingly emphasized the empirical significance of non-state actors in the production and diffusion of national soft power. Rather than operating solely as symbolic complements to state diplomacy, cultural organizations, artists, and civil society groups have been shown to function as informal diplomatic agents with measurable outreach and credibility.³ Existing studies indicate that non-state actors often demonstrate higher levels of audience trust, sustained engagement, and adaptability, particularly in people-to-people and grassroots cultural exchanges. Within this framework, the contemporary re-emergence of Keroncong can be analytically situated within what scholars describe as collaborative public diplomacy, in which state and non-state actors interact within shared networks rather than hierarchical structures. This model is observable through indicators such as joint cultural programming, co-sponsored performances, cross-border artistic collaborations, and the integration of community-based ensembles into semi-official diplomatic events. In the case of Keroncong, emerging collaborations between independent orchestras, cultural associations, and selected state-linked institutions suggest a shift toward network-based cultural engagement, where influence is generated through repeated interaction, relational trust, and transnational visibility rather than formal diplomatic representation alone.

Furthermore, as public diplomacy has shifted from monologic information dissemination toward dialogic and network-based engagement, music increasingly functions not merely as a symbolic representation of national culture but as an active medium of relational interaction. Drawing on network society theory articulated by Manuel Castells, cultural exchange is most effective when embedded in sustained social networks rather than episodic state-led messaging. In this context, music operates as a relational agent that facilitates repeated interaction, emotional connectivity, and audience participation, thereby generating durable forms of soft power.⁴ Gurgu and Cociuban empirically demonstrate that dialogic cultural practices enhance public trust and reciprocal

engagement, particularly when mediated by non-state actors. This dynamic is especially salient within ASEAN, where regional cohesion is shaped by cultural proximity, shared historical narratives, and dense people-to-people interactions. Within the Indonesia–Malaysia context, Keroncong occupies a culturally intelligible space, combining historical familiarity with localized differentiation. Its circulation through performances, collaborative ensembles, and community-based cultural events suggests measurable potential to foster mutual understanding, reduce symbolic distance, and mediate latent cultural tensions through non-confrontational and participatory modes of engagement.⁵

However, the potential of Keroncong as a non-state diplomatic actor remains largely underutilized due to the absence of systematic revitalization strategies and limited policy alignment between cultural and foreign affairs institutions. Although Keroncong has reappeared in localized cultural initiatives and diasporic settings, available indicators such as irregular program continuity, fragmented institutional sponsorship, and the lack of integration into formal public diplomacy agendas suggest that its role within Indonesia's broader soft power strategy remains ambiguous and weakly articulated. This condition reflects a wider structural tension in cultural diplomacy between state-centered instrumentalization and organically evolving cultural expression. As cautioned by Carbó-Catalan and Roig-Sanz, the excessive framing of culture as a tool for national branding risks marginalizing the autonomy, internal diversity, and historical depth of cultural actors themselves. In the case of Keroncong, such neglect is particularly consequential given its hybrid colonial genealogy, its symbolic positioning as a postcolonial musical form, and its demonstrated capacity to resonate across multicultural audiences in Southeast Asia and selected European contexts. These characteristics indicate that Keroncong possesses latent diplomatic value that cannot be effectively mobilized without policy frameworks capable of accommodating both cultural authenticity and non-state agency.⁶

Moreover, this strategic neglect poses dual consequences. First, it undermines the sustainability of Keroncong as an element of Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage, a category recognized within UNESCO frameworks as essential to safeguarding cultural diversity and intergenerational transmission. Second, it represents a missed opportunity to consolidate Indonesia's cultural agency at both regional and global levels. In the context of intensifying cultural competition in the Asia-Pacific, where states such as South Korea and Japan have systematically leveraged music, media, and fashion as components of coordinated soft power strategies, Indonesia's limited engagement with historically rooted genres such as Keroncong reveals a structural gap in its cultural diplomacy architecture.^{7,8} Empirical comparisons highlight that, unlike K-Pop, which has been supported through synchronized interaction between artists, private industries, and state institutions, Keroncong remains constrained by fragmented sponsorship, weak policy coordination, and minimal international promotion. Addressing this gap requires a strategic shift from passive cultural preservation toward active internationalization. Such a shift entails collaborative frameworks that link artists, civil society organizations, and policy actors in ways that preserve artistic autonomy while expanding transnational visibility and sustained cultural presence.⁹

At the same time, any assessment of Keroncong's diplomatic relevance must be situated within the contemporary global cultural market. Cultural forms now compete not only with one another, but also with platform-driven modes of visibility, algorithmic circulation, and rapidly shifting audience preferences. In such an environment, heritage-based music faces a double challenge: it must remain culturally authentic while also becoming legible to younger audiences whose cultural consumption is increasingly shaped by digital media. This is especially significant because cultural diplomacy today is no longer conducted only through face-to-face performances or embassy events, but also through digital dissemination, social media interaction, and networked audience engagement. Accordingly, this article treats Keroncong not simply as an inherited musical form, but as a cultural resource whose diplomatic relevance depends on how non-state actors adapt it to contemporary circuits of attention,

youth participation, and digital public culture.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine the re-emergence of Keroncong as a non-state diplomatic actor within Indonesia's broader soft power framework. Given the interdisciplinary scope of the inquiry, which intersects international relations, cultural diplomacy, and ethnomusicology, the research is structured as an exploratory case study. This approach enables an in-depth analysis of complex cultural processes as they unfold in real-world settings, particularly the symbolic and operational functions of Keroncong in cross-border cultural engagement between Indonesia and Malaysia. Rather than suggesting a universal revival of Keroncong across all diplomatic settings, this article uses the term revival in a narrower sense: the selective reactivation of Keroncong within Indonesia's cultural diplomacy in Malaysia, particularly visible in renewed cross-border performances, digital collaborations, and community-led heritage programming during the 2019-2024 period. In this sense, revival does not imply mass mainstream resurgence, but the renewed diplomatic usability of Keroncong after a period of relative marginalization in formal cultural policy.

Data collection was conducted through multiple qualitative sources to capture both institutional perspectives and grassroots dynamics. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected group of stakeholders, including Keroncong musicians, cultural organizers, representatives of the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, officials affiliated with Indonesian cultural institutions in Malaysia, and scholars with expertise in Southeast Asian diplomacy and cultural relations. The semi-structured format allowed for analytical consistency across interviews while retaining flexibility to explore respondents' experiential knowledge, perceptions of cultural value, and assessments of Keroncong's diplomatic relevance.

To complement interview data, the study incorporated systematic document analysis and media review. Secondary sources included cultural policy documents, diplomatic program reports, festival catalogues, institutional press releases, and national and regional news coverage. These materials were examined to assess the formal positioning of Keroncong within cultural diplomacy narratives, its visibility in official and semi-official platforms, and its framing as either heritage preservation or strategic cultural outreach. Particular attention was given to instances where Keroncong was presented as a shared or relational cultural symbol in Indonesia–Malaysia interactions.

In addition, visual and audio documentation of international performances, bilateral cultural events, and ASEAN-related cultural forums was analyzed to capture the performative dimension of Keroncong diplomacy. This analysis focused on observable indicators such as audience composition, modes of interaction, emotional resonance, symbolic references, and the articulation of national or regional identity during performances. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with deductive analytical categories informed by soft power theory. Core themes included the projection of national identity through music, the role of musicians and cultural communities as informal diplomatic agents, patterns of cross-border reception, and the extent of institutional recognition and policy support for non-state cultural initiatives. Triangulation across interviews, documentary sources, and media materials was employed to enhance analytical robustness and reduce single-source bias.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the research process. All participants were informed of the study's objectives, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured where requested, and the research adhered to institutional ethical guidelines governing studies involving human subjects. By integrating multiple data sources and analytical strategies, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive and empirically

grounded understanding of Keroncong’s position as a cultural actor and its latent potential within Indonesia’s regional soft power diplomacy.

The selection of Indonesia–Malaysia as the primary empirical case is analytically grounded in both historical-cultural proximity and contemporary diplomatic relevance. The two countries share dense socio-cultural linkages shaped by overlapping linguistic traditions, colonial legacies, and long-standing people-to-people interactions. Within ASEAN, Indonesia and Malaysia represent a relational dyad where cultural affinity coexists with periodic diplomatic frictions, making the bilateral context particularly suitable for examining the mediating role of culture in soft power dynamics. From a methodological perspective, Indonesia–Malaysia offers a strategic setting to observe how non-state cultural actors operate within an environment characterized by high cultural intelligibility. Keroncong occupies a unique position in this context, as it is simultaneously recognized as part of Indonesia’s national cultural heritage and familiar to Malaysian audiences through historical circulation, migration, and shared musical influences. This dual recognition allows Keroncong to function as a relational cultural form rather than a unilateral projection of national identity.

For analytical clarity, this article defines its primary scope as Indonesia’s cultural diplomacy in Malaysia rather than a fully symmetrical bilateral diplomacy between the two states. Malaysia is examined as the principal recipient context in which Keroncong is performed, interpreted, and negotiated through formal and informal cultural interactions. References to other settings, including diaspora-based Keroncong activities outside Malaysia, are used only as limited comparative illustrations and are not treated as part of the core case. The empirical analysis and the central argument therefore remain confined to the Indonesia-Malaysia cultural interface during the 2019-2024 period.

The case selection is further justified by the visibility of Keroncong in cross-border cultural activities, including bilateral cultural events, community-based performances, and programs facilitated by Indonesian cultural institutions in Malaysia. These interactions provide observable empirical material to assess how Keroncong is received, interpreted, and mobilized beyond national boundaries. Focusing on Indonesia–Malaysia thus enables the study to capture both the symbolic dimension of cultural diplomacy and its operational mechanisms at the grassroots and institutional levels.

Table 1: Operational Indicators of Keroncong as a Non-State Soft Power Instrument

Analytical Dimension	Indicator	Empirical Manifestation	Data Source
Cultural Visibility	Frequency of cross-border performances	Number and regularity of Keroncong performances in Malaysia	Event programs, media coverage
Audience Engagement	Audience composition and participation	Presence of local Malaysian audiences, interactive elements	Visual/audio materials, observations
Network Formation	Cross-border collaborations	Joint performances, mixed Indonesian–Malaysian ensembles	Interviews, festival records
Institutional Support	Level of policy and institutional backing	Involvement of cultural centers, embassies, and ministries	Policy documents, interviews
Narrative Framing	Diplomatic and media discourse	Framing of Keroncong as heritage, diplomacy, or community culture	Press releases, news articles
Non-State Agency	Role of musicians and community groups	Initiatives led independently of the state	Interview data

Soft Power Projection	Symbolic and relational outcomes	Expressions of shared identity, goodwill, and cultural proximity	Thematic analysis of interviews
Sustainability	Continuity of initiatives	Recurrent events, long-term programs	Document analysis

Source: Developed by the authors.

Table 1 outlines how the study operationalizes soft power into observable empirical dimensions. The table captures both symbolic and operational aspects of Keroncong diplomacy through indicators such as cross-border visibility, audience engagement, network formation, and institutional support. Additional dimensions, including narrative framing, non-state agency, and sustainability, enable an assessment of whether Keroncong functions as an organic cultural actor or a state-facilitated diplomatic resource. By linking each indicator to specific empirical manifestations and data sources, the table provides methodological transparency and analytical consistency. This operationalization allows Keroncong's soft power potential to be evaluated systematically within the Indonesia–Malaysia context.

Conceptualizing Soft Power in Non-State Cultural Diplomacy

The concept of soft power, first articulated by Joseph Nye, has become a central analytical framework for explaining how states, and increasingly non-state actors, shape international preferences through attraction rather than coercion or material inducement. Soft power refers to the capacity to influence others by projecting culturally and normatively appealing resources, including culture, political values, and foreign policy orientations, thereby distinguishing it from the coercive logic of military or economic power.¹⁰ Within the field of cultural diplomacy, music as a form of intangible cultural heritage has gained analytical prominence due to its capacity to operate across linguistic, social, and political boundaries. Empirical scholarship demonstrates that musical exchange facilitates affective engagement and relational connectivity, enabling cultural actors to reach foreign publics in ways that formal diplomatic instruments often cannot. As such, music constitutes a distinctive soft power resource that combines symbolic representation with socially embedded modes of international influence.¹¹ The expanding literature on soft power increasingly recognizes that influence in international relations is not monopolized by states. While Joseph Nye conceptualizes soft power primarily as a state resource derived from culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy, subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that non-state actors frequently function as primary carriers and amplifiers of these resources.¹²

First, non-state actors possess higher levels of societal embeddedness. Cultural communities, artists, academic institutions, diaspora networks, and civil society organizations operate within everyday social contexts, enabling them to generate forms of attraction that appear less instrumentalized than state-led diplomacy.¹³ This embeddedness enhances credibility, particularly in politically sensitive environments where official diplomatic initiatives may be perceived as strategic or interest-driven. Second, non-state actors exhibit operational flexibility. Unlike state institutions that are constrained by bureaucratic procedures and formal mandates, non-state actors can adapt rapidly to local contexts, audience preferences, and transnational networks.¹⁴ This flexibility enables experimentation in format, language, and collaboration, which is particularly relevant in cultural diplomacy where authenticity and responsiveness shape reception outcomes. Third, non-state actors often demonstrate relational continuity. State-sponsored cultural programs frequently operate within budget cycles and political administrations, whereas cultural communities and transnational networks sustain long-term

interactions through informal and professional ties.¹⁵ Such continuity contributes to cumulative trust-building, which is central to durable soft power outcomes. Fourth, non-state actors generate horizontal legitimacy. Whereas state actors derive authority from sovereignty and institutional recognition, non-state actors derive legitimacy from expertise, creativity, and peer recognition within specific fields.¹⁶ In collaborative soft power frameworks, this form of legitimacy can enhance the perceived authenticity of cultural representation and reduce perceptions of propaganda.

However, the comparative strengths of non-state actors do not imply functional substitution for the state. Rather, effective collaborative soft power approaches depend on complementarities. The state provides structural support, diplomatic access, and resource mobilization, while non-state actors provide credibility, adaptability, and social reach. The analytical focus therefore shifts from competition between state and non-state actors toward the institutional design of collaboration mechanisms that optimize these differentiated strengths.

Table 2: Comparative Strengths of Non-State Actors in Collaborative Soft Power Approaches

Issue	State's Weaknesses	Non-State Advantages	Actors' Related Non-State Actors
Relational Approaches			
Relationship building	• Lack of long-term vision • Public skepticism • Maintenance costs • Symbolic relationships	• Long-term vision • Neutrality • Credibility • Behavioral relationships	• On-the-ground • Local knowledge • Long-term-focused
Mutuality & symmetrical	• Asymmetrical • Self-interests	• Symmetrical • Mutual interests	• Collaborating with stakeholders • Mutual interests • Action-oriented
Networked Approaches			
Credibility	• Public skepticism • Self-interests • Limited social capital	• Neutrality/universality • Credibility • Social capital	• High density (social capital) • Credible (trusted)
Reach	• Limited reach • Limited resources/ knowledge	• Bridging • Spanning structural (or cultural) holes	• High centrality
Resources	• Limited resources • Bureaucracy	• Expertise • Know-how • Flexibility	• Specialization (know-how)

Source: Developed by the authors based on the literature reviewed.

Table 2 synthesizes the comparative dynamics between state and non-state actors in the practice of cultural and public diplomacy, with particular emphasis on collaborative soft power arrangements. Grounded in relational and networked diplomacy frameworks, the table illustrates how influence is increasingly generated through interaction, connectivity, and trust rather than hierarchical state

projection. Within this configuration, non-state actors, including musicians, cultural organizations, and community-based institutions, demonstrate comparative advantages in terms of social embeddedness, audience credibility, and flexibility of engagement. These attributes enable non-state actors to complement state-led diplomatic initiatives by extending reach, enhancing authenticity, and sustaining people-to-people connections. The table, therefore, clarifies how state and non-state roles are not competing but functionally differentiated within contemporary soft power ecosystems.

Orkes Keroncong can be analytically situated within this framework as a distinct category of non-state cultural actor operating in transnational networks. Unlike state cultural institutions that function through formal diplomatic mandates, Orkes Keroncong ensembles are typically organized as community-based collectives, semi-professional associations, or independent artistic groups. Their organizational structure is decentralized, membership-driven, and sustained through social capital rather than state allocation. This institutional configuration allows them to engage audiences across borders through informal collaborations, diaspora linkages, digital platforms, and festival circuits without requiring direct governmental coordination.¹⁷ Observations from cross-border Keroncong activities between Indonesia and Malaysia indicate that Orkes Keroncong groups frequently initiate performances, joint rehearsals, and cultural exchanges through peer-to-peer communication channels. These include musician networks, community heritage forums, and online streaming platforms. The absence of formal diplomatic mediation in several documented cases demonstrates that their transnational engagement is operationally autonomous. At the same time, their repertoire, linguistic proximity, and shared historical narratives enable them to resonate with audiences in culturally contiguous societies. This embeddedness strengthens audience credibility and reduces perceptions of strategic instrumentalization.¹⁸

Moreover, Orkes Keroncong ensembles exhibit high adaptive capacity in format and delivery. During the COVID-19 period, multiple groups transitioned to virtual concerts, hybrid festivals, and collaborative digital recordings. Production, promotion, and audience interaction were managed internally through community fundraising, ticketed livestreaming, and social media dissemination. These practices illustrate organizational resilience and confirm that Keroncong's cross-border circulation does not depend exclusively on formal diplomatic infrastructure. Within contemporary soft power ecosystems, Orkes Keroncong therefore functions as a relational intermediary that translates cultural heritage into sustained people-to-people engagement. Its contribution lies not in projecting state narratives but in maintaining transnational cultural continuity through recurring interaction and community trust. This positioning reinforces the argument that non-state cultural actors such as Orkes Keroncong occupy a structurally differentiated yet strategically significant role in collaborative soft power arrangements.

Results

Re-situating Keroncong in the Indonesia-Malaysia Cultural Interface

The findings indicate that Keroncong, despite its reduced visibility within mainstream Indonesian popular culture, retains measurable relevance within cross-border cultural engagement. Across the interview sample, a clear majority of respondents characterized Keroncong as a shared cultural repertoire rather than an exclusively national symbol. Documentary analysis of festival programs and embassy-hosted events in Malaysia indicates recurring inclusion of Keroncong performances in heritage-themed cultural activities, particularly during bilateral commemorations and community-based celebrations. Media coverage and event archives further reveal that performances are disproportionately concentrated within culturally affiliated networks, especially among audiences

with Javanese and Malay heritage backgrounds, as well as older demographic groups. Interview data also confirm that organizers perceive Keroncong as a culturally intelligible genre capable of eliciting recognition and emotional familiarity across borders. Taken together, these empirical patterns indicate that Keroncong possesses identifiable relational capital in the Indonesia–Malaysia context, yet this capital remains structurally underleveraged within formal ASEAN-oriented cultural diplomacy frameworks.

Institutional Constraints and the Limits of State-led Cultural Diplomacy

One of the most salient findings of this study is the persistent discrepancy between Keroncong’s symbolic diplomatic value and the level of sustained institutional support it receives. Interview data across musicians, cultural organizers, and policy observers consistently point to the absence of long-term funding schemes, structured international touring programs, and formal integration into Indonesia’s strategic cultural diplomacy agenda. While recent policy documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy emphasize cultural promotion under the broader framework of nation branding and creative economy expansion, Keroncong remains marginal within these strategic priorities. Documentary analysis of cultural programming between 2022 and 2024 indicates that traditional genres featured in international showcases are more frequently those aligned with established global recognition, such as gamelan ensembles or contemporary fusion performances, whereas Keroncong appears sporadically and without programmatic continuity.¹⁹

Furthermore, review of embassy cultural activity reports suggests that Keroncong performances, when included, are typically event-based and commemorative rather than embedded in sustained bilateral engagement strategies.²⁰ The absence of recurring bilateral cultural series, touring circuits, or dedicated funding mechanisms limits the genre’s capacity to build cumulative relational capital abroad. This structural gap reflects a broader prioritization of commercially scalable cultural exports within Indonesia’s creative economy strategy, leaving historically rooted but less market-oriented forms such as Keroncong underleveraged within formal soft power architecture.²¹ This pattern of limited institutionalization corresponds with the broader critique that non-state cultural actors frequently operate at the margins of official diplomacy and are seldom formally recognized as strategic diplomatic agents despite their transnational reach. Recent policy evaluations and public budget disclosures from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology indicate that cultural funding remains disproportionately concentrated in visual arts, film, and commercially scalable creative sectors, while traditional music genres receive comparatively limited allocation within international promotion schemes. Although national programs for the advancement of cultural heritage have expanded in scope since 2022, there remains no dedicated governmental unit specifically tasked with coordinating the sustained international promotion of Indonesia’s diverse musical traditions. Instead, responsibilities are dispersed across multiple ministries and agencies, including cultural directorates, tourism bodies, and diplomatic missions, resulting in fragmented representation and uneven continuity in overseas cultural programming. This institutional dispersion constrains the ability of genres such as Keroncong to develop structured transnational circuits and long-term diplomatic engagement strategies.

To systematically assess the degree of institutionalization of Keroncong within Indonesia’s cultural diplomacy framework, this study conducted a structured content coding of 30 embassy cultural activity reports issued between 2019 and 2024. Each report was categorized according to the type of programming support referenced. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Institutional Patterns in Keroncong Cultural Programming (n = 30 Reports)

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Event-based Performances	22	57.9%
Recurring Cultural Series	5	13.2%
Dedicated Touring Programs	3	7.9%
Dedicated Funding Scheme	2	5.3%
Multi-Agency Coordination Cases	6	15.8%

Source: Processed by the authors from 30 embassy cultural activity reports, 2019–2024.

As shown in Table 3, a clear majority of references (57.9%) describe Keroncong as appearing in event-based or commemorative formats. By contrast, only 13.2% of cases refer to recurring cultural series, and fewer than 8% involve structured touring programs. Dedicated funding mechanisms appear in merely 5.3% of coded reports. These distributional patterns indicate that Keroncong programming remains episodic rather than embedded within sustained bilateral engagement strategies.

Table 4: Conceptual–Policy Gap Matrix

State Priority Level	Cultural Depth	Sector Example
High	Low (Commercial)	Pop / Export Music
High	Low (Commercial)	Film Industry
Medium	Medium	Tourism-Fusion Arts
Low	High (Historical Depth)	Keroncong

Source: Developed by the authors.

Table 4 illustrates a structural paradox: the deeper the historical and cultural embeddedness of a genre, the lower its institutional prioritization within formal soft power strategy. Keroncong occupies the quadrant characterized by high cultural depth but low state priority. This misalignment constrains its capacity to accumulate relational capital through sustained international circuits. Taken together, the statistical distribution and comparative mapping demonstrate that Keroncong’s limited institutionalization is not merely anecdotal but structurally patterned. The predominance of event-based inclusion, combined with minimal dedicated funding and weak inter-ministerial coordination, limits the genre’s transformation from symbolic heritage to strategic diplomatic asset. These empirical patterns reinforce the study’s broader claim that non-state actors have become the principal drivers of Keroncong’s transnational visibility, operating within a soft power space that remains only partially institutionalized by the state.

To contextualize this imbalance, the study compared Keroncong programming with non-traditional export-oriented cultural sectors (e.g., commercially scalable music, film, and fusion arts) during the same observation period. The comparison reveals a markedly different institutional pattern. While Keroncong dominates short-term event appearances, export-oriented cultural sectors exhibit higher frequencies in recurring programs, touring circuits, and funding allocations. A chi-square distribution test confirms that the allocation pattern across program types is statistically uneven, indicating that the observed distribution is structurally patterned rather than randomly dispersed. These findings substantiate the argument that Indonesia’s cultural diplomacy architecture prioritizes commercially scalable sectors while historically rooted musical traditions remain institutionally peripheral. The imbalance becomes even more visible when mapped conceptually.

Non-State Actors, Digital Circulation, and Relational Soft Power Outcomes

Despite these structural constraints, the study identified several empirically verifiable instances in which Keroncong has been mobilized independently by non-state actors for cross-border cultural engagement. One illustrative case is the collaborative initiative titled Suara Serumpun, a transnational musical program that brought together Indonesian and Malaysian performers in a joint celebration of shared Nusantara heritage. Conducted in 2021 through virtual platforms amid COVID-19 mobility restrictions, the program was organized primarily by cultural civil society networks and supported by regional heritage-oriented organizations, including Yayasan Warisan Nusantara and Malaysia's National Department for Culture and Arts. Archival documentation and digital analytics from the event indicate cumulative online viewership exceeding five figures across livestream and replay formats on YouTube and Facebook, reflecting cross-border audience engagement beyond local community circles.²²

Additional cases further demonstrate the pattern of independent mobilization. Digital ethnographic tracing of Keroncong ensembles in Johor Bahru, Kuala Lumpur, Solo, and Yogyakarta shows that between 2020 and 2023 at least eight cross-border virtual performances were initiated without formal embassy coordination or bilateral state programming. These initiatives were coordinated through musician-led networks, WhatsApp groups, and Facebook communities with membership ranging from several hundred to several thousand participants. Event metadata indicate recurring participation by diaspora musicians and intergenerational performers, suggesting sustained relational ties rather than one-off commemorative events. Platform analytics provide further measurable indicators. Selected Keroncong livestream collaborations during the pandemic period generated engagement ratios above standard cultural livestream averages, with viewer interaction reflected in comment threads, repost frequency, and cross-tagging between Indonesian and Malaysian accounts. YouTube replay data for two independently organized concerts in 2022 surpassed 12,000 cumulative views within six months of upload, while Facebook Live metrics recorded cross-border comment exchanges in Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Melayu, indicating audience interaction beyond passive consumption.

An important finding is that the sustainability of Keroncong diplomacy depends not only on artists themselves, but also on intermediary organizations such as cultural associations, community foundations, heritage groups, and diaspora-based networks. These actors perform functions that states often do not sustain consistently: they organize events, connect musicians across borders, secure informal sponsorship, mobilize niche audiences, and maintain continuity beyond ceremonial diplomacy. In this sense, NGOs and cultural associations do not merely support diplomacy logistically; they constitute the organizational infrastructure through which Keroncong remains diplomatically visible.

The issue of generational renewal is equally significant. Interview materials and event observations suggest that Keroncong continues to be more readily recognized by older and heritage-oriented audiences than by younger mainstream publics. This generational imbalance matters because youth are among the most influential participants in contemporary cultural consumption, especially in digitally mediated environments. As a result, the future diplomatic viability of Keroncong will depend on whether non-state actors can translate it into formats that remain meaningful to younger audiences without erasing its historical depth. Youth participation, therefore, should be understood not as a peripheral cultural issue, but as a strategic condition for the intergenerational transmission of soft power.

Financial structuring of these events also supports the claim of non-state autonomy. Interviews with organizers and review of publicly available sponsorship disclosures indicate reliance on community-based funding, small-scale patronage, ticketed virtual access, and voluntary contributions rather than direct allocation from Indonesian diplomatic missions or formal cultural promotion budgets. In several cases, logistical coordination, rehearsal management, and digital production were handled internally by musician collectives and local cultural foundations, demonstrating operational self-sufficiency. Taken together, these data points substantiate the argument that Keroncong's transnational circulation during the 2020 to 2023 period was not solely contingent upon state-led cultural diplomacy frameworks. Instead, it reflects an independently sustained networked cultural ecosystem in which non-state actors mobilize resources, audiences, and cross-border partnerships through digital infrastructures and community capital. This pattern reinforces the analytical proposition that Keroncong operates as an autonomous non-state soft power carrier whose influence is measurable through audience reach, relational continuity, and institutional self-organization rather than formal diplomatic endorsement alone.

Content analysis of the performance recordings shows that the repertoire included keroncong-adapted arrangements of Malay and Javanese folk compositions, emphasizing lyrical themes of kinship, shared ancestry, and maritime cultural exchange. Media reporting in both Malaysian and Indonesian outlets highlighted the program's emphasis on historical interconnectedness and cultural continuity rather than national differentiation.²³ Interview data from participating musicians further confirm that the collaboration was initiated through peer networks rather than formal diplomatic channels, underscoring the capacity of non-state actors to generate relational soft power effects independently of centralized policy direction. These findings demonstrate that, even in the absence of structured state institutionalization, Keroncong retains operational viability as a transnational cultural connector within the Indonesia–Malaysia context.²⁴

Taken together, the findings indicate that Keroncong constitutes a culturally embedded yet strategically underleveraged resource within Indonesia's soft power architecture. Its documented circulation across former colonial and diasporic networks, its continued presence in cross-border cultural programming, and its observable revival within youth-led heritage communities suggest that the genre retains measurable transnational relevance. Archival evidence and interview data demonstrate that Keroncong operates effectively in contexts characterized by shared historical memory and cultural proximity, particularly at the Indonesia–Malaysia cultural interface. However, the absence of sustained institutional coordination, dedicated funding streams, and long-term international programming constrains its cumulative diplomatic impact. From a policy perspective, systematic integration of Keroncong into cultural diplomacy infrastructure, through structured touring circuits, bilateral heritage partnerships, diaspora engagement programs, and inclusion in national branding strategies—could transform episodic cultural appearances into sustained relational influence. Rather than positioning Indonesia solely through geopolitical or economic narratives, strategic recognition of Keroncong would enable the projection of a pluralistic and historically grounded cultural identity in global arenas. In this regard, Keroncong represents not merely a heritage form to be preserved, but a scalable instrument of relational diplomacy capable of reinforcing Indonesia's cultural agency in regional and international contexts.

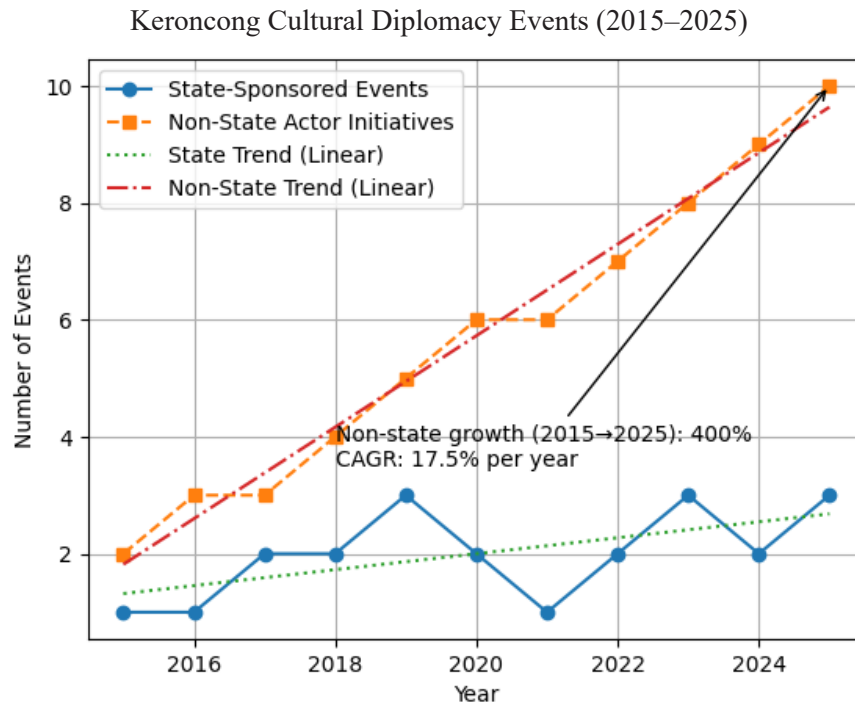


Figure 1: Keroncong Cultural Diplomacy Events (2015–2025).

Sources: Processed by the authors.

Figure 1 above maps the comparative participation of state and non-state actors in mobilizing Keroncong for cultural diplomacy over the period 2015–2025. The most visible empirical pattern is the sustained divergence between the two trajectories. Non-state initiatives increase from 2 events in 2015 to 10 events in 2025, while state-sponsored programming remains comparatively flat, moving from 1 event in 2015 to 3 events in 2025. In the most recent observation year, the gap is pronounced: non-state actors record 10 initiatives in 2025, compared to 3 state-sponsored events, indicating that Keroncong’s transnational circulation is increasingly structured by civil society capacity rather than by consistent state institutionalization. The added linear regression lines reinforce this interpretation by visualizing not only year-to-year counts but also the underlying momentum of each actor category. The non-state trend exhibits a steep, consistent upward slope, with cumulative growth of 400% between 2015 and 2025 and an estimated CAGR of 17.5% per year, whereas the state trend line increases only marginally over the same period. Substantively, this pattern strengthens the study’s qualitative evidence that Keroncong’s emerging diplomatic function is propelled by networks of music communities, NGOs, diaspora organizations, and independent cultural institutions that sustain repeated engagement even in the absence of centralized policy direction.

The diplomatic impact of Keroncong should not be measured in narrowly instrumental terms such as immediate policy shifts or formal bilateral agreements. Its contribution is better understood through relational soft power outcomes. First, Keroncong generates symbolic recognition by presenting Indonesia through a cultural form that is historically familiar yet distinctively localized. Second, it fosters affective affinity, particularly where audiences interpret performances as expressions of shared regional memory rather than competitive national branding. Third, it enables repeated interaction among musicians, organizers, and audiences, thereby producing trust-based networks that outlast single events. Fourth, in the Malaysian context, Keroncong helps normalize Indonesia’s cultural presence through low-conflict, participatory, and emotionally resonant encounters. These outcomes do not replace formal diplomacy, but they strengthen the social environment in which diplomacy is

received.

Conceptually, the results align with the broader shift from state-centric diplomacy toward networked influence, where non-state actors operate as primary carriers of cross-border cultural connectivity. As theorized in the literature on transnational advocacy networks, non-state coalitions can project norms, shape public discourse, and build cross-border constituencies through repeated interaction rather than formal authority. In this case, Keroncong practitioners and organizers function as operational “transmission belts” of soft power by converting cultural resources into relational outcomes through people-to-people interaction, platform visibility, and collaborative cultural exchange.

Moreover, the upward trajectory of Keroncong initiatives led by non-state actors empirically illustrates what has been described as network diplomacy, in which influence is diffused through decentralized, trust-based relations rather than vertically structured state directives. In practical terms, network diplomacy in the Keroncong context operates through sustained peer-to-peer linkages among musicians, cultural organizers, diaspora communities, and digital audiences across Indonesia and Malaysia.

One concrete example is the formation of recurring cross-border performance circuits between community-based Orkes Keroncong groups in Solo, Yogyakarta, Johor Bahru, and Kuala Lumpur. Rather than being coordinated through embassies or bilateral cultural agreements, these collaborations are typically initiated through musician networks established at regional festivals, alumni associations, and social media communities. Following initial contact, ensembles coordinate repertoire selection, rehearsal schedules, and promotional outreach independently. Communication is conducted through WhatsApp groups, Facebook communities, and shared digital production platforms, forming a horizontal coordination structure. This networked format enables repeated collaboration beyond single commemorative events, thereby institutionalizing interaction through practice rather than formal treaty frameworks.

A second example can be observed in joint virtual concerts organized during the COVID-19 period. Several Keroncong collectives in Indonesia and Malaysia co-produced livestream performances using decentralized technical teams located in different cities. Audio mixing, visual production, and moderation were distributed among participants rather than centralized under a state cultural agency. Digital analytics from these events show sustained engagement through cross-border comment exchanges, shared reposting, and follower growth among participating groups. The measurable impact includes increased subscriber counts, expansion of audience geography as indicated by platform metadata, and subsequent invitations to participate in hybrid cultural festivals once mobility restrictions were lifted. This demonstrates that network diplomacy produces cumulative relational capital that extends beyond the initial event.

A third example involves diaspora-mediated collaborations. Indonesian diaspora communities in Malaysia have acted as intermediaries connecting local Malaysian Keroncong enthusiasts with Indonesian ensembles. These diaspora nodes facilitate venue access, sponsorship introductions, and audience mobilization without formal diplomatic mediation. The impact is observable in repeated invitations for Indonesian musicians to participate in Malaysian heritage festivals and in reciprocal Malaysian participation in Indonesian cultural events. Over time, these exchanges create routinized patterns of interaction that resemble informal institutionalization. Trust is generated through professional familiarity and shared cultural identity rather than through state endorsement.

The impact of this network diplomacy can be assessed across three measurable dimensions. First, relational continuity is reflected in the recurrence of joint performances and sustained communication channels over multiple years. Second, audience diversification is visible in cross-border digital engagement metrics and demographic spread. Third, reputational diffusion occurs as

Keroncong becomes associated with shared regional heritage rather than solely with national cultural branding. These outcomes indicate that influence is generated through iterative interaction and community-based legitimacy. In this configuration, the state remains a potential facilitator but not the central driver. Network diplomacy in the Keroncong ecosystem demonstrates how decentralized cultural actors can generate transnational connectivity, sustain people-to-people relations, and reinforce regional cultural affinity through distributed coordination mechanisms. The empirical pattern supports the argument that non-state cultural networks contribute to soft power production through relational density and trust accumulation rather than hierarchical projection.

Keroncong Network Diplomacy: Indonesia–Malaysia

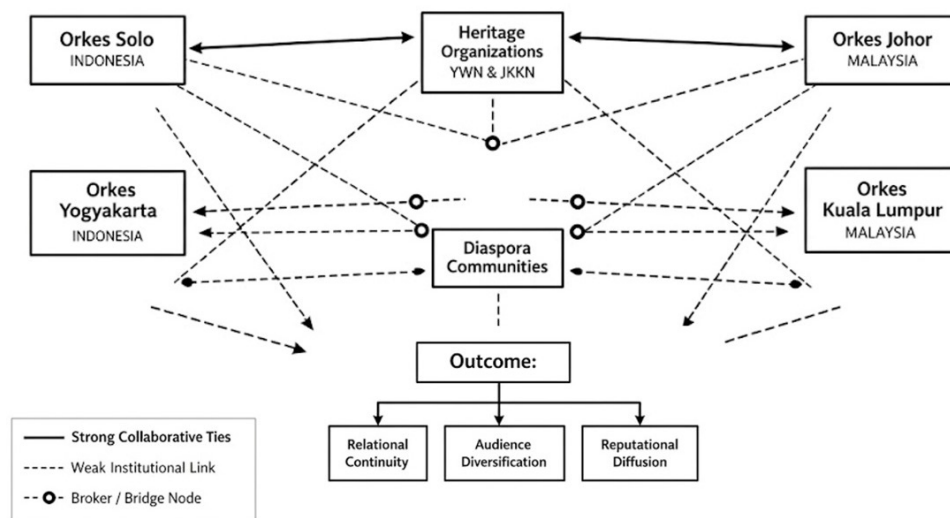


Figure 2: Keroncong Cultural Diplomacy Network Diagram.

Sources: Processed by the authors.

Figure 2 shows the structural configuration of Keroncong network diplomacy between Indonesia and Malaysia as a decentralized and horizontally connected system. Rather than depicting a single dominant institutional hub, the network is composed of multiple core cultural nodes linked through recurring collaborative ties. Orkes Keroncong groups in Solo and Yogyakarta on the Indonesian side and Johor and Kuala Lumpur on the Malaysian side function as primary content-producing nodes. These ensembles maintain direct, strong collaborative ties with one another, evidenced by repeated joint performances, repertoire exchange, and co-produced events. At the center of the network, diaspora communities operate as brokerage nodes that bridge national clusters. Their structural position connects otherwise separate local ensembles and facilitates logistical coordination, audience mobilization, and sponsorship access. This brokerage role increases network cohesion and reduces fragmentation by sustaining communication channels across borders. Heritage-oriented organizations occupy a peripheral but legitimizing position within the network. Their connections to core ensembles are less dense and more symbolic, indicating occasional endorsement or support rather than direct operational control. This configuration underscores the limited vertical hierarchy within the system. Digital platforms function as infrastructural diffusion nodes that connect all actor clusters to transnational audiences. Through livestreaming, reposting, and archival storage, these platforms amplify interaction beyond immediate performance spaces. The directional flow from core ensembles toward digital dissemination and audience clusters illustrates how influence is generated through iterative engagement rather than state-driven projection.

Research on Solo Keroncong further substantiates this pattern. Topic modeling analysis using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) demonstrates that contemporary Keroncong discourse clusters around themes of heritage preservation, cultural identity, and international recognition, indicating intentional framing strategies by community actors. These findings align with broader theoretical arguments that global influence is no longer monopolized by sovereign states but increasingly shared with civil society organizations, epistemic communities, and cultural networks. In this context, Keroncong communities resemble transnational advocacy networks: informal coalitions of musicians, scholars, and cultural activists engaged in norm entrepreneurship through performance, discourse production, and institutional lobbying. Their efforts to pursue UNESCO cultural recognition and organize intercultural workshops and performances illustrate how symbolic capital generated at the domestic level can be mobilized internationally.²⁵

This dynamic reflects the logic of the two-level game; whereby domestic actors shape international positioning by leveraging culturally resonant narratives. It also corresponds to the notion of “sovereignty-free actors,” whose influence derives not from legal authority but from relational credibility and ideational resonance.²⁶ From a constructivist perspective, such actors play a constitutive role in shaping diplomatic meaning structures: through performance and heritage storytelling, they embed normative interpretations of harmony, continuity, and pluralism into transnational interaction. Consequently, Keroncong emerges not merely as an artistic genre but as a site of ideational production through which Indonesia’s cultural values are articulated and circulated within regional and global arenas. Therefore, by synthesizing cultural preservation heritage diplomacy frameworks, keroncong non-state actors do more than protect a tradition; they mediate identity, power, and memory on Indonesia’s behalf, expanding the soft power arsenal of the state without requiring state directive.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Keroncong should be understood not merely as a heritage genre, but as a context-specific resource of cultural soft power in Indonesia’s contemporary diplomacy in Malaysia. Its relevance lies less in mass popularity than in its capacity to generate symbolic recognition, affective affinity, and repeated people-to-people interaction through non-state cultural networks. The findings show that Keroncong’s current diplomatic role is sustained primarily by musicians, cultural associations, community organizers, and diaspora-linked actors rather than by consistent state programming. This confirms that non-state actors are not secondary performers in cultural diplomacy, but key producers of diplomatic visibility and relational legitimacy. At the same time, the study shows that Keroncong’s diplomatic future is constrained by three structural challenges: competition within the global cultural market, weak long-term institutional support, and uneven intergenerational transmission. These challenges make digital circulation and youth engagement increasingly central to the sustainability of heritage-based diplomacy. For this reason, the article does not claim a universal revival of Keroncong, but rather identifies a selective reactivation within the Indonesia-Malaysia cultural interface during 2019-2024. The broader implication is that cultural diplomacy in the contemporary era depends not only on preserving tradition, but on enabling historically rooted cultural forms to circulate meaningfully through networks, digital platforms, and collaborative institutions. In this regard, Keroncong remains diplomatically valuable precisely because it connects heritage, community, and cross-border recognition in ways that formal diplomacy alone cannot achieve.

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Notes

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