The Role of Iran–China Cultural Relations in Developing Post-COVID Tourism Collaboration

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global tourism networks, exposing vulnerabilities but also opening opportunities for renewed international cooperation based on cultural exchange. This paper examines the evolving cultural relations between Iran and China and their potential to foster sustainable tourism recovery in the post-pandemic era. Drawing upon academic literature, policy reports, and institutional data, the study analyzes how shared civilizational heritage, cultural diplomacy, and modern initiatives such as the Belt and Road framework can enhance bilateral tourism. Findings reveal that cultural diplomacy acts as a soft-power mechanism that rebuilds trust, enhances destination image, and creates long-term partnerships. Iran's cultural assets, its Silk Road legacy, UNESCO-listed heritage, and traditions of hospitality, complement China's outbound travel market and technological advancement. However, barriers such as visa restrictions, flight connectivity, and limited marketing still hinder progress. The study proposes a policy roadmap focused on visa facilitation, joint governance, digital diplomacy, product adaptation, and data measurement. By embedding culture into tourism policy and adopting evidence-based management, Iran and China can transform their historical friendship into a model of resilient, inclusive, and mutually beneficial post-COVID cooperation.

Keywords: *Iran–China Relations, Cultural Tourism, Soft Power, Belt and Road Initiative, Post-COVID Recovery, Cultural Diplomacy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry was among the sectors most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, suffering unprecedented economic and cultural disruptions.[1] Border closures and travel restrictions not only reduced mobility but also weakened the cultural links that underpin mutual understanding among nations. As the world gradually transitions from crisis to recovery, tourism is no longer viewed merely as an economic engine but as a bridge for cultural resilience and sustainable development.[2]

For countries like Iran and China — two ancient civilizations linked by centuries of cultural, artistic, and intellectual exchange — the post-pandemic era offers a rare opportunity to redefine their partnership.[3] Rooted in the legacy of the Silk Road, their cooperation extends beyond trade and politics to encompass shared values of learning, creativity, and harmony. In modern times, initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have provided a strategic platform to revive this historical relationship through culture and tourism.[4]

However, this partnership should not be confined to infrastructure and mobility. It has the potential to evolve into what can be called a "cultural synergy", where tourism serves as a two-way process of co-creation rather than one-sided consumption.[5] Iran's poetic traditions, craftsmanship, and hospitality blend naturally with China's Confucian values of harmony and collective progress.

This synergy could transform tourism into an ongoing cultural dialogue — a process that enriches communities, strengthens mutual respect, and promotes sustainable growth.

By combining these cultural strengths, both nations can build a form of mutual cultural modernity, where ancient heritage coexists with innovation and modern tourism practices. Such collaboration can extend to joint art exhibitions, culinary fusion experiences, educational exchange programs, and intercultural research projects. These initiatives would allow Iran and China to position themselves as global leaders in culture-based tourism diplomacy.

Therefore, the present study explores how Iran–China cultural relations can drive the post-COVID tourism recovery. Specifically, it aims to:

➢ Examine the evolution of bilateral cultural and tourism cooperation,
➢ Identify the mechanisms of cultural diplomacy and soft power that foster resilience [6]
➢ Propose a sustainable framework for future cultural-tourism collaboration.

Therefore, to understand how these cultural and diplomatic dynamics influence tourism cooperation, it is essential to first explore the theoretical and historical foundations of the Iran–China relationship.

II. BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

➢ *Cultural Tourism and Its Strategic Role*
Cultural tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism industry and serves as a bridge between heritage preservation and economic development. [7,8] It enables travelers to experience local traditions, arts, and values while supporting host communities. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), cultural tourism accounts for nearly half of international travel motivations.[1]

In the context of Iran and China, cultural tourism represents an essential link between history and modernity. Both nations are home to ancient civilizations that have contributed immensely to world culture. The exchange of cultural experiences through tourism not only strengthens bilateral relations but also enhances the image of both countries in global tourism markets.

➢ *Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power*
Cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural exchange as an instrument of foreign policy to foster goodwill, trust, and understanding between nations. The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye (2004), describes the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion.[5]

For Iran, cultural diplomacy offers a tool to promote its civilizational heritage and counteract negative stereotypes. For China, it aligns with its global leadership goals under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Joint exhibitions, tourism fairs, and academic collaborations exemplify how both countries can utilize soft power to enhance mutual recognition and cooperation.[6]

➢ *Historical Background: The Silk Road Legacy*
The historical relationship between Iran and China dates back more than two thousand years.[3] The ancient Silk Road served as a vital artery for trade, cultural exchange, and the spread of ideas, religion, and technology. Persian merchants and Chinese scholars were instrumental in building this transcontinental bridge between East and West.

This shared legacy is more than a historical curiosity—it's a living symbol of cooperation. The modern revival of the Silk Road through the Belt and Road Initiative reflects both countries' efforts to reconnect through culture and tourism, reviving the same spirit of dialogue that once united their ancestors.[9]

➢ *Theoretical Framework*
This study is guided by theories of soft power, cultural exchange, and international collaboration. The conceptual framework assumes that:

- Cultural diplomacy enhances bilateral trust and destination image.
- Shared heritage fosters authenticity and emotional connection.
- Institutional collaboration converts cultural assets into economic and diplomatic value. [3,5,6]

These theoretical perspectives form the foundation for understanding how Iran–China cultural relations can.
Building on these theoretical foundations, the following section reviews the existing literature on cultural diplomacy, soft power, and tourism cooperation between Iran and China.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

➢ *Overview of Research Trends*
Tourism studies increasingly recognize culture as a fundamental element of sustainable development and destination competitiveness. According to recent research, cultural tourism has evolved from a niche activity into a mainstream driver of identity, education, and intercultural understanding. After the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers such as Sigala (2020) and UNWTO (2023) have emphasized that tourism resilience depends on collaboration, innovation, and cultural integration. [1,2]

In this context, examining Iran–China relations offers valuable insights into how heritage and diplomacy intersect in tourism. Existing studies focus primarily on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a framework for cultural cooperation, yet few have specifically addressed the mechanisms that shape tourism collaboration between these two countries.[4]

➢ *Cultural Diplomacy and Tourism Development*
Tourism functions as a form of cultural diplomacy by facilitating direct interpersonal exchange and contributing to destination image recovery.[10]

For Iran, emphasizing cultural diplomacy allows it to communicate its authentic image and historical depth to the world. For China, such initiatives align with its broader foreign policy goals under the BRI.[6] Joint film productions, language institutes, art festivals, and tourism exhibitions are among the most effective means of enhancing mutual understanding and increasing tourism flows.

➢ *Iran–China Relations in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative*
The Belt and Road Initiative, introduced by China in 2013, has become a cornerstone of its global economic and cultural outreach. Iran, positioned strategically along both land and maritime routes, plays a key role in this framework.

The BRI's "people-to-people connectivity" pillar directly supports cultural exchange and tourism cooperation.

Research by Ghasemi and Zhang (2023) highlights that while Iran and China have signed several cultural agreements, practical cooperation in tourism remains limited due to regulatory, linguistic, and logistical barriers.[9] Strengthening institutional and digital collaboration is thus essential for transforming political will into tangible tourism outcomes.

➢ *Digitalization and Cultural Tourism Promotion*
Digital transformation has revolutionized how destinations communicate and engage with travelers. Chen and Huang (2021) emphasize that digital storytelling, online exhibitions, and influencer marketing can reshape a nation's cultural narrative in the global tourism arena.[11]

For Iran and China, adopting bilingual websites, social media cooperation, and AI-based travel tools can create visibility, accessibility, and emotional connection among travelers. Digitalization is not only a marketing tool but also a medium for intercultural dialogue and creative co-production.

➢ *Research Gaps and Conceptual Insights*
While the literature on cultural diplomacy and tourism has grown significantly, there remain important gaps. Few studies have conducted comparative analyses of Iran and China, and even fewer have proposed integrated frameworks linking cultural diplomacy, digital innovation, and sustainable development.[12]

This paper therefore aims to address these gaps by synthesizing academic and policy perspectives into a unified conceptual model. It proposes that cultural synergy, supported by governance and technology, can serve as the foundation for sustainable tourism recovery between Iran and China.

While the reviewed studies provide valuable insights, they also reveal gaps that necessitate a structured review of available data and conceptual frameworks. The next section outlines the methodology adopted to address these gaps.

IV. METHODOLOGY

➢ *Research Design*
This research adopts a narrative review approach, which is a qualitative method for synthesizing and interpreting knowledge across multiple disciplines.[13] Unlike systematic reviews that use strict inclusion criteria, narrative reviews allow broader conceptual exploration and integration of ideas from different sources.

This design is appropriate for analyzing cultural and tourism cooperation between Iran and China, where empirical data are limited but conceptual insights and policy documents are rich.

➢ *Data Sources and Selection Criteria*
The study relies exclusively on secondary data, including:

- Peer-reviewed academic journals published between 2010 and 2025.
- Reports and datasets from UNWTO, UNESCO, OECD, and other relevant international bodies.
- Governmental and institutional policy papers from Iran's Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts (MCHTH) and China's National Tourism Administration (CNTA).
- Publications related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) focusing on cultural and tourism cooperation.
- Verified databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect for scholarly sources.

Selection criteria included relevance to cultural diplomacy, soft power, post-COVID tourism, and the Iran–China context. Sources were screened to ensure academic credibility and recency (preferably post-2018).

Table 1 Overview of Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Source Type	Examples / Institutions	Time Frame	Purpose in Study
Academic Journals	*Tourism Management, Annals of Tourism Research*	2010–2025	Provide theoretical grounding and evidence
Policy Documents	*MCHTH (Iran), CNTA (China)*	2015–2024	National and bilateral policy review
International Organizations	*UNWTO, UNESCO, OECD, UNDP*	2010–2023	Frameworks for sustainable cultural tourism
BRI Publications	*White Papers, Forum Reports*	2013–2024	Regional cooperation context
Online Databases	*Scopus, Google Scholar*	Current	Source identification and synthesis

Summary of secondary data sources used in the study. Data compiled from UNWTO (2023), UNESCO (2022), OECD (2023), CNTA (2023), and MCHTH (2023) [1,3,14,15,16]

➢ *Data Analysis*
Data were examined using qualitative content analysis, following the three-step method of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Mayring, 2014).[13]

Through this process, common themes such as cultural diplomacy, digital innovation, and bilateral policy cooperation were identified and synthesized.

Patterns emerging from literature and policy documents were then organized into conceptual categories to support theoretical insights and policy recommendations.

➢ *Reliability and Validity*

To enhance reliability, multiple data sources were cross-checked (triangulation) and analyzed independently. Validity was maintained by transparent documentation of data selection, adherence to theoretical frameworks, and consistency in interpretation.

The combination of diverse data and conceptual rigor ensures the robustness of the findings.

➢ *Limitations*

Since this study relies solely on secondary sources, potential limitations include publication bias and limited access to primary perspectives from Iranian and Chinese stakeholders.

However, the narrative approach provides a strong foundation for synthesizing interdisciplinary insights and identifying future research directions.

Based on this methodological framework, the findings and discussion presented in the next section illustrate the major themes and patterns emerging from the reviewed literature and policy analysis.

V. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

➢ *Cultural Diplomacy as a Catalyst for Recovery*

The findings indicate that cultural diplomacy serves as the main catalyst for post-pandemic tourism recovery. By promoting art, language, education, and heritage exchange, both Iran and China can build mutual trust and shape positive destination images. Cultural diplomacy moves beyond official agreements — it embodies human interaction, creativity, and shared learning.

Iran's cultural identity, with its deep roots in poetry, architecture, and hospitality, complements China's values of harmony and collective development. Together, these cultural dimensions create an environment where tourism is not just an economic transaction but also a social and emotional connection.

This combination enhances both nations' soft power and reinforces long-term collaboration. [5,10]

➢ *Destination Branding and Cultural Identity*

Destination branding has become essential in shaping tourist perceptions. For Iran, projecting an authentic and accessible image is vital to re-enter global markets.

The partnership with China can help reposition Iran's brand through digital content, joint marketing campaigns, and shared cultural narratives.

Similarly, Chinese outbound tourists increasingly value destinations offering authenticity, cultural learning, and emotional depth. Iran's diverse cultural landscapes — from ancient Persia to Islamic architecture — perfectly match these expectations.

Collaborative storytelling through documentaries, online tours, and cultural festivals can strengthen both countries' visibility and mutual appreciation.[10]

➢ *Policy Coordination and Governance*

One of the critical findings is that weak governance and fragmented coordination hinder progress in Iran–China tourism cooperation.[12]

The establishment of a Joint Cultural and Tourism Council (JCTC) is proposed to ensure continuous dialogue and shared project management.

Such a council could coordinate visa facilitation, academic exchanges, and air connectivity while aligning national tourism strategies with international goals.

Institutionalizing this collaboration would reduce duplication, encourage transparency, and improve long-term policy stability.[14] It would also enable both governments to evaluate outcomes more systematically.

➢ *Digital Transformation and Smart Cooperation*

Digitalization is the most dynamic enabler of bilateral tourism. Platforms such as WeChat, Fliggy, and Ctrip dominate China's travel market, and Iran's integration into these systems can increase exposure to millions of potential travelers.

Developing bilingual websites, QR-based guides, and mobile applications with virtual heritage experiences would attract tech-savvy tourists while preserving cultural integrity.

Digital diplomacy — including joint virtual exhibitions, influencer campaigns, and cultural webinars — can also reduce the perception gap between the two nations and provide a sustainable marketing solution in times of crisis.[11]

➢ *Barriers and Challenges*

Despite shared interests, several barriers persist:

- Limited direct flight connections between major cities.
- Complex visa procedures and slow e-visa implementation.
- Low visibility of Iranian destinations on Chinese digital platforms.
- Cultural misunderstandings caused by language differences.
- Insufficient joint data collection and monitoring mechanisms as highlighted in international and national policy reports and academic studies. [1,15,16,17]

Addressing these challenges requires an integrated approach involving governments, tourism organizations, academia, and the private sector.

By applying strategic planning and people-centered diplomacy, Iran and China can transform these weaknesses into future strengths.

The overall conceptual relationship between cultural exchange, diplomacy, and tourism cooperation is illustrated in Figure 1 below.
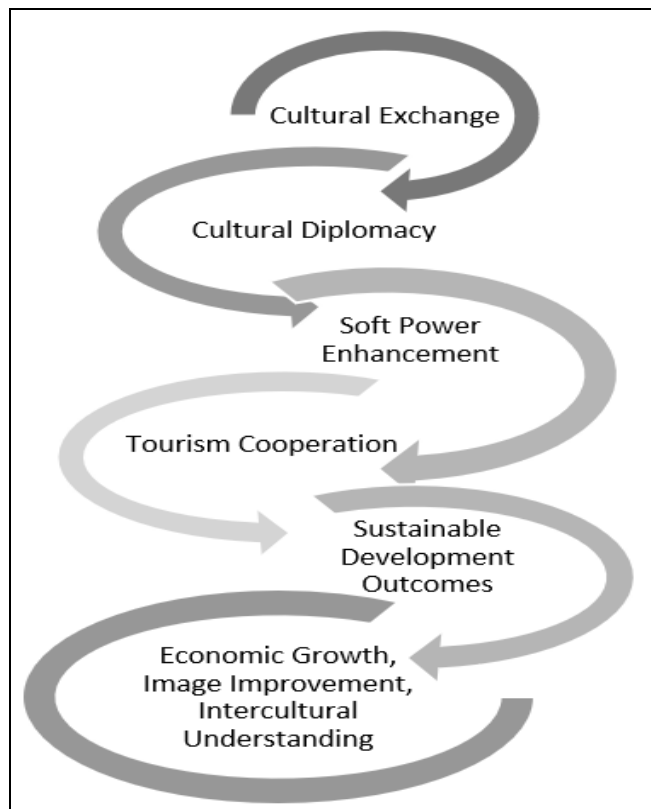

Fig 1 Conceptual Model of Iran–China Cultural Relations and Post-COVID Tourism Development (Author's Own Conceptualization)

As shown in Figure 1, the integration of cultural diplomacy and soft power creates a pathway toward sustainable tourism development between Iran and China.

VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis indicates that although Iran and China possess deep historical and cultural connections alongside highly complementary tourism potentials, the realization of effective bilateral cooperation requires a clear, coordinated, and forward-looking policy framework.[12,14] Strengthening tourism and cultural collaboration between the two countries necessitates institutional coordination, infrastructural facilitation, and adaptive governance mechanisms that respond to both market demands and external risks.

One of the most immediate policy priorities is improving accessibility through visa facilitation and air connectivity. Simplifying visa procedures by introducing comprehensive e-visa systems, alongside expanding direct flight routes between major cities such as Tehran, Beijing, and Shanghai, would significantly reduce travel barriers. Enhanced accessibility is expected to stimulate business, leisure, and cultural travel, thereby accelerating the recovery of bilateral tourism flows in the post-COVID era. [1,16]

Institutional coordination is equally essential. The establishment of a Joint Cultural and Tourism Council could provide a formal governance platform to oversee bilateral initiatives, coordinate shared projects, and ensure policy coherence across governmental agencies. Regular meetings supported by shared digital dashboards would enhance transparency, monitoring capacity, and long-term strategic alignment.[14]

Cultural heritage cooperation represents another critical avenue for collaboration. Reviving the historical Silk Road through the development of joint tourism packages, heritage trails, and cross-border exhibitions would emphasize shared civilizational roots while strengthening cultural diplomacy. Such initiatives not only enhance destination branding but also foster mutual cultural recognition and pride.

In parallel, digital diplomacy and media collaboration can play a transformative role in shaping contemporary tourism narratives. The development of bilingual tourism platforms, co-produced documentaries, and coordinated online promotional campaigns in Persian and Chinese would enable both countries to reach younger and digitally engaged audiences. These initiatives also contribute to presenting more accurate and balanced cultural representations in the global media space.[11]

Long-term cooperation further depends on educational and institutional partnerships. Strengthening collaboration between universities, research centers, and museums through joint programs in heritage management, tourism marketing, and intercultural communication can cultivate a new generation of professionals capable of sustaining bilateral cooperation. Such academic and cultural exchanges reinforce knowledge transfer and institutional capacity-building.[14]

Market readiness is another crucial dimension. Iranian tourism service providers must be supported through targeted training programs to better understand Chinese traveler preferences, including language services, culinary expectations, and the use of digital payment systems. Cultural sensitivity and service adaptation are key determinants of visitor satisfaction and repeat visitation. [10,16]

At the same time, inclusive and community-based tourism policies should be promoted to ensure that local communities actively participate in cultural tourism development. Community-driven initiatives can enhance social inclusion, empower women, and ensure more equitable distribution of tourism revenues, thereby increasing local support for bilateral tourism projects.[18]

Effective cooperation also requires robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The implementation of a shared digital tourism data system would allow both governments to access real-time information on visitor flows, market trends, and sustainability indicators. Data-driven decision-making can improve policy responsiveness and help measure progress toward long-term development goals.

Financial cooperation constitutes another strategic pillar. The creation of joint tourism investment funds and public–private partnerships can mobilize capital for infrastructure development, promotional activities, and capacity-building initiatives. Such financial integration reduces investment risks while aligning public and private sector interests.

Finally, the resilience of bilateral tourism cooperation depends on coordinated crisis and risk management.

Developing joint contingency frameworks for health emergencies, environmental challenges, and geopolitical uncertainties would enhance preparedness and adaptive capacity. Proactive risk management not only safeguards tourism flows but also strengthens mutual trust and institutional resilience in the face of future global disruptions.[1]

Table 2 Policy Recommendations Proposed by the Author, Derived from Findings and Synthesized Literature on Iran–China Cultural and Tourism Cooperation.

Policy Pillar	Objective	Expected Impact
Visa Facilitation & Air Connectivity	Simplify travel procedures and expand routes	Increase tourist arrivals
Joint Governance (JCTC)	Create a bilateral tourism and culture council	Strengthen coordination
Heritage Branding	Revive Silk Road and shared identity	Enhance cultural pride
Digital Diplomacy	Build bilingual platforms and campaigns	Boost visibility and soft power
Education Partnerships	Expand academic and museum cooperation	Build long-term human capital
Market Readiness	Adapt to Chinese traveler preferences	Improve satisfaction
Inclusive Tourism	Empower local communities	Promote equity and sustainability
Monitoring Systems	Shared data and evaluation tools	Improve transparency
Financial Cooperation	Create investment funds and PPPs	Expand joint projects
Crisis Resilience	Health and environmental planning	Build future-proof recovery

These strategic recommendations form a practical roadmap for transforming Iran–China cultural relations into a sustainable and resilient model of post-pandemic tourism development.

Together, these strategic recommendations form a comprehensive roadmap for strengthening bilateral cooperation in tourism and culture.

The following conclusion summarizes the key insights of this study and outlines the broader implications for sustainable Iran–China collaboration.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study explored how Iran–China cultural relations can foster sustainable tourism development in the post-COVID era.

The findings reveal that cultural diplomacy, soft power, and digital innovation are central mechanisms for strengthening mutual trust and transforming historical ties into modern tourism cooperation. [5,10]

Both countries possess deep civilizational resources that, when integrated into policy and tourism practice, can serve as powerful tools for recovery and long-term growth.

The paper highlighted that while cultural similarities create natural grounds for collaboration, institutional barriers — such as visa restrictions, limited air connectivity, and data gaps — continue to hinder progress.[1]

Overcoming these challenges requires joint governance, investment in digital platforms, and an inclusive approach involving local communities and educational institutions.

From a theoretical perspective, this research demonstrates that tourism can function as a cultural dialogue process, not merely an economic activity.[5]

By embedding cultural exchange within diplomatic and technological frameworks, Iran and China can set a global example of how cross-cultural collaboration supports resilience and sustainability.[19]

Future studies should include empirical surveys and field research to measure tourists' perceptions and the tangible impacts of bilateral cooperation.

Such studies would provide deeper insights into how cultural identity, policy, and innovation interact in real-world tourism settings.

In conclusion, Iran–China cultural relations represent more than historical friendship — they embody a shared vision of harmony, creativity, and cooperation.

By investing in people, culture, and technology, both nations can transform their heritage into a model of sustainable post-pandemic tourism development for the world to follow.

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