FROM HISTORICAL CONNECTIVITY TO CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL COOPERATION: THE ROLE OF THE SILK ROAD LEGACY IN CHINA–CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

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ОТ ИСТОРИЧЕСКИХ СВЯЗЕЙ К СОВРЕМЕННОМУ КУЛЬТУРНОМУ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВУ: РОЛЬ НАСЛЕДИЯ ВЕЛИКОГО ШЁЛКОВОГО ПУТИ В ОТНОШЕНИЯХ КИТАЯ И ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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TARIXIY ALOQALARDAN ZAMONAVIY MADANIY HAMKORLIKKACHA: BUYUK IPAK YO‘LI MEROSINING XITOY–MARKAZIY OSIYO MUNOSABATLARIDAGI O‘RNI

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Abstract

This article examines the historical and cultural legacy of the Silk Road and its influence on contemporary cultural relations between China and the countries of Central Asia. It aims to explore how historical processes of transcontinental cultural exchange have informed

present-day forms of international cooperation and to analyse how historical-cultural continuity is reflected in contemporary cultural diplomacy. The study employs historical and comparative analysis, qualitative content analysis, document analysis, and a case-study approach. It considers the development of inter-civilizational dialogue, the exchange of religious and scientific knowledge, and the circulation of artistic and craft traditions along the Silk Road. It also analyses contemporary cooperation in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative, educational exchange, cultural diplomacy, tourism, and the protection of cultural heritage. Particular attention is paid to Uzbekistan as a case through which the role of historical heritage in contemporary cultural relations and its potential contribution to regional cooperation can be examined. The article approaches the Silk Road legacy not merely as a historical memory, but also as a resource shaping contemporary transnational connections, cultural diplomacy, and mutual understanding between regions.

Keywords: *transcontinental cultural exchange; historical-cultural continuity; inter-civilizational dialogue; cultural diplomacy; soft power; China–Central Asia relations.*

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются историческое и культурное наследие Шёлкового пути и его влияние на современные культурные отношения между Китаем и странами Центральной Азии. Цель исследования — изучить, каким образом исторические процессы трансконтинентального культурного обмена повлияли на современные формы международного сотрудничества, а также проанализировать отражение историко-культурной преемственности в современной культурной дипломатии. В исследовании используются исторический и сравнительный анализ, качественный контент-анализ, анализ документов и метод тематического исследования. Рассматриваются развитие межцивилизационного диалога, обмен религиозными и научными знаниями, а также распространение художественных традиций и ремёсел вдоль Шёлкового пути. Кроме того, анализируется современное сотрудничество в контексте инициативы Китая «Один пояс, один путь», образовательных обменов, культурной дипломатии, туризма и охраны культурного наследия. Особое внимание уделяется Узбекистану как примеру, позволяющему изучить роль исторического наследия в современных культурных отношениях и его потенциал для регионального сотрудничества. Наследие Шёлкового пути рассматривается не только как историческая память, но и как ресурс, формирующий современные транснациональные связи, культурную дипломатию и взаимопонимание между регионами.

Ключевые слова: *трансконтинентальный культурный обмен; историко-культурная преемственность; межцивилизационный диалог; культурная дипломатия; мягкая сила; отношения Китая и Центральной Азии*

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada Ipak yo‘lining tarixiy va madaniy merosi hamda uning Xitoy va Markaziy Osiyo mamlakatlari o‘rtasidagi zamonaviy madaniy munosabatlarga ta’siri o‘rganiladi. Tadqiqotning maqsadi tarixiy transkontinental madaniy almashinuv jarayonlari bugungi xalqaro hamkorlik shakllariga qanday ta’sir ko‘rsatganini aniqlash hamda tarixiy-madaniy uzviylikning zamonaviy madaniy diplomatiyada qanday aks etishini tahlil qilishdan iborat. Tadqiqotda tarixiy va qiyosiy tahlil, sifat kontent-tahlili, hujjatlar tahlili hamda keys-stadi yondashuvidan foydalaniladi. Ipak yo‘li bo‘ylab sivilizatsiyalararo muloqotning rivojlanishi, diniy va ilmiy bilimlar almashinuvi, san’at va hunarmandchilik an’analarining tarqalishi ko‘rib chiqiladi. Shuningdek, Xitoyning «Bir makon, bir yo‘l» tashabbusi, ta’lim almashinuvi, madaniy diplomatiya, turizm va madaniy merosni muhofaza qilish doirasidagi zamonaviy hamkorlik tahlil etiladi. Tarixiy merosning bugungi madaniy munosabatlardagi o‘rni va mintaqaviy hamkorlik salohiyatini o‘rganishda O‘zbekiston misoliga alohida e’tibor qaratiladi. Ipak yo‘li merosi faqat tarixiy xotira sifatida emas, balki zamonaviy transmilliy aloqalar, madaniy diplomatiya va mintaqalararo o‘zaro tushunishni shakllantiruvchi resurs sifatida talqin qilinadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: *transkontinental madaniy almashinuv; tarixiy-madaniy uzviylik; sivilizatsiyalararo muloqot; madaniy diplomatiya; yumshoq kuch; Xitoy–Markaziy Osiyo munosabatlari*

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout world history, certain geographical corridors and trade networks have played an important role not only in economic development but also in the growth of cultural, social, and intellectual relations among civilizations. One such historical space was the Silk Road. More than a network of trade routes connecting East and West, it served as a transcontinental system of communication through which diverse peoples, states, and cultures entered into multifaceted relationships.

The term “Silk Road” does not refer to a single, unchanging route. Rather, it describes a network of overland and maritime routes that expanded, shifted, and incorporated different geographical areas over time. This network connected the ancient centres of China with Central Asia, Iran, the Middle East, and Europe. Along these routes, not only silk, spices, precious objects, and other commodities circulated, but also religious ideas, scientific knowledge, technologies, artistic traditions, and cultural practices.

The Chang’an–Tianshan Corridor, recognised by UNESCO, is an important example of the historical scale of the Silk Road. This approximately 5,000-kilometre corridor connected the ancient Chinese capital of Chang’an with the Zhetysu region of Central Asia. According to UNESCO, the route took shape from the second century BCE to the first century CE and remained in use until the sixteenth century. Along it, trade was accompanied by the circulation of religious beliefs, scientific knowledge, technological innovations, art, and cultural practices (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

The historical significance of the Silk Road remains relevant today. In particular, the intensification of political, economic, and cultural relations between China and the Central Asian states has renewed scholarly interest in this shared historical legacy. In contemporary international relations, historical memory, shared cultural heritage, and inter-civilizational dialogue are important not only for understanding the past but also for shaping new mechanisms of cooperation.

Launched in 2013, China’s Belt and Road Initiative has reinterpreted the historical idea of the Silk Road within the framework of contemporary international cooperation. Although the initiative initially focused on strengthening infrastructure and economic connectivity, education, science, culture, and people-to-people contacts have also become important areas of engagement. Nevertheless, the historical Silk Road and the modern initiative should not be treated as equivalent: they differ in their historical circumstances, political structures, participants, and operating mechanisms.

The relevance of this study lies in the need to examine more closely the relationship between historical heritage and contemporary cultural cooperation. In particular, identifying the role of historical cultural connections in present-day cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, tourism, and transnational cooperation constitutes an important research problem.

The central research question is: How does the historical and cultural legacy of the Silk Road influence contemporary cultural relations between China and the Central Asian states, and how is this legacy reinterpreted through contemporary cultural diplomacy?

To address this question, the article pursues the following objectives:

to examine the historical formation of the Silk Road and its role in transcontinental cultural exchange;

to analyse the principal dimensions of historical inter-civilizational relations between China and Central Asia;

to identify how historical-cultural continuity is reflected in contemporary cultural diplomacy;

to explore cooperation in education, language learning, tourism, and the protection of cultural heritage;

to assess the significance of historical heritage in contemporary international cultural relations through the case of Uzbekistan.

Literature Review

Research on the Silk Road covers several major areas, including historical trade relations, cultural exchange, the spread of religious traditions, archaeological heritage, international cooperation, and contemporary cultural diplomacy.

The first strand of scholarship examines the historical-geographical and civilizational characteristics of the Silk Road. UNESCO’s Silk Roads Programme interprets this historical network as a space of interaction among different peoples and civilizations. World Heritage documentation on the Chang’an–Tianshan Corridor records the circulation of religious beliefs, technologies, scientific knowledge, and artistic forms along the routes. This approach highlights the cultural and intellectual significance of the Silk Road alongside its economic functions.

A second strand explores the use of historical heritage in contemporary international relations. Sciorati (2023) analyses China’s heritage diplomacy in Central Asia, focusing on the inscription of the Chang’an–Tianshan Corridor on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The author demonstrates how the presentation of historical heritage as a symbol of a shared past and cooperation can influence interstate relations. At the same time, the study highlights the complex relationship between national interests and historical memories in the interpretation of heritage.

A third strand focuses on China’s cultural diplomacy and soft power. Xu (2021) examines the educational dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative from a cultural-political-economy perspective. Educational exchange, academic cooperation, and cultural connections are considered important components of the initiative. This perspective makes it possible to analyse education not only as a process of knowledge transfer but also as a mechanism that can foster international understanding and cultural influence.

However, the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy cannot be measured solely by the number of official initiatives or organised events. Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva (2025) examine China’s soft power in Central Asia and show that economic and political influence does not automatically translate into positive public attitudes. Their study identifies historical memory, territorial issues, and ethnic factors as important influences on China’s attractiveness in the region.

Taken together, these studies help explain the significance of the Silk Road legacy in contemporary political and cultural relations. Nevertheless, there remains scope for an integrated analysis of the transition from historical cultural exchange to contemporary cultural diplomacy, particularly one that brings historical and contemporary factors together through

the case of Uzbekistan. This article addresses that issue by examining the continuity, reinterpretation, and practical expression of historical heritage in contemporary cultural cooperation.

2. METHODS

The study adopts a qualitative research approach because its primary purpose is to identify the content, formative factors, and interrelationships of historical and contemporary cultural relations. Several complementary methods are employed.

Historical-analytical method. This method is used to examine the formation and development of the Silk Road and the historical stages of cultural relations between China and Central Asian territories. Historical sources and scholarly literature provide the basis for analysing the main patterns of exchange in trade, religion, science, and the arts.

Comparative method. Cultural relations during the historical Silk Road period are compared with contemporary China–Central Asia cooperation. The analysis considers both similarities and differences, including institutional, political, and communicative dimensions.

Qualitative content analysis. Declarations of China–Central Asia summits, interstate agreements, cultural cooperation programmes, and documents issued by international organisations are examined. The analysis focuses on the use of concepts relating to cultural heritage, educational exchange, people-to-people communication, cultural diplomacy, and regional cooperation.

Case-study approach. Uzbekistan is selected as the principal case through which historical relations and contemporary cultural cooperation between China and Central Asia are examined. The analysis considers cooperation in education, language learning, cultural heritage, and tourism.

The geographical scope covers China and the five Central Asian states: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. However, Uzbekistan receives particular attention in areas where information is available and the analysis can be developed in greater depth. The temporal scope is divided into two broad periods: historical relations in antiquity and the medieval era, and contemporary relations, primarily from 1991 onwards.

An important methodological limitation is that the presence of cooperation initiatives in official documents does not, by itself, demonstrate that these initiatives are uniformly accepted by society or that they have achieved their intended practical outcomes. For this reason, official statements, scholarly research, and available empirical evidence should be assessed in relation to one another.

3. RESULTS

3.1. The historical and cultural significance of the Silk Road

The Silk Road was one of the most important international communication networks of the ancient world. Its development was closely connected with the expansion of trade and diplomatic relations between China, Central Asia, and other regions. The routes changed across historical periods in response to political circumstances, economic needs, and geographical conditions.

The expansion of diplomatic and commercial relations between China and Central Asia during the Han dynasty in the second century BCE marked an important stage in the development of the Silk Road network. In subsequent centuries, connections among China, the Fergana Valley, Sogdiana, Bactria, Iran, and other territories grew through these routes.

The historical significance of the Silk Road also derives from the fact that it was not a single route. It operated as a complex network linking cities, oases, mountain passes, and commercial centres. Central Asia’s geographical position made the region an important intermediary in connections between East and West.

Cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Termez, Tashkent, and Otrar developed as centres of trade, craftsmanship, scholarship, and cultural interaction. Samarkand and Bukhara, in particular, were important not only for economic exchange but also for intellectual and cultural activity.

Participants in the Silk Road network exchanged more than goods. Merchants, envoys, scholars, travellers, religious figures, and artisans helped circulate knowledge and experience between different regions. The Silk Road should therefore be studied not merely as a trading system but as a complex network of transnational cultural relations.

Intercultural dialogue and civilizational interaction

One of the most important characteristics of the Silk Road was its role in creating conditions for dialogue among different civilizations. Religious beliefs, philosophical ideas, scientific knowledge, and artistic traditions travelled from one region to another through this network.

The spread of Buddhism from India to China through Central Asia is an important example of historical cultural exchange. Central Asia was not simply a geographical transit zone in this process; it also contributed to the translation and interpretation of religious teachings and their adaptation to new cultural environments.

Music, architecture, visual art, textile production, and craft traditions also circulated along the routes and influenced the aesthetic perspectives of different peoples. In some forms of artistic expression and decoration, the interaction of diverse cultural traditions produced distinctive combinations.

Cultural exchange was not a one-way process. China, Central Asia, and other regions adopted new practices through mutual contact while adapting existing cultural forms to local conditions. The culture of the Silk Road can therefore be understood as a multi-layered historical phenomenon shaped by interaction among different peoples.

The exchange of science, technology, and intellectual knowledge

The Silk Road facilitated the circulation not only of material goods but also of scientific and technological knowledge. The transmission of papermaking technology from China westward through Central Asia is one of the best-known examples of this process.

During the medieval period, Central Asian cities played an important role in the development of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, philosophy, and geography. Scholars working in the region engaged with different intellectual traditions and contributed to their further development.

In this respect, the Silk Road was not only a network of economic connections but also a space for the circulation of knowledge and intellectual interaction. These historical connections provide important context for the study of international scientific cooperation today.

5. HISTORICAL CULTURAL RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIA

5.1. Diplomatic and trade relations

Relations between China and Central Asia developed from ancient times through diplomatic missions, merchant caravans, and different political formations. Although these relations changed across periods, geographical and economic interdependence contributed to their continuity.

Silk, porcelain, and other goods were transported from China to Central Asia. In the opposite direction, horses, precious stones, metal objects, craft products, and other commodities were carried eastward from Central Asian territories.

Alongside commercial relations, diplomatic contacts also developed. Envoys exchanged between different states and political centres contributed not only to political agreements but also to the circulation of cultural experience and information.

5.2. The role of the Sogdians as cultural intermediaries

The Sogdians were among the most important intermediaries in the development of economic and cultural relations between China and Central Asia. Particularly during the sixth to eighth centuries CE, networks of Sogdian merchants centred around the regions of Samarkand and Bukhara connected China with India, Iran, Byzantium, and other territories. Their activities extended beyond trade: they also contributed to the circulation of languages,

customs, religious ideas, and cultural values among different peoples (Yoshida, 2021; de la Vaissière, 2004).

An important body of historical evidence for Sogdian activity in China consists of the ancient Sogdian letters discovered near Dunhuang. These written documents indicate that Sogdian merchants were active in Chinese territory in the early fourth century and maintained correspondence and connections with Samarkand. The fact that one of the letters was addressed to Samarkand provides evidence of long-distance commercial and social networks (Sims-Williams, 1985).

In addition, the Sogdians interacted with various ethnic and religious communities living in China and contributed to the development of intercultural communication. Their multilingual abilities, mobility along trade routes, and capacity to adapt to different cultural environments made them significant transregional intermediaries of their time (Huber, 2020).

The historical activities of the Sogdians demonstrate that the Silk Road was not merely a route for economic exchange. It was a broad transcontinental space in which cultural, linguistic, and social connections developed among different civilizations.

5.3. Mutual influence and the exchange of cultural heritage

The Silk Road facilitated extensive exchanges between China and the peoples of Central Asia in art, music, architecture, religious ideas, and everyday cultural practices. One striking example of this interaction is the wall paintings from the palace complex at Afrasiab in Samarkand.

Figure 1. Wall paintings from the Afrasiab palace, Samarkand (seventh century CE).

Source: Provide the original museum or scholarly source of the image.

The seventh-century Afrasiab paintings depict envoys from different lands and provide evidence of diplomatic contacts. Among the figures are individuals associated with China, making the paintings an important historical source for the study of diplomatic and cultural relations between Samarkand and China during this period. The murals also reflect the international connections and cultural diversity of Central Asia at the time (Society.uz, 2023).

Music represents another important dimension of cultural exchange. Historical accounts indicate that musicians and dancers from Central Asia participated in Chinese court culture. During the Tang dynasty in particular, Central Asian musical traditions and performance practices attracted considerable interest. This development illustrates the role of the Silk Road in the circulation of music and artistic practices across regions (Encyclopaedia Iranica, n.d.).

These historical examples suggest that cultural relations between China and Central Asia developed not through one-sided influence but through processes of mutual exchange and enrichment. The Silk Road therefore contributed not only to the circulation of material goods but also to the formation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

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[Editorial note: The Afrasiab mural image has been omitted from this version because its original museum or scholarly source and reproduction permission were not supplied. Reinsert only after verifying the source and caption.]

3.3. Contemporary cultural cooperation

Announced in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative developed as a broad international strategy aimed at strengthening economic and transport connectivity across Eurasia. Drawing on the historical image of the Silk Road, the initiative seeks to promote contemporary transport links, trade, investment, and interregional cooperation.

The principal connection between the historical Silk Road and the modern initiative lies in their shared emphasis on geographical connectivity and interaction. Nevertheless, important differences separate them. The historical Silk Road developed through complex interactions among different political centres and independent trading networks, whereas the contemporary initiative is implemented through interstate agreements, international institutions, and infrastructure projects.

The role of historical heritage in the contemporary initiative should therefore not be explained solely in terms of historical continuity. It should also be analysed as a political symbol, a form of shared historical memory, and a cultural discourse through which international cooperation is presented and given meaning.

Cultural diplomacy and soft power

Cultural diplomacy refers to the use of culture, education, the arts, and other social instruments to foster mutual understanding, trust, and positive relations between states. In contemporary China–Central Asia relations, these mechanisms are reflected in language teaching, university partnerships, academic exchange, cultural events, and initiatives to protect cultural heritage.

The concept of soft power refers to the ability to influence others through attraction and voluntary acceptance rather than coercion or material incentives. Cultural diplomacy and soft power should not, however, be treated as identical concepts. Cultural diplomacy refers to particular instruments and practices, whereas soft power describes a broader capacity to shape preferences and political influence.

Sciorati (2023) analyses China’s heritage diplomacy in Central Asia and shows that the construction and interpretation of shared historical heritage can become an important symbolic instrument in interstate cooperation. At the same time, interpretations of heritage may differ among participants and can raise complex issues related to national historical memory and interests.

Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva (2025) demonstrate that China’s soft-power potential in Central Asia does not necessarily develop in parallel with its economic and political influence. This finding highlights the need to consider local public attitudes, historical memory, and specific social contexts when assessing the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy.

Educational and linguistic exchange

Educational exchange is one of the important dimensions of contemporary cultural cooperation between China and Central Asia. University partnerships, student and academic staff mobility, scholarship programmes, Chinese-language teaching, and joint research projects contribute to the development of intercultural communication.

Xu (2021) examines the role of education within the Belt and Road Initiative from a cultural-political-economy perspective. The study presents education not only as a means of exchanging knowledge and skills but also as an important instrument for building cultural relations and international cooperation.

Growing interest in learning Chinese is another indicator of contemporary cultural connections. Language learning is not limited to the development of communicative competence; it also creates opportunities to understand another society’s historical experience, values, worldview, and cultural characteristics.

At the same time, cultural exchange should be reciprocal. Alongside the study of Chinese, the languages, histories, and cultural heritage of Central Asian peoples should receive wider

attention in China’s academic and social environments. Such a balanced approach can help ensure that cultural cooperation is based on mutual respect and equality.

Tourism and the protection of cultural heritage

Tourism is an important field connecting historical heritage with contemporary cultural exchange. Historic cities, architectural monuments, museums, and archaeological sites associated with the Silk Road can stimulate international tourism while increasing mutual cultural awareness among peoples.

The historic cities of Uzbekistan, including Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, and Shahrisabz, form an important part of the Silk Road legacy. These cities are not only symbols of national history and culture but also significant spaces for international cultural dialogue.

The development of cultural tourism is closely linked to the preservation, restoration, scholarly study, and public presentation of historical sites. Cooperation between China and the Central Asian states may therefore benefit from archaeological research, partnerships among museums, and the exchange of expertise in heritage protection.

However, the development of tourism and heritage diplomacy should also take account of the commercialisation of historical sites, the interests of local communities, and the need to preserve the authenticity of cultural heritage.

3.4. Uzbekistan as a centre of China–Central Asia cultural relations

Uzbekistan is of particular importance to the study of historical and contemporary relations between China and Central Asia because of its geographical position, rich historical heritage, and cultural traditions. Since ancient times, the territory of present-day Uzbekistan has been located at the intersection of trade routes and has served as a space in which different peoples and cultures interacted.

Historic centres such as Samarkand and Bukhara played an important role in trade, scholarship, and cultural exchange during the Silk Road period. Their architectural monuments, craft traditions, and historical sites reflect the region’s multi-layered cultural history.

Since independence, relations between Uzbekistan and China have expanded in diplomatic, economic, educational, and cultural fields. Cooperation between higher education institutions, Chinese-language teaching, student exchange, and cultural events have contributed to strengthening contacts between the peoples of the two countries.

The first China–Central Asia Summit, held in Xi’an on 18–19 May 2023, marked an important stage in the institutional development of regional cooperation. The Xi’an Declaration adopted at the summit addressed multilateral cooperation, transport connectivity, people-to-people contacts, and the development of traditional friendship between China and the Central Asian states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2023).

The declaration illustrates how ideas of historical friendship and shared cultural heritage are linked to political cooperation in contemporary China–Central Asia relations. Nevertheless, the objectives set out in the declaration should be distinguished from their practical implementation and outcomes.

Uzbekistan’s role in this process is determined by more than geographical or economic factors. The country’s historic cities, cultural heritage, educational institutions, and research capacity create important opportunities for expanding cultural cooperation with China.

From this perspective, Uzbekistan can both preserve its historical heritage and make it an active component of contemporary international cultural dialogue. The key principles of such cooperation should include mutual respect, cultural equality, scholarly rigour, and the preservation of independent local interpretations of heritage.

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis suggests that the Silk Road legacy performs several interconnected functions in contemporary China–Central Asia relations.

First, historical heritage functions as a resource for shared memory and cultural identification. Historical connections formed through the Silk Road make it possible to understand contemporary relations between states in a broader historical context. However, the existence of a shared heritage does not mean that all states and societies interpret it in the same way.

Second, historical heritage becomes a symbolic resource for cultural diplomacy. Transnational heritage projects within UNESCO, joint research on historical sites, and cultural events can create opportunities to strengthen interstate cooperation. At the same time, interpreting historical heritage exclusively within the national or political narrative of one state may marginalise the historical experiences of other participants.

Third, educational and linguistic exchange provides an institutional foundation for cultural relations. University partnerships, academic mobility, and language education foster long-term interpersonal connections. The effectiveness of such cooperation should be assessed not only by the number of official programmes but also by participants’ actual experiences, reciprocal knowledge exchange, and sustained academic outcomes.

Fourth, the effectiveness of soft power depends on local social and historical contexts. China’s active economic and political engagement does not automatically increase its cultural attractiveness. Public opinion, historical memory, local values, and the information environment all influence how cultural diplomacy is received.

On this basis, the article treats historical-cultural continuity not as a simple, uninterrupted process but as one that is reinterpreted and transformed under contemporary conditions and in response to political and social factors.

5. CONCLUSION

The Silk Road was a complex transcontinental network that significantly influenced the development of economic, political, and cultural relations throughout human history. Its historical importance extended beyond the exchange of commercial goods to the circulation of religious ideas, scientific knowledge, technologies, art, and cultural values among different peoples.

The analysis conducted in this study indicates that the historical legacy of the Silk Road continues to be expressed in various forms in contemporary China–Central Asia relations. Cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, language learning, tourism, and the protection of cultural heritage are among the important areas through which this historical connectedness is reflected in contemporary cooperation.

At the same time, the historical Silk Road should not be equated directly with the modern Belt and Road Initiative. Their relationship is expressed primarily through historical symbols, geographical space, and the idea of transnational connectivity. Contemporary cooperation, by contrast, develops through interstate agreements, institutional mechanisms, and new economic and political conditions.

The case of Uzbekistan demonstrates particularly clearly the significance of historical heritage in contemporary cultural relations. The country’s historic cities, scholarly traditions, and cultural wealth create important opportunities for expanding cooperation with China. The sustainability of this process, however, depends on cultural equality, mutual respect, and the preservation of independent interpretations of local historical heritage.

The findings suggest several priorities for the development of China–Central Asia cultural cooperation:

expanding joint historical and archaeological research related to the Silk Road;

developing inter-university academic mobility and reciprocal language-education programmes;

strengthening the participation of local communities and research institutions in cultural heritage protection;

promoting cultural tourism while preserving the authenticity of historical sites;

expanding scholarly platforms devoted to the balanced and reciprocal study of the historical experiences of China and the peoples of Central Asia.

Overall, the Silk Road legacy provides an important historical and cultural foundation for understanding contemporary China–Central Asia relations. Its significance today lies not in reproducing past forms of interaction, but in transforming historical experience into a meaningful resource for modern, mutually beneficial, and equitable cultural cooperation.

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