

Gandhāra and the Silk Road Legacy: Cultural Heritage under BRI Cooperation

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Abstract

The reinterpretation of Gandhāran heritage sites in Swat and Taxila within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where cultural heritage is used as a tool for regional connectivity and diplomacy, is examined in this article. Based on cultural diplomacy and critical heritage studies, it takes an interdisciplinary approach using archaeological, policy, and heritage management sources. Although BRI collaboration encourages restoration, museum growth, and digital preservation, the study highlights issues with local participation, authenticity, and commercialization. It recommends that cooperative governance that strikes a balance between diplomatic, cultural, and developmental objectives is necessary to preserve Gandhāra's legacy.

Keywords: Gandhāra, Swat Valley, Taxila, Silk Road, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Cultural Heritage, Sino-Pakistan Cooperation, Cultural Diplomacy

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Introduction

The Gandhāra civilization emerged in the valleys of Swat, Peshawar, and Taxila—areas that were crucial intersections between South and Central Asia—and flourished from the sixth century BCE to the fifth century CE. Several empires, such as the Achaemenid, Greek, Mauryan, and Kushan, had a significant impact on its political, cultural, and artistic landscape. Buddhism spread widely under Ashoka's Mauryan rule, and Gandhāra was transformed into a flourishing hub of Buddhist learning and creative expression by the Kushans. This combination of religious fervor and imperial patronage created a unique Greco-Buddhist cultural identity that reflected the blending of Hellenistic artistic ideals with Indian spirituality.¹

Gandhāra, which was situated along the Silk Road, developed into a commercial and cultural center that connected China, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Buddhism was able to spread throughout Central and East Asia thanks to the flow of goods, ideas, and artistic traditions through its cities. According to UNESCO's Silk Roads program "Pilgrims and caravans from South, West, and Central Asia converged in Gandhāra, at the crossroads of commerce and of world religions."² Archaeological findings at important locations like Takht-i-Bahi, Saidu Sharif I, Taxila, Butkara, and Swat show a thriving urban and monastic landscape with cross-cultural symbolism and elegant architecture. Gandhāra's function as a crossroads of civilizations is demonstrated by excavations conducted by academics such as Marshall, Faccenna, and Dani; its art and legacy serve as timeless reminders of the ancient Silk Road world's cultural interconnectedness.³

¹ Behrendt, K. A. (2007). *The Art of Gandhara in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, pp. 15–22; Rowland, B. (1953). *The Art and Architecture of India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, pp. 96–101.

² UNESCO Silk Roads Programme. (2014). *The Silk Roads: Connecting Cultures, Building Trust*. Paris: UNESCO, p. 19.

³ Marshall, J. (1951). *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Vol. I, pp. 3–12; Faccenna, D. (1981). *Butkara I (Swāt, Pakistan) 1956–1962: The Stupa, Preliminary Report on the Excavations*. Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente; Dani, A. H. (1968). *Gandhara Art in Pakistan*. Peshawar: Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan.



Map 1 showing the historic region of Gandhāra (roughly northwest Pakistan, including Taxila, Peshawar Valley and surrounding areas) as the cultural crossroads of ancient South Asia.

Literature Review

Gandhāra is the site of cultural synthesis, where Indian, Persian, and Hellenistic artistic traditions merged to create a unique visual culture for Buddhism.¹ Archaeologists Marshall (1951), Dani (1999), and Olivieri (2014) have carried out extensive research on sites like Taxila and the Swat Valley, highlighting their function as monastic, artistic, and intellectual hubs during the Kushan Empire.²

In recent decades, Gandhāran studies have shifted their focus from art history to issues of cultural diplomacy and heritage management. In view of Filigenzi (2014) and Khan & Rehman (2019), partnerships between Pakistani and foreign organizations—especially the Italian Archaeological Mission—have led to changes in excavation and conservation techniques in Swat.³ In post-conflict contexts, heritage has the potential to promote regional cooperation and sustainable tourism, according to parallel studies conducted by UNESCO (2012, 2018) and ICCROM (2017).⁴

Literature on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) further situates heritage within the realm of transnational cultural exchange. Callahan (2016) and Wang (2021) argue that BRI extends China's "soft power" by promoting

¹ Gérard Fussman, "Upāya-kausālyā: L'art du prêche dans l'art du Gandhāra," *Annuaire du Collège de France* 87 (1987): 463–478; John Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 112–118.

² John Marshall, *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), vol. I, 12–15; Ahmad Hasan Dani, *History of Pakistan: Pakistan Through Ages* (Islamabad: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1999), 45–49; Luca M. Olivieri, *Archaeology and Heritage in Pakistan: From the Field to the Museum* (Rome: ISMEO, 2014), 67–70.

³ Anna Filigenzi, "Archaeology, Communities and Sustainable Development in Swat (NWFP, Pakistan): A Case Study from the Archaeological Mission of ISMEO," *East and West* 64 (2014): 45–72; Fida Khan and Muhammad Rehman, "Preservation of Cultural Heritage in Pakistan: Challenges and Prospects," *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* 39, no. 2 (2019): 357–369.

⁴ UNESCO, *Culture: A Driver and an Enabler of Sustainable Development* (Paris: UNESCO, 2012), 23–25; UNESCO, *World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 2018), 10–13; ICCROM, *Heritage and Resilience: Issues and Opportunities for Reducing Disaster Risks* (Rome: ICCROM, 2017), 4–8.

shared cultural narratives through heritage diplomacy.¹ Additionally, literature about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) places heritage in the context of cross-border cultural exchange. Such as Callahan (2016) and Wang (2021) argue that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) builds on China's "soft power" by promoting shared cultural narratives through heritage diplomacy.²

Altogether, this literature shows how archaeology, diplomacy, and sustainable development are increasingly overlapping, redefining Gandhāran heritage as a living resource and a scholarly topic within the changing cultural framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on two complementary theoretical lenses: Cultural Diplomacy Theory and Critical Heritage Studies.

Cultural Diplomacy Theory explained by Bound (2007) and Nye, (2004) explains how states use cultural assets—such as archaeology, art, and shared historical narratives—to project influence and foster international cooperation.³ Within the BRI framework, China's engagement with Gandhāran sites in Pakistan functions as a form of "heritage soft power," positioning cultural restoration and joint research as instruments of geopolitical goodwill and image-building.

While Critical Heritage Studies, as articulated by Smith (2006) and Harrison (2013), problematize the notion of heritage as static or apolitical.⁴ As an alternative, heritage is viewed as a socially constructed process that is influenced by identity, power, and negotiation. This viewpoint highlights conflicts between local autonomy and outside investment—between development for financial gain and preservation for cultural continuity—in the context of BRI heritage projects in Swat and Taxila.

By combining these frameworks, it is possible to gain a sophisticated understanding of how Gandhāran heritage functions on several levels, including as an archaeological legacy, a site of cultural diplomacy, and a contentious area in narratives about global development.

Research Questions

1. What effects does the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have on Pakistan's Gandhāran heritage representation, management, and preservation, especially in Swat and Taxila?
2. How can Gandhāran heritage be used as a soft power tool for cultural diplomacy in Sino-Pakistan relations?
3. What risks and difficulties come with incorporating heritage conservation into major BRI infrastructure and tourism development projects?

The Belt and Road Initiative and Cultural Heritage Diplomacy

In the current China-Pakistan relationship, Gandhāra's legacy has taken on new significance as a result of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which prioritizes both economic growth and cultural connectivity. A crossroads of the ancient Silk Road and a historic center of Buddhist learning, Gandhāra now represents friendship and mutual cultural exchange between the two countries. Through joint archaeological missions, museum partnerships, and digital preservation projects in Taxila and Swat, both countries are reframing Gandhāra's Buddhist legacy as a foundation for cultural diplomacy and mutual understanding. Within this framework, the BRI's cultural cooperation—interpreted through the lens of cultural diplomacy theory—illustrates how heritage functions as an instrument of soft power, allowing China to strengthen international partnerships and extend its influence through shared historical narratives.⁵

¹ William A. Callahan, "China's 'Asia Dream': The Belt Road Initiative and the New Regional Order," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 1, no. 3 (2016): 226–243; Yi Wang, *The Belt and Road Initiative and Global Governance: Chinese and European Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 54–57.

² Samina Nazir, "Tourism, Faith and Heritage: The Case of Buddhist Sites in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Tourism and Hospitality* 4, no. 2 (2021): 85–97; Ahmad Rahman, "Cultural Heritage and Local Communities: A Case Study of Swat," *South Asian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2020): 123–136.

³ Bound, Kirsten, Rachel Briggs, John Holden, and Samuel Jones. *Cultural Diplomacy*. London: Demos, 2007, pp. 15–18; Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2004, pp. 5–8.

⁴ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 11–29; Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 15–33.

⁵ Bound, K., Briggs, R., Holden, J., & Jones, S. (2007). *Cultural Diplomacy*. London: Demos, pp. 10–14; Nye, J. S. (2004).

More and more academics are connecting China's heritage diplomacy to larger geopolitical goals. Cultural heritage is now "an important pillar of China's strategy to secure influence internationally," as explained by Fiona McGowan. This is in line with Xi Jinping's Global Civilization Initiative, which encourages intercultural communication and diversity.¹ The Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (2015) are two official BRI documents that specifically emphasize the significance of heritage projects, such as Buddhist–Taoist pilgrimage routes and museum partnerships.² Critical Heritage Studies viewpoints, however, warn that these kinds of projects run the risk of reiterating external narratives and marginalizing local voices.³ Pakistan must thus strike a balance between local agency and China's cultural soft power to engage in sustainable heritage cooperation under the BRI. This will guarantee that Gandhāra's resurgence not only advances diplomacy but also protects authenticity, community involvement, and cultural continuity.⁴

BRI Heritage Conservation Initiatives and Cooperation Projects in Pakistan

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has accelerated Chinese heritage diplomacy in Pakistan, resulting in official agreements and cooperative initiatives. The 2018 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between China's National Cultural Heritage Administration and Pakistan's National Heritage and Culture Division made history by outlining cooperative archaeological research, conservation, museum collaborations, and anti-antiquity trafficking initiatives.⁵ Chinese engagement has been characterized by Pakistani officials, such as Dr. Abdul Samad, (DoA-KPK), as a sincere effort to preserve Gandhāran heritage.⁶ Beijing's commitment to heritage-based diplomacy within the BRI framework is further demonstrated by its involvement in the 2022 Alliance for Cultural Heritage in Asia (Xi'an) and Xi Jinping's emphasis on cultural cooperation.⁷

Academic cooperation and large-scale public exhibitions have promoted cultural diplomacy. The biggest exhibition of Gandhāran artifacts ever held in China was the 2023 "Gandhāra Heritage along the Silk Road," which was co-organized by the Palace Museum in Beijing and the Department of Archaeology and Museums in Pakistan.⁸ Deep cultural ties were symbolized by the loan of more than 200 Buddhist sculptures, coins, and reliefs from Pakistan. President Arif Alvi and other Pakistani officials praised this initiative as a significant step toward fostering "dialogue among civilizations."⁹ These initiatives show how the BRI goes beyond economics to advance common cultural narratives that have their roots in the historic Silk Road.

This collaboration has been strengthened by a number of conservation and training programs. With funding from China, the "Guardians of Gandhāra" program unites students, conservators, and archaeologists from both nations.¹⁰ Especially at locations like Takht-i-Bahi, collaborative field surveys, excavations, and restoration projects highlight authenticity in preservation and improve technical proficiency. Cooperation has also benefited museums; for example, the Palace Museum in Beijing supplies conservation education, documentation, and

Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. New York: PublicAffairs, pp. 75–78.

¹ McGowan, F. (2021). "China's Heritage Diplomacy and the Belt and Road Initiative: Cultural Routes and Global Influence." *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 27(6), 812–828.

² National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). (2015). *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*. Beijing: Government of the People's Republic of China. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.cn>

³ Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge, pp. 44–47; Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. London: Routledge, pp. 15–19.

⁴ Chawla, M. I. (2022). "BRI, Cultural Connectivity and Heritage Cooperation between China and Pakistan." *Journal of Asian Civilizations*, 45(2), 67–88; UNESCO. (2021). *Silk Roads and Shared Heritage Cooperation under BRI Framework*. Paris: UNESCO Publications.

⁵ National Heritage & Culture Division, Government of Pakistan. (2018). *Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cultural Heritage Cooperation*. Islamabad: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

⁶ Samad, A. (2020, November 5). Interview with China Daily: "China-Pakistan Cultural Cooperation Protecting Gandhara Heritage." *China Daily Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn>

⁷ Alliance for Cultural Heritage in Asia. (2022). *Founding Declaration and Member Statements*. Xi'an: National Cultural Heritage Administration of China. Retrieved from <http://en.chncpa.org.cn>

; Xi Jinping. (2023). *Speech at the Alliance for Cultural Heritage in Asia Forum*. Beijing: Xinhua News Agency.

⁸ Palace Museum Beijing & Department of Archaeology and Museums Pakistan. (2023). *Gandhāra Heritage along the Silk Road: Exhibition Catalogue*. Beijing: Palace Museum Press.

⁹ "Pakistan, China Open Grand Gandhara Exhibition in Beijing." (2023, April 17). *Dawn News*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1747894>.

¹⁰ Cultural Cooperation Office, Embassy of China in Pakistan. (2022). *Guardians of Gandhara: Joint Conservation Training Report*. Islamabad–Beijing Cultural Exchange Series.

scholarships to Pakistani professionals.¹ These programs improve academic and institutional ties while simultaneously preserving material heritage.

Through tourism development and digital innovation, heritage collaboration has grown even more. The Digital Gandhāra Project (Harvard University and KP Archaeology Department, 2024) documents Gandhāran monuments and artifacts using 3D scanning, which supports the preservation and accessibility objectives of the BRI.² In the meantime, the Prime Minister's Task Force on Gandhāra Tourism in Pakistan collaborates with Chinese partners to improve connectivity, visa facilitation, and Buddhist tourism infrastructure. The CPEC's improved road connections between Taxila and Swat also it have improved site accessibility and the potential for tourism.³ When taken as a whole, these projects demonstrate how, within the larger BRI vision, Gandhāra's Buddhist heritage is being reframed as a basis for sustainable tourism, cultural diplomacy, and heritage-led development.

Here is a Table 1 summarizing Heritage-conservation and cooperation initiatives in Pakistan linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Initiative / Project	Location / Heritage Site	Partners & Cooperation Focus	Significance
Gandhara Heritage along the Silk Road: A Pakistan-China Joint Exhibition”	China (Beijing, Gansu, Shenzhen); artifacts from Pakistan’s Gandhāra region	Pakistan’s National Heritage & Culture Division + China’s Palace Museum (Beijing)	Showcased 203 artifacts (173 from Pakistan museums) of Gandhāra art, underscoring the shared Silk Road cultural legacy between Pakistan & China.
Digital documentation & preventive conservation of Buddhist rock reliefs in Swat Valley	Swat Valley, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan	Local agencies (Directorate of Archaeology & Museums KP), Italian Archaeological Mission, British Council Cultural Protection Fund	Focuses on tangible heritage in the Gandhāra region, climate-adaptation of rock reliefs threatened by erosion.
Inclusion of Pakistan artefacts in “Excellence in Cultural Heritage of National Museums of the SCO” exhibition	Beijing, National Museum of China	Pakistan’s DOAM & Chinese counterpart	Pakistan contributed artefacts (Indus, Gandhāra, Mughal) to an SCO member-states heritage exhibition; reflects broader cooperation under Silk Road/BRI cultural diplomacy.
Executive Programme of Cultural Agreement between Pakistan + China (2023-2027)	Pakistan & China (multi-site)	China-Pakistan cultural & tourism institutions	Formal framework for collaboration: cultural tours, museum links, people-to-people exchange, publishing cooperation among others.

Challenges and Risks in Heritage Preservation

Even with eager collaboration, many obstacles still exist. Security and political unrest continue to jeopardize Gandhāra sites. Numerous monuments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were either targeted or neglected as a result of

¹ “Chinese Experts Train Pakistani Museum Staff in Conservation Techniques.” (2023, March 22). The Express Tribune. Retrieved from <https://tribune.com.pk>.

² Harvard University Asia Center & KP Directorate of Archaeology and Museums. (2024). Digital Gandhāra Project Report. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

³ Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives. (2023). CPEC Tourism Development Plan 2023–2030. Islamabad: Government of Pakistan; Prime Minister’s Task Force on Gandhāra Tourism. (2023). Progress Report. Islamabad: Cabinet Division.

the decades-long conflict. When the Taliban took control of Swat in the 2000s, "they damaged the Buddhist sites," according to Italian archaeologist Luca Maria Olivieri, and Gandhāra heritage is "extremely underestimated and underfunded."¹ Therefore, there is a constant risk to conservation efforts from terrorism and radicalization.

Another issue is management and resources. According to one analysis, Pakistan's heritage agencies have low funding and insufficient staff.² UNESCO sites, such as Takht-i-Bahi and Taxila, are said to be "vanishing due to poor management."³ Local experts regret that theft and illegal trade still another issue within Gandhāran art. For example, antiquated artifacts are still being sold on illicit markets, proving that border security and law enforcement are inadequate.⁴ This is made worse by unchecked development and urbanization. According to the same study, sites can be physically destroyed by unchecked urban sprawl and construction. Historic warnings highlight instances where development projects have harmed cultural heritage, including Barikot, Saidu Sharif, and Udegram Swat heritage sites.⁵ Similar concerns have been raised by observers that, if not properly planned, CPEC infrastructure—new roads, railroads, hydropower, and industrial zones—may intrude on Gandhāran landscapes. In fact, under BRI projects, a heritage manager cautions that "we might damage the Gandhara heritage" in the absence of surveys and preservation measures.⁶

Over-development and authenticity concerns are closely related. Quick construction close to ruins can cause their context to be lost. Preservation of the integrity of archaeology is emphasized by heritage experts. The Chinese restoration team in Nepal, for instance, received recognition for their "extreme caution in preserving the authenticity, integrity, and values of the World Heritage site."⁷ On the other hand, Pakistani critics fear that construction associated with the CPEC may alter site settings or put pressure on authorities to "hurry" projects at the expense of meticulous conservation. A further risk is the commodification of heritage for tourism without the necessary context, such as when theme parks or hotels are built next to stupas instead of maintaining their sanctity. An associated difficulty is controlling the number of visitors: Every year, up to a million tourists visit Taxila, and Swat tourism is expected to increase.⁸ Without boundaries, this might put undue strain on brittle structures and necessitate unsustainable infrastructure. Indeed, the promoters of Gandhāra tourism themselves identified problems such as "unsupervised hotels, underdeveloped roads, and tourist safety" as barriers.

Lastly, things are made more difficult by geopolitical balancing. Chinese investment is brought about by the BRI, but experts warn that problem is continuity; because of internal political unrest, Pakistan's cultural projects have occasionally stalled. As Iqbal Chawla points out, previous heritage initiatives frequently stalled when governments shifted.⁹ One of the most important ongoing challenges under the BRI framework is making sure that sites are protected beyond short-term projects and that conservation standards adhere to international standards.¹⁰

Policy Implications for Sustainable Heritage

¹ Olivieri, L. M. (2018, July 16). Buddhist Heritage in Pakistan's Swat: A Symbol of Tolerance. Interview with Al Arabiya English. Retrieved from <https://english.alarabiya.net/webtv/reports/2018/07/16/Buddhist-heritage-in-Pakistan-s-Swat-a-symbol-of-tolerance>.

² Ali, I., & Qureshi, S. (2020). "Challenges in Heritage Management in Pakistan: A Policy Review." *Journal of South Asian Heritage Studies*, 12(1), 55–70.

³ UNESCO. (2021). *State of Conservation of World Heritage Properties in Pakistan (Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi)*. Paris: UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org>

⁴ ICOM (International Council of Museums). (2019). *Red List of South Asian Cultural Objects at Risk: Pakistan Section*. Paris: ICOM Publications.

⁵ Olivieri, L. M., Vidale, M., & Filigenzi, A. (2006). "Archaeology and Landscape in the Swat Valley." *East and West*, 56(1–3), 73–110; Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. (2019). *Annual Report on Cultural Heritage Sites of Swat Valley*. Peshawar: Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

⁶ "Cultural Heritage Concerns amid CPEC Expansion." (2022, December 14). Dawn News, quoting remarks by an unnamed heritage site manager, Department of Archaeology and Museums, Islamabad. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com>

⁷ UNESCO & ICOMOS. (2016). *Report on the Conservation of the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site (Nepal)*. Paris: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, p. 22.

⁸ Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. (2023). *Annual Heritage Tourism Report: Swat and Taxila Circuits*. Peshawar: DoAM Publications.

⁹ Chawla, M. I. (2022). "BRI, Cultural Connectivity and Heritage Cooperation between China and Pakistan." *Journal of Asian Civilizations*, 45(2), 67–88.

¹⁰ UNESCO. (2021). *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. Paris: UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

An integrated strategy that strikes a balance between development and preservation is necessary for the sustainable management of Gandhāra's heritage under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Experts support requiring Cultural Heritage Impact Assessments before beginning infrastructure projects like the CPEC in order to ensure that archaeological surveys inform route planning and shield historic sites from harm. With the help of China, Pakistan, UNESCO, and foreign donors, a dedicated Gandhāra Heritage Commission could strengthen governance and centralize conservation, tourism, and education efforts. Meanwhile, a permanent endowment fund would ensure steady funding.

Expanded training programs for conservators and archaeologists, possibly funded by Chinese-Pakistani scholarships, would professionalize heritage management. Building capacity is equally important. A long-term Vision 2050 for Religious Tourism could offer strategic continuity in tandem with Pakistan's National Security Policy. Instead of using CPEC funds for intrusive construction, tourism development should adhere to community-based and heritage-sensitive models, directing them toward local employment and access infrastructure. International awareness and collaboration can be improved through broader cultural diplomacy, such as Buddhist pilgrimage exchanges with China, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

Every restoration project should follow ICOMOS and UNESCO conservation guidelines, which place a strong emphasis on authenticity, using traditional materials, and keeping detailed records. Protection would be strengthened even more with digital archiving and new World Heritage nominations (such as Butkara and Takhti-Bahi). Reinvesting tourism profits back into site maintenance and offering financial incentives to "heritage-friendly" businesses could guarantee self-sustaining preservation.

To put it simply, a comprehensive strategy based on planning, institutional strength, community involvement, and adherence to international conservation standards can guarantee that China-Pakistan cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) preserves and revitalizes Gandhāra's Silk Road heritage for coming generations.

Conclusion

Once a thriving hub of Buddhist art and intercultural interaction along the historic Silk Road, the Gandhāra region is now at the intersection of a renewed sense of connectivity to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This study illustrates Pakistan-China heritage cooperation has revitalized Gandhāra's trans-regional significance, turning it into a cultural diplomacy tool as well as an archaeological revival site. Through digital documentation initiatives, museum partnerships, and restoration projects, the BRI framework has contributed to the recovery and reinterpretation of Gandhāra's legacy in a contemporary developmental context.

But the results also show that there are some complications in this process. Questions concerning authenticity, commercialization, and community involvement are brought up by the junction of extensive infrastructure development and cultural heritage. Heritage could end up being used as a soft power symbol instead of being maintained as a living cultural tradition if there are no clear safeguards in place. Therefore, inclusive governance, open planning, and adherence to international conservation standards are necessary for sustainable heritage management, which calls for more than just financial investment.

China and Pakistan can make the BRI partnership a model of balanced development by fusing conservation ethics with cultural diplomacy. A Gandhāra Heritage Commission, thorough Cultural Heritage Impact Assessments, and a long-term Vision 2050 for Religious Tourism are examples of institutional innovations that can guarantee that cultural preservation continues to be a key component of infrastructure development. Such policies, if applied comprehensively, would enable Gandhāra's Silk Road legacy to serve as a living bridge of communication, identity, and shared prosperity for future generations rather than just as a relic of the past.

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