

Beyond Symbolic Exchange: A Governance Framework for Exhibition-Based Cultural Cooperation in Saudi Chinese Relations

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HOW TO CITE:

Haneen Mohammad Shoaib (2026).
Beyond Symbolic Exchange: A
Governance Framework for
Exhibition-Based Cultural
Cooperation in Saudi Chinese
Relations.
International Journal of Special
Education, 41(18s), 400-417

ABSTRACT:

This study develops an analytical framework for understanding exhibition-based cultural cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China within the broader context of Sino-Arab relations. Moving beyond conventional narratives of symbolic exchange and mutual understanding, the study argues that exhibitions function as structured institutional platforms that integrate cultural diplomacy, governance arrangements, creative-economy priorities, and international partnership mechanisms. As Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 prioritizes culture and tourism and China's Belt and Road Initiative promotes cultural connectivity, exhibitions have become increasingly relevant sites of bilateral engagement. Adopting a qualitative exploratory design grounded in secondary-data analysis, including policy documents, cooperation agreements, institutional reports, and exhibition materials, the study draws on cultural economics, soft-power theory, international cultural-policy studies, and governance theory. Findings reveal three interconnected dimensions: exhibitions serve as symbolic platforms for presenting national identity and civilizational narratives; as governance spaces requiring multi-actor coordination across ministries, museums, curators, and private sectors; and as economic drivers supporting tourism, creative entrepreneurship, and cross-border cultural industries. The discussion emphasizes that sustainable cooperation depends on coherent governance, stable financing, professional development, and evaluative mechanisms, moving from event-based gestures toward long-term institutionalized partnerships. The study concludes that exhibition-based cooperation remains an under-theorized yet vital component of Saudi Chinese relations, offering a governance-oriented framework that contributes to broader debates on culture as an institutionalized dimension of contemporary international relations while providing foundations for future empirical research.

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Keywords: China-Arab, Cooperation, Cultural Diplomacy, Creative Economy, Belt and Road

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, culture has assumed an increasingly strategic role in international

relations, shaping how states construct identity, claim legitimacy, and position themselves within a multipolar order. Scholarship in international relations and cultural policy demonstrates that cultural interaction now operates alongside economic and political engagement as a core dimension of diplomacy, particularly where traditional power hierarchies are being reconfigured (Ang et al., 2015; Acharya, 2014a). Culture thus functions not merely as symbolic exchange but as an institutional resource embedded in state strategies of positioning and relational governance. Within this evolving landscape, Sino-Arab relations provide a compelling yet underexplored context for examining the internationalization of culture (Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, 2025). Academic scholarship on China-Arab engagement has expanded significantly in recent years, but it remains heavily concentrated on trade, energy security, infrastructure development, and geopolitics, particularly regarding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Fulton, 2019; Akbarzadeh & Saba, 2025). Cultural cooperation, by contrast, is often treated as a secondary or supportive dimension of these partnerships, rather than as an analytical category. As a result, we still lack a clear account of how cultural interaction shapes the longer-term stability and institutional depth of Sino-Arab relations.

Within the domain of cultural cooperation, exhibitions occupy a distinctive institutional position. Unlike informal people-to-people encounters or short-term cultural exchanges, exhibitions are curated, publicly visible, and organizationally complex cultural forms. They translate historical narratives, artistic production, and national identity into structured spaces of interpretation that are accessible to broad audiences. Museum and exhibition studies have long emphasized that exhibitions are not neutral displays, but sites where knowledge, power, and representation intersect through curatorial practice and institutional governance (Macdonald, 2011). As such, exhibitions function simultaneously as cultural, institutional, and political platforms, making them particularly well-

suited for examining how cultural diplomacy operates in practice.

Despite their analytical relevance, exhibitions remain marginal within the literature on Sino-Arab relations and Arab cultural diplomacy (Ang et al., 2015). When cultural exchange is addressed, it is often framed in abstract terms of soft power or illustrated through isolated initiatives, without sustained attention to institutional arrangements, governance mechanisms, or economic logics (Ang et al., 2015; Vlassis, 2016). This limitation is especially evident in studies of Saudi Arabia's cultural transformation, which have largely focused on domestic reform, heritage preservation, tourism development, or the expansion of entertainment sectors under Vision 2030, rather than on cross-border cultural cooperation with non-Western partners such as China (Sheline & Ulrichsen, 2025). Saudi Arabia and China nonetheless represent a particularly significant case for examining exhibition-based cultural cooperation. Diplomatic relations between the two countries, established in 1990, have expanded rapidly across economic, technological, and political domains. More recently, culture has gained strategic prominence as Saudi Arabia positions cultural policy at the center of national identity reconstruction, heritage revitalization, and global repositioning under Vision 2030, while China continues to integrate culture into its international engagement through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and broader cultural-governance frameworks (Keane, 2016; Juan et al., 2018). For China, cultural engagement with the Arab world increasingly reflects an effort to present itself as a civilizational partner and knowledge producer, rather than solely as an economic actor within the Global South (Acharya, 2014b). This study addresses a clear conceptual gap in the literature by examining exhibitions as a central mechanism of Saudi Chinese cultural cooperation. It asks how exhibitions function as platforms through which cultural meaning, institutional collaboration, and economic value intersect, and how these platforms contribute to the broader evolution of Sino-Arab cultural relations. Rather than treating culture as a symbolic dimension of diplomacy, the study

positions exhibition-based cooperation as an integral, operational component of contemporary Arab-China engagement, shaped by governance arrangements, financing structures, and human capital development.

Methodologically, the study adopts a theoretical and exploratory approach grounded in a systematic synthesis of secondary data. Drawing on cultural economics scholarship, soft power theory, and international cultural policy frameworks, it develops an analytical model that situates Saudi Chinese exhibition cooperation within broader debates on cultural diplomacy and the development of the creative economy (Throsby, 2010). This approach is particularly appropriate given the emergent nature of Saudi Chinese cultural collaboration and the limited availability of consolidated empirical datasets across national and institutional contexts. While soft power theory explains attraction-based influence and cultural economics clarifies value creation, neither sufficiently accounts for the institutional architecture that sustains cross-border governance and hosts cross-border exhibitions. This study therefore develops a governance-centered analytical model that integrates policy alignment, institutional coordination, financing mechanisms, and human capital development as interdependent dimensions of cultural cooperation. To address the identified conceptual and empirical gap, this study is guided by the following research questions.

RQ1: How do exhibitions function as institutional mechanisms of Saudi-Chinese cultural cooperation?

RQ2: What governance mechanisms enable exhibition-based cooperation to evolve beyond episodic representation toward sustainable partnership?

RQ3: How does human capital development contribute to the institutionalization of Sino-Saudi cultural cooperation?

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it advances Arabic and Middle East studies by foregrounding culture, and exhibitions in

particular, as a substantive field of inquiry within Sino-Arab relations, addressing a literature long dominated by political economy and geopolitics. Second, it offers a structured analytical framework that connects cultural diplomacy with institutional governance and cultural-economic value creation, moving beyond descriptive accounts of exchange. Third, by focusing on Saudi Arabia and China, the study broadens the geographical and conceptual horizons of Arab cultural studies scholarship, which has traditionally privileged Arab-Western cultural relations.

In doing so, the findings from this study respond to growing scholarly calls to re-examine cultural interaction in a multipolar world and to reassess how Arab cultural agency is exercised through partnerships beyond the Western sphere (Acharya, 2014b; Ang et al., 2015). The Saudi Chinese case thus provides a timely and analytically productive lens through which to explore how culture functions simultaneously as a site of meaning, governance, and strategic resource in contemporary international relations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Arab-China Cultural Relations and Civilizational Dialogue

Historical and contemporary scholarship recognizes cultural exchange as a foundational dimension of China-Arab relations, rooted in centuries of interaction along the Silk Road and revitalized in the modern era through diplomatic and people-to-people engagement (Liu, 2010; Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, 2025). Recent studies emphasize that China's engagement with the Arab world is not solely economic but also civilizational, drawing on narratives of mutual respect, non-interference, and shared historical memory (Acharya, 2014a; Fulton, 2020; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023). Cultural cooperation thus functions as a means of constructing relational legitimacy and sustaining long-term partnership (Ang et al., 2015). In Arabic and Middle East studies, cultural policy is increasingly analyzed as a mechanism through which states reshape national identity and reposition themselves internationally during periods of transformation. In Saudi Arabia, Vision

2030 has intensified attention to heritage re-narration, entertainment expansion, and creative-economy integration as tools of domestic legitimacy and international repositioning (Sheline & Ulrichsen, 2025). Yet Sino-Saudi cultural relations remain under-theorized compared with the extensive political economy literature on China-Arab engagement. Despite this growing interest, existing research often treats cultural cooperation descriptively, focusing on isolated events or symbolic gestures rather than on institutional structures and mechanisms. Moreover, Sino-Saudi cultural relations remain marginal within broader China-Arab studies, which tend to privilege macro-level political economy analysis. This gap underscores the need for more systematic examination of how cultural exchange is organized, governed, and sustained.

2.2 Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, and Institutional Cooperation

Cultural diplomacy scholarship situates culture as a medium of influence, attraction, and international communication (Ptáčková et al., 2021; Draissi et al., 2025). Soft power has been especially influential in analyzing how states deploy culture to shape global perceptions (Akbarzadeh & Saba, 2025). In the Chinese context, scholars argue that cultural diplomacy serves to project civilizational confidence and relational legitimacy, particularly in regions such as the Arab world, where historical narratives of East-East interaction resonate strongly (Ang et al., 2015; Fulton, 2019; Akbarzadeh & Saba, 2025). While soft-power scholarship provides useful analytical tools, it risks overstating the intentional projection of state power and underestimating the institutional complexity of cultural production. Exhibition cooperation often unfolds through negotiation and constraint rather than strategic design alone. Alliance theory further illuminates how cultural cooperation can be institutionalized. Doz and Hamel (1998) emphasize that alliances generate value when partners engage in learning, capability complementarity, and trust-building. Applied to cultural exchange, this perspective highlights the importance of governance structures, shared decision-making, and long-term

institutional commitment. Within Arab cultural diplomacy, institutionalization is particularly critical, as episodic initiatives often fail to produce lasting impact without sustained organizational frameworks. Despite these insights, much of the literature remains conceptually fragmented. Cultural diplomacy is frequently discussed in abstract terms, while alliance theory is rarely applied to cultural cooperation in Arab-China contexts. This study bridges these strands by examining exhibitions as institutionalized platforms where cultural diplomacy, learning, and cooperation intersect.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, theoretical, and exploratory research design grounded in systematic secondary data analysis. It follows a theory-building logic common in cultural policy studies research. This design is particularly appropriate for examining emerging forms of Sino-Arab cultural cooperation, where institutional arrangements, cultural practices, and policy frameworks remain in flux and consolidated longitudinal datasets are limited or unevenly developed. Qualitative and exploratory approaches are well-suited to contexts in which the objective is not hypothesis testing but theory building and conceptual clarification, especially in complex, multi-actor international settings (George & Bennett, 2005). The study follows a theory-building logic aimed at conceptual clarification rather than hypothesis testing, consistent with qualitative traditions in international and area studies (George & Bennett, 2005). Exploratory qualitative designs are particularly suited to under-theorized domains where institutional arrangements and governance mechanisms remain emergent. In the context of Sino-Arab cultural cooperation, this approach enables systematic synthesis of dispersed policy, institutional, and scholarly materials. By relying on secondary-data synthesis, the study follows established practices in comparative and international research that emphasize analytical depth, contextual sensitivity, and triangulation over statistical generalization (George & Bennett,

2005). This design allows the research to capture the evolving governance logics, institutional pathways, and meaning-making processes that characterize contemporary Saudi-Chinese cultural cooperation, while laying a conceptual foundation for future primary and mixed-methods research.

3.2 Epistemological Orientation

This study adopts an interpretivist epistemological perspective that understands culture as a socially constructed and meaning-laden phenomenon shaped by historical narratives, institutional practices, and symbolic representation. Cultural cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and exhibition-making involve processes of interpretation and meaning-making that cannot be adequately captured through positivist or purely quantitative approaches. Instead, the analysis prioritizes contextual understanding and relational dynamics within cultural interaction. As an interpretive analysis grounded in secondary sources, this study is necessarily shaped by the availability and framing of publicly accessible documents. This orientation is consistent with established traditions in Arabic and Middle East studies, where qualitative interpretation has long been central to the study of cultural exchange, identity formation, and cross-civilizational relations. It also aligns with cultural economics and soft power scholarship, which recognize that cultural value extends beyond measurable economic outputs to include symbolic legitimacy and relational influence (Throsby, 2010).

3.3 Data Sources and Analytical Scope

The analysis draws on a curated corpus of secondary sources selected for relevance, credibility, and institutional authority. Secondary data synthesis is appropriate for examining transnational governance processes in which policy documentation and institutional reporting constitute primary evidence (Johnston, 2014; George & Bennett, 2005). The sources used in this study include four principal categories. First, national cultural and development strategies from Saudi Arabia and China form a foundational layer of analysis, most notably Saudi Vision 2030 and official Chinese cultural and people-to-people cooperation frameworks. Such policy documents

are treated as authoritative expressions of state cases' priorities and governance logics rather than neutral descriptions of practice. Second, the study draws on international cultural-policy documents and analytical reports issued by multilateral organizations, including UNESCO, OECD, UNCTAD, and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). These sources provide globally recognized frameworks for understanding culture as a development sector, a governance domain, and a component of international cooperation, and are widely used in comparative cultural-policy research (OECD, 2022; UNCTAD, 2024). Third, the analysis incorporates peer-reviewed academic literature spanning Arabic and Middle East studies, China-Arab relations, cultural economics, cultural diplomacy, and creative-industry research. This interdisciplinary body of scholarship enables conceptual triangulation across international relations, cultural studies, and political economy, strengthening analytical validity and contextual depth (Throsby, 2010).

Finally, the study draws selectively on comparative case studies of international exhibitions, museum collaborations, and creative districts documented in academic and institutional publications. Case-based analysis is employed not for statistical generalization but for analytical insight, allowing exhibitions to serve as bounded empirical sites through which broader dynamics of cultural governance, institutional cooperation, financing models, and human capital development can be examined. Consistent with qualitative and interpretive research traditions, the study does not aim for exhaustive coverage of all cultural initiatives but focuses on exhibitions as analytically strategic cases, through which the organization and institutionalization of Sino-Arab cultural cooperation can be meaningfully interpreted.

3.4 Data Selection and Analysis Protocol

The secondary-source corpus was constructed through systematic search across four databases: Web of Science, Scopus, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), and Google Scholar, using search terms including: 'China-Arab cultural cooperation,' 'exhibitions + diplomacy,'

'Belt and Road + culture,' 'Saudi Arabia + China + culture,' 'museum cooperation,' and 'creative economy + Middle East.' Sources were selected based on four criteria: (1) relevance to cultural cooperation, exhibitions, or Sino-Arab relations; (2) methodological rigor (peer-reviewed or authoritative institutional sources); (3) temporal coverage (2010-2025); and (4) geographic focus (Saudi Arabia, China, Gulf, or Arab world). The final corpus comprised 64 documents, categorized in Table 1, which include peer-reviewed articles,

books, policy documents, and institutional reports. Thematic coding followed an iterative process: initial open coding identified recurring themes (governance, human capital, economic value, sustainability), followed by axial coding linking themes to theoretical frameworks (cultural economics, soft power, governance theory), and selective coding synthesizing findings into the analytical framework presented in the following sections.

Table 1: Analytical Corpus

Category	Number of Documents	Time Frame	Examples
Saudi National Policy Documents	4	2016-2025	Vision 2030; Ministry of Culture releases; Royal Commission for AlUla documentation
Chinese National Policy Documents	4	2017-2024	BRI Action Plan; Cultural Country Outline; State Council reports
Bilateral Cultural Cooperation Documents	1	2018	Juan et al. (2018) BRI-Vision 2030 alignment analysis
International Cultural Policy Reports	8	2005-2025	UNESCO; OECD; UNCTAD; World Economic Forum; NEMO reports and conventions
Exhibition-Specific Institutional Reports	1	2023	Bureau of China International Import Expo documentation
Peer-Reviewed Academic Sources	46	1995-2025	Cultural diplomacy; governance; museum and exhibition studies
Total	64		

3.5 Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy employed a structured thematic analysis consistent with the coding framework detailed in Appendix A. Following corpus construction, analysis proceeded through three sequential stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, applied to the sixty-four documents identified in the present study. In the first stage, open coding required close reading of policy documents, institutional reports, and academic sources to identify recurring patterns in

the framing of cooperation, governance, and value. Initial codes clustered around governance arrangements, policy alignment between national strategies, economic ecosystem integration, human capital formation, and institutional sustainability and durability. These codes reflected repeated patterns across both Saudi and Chinese sources. In the second stage, axial coding organized these recurring references into five principal analytical categories: policy alignment; governance architecture; economic ecosystem integration; human capital and knowledge

systems; and institutionalization mechanisms. This stage helped clarify how these categories relate to one another, particularly how governance arrangements, professional capacity, and economic integration reinforce or constrain exhibition-based cooperation. In the final stage, selective coding integrated these categories into four core themes developed in Sections 4-6: exhibitions as institutional platforms rather than episodic events; governance architecture as the central explanatory mechanism; human capital as relational infrastructure mediating cooperation; and multidimensional value generation encompassing economic, diplomatic, and social outcomes. These themes form the conceptual foundation of the analytical model presented in

Figure 1. The coding process was iterative, involving movement between empirical patterns and relevant theoretical lenses, including governance theory, cultural economics, soft-power scholarship, and alliance-based cooperation. This integration enabled the articulation of relational mechanisms that explain how exhibition-based cultural cooperation operates within the Saudi Chinese context. Rather than producing statistical generalizations, the analysis seeks to identify governance dynamics and institutional mechanisms that are conceptually robust and analytically transferable to comparable Sino-Arab and Global South cultural partnerships, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Coding Matrix Summary

Analytical Category	Representative Codes	Representative Sources
Policy Alignment	Strategic convergence; Vision 2030-BRI linkage; national modernization narratives	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2016); State Council (2017, 2023); Juan et al. (2018)
Governance Architecture	Steering mechanisms; coordination structures; ethical stewardship; hybrid financing; accountability	Kooiman (2003); Ansell & Gash (2008); UNESCO (2022); Holden (2015)
Economic Ecosystem Integration	Creative economy; tourism multiplier; employment generation; investment signalling	Throsby (2010); OECD (2022); UNCTAD (2024); Kong (2021)
Human Capital & Knowledge Systems	Curatorial expertise; intercultural competence; institutional learning; professional exchange	Gibbons et al. (1994); Pratt (2009); Earley & Ang (2003); Macdonald (2011)
Institutionalization Mechanisms	Governance density; feedback loops; adaptive coordination; partnership durability	Jessop (2016); Doz & Hamel (1998); UNESCO (2022)

3.5 Methodological Limitations

As a theory-oriented and secondary-data-based study, this research does not claim empirical completeness. The absence of primary fieldwork and quantitative measurement limits the ability to assess causal impact or stakeholder perceptions directly. However, this limitation is consistent

with the study's objective of conceptual clarification and framework development. The proposed analytical model is intended to inform and guide future empirical research, including qualitative field studies, interviews with cultural practitioners, and quantitative assessments of cultural and economic impact. As an interpretive analysis grounded in evolving policy

documentation, the study is shaped by the pace and visibility of institutional reform. The rapid pace of institutional change in Saudi Arabia makes this cooperation both analytically compelling and methodologically challenging.

4. Findings

4.1 Governance and Sustainable Institutional Implementation in Saudi Chinese Cultural Cooperation

Thematic analysis of the sixty-four-document corpus identified governance architecture as the dominant analytical cluster shaping Saudi Chinese exhibition cooperation. Across policy texts, institutional reports, and academic scholarship, recurring references to coordination structures, policy alignment, financing mechanisms, and ethical stewardship converged around governance as the central explanatory mechanism. Section 4 develops this corpus-derived theme by examining how governance structures enable or constrain the institutional durability of exhibition-based cooperation. The durability of Saudi Chinese exhibition cooperation depends on governance architecture rather than symbolic visibility alone. Policy alignment, coordination structures, financing mechanisms, and ethical stewardship collectively determine whether cultural initiatives evolve into sustained institutional partnerships (UNESCO, 2022; Kooiman, 2003). In the Saudi Chinese context, exhibitions increasingly function as institutional platforms rather than isolated cultural events. Their sustainability is shaped by four interrelated governance dimensions: policy alignment, institutional coordination, accountability and ethical stewardship, and adaptive capacity. Together, these dimensions determine whether cultural cooperation evolves into a durable partnership or remains confined to representational exchange.

4.2 Policy Alignment and Strategic Convergence

Policy alignment emerged in axial coding as a foundational dimension linking national cultural strategies and bilateral cooperation. Saudi Arabia's cultural transformation under Vision 2030 and China's international cultural engagement through

the Belt and Road Initiative reflect a shared policy reorientation that positions culture as a development sector and a component of international engagement (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017). In both contexts, culture is no longer framed solely in terms of heritage preservation or symbolic diplomacy, but as an integrated field linked to tourism, education, urban regeneration, and creative industries (Keane, 2016). This convergence creates enabling conditions for structured bilateral cooperation. Saudi Arabia's rapid expansion of museums, heritage districts, and exhibition infrastructure intersects with China's long-standing experience in large-scale exhibition production and cultural-infrastructure governance (Bouchenaki, 2011; Keane, 2016). Exhibitions thus emerge as practical sites where policy priorities intersect and where cooperation can be operationalized rather than improvised. From an analytical standpoint, this alignment illustrates how cultural cooperation can be embedded within development strategies rather than appended to them. It also highlights how exhibitions function as policy instruments through which abstract cultural objectives are translated into visible and organized institutional practice, linking cultural representation to broader agendas of urban development, tourism, and international positioning (Kong, 2021).

4.3 Institutional Coordination and Governance Architecture

Sustainable cultural cooperation requires governance arrangements that operate across multiple institutional levels (Kooiman, 2003). At the bilateral level, coordination mechanisms provide strategic direction, policy coherence, and continuity across political cycles, embedding cultural initiatives within broader diplomatic and policy frameworks (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023). At the institutional level, museums, cultural authorities, universities, and exhibition professionals function as implementing actors responsible for curatorial decisions, production processes, and audience engagement. The interaction between these levels determines whether cultural cooperation becomes

institutionalized or remains episodic. Exhibition cooperation is governance-intensive, requiring coordination across legal, administrative, and curatorial systems. Effective implementation depends less on hierarchical control than on networked coordination and professional negotiation capable of bridging institutional differences (Macdonald, 2011). International cultural-policy scholarship therefore emphasizes networked and collaborative governance models that prioritize coordination, professional autonomy, and shared standards over rigid authority structures (Kooiman, 2003; Jessop, 2016). In the context of exhibition cooperation, such models enable institutions to maintain curatorial credibility while operating within agreed frameworks of responsibility and mutual trust (Holden, 2015; Macdonald, 2011). Governance architecture influences the durability of cooperation through several interrelated mechanisms: it enhances coordination efficiency by reducing transaction and misalignment costs; it stabilizes trust across institutions by formalizing expectations and responsibilities; and it preserves institutional memory through proceduralizing, documentation, and iterative learning. Through these mechanisms, governance becomes not merely an administrative backdrop but a structural condition for sustained Saudi-Chinese cultural partnership. Yet not all governance arrangements are equally resilient. Institutional fragility remains a possibility.

4.4 Financing, Accountability, and Ethical Stewardship

Financial structures form a core component of governance sustainability (Throsby, 2010). Exhibitions require sustained investment, yet reliance on single funding sources often undermines resilience and limits strategic flexibility. Comparative cultural-policy research demonstrates that hybrid financing models, combining public funding with institutional, private, and philanthropic participation, offer greater stability and adaptability (OECD, 2018). In Saudi-Chinese cooperation, public investment provides foundational support, reflecting the strategic importance attached to culture in both

national contexts. However, diversified financing mechanisms are essential for sustaining touring exhibitions, co-curated projects, and long-term institutional collaboration without excessive fiscal dependence (World Economic Forum, 2025; NEMO, 2021). Accountability in exhibition-based cooperation extends beyond financial oversight. It encompasses cultural representation, interpretive responsibility, audience engagement, and institutional learning (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Macdonald, 2011). Performance assessment therefore requires multidimensional indicators that integrate economic measures with cultural and institutional criteria, including curatorial quality, narrative integrity, educational value, and public reception. Ethical stewardship is particularly consequential in cross-cultural exhibitions, where interpretive choices shape how histories, identities, and values are publicly represented. Governance frameworks that embed ethical responsibility enhance institutional credibility and public trust, ensuring that exhibitions function as legitimate spaces of intercultural engagement rather than instruments of unilateral narrative projection.

4.5 Economic Value Generation: Evidence and Indicators

Economic ecosystem integration appeared consistently across the corpus as a secondary but reinforcing dimension of governance sustainability. Exhibition-based cultural cooperation generates economic value beyond symbolic diplomacy by operating within broader creative-economy ecosystems. Although comprehensive exhibition-level data on Saudi-Chinese collaborations are not publicly available, convergent evidence from national strategies and international cultural policy research points to plausible economic channels. The indicators presented here are therefore benchmark-based and inferential rather than exhibition-specific impact measurements. Under Vision 2030, culture and creative industries are positioned as pillars of economic diversification, with a targeted contribution of 3 percent of GDP and substantial employment growth (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Cultural-economics scholarship

emphasizes that museums and exhibitions often function as anchor institutions within cultural ecosystems, stimulating adjacent sectors such as tourism, heritage services, and creative entrepreneurship (Throsby, 2010; Pratt, 2009). In this framework, exhibition cooperation contributes not only to cultural visibility but also to ecosystem formation and economic circulation. Comparative evidence from China's museum expansion illustrates the potential scale of exhibition-driven engagement. Large visitor volumes and integrated museum-tourism systems demonstrate how exhibitions generate direct and indirect economic effects across hospitality, retail, and urban services (Kong, 2021). International research similarly documents tourism multiplier effects associated with major exhibitions, extending visitor expenditure beyond admission fees to accommodation and transportation (OECD, 2022). While Saudi Arabia's exhibition infrastructure remains in earlier stages of development, such benchmarks indicate the economic potential of sustained institutional cooperation. Employment and skills development constitute an additional channel of economic value. Exhibition production generates direct professional roles and indirect service-sector employment, aligning with Vision 2030 workforce targets (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Beyond immediate job creation, cultural-economy scholarship highlights the importance of knowledge transfer and skill accumulation in sustaining long-term creative-sector capacity (Gibbons et al., 1994; Pratt, 2009). Exhibitions may also function as economic signaling mechanisms within broader bilateral engagement. UNCTAD identifies cultural collaboration as a trust-building factor that can facilitate subsequent investment in creative and digital sectors (UNCTAD, 2024). From a governance perspective, embedding exhibitions within formal cooperation frameworks positions culture as part of economic infrastructure rather than purely symbolic exchange. Significant limitations remain. Exhibition-level economic data are not systematically disclosed, indirect and induced effects require complex modeling, and counterfactual analysis poses methodological

challenges common in cultural-impact research (Throsby, 2010; Belfiore & Bennett, 2008). And while national strategies emphasize creative-economy targets, it remains unclear how exhibition-level budgeting decisions are negotiated in practice, particularly when cultural diplomacy intersects with domestic fiscal priorities. These constraints highlight the need for future empirical assessment. Overall, available evidence supports the interpretation of Saudi Chinese exhibition cooperation as economically consequential through ecosystem stimulation, tourism integration, employment generation, and investment signaling, even if precise quantification remains limited.

4.6 Adaptive Governance and Long-Term Sustainability

Institutionalization mechanisms, particularly adaptive coordination and feedback processes, constituted a distinct thematic cluster in the analysis. Cultural cooperation unfolds within dynamic political, social, and technological environments, making adaptability a central governance requirement (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Jessop, 2016). Adaptive governance emphasizes learning, feedback, and incremental adjustment rather than fixed regulation, enabling institutions to respond to changing audience expectations, technological innovation, and evolving diplomatic contexts (UNESCO, 2022). In the Saudi Chinese context, adaptability is particularly relevant given the rapid pace of cultural development in Saudi Arabia and the evolving nature of China's global cultural engagement (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; Keane, 2016). Mechanisms such as pilot exhibitions, professional exchange, periodic evaluation, and institutional dialogue contribute to governance resilience by embedding learning within cooperation processes (Holden, 2015). Taken together, policy alignment, institutional coordination, accountable financing, ethical stewardship, and adaptive capacity determine whether exhibition-based cooperation evolves into a sustained institutional partnership or remains confined to symbolic exchange. By foregrounding governance as an analytical core rather than an administrative backdrop, this

section demonstrates that sustainable Saudi Chinese cultural cooperation is fundamentally a question of institutional design and practice, not merely cultural ambition (Karp et al., 2006).

4.7 Human Capital, Knowledge Transfer, and Capacity Building

A second major analytical category identified through axial coding concerned human capital and knowledge systems as mediating mechanisms between governance design and the sustainability of long-term cooperation. Sustainable cultural cooperation depends on human capital and the institutional knowledge systems that sustain continuity and learning across borders. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that cultural ecosystems are maintained not only through economic investment but through skills, expertise, and organizational learning embedded in professional practice (Pratt, 2009; Gibbons et al., 1994). Within Saudi Chinese cooperation, human capital serves as a relational infrastructure that links governance design to sustainable practice. Curators, cultural administrators, and researchers mediate institutional norms and interpretive frameworks across contexts, enabling knowledge transfer and adaptive collaboration (Keane, 2009).

Exhibitions exemplify this dynamic as knowledge-intensive cultural forms whose production relies on interdisciplinary expertise shaping interpretation and public meaning-making (Macdonald, 2011). Through joint curatorial work and professional exchange, exhibitions become sites of institutional learning and capacity building rather than isolated cultural events. Accordingly, long-term Saudi Chinese cultural cooperation depends on education, research exchange, professional mobility, and intercultural competence as mechanisms for co-producing durable cultural knowledge infrastructures and adaptive governance practices (Holden, 2015).

4.8 Knowledge and Learning in Cultural Cooperation

Cultural cooperation operates through learning processes that extend beyond formal diplomacy (Kooiman, 2003). Knowledge transfer occurs

through shared curatorial practice, collaborative research, professional dialogue, and exposure to different cultural epistemologies (Karp et al., 2006). In Sino-Arab relations, such learning is particularly significant because it enables mutual understanding across distinct civilizational traditions (Earley & Ang, 2003; Draissi et al, 2025). Within Saudi Chinese cooperation, exhibitions function as sites of informal pedagogy, engaging audiences and professionals with new cultural narratives and interpretive frameworks (Macdonald, 2011). This learning dimension underscores the importance of investing in human capital capable of navigating historical complexity, symbolic meaning, and contemporary cultural discourse. However, by integrating education, research collaboration, professional learning, and intercultural competence, human capital development provides a self-reinforcing foundation for sustainable cultural cooperation (Earley & Ang, 2007). Exhibitions both draw upon and contribute to this foundation, functioning as spaces where knowledge is tested, shared, and made visible (Macdonald, 2011). From a Sino-Arab perspective, investment in human capital enables cultural cooperation to move beyond episodic exchange toward a durable partnership. It ensures that collaboration is sustained not only through institutional agreements but also through shared expertise, intellectual exchange, and mutual respect, linking governance structures, cultural meaning, and long-term cooperation (Earley & Ang, 2007).

5. Comparative Analysis of Two Exhibition Cases

To move from descriptive illustration to analytical comparison, Table 3 contrasts the governance and operational features of the two primary cases examined (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2018; Royal Commission for AlUla, 2024). These are analytically illustrative cases, not evaluative impact studies, selected to demonstrate variation in governance. The 2018 exhibition took place at a time when Saudi cultural reform was still in its early phase of institutional consolidation, preceding the establishment of several new

cultural authorities, whereas the 2024 exhibition occurred during a more developmental period.

Table 3: Comparative Governance Features of Exhibition Cases

Dimension	Treasures of China (2018)	AlUla: Wonder of Arabia (2024)
Host Institution	National Museum of Saudi Arabia	Palace Museum, Beijing
Initiating Actor	National Museum of China	Royal Commission for AlUla
Governance Structure	Bilateral institutional coordination	Structured cross-institutional governance with artifact loan agreements
Artifact Volume	Selected representative relics	230+ archaeological artifacts
Multilingual Narrative	Limited	Arabic, Chinese, English
Strategic Framing	Civilizational respect	Silk Road and heritage diplomacy integration
Evidence of Institutional Learning	Initial reciprocal platform	Advanced coordination and standardized loan protocols
Duration	Short-term	3 months (Jan-Mar 2024)
Documented Public Engagement	State media coverage; no visitor data available	High-profile opening; visitor data not publicly disclosed
Policy Context	Early phase of Vision 2030 cultural expansion	Preceding the Saudi-China 2025 Cultural Exchange Year framework

This comparison demonstrates an unclear maturation of governance sophistication between 2018 and 2024, suggesting the progressive institutionalization of cooperation mechanisms.

6. Integrating Governance, Cultural Practice, and Knowledge Systems

Selective coding integrated governance architecture, human capital systems, and institutionalization mechanisms, particularly governance density and feedback processes, into a consolidated analytical model explaining how exhibition-based cooperation evolves toward institutional durability. A central implication of this study is that effective cultural cooperation depends on integrating governance mechanisms with cultural practices and knowledge systems (Chung et al., 2023). Governance frameworks

provide coordination and continuity, while exhibitions translate institutional arrangements into visible cultural encounters. Human capital and institutional learning sustain this process by enabling adaptation, reflection, and professional continuity (Kooiman, 2003). This integrated model questions approaches that reduce cultural diplomacy to symbolic exchange, instead emphasizing its institutional and operational dimensions. Instead, it positions culture as an operational field in which institutions, professionals, and audiences interact over time. For Sino-Arab relations, this highlights the importance of analyzing cultural cooperation as embedded within broader social, institutional, and economic systems rather than as a peripheral dimension of foreign policy. The following analytical model synthesizes the categories

generated through axial and selective coding, integrating governance architecture, human

capital systems, and multidimensional outcomes into a unified framework.

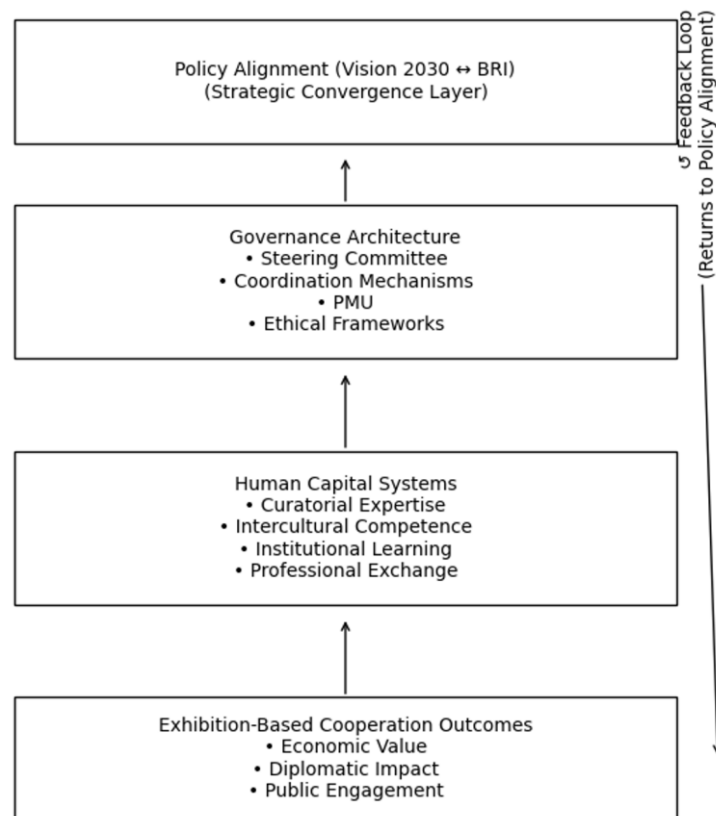


Fig. 1: Analytical Model Diagram

Figure 1 consolidates the study's analytical argument by depicting exhibition-based cultural cooperation as a layered governance process rather than an isolated cultural event. Policy alignment between Vision 2030 and the Belt and Road Initiative provides strategic convergence, enabling the construction of a governance architecture and coordination mechanisms. Human capital systems mediate implementation by translating institutional design into professional practice. Exhibition outcomes, economic, diplomatic, and social, emerge from this interaction. The feedback loop illustrates how demonstrated outcomes reinforce policy alignment and institutional learning, conceptualizing cultural cooperation as an adaptive and iterative governance cycle rather than a one-directional initiative.

7. Discussion and Implications

The Saudi Chinese case offers broader insights for both China-Arab relations and contemporary

Arabic cultural studies. First, it demonstrates how Arab cultural agency is increasingly exercised through partnerships beyond the Western sphere, reflecting a diversification of cultural reference points and a pluralization of global cultural order consistent with Global International Relations perspectives (Acharya, 2014b; Amin, 2016). This shift positions Sino-Arab cooperation within wider South-South and East-East cultural dynamics rather than within legacy Western frameworks. Second, the case highlights the analytical value of exhibitions as institutional sites where cultural meaning, diplomacy, and economic considerations intersect. Museum scholarship has shown that exhibitions function not merely as representational platforms, but as arenas in which national narratives, governance priorities, and transnational cultural relationships are negotiated and publicly articulated (Macdonald et al., 2011; Karp et al., 2006). This perspective foregrounds exhibitions as active instruments of cultural diplomacy rather than symbolic cultural

showcases. Third, the analysis underscores the need for interdisciplinary approaches that integrate cultural analysis with governance and political-economy perspectives. Work on the cultural economy demonstrates that cultural production and international cultural engagement are shaped by institutional arrangements, labor systems, professional practices, and state strategies, rather than by symbolic cultural expression alone (Pratt, 2009). For Chinese scholarship on the Arab world, this approach deepens understanding of how cultural cooperation complements economic and political relations (Akbarzadeh & Saba, 2025). For Arabic studies, it situates contemporary cultural transformation within emerging multipolar cultural governance structures, moving beyond inherited Western analytical paradigms.

Building on the preceding analysis and international scholarship on collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023), this study proposes a structured governance architecture to institutionalize exhibition-based cultural cooperation. The framework integrates strategic alignment, operational coordination, performance accountability, and financial sustainability into a coherent model that enhances durability. At the strategic level, a joint steering committee composed of representatives from both Ministries of Culture and relevant institutional partners would provide long-term alignment and oversight. Its core functions would include strategic objective-setting, resource allocation, and periodic performance reviews, ensuring that exhibition initiatives remain embedded within broader bilateral cultural policy frameworks. At the operational level, a dedicated project management unit (PMU) would oversee implementation. This unit would coordinate logistics, curatorial coherence, communication strategies, documentation, and compliance with artifact-loan standards. Such intermediary structures are essential in complex cross-border initiatives where administrative, legal, and interpretive systems intersect (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Performance accountability should be institutionalized through

a multidimensional measurement framework (see Appendix B). Exhibitions would be assessed across four categories: economic indicators (e.g., cultural investment volume, partnership agreements); cultural indicators (e.g., visitor numbers, program diversity); diplomatic indicators (e.g., media reach, bilateral institutional agreements); and social indicators (e.g., audience satisfaction, intercultural engagement). This approach reflects cultural policy scholarship that emphasizes public value beyond financial returns (UNESCO, 2022). Finally, financial sustainability would be supported by a hybrid funding model that combines approximately 40 percent public funding, 35 percent private sponsorship, and 25 percent revenue from ticketing and related services. Diversified financing enhances resilience and reduces institutional dependency, aligning with comparative cultural-governance research (OECD, 2022). Collectively, this governance framework translates cultural ambition into institutional durability by integrating policy alignment, operational capacity, accountability mechanisms, and sustainable financing within a structured architecture for long-term Saudi-Chinese exhibition cooperation. Yet, this proposed structure assumes sustained bureaucratic continuity, a condition that may not be uniformly present across changing leadership cycles.

8. Limitations and Future Research Agenda

This study has several limitations that inform the proposed research agenda. First, the reliance on secondary-data analysis, while appropriate for framework development, means the findings remain interpretive rather than empirically grounded in primary institutional practices. The governance dynamics, coordination mechanisms, and decision-making processes identified here require validation through direct engagement with practitioners. Second, the study does not examine audience reception or public impact, leaving assumptions about exhibitions' capacity to foster intercultural understanding untested. Third, the bilateral focus on Saudi-China relations limits generalizability to other Sino-Arab partnerships, where historical ties, institutional capacities, and

strategic priorities may differ significantly. Addressing these limitations, future research should pursue three interconnected directions. Primary qualitative research with exhibition curators, cultural policymakers, and museum directors in both countries would illuminate decision-making processes, institutional constraints, power dynamics, and professional networks that shape cooperation in practice. Semi-structured interviews, participant observation during exhibition planning, and internal document analysis could capture micro-level dynamics obscured in policy discourse. Audience research employing mixed methods—surveys measuring visitor satisfaction and cultural learning, ethnographic observation of visitor interaction, and digital analytics of online engagement—would assess how diverse publics interpret co-curated exhibitions, testing whether they genuinely foster intercultural understanding or remain elite-driven symbolic exercises. Comparative analysis across multiple Arab-China cultural partnerships (e.g., Egypt-China museum cooperation, UAE-China heritage digitization, Jordan-China archaeological collaboration) would enable systematic assessment of how governance models, financing structures, and institutional arrangements vary across national contexts, identifying factors that enhance or constrain sustainability. Such comparative work could employ structured case comparisons or qualitative comparative analysis to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for successful cultural partnership. Additionally, emerging technological dimensions warrant investigation: digital exhibitions, virtual reality heritage experiences, AI-assisted curation, and blockchain-based cultural IP management are rapidly transforming exhibition production and dissemination. Research examining how these technologies reshape curatorial practice, audience experience, and cross-border collaboration would contribute to broader debates on digitalization, cultural heritage, and international cooperation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution context. Beyond academic inquiry, comparative findings could inform the policy recommendations outlined

above, enabling stakeholders to adapt governance frameworks to diverse institutional environments.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined Saudi Chinese cultural cooperation through the analytical lens of exhibition-based governance. By conceptualizing exhibitions not as symbolic cultural showcases but as institutional arenas where policy alignment, organizational coordination, and human capital converge, the analysis advances a governance-centered framework for understanding contemporary cultural diplomacy in Sino-Arab relations. The selective coding process generated four principal findings. First, exhibition cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China demonstrates progressive institutional maturation rather than episodic engagement. Comparative analysis of the 2018 Treasures of China exhibition and the 2024 AlUla: Wonder of Arabia exhibition indicates increasing governance sophistication, including formalized artifact-loan procedures, multilingual narrative design, and integration within broader bilateral cultural frameworks. This trajectory suggests cumulative institutional learning rather than the production of isolated events. Second, sustainable cooperation depends on an integrated governance architecture. Policy alignment between Vision 2030 and the Belt and Road Initiative provides strategic convergence; networked institutional coordination stabilizes implementation; hybrid financing enhances resilience; and adaptive governance mechanisms embed learning and continuity. Durability, therefore, is not a function of symbolic visibility but of deliberate institutional design. Third, human capital serves as the relational foundation that enables cooperation to persist amid institutional change. Curatorial expertise, intercultural competence, institutional memory, and professional mobility collectively sustain cooperation across changing cycles. Exhibitions serve simultaneously as outputs of professional capacity and as sites of capacity formation, reinforcing the co-evolution of governance and knowledge systems. Fourth, exhibition-based cooperation generates multidimensional value across cultural, diplomatic, social, and economic

domains. While exhibition-level economic data remain limited, international benchmarks and sectoral evidence indicate that exhibitions function as catalysts within creative-economy ecosystems, stimulating tourism, employment, and long-term partnership signaling alongside symbolic and relational gains. The study contributes to Arabic and Middle East studies by repositioning culture as a substantive field of analysis in Sino-Arab relations, which have historically been dominated by political economy and geopolitics. It contributes to cultural diplomacy scholarship by demonstrating that influence operates through institutionalized governance practices rather than abstract soft-power narratives alone. It further contributes to exhibition and museum studies by theorizing exhibitions as governance infrastructures embedded in development strategies and transnational cooperation frameworks. The analysis suggests that exhibition-based cooperation is most likely to endure when policy alignment, governance density, and human capital investment reinforce one another through iterative institutional learning. Under such conditions, culture evolves from a symbolic diplomatic supplement into a durable pillar of multipolar international engagement. As a theory-building study grounded in secondary-data

synthesis, this research does not incorporate primary stakeholder interviews or exhibition-level quantitative impact assessment. The absence of field-based evidence limits insight into micro-level decision-making processes and audience reception dynamics, while the focus on a Saudi Chinese case constrains the scope for broader comparative generalization. These limitations indicate the need for future empirical validation through qualitative fieldwork, audience research, and cross-national comparative analysis. The Saudi Chinese case illustrates that cultural cooperation can gain strategic depth when embedded within coherent governance systems and sustained through professional capacity. In an increasingly pluralized global order, exhibitions demonstrate how culture can operate not merely as representation, but as organized institutional practice, linking identity, development, and diplomacy in structurally durable ways.

Funding Statement

This research was conducted with the support of the Saudi Chinese Cultural Relations Research Grant launched by the Ministry of Culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 1447AH/ 2025AD. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry.

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