



RESEARCH PAPER

Global Governance in the Context of BRI and CPEC: Heritage Challenges and Opportunities in Pakistan

Prof. Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Chawla

Visiting Professor at the Belt and Road & Global Governance Institute, Fudan University, Shanghai, China; Former Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

Corresponding Author

akramayesha225@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study underscores the importance of Pakistan's religio-cultural heritage, highlighting its historical legacy of pluralism, tolerance, and coexistence. It asserts that Pakistan's rich tangible heritage deserves greater global recognition. Pakistan's diverse religious traditions—spanning Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Christianity—present a significant opportunity for faith-based tourism. With 120 out of 480 tourist destinations being religious sites, the country's growing appeal is evident in its rise on the International Travel and Tourism Development Index, climbing from 89th in 2019 to 83rd in 2021. Collaborative Opportunities: By examining key religious sites and past partnerships, this study explores ways to strengthen cultural ties and advance global heritage tourism. China's Global Civilization Initiative promotes cross-cultural dialogue, fostering international harmony. This research adopts a social history approach, employing historical methodology that relies on primary and secondary sources to reconstruct and analyze the socio-cultural past. Pakistan, with its untapped potential in religious tourism, stands to benefit significantly from Chinese tourist interest. As China invests in human capital and cultural exchange, this research investigates how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can boost religio-cultural tourism in Pakistan. By identifying challenges and opportunities, the study emphasizes how tourism development can spur economic growth while enhancing Pakistan's global image. This research adopts a social history approach, employing historical methodology that relies on primary and secondary sources to reconstruct and analyze the socio-cultural past. While substantial scholarly attention has been devoted to analyzing CPEC's economic, infrastructural, and political dimensions, its sociocultural implications - particularly in the realm of religious tourism - have received comparatively limited examination. This study seeks to address this scholarly gap by offering a critical intervention in the existing historiography.

Keywords: Heritage, BRI, CPEC, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Tourism

Introduction

The China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ohashi, H. (2018)) seeks to strengthen "people-to-people bonds" and encourage "mutual learning among civilizations" through cultural exchange, fostering greater understanding and trust among diverse cultures and nations. Similarly, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has emphasized cultural connectivity (Rahim, Khan & Muzaffar, 2018). However, Pakistan has not effectively showcased its rich heritage, leaving much of its cultural potential untapped and preventing tourism from reaching its full potential.

This research critically examines China-Pakistan cultural relations and exchanges over the past seven decades, identifying gaps between tangible and intangible cultural interactions and areas of potential conflict. It reviews historical developments and explores new opportunities for future collaboration. As China increasingly invests in human capital,

a deeper understanding of cultural exchange will help shape a stronger and more connected shared community.

Literature Review

Cultural tourism involves travelers engaging with and experiencing a destination's culture, including its history, heritage, arts, and way of life. Richards (2001) defines it as "the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs." This broad concept includes activities that immerse tourists in local culture, such as visiting museums, historical sites, art galleries, and participating in festivals and traditions.

Heritage tourism focuses on exploring historical and cultural landmarks, including historic sites, forts, monuments, and museums. It allows visitors to appreciate the historical narratives and cultural legacies of different places. Examples include Rome and Athens' ancient cities, Egypt's Pyramids of Giza, and China's Great Wall.

Cultural diplomacy, as highlighted by (Shah, 2023; Imtiaz, Yaseen, & Muzaffar, 2023), is a vital instrument for building soft power by promoting ideas, information, art, language, and other cultural elements—both tangible and intangible—between nations. It fosters mutual understanding, encouraging peace, harmony, and goodwill despite differences in traditions, norms, and languages.

China has emerged as a global leader in "soft cultural diplomacy." (Yaseen, Afridi & Muzaffar 2017). This research explores China's approach to cultural communication and exchange, with a particular focus on its engagement with key allies like Pakistan.

While previous studies examine various aspects of China-Pakistan relations (Bisit, 2019), this research focuses on exploring the religio-cultural linkages between the two nations, filling a gap in the existing literature. This study falls within the cultural aspect of history and therefore employs anthropological and historical methods to reconstruct the concept of heritage in Pakistan.

Theoretical framework

Heritage theory examines how societies perceive, appreciate, and engage with their past, focusing on cultural heritage, preservation, and the past's influence on the present and future. Heritage theory examines how societies perceive, appreciate, and engage with their past, focusing on cultural heritage, preservation, and the past's influence on the present and future. The exploration of how heritage sites and cultural attractions are utilized for tourism, along with the effects of tourism on heritage and local communities.

Material and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative methodology, drawing on both primary and secondary documentary sources for data collection. These include research articles, books, online materials, newspapers, and official reports. The collected data is analyzed through qualitative discussion, providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Historical Context

Pakistan and China formally established diplomatic relations in 1951, with Pakistan being one of the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China. Over the decades, their bond has deepened into a resilient and time-tested partnership.(Niazi, Shoaib, & Khalid, 2020). A defining milestone in their cultural ties was reached in March 1965, when Pakistan and China inked a cultural cooperation agreement, laying the groundwork for

decades of mutual exchange. Since then, the two nations have consistently deepened their cultural partnership, fostering collaboration in arts, literature, education, and language studies (GUI & Arif, 2016).

China and Pakistan share a longstanding and deeply rooted friendship, reinforced by their geographical proximity and historical bonds. Their connection traces back more than two thousand years to the Silk Road, which served as a vital conduit for trade and cultural exchange. exchanges between the two regions. (Samoylovskiy, A. L., & Samoylovskiy, A. L. (2024) Despite differences in social systems and cultural traditions, both countries have maintained strong bilateral relations and have actively worked to enhance cultural communication (Muzaffar, Shah & Yaseen, 2018; Shanglin, 2001).

Although formal diplomatic relations were established in 1951, the civilizational ties between China and Pakistan date back to ancient times. The two nations share cultural affinities that continue to promote mutual understanding and engagement. Cultural exchanges have remained a key aspect of their relationship, with both countries prioritizing economic and cultural collaboration (Ishaque, 2020).

China and Pakistan enjoy a profound and time-tested friendship, forged by their majestic mountain ranges and winding rivers that connect their territories. This special relationship traces its roots to ancient times, when the Silk Road served as a vital bridge between their civilizations nearly two millennia ago. While distinct in their social structures and cultural heritage, the two nations have maintained unwavering mutual support, continuously fostering cultural dialogue and deepening their mutual comprehension. (Kataria, & Riaz, 2020).

The 1965 cultural agreement institutionalized bilateral exchanges, creating a structured mechanism for sustained collaboration across arts, literature, education, sports, and media sectors. This framework has facilitated numerous cultural interactions, with Chinese performing arts groups regularly staging shows in Pakistan, while joint creative ventures in visual arts, traditional crafts, performing arts, and broadcast media have significantly strengthened cultural connections. The 1980s witnessed innovative cultural diplomacy through co-produced television programs that celebrated the historical friendship between the two nations. A significant advancement occurred in 2015 with the launch of the Dosti Channel (Friendship Channel), a pioneering radio initiative jointly developed by China Radio International and Radio Pakistan. This specialized platform was designed to enhance mutual understanding through curated cultural programming. However, analysis reveals that Pakistan's rich cultural legacy has remained under-prioritized in bilateral cultural policymaking, receiving inadequate focus from decision-makers in both countries. This study aims to address this oversight and underscore its importance. As CPEC enters its next phase of development (Muzaffar & Khan, 2021; Ali, 2020) , with the growth of new trade and industrial linkages, thousands of people from different cultures are arriving in Pakistan, and a great many will naturally want to engage with its deep-rooted heritage. This study critically examines the barriers hindering Pakistan's potential to become a cultural tourism destination under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). (Yaseen, Muzaffar & Shahbaz, 2023; Ain, Muzaffar & Yaseen, 2024).By analyzing these challenges, the research aims to propose actionable solutions while evaluating Pakistan's heritage assets—focusing on significant historical and cultural sites. Additionally, it explores how Pakistan's cultural tourism strategies align with BRI projects, identifying best practices to improve heritage conservation and promotion

Buddhist Sites

Buddhism is the largest officially recognized religion in China (Safdar, 2024),, with approximately 470 million adherents, accounting for around 33.4% of the population. It is primarily divided into three major branches: Han (or Chinese) Buddhism, Tibetan

Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism. Pakistan has a rich and diverse religious heritage, with Buddhism playing a significant role in its historical and cultural landscape. This study examines religious and historical sites that could serve as cultural bridges between BRI countries, CPEC, and Pakistan (Akhtar, Jathol & Hussain, 2019), particularly focusing on Buddhist sites across the region. By retracing and mapping the journey of the Korean monk Hyecho from Pakistan through China to Korea, this research aims to deepen understanding of historical connections along the Silk Road.

While extensive studies have explored the origins and development of Buddhism and the Gandhara civilization, limited research has been conducted on the transmission of Buddhism from Gandhara to Korea (Firdous, 2020).

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Pakistan boasts a diverse religious heritage, with Buddhism playing a pivotal role in its history. This paper explores religious and historical sites that could serve as cultural links between BRI countries, CPEC, and Pakistan particularly through Buddhist sites across the region (Shah, Muzaffar & Yaseen, 2020). By retracing and mapping Hyecho's journey from Pakistan through China to Korea, we can gain deeper insights into these historical connections along the Silk Road. While numerous studies have examined the origins and evolution of Buddhism and the Gandhara civilization, few have focused on its transmission from Gandhara to Korea.

It highlights key sites in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and brings attention to lesser-known Buddhist landmarks in Punjab, including those in Gujranwala Division including Sialkot. More than just a historical and archaeological survey, it delves into historical narratives and debates surrounding Hyecho's role in spreading Buddhism to the Far East, particularly South Korea. This study explores Buddhism from antiquity to the present, filling a crucial gap in historical literature. Additionally, it identifies with remarkable accuracy the locations Hyecho visited and the Buddhist remains he observed. This book serves as a valuable resource for students and scholars of archaeology, history, anthropology, and religious studies, as well as for visitors eager to explore Pakistan's Buddhist sites.

Hindu Religious sites in Pakistan

Pakistan hosts numerous important Hindu religious sites (Fatima, Ahmed & Khursheed, 2023), such as the revered Hinglaj Mata Temple in Balochistan, the historic Katas Raj Temple, and the ancient Umarmkot Shiva Temple, among others. Below is an overview of some of the country's most notable Hindu temples:

- **Hinglaj Mata Temple (Balochistan):** Situated in Hingol National Park, this temple is a major Hindu pilgrimage site and is officially recognized by the Pakistani government.
- **Katas Raj Temple (Punjab):** Also called Qila Katas, this ancient temple complex lies in Punjab.
- **Umarmkot Shiva Temple (Sindh):** One of Sindh's oldest and most sacred Hindu shrines, located in Umarmkot district.
- **Varun Dev Temple (Karachi):** An approximately 1,000-year-old temple on Manora Island, now in ruins.

- **Panchmukhi Hanuman Mandir (Karachi):** Famous for its 8-foot "natural statue" of Hanuman, located in Soldier Bazaar.
- **Churrio Jabal Durga Mata Temple (Tharparkar District):** Perched on a hill in Nangarparkar, it serves as a site for immersing ashes in sacred waters.
- **Sharda Peeth (Pakistan-administered Kashmir):** Among the 18 Maha Shakti Peethas, it holds deep religious importance for Kashmiri Hindus.
- **Kalat Kali Temple (Balochistan):** A sacred Hindu site at the base of the historic Kalat Fort.
- **Ratneshwar Mahadev Temple (Karachi):** An underground temple near Clifton Beach, attracting thousands during Maha Shivratri.
- **Gorakh Nath Temple (Peshawar):** A rare surviving Hindu temple in Peshawar, dating to the mid-19th century.
- **Bhagnari Shiv Mandir (Karachi):** Associated with the Bhagnari Baloch Hindu community, situated in Lea Market.
- **Krishna Temple (Islamabad):** The first government-approved Hindu temple in Islamabad, currently under development.
- **Jagannath Mandir (Sialkot):** Constructed in 2007, it stands as one of Pakistan's most prominent Hindu temples.

These temples serve as vital religious and cultural landmarks, preserving Hindu heritage in Pakistan. With proper promotion, they could draw Hindu pilgrims globally, particularly from South Asia and the Far East (Nawab, Yaseen & Muzaffar, 2021).

Sikh Sites in Pakistan

Pakistan preserves some of Sikhism's most sacred shrines, welcoming thousands of global pilgrims annually." (Boivin, 2023; Saeed, Muzaffar, & Yaseen, 2023). Beyond their religious significance, these sites are treasured historical landmarks tied to Sikhism's origins and the legacy of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. A pilgrimage to Pakistan—from his birthplace to ancient gurdwaras—offers both deep spiritual fulfillment and cultural immersion (Ali, 2025).

Major Sikh Pilgrimage Sites in Pakistan

Prominent Sikh Pilgrimage Sites in Pakistan

Gurdwara Janam Asthan, Nankana Sahib

Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, is the most sacred site in Sikhism. Located about 75 km from Lahore, Gurdwara Janam Asthan attracts countless pilgrims each year. A visit to this holy city is a central feature of Sikh Yatra packages, offering devotees a profound connection to the roots of their faith.

Gurdwara Panja Sahib, Hassan Abdal

Near Islamabad, Gurdwara Panja Sahib is renowned for the sacred rock bearing Guru Nanak Dev Ji's handprint—a divine testament to his spiritual presence. This revered shrine is a must-visit for those seeking to honor the legacy of the first Sikh Guru.

Gurdwara Dera Sahib, Lahore

Situated close to the Lahore Fort, Gurdwara Dera Sahib marks the martyrdom site of Guru Arjan Dev Ji, the fifth Sikh Guru. Included in Lahore's three-day pilgrimage circuit, this gurdwara provides deep spiritual and historical significance for visitors.

Gurdwara Rori Sahib, Eminabad

A peaceful sanctuary, Gurdwara Rori Sahib stands where Guru Nanak Dev Ji meditated amid challenges. This serene spot is a must-visit for pilgrims discovering Pakistan's Sikh heritage.

Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib, Narowal

Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib is where Guru Nanak Dev Ji spent his final years. The Kartarpur Corridor now enables seamless access for Sikh devotees from India, symbolizing unity and harmony. A pilgrimage here is an essential spiritual journey for every Sikh.

Each of these sacred sites holds a unique place in Sikh history, offering pilgrims an opportunity to reflect, pray, and connect with their faith. (Ahmad, 2023).

For those planning a Sikh pilgrimage, various Sikh Yatra packages provide comprehensive services, including transportation, accommodation, and guided tours of these sacred sites. Many travelers choose specialized agencies like iMusafir.pk for a smooth and enriching experience (Hussain, Manzoor & Javaid, 2024)

Islamic Heritage in Pakistan

The arrival of Islam in present-day Pakistan, beginning in Sindh during the 8th century CE, introduced Islamic values and culture, shaping art and architecture. This influence led to a gradual and seamless transition to predominantly aniconic Islamic architecture. From the time of Muhammad bin Qasim to the present day, Islam in South Asia has left a lasting legacy through the construction of mosques, mausoleums, gardens, forts, and shrines (Yaseen, Jathol, & Muzaffar, 2020). One of the earliest mosques from the formative period of Islam in South Asia is the mihrab-less mosque of Banbhore, built in 727 CE, marking the region's first Muslim place of worship. During the Delhi Sultanate, Persian-Central Asian influences became predominant, replacing earlier Arab architectural elements. The iwan—a vaulted hall that is open on one side and surrounded by walls on the other three—is a characteristic of this architectural style. Large prayer halls, tall domes decorated with geometric patterns and elaborate mosaics, and the liberal use of painted tiles are other noteworthy features. The Tomb of Shah Rukn-i-Alam at Multan, the Badshahi Mosque, and the Lahore Fort are a few of the best and most intact specimens of Islamic architecture in the area.

Furthermore, Pakistan is a popular destination for tourists from abroad since it is home to many historic sites that draw tourists from all over the world.

Massive bulbous domes, elegant minarets at every corner, vast courtyards, colossal arched gateways, and elaborate architectural details—often placed amid painstakingly planned gardens—are hallmarks of Mughal architecture, which is renowned for its magnificence. The Lahore Fort is one of the earliest examples still standing in Pakistan. It was constructed in the eleventh century and underwent significant renovations by Mughal emperors Akbar and Jahangir (1556–1627). The Begum Shahi Mosque, Hiran Minar, and the Tomb of Anarkali are other noteworthy sites from this period.

Built for the fourth Mughal emperor, the Tomb of Jahangir was finished in 1637 under the rule of Shah Jahan, his son. Jahangir deviated from custom by specifically prohibiting the installation of a dome above his tomb, leaving it with an incredibly plain and unadorned roof. The mausoleum is situated inside a sizable garden complex that also contains the Akbari Sarai, one of Pakistan's best-preserved caravanserais from the Mughal era, and the tombs of Empress Nur Jahan and her brother Asif Khan.

Other notable Mughal-era sites include the Shah Jahan Mosque in Thatta, the Wazir Khan Mosque in Lahore, the Dai Anga Mosque, the Tomb of Dai Anga, the Shalimar Gardens, and the Shahi Hammam. One of the most surviving examples of Mughal architectural grandeur is the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore, which was constructed by Aurangzeb in 1673. It is built of red sandstone and has three graceful marble domes on top. Its architecture is quite similar to that of Delhi's Jama Masjid.

Famous sites such as the Minar-e-Pakistan in Lahore, the Quaid-i-Azam Mausoleum in Karachi, and the Faisal Mosque in Islamabad are potent representations of both national and religious identity in postcolonial Pakistan. Numerous holy Sufi shrines may be found in Pakistan, such as the Data Darbar in Lahore, the Shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif, and the Shrine of Bahauddin Zakariya in Multan.

Renowned Sufi Shrines in Pakistan

- Data Darbar, Lahore
- Shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, Sehwan Sharif
- Shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi, Karachi
- Shrine of Sheikh Rukn-ud-Din Abul Fateh, Multan
- Shrine of Baha-ud-Din Zakariya (1170–1267), Multan
- Shrine of Hazrat Muhammad Shah Yusaf Gardezi
- Shrine of Shams-i-Tabrīzī (Shams al-Din Mohammad)
- Shrine of Syed Jalaluddin Surkh-Posh Bukhari

Religious Tourism in Pakistan: Potential and Challenges

Pakistan's diverse religious heritage encompasses Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Christianity, presenting significant opportunities for religious tourism (Hussain, Manzoor & Javaid, 2024). The country boasts 120 religious sites among its 480 tourist destinations, with its ranking on the International Travel and Tourism Development Index rising from 89th in 2019 to 83rd in 2021.

Religious Sites and Tourism Potential

Pakistan hosts 80% of Sikhism's holiest sites, including Nankana Sahib, Kartarpur Sahib, and Gurdwara Panja Sahib. Each year, around 7,500 Sikhs from India and 2,000 from other countries visit, with the potential to generate Rs. 18 billion in revenue. The Gandhara region, home to historical sites like Taxila, Mardan, and Swat, draws Buddhist tourists, particularly from Japan, Korea, and China. Given the global Buddhist population of 500 million, developing this sector could inject Rs. 16 billion into Pakistan's economy while generating 30,000 new jobs.

Pilgrims from all around the area are welcomed to Pakistan's holy Hindu monuments, which include the acclaimed Katas Raj Temple, Shri Hinglaj Mata Temple, and Shiv Mandir. Through a unique bilateral agreement, Pakistan issued over 400 visas to Indian Hindu pilgrims in 2022 alone. With its distinctive cultural legacy, the Kalash community in Chitral welcomes a substantial amount of religious tourism each year, with 2.5 million domestic and 1,000 foreign tourists. In the meanwhile, millions of pilgrims visit Pakistan's Sufi shrines every year, including those of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and Data Ganj Bakhsh.

Governance and Economic Impact

While PTDC and NTCB promote tourism, the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) and the Auqaf Department oversee religious sites. However, travel and hotel services are handled by private companies. Sikh tourism alone has the potential to create 82,000 employment and earn Rs. 18 billion in revenue yearly, with extra possibilities from domestic and Buddhist tourists.

China and Pakistan have a long-standing connection that dates back centuries and is based on their close proximity. Long-lasting connections that go beyond variations in government and customs were established by the historic Silk Road, which linked their civilisations more than 2,000 years ago. Although the two countries' official diplomatic relations were established in 1951, their historical links go far deeper and have fostered mutual understanding via cultural similarities. China's investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which have been in place since 2013, have further enhanced bilateral collaboration and demonstrated their shared dedication to regional stability. (Muzaffar, Fern & Yaseen, 2023). Through global venues that improve policy coordination and dispute resolution, this collaboration keeps expanding.

Since the 7th century, Islam has been in China, where there are currently between 17 and 25 million Muslims, or less than 2% of the overall population. With a sizable Uyghur population, Xinjiang has the highest number of Muslims, although the Hui people make up the biggest Muslim group. There are also smaller yet significant Muslim communities in Qinghai, Gansu, and Ningxia. Ten of the fifty-five officially recognised ethnic minorities in China are Sunni Muslims.

With Buddhism being practiced by 13–16% of the population, Taoism by 10%, Christianity by 2.53%, and Islam by 0.83%, and folk religions at 2–13%, China has a rich religious landscape. Furthermore, many academics are influenced by Confucian values. Pakistan and China's cultural links are further strengthened by their common religious and philosophical background, which promotes more international interaction and understanding.

Conclusion

Today's There are many different religions in Pakistan, including those that have developed or prospered there. Similarly, China has a rich religious, historical, and cultural legacy that draws millions of tourists every day. Reflecting their common dedication to preserving cultural heritage, both countries have made major efforts to protect sacred places of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and Sikhism.

Pakistan is well-positioned to establish industrial and commercial hubs throughout the nation with the opening of the second phase of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the operationalisation of Gwadar's aviation and seaports, and the development of road and rail networks. These developments will attract companies and entrepreneurs, strengthening Pakistan's ties to China and the international market.

The foundation of Pakistan-China ties has traditionally been intellectual and cultural exchanges, which promote understanding and advancement on both sides. These contacts have enormous potential, especially in the tourist industry, as bilateral collaboration develops into multilateral partnerships, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Youth initiatives and educational partnerships between the two nations have grown to be vital venues for scholars and students, fostering intellectual and cultural connections. In light of these changes, it is more crucial than ever to promote cultural tourism in Pakistan so that tourists from across the world, particularly those from China, may experience its rich history.

In China, Buddhism continues to be the most popular legally recognised religion, with around 470 million followers, or 33.4% of the total population. The three primary lineages of Buddhism are Theravāda Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Han (Chinese) Buddhism.

Recommendations

The lack of a thorough national tourist policy, inadequate data gathering, abandoned cultural sites, stringent land leasing laws that deter investment, and tight visa procedures are some of the challenges facing religious tourism in Pakistan. Pakistan should put the following tactics into practice in order to fully realise the potential of religious tourism:

- Strengthen Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) to advance sustainable tourism and build infrastructure.
- Update land lease regulations to draw in both domestic and international private capital.
- Make use of cutting-edge technologies, such virtual reality, to enhance tourist experiences and preserve historical places digitally.
- Improve transport and hospitality offerings to provide visitors a smooth and satisfying journey.
- By implementing these programs, Pakistan may establish itself as a major destination for religious tourism, promoting cultural interaction and economic prosperity. (Arshad, Iqbal & Shahbaz, 2018).

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