

Trade routes to tourist routes: Assessing Sino-Omani cooperation in tourism development under the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: This article explores the possibilities of developing Oman's tourism sector under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Tourism is a cornerstone of Oman's economy, with the government prioritizing substantial efforts toward its development to foster economic diversification. This paper examines the broader efforts of Oman to strengthen its relations with China, which will indirectly benefit the tourism industry. This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the historical exchanges and future cooperation between China and Oman under BRI, specifically focusing on developing infrastructure and technology in Oman to support the tourism sector. It has been argued that BRI has the potential to significantly contribute to the growth and development of Oman's tourism sector through increased investment and cooperation with Chinese counterparts.

Keywords: Oman; China; GCC; tourism planning; tourism development; belt and road initiative

1. Introduction

Tourism is a cornerstone of Oman's economy, with the government prioritizing its development to achieve economic diversification (Al-Maqbali et al., 2020). The Ministry of Tourism in Oman highlights three critical elements for tourism growth: the natural landscape, cultural heritage, and available activities. Oman's diverse natural environment, including deserts, seas, and mountains, makes it an attractive tourist destination (Al-Bulushi, 2020). Strengthening Oman's relationship with China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can further enhance its tourism sector. Despite limited literature on the direct impact of the BRI on Oman's tourism, several sources explore the broader efforts to improve Sino-Omani relations and the potential benefits of tourism (Al-Kiyumi and Al-Badi, 2021).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a strategic framework promoting economic development and cooperation among Asian, European, and African countries (Su, 2019). Oman has shown interest in participating in the BRI and has made significant efforts to strengthen its ties with China. This participation has resulted in Chinese investments in various sectors, including tourism (Al-Kiyumi and Al-Badi, 2021). This paper will review and analyze existing literature on how the BRI could impact Oman's tourism industry. It discusses the historical relations between China and Oman, the role of Chinese investment in developing Oman's infrastructure, and the importance of enhancing communication networks and technology to support tourism (Al-Maqbali et al., 2020).

The study provides policy recommendations for Oman to further benefit from its relationship with China and promote its tourism sector. These include developing sustainable tourism practices (Al-Maqbali et al., 2020), improving infrastructure and

transportation systems (Al-Bulushi, 2020), increasing marketing efforts to attract Chinese tourists (Al-Kiyumi and Al-Badi, 2021). The paper argues that collaboration with China under the BRI offers significant opportunities for Oman's tourism industry, contributing to economic growth and diversification while emphasizing the need to manage potential risks and dependencies.

2. Tourism as a tool of economic development

Tourism is a crucial sector many countries focus on to achieve economic growth and diversify their economies. Oman has been attempting to leverage its tourism industry to drive economic growth and reduce its reliance on oil. Numerous studies have examined the impact of tourism on Oman's economy and its potential for diversification. For instance, Al-Alawi and Cetin (2018) argue that the tourism sector has the potential to help Oman achieve high economic growth and create a sustainable future that is less dependent on hydrocarbons. Furthermore, according to the same study, Oman's strategic location, ecological ecosystem, rich historical culture, and heritage are all important ingredients that enable the tourism sector to flourish. Many other studies have also highlighted the positive impacts of tourism beyond its contribution to GDP, including job creation, increased revenues, and social and cultural benefits (Baig and Zehra, 2020; Baig et al., 2022).

Al-Alawi and Cetin (2018) also examine the impact of tourism on Oman's economy, presenting comparative data on its contribution to GDP between 2017 and 2018. The author notes a considerable increase in tourism's contribution to Oman's GDP from 3% to 6% between 2017 and 2018. The article also acknowledges the essential role of the tourism sector in creating jobs for the local population, particularly in housing, airlines, and travel agencies.

Despite the valuable insights provided by Al-Alawi and Cetin's study on Oman's tourism industry, additional strategies are being employed by the government to enhance the sector that requires further exploration. In particular, the study overlooks the role of the private and public sectors in fostering growth and promoting Oman as a unique destination in the region. These factors are crucial in achieving Oman's futuristic vision for 2040, which emphasizes economic diversification and sustainable development. Therefore, examining how the tourism industry can contribute to Oman's overall economic growth is essential. Khan et al.'s (2021) study on the relationship between the tourism industry and economic growth in the GCC countries, including Oman, provides valuable insights into this area. The study highlights the significant contribution of the tourism industry to Oman's GDP in 2019 and its role in job creation and sustainable development.

3. Tourism development strategies in Oman: An overview

Baporikar's (2012) study provides valuable insights into the top trends in Oman's tourism industry but lacks an examination of government policies and projects to improve these destinations. In contrast, Khan and Krishnamurthy (2016) highlight the significance of preparing students for the tourism sector, recognizing it as a vital contributor to the country's economic growth. The authors emphasize the need for the government to introduce strategies to train more Omani youth to work in the industry,

suggesting that tourism schools should expand their curriculum to include various aspects of the tourism industry, such as management, marketing, and hospitality. Additional insights are provided by Khan and Krishnamurthy (2016) about the Omani government's efforts to develop the tourism industry. The paper highlights the significance of preparing students for the tourism sector, recognizing it as a vital contributor to the country's economic growth. The authors emphasize that the attitude of those working in the industry will directly impact the sector's success. Therefore, the government should introduce strategies to train more Omani youth to work in the industry. The paper underscores tourism schools' vital role in helping the government achieve its goal of training Omanis capable of working in the sector and promoting the tourism industry. The authors suggest that the curriculum of these schools should expand to include various aspects of the tourism industry, such as management, marketing, and hospitality, to prepare students for the dynamic and evolving nature of the sector. The paper further recommends that the government provide incentives such as scholarships, internships, and job placement opportunities to encourage Omani students to pursue careers in tourism. In summary, the paper highlights the importance of investing in human capital to promote the sustainable development of Oman's tourism industry.

Zakiya (2019) describes the Omani government's initiatives to promote the tourism sector, including the "Tanfeedh (Implementation) Program Open Day" held in Muscat in November 2016, which showcased the government's strategies to develop the tourism industry. The author also elaborates on the government's plan to improve infrastructure and hotel services for tourists, highlighting their aim to achieve an equal distribution of hotels across different regions of Oman. The Omani government has already implemented a plan to diversify its economy, particularly emphasizing the development of the tourism industry. The paper sheds light on the government's initiatives to promote the tourism sector, such as the "Tanfeedh (Implementation) Program Open Day" held in Muscat in November 2016, which showcased the government's strategies to develop the tourism industry. The author also elaborates on the government's plan to improve infrastructure and hotel services for tourists, highlighting their aim to achieve equal distribution of hotels across different regions of Oman. Moreover, the paper outlines Oman's 2040 strategy, which aims to attract an annual tourist influx of approximately 5.3 million. The author provides detailed information on the strategy, including the government's intention to double the number of hotel rooms from 15.5 thousand to 30 thousand between 2016 and 2030. This increase in hotel rooms is expected to generate more job opportunities for job seekers. The "Tourism Development Plan in Oman" comprehensively analyzes the government's ongoing efforts to foster the tourism industry, making it a valuable resource for researchers and policymakers.

Simpson (2018) sheds light on the characteristics of Oman's tourism industry and the government's efforts to utilize its potential for economic diversification. Specifically, Simpson discusses the National Program for Enhancing Economic Diversification, which aimed to promote Oman as a tourist destination and reduce the country's reliance on oil. Simpson also highlights the role of the Oman Tourism Development Company in maximizing the potential of the tourism sector and tackling its challenges. Despite the valuable insights provided by Simpson in his analysis of

Oman's tourism industry, the author overlooked some crucial aspects that could have added to the comprehensiveness of his study; Baig and Zehra (2020) and Baig et al. (2022) further explore the positive impacts of tourism beyond its contribution to GDP, including job creation, increased revenues, and social and cultural benefits. They argue that strategic locations, ecological ecosystems, and rich historical culture and heritage are crucial ingredients that enable the tourism sector to flourish.

In addition to examining specific initiatives, it is crucial to understand the strategic plan that the country is implementing for sustainable development in the tourism sector. This plan includes diversifying product offerings, expanding tourist destinations, promoting partnerships, and improving tourist visa processes. To put the tourism industry in the context of Oman's long-term vision, it is important to link it to Oman 2040, the country's futuristic vision for transforming into a global logistics hub and a leading sustainable tourism destination. This will help identify ways the tourism industry can contribute to Oman's economic development and diversification.

Finally, it is essential to address the challenges facing the tourism sector in Oman, particularly the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic has significantly affected the industry worldwide, the government has taken measures to support affected businesses and promote domestic tourism. Understanding these challenges and the government's efforts to overcome them will provide a more comprehensive understanding of Oman's tourism industry's potential.

He did not discuss tourist destinations in Oman or draw any comparisons between Oman's tourism sector and that of other Gulf States. Other studies have shown how successful Gulf countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia have capitalized on their tourism potential to boost their economies, and it would have been beneficial for Simpson's analysis to include a discussion of such cases.

Henderson's (2015) research acknowledges the necessity of restructuring certain institutions in Oman to promote tourism development. Additionally, the study suggests that improving international relations would further advance the country's tourism industry. However, the research overlooks the current government initiatives aimed at improving the tourism sector despite presenting various solutions to enhance tourism development. The study mainly provides informative data on Oman's tourism industry strengths without delving extensively into the government's efforts to improve it. These studies highlight Oman's tourism industry potential and its positive economic impacts. However, there exist some limitations, too. Baporikar's (2012) research lacks a discussion of government policies and strategies to organize and improve tourism destinations and does not link the tourism sector to Oman's futuristic vision or challenges. On the other hand, Simpson discusses Oman's national program for enhancing economic diversification and Oman's role in handling tourism challenges but does not mention popular tourist destinations or how Oman can learn from the successful stories of other Gulf States in utilizing tourism trends.

4. Challenges to the tourism industry in Oman

The tourism industry in Oman faces challenges that could impede its prosperity and growth. However, few sources discuss the challenges facing this industry. For instance, Al-Hasani (2021) outlines the challenges the tourism industry in Oman faced

during the Covid-19 pandemic. Al-Hasani noted that the pandemic reduced tourism revenue and resulted in fewer hotel bookings due to concerns about contracting the virus. Although the paper highlights the challenges during the pandemic, it does not discuss the general challenges that have hindered the industry's growth over a more extended period—for instance, issues such as poor infrastructure. Other studies address these limitations. For example, Yuksel's (2017) study contributes to the literature by identifying the significant challenges facing Oman's tourism industry and providing recommendations to overcome them. The author highlights the importance of developing attractive destinations to target specific tourist groups and organizing them to target a larger scale of groups. Additionally, the author emphasizes the need to enhance accommodation facilities to meet the longer-stay requirements of tourists and to decentralize the hotel markets to prevent the marginalization of other places in Oman with attractive destinations. The study also underscores the need to improve transportation infrastructure and accessibility to all sites and destinations in Oman, including developing domestic transportation modes that facilitate access to seas.

Yuksel's study suggests several solutions to promote tourism in Oman, including reducing travel taxes and initiating exemptions from visa fees. The author also recommends improving hospitality services to attract more tourists who stay for extended periods with practical costs. However, the study does not mention the government's participation in international projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which could significantly impact the development of Oman's tourism industry.

Overall, Yuksel's study provides valuable insights into the challenges facing Oman's tourism industry and proposes solutions to overcome them, making it a valuable resource for researchers and policymakers interested in promoting the sustainable development of Oman's tourism industry.

It is also important to note that promoting Oman's cultural heritage and values can be a unique selling point for the country's tourism industry. The country can attract tourists interested in authentic and immersive cultural experiences by showcasing Oman's rich history, culture, and traditions. This can also provide job opportunities for Omanis who are knowledgeable about their country's culture and serve as cultural ambassadors to tourists.

In addition to promoting Oman's cultural heritage, the government and private sector can also focus on developing sustainable tourism practices that prioritize environmental conservation and social responsibility. This can attract tourists who are increasingly concerned about the impact of tourism on the environment and local communities by promoting sustainable tourism practices.

Oman can differentiate itself from other destinations and attract environmentally-conscious tourists. Overall, addressing the challenges facing Oman's tourism industry requires a comprehensive approach that includes promoting the sector's importance, creating job opportunities for Omanis, promoting cultural sensitivity and diversity, showcasing Oman's cultural heritage, and developing sustainable tourism practices (Khan and Krishnamurthy, 2016).

5. Belt and road initiative: A new silk route to tourism development

Oman's involvement in the Chinese-led Belt and Road initiative is a strategic move to boost economic growth and advance the country's tourism industry. The Belt and Road Initiative aims to assist developing nations in five primary areas, focusing on infrastructure development (Alam et al., 2019). As infrastructure is a critical component of any country's tourism industry, the Belt and Road initiative has been identified by numerous scholars as a critical driver of Oman's tourism growth potential.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a strategic plan to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, ports, and more. Oman is one of the countries that have shown interest in participating in the BRI, and several literature sources explore the country's efforts to build a stronger relationship with China and benefit from the BRI. In their article, Han and Chen (2018) emphasize the significance of the friendly relationship between China and Oman, which has a lengthy historical background, and how the BRI has further strengthened this bond. The authors posit that the BRI is a mutually beneficial initiative that brings positive outcomes for both countries in various fields, including tourism. They provide examples of how Chinese companies have contributed to developing Oman's infrastructure, particularly in the tourism sector. They cite the Chinese government's financing of several projects to enhance Oman's railway system. Such a development will lead to better transportation facilities in the country, which, in turn, will attract more tourists. Their study highlights the efforts of Chinese companies in improving Oman's maritime transport sector, specifically the port of Salalah, which is a crucial location for trade and tourism. It contends that developing such infrastructure will enhance Oman's tourism sector and promote economic growth. By improving Oman's connectivity with other countries, Chinese companies can help attract more foreign tourists to Oman, boosting the tourism industry.

Moreover, the authors emphasize the positive impact of developing communication networks and technology in Oman's tourism industry. They cite examples of the Knowledge Oasis Muscat, an industrial park in Oman, where many IT companies have established businesses. Chinese private companies such as Huawei and ZTE have also invested in this area, contributing to the development of Oman's technology sector. This focus on developing technology and communication networks can facilitate the tourist movement, enhancing the overall tourism experience in Oman. Overall, the article by Han and Chen provides a comprehensive analysis of the benefits of the BRI for Oman's tourism sector, highlighting the significant contributions of Chinese companies in developing Oman's infrastructure. The authors also emphasize the importance of developing communication networks and technology to enhance the tourism experience.

Among other scholars, Al-Fazari and Teng (2018) explore the opportunities Oman will have from participating in this initiative to develop the tourism industry. Examples of these opportunities include establishing Arabic theme parks and promoting cultural tourism, especially by encouraging exchange programs between Oman and China. The corridors established under this initiative could also encourage more tourists to visit Oman, reflecting positively on the country's tourism growth. The authors also focus on the industrial park in Duqm and how this area can be developed

to become one of Oman's most important tourist destinations. The article argues that the emergence of private companies from China in Duqm could produce a fantastic destination in Oman's tourism industry. Developing hotels in these areas is essential to making Duqm a favorite tourist destination. While this article is beneficial in reviewing the benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative in different fields of Oman, there is little focus on the tourism sector and the projects developed due to this initiative. The only example given is projects in the Duqm area.

Oman can benefit from Chinese expertise in diversifying its economy and reducing its oil dependence. The Belt and Road Initiative can provide Oman with technical support from China to develop projects to enhance infrastructure and promote tourism (Tillman et al., 2019). They explore China's roles in developing the country's infrastructure and ports to provide better services for tourists. The construction of a railway system in Oman is expected to be a valuable addition to the country's infrastructure and a significant

Contributor to its tourism sector, helping to achieve the country's vision for 2040. While the study acknowledges the general impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Oman's development and infrastructure, it lacks specific information on major projects in the tourism sector that will help improve and develop the country's tourism performance. Furthermore, the article does not elaborate on the benefits of cultural tourism in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative's goal of fostering people-to-people connections between Oman and China. In their 2017 paper titled "China's Road to the Gulf: Opportunities for the GCC in the Belt and Road Initiative," Ishfaq et al. (2017) highlight the advantages of the Belt and Road Initiative, specifically for Oman. One of the benefits they point out is the development of the Al Duqm port, which is expected to significantly impact investment growth and the tourism industry in the country.

Yumul (2021) focuses on Oman's attempts to benefit from the Chinese experience to diversify its economy and increase investments, particularly in the tourism sector. Yumul explains how Oman and China have agreed to do away with visas to allow easy movement of people between the two countries and support tourism. In contrast, Yengigun and Al-Maashani (2020) focus on improving trade and investment to achieve economic diversification rather than the faces of cooperation between China and Oman in tourism. However, this article provides insight into the historical relations between China and Oman and the factors that have strengthened their relationship.

Overall, the Belt and Road Initiative has the potential to significantly benefit Oman's tourism sector by improving the country's infrastructure and attracting more tourists from China and other countries. While there is limited literature on Oman's participation in the initiative and its impact on the tourism sector, authors have discussed the benefits of the initiative in general for Gulf States, including Oman. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a platform for economic development and a route to tourism development. The BRI has the potential to stimulate tourism growth in participating countries by creating new opportunities for investment and travel. The development of infrastructure projects, such as transportation networks and tourist facilities, will facilitate more excellent connectivity and accessibility between countries along the route. Additionally, the BRI provides a framework for cross-

cultural exchanges, promoting greater understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural heritage. As a result, the BRI could catalyze sustainable tourism development, benefiting both the tourism industry and local communities.

In conclusion, the above literature sources provide different perspectives on Oman's attempts to benefit from the BRI and strengthen its relationship with China, particularly in the tourism sector. While some sources focus on the historical relations between the two countries, others provide specific examples of how Chinese companies contribute to Oman's infrastructure development. Ultimately, these efforts are aimed at diversifying Oman's

6. Conclusion and the path forward

Oman's tourism industry faces various challenges that hinder its growth and prosperity. These challenges include poor infrastructure and services, limited accessibility, undeveloped accommodation facilities, centralization of hotel markets, and a lack of Omanis working in the industry. While some of these challenges are specific to Oman, others are global challenges affecting the tourism industry worldwide. A coordinated effort from the government and private sector is required to overcome these challenges. Initiatives to promote the importance of the tourism industry and create job opportunities for Omanis should be implemented. Improvements to infrastructure and services, as well as accommodation facilities, should also be prioritized. Furthermore, efforts should be made to decentralize the hotel market and enhance accessibility to different destinations in Oman.

It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic has added to the challenges facing Oman's tourism industry. While the pandemic has highlighted the need for safety and hygiene measures, it has also reduced tourism revenue and resulted in fewer hotel bookings. As such, the industry needs to adapt to changing circumstances and prioritize safety measures while still providing high-quality services and experiences for tourists.

In conclusion, the Belt and Road Initiative has created an opportunity for Oman to strengthen its relationship with China and diversify its economy. The literature sources discussed above have provided valuable insights into Oman's attempts to benefit from the BRI, particularly in the tourism sector. The historical relations between China and Oman have been a significant factor in the two countries' friendly relationship and cooperation under the BRI. However, the BRI has also facilitated the development of infrastructure projects in Oman, which has positively impacted the tourism sector.

Chinese investment in Oman's railway and maritime transport and IT sectors has contributed to developing Oman's infrastructure and technology sector. This has enabled the country to improve its communication networks, essential in attracting more tourists. Furthermore, Oman and China have agreed to do away with visas, which has made it easier for people to travel between the two countries, promoting tourism. Oman's efforts to attract more

By opening a tourism office in China and launching new tourism projects, Chinese tourists are taking the proper steps.

However, there are potential risks associated with Oman's involvement in the

BRI. The country must ensure it is not over-reliant on Chinese investment and maintains its sovereignty and independence. Additionally, there are concerns about the environmental impact of some of the infrastructure projects associated with the BRI.

Overall, the literature sources discussed in this paper demonstrate the potential benefits of Oman's involvement in the BRI. However, Oman must tread carefully and maximize the benefits while mitigating potential risks. The BRI can potentially provide Oman with significant economic opportunities, particularly in the tourism sector, but it must be approached with caution and foresight.

Based on the above discussion, here are five policy recommendations for Oman to benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative and strengthen its relationship with China in the tourism sector:

- 1) Encourage private sector participation: Oman's government should encourage private sector participation in tourism projects with Chinese firms. This would help implement projects, create job opportunities, and transfer skills to the Omani workforce.
- 2) Increase marketing efforts: Oman should increase its marketing efforts in China to attract more tourists. The opening of a tourism office in China is a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done to promote Oman's unique tourist attractions, such as its beaches, mountains, and cultural heritage sites.
- 3) Foster technology transfer: Oman should foster technology transfer by encouraging Chinese technology firms to invest in Oman's technology sector. This would help Oman develop its technology capabilities, which could lead to innovative tourism products and services.
- 4) Develop human resource capabilities: Oman should develop its human resource capabilities in the tourism sector to cater to the needs of Chinese tourists. This can be done through training and education programs for Omani nationals to acquire the necessary language, hospitality, and tourism management skills.
- 5) Strengthen regulatory framework: Oman should strengthen its regulatory framework to ensure Chinese firms comply with Omani laws and regulations. This would help to safeguard Omani interests, protect the environment, and maintain social and cultural integrity while ensuring that Chinese investors feel secure in Oman's business environment.

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