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Azerbaijan-China Relations: Azerbaijani Culture Emergence in the Context of the People's Republic of China

Abstract

This paper examines the evolving cultural and diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and China, with a particular focus on the emergence and growing visibility of Azerbaijani culture within Chinese socio-political and academic contexts. Against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting global order, the study analyzes how Azerbaijan strategically employs a multi-level approach, encompassing state-led diplomacy, educational cooperation, and diaspora entrepreneurship, to enhance its cultural presence and soft power in China. A mixed-methods approach is adopted, combining qualitative content analysis of policy documents, media narratives, and institutional reports with quantitative data derived from two rounds of structured surveys. Special attention is paid to the formal establishment of a strategic partnership between the two countries in 2024, the state visit of President Ilham Aliyev to China in 2025, and the enduring alignment of bilateral cooperation with the principles of the Belt and Road Initiative. Consequently, by integrating cultural diplomacy with pragmatic economic strategies, Azerbaijan seeks to further solidify its cultural presence and strengthen bilateral relations in an increasingly interconnected global landscape.

Keyword: Azerbaijani Culture, Cultural Diplomacy, World Order, Azerbaijan-China Relations



Azerbaycan-Çin ilişkileri: Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti bağlamında Azerbaycan Kültürünün Yükselişi

Öz

Bu makale, Azerbaycan ile Çin arasındaki gelişen kültürel ve diplomatik ilişkileri, özellikle de Çin'in sosyo-politik ve akademik bağlamları içinde Azerbaycan kültürünün yükselişi ve artan görünürlüğü üzerine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Hızla değişen küresel düzen arka planında çalışma, Azerbaycan'ın Çin'deki kültürel varlığını ve yumuşak gücünü artırmak amacıyla devlet odaklı diplomasi, eğitim iş birliği ve diaspora girişimciliğini kapsayan çok düzeyli bir yaklaşımı stratejik biçimde nasıl kullandığını analiz etmektedir. Nitel içerik analizi (politika belgeleri, medya anlatıları ve kurumsal raporlar) ile iki aşamalı yapılandırılmış anketlerden elde edilen nicel verilerin birleştirildiği karma yöntemli bir araştırma yaklaşımı benimsenmiştir. Özellikle 2024 yılında iki ülke arasında stratejik ortaklığın resmen kurulması, 2025'te Cumhurbaşkanı İlham Aliyev'in Çin'e yaptığı devlet ziyareti ve ikili iş birliğinin Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi ilkeleriyle sürekli uyumu üzerinde durulmaktadır. Sonuç olarak Azerbaycan, kültürel diplomasiyi pragmatik ekonomik stratejilerle bütünleştirerek kültürel varlığını daha da pekiştirmeyi ve giderek daha fazla birbirine bağlı hâle gelen küresel ortamda ikili ilişkileri güçlendirmeyi hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Azerbaycan Kültürü, Kültürel Diplomasi, Küresel Düzen, Azerbaycan-Çin İlişkileri

Introduction

The strengthening relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the People's Republic of China exemplify a dynamic interplay of diplomacy, economics, and cultural exchange. As historical connections, facilitated by the ancient Silk Road, established early patterns of cultural and commercial exchange between East and West (Rong, 2022), contemporary relations exhibit a significantly deepened engagement. Concurrently, Azerbaijan and China maintain a comprehensive strategic partnership firmly grounded in economic cooperation, shared geopolitical interests, and mutual participation in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This partnership has not only driven economic growth and development but has also fostered a deeper understanding and appreciation between the two nations.

The modern diplomatic and political ties between Azerbaijan and China formalized on April 2, 1992, following China's recognition of Azerbaijan's independence on December 27, 1991. Since then, the bilateral relations have developed harmoniously with high-level exchanges being close and frequent. The two countries have witnessed numerous visits by heads of state and ministers, which have significantly contributed to the strengthening of their ties. For instance, Mr. Heydar Aliyev, the former president of the Republic of Azerbaijan, paid an official visit to China in 1994 (Aliyev Heritage Organization, 1994), and his successor, Ilham Aliyev, has made multiple visits to China, including in 2005, 2008, 2014, 2015, 2019, and 2025, highlighting the significance of both nations attach to their collaborative ties.

The establishment of diplomatic relations has catalyzed a substantial transformation in economic cooperation between the two nations, characterized by swift growth, progressive deepening, and multi-dimensional expansion across trade frameworks and investment portfolios. In recent years, the trade volume between China and Azerbaijan has been exhibiting consistent growth, exceeding the threshold of USD 2 billion (Ministry of Commerce of China, 2024). Through collaborative efforts, it is anticipated that by 2034, it may surpass 3 billion, while freight volume could attain 17 million tons.

While the strategic and economic dimensions of Azerbaijan–China relations have received considerable scholarly attention, a less explored yet increasingly significant aspect is the subtle emergence and growing visibility of Azerbaijani culture within the broader Chinese sociocultural context. This article investigates how Azerbaijani cultural identity is being expressed, interpreted, and recognized in China, focusing on the diverse channels through which cultural exchange is facilitated. These include state-sponsored initiatives, educational cooperation, diaspora engagement, and artistic expression. By analyzing these mechanisms, the study sheds light on the expanding cultural awareness and appreciation of Azerbaijan in China, positioning cultural diplomacy as a vital complement to the countries' geopolitical and economic collaboration.

1. Literature Review: Azerbaijan's Post-Soviet Foreign Policy and Its Relations with China

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a pivotal geopolitical shift, leading to the emergence of fifteen independent states, including the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the immediate aftermath, Azerbaijan faced the dual challenge of internal state-building and repositioning itself within the evolving international system. Scholars such as Cornell (2005) and Herzig (1999) emphasize that Azerbaijan's early foreign policy was characterized by pragmatism, aiming to balance relations among Russia, the West, and regional powers like Turkey and Iran. The country's strategic location in the South Caucasus, coupled with its vast hydrocarbon resources, necessitated a multifaceted and dynamic foreign policy approach.

Azerbaijan's geostrategic positioning at the crossroads of Eurasia has garnered escalating attention from diverse geopolitical stakeholders (Zeynalov, 2017), particularly due to its centrality as a critical nexus within intercontinental logistics networks and hydrocarbon transit corridors. Several studies underscore the country's strategic positioning along major international routes that connect the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea (Ziyadov, 2011; Gafarova, 2024). This has enabled Azerbaijan to emerge as a key node in developing the North–South and East–West transportation corridors, including the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR).

At the dawn of the 21st century, Azerbaijan put forward its national development plan, the Restoration of the Great Silk Road, to reinstate the nation as a key transit point connecting East and West (Aliyev Heritage Organization, 2000). This strategy bears notable similarities with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was launched in 2013 to enhance infrastructure connectivity and economic cooperation across Eurasia (Zeng et al., 2019; Musayev & Gasimov, 2023). The interplay of geopolitical tensions, protectionist trade policies, and institutionalized barriers has reshaped the global economic landscape, disproportionately affecting developing countries. In light of contemporary systemic challenges, both the Restoration of the Great Silk of Azerbaijan and the BRI of China cannot simply be conceptualized as economic development strategies; they have also become vehicles for

promoting South–South cooperation and offering alternatives to Western-led development models (Rolland, 2020). Azerbaijan and China have maintained diplomatic relations for over three decades since the formal establishment of ties in 1992. Over the years, the two countries have developed a comprehensive and multifaceted partnership rooted in mutual respect, non-interference in internal affairs, and shared strategic interests. A significant milestone in the evolution of the relations occurred on July 3, 2024, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Astana Summit, where the Republic of Azerbaijan and the People’s Republic of China signed the Joint Declaration on the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership (Administration of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024). This development marks a substantial deepening of bilateral cooperation and reflects a broader alignment with shifting geopolitical dynamics, particularly the growing prominence of alternative multilateral frameworks that promote South–South cooperation and seek to re-balance global governance structures.

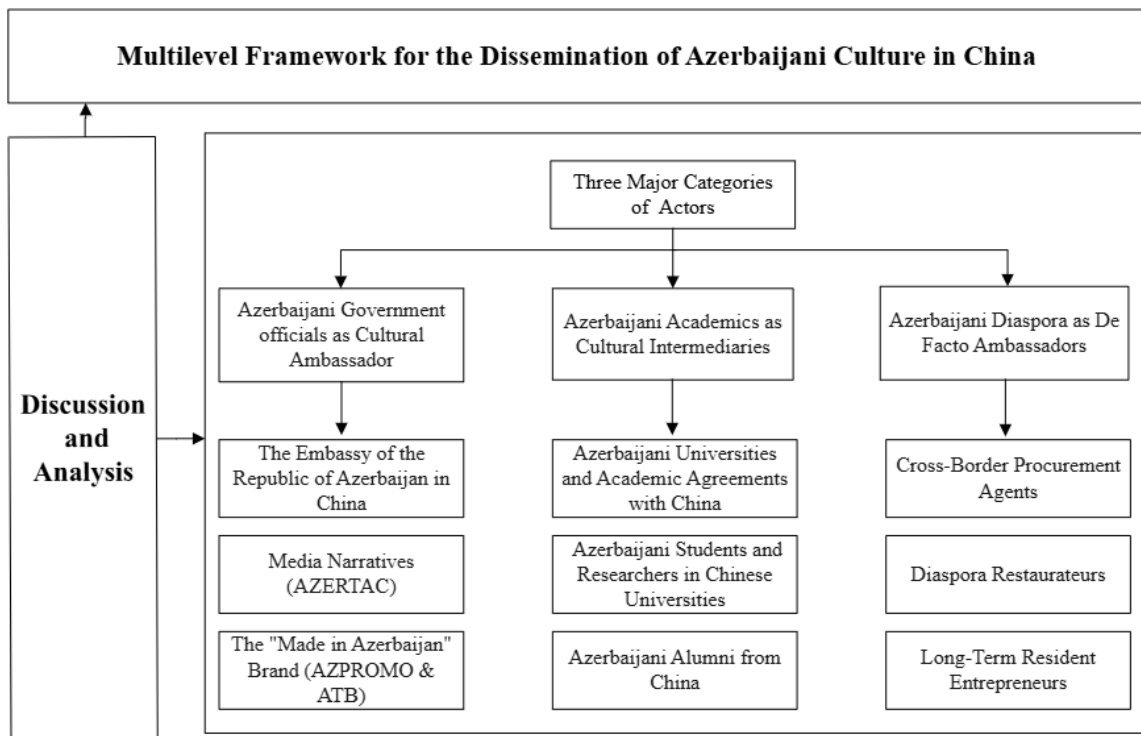
According to recent diplomatic communications, the official visit of the Azerbaijani president to China in 2025 is anticipated to further consolidate political trust and expand avenues of cooperation across infrastructure, the digital economy, energy, and regional security (Novruz, 2025). It is firmly believed that the deepening of Azerbaijan–China relations is emblematic of a broader realignment wherein emerging economies are forging new networks of mutual reliance, redefining the contours of global economic governance and resisting marginalization in a bifurcated international system.

In a nutshell, the trajectory of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union reflects a pragmatic and adaptive response to regional and global dynamics. The country’s evolving relations with China underscore its commitment to strategic diversification and its ambition to become a pivotal player in Eurasian connectivity. Therefore, the exploration of Azerbaijan–China relations bears strategic and enduring significance for the advancement of bilateral cooperation in the new era. By focusing on the emergence and development of Azerbaijani culture in China, this paper seeks to illuminate its cultural and diplomatic implications, offering constructive insights and strategic foresight to further strengthen mutual understanding and promote the sustainable development of bilateral relations.

2. Research Method

This study employs a mixed-methods, interdisciplinary approach to examine the evolving cultural and diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and China, with particular emphasis on the growing visibility of Azerbaijani culture within Chinese academic, economic, and sociocultural spaces. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, the research ensures analytical depth, methodological triangulation, and enhanced validity of findings. The discussion and analytical framework of the research are illustrated in the diagram below:

Diagram 1. Framework of Research Discussion and Analysis



3. The Role of Azerbaijani Government Officials as Cultural Ambassador

3.1 The Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in China: Diplomacy through Cultural Engagement

The People's Republic of China officially recognized the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan in December 1991, following a telephone communication from the Chinese Foreign Minister to his Azerbaijani counterpart. Formal diplomatic relations between the two countries were subsequently established on April 2, 1992. The Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Beijing commenced its operations on September 3, 1993, marking a significant institutional step in bilateral engagement. On January 12, 1994, Azerbaijan's inaugural

ambassador to China formally presented his credentials to the Chairman of the People's Republic of China, solidifying the foundation for diplomatic representation and cooperation.

Since then, the Azerbaijani Embassy has evolved beyond its diplomatic role to become an active institutional actor in shaping multifaceted cooperation with China. In addition to its primary functions, the Embassy of Azerbaijan in China maintains proactive linkages with the PRC's administrative organs, SCO-affiliated entities, and policy implementation units. This dual-track engagement serves to institutionalize bilateral mechanisms for advancing shared objectives in economic prosperity, security coordination, and intercultural dialogue, reinforcing the normative foundations of the Azerbaijan–China strategic partnership. For instance, with the help of the Azerbaijani Embassy, China Central Television officially invited a group of Azerbaijani national dancers to celebrate the 2020 Chinese Lunar New Year (CCTV 1, 2020); the ballet *Seven Beauties* (Garayev, 1947) and the operetta *The Cloth Peddler* (Tahmasib, 1945) were also presented to the Chinese public in September 2021.

3.2 Strategic Communication and Image Building: Media Narratives of Azerbaijan

In recent years, Azerbaijan has actively pursued comprehensive media outreach strategies in the People's Republic of China, employing both traditional and digital platforms to promote greater awareness and understanding of its political developments, economic priorities, cultural heritage, and societal values. A key component of this effort is the presence of the Azerbaijan State News Agency (AZERTAC), which has operated a correspondent office in Beijing since 2011 as part of its broader international media network. Through this platform, AZERTAC has cultivated substantive and multifaceted partnerships with leading Chinese media institutions, including Xinhua News Agency, China Daily, and People's Daily.

In parallel with its broader media diplomacy efforts, Azerbaijan has actively facilitated coverage by major Chinese media outlets on Azerbaijan-related topics by providing access to official materials and arranging high-level interviews. Another prominent example occurred in April 2025, when President Ilham Aliyev granted a written interview to *Xinhua News Agency* ahead of his state visit to China (Administration of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2025). In the interview, President Aliyev expressed a positive outlook on the continued

deepening of the strategic partnership between the two nations. The publication of the interview by *Xinhua* garnered significant attention among the Chinese public and media. This instance reflects a broader pattern, wherein Azerbaijani officials, including President Aliyev (CGTN, 2025), Presidential Assistant Hikmat Hajiyev (CGTN, 2024), and other prominent public figures, have regularly engaged with leading Chinese media platforms, contributing to the construction of a favorable national image and fostering mutual understanding between the two countries.

3.3 Promoting National Identity through Trade: The “Made in Azerbaijan” Brand (AZPROMO & ATB)

Historically reliant on hydrocarbons, Azerbaijan now has prioritized the revitalization of its non-oil economy to ensure long-term sustainability, reduce vulnerability to oil price volatility, and foster inclusive economic growth. As part of this agenda, the Export and Investment Promotion Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (AZPROMO) was established to support the expansion of non-oil exports and attract foreign direct investment, operating under a “single window” approach to streamline services for potential investors.

In an effort to promote Azerbaijani products in China, AZPROMO has established a series of trading houses, trade offices, and wine houses in major Chinese cities. Specifically, by May 2024, Azerbaijan has opened five trade houses in Chengdu, Qingdao, Zhangjiajie, Xi'an, and Beijing. In addition, four trade offices are operational in Shanghai, Harbin, Jinan, and Wuhan, along with three wine houses in Urumqi and Shanghai (AZPROMO, 2024). These institutions serve as critical platforms for promoting Azerbaijani products under the *Made in Azerbaijan* brand, enhancing their visibility and market access in China, and contributing to the expansion of Azerbaijan's export-oriented, competitive goods in the Chinese market.

What's more, the Chinese outbound tourism market is widely viewed as highly promising due to the strong alignment between Chinese travelers' preferences and Azerbaijan's rich cultural heritage, historical landmarks, diverse natural landscapes, renowned hospitality, varied cuisine, and its unique blend of modern urban development with ancient traditions. Recognizing this potential, the Azerbaijan Tourism Board (ATB) has implemented a series of targeted promotional strategies, including Mandarin-language marketing initiatives, active participation

in major Chinese travel expos, and the development of digital content specifically tailored to Chinese audiences (Novruz, 2025). These efforts aim to raise Azerbaijan's profile within China's outbound tourism sector and strategically position the country as an appealing destination that offers immersive cultural experiences.

4. The Role of Azerbaijani Academics as Cultural Intermediaries

4.1 Institutional Outreach: Azerbaijani Universities and Academic Agreements with China

Over the past few decades, academic institutions in both countries have increasingly leveraged education as a platform to foster mutual understanding, enhance people-to-people exchanges, and support broader geopolitical and economic objectives. Two universities stand at the forefront of this growing partnership: Baku State University (BSU) in Azerbaijan and Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) in China.

Baku State University, one of Azerbaijan's most prestigious institutions and the alma mater of former President Heydar Aliyev, has been a central actor in shaping educational ties with China. The establishment of the Department of Chinese Studies within its Faculty of Oriental Studies in 2004 marked a significant milestone in the institutionalization of Chinese language and cultural education in Azerbaijan. This initiative laid the groundwork for sustained bilateral academic engagement. In 2011, BSU collaborated with Anhui University to launch the first Confucius Institute in Azerbaijan, further formalizing its commitment to China studies. The partnership reached a new level in 2023 with the introduction of a joint dual degree program in Philology (Chinese Language and Literature), reflecting an integrated approach to curriculum development and talent cultivation. In addition, BSU has signed Memoranda of Understanding with several leading Chinese universities, including Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), Hefei University of Technology (HFUT), and Tongji University, enlarging its academic network and promoting multidimensional cooperation.

Correspondingly, Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) has made significant contributions to promoting the Azerbaijani language and culture. In line with its strategic focus on the Central Asian and Caucasus Studies, BFSU introduced Azerbaijani as an elective third-

language course in 2016. Following approval from China's Ministry of Education, the university elevated the program to a full undergraduate major in 2018, becoming the only institution in China to offer a degree program in Azerbaijani language studies. This academic innovation signifies China's recognition of Azerbaijan's growing regional importance and reflects BFSU's role in preparing linguistically and culturally competent professionals for engagement with the South Caucasus. Furthering its academic leadership in the field, BFSU hosted the First Chinese International Scientific Conference on Azerbaijan Studies in September 2024. The conference not only revitalized scholarly interest in Azerbaijani studies but also catalyzed new academic partnerships and cultural exchange mechanisms between the two countries.

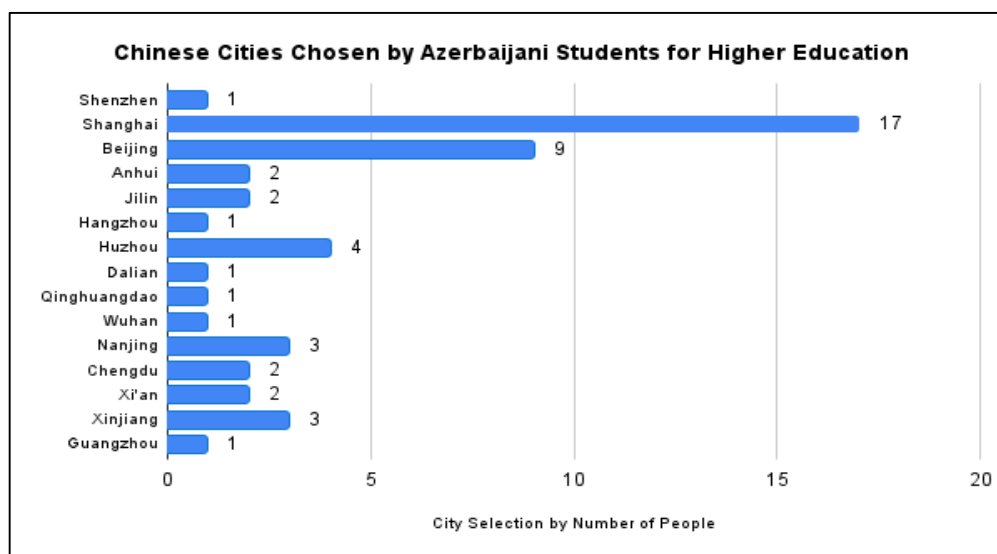
4.2 Scholarly Presence Abroad: Azerbaijani Students and Researchers in Chinese Universities

Since the late twentieth century, China has pursued an active policy of international educational engagement, characterized by both the outward mobility of Chinese students and the inward flow of international students. This long-standing policy of academic openness has expanded significantly in recent decades, particularly toward countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative, such as Azerbaijan. A tangible result of this cooperation is the steady increase in the number of Azerbaijani students pursuing higher education in China. According to Azerbaijan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jeyhun Bayramov, nearly 500 Azerbaijani students were enrolled in Chinese universities as of early 2020 (AZERNEWS, 2020). Approximately 50 of these students receive full scholarships annually under bilateral intergovernmental agreements, while more than 300 have sought study opportunities through Confucius Institute programs. These figures underscore both the effectiveness of Chinese scholarship mechanisms and the growing interest among Azerbaijani youth in China's academic and cultural offerings.

The spatial distribution of Azerbaijani students within China reflects a complex interplay of academic, economic, and geopolitical factors. The following bar chart, derived from a randomly selected sample of 50 students out of a total applicant pool of 300, offers meaningful insights into current patterns of student mobility and geographic preferences. The data reveal that Beijing and Shanghai remain the most favored destinations among Azerbaijani students,

reflecting their status as China's political and economic centers, respectively. These cities host a concentration of globally ranked universities that offer internationally competitive programs in key fields such as international relations, economics, and Chinese language and culture. In addition to academic excellence, their cosmopolitan environments, extensive international networks, and robust infrastructure contribute to their appeal.

Figure 1. Chinese Cities Chosen by Azerbaijani Students for Higher Education



Beyond China's primary academic hubs of Beijing and Shanghai, a large number of Azerbaijani students have chosen to pursue their studies in northern provinces such as Hebei, Anhui, Sichuan, Jilin, and Liaoning. Some of regions offer a strategic combination of geographic proximity to the capital, comparatively lower living costs, and access to reputable higher education institutions with strong academic infrastructures. For students seeking high-quality education in more affordable and accessible environments, such provinces represent practical and attractive alternatives. Likewise, the southern cities of Guangzhou and Shenzhen have also gained prominence as study destinations, mainly due to their rapid economic growth, integration into global trade networks, and thriving innovation ecosystems. These cities expose students to dynamic industrial landscapes and emerging technologies, aligning educational experiences with future-oriented career pathways.

The diverse geographic distribution of Azerbaijani students in China underscores the multifactorial nature of educational mobility, shaped by both institutional factors and individual aspirations. More importantly, these students contribute significantly to the cultural and social fabric of their host institutions. Through active participation in cultural exhibitions,

international student festivals, and peer exchange activities, Azerbaijani students play a vital role in promoting their national heritage. Their engagement fosters intercultural awareness and supports a more inclusive and globally engaged campus environment. In this capacity, Azerbaijani students function not only as recipients of international education but also as agents of cultural diplomacy. Their presence illustrates how educational exchange programs can simultaneously serve academic goals and enhance bilateral understanding through soft power mechanisms.

4.3. Intellectual Returnees: The Cultural Capital of Azerbaijani Alumni from China

Azerbaijani returnees who have completed higher education in China represent an emerging cohort of transnational professionals whose academic and intercultural experiences significantly contribute to the development of Azerbaijan-China relations. Equipped with advanced multilingual skills, specialized training across diverse disciplines, and a deep understanding of Chinese society, these individuals are well-positioned to serve as cultural and diplomatic intermediaries. A notable proportion of returnees have chosen to remain in China, pursuing careers in academia and language instruction. One prominent example is Dr. Agshin Aliyev, the head of the Azerbaijani Language Department at Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) and the founder of the China Research Center at Khazar University. Dr. Aliyev, holding a Ph.D. in Philology, is widely recognized as a pioneering figure in the establishment of the Azerbaijani language studies in China. His scholarly contributions include the development of critical bilingual resources, such as the Azerbaijani-Chinese Dictionary and Azerbaijani Language Teaching Materials, which have played an instrumental role in enhancing linguistic exchange and fostering greater cultural understanding between the two nations.

In parallel, numerous returnees have applied their expertise within Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where their proficiency in Chinese and familiarity with Chinese political and cultural dynamics position them as crucial diplomatic assets. These returnees have played an essential role in fostering bilateral cooperation across key areas such as education, culture, and tourism. Their expertise in bridging cultural gaps and their linguistic proficiency have enabled them to effectively promote mutual understanding and strengthen diplomatic relations. Furthermore, many returnees have pursued careers in academic research, contributing to Azerbaijani think tanks and academic institutions. Their research, which frequently addresses the historical, economic, and cultural dimensions of Azerbaijan-China relations, provides valuable insights that inform policymaking and further reinforce diplomatic ties.

In addition to careers in academia and diplomacy, a growing segment of returnees has

become entrepreneurs, utilizing the intercultural competencies and commercial awareness developed during their studies in China to establish and expand cross-border business ventures. These individuals are uniquely positioned to navigate both Chinese and Azerbaijani markets, facilitating the exchange of goods, services, and investment. Their entrepreneurial endeavors commonly involve the export of distinctive Azerbaijani products, such as carpets, pomegranates, and wines, while simultaneously promoting Chinese technology, electronics, and consumer goods in Azerbaijan. Moreover, their business initiatives contribute to the deepening of bilateral economic ties, serving as practical extensions of soft power diplomacy.

5. The Role of Azerbaijani Diaspora as De Facto Ambassadors

5.1. Cross-Border Procurement Agents: Facilitators of Trade and Cultural Awareness

Azerbaijani entrepreneurs engaging in business between China and Azerbaijan serve as vital informal agents for transmitting Azerbaijani culture to China. Distinct from diplomats and scholars who are formally assigned to promote cultural exchange and mutual understanding, these business actors, in the course of their routine market-driven interactions, play a crucial yet indirect role in fostering cultural exchange and awareness. Their frequent travels and commercial activities position them as “De facto ambassadors,” bridging the cultural gap between China and Azerbaijan through economic engagement.

In the process of importing Chinese goods into Azerbaijan and the broader South Caucasus region, these entrepreneurs also introduce Azerbaijani culture to China. They bring a wide array of products from China to meet the growing demand in Azerbaijan, while also introducing Azerbaijani goods to the Chinese market. This two-way trade flow not only diversifies Azerbaijan’s consumer market but also enhances its position as a regional trade hub and promotes the exchange and integration of Chinese and Azerbaijani cultures. For instance, Azerbaijani entrepreneurs may introduce traditional Azerbaijani handicrafts, food, music, and other cultural products to China. In this way, they showcase the unique charm of Azerbaijani culture to the Chinese, arousing the Chinese people’s interest and attention towards Azerbaijani culture and promoting the spread of Azerbaijani culture in China.

Significantly, the strategic location of Azerbaijan as a transit point between Asia and Europe further strengthens the role of these entrepreneurs in cultural transmission. Located at the heart of the dynamic logistics network of the Middle Corridor, a key component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), these procurement agents benefit directly from the substantial

infrastructure developments in the corridor. For instance, the modernization of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway has increased its cargo handling capacity to 5 million tons per year, enhancing the efficiency and reliability of trade flows. This provides Azerbaijani entrepreneurs with more convenient and cost-effective transportation options, enabling them to carry out cross-border trade activities more effectively and promoting the exchange and dissemination of cultural products between the two countries.

Furthermore, the establishment of the Middle Corridor Multimodal joint venture in 2023, involving Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia, offers a “one-stop-shop” service for cargo delivery (Abbasova, 2024). This initiative streamlines logistics processes and reduces transit times, aligning with the broader goals of the BRI to enhance regional connectivity and trade facilitation. It also provides Azerbaijani entrepreneurs with a more favorable environment and conditions for business operations. In turn, this encourages more entrepreneurs to engage in trade activities between China and Azerbaijan, promoting the spread of Azerbaijani culture in China to a larger scale and extent.

In the course of their business activities in China, Azerbaijani procurement entrepreneurs in China serve not only as commercial intermediaries but also as informal cultural transmitters. Through routine business practices, they introduce key aspects of Azerbaijani business culture, such as relationship-based trust, hospitality, and long-term cooperation, into the Chinese commercial environment. Furthermore, during negotiations, trade fairs, and shared meals, they informally convey cultural elements including Azerbaijani dining etiquette, traditional cuisine, and tea culture. These culturally embedded interactions contribute to a gradual yet meaningful exposure of Azerbaijani values and social norms within the transnational trade context. Following the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and China, the cultural role of these entrepreneurs is expected to gain further relevance, serving as a grassroots force in deepening bilateral understanding and people-to-people connectivity.

5.2. Diaspora Restaurateurs: Culinary Spaces as Cultural Interfaces

Azerbaijani diaspora restaurant entrepreneurs illustrate the impactful role of culinary diplomacy in facilitating transnational cultural exchange, with the Maiden Tower restaurant in Beijing serving as a representative example. As one of the Azerbaijani restaurants in the capital of China, the Maiden Tower transcends its commercial function to operate as a multisensory cultural embassy (Coy, 2024). Located on the third floor of Dongxin Commercial Plaza, the restaurant not only offers authentic Azerbaijani cuisine prepared by a seasoned Azerbaijani chef

using traditional methods like charcoal grilling, but also integrates imported goods from its affiliated Azerbaijan Trade House, creating a holistic cultural experience. This dual role as both a dining establishment and a commercial-cultural hub underscores how diaspora entrepreneurs strategically leverage gastronomy to foster cross-cultural understanding.

The restaurant's menu acts as a culinary archive of Azerbaijan's Silk Road heritage. Signature dishes such as Shah Plov (a saffron-infused rice dish layered with dried fruits, nuts, and meat, encased in lavash bread) and Kebab & Shashlik Set (grilled meats spiced with Azerbaijani blends) reflect the nation's historical synthesis of Turkic, Persian, and Mediterranean influences. By contextualizing these dishes within narratives of ancient trade routes, Maiden Tower transforms meals into historical dialogues, inviting diners to engage with Azerbaijan's identity as a crossroads civilization. This aligns with UNESCO's recognition of Azerbaijan's Walled City of Baku, home to the iconic Maiden Tower monument, as a symbol of cultural hybridity.

The interior design of Maiden Tower further amplifies its cultural mission. The restaurant's decor features Azerbaijani patterned tablecloths, tiled floors, and displays of traditional pottery, evoking the ambiance of a caravanserai. Private dining rooms named after Azerbaijani cities and a stage hosting live music or cultural videos immerse patrons in a curated sensory journey. This architectural mimicry of Azerbaijan's historic landscapes, such as the 12th-century Maiden Tower—a UNESCO World Heritage site and national emblem depicted on currency—reinforces the restaurant's role as a transnational cultural node.

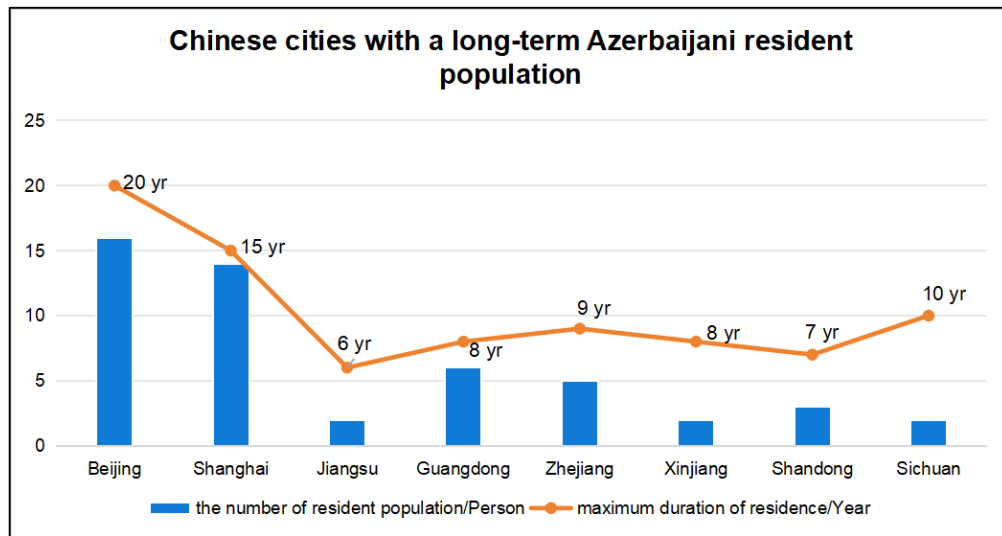
Beyond cuisine and aesthetics, Maiden Tower operates within a broader ecosystem of cultural diplomacy. Its connection to the Century Silk Road International Block, a marketplace showcasing goods from Belt and Road countries, positions the restaurant as part of a geopolitical narrative that echoes Azerbaijan's historical role as a Silk Road intermediary. Additionally, the Azerbaijan Trade House adjacent to the restaurant sells culturally significant products like pomegranate juice (a national symbol) and handwoven carpets, extending the culinary experience into tangible cultural artifacts.

More briefly, Azerbaijani diaspora restaurant entrepreneurs contribute to cultural exchange and understanding in multiple ways. Firstly, they provide authentic Azerbaijani culinary experiences, allowing locals to savor the unique tastes and aromas of Azerbaijan. As customers enjoy these meals, they gain insights into Azerbaijani traditions and customs. Secondly, the restaurants serve as cultural showcases. The interior design, music, and service style often reflect Azerbaijani cultural elements, offering a holistic Azerbaijani cultural experience. Thirdly, these entrepreneurs actively participate in local cultural events and festivals. They may host cultural theme days at their restaurants, collaborate with local artists and cultural institutions, and participate in food festivals and other activities. Through these events, they introduce Azerbaijani culture to a wider audience and promote cultural exchange and integration between Azerbaijanis and the local population. In doing so, they enhance the local community's understanding and appreciation of Azerbaijani culture, breaking down cultural barriers and fostering friendship and cooperation between the two peoples.

5.3. Long-Term Resident Entrepreneurs: Sustained Soft Power through Embedded Economic Activity

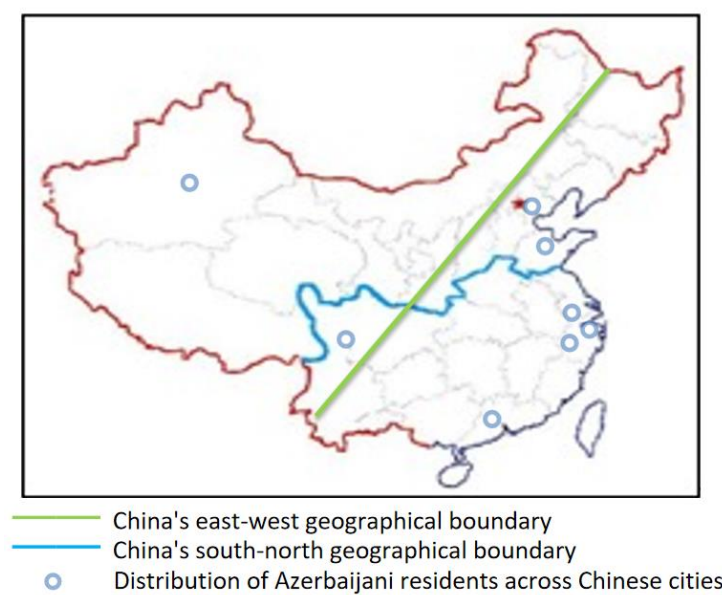
Long-term resident Azerbaijani entrepreneurs in China represent a distinctive and underexplored segment of the broader Azerbaijani diaspora. Their sustained presence enables them to serve as durable conduits for both economic exchange and cultural transmission. Unlike short-term visitors or transient business actors, these individuals exhibit a deep level of integration into Chinese society. They are embedded within local socio-economic structures, maintaining networks that span formal institutions, such as municipal engagement and regulatory compliance, and informal systems, including community associations and diaspora support groups. Many have resided in China for extended periods, often more than five years, with some surpassing two decades. This longevity fosters trust, administrative fluency, and cultural adaptability, allowing them to bridge linguistic, social, and bureaucratic divides between China and Azerbaijan.

Figure 2. Chinese cities with a long-term Azerbaijani resident population



The above research draws on empirical data collected during 2024 and 2025 through qualitative interviews and structured surveys involving a purposive sample of 50 Azerbaijani residents in China. Participants were identified through two WeChat-based diaspora networks, each comprising approximately five-hundred members. The findings reveal a geographically stratified diaspora, with a strong preference for urban centers in China’s economically advanced eastern coastal regions. Approximately 32 percent of respondents reside in Beijing, 28 percent in Shanghai, 12 percent in Guangdong, and 10 percent in Zhejiang. Smaller, yet notable, Azerbaijani communities were identified in Shandong, Jiangsu, Xinjiang, and Sichuan, each accounting for about 4 to 6 percent of the sample.

Figure 3. The distribution of Azerbaijani residents across Chinese cities



The duration of residence also emerged as a critical variable. In metropolitan areas such as Beijing and Shanghai, many respondents reported continuous residence exceeding fifteen and twelve years, respectively. This concept refers to the simultaneous participation of individuals in formal regulatory frameworks, such as licensing, taxation, and municipal cooperation, and informal community-based networks that support adaptation and cohesion. From a geographical and strategic standpoint, over 76 percent of observed diaspora entrepreneurial activity is concentrated in China's eastern coastal provinces. This distribution corresponds with the availability of economic infrastructure and the strategic priorities of national initiatives, particularly those associated with the Belt and Road Initiative. Azerbaijani entrepreneurs engage in a broad spectrum of sectors, including international trade, logistics, retail, personal services, and cultural production. A defining feature of their business operations is the intentional incorporation of Azerbaijani cultural elements into commercial practice.

At the micro level, cultural engagements by Azerbaijani long-term resident entrepreneurs in China serve as informal platforms for cross-cultural exchange and soft cultural diplomacy. Through their sustained presence, they have established commercial spaces that are frequently adorned with national symbols, traditional design motifs, and multilingual signage, effectively transforming these venues into hybrid cultural-economic spaces. These environments simultaneously reinforce diasporic identity and foster intercultural understanding within local communities. Their long-term settlement also facilitates broader civic integration: many engage actively in local festivals, educational partnerships, and community outreach initiatives. These contributions extend their influence beyond the economic domain, supporting a more inclusive and pluralistic representation of Azerbaijani culture within China's increasingly globalized urban settings.

Conclusion

The growing presence of Azerbaijani culture in the People's Republic of China results from a coordinated, multi-level approach that combines official state efforts, academic cooperation, and the active role of the diaspora. This threefold structure, comprising government representatives, scholars, and long-term entrepreneurs, illustrates how Azerbaijan integrates formal diplomatic channels with community-based initiatives to enhance its cultural recognition across China's dynamic socio-political environment. The Azerbaijani government, through its embassy and affiliated agencies like AZPROMO and ATB, has strategically positioned itself as a cultural interlocutor. By framing the "Made in Azerbaijan" brand within China's consumer markets and organizing high-profile cultural events, official

actors have institutionalized Azerbaijan's national identity in Chinese public consciousness. These efforts are amplified by state-crafted media narratives that emphasize Azerbaijan's historical Silk Road heritage, aligning with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) discourse. However, the efficacy of such top-down approaches remains contingent on sustained funding and alignment with China's geopolitical priorities. Azerbaijani academics and students in China act as critical cultural translators, fostering intellectual reciprocity through institutional partnerships and research collaboration. Returnees from Chinese universities carry dual cultural capital, enabling them to reinterpret Azerbaijani traditions through a China-oriented perspective. This cohort not only disseminates knowledge about Azerbaijan within Chinese academic circles but also introduces Chinese socio-economic models to Azerbaijani institutions, creating a feedback loop of mutual influence. Yet, their impact is often constrained by the niche scope of academic exchanges and limited public engagement beyond scholarly networks. The Azerbaijani diaspora, particularly long-term resident entrepreneurs, embodies the most dynamic and sustainable form of cultural diplomacy. By embedding Azerbaijani motifs into commercial spaces, from Azerbaijan-themed restaurants to trade hubs adorned with Maiden Tower architecture, these actors normalize cultural encounters in everyday Chinese life. Their dual role as economic agents and de facto ambassadors ensures that cultural transmission occurs organically, bypassing the rigidity of state protocols. Cross-border procurement agents and restaurateurs further exemplify how micro-level interactions accumulate into macro-level soft power, particularly when aligned with BRI's infrastructure-driven connectivity. Ultimately, these actors form a complementary ecosystem: government officials set the diplomatic agenda, academics legitimize cultural narratives, and the diaspora operationalizes them through lived experiences. This multi-scalar approach mitigates the limitations of unilateral strategies, ensuring resilience against geopolitical shifts. Crucially, Azerbaijan's success lies in its ability to intertwine cultural promotion with economic pragmatism, whether through trade fairs showcasing pomegranate products or academic partnerships focused on energy logistics. Amid a rapidly transforming and increasingly unpredictable world order, the deepening of Azerbaijan-China relations has emerged as a strategically significant development. The April 2025 state visit of President Ilham Aliyev to the People's Republic of China symbolized not only the reaffirmation of diplomatic ties but also the strategic recalibration of Azerbaijan's foreign policy in response to shifting global dynamics. In an era characterized by the erosion of traditional alliances, the reconfiguration of global supply chains, and the rise of regional powers,

both Azerbaijan and China have demonstrated a mutual interest in constructing a resilient, future-oriented partnership. The bilateral incentive mechanisms introduced during this visit, encompassing trade facilitation, joint energy initiatives, and academic collaboration, reflect a move toward institutionalized, multi sector cooperation that transcends transactional diplomacy.

In conclusion, the growing visibility of Azerbaijani culture in the People's Republic of China represents more than a cultural trend, it reflects a calculated and strategic response to the complexities of the contemporary global order. The elevation of bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership during President Ilham Aliyev's state visit to China in April 2025 marks a pivotal moment in Azerbaijan-China relations. Among the key outcomes of the visit was the signing of a mutual visa exemption agreement for ordinary passport holders, a development that significantly lowers barriers to mobility and facilitates closer people-to-people ties. This policy shift is expected to catalyze deeper cultural, academic, and economic engagement between the two countries, fostering mutual understanding and expanding channels for soft diplomacy. Against this backdrop, the dissemination of Azerbaijani culture within China acquires heightened geopolitical and diplomatic significance. It not only contributes to cultural pluralism in China's globalizing urban centers but also strengthens Azerbaijan's international image as a culturally confident and strategically engaged actor. Moving forward, Azerbaijan's ability to effectively integrate its diplomatic efforts with cultural, academic, and diaspora-based exchanges will be instrumental in consolidating its position within the evolving Asia-centric global landscape. In an era defined by fluid alliances and shifting geopolitical norms, this multidimensional approach will be essential for advancing stable and constructive ties with China.

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