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**Strategic Consulting for Sino-Iran Saffron Trade
under the Belt and Road Initiative: Challenges and Opportunities**
**การให้คำปรึกษาเชิงกลยุทธ์สำหรับการค้าหัวฝักรัน จีน – อิหร่าน
ภายใต้โครงการหนึ่งแถบหนึ่งเส้นทาง: ความท้าทายและโอกาส**

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ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a global development strategy that has strengthened economic cooperation between China and Iran. This study examines how Sino-Iran saffron trading companies can leverage strategic consulting services to address BRI-related challenges and capitalize on opportunities through optimized interfirm management and highly effective cross-cultural communication. Focusing on 24 managers from 12 saffron trading companies (including exporters, importers, wholesalers and retailers) selected through purposive sampling, this study employs semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to investigate trade barriers and BRI opportunities. The study emphasizes the need for tailored consulting solutions to enhance sustainable cross-border trade, based on a qualitative case study analysis. Findings reveal that saffron trading companies are primarily facing with challenges such as policy and compliance barriers, cultural and cognitive gaps, and

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technological and resource constraints. Furthermore, BRI brings opportunities such as policy synergy and support, technological innovation and integration, and health and cultural consumption upgrades. The demand for strategic consulting primarily lies in compliance adaptation, market entry, and supply chain optimization. Based on the research questions, the findings were applied to develop general guidelines for trading companies. It provides insights into strategic management for Sino-Iran saffron trade and practical recommendations for leveraging consulting services to foster long-term growth.

Keywords: Challenges and Opportunities, Strategic Consulting, International Sino-Iran Trading Companies, Inter-business Management, Cross-cultural Collaboration, Belt and Road Initiative

บทคัดย่อ

โครงการริเริ่มหนึ่งแถบหนึ่งเส้นทาง (BRI) เป็นยุทธศาสตร์การพัฒนาระดับโลกที่ส่งเสริมความร่วมมือทางเศรษฐกิจระหว่างจีนและอิหร่าน การศึกษานี้ศึกษาว่าบริษัทค้าเหู้าฝร้นจีน-อิหร่านสามารถใช้ประโยชน์จากบริการให้คำปรึกษาเชิงกลยุทธ์เพื่อรับมือกับความท้าทายที่เกี่ยวข้องกับ BRI และใช้ประโยชน์จากโอกาสต่าง ๆ ผ่านการบริหารจัดการระหว่างธุรกิจและการสื่อสารข้ามวัฒนธรรมที่มีประสิทธิภาพสูงสุดอย่างไร งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งเน้นไปที่ผู้จัดการ 24 คนจากบริษัทค้าเหู้าฝร้น 12 แห่ง (ผู้ส่งออก ผู้นำเข้า ผู้ค้าส่ง และผู้ค้าปลีก) ซึ่งได้รับการคัดเลือกโดยการสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบเจาะจง งานวิจัยนี้ใช้การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างและการวิเคราะห์เชิงหวัข้อเพื่อศึกษาอุปสรรคทางการค้าและโอกาสต่าง ๆ ในโครงการ BRI งานวิจัยนี้เน้นย้ำถึง บทสรุปของการให้คำปรึกษาที่ปรับแต่งได้ตามความต้องการ เพื่อยกระดับการค้าข้ามพรมแดนอย่างยั่งยืนผ่านการวิเคราะห์กรณีศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพ ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่าบริษัทค้าเหู้าฝร้นส่วนใหญ่กำลังเผชิญกับความท้าทายต่าง ๆ เช่น อุปสรรคด้านนโยบายและการปฏิบัติตามกฎระเบียบ ช่องว่างทางวัฒนธรรมและความรู้ความเข้าใจ ข้อจำกัดด้านเทคโนโลยีและทรัพยากร นอกจากนี้ โครงการ BRI ยังนำมาซึ่งโอกาสต่าง ๆ เช่น ความร่วมมือและการสนับสนุนด้านนโยบาย นวัตกรรมและการบูรณาการทางเทคโนโลยี การยกระดับสุขภาพและการบริโภคทางวัฒนธรรม การให้คำปรึกษาเชิงกลยุทธ์ต้องการแนวทางหลักในการปรับตัวให้สอดคล้องกับกฎระเบียบ การเข้าสู่ตลาด และการเพิ่มประสิทธิภาพห่วงโซ่อุปทาน จากคำถามการวิจัย ผลการวิจัยนี้ได้ถูกนำไปปรับใช้เป็นแนวทางทั่วไปสำหรับบริษัทการค้า โดยให้ข้อมูลเชิงลึกเกี่ยวกับการจัดการเชิงกลยุทธ์สำหรับการค้าเหู้าฝร้นจีน-อิหร่าน และคำแนะนำเชิงปฏิบัติสำหรับการใช้ประโยชน์จากบริการให้คำปรึกษาเพื่อส่งเสริมการเติบโตในระยะยาว

คำสำคัญ: ความท้าทายและโอกาส การให้คำปรึกษาเชิงกลยุทธ์ บริษัทการค้าจีน-อิหร่านระหว่างประเทศ การบริหารจัดการระหว่างธุรกิจ ความร่วมมือข้ามวัฒนธรรม โครงการหนึ่งแถบหนึ่งเส้นทาง

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, has evolved from a concept into practice, significantly promoting the cross-border cooperation in infrastructure, investment, trade and people-to-people exchanges (Yu, 2024). It is a transformative force which seeks to revitalize ancient trade routes, fostering international cooperation and economic development, especially with countries like Iran. With its rich natural resources, strategic geographical location and deep historical roots with China, Iran is an important partner under the BRI framework. As a transportation hub connecting Asia, Europe and Africa, as well as an important oil and gas producer, Iran has huge potential for cross-border trade and cooperation.

Even under Western sanctions, China and Iran have maintained a stable and cooperative bilateral relationship. Notably, the 25-Year Cooperation Agreement signed in 2021 has strengthened the economic ties between the two countries. In 2023, bilateral trade reached \$14.65 billion, with China being Iran's largest trading partner and a major buyer of its energy (Hanafusa et al., 2024) and non-oil products. Among the latter, saffron stands out as a strategic export product for Iran, with more than 90% of the global supply. In 2022, Iran exported \$121 million worth of saffron, with China being its third largest buyer.

Despite the growth opportunities, Sino-Iran trading companies face many challenges, including political tensions, US-led sanctions, financial restrictions and cultural barriers (Madani, 2022; Lu et al., 2016; Wu and Ruan, 2018). These constraints affect daily transactions, market access and strategic decisions. Sanctions have led to higher transaction costs (Jelodar and Duan, 2022), forcing many companies to seek to alternative payment methods, which often comes with higher risks. Moreover, the Iran inflation rate for 2022 is 43.5%, ranking the eighth highest in the world. Iran's economic volatility and high inflation further complicate sustainable trade.

Although there are many challenges facing China-Iran companies, saffron stands as one of Iran's most valuable non-oil exports, and its traders face additional obstacles such as inadequate marketing strategies, non-compliance with international standards, lack of investment, and limited advisory support (Ardehali and Hashempour, 2009; Mohammadi and Reed, 2020). Although Iran dominates global saffron production, it falls behind in value-added processing and branding. For example, Spain produces only 1% of global saffron, but exports 30% of global saffron due to its advanced marketing and packaging capabilities (Mohammadian et al., 2023).

Strategic consulting services play a key role in helping companies navigate these complexities. By providing targeted insights and customized strategies, consulting firms can improve operational efficiency, regulatory compliance, and market development capabilities. However, current research on China-Iran trade often lacks practical country-specific guidance, especially in areas such as cross-border trade represented by saffron.

However, strategic consulting firms have yet to adequately address these issues. Their responses remain one-size-fits-all, with limited tailored solutions for market entry, value enhancement, or operational transformation in the saffron industry. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the intersection between strategic consulting services and China-Iran trade, especially in the saffron field, is critical to fully release the potential of bilateral cooperation.

Therefore, this study focuses on the challenges and opportunities faced by Sino-Iran trading companies, especially in the saffron sector, under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. It aims to explore how strategic consulting services can help these companies overcome obstacles and achieve sustainable development. The research results are intended to provide references for academic research, business practices, and policy making in the evolving pattern of Sino-Iran economic cooperation.

Research Questions

The obstacles and problems exposed in the saffron industry reflect the lack of research on the strategic consulting services industry in dealing with the complexity of international trade in a single specific industry and between specific countries. Accordingly, this study conducts a systematic analysis based on the following three questions:

1. What are the primary challenges encountered by Sino-Iran trading companies in seeking and applying strategic consulting services under the BRI?
2. What opportunities exist for these companies within the strategic consulting landscape under the BRI?
3. How factors of inter-business management -such as supply chain management, and cross-cultural communication can leverage the strategic consulting services be optimized to address the unique needs of Sino-Iran trading companies and contribute to their success?

Research Objective

This study needs to transform the problem into an achievable goal through systematic and scientific exploration, which is shown as three objectives below:

1. To investigate the challenges faced by Sino-Iran trading companies in obtaining and implementing strategic consulting services.
2. To identify the opportunities that arises for these companies within the strategic consulting landscape under the BRI.
3. To give guidelines for enhancing the effectiveness of strategic consulting services for Sino-Iran trading companies, through practical insights and examine the relationship of inter-business factors and cross-cultural communication in the inter-business.

Benefits of Research

This research holds significance as it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities in the strategic consulting services for Sino-Iran trading companies under the BRI. The findings of this study can inform policymakers, business leaders, and consultants, facilitating informed decision-making and strategic planning in the context of international trade.

While the Belt and Road Initiative has gotten substantial attention, there is a lack of comprehensive research specifically focusing on the strategic consulting services utilized by international Sino-Iran trading companies. By delving into this niche, the research expands the body of knowledge related to international business, strategic management, and the dynamics of economic cooperation within the BRI framework.

Given the geopolitical significance of the Sino-Iran partnership under the BRI, the study's findings carry implications for policymakers and diplomats. Understanding the challenges faced by trading companies can inform the development of policies that facilitate smoother international collaborations. Moreover, it can contribute to the refinement of diplomatic strategies aimed at strengthening economic ties and fostering mutual benefits between nations.

For international Sino-Iran trading companies, navigating the complex landscape of cross-cultural trade, regulatory frameworks, and geopolitical considerations is a hard task. This study provides practical insights derived from the analysis of challenges and opportunities in strategic consulting services. Business leaders and practitioners can use these insights to

formulate informed strategies, enhancing their ability to overcome challenges and leverage opportunities for sustainable growth.

Literature Review

This section reviews the existing literature relevant to the challenges and opportunities encountered by strategic consulting services working with international Sino-Iran trading companies under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It draws upon literature reviews as the researcher's theoretical framework which shows an analytical foundation on several key areas, including the strategic implications of the BRI, the dynamics of Sino-Iranian trade relations, and the operational landscape for consulting services in international trade.

1. Belt and Road Initiatives

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by China in 2013, aims to enhance connectivity and cooperation across Asia, Europe, and Africa through the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, focusing on infrastructure, trade facilitation, and cultural exchange. The BRI is a comprehensive strategy integrating policy coordination, connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds.

Driven by BRI, China-Iran relations have strengthened marked by increased political trust, stable energy cooperation, and expanded cultural exchanges. In recent years, high-level visits between the two countries have occurred 11 times, indicating deeper bilateral ties.

Iran plays a crucial role in BRI due to its geopolitical location, energy resources, and strategic access to the Middle East and Eurasia. As a key partner, Iran offers stability and economic potential, forming a pragmatic alliance with China amid Western pressure (Osiewicz, 2018). Iran also benefits from China's 5G technology and seeks investment in renewable energy and infrastructure. Iran's strategic location and economic potential make it vital for BRI's goals. Geopolitically, it acts as a transportation hub and energy supplier, promoting regional cooperation and stability (Madani, 2022). Economically, it seeks foreign investment through BRI, while culturally; its Persian heritage fosters civilizational exchanges.

Iran accounts for over 90% of global saffron production, making saffron a key non-oil export (Mohammadi and Reed, 2020). As a cultural and economic bridge, saffron supports Iran's rural economy and symbolizes value-added agricultural trade under the BRI, enhancing market access through strategic partnerships (Ghorbani, 2007; Kalhor et al., 2014; Jafari-Ghanavati and Saket, 2020).

2. Challenges and opportunities

Challenges and opportunities are relative concepts for describing possibilities and difficulties. In the BRI context, for Iran-China saffron trading companies, challenges include geopolitical tensions, sanctions, cross-cultural barriers, and an unfriendly business environment, while opportunities lie in stable diplomatic relations, market potential, and rising saffron demand. For comparative insights on choosing saffron as targeted product, it can be drawn from other agricultural products under the BRI framework. For example, the China-Kazakhstan wheat trade demonstrates how infrastructure investment and regulatory alignment facilitated large-scale grain exports through dry ports and rail corridors (Chen and Zhang, 2022). Therefore, saffron trade involves higher unit value, stricter customs controls, and complex cultural positioning, requiring more customized consulting strategies.

To identify these specific challenges and opportunities, PESTEL, BCG, Five Force, SWOT, and VRIO analyses are applied in this study.

2.1 The PESTEL Model

A PESTEL analysis is an analytical tool for strategic business planning that provides a strategic framework for understanding the external influences on a business or other form of entity. It clusters external parameters into various factor categories under the broad headings of Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental (PESTLE) considerations (Christodoulou and Cullinane, 2019). Rastogi and Trivedi (2016) noted that PESTLE is a good way of ensuring one has captured all potential risks and issues, according to which Table 1 was made as follows to explain each component of this model.

2.2 The BCG Model

This section discusses the BCG matrix in the framework of Sino-Iran saffron trading companies, listed relevant studies and insights on its usefulness and adaptability to international trading business between China and Iran. By dividing the matrix into four cells (quadrants), four categories of strategic market position can be classified, shown as: star, problem child, cash cow and dog. Table 1 was made as follows to explain each component of this model.

Table 1: Components of the BCG Model

Dimensions	Descriptions
Stars	Indicated by achieving a large market share in a fast-growing market (Thompson and Strickland, 1995)

Cash cows	A large market share in a mature period of a slow growing industry (Thompson and Strickland, 1995)
Question marks	Business units that have a small market share in a high growth market
Dogs	Businesses procedures which have weak market shares in low growth, or no market growth mature industries.

Source: Thompson and Strickland (1995)

2.3 The Five Forces Model

The Five Forces, proposed by Porter, are the threats posed by competitive rivalry, powerful buyers, powerful suppliers, potential new entrants, and substitute products (Dobbs, 2014). It can be helpful to clarify profitability and shape the competitive power of strategies. For Sino-Iran saffron trading companies, this model provides access to have a deeper understanding on challenges and opportunities in this niche market.

2.4 The SWOT Model

SWOT analysis is a very efficient way of identifying strong and weak points and of examining the opportunities and threats, which can be seen as necessary for thinking in a strategic way (Lozano, M. and Vallés, 2007). In a literal sense, SWOT is the shortened form from strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

2.5 The VRIO Model

The VRIO framework is a trusted tool for businesses to find their competitive edge by assessing their valuable resources and capabilities. Through VRIO analysis, this literature can help to clarify the competition advantages for Sino-Iran trading companies based other current resources. Saffron is one of the most important export products (Ghorbani, 2007), therefore, this part is essentially critical for Sino-Iran saffron trading companies to figure out how to maintain sustainable competition advantages.

3. Inter-business Management

International business (IB) involves cross-border trade and investment activities. It typically includes the exchange of goods, services, capital, knowledge, and information between companies from different countries. In this study, IB specifically refers to trade activities between China and Iran, focusing on saffron products and related consulting services.

Contributing to substantial changes, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has a profound impact on international business (Visvizi et al., 2020). Recent studies have shown that the BRI has already increased FDI outflows from China to other BRI countries, and likely to boost China's GDP (Lewin and Witt, 2022; Zhai, 2018; de Soyres et al., 2019), help address the problem of China's overcapacity (Ferdinand, 2016). On the other hand, it is also beneficial to other countries, such as decreasing poverty and positive spillover effects on global welfare.

In this case, the BRI has significantly strengthened China-Iran economic ties. As Iran plays a strategic role in the BRI, bilateral trade has expanded, with China maintaining its status as Iran's largest trading partner. As of 2015, China had maintained its status as Iran's largest trading partner for seven consecutive years (Lu et al., 2016). Over the past decade, China has increased investments in Iran, particularly in infrastructure and energy projects. The BRI has not only enhanced trade volume but also facilitated cultural and business exchanges, reinforcing Iran's role as a regional hub in West Asia.

4. Cross-cultural Communication

Cross-cultural communication refers to interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds. It encompasses spoken and written language, body language, etiquette, and social norms (Hurn and Tomalin, 2013). For successful communication with carriers of other languages, it is necessary to master not only a verbal code (foreign language), but also extra code, background knowledge (Andreyeva et al., 2015). To navigate the interactions between business communication and culture, scholars discussed both in internal and external.

Consequently, entities engaged in international trade must pay sufficient attention to cross-cultural communication. If globalization is an inevitable process, then cross-culturalization will also be inevitable (Lillis and Tian, 2010). This means that global/international business communication, a cross-cultural process, requires managers to be well informed about cultural differences nationally, locally, and ethnically to win in global markets. Cross cultural solutions to international business, therefore, are increasingly in suggested as a valid and necessary method in enhance in communication and interaction in and between business partners, between companies and customers, and between coworkers.

5. Strategic Consulting Services

Strategic consulting involves providing professional advice to improve a company's strategic management, competitiveness, and innovation. It encompasses services such as market entry, regulatory compliance, supply chain optimization, cross-cultural negotiation, and

financial strategy (Volodymyrovych, 2016). Originating in the 1960s, it became main stream with the rise of firms like BCG and Bain & Company, which introduced systematic approaches to strategic planning. In the following part, researcher would analyze it mainly from five aspects: market entry and expansion, regulatory compliance and risk management, supply chain optimization, cross-cultural negotiation and partnership facilitation and financial aspect.

5.1 Market Entry and Expansion

Entering foreign markets, especially between China and Iran, requires tailored strategies due to differences in regulations, consumer behavior, and economic conditions. Consulting services can help firms decide between entry modes such as exporting, franchising, joint ventures, mergers, or direct investment. According to Buckle and Casso’s (1998) research, it is determined into twelve main strategies of market entry, which are re-drawn as Figure 1.

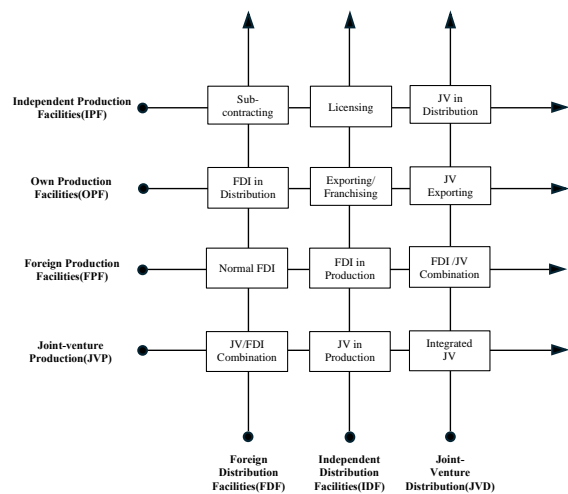


Figure 1: Twelve main strategies

Source: Re-drawn according to summary by Buckley and Casson (1998)

5.2 Regulatory Compliance and Risk Management

Compliance with international and domestic regulations is essential for cross-border trade. Companies must navigate challenges like sanctions, tariffs, and data protection laws. The Governance, Risk, and Compliance (GRC) framework offers a holistic approach to managing legal and operational risks (Racz et al., 2010). Sadiq and Governatori (2015) defined compliance as ensuring that business processes, operations, and practice are in accordance with a prescribed and/or agreed set of norms (Sadiq and Governatori, 2015).

In a general sense, Tarantino (2008) defined risk as the possibility of a loss, or an injury created by an activity or by a person. Risk management seeks to identify, assess, and measure risk and then develop countermeasures to handle it (Tarantino, 2008). To figure out what are risks there exactly, Dionne (2013) listed five main risks, while Tarantino (2008) described seven major areas of operational risk based on Basel II.

Accordingly, it can be described that it is significant and fundamental to carry out risk management for sustainable and healthy operation of the company, especially under the guideline of professor consultants.

5.3 Supply Chain Optimization

Essentially, as a cross-border business activity, how to ensure that the products could be shipped to the final customers plays an important role in international trading except quality and marketing strategies, especially for saffron products. Pardalos and Hearn (2005) stated that a supply chain is a group of organizations (including product design, procurement, manufacturing, and distribution) that are working together to profitably provide the right product or service to the right customer at the right time (Pardalos and Hearn, 2005).

Besides, Perea-Lo'pez et al. (2003) argued that supply chains are systems with four highly interconnected elements: suppliers, manufacturing, distribution network and customers. Hence supply chain optimization is to consider all the interactions and limitations among these elements to create operating plans that will deliver the best results for the supply chain, when making decisions for running a profit-able supply chain (Perea-Lo'pez et al., 2003).

In addition, with a total of 77 reviewed works published between 1993 and 2016 are used as references, Taşkın Gümüş et al. (2018) made a general review on supply chain optimization topic and optimization model. As it is defined in the article, supply chain optimization topics are related with supply chain operations, and required in making strategic, tactical and operational decisions.

5.4 Cross-cultural Negotiation and Partnership Facilitation

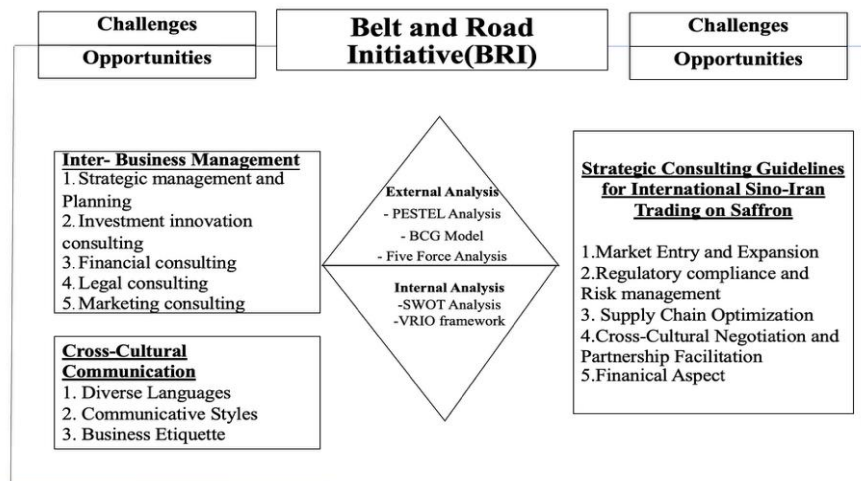
Groves et al. (2014) discussed that cross-cultural negotiation is increasingly becoming an invaluable management competency that often determines an organization's success in the global business community. Prior scholars suggest that international negotiations frequently fail due to an overall lack of understanding and knowledge of the multiple cultures involved in the transactions (Groves et al., 2014). George et al. (1998) proposed that there are three key sets of determinants of negotiators' affect during cross-cultural negotiations: individual differences,

cross-cultural differences, and contextual factors (George et al., 1998). Negotiation is not just about getting what you want, but also about creating value and building trust with the other party. That's where facilitation skills come in handy.

5.5 Financial Aspects

Financial strategy consulting performs an important role in shaping cross-border trade agreements, especially for companies who are exploring new market. Due to the international transactions, floating exchange rate, and bank limitation, currency volatility is the most challengeable financial risks for Sino-Iran trading, as that described on restriction in transfer of funds by Hajiani et al. (2018). As saffron is a high unit-price product, with ups and downs of its purchase cost, which indicates the significance of estimating accurate cost of saffron. In this case, strategic consulting in financial aspects shall provide practical and overwhelm framework through cost-benefit analysis, including purchase, logistics, packing and legal costs. Furthermore, it is also necessary to conduct market investigation, to give guidelines on market positioning and pricing strategies. In summary, it requires deeply understand international financial dynamics, regional policies and characteristics of saffron as high value-added product to conduct valuable financial strategy consulting for Sino-Iran saffron trading companies.

Conceptual Framework



Source: Researcher (2025)

This study examines the challenges and opportunities for Sino-Iran saffron trading under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focusing on strategic consulting solutions. The framework integrates inter-business management, cross-cultural communication, external analysis (PESTEL, Five Forces, BCG Model) and internal analysis (SWOT, VRIO) to evaluate trade dynamics. The proposed strategic consulting guidelines cover market entry, compliance, supply chain optimization, cross-cultural negotiation, and financial strategies to foster sustainable trade.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore challenges and opportunities in Sino-Iran saffron trade under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Using saffron as a critical case, it analyzes cultural, economic, and geopolitical factors shaping China-Iran trade dynamics.

In this study, a comprehensive approach to data collection was conducted, including primary data and secondary data in order to have a general understanding of the research questions. The primary data comes from Sino-Iran saffron trading companies, including exporters, importers, wholesalers, and retailers. A total of 12 companies (3 per category) and 24 key informants are selected through non-probability purposive sampling, focusing on experienced managers with minimum 3 years of industry expertise to ensure depth of insights. The sampling prioritized participants who could provide first-hand perspective on BRI-related trade barriers and strategic consulting needs.

The primary tool is a semi-structured in-depth interview, designed with 18 questions covering topics like trade challenges, BRI opportunities, market dynamics, competition, and consulting needs. Interviews, lasting 40-60 minutes, are conducted face-to-face or online. Data collection occurs over two months (Nov – Dec 2024) through platforms like VooVmeeting, Zoom, and Teams.

Moreover, the secondary data is from academic journals, government reports, industry publications, official news, online databases, etc. Specifically, some Chinese and Iranian scholars who mainly focus on China-Iran trades and saffron, leading to an understanding existing literature and theoretical frameworks to the research topic.

Data triangulation enhances validity by cross-referencing interviews with secondary sources (e.g., reports) and using field notes. Ethical guidelines include informed consent,

confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The researcher discloses potential conflicts of interest to ensure unbiased data collection.

The study uses thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, including data familiarization, coding, theme identification, review, definition, and reporting. Data interpretation synthesizes insights to understand trade challenges and consulting needs, aligning findings with existing theories.

By combining qualitative methods, thematic analysis, and ethical practices, the study provides a comprehensive and credible assessment of strategic consulting needs for Sino-Iran saffron trading companies under BRI.

Research Results

1. Primary data analysis

The study interviewed 24 managers from 12 companies involved in the saffron industry, covering exporters, importers, wholesalers, and retailers. The sampling criteria are saffron industry focus, choosing managers from one of roles in the saffron supply chain. It can different in company size, ownership structure, years of experience and market focus. The majority of companies are SMEs and joint ventures, leveraging local Iranian resources while exploring Chinese markets.

1.1 Challenges Faced by Sino-Iran Trading Companies

Challenges were categorized into political, economic, social/cross-cultural, technological, legal, and environmental factors as Table 2.

Table 2: Challenges faced by Sino-Iran trading companies

Dimensions	Challenges
Exporters	Main issues are political (sanctions), economic (currency fluctuations), and legal (strict Chinese regulations). Technological and environmental challenges are less concerning.
Importers	Political sanctions and financial transfer issues are primary challenges, with additional concerns about cultural differences and legal compliance.
Wholesalers	Political risks and currency fluctuations are key, along with challenges from cross-cultural differences and environmental factors.
Retailers	Focus on economic pressures (traffic costs, long payment cycles), legal compliance, and customer awareness.

Source: Organized by the author (2025)

For example, one of the importers expressed that “*Well, it’s really worrying! As you know, we are doing business like brothers with Chinese buyers, but sanctions just like...like the wind in the dessert. That made it hard to receive money from China, and we just become into camels lost in the way. Ugn...sometimes, even after signing the contract, the order was cancelled because of the payment issues!*”

Across groups, common challenges include sanctions, financial transfer issues, cultural differences, and legal compliance, while technological and environmental challenges are less prominent.

1.2 Opportunities for Sino-Iran Trading Companies

Table 3: Opportunities faced by Sino-Iran trading companies

Dimensions	Opportunities
Exporters	Direct supply from farmers and BRI logistics improvements are strengths. E-commerce and health/beauty markets show potential.
Importers	Flexible packaging and BRI policies simplify customs. Technological advancements open market potential.
Wholesalers	Direct supply and strict quality control are key, with increasing demand for health-conscious and gift-packaged products.
Retailers	Cultural integration and policy support are vital, with opportunities in convenient packaging and health-conscious products.

Source: Organized by the author (2025)

Key opportunities lie in supply chain improvements, policy support under BRI, technological advancements, and increasing health consciousness in the Chinese market.

1.3 Product and Competitiveness Analysis

Product strategies vary across roles identified using the BCG Matrix and Five Forces Model as Figure 1 and Table 4.

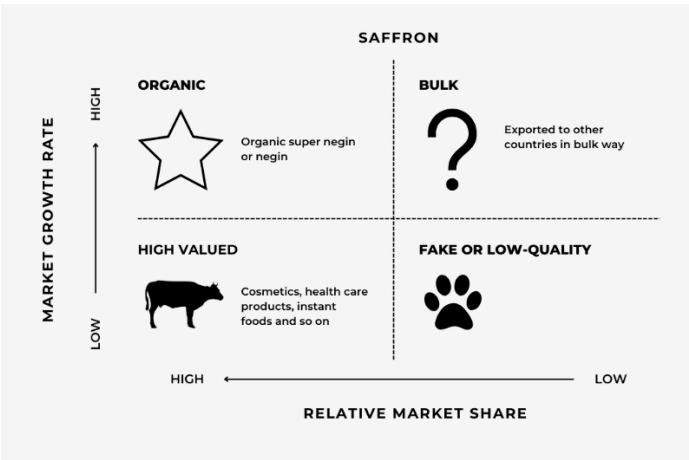


Figure 2: Saffron BCG Matrix

Source: Organized by the author (Researcher, 2024)

Table 4: Product & Competitiveness Analysis

Dimensions	Product & Competitiveness
Exporters	Super Negin saffron as a star, bulk saffron as a cash cow, saffron powder as a dog product. Major competitors are non-Iranian saffron producers.
Importers	Small portions are stars, bulk saffron as a cash cow, saffron cosmetics as a dog. Afghan and Spanish saffron are competitive threats.
Wholesalers	Small packages are stars, bulk saffron as dogs. Competitors include synthetic saffron and Tibetan saffron.
Retailers	Gift-packed saffron is a star, bulk saffron as a dog, with small-portion saffron as a cash cow.

Source: Organized by the author (2025)

Strategies should balance premium star products and bulk cash cows while mitigating threats from non-Iranian competitors and synthetic alternatives.

1.4 Cross-Cultural Communication Analysis

Cultural commonalities between China and Iran support collaboration, but cognitive differences regarding saffron usage create challenges:

Table 5: Cross-Cultural Communication Analysis

Dimensions	Cross-Cultural Communication
Exporters	Emphasize cultural similarities.
Importers & Wholesalers	Highlight differences in saffron perception (daily spice vs. luxury medicine).

Retailers	Struggle with customer awareness and product recognition.
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Source: Organized by the author (2025)

Companies should focus on localized narratives, embed products into Chinese cultural contexts (e.g., TCM and gifting), and improve educational marketing to bridge cognitive gaps.

1.5 Inter-Business Management Analysis

Key themes identified are market-driven strategies, compliance adaptation, and supply chain resilience.

Table 6: Inter-Business Management Analysis

Dimensions	Inter-Business Management
Exporters	Focus on marketing and legal compliance, targeting health/beauty sectors.
Importers	Emphasize internal management, customer retention, and cross-border compliance.
Wholesalers	Prioritize marketing, risk control, and strategy formulation (OEM or branding).
Retailers	Concentrate on legal compliance, especially advertising laws, and cost control.

Source: Organized by the author (2025)

The focus varies by role but generally includes marketing, compliance, and risk management. Strategic transformation and financial planning are less prioritized.

1.6 Strategic Consulting Analysis

Demand for strategic consulting varies across the value chain.

Table 7: Strategic Consulting Analysis

Dimensions	Strategic Consulting
Exporters	Focus on branding, blockchain for supply transparency, and AI for production.
Importers	Market research and cross-border compliance are primary needs.
Wholesalers	Seek big data insights and cross-border tax planning.
Retailers	Need compliance guidance for advertising and functional product applications.

Source: Organized by the author (2025)

Strategic consulting needs revolve around market adaptation, compliance, technological integration, and filling strategic capability gaps, with a focus on leveraging BRI benefits and digital tools.

2. Secondary data analysis

As it is mentioned ahead, five models are employed in this study to analyze the various factors that affecting Sino-Iran trading companies. Thus, this section conducts to specific analysis on both external factors with PESTEL, BCG, Five Force models, as well as internal factors with SWOT and VRIO models.

2.1 The PESTEL analysis: Sino-Iran trading companies

Under the theoretical framework of PESTLE, the external factors for Sino-Iran saffron trading companies are assessed as follows.

Table 8: The PESTLE analysis on external factors for Sino-Iran saffron trading companies

Dimensions	Factors	Descriptions
Political	Diplomatic Relations	Diplomatic cooperation between the two countries is strong, yet geopolitical instability and contrasting taxation policies generate operational friction.
	Government Policies	
	Geopolitical tensions	
	Policy stability	
Economic	Economic growth	China's stable growth contrasts sharply with Iran's inflation-driven volatility and sanctions-related limitations.
	Sanctions	
Social	/	Saffron's cultural significance in Iran requires adaptation to Chinese market expectations through culturally intelligent strategies. The initiative has moved bilateral relations into practical commercial collaboration phase.
Technological	Infrastructure development	Technological developments, particularly in infrastructure, have improved trade connectivity; however, Iran's reliance on external technologies reveals capacity gaps.
	Technology transfer	
Legal	/	Inconsistent business legislation and opaque regulatory environments in Iran create uncertainty.
Environmental	/	Administrative inefficiencies and challenging business conditions further constrain trade expansion

Source: Organized by the author (2025)

2.2 The BCG analysis: Sino-Iran trading companies

Through BCG analysis, it reveals some key opinions on how to manage saffron products directions, creation and combinations. Iranian saffron is obviously star product in high-end market of China, and the current saffron business channels are reliable “Cash Cows”. However, creative saffron products represent a question mark, which needs further investment and strategic cooperation to transfer it to star products. Meanwhile, fake and low-quality saffron belongs to the “Dogs”. In a word, Sino-Iran saffron trading companies can optimize their investment strategies and combination, and manipulate the complexity of saffron business better, to enhance the competitive advantages in the changeable market.

Table 9: The BCG analysis on Sino-Iran saffron products

Dimensions	Application and suggestions in Sino-Iran saffron trade
Stars	Iran's high-end saffron, such as Super Negin or Negin, meets the star product profile but requires further support for further promotion.
Cash cows	Iran is the major producer and exporter of saffron, but the value-add is losing due to its poorly packing and marketing. Sino-Iran saffron trading companies to needs to focus on localizing saffron packages and marketing to gain more market shares.
Question marks	For high value-added saffron products, such as saffron cosmetics, health care products as well as instant foods, are receiving increasingly preference by customers, however, the market share of these products remains still at low level.
Dogs	Fake or low-quality saffron not only destroys the reputation and image of Iranian saffron, but also causes prejudice and hesitation of customers when buying saffron.

Source: Organized by the author (2025)

2.3 The Five Forces analysis: Sino-Iran trading companies

The saffron trade is shaped by moderate competitive rivalry and strong supplier influence, as Iran dominates global supply. Chinese buyers have significant leverage due to growing demand and market control. Entry barriers for new producers remain high due to strict cultivation requirements and knowledge intensity. Meanwhile, substitute products—either synthetic or regionally produced—pose a limited but emerging threat. These dynamics necessitate strategic responses from both Iranian and Chinese stakeholders to maintain competitiveness.

The above review provides a framework for analyzing Sino-Iranian saffron trading companies using Porter's Five Forces Model, highlighting key characteristics of Chinese market such as limited geography of saffron planting and distinctive Iranian culture. Although Iranian saffron suppliers have strong capability in bargaining, Chinese buyers have moderate

lever. By the way, Iranian saffron is also under threatening by substitute or saffron suppliers from other countries. As the saffron demand from China is gradually growing, it could be critical important for Iranian suppliers and Chinese importers to understand the above dynamics to make development and cooperative strategies.

2.4 The SWOT analysis: Sino-Iran trading companies

The current trade relationship benefits from economic complementarity and stable diplomatic ties. Iran's saffron dominance aligns well with China's rising demand. However, structural weaknesses persist, including restricted financial operations, regulatory friction, and exposure to international sanctions. Opportunities include expanded policy cooperation and evolving consumption trends, while threats stem from regional instability and economic unpredictability. These contrasting forces demand balanced strategic responses tailored to evolving geopolitical and market realities.

Literature on SWOT analysis of Sino-Iran trading companies highlights a complicated but strategic relationship between two countries. Although it is obvious to see and be convinced by its strengths and opportunities, there are intractable and unavoidable issues related to sanctions, geopolitical tension, and instable economy and so on. To realize full development potential, Sino-Iran trading companies shall seriously face these challenges, take advantages, reduce risks, and learn to survive and seek to further development for their own.

2.5 The VRIO analysis: Sino-Iran trading companies

The VRIO analysis on Sino-Iran saffron trading companies reveals some strategic ideas. Serval factors offer companies with obvious competitive advantages, including inner value, rarity and difficulty in production imitation of saffron. However, it is also needed to obtain differentiation by market strategies, quality control and creation. Through VRIO analysis, Sino-Iran saffron trading companies can have a better understanding in how to establish and keep sustainable competition in increasing complicated market environment.

Table 10: The VRIO analysis on Sino-Iran saffron trading companies

Dimensions	Highlights
Value	High-quality Iranian saffron meets increasing Chinese demand. Saffron is a high-value-added product used in multiple industries, offering intrinsic value. Investing in branding, packaging, and quality authentication creates significant value.
Rarity	Iran dominates global saffron exports (80% of total), with labor-intensive production and limited cultivation areas. Saffron's unique medicinal and culinary uses make it rare. Strict Chinese customs control adds to its rarity.
Imitability	Geographical and climatic limitations make it hard to produce high-quality saffron in China. Marketing and distribution models can be easily imitated. Protecting intellectual property in product formulas and packaging is crucial.
Organization	Proper supply chain management and distribution networks are essential for long-term success. Compliance with international trade laws and leveraging political and economic complexity between Iran and China are also important.

Source: Organized by the author (2025)

2.6 Inter-business Management Analysis

This study focuses on saffron product between China and Iran; therefore, it was analyzed to contribute to better understanding on Sino-Iran saffron business from following 5 perspectives: strategic management and planning, investment innovation consulting, financial consulting, legal consulting, and marketing consulting.

2.6.1 Strategic Management and Planning

Effective cross-border management in the saffron trade requires a grasp of core elements such as cultural communication, regulatory frameworks, supply chain coordination, and risk mitigation. Despite shared collectivist values between China and Iran, differences in cultural expressions can influence negotiations and cooperation. Iranian enterprises often struggle with outdated management systems, unpredictable markets, and sanction-related barriers, complicating their regulatory compliance and market responsiveness. Under external volatility—including geopolitical risk and currency fluctuations—robust risk management becomes essential. Diversifying product lines, such as developing saffron extracts, cosmetics, and other high-value goods, offers a practical approach to reduce overdependence on traditional forms. Strengthening internal financial systems is also critical for withstanding exchange rate pressures and maintaining operational stability.

2.6.2 Investment Innovation Consulting

For Sino-Iran saffron trading companies, adapting to changing market conditions calls for innovation in both production and sales strategies. Utilizing advanced agricultural techniques and digital platforms—such as those connecting local producers directly with end markets—can boost product visibility and perceived value. By embedding innovation into investment strategies, firms can improve resource allocation and competitiveness. Market trend analysis and consumer insight research support informed decision-making, enabling firms to align strategic investments with shifting demand patterns.

2.6.3 Financial Consulting

Financial consulting serves as a safeguard for saffron trading companies by addressing risks related to exchange rate fluctuations, sanctions, and unstable financial channels. Key functions include risk identification, impact assessment, and mitigation planning. Specialized consulting helps firms navigate restrictions in currency exchange and fund transfers, which are particularly acute for Iranian entities operating in or with China. A structured approach to financial risk management can enhance long-term resilience and protect against market shocks.

2.6.4 Legal Consulting

Legal consulting plays a vital role in supporting Sino-Iran saffron firms through complex regulatory environments. With frequent changes in trade laws and compliance requirements, especially in cross-border contexts, companies require up-to-date legal guidance to ensure smooth operations. Legal consultants assist with drafting and interpreting contracts, managing taxation obligations, and securing import/export licenses. These services help minimize regulatory risk and enhance operational confidence in a volatile international business climate.

2.6.5 Marketing Consulting

Marketing consulting enables companies to better understand foreign market structures, consumer behavior, and competitive dynamics. In the context of saffron trade, selecting appropriate entry modes—such as partnerships or joint ventures—can lower costs and reduce entry barriers. Consultants also support firms in building distribution networks and local partnerships. Tailored marketing strategies and brand localization enhance visibility and market fit, especially when introducing culturally sensitive or premium products like saffron to new consumer segments.

By incorporating strategic, financial, legal, and marketing consulting, Sino-Iran saffron trading companies can better navigate the challenges of international trade and strengthen their market position.

2.7 Cross-cultural Communication Analysis

Cross-cultural differences present both challenges and opportunities in the trade relationship. Both China and Iran demonstrate hierarchical and collectivist traits but differ in communication styles, time perception, and negotiation norms. Language barriers and etiquette expectations also influence business outcomes. Mutual understanding of social customs, such as Guanxi in China and Taarof in Iran, is critical to establishing trust and maintaining stable partnerships. Strengthening cultural intelligence can significantly improve negotiation outcomes and customer engagement. According to the relevant research, the results are proved as Table 11 followed.

Table 11: Comparison of findings on Hofstede's cultural dimension in the context of China and Iran

Dimensions	Highlights
Power Distance	Degree of acceptance of unequal power distribution. Both China and Iran have high power distance, reflecting hierarchical structures.
Individualism vs. Collectivism	China is collectivist, valuing group harmony, while Iran, though traditionally collectivist, shows individualistic tendencies in business settings.
Masculinity vs. Femininity	Both cultures are considered masculine, emphasizing competitiveness and achievement.
Uncertainty Avoidance	Iran shows higher uncertainty avoidance compared to China, preferring clear rules and structured processes.
Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation	China favors long-term planning, while Iran has a relatively balanced approach.
Indulgence vs. Restraint	Iran exhibits more restraint, valuing social norms, while China shows moderate indulgence.

2.7.1 Diverse Languages

Language diversity significantly affects communication in international business, particularly in the context of Sino-Iran saffron trade. Language functions not only as a means of information exchange but also as a medium for building trust between business partners. Miscommunication may arise when interacting parties rely solely on a third language such as

English, which is commonly used but often limited in nuance. Using native languages like Chinese or Persian can foster a deeper level of understanding and trust. Therefore, it is beneficial for companies to invest in language training for employees in both countries, as this enhances communication efficiency and minimizes the risk of misunderstandings in negotiations and daily operations.

2.7.2 Communicative Styles

Iran and China both belong to high-context cultures, where indirect communication is preferred, and personal relationships are highly valued in business interactions. In Iran, trust is gradually built through repeated formal and informal meetings, and the cultural concept of *Aberu*—related to reputation and social status—plays an important role in shaping professional behavior. Business conversations often reflect courtesy, indirectness, and respect for social harmony.

Similarly, Chinese business culture emphasizes patience, politeness, and relational dynamics. The concept of *Guanxi*, which involves developing personal networks to facilitate business, is essential for building trust and reducing transaction costs. For Iranian saffron exporters, understanding and integrating into Chinese relationship-building practices such as *Guanxi* is critical to successful cooperation. Conversely, Chinese companies must recognize the Iranian preference for personalized and respectful interaction when approaching negotiation or collaboration.

2.7.3 Business Etiquette

Awareness of mutual business etiquette is essential to maintaining smooth cooperation between Chinese and Iranian companies in the saffron industry. Chinese business etiquette places great importance on formality, hierarchical respect, and relationship-building over immediate outcomes. Activities such as banquets and extended group meals are seen as integral to strengthening business ties. The exchange of gifts, typically conducted with both hands and accompanied by gestures of respect, reflects cultural values of courtesy and honor.

In Iran, business etiquette is shaped by the principle of *Taarof*, which emphasizes indirect communication, politeness, and hospitality. This cultural practice can affect how offers and refusals are expressed, often requiring nuanced interpretation. Flexibility around scheduling and a less rigid approach to time are also characteristic of Iranian business culture, which may require patience and adaptability from Chinese partners. Both cultures value hospitality, often demonstrated through hosting meals and events, which serve to deepen business relationships and foster long-term collaboration.

By recognizing cultural nuances and adapting communication strategies, Sino-Iran saffron trading companies can foster effective cross-border partnerships, promoting mutual trust and long-term success.

Research Discussion

The strategic consulting research on Sino-Iran saffron trade reveals the dynamic interaction mechanism of policy coordination, cultural tension and technology implementation in the framework of a complex international economic and trade environment. The following sections start with a conclusive discussion through systematically answers to three research questions. From three dimensions of challenge attribution, opportunity path and strategic management coordination, the framework is provided as two-way inspiration for both strategic consulting research and practice in cross-border agricultural product trade under BRI.

1. Challenges

The study identifies three core challenges for Sino-Iran trading companies under the BRI:

1.1 Policy and Compliance Barriers:

- International Sanctions: Iranian companies face severe constraints due to Western sanctions, affecting cross-border payments and business operations in China.
- Customs and Market Compliance: Chinese regulations on saffron as both food and medicine create complex import and sales processes, requiring meticulous documentation and compliance with advertising laws.
- Advertising Restrictions: Strict rules on health-related claims challenge companies' marketing strategies, demanding compliant product descriptions and advertising copy.

1.2 Cultural and Cognitive Gaps:

- Perception Differences: In Iran, saffron is viewed as a common spice, while in China, it is a luxury medicinal product associated with caution and selective use. This contrast affects market positioning and consumer acceptance.

- **Language Barriers:** Communication challenges arise due to differences in language proficiency and cultural contexts, increasing the risk of misunderstanding and contract issues.
- **Trust Issues:** The historical and cultural gap between Chinese and Iranian business practices leads to heightened trust-building requirements.

1.3 Technological and Resource Constraints:

- **E-commerce Challenges:** Technological barriers in online store setup, design, and customer interaction hinder companies' digital transformation efforts.
- **Data Management Deficiency:** Companies lack tools for customer relationship management and consumer trend analysis, limiting their ability to build long-term customer loyalty.
- **Technology Adoption:** Blockchain and AI applications, although promising for product traceability, face resistance due to high investment and limited immediate returns.

These findings are consistent with prior literature emphasizing the difficulty of navigating international sanctions in BRI-affiliated economies (Meyer et al., 2023). The complexity of cross-border compliance, as reported by Iranian exporters and Chinese importers, also echoes Tarantino's (2008) operational risk framework and the Governance, Risk and Compliance (GRC) model by Racz et al. (2010), which emphasize dynamic monitoring and adaptive policy interpretation in high-risk trade environments.

Furthermore, the cultural and cognitive gaps identified—particularly the perception of saffron as a luxury medicinal product in China versus an everyday commodity in Iran—correspond with Hofstede's (2010) uncertainty avoidance and high-context communication findings, suggesting the need for narrative-based product repositioning in cross-cultural markets.

2. Opportunities

Despite challenges, BRI brings several opportunities for Sino-Iran trading companies:

2.1 Policy Synergy and Support:

- **Regional Cooperation:** Initiatives like the SCODA in Qingdao facilitate bilateral trade through infrastructure support and trade facilitation. Consulting agencies

can help companies leverage these policies for streamlined import processes and compliance.

2.2 Technological Innovation and Integration:

- **E-commerce and Digital Tools:** Online sales channels, live streaming, and private traffic operations (e.g., Douyin) offer new marketing possibilities. Strategic consulting can support digital marketing strategies to boost customer engagement.
- **Blockchain and Traceability:** Although costly, implementing blockchain can enhance product credibility, especially in the premium saffron market.

2.3 Health and Cultural Consumption Upgrades:

- **Health Awareness:** The increasing demand for health products in China supports the development of saffron-based beauty and wellness products.
- **Cultural Integration:** Storytelling that aligns with local cultural narratives (e.g., saffron in TCM) can enhance product appeal and consumer trust.

The observed opportunities in policy support and digital transformation align with the external drivers described in the PESTEL framework, particularly under “Technological” and “Political” dimensions. For example, the utility of blockchain and AI technologies reflects the increasing reliance on digital tools for traceability and value-addition, a theme also discussed by Groves et al. (2014) in the context of cross-cultural negotiation facilitation.

3. Strategic Management Optimization

This study reveals that inter-business management and cross-cultural communication are critical in customized consulting services for Sino-Iran saffron trade. It shows that strategic consulting must adopt a differentiated, role-specific approach that harmonizes cultural intelligence with operational flexibility. A dual-link adaptation model integrating cross-cultural communication and supply chain resilience is proposed:

- ### 3.1 Cultural Adaptation:
- Using a double-level narrative to combine supply chain transparency with consumer engagement can reduce cognitive gaps (e.g., farmer stories for authenticity).

3.2 Supply Chain Resilience: Establishing a dynamic compliance system can adapt to policy changes while ensuring robust cross-border collaboration.

By addressing industrial difficulties and leveraging cultural driving force, the consulting services can promote the sustainable growth.

Suggestions

Based on the research findings, this study offers the following actionable recommendations as guidelines for companies, consulting agencies, and policymakers:

1. Business Strategy Recommendations: role-oriented hierarchical strategy

- Exporters:
 - Prioritize supply chain stability and high-value market penetration.
 - Leverage blockchain for traceability and target health-conscious consumers with certified organic products.
- Importers:
 - Enhance compliance capabilities by integrating customs clearance SOPs and focusing on local policy interpretation.
 - Develop data-driven decision-making strategies through market analysis and customer behavior tracking.
- Wholesalers/Retailers:
 - Innovate in product scenarios, such as combining saffron with tea or beauty products for cultural resonance.
 - Establish private traffic ecosystems to maintain consumer loyalty and increase repeat purchases.

2. Policy Recommendations: institutional synergy and cross-border business facilitation

- Institutional Synergy:
 - Enhance bilateral agreements to create a BRI white list for specialty products like saffron, enabling streamlined customs processes.
 - Establish a Silk Road Cultural Trade Fund to support companies in cultural integration and product innovation.

- Cross-Border Business Facilitation:
 - Promote dynamic compliance monitoring systems to help companies stay updated on policy changes, exchange rate shifts, and advertising regulations.
 - Foster knowledge-sharing platforms to help SMEs adopt new technologies like blockchain and AI for quality assurance and traceability.

3. Consulting Service Optimization: from service providers to ecosystem co-builders

- Role-Specific Consulting:
 - Exporters: Support high-value market access through blockchain integration.
 - Importers: Offer e-commerce compliance guides and regional policy analysis.
 - Wholesalers: Provide big data consumer insights and cost-control strategies.
 - Retailers: Develop marketing compliance checklists and cultural product design templates.
- Dynamic Toolkits:
 - Offer quick reference guides for customs compliance and marketing regulations.
 - Develop scenario-based solutions for advertising risk management and market adaptation.

4. Consulting Agency Roles

- Transition from traditional service providers to ecosystem co-builders.
- Establish early warning systems for policy updates and compliance risks.
- Create lightweight consulting products for different company roles, such as quick customs clearance guides for exporters and compliance marketing templates for retailers.

This study uses China-Iran saffron trade as an empirical context under the Belt and Road Initiative to systematically reveals the “policy–culture–technology” trilemma in cross-border agricultural strategic consulting and proposes pathways for resolution. By integrating the PESTLE and BCG–Porter hybrid model, the research finds that international sanctions, cognitive gaps, and technical barriers constitute core challenges, while policy coordination, health consumption upgrades, and cultural storytelling create differentiated opportunities.

The study further proposes a “culture–supply chain dual-link adaptation” framework to support role-based optimization of strategic consulting tools (e.g., technology empowerment for exporters, compliance scenarios for retailers). Despite limitations in sample scope and

methodological singularity, this study builds a “problem–tool–scenario” matching paradigm for BRI specialty agricultural trade. It fills a contextual gap in cross-border strategic management theory and offers an actionable blueprint for policymakers, companies, and consulting institutions to move beyond “compliance survival” and achieve “value co-creation.”

This study is primarily qualitative and based on semi-structured interviews with 24 participants from 12 companies involved in the Sino-Iran saffron trade. While this approach offers in-depth insights, the findings may not fully capture the broader diversity of trade actors or generalize to other agricultural sectors. Additionally, the context-specific focus on saffron—being a niche, high-value, and culturally sensitive product—limits the direct applicability of findings to bulk commodity trades such as grains or fruits. Future studies should expand the sample, include longitudinal or mixed-method designs, and explore comparative analysis with other BRI agricultural sectors.

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