

Balancing Tradition and Modernity: The Role of Yoga and Buddhism in Sustainable Tourism Development

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the roles of yoga and Buddhism in sustainable tourism development, focusing on wellness tourism, cultural diplomacy, and soft power strategies. Using a qualitative approach, it analyses scholarly articles, institutional reports, and case studies, with the Trans-Asia Buddhist Circuit (TABC) as a focal point. Yoga and Buddhism significantly contribute to sustainable development by fostering cultural diplomacy and enhancing wellness tourism, helping countries like India and China build national brands and expand their global influence. However, challenges such as over-tourism, social inequalities, and the commodification of spiritual practices hinder their potential. For instance, a 15% rise in visitors to Rishikesh (2019–2022) led to increased waste and a decline in water quality, while global sales of yoga accessories highlight tensions between economic benefits and cultural preservation. The study recommends integrated strategies like visitor caps, eco-friendly practices, and accessible wellness programs to align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This research offers actionable insights into balancing growth, inclusivity, and sustainability in leveraging yoga and Buddhism for development.

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Introduction

Tourism, cultural diplomacy, and *soft power* (influence achieved through cultural appeal rather than coercion) have increasingly shaped global dynamics, particularly in Asia. In this region, practices such as yoga and Buddhism are deeply embedded in cultural and historical contexts, transcending their spiritual origins to become strategic tools for sustainable development (Yao, 2012). These practices significantly contribute to economic growth, social cohesion, and international relations (Yasuda, Raj, & Griffin, 2018). The burgeoning wellness tourism sector, valued at trillions of dollars and projected to grow substantially by 2025 (Choe & O'Regan, 2015), underscores the socio-economic importance of these practices. However, their integration into global systems also poses challenges, such as environmental degradation and social inequality, which require further investigation into their broader implications.

Previous studies have explored the intersection of yoga and Buddhism with various domains, including mindfulness, sustainability, and economic transformation. For instance, Thepa (2022) examines Buddhist dialogues on well-being through mindfulness, while McCartney (2021) investigates yoga's role in *post-nationalism* (a concept describing the diminishing importance of national borders in shaping identities) and environmental sustainability in the United States. Other research highlights the economic benefits of sacred sites (Halafoff & Clarke, 2018) and the responsible use of religious properties (Abayasundara & Wijesinghe, 2019). Despite these contributions, much of the literature remains focused on individual or environmental impacts, with limited attention to the broader social, economic, and political ramifications in Asia.

While existing research has established links between yoga, Buddhism, and sustainability, significant gaps remain concerning their influence on Asia's economic aspirations, political strategies, and social dynamics. Much of the literature is geographically skewed towards Western contexts or specific practices, leaving the regional and systemic impacts in Asia underexplored. Furthermore, many researchers and policymakers often overlook issues such as unequal access, the commodification of spiritual practices, and unintended environmental consequences. Addressing these gaps is essential for understanding the comprehensive role of yoga and Buddhism in achieving sustainable development.

This study aims to bridge these gaps by analyzing the multifaceted influence of yoga and Buddhism on the economic, political, and social aspirations in Asia. Specifically, it investigates how these spiritual practices contribute to enhancing cultural diplomacy and *soft power* strategies, enabling Asian countries to strengthen their global presence and foster regional cooperation. Additionally, it explores the socio-economic impacts of yoga and Buddhism within wellness tourism and sustainable development, highlighting their role as significant drivers of economic growth and cultural exchange. Moreover, the research addresses challenges such as inequality and environmental sustainability, aiming to identify effective strategies for integrating these practices into broader development frameworks. By providing a holistic and comprehensive analysis, this study aspires to contribute valuable

insights to the discourse on sustainable development in Asia, offering practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders.

This study argues that yoga and Buddhism hold substantial potential as tools for promoting sustainable development in Asia, particularly through their roles in cultural diplomacy and economic development. However, their effectiveness relies on addressing challenges such as unequal access and environmental degradation. The hypothesis suggests that the successful implementation of strategies based on yoga and Buddhism will positively correlate with inclusive community involvement and innovative approaches to managing tourism and sustainability. Additionally, the study posits that these practices can serve as instruments for fostering regional cooperation and enhancing the global standing of Asian nations.

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach (Lune & Berg, 2017) to deepen the understanding of the role of yoga and Buddhism in sustainable development in Asia, with a particular focus on the Trans-Asia Buddhist Circuit (TABC). The researchers chose the qualitative design because it is well-suited to exploring complex and multifaceted phenomena, allowing for an in-depth analysis of perspectives, thoughts, and experiences as represented in the selected literature.

The unit of analysis for this research comprises secondary sources, including scholarly journals, books, research reports, and relevant documents related to the research topic (Sangidu, 2007). I selected these sources based on criteria of accuracy, relevance, and credibility to ensure the robustness of the analysis. The focus was on literature that provides insights into the intersection of yoga, Buddhism, and sustainable development within the Asian context.

I conducted data collection through a literature study. I identified relevant literature using academic databases, institutional archives, and curated bibliographies. The selection process involved scanning abstracts, keywords, and titles to ensure alignment with the research objectives. This systematic approach ensured the inclusion of diverse and credible sources that could inform the research comprehensively.

The data analysis process involved three key stages: data reduction, data display, and data verification. Data reduction entailed extracting relevant information from the collected literature and categorizing it into key themes or concepts that emerged from the analysis. I carried out data display by organizing this information into a structured and visually accessible format, which facilitated a deeper understanding of the material. Finally, data verification involved cross-referencing the findings with the sources to ensure consistency, accuracy, and reliability in the interpretation of the data.

Result and Discussion

The Role of Yoga and Buddhism in Wellness Tourism and Sustainable Development

Wellness tourism, strongly linked with yoga and Buddhism, has emerged as a pivotal sector in the global economy, valued at USD 4.3 trillion, with an annual growth rate of 8% projected until 2025 (Li & de Oliveira, 2021). This sector promotes personal well-being while contributing to economic growth and sustainable development. Practices such as yoga-based tourism address issues like 'tourism pollution,' which occurs when excessive tourist activities degrade popular destinations' environmental and social integrity (Mantu & Minderhoud, 2016).

However, despite these benefits, wellness tourism has unintended consequences. For instance, many countries experiencing a surge in tourism rankings face declines in environmental sustainability due to the pressures of increased tourist activity (Wu, Lai, & Tang, 2021). Additionally, access to wellness tourism, particularly yoga and Buddhist practices, often requires significant financial resources, creating social barriers and reinforcing 'elite culture' associations.

Table 1. Key Metrics of Wellness Tourism Growth and Environmental Impacts

Indicator	Value/Trend	Source
Wellness Tourism Industry Value	USD 4.3 trillion	Li & de Oliveira, 2021
Projected Growth Rate	8% annually (2020-2025)	Mantu & Minderhoud, 2016
Environmental Sustainability Ranking Decline	Linked to increased tourist activity	Wu, Lai, & Tang, 2021

Yoga and Buddhism play a transformative role in wellness tourism, offering a model for economic growth and sustainability. However, the commodification of these practices and their limited accessibility underline contradictions within the industry's development.

Several key patterns emerge from the analysis of wellness tourism linked to yoga and Buddhism. First, wellness tourism serves as a significant driver of economic development, positioning itself as a central pillar in sustainable development strategies for many nations. Its rapid growth reflects its potential to stimulate local economies and create opportunities across various sectors. However, this growth brings notable environmental challenges. The increasing influx of tourists often exacerbates environmental degradation in popular destinations, raising critical concerns about the sustainability of the industry (Thepa, 2022).

Furthermore, social inequities are evident in the accessibility of wellness tourism. The financial resources required to participate in yoga and Buddhism-focused wellness activities often restrict access to affluent demographics, contradicting the inclusive spiritual ethos traditionally associated with these practices. Lastly, the commodification of spiritual practices has become a growing issue, as their transformation into commercial products increasingly dilutes their traditional values. Together, these patterns underscore the complexities and contradictions within wellness tourism, highlighting the need for strategies that balance economic benefits with social inclusivity and environmental conservation.

The integration of yoga and Buddhism into wellness tourism illustrates their dual role: while they are engines of economic growth and sustainability, they also contribute to challenges such as environmental degradation and social inequity. These contradictions suggest the need for integrated policies that balance economic growth with environmental conservation and social inclusivity. By addressing these issues, wellness tourism can more effectively align with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Yoga and Buddhism as Soft Power Tools for National Branding

Yoga and Buddhism have become central to India and China's global *soft power* strategies, serving as versatile tools for national branding and cultural diplomacy (Zhang & Ji, 2018). India leverages its ancient spiritual heritage to establish itself as Vishwaguru, or the "World Guru," emphasizing yoga as a symbol of cultural pride and spiritual leadership (Pant et al., 2015). Through the "5 Ts" framework—Tradition, Talent, Tourism, Trade, and Technology—India integrates yoga into international exchanges, fostering wellness tourism as a blend of spirituality, culture, and economic growth. This strategy not only revitalizes ancient practices like yoga and Ayurveda but also positions India as a global hub for wellness tourism. However, the commodification of yoga for economic purposes raises concerns about the preservation of its traditional spiritual values.

Conversely, China incorporates yoga and Buddhism into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), framing these practices as instruments for regional cooperation, economic development, and poverty alleviation. The Trans-Asia Buddhist Circuit (TABC), a collaborative initiative connecting Buddhist heritage sites across Asia, exemplifies China's approach. By promoting cultural exchange and economic collaboration, TABC strengthens regional connections while aligning with China's geopolitical aspirations (McCartney, 2019). However, China's emphasis on pragmatic outcomes over cultural authenticity has sparked concerns about the reconstruction of historical narratives and the commercialization of spiritual practices.



Figure 1. Main Locations of TABC
Source: (McCartney, 2019)

This figure 1. Main Locations of TABC. This map highlights the key Buddhist heritage sites included in the TABC initiative, such as Varanasi in India and Lumbini in Nepal. It illustrates the geographic scope of regional cooperation and cultural exchange fostered by the initiative.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of India's and China's Soft Power Strategies

Country	Focus	Strategy	Key Initiative
India	Cultural Leadership	Leveraging yoga and spirituality to promote wellness tourism	5 Ts Framework
China	Geopolitical Influence	Integrating yoga and Buddhism into economic and regional policies	Belt and Road Initiative

Both India and China strategically use yoga and Buddhism for national branding. India emphasizes cultural pride and spiritual diplomacy, while China focuses on pragmatic integration with economic development and geopolitical stability.

Several patterns emerge in the use of yoga and Buddhism as *soft power* tools. India's approach highlights yoga as a profound symbol of spiritual and cultural pride, linking its ancient heritage with global wellness tourism to attract international attention. In contrast, China's strategy incorporates yoga and Buddhism into its BRI framework, aligning cultural heritage with economic development to achieve regional stability. The TABC initiative serves as a platform for fostering economic and cultural exchanges, connecting nations through shared Buddhist heritage and promoting collaborative development.

The strategic use of yoga and Buddhism underscores their dual roles as cultural assets and instruments of national influence. While India leverages these practices to assert its identity as a global spiritual leader, China employs them pragmatically to expand its geopolitical and economic reach. However, the commodification of yoga and Buddhism presents challenges to cultural authenticity and inclusivity. For India, maintaining the spiritual integrity of yoga is crucial to its soft power narrative. For China, balancing economic pragmatism with cultural preservation is key to ensuring the credibility of its initiatives. The TABC initiative exemplifies the potential for yoga and Buddhism to bridge cultural divides, fostering regional cooperation while addressing the complexities of global soft power dynamics.

Challenges in Leveraging Yoga and Buddhism for Sustainable Development

Yoga and Buddhism, integral elements of cultural and spiritual heritage, face significant challenges in their integration into sustainable development frameworks. Despite their transformative potential, over-commercialization, environmental degradation, and social inequalities remain substantial barriers. These challenges are particularly pronounced in wellness tourism, where rapid growth often prioritizes economic gains over cultural authenticity and environmental sustainability, conflicting with the principles of the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

The rising popularity of yoga and Buddhist tourism has brought significant environmental and social challenges. Over-tourism in spiritual hubs such as Rishikesh, India, and Lumbini, Nepal, has strained local ecosystems, leading to increased waste production, resource depletion, and ecological damage. In 2022, Rishikesh welcomed over 800,000 international visitors—a 15% increase from 2019—which contributed to a 20% rise in waste generation and a 12% decline in the water quality of the Ganga River (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). Alongside environmental pressures, social inequalities have emerged as the high costs of wellness retreats exclude lower-income communities. These retreats, often priced between USD 1,500 and USD 5,000, are financially inaccessible to 78% of India's middle- and lower-income population, fostering an "elite yoga culture" that prioritizes affluent demographics over inclusivity (Bowers & Cheer, 2017).

Furthermore, the commodification of yoga and Buddhism has diluted their spiritual essence, reducing these profound traditions to mere marketable products. By 2023, global sales of yoga accessories, such as mats and clothing, reached USD 12 billion, overshadowing investments in spiritual education and training (GWI, 2023). These intertwined challenges highlight the tension between the economic growth driven by yoga and Buddhist tourism and the need to preserve their cultural authenticity and promote social and environmental sustainability.

Over-tourism Trends in Major Asian Yoga Destinations
This bar chart illustrates the rising tourist numbers in key spiritual hubs and their corresponding environmental impacts (Yasuda et al., 2018). For instance, Rishikesh and Lumbini show a 20% annual increase in visitor numbers, correlating with declining water quality and increased waste generation.

Table 3. Challenges in Leveraging Yoga and Buddhism for Sustainable Development

Challenge	Description	Impact
Environmental Degradation	Over-tourism strains natural resources and ecosystems	Reduced sustainability of cultural and ecological assets
Social Inequities	Exclusive retreats limit accessibility for lower-income groups	Marginalization of disadvantaged communities
Cultural Commodification	Market-driven practices overshadow the spiritual significance	Dilution of authenticity and spiritual values

The integration of yoga and Buddhism into sustainable development strategies encounters challenges that undermine their inclusivity and authenticity. Over-tourism, social inequalities, and commodification reflect significant barriers, particularly when contrasted with the inclusive and conservation-oriented principles of SDGs 11 and 13.

The integration of yoga and Buddhism into sustainable development reveals several significant challenges that undermine their transformative potential.

Exclusive yoga tourism, characterized by high costs of retreats and wellness programs, primarily caters to affluent demographics, sidelining economically disadvantaged groups and contradicting the inclusive spiritual ethos that these traditions represent. Environmental degradation is another pressing issue, particularly in spiritual hubs like Rishikesh, where over-tourism has led to polluted rivers, deforestation, and excessive waste accumulation. These environmental impacts threaten the sustainability of both the destinations and their surrounding ecosystems (Wu et al., 2021). Furthermore, the commodification of yoga and Buddhism prioritizes economic profitability over cultural and spiritual essence. This shift diminishes their authenticity and reduces their role as tools for spiritual growth, transforming them into commodities of consumerism. Collectively, these challenges highlight the complex tensions between economic growth, environmental sustainability, and the preservation of cultural integrity.

Addressing the challenges associated with integrating yoga and Buddhism into sustainable development requires a multifaceted approach that balances economic growth with inclusivity, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation. Managing over-tourism in spiritual hubs like Rishikesh and Lumbini can be achieved through the introduction of visitor caps and the enforcement of eco-friendly practices. Revenue generated from tourism taxes could be strategically allocated to fund environmental conservation projects, ensuring the long-term sustainability of these destinations (Weisner & Cameron, 2020). Promoting inclusivity is equally critical; developing affordable wellness programs can broaden access for lower-income groups, while partnerships with local communities can create initiatives that distribute economic benefits more equitably. To preserve cultural authenticity, certification systems for wellness retreats can be implemented, ensuring that cultural and spiritual integrity remains central to their offerings. Additionally, funding programs that educate tourists on the historical and spiritual significance of yoga and Buddhism can help counter the effects of commodification and foster deeper appreciation. These integrated strategies provide a pathway to address the pressing challenges while honoring the transformative essence of yoga and Buddhism.

Integrating Yoga and Buddhism for Sustainable Tourism

This study emphasises the significant role of yoga and Buddhism in promoting sustainable tourism development, particularly in wellness tourism (tourism focused on activities that improve health and well-being) and cultural diplomacy. With an economic value of USD 4.3 trillion and a projected annual growth rate of 8% until 2025 (Li & de Oliveira, 2021), wellness tourism has become one of the main pillars of global economic growth. However, the study also highlights pressing challenges, such as environmental degradation, social inequality, and the commodification of spiritual values. For instance, *overtourism* (excessive tourist activity leading to negative impacts on the environment and local communities) in spiritual hubs such as Rishikesh and Lumbini has resulted in a 20% increase in waste production and a 12% decline in the water quality of the Ganges River (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). Additionally, the exclusivity of expensive wellness programmes limits access for low-income groups, exacerbating social inequalities.

The global commodification of yoga, reflected in the USD 12 billion sales of yoga accessories in 2023 (GWI, 2023), further demonstrates the erosion of its spiritual essence into marketable products.

The study also reveals that these challenges arise from an imbalance between economic growth and the preservation of cultural and environmental integrity. The reliance on market-driven tourism models often prioritises economic gains while neglecting sustainability and inclusivity. Yoga and Buddhism, traditionally regarded as tools for spiritual and social transformation, are increasingly reduced to symbols of elite consumption that fail to fully reflect their original values.

In relation to existing literature, the findings align with Bowers and Cheer (2017), who explored how yoga has become a part of Western consumer culture, and Thepa (2022), who examined the link between mindfulness and sustainability. However, this study goes further by analysing how yoga and Buddhism are utilised in cultural diplomacy and *soft power* (the ability to influence others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion) strategies in countries such as India and China, as well as their implications for global politics and economics. These findings add a new dimension to the literature by focusing on the integration of yoga and Buddhism as part of sustainable development strategies in Asia.

Reflections from this study provide broader insights into how yoga and Buddhism can serve as references for global contexts. For example, Ha (Ha, 2024) highlighted the role of Buddhist cultural spaces in Vietnam, emphasising how these spaces could integrate cultural preservation with sustainable tourism. Similarly, Thimm (2021) discussed how tourism linked to Buddhism in the Alpine area inherently supports sustainability through modest, non-commercial practices. These insights align with the challenges and opportunities identified in the current study, demonstrating that principles such as integrating cultural values with sustainability strategies can be applied to other regions, including Europe and America. In Western countries, challenges like the commodification of spiritual values are also relevant, offering opportunities to adopt more inclusive and community-based approaches similar to Buddhist practices in Asia (Ha, 2024; Sirirat, 2019). Thus, this study not only provides recommendations for Asia but also serves as a model for sustainable tourism development globally.

These findings underscore that yoga and Buddhism hold great potential as tools for cultural diplomacy and sustainable development. However, without prudent management, this potential risks undermining cultural authenticity and spiritual values. Challenges such as environmental degradation and social inequality highlight the need for more inclusive and sustainability-oriented policy interventions.

These challenges stem from global market pressures that drive the commodification of cultural practices to meet the demands of international tourists. This creates an imbalance between economic needs and the preservation of spiritual values. Additionally, the lack of regulation on *overtourism* and commodification exacerbates the negative impacts of tourism on local communities and the environment (He & Wang, 2022).

Based on these findings, several policy recommendations can be proposed. First, limiting visitor numbers and implementing eco-friendly practices at major spiritual destinations are essential to mitigate the adverse effects of *overtourism*

(McCartney, 2021). Second, developing affordable wellness programmes can enhance inclusivity, particularly for low-income groups (Charak, Sharma, & Chib, 2020). Third, a certification system for wellness programmes and spiritual retreats can help preserve the cultural integrity of yoga and Buddhism. Lastly, educating tourists about the historical and spiritual significance of these practices can foster greater appreciation for local cultures while reducing commodification (Bowers & Cheer, 2017).

By adopting these measures, policymakers and stakeholders can address the identified challenges while preserving the transformative potential of yoga and Buddhism. These steps align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), ensuring that these cultural and spiritual practices contribute meaningfully to global sustainable development.

Conclusion

This research highlights the critical roles of wellness tourism, cultural diplomacy, and soft power in sustainable development, with yoga and Buddhism serving as focal points in Asia, despite the wellness tourism industry's significant economic contributions—valued at USD 4.3 trillion globally with projected annual growth of 8%—several challenges emerge, including environmental degradation and access inequality. For instance, Rishikesh, India, experienced a 15% increase in international visitors from 2019 to 2022, correlating with a 20% rise in local waste production and a 12% decline in the Ganga River's water quality (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). These findings underscore the pressing need to address the unintended consequences of over-tourism on environmental sustainability.

The research also sheds light on India's and China's distinctive strategies in leveraging yoga and Buddhism as tools of soft power. India's emphasis on reviving its cultural heritage through initiatives like the "5 Ts" framework—Tradition, Talent, Tourism, Trade, and Technology—sets it apart as a global spiritual hub, fostering national pride and wellness tourism. Conversely, China incorporates yoga and Buddhism into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), showcasing its potential to enhance regional cooperation and economic development. This comparative analysis reveals a nuanced understanding of how spiritual practices are mobilized for geopolitical and economic objectives, highlighting a significant contribution to the field by bridging the gap between spiritual tourism and diplomacy.

However, the study also acknowledges its limitations. The analysis was geographically constrained to key destinations like Rishikesh and Lumbini, leaving room for further research on lesser-known sites affected by similar challenges. Additionally, this research relied on secondary data, which may not capture local communities' perspectives comprehensively. Future studies should incorporate primary data collection to understand the socio-environmental impacts of wellness tourism better. Investigating innovative strategies for leveraging yoga and Buddhism—such as the Trans-Asia Buddha Circuit—can provide actionable insights into fostering collaboration among Asian countries. Such research can help balance economic growth with inclusivity and sustainability, ensuring that these spiritual practices retain their cultural integrity while addressing global development goals.

This study's unique contribution lies in its integration of wellness tourism, soft power dynamics, and sustainable development within a single framework. By connecting spiritual traditions to modern global challenges, this research not only deepens understanding but also provides a foundation for actionable solutions in policy and practice.

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