

Building a Cultural Network among Sea Port Cities to Advance Korea–China Maritime Cooperation: The Cases of Busan Metropolitan City and Dalian

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Abstract: *This study examines the cooperation between Busan and Dalian by conceptualizing them as representative maritime cities of South Korea and China, respectively. It reinterprets their relationship through the lens of maritime city cultural diplomacy. Moving beyond traditional port and logistics-focused approaches, the study explores how maritime cooperation can be institutionalized at the city level across four key areas: maritime education and training, maritime law and arbitration, maritime tourism and cultural exchange, and strategic collaboration in response to emerging Arctic shipping routes. The findings demonstrate that Busan and Dalian possess similar maritime industrial structures, human resource systems, and cultural assets, providing a robust foundation for enhanced intercity cooperation. Specifically, the establishment of joint maritime education and research platforms and cooperation in maritime legal governance are identified as crucial mechanisms for strengthening regional maritime capacity and governance resilience. Furthermore, cooperation in maritime tourism and cultural exchange can fortify the social foundations of maritime collaboration, while coordinated responses to Arctic shipping routes present a long-term strategic opportunity for risk-sharing and capability building. Overall, the Busan-Dalian case illustrates how maritime city-based cooperation can complement state-centered diplomacy and contribute to the development of a sustainable and inclusive maritime cooperation model in Northeast Asia.*

Keywords: Busan; Dalian; Sea Port Cities; Maritime City Cultural Diplomacy; Maritime Education and Training; Maritime Law and Arbitration; Maritime Tourism; Arctic Shipping Routes; Northeast Asian Maritime Cooperation

1. Introduction

Under the Cold War order, the Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China maintained only limited contacts with each other, owing to their divergent ideological orientations and political and socio-economic systems. However, the establishment of diplomatic relations on 24 August 1992 marked a qualitative turning point in bilateral relations. Since normalization, Korea–China relations have expanded rapidly, underpinned by geographical proximity, economic complementarity, historical linkages, and cultural affinities. In particular, economic cooperation has functioned as a central pillar of bilateral relations. From an initial trade volume of merely USD 6.4 billion at the time of normalization, bilateral trade increased dramatically, driven by the deepening of China's reform and opening-up policies in conjunction with the proactive entry of Korean enterprises into the Chinese market [1]. As a result, as of 2022, the volume of bilateral trade between Korea and China reached USD 272.9 billion, representing an approximately forty-three-fold increase compared to the level at the time of diplomatic normalization. As of 2024, China stands as South Korea's largest trading partner and primary export destination, while South Korea has emerged as China's second-largest trading partner. These figures clearly underscore the structural significance of Korea–China relations within the economic order of Northeast Asia [2].

Despite the quantitative expansion of Korea–China relations, bilateral cooperation has repeatedly experienced cycles of advancement and tension in response to changes in the diplomatic and security environment. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, the diffusion of cultural exchanges—most notably represented by the Korean Wave—along with the growth of people-to-people exchanges, has significantly increased the frequency of interactions between the two societies. Nevertheless, such exchanges have largely remained confined to consumption-oriented and unidirectional flows, falling short of fostering a deep understanding of the social, cultural, and historical contexts of the counterpart country. In particular, insufficient understanding within South Korea of Chinese society, its political system, and historical perceptions has functioned as a factor exacerbating perceptual gaps between the two countries. Ideological distance formed during the Cold War era and divergent value systems have not been fully resolved even after normalization, persisting as latent sources of tension and constituting a structural constraint on the qualitative deepening of substantive bilateral cooperation.

These limitations have become more evident in the realm of diplomatic and security issues. Recognizing the strategic importance of Korea–China relations, the Park Geun-hye administration pursued what was termed “unification diplomacy,” seeking close cooperation with China to promote the denuclearization of North Korea and the establishment of lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula. In particular, President Park’s attendance at China’s Victory Day military parade in August 2015 symbolically demonstrated that Korea–China relations had reached their peak in political and diplomatic terms. However, this phase of cooperation was fundamentally tested following North Korea’s fourth nuclear test in 2016 and the subsequent rapid deterioration of the security environment on the Korean Peninsula. Following South Korea’s decision in July 2016 to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, bilateral relations deteriorated sharply. While the South Korean government maintained that the deployment was an unavoidable defensive measure against North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats, China strongly opposed the decision, characterizing it as an infringement upon its strategic security interests. As a result, political and diplomatic trust between the two countries was severely undermined, producing negative spillover effects across economic, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges. These experiences illustrate that when Korea–China relations become excessively dependent on state-centered diplomatic and security issues, both their achievements and stability can be easily destabilized. Accordingly, ensuring the sustainability of bilateral relations necessitates the exploration of new dimensions of cooperation that can complement traditional state-to-state diplomacy. In particular, analytical attention is required for areas of cooperation that are relatively insulated from political and security tensions and that can contribute to long-term trust-building. In this context, city-to-city cooperation mediated through maritime connections—especially exchanges centered on port cities—can be regarded as an alternative cooperation model capable of compensating for the structural vulnerabilities of Korea–China relations [3].

Against this backdrop, this study examines the potential and policy implications of maritime cooperation between Busan and Dalian, two representative port cities of Korea and China, respectively. Both cities are maritime-oriented urban centers characterized by a high concentration of port functions, shipping industries, maritime education, and maritime culture. Beyond the framework of national-level diplomatic relations, Busan and Dalian possess substantial potential to establish a more stable and sustainable Korea–China cooperation network through city-level collaboration. This study conceptualizes such interactions through the analytical framework of maritime city cultural diplomacy, aiming to expand the scope of maritime cooperation beyond conventional economic and logistics-centered approaches to encompass social, cultural, and institutional dimensions.

To this end, the paper first examines the strategic status of Busan and Dalian as port cities, followed by an analysis of existing exchange networks, their achievements, and their limitations. It then systematically organizes the structural conditions for bilateral cooperation through a SWOT analysis and, based on this assessment, proposes policy-oriented cooperation measures focusing on maritime education, maritime law, maritime tourism, and responses to the Arctic shipping routes. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the pursuit of sustainable development pathways for maritime cooperation in Northeast Asia by presenting Busan–Dalian cooperation as a new subnational model of Korea–China relations.

2. Research Backgrounds

2.1 Understanding Maritime Cities and Maritime City Cultural Diplomacy

Sea port cities are urban spaces formed at the intersection of sea and land, functioning as complex nodal points where political, economic, social, and cultural interactions are concentrated beyond their conventional roles in transportation and logistics. Such cities should be analyzed not merely within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state, but rather as open spaces in which transnational mobility and networks actively operate. Sea port cities mediate between maritime and terrestrial networks and have historically developed distinctive urban structures and cultural identities centered on their port functions [4].

Cultural interaction refers to a dynamic process through which heterogeneous cultural systems come into contact, collide, and undergo mutual negotiation and transformation, ultimately generating new systems of meaning. This process unfolds most actively in spaces where borders operate relatively loosely, and sea port cities function as representative “contact zones” in which diverse flows of people, goods, and information overlap. The deepening of global capitalism and advances in maritime transportation and communication technologies have accelerated the circulation of culture, positioning sea port cities as key arenas for cultural production and reconfiguration [5].

In the global society of the twenty-first century, the nation-state remains an important institutional unit; however, its functional limitations have become increasingly evident with the expansion of transnational economic activities and interregional cooperation. Particularly in the maritime domain, network-based cooperative structures are gaining prominence over state-centered territorial logics. In this process, sea port cities operate as substantive actors and platforms that mediate connections between states. The sea areas formed through interactions among sea port cities can thus be understood not merely as physical spaces, but as relational spaces in which exchanges and cooperation are repeatedly accumulated [4].

Sea port city cultural diplomacy is a conceptual framework designed to analyze patterns of cultural interaction that emerge from these spatial and structural characteristics. Rather than constituting a simple aggregation of cultural exchanges, this concept provides an analytical lens for explaining how culture is produced, transformed, and disseminated within a structure shaped by the interaction of the port as a physical foundation, networks as connective mechanisms, and the city as a social space [4]. From this perspective, sea port city cultural diplomacy exhibits distinctive mechanisms that differentiate it from cultural transformations observed in land-oriented cities.

This study identifies three core elements for analyzing sea port city cultural diplomacy: ports, networks, and cities. Ports serve as physical contact points where sea and land converge and where mobility and settlement intersect; networks represent transnational connective structures that expand human, material, and cultural flows; and cities constitute socio-cultural totalities formed through the interaction of ports and networks, generating landscapes and civic cultures unique to sea port cities.

In this sense, sea port city cultural diplomacy constitutes an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that elucidates the processes through which new cultural meanings and practices are formed through mediated human and material exchanges. The conceptual discussion presented in this section provides the theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis of Busan and Dalian as concrete cases of sea port cities, through which the potential for building cultural networks aimed at advancing Korea–China maritime cooperation is examined.

2.1.2 The Strategic Status of Korea–China Sea Port Cities

China, located at the eastern edge of the Eurasian continent, is both a continental and a maritime state with an extensive coastline. Since 2012, it has promoted the strategy of becoming a “maritime power”, seeking to simultaneously advance economic growth and expand national influence. This strategy encompasses not only the upgrading of maritime industries but also the expansion of external exchanges and cultural influence mediated through maritime space as key policy objectives [6].

Busan, Incheon, and Gwangyang in Korea, together with Shanghai, Qingdao, and Dalian in China, constitute representative sea port cities in Northeast Asia. In these cities, port functions play a central role in regional economic structures while also exerting a decisive influence on the formation of urban social composition and cultural characteristics. These cities have developed on the basis of maritime logistics and industrial activities, and the networks formed around their ports have been deeply involved in shaping urban spatial organization and the processes through which civic cultures have emerged.

Among these possible pairings, this study focuses specifically on Busan and Dalian due to their distinctive combination of functional similarity, geopolitical positioning, and structural comparability. Unlike Shanghai, which functions as a global mega-hub with a highly internationalized economic structure, or Incheon, which is more closely integrated into the Seoul metropolitan system, both Busan and Dalian exhibit a more balanced maritime city profile, where port, industry, education, and urban identity are closely intertwined.

In particular, Busan and Dalian function as strategic hubs connecting the Yellow Sea Rim and the East Sea (Sea of Japan) Rim, respectively, and are positioned at key nodal points within Northeast Asian maritime networks. Both cities share comparable roles as secondary national gateways rather than dominant capital-centric hubs, and they possess strong institutional infrastructures in maritime education, shipping industries, and port governance. This structural similarity enables a more meaningful comparative and cooperative analysis than alternative pairings such as Busan–Shanghai or Incheon–Dalian, where asymmetries in scale, function, or governance structures are more pronounced. Based on their geopolitical proximity and functional similarities, the two cities have sustained continuous flows of human and material exchanges, which possess the potential to expand beyond economic cooperation into deeper forms of cultural interaction. Accordingly, the advancement of cultural networks between Busan and Dalian can be evaluated as a foundational element that substantively supports Korea–China maritime cooperation and strengthens the sustainability of the broader maritime cooperation framework in Northeast Asia, extending beyond conventional city-to-city exchanges.

2.2 Current Status and Similarities of the Korea–China Maritime Industry

2.2.1 South Korea

As a peninsular state surrounded by the sea on three sides, the Republic of Korea has developed its shipping industry as a foundational pillar of the national economy. Maritime transport accounts for approximately 99.7 percent of Korea's total import and export cargo, and essential raw materials such as crude oil, coal, and iron ore are transported almost entirely by sea [7]. Accordingly, the shipping industry plays a critical role in sustaining national economic activity. The shipping sector also contributes significantly to foreign currency earnings and job creation through extensive linkages with related industries, including port operations, shipbuilding, maritime services, and finance. In 2021, the total revenue of Korea's global shipping companies reached approximately USD 35.7 billion [8].

South Korea is widely regarded as possessing integrated maritime competitiveness, combining the characteristics of a seafarer-supplying nation, a ship-owning nation, and a shipbuilding nation. As of 2024, Korea operated a fleet of 1,688 vessels totaling about 97.02 million DWT, accounting for approximately 4.2 percent of global shipping capacity, while major companies such as HMM, Pan Ocean, and Hyundai Glovis maintain international competitiveness across key vessel segments [9].

Distinctively, Korea's shipping industry followed a development path that prioritized the training of seafarers prior to the accumulation of ships and capital. Through overseas employment, Korean seafarers acquired navigational and managerial expertise, which later facilitated vessel acquisition and market entry. This human-capital-driven trajectory represents a rare development model in the global shipping industry [10]. From a strategic perspective, the shipping industry also serves national security functions by supporting the transport of strategic and military supplies and by enhancing national presence at sea [11]. Moreover, Korea has played an active role in global maritime governance, maintaining Category A membership in the IMO Council since 2001 and contributing to international rule-making, including through the tenure of Kitack Lim as IMO Secretary-General from 2016 to 2023.

Overall, by integrating human resources, fleet capacity, and an advanced shipbuilding base, South Korea has consolidated its position as a comprehensive maritime power.

2.2.2 China

China occupies a strategically significant position in the global maritime industry by simultaneously functioning as a shipbuilding nation, a ship-owning nation, and a seafarer-supplying nation. This integrated role structurally reinforces China's influence over international shipping networks, global trade flows, and national economic development.

As of 2024, China has consolidated its global dominance in shipbuilding. It accounted for 55.7 percent of global shipbuilding output, 74.1 percent of new orders, and 63.1 percent of order backlogs, maintaining shares

exceeding 50 percent across all major indicators since 2023. Ship production is concentrated in container vessels, tankers, LNG carriers, and large bulk carriers, with the proportion of environmentally friendly and high-efficiency vessels steadily increasing. In 2023, China's ship exports reached USD 31.87 billion, accounting for 87.4 percent of total production, confirming its status as the world's largest ship supplier [9].

China also possesses one of the world's largest fleets. As of 2024, its total fleet capacity reached approximately 309.9 million DWT, operated by both state-owned and private shipping companies and supported by major hub ports such as Shanghai, Ningbo–Zhoushan, and Tianjin. Through strategic fleet management policies, the Chinese government seeks to ensure stable maritime transport capacity to support foreign trade [9].

From the perspective of seafarer supply, China places strong policy emphasis on maritime education and training. With more than 130 maritime education and training institutions, China cultivates the world's largest pool of seafarers. By the end of 2020, the number of registered Chinese seafarers reached approximately 1.72 million, including nearly 593,000 engaged in international navigation [10]. China's seafarer training, certification, and welfare systems maintain alignment with international standards such as the MLC 2006 and STCW, enabling substantial participation in the global maritime labor market.

China's fleet exhibits a dual characteristic. Although China ranks second globally in fleet capacity—accounting for approximately 13.3 percent of the world total—a majority of Chinese-owned vessels are registered under foreign flags [9]. This reflects Chinese shipping companies' active engagement with global shipping markets while maintaining sufficient transport capacity to support China's position as the world's largest trading nation.

China's international maritime standing is further demonstrated through its active participation in global maritime governance. In November 2025, China was re-elected for the nineteenth consecutive term as a Category A member of the IMO Council, receiving the highest number of votes among member states. This underscores China's sustained influence as a leading maritime power and norm-setting actor in international maritime institutions.

2.2.3 Current Status of Korea–China Shipping Cooperation

Shipping collaboration between South Korea and China has developed into a central component of the two nations' economic interdependence. In 2024, South Korea's total exports reached a record high of approximately USD 683.8 billion, reflecting sustained growth, with trade with China continuing to account for a substantial share of this figure [12]. According to data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Korea International Trade Association, bilateral trade between the two countries in 2024 amounted to several hundred billion US dollars, reaffirming China's position as one of South Korea's most significant trading partners in both exports and imports [12].

The Korean economy is structurally trade-dependent, recording a trade dependence ratio of about 69.6 percent in 2021. Given that intermediate goods constitute a major portion of Korea's exports and imports, the economy remains highly sensitive to fluctuations in global supply chains. Within this context, maritime connectivity with China plays a vital role in sustaining Korea's trade flows and maintaining the resilience of its industrial supply chains [13].

The institutional basis for bilateral maritime cooperation was formalized through the Korea–China Shipping Talks initiated in 2013, which expanded the network of car ferry services between the two nations. This framework facilitated the establishment of multiple regular routes connecting Korean ports—such as Incheon, Pyeongtaek, and Gunsan—with major Chinese counterparts. Currently, Incheon Port serves as the primary hub, operating ferry routes to key Chinese ports including Weihai, Tianjin, Qingdao, Dalian, Dandong, Yantai, Shidao, Yingkou, Qinhuangdao, and Lianyungang [13]. Among these, routes linking to Northeast China—particularly Dandong, Dalian, and Yingkou—form a structural foundation for bilateral logistics and human exchange. In the post-COVID-19 era, although maritime passenger tourism has yet to fully recover, demand for ferry-based cargo and passenger transport related to Northeast China remains a key element of the East Asian maritime network. Ports in this region also serve as logistics gateways connecting China's inland areas with the Korean Peninsula and, more broadly, with the Maritime Silk Road. This underscores both the geographic and strategic importance of Korea–China maritime cooperation [14]. From a port throughput perspective, Incheon Port has consolidated its role as a central node in bilateral maritime logistics. In the first half of 2024, the port handled approximately 1.79 million TEU—the highest in its history—with exports to

China accounting for roughly 55–64 percent of total container volumes. These figures highlight Incheon Port's strategic function in supporting trade and logistics between the two nations [13].

In sum, Korea–China maritime cooperation reflects deep-rooted macroeconomic interdependence and the evolving structure of regional maritime networks. The institutionalization of ferry operations, steady growth in port throughput, and ongoing expansion of maritime infrastructure—centering on Incheon Port—have collectively strengthened logistics connectivity and people-to-people exchanges, thereby serving as a vital pillar of the regional shipping order and economic cooperation in Northeast Asia.

3. Analysis of the Cooperative Basis between Busan and Dalian as Sea Port Cities

3.1 Analysis of City-Specific Cultural Resources

3.1.1 Busan: A Maritime Cluster City of Education, Culture, and Research Based on Its Role as Korea's Maritime Capital

Busan has developed as a representative sea port city of the Republic of Korea and as the nation's "maritime capital," evolving into a maritime cluster city in which education, research, and cultural functions are concentrated upon a strong foundation of port and shipping industries. Centered on Busan Port, a comprehensive maritime industrial ecosystem has taken shape, within which research institutes affiliated with the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, public agencies specializing in marine science and technology, and higher education institutions dedicated to maritime studies are spatially clustered [15]. This concentration provides a structural basis for the production of maritime knowledge and for institutional linkages between policy formulation, industrial practice, and academic research.

In particular, Busan serves as a core hub of maritime education with a well-established system for training professional seafarers. Educational institutions and training infrastructure responsible for the cultivation of deck officers and marine engineers operate in alignment with standards set by IMO. This institutional configuration enables Busan to function as an important pillar within the global supply system for maritime professionals [16]. Beyond vocational training, seafarer education in Busan embodies public values related to maritime safety, the maintenance of maritime order, and the accumulation of professional maritime expertise, thereby constituting a foundational element of maritime governance.

Moreover, the maritime culture formed around seafarers and maritime labor constitutes a key component of Busan's identity as a sea port city. The everyday culture, work ethics, and experiences of international mobility accumulated within seafarer communities have imparted a distinctive openness and multicultural character to the city's urban culture. This seafarer-centered culture is reproduced in diverse forms within port spaces and everyday urban life and has been institutionalized as collective social memory through cultural mechanisms such as maritime museums, maritime cultural festivals, and oral history projects [17]. The structural integration of human resource development centered on seafarer education, the accumulation of maritime research and policy capacity, and the formation of a seafarer-based maritime culture positions Busan as more than a logistics- or industry-oriented port city [15]. Rather, it can be defined as a maritime cluster sea port city in which maritime knowledge and culture are densely accumulated. These characteristics provide a critical foundation for Busan to play a central role in the future construction of cultural networks among sea port cities and in the advancement of Korea–China maritime cooperation.

Jungang District, located in Jung-gu, Busan, represents a port-adjacent district whose formation has been closely intertwined with the city's urban development and port expansion. Originally characterized by a natural topography combining coastal areas and hillsides, the district was artificially reshaped through large-scale land cutting and reclamation during the Japanese colonial period as part of port expansion and urban infrastructure development. This physical reconfiguration paralleled the modernization of Busan Port and established Jungang District as a core space in which port functions converged with urban administrative and commercial activities. Today, Jungang District functions primarily as a commercial and business center with minimal residential use. Along Jungang-daero, regional branches of major corporations and public enterprises, financial institutions, and headquarters or branch offices of shipping and logistics companies are densely concentrated. The district is also adjacent to key port and customs infrastructure, including the Busan Port Coastal Passenger Terminal, the Busan Main Customs Office, and major port berths. Historically, it served as a center of administrative authority and public communication, having housed the Busan Metropolitan Government and major media organizations. This demonstrates that Jungang District has functioned as a strategic space in which urban power, information,

and capital have been concentrated through the mediation of the port. Most notably, Jungang District symbolically represents the socio-cultural structure of Busan as a sea port city, as it has long served as a central hub for seafarer labor and maritime human resource management. With a high concentration of ship management companies and crewing departments of shipping firms, the district has functioned as a site for seafarer recruitment, training coordination, employment management, and the formation of professional networks. This spatial concentration has shaped Jungang District as a place where seafarer-centered maritime labor culture is reproduced in everyday urban life, providing a concrete illustration of sea port city culture formed through the interaction between port labor and urban space. Accordingly, Jungang District can be regarded as a representative site that empirically demonstrates both the historical formation of Busan as a sea port city and the accumulation of its maritime culture, characterized by the overlapping of port infrastructure, shipping industries, maritime labor, and urban commercial functions.

3.1.2 Dalian: A Gateway Sea Port City of Northeast China and a Space of Accumulated Modern Culture

Dalian occupies a position of structural and strategic importance as the sole maritime gateway for China's three northeastern provinces (Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang) and as a key sea port city linking the inland-oriented Northeast region to the maritime order of Northeast Asia [14]. Geographically, Dalian is located at the southern tip of the Liaodong Peninsula in Liaoning Province, at a strategic juncture connecting the Bohai Sea and the Yellow Sea [14]. This location enables Dalian to function as a critical outlet through which industrial production, logistics flows, and human mobility from Northeast China extend seaward. Such spatial conditions define Dalian not merely as a coastal city, but as a gateway port city mediating between Northeast Asia and the Eurasian continent. In particular, given the inland geopolitical characteristics of the Northeast region bordering Russia, North Korea, and Mongolia, Dalian has historically served as a strategic maritime hub that structurally compensates for the region's limited access to the sea [18].

The maritime urbanization of Dalian accelerated with the advent of modern port development. The construction of the port by the Russian Empire in 1897 and the establishment of the southern terminus of the South Manchurian Railway transformed Dalian into a modern sea port city within a short period of time [19]. Following the Russo-Japanese War, Japanese colonial rule further reorganized Dalian into a composite maritime city integrating port, military, and administrative functions [19]. Through this process, Dalian emerged as a space where the formation of the Northeast Asian maritime order intersected with imperial maritime domination strategies, and its urban spatial structure and industrial system were shaped around the port. From its inception, therefore, Dalian's urban identity was constructed around maritime functions, forming the historical foundation of its continuing maritime urbanization.

Following China's reform and opening-up, Dalian's maritime urbanization underwent a qualitative transformation through its integration with national development strategies [14]. China's pursuit of the Maritime Power strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly the Maritime Silk Road, repositioned Dalian as a core node for maritime cooperation and international logistics in Northeast Asia. Moving beyond traditional port cargo handling, Dalian has advanced its industrial structure toward high value-added maritime sectors, including international shipping services, marine logistics, port-adjacent petrochemicals, marine advanced materials, and high-end shipbuilding and marine equipment manufacturing [20]. In 2023, Dalian's gross marine economic output exceeded RMB 270 billion, accounting for more than 30 percent of the city's total GDP, clearly demonstrating that the marine economy constitutes a central engine of urban growth [21].

In recent years, Dalian has articulated maritime urbanization not merely as industrial expansion but as a comprehensive strategy for building a "modern maritime city [21]." At the First Meeting of the Marine Development Committee in 2025, the city institutionally confirmed a high-quality development pathway integrating marine industrial growth, marine science and technology innovation, and marine environmental protection. Key policy priorities include strengthening Dalian's role as an international shipping and logistics center in Northeast Asia, enhancing the global competitiveness of advanced shipbuilding and marine equipment industries, fostering marine data-driven industries, and developing research platforms for marine clean energy and marine biotechnology [21]. These initiatives indicate that Dalian's maritime urbanization is evolving from a port-centered model toward a multidimensional maritime city model integrating technology, data, environmental sustainability, and culture.

Beyond its economic functions, Dalian's maritime character is also layered with historical and cultural significance. Dalian—particularly the Lüshun area—constitutes a space where the memories of anti-colonial resistance and martyrdom of prominent Korean independence activists, including Ahn Jung-geun, Shin Chae-ho,

and Lee Hoe-young, have been accumulated around sites such as Lüshun Prison. These historical experiences define Dalian not simply as a Chinese port city, but as a sea port city where modern Korean and Chinese histories intersect, and as a site of transnational memory [20]. The history of colonial domination and resistance formed through maritime connections continues to inform Dalian's maritime cultural identity today and possesses significant potential to be reinterpreted as a resource for maritime tourism and cultural exchange [20].

Dalian's maritime urbanization has deepened progressively through the interaction of geographic conditions, the historical trajectory of modern port development, national maritime strategies, and the cumulative integration of industry, technology, and culture. This maritime character positions Dalian not merely as an export port for Northeast China, but as a strategic hub for Northeast Asian maritime cooperation and for the construction of Korea–China sea port city networks. Particularly in the context of cooperation with Busan, Dalian can be evaluated as a core partner city capable of developing substantive and sustainable cooperation models mediated by maritime industries, maritime human resources and education, and shared maritime culture and historical memory.

3.2 Structural Characteristics and Limitations of the Existing City Diplomacy Network between Busan and Dalian

As the leading port city of the Republic of Korea and a major maritime hub in Northeast Asia, Busan Metropolitan City has, from a relatively early stage, expanded sister-city and friendly cooperation relations with major overseas cities. In particular, exchanges with China gained momentum following the establishment of diplomatic relations between Korea and China in 1992, functioning as an institutional framework that extended beyond economic, logistics, and maritime cooperation to support cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

Among Busan's sister-city partnerships in China, the most representative case is its sister-city relationship with Shanghai, established in 1993. As China's largest port city and a center of finance and trade, Shanghai shares key characteristics with Busan as a sea port city whose growth has been driven by port-based development [22]. This partnership, concluded shortly after the normalization of Korea–China relations, symbolically illustrates how Busan's city diplomacy toward China has been closely aligned with national-level diplomatic orientations. Subsequently, Busan expanded the scope of its city diplomacy by establishing friendly cooperation relations with major Chinese cities such as Shenzhen, Tianjin, Chongqing, and Beijing [22].

Despite the quantitative expansion of this city diplomacy network, however, the substance and outcomes of actual exchanges have remained limited. Most sister-city and friendly cooperation activities have been confined to administrative agreements, one-off reciprocal visits, and culture-oriented events. They have rarely evolved into sustained and structured cooperation in core areas closely linked to Busan's urban identity, such as port management, shipping and logistics, or the training of maritime human resources [23]. In particular, many of Busan's partner cities in China differ significantly in political, administrative, and economic scale, and cooperation agendas have tended to remain broad and declaratory in nature, revealing clear limitations in generating tangible collaborative outcomes.

A similar pattern can be observed in Dalian's international exchanges at the local government level, which remain relatively limited in scale and scope compared to those of Busan. Dalian has established sister-city or friendly relations with several local governments in Korea, primarily at the district or county level [21]. Representative examples include exchanges between Suyeong-gu and Sasang-gu in Busan and Jinzhou District and Ganjingzi District in Dalian, respectively. In addition, Dalian maintains friendly relations with cities such as Seoul, Incheon, Gwangyang, Pyeongtaek, and Jeju; however, these exchanges have largely been confined to administrative interaction and goodwill visits between local governments [21].

Notably, the lack of strategic attention and policy linkage at the central government level has functioned as a structural constraint on the expansion of Dalian's international exchanges. This limitation is closely related to Dalian's relatively lower policy priority within China compared to cities such as Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Tianjin, which are more directly aligned with national development strategies. As a result, despite its core urban functions in ports, shipping, and maritime industries, Dalian's external exchanges have been managed in a fragmented manner that fails to systematically reflect its maritime identity.

Nevertheless, Busan and Dalian continue to possess substantial potential for practical cooperation centered on the maritime domain. Both cities are sea port cities that have developed on the basis of port functions and serve as key nodes within Northeast Asia's maritime transport network, sharing strong functional similarities and complementarities. While Busan has accumulated extensive experience in shipping and port operations, maritime human resource development, and the cultivation of maritime culture as a global transshipment hub

and “maritime capital,” Dalian has played a pivotal role as the gateway port for Northeast China, serving as a logistics and maritime industrial hub for the region.

Accordingly, there is a pressing need to move beyond the formal and symbolic framework of sister-city and friendly cooperation agreements toward a function-oriented cooperation model focused on specific domains such as maritime industries, shipping and logistics, seafarer education, and maritime cultural exchange. This shift does not simply represent an expansion of city diplomacy, but rather a strategy of selective concentration that foregrounds the identities of Busan and Dalian as sea port cities. Such a reorientation constitutes a critical starting point for upgrading bilateral cooperation into a results-oriented maritime cooperation network capable of delivering substantive and sustainable outcomes.

4. Strategy for Building a Maritime Cooperation Network through Cultural Diplomacy between the Port Cities of Busan and Dalian

Busan and Dalian are representative sea port cities and maritime-oriented urban centers in the Republic of Korea and China, respectively, functioning as strategic spaces in which ports, shipping, maritime education, and maritime culture are highly concentrated. The two cities share historical experiences of interaction formed through the Yellow Sea and the broader Northeast Asian maritime domain, and have developed upon a common industrial foundation encompassing shipping, shipbuilding, and maritime human resources. In particular, as the global shipping industry enters a period of structural transformation driven by decarbonization, digitalization, and the reconfiguration of global supply chains, response strategies centered on individual states or single ports are increasingly revealing their limitations. Against this backdrop, the importance of building cooperative networks among sea port cities has become more pronounced.

In this context, cooperation between Busan and Dalian needs to be reconceptualized beyond conventional port cooperation or economic exchange, and reframed from a more comprehensive and long-term perspective of maritime city cultural diplomacy. Maritime city cultural diplomacy may be understood as an approach that institutionalizes sustainable trust and cooperation between cities through multi-layered interactions integrating maritime industries and institutions, human resources, education, legal and normative frameworks, and maritime culture [18]. By complementing traditional state-centered diplomacy, this approach offers a policy instrument capable of generating substantive outcomes in city-level diplomacy mediated by the maritime domain.

4.1 Establishing a Joint Maritime Education and Training (MET) Platform for the Development of Advanced Maritime Professionals in Asia

One of the core strategies for advancing maritime cooperation between Busan and Dalian is the establishment of a joint Korea China Maritime Education and Training (MET) and research platform. At present, Asian countries such as China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and India supply approximately 44 percent of the world’s seafarers, and the global shipping industry remains structurally highly dependent on Asian maritime labor [24]. Nevertheless, structural challenges including the declining attractiveness of seafaring careers, workforce aging, and imbalances in labor supply and demand caused by reluctance to serve at sea are commonly observed across Asian countries.

Under these circumstances, the joint development of an advanced MET system by Korea and China, as leading maritime nations in Asia, should be regarded as a strategic undertaking that goes beyond conventional educational cooperation and directly affects the sustainability of the Asian shipping industry. In particular, the establishment of a jointly operated graduate level institution tentatively referred to as the Asia Maritime University, by Korea Maritime and Ocean University and Dalian Maritime University could serve as a hub for the cultivation of advanced maritime professionals, with a focus on future oriented agendas such as shipping decarbonization, digital navigation systems, autonomous vessels, and maritime safety and environmental regulations [10].

Dalian Maritime University occupies a uniquely distinguished institutional position within China’s higher education system in the field of MET. It is the only maritime specialized university included in China’s Project 211, and in 2017 its discipline of transportation engineering was selected under the Double First Class initiative, thereby firmly establishing the university as a core education and research institution directly aligned with China’s national shipping strategy. Moreover, as a national key university directly affiliated with the Ministry

of Transport, Dalian Maritime University functions as a central implementation platform for China's maritime policy and maritime human resource development strategy [25].

Korea Maritime and Ocean University likewise operates a specialized MET system focused on the training of maritime officers and the development of maritime human resources, and has developed a practice oriented educational model that integrates professional certification, onboard training, and advanced maritime research. The two universities demonstrate a high degree of institutional similarity in their MET structures, including officer centered training systems, uniformed and quasi military management practices, and an educational culture premised on mandatory seagoing service [10]. This shared institutional foundation significantly lowers the barriers to the operation of joint MET programs and degree courses.

The establishment of a joint graduate institution would not be limited to serving students from Korea and China, but also holds the potential to evolve into an international MET hub encompassing students from major Asian seafarer supplying countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and India [10]. Such a development would contribute to elevating Busan beyond its role as a Northeast Asian center for MET, positioning it as a global hub for the cultivation of advanced maritime human resources.

4.2 Enhancing Maritime Governance Capacity through Cooperation in Maritime Law and Maritime Arbitration

The second axis of cooperation focuses on institutional and human resource collaboration in the fields of maritime law and maritime arbitration. Maritime law and the law of the sea are inherently international legal domains, and as decarbonization and digital transformation in the shipping industry accelerate, the importance of international norms and dispute resolution mechanisms continues to grow. Legal issues related to shipbuilding, navigation, marine insurance, maritime accidents, and environmental liability directly affect national shipping competitiveness and the stability of maritime industries [26].

China has already established a systematic maritime judicial and arbitration framework by setting up specialized maritime courts in eleven cities, including Shanghai, Dalian, Tianjin, and Qingdao, and by strengthening the role of the China Maritime Arbitration Commission as a central dispute resolution institution [27, 28]. Within this system, Dalian Maritime University has functioned as a key hub for the training of maritime law professionals and academic research, operating education and research programs closely linked with maritime court practice and maritime arbitration proceedings [27].

In contrast, despite long standing discussions on the establishment of a maritime court, Korea has yet to reach the stage of institutionalization. Maritime arbitration in Korea also remains limited in scope and function, primarily centered on the Asia Pacific Maritime Arbitration Center. This institutional gap may, in the long term, impose structural constraints on Korea's legal responsiveness and international dispute resolution capacity in the maritime sector [28].

Against this backdrop, it is necessary to institutionalize human resource and academic cooperation among Korea Maritime and Ocean University in Busan, Dalian Maritime University in Dalian, the China Maritime Arbitration Commission, and the Asia Pacific Maritime Arbitration Center. Joint degree programs, researcher exchange schemes, and professional education programs in maritime law and maritime arbitration would strengthen the academic and policy foundations for the establishment of a maritime court in Busan, while simultaneously contributing to the development of Busan as a maritime governance city where functions related to maritime law and maritime arbitration are concentrated in Northeast Asia.

4.3 Expanding the Social Foundations of Maritime Cooperation through Marine Tourism and Cultural Diplomacy

The third area of cooperation focuses on the institutionalization of social exchange mediated by marine tourism and maritime culture. For cooperation between sea port cities to achieve sustainability and stability, collaboration must extend beyond industrial and policy dimensions to include mutual understanding and cultural affinity at the level of civil society. In this respect, exchanges based on marine tourism and maritime culture carry significant strategic value, as they are grounded in the shared spatial and identity-based characteristics of sea port cities and tend to function as relatively stable channels of interaction even amid fluctuations in intergovernmental diplomatic relations. Dalian is a representative marine-oriented and marine tourism city in northeastern China, where marine industries and marine service sectors occupy a substantial share of the regional economy [29]. Alongside port operations, shipbuilding, and marine equipment manufacturing, the integrated development of marine tourism, marine leisure, and maritime cultural content industries has positioned the marine economy as a core growth engine accounting for a significant portion of Dalian's regional

GDP. This industrial structure demonstrates that Dalian is not merely a logistics hub but a typical sea port city whose economic activities, cultural development, and urban identity are fundamentally shaped by maritime space [29].

Despite this potential, the actual level of tourism and cultural exchange between South Korea and China's northeastern provinces remains relatively limited. Notwithstanding historical and geographical proximity, northeastern China has not sufficiently developed tourism infrastructure or cultural content systematically targeted at Korean visitors [14]. In addition, air and maritime transportation networks have been largely concentrated around Incheon, resulting in structural constraints on marine tourism and cultural exchange between Busan and northeastern China. This has limited Busan's ability to fully realize its potential within the Northeast Asian marine tourism network, despite its status as a maritime capital with well-established marine tourism capabilities.

To overcome these limitations, it is necessary to institutionalize a maritime-friendly city partnership centered on Busan and Dalian and to link transportation, tourism, and cultural policies accordingly. As an initial step, the establishment of regular air routes and cruise services between Busan and Dalian would significantly enhance accessibility between the two cities. Cruise routes, in particular, function not merely as modes of transportation but also as platforms for experiencing maritime culture and shaping intercity perceptions, thereby transforming the identity of sea port cities into tangible tourism products [30]. Beyond the development of a single Busan–Dalian route, the creation of multinational and multi-regional marine tourism routes such as Busan–Dalian–Japan or Busan–Dalian–Jeju could further expand the spatial scope of Northeast Asian marine tourism cooperation. These composite routes would not only extend tourists' length of stay and expenditure but also strengthen interconnectivity among Northeast Asian cities through maritime linkages. Cultural events, marine festivals, and programs connecting cruise tourism with maritime museums and maritime heritage sites would further contribute to deepening mutual understanding of maritime culture.

The expansion of marine tourism and cultural diplomacy serves not only to promote the tourism industry but also to consolidate the social foundations of cooperation among sea port cities. As citizen-level exchanges accumulate, maritime cooperation is more likely to evolve from short-term policy initiatives into sustainable intercity partnerships [31]. Exchange programs involving students, young people, maritime professionals, and cultural practitioners are particularly valuable in fostering long-term maritime awareness and cooperative mindsets among future generations.

Marine tourism and cultural diplomacy between Busan and Dalian complement functional cooperation centered on shipping and port operations while extending the scope of sea port city collaboration into civil society and cultural domains. This approach concretizes the shared maritime identity of Busan and Dalian as marine-oriented cities and functions as a practical policy instrument for enhancing the sustainability and stability of maritime cooperation in Northeast Asia.

4.4 Strategic Maritime Cooperation in Preparation for the Arctic Shipping Route

The emergence of the Arctic shipping routes represents a structural transformation in the global maritime and logistics system, driven by accelerated Arctic ice melting due to climate change [32]. As these routes offer significant reductions in sailing distance and transit time between Asia and Europe, major maritime powers increasingly regard the Arctic not as an alternative route but as a strategic maritime space. China has responded proactively by positioning itself as a near Arctic state and advancing the Ice Silk Road initiative as part of the broader Belt and Road framework [33]. Through investments in icebreakers, Arctic research infrastructure, and diplomatic and economic cooperation with Arctic coastal states, China has moved beyond experimental navigation toward regular commercial operations along Arctic routes. This shift indicates that the Arctic route is becoming a realistic and competitive option within global shipping networks [34].

In this context, viewing Korea China relations solely through the lens of competition presents strategic limitations. While Korea possesses advanced shipbuilding, shipping, and port operation capabilities, its institutional and long-term preparedness for Arctic navigation remains relatively underdeveloped. Given the high risks and costs associated with Arctic operations, cooperative and phased approaches offer a more practical alternative than unilateral strategies.

Thus, strategic cooperation between Busan and Dalian provides a viable platform for joint preparedness in the Arctic route era. As key maritime hubs in Northeast Asia, both cities share the potential to function as gateway nodes for Arctic shipping routes. Priority areas for cooperation include maritime education and training for polar navigation, joint research on Arctic marine safety and environmental protection, and collaboration on

low carbon shipping and environmentally sustainable maritime governance. Busan Dalian maritime cooperation in the context of Arctic shipping should be understood not as a zero sum competition but as a strategic partnership that leverages complementary strengths. Such cooperation represents a long term and realistic response to structural changes in global maritime order and contributes to enhancing the strategic standing of both cities within the evolving maritime governance framework of Northeast Asia.

4.5 Remarks

Busan–Dalian maritime city cultural diplomacy holds the potential to evolve into a comprehensive maritime cooperation network encompassing multiple dimensions, including maritime education and training, maritime law, maritime tourism, and strategic responses to the Arctic shipping routes. If institutionalized on the basis of a shared identity as maritime centered cities, such cooperation could serve as a key driving force for Busan’s emergence as a maritime capital of Northeast Asia, while also offering a representative model of a new Asia centered maritime cooperation framework.

5. Conclusions

This study conceptualizes Busan and Dalian as representative sea port cities and maritime centered cities of South Korea and China, respectively, and seeks to reconceptualize cooperation between the two cities beyond a conventional port and logistics-oriented approach by applying the analytical framework of maritime city cultural diplomacy. To this end, the study analyzes the structural potential and policy implications of Busan–Dalian cooperation across four key domains: maritime education and training, maritime law and maritime arbitration, maritime tourism and cultural exchange, and strategic cooperation in preparation for the Arctic shipping era.

The analysis demonstrates that Busan and Dalian share urban structures in which maritime education, maritime human resources, and maritime culture are highly concentrated alongside port functions and shipping industries. This shared structural characteristic provides an important foundation for deepening cooperative networks between sea port cities. In particular, the establishment of a joint maritime education and research platform centered on Korea Maritime and Ocean University and Dalian Maritime University may be evaluated as a strategic task directly linked to the sustainability of the Asian shipping industry, with the potential to evolve from short term exchanges into an institutionalized cooperation model. Moreover, cooperation in the fields of maritime law and maritime arbitration is expected to strengthen Busan’s maritime governance capacity while enhancing its policy standing within the Northeast Asian framework for maritime dispute resolution.

Social exchange mediated through maritime tourism and maritime culture constitutes another important pillar of cooperation emphasized in this study. For cooperation between sea port cities to achieve sustainability and stability, industrial and policy level collaboration must be complemented by mutual understanding and cultural consensus at the level of civil society. Maritime tourism and cultural diplomacy connecting Busan and Dalian are strategically significant in that they concretize a shared identity as maritime centered cities and provide a relatively stable foundation for cooperation even amid fluctuations in diplomatic and political environments.

Furthermore, this study situates Busan–Dalian cooperation within the long term context of structural changes in the global maritime order driven by the rise of Arctic shipping routes. In an environment of intensifying international competition surrounding the Arctic routes, approaches that frame Sino Korean relations solely in terms of rivalry face inherent limitations. Step by step cooperation centered on maritime human resources, education, research, and environmental norms between Busan and Dalian offers a risk diversified strategy for the Arctic era and highlights the possibility for the two cities to perform complementary roles in the reconfiguration of the Northeast Asian maritime order.

In particular, Dalian occupies a strategically important location as a major maritime city and the central hub of Northeast China, facing both the Yellow Sea and the Bohai Sea. It also holds significance as a key spatial axis of South Korea’s New Northern Policy, particularly in relation to the construction of Eurasian logistics networks and the potential for trade with North Korea. At present, a substantial Korean expatriate community and numerous Korean affiliated firms are active in Dalian, alongside a large ethnic Korean population, indicating that a solid foundation for economic and human exchange is already in place. In addition, the presence of historical legacies associated with Korean independence activists such as Ahn Jung geun, Shin Chae

ho, and Lee Hoe young suggests that Busan–Dalian cooperation can expand beyond economic collaboration to encompass historical and cultural solidarity.

Within this context, the establishment of a maritime friendly city partnership between Busan and Dalian may serve not merely as a symbolic gesture but as a starting point for institutionalizing a substantive cooperation network encompassing maritime education, maritime law, maritime tourism, and responses to the Arctic shipping routes. By employing the concept of maritime city cultural diplomacy, this study extends maritime cooperation into the domain of city diplomacy and presents a new policy model for maritime cooperation in Northeast Asia, thereby contributing both theoretical and practical value.

Nevertheless, as this study focuses primarily on institutional analysis and policy recommendations, it has limitations in terms of empirically assessing the economic impacts and sociocultural spillover effects of individual cooperative initiatives. Future research should therefore incorporate quantitative analyses of actual Busan–Dalian exchange cases alongside surveys of public perception to more comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of maritime city cultural diplomacy. Despite these limitations, this study offers a meaningful reference for future discussions on Sino Korean maritime cooperation by proposing cooperative directions through which Busan and Dalian can proactively respond to changes in the Northeast Asian maritime order on the basis of their shared identity as maritime centered cities.

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