

UNESCO World Heritage Sites in China's cultural diplomacy: Fostering mutual understanding along the Silk Roads

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Abstract

The adoption of the World Heritage Convention (WHC) in 1972 was the response to a world asking for peace after the destruction caused by the two world conflicts, particularly to cultural heritage (CH). UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS) act as enablers in establishing strong and effective relationships among countries, people, culture and history, while influencing and attracting these elements to promote a positive national image and fostering mutual understanding, which is the main objective of cultural diplomacy (CD). This holds true also for China and this institutes the need to investigate on how UNESCO World Heritage acts as a strategic asset in Chinese CD. This paper will provide an empirical framework addressing the position of WHS embedded in the Chinese CD. Discussion on the growing Chinese involvement of WHS in cultural projects fostering international relations and considerations on the potential impact and future development of this phenomenon with regards to China and the WHC are offered.

Keywords

World Heritage, Cultural Diplomacy, China, Soft Power, Silk Roads.

UNESCO and China's cultural engagement in the World Heritage Convention

UNESCO WHS along the Silk Roads (SR) represent vehicles of paramount importance for China to pursue its CD and disseminate its cultural values. In the Chinese context, CD represents a powerful tool with regards to a nation whose integration with the world fuels and shapes the academic debate both on the CH realm¹ and the international political-economy realm (IPE)², although the latter lacks a more-in depth analysis on how China's rich cultural and intellectual traditions influence its global integration. The case of China is worth mentioning because of the uniqueness of its model and political system which govern the cultural development and manage the CH of the country³. The first key argument advanced by this paper is that, in order to better depict the Chinese cultural development and commitment to the WHC in the 50 years since its adoption, it is necessary to delve into the historical and institutional path that China took through the years. It shows how CH assumed different relevance based on the country' strategic objectives. During the first decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the adoption of an international treaty concerning the protection of cultural and natural heritage - and interests in international affairs in general - did not align with the historical turmoil and political changes and was not a priority in the country's national agenda in those years. Although it had been a founding member

of UNESCO in 1945, China's commitment to UNESCO only started from the '80s. The adoption and ratification of the WHC in 1985 coincided with a moment of vibrant and flourishing international cooperation which China wanted to embrace. As a matter of fact, the *Reform and Opening-up Policy* launched by the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978 signified – although gradual and progressive – openness on all counts, particularly culturally. The establishment of the National Commission for UNESCO in 1979 was the most significant sign that officialized the country's cultural opening-up and willingness to international cooperation⁴. Looking at the success of other countries, but aiming at resisting Western ideologies' influence, China developed a new regulatory regime favoring tourism and heritage-centered economic purposes through a selected use of cultural tradition⁵. Since the 1980s, official references to China's cultural tradition have been growing at a rapid pace and culture protection assumed a prominent position that ultimately resulted in China's numerous inscriptions on the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL) from 1987. Although one of the major elements that contributed to the Chinese success in the effective implementation of the WHC was the ability to promote a positive image of the country, the so-called Chinese economic miracle generated, in turn, a strong debate on the challenges posed by China's integration and expansion on the international arena⁶. The SR is perfectly positioned in such a debate. As a matter of fact, the second key point this paper wants to disentangle is how China developed its own narrative and how this is used to promote an analogous initiative with economic and foreign policy objectives, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Due to its ambitious goals and global relevance, the BRI has been vastly analyzed by scholars and pundits as China's biggest manifestation of its variegated integration to the world with relevant implications contesting both the notion of the CH and IPE paradigms⁷. A basic departure point of this research is that it considers the Chinese narrative playing a fundamental role in the successful engagement with the outside world and, thus, in the successful implementation of the BRI. A narrative centered on the historical SR heritage that manifests itself through soft power' (SP) strategies and mechanisms of CD. To this regard, it is useful to offer an outline of how this narrative is constructed based on the abovementioned scholarships and discuss its relevance in forging and projecting a positive image of the country.

UNESCO World Heritage Sites in China's cultural diplomacy along the Silk Roads

Historical narratives and discourses are essential to the construction of heritage. The Chinese narrative itself is a heritage constructed throughout four thousand years of history. In particular, the use of SR narrative predates the BRI and reveals to revolve around three main elements that build on both historical and contemporary references. The first is the revitalization of the past that leverages on historical figures who traveled along the ancient SR and positively contributed to the encounter of people⁸. Second, this reference can also be used to revitalize the heritage of the SR Spirit⁹, as outlined in the document *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, published in 2015 to delineate the guidelines of the BRI. The concept of the SR Spirit is specified as the spirit of «peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit» that was developed more than two thousand years ago when «the diligent and courageous people of Eurasia explored and opened up several routes of trade and cultural exchanges»¹⁰. Furthermore, the image of the SR as a path that starts in China to reach the outside world is not only considered particularly appealing for the Chinese domestic public but also useful to open communications with external

actors¹¹. In this sense, the SR rhetoric is unique and beneficial as it allows underlining the shared historical heritage of different states¹². The SR offers the possibility to find points of cultural connection through the language of shared heritage to gain regional influence and loyalty¹³. In the particular case of the PRC, while domestically the ancient SR is connected with a positive image of China, more recently the BRI exploits the common heritage of the SR as a tool to project the same image internationally¹⁴. This can be primarily achieved by developing *people-to-people bonds* identified as one of the main cooperation priorities for the BRI in the Vision and Actions document. It is exactly this third element of the narrative that can be considered the very tool disseminated in China's SP strategies enhancing the effectiveness of CD linked to the BRI. When it comes to China's application of SP, the ability to affect other countries resonates in the power of discourse based on persuasion¹⁵, rather on coercion, which is connected to the development of the BRI. The Chinese leadership proved to understand the relevance of strategic narratives. President Xi Jinping's launch of the BRI in 2013 elevated the SP strategy to a higher level in terms of the width of the vision and the extent of other countries' involvement. To this regard, it is noteworthy that when referring to the BRI, Chinese authorities use the term *strategy* when addressing the Chinese public but prefer the less aggressive one of *initiative* with outsiders¹⁶. Furthermore, Xi Jinping underlines the necessity to build a «community of shared destiny» that, beyond infrastructural connectivity, would entail the ideas of exchange and values. In this context, the BRI became the instrument employed by the PRC to connect such a community, using public diplomacy to foster the acceptance of this project. Hence, the use of the heritage of the SR can be considered part of a «discursive strategy» that allows engaging outsiders¹⁷. Extant literature highlights the SP components of the BRI and shows how the CH connected to the ancient SR became an instrument for the Chinese narrative connected to the BRI¹⁸. Recent scholarship shows how Chinese SP strategies have been unfolded internationally, successfully resonating in Africa¹⁹, and showing different patterns of projections across groups of countries²⁰. In this context, the BRI employs CD to internationalize Chinese culture, not only relying on economic cooperation but also on people-to-people relations²¹. The people-to-people aspect of the initiative are exemplified in projects focusing on culture, education, science, and tourism²². In fact, since 2013 the BRI has involved investments in cultural and international cooperation, in projects regarding art, cinematography, museums, CH, tourism, etc²³. In the educational sphere enhancing the BRI, Confucius Institutes, Chinese universities, and educational programs were founded abroad²⁴. Finally, an additional priority of people-to-people diplomacy efforts is international cooperation in the promotion of CH. In this sense, the inscription of the site *Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor* in the WHL in 2014²⁵, represents the main example that as a natural consequence, spurred other countries' interest in the heritage of the SR and in joining other inscriptions of this kind²⁶. It is upon this scholarship, then, that this paper builds further explicitly aiming to relate the WHC and inherent WHS along the SR as strategic assets for China to build its SP and exert its CD. To this regard, the following first studies the origins of the UNESCO SR Project and then reveals how its significance as a cultural route instigated a stronger interest to the transnationalization of properties inscribed on the WHL. Moreover, this section analyzes how WHS confers legitimacy to the Chinese narrative, which lies behind its foreign policy initiative, the BRI. As noted above, UNESCO was established after a period of international crises due to World War II that launched a universal narrative thread centered around the word peace. Building on this assumption, the UNESCO SR Program traces back to the first attempt to increase international awareness

about the history of Eurasian connectivity, the *Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue*. Challenged by operational factors and issues of under-representation of the Central Asia region on the WHL, the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) conducted a thematic study aiming at providing a wider overview of the nature of sites along these vast routes, *The Silk Roads: an ICOMOS Thematic Study*²⁷. Parallel to the analysis conducted to describe the elements of the Chinese narrative inherent to the SR, below we propose an analysis of the mechanisms underlying the WHC and the relevance of the WHS as part of UNESCO-promoted SR Program, in compliance with the main arguments of our research. On one hand, the reference to historical revitalization in the Chinese narrative leads to one figure in particular, Admiral Zheng He, who embodies China's grand narrative of region-wide trade, encounter, and exchange along the Maritime Silk Routes (MSR)²⁸. The Chinese interest in the MSR from a cultural perspective was officially manifested with the promotion of the meeting of UNESCO experts for the World Heritage Nomination Process of the MSR²⁹. However, in addition to the museums, mosques, and artefacts now appearing around the region celebrating his voyages, China financed countries that are key nodes in the modern-day BRI infrastructure network to support the search for remains of Zheng He's fleet, beyond the construction of port infrastructure. Interestingly, foreign political leaders leverage on the historical narrative represented by Zheng He's voyages to help raise public awareness about each countries' maritime history and connections to China that are explicitly invoked to build domestic support for the strategic engagement in the BRI. Given the networked nature of the initiative, over the coming years we will potentially see other states dig into – both physically and discursively – their own maritime pasts and build heritage industries and museums around stories of trade, connection, and exchange³⁰. This represents a great opportunity for China to cooperate with those countries that Zheng He's voyages navigated along the MSR and inscribe transboundary sites on the WHL based on shared heritage and history. On the other hand, scholars noted that the SP generated by the BRI holds the ambitious objective of making China a leader of CD³¹. However, we contend that the 56 WHS inscribed on the Chinese WHL are already some evidence that confers China such a leadership. A sort of charming calling card holding tremendous potential when it comes to the nomination of those sites along the SR not yet inscribed on the WHL, not to mention transnational ones. Remarkably, the historical narrative based on the shared heritage along with the impact represented by these potential nominations will fuel the Chinese narrative which, in turn, will give significant impetus to the BRI. In practice, WHS function as powerful tools backing the implementation of the «community of a shared destiny» endorsed by Xi Jinping.

Final remarks: China's cultural diplomacy and the future of the WHC

Delving into the mutually reinforcing concepts of the SR and BRI shows that connectivity - both economic and cultural - reduces suspicion and promotes common prosperity, as demonstrated by the history of the ancient SR³². For many in the Central Asia region, the Silk Road is a story of peaceful trade, and a rich history of religious and harmonious cultural exchange. The BRI seeks to directly build on this legacy. The Chinese narrative attached to the Silk Roads is the story China is now telling the world to boost its SP and exert CD, assuming that the “cultural capital” at the basis of the country's SP comes not only from its successful economic model but also from its glorious past which ultimately suggests a glorious future through the BRI³³. Altogether, the analysis above highlights a characteristic polymorphic China's integration with the world³⁴, which we contend to make

for a polymorphic interpretation of the future of the WHC. This raises structural considerations concerning the notion of CH and the role of the WHC. From an IPE perspective, the spatial paradigms inherent in the SR vision are challenging a dominant feature of the global political economy³⁵. From a CH perspective, this envisages a notion of multiculturalism. Given the Sino-centric view of the SR, it might be the case of a China-induced multiculturalism where corridors, nodes, sea routes would generate new cultural basins and, thus, new categories where to conceptualize novel understandings of CH. In this respect, there is big room for the people-to-people connectivity acting as the driving force at the basis of a widespread mutual understanding encompassing a wide array of nation states across the Eurasian and African continents. Demographic shifts and confluence of people and cultures across these vast geographic spaces will bring about socio-economic and political factors that necessarily imply to consider culture among the wider political economic dynamics. A fundamental question to ask is how the WHC will evolve vis-à-vis these developments. In contemporary times, the WHC is already challenged by lobbying mechanisms that raise credibility concerns³⁷. In their participation at UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, State Parties now regularly use this language of shared heritage to endorse each other's nominations. World Heritage has thus become an important platform for identifying trade, religious and other connections from the past as the basis for future cooperation³⁶. Adding to this, the impact of a successful implementation of the BRI that besides economic interests could spur a shared culture and identity framework, incontestably requires the WHC to govern and harmonize enormous geocultural outcomes. How existing institutions - governmental and non-governmental - and relevant stakeholders - architects, anthropologists, policy-makers - operate in a context of new cultural basins will be a crucial factor. New professionals and experts working in the cultural development of mankind are required to cope with new socio-cultural infrastructures and dynamics. As for policy suggestion, UNESCO should play an active yet neutral role as both guarantor and promoter of transboundary inscriptions from under-represented State Parties on the WHL. This has twofold benefits. On one hand, more inscriptions of such kind would foster the representative, balanced and credibility of the WHL. On the other, it would limit the Sino-centric narrative of the SR. As for the contribution to the scholarship, the BRI is probably the most significant initiative in the history of the world that fosters international cooperation and the encounter between people, which is ultimately one of the main objectives and ambitions of the WHC. Considering the great geopolitical and geocultural implications cultural specialists have done little to apply their more recent insights to the issues that most concern international relations scholars³⁷. Beyond geopolitics and IPE dynamics usually scrutinized in academic research when it comes to China's integration with the world, more attention should be placed on the adoption of an interdisciplinary approach that includes the analysis of cultural dynamics underlying and shaping international relations and governance. We argue that the UNESCO WHC - and the Chinese commitment to it - stands as the iconic platform to disclose the interdependence and the mutually reinforcing trend of such dynamics.

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