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A Geocultural Power Competition in UNESCO's Silk Roads Project: China's Initiatives and the Responses From Japan and South Korea

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Abstract

Since Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, China has increasingly engaged in UNESCO's Silk Roads project. China's emphasis on its western routes signals its strategic interest in the reconstruction of its historical connections that matches China's global networking in Eurasia, the Middle East, and Europe. However, whether China will successfully reformulate the international visions of the past, present, and future for its benefit remains an open question. This article focuses on the responses from Japan and South Korea, both of which hold critical positions as the owners of eastern Silk Roads heritage and the funders of UNESCO's Silk Roads heritage studies and World Heritage nomination assistance. Extending the conceptual framework of memory infrastructure to the study of heritage politics and diplomacy highlights the competitive aspect of a transnational heritage project in shaping and reshaping historical and contemporary geographical landscapes.

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Keywords

Heritage, transnational, belt and road, cultural diplomacy

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Introduction

As China has risen based on its increasing wealth and military power, its historical narratives have also changed. Whether the topic is China's role in WWII or the historical ownership of Koguryo, an ancient kingdom in north-eastern China and northern Korea, changes in China's official historiography over recent decades indicate that a new historical narrative has been constructed in the light of present needs and visions of the Chinese government (Mitter, 2020; Seo, 2008). The emergence of the Silk Roads as a focal point in China's official rewriting of history corresponds with its global project of "One Belt One Road" (OBOR; Silk Road Economic Belt and the Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road), which was later renamed the "Belt and Road Initiative." Domestically, it signals the party-state's aspiration to consolidate power under Xi Jinping (Freymann, 2020: 47–63). Internationally, the Silk Roads narrative and heritage management serve China's strategic interest in the reconstruction of its historical connections that matches the country's evolving global networking and global (re)ordering (Benabdallah, 2021; Mayer, 2017; Winter, 2019, 2021a).

China's emphasis on its western connections in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East, East Africa, and Europe reflects its economic and strategic interests in these regions. Its efforts to use the Silk Roads cultural heritage have increased to justify its geographical connections and to reach out to the Silk Roads project led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). However, whether China will successfully synchronise UNESCO's Silk Roads project with its global initiative and reformulate the international visions of the past, present, and future for its benefit remains an open question. Like many observers of China's ascendance suggest, China's influence cannot be properly assessed just by examining what China does; it can be understood by examining how others perceive China (Goh, 2016: 2). With this concern, this article aims to answer the following two questions: What are the geocultural implications of China's initiatives in the Silk Roads project's transnational heritage? How have the two heritage competitors in the region, Japan and South Korea, viewed and responded to China's ambitions?

Among many concerned parties involved in the Silk Roads heritage and historiography, Japan and South Korea hold critical positions both as the owners of the eastern Silk Roads heritage and the funders of UNESCO's studies of the Silk Roads heritage and the World Heritage nomination assistance. Japan has played a particularly key role in capacity-building and technical and financial assistance for heritage conservation and management in China, Central Asia, and other regions since the late 1980s (MOFA, 2021). While Japan and South Korea have little conflict with China over the construction of the transnational Silk Roads' heritage, they do not want their heritage and contributions to be too much overshadowed by China's emphasis on its western connections.

By extending the conceptual framework of "memory infrastructure" to the study of heritage politics and diplomacy, this article links Heritage Studies, Memory Studies, and International Relations, which are conventionally understood as separate disciplines.

As Mayer explains in the Introduction of this special issue, memory infrastructure is a structural foundation of collective memories and imaginations – an arena for meaning/significance making of past memories. By focussing on UNESCO’s Silk Roads project as laying the foundation of transnational memory infrastructures, this article advances the comprehensive understanding of a socio-political structure that constrains and enables China’s Silk Roads diplomacy. In International Relations, constructivism acknowledges that the “realities” of the world are socially constructed (Wendt, 1995; Onuf, 2013). Examining the process of changes in international relations requires an engagement with the broader questions of norms, culture, narratives, and perceptions within which discussions among multiple players take place. While the power of the narratives is particularly prominent in shaping the structure of international politics (Hagström and Gustaffsson, 2019), the notion of memory infrastructure allows us to extend the scope of narrative power to the area of material objects and institutions in shaping and reshaping geographical and historical landscapes.

The focus of this study is placed primarily on state officials, heritage experts and institutions as the primary actors that shape the processes of the World Heritage nomination of the Silk Roads. Informed by interviews with heritage experts and documentary sources in each country, this article sheds light on the views of Japan and South Korea in response to China’s Silk Roads initiative. The responses and reactions from other relevant countries and institutions, as well as local views and tourist perceptions of the Silk Roads sites, are important components of the Silk Roads memory infrastructures. However, this article limits its scope to China, Japan, and South Korea to highlight the competitive aspect of transitional memory infrastructure making.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. In the first section, I introduce the concept of memory infrastructure and how it relates to a geocultural power competition. Secondly, I identify the institutional role of UNESCO’s World Heritage in the construction of memory infrastructures across the globe. Thirdly, I define UNESCO’s Silk Roads project as a memory infrastructure project and articulate the emerging role of China in the project. In the fourth and fifth sections, I examine Japan and South Korea’s Silk Roads heritage policies and responses to China’s initiative. The Conclusion summarises the findings of this article.

Cultural Memory, Infrastructure, and Geocultural Power Competition

Memory infrastructure is a useful concept in the study of transnational heritage making and practices of memory. The type of memory discussed in this study is cultural memory. The notion of cultural memory has developed largely based on the work of Jan Assmann. He argues that cultural memory is a specific concept to point to accumulated residues of the remote past that constitutes the “store of knowledge from which a group derives awareness of its unity and peculiarity” (Assmann, 1995: 130). It should be differentiated from communicative memory by which images of the recent past are handed down within

a group of people in everyday communication. Cultural memory requires organised communication, materials and cultural institutions, such as monuments, museums, libraries, and archives, to be circulated in society and to be transmitted from one generation to another. The memory of one generation can be maintained as the memory of society in symbolic forms, grounded on objects and practises. Because cultural memory survives in texts, images, artefacts, ceremonies, and other media, it is more durable than communicative memory which is non-institutional and only lasts for no more than three generations (Assmann, 2008: 12).

Due to this institutional character, cultural memory is not so different from history. Memory is often contrasted with history, as discussed explicitly in Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1989: 8–9). According to Nora, memory is specific to an individual or a group, open to change and responsive to the present conditions, while history is the intellectual reconstruction of the past as the things that are no longer living. However, the relationship between memory and history is not straightforward (Poole, 2008). To be sure, history is one mode of remembering, but there are other ways of remembering the past, ranging from the formation of myth to monuments and from ritual to history (Erlil, 2008: 7). What sustains people's memory of the past is not the past itself but symbolic representations of the past and institutionalised practices of memory. Thus, Assmann (1995: 113) argues, "in the context of cultural memory, the distinction between myth and history vanishes."

Yet, memory has a normative character that history does not necessarily have (Poole, 2008: 158–160). Stories of collective struggle and achievement provide members of the community with a sense of belonging and responsibilities for the present and future. While history is about the past as knowledge, memory treats the past as ours/mine (Assmann, 2013: 38). This nominative aspect of memory is embodied in cultural heritage. Researchers in heritage studies have often emphasised links between the past, present, and future precisely because heritage is always constructed and maintained as a living present (Harrison, et al. 2020; Lowenthal, 2015). Recognising the close relationship between cultural memory and heritage, Apaydin (2020: 17) also explains that "heritage is a reservoir of memory that allows for the survival of collective identity."

Some researchers who focus on the institutional character of cultural memory adopt the idea of infrastructure to conceptually ground their study. They consider infrastructure a useful notion to identify the metaphysical constraint that a network of memory institutions has on our remembering and forgetting. Building on the scholarly works on infrastructure as facilitating networks for the circulation of people, things, and ideas (Star, 1999; Star and Rhuleder, 1996), Rubin (2018: 215) describes that memory infrastructures "enable and constrain the circulation of past experience in the public sphere." What shapes and composes the past in the present is not simply a historical narrative but physical and institutional nodes of memory. Mayer in this special issue also describes memory infrastructure as a "bridging" institution between the combination of hard and soft infrastructures, which provides a broad foundation of collective memories and imaginations. Memory infrastructures available to the public can vary in time and space. Focussing on the important role of memory infrastructures, Johnston (2020) argues that information

science has taken over the twentieth-century librarianship for remembering and forgetting. Across time, memory infrastructures limit or delimit memory and heritage practices. Although memory infrastructures do not impose direct control, they function like environments that shape everyday people's remembrance and forgetting over the longer term. For Johnson (2020: 15), "infrastructural materials are forceful tools that are made available for public intervention, even if access is not distributed equally." What is emphasised in this body of literature is that memory is shaped, maintained, communicated, and contested under the constraints of memory infrastructures.

Because of this fundamental role in memory making and practices, memory infrastructures can be a target of criticism and contestation. In his study of activists seeking to challenge the material infrastructures built under Francisco Franco's dictatorship, Rubin (2018: 216) explains that the exhumation of mass graves of the Spanish civil war victims, archival efforts to generate and reorganise related documents on Franco's oppression and its victims, and the creation of social networks of living and dead persons are a way of building a different kind of infrastructure. The disputes with the material remnants in which hegemonic narratives of past events are embedded open a new arena of historical sites and destabilise the existing political order.

While Rubin's case is a domestic struggle, competitions over hegemonic memory infrastructures can take place at an international level. This is what I call a geocultural power competition. Like a geopolitical or geoeconomic competition, this competition involves map-making processes in which states seek to make sense of the distribution of things and values in territories and their populations. It is a dynamic power-political process to formulate or alternate a geographical landscape for one's political or economic advantage; ethnic, religious, and cultural histories are used to connect or divide a space in the world.

Winter describes China's Belt and Road as a geocultural project in which China uses pre-modern cultural sites and monuments to smooth out the source of friction in the Belt and Roads Initiative and formulate the public image of China's civilisational centrality in the world (Winter, 2019, 2020, 2021a). From ceremonial entertainment to speeches and international forums, China's Silk Roads project goes far beyond the construction of historical narratives. They include the material construction of museums, World Heritage sites, monuments, and festivals to play a central role of redefining the space and institutional memory of human connections centring around China. So far, across Asia, East Africa, and Southern Europe, many countries and institutions have joined in those Silk Roads cultural projects, but the making process of transnational memory infrastructures remains open to competition, like in any other politics of memory infrastructures.

World Heritage and the Making of Memory Infrastructures

UNESCO's World Heritage is an elaborate international mechanism with the aim of the protection, conservation, and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world. It was founded by the Convention concerning the World Cultural and National Heritage in 1972 (World Heritage Convention), and was ratified by 194 states as of

2022. Like many other international organisations, UNESCO and its heritage programmes are characterised by the dominance of the nation-state framework that creates tensions between international cultural norms and local/national perspectives of cultures (Nakano, 2018; Singh, 2007; 2014). Nevertheless, there is an institutional mechanism to develop and maintain transnational memory infrastructures in the way to reflect a collective will of preserving cultural heritage.

UNESCO's World Heritage makes it a duty for state parties to engage in the identification, documentation, interpretation, management, and monitoring of selected heritage properties that are deemed to have "Outstanding Universal Value" (OUV). This is a long-term process in which a range of selected properties and narratives are shaped and reorganised, and diverse values and viewpoints are generated and at the same time dismissed. What can emerge through the nomination and preservation of World Heritage are opportunities to develop material properties as heritage, legal, and policy frameworks for management, expert networks, and media and entertainment products that pull local and national stories together. It is through the formation of tangible and intangible heritage and the development of narratives and visual images associated with heritage that various selected memories and values are shaped, communicated, contested, and negotiated. Thus, the World Heritage system is not just about taking care of the tangible aspects of World Heritage. It has a broader impact on, and implications for the making of, memory infrastructures. Hereby, the three functions of the World Heritage system can be recognised: legitimisation, institutionalisation, and publicisation.

Firstly, the World Heritage system offers a platform to legitimise the dominance of selected memories in the form of cultural heritage. World Heritage nominations by state parties go through the evaluation process of UNESCO's advisory bodies, such as the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). These are non-governmental expert organisations dedicated to the conservation and preservation of cultural and natural heritage. They conduct informal consultation with state parties, make site visits to understand local contexts, and evaluate nomination files based on the criteria for selection in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 2019a: annex 6). Out of ten selection criteria, heritage needs to meet at least one to be recognised as OUV, which is an explicit mark of the world's significance. With the experts' recommendation, nomination files are sent to the final evaluation by the intergovernmental body, the World Heritage Committee (WHC). In the twenty-first century, more and more recommendations by advisory bodies have been reversed at the final decision by the WHC, which raised concerning voices over the loss of credentials in UNESCO (Meskell, 2013: 486–487). However, state parties continue to enthusiastically pursue the inscription of their nominated sites as if experts' authorisation be not a priority. For them, what matters the most is the acquisition of the UNESCO brand in World Heritage. Because heritage is made from the selective use of the past accompanied by historical interpretations and narratives, states expect the credentials of World Heritage to legitimise their official narrative of the selected past (Nakano and Zhu, 2020).

Secondly, the World Heritage system ensures the state parties' long-term commitments to the conservation and management of selected heritage sites. According to the World Heritage Convention, state parties have the obligation to manage, monitor, and preserve the properties and report regularly to the WHC on the status of conservation and updated information. To do so, they need to institutionalise their domestic process of conducting surveys, monitoring, documentation and making a strategy for interpretation about how to protect World Heritage sites – a similar process can be found in Intangible Cultural Heritage (see Maag in this special issue). The List of World Heritage in Danger works as a tool to encourage or put pressure on the state parties to carry out their duties of conservation and preservation of the sites as they are (Cameron, 2016: 330). “Inscribed” in the List in Danger is largely perceived as a stigma for state parties: powerful states therefore tend to use their diplomatic power, and WHC membership if applicable, to thwart or stall inscription into the List in Danger (Brown et al., 2019). At the same time, the List can also operate as a “fire alarm” to garner special attention from the advisory bodies, non-governmental organisations, and other WHC member states and obtain funding, including World Heritage Fund, for the conservation, protection and rehabilitation of endangered heritage (Hølleland et al., 2019). This mechanism of intervention in states' heritage properties demonstrates that states conservation and protection efforts are expected to be perpetual.

Thirdly, the inscription on the World Heritage List publicises the importance of the selected heritage to a large audience. The news of a World Heritage inscription is likely to get local, national, and international media attention at least temporarily. For the tourism industry, World Heritage inscription is a great business opportunity (RC and TBR, 2009). It gives incentives to public and private sectors to construct better transportation, accommodations, and other facilities, and to organise cultural and social events for the purpose of entertainment, education, and local revitalisation. Because mass tourism and new infrastructure development can threaten the prominence of World Heritage sites, how to ensure the sustainability of a property is a key issue (Labadi and Gould, 2015). The construction of hard infrastructures contributes to the wider sharing of a specific site or landscape through which visitors can reflect, imagine, and understand the selected past. Heritage does not guarantee the continuity of a specific memory. However, when the official interpretations of historical events and experiences in the nomination file are repeatedly used with the visual images of heritage sites, World Heritage also contributes to narrative continuity.

For its functions of building and reinforcing memory infrastructures, UNESCO's World Heritage attracts states that are keen for nation-building, nation-branding, status-seeking, and economic opportunities (Nakano and Zhu, 2020; Yanık and Subotić, 2021). Despite the use of cosmopolitan language such as a common heritage of humanity, state parties aim to exploit the UNESCO's World Heritage brand to mobilise resources for the reinforcement of selected memories (Logan, 2012). However, the World Heritage system also serves for the construction of transnational memory infrastructures. In 2013, UNESCO made a new recommendation for the joint nomination of transnational heritage

by concerned state parties. Paragraph 135 in the “Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention” reads:

Wherever possible, transboundary nominations should be prepared and submitted by States Parties jointly in conformity with Article 11.3 of the *Convention*. It is highly recommended that the States Parties concerned establish a joint management committee or similar body to oversee the management of the whole of a transboundary property. (UNESCO, 2019a)

The scheme for transnational, serial nominations for UNESCO World Heritage status is meant to overcome inward-looking nationalistic narratives and move forward to shape heritage as the diplomacy of transnational networking and cooperation (Winter, 2015). A joint nomination of transnational heritage requires international cooperation among concerned parties. In the process of survey, selection, and documentation, related state parties need to institutionalise and materialise places and practices as transnational heritage to meet the criteria of UNESCO’s World Heritage.

However, a joint nomination by multiple state parties is not popular. Even if heritage can be promoted jointly with others, state parties prefer to take a nationalistic approach to proceed alone so that they can control heritage and claim its ownership (Aykan, 2015). Moreover, preparing for a transnational World Heritage nomination is a far more complex, and internationally more contested, process than a national one. In a single country’s nomination, the government is responsible for an entire nomination process. In the case of transnational heritage, no central authority can dictate the process of World Heritage nomination without the consent of other involved state parties. As in the case of Qhapaq Ñan, the road system of the Inka empire, even without the inclusion of indigenous and local communities, it is not easy to coordinate efforts of institutions of multiple countries with different laws, cultures, languages, motives, and attitudes to heritage (Korstanje and Azcárate, 2007). In addition to the requirement of diplomatic negotiations and multilateral compromises, capacity differences among involved parties can bring a challenge of geocultural power competition over how the shared past comes to be imagined and communicated. For transnational heritage to be successful memory infrastructures, not just heritage but heritage construction process should be acceptable to involved parties.

UNESCO’s Silk Roads Project and China’s Initiative

Since the German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen wrote about *die Seidenstrasse* in 1877, books, documentaries, websites, films, discourses of diplomacy, and tourism have made the ancient Silk Roads the symbol of common humanity and a hope (Chin, 2013; Thorsten, 2005). Built on the accumulated knowledge and understanding of the Silk Roads, UNESCO has used the Silk Roads as a focal point of intercultural dialogue and international cooperation in its East–West Major Project (1957–1966), the Integral Study of the Silk Roads (1988–1997), and a new project on the serial transnational World Heritage nomination of the Silk Roads since 2003 (Winter, 2020, 2021a). To prepare

for transnational World Heritage nominations of the Silk Roads, UNESCO has organised a series of sub-regional meetings, workshops, and studies, in which related state parties, with the assistance of international experts in ICOMOS, explored the idea of nominating their cultural properties as part of the transnational heritage routes of the Silk Roads. In 2019, representatives and experts from sixteen countries (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Pakistan, South Korea, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), as well as Bhutan as an observer, participated in the sixth meeting of the Coordinating Committee on the Serial transnational World Heritage nomination of the Silk Roads (UNESCO, 2019b).

The process of exploring the possibility of making serial transnational nominations of the Silk Roads contributes to the further development of memory infrastructures through which structured images are shaped to make the Silk Roads stories durable memories. Even if the nomination is not successful, meetings and workshops for preparing nominations bring institutions and experts from different countries together and contribute to information sharing, communication, negotiations, and knowledge production over what the Silk Roads mean, where the routes can be found, and how to preserve or reconstruct them. The development of an information sharing and management system in Central Asia was one prominent outcome of transnational heritage dialogue (Vileikis, 2016).

However, tensions have emerged behind the development of this project. UNESCO's exploration for the serial transnational World Heritage nominations of the Silk Roads began with the exploration of related heritage in the Chinese territory. The first UNESCO expert mission was sent to the Chinese section of the Silk Roads in 2003 in order to investigate candidatures for inscription on the World Heritage list (Jing, 2013). Although Central Asian countries were invited to the following workshops to overcome their underrepresented status in World Heritage lists, China, with a growing economic power, emphasised the impact of the Chinese civilisation on the construction of the Silk Roads. In a series of sub-regional workshops in Almaty (2005), Turfan (2006), Samarkand (2006), Dushanbe (2007), Xi'an (2008), and Almaty (2009), an overarching framework to formulate the transnational Silk Roads heritage was under question. According to Wang (2019), two contrasting views have emerged: a "monumental approach" with a focus on the imperial power of ancient China, and an "assemblage approach" that regards the Silk Roads as a collection of various civilisations. Although the Concept Paper in the Xi'an workshop emphasised the role of China in shaping the ancient trading path apolitical framework, the *2014 ICOMOS Thematic Study on the Silk Roads*, written by heritage experts in University College London commissioned by ICOMOS, comprehensively covers a network of "nodes" and "corridors" through which various objects and entities travelled and reshaped civilisation in the places they passed through (Williams, 2014). This report significantly contributed to the shift of focus in the construction of the Silk Roads heritage in a later period and made it open to the inclusion of various properties in other regions beyond China and Central Asia (Wang, 2019).

As *ICOMOS Thematic Study* also suggests that each heritage corridor should be nominated as an independent serial nomination (Lin, 2014), China, Kazakhstan, and

Kyrgyzstan jointly nominated the Chang'an-Tian-shan Corridor as the Silk Roads' "routes network" while Tajikistan and Uzbekistan nominated the Penjikent-Samarkand-Poykent Corridor. Although China's attempt to exclude Uzbekistan from the development of its nomination dossier upset Uzbek researchers (Yamauchi, 2021), China pushed this idea and achieved its objective for World Heritage inscription in 2014. This success did not just mean the elevation of Chinese nationalism or tourism development but "substantial cultural and historical support for the 'Silk Road economic belt' project" (Zhang, 2020: 60).

After the inscription, the Coordinating Committee on the Serial Transnational World Heritage Nomination of the Silk Roads has continued to support for the improvement of the documentation of the Penjikent-Samarkand-Poykent Corridor, whose inscription was deferred. Considering that many other routes have a potential for joint World Heritage nomination, the Committee also aims at the development of other Silk Roads corridors nomination. The fourth meeting of the Coordinating Committee on the World Heritage Serial Nomination of the Silk Roads in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in 2015, decided to review the progress of the Silk Roads World Heritage nomination, including the South Asian Silk Roads (Nepal, Bhutan, China, and India), the Fergana-Syrdarya Silk Roads Heritage Corridor (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), as well as other Silk Roads initiatives from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Turkmenistan (UNESCO, 2015). Those meetings and related workshops encourage efforts for constructing various routes of Silk Roads heritage, while the Coordinating Committee limited the scope to the land-routes and suggested another venue for discussing the maritime Silk Roads if necessary (UNESCO, 2018). Largely following the direction of *ICOMOS Thematic Study*, UNESCO embraces multilateralism in which underrepresented or undiscovered sites and routes related to the Silk Roads should be respected and explored for future World Heritage nomination.

While UNESCO continues to provide an international platform on the Silk Roads, China has become the largest financial contributor to UNESCO since 2019. Through its enthusiastic support for World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Chinese government has made UNESCO a "complicit partner" in the transformation of ethnic and minority cultures within the Chinese territory into the national assets and resources for boosting Chinese civilisational legacy and the tourism industry (Shepherd, 2009: 64; see also Blumenfield and Silverman, 2013). The Chinese presence in UNESCO's Silk Roads project has dramatically increased not just because of the governmental initiatives but the active engagement of Chinese sub-state actors in UNESCO's Silk Roads project. The Municipality of Xi'an has aligned its urban development plans with the national government's recognition of the "east terminus of the historic Silk Road" (Yang, 2020). It has hosted a number of sub-regional meetings and ceremonial events on the Silk Roads, one of which was to launch a new online platform, the "Silk Roads programme," in collaboration with the Tang West Market Cultural Industry Investment Group of China, the Provincial Government of Shanxi Province and the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO (UNESCO, n.d.). The Silk Roads Youth Research Grant scheme was also established with the support of China's National Commission for UNESCO, while a project to develop an Interactive Atlas of Cultural

Interactions along the Silk Roads and the Youth Eyes on the Silk Roads Photo Contest were funded by the China World Peace Foundation.

Outside UNESCO, China has increasingly exploited the Silk Roads theme for the reconfiguration of global and local space (Mayer and Zhang, 2021). Under Xi Jinping, China declared the OBOR initiative, later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative, to strengthen the economic and political links with other countries and relocate China as a global power. In this context, China's engagement in UNESCO's Silk Roads project, not to mention the success of China's World Heritage nomination, serves China's geopolitical and geoeconomic policies of "opening borders" (Wang, 2019) and "inclusive" globalisation (Seoane, 2020) and the positioning of itself as a "civilisational state" with a long and continuous history (Winter, 2021b). Jing Feng, the Director of WHC's Asia and the Pacific Unit and the coordinator of UNESCO's Silk Roads project, also stated in *People's Daily* that the success of the World Heritage Silk Roads nomination is an important achievement in the cultural field of the OBOR initiative (Jing, 2019).

China's Silk Roads project outshines Central Asia, even though the region remains at the centre of the Silk Roads historical narratives. Central Asian countries continue to be peripheral due to a lack of funding and insufficiency in detailed scholarly studies of its geographical and chronological components (Whitfield, 2020: 34–35). Funds to support those and other countries are essential to the exploration and management of underrepresented routes and sites. In this sense, the contributions by Japan and South Korea to UNESCO's Silk Roads project are noticeable as other Asian countries, aside from China, that have made extrabudgetary funding available to the study and preservation of the Silk Roads heritage sites. The UNESCO/Japanese Funds-in-Trust (FiT) supported capacity-building activities and nomination preparation in Central Asia while the UNESCO/Korea FiT funded the South Asian Silk Roads project. Having China, Japan, and South Korea together in the same international heritage platform is significant given that those East Asian countries have various heritage conflicts and controversies including Japan's industrial heritage and the Koguryo kingdom (Lee, 2020; Nakano, 2021a, 2021b). In contrast, the Silk Roads, commonly viewed as a positive past, brought new opportunities for developing transnational memory infrastructures under the same theme.

Japan on the Silk Roads

Japanese interest in the Silk Roads heritage and history can be traced back to the Meiji era (1868–1912) (Esenbel, 2017). As Japan ascended to a great power status in the early twentieth century, the Silk Roads became intellectually and ideologically an important subject as it offers a civilisational discourse that connects the East and the West (Winter, 2021b: 4). Even after the defeat of Japan in 1945, the rich and diverse content of the Japanese report, *Research in Japan in History of Eastern and Western Cultural Contacts*, compiled for UNESCO's East–West Major Project, demonstrates a strong Japanese scholarship in the Silk Roads archaeology and history (Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, 1957). As Japan became more aware of its international position in the 1980s, the semi-governmental television network NHK featured

the Silk Road in documentary series, which stimulated the Japanese people's romantic imagination of the distant intra-regional history (Schoenberger, 1988). The nostalgic image of the Silk Roads has been sustained by entertainment products, museums, and artworks, including the famous paintings of caravans and camels by Japanese artist Hiyarama Ikuo (1930–2009). To a large extent, the Silk Roads are given a high significance in post-war Japan as it is considered the important legacy of peace and humanity. In 1989, Japan actively participated in UNESCO's expeditions for the "Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue," one of which included Osaka as the destination. With such a long history of Japan's engagement in the Silk Roads, former Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto (1997) referred to the Silk Roads as Japan's nostalgia in his speech.

Over decades, Japan has involved in the development of the Silk Roads memory infrastructures not only in Japan but outside. Nara, the ancient capital of Japan, publicly known as the eastern end of the Silk Roads, was an obvious place for the domestic cultural agencies to focus on, but it was the task of Japan's foreign ministry to promote a wide range of activities to conserve and preserve the sites and properties of the Silk Roads in China, Central Asia, South Asia, and other regions. In particular, UNESCO/Japan's FiT for the Preservation of the World Cultural Heritage, which was created in 1989, supported UNESCO's projects on safeguarding the Silk Roads sites in China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (MOFA, 2021).

When Matsuura Koichiro took the position of UNESCO's Director General (1999–2009), UNESCO gained another moment to initiate campaigns for the promotion and preservation of the Silk Roads cultural heritage. Hirayama Ikuo, as UNESCO's goodwill ambassador, donated to UNESCO to establish ten yearly fellowships (Hirayama Fellowships) from 1990 to 1999. According to Yamauchi (2016: 8–9), the idea of the Silk Road World Heritage nomination also came from the joint request in 2002 from Hirayama and the then president of the UNESCO General Conference. Japan's technological support for the Silk Roads has been also active. In 2001, the National Institute of Informatics of Japan and the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO launched a Digital Silk Roads' initiative for the digitalisation of the Silk Roads-related materials (Ono et al., 2005). After the Buddhas of Bamiyan, known as the Silk Roads heritage in Afghanistan, were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, Japan both financially and technically contributed to a UNESCO's campaign for the preservation of the Bamiyan site (Toubekis et al., 2009).

However, subregional meetings and research on the Silk Roads routes and sites for a World Heritage nomination started without Japan. It was only in 2007 that Yamauchi Kazuya, a Japanese archaeologist and a contributor to Japan's conservation project in Central and South Asia, participated in the UNESCO subregional workshop on the World Heritage serial nomination for Central Asian Silk Roads in Dushanbe (Yamauchi, 2016: 13–14). He discovered there that the Japanese ancient capital, Nara, was not included in the Silk Roads map. For Nara not to be forgotten, Japan started sending a delegate to UNESCO's subregional workshop in the following year and launched a systemic effort to support Central Asia in the framework of a three-year UNESCO/Japanese FiT project, "Support for Documentation Standards and Procedures of

the Silk Roads World Heritage Serial and Transnational Nomination in Central Asia” (2011–2014). The programme aimed at capacity-building in Central Asia, including the improvement of conservation standards, management and planning skills, as well as the documentation of archaeological and architectural sites, all of which are important for a successful World Heritage nomination (JCIC, 2014). This project was extended in 2014 for another three years for further work on documentation and training in Central Asia.

Japan’s aid and supporting activities for capacity-building in Central Asia are not simply goodwill diplomacy but are rooted in Japan’s sense of ownership that is linked with the history and heritage of the Silk Roads. The Japan Consortium for International Cooperation in Cultural Heritage (JCIC) describes what the Silk Roads means to Japan:

Our assistance for registration of Silk Roads as World Heritage by five Central Asian Republics has and will help us to review the history of Japan and understand the future because Japan, which is located at the east end of Silk Roads, was also a part of the history of the interactions between the East and the West through Silk Roads. In this sense, it is our pleasure and responsibility to support the inscription of the Silk Roads network on the World Heritage List by the five Central Asian Republics. In addition, the restoration of Silk Roads as World Heritage Sites by international cooperation will be a key in Japan’s re-establishment of dialogues and harmonious relationships with other Asian and European countries through cultural interaction. (JCIC, 2014)

Positioning Japan as a “part of the history of the interactions between the East and the West through Silk Roads,” this statement suggests that Japan is a responsible player in restoring the heritage of the Silk Roads and contributing to international dialogue and peace. This is defined as a distinct legacy of Japan that should not be forgotten.

China’s economic ascendance and its increasing Silk Roads initiative pose a challenge to Japan’s self-conceptualisation. The absence of Nara on the Silk Roads map meant that memory infrastructures could be created without Japan. Such a concern drove Japan to be more active in UNESCO’s Silk Roads project and other supporting activities for Central Asian countries over the Silk Roads heritage conservation and documentation. Japan clearly wants to maintain its position as a long-term contributor to the Silk Roads memory infrastructures through the assistance to heritage conservation and management. According to Yamauchi (2021), Japan’s capacity-building supports are much welcomed by Central Asian countries. It is a way to balance out China whose Silk Roads initiative is extensively tied up with its strategic agendas, including trade, energy resource exploitation, and security. In 2020, with Yamauchi’s initiative, Japan’s research theme was extended to the Maritime Silk Roads (JCIC, 2021). JCIC conducted a survey to gain the knowledge and views of experts in fifty countries on maritime networks and waterborne traffic. This effort implies that Japan’s engagement in the Silk Roads heritage conservation, and more broadly, memory infrastructures, will likely continue or even expand in the future.

South Korea on the Silk Roads

South Korea's engagement in UNESCO's Silk Roads project came much later than Japan. South Korea's interest in the history of the Silk Roads and its cultural connection to the Korean peninsula emerged only when economic opportunities in Central Asia arose in the post-Cold War era. A steady increase in business transactions and the movements of people between South Korea and Central Asia culminated to President Park Geun-hye's Eurasia initiative in 2013, aiming at "a set of directions for making Eurasia into a single united continent: a continent of creativity and a continent of peace" (Park, 2016). According to Dadabaev (2018: 34), South Korea's use of Silk Roads as rhetoric is more "practical" than Japan's use for its focus on investment and business opportunities as well as access to energy and other resources in Eurasia.

While economic relations are the initial focus of South Korea's foreign policy, the government's engagement in UNESCO's Silk Roads project has deepened since 2015. For the first time in 2015, South Korea's representatives participated in UNESCO's Coordinating Committee on the Serial Transnational World Heritage Nomination of the Silk Roads. It was mainly because South Korea financially contributed to the launch of UNESCO's Silk Roads project, "Support for the Preparation for the World Heritage Serial Nomination of the Silk Roads in South Asia," through the UNESCO/Korea FiT. To explore the Silk Roads heritage route networks in Bhutan, Nepal, and India, this project made it possible for UNESCO/ICOMOS experts to conduct consultation meetings and field expeditions in cooperation with regional offices and institutions (Williams, 2016). In addition, Korean heritage experts and curators started participating in international dialogues and information sharing for the consolidation and digitalisation of the Silk Roads knowledge and artefacts through UNESCO's Silk Roads programme, an online platform, which was launched in the same year with a strong initiative of China (Kim, 2021).

Since 2015, South Korea's domestic effort to raise the people's awareness of its historical connection with the Silk Roads has significantly grown. In discussing the Silk Roads in a multilateral framework, South Korea recognised the importance of asserting its historical connection with Silk Roads so that this connection would not be forgotten by the public. The most prominent Silk Roads heritage site on the Korean peninsula is the ancient tombs in the city of Gyeongju, which is also known as the capital of the Silla Kingdom (57 BC–935 AD) in Korea. In 2015, the Conference of the Eastern Silk Roads Story was organised by UNESCO Bangkok and the Gyeongju World Culture Expo, with the support of the municipal governments of Gyeongju and Gyeongsangbuk-do Province. At this conference, Kim Gwang-Jo, the director of UNESCO Bangkok, described Gyeongju as a "key nodal point" in the Eastern Silk Roads (UNESCO, 2016: 3).

In the same year, the Silk Roads Universities Network (SUN) was founded based on the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and the Provincial Government of Gyeongsangbuk-do. This organisation aims to restore "'SilkRoadia', the Silk Roads spirit – a symbol of the bridge between the

East and West by banding together universities located on the land and sea routes of the Silk Roads and contributing to world peace and the creative development of civilisation by training future leaders devoted to this spirit” (Silk Road Universities Network, n.d.). Hwang Sungdon, the secretary-general of SUN, admits that many Koreans do not think of Korea as a part of the Silk Roads, but he argued for the importance of educating Koreans, particularly those who may become leaders in business and society, through field trips, lectures, and exhibitions to better understand Korea and its connection with the world (Hwang, 2020).

Externally, the government of South Korea situates the Korean connection with the Silk Roads largely as part of the Korean legacy of its openness and creativity. On Korea’s sectional page on the UNESCO’s website, it is said:

The culture of the Silla Kingdom can be characterised as international and global at that time because the various other cultural elements were harmonised in it. Gyeongju, the capital of Silla, was the very place where all cultures of the Eurasian continent had spread to the edge of the Korean Peninsula through the Silk Roads. The Silla Kingdom of Korea was an open-minded society to all kinds of cultures. Gyeongju was one of the globalised lively cities exchanging with other worlds by the Silk Roads both land and maritime. Silla well shows the truth of the proposition that the culture could develop as more creative as it would be mixed with other ones. (UNESCO, n.d.)

As this statement demonstrates, South Korea used its connection with the Silk Roads to emphasise the image of its open-mindedness and global connections.

It is not deniable that UNESCO’s Silk Roads project has revived Korean interest in rediscovering and reconstructing its ancient global connections. Korean officials and experts used it as an important opportunity to promote their research, tourism, and education, which contribute to the construction of the Silk Roads memory infrastructure at a local level. However, China’s Silk Roads initiative caused some concern in South Korea.

Firstly, there was a worry about a loss of balance in UNESCO as an independent international organisation. Becoming a member of the International Network of the Silk Roads Programme in UNESCO, South Korea witnessed China’s ambition for dominating the programme. In the recollection of Kim Jongsok, the former chief curator of the National Museum of Korea and in charge of Korea’s focal point of the Silk Roads programme (2015–2019), Korean applications for the UNESCO Youth Research Grant, funded by China, were rejected outright by UNESCO’s Beijing Office because South Korea did not participate in China’s OBOR initiative. Being alarmed, Kim, together with the Korean National Commission for UNESCO, made a complaint to the UNESCO Headquarters and later received an apology statement from a UNESCO official (Kim, 2021).

Secondly, Korean academics in Central Asian studies were alarmed by the emergence of the Sinocentric Silk Roads narrative. Kang In Uk, a Korean historian, is one of the leading critics of the Sinocentric historical narrative of the Silk Roads. He argues that the Chang’an-Tianshan Corridor in the World Heritage List excessively stresses the

role of ancient China and the efforts of Zhang Qian, a Chinese explorer of the Han Dynasty (206 BC –220 AD), to open a new trade route to the Western region. In his view, the World Heritage nomination process of the Silk Roads “omit” the important actors, such as Russia and Mongolia (Kang, 2019: 60). He warns, “With China’s capital and immense human resources, the Silk Roads Heritage project has naturally been absorbed into the politics of the country’s Belt and Roads Initiative” (Kang, 2019: 61). His co-authored book, with Lee Ji-eun, and others in the Korean Association for Central Asian Studies, is the denial of Sinocentric and Eurocentric historical narrative of the Silk Roads and push forward the stories of land cultivators in Tibet (Lee, et al., 2018). Similarly, a report on “Shed new light on Silk Road – Rediscovery of Jeollabuk-do as a passage of civilisation” in 2019 says:

The study of the Silk Road has been mainly focused on the perception of Western Europe and China. As a result, East Asia including Korea was excluded when discussing the Silk Road. Where the establishment of a cooperative network between the areas surrounding Silk Road came to the fore as an alternative of Western-centric globalisation, it is essential to reinterpret the Silk Road based on the emphasised role of Korea. (JNU and SNUAC, 2019: 3)

Exploring the historical connection between Korea and the world, contributors to South Korea’s Silk Roads heritage gives the voice against the Sinocentric construction of the Silk Roads memory infrastructures. While South Korea does not have the same level of historical commitment to the Silk Roads compared with Japan, it is more active in cultivating its own space for the construction of the Silk Roads memory infrastructures in recent years. While UNESCO’s Silk Roads project, which China promoted, enabled South Korea to promote its own historical connections, South Korea distances itself from China’s vision of the old and new Silk Roads and objects to the sinification of UNESCO’s memory infrastructures.

Conclusion

This article explores the evolution of UNESCO’s Silk Roads heritage project as laying the foundation of transnational memory infrastructures. UNESCO’s international platform for the World Heritage nomination of the Silk Roads brought new opportunities for restoring material properties as transnational heritage, developing expert networks and legal and political frameworks for heritage management, and producing media and entertainment products of the Silk Roads. However, having witnessed China’s enormous resources and efforts to synchronise UNESCO’s project with its Belt and Road Initiative, heritage experts and diplomats in Japan and South Korea are cautious about a possibility that their notion of Silk Roads, and their contributions to the Silk Roads heritage, would be excluded or ignored. In response, both Japan and South Korea support the direction to ensure that the Silk Roads concept includes multiple routes that are open to multiple interpretations. Domestically, South Korea has accelerated its efforts for research and education on the Silk Roads to be part of transnational cultural heritage, while Japan has

maintained its research activities intact. Internationally, their assistance for documentation, research, and capacity-building abroad functions as balancing acts to prevent China from dominating UNESCO's Silk Roads project. Because material sites are important in shaping geographical and historical landscapes, those countries are alarmed by China's increasing initiative in UNESCO's Silk Roads project. Although Japan and South Korea do not form any alliance or strategic cooperation against China, both see that the diversified local/national knowledge production and institution-alisation of the Silk Roads heritage makes transnational memory infrastructures less hegemonic and more multilateral processes. In this way, UNESCO's Silk Roads project involves a geocultural power competition.

Concerns over fairness and legitimacy are not limited to China's eastern neighbours. As Indian historians also raise questions on the Sinocentric historical narrative of the Silk Roads (Mishra, 2020), those involved in the Silk Roads history do not easily give up their historical views and the sense of ownership of the ancient Silk Roads. Further research is required to obtain a full picture of the multilateral Silk Roads memory infrastructure-making. The impact of China on international geographical and historical landscapes, and the destiny of UNESCO's Silk Roads project, can be assessed and understood only in this way.

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