

Reshaping the Cultural Heritage Regime: How Japan and China Engage in UNESCO's Heritage Programs

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Abstract

Non-Western rising powers wield significant influence in reshaping the direction of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), ensuring its alignment with the dynamic global landscape and meeting the expectations of both rising states and those in the Global South. This article closely examines how Japan and China, as rising powers in the past and present, have actively engaged with UNESCO to exhibit their rich cultural legacies and histories while harnessing their influence to challenge Eurocentric heritage paradigms and assert their distinct Asian leadership positions. The article also underscores apprehensions regarding China's approach, rooted in a discourse of civilization and transregional connectivity, which might be intricately linked to global geopolitical ambitions and economic interests.

Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has long been recognized as a vital cultural organization whose mission is to foster a culture of peace, eradicate poverty, and facilitate intercultural dialogue through education, science, culture, communication, and information.¹ The main architects of UNESCO primarily hailed from Western countries, predominantly Europeans, British, and Americans. They played a pivotal role in shaping the organization, following in the footsteps of its forerunners, the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation and the International Bureau of Education. From standard-setting to social, cultural, and educational campaigning, a wide range of UNESCO's activities underscore the universal ideal of peace, reflecting the norms, values, and practices of Western enlightenment and humanist traditions.²

However, as multipolarity and pluralism gain prominence in global governance, UNESCO must reflect the new global geopolitical dynamics by working in line with the expectations of developing and emerging states that comprise the Global South.³ This is inevitable for ethical and financial reasons. UNESCO's moral and expert authorities have so much relied on the support from its member states (as of 2023, 194 member states and 12 associate members). Financially, UNESCO severely suffered the loss of funding after the United States decided to halt a planned payment to UNESCO for the recognition of Palestine as a new member in 2011.⁴ Although the

¹ UNESCO, Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/constitution>

² J.P. Singh, *United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): Creating Norms for a Complex World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

³ Willem J. H. Willems, "The Future of World Heritage and the Emergence of Transnational Heritage Regimes," *Heritage & Society*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2014, pp. 105–120.

⁴ The US also made an official withdrawal from UNESCO in 2019 due to the alleged bias of UNESCO against Israel. Joe Hernandez, "The U.S. Says It Wants to Rejoin UNESCO after Exiting during the Trump Administration," *National Public Radio*, June 12, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/12/1181687608/united-states-unesco-return-membership-funding>

US declared its return to UNESCO in June 2023, the relative decline of the Western economic powers makes it imperative for UNESCO to cultivate partnerships outside the West to secure its funds for operation. In particular, non-Western rising powers that have gained more resources and advanced technologies hold strategically important positions that no international organizations can ignore.

Likewise, rising powers also care about international organizations like UNESCO to enhance their position in the global hierarchy. As they accumulate economic power, they strive for prestige and respect in the international arena.⁵ Culture is a significant platform for those states that want to showcase their rich history, traditions, civilization, creativity, and achievement. Consequently, it is not surprising that rising powers are increasingly engaging UNESCO and participating in its flagship heritage platforms, such as World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage.⁶

Against this background, this article examines the endeavors of Japan and China to (re-) establish themselves as culturally and historically prominent nations within UNESCO while reshaping the international heritage regime in favor of their interests and perspectives. Japan was the first Asian country to become a major financial contributor to this Western-dominated organization, but China swiftly emerged as an influential actor in the twenty-first century, leveraging its financial power to the fullest extent. Both countries have actively preserved and promoted cultural heritage, challenging the Eurocentric view of heritage by emphasizing Asian or non-Western (Global South) perspectives. However, this article contends that China's recent emphasis on a civilizational discourse in the construction of its transregional cultural heritage is raising significant concerns due to its apparent connection with the country's political ambitions to establish itself as a central player in the global order. Moreover, this discourse is seen as a means to achieve its economic goals, including gaining access to resources and markets on a global scale. In response to the growing dominance of a Sinocentric historical narrative, major powers need to ensure UNESCO's transparency, accountability, and multilateral decision-making to better serve the interests of its diverse membership and the broader global community.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, I will explain the general characteristics of UNESCO's World Heritage, the international platform for safeguarding natural and cultural heritage worldwide. Second, I will examine the efforts made by Japan to expand the Eurocentric concept of cultural heritage. As one of the main contributors to UNESCO, Japan has used its economic leverage to instill non-Western perspectives into World Heritage criteria. Following the changes of UNESCO's heritage concept, the third section focuses on China, the new emerging power that aims to exhibit its presence in UNESCO. Using its financial power, China has contributed to the emergence of new norms regarding heritage conservation and international cultural cooperation. I conclude that those efforts serve to diversify the cultural heritage concept per the needs and perspectives of non-Western nations; however, it is necessary not to confuse cultural diversity with cultural multicentricity. Japan, for its part, should play a role in deterring forces to eliminate diversity and create another cultural hierarchy.

UNESCO's World Heritage and Eurocentrism

World Heritage is the most recognized international platform that UNESCO has developed, gaining in global popularity since its inception in 1972. As of 2023, 195 state parties have signed the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (known as World Heritage Convention). World Heritage is the largest international cultural framework

⁵ Rohan Mukherjee, *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁶ Ryoko Nakano and Yujie Zhu, "Heritage as Soft Power: Japan and China in International Politics," *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 26, no. 7, 2020, pp. 869–881.

uniting diverse state and non-state entities in the mission to safeguard and preserve natural and cultural heritage worldwide.

European countries dominate the World Heritage List, with one notable exception: China. As of 2023, Italy, China, Germany, France, and Spain were the top five countries with World Heritage properties. Europe and North America account for 47.12% of the total properties, followed by Asia and the Pacific (24.1%), Latin America and the Caribbean (12.43%), Africa (8.59%), and the Arab states (7.76%).⁷

It would be hasty to conclude that African and Arab states lack significant heritage compared to Europe and North America. Whether or not one country has a culturally significant heritage is not solely determined by the number of properties listed on the World Heritage List. African and Arab states have rich and diverse cultural and natural heritage that may not have been extensively recognized or included on the list. The underrepresentation of certain regions could reflect systemic biases in the nomination and evaluation processes rather than the lack of outstanding heritage sites and landscapes.

One perspective for explaining the small number of World Heritage sites in African and Arab states is that the criteria of the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) to be recognized as World Heritage are biased.⁸ Those who explore heritage as an area of critical inquiry argue that European heritage experts have shaped UNESCO's charters and recommendations.⁹ As a result, Eurocentrism within World Heritage criteria accounts for the overrepresentation of European countries. For instance, if "authenticity" is linked to material and substance based on European heritage examples, such as brick and stone buildings, wooden buildings may not be authentic because their materials are usually replaced with new ones over decades and centuries.

Due to differing perspectives, interests, and priorities among member states regarding World Heritage, the North-South contestation has marked the discussions in the World Heritage Committee, comprising 21 states that make final decisions on World Heritage inscriptions.¹⁰ Developed countries, primarily from the Global North, often have greater financial and technical resources, which enable them to select sites and to submit more nominations for a World Heritage status. With the notion that the preservation of high standards, rigorous evaluation processes, and adherence to technical criteria to maintain the integrity and universal value of the World Heritage List, European states may emphasize the importance of expert evaluations and the need for stringent criteria to protect the credibility and authenticity of the list. However, developing countries, primarily in the Global South, often face challenges due to their limited resources, capacity, and infrastructure. Some developing countries advocate for greater inclusivity, fairness, and recognition of their cultural and natural heritage, calling for reforms in the nomination process, evaluation criteria, and allocation of resources to ensure a more equitable representation of sites from diverse regions and cultures. Nevertheless, non-Western countries, joining the platform relatively later, feel compelled to conform to the norms and practices of Western heritage conservation and management.

Ultimately, the North-South contestation within the World Heritage Committee represents the current changing global power dynamics in the twenty-first century. In some areas, efforts have

⁷ UNESCO, "World Heritage List Statistics," <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/stat>

⁸ OUV means cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity.

⁹ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). Denis Byrne, "Western Hegemony in Archaeological Heritage Management," *History and Anthropology*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1991, pp. 269–276.

¹⁰ Christoph Brumann, "Slag Heaps and Time Lags: Undermining Southern Solidarity in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee," *Ethnos*, vol. 84, no. 4, 2019, pp. 719–738.

been made to bridge this divide through dialogue, capacity-building initiatives, and collaborative projects to address the concerns of developing countries and promote a more balanced and inclusive representation of World Heritage. A noteworthy example of this is the increasing influence of the Global South within UNESCO, prompting UNESCO's secretariat to prioritize the development of a sustainable development framework, given that development is a primary concern of the Global South.¹¹

In this context, the engagement of rising powers in UNESCO has become key. In particular, the emergence of Japan and China as major economic powers has significantly influenced the modifications of UNESCO's heritage concept and institutions. In the following sections, I will examine those two cases as essential steps for diversifying UNESCO's heritage platforms.

Japan and the expanding scope of cultural heritage

Japan joined UNESCO in 1951, before signing the San Francisco Peace Treaty to formally end World War II.¹² At that time, Japan faced limited opportunities for membership in international organizations due to its role as an aggressor during the war. However, UNESCO emerged as the first organization to approach Japan under the US occupation (1945–1952), initiating “re-education activities” aimed at eliminating the causes of war and aggression.¹³ A group of Japanese professors and educators welcomed UNESCO's initiatives and created a mass educational movement to promote the understanding of peace, human rights, and justice, as advocated by UNESCO. Consequently, UNESCO played a pivotal role in Japan's re-entry into the international arena during the postwar era.

As time progressed, Japan actively participated in UNESCO's initiatives, leveraging its expertise, sharing its cultural resources, and contributing to numerous programs and projects led by the organization. As early as 1954, a group of Japanese archeological experts and historians prepared an extensive report on the Silk Roads as part of the contribution to UNESCO's “Major Project for Mutual Appreciation of Cultural Values of East and West.”¹⁴ At the ascendance of Japanese economic power, the Silk Roads captured the Japanese imagination when NHK, a semi-governmental television network, produced and aired a documentary series about the Silk Roads in the 1980s. The program ignited the Japanese people's romantic fascination with ancient regional history.¹⁵ With significant interest by society, the Japanese government decided to participate in UNESCO's ten-year project of the “Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue” in 1988. Japan supported the expedition known as “the Maritime Route from Venice to Osaka,” involving Japanese scientists, researchers, and journalists. As a result, Japan has emerged as one of the proactive participants in UNESCO's endeavor to rekindle the Silk Roads memories and heritage during the 1990s.

¹¹ Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach, “Cultural Heritage and Development: UNESCO's New Paradigm in a Changing Geopolitical Context,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol.40, no.9, 2019, pp. 1593–1612.

¹² Takashi Saikawa, “Returning to the International Community: UNESCO and Post-War Japan, 1945–1951,” in Poul Duedahl, ed., *A History of UNESCO: Global Actions and Impacts* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 116–130.

¹³ Aigul Kulnazarova and Poul Duedahl, “UNESCO's Re-education Activities in Postwar Japan and Germany: Changing Minds and Shifting Attitudes towards Peace and International Understanding,” in Aigul Kulnazarova and Christian Ydesen, eds., *UNESCO without Borders* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 52–75.

¹⁴ Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, *Research in Japan in History of Eastern and Western Cultural Contacts: Its Development and Present Situation*, Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, 1957.

¹⁵ Marie Thorsten, “Silk Road Nostalgia and Imagined Global Community,” *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2005, pp. 301–317.

Japan's support for UNESCO's efforts to preserve World Heritage predates its ratification of the World Heritage Convention. In 1989, Japan financed the establishment of UNESCO/Japan's Funds-in-Trust for the Preservation of the World Cultural Heritage. This was consistent with Japan's interest in international cultural cooperation, which came to be a dominant theme for an economically developed Japan.¹⁶ After the ministerial discussion and coordination over the difference between the codes and discourse of the World Heritage Convention and Japanese domestic law on cultural property, Japan finally ratified the World Heritage Convention in 1992.

Since then, as a major financial contributor to UNESCO, Japan has significantly challenged the organization's Eurocentric heritage concepts and norms. As mentioned earlier, World Heritage and its related discourse were predominantly shaped by European scholars and practitioners in heritage conservation and management and European-based organizations in the field. Japan encountered such European-dominated discourse when the Horyuji temple and other Buddhist monuments were assessed for World Heritage inscription in the early 1990s. While the "authenticity" of the wooden temple was questioned due to the view that replaced materials were not original, Japan started exploring the meaning of authenticity.¹⁷ Consequently, Japan supported experts' initiatives for acknowledging non-Western heritage concepts in relation to the OUV criteria. The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), the outcome document of this meeting, had a major impact on UNESCO's understanding of heritage, as it emphasized cultural contexts in determining authenticity.¹⁸ The document also legitimized the Japanese claim that wooden monuments and buildings whose materials are replaced with new ones also should be considered authentic.

Another milestone for Japan in UNESCO was the election of Koichiro Matsuura, a Japanese diplomat who served earlier as the Chair of the World Heritage Committee, as the Director-General of UNESCO in 1999. By that time, UNESCO had adopted a nonbinding Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore (1989), a Living Human Treasures System (1993), and a Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral Heritage of Humanity Program (1998). These documents reflect the interest of non-Western countries that have rich non-material cultural assets and resources. However, Matsuura's leadership, backed by Japan's financial and diplomatic support, made it possible to upgrade the Masterpieces program to the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Convention (2003) and institutionalize a non-Western concept of intangible cultural heritage.¹⁹ Having Natsuko Aikawa from Japan as a developer of the intangible cultural heritage program, Japan further reinforced its commitment to UNESCO by actively shaping and influencing the organization's agenda.²⁰ Given Japan's rich cultural traditions, foods, cultural practices, and handicraft skills, creating a new international heritage platform in UNESCO made sense. The launch of the ICH program was also timely as UNESCO adopted the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity in 2002, which defines "culture" broadly and urges all nations and institutions to preserve culture in all forms. Although this achievement was not entirely Japan's success, having involved a bottom-up initiative, Japan's financial and diplomatic

¹⁶ Natsuko Akagawa, *Heritage Conservation and Japan's Cultural Diplomacy: Heritage, National Identity and National Interest* (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁷ Aurélie Éliisa Gfeller, "The Authenticity of Heritage: Global Norm-Making at the Crossroads of Cultures," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 122, no. 3, 2017, pp. 758–791.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Aurélie Éliisa Gfeller and Jaci Eisenberg, "UNESCO and the Shaping of Global Heritage," in Poul Duedahl, ed., *A History of UNESCO* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 279–299.

²⁰ Natsuko Akagawa, "Intangible Heritage and Embodiment: Japan's Influence on Global Heritage Discourse," in William Logan, Máiréad Nic Craith, and Ullrich Kockel, eds., *A Companion to Heritage Studies* (Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), pp. 69–86.

contribution made a significant impact, enhancing greater inclusivity in UNESCO.²¹

These initiatives highlight Japan's proactive approach to reshaping the discourse on heritage and promoting its own cultural perspectives. For non-Western powers engaging with UNESCO, the Eurocentric discourse creates a pressing need to assert their national and regional characteristics in heritage conservation and management. It also presents an opportunity to potentially revise existing platforms to better serve their own interests. Japan has sought to bridge the gap and ensure that its unique heritage perspectives and practices are duly recognized and incorporated into the global heritage discourse. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a more inclusive and balanced approach to heritage conservation that acknowledges the diverse cultural landscapes and traditions of non-Western societies. The scope of UNESCO's cultural heritage has expanded following the new voices of non-Western countries, particularly Asian.

China and the creation of a new cultural platform

China's engagement with UNESCO's heritage regime can be traced back to its ratification of the 1972 World Heritage Convention in 1985. Initially, China concentrated on its domestic agenda, including capacity-building and raising people's awareness of World Heritage. Unlike Japan, which accumulated knowledge and experiences regarding heritage conservation and restoration over decades, China experienced a social and educational disruption during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), which destroyed material cultural properties and the persecution of "intellectuals" in various cultural, professional, and educational domains. China therefore pursued expertise in the field of heritage conservation. With the successful outcomes of China's reform and opening-up policies in spurring economic development, the Chinese government also participated in three Advisory Bodies of the World Heritage Committee: International Council on Monuments and Sites in 1993, the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 1996, and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property in 2000.

China gradually accepted the concept of World Heritage while actively learning the language of the World Heritage nomination.²² This is a top-down process in which government bodies, such as the State Administration for Cultural Heritage, the Ministry of Construction, and the Ministry of Education, have participated. This integration of various government bodies and expertise underscores China's commitment to actively participate in the World Heritage Committee and engage with heritage-related matters on a national and international level. It demonstrates a coordinated effort to combine diplomatic and cultural heritage perspectives within China's delegations, emphasizing the importance the country places on heritage preservation and its recognition by international organizations like UNESCO.

As China's economic ascendance has gained prominence, and tourism became popular activities among Chinese citizens, China's heritage policy entered a new era. Like many other developing countries, the Chinese government was keen to increase the number of World Heritage sites both for inbound and domestic tourists. As has been called "heritage fever," even Chinese local officials made restless efforts to obtain World Heritage recognition in their corresponding sites.²³

After Xi Jinping came in power, China reinvigorated its commitment to UNESCO and the

²¹ J.P. Singh, "Cultural Networks and UNESCO: Fostering Heritage Preservation betwixt Idealism and Participation," *Heritage & Society*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2014, pp. 18–31.

²² Rouran Zhang, "World Heritage Listing and Changes of Political Values: A Case Study in West Lake Cultural Landscape in Hongzhou, China," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2017, pp. 215–233.

²³ Celine Lai, "UNESCO and Chinese Heritage: An Ongoing Campaign to Achieve World-Class Standards," in Poul Duedahl, ed., *A History of UNESCO: Global Actions and Impacts* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 313–324.

preservation of cultural heritage. Xi's profound dedication to UNESCO was evident, with his initial visit to a UN organization being to UNESCO. Embracing the "China Dream" as the cornerstone of his policy, President Xi directed his attention toward the renaissance of Chinese heritage, culture, and civilization. Together with the Belt and Road Initiative, a massive infrastructure development assistance project that Xi launched, China began to express its willingness to promote not only its economic relationship but cultural and social relationships with other countries.

During Xi's period, China transformed itself from a passive observer to an active contributor within UNESCO. China's financial contribution to the UNESCO annual budget overtook the amount of Japan's contribution, making China the biggest contributor to UNESCO after the US withdrawal from the organization in 2019.²⁴ In the World Heritage Committee, China has become one of the most vocal and influential countries in decision-making.²⁵ China has also managed to have placed its own officials in top management positions: Xing Qu as Deputy Director-General and Qian Tang as President of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education.²⁶ Viewed through the lens of shifting power dynamics, these developments signify the culmination of China's willingness to take a lead in UNESCO's programs.

One of the themes over which China actively aligns itself with UNESCO is the linkage between culture and development in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Building on its previous emphasis on UNESCO's role in development and its own domestic experiences, China backed Director-General Bokova's agenda to enhance UNESCO's involvement in the UN's Post-2015 Development Agenda. This support had already appeared when China hosted the International Congress "Culture: Key to Sustainable Development" convened by UNESCO in Hangzhou in 2013, marking the initiation of the agenda to connect culture with development.²⁷ China's engagement in this agenda serves its domestic interests in development-focused approaches to culture. While some warn that such a policy has destroyed local cultural heritage in Xinjiang, Tibet, and other regions of ethnic communities, this initiative has legitimized the state's utilization of cultural heritage in the name of development. The ultimate outcome of this endeavor was dependent on a broader international network. By connecting the multilateral culture–development agenda and China's own domestic cultural development, China exhibited its central role in promoting the interest of the Global South to the international audience.

Moreover, China's promotion of the Silk Roads heritage in UNESCO has indicated China's desire to champion the field of international cultural cooperation. Notably, China's involvement is comprehensive, with both the central government and regional entities actively participating in the promotion of Silk Roads narratives, resulting in increased recognition and reputation. The Municipality of Xi'an, recognizing its historical role as the "east terminus of the historic Silk Roads," has actively used its historical legacy and aligned its urban development plans accordingly.²⁸ Additionally, Xi'an has hosted several subregional meetings and ceremonial events related to the Silk Roads. At the launch of the collaborative "Silk Roads programme" in UNESCO in 2015, it was not only the Chinese National Commission for UNESCO, but commercial actors,

²⁴ This might change as the US decided to return to UNESCO in 2023.

²⁵ Enrico Bertacchini, Claudia Liuzza, and Lynn Meskell, "Shifting the Balance of Power in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee: An Empirical Assessment," *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2017, pp. 331–351.

²⁶ Grace Guo, "Should China Now Lead UNESCO?" *The Diplomat*, September 22, 2017. Hwa Young Nam, "The UNESCO Unveiled," *Investigative Journalism Reportika*, 2023. <https://ij-reportika.com/download/9308/?tmstv=1694065301>

²⁷ Wiktoria Mach, 2019, p. 1594.

²⁸ Yang Yang, "Producing Multiple Imaginations of the Silk Road in Xi'an, China's Urban Development," *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2020, pp. 854–866.

such as the Tang West Market Cultural Industry Investment Group of China, and local agents such as the Provincial Government of Shanxi Province, were also involved.²⁹ China's National Commission for UNESCO has provided support for initiatives such as the Silk Roads Youth Research Grant scheme, while the Beijing International Peace Culture Foundation has funded projects such as the development of an Interactive Atlas of Cultural Interactions along the Silk Roads and the Youth Eyes on the Silk Roads Photo Contest.³⁰

China's wide-ranging activities in the Silk Roads heritage field has broader geopolitical implications. China positions itself as the focal point of civilization, with multifaceted connections to the Middle East, Europe, and Africa, entails China's active involvement in constructing a heritage discourse aligns with its geopolitical and economic agenda.³¹ In contrast to Japan's promotion of the Nara Convention and its initiative for establishing the Intangible Cultural Heritage, China's emphasis on its pivotal role in development and culture, and its promotion of a new Silk Roads heritage platform, is directly related to the discursive construction of the Sinocentric national narrative that China aims to spread across the globe. Fearing such a dominant historical narrative, voices in Southeast Asia are advocating for the acknowledgment and reclamation of their region's historical contributions to the maritime Silk Roads.³² Japan and South Korea also share concerns that their historical ties to the Silk Roads may be overshadowed by Chinese initiatives, leading to potential oblivion.³³

In the aftermath of the zero-COVID policy in 2023, China organized the Alliance for Cultural Heritage in Asia, reviving the ambition to develop "Asian approaches" to conserving and preserving cultural heritage.³⁴ Closely observing China's Silk Roads diplomacy and heritage promotion, Tim Winter, the author of *Geocultural Power* (2019), warned that China's grand initiative for creating a matrix of cultural cooperation, or what Xi Jinping calls a new Global Civilization Initiative, could be a disaster for communities and cultures throughout Asia.³⁵ Mistakes have been made in the past, with the excesses related to the promotion of cultural heritage and development destroying people's livelihoods and natural and cultural environment. For China to be a champion of both development and cultural heritage conservation and preservation in Asia, communities, cultures, and people in the Silk Roads corridors should not be sacrificed for being commodified and commercialized for tourism and state-led infrastructure development projects.

²⁹ UNESCO, "The First Meeting of the International Network for the Silk Road Online Platform: A New Phase in UNESCO's Silk Roads Initiative," <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/first-meeting-international-network-silk-road-online-platform-new-phase-unescos-silk-roads>

³⁰ UNESCO, "Youth Eyes on the Silk Roads: Beijing International Peace Culture Foundation," <https://unescosilkroadphotocontest.org/en/node/41>

³¹ Giulia Sciorati, "'Constructing' heritage diplomacy in Central Asia: China's Sinocentric historicisation of transnational World Heritage Sites," *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2023, pp. 94–112.

³² Kwa Chong Guan and Han Fook Kwang, "Southeast Asia in the Forgotten History of the Maritime Silk Road?" *RSIS Commentary*, October 13, 2023, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/southeast-asia-in-the-forgotten-history-of-the-maritime-silk-road/?doing_wp_cron=1697589997.5977740287780761718750

³³ Ryoko Nakano, "A Geocultural Power Competition in UNESCO's Silk Roads Project: China's Initiatives and the Responses from Japan and South Korea," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2023, pp. 185–206.

³⁴ Xinhua, "Xi Greets Conference of Alliance for Asian Cultural Heritage," *China Daily*, April 25, 2023, <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/327459>

³⁵ Tim Winter, "What's behind China's New Alliance for Cultural Heritage in Asia?" *The Diplomat*, May 4, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/whats-behind-chinas-new-alliance-for-cultural-heritage-in-asia/>

Concluding thoughts

The history of international cultural cooperation in UNESCO reflects the aspirations of countries seeking to bolster their international standing. By actively engaging in UNESCO, these nations aim to contribute to shaping the international cultural landscape, exert influence, and establish narratives of their national history and culture, and contributions within the organization's framework. Through UNESCO, rising powers in particular aim to leverage their cultural heritage and resources to enhance their soft power and assert their presence on the global stage. Japan's aspiration to become a cultured nation is no exception, as it seeks to overcome WWII's negative legacy and move beyond economic power to cultivate its moral standing. Similarly, China launched an endeavor to work within the Western-dominated international order in the 1970s. As its economic power grew, it also aimed to cultivate a new terrain of cultural cooperation and present its national legacy and historical connectivity with the world.

For UNESCO, ensuring a fair and equitable approach to the recognition and preservation of diverse culture and heritage worldwide remains an ongoing challenge. Greater transparency ensures that decisions and actions are accountable and open to scrutiny, reducing the potential for favoritism or biased decision-making. Efforts have been made to address the imbalances in heritage lists/registers and promote a more inclusive representation of heritage from different regions. These measures need to be upgraded to reshape international cultural cooperation to cater not only to the interests of a select few but to many without power.

However, there is a risk that UNESCO will become a platform for specific countries to promote and legitimize their historical narratives and expand their influence beyond the cultural terrain. In particular, China apparently uses UNESCO and its cultural programs to promote its agenda and influence. China combines heritage with development. The inclusion of development attracts developing countries that prioritize economic growth rather than cultural conservation. Under the name of culture and people-to-people connections, China's initiatives can create major social and physical upheavals and destructions, justifying infrastructure projects that may benefit the tourism industry but displace populations.

For those who want to retain their cultural distinctiveness and historical significance, the growing dominance of a Sinocentric historical narrative regarding the Silk Roads is a source of apprehension. Other major powers, including Japan, may be responsible for further enhancing UNESCO's improvement by ensuring transparency, accountability, and multilateral decision-making in the organization. It is also important to support the capacity-building for heritage conservation and protection in other countries, like Japan's recent assistance to the Silk Roads heritage nomination by Central Asian countries.³⁶ By encouraging other UNESCO members to focus on cultural heritage matters, Japan should contribute to creating a more inclusive and democratic environment within the organization, enhancing fairness, inclusivity, and equal representation in UNESCO. By doing so, Japan may serve the original mission of UNESCO and the broader global community.

The recent news of the US rejoining UNESCO is potentially positive.³⁷ Having the US actively participate in UNESCO discussions could help counterbalance China's influence and its pressures on other UNESCO member states. However, the US must assume a constructive role to gain the

³⁶ For example, see UNESCO, "Silk Roads World Heritage Serial and Transnational Nomination in Central Asia: A UNESCO/Japanese Funds-in-Trust Project," <https://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/825/>. UNESCO, "Expert Meeting launches Phase III of the UNESCO/Japan Funds-in-Trust Project: Support Silk Roads World Heritage Nomination(s) process," February 23, 2022, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2416>

³⁷ UNESCO, "The United States' Return to UNESCO Celebrated with a Flag-Raising Ceremony," July 26, 2023, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/united-states-return-unesco-celebrated-flag-raising-ceremony>

trust and backing of countries in the Global South. This involves offering timely and proficient assistance to developing nations regarding culture and development and advocating for essential reforms within UNESCO. Without these efforts, the journey toward a more diverse and inclusive global community may result in the establishment of a multipolar hierarchy instead.