Heritage diplomacy along the One Belt One Road

Today the preservation and commemoration of cultural heritage in Asia occupies a complex place in an increasingly integrated and interconnected region. In comparison to ten years ago we are seeing a significant growth in the level of international hostility concerning the past and its remembrance. Histories of conflict, for example, are the source of ongoing tension in East Asia at a time of escalating militarisation. The diplomatic tensions between Japan, Korea and China concerning the events of World War 2 are being further exacerbated by the approach of museums in the region and attempts to have remnants – whether it be buildings, letters or landscapes – recognised by international heritage agencies. At the same time, however, we are also seeing major growth in the scale and scope of international cooperation between countries across Asia regarding the preservation of the past. Heritage conservation is fast emerging as an important component of the intra-regional economic and political ties that are binding states and populations in the region. In the coming decade one initiative in particular will take this heritage diplomacy to a whole new level, China’s One Belt One Road.

Tim Winter
One Belt One Road

One project that exemplifies the trends outlined here is One Belt One Road. Launched by Xi Jinping in September 2013, the project has been described as “the most significant and far-reaching initiative that China has ever put forward.”

Five major goals sit within a broad framework of connectivity and cooperation: policy coordination; facilities connectivity; unimpeded trade; financial integration; people to people bonds. Although recognised as an important mechanism for deepening bilateral and multilateral cooperation, this final goal has received less media and expert attention in large part because its projects do not carry the spectacle of multi-billion dollar infrastructure investments and contracts, or the mega-project outcomes they produce. In contrast to the ‘harder’ matters of trade agreements, physical infrastructure or reforms in legal systems, the people-to-people elements of the project are passed off as a series of ‘softer’ outcomes. Moreover, where such issues are discussed they tend to be vaguely accounted for as Chinese ‘soft power’, an analysis that misses the complex role culture and history play in the initiative. Indeed, I would suggest for both China and many of the countries involved, in cultural and historical terms much is at stake in this project.

In recent years a growing number of experts have pointed to the role deep history plays in China’s conduct of international affairs today. The long game, it is suggested, is overcoming a century of humiliation, a sense of national weakness at the hands of oppressive powers, and securing international recognition for their culture and civilisations, but also using that sense of history to create political and economic loyalty in a region characterised by unequal and competing powers. But this idea only partially captures what is at stake in One Belt One Road. Reviving the idea of the silk roads, on both land and sea, gives vitality to histories of transnational, even transcontinental, trade and people-people connections. Nowhere is this more important than within the region itself, where there are deep seated suspicions about China’s economic and military rise. I would suggest that it is within this wider context that we need to situate the Belt and Road strategy of fostering people-to-people connections.

Moreover, we need to look to the ways in which a historical narrative of silk, seafaring and cultural and religious encounters also opens up a space for other countries to draw on their own deep histories in the crafting of contemporary trade and political relations. Iran, Turkey and the Arab States of the Persian Gulf are among those looking to Belt and Road as an expedient platform for not only securing international recognition for their culture and civilisations, but also using that sense of history to create political and economic loyalty in a region characterised by unequal and competing powers. This new conventional idea of soft power focuses on how states and countries secure influence through the export of their own cultural and social goods. But this idea only partially captures what is at stake in One Belt One Road. Reviving the idea of the silk roads, on both land and sea, gives vitality to histories of transnational, even transcontinental, trade and people-people encounters as a shared heritage. Crucially, it is a narrative that can be activated for diplomatic purposes.

In their participation at UNESCO’s annual world heritage committee meetings, state parties now regularly use the 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 cooperation. It is an arena that explicitly encourages states to be internationally disposed, wherein norms of cooperation rely upon internationalised cultural nationalisms and the building of bridges as a platform for strengthening bilateral relations. While the idea of Silk Road nominations formally commenced in 2003, we are now seeing a surge in activity with Belt and Road dramatically changing the political imputes for cultural sector cooperation. Financial support from the governments of Japan, Norway and South Korea contributed to the first successful Silk Road world heritage listing in 2014. The nomination involved government departments and experts from China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan cooperating over thirty three separate sites. In November 2015 the fourteen country members that currently make up the Silk Roads Coordinating Committee gathered in Almaty, Kazakhstan to plan future nominations and tourism development strategies. Given dozens of Silk Road corridors potentially linking more than five hundred sites across the region have been identified, the Silk Road is likely to emerge as the most ambitious and expansive international cooperation program for heritage preservation ever undertaken.

Heritage diplomacy as hard power

Collaboration over nominations is only a small part of a much larger trend towards international cooperation for heritage preservation in Asia. Numerous world heritage sites across Asia have become honeypots of development in the past twenty years, and provided the logic for the construction of airports, roads, hotel zones and various forms of urban redevelopment. Increasingly tied to infrastructure, urban planning, tourism, post-disaster reconstruction and conflict transformation, heritage thus has emerged as an important form of spatial and social governance. The provision of cross-sector bi-lateral aid in this space also complicates any distinction between soft and hard power. This is evident in the apparent alignment of Silk Road heritage nominations with the multilateral structures of cooperation now proposed under the ‘Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road’ issued by the Chinese government in early 2015. A proposed South Asian Silk Road nomination largely corresponds with Belt and Road’s Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and plans for a Central Asian heritage corridor involving Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan directly align with the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor.

Central to all this tourism, an industry that uses people-to-people connections to link the cultural past to economic development. Over the next twenty years the Asia Pacific region will be the key driver of growth in a global tourism industry forecast to reach 1.8 billion international arrivals by 2030 (from around 1 billion currently). Rising middle classes in Asia, most notably China, will populate the airports and hotels built along the Silk Road opening up previously remote regions and communities. As a transboundary cultural landscape, the Silk Road will become a network of corridors and hubs of tourism development, oriented in large part around the branding of world heritage. As low and middle income countries in South and Southeast Asia have demonstrated in recent decades, international tourism has become a significant factor in GDP growth.
Heritage diplomacy along the One Belt One Road continued

For the Silk Road, the UN World Tourism Organisation is working with thirty three states, spanning Southeast Europe and Asia to align their tourism development strategies. In reversing long standing policies based on anxieties about regional counterparts or previous geopolitical alignments, many of these member states are now reforming visa regulations to facilitate greater leisure mobility and a less bureaucratic experience for tourists moving across multiple jurisdictions. Xian in northwest China has developed an ambitious heritage tourism strategy that capitalises on its location as the starting point of the original Silk Road. Projects in development include the “Silk Road International Museum City” and “Silk Road Expo Park”. Museums and pavilions will exhibit the arts, crafts and archaeological artefacts of many of the twenty Silk Road countries. In this regard Xian aims to be the gateway for a new era of international tourism. In such exchanges we also begin to see how prioritising people-to-people connections, both domestic and cross-border, ties into the security dimensions of the Belt and Road initiative. One of the lessons of the original Silk Road was that cross-border trade and cultural exchange build mutual respect and trust. Of paramount importance to Beijing is the stability of its western provinces, and transforming Urumqi and Kashgar into commerce and transport hubs – and the wealth generation that affords – will integrate the Muslim Uighur communities of the region with the rest of the nation. Indeed, the recent history of Tibet and Lhasa provides a likely template of the region-wide trade, encounter and exchange. Belt and Road’s emphasis on maritime connections also sustains claims that China ranks alongside its European counterparts as one of the great naval powers in world history. One figure in particular, Admiral Zheng He, embodies this grand narrative. A Muslim eunuch who led seven fleets across to South Asia, the Arabian peninsula and West Africa between 1405 and 1433 during the Ming dynasty, Zheng He is widely regarded as a peaceful envoy in both China and by the overseas Chinese living in Malaysia, Indonesia and elsewhere. In addition to the museums, mosques, and artefacts now appearing around the region celebrating his voyages, China has given millions of dollars to Sri Lanka and Kenya to support the search for remains of Zheng He’s fleet. Both countries are key nodes in the Belt and Road infrastructure network, with China financing the construction of deep water ports in Colombo and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Lamu in Kenya. In 2005 Singapore also celebrated the 600th anniversary of Zheng He’s voyages, hosting multiple events over the course of the year.” These helped raise public awareness about Singapore’s maritime history and connections to China; an historical narrative political leaders now explicitly invoke to garner domestic support for Singapore’s strategic engagement in Belt and Road. Given the networked nature of the initiative, over the coming years we will see other states in the Persian Gulf, East Africa, and South-East Asia excavate – both physically and discursively – their own maritime pasts and build heritage industries and museums around stories of trade, connection and exchange.

The connections of silk

By speaking to the construct of the Silk Road, One Belt One Road sits on a deep history of cultural entanglements and flows, which continue to expand and connect into and appropriate for their own ends. As a bridge, this complex trans-boundary cultural history is reduced to a series of heritage narratives that directly align with the foreign policy and trade ambitions of governments today. The Silk Road is a story of connectivity, one that enables countries and cities to strategically respond to the shifting geopolitics of the region and use the past as a means for building competitive advantage in an increasingly networked Sinocentric economy. Culture forms part of the international diplomatic armoury, and, with routes, hubs and corridors serving as the mantra of Belt and Road, countries will continue to find points of cultural connection through the language of shared heritage in order to forge regional influence and loyalty. But this also raises important questions concerning new forms of cultural erasure and colonisation and the political violence they deliver. The lives of vulnerable cultural communities, particularly those located in borderland regions, will be deeply affected by the developments outlined here. In both its land and sea forms, Belt and Road gives impetus to a network of heritage diplomacy that fosters institutional and interpersonal connections. This in turn provides the foundation for the more informal people-to-people connections that lie at the heart of Silk Road tourism. Indeed, framed by the political and economic imperatives of One Belt One Road, there is a distinct possibility that the heritage of silk will have lasting consequences that far outline the tensions of twentieth century conflict and occupation.

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