

Heritage Diplomacy along Silk Roads: UNESCO & Belt and Road Initiative

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INTRODUCTION

Heritage conservation increasingly attracts world attention not only because of the globally significant historical value of the heritage itself but also the economic and political importance yielded from heritage to nations and other stakeholders. So, the diplomacy of heritage preservation is essential to bring state and non-state actors in to manage potential bi- and multi-lateral cooperation and conflicts, particularly in the inscription processes of UNESCO world heritage. Although such processes, which require substantial national or transboundary technical and financial resources, traditionally favor western or pro-western countries, recent government-led regional efforts such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) concerning Silk Road heritage conservation may inject new momentum to reshape the current framework of heritage diplomacy. China's BRI may serve as a new venue which financially supports and coordinates all concerned state parties as well as relevant experts to investigate the feasibility of potential nominations.

This paper examines the evolution of heritage diplomacy practices concerning the nomination of Silk Road-related world cultural heritage with the launch of BRI in 2013. The paper first discusses the evolving concept of heritage diplomacy and how the UNESCO framework works to decide the inscription of world cultural heritage. The conditions necessary for world cultural heritage nomination serve as the foundation of potential international cooperation as well as become sources of possible conflicts. The paper proceeds to review the conservation of Silk Road cultural heritage under UNESCO since the late 1980s. In different stages, to what extent, UNESCO has achieved to preserve the Silk Road as a globally important cultural heritage? The constraints and limitations of UNESCO together with the global power shift lead to BRI as a new regional-oriented effort for heritage conservation. Then, the paper investigates two potential Silk Road-related nominations in Central and South Asia respectively. The two nominations have been discussed before the launch of BRI in 2013. UNESCO together with the financial support of country-specific Funds-in-Trust (FIT) attempted to coordinate various Silk Road countries to put forward the nominations. The successful inscription of "Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor" as World Cultural Heritage in 2014 demonstrates UNESCO's authority on shaping heritage diplomacy. However, the results in other areas such as South Asia were not so satisfactory, and further in-depth discussion is necessary. China's BRI then promises to provide financial supports and take concrete measures to coordinate concerned parties in the nominations of world heritage. The paper argues that UNESCO remains the main player in managing and promoting heritage conservation, but China's BRI may balance "Western-dominated" heritage diplomacy through technical and financial assistance. The paper concludes by discussing the challenges and prospects of BRI heritage preservation.

Before proceeding to the following sections, it is essential to outline the methodology of the research which is based on documentary and archival analysis (Burnham, P, Gilland, K., Grant, W., Layton-Henry, Z. 2004). The materials used in this study can be classified as primary sources such as UNESCO documents (Convention, Operational Guidelines, Project Reports, and other publications related to World Cultural Heritage) as well as national government documents and secondary sources such as newspapers, books, and academic journal articles.