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World Heritage Nomination As A Diplomatic Strategy: The Case of China ^[1]

During the 47th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, convened this May, China's Xixia Imperial Tombs (pictured above) was inscribed on the World Heritage List. With 60 sites inscribed, China is the country with the second most World Heritage Sites, runner-up to Italy. Heritage plays a central role in China's approach to diplomacy. The Belt and Road Initiative, China's greatest project to reshape global order, overlaps with the ancient Silk Roads. In 2014, one year after Xi Jinping announced the BRI, China jointly nominated the Chang'an-Tian Shan portion of the Silk Road routes as a World Heritage Site with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. China's dedication to putting forward World Heritage nominations reflects its ambition to curate its national image and leverage it to push for a developmental agenda through heritage diplomacy.

Located in Ningxia Province in Northwestern China, Xixia Imperial Tombs was still a niche tourist destination last year. An examination of the site's history reveals the reason for its nomination. Founded by nomads of Dangxiang ethnicity in the 11th century, Xixia was a regional strong power in Northern China and co-existed with the Han Chinese regime for nearly 200 years. Despite military conflicts with the Han Chinese, Xixia was influenced by Chinese culture. The Xixia regime invented its writing system based on Chinese characters and borrowed from Han legal traditions. Xixia's interaction with Han Chinese culture is central to Xixia Imperial Tombs' importance. State media outlets hailed the site as a material testimony to cultural fusion in Chinese history and cultural exchange along the Silk Road in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries.

"Cultural fusion" and "cultural exchange" are two concepts that China uses to frame its World Heritage Sites. As China becomes an assertive global power, it is keen to challenge the Eurocentric view of civilizations and redefine its place in the world. The World Heritage List, which identifies sites of "common importance for present and future generations of all humanity," allows China to establish itself as a peaceful rising power whose culture is universally relevant. Since the inscription of the Chang'an-Tian Shan Corridor of the Silk Road, China has nominated a series of cultural heritage sites that project its image as an inclusive, impactful power. The Cultural Landscape of Old Tea Forests of the Jingmai Mountain in Pu'er, inscribed in 2023, is a hub of tea culture, one of China's major cultural exports. Beijing Central Axis, inscribed in 2024, reinforces connections between China's ancient political tradition with its current regime. The newly inscribed Xixia Imperial Tomb illustrates China's cultural inclusivity. Together, the Chinese World Heritage Sites inscribed over the last decade delineate a Sinocentric vision of China's cultural cohesion and cultural influence.

The cultural heritage sites on China's tentative list, which await formal nominations, also align with the Chinese narrative of diversity and global influence. The Sites of Hongshan Culture are early human settlements in Northeastern China that showcase how diverse early civilizations evolved and converged to form the Chinese culture. Tulin-Guge Scenic and Historic Interest Areas

are the relics of a local civilization on the Tibetan Plateau that rose after the fall of the Tubo Dynasty. The Site of Southern Yue State are the remains of an ancient vassal state whose lords sinicized the southern periphery of the Chinese empire. Other sites like the Chinese Section of the Silk Roads demonstrate China's influence on neighboring civilizations.

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Tourism enables the narrative that China shapes through its curated list of World Heritage Sites to inform public perception of the country. For many, the World Heritage List is a list of must-visit destinations. Since its inscription, the Xixia Imperial Tombs has seen its daily number of visitors increase by around 30%. In the previous year, after the inscription of the Beijing Central Axis, touring along the axis became a topic among domestic and international visitors. Experiencing Beijing's political center in the context of World Heritage challenges the negative connotation associated with Chinese politics, grounding the visitors' understanding of China in aesthetic and political traditions instead of ideology. As China seeks to develop "people-to-people diplomacy" despite its lack of an independent civil society, heritage tourism supplies an alternative venue for public diplomacy.

On the official level, China actively leverages its World Heritage resources to conduct heritage diplomacy through both UNESCO channels and BRI platforms. In 2021, the Chinese government launched the Silk Roads Youth Research Grant, which supports selected research projects on the "shared heritage and plural identities of the Silk Roads." Chinese heritage professionals regularly assist in World Heritage restoration projects across Asia. Chinese conservators are currently conserving Cambodia's World Heritage Site of Angkor Wat, a project that Chinese media outlets characterize as a symbol of Sino-Cambodia friendship and one step to reinvigorating the Silk Road. This project, among others, is embedded in the reality of China's growing economic interest in neighboring countries. China invested \$1.378 billion dollars in Cambodia in 2023 alone, financing infrastructure including an airport that increases Angkor Wat's accessibility to tourists. China's heritage diplomacy is deeply pragmatic, placing cultural heritage at the nexus of infrastructure and development.

Underneath its commitment to the World Heritage brand, China is pushing for the Belt and Road agenda. The 2023 China-Central Asia Summit, convened in Xi'an, the starting point of the ancient Silk Road, was staged to evoke Silk Road heritage. Xi Jinping held a banquet for the Central Asian presidents at a reconstruction of a Tang-dynasty relic, where merchants and diplomats from across Eurasia would have gathered ten centuries ago. The choreography of the Summit sends the message that cultural heritage can be translated into a solid ground for economic collaboration among the Silk Road countries.

While China upholds the World Heritage Convention, it is simultaneously using World Heritage nominations to gain narrative power and project its image as a peaceful, inclusive player in the global order. Wielding a narrative that centers on the Silk Road, China legitimizes its vision for the Belt and Road Initiative. China's engagement with the UNESCO World Heritage List is a case study of how states could appropriate the prestige conferred by international organizations to further their own diplomatic and developmental agenda.

