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Conceptualisation of heritage diplomacy in scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Heritage diplomacy is a recent concept and a new area of interest in the expanding scope of diplomacy. The concept is explored with various epistemological foci and theoretical frameworks in Western scholarship. It is often used to describe joint international projects or government initiatives abroad for preserving tangible cultural heritage. Several recent studies link heritage diplomacy to attempts to develop reciprocal relations between countries, regions, and/or communities through cultural heritage based on dialogue. This article contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship on heritage diplomacy by clarifying the concept, including its inherent notions of cultural heritage and approaches to power. Our critical close reading of 57 sampled scholarly publications reveals how heritage diplomacy is commonly approached from a conservationist point of view, emphasising the preservation of tangible cultural heritage through knowledge exchange, material aid, and funding. Scholarship lacks studies focusing on the uses of intangible cultural heritage for heritage diplomacy. The study reveals heritage diplomacy scholars' shared interest in power asymmetry and struggle: the concept can be used to recognise and deconstruct power hierarchies between heritage communities. We do this by understanding cultural heritage as a contact zone of people-to-people connectivity, reciprocal cooperation, mutual trust, and dialogue.

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Introduction: increasing interest in the entanglement of cultural heritage and diplomacy

During the past few years, policymakers, cultural managers, and scholars have become increasingly interested in the social value of cultural heritage. Its potential for initiating and strengthening cooperation between and within heritage communities has been recognised, as has its value for creating diplomatic relationships as part of international heritage governance and states' foreign policy. Recently, scholars have explored these linkages between cultural heritage and diplomacy with various emphases and conceptualisations. This interdisciplinary research combines diverse human sciences, including international relations, law, public policy and governance, history and critical heritage studies. Scholars have critiqued the instrumentalisation of cultural heritage for political purposes, which, intentionally or not, may maintain or create hierarchical power relations (e.g. Luke and Kersel 2012; Kersel and Luke 2015; Meskell 2015; Carruthers 2016; Peycam 2016; Hafstein 2018; Winter 2019; Andersen, Clopot, and Ifversen 2020). At the same time, various recent studies (e.g. Andersen, Clopot, and Ifversen 2020; ECHOES 2020; Clopot, Andersen, and Oldfield 2022; Čeginskas and Kaasik-Krogerus *forthcoming*) emphasise the importance of developing

reciprocal relations through cultural heritage based on dialogue. Conceptual plurality and ambiguity reflect the ways in which scholars have linked the notions of cultural heritage and diplomacy and approached the concerns and potentials associated with this entanglement.

Heritage diplomacy is a new area of interest in the expanding scope of diplomacy. Although cultural heritage has been used for diplomatic endeavours since Pharaonic Egypt and Ancient Greece and Rome (Black 2010), explicit explorations of the concept are more recent. In the 2010s, critical heritage scholars have increasingly explored heritage diplomacy due to the launch of several political initiatives and policies worldwide seeking to link cultural heritage and diplomacy. These include the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013 and the European Union's document 'Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations' published in 2016. The research on heritage diplomacy reflects recent intertwined political, social, and cultural movements in Western societies focused on global inequality, including debates on cultural appropriation, decolonisation, repatriation of cultural heritage, and recognition of indigenous knowledge and heritage practices.

Conceptual clarity has not arisen from this increase in scholarship. Case studies on heritage diplomacy reflect different geopolitical contexts and are based on divergent epistemological approaches and academic disciplines. Thus, the concept is used with various emphases and meanings: as an analytical tool, it remains ambiguous and vague. Motivated by this plurality and ambiguity, in this article we aim to clarify what heritage diplomacy means by exploring scholars' use of the concept, including their notions of cultural heritage and approaches to power.

In this article, we focus on the conceptual entanglement of cultural heritage and diplomacy and explore how the linkages between them are explained, theoretically framed, and conceptually developed in scholarship. Our core research questions are: How has heritage diplomacy been conceptualised in scholarship and what is the concept's interdisciplinary potential? Our data consists of sampled scholarly publications, which we perceive as a discursive space to construct the meanings of heritage diplomacy and define the conceptual linkages between cultural heritage, diplomacy, and various forms of power. To serve scholars exploring the practices and policies of heritage diplomacy, we conclude by proposing how the concept could be approached and defined in future research.

The recent scholarly interest in the uses of cultural heritage for diplomatic endeavours reflects the development of scholarship that both responds to and actively participates in the above-mentioned political, social, and cultural movements. In the 2000s, research on cultural heritage faced a paradigm shift in Western academia (e.g. Smith 2006; Harrison 2013a, 2013b; Lähdesmäki, Zhu, and Thomas 2019). This shift has broadened the field of heritage studies beyond conservation of heritage, although conservation still is an important area in the field (Lähdesmäki, Zhu, and Thomas 2019), to pivot on a question of power: the ability of discourses and practices in cultural heritage to both create and dismantle power relations. This research has drawn from poststructuralist and Foucauldian perspectives on power, borrowing from postcolonial, racial, gender, and subaltern studies and new museology developed in the 1970s and 1980s (Lähdesmäki, Zhu, and Thomas 2019). Scholars drawing on such critical perspectives have sought to deconstruct the role of cultural heritage in monocultural nation-building projects, transmitting elitist cultural canons, and upholding Western cultural values. As a part of this paradigm shift, consensus on the ideas of nation and national identity have been questioned and contested by alternative identity claims and/or plural heritage narratives (Smith 2006; Ashworth, Graham, and Tunbridge 2007; Labadi 2007; Lähdesmäki, Zhu, and Thomas 2019). Besides nationalism, critical scholars have scrutinised how several other 'grand narratives', such as 'imperialism, colonialism, cultural elitism, Western triumphalism, social exclusion based on class and ethnicity, and the fetishizing of expert knowledge' (Smith 2012, par. 2; see also 2006), have dominated the meaning-making and practices of cultural heritage, both in the 'West' and, through its dominance, elsewhere in the world. These narratives and the ideas and ideologies they include have influenced what has been understood and defined as cultural heritage by privileging 'old, grand, prestigious, expert approved sites, buildings, and artefacts that sustain Western narratives of nation, class and science' (Smith 2012, par. 3).

The critical approach to power in the research of cultural heritage has had major political implications. First, it has revealed the role of cultural heritage in creating social relations. Recent research has brought out various oppressed, colonised, marginalised, and silenced heritage narratives as well as emancipatory and empowering narratives, thus emphasised the diversity of cultural heritage and linked it to the pursuit of justice and rights today (e.g. Whitehead et al. 2019; Andersen, Clopot, and Iversen 2020; Knudsen et al. 2022). Second, the critical approach has changed the very idea of cultural heritage and its function within communities and societies, and in their internal and external relations. The critical approach builds on the notion that cultural heritage is proactive, that is, it ‘does’ things through how heritage is discussed, used, and managed (Harrison 2013a, 2013b). Cultural heritage is seen as actively transmitting values, social norms, and political ideas; establishing worldviews and power relations but also questioning them; strengthening or oppressing identities and feelings of belonging; creating dialogue and reciprocity or leading to confrontation in or between communities, and so forth (see Smith 2006; Harrison 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Lähdesmäki, Zhu, and Thomas 2019; Whitehead et al. 2019; Lähdesmäki et al. 2020). Drawing predominantly on critical heritage studies, our theoretical approach to heritage diplomacy builds on this proactive understanding of cultural heritage and critical emphasis on power. Moreover, we take the constructivist perspective on language use. Concepts, such as heritage diplomacy, are linguistic constructions used to order and understand abstract and ambiguous phenomena. Concepts are not neutral means of explanation but scholars explicitly and implicitly ‘engineer’ their meanings (Kuutma 2012; Lähdesmäki 2016).

Our exploration of heritage diplomacy is structured into four sections. We start by introducing our data and methods. The data is then explored in two more sections: in one, we discuss the meaning-making and definitions of heritage diplomacy in scholarship and the notions of cultural heritage embedded them. In the other, we explore how the idea of heritage diplomacy has developed in scholarship and reflects the broader conceptual contexts of (international) cultural relations. Fourthly, we explore the use of power and power relations embedded in the conceptualisations of and approaches to heritage diplomacy. The conclusion draws together the main findings and arguments of the article with suggestions for how to approach heritage diplomacy in future critical heritage studies and in interdisciplinary research.

Data and methods

Ambiguous and fluid concepts – particularly recent ones that are not yet established – can be used in various contexts and include diverse meanings that are more or less theoretically rigorous (Soini and Birkeland 2014; Lähdesmäki 2016). To investigate the conceptualisation of heritage diplomacy in scholarship, we gathered 57 scholarly publications through two sampling methods. The first sample was based on English-language scholarly publications (journal articles, review articles, book chapters, and books) found from interdisciplinary ProQuest and JSTOR databases with search term ‘heritage diplomacy’. This sample included 41 texts published between 2012 and 2021. For both databases, the search tool failed to identify certain publications we had previously found in our broader review of literature on international cultural relations and cultural diplomacy. Therefore, we decided to broaden the results by adding a second sample of 16 more publications (scholarly articles and book chapters) that explicitly refer to heritage diplomacy. Together, both samples extend our interdisciplinary approach to the concept beyond few widely cited authors to include less-known voices. We do not refer to all 57 publications here, but we have marked those to which we refer with an asterisk in our list of references.

Heritage diplomacy affects different areas of scholarship. JSTOR and ProQuest are central, frequently used databases in humanities and social sciences, which offer access to a very broad range of scholarly journals, periodicals, books, collections, and other sources within *and* across multiple fields. JSTOR claims to provide more than 12 million academic journal articles, 85,000 books, and 2 million primary source documents in 75 disciplines in English and other languages.

We decided to limit our search to scholarly articles and book chapters published in English both to narrow the scope and to address an international audience in this scholarly journal. English has become a global *lingua franca* in academic research and cooperation, and scholars writing in other languages are increasingly asked to publish their key research in English in order to increase their impact. This applies to the authors of the selected publications on which we draw, who represent different disciplines and differing approaches to heritage diplomacy based on their various national and cultural backgrounds.

To understand the conceptualisation of heritage diplomacy, including the notions of cultural heritage and the approaches to power it contains, we examined the data in the light of our research question through critical close reading. The method of close reading concerns the broad category of interpretative explorations that enable detailed analysis of linguistically communicated phenomena at semantic, structural, representational, and sociocultural levels. Close reading originates in literary studies, where it has been associated with New Criticism (Dubois 2003, 2). In this context, the method aims at the ‘mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings’ (Brummett 2010, 3). It has been subsequently employed in social sciences (Gallop 2007, 183–184; Norocel et al. 2020), where the context surrounding the analysed data is also considered. Critical close reading entails interpretative and hermeneutically oriented analysis, aiming to understand the meaning-making and functioning of power in the explored phenomenon. In our study, we conducted critical close reading as interactive teamwork: our remarks on the conceptualisation of heritage diplomacy were constantly discussed and jointly structured into meaningful units.

Meaning-making of heritage diplomacy and notions of cultural heritage

Next, we discuss how scholars in our data approached and defined the concept of heritage diplomacy by linking it to certain types of heritage, practices of fostering it, and actors seen as central for such practices. Our discussion proceeds from the most common understandings of heritage diplomacy to attempts to reinterpret or restructure the existing approaches.

In our data, heritage diplomacy is typically approached from a perspective of cultural heritage stewardship (see Billore 2021), which emphasises the importance of international action and collaboration in sustainably conserving and transmitting cultural heritage for future generations. The studies address the role and responsibility of various stakeholder engagements in the preservation, restoration, and revitalisation of cultural heritage-based resources and practices through academic involvement, technical and financial support, and a communities-based approach in international relations (e.g. Luke 2012a; Luke and Kersel 2012; Winter 2014; James 2016; Peycam 2016; Larsen and Buckley 2018; Svensson and Maags 2018). This conservationist approach builds on a traditional Western notion of what cultural heritage is by emphasising its material continuity and authenticity (see Stille 2002). Most of the studies in our data explore joint international projects or government-initiated activities abroad for preserving tangible cultural heritage (particularly archaeological sites, historical buildings, and monuments) through scientific conservational knowledge exchange, material aid, and funding. Moreover, exploration of diplomatic action often focuses on cultural heritage that Western heritage experts or an international heritage organisation, chiefly the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), considers as forgotten, neglected, damaged, or threatened, and therefore in need of an international conservationist collaboration. This perspective of cultural heritage stewardship includes studies of heritage diplomacy through the prevention of illegal practices such as looting, illicit trade, or trafficking of cultural heritage goods (e.g. Luke 2012b; Winter 2016, 2017; Hafstein 2018), as well as through tackling military or terrorist destruction of heritage sites in conflict zones (e.g. Schwartz 2018).

Scholars commonly approach heritage diplomacy as a loose conceptual framework defined by states’ and diplomats’ actions in bilateral or multilateral projects dealing with cultural heritage, or state cooperation in international heritage governance. This understanding of heritage diplomacy is aptly described by Clarke (2018)

There are several common ways in which heritage diplomacy takes place: in the high-level negotiations between state parties with regards to conservation decisions such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage listing; in donations of funding and expertise proffered by one or more external actors to a strategically valuable state; and even in the exchange of artefacts and exhibitions as a means of promoting bilateral bonds or mending damaged relationships.

Although the scholars in our data typically connect heritage diplomacy to state-led or state-initiated high-level collaboration and the work of official networks and international organisations dealing with heritage – thus ‘intrinsically connected with a country’s foreign policy’ (Winter 2015, 14–15) – several of them, including Clarke (2018), identify non-state actors as planners and implementors of heritage diplomatic projects. These actors include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), networks of local stakeholders, and individual experts, such as archaeologists working at heritage sites (e.g. Luke and Kersel 2012; Luke 2012a, 2012b; McClelland 2020). Through these actors, heritage diplomacy can be considered as including people-to-people diplomatic relationships, which scholars rarely scrutinise. Such research could broaden the current understanding of heritage diplomacy (Tal 2017, 3).

Our analysis shows how the conceptual understanding of heritage diplomacy developed and underlines the influence of a few pivotal scholars. In our data, heritage diplomacy is commonly defined by referring to Winter’s notion of it as modes of commemorating and communicating the past to shape international relations (Winter 2015, 14–15). These definitions mention his seminal theorisation of two core approaches: ‘heritage *in* diplomacy’ and ‘heritage *as* diplomacy’. The difference is in whether heritage is or is not shared between the parties in heritage diplomacy. By the first approach (heritage *in* diplomacy), Winter refers to heritage-related initiatives and projects that are coordinated as part of diplomatic actions that do not depend on the notion of mutual or shared heritage as a mediator of relations, but rather ‘highlight the various ways in which heritage figures into existing diplomatic ties and policy structure built around trade, the bonds of colonialism, conflict or other strategic alliances’ (Winter 2015, 1009). The ‘heritage *as* diplomacy’ approach draws on fostering shared heritage and building connectivity by identifying shared pasts. Winter (2015, 1011) notes how, today, former colonial powers discursively shape a certain material culture as heritage shared by the former coloniser and colonised to create historical and cultural connections between them and give their contemporary international relations more diplomatic weight and historical validity. He recognises the legacy of unequal power relations included in the concept but sees that it simultaneously helps to ‘move beyond the commonly used frameworks of the colonial and postcolonial’ (Winter 2015, 998).

Winter’s conceptualisation is developed further in some studies in our data. For instance, Vandesande discusses how both heritage *in* diplomacy and heritage-driven diplomacy (drawing from Winter’s heritage *as* diplomacy) are based on three modes of addressing heritage. Her conceptualisation draws on the location and origin of both the heritage and the actor who is using it for diplomacy. She calls the first mode ‘heritage on location’ that refers to ‘heritage in a specific country being investigated, promoted or supported by international stakeholders’ (Vandesande 2019, 72). The second mode, ‘heritage “own-origin”’ refers to how ‘heritage of a country or a smaller entity is presented outside the country’s borders’ usually by the actors from that country or entity, and the last mode, ‘shared pasts’ is based on ‘a notion of mutually shared transnational pasts’ between countries or smaller entities (Vandesande 2019, 73–74). This conceptualisation reflects common understandings of heritage diplomacy in our data emphasising international heritage governance (first mode); states’ international cultural relations or even nation-branding that is often seen characterising the goals of cultural diplomacy (second mode); and Winter’s notion of heritage *as* diplomacy (third mode).

Huang and Lee (2019) use Winter’s work as their point of departure for developing the notion of ‘difficult heritage diplomacy’ and ‘heritage *off* diplomacy’. They note how ‘in a region where geopolitics remains difficult, difficult heritage may even become heritage *off* diplomacy when other diplomatic challenges arise’ (Huang and Lee 2019, 143). This may occur when the parties

involved in heritage diplomacy ‘have different views of how to reassemble and reformulate difficult memories to ensure balance is maintained in the multi-lateral relations that extend beyond the collaboration’ (Huang and Lee 2019, 147). In this conceptualisation, cultural heritage not only enables diplomacy but may suppress it. In such cases, diplomatic attempts may become ‘integral to the making of heritage’ (Huang and Lee 2019, 154): challenges in heritage diplomacy may rearticulate meanings of cultural heritage and bring about new heritagisation processes.

In our data, scholars rarely explored the scale in heritage diplomatic actions and the creation of symbolic value for cultural heritage. Chalcraft takes scale and sociological value as a basis for developing a new typology, drawing from tensions between ‘charismatic heritage diplomacy’ and ‘careful heritage diplomacy’ (Chalcraft 2021, 2). The first type of heritage diplomacy focuses on endangered, internationally recognised, and highly symbolic heritage sites that offer international donors’ diplomatic visibility and opportunities for image-building as concerned actors and supporters of ‘universal’ values of heritage. The second type of heritage diplomacy is less spectacular and focuses on high-risk projects, often dealing with communities and their intangible cultural heritage to ‘open up the past and make it work for communities traumatised by conflict’ (Chalcraft 2021, 2).

Chalcraft’s is one of few studies in our data that recognise the potential of intangible cultural heritage for heritage diplomacy. One other study discusses ‘digital heritage diplomacy’ but simply defines it as focusing on ‘the role and potential of heritage within digital diplomacy strategies’ (Clarke 2016, 52). Clarke emphasises the need for a deeper analysis in this emerging field and calls for heritage professionals to increase their efforts to push it up national digitalisation agendas. Recently, the digitalisation of heritage as a diplomatic practice has been explored within the context of museums and as museum diplomacy. Besides its potentials regarding access to cultural heritage and communicating it easily to diverse audiences, this research has identified challenges stemming from power hierarchies and imperialistic and colonial legacies similar to those in ‘analogue’ heritage diplomacy (Grincheva 2020).

Contexts of conceptual development

In this section, we explore how the idea of heritage diplomacy has developed in scholarship and reflects the broader conceptual contexts of (international) cultural relations. The emergence of heritage diplomacy as a policy and practice is connected to the beginning of international heritage governance, which was based on the experience of tangible cultural heritage being destroyed and museums and collections looted during international conflicts in the twentieth century. As part of a broader move towards internationalism in politics after the Second World War, the international community was established as custodian of cultural heritage, reflecting the growing awareness that a multilateral approach to heritage protection was needed that went beyond traditional approaches and means of diplomacy (Geering 2020; Gaudenzi and Swenson 2018; Winter 2017; Swenson 2016). Central institutional networks were established as new actors in international cultural relations, including UNESCO, the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the International Centre for the Study of the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). This move resulted in the first international treaty focusing on cultural heritage, the Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict in 1954.

With the establishment of the international community as warden, cultural heritage has become an international phenomenon of shared concern and is no longer exclusively an element of nation-building. Huang and Lee (2019, 146) describe this development by noting how UNESCO’s World Heritage List is ‘a set of processes by which the state paradoxically makes heritage into national and international objects at the same time’. Heritage regulations within the framework of the international community have come to function as a tool to discipline and regulate states that fail to adhere to international conventions of heritage governance. Such governance has raised the moral

responsibility of the signatory states to conserve and protect World Heritage sites and national heritage on their territories, as well as to assist heritage conservation management of endangered cultural and natural property outside their borders (Geering 2020; Hølleland, Hamman, and Phelps 2018). Reflecting this context of international heritage governance, various endeavours in heritage diplomacy are commonly underpinned by a universalistic discourse on science, culture, and education as a basis of building intercultural understanding and peace between peoples and countries (Riviera 2015; Winter 2016, 2019; see also UNESCO 1972, Art 1.1).

The emphasis on the transnational, or even universal, character of cultural heritage as belonging to all humanity has contributed to establishing the idea of heritage conservation and management as a basis for international actions enhancing international relations of mutual trust. This emphasis has also helped to legitimise cooperation with non-state actors through institutionalised frameworks (Winter 2015; Tal 2017; Clarke 2018; Hølleland, Evan, and Phelps 2018): participants in heritage diplomacy now range from governmental actors (e.g. states, foreign ministries, diplomats, and policymakers) to non-governmental ones (e.g. international and national NGOs, cultural organisations, civil interest groups, museums, heritage practitioners, heritage communities, and cities). Digital strategies enable even broader participation in heritage diplomacy, which broadens the notion of international cultural relations (Clarke 2016). The deepening entanglement of official, unofficial, governmental, and non-governmental actors in a 'network of networks' (Winter 2015, 1006) challenges previous understandings of diplomacy as an exclusive domain of states (see also Tal 2017, 3).

Some of the recent studies on heritage diplomacy highlight the role of the international heritage community for shaping discussions on cultural heritage, cultural rights, and justice, such as debates on the ownership of heritage items and their repatriation and restitution in colonial contexts. These studies point out that as a result of the inclusion of non-governmental actors in international heritage projects, the heritage diplomacy agenda has become increasingly linked to the promotion of (Western) values of democracy, human rights, diversity, and civil society. This connects cultural heritage with a wide range of topical global issues, including tourism, sustainability, environmental crises, climate change, migration, inclusion, citizenship, and international security. As a result, the rights-based approach to heritage practices and ownership of heritage has increased and attempts to create dialogue through heritage have been strengthened (e.g. Winter 2015, 2017; Gaudenzi and Swenson 2018; Larsen and Buckley 2018; Schwartz 2018; Jang, Lee, and Kang 2020; Kirchmair 2020).

All these developments move heritage diplomacy further away from the common conceptualisation of cultural diplomacy. Indeed, the studies in our data commonly emphasise the difference between heritage and cultural diplomacy. Winter (2015, 1007) notes, for instance, how in the latter 'relations are couched in self-promoting one-sided actions of a soft power nature' while 'heritage diplomacy is closer to a relational perspective of cultural flows and exchanges'. In the studies, heritage diplomacy is still often seen as the use of 'soft power', drawing on the theory on different forms of power politics between states in global competition (Nye 2004, 2008, 2011) but incorporating forms of 'hard power' (Winter 2015, 11; McClelland 2020, 381). Luke (2012a, 2012b) identifies heritage diplomacy as reflecting 'smart power' (Nye 2008) based on a strategic mixture of soft and hard tools in appropriate context (see also Winter 2015; Clarke 2018).

Instead of simply exporting or projecting one culture as part of a state's soft power and branding strategies, in our data, scholars emphasise building long-term heritage diplomatic relations between states and people through establishing partnership and cooperation drawing on historical cultural interconnections (e.g. Winter 2015, 2016; Clarke 2018). In some of the recent studies in our data, this understanding of heritage diplomacy even moves towards the idea of intercultural encounters. Kersel and Luke (2015, 70, 79, 87) note how heritage diplomacy may function as a 'contact zone between people' enabling 'sources of knowledge and catalysts for new relationships – both within and between communities' and as an 'open and honest dialogue' where 'productive and lasting relationships emerge' (see also Chalcraft 2021). Andersen, Clapot, and Ifversen (2020, 3) take

a similar approach by emphasising the people-to-people dimension in ‘colonial heritage diplomacy’ as reflecting ‘a more expansive interpretation of what heritage [is], which goes hand in hand with a more expansive interpretation of who can act as agents of heritage diplomacy’. In their view, heritage diplomacy may facilitate intercultural dialogue based on the negotiation of common values and accounting for the past.

Heritage diplomacy, power, and geoculture

Our exploration reveals power as key factor in heritage diplomacy. Scholarly interest in power refers to both its use in international relations and attempts to deconstruct or reorganise existing power hierarchies. Next, we explore the power relations embedded in the conceptualisations of and approaches to heritage diplomacy. In our data, most authors are interested in power politics in the international political economy, states’ foreign policy, and international relations (Winter 2014, 2015) including emerging political and economic powers, such as China and India, who are attempting to make their mark on the global map. The much-studied Chinese Silk Road Diplomacy is a typical example of such a scholarly focus on power politics (e.g. Pradhan 2017, 2019; Sevilla 2017; Winter 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Xie, Zhu, and Grydehøj 2020). The interest in power characterises several studies exploring diplomacy in the policy and decision-making processes within UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee. These studies (Luke 2016; Peycam 2016; see also Meskell 2018) stress how the Committee’s work is intertwined with power struggles and negotiations between state actors.

Diplomatic endeavours may include the use of structural power. Some scholars have noted how practices and policies of cultural diplomacy may echo (cultural) imperialism and power relations stemming from colonialism (Reeves 2007; Nisbett 2013). Some of the texts in our data focus on global structural power, to describe how Western dominance and its imperialistic and colonial legacies still define various heritage diplomatic projects, for instance, through their ‘West knows best’ stance (Meskell 2015, 8). These researchers have explored the unintentional creation of a ‘neo-colonial’ or ‘neo-imperial’ environment in UNESCO’s transnational conservation and preservation projects stemming from the power exerted by Western experts and their scientific values at non-Western heritage sites (Kersel and Luke 2015). In these critical studies, heritage diplomacy includes exploration on ‘how nations struggle internally to understand their own pasts and the ways in which that specific historical experience continues to condition attitudes and actions’ (Yapp 2019, 68).

Many studies in our data criticise the international heritage community as a norm entrepreneur that establishes an international ‘authorized heritage discourse’ (Smith 2006) founded on Western values through its guidelines and conventions as well as on the heritage diplomacy activities of former colonial powers (e.g. Hafstein 2018; Larsen and Buckley 2018; Schwartz 2018; Huang and Lee 2019; Winter 2019; see also Meskell 2015). Several authors show how the international heritage community includes a power asymmetry based on a small number of primarily Western states that implement international heritage governance by transferring institutionalised approaches to other regions of the world at the expense of local conservation and management practices and decision-making (see Kersel and Luke 2015; Meskell 2015; Akagawa 2016; Clarke 2016; Carruthers 2016; Peycam 2016; Sevilla 2017; Andersen, Clopot, and Ifversen 2020). These studies point out how power imbalance continues to influence today’s international relations between the Global North and Global South, or the West and the East (e.g. Luke and Kersel 2012; Kersel and Luke 2015; Meskell 2015; Carruthers 2016; Peycam 2016; Hafstein 2018; Winter 2019; Andersen, Clopot, and Ifversen 2020). However, Beaumont (2016, 363–364), who studied Australian extra-territorial heritage sites in Papua New Guinea, argues that successful bilateral heritage diplomacy can be based on an imbalanced, asymmetrical, and even neo-colonial power relationship between countries, provided that the relations are positioned in terms of mutual gain and self-interest for all involved countries (see also Winter 2015, 998, 2019).

Heritage diplomacy ideally ‘relies for its legitimacy on an appearance of openness to dialogue, an avoidance of nationalist sentiments, and a sense of distance from the immediate political priorities’ of the government (Clarke and Duber 2020, 63). Several scholars in our data (e.g. Winter 2016, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Tal 2017; Pradhan 2019; Geering 2020), however, point out that heritage diplomacy or international cultural relations more broadly are controversial as they often disguise national policy objectives and strategies that are labelled as a ‘byproduct of the trust, understanding, and relationship developed through cultural relations’ (Riviera 2015, 11). These studies draw critical attention to how heritage diplomacy may reflect strategic national objectives in international relations, which makes it difficult to clearly distinguish between domestic and international policy goals. Indeed, the emphasis on the international heritage community’s stewardship often conceals geopolitical complexities underlying international funding and engagement in cultural heritage (see Luke 2012a, 2012b; Luke and Kersel 2012; Winter 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019; Kersel and Luke 2015). For instance, many international heritage projects during the Cold War era were embedded in the strategic social, political, and economic objectives of competing political ideologies and geopolitical blocs (Winter 2014, 2017, 2019; Carruthers 2016; Tal 2017; Hafstein 2018; Pomian 2019; Geering 2020). More recent examples of international heritage cooperation in response to the destruction of World Heritage sites in the Middle East and Africa (e.g. the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan and the cultural heritage sites of Timbuktu in Mali, Nimrud and Niniveh in Iraq, and Palmyra in Syria) are also closely linked to international and national security concerns about combatting extremism and preventing the illegal trade in cultural goods as an important source of income for terrorist groups (Hafstein 2018; Schwartz 2018; Kirchmair 2020).

Our data reveal how states mobilise heritage discourses to advance their strategic political priorities in both their domestic and international relations (e.g. Winter 2014, 2015, 2016, 2020a, 2020b; Kersel and Luke 2015; Meskell 2015; James 2016; Hølleland Hamman, and Phelps 2018). In both contexts, heritage discourses commonly emphasise a mutual past or historical connectivity as a basis either for nation-building or building trust and international relations in the countries’ foreign policies (see Calligaro 2014; Winter 2014, 2015). Scholars in our data critically note that not every case of historical cultural contact is evidence of a ‘shared’ heritage (Swenson 2016; Winter 2019; Andersen, Clopot, and Ifversen 2020). References to a ‘shared’, ‘common’, or ‘mutual’ heritage often have power to depoliticise international relations (Yapp 2016, 74) by associating histories of connectivity and cultural entanglement with positive ideals and values, such as peace, exchange, friendship, dialogue, and trust (Winter 2021, 701). While an emphasis on shared heritage in international relations helps to question prevalent national interpretations of the past by offering a transnational perspective on entangled historical processes and events, it can be used to secure influence in strategically important regions, both within countries and in relations with other countries.

Even though heritage diplomacy typically has an international dimension, its goals may still draw from domestic geostrategic interests, such as the governance of cultural minorities or the fostering of cultural nationalism (e.g. Akagawa 2014, 2016; Winter 2014, 2020a, 2020b; Yapp 2016; Pradhan 2017, 2019; Svensson and Maags 2018; Huang and Lee 2019; Winter 2019, 2020b, 2021; Xie, Zhu, and Grydehøj 2020). The domestic and international dimensions may even collide. Clarke (2017) discusses Australia’s attempt to create a list of extra-territorial heritage sites situated overseas that highlights its ‘global past’, revealing that the instrumentalisation of heritage for domestic and nationalistic reasons may create tensions in international relations. Also, Clarke and Duber (2020) point out that successful domestic strategies are not necessarily successful in foreign relations, as manifested in the case of Poland’s attempts to govern the meanings of war heritage at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. Moreover, many of the heritage diplomatic projects between former colonising and colonised countries stem from domestic geostrategic interests. Heritage diplomacy in such contexts may include geopolitical power imbalances that obscure (colonial) legacies connected to experiences of shame, trauma,

violence (e.g. Gaudenzi and Swenson 2017; Garnsey 2019; Jang, Lee, and Kang 2020; Andersen, Clopot, and Ifversen 2020), or unresolved geopolitical conflicts (Huang and Lee 2019; Jang, Lee, and Kang 2020; Pradhan 2019; Winter 2019).

China's heritage diplomacy in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is considered as a successful recent example of intertwining international and domestic interests. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the BRI was launched in 2013 as part of a new grand strategy to make China an economic superpower. China's new focus on economic expansion changed its diplomatic strategy in international relations, incorporating different uses of soft power to secure and improve its international status (see Winter 2019). The BRI is a highly controversial initiative. The international community, with the USA, EU, India, and Australia leading the way, criticise the BRI for encouraging corruption, failing to meet international standards, and leveraging a form of debt-trap diplomacy for geopolitical ends (see Ohashi 2018). A number of scholarly works, including Winter's pre-eminent analyses of heritage diplomacy, focus on China's BRI model in global political and economic governance, which necessitates a more extensive discussion of it here.

Winter's recent works (2017, 2019, 2020b, 2021) reveal the strategic value that China attaches to its attempts to revive the Silk Road narrative to 'win friends and build loyalties, and to legitimise expansionist ambitions to public audiences, both at home and abroad' (Winter 2019, 18). He shows how China has taken the Silk Road narrative forward, reinterpreting the past to expand its significance in international affairs, while framing its foreign policy ambitions within a language of peaceful connectivity and harmonious dialogue (Winter 2019). Winter addresses China's Silk Road diplomacy with the concept of geoculture, which he understands as a strategic exercise of geopolitical power (Winter 2019, 2020a, 2021). Within this exercise, the selective mobilisation of culture and history are being used to promote a new level of cultural cooperation and people-to-people contacts in international relations (see also Huang and Lee 2019; Khazanov 2019). Geoculture critically points towards the ways in which fragmented and disconnected strategies find coherence in a grand narrative that not only serves international relations and domestic governance, but also makes the distinction between them, and between hard and soft power, irrelevant in heritage diplomacy. For Winter (2019), geoculture combines a spatial and cultural reach beyond the territorial and temporal confines of a nation state; it scrutinises new forms of knowledge, power, and ways of recreating history. His conceptualisation of geoculture is important for broadening the understanding and use of heritage diplomacy in international relations beyond perspectives of cultural heritage stewardship.

Some scholars in our data discuss how Chinese Silk Road Diplomacy can serve to both counter-balance Western influence in international heritage governance and impel states to expand their vision of common cultural and political values and priorities around the notion of interconnected pasts (Sevilla 2017; Svensson and Maags 2018; Xie, Zhu, and Grydehøj 2020). Other scholars critically highlight how this narrative helps China to legitimise its current geopolitical claims and to strengthen its geopolitical and economic power in a vast area from East Asia to South-East Asia, West Asia, Middle East, Europe, and East Africa, indeed on the global stage (see also Pradhan 2017, 2019; Winter 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Xie, Zhu, and Grydehøj 2020). Cultural heritage connects to geocultural power aspirations in the context of the European Union's international relations with strategically important regions and countries. While scholars of this connection point out the use of similar narratives of historical connectivity, shared cultural heritage, and common values, and refer to the EU's alleged historical competence in creating intercultural dialogue, these researchers often discuss these attempts in terms of cultural diplomacy (e.g. see Isar 2010; Vos 2017; Clarke 2018; Lähdesmäki, Kaasik-Krogerus, and Mäkinen 2019; Lähdesmäki et al. 2020; Scott 2019; Molho 2020; Carta and Higgott 2020; Čeginškas and Kaasik-Krogerus forthcoming).

Conclusions

Scholars have long explored the role of cultural heritage in international cultural relations. Scholarly discussion on heritage diplomacy as such is more recent. This discussion has emerged and developed during the past decade – particularly inspired by Winter’s seminal studies. The increased scholarly interest in the potential of cultural heritage for diplomacy can be connected to the paradigm shift – the emergence of a novel critical view in heritage scholarship – towards understanding heritage as proactive. Critical heritage researchers have become more interested in power, the uses of cultural heritage for diverse political purposes, and how fostering something as heritage can ‘do’ things. Moreover, the scholarly interest in heritage diplomacy reflects the recent emphasis on the social dimension of cultural heritage, such as its potential for bringing about community building, social participation, and dialogue.

Our exploration of the sampled publications revealed seven main ways in which scholars conceptualise and define heritage diplomacy. To a certain extent, these different approaches build on each other and overlap in scholarly works. First, these conceptualisations commonly deal with heritage-related actions in states’ international relations and foreign policy, as well as cooperation within international heritage governance, particularly in the framework of UNESCO. In this context, heritage diplomacy is also understood as acts of enhancing peace, stability, and trust in conflict zones through international collaboration. Second, scholars often approach heritage diplomacy as influenced by and being part of states’ domestic policy goals and governance. This conceptualisation challenges the idea of heritage diplomacy as ‘soft power’ (Nye 2004) that aims at impacting ‘outsiders’ and the conditions ‘outside’ one’s own borders. Rather, it suggests new ways to think about heritage diplomacy, as in the case of Winter’s recently developed concept of geoculture. This concept represents a third way to conceptualise heritage diplomacy in our data. It emphasises culture more broadly as a constant parameter of intertwined international and domestic power relations that blurs rigid distinctions between internal and external objectives, policies, and practices in states’ international relations. Winter’s impact on scholarship is particularly evident also in his conceptualisation of ‘shared heritage’ as a basis for heritage diplomacy. This concept represents a fourth avenue for understanding heritage diplomacy as an attempt to build international relations by identifying shared values and interpretations of the past. The idea of shared heritage and historical connectivity guides scholars to explore heritage diplomacy in two more, overlapping contexts: one within a (de)colonial framework emphasising heritage-related actions to dismantle historical and ongoing power asymmetry through repatriation and restitution and the other taking a rights-based approach to heritage practices and ownership of cultural heritage. These two conceptualisations of heritage diplomacy represent a fifth and a sixth approach, respectively, in our data. Both approaches underpin heritage as a challenging political and diplomatic tool in international relations that goes beyond its use for strengthening cohesion and inclusion by emphasising its ability to create exclusion, division, and hierarchical power relations between people. Finally, and as the seventh mode of conceptualisation, heritage diplomacy is also perceived more broadly as providing contact zones for intercultural dialogue within and between diverse communities and cultural groups.

Most of the studies in our data were written by scholars with a background in history, (archaeological) anthropology, or built heritage, who explore the management of historical monuments, buildings, artefacts, or archaeological sites through diverse programmes and initiatives of conservation, restoration, research, funding, transfer of scientific and technical expertise, building of institutional structures, or cultural exchange. This scholarship sharpens the focus on tangible cultural heritage in heritage diplomacy. Only in the past few years, scholars have started to explore the full potential of cultural heritage by considering intangible aspects, such as value discourses and the relevance of narratives in building international cultural relations. Our data, however, lack studies focusing exclusively on intangible cultural heritage in the field of heritage diplomacy.

Even though heritage diplomacy is a relatively new concept in scholarship, many of its core elements have been previously discussed within the frameworks of cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, new diplomacy, soft power, or the internationalisation of politics that emphasise the interconnection of cultural heritage with power and geopolitics. However, scholars usually distinguish between these previous frameworks and heritage diplomacy. Our analysis shows that heritage diplomacy provides a useful conceptual framing to interdisciplinary research on the manifold ways in which heritage and history are deployed in the building, negotiation, and struggle over geopolitical power. Thus, the concept of heritage diplomacy can effectively capture current global issues drawing on power asymmetry, such as the use of cultural heritage in the intertwined political, social, and cultural movements seeking to counter inequality, colonial legacy, and racism, and to enhance the pursuit of justice and (cultural) rights.

Our research underlines that cultural heritage and power relations are entangled in the conceptualisations and explorations of heritage diplomacy. A critical approach to this entanglement encourages us in line with earlier research to rethink cultural heritage through a transnational perspective that highlights the historical connectivity and mobility of people, objects, and ideas, as well as the uses of power included in narratives dealing with such connectivity. Moreover, it encourages us to rethink who the actors in heritage diplomacy are – who wields the power? We suggest approaching heritage diplomacy as way to recognise and deconstruct power hierarchies between heritage communities by understanding cultural heritage as a contact zone of people-to-people connectivity, reciprocal cooperation, and mutual trust. Both governmental and non-governmental actors can appropriate and use cultural heritage to become contact zones that enable intercultural encounters. Meaningful encounter requires dialogue that incorporates a sensitivity towards difference (Constantinou 2013), empathy (Lähdesmäki and Koistinen 2021), an appreciation of different types of knowledge (Clopot, Andersen, and Oldfield 2022), and active listening (Di Martino 2020) – ‘an ethical approach to listening, based on a genuine interest in the other’s perspective and placing listening as an outcome in and of itself’ (Clopot, Andersen, and Oldfield 2022, 275; see also Di Martino 2020). A dialogic understanding of heritage diplomacy is not restricted to harmonious relations, but includes controversies and dissonance. Indeed, heritage dissonance can strengthen dialogue by enabling people to open up and use the dissonance to ‘do’ more inclusive heritage (Čeginskas and Kaasik-Krogerus *forthcoming*; see Mäkinen 2019). This contact-zone approach enables scholars to perceive cultural heritage as a proactive site of connectivity linked to multiple global issues and challenges. This will advance the interdisciplinary research of heritage practices and processes within societies and communities, in their intertwined relations internally and with the wider world.

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