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Contested UNESCO Heritage in East Asian Relations

Conceptualizing State Behavior in International Heritage Conflicts

Topic and Research Question

This thesis examines the emerging phenomenon of contested UNESCO heritage in East Asia. East Asian states have become increasingly assertive in the recent two decades not only in pursuing heritage inscriptions, but also in criticizing and even contesting inscriptions of neighbor states as inauthentic, illegitimate, or unjustified. This has been documented by scholars such as Brumann (2016), Nakano (2018a/b/c), Kim (2020), Underwood (2015), Lee (2020), Park (2017), and more. Significantly, the contestations, which can be categorized as what Ross termed “cultural contestations” (Ross 2018: v), transcend the domestic realm of identity politics and have entered the dimension of international relations between states, affecting diplomacy between them as well as the international institution of UNESCO itself, being criticized by various East Asian countries for its supposedly insufficient inscription process and being utilized for political agendas by their neighboring countries. The research question is thus:

Which shared underlying factors and preconditions in the emergence of conflicts around UNESCO heritage inscriptions in East Asia can be identified?

In answering this question, next to underlying dynamics of states’ behavior in heritage conflicts, the structure of UNESCO’s heritage program as a potential facilitator of these conflicts is critically analyzed as well in order to discern whether it has the potential to act as a mediator of conflict or rather is its main source in the first place. Based on these observations an explanatory model and theory of a systematic nature explaining state behavior in the international heritage arena of East Asia is derived which can then serve as a basis for formulating potential strategies of mediation.

State of the Art

The conflicts surrounding the contestation of UNESCO heritage inscriptions in East Asia do not only affect the diplomatic relations between states, but UNESCO itself, with Korea requesting to remove a Japanese heritage and Japan threatening to withdraw its funding. It thus has a financial incentive in efforts that analyze root causes and dynamics of such controversies. Nakano observes the “strong pressure on UNESCO to reform its selection process for contested heritage” (2018a: 482) amid controversies in East Asia, in part due to “lack of institutional mechanisms to manage the tensions.” (2018a: 492). While studies that explore the origins for

this emerging phenomenon have already been comparably few, what has been especially missing are long-form systematic comparative studies looking beyond essentialist, monocausal factors. Some studies link the phenomenon to single factors, such as Underwood (2015) focusing on Japan’s domestic nationalist initiatives or Kim (2020) on East Asian nationalism in general. In their limited scope these however fall short to grasp the larger context, where one can observe that all three states, Japan, China, and South Korea have been becoming increasingly assertive in the realm of UNESCO heritage.

The field of critical heritage studies provides analytical readings of heritage to uncover its underlying functions and representations. These include reading heritage as discourse (Smith 2006) which reproduces certain power structures and socially constructs narratives of national identity and collective memory. Especially readings of heritage as representations of national identity (Sommer 2009; Moody 2015) and collective memory (Sather-Wagstaff 2015) can act as bases for the emergence of identity conflicts. Next to materialist readings of conflicts about the competition over limited resources, idealist readings include theories on (identity) conflicts erupting over a struggle for recognition (Taylor 1994; Honneth 1995) or the formation of cultural identities based on difference and mutually irreconcilable claims. (Ross 1993; 2007) In international relations, heritage conflicts can be read through the lens of realism where states seek self-interest through power maximization (Waltz 1979) leading them to engage in contestation. Liberal institutionalist (Keohane 2012) and English School (Buzan 2004) approaches allow to locate a main factor of conflict emergence in institutional shortcomings, in this case UNESCO’s heritage program. Recognition theory (Wendt 2003; Ringmar 2012) and ontological security theory (Steele 2008; Mitzen 2006) in IR allow a reading of conflict emergence where states engage in conflict out of largely non-material motivations, such as the (performative) assertion of national identities.

Methodology and Approach

The study is conducted through the examination of three case studies of contested UNESCO heritage in East Asia that happened in the last two decades: The “Danoje Festival” inscribed as S. Korean intangible heritage in 2008 and contested by China, the “Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution” inscribed in 2015 and contested by S. Korea, and the “Documents of Nanjing Massacre”, inscribed into the UNESCO Memory of the World (MoW) program as heritage in 2015 and contested by Japan. It

takes an interdisciplinary approach by combining the fields of critical heritage studies, conflict studies, and international relations. The concept of UNESCO heritage is critically analyzed through the lens of heritage studies and put in the East Asian context to decipher the dynamic of its emergence, and the functions that various actors bestow on it in this process, including the reading of heritage as a vehicle for constructing and legitimizing narratives on national identity. This is done by methodologically employing Discourse Analysis and Actor-Network-Theory on various heritage texts, official statements, media reactions, and diplomatic interactions. Based on the understanding of the main functions attached to heritage by states and adjacent actors, the main underlying factors and preconditions for its contestation by other states are examined in employing IR theory and conflict studies theory. Here, idealist, materialist, and institutional factors of conflict emergence are synthesized, taking into account the East Asian geopolitical context.

Main Facts

The case of the “Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution” examines how the Japanese nomination dossier constructs a narrative of Japanese national identity which portrays it as a peaceful national success story of the first non-western industrialization based on adaptation of western technologies which are synthesized with Japanese traditions. This is contested by S. Korea, which accuses Japan of omitting the fact that the use of Korean forced laborers was an integral part of its industrialization. At the heart of the issue is the dissonance of perception of the past which is incorporated in both countries’ images of the self and other, with Japan denying that forced labor took place and arguing that S. Korea was lawfully annexed in 1910. Japanese companies are also incentivized to avoid admissions of forced labor which could act as precedents for future reparation claims.

The case of “Documents of Nanjing Massacre” examines China’s effort to achieve international recognition of Japan’s role as aggressor during WWII in the context of a rising trend of contemporary Chinese patriotism. This image contradicts Japan’s contemporary national identity image of a “peace-loving country”, inducing it to contest the inscription, accusing China of politicization. This notably happened in the context of a conflict around territorial claims on islands between the two countries. The case of “Danoje Festival” is representative for a larger trend of intangible heritage contests between China and Korea, which revolve around a zero-sum

framing of “possession” of heritages which can act as tools for national identity assertions, territorial claims, and control, for example by framing Korean minority inscriptions as Chinese heritage. This leads to a dynamic of attempts at “territorializing” heritage under an ideology of “heritage proprietorism”.

Results

The study finds that the East Asian geopolitical and historical context contributes to a dynamic in which UNESCO heritage inscriptions are utilized by states to legitimize territorial claims and pursue further material/power-political interests leading to a zero-sum game of competition, ownership, and interpretative authority over heritage inscriptions. Furthermore, mutually contradictory yet interdependent conceptions of national identity are engaged in a “struggle for recognition” which contributes to conflict emergence through a performative identity assertion through the medium of UNESCO heritage. UNESCO heritage inscriptions here serve as a ratchet effect to construct precedents that can legitimize future political claims. The institution of UNESCO fails to successfully prevent or mitigate these conflicts as, although tasked with balancing idealist and materialist interests of its member states, it is fundamentally not conceptualized as an institution for conflict mitigation or prevention and thus lacks proper institutional mechanisms for this purpose. It has therefore morphed into an institution which rather facilitates and exacerbates conflicts in East Asia by bringing them to the forefront, contrary to its intended purpose.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://theses.univie.ac.at/>

About the Author

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