

## Conference Report

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On November 11-12, 2023 the 7th Berlin Forum on Korea was held with the title “Diversity in Unity – Cultural Diplomacy in East Asia” in Harnack-Haus Berlin. This forum was organized to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Graduate School of East Asian Studies (GEAS).

The aim of the conference was to bring together leading scholars in the fields of cultural diplomacy and heritage preservation in and beyond East Asia to discuss the origins of the above-mentioned contestations, their specific manifestations, their consequences for socio-economic and political interactions in East Asia, as well as their reception by international target audiences. More specifically, the aim was to discuss these dynamics in the context of hegemony and power relations. This was because in East Asia, it was observed that countries that did not necessarily possess political and economic power might be able to dominate the discourse on cultural or social practices in the region. In a nutshell, this conference sought to analyse how to circumvent the individual claims of East Asian countries to uniqueness, given the relative homogeneity of a material cultural tradition. We argued that tradition could not be equated with the past and needed to be negotiated: How did cultural and heritage diplomacy relate to each other and diverge in the context of diversity in unity? If we considered heritage as hybrid and relational in power relations, who defined culture and hegemonic discourses in Asia? And finally, how were such rivalling discourses and practices received by international target audiences?

The event was officially inaugurated with the Keynote Roundtable on “Diversity in Unity - Cultural Diplomacy in East Asia”. Prof. Dr. Eun-Jeung Lee (Department of Korean Studies and GEAS, Freie Universität Berlin), Prof. Dr. Heonik Kwon (Department of Anthropology, Cambridge University), Prof. em. Carol Gluck (Department of History, Columbia University, USA), Prof. Dr. Klaus Mühlhahn (Chair of Chinese Studies, Zeppelin Universität, Friedrichshafen), Prof. Dr. Jessica Gienow-Hecht (North American History, John F. Kennedy Institute, Freie Universität Berlin) and Prof. Dr. Susan Pharr (Edwin O Reischauer Research Professor of Japanese Politics, Harvard University, USA) delivered their speeches.

All experts emphasized the significance of Asia as a region with immense potential, noting that its countries are interconnected through a shared cultural heritage and intertwined histories, yet also burdened by conflicts stemming from historical legacies since the 1990s. Despite this interconnectedness, each nation maintains its own distinctive history and cultural identity. China, Korea, and Japan, for instance, possess strong national identities deeply rooted in their historical experiences and cultural practices, which are influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and traditions such as calligraphy, rice consumption, and tea ceremonies. The political dimensions of cultural heritage become particularly apparent during disputes over UNESCO's designations of World Heritage Sites and Partitions, which underscore the complexities and persistent resentments that arise from these cultural conflicts.

It was noted that national boundaries within area studies must be transcended to effectively address multifaceted issues such as cultural hegemony, economic competition, and the shifting dynamics of geopolitical powers. Moreover, participants offered a nuanced structural and political analysis regarding the exacerbation of conflicts in East Asia. They underscored the significance of interrogating nationalist narratives and acknowledging the dual historical narrative of interconnectedness and conflict within the region. The importance of cultural diplomacy within both international and national governmental policies was emphasized, alongside the pivotal role of grassroots organizations and non-state actors in facilitating cross-border dialogue. Currently, a historical transition is underway, characterized by a period of tumult and ambiguity. Observers noted the fragmentation of the global order and the dissolution of the post-Cold War paradigm.

While the European Union analogy is frequently invoked in discussions about East Asia, it was argued that this comparison inadequately captures the unique dynamics of the region. However, the concept of pluralism converging into unity, akin to the European Union's principle of unity amidst diversity, could be useful in addressing issues such as economic cooperation and conflict resolution. Cautionary remarks were made against the weaponization of history and the commodification of heritage, advocating for novel perspectives on East Asia within a global framework.

In this context, the significance of GEAS as an institution lies in its capacity to amalgamate and foster the advancement of regional studies and combine them with social sciences. GEAS functions as a nexus for aspiring scholars in Berlin and the institution has broadened its international reach by expanding its geographic network to encompass specialists in Southeast Asia and South Asia. With a decade marked by excellence behind it, the Graduate School of East Asian Studies (GEAS) looks toward a promising and dynamic future.

It is imperative to fortify these institutions dedicated to the study of East Asia. Alumni can pursue diverse career trajectories, spanning academia, business, and various professional domains, each contributing their specialized expertise to enriching institutions. Furthermore, all of the experts accentuated that transnational relations can flourish independent of state actors, highlighting the potential for GEAS students to instigate transformative institutional changes.

The keynote roundtable concluded with a question and answer session, allowing participants to engage with the speakers on various topics discussed throughout the event.

The topic of the first Panel was Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power. The first presenter was Prof. Dr. Cho Kisuk (Graduate School of International Studies, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea) with her presentation titled “Theoretical Review on Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy.” She discussed how since the seminal publication of Joseph Nye’s *Soft Power*, new public diplomacy has emerged as one of the hottest topics in diplomatic studies. Soft power became the central concept of public diplomacy. Despite much progress, the conceptualization of soft power is at a standstill according to Nye, where resources and assets define soft power. She pointed out the most severe problem of this conceptualization, stemming from the fact that soft power is defined in a tautological way: some regard public diplomacy as the result of soft power, while others view soft power as the result of public diplomacy. It is argued that there are two aspects of soft power: one is inherited from the past, particularly from imperial-colonial history (referred to as Type I), whereas the other (referred to as Type II) is formed as the outcome of effective public or cultural diplomacy. She aimed to present a theoretical model that not only explicates the two types of soft power and hard power but also how these powers are related to public diplomacy. This, he claimed, would help to explain the ambivalent (polarized) image of South Korea in the East Asian region, while South Korea’s favourability is rising in other parts of the world. He also attempted to disentangle the close link between cultural and public diplomacy. Many idealize that culture and politics should be separated, but in the real world, he noted, both are entangled, particularly in UNESCO heritage registration due to UNESCO rules that foster contestation among neighbouring countries. In the registration process, he emphasized the role of hard power is ironically overwhelming. She concluded that to understand complicated and ambivalent phenomena in East Asian cultural diplomacy, theoretical discussion and conceptualization on soft power, cultural diplomacy, and public diplomacy are suggested to be preceded.

The second presenter was Prof. Dr. Eun-hee Woo (Center for Language Education, Josai Women’s University, Chiba, Japan) with her presentation on “The Polarization of Japanese Perceptions of South Korea.” She discussed how in the last two decades, Japanese perceptions of South Korea have been polarized. There are generation and gender gaps in affinity towards South Korea, particularly with younger women who tend to like South Korea more than other demographic groups. The fandom of Korean pop culture including K-pop, drama, and fashion, has dramatically increased, similar to other countries worldwide. At the same time, the Korean wave consumer groups became much younger. In consequence, the needs for Korean language courses and six departments of Korean studies at the university level have also risen.

On the other hand, Japanese antipathy toward South Korea has also become palpable. In Japanese bookstores, for example, it is not difficult to find books with hateful content toward South Koreans. One of the main reasons for these polarizing perceptions is the rapid transformation of South Korea, which provides different experiences for Japanese people. From the Japanese older generation’s viewpoint, South Korea is still a developing country that cannot compete against Japan politically and economically. From the younger generation’s perspective, however, South Korea is one of the leading countries in producing popular culture. She explained that anti-Korean sentiments in Japan have risen as a xenophobic reaction to the popularity of the Korean wave. She highlighted the phenomenon of “hate books” in Japan, a market for books that praise Japan and demean its

neighbours. She reported that 48% of readers of these books said their opinion of South Korea was negatively influenced. This trend is a product of increased Japanese nationalism, which has risen due to the deterioration of Japanese-Korean relations and increased uncertainty in Japanese society caused by economic stagnation.

The discussant and moderator for this panel was Prof. Dr. Gunter Schubert (Chair of Greater China Studies, Eberhard-Karls University Tübingen).

In the second panel with the title *Cultures, Memories, and Heritage*, Kwon Gi-jun (National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, Seoul, South Korea) gave a presentation with the title “The exhibition about Korean Wave in Germany.” The Korean Wave, a surge of Korean popular culture, has risen more dramatically than ever in recent years. This rise resulted in exhibitions in London and Seoul. The Victoria & Albert Museum introduced the overall concept of the Korean Wave, from history to fashion. Meanwhile, the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History focused on the Korean Wave as a global phenomenon and tried to compare it to other cultural waves from America and Asia. As the Korean Wave did, these two exhibitions are preparing touring exhibitions on the other side of the world. From a curator’s perspective, he asked what can be discussed through the exhibition when meeting the new audience. Reviewing the 30-year history of Korean music, drama, and movies will give visitors a new perspective on how Korea’s hybrid culture, different from that of China and Japan, grew with the interaction between nationalism and transnationalism. Moreover, how fandom was formed and rose, accepting not well-known Asian culture would be an essential subject to deal with in the German context.

The second presenter Prof. Dr. Julia Gerster-Damerow (IRIDES, Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan) gave a presentation with the title “Disaster Cultural Memory in Japan. How to represent 3.11?” After the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster, numerous disaster memorial facilities were preserved or newly created at the Pacific coast of the Tohoku region. However, the distinction between what is upheld as a cherished piece of cultural memory and what is dismissed as mere “debris” has emerged as a deeply contentious and persistently debated issue within local communities. This presentation introduced some of these multifaceted debates, shedding light on the divergent narratives that have arisen among the stakeholders involved.

In the third panel on *Hegemonies and Heritage* Prof. Dr. Yoshimi Shun’ya (Faculty of Interdisciplinary Information Studies, Tokyo University) provided a presentation titled “Memory Landscapes of Tokyo: Three Times Occupations in Long History,” a comprehensive exploration of Tokyo’s intricate historical and geographical evolution. He began by emphasizing Tokyo’s prominence as the world’s largest metropolitan area, where over half of Japan’s population resides. Despite its immense significance, the city faces pressing challenges, including a decreasing population and stagnation in its GDP since the 1990s, which may prompt a future alignment with other major cities like Seoul.

He explored the historical layers of Tokyo’s transformation, noting that the city has undergone three major occupations, each of which has profoundly altered its landscape. The first occupation marked a period of significant change influenced by colonial forces, followed by the Tokugawa period in 1590, during which Tokugawa’s occupation led to the redirection of river flows and the construction of extensive canals, fundamentally reshaping the city’s water system. The second

significant phase of occupation came in 1868 when Tokugawa and the samurai's resistance against the new government resulted in substantial conflict, making Tokyo the epicenter of major historical upheavals. The third major transformation occurred in 1945, during the postwar period, when Tokyo underwent extensive reconstruction. Prof. Shun'ya described how postwar Tokyo evolved into the "City of the Olympics and Automobiles," driven by the preparations for the 1964 Olympics. This period saw the extensive demolition of historical sites, including rivers, canals, and tram lines, to make way for Olympic venues and infrastructure. Despite these modernizations, he pointed out that remnants of the city's historical landscape continue to lie beneath its contemporary surface, awaiting rediscovery.

Prof. Shun'ya also highlighted several ongoing and proposed projects aimed at addressing these historical displacements and enhancing urban connectivity. These include efforts to reconstruct old tram lines, improve connections reflecting the city's diverse religious heritage, and consider the removal of the Tokyo metropolitan expressway to better connect the eastern and western parts of the city. These initiatives are part of a broader vision to transform Tokyo into a more cohesive and culturally integrated Trans-Asian city.

In conclusion, he stressed the need to balance rapid urban development with sustainability and quality of life improvements. He argued that while Tokyo's rapid growth has led to significant architectural advancements, it is crucial to focus on enhancing resilience and preserving historical memory. By adopting a structuralist perspective to examine the historical and contemporary urban transformations, the study aims to better understand the implications of Tokyo's concentration of population and resources, and its impact on the surrounding rural areas. This research underscores the importance of reclaiming and integrating historical elements into modern urban planning to ensure a more holistic and sustainable future for Tokyo.

Prof. Park Tae-gyun (Modern Korean History, Seoul National University, South Korea) gave a presentation titled "A rediscovery of Modern East Asia in the Connectivity with the world history." In his presentation, Prof. Park Tae-gyun explored the unique aspects of Korean history while highlighting its parallels with other nations. A key point he addressed was the pervasive patriarchy within Korean society, a theme that is often portrayed in Korean cinema. Prof. Park also discussed Korea's historical participation in the tributary system, a diplomatic arrangement that influenced its interactions with neighboring countries and shaped its foreign policy.

Drawing on international relations theory, Prof. Park explained that smaller nations typically face a strategic choice between balancing power among larger states or bandwagoning with a dominant power to ensure their survival. Korea's approach, as he detailed, was to adopt a stance of neutrality. This strategy involved negotiating multiple treaties with various powers to prevent any single nation from gaining disproportionate influence over Korea.

Prof. Park emphasized that Korea's historical experience provides valuable, universal lessons. Maintaining a balance of power and developing diplomatic relations with a range of countries are critical strategies for small nations aiming to protect their sovereignty and ensure stability. These approaches are essential for navigating the complexities of international relations and managing external pressures effectively.

In his presentation, Prof. Dr. Laurent Chircop-Reyes (Chinese Studies, D2iA, Université Bordeaux Montaigne) examined the complexities surrounding the

preservation of Chinese martial arts as a cultural heritage. He highlighted that traditional Chinese martial arts have historically been passed down through a private master-disciple relationship, a system now facing challenges due to concerns over the decline of these practices. Some masters worry about the fading relevance of their art, which raises questions about the traditional methods of transmission and the authenticity of orthodox practices.

He followed this up with a discussion about the role of intangible cultural heritage initiatives, which involve various social actors, including martial arts masters, in evaluating and preserving these traditions. He focused on an esoteric martial art from Shanxi Province, China, and explored the balance between preserving cultural integrity and engaging in evaluation and standardization processes.

The presentation addressed the paradox of preserving martial arts while also ensuring they remain relevant. A significant challenge is the decline in disciples and the erosion of the traditional master-disciple dynamic, coupled with issues of loyalty and distrust. As martial arts become more commercialized or widely diffused, there is a risk that their essence might be diluted, leading to a loss of authenticity. Martial arts, considered intangible cultural heritage, face a unique dilemma when they become too tangible. Over-commercialization can strip them of their cultural depth, turning them into mere entertainment rather than preserving their authentic form. This is compounded by the fact that martial arts often operate outside mainstream societal controls and are rarely showcased in museums, partly due to their controversial history and underground nature.

A critical question raised was what constitutes cultural heritage. It involves both the practice and the embodied knowledge of these traditions. If these elements become disconnected, the heritage may lose its significance. Economic pressures and market incentives to make martial arts more accessible can further erode the authenticity and depth of these practices. While official recognition by the Chinese government can provide support to martial arts masters, those not officially recognized struggle to maintain their traditions and prove their expertise. This creates a dilemma between preserving the cultural essence of martial arts and responding to commercial pressures.

The focus of the fourth panel was Diversity in Unity. The discussion in this panel was chaired by Prof. Dr. Sabrina Habich-Sobiegalla (State and Society of Modern China, Freie Universität Berlin) and discussants were Prof. Dr. Ines Eben von Racknitz (Chinese History, Freie Universität Berlin), Prof. Dr. Kim Eun-shil (Gender Studies, Ewha University), Prof. Dr. Claudia Derichs (Transregional Southeast Asian Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) and Prof. Dr. Verena Blechinger-Talcott (Japanese Politics and Economy, Freie Universität Berlin).

Returning to the question of the conference's motto, "Unity in Diversity," the panellists and discussants raised significant issues regarding the study of East Asia. Panellists raised concerns about the emphasis on diversity in previous panels, questioning whether studying East Asia from a global perspective was effective or if the significant differences among the countries warranted separate, individual study. This discussion highlighted the ongoing challenge of defining East Asia as a cohesive region.

Heritage preservation, particularly through UNESCO, has turned into a political battleground. This raised the fundamental question of what binds countries such

as China together as a nation. Cultural diplomacy from the top-down approach often fails, leading to a need to focus on people and civic partnerships. An example of resistance to official cultural diplomacy was seen in the actions of Ke Ren, a Chinese diplomat in Paris in the 1870s.

It was suggested that the study of East Asia as one region should consider the political driving factors. When examining Southeast Asia, which is diverse in religion, economy, and ethnicity, it becomes clear that people in the region still identify with the label. The key question becomes then what common goals these countries could achieve and how they could cooperate with other countries under a unified term, such as Japan's interest in the Indo-Pacific or China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Another highlighted issue was the one of funding, noting that money with political agendas might influence scholarship. Scholars needed to be cautious not to fall into these traps. Additionally, the topic of cultural appropriation was raised. The question arose whether there was a discussion about cultural appropriation in Northeast Asia.

In summary, the panellists discussed the complexities of studying East Asia as a unified region, the political implications of heritage preservation, and the challenges of cultural diplomacy. They also addressed the influence of funding on scholarship and the importance of recognizing cultural appropriation issues in the region.