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Heritage for sustainable peace: the politics of contested histories and the Nanjing controversy at UNESCO

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This article explores the politics of heritage of the 2015 Sino-Japanese confrontation resulting from the controversial inclusion of the “Documents of Nanjing Massacre” in UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register, which promotes the preservation of archival documents as humanity’s common heritage. Through an analysis of the Chinese nomination form proposing the inclusion of the documents in the register and the Japanese response to it, reflected against the principles of the register, this article examines how the seemingly apolitical and universal understanding of heritage and its links with sustainable peace proposed by organizations such as UNESCO fails to hold its ground when linked to the interests of a nation that claims ownership of it. Through an exploration of the Nanjing debate as a point of friction in the interplay of international ideals and national interests, it makes a case for an understanding of the interaction between the supranational and the national as a two-way street through the example of UNESCO’s somewhat peculiar understanding of sustainable peace and its exploitation for political purposes. The article concludes that the idealistic effort to preserve archival heritage and to increase recognition of its significance seems to have become overshadowed by the MoW register’s unintended facilitation of competing nationalistic narratives, leaving the door open for the exploitation of the register for purposes that contradict the very principles it was founded upon. Thus, while this case surfaces practical issues with the adoption of UNESCO’s “heritage for sustainable peace” agenda seriously calling into question the realizability of such an idea, the mere fact that both China and Japan sought to seek ruling on their bilateral dispute through UNESCO implies a display of faith in the organization and its mission.

KEYWORDS

UNESCO, Memory of the World Programme, sustainable peace, Nanjing Massacre, politics of heritage

1 Introduction

In 2015, the “Documents of Nanjing Massacre” were included in UNESCO’s Memory of the World (MoW) register, following a proposal by seven Chinese museums and archives. The MoW programme operates on the grounds that the preservation, awareness, and access to historical documents facilitates a rethinking of history as humanity’s common heritage. The Nanjing Massacre refers to an attack by the Imperial Japanese Army against the residents of the then Chinese capital during the Second Sino-Japanese War, taking place over at least 6 weeks in the winter of 1937–38, and the resulting civilian deaths. The Japanese military leaders considered responsible for the atrocity were brought to justice at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in 1946–1948. Despite this, the

details of what actually took place in Nanjing remain a topic of heated debate, with both Japan and China instrumentalizing history to berate each other in their quest to uphold a self-righteous nationalistic discourse that holds little promise for lasting reconciliation.

Nationalistic defense of sovereignty against one's neighbors by way of moralistic exhortation of historical issues is consistently prevalent in East Asian publicity (Gustafsson, 2011), making politicking with history one of the most distinctive features of the bilateral relations between China and Japan. It then follows, that for both China and Japan, the debate over the Nanjing events has become a significant site for constructing the image of the two nations in the eyes of the international society (Yoshida, 2006; Liu, 2017; Zhang, 2017; Qian and Liu, 2019). The MoW listing, acknowledging the Chinese documentation of the events as part of humanity's common heritage can therefore be seen as UNESCO favoring the Chinese narrative at the expense of Japan's. As could be expected, Japan was not pleased. Soon after the inscription, Japan criticized China for utilizing UNESCO to advance its own political aims through the nomination, interpreted by some as yet another move in China's campaign to spread its anti-Japanese discourse (see e.g., Yamamoto, 2016). The majority of Japan's criticism was, however, targeted at UNESCO. Demanding reforms of the MoW register, the state withdrew its UNESCO funding. Both China's initial nomination seeking recognition for its side of the story and Japan's targeting of UNESCO as the party responsible for the perceived injustice makes it evident that this was not merely a case of a separate reciprocal confrontation, but an employment of UNESCO's instruments in a wider political game.

The tensions underlying the relationship between universal heritage ideals and interest-driven national agendas are epitomized in UNESCO's critical role as a protector of humanity's common heritage and mediator between competing claims and interpretations of it (Dumper and Larkin, 2012). Moreover, as this article seeks to showcase, this renders the organization open to various political uses facilitated by its own mandate and mission. This implies that UNESCO's position as the primary international actor in the field of cultural politics by necessity also accommodates strategies seemingly contrary to its own principles, especially when caught between competing political agendas articulated in the form of contested historical narratives, and their entanglements with regional politics and international diplomacy. From this perspective, the article puts forward two intertwining arguments. First, it proposes that in the UNESCO context, the organization's peace ideal is one of the key means of understanding the relationship between sustainability and the aim to protect cultural practices and rights. Second, through an exploration of the Nanjing debate as a point of friction in the interplay of international ideals and national interests, it makes a case for an understanding of the interaction between the supranational and the national as a two-way street through the example of UNESCO's somewhat peculiar understanding of sustainable peace and its exploitation for political purposes. To put it simply, this article sets out to explore the ways in which the seemingly apolitical and universal understanding of heritage and its links with sustainable peace proposed by organizations such as UNESCO fails to hold

its ground when linked to the interests of a nation that claims ownership of it.

While the idea of humanity's common heritage in general celebrates humanity's greatest achievements, some heritage claims its position through ties with armed conflicts and atrocities. Such "dark heritage" forms an integral part of the tangible heritage of many societies (Logan and Reeves, 2009). The management, production and presentation of dark heritage is often tied to the national context. The main point of scholarly reference is dark heritage's role in the national memory culture, conceived either in terms of the national community's attempt to manage its own identity in positive and productive ways (e.g., Carrier, 2005) or national identity and the politics of commemoration (e.g., Lebel, 2013). On the international level, dark heritage is associated with the ways in which certain narratives of dealing with violent histories transcend national borders (Sierp and Wüstenberg, 2015) and addressed through its potential contribution to state's soft power and diplomatic interactions (Clarke et al., 2017). The presentation of such heritage can, on the one hand, provide a catalyst for reconciliation (Beaumont, 2016) or, on the other hand, be utilized as an arena for diplomatic disputes (Young, 2009, p. 60) with the latter being the case with the Nanjing listing.

While the Nanjing dispute sprouted from contestations over heritage, it also targeted UNESCO with demands to take a stance on issues of nationalism, collective memory, identity, and reconciliation. Above all else, it was a political game centered around the issues of recognition, reputation, and rank taking place in the framework of international cultural politics. The altercation between Japan and China was primarily an attempt to gain prestige at the expense of each other, following the line of reasoning that "what others think about us is as important as what we are" (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 51). East Asian diplomacy is characterized by antagonist rhetoric seeking to manipulate the international image of the neighboring countries for one's own benefit, with the main contest being that between Japan and China. The unwillingness to recognize the other state's legacy and its ties with identity has led to a deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations (Gustafsson, 2015, 2016; Hagström, 2021). Perceptions of past wrongdoings are endlessly narrated not just within the region but also in the context of multilateral diplomacy. In addition to the military-diplomatic and economic aspects, the state of Sino-Japanese relations at the time of the MoW debate is commonly framed as a propaganda war (see e.g., Pugliese and Insisa, 2017), centered around engagements with message manipulation and negative publicity through antagonistic discourse, and spoken of in these terms in both academia and the media.

China's policy aspirations in this regard are increasingly conceptualized through sharp power (see e.g., Nye, 2018; Shen, 2020), while Japan's aims are primarily understood as a form of soft power (see e.g., Bukh, 2014; Iwabuchi, 2015). Sharp power, typical of authoritarian states, is understood as a form of power aiming to interfere in the internal affairs of another state through the manipulation of information, comprising of both shaping one's own national image and influencing the affairs of another through manipulation, censorship and the spreading of false news and information (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). Soft power, on the other hand, describes the means to achieve specific foreign policy

aims through attraction grounded on cultural and ideological appeal (Nye, 1990). What these two seemingly distinct forms of power have in common is that they are both founded upon persuasion, and therefore on the idea of influencing opinions through argumentation.

Through a reading of the nomination form that the Chinese actors¹ submitted to UNESCO reflected against the Japanese reaction to the listing and juxtaposed against UNESCO's mandate and the principles of the MoW register, this article approaches the MoW dispute as a skillfully deployed strategy to (ab)use UNESCO's status as a moral force in global politics. This becomes evident in the ways both China and Japan mobilize UNESCO's own arguments and vocabulary for making their own case, as the analysis will demonstrate. Rather than looking at the bilateral relations of the two, or the historically embedded nationalistic geopolitical perspectives of the Nanjing debate, this article focuses on the ways in which understandings of the events are debated and constructed in the contemporary global political context (cf. Yoshida, 2006). It locates the MoW debate at the interface of the past and the future, as an indicator of the problems embedded in what this article calls UNESCO's agenda of heritage for sustainable peace. As this article deals with a highly delicate and controversial topic, it needs to be spelled out that the aim here is not to evaluate the national policies of the two countries, nor is it to pass judgement on who was right and who was wrong. Rather, the focus is on UNESCO as the platform on which the bilateral debate was reignited.

The fact that the decades-long Nanjing dispute was escalated in the international context through UNESCO seems a peculiar choice. UNESCO, by its constitutionally dictated mandate, is a multilateral diplomatic forum dedicated to "the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas and knowledge" (UNESCO, 1945, Preamble). Thus, turning UNESCO into an arena for a bilateral showdown seems to problematize everything UNESCO stands for, as by its mandate UNESCO should not be harnessable to serve such a purpose. Furthermore, dictated by its position as both a moral force in global politics (Singh, 2011) and one of the most notable platforms for multilateral cultural diplomacy (Huttunen, 2022), UNESCO should have been the primary international actor to reconcile the situation – not the one to let it escalate this far. The debate over the inclusion of the Nanjing Documents into the MoW register therefore raises serious concerns over UNESCO's moral authority in terms of both the preservation of the common heritage of all humankind and its position as an international organization promoting sustainable peace.

This article thus seeks to shed light on the politics of heritage in the Nanjing debate, and the clever use of the MoW register and its international ideals in the advancement of

national interests through UNESCO's own logic and reasoning, the foundations of which are the topic of the next section linking the Memory of the World register and the inclusion of the Nanjing documents in it with UNESCO's two-sided understanding of the makings of sustainable peace. The following analysis section describes the political game played in the context of the MoW listing, problematizing the universal ideal of humanity's common heritage. It proceeds by introducing three key strategies this article distinguishes in the Chinese nomination calling for the inscription of the Nanjing documents in the MoW: (1) war, collective memory, and international judgment, (2) foreign witnesses and external authority, and (3) common heritage. These are read against the Japanese response to the listing in the context of the criticism it presented toward UNESCO and the Memory of the World register. The article concludes that while the practical adoption of UNESCO's heritage for peace agenda in the MoW register seriously calls into question the realizability of such an idea, the mere fact that both China and Japan sought to seek ruling on their bilateral dispute through UNESCO implies a show of faith in the organization and its mission.

2 Two paths to peace

The Memory of the World Programme and the adjoining MoW register is a direct descendant of UNESCO's conventions concerned with issues of heritage and diversity². With the initial aim of protecting documentary heritage from destruction, MoW was initiated in 1992, following UNESCO's mandate to conserve and preserve humanity's common heritage and to protect them against destruction whether caused by natural decay or neglect but also against instances of deliberate destruction. MoW represents a distinct exception in UNESCO's programmes, as it was not established by a treaty, international agreement or convention signed by state parties to guide its operation and the selection process of listings.

Following UNESCO's own reasoning, the most essential function of the preservation of cultures that the MoW aims at is its contribution to sustainable peace. While it is primarily through its Conventions that UNESCO has come to be perceived as an international cultural organization, at its core it still remains as it was founded nearly eight decades ago: a post-World War II peace organization. Looking at UNESCO through this lens, its purpose is "to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture" [UNESCO, 1945, Article 1(1)], implying that as far as UNESCO is concerned, the primary way in which culture can serve in international politics is as a means toward peace—whatever this might mean in practice. For UNESCO, peace is more than merely the absence of war and armed conflict. It is

1 The nomination to include "Documents of Nanjing Massacre" into the MoW register was made by seven Chinese museums and archives: The Central Archives of China, the Second Historical Archives of China, Liaoning Provincial Archives, Jilin Provincial Archives, Shanghai Municipal Archives, Nanjing Municipal Archives and The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders (UNESCO, 2021). When documentary collections are split, as in this case, MoW requires nominations to be submitted jointly in the name of all the parties involved (UNESCO, 2002, p. 25).

2 The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, 1954; The Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972; The Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, 2001; The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003; The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, 2005

“a condition of solidarity, harmony of purpose and co-ordination of activities in which free men and women can live a secure and satisfactory life—a condition in which war is affirmatively prevented by the dynamic and purposeful creation of a decent and human relationship between the peoples of the world—a condition in which the incentives to war are neutralized by the social, spiritual and economic advances created and achieved” (UNESCO, 1947, p. 219). In other words, the foundations of lasting peace are to be found in the co-existence of nations and their cultures, which demands the forging of consensus achievable through “mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other’s lives” with such knowledge maintained, increased, and diffused by “assuring the conservation and protection of the world’s inheritance of books, works of art and monuments of history and science” as the UNESCO (1945) Constitution phrases it.

It is then evident that, from this perspective, the organization’s understanding of sustainable peace itself must be something of an oddity: if we are to take UNESCO’s word for it, a future of peace must be built upon a careful consideration of the past. Therein, however, lies a fundamental problem. The interpretation of history or of specific historical events often involves several, occasionally contradicting, points of view. The aim to preserve cultural heritage therefore means carefully treading on somewhat dangerous ground. UNESCO’s job, from this perspective, is primarily to function as a platform for an unbiased examination of the past to provision for a sustainable future. UNESCO should provide space for dialogue aiming to avoid biased interpretations of the past and addressing contested and difficult histories in order to prevent problems arising from the recognition of certain narratives and neglect of others. However, at the same time, UNESCO’s own instruments demand the equal treatment of diverse cultural traditions, ensuring that all voices and stories are heard. This, in a sense, robs the organization of the possibility of acting as a normative mediator.

It is through these same contradictory instruments that UNESCO works toward the achievement of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Agenda 2030 identifies 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 associated targets. In terms of UNESCO’s understanding of heritage as a building block of sustainable peace, there are two ways UNESCO’s work directly links with the wider UN agenda. Target 11.4 under Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) makes a direct reference to heritage, calling for the strengthening of “efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.” Target 4.7 under Goal 4 (Quality education), on the other hand, refers to the “promotion of a culture of peace” and “culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (United Nations, 2015). These provide UNESCO with the means to legitimize its mission and actions in relation to the wider sustainability agenda.

On the practical level UNESCO’s take on sustainability seems inseparably intertwined with development, as is made evident by the organization’s engagement with projects such as the International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development (see UNESCO, 2021), directly linking the organization’s efforts in the realm of culture and sustainability to the economization of culture. Looking a bit deeper, however, and turning the gaze to international treaties facilitated by UNESCO, which are the primary instruments at the organization’s disposal,

it becomes evident that beneath this simmers a desire to forge a link between culture and sustainability in more complex terms, too. It is through these treaties that UNESCO has sought to formulate new contexts and meanings for culture also in the sustainability framework.³ What is interesting here, is that these treaties, while seeking to lay the ground for a sustainable future, are all focused on the protection and preservation of cultures and their concrete manifestations, be they specific ways of being and living, or physical works of art. It then follows, that UNESCO has been a leader in efforts to insert heritage into various international development frameworks, suggesting a prominent presence of the “heritage for development” discourse within the organization.⁴

Therefore, two intertwined, yet distinctively different, sustainability discourses circulate within and around UNESCO: those of culture and development, and culture and preservation. To put it rather simplistically, what sets these two apart is the fact that while the former is concerned with the future, the latter takes as its starting point the past. However, while heritage is often understood primarily as preserving the past, its main contribution to sustainability is linked with the process of “doing heritage,” referring to engagement with and negotiation of the past in the present in order to shape the futures we create, as interaction between people and the world they inhabit, and as a process of creating, defining and preserving heritage (Auclair and Fairclough, 2015). This fluid temporal dimension of heritage therefore links the past with the present and, indeed, with the future.

This is the starting point for the Memory of the World register, launched in 1995. The register consists of a collection of archival and library content, documents, and manuscripts as well as oral traditions and audio-visual materials deemed to hold universal value. As of May 2023, there are 432 Memory of the World inscriptions on the International Register.⁵ Through the register UNESCO seeks to encourage a rethinking of history on global terms, as humanity’s common heritage. The nomination process of the MoW register is open to “any person or organization, including governments and NGOs” (UNESCO, 2002, p. 23). Priority is, however, given to nominations made by the relevant national or regional committees. The main criteria for the inclusion of an item or a collection of items in the register include their authenticity, uniqueness, and irreplaceability (UNESCO, 2002, p. 22). State parties cannot directly be involved in the actual selection process of the listings, but rather the recommendation of selected

³ While UNESCO has quite understandably been an advocate of recognizing the role of culture in sustainability from early on, in the formal texts considered to be foundational for the sustainable development agenda (the “Brundtland Report” 1987 and the Rio Summit Declaration and Agenda 21 1992), the concept links almost exclusively to the economic, ecological, and social dimensions.

⁴ For an account of how the heritage for development idea evolved within the construction of the wider culture and sustainable development agenda, see e.g., Labadi (2022).

⁵ Following the establishment of the MOW Register, UNESCO has encouraged the founding of national and regional registers. These focus on the preservation of documentary heritage holding primarily regional or national value and therefore not meeting the criteria of the International Register.

nominations is made by an International Advisory Committee (IAC) following the recommendations made by the Register Subcommittees who, in turn, rely on expert advice from selected parties in their decision making. The IAC meetings are closed to the public, further limiting the role of state actors in the selection process. Against this backdrop, attempting to resolve state-to-state disagreements in the MoW framework seems more and more farfetched. Yet, this is precisely what seems to have happened with the Nanjing controversy.

UNESCO's recognition of cultures and their concrete manifestations as categorically different but equally valuable and as such, worth maintaining, protecting, and promoting as epitomized in the Memory of the World Programme crystallizes the organization's main principles essential for grasping the case at hand. First, international cultural politics rely on commonly shared ideals, the practical implementation of which UNESCO itself provides the moral and normative standards for. Within the international community as it must be understood in the field of international cultural politics, UNESCO is the most salient actor in providing norms and guidelines for signifying culture (see e.g., Hoggart, 1978; De Beukelaer et al., 2015; Garner, 2016).

Second, through this role, UNESCO claims authority and legitimacy as a moral force in global politics (Singh, 2011). Generally speaking, there are four distinct ways in which international organizations seek to legitimize their existence and actions: state-derived delegated legitimacy, rational-legal authority building on their charters, expert legitimacy, and moral legitimacy utilizing their missions as the main source of authority (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). In UNESCO's case, it all begins with its mandate to build the "foundations of peace in the minds of men," with its power to persuade people of what is right and what is wrong, what could and what should be. While driven by politically motivated aspirations, UNESCO's actions are often veiled under a politically neutral or even apolitical façade (Huttunen, 2022). Operating in the realm of formal, institutionalized international cultural policy assigns the organization with a functionalist role as one of the "apolitical" aides within the UN system (Wells, 1987, p. 5), which further enhances conceptions of an innocent-seeming idealism at the organization's core. During the organization's history these conceptions have, however, been repeatedly called into question through accusations of "politicization" (see e.g., Dutt, 1995) grounded on what is known as the functionalist approach to international organization (see Mitrany, 1944). The same can be said about the MoW register (see e.g., Charlesworth, 2010; Nakano, 2018; Edmondson et al., 2020).

Third, the value assigned to the continuity and equality of cultures within the UNESCO system centering around questions of both cultural diversity and heritage, brings forth the idea that cultural expressions must be safeguarded in the name of preserving distinct ways of life (Isar, 2017, p. 154). Manifested most notably in the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005)⁶ and the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), this

idea places the tradition of cultural relativism (Lévi-Strauss, 1952) at UNESCO's core. While cultural relativism accurately captures UNESCO's position on cultural universals underpinning cultural distinctiveness, its recognition opens the gates for the controversies the idea carries with it. The idea of cultures as distinct but equal raises serious concerns over whether all cultural traditions deserve to be protected, and who, if anyone, possesses the right to negotiate these issues and on what grounds. A noteworthy point here is that, on paper, the Memory of the World Programme emphasizes cultural differences and diversity, and links the listed documents with the heritage of corresponding states. With this recognition of pluralism, it seems a safe vehicle for a negotiation of the universal value of documentary heritage, as it does not pose a threat to national sovereignty.

However, such an emphasis on self-determination in the realm of culture and heritage can, at its worst, lead to the untenable requirement to preserve ethically condemnable cultural practices or, at their most extreme, ones that go against the principles dictated in UNESCO's own international treaties. By UNESCO's mandate, in the name of the peaceful coexistence of cultures, such practices are often, if not accepted, then at least tolerated, marking the organization's vulnerability to the misuse of its highly idealistic aims for the advancement of interests possibly contradicting the aims formulated in the very same treaties. Quite evidently, negotiating such issues requires carefully watching one's words and actions, as the risk of provoking tensions between communities is ever-present.

Such a "history problem" is predominantly present in East Asian politics, as debates over certain narratives keep rising to the forefront (Gustafsson and Hall, 2021). The insertion of these debates into the UNESCO context through the Nanjing controversy thus positions the Memory of the World Register as a prime site for an exploration of the opportunities this opens for using and misusing the organization's ambiguous understanding of the preservation and promotion of (national) cultures and their relationship with what UNESCO positions as the building blocks of sustainable peace.

3 The politics of contested heritage

The collection of "Documents of Nanjing Massacre" consists of three parts. The first part contains files documenting the atrocities committed during the massacre of 1937–1938. The second part concerns the post-war investigation as documented by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) along with the Chinese Nationalist Government's Military Tribunal in 1945–1947. The third and final part consists of files on Japanese war criminals as documented by the People's Republic of China's judiciary authorities between 1952 and 1956. A detailed listing of the documents included in the proposal is not publicly available, but the nomination form notes items such as photographs, diaries, and a documentary film in addition to the emphasized records of the tribunals. Understandably, the nomination form makes its case in reference to the criteria of the MoW, partly dictated by the

⁶ There are two levels to the Convention's understanding of diversity: the humanitarian and democracy-oriented wide understanding—which I am referring to here—and the narrow understanding addressing cultural

industries and markets, and the mechanisms that regulate them (see e.g., Singh, 2011; Pykkönen, 2012).

structure of the form itself. Beyond that, the authors of the form seem to have formulated their arguments with great care, linking their claims with themes quite clearly devised to appeal to their chosen audience also beyond the MoW framework. The following analysis builds on the three key themes repeated throughout the form: (1) war, collective memory, and international judgment; (2) foreign witnesses and external authority; and (3) common heritage, which runs as a thread through the other two.

3.1 War, collective memory, and international judgment

The nomination form makes strategic use of previous rulings by the international community, especially the sentencing of Japanese war criminals by several different courts. This makes sense, as it is well-known that the Tribunals showed little mercy to the Japanese. Even the International Military Tribunal, which can perhaps be assumed to have been the more neutral one out of the three trials listed, openly testifies to the horrors that took place in Nanjing (IMTFE, 1948). Specifically indicating the IMTFE records as a part of the Nanjing documents therefore seems like a smart move. However, their inclusion does raise some questions, as the records are, in fact, publicly available and therefore in no particular need of protection and preservation. In the form, the records of IMTFE and associated Nanjing War Tribunal serve primarily to lend the nomination the required authority through the use of terminology and an interpretation of history favorable to the Chinese. For this reason, perhaps, the form is full of quotes—occasionally unattached—especially from the IMTFE records. One of the wider strategies the nomination form relies on is thus, quite naturally, reminding the audience of the universal nature of the horrors of war and the position that the very idea of war and conflict holds in our collective memories. Behind this lurks what might be the underlying motivation behind the emphasis on the tribunal records: a not-so-gentle reminder of the aftermath of war and a collective lynching of the wrong-doers in the name of international justice. The authors of the nomination form seem very aware of the fact that, considering UNESCO's original motivation to act as an antidote to Nazi propaganda, it does not take a lot to evoke vivid memories of the European side of World War II. The nomination form makes the most out of this connection, as the phrase "China's 'The Diary of Anne Frank'"⁷ is strategically placed on the first page of the form.

As the MoW context implies, it is evident that through the debate neither China nor Japan sought to address one another, but rather directed their arguments to the international community. Thus, in line with the defined target audience, the nomination form makes several mentions of the foreign countries represented in the International Military Tribunal for the Far East: "the United States, China, Britain, Soviet Union, Australia, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, India, the Philippines and other countries." The "other countries" here, slightly oddly, refers only to Canada.

Despite the ruling and sentencing by the international community, the case of Nanjing was never resolved in the eyes of China and Japan. For several decades following the events, the case was, however, kept quiet on both sides. No official diplomatic relationship between the two existed until the 1970's, and so the lack of an appropriate forum partly explains the silence. It was only in the 1980's that the issue reemerged, largely resulting from the Chinese attempts to disguise internal controversies and to unify the nation through nationalistic discourse founded upon the resurrection of memories of suffering in the hands of a common enemy—Japan. Following this, the associated victimhood narrative has become closely intertwined with the construction of Chinese national identity and has been called into question primarily by Japanese far-right historical revisionists. This, quite understandably, has made the memory of the massacre a recurring point of friction in Sino-Japanese relations (Yoshida, 2006; Wang, 2012; Zhang, 2017). Outside of Japan, interpretations of the Nanjing events seem to have reached an agreement, where the debates over the number of people killed and raped in Nanjing should not derail us from "the fact that a very large number died as the out-of-control Imperial Army exacted revenge on a population that had stood in the way of its advance" (Mitter, 2013, p. 135). This is something the nomination form would never allow to slip our minds:

The Nanjing Massacre took place in the country's former capital. Disarmed Chinese soldiers were mass murdered, while peaceful civilians including seniors, women and children were slaughtered. After the war, both the Far East International Military Tribunal, which was organized by 11 countries including the United States, United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union and China, and the Nanjing War Criminals Tribunal set special trials on the war criminals of the Nanjing Massacre. Iwane Matsui and Tani Hisao, respectively class-A and class-B war criminals, were both sentenced to death by court ruling.

General Matsui, the commander of the expeditionary force sent to China faced the court in the International Military Tribunal. He was found guilty of war crimes and sentenced to death by hanging for his involvement in the Nanjing Massacre. He, along with other convicted war criminals, is enshrined in the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. Lieutenant General Tani was charged with class B and C war crimes—war crimes and crimes against humanity, respectively—but was extradited to China at the request of the Chinese government and stood trial at the Nanjing War Crimes Tribunal in China. He denied all charges but was found guilty and sentenced to death by a firing squad.

On the one hand, the inscription of the Nanjing Documents into the MoW register reflects a legitimate concern over the remembrance of war and atrocity but, on the other hand, it served to reignite the tension between China and Japan (Nakano, 2018). UNESCO's recognition of the Chinese documentation of the events caused an uproar in Japan, and Japan was forced to bring out the big guns. It withdrew its UNESCO funding, introducing the coercive hard power mechanisms of economic sanctions into an organization operating primarily through its constitutionally

⁷ The Diaries of Anne Frank themselves were listed in the MoW in 2009.

dictated principles of soft power.⁸ No wonder: The nomination openly accuses the Japanese of a “deliberate cover-up of the truth.”⁹

The listing can therefore be seen to favor the Chinese narrative of a shared historical event at the expense of that of Japan, therefore implying China’s diplomatic victory (Nakano, 2021). In other words, through this listing, UNESCO accepted the Chinese interpretation of a historical conflict between China and Japan. This was made even more embarrassing by the fact that this took place in the framework of an international organization with which Japan has a long and close relationship. Japan has been a member of UNESCO since 1952. In fact, joining the organization was one of the first steps taken to restore Japan’s status in the international community after World War II, signaling the state’s commitment to world peace and the part cultural relations could play in achieving it (Huttunen, 2017). UNESCO’s heritage programmes, especially, have been widely utilized by Japan to secure its international position through the recognition of its national heritage’s significant universal value, and to indicate the state’s dedication to the organization’s principles (Lincicome, 2020). China, on the other hand, has been a member since 1946, making it one of the organization’s founding members. For the first decades, as a result of the Communist Revolution, China’s relationship with UNESCO’s was hindered by a debate about which government should represent China at the organization: the People’s Republic of China, based in mainland China, or the Republic of China, based in Taiwan. The People’s Republic of China became the representative of China only in 1971. Traditionally, Japan has been eager to engage with UNESCO’s initiatives,¹⁰ and often among the first to adopt them into the national context, while China’s approach has been practically the opposite (Alasuutari and Kangas, 2020).

Since 2011, Japan had been UNESCO’s biggest financial contributor, although recently overtaken by China, following the decision of the United States to withhold its funding as a response to Palestine’s admission as a full member. Japan’s reaction, therefore, was not only a blow to UNESCO’s reputation and credibility, but also had severe financial implications. From UNESCO’s perspective, this complicates matters even further, as in its probable desire to avoid alienating its main funders, the organization must have been all the more aware of the delicate nature of the situation.

Japan’s criticism of the decision to include the Nanjing Documents in the MoW register was specifically targeted at the selection process of the register. As the MoW register operates on the basis of expert authority, it facilitates no official state-level negotiation on the listings. This, in practice, means that should any criticism arise, there exists no official arena to address these

8 In addition to the listing of the Nanjing Documents, another possible factor behind the suspended funding may have been the proposed listing of documents related to “comfort women” documenting forced prostitution before and during World War II, which had also been submitted for inclusion in the Memory of the World list by Chinese and South Korean representatives (see e.g., Vickers, 2021).

9 While Japan officially denied the connection between the MoW listing and suspending its UNESCO funding, the consensus now is that the two events were directly linked.

10 An interesting exception in this history is the fact that Japan still has not ratified the 2005 Diversity Convention.

concerns. In its meeting in December 2014, the Register Subcommittee expressed its concern that it was not officially stated that the “inscription of documents to a register does not necessarily imply that UNESCO endorses the content of these documents” (UNESCO, 2015). Since no such statement of non-endorsement was in effect at the time of the inclusion of the Nanjing Documents into the MoW register, UNESCO was a natural scapegoat thus accommodating Japan’s response.

To eliminate the problem, seen to be fundamental in the nomination and evaluation process, Japan called for a reform of the register. In 2015, the head of the Japanese delegation and the Japanese Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Hiroshi Hase, spoke to the General Conference of UNESCO: “On this occasion, we should reflect back on the aspiration that “it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed,” which is the motto of UNESCO. Whatever we say or do here at UNESCO, it should be in line with this basic spirit of UNESCO.” Japan’s main strategy therefore seems to be to speak from within and as a part of the organization and to simply appeal to UNESCO’s own mission and principles to persuade the organization to side with it. Hase continued:

In this sense, protecting World Heritage, Intangible Cultural Heritage and Documentary Heritage, and transmitting such heritages to the next generation, is at the forefront for building the defenses of peace. It should be pointed out that such activities in the field of culture must unite, not divide nations, as Madame Director-General Bokova emphasizes frequently, and must be also intended for mutual understanding and solidarity among the Member States. Particularly in regards to the Memory of the World, it is necessary for all Member States, as they exercise their due responsibility at UNESCO, to discuss among each other for reforms in order to improve governance and transparency. (Hase, 2015)

Hase, evidently knowing how to hit where it hurts, made the most of the opportunity to point out that the reforms Japan called for would not only serve to enhance the realizability of UNESCO’s mission but were, in fact, necessary for the organization to maintain its integrity. Japan’s interests were therefore also those of UNESCO. It seems Japan’s initial criticism of China unnecessarily politicizing UNESCO for the advancement of its own political aims comes across as not much more than empty words, for that is precisely what Japan did with its own response although the chosen means of argumentation seem to be slightly more subtle. Furthermore, Hase’s speech speaks directly to the main weakness of UNESCO’s heritage for sustainable peace agenda: the fact that heritage is inherently political and that assuming that the innocent-seeming, idealistic understanding of it can remain unstained by its exploitation for political purposes is a drastic mistake.

3.2 Foreign witnesses and external authority

Many of those mentioned in the nomination form as recorders and documenters of the events in Nanjing are not Chinese, but

foreign nationals, which further speaks to the fact that the aim of the authors is indeed to speak to the international community. In doing so, the nomination attempts to get across the message that the contested memories of the Japanese atrocities do not concern only China but are an issue that requires world recognition. Some individuals mentioned in the form are said to have reported their findings to newspapers in their home countries. Amongst them was a British priest, who is reported to have “had repeatedly exhorted Japanese commanders but of no avail. Those exhortations were purely from humanitarian considerations.” The news reports based on witness statements evoked strong emotional responses in their readers, leading one to conclude in a letter to his brother that “[t]hese Japanese soldiers are inhuman.”

The nomination form specifically mentions 17 foreigners who stayed in Nanjing to set up the International Safety Zone Committee. It is also emphasized that the collection of documents consists not only of Chinese and Japanese archives but also contains “documentary films and photos, diaries and the Nanjing International Safety Zone files” many of which were recorded by citizens “of the United States, Germany, Denmark, etc., who then stayed in Nanjing as teachers, missionaries and journalists.” These are presented as solid evidence, and are reported to have had “a profound appeal to the global community and helped people around the world better understand the cruelty of war,” and which, by the looks of it, are still hoped to do so.

The form does not go as far as openly accusing the Japanese of outright lies, but rather of a “deliberate cover-up of the truth.” It is therefore hardly surprising that one of the key argumentative devices utilized in the form is argumentation aiming to justify its contents as undeniable fact: “The documents have gathered together views of experts over their years of research on Nanjing Massacre, with full descriptions of the documents’ features, their historical values and impact. All the descriptions have the full support of academic research.” Again, the nomination relies on external, often foreign authority, to underline its trustworthiness, as “[t]he Nanjing Massacre Documents contain files on Japanese perpetrators, Chinese victims, and third-party witnesses from the United States, United Kingdom, etc. The historical clues and records are clear, while the materials are mutually verifiable and complementary.” After the official international resolution provided by the Tokyo Tribunal, the issue had laid dormant in the eyes of the international community, but remained a source of constant tension in the bilateral relationship between China and Japan. The nomination form proposing the inclusion of the documents in the MoW list acknowledges no such debate, but rather claims “indisputable authority and authenticity” for the documents “being the testimony of Nanjing Massacre as a historical fact.”

Japan’s proposal for reforms included, among others, revising the selection process of the IAC members and forming a committee to facilitate inter-state discussion on the nominations. In 2017, UNESCO endorsed a review report on the MoW addressing, among others, issues “relating to procedures for nominations that have been called into question” or “cases when Member States sharply disagree over the significance of the documents nominated, or when historical issues are mixed with national political agendas and international disputes, accompanied by active lobbying through diplomatic channels.” The review report

suggested that in such cases, open, mediated dialogue should be facilitated between the parties concerned (UNESCO, 2017a).

The Revised General Guidelines for the MoW Programme (UNESCO, 2017b) reflect Japan’s criticism. In a new Appendix 4, a section on “Questioned nominations” states that “MoW’s concern is with the preservation and accessibility of primary sources, not with their interpretation or the resolution of historical disputes.” The new guidelines also allow for concerned parties to provide opinions, which are to be taken into account in the assessment of submissions. Japan’s strategy was thus highly successful as its funding withdrawal resulted in promises for reforms in the MoW register.¹¹ As a result, Japan resumed its membership payments. Japan’s decision to dispute the inclusion of the documents in the MoW register in the first place, however, seems counterproductive as it quite clearly plays into the Chinese narrative of Japan’s impenitence. To complicate matters further, it also seems to problematize Japan relationship with UNESCO. Japan’s reaction, however, was understandable, as UNESCO’s “unilateral decision on the inclusion of the Documents of the Nanjing Massacre does not help to create a situation in which Japan and China can move toward a more constructive dialogue for mutual understanding and reconciliation” (Nakano, 2018, p. 6). Furthermore, for Japan, this was probably a relatively safe move, as its financial status guaranteed it was negotiating from a highly advantageous position.

An interesting component of the arguments building on the statements of the foreign witnesses points to the significance of terminology: “The title [referring to the name of the document collection, “Documents of Nanjing Massacre”], for instance, is a standardized Chinese official terminology, and also in line with the customary description of the incident by the public.” The Chinese name for the Nanjing events translates directly as “Nanjing Massacre,” while the Japanese name ambivalently means “Nanjing Incident.” The point the form is evidently trying to get across here is that the Chinese name of the events is the one more in line with the truth and facts—partly because it is also the one commonly in use internationally and therefore possibly hoped to resonate with the MoW register’s criteria of global significance and authenticity.

3.3 Common heritage

Interestingly, the immoral nature of the Japanese troops as represented in the nomination form is not limited to their actions against the residents of Nanjing, but the severity of their bestial behavior is further underlined by the way they treated documentary evidence of the events. “In August 1945, right before their surrender, the Japanese troops burnt and destroyed a large amount of files and evidences with a plan and purpose,” the form notes and continues to emphasize the irreplaceable historical value of the collection of documents: “the damage to the files by the war and social upheaval, and that Japan destroyed many archival materials after its surrender in August of 1945, the rarity of the

¹¹ For a more detailed account of Japan’s strategy to use “its financial leverage and political influence, as well as diplomatic lobbying” in response to the listing and to block another listing unfavourable to Japan along with a discussion of the reforms and their possible shortcomings, see Shin (2021).

non-renewable documents stored in the archival is increasingly perceived as the time goes by.” The actions of the Japanese, therefore, are made even worse by the fact that in intentionally destroying documentary evidence of the atrocity, they acted against the principles endorsed by the MoW.

The victims of Japan’s atrocities as they are constructed in the nomination form are not only the people of Nanjing, but the city and indeed the nation itself: “The aggressive war launched by Japan brought a standstill to China’s political, economic and cultural development, severely damaged the historical cultures of a city with over a 1,000-year history.” Similar construction of victimhood is cleverly tied together with argumentation quite clearly speaking the language of the MoW:

As the number of living survivors decreases each year, the historical value of the archives becomes even greater. These archives mean so much emotionally to the descendants of the victims of the massacre, to the citizens of the victimized city of Nanjing, and to the people of the once injured country. Today, tens of millions of Chinese and foreign people, including Japanese people, pay their visit to the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders annually. On December 13 each year, people hold memorial services for the victims. As from 2014, the Chinese government makes December 13 a national memorial day for the whole nation to hold mourning events and convey condolences to those killed during the Nanjing Massacre.

In its construction of victimhood, the nomination form seems to imply that the victims, their descendants, and those who speak on their behalf are passionate, yet trustworthy students of history, who have spent years gathering evidence of historical facts seeking to highlight the wrongs done to them. The Japanese perpetrators, on the other hand, are given no credit for such behavior, as it has evidently fallen to the Chinese to keep the memory of the atrocities alive. It is hinted that we are actually all victims of the Japanese atrocities, because in their attempts to destroy documentary evidence of the Nanjing events, the Japanese were actually robbing us all of our common heritage. Therefore, in addition to their actions in Nanjing, judgment is also passed on the wrong-doers for their ignorance and negligence when it comes to the preservation of humanity’s common history and respect for UNESCO’s aspirations as given form through initiatives such as the MoW.

The primary strategy the authors of the nomination form turned to make their case is made evident in the closing sentence of the one-page summary of the nomination: “the above-mentioned items have indisputable authority and authenticity being testimony of Nanjing Massacre as a historical fact.” This chain of MoW related keywords implies that UNESCO was hoped to provide a stamp of “historical truth,” which may well have been one of the primary motivations behind the nomination, with UNESCO and the MoW being used as “prestigious brand-names” (Yamamoto, 2016, p. 15, 17), endorsing particular versions of history at the expense of others.

In response, Japan positions itself as a loyal supporter of UNESCO, and one that is happy to let the organization lead the way into a future of sustainable peace:

Upon the occasion of UNESCO’s 70th anniversary, the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO is honored to submit a Statement, emphasizing the importance of respecting diversity and valuing the role of UNESCO for realizing a sustainable society. This statement pays respect to UNESCO for having worked so hard toward world peace for the past 70 years. The statement also proposes that UNESCO should assume the role of an “intellectual leader” in this new era of the international community. I would like to conclude by expressing my highest expectations for UNESCO’s further development, and its contributions to the international community, under Madame Director-General Bokova’s strong leadership. The Japanese Government is fully committed to making further efforts to promote UNESCO’s activities.

The concluding remarks of Hase’s speech do not leave much room for interpretation: It is UNESCO’s intellectual leadership that is required to lead the international community through whatever challenges the future holds, and Japan is eager to follow. Veiled in this seems to be the idea that through its engagement with UNESCO’s activities, Japan deserves to be redeemed, for how could someone so dedicated to respecting UNESCO’s principles and advancing the aims set out in the organization’s mandate still be punished even if they once strayed from the path. Positioning Japan as an obedient subordinate of the organization, Hase’s speech also speaks to Japan’s willingness to accept any judgment UNESCO might pass—with certain terms and conditions fulfilled.

Understanding UNESCO’s role as a setter of international normative standards helps grasp the crucial significance placed on the organization’s ruling on the matter. It is, after all, thanks to UNESCO that there exists a global consensus on culture as a component of national and international politics (Alasutari and Kangas, 2020). The same can be said about the emergence of the idea of universal world heritage, which was also consolidated within and through the UN and UNESCO system (Elliott and Schmutz, 2012), an idea the MoW register builds on.

4 Conclusions

While the idea of humanity’s common heritage should provide the framework for producing shared narratives facilitating reconciliation, its practical adoption in the MoW register seriously calls into question the realizability of such an ideal. The idealistic effort to preserve archival materials and to increase recognition of their significance seems to have become overshadowed by the register’s unintended facilitating of competing nationalistic narratives, leaving the door open for the exploitation of the register for purposes that contradict the very principles it was founded upon. As the case of the Nanjing debate makes evident, the choice to engage with one documentation of history at the expense of another cannot provide a road to peace and reconciliation.

Placing the contested narrative of a historical conflict in the MoW framework indicates a move to position the bilateral dispute surrounding the Nanjing events into the international context. Both China and Japan turned to UNESCO with their demands for international recognition centered around global remembering of the past. While through the controversy resulting from the

MoW listing UNESCO was positioned as an arena for a bilateral showdown, the debate itself did not take place between China and Japan, as neither sought to directly address the other. Instead, the chosen audience for the arguments presented on both sides was the wider international community, given a concrete form through UNESCO. It therefore makes perfect sense to speak UNESCO's language.

Both China and Japan seemed to act just as could be predicted based on previous conceptualizations of their policy aspirations as sharp power and soft power, respectively. While both parties evidently utilized UNESCO's own mission, mandate and arguments for their own benefit, the chosen strategies of implementation were drastically different. China, rather wisely, repeated the main criteria for the inclusion of items in the register, namely those of authenticity, uniqueness, and irreplaceability. To top it up, these were accompanied with arguments relying on the organization's pursuit of objective truth. Skilfully these arguments were reformulated through moral judgement and accusations, all aiming to present Japan in the worst possible light. Japan, on the other hand, presented its arguments in a polite—one might be inclined to say gentlemanly—, yet at the same time oddly patronizing manner, leaning on UNESCO's basic principles and its underlying idealism in a rather successful attempt to appeal to the organization's dignity almost as if to elevate itself above the dispute at hand. This could be read as an indication of Japan's unwillingness to directly address past atrocities, which seems rather counterproductive as it directly plays into the Chinese narrative of Japan's impenitence. Furthermore, Japan's arguments seemed to be grounded on UNESCO's principles on the role heritage can play in building sustainable peace. However, it does need to be pointed out that the Japanese commentary presented to UNESCO's General Conference did not explicitly refer to the Nanjing dispute, which might partially explain the more subtle, yet evocative, argumentation strategy.

For China, the Nanjing debate primarily functioned as a means of elevating its own international reputation and prestige at the expense of that of Japan. Far from standing powerless in front of the Chinese declaration of political power, Japan stood its ground and played its cards wisely. While China emerged from the dispute as the apparent moral winner, Japan was not left empty-handed either: Partly because of Japan's reaction to the listing, UNESCO was forced to change the decision-making practices of the MoW register, indicating perhaps UNESCO's acknowledgment of a misjudgement on its part and most definitely a recognition of Japan—or at least its financial contributions—as a member state worth holding onto.

The UNESCO framework demands the recognition of supranational ideals as the basis of international cultural politics, while the states framework inserts national interests into the equation. It goes without saying that occasionally these two do not operate in harmony, but rather provide instances of ambiguity or even controversy. While the prerequisites for supranational cultural politics that UNESCO represents are built upon universal ideals, which must take on new forms and ways of practical implementation as they spill down to the national level, with the MoW dispute UNESCO was forced to re-examine the position of contradicting, politically loaded nationalistic interpretations of the past in conflict with its attempts to encourage a rethinking

of history as humanity's common heritage. In other words, as the clever uses of UNESCO's allusive ideal of sustainable peace demonstrate, the relationship between the national and the supranational comes across as a two-way street with national interests feeding back to the level of international ideals. The Sino-Japanese altercation thus pushes us to ponder whether UNESCO's role in the realm of international cultural politics necessarily facilitates strategies and policies with aims seemingly contrary to its own principles.

The choice to insert the bilateral diplomatic dispute between China and Japan into the UNESCO context seems farfetched, as facilitating such confrontation seems to go against everything the organization stands for. These events can easily be interpreted as a failure on UNESCO's part and can therefore be seen as a practical manifestation of the credibility problems the organization continues to face. In addition to the somewhat obvious attempts to seek for a conclusion to the bilateral dispute between China and Japan, one of the motivations behind the proposal to include the Nanjing Documents in the MoW register was perhaps to critically examine the cruelties and horrors of war and the nationalistic geopolitical polarizations behind them in the international context. This is very much in line with the aims of the MoW register and even those of UNESCO itself. However, as the analysis shows, in this case UNESCO's MoW register was instrumentalized as a platform for creating problems, enhancing existing ones or even lighting a new fire under issues left dormant on the international arena for decades.

Even though on the surface it would seem that from UNESCO's perspective, the Nanjing debate was a magnificent failure, the issue is far from this simple. If one of the aims was, indeed, to seek settlement by the international community, it must have been something very specific China set out to accomplish through its nomination and Japan through its criticism: The international community had, after all, given its verdict on the matter already in the post-World War II tribunals. While UNESCO without a doubt emerged from the controversy with a slight stain on its shield, the fact that UNESCO was chosen as a platform for the bilateral showdown shows that UNESCO does indeed hold a position of significant power in the arena of international cultural politics. This is evidently due to its position as a moral force, proving without a doubt that the organization still holds power in determining what is right and what is wrong. It could then be argued that instead of China or Japan, the party which most significantly enhanced its recognition, reputation, and rank—or prestige—was, in fact, UNESCO. Thus, and to end on a more positive note, the altercation between China and Japan can also be looked at as an attempt to finally move the relationship between the two out of the ruins of the not-so-distant past. To do so through seeking a ruling on the matter from the “moral police” of international cultural politics leads one to conclude that, perhaps, there is hope for UNESCO's agenda of heritage for sustainable peace yet. As the reforms to the MoW register brought about as a result of the Nanjing listing indicate, the future direction of the organization seems to be one accommodating and promoting a multi-perspective approach to history and heritage—something the MoW register should have been from the beginning. Taking this direction is likely to make the organization less vulnerable to strategies aiming to weaponize the organization

and the platforms it provides, resulting in a more resilient and robust UNESCO.

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