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# Research report

Forum: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Issue: Exploring global strategies to preserve cultural heritage in developing countries amid Western influences

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### Introduction

Cultural heritage plays an important part in everyone's identity and a community's as well. It carries important connections to everyday interactions such as politics, social etc. Cultural heritage is also physical with historical monuments and cultural sites playing a critical role in our understanding and values towards one another. The designs placed upon them help symbolise everything that connects the real world to ideologies, important events, or figures. Overall, they contribute to the understanding we have of everyone's world, behaviour and the many complex societies we have while respecting history that has been set in stone.



In developing nations, the conservancy of cultural heritage is extremely problematic due to the consequences of Westernization, monetary stresses, and globalisation. The obtrusion of Western values and practices can overbalance and marginalised local cultures and traditions, leading to the prioritisation of Western-style expansion over the conservancy of indigenous cultural sites. Additionally, economic limitations often restrict the ability of these countries to fund their own

protection of their cultural heritage.

UNESCO has been vigorously preaching these issues through various enterprises aimed at enabling the preservation and protection of cultural heritage in developing lands. These actions include the identification of World Heritage Sites, providing specialised and monetary support for preservation projects and extending recognition about the significance of cultural heritage. (Blue Shield International, 2022)

### Definition of key terms

**Cultural Heritage:** The culmination of qualities, inheritance, customs, and events that contribute to enhancing the legacy of a group or society.

**Historical Monument:** An appointed asset that serves as a reminder or mark of a historical event or figure. A structure that celebrates and is an expression of a historical period.

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**UNESCO World Heritage Sites:** A location that is legally protected and preserved because of its historical, scientific, or cultural significance. The sites are decided and deemed as such by a committee overseen by UNESCO. (Britannica, 2023)

**Preservation:** Consistent assessment and maintenance of a structure to keep it in its original or best condition.

### General overview

Historically, the protection of cultural heritage has encountered considerable difficulties, especially in developing countries. This stems from colonialism and Western influences which have often led to the negligence, alteration, or demolition of local cultural spots. During the colonial eras, many cultural artefacts were sacked from their places of origin and taken to museums in Western countries like India or Greece, and then brought to the UK. This practice has greatly affected the cultural landscape of many developing nations (Britannica, 2024). Post-colonial efforts to reclaim and keep cultural heritage have persisted, yet they are often impeded by a lack of resources, expertise, and political will.

The preservation of cultural heritage in developing countries faces several obstacles:

- Western influences: The imposition of Western values and traditions can overpower and marginalise local cultures and traditions. This impact can lead to the prioritisation of Western-style development over the preservation of indigenous cultural sites.
- Economic pressures: Developing countries often struggle with economic constraints that limit their ability to fund the preservation of cultural heritage. Funding is usually directed toward more immediate economic and social needs (World Monuments Fund).
- Lack of expertise and resources: Many developing countries lack the technical expertise and resources for effective preservation. This includes knowledge of preservation techniques, availability of conservation materials, and keys to modern technology (ICOMOS, 2023).
- Globalisation and urbanisation: Rapid urbanisation and globalisation can threaten cultural heritage sites as land is/can be repurposed for further developments and traditional practices are ditched in turn of modern lifestyles.



These barriers collectively contribute to the decay of cultural inheritance in developing countries. The effect is seen in the loss of historical sites, traditional practices, and indigenous knowledge

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methods, crucial for conserving cultural uniqueness and continuity.

There have been recent actions and measures to keep cultural heritage in developing countries which have focused on balancing growth with conservation. UNESCO has been at the vanguard of these efforts, designating World Heritage Sites and supplying support for preservation ambitions.

- International aid: Organisations such as UNESCO, the World Monuments Fund, and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) have been operating for years to provide specialised and financial support for conservation projects in several countries such as; China, Italy, Germany, Indonesia, Philippines etc. These efforts include training local experts, providing funding for restoration projects and increasing awareness about the essence of cultural heritage (World Monuments Fund, 2022).
- Local initiatives: In many developing countries, local communities and governments are taking endeavours to protect their cultural heritage. This includes establishing national heritage sites, creating cultural preservation laws, and promoting traditional practices through education and tourism of travellers.

UNESCO has been playing a viable role in boosting the preservation of cultural heritage via initiatives such as the World Heritage List, which acknowledges sites of extraordinary cultural and natural significance. UNESCO supplies technological service, budget and advocacy to help preservation actions in developing countries. Cultural legacy is vital for upholding the diversity and richness of human culture in times where globalisation and TNCs are exponentially growing at rapid rates. Culture contributes to a feeling of uniqueness, funds tourism and economic development and enables understanding/respect amongst different cultures (Britannica). Such examples of these things are like the various international agreements, such as the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, provide frameworks for the protection and preservation of cultural heritage.

Major parties involved

### **China**

China has encountered momentous cultural heritage theft, especially during periods of conflict. A notable one being The Nanjing Massacre, which occurred from December 1937 to January 1938 during the Second Sino-Japanese War. There was tons of looting and demolition of innumerable

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cultural heirlooms by Japanese soldiers (Britannica, 2024). Additionally, during the colonial era, many Chinese cultural articles, including the renowned blue and white pottery and tea, were seized by the Dutch. This historical context highlights China's continuous struggles to reclaim and rescue its cultural heritage (UNESCO).

### **Japan and Korea**

Japan and Korea have complex historical associations with China, concerning the adoption and adaptation of Chinese cultural elements. Japan, during its imperial evolution, adopted characteristics of Chinese architecture, clothing, and culinary traditions. The Nanjing Massacre also spotlights the important cultural collapse and takeover by Japan. Korea, similarly, has blended many Chinese cultural elements into its traditions, sometimes leading to cultural confrontations.

### **France and the United Kingdom**

France and the United Kingdom have a notorious history of stealing cultural artefacts from around the world during their plentiful colonial evolutions. Unfortunately, many of these artefacts are now housed in museums in these countries. The British Museum, for example, contains numerous items acquired during colonial rule, including significant Greek, Indian, Filipino, Indonesian etc. artefacts. Both countries face constant international pressure to yield these items to their countries of origin rightfully (Britannica).

### **UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)**

UNESCO plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage worldwide. UNESCO advocates for the safeguarding of cultural heritage and promotes international cooperation to ensure these valuable resources are protected (UNESCO).

### **Blue Shield International (BSI)**

Blue Shield International focuses on protecting cultural heritage during conflicts and disasters. It conducts risk assessments, and emergency planning, and collaborates with military and humanitarian organisations to minimise the impact of crises on cultural sites. BSI also supports recovery and reconstruction efforts (Blue Shield International, 2022).

### **World Monuments Fund (WMF)**

It partners with local communities, governments, and organisations to undertake conservation projects. WMF emphasises capacity building, restoration, and the sustainable management of cultural sites (World Monuments Fund).

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**International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)**

ICOMOS provides expert advice on the conservation and management of cultural heritage sites. It develops guidelines and recommendations for best practices in heritage conservation and conducts evaluations to identify the conditions and threats to cultural sites (ICOMOS, 2023).

**CyArk**

CyArk uses digital technology to preserve cultural heritage sites through 3D modelling and digital documentation. These efforts create virtual replicas of significant monuments, serving as valuable educational and research tools. CyArk's work helps ensure that cultural heritage is accessible globally and aids in the restoration of damaged sites (CyArk, 2022).

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A timeline of key events

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Date	Event	Description
1954	Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property	Established guidelines for protecting cultural property during armed conflicts.
1972	UNESCO World Heritage Convention	Created the World Heritage List to identify and protect cultural and natural heritage sites.
1996	Blue Shield International Founded	An NGO focused on protecting cultural heritage during conflicts and disasters.
2003	Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage	Aimed to protect intangible cultural heritage, such as traditions and practices.
2015	Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction	Included measures for protecting cultural heritage from disasters.
2015	Gorkha Earthquake	Devastated several UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Nepal, prompting significant restoration efforts.
Jan/15	Fire at Royal Palaces of Abomey	A devastating fire destroyed part of the UNESCO World Heritage site in Benin.
Various Dates	Bilateral Agreements for Artifact Repatriation	Various agreements facilitated the return of stolen artifacts to their countries of origin.
Ongoing	NGO Efforts (e.g., World Monuments Fund, CyArk)	Continuous projects for the restoration, preservation, and digital documentation of cultural heritage sites globally.



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2023	UNESCO Initiatives	Continued advocacy and support for the protection of cultural heritage sites in developing countries.

### Previous attempts to solve the issue

There have been numerous and countless efforts to conserve cultural heritage in developing countries applying various initiatives by international organisations, national governments, and NGOs. These attempts have met with contrasting degrees of success and challenges.

UNESCO has been at the forefront of efforts to preserve cultural heritage through several key conventions and initiatives. The 1972 World Heritage Convention strived to recognise, safeguard, and keep cultural and natural heritage around the world thought to be of great value to humanity. This showed the innovation of the World Heritage List, which includes many sites in developing countries.

However, these measures have often been interfered by insufficient funding and resources for practical commission and management despite NGOs and governmental funding. These projects span many years, decades even thus funding runs thin and dry. Many developing countries struggle to allocate sufficient resources for the preservation of their cultural sites, leading to continued degradation and risk of loss.

In certain cases, several bilateral and multilateral agreements have been appointed to enable the return of stolen cultural artefacts to their countries of origin. For instance, agreements between Italy and several countries, including the United States, have resulted in the repatriation of artefacts. Despite these efforts, the procedure of returning cultural property has been slowly and fraught with legal challenges. Countries often face difficulties in verifying their own ownership and guiding complicated international legal frameworks

### An overview of possible solutions

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### **Further strengthening international collaboration**

Improved international collaboration is paramount for pooling resources, expertise, and most promising practices. This includes additional practical enactments of UNESCO conventions, wiser ways of increased funding for preservation projects, and streamlined processes for the repatriation of cultural artefacts.

### **Capacity building**

Developing countries often lack the technical expertise required for effective preservation. Providing training and technical assistance to local professionals can build capacity and ensure that preservation efforts are sustainable.

### **Community engagement and education**

Engaging local communities in preservation efforts is vital for ensuring the success and sustainability of these initiatives. Education programs that promote the value of cultural heritage and traditional practices can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members.

### **Digital preservation**

Leveraging technology for digital preservation can safeguard cultural heritage against physical deterioration and loss. Organisations like CyArk have demonstrated the potential of 3D modelling and digital documentation in preserving cultural sites virtually, providing a valuable resource for restoration efforts and global access especially in those who are HIC.

### **Sustainable tourism**

Developing sustainable tourism practices can provide economic benefits to local communities while ensuring the protection of cultural heritage. This includes developing eco-friendly tourism infrastructure, promoting cultural awareness among tourists, and ensuring that tourism revenues are reinvested in preservation efforts.

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Further reading

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