China: just soft power, or cultural imperialism?

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Abstract

This thesis examines China's cultural (foreign) policies. Taking a sample of three different case studies, this thesis aims to find an answer to the question of how China is using cultural heritage as a means to becoming a modern imperial power. A possible reason for the Chinese government to do this is that the current global power dynamic is shifting eastwards, away from the U.S., and towards China. Over the three case studies, which all fall into a different type of imperialism, it becomes clear that the cultural heritage policies China employs are not just soft power, but indeed are cultural imperialism.

Keywords: China; Cultural heritage; modern imperialism; UNESCO

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Introduction

At the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, China changed relatively abruptly from a socialist, self-contained nation, to exporting a large amount of money into international projects and towards other governments. A brand new kind of mindset was put in motion through this change, one that was not quite what was expected from a previously communist - and then socialist - nation (Madsen 2014, 59).

"Modern imperialism" is used in historical research as a term for the period in the 19th century, when a multitude of nations participated in a race to colonise as much territory as possible for their own economical gain (McDougall et al. 2023). However, in the context of this thesis, modern imperialism is a term used to describe a 21st century phenomenon. When paying close attention to certain nation-states, one of which is China, a new type of imperialist behaviour surfaces. For this thesis, 21st century modern imperialism is described as a process that outgrows the term "globalisation", in which a nation expands economically beyond its own borders (Chang 2023, 231). The expansion of both soft and hard power centres globally, augmentation of military power, and heightened audacity in diplomatic dealings, are all hallmarks of a nation-state moving towards modern imperialism in the 21st century. These attributes are also evident in China's current foreign policy, such as their military expansion into the South China Sea, exporting of funds to multiple countries globally to set up projects like the Belt & Road Initiative, and their use of the internet to spread information about Chinese culture, history and language. (Li 2021, 49-50)

In the past few decades, China has been going through some major changes in their political agenda, as well as their ideological systems. Before 1997, China's military development was not a priority in the political realm, as Deng Xiaoping primarily concentrated on economic reforms. It was only after establishing confidence through swift economic growth that the Chinese political leadership, in the autumn of 1997, opted to shift the focus of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) from commercial endeavours to its core functions of pre-emptive action, coercion, and war (Bitzinger 2011, 7).

However, the military sector and the economical sector were not the only ones undergoing a major shift in mindset since the end of the 20th century. This is also

when the shift in ideology among the Chinese government started (Madsen 2014, 59). The importance of cultural heritage and preserving their history became more of a priority. The multiculturalism within and just outside the Chinese borders started to play a much larger role than it did previously, as tourism to the area grew with the change in mindset. With the ratification of the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985, the "heritage race" started in China (Yan 2018, 2).

While the importance of China's new imperialism has surfaced among scholars for the past few decades, this research has mostly been focused on the economical aspect of China's reach into other countries. However, the reach of China is far beyond just the economical influence in other countries. Globalisation has been a driving force behind multiple successful economies and political collaborations (Chang 2023, 57-8).

Although literature has been written on the race within China to protect "their" history, little to nothing has been written about the possibility of cultural heritage coming into play when it comes to international power dynamics and China's new imperialism. The main question this thesis aims to answer is, "How is China using cultural heritage as a means to becoming a modern imperial power?" The changes to Chinese governance and their global power, could mean a significant shift from the U.S. being the main centre of power in the world, to a more East Asian centred worldview (Albert 2018, 1-2). While this has not happened yet, China is using different techniques to increase their global power. The economical side of this - building new hard power centres in i.e. Africa and Southeast Asia - has been readily studied and examined, the implications for the shift in the global power balance laid out. China's use of soft power - spreading culture, assimilating culture within their own borders - is still a topic of slight contention, as it might not be as immediately obvious to the general public, as the spreading of hard power. So while there is research done into China's relatively new cultural policies and actions, this thesis aims to combine a number of different instances in which China is using cultural heritage as a means to becoming a modern imperial power, and why this is modern cultural imperialism.

In the first chapter of this thesis, the idea behind modern imperialism as a term in combination with China is explained. Thereafter, the term "modern imperialism" will be put into the context of other academic research, in order to create a basis for the analysis chapter. In the methodology chapter, the research

being conducted on this topic, as well as the context in which the research takes place will be clarified. The case studies chosen for this thesis are also explained in this chapter. In the next chapter, a general overview of the case studies is provided, after which more in-depth information about the specific topic of this thesis is provided. The discussion chapter is structured by combining the information gathered from the three case studies, and discussing exactly how these three case studies fit into the term "modern imperialism". After this, a brief insight into what the future of this type of critical heritage research could hold will be provided.

Literature review

The main focus of this literature review is to put the research question into context. This is done using several sources to explain terms used in this thesis, and also by discussing the previous research surrounding the topic. The review is organised into four main sections. The first section provides a historical overview of imperialist theory, tracing its evolution from early economic perspectives to its current multifaceted nature. The second section explores the different types of imperialism, as classified by Cope (2022), and discusses how these categories have expanded to encompass cultural dimensions in the 21st century. The third section examines the interplay between imperialism and cultural heritage, highlighting the role of soft power in modern imperialist strategies. The final section focuses on China's imperialist practices, analysing its economic ventures and cultural policies in the context of contemporary imperialism.

Imperialism

Imperialist theory, in its most basic form, is the actions taken and policies made by a nation to gain territory, to superimpose their culture or heritage on another nation, or use their economical, military or political superiority to dominate over other nations (Cope 2022, 15). The research into 20th century imperialism has its roots in the 1902 work by John Atkinson Hobson, named "Imperialism, a Study", in which he unearthed the interests of capitalists as the driving force behind the new shape imperialism was taking at the time (Hobson 1902).

This is somewhat corroborated by Vladimir Lenin in 1917, when he published "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism", in which he links the rise of modern imperialism to a change in capitalism, from smaller competitors to a monopoly economy. There is still competition, but it is between a limited number of extremely powerful giants who can exert significant influence over huge portions of the domestic and global economies. Imperialism is fostered by monopoly capitalism and the rivalry that results between monopoly capitalist nations. Imperialism, in turn, encourages monopoly capital's continued growth and its sway over society as a whole (Lenin 1917).

In the 19th century, when the term "imperialism" first started to be used, this term was not necessarily used in combination with economic theory, though

imperialist states often had more capital goods to work with than states they exercised their power over (Noonan 2022, 46). The term only became inextricably linked to economic theory in the 20th century, as explained by Hobson and Lenin in their pioneering works, with the worldwide economical change towards monopoly capitalism. In the 21st century, imperialism is increasingly rearing its head again, as capitalism is still gaining traction in almost every part of the world (Noonan 2022, 54).

Imperialism in the 21st century

Imperialism has changed over the centuries in which the term has been used. Where imperialism used to singularly point towards a colonialist mindset, the term is now much broader. Modern imperialism, as outlined in the previous section, has become inextricably linked with economics and capitalism over the years, meaning the term can be used for a variety of inequality-based economic models. Cope (2022) outlines five different types of imperialism in his introductory chapter of "the Oxford Handbook of Economic Imperialism". These are colonialism, internal colonialism, settler colonialism, investment imperialism, and unequal exchange (Cope 2022, 15).

In his classification "colonialism" is defined by Cope as "the practice by which a powerful nation or country subjugates another." The word is often used in the context of major European countries exercising control over non-European countries, but this dichotomy is not necessary for the term to apply. One visible trend in colonialism is that the "colonisers" were frequently the more affluent, more developed countries, while the "colonised" were more often poorer, less developed countries (Cope 2022, 16).

The trend of richer vs poorer persists in the term "internal colonialism". This term, while slightly oxymoronic, is necessary to describe states with multiple ethnic groups within its borders, where one or more groups endure ethnic inequality from the government (Cope 2022, 18-9). An example of this is the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, which will be discussed later in this thesis.

Cole also describes the term "settler colonialism". This is a particular form of domination in which a group of foreign settlers permanently relocates to a new area, eradicates or dispenses with native people and sovereignties, and establishes an independent governmental entity (Cope 2022, 20).

Economic imperialism really finds its turn in foreign investments, such as foreign led-infrastructure projects, or governmental loans, as the export of capital. Another form of economic imperialism is exploitative international trade. Exploitation in international trade arises where the labour or natural resources that a nation contributes, and the ones it receives in return differ systematically (Cope 2022, 20-3).

Imperialism and heritage research

Cope's classification of types of economic imperialism, set out and explained in the section above, can be applied to critical heritage research, albeit slightly edited to fit the parameters of heritage better. The five categories would then, instead of being "colonialism, internal colonialism, settler colonialism, investment imperialism, and unequal exchange" (Cope 2022, 15), become "colonialism, internal cultural assimilation, settler colonialism, and investment cultural imperialism". These four terms describe the four different types of cultural imperialism in the 21st century, as a subset to the five terms described by Cope about economic imperialism.

One of the important distinctions to make when talking about imperialist powers is the difference between soft and hard power. Hard power involves the use of military force, economic coercion, or political pressure to achieve a country's objectives and influence the behaviour of other nations. In contrast, soft power refers to a nation's ability to influence others through attraction, persuasion, and cultural appeal, rather than coercion or force. It often involves the dissemination of cultural values, diplomacy, and the promotion of a positive international image (Gray 2011, 31). Thus, when talking about cultural heritage as a tool for modern imperialism, it mainly refers to soft power.

Cultural heritage is often tied to one or more nation-states, especially in the case of those nation-states claiming cultural heritage as theirs in relation to the UNESCO World Heritage List. However, Cuno (2008) disputes the fact that cultural heritage should "belong" to any nation-states. He argues that the way modern borders are laid out and current nation-states are shaped, has very little to nothing to do with the historical circumstances in which the cultural heritage existed within its own time. Territories contract and expand in drastic ways. In the case of China, the borders have constantly changed over the history of the territory, and while it is all united within one nation at the moment, this was not always the case. While a

number of ancient states and territories might fall within China's modern border, they might have nothing to do with the history and culture of China as it is now. Cuno argues that the only claim these nations have to these types of heritage is geography, and there should be a more nuanced view on cultural heritage (Cuno 2008, 146). While Cuno's point of view argues that cultural heritage should not "belong"or be claimed by any one nation state, the status quo introduced by UNESCO and the World Heritage List makes it precisely so that it is most profitable and advisable for nation-states to singularly claim cultural heritage sites and practices, and not share the claim with other nations.

An example of Cuno's ideas in practice in China is the extreme multiculturalism between different parts of China. While the biggest ethnic group in the nation is Han Chinese, there are dozens of small ethnic minorities present in different regions of China. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is an example of this, where the Han Chinese are actually outnumbered by other ethnic groups, and Islam is the primary religion (Dwyer 2005, 2). While the region falls within the borders of the current nation-state of China, it is fundamentally different from other regions in China. This begs the question, does China have any claim over the heritage of these culturally diverse regions?

China and modern imperialism

The fact that China is capitalist, and not merely socialist as the nation-state would claim, is what makes the question of this thesis a viable one (Sparks 2020, 276-277). As Sparks determines in his paper, only a capitalist nation-state has the capacity to take imperialist actions. One of the defining actions of an imperialist state is the "export of capital" (Sparks 2020, 277). From the 21st century onwards, China has been exporting significant sums of money and manpower to different parts of the world, indicating that the nation-state has been turning into an imperialist state for a substantial number of years (Sparks 2020, 275). However, this is not the only indicator of an imperialist nation.

When looking at China and their worldwide connections and relations through an economic lens, one can easily spot the pattern that is named "modern imperialism" in this thesis. As previously explained, modern imperialism is a pattern of behaviour of a nation that changes from globalisation into something that very much resembles a modern version of colonialist imperialism from the 19th century

(Chang 2023, 231). Namely, a pattern of expansion of both soft and hard power centres globally, augmentation of military power, and heightened audacity in diplomatic dealings, are signifiers of modern imperialism, as previously explained.

China has a large number of very lucrative projects in other countries, one of which is Kenya. Kenya has become the centre for both soft and hard power of China on the African continent, with its Belt & Road Initiative. In 2017 a railway network was launched that connects multiple important cities in Kenya, all the while emphasising that this is all possible because of Chinese culture, because of older, existing Sino-African relations (Chang 2023, 56-57). An example of Chinese hard power in other nations is in Afghanistan, where China has begun a project digging for raw minerals, mainly lithium. If the Chinese government were to side with the Taliban, it would earn them another centre for soft power in Central Asia, as well as access to a void in the market for lithium, the space for which was created by the Taliban coming back into power after the United States of America evacuated the country in 2020 (Ali 2023).

Another big indicator of China's imperialist nature is the fact that the nation has taken on a much more assertive role within its military policy and foreign relations (Sparks 2020, 277-278). Where the international power centres are mainly used for soft power by China, internally it has very much strengthened its hard power. It has also greatly expanded its possible military connections with other countries, aside from expanding their own military capacity (Bitzinger 2011, 7). An example of this is the new military and naval bases China has built in the disputed area of the South China Sea, as well as the new technology - such as multiple aircraft carriers and different types of planes - these bases employ. These military bases are outside the internationally recognised territory of China, which greatly increases the influence they have over the countries that want to also lay claim to the area the bases are in (Sparks 2020, 277).

China's military has been growing due to four reasons. Firstly, due to military spending and the procurement of resources for development. Secondly, refining its defence industry through the introduction of new technologies. Thirdly, an overhaul of their military system through airborne and sea techniques, including brand new communication channels and advanced missile systems. Lastly, the PLA's (People's Republic Army) contribution towards training and education, as well as increase in remuneration of military personnel (Bitzinger 2011, 7-8).

China's stance on cultural heritage

Within Chinese government parties, there has recently been a shift in ideology. The importance of Marxist politics has been slowly but surely losing to the newfound importance of the 5000 year history of China. Specifically, a trend has been noticed where the Chinese government seems to use an ever growing amount of "Confucian" ideologies and narratives to legitimise their rule (Guo 2020, 89-91). Confucianism is a philosophical and ethical system based on the teachings of Confucius, an influential Chinese thinker and educator. Confucian values emphasise moral integrity, social harmony (i.e. filial piety), and ethical behaviour. The Chinese government, instead of clinging to the ideals of the Communist Party, has proclaimed it wants to return to Confucian ideals and protect the nation's Confucian heritage (Guo 2020, 90-1). According to Madsen (2014) this is especially visible in the renewed financial support for small scale projects on a local level to revive and nationalise ancient heritage. This is an attempt by Xi Jinping to legitimise the rule of the Communist Party, as the revival of cultural heritage is much more important to small, local communities than the Marxist ideologies, which, according to Madsen, have no "moral appeal" to those communities (Madsen 2014, 59).

Chang (2023) goes into the efforts China is putting into "a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". According to Chang, this kind of global development has slowly begun to morph from nationalism to imperialism. This new kind of imperialism is based on the belief of the PRC, that they can bring benefits to the rest of the world (Sparks 2020, 280). This kind of moral appeal very much combines the Constructivism theory of International Relations, and the Chinese "race" to protect their heritage. International relations constructivism is a theoretical approach that emphasises the role of ideas, norms, and shared beliefs in shaping international behaviour. Constructivists argue that international relations are socially constructed, with states and actors interpreting and assigning meaning to their environment based on shared understandings. This theory rejects the purely materialist view and suggests that identities, culture, and norms influence state behaviour (Cristol 2019).

According to Christina Maags (2018), China, in its race for cultural unification, has been unilaterally altering history and cultural heritage. The way they were able to do this was because the nation-state has a giant financial stake in numerous international institutions, one of which is UNESCO (Maags and Svensson 2018, 14).

Conclusion

This literature review has provided a comprehensive exploration of the evolution and multifaceted nature of imperialism, focusing on historical theories, types of imperialism, the relationship between imperialism and cultural heritage, and China's contemporary practices. Imperialist theory has evolved from early economic perspectives, as detailed by Hobson and Lenin, to a broader understanding that encompasses economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Cope's classification of modern imperialism—ranging from colonialism to unequal exchange—demonstrates the varied forms through which powerful nations exert influence today. The analysis of cultural heritage within this framework highlights the role of soft power in modern imperialism. China's manipulation of cultural narratives and its strategic economic investments, such as the Belt & Road Initiative, exemplify how cultural and economic tools are used to extend influence. This integration of cultural heritage into imperialist strategies underscores a shift from traditional military dominance to more subtle forms of cultural and economic control. China's actions, including its Confucian ideological shift and increased military assertiveness, illustrate the complex interplay of economic, military, and cultural forces in modern imperialism. These strategies reflect a broader pattern of soft and hard power that aims to reinforce its global position. Despite the comprehensive coverage, gaps remain, particularly in understanding the long-term impacts of cultural heritage manipulation on international relations. Future research should investigate the effectiveness and ethical implications of various imperialist strategies, especially in the context of emerging powers like China.

Methodology

Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has increasingly become involved in international trade, and has since been exhibiting more traits of becoming a capitalist nation, despite the government insisting the nation remains socialist and staying away from capitalism. With the globalisation of their trade and their spreading of soft power globally, comes a debate on whether China is actually becoming a modern imperialist nation. The current research into this subject is almost entirely focused on the economical use of the term, with explorations into its military use. There is a large gap here in the research on the traits of cultural imperialism that China is exhibiting, which has gone largely under-researched. The research question I want to answer here is: "How is China using cultural heritage as a means to becoming a modern imperial power?" This question is an important one as, although this has not yet occurred, a major shift from the United States as the primary centre of power in the world to a worldview more centred on East Asia may arise from changes to Chinese governance and its considerable worldwide influence, because China is utilising a variety of strategies to strengthen their position in the world.

In this thesis, I will be conducting a meta analysis of literature and case studies combining several sources, over three different cases. I will first be looking at the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), as an example of how the Chinese government is forcefully attempting to make ethnic history and culture part of their own narrative.

Next I will be taking the recent example of Goguryeo (or Gaogouli, in Chinese), as an example of disputed historical heritage, as both Korea and China have a "legitimate claim" to this part of history. Though a part of this dispute has already been solved by inscription of Goguryeo heritage sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List for both nations, a large part of this dispute and a lot of tension between the nations remains unsolved, thus making this a good example of how the cultural heritage race of China can affect diplomatic relations with other nations.

For the third case study I will analyse the effect that the Confucius Institute has had, and is continuing to have, on international relations with China and how the institute has used its influence in different nations, to spread Chinese heritage, language, and history.

These three different case studies provide a relatively wide spread of information, both in chronological and geographical relevance. The key difference in the case studies is the fact that they all show a different type of modern imperialism, as outlined by Cope, and then applied to heritage research, in the previous chapter. The four types of cultural imperialism I have previously identified are, "colonialism, internal cultural assimilation, settler colonialism, and investment cultural imperialism".

The first type is internal cultural assimilation, which we see in the case of the XUAR. Secondly, the case of Goguryeo, while not technically falling into any of the four identified categories, is a type of cultural assimilation, though external. Though not fitting the term perfectly, the case study of Goguryeo can be seen as a type of cultural colonialism. Lastly we have the case of the Confucius Institute, which, in Cope's classification, falls into the category of investment cultural imperialism.

Within the three case studies I will first provide some general information about the history and current, ongoing events of the areas in question. Using both academic-, and non-academic sources, such as news outlets, and websites of organisations. I will then establish how the case study fits into Chinese modern imperialism from a cultural heritage perspective. In the discussion I will compare the three case studies and my findings.

Analysis

Case study 1: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)

Xinjiang is one of five autonomous regions of China. These autonomous regions have their own local government and have the right to mostly self-govern, although they still fall under Chinese rule (Li 2005, 5). Xinjiang, as an autonomous region, should theoretically have certain cultural and administrative rights. An example of this would be the right to formulate their own cultural rules, as autonomous regions generally have a higher population of ethnic minorities than Han-Chinese inhabitants (Li 2005, 5). However, the Chinese government's actions in recent years have centralised control and weakened the autonomy that the Uyghurs in the XUAR should enjoy, which is one of the factors contributing to the erosion of their culture. This happened mainly because of the still-remaining undercurrent of separatist movements and the claim that the autonomy afforded to the XUAR is the cause of anti-China terrorism (Milward 2004, 1-2).

Xinjiang is located in western China, its population is made up of approximately 45% ethnic Uyghur people, 42% Han Chinese, and around 13% other ethnic minorities, according to the 2020 census. The region is extremely rich in natural resources and opportunities for development, according to the Chinese government (Mackerras et al. 2009, 10). While Xinjiang is an autonomous region of China - and therefore the ethnic minorities living there are Chinese citizens - the Uyghur population living in Xinjiang is frequently seen as "less than" the Han Chinese population, because of their ethnicity and their religious affiliations that make them "anti-Chinese" (Mackerras et al. 2009, 10-3). On top of that, there are widespread reports and allegations of human rights abuse happening in Xinjiang, concerning the Uyghur population. While the Chinese government protests most of these reports and allegations, a number of them have already been proven (Waller et al. 2021, 102). They instead characterised their actions as necessary to combat extremism, terrorism, and promote economic development in the region. The Chinese government describes the existence of re-education camps as vocational training centres and disputes the claims of human rights abuse. Because of the lack of UN reports or interventions, international independent media and NGOs have used unofficial reports, satellite images and leaked Chinese documents to attempt to

bring awareness to the ongoing issues and hopefully put a stop to the human rights violations allegedly going on (Waller et al. 2021, 100).

One of the major allegations against the Chinese government is about the previously mentioned "re-education" camps, which have been said to detain large numbers of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. These camps are alleged to be used for political indoctrination, forced labour, and attempts to suppress Uyghur cultural and religious practices. Another violation of human rights in Xinjiang is the intense surveillance and monitoring that its minority groups are subjected to. Xinjiang has been described as one of the most heavily surveilled regions in the world, with extensive use of facial recognition technology, security checkpoints, and restrictions on movement. Families have been reportedly separated, with children often sent to state-run institutions, while parents were detained or placed under surveillance. First-hand accounts of Uyghur people show a stark difference between how the Muslim minorities are treated and how the Han Chinese people in the XUAR are treated (Ding 2018, 86).

Aside from the main allegations of Uyghurs being subjected to "re-education", another allegation is that of Uyghurs working in forced labour in various industries, including textiles, agriculture, and manufacturing. Many products made using this labour have also been exported internationally. The camps have also been alleged to hold more than a million Uyghur and other Muslim minority groups prisoner and subject them to physical and sexual abuse, as well as forced sterilisation (Waller et al. 2021, 100).

One of the most crucial facts about the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, is the Chinese government systematically attempting to erase and suppress Uyghur culture from the region. Some sources suggest that the Chinese government is taking measures to suppress Uyghur culture, language, and religion, including the destruction of Uyghur cultural sites and the widespread removal of religious symbols. Mosques, shrines, and other religious and cultural landmarks have been demolished or altered (Drexel 2020, 3-4). This not only erases physical symbols of Uyghur culture but also disrupts the community's ties to their spiritual beliefs and history. Uyghur Muslims have faced severe restrictions on their religious practices. This includes limitations on fasting during Ramadan, banning the wearing of religious clothing, and strict control over religious gatherings and activities (Szadziewski et al. 2022, 143). Even Uyghur traditions like the Meshrep, which has

been on the UNESCO List of Intangible Heritage since 2010 (UNESCO 2023), have been suppressed.

One of the most striking ways the Chinese government has attempted to erase Uyghur culture is through a campaign of forced assimilation and ideological re-education. Uyghurs have been compelled to learn and adhere to Chinese Communist Party ideology while suppressing their own cultural and religious practices. Reports from former detainees and leaked Chinese government documents suggest that the state aims to "Sinicize" Uyghurs by forcibly indoctrinating them in Chinese culture and ideology (Szadziewski et al. 2022, 141).

The Uyghur language is an essential part of their cultural identity, but the Chinese government has implemented policies to suppress it. Uyghur children have been reportedly forced to study in Mandarin Chinese, undermining their ability to communicate in their native language. The use of Uyghur language in public spaces and education has been discouraged, further marginalising this aspect of their culture (Szadziewski et al. 2022, 143).

The Chinese government's political repression extends to Uyghur intellectuals, artists, and activists who have sought to preserve Uyghur culture and identity. Many have been detained or silenced, making it increasingly difficult for Uyghurs to advocate for their cultural rights. Cultural artefacts, including Uyghur music, literature, and art, have been confiscated and suppressed. This prevents the transmission of cultural knowledge and contributes to the erosion of Uyghur identity (Szadziewski et al. 2022, 143). Uyghur history, including their role along the Silk Road and their rich cultural contributions, is downplayed or suppressed in official Chinese narratives. The Uyghur people played a key part in the existence of the Silk Road, as the city of Kashgar was one of the first cities in which the traders along the Silk Road could resupply after going through the wasteland of central Asia. The fact that the Chinese government is attempting to suppress these contributions, undermines their historical and cultural significance (Drexel 2020, 7-8).

The Chinese government's crackdown on Uyghur culture has also led to international isolation for Uyghurs. They face difficulties in travelling abroad, and those living outside China often fear for the safety of their families back home. From a number of first-hand accounts of Uyghur people living internationally, it is shown that they do not have contact with their family still living in the XUAR, and some of

them do not even know if their family members are still alive. This social isolation further impedes cultural exchange and preservation (Drexel 2020, 30-1).

Sources have also emerged suggesting that the Chinese government encourages interethnic marriages between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. While interethnic marriages can promote cultural exchange, the concern lies in whether these unions are consensual or coerced, and whether they lead to the erosion of Uyghur culture (Ding 2018, 86).

Amidst the destruction of Uyghur culture, the Chinese government has undertaken a large-scale demolition of the city of Kashgar. Many of the original housing structures, communal buildings and cultural buildings have been destroyed in what China is claiming is a complete overhaul of the city, for the benefit of the people living there. Claiming that the new houses and buildings will be safer and more resistant to natural disasters, the Chinese government is covering up the fact that they are destroying hundreds, possibly even thousands of years of cultural heritage (Szadziewski et al. 2022, 149). The only part of cultural heritage the people living in Kashgar are allowed to keep are rebuilt and censored versions of the original buildings in the city (Szadziewski et al. 2022, 140-1). This is an example of museumification (also called Disneyfication). This means that the actual culture is being heavily repressed, while a rebuilt, fake version of the heritage is made, solely for the sake of tourism - or keeping up a facade - to the area (Szadziewski et al. 2022, 144-47).

The largest ethnic group in China's autonomous province of Xinjiang is a sizable Uyghur population. The region's autonomy has been undermined by recent moves from the Chinese government, which have centralised power despite their supposed rights to cultural and administrative autonomy as an autonomous province. Sources have shown a number of humanitarian, as well as cultural problems in the area. Human rights violations, coerced integration, and the eradication of Uyghur cultural landmarks, linguistic limitations, and political indoctrination are among the allegations. Claims of forced labour, surveillance, and the erasure of Uyghur identity have been made, which have been brought to light by international reports, satellite photographs, and leaked papers. In addition, demolishing Kashgar, erasing centuries' worth of cultural history, all the while presenting a sanitised version for tourists.

Case study 2: Goguryeo (Gaogouli)

Goguryeo was a Korean kingdom that emerged in the 1st century BCE and became a major power in Northeast Asia. It reached its height during the reign of King Gwanggaeto in the 4th century, expanding its territory across present-day North Korea, South Korea, and parts of China. Goguryeo faced conflicts with neighbouring states, including China, and eventually fell in 668 CE due to internal strife and external pressures. It was located in a region of East Asia that encompassed parts of what is now North Korea, South Korea, and China's northeastern regions, including parts of Jilin and Liaoning provinces. Throughout its existence, Goguryeo maintained complex relationships with neighbouring states, including China (Hwang 2017, 5).
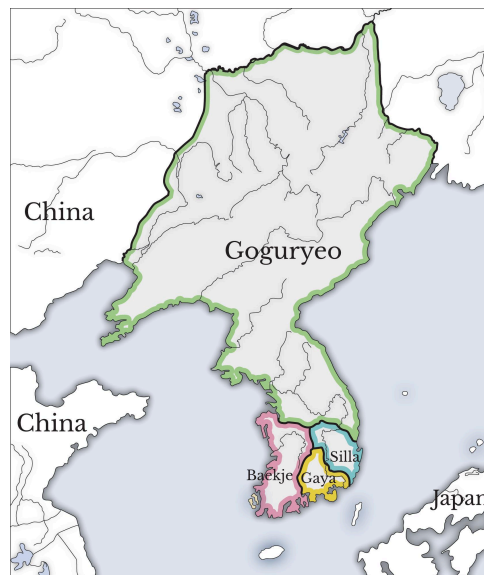
A map showing the ancient kingdoms of Goguryeo, Silla, Gaya and Baekje in relation to the Korean peninsula and modern-day China. (World History Encyclopedia 2016)

The dispute between China and the Koreas over the history of Goguryeo, also known as Gaogouli in Chinese, is a complex and longstanding issue that revolves around differing interpretations of the ancient kingdom's territorial boundaries and cultural identity. This dispute primarily involves China, South Korea, and North Korea, and has been a source of tension in their diplomatic relations. The historical and cultural significance of Goguryeo, as well as its geographical location, has made it a contentious subject for all parties involved (Ahn 2008, 5).

The start of the contention between the parties involved started with The Northeast Project of China, officially conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences from 2002 to 2007, which aimed to assert China's historical and territorial claims over the northeastern region, including Manchuria and parts of Korea. The project focused on ancient kingdoms such as Gojoseon, Goguryeo, and Balhae, framing them as integral to Chinese history (Yoon 2005, 158). This initiative sought to counter historical narratives from neighbouring countries, particularly South Korea, which views these kingdoms as central to Korean heritage. The project sparked significant controversy, especially in South Korea, where it was seen as an attempt by China to distort history and undermine Korean identity. South Korean scholars and the public criticised the project for its perceived political motivations and methodological biases. They argued that the project was less about historical accuracy and more about bolstering China's contemporary territorial claims (Yoon 2005, 161). International historians also criticised the project for its lack of objectivity, suggesting it was designed to support China's geopolitical ambitions rather than provide an unbiased historical account (Yoon 2005, 161). The project's findings intensified tensions between China and South Korea, impacting diplomatic relations and contributing to regional instability (Yoon 2005, 163-4).

Chinese scholars claim that Goguryeo was influenced by Chinese culture, language, and political systems. They argue that Goguryeo was a regional state in Northeast Asia with close cultural and historical ties to the Chinese people. China also contends that Goguryeo was a vassal state - a subservient state that paid tribute to a larger or more dominant state - of various Chinese dynasties, including the Han and Tang dynasties. They argue that Goguryeo's submission to Chinese dynasties demonstrates its status as an entity within the Chinese sphere of influence. China asserts that certain regions in northeastern China, such as Liaoning and Jilin, were historically part of Goguryeo and therefore the historic state of Goguryeo should be considered part of Chinese territory (Hundt et al. 2016, 2).

Korean scholars and authorities argue that Goguryeo was an independent Korean kingdom with its own distinct culture, language, and history. They believe that Goguryeo was not a Chinese state or a vassal but rather an integral part of Korean history. Korean historians stress the Korean identity of Goguryeo, highlighting its contributions to Korean culture, language, and heritage. Goguryeo's historical significance as part of Korean history is paramount in this narrative. South

and North Korea dispute China's territorial claims over areas historically associated with Goguryeo, emphasising their belief in Goguryeo's Korean identity. This, along with the fact that a part of Goguryeo also overlapped with what is currently South and North Korea, strengthens that argument (Hundt et al. 2016, 2).

About 13,000 graves from the Goguryeo period have been found in North Korea and China combined (Ahn 2008, 2). The problem stems from the fact that both countries are attempting to claim the tombs and historical Goguryeo as part of their own historical legacy because they have been discovered in such a vast area. Geographically, both countries can legitimately claim Goguryeo's past, but culturally, things are a little more nuanced. China and the two Koreas are currently taking great care to safeguard the cultural sites. Initiatives aimed at uncovering, reconstructing, and/or conserving the remains and artefacts are instances of the ongoing political conflict over the Goguryeo/Gaogouli heritage (Ahn 2008, 6-7).

Most neighbouring countries have expressed a relatively neutral opinion, though a number of archaeologists have voiced their concerns over the material heritage and its destination. Before the 21st century, North Korea was not in an ideal situation to take care of and protect material heritage. However, South Korea and UNESCO created a fund, exactly for this reason. Through this fund, money was available for education and preservation in North Korea (Ahn 2008, 6).

There have been disagreements over the recognition and preservation of these historical sites. China's claims to some of these sites have created disputes over access, ownership, and management (Ahn 2008, 7). Designation of UNESCO World Heritage sites related to Goguryeo-era artefacts and tombs has been a source of disagreement. Both China and Korea have sought to include such sites on the list, using historical narratives to support their claims. Currently, a number of these sites have been inscribed on the World Heritage List, some in the name of China, and some in the name of North Korea (UNESCO 2023). The two state parties independently filed the nomination; there was no one proposal for a transborder site. Two nomination dossiers were filed separately and both focused on the same Goguryeo/Gaogouli civilisation's history. China and North Korea each proposed a distinct cultural asset that was situated on its own territory (Ahn 2008, 6). While it seems that UNESCO is mainly working with the modern borders of the nation-states, both China and Korea still wholeheartedly disagree over which nation should lay claim on these heritage sites.

However, it is not only physical cultural heritage that is an issue between China and Korea. The content of textbooks used in schools is another contentious issue. South Korea and North Korea emphasise Goguryeo's Korean identity, while Chinese textbooks often reflect the Chinese perspective, leading to conflicting historical narratives. This, in turn, leads to conflict between scholars from both nations, who have been taught different versions of the historical narrative. This sometimes leads to disagreements and political interference in academic work (Hundt et al. 2016, 7-9).

The dispute has at times strained diplomatic relations between China and both Koreas. It has complicated efforts to find common ground on various political and economic issues. Nationalist sentiments in China and both Koreas have occasionally led to protests and demonstrations on this issue, further fueling tensions. Nationalist sentiments in all three countries have been inflamed by this dispute, often being used by governments to consolidate domestic support or project a strong national image. Goguryeo has become a symbol of national identity for both Koreas, who view the historical kingdom as an integral part of their cultural and historical heritage. China, on the other hand, views Goguryeo as part of its own historical narrative (Hundt et al. 2016, 9-10).

Goguryeo, a Korean kingdom that existed from the 1st century BCE to 668 CE, and reached the pinnacle of their political, cultural and economical growth under King Gwanggaeto in the 4th- and 5th century CE, expanding into present-day North Korea, South Korea, and parts of China. The ongoing dispute between China, South Korea, and North Korea over Goguryeo's history centres on differing interpretations of its cultural identity and territorial boundaries. While Chinese scholars claim Goguryeo was influenced by Chinese culture and was a vassal state, Korean scholars assert its independent Korean identity. Territorial disputes, disagreements over UNESCO World Heritage sites, conflicting textbooks, and nationalist sentiments have strained diplomatic relations. Goguryeo has become a symbol of national identity for both Koreas, adding complexity to regional politics and historical narratives.

Case study 3: The Confucius Institute

The Chinese government, by way of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, founded the Confucius Institute (also known as CI), which

provides an important international forum for the promotion of Chinese language and culture. The institute, whose goal is to promote mutual understanding and educational exchange, has expanded into a vast network that has a significant impact on international education and cultural diplomacy. The Confucius Institute started its operations in June of 2004, and in November of the same year, opened their first location in Seoul, South Korea, after running a pilot in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. As of 2019, there were 530 locations of the Confucius Institute worldwide, spread over six continents. At its height, there were over 550 locations of the institute open worldwide. The institute is named after the well-known Chinese philosopher Confucius, who is closely associated with Chinese culture and educational values (Confucius Institute 2024). The Confucius Institute's main goals include teaching Chinese language, promoting awareness of Chinese culture, assisting Chinese language instructors in their professional development, and establishing scholarly contacts. This program is in line with China's overarching objective of bolstering its soft power and cultural diplomacy, particularly as the nation continues to emerge as a major player in the world economy and politics (Albert 2018, 5).

The Confucius Institute collaborates with worldwide academic establishments, mostly universities, to carry out its operations. Usually, a partner university in China and a local university in the host nation co-sponsor each institute. This concept guarantees a cooperative approach to cultural promotion and educational exchange. The Confucius Institute is funded by the Chinese government, which provides significant financial support for the establishment and management of each institute. Often providing buildings and other operational support, host universities make a joint investment in the institute's success. The Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (a subsidiary organisation to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China) oversees the management and curriculum of every Confucius Institute, guaranteeing uniformity in the standard of cultural programming and language training (Confucius Institute 2024).

Confucius Institutes provide a variety of programs aimed at fostering cultural awareness and Chinese language proficiency. A vital component that serves students of all ages and proficiency levels is language training. In addition to offering basic and advanced Mandarin education, these courses also get students ready for Chinese proficiency exams like the HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi), which is a widely accepted test for language certification. Confucius Institutes offer more than just language

training; they also organise cultural activities such as Chinese New Year festivities, traditional dance and song performances, calligraphy classes, and movie screenings. These gatherings give the local population a chance to interact directly with Chinese culture and discover its varied customs and modern advancements (Confucius Institute 2024). An additional important element of the Confucius Institute's goal is educational exchange. The institute supports study abroad initiatives by providing exchange opportunities and grants for educators and students to pursue studies in China (Hubbert 2019, 14-5). Through deeper comprehension of Chinese language, society, and culture, these programs hope to increase participants' intercultural competency and appreciation. Another essential element of the institute's operations is teacher training. Locations of the Confucius Institute offer workshops, seminars, and certification courses as part of their professional development programs for Chinese language teachers. These initiatives contribute to the global improvement of Chinese language instruction and meet the increasing need for trained Chinese language teachers (Hubbert 2019, 18).

From 2006 to 2019, the institute spread so rapidly, they started receiving criticism and backlash in regard to some of their practices. There were concerns of the Confucius Institute operating within existing schools and universities, where the Confucius Institute's effect on academic freedom is one of the main worries. Critics claim that because of the institute's close ties to the Chinese government, talks on touchy subjects including human rights, Tibet, Taiwan, and the Tiananmen Square uprisings may be suppressed (Hubbert 2019, 130-1).

The Confucius Institutes' governance and (lack of) openness are other points of concern. Critics assert that the institutes' financing and operations are opaque, casting doubt on their motivations. Some see the Confucius Institute as a vehicle through which the Chinese government may project soft power and advance a positive foreign perception of China. Due to this impression, the institutes' operations are being scrutinised more closely and there have been requests for more responsibility and monitoring (Hansen 2014). There has also been discussion over the Confucius Institute's political influence. Some contend that China is using the institute as part of a larger plan to increase its power and reshape perceptions around the world to serve its political objectives (Hubbert 2019, 10-2).

Critics caution that Confucius Institutes may be involved in intelligence gathering or in helping China get intellectual property and sensitive technologies

from host nations. The institutes' affiliation with academic institutions that conduct research and development in strategically important domains exacerbates this worry. Some critics further claim that Confucius Institutes could be used as fronts for espionage activities, despite the fact that direct evidence is frequently lacking. Due to these worries, the CIs and their operations are coming under more scrutiny and requests for further monitoring have been made (Horsley 2021, 2-3).

A large number of universities have since cut their ties with CI. In 2014, a U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, Representative Christopher H. Smith said, "U.S. colleges and universities should not be outsourcing academic control, faculty and student oversight or curriculum to a foreign government." After this hearing, universities in the U.S. were strongly advised to cut their ties with CI, with experts saying their own government should invest more in cultural and language exchange, rather than rely on the funds of a foreign government (Hansen 2014). Aside from the U.S. closing more than 80% of their Confucius Institute locations, a number of European universities, including Leiden University, have also decided in recent years to cut their ties with CI. Many of the universities that have cut ties with CI, however, have implemented programs close or related to CI.

In 2020, the Chinese government announced reforms aimed at resolving the concerns and disputes surrounding the Confucius Institute. A newly established non-governmental body called the Chinese International Education Foundation took over as the Confucius Institute's administration (Horsley 2021, 4). By taking this action, the institute hopes to improve its credibility and transparency while removing itself from direct government control. The Confucius Institute's future is still unknown in spite of these initiatives. The institute is still under investigation and discussion because of its impact on foreign perceptions of China, as well as its position in global education. The Confucius Institute will have to overcome these obstacles, and adjust to the shifting nature of academic exchange and cultural diplomacy, as the field of foreign education changes.

Discussion

The question this thesis tries to answer is: How is China using cultural heritage as a means to becoming a modern imperial power? When defining modern imperialism from a few different standpoints, it is shown that spreading soft power centres internationally, increasing military power and becoming more daring in its international relations are all indicators of an increasingly imperialist nation-state - and are also all present in how China is currently conducting themselves.

Imperialism has evolved significantly over the centuries. Initially, it primarily referred to a colonialist mindset, but today, it encompasses a broader range of contexts. Modern imperialism is now closely tied to economics and capitalism, reflecting various inequality-based economic models. Cope (2022), in "The Oxford Handbook of Economic Imperialism," identifies five types of imperialism: colonialism, internal colonialism, settler colonialism, investment imperialism, and unequal exchange. When applied to critical heritage studies, the classification morphs into, "colonialism, internal cultural assimilation, settler colonialism, and investment cultural imperialism". These four terms describe the four different types of cultural imperialism in the 21st century, as a subset to the five terms described by Cope about economic imperialism.

On an economic level, China is growing continuously towards the export side, while in the 20th century, it was still an almost wholly import based nation. By investing in a great number of projects abroad, it has created new soft power centres in Kenya through the Belt & Road Initiative, as explained in the literature chapter above. China has also expanded its military outside its borders, mainly in the South China Sea, by building multiple military and naval bases, including a number of large aircraft carriers - which it did not have previously. In order to undermine the USA as the dominating force in worldwide power, China has also tentatively teamed up with multiple nations, namely the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries. All these actions specifically identify China as an imperialist nation-state. However, on a soft power level, when talking about cultural heritage, is China also classified as a cultural imperialist nation-state?

Constructivism is a theoretical framework in international relations that emphasises how ideas, norms, and common beliefs influence behaviour on a global scale. International relations, according to constructivists, are socially created, with

governments and other actors using common understandings to interpret and provide meaning to their surroundings. This theory contends that identities, culture, and norms impact state behaviour, rejecting the merely materialist viewpoint. When looking at the combination of the three case studies explored above, one clear theme emerges between the differences. China's government is using cultural heritage - and not always its own - to strengthen its national and international soft power.

In the case of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) the Chinese government is using the cultural heritage of an entirely different culture, namely the Uyghur culture, in order to cement their power over the region. Combining this with the three different types of imperialism we laid out earlier, this falls into the category of internal cultural assimilation. China uses the concept of museumification, or Disneyfication, to keep up the appearance of protecting Uyghur culture, while simultaneously tearing it down behind the scenes. The Chinese government argues that this is to counteract anti-Chinese terrorism, while in reality creating a more homogenous society.

Goguryeo/Gaogouli is a case study that falls slightly outside the four previously identified categories, but fits into the broader category of cultural assimilation, except externally to the borders of the nation-state When looking at this case study, it can be seen from two different perspectives, the Korean perspective and the Chinese one. However, from an outside angle, it appears to be a case of China attempting to shape history into its own narrative, rather than letting Goguryeo/Gaogouli be a separate kingdom of the past. As shown before, modern borders do not always work to define historical cultural heritage, and this case is no different.

The Confucius Institute is one of the clearest examples of the spreading of soft power China is attempting, but the question to ask is, does that amount to cultural imperialism? In Cope's classification of types of imperialism, he identifies investment imperialism as one where a nation-state makes foreign investments with the knowledge that those investments will secure said nation-state a centre of power. The Confucius Institute is so dramatically widespread globally, the Chinese government has hands in almost every university in the world at some point or other. Because the funding for the CI locations comes mostly from the Chinese government themselves, rather than the host universities and -schools, this means a certain amount of influence in what is taught at the CI locations, and what is not. While the

Institute has gone through great changes in the past few years, as well as having many schools end their contracts with them, CI still holds a significant amount of power over the education of Chinese language and culture.

Constructivism highlights the importance of non-state actors and the potential for change in the international system through the evolution of ideas and identities. In China's race for cultural heritage, whether it is their own, or they perceive it as theirs because it falls within their modern borders, constructivism plays a key role.

The exploration into the concept of modern imperialism through the lens of cultural heritage has unravelled multifaceted dimensions of China's evolving global role. The central question of this thesis sought to comprehend the essence of new imperialism within the realm of cultural heritage and discern whether China strategically deploys this cultural perspective to recalibrate the global power dynamics.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to find out the answer to the question, "How is China using cultural heritage as a means to becoming a modern imperial power?" Through the analysis of multiple kinds of literary sources and three different case studies, this thesis has unravelled the complex and multi-layered decisions, actions, and policies the Chinese government has made and is making in the field of cultural heritage.

Imperialism

Imperialism is fundamentally the actions and policies a nation undertakes to dominate others through territorial acquisition, cultural imposition, or economic, military, or political superiority. The study of imperialism was significantly advanced in the 20th century by John Atkinson Hobson and Vladimir Lenin. Hobson's 1902 work revealed that capitalist interests were driving the new form of imperialism, while Lenin's 1917 analysis tied the rise of modern imperialism to the evolution of capitalism into a monopoly economy, where a few powerful entities control large segments of the global economy. Historically, imperialism wasn't always linked to economic theory, but it did become linked in the 20th century as global capitalism shifted towards monopolies. In the 21st century, imperialism continues to be significant as capitalism continues to spread.

Modern imperialism, according to Cope, manifests in various forms such as colonialism, internal colonialism, settler colonialism, investment imperialism, and unequal exchange. Cultural imperialism today parallels economic imperialism but focuses on cultural dimensions. It includes actions like cultural assimilation and leveraging cultural heritage for influence. Distinguishing between soft power, which uses cultural appeal and diplomacy, and hard power, which relies on military and economic coercion, is crucial in understanding modern imperialism.

China and modern imperialism

Since the 21st century, China has been exporting capital and manpower worldwide, indicating a shift towards imperialistic practices. China's global economic activities, such as the Belt & Road Initiative in Kenya, showcase a form of modern imperialism that resembles 19th-century colonialism. These activities include expanding influence through economic projects, military power, and assertive

diplomatic efforts. In Kenya, China's involvement has linked economic growth to Chinese culture and heritage, demonstrating a blend of soft and hard power.

China's imperialistic tendencies are also evident in its aggressive military expansion. It has increased its military capacity, established new bases, and enhanced its technological capabilities. The South China Sea, where China has built military installations outside its recognized territory, is a prime example of how it uses military power to expand influence.

There has been a shift within the Chinese government from Marxist ideologies to an emphasis on China's 5,000-year history and Confucian values. This trend includes increased financial support for local projects that revive and nationalise cultural heritage, which helps legitimise the Communist Party's rule by appealing to local communities. China's focus on cultural rejuvenation is part of a broader effort that merges nationalism with imperialism. This effort is grounded in the belief that China can bring benefits to the rest of the world, combining elements of constructivist international relations theory, which emphasises the role of ideas and norms in shaping behaviour. China's drive for cultural unification includes altering historical narratives and cultural heritage. By leveraging its financial influence in international bodies like UNESCO, China has been able to unilaterally reshape cultural history to fit its nationalistic agenda.

Case studies

In Xinjiang, the Chinese government employs a form of cultural imperialism categorised as internal cultural assimilation. The Chinese government utilises Uyghur cultural heritage to consolidate its control over the region. The concept of Disneyfication serves as a veneer to portray protection of Uyghur culture while, in reality, homogenising the society under the pretext of countering anti-Chinese terrorism.

Goguryeo/Gaogouli presents a case of external cultural assimilation, reflecting China's attempt to shape historical narratives, and using cultural history to their benefit. The struggle between the Korean and Chinese perspectives highlights the complex nature of defining historical cultural heritage, challenging traditional borders and interpretations.

The case of the Confucian Institute falls under the term investment imperialism, as a giant foreign investment by the Chinese government, as an attempt

to spread the Chinese language and culture, as well as to entice more international students to come to China. At first, the institute very much succeeded in the spreading of China's soft power. However, in recent years the institute has come under fire for controlling information flows at the partnered universities, as well as allegedly performing espionage.

Limitations and Future implications

This research has a number of limitations that make future research into this topic possible, but also important. One of the reasons this research is limited is the access to source material. Most of the primary sources dealing with China's cultural heritage are written in Chinese, which is not readily available in translation. Another limitation is scope. Being a time-restricted, word-limited research report, this thesis very much has had to be limited to only three case studies, as well as a very specific thesis question.

The research done in this thesis has implications on how the words "modern imperialism" could take on a brand new meaning within academics in the future. Where it used to refer only to the 19th century colonialism race, this thesis could form the base for uncovering a new theme in critical heritage studies.

In conclusion, the confluence of economic prowess, military expansion, and the strategic deployment of cultural heritage underscore China's unmistakable trajectory towards a new form of imperialism. The interplay of constructivism in shaping global perceptions of cultural heritage amplifies the significance of non-material factors in contemporary international relations. As China navigates this cultural terrain, the implications for global power dynamics are profound, marking a pivotal juncture in the evolving landscape of new imperialism.

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