

Visualizing East Asian Cultural Diplomacy at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Abstract

This paper critically examines how China, Japan, and Korea practice cultural diplomacy through their respective national galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It engages museum theory and soft power discourse to evaluate how each nation projects its historical narrative, aesthetic priorities, and strategic interests through curated space. With the Met serving as a universal museum and a global cultural stage, these galleries represent not just artistic heritage but also tools of international identity formation and influence. Drawing from contemporary policy studies, comparative frameworks, and case-specific analysis, this study explores national motivations and tensions within museum diplomacy. It concludes by arguing for more integrated approaches that balance traditional heritage with modern cultural dynamics, particularly for nations such as Korea, which possess powerful contemporary cultural assets.

Keywords: East Asian culture, cultural diplomacy, Metropolitan Museum of Art, soft power

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Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is increasingly recognized as a strategic tool for nations to assert their identity, values, and influence on the international stage. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is rooted in political or military power, cultural diplomacy operates through the exchange and promotion of culture, the arts, language, and traditions to foster mutual understanding and extend a country's soft power (Nye, 1990). Museums have emerged as central platforms for such diplomacy, serving as curated arenas where national identity is exhibited and interpreted. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), one of the world's foremost universal museums, presents a compelling case study for examining how East Asian countries, China, Japan, and Korea, utilise museum galleries to represent and assert their cultural identities.

Cultural Diplomacy and Museums: Theoretical Framework

Although there is no set or commonly agreed upon definition of cultural diplomacy, it could be "best described as the means through which countries promote their cultural and political values to the rest of the world" to "foster mutual understanding and dialogue" through culture (Chakraborty, 2013, p. 30; Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010, p. 6). Bennett (2013) conceptualizes the museum as a "governmental assemblage," where displays serve ideological functions in shaping public understanding which have been deployed with a particular political intention in each historical moment and context (Ang et al., 2018). Therefore, museums, especially public or national ones, are not neutral spaces; political forces and institutional agendas structure them.

In so-called "universal museums" such as The Met, which aim to showcase artistic achievements from all civilizations and cultures around the world across all eras from ancient to contemporary, targeting global citizens (ICOM, 2002), national galleries become an effective medium for cultural diplomacy. In this regard, the state-led agencies and programs may emphasize image-building and soft power, while relational models stress co-creation and exchange. This mode is visible in East Asian cultural diplomacy today.

This study employs the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) as a primary case study to examine East Asian cultural galleries, specifically those of China, Japan, and Korea, and their relationship to cultural diplomacy strategies. Situated in the heart of New York City, the world's most prominent multicultural metropolis, the Met serves as both a representative "universal" museum and a symbolic site for the display of East Asian cultures. Methodologically, two approaches were adopted: first, an analysis of the cultural diplomacy strategies of the three nations (Table 1); and second, a field observation of the respective galleries to explore how East Asian cultures are represented. This dual approach aims to reveal the relationship between national cultural diplomacy and the actual visualization of culture in a global museum setting.

Table 1*Comparison of Cultural Diplomacy Strategies in East Asia*

Country	Operator Type	Key Institutions	Key Content	Target Audience	Strategic Focus
China	Government-led	Ministry of Education (Confucius Institutes) (2004, 500+)	Traditional culture and history	Political partners, developing countries	Alignment with national strategies and political messages
Japan	Government-led, Public institutions	Japan Foundation (1972/2003), Agency for Cultural Affairs (Japan Cultural Center)	Animation, traditional arts, cuisine	Global cultural enthusiasts	Balance between tradition and modernity, “Cool Japan”
South Korea	Government-led institutions + private sector collaboration	Korea Foundation (1991), KOCIS (Korean Cultural Center)	K-culture (Hallyu, music, drama, food)	Global youth and general public	Promotion of K-content, participatory digital outreach

East Asian Galleries at the Met**China: Civilizational Soft Power Through Cultural Heritage**

China’s cultural diplomacy is primarily government-led and tightly integrated with national political agendas. The Ministry of Education oversees the Confucius Institutes, which have expanded globally since 2004 to over 500 branches. These institutions focus on promoting traditional Chinese culture and history, particularly in developing countries and political partner states. China’s approach is characterized by the alignment of cultural initiatives with foreign policy objectives, emphasizing state messaging, ideological coherence, and centralized control over content and delivery (Jiang, 2021).

Recent studies on China’s cultural diplomacy have emphasized the state’s active role in shaping global narratives through institutionalized platforms and translation strategies. Jiang (2021) positions translation not merely as a linguistic tool, but as a core mechanism of cultural diplomacy that negotiates political meaning and legitimacy in the international arena. Wang (2024) further deepens this analysis by examining the structural role of China Cultural Centers abroad, framing them as nodes of platformized diplomacy. His analysis reveals how these centers serve not only as spaces for showcasing Chinese culture, but also as strategic interfaces for soft power projection through state-driven digital and physical infrastructures.

The Chinese gallery, opened in 1981, was the first permanent cultural space representing China in a major American institution following the normalization of U.S.-China diplomatic ties. The centerpiece is the Astor Court, a full-scale reconstruction of a Ming Dynasty scholar’s garden built with materials and expertise imported from Suzhou. This representational space serves both aesthetic and diplomatic functions. It emphasizes continuity, refinement, and China’s ancient civilizational heritage. The gallery aligns with China’s broader strategy to brand its culture as a shared heritage of humanity, thereby

expanding its soft power under a universalist discourse. According to Wang (2024), Chinese cultural centers including Confucius Institutes operate similarly, asserting China's global cultural relevance while maintaining centralized control. The Met gallery embodies this ethos through its emphasis on grandeur, longevity, and harmony, intended to appeal to both Western admiration for classical art and the political narrative of a peaceful rise.

Japan: Aesthetic Diplomacy and Cultural Refinement

Japan's cultural diplomacy operates through a hybrid model, combining government leadership with the work of public institutions such as the Japan Foundation (established in 1972, independent since 2003) and the Agency for Cultural Affairs. These entities promote content ranging from traditional arts and cuisine to globally popular animation. Japan targets global cultural enthusiasts through its Cool Japan strategy, which aims to strike a balance between heritage and modern artistic forms. The emphasis on maintaining cultural authenticity while embracing creative industries exemplifies Japan's nuanced positioning in global soft power diplomacy.

Japan's approach to cultural diplomacy has been critically examined through the lens of heritage conservation and geopolitical narratives. Akagawa (2014) examines how national identity is embedded in heritage diplomacy, illustrating that conservation policies often serve as tools for nation-building. Bukh (2014) critiques the agent-level interpretation of Japan's soft power, arguing that it inadequately accounts for the structural and institutional dimensions of cultural diplomacy. Complementing this, Otmazgin (2012) highlights the geopolitical role of Japan's cultural initiatives in Asia, underscoring the complex interplay between culture, regional politics, and media representation. Together, these studies highlight the tensions between universal values and national interests in Japan's diplomacy.

Japan's gallery at The Met, titled Arts of Japan, is less overtly nationalistic and more attuned to conveying an aesthetic experience. Built up from the early 20th century, with significant expansions in the 1970s and 1980s during the so-called "Japan aesthetic boom" in the U.S., the gallery focuses on themes such as Zen Buddhism, the tea ceremony, and samurai culture. According to Iwabuchi (2015), postwar Japanese diplomacy involved "softening" Japan's international image, which had been tarnished by wartime aggression. Cultural artifacts, rather than political discourse, became tools to communicate refinement, peace, and spiritual depth. Japan's strategy is unique in that it relies heavily on diaspora collectors and private patrons, such as the Avery and Brankenridge families, rather than government agencies. This decentralized mode allows for aesthetic autonomy, while still supporting the national brand. Japan's gallery at The Met exemplifies "quiet cultural diplomacy", a model that blends individual agency with state ambition.

Korea: Traditional Heritage and Contemporary Dissonance

South Korea presents a hybrid public-private model of cultural diplomacy, led by government institutions such as the Korea Foundation (established in 1991) and the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS), under the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. With a strategic focus on K-culture, South Korea leverages the global popularity of Hallyu (Korean Wave) to engage youth and the general public worldwide. The country's approach is notable for its quickness, media-driven outreach, and emphasis on co-producing cultural narratives that appeal to global audiences, particularly through K-pop, drama, food, and digital platforms.

South Korea's cultural diplomacy has increasingly focused on institutional innovation and global cultural representation. Istad (2016) proposes a strategic framework for public diplomacy that integrates cultural, political, and communicative dimensions under a coherent policy structure. Kim (2024) provides a case study of the British Museum's Korean gallery, analyzing it as a transnational site of soft power embodiment in the 1990s. This reflects Korea's efforts to institutionalize its cultural image abroad. While earlier approaches focused on government-led narratives, recent discussions emphasize the hybridity and co-production of Korean culture within global cultural institutions, marking a shift toward participatory and co-creative models of diplomacy.

The Korean gallery, Arts of Korea, was inaugurated in 1998 through collaboration between The Met, the Korea Foundation, and other institutions such as the Samsung Culture Foundation. It represents artifacts from the Three Kingdoms through the Joseon Dynasty, highlighting celadon ceramics, Buddhist sculpture, and folk crafts. The gallery's curatorial narrative emphasizes Korea's craftsmanship, historical continuity, and indigenous spirituality. However, as noted by Kim (2024), this portrayal is often disconnected from Korea's contemporary global cultural identity, which is shaped more by K-pop, film, and digital content—a phenomenon known as Hallyu. Unlike China's immersive space or Japan's aesthetic cohesion, Korea's gallery adopts a chronological structure and relies. The gap between Korea's traditional narrative in The Met and its contemporaneous soft power initiatives signals a need for more integrative curatorial strategies.

The following Table 2 summarizes the cultural diplomacy strategies employed by China, Japan, and Korea at The Met:

Table 2

Visualization of Cultural Diplomacy Strategies in East Asian Galleries in "The Met"

Country	Opened	Strategy	Cultural Focus	Government Role	Diplomatic Message
China	1981	Civilizational Soft Power	Astor Court, Ming Tradition	High (State-led)	China as ancient, harmonious civilization
Japan	1970s–80s	Aesthetic Diplomacy	Zen, Samurai, Tea	Low (Collector-driven)	Japan as refined and peaceful
Korea	1998	Heritage and Institutional	Chronological artifacts	Moderate (Foundation-based)	Korea as historically rich, craft-oriented

Conclusion

The Met's East Asian galleries function as visual embodiments of cultural diplomacy strategies (Kim, 2024) and a symbolic space for understanding how they represent and utilize soft power using their cultural heritages. China asserts its place as a timeless civilization through promoting its gigantic cultural heritage and narrative cohesion. Japan promotes refined aesthetics through decentralization by providing an impressive artistic experience with a sophisticated atmosphere, and collector-led diplomacy relatively. Korea emphasizes national heritage but must further integrate its contemporary cultural dynamism despite its

cultural-historical authenticity. The East Asian nations similarly or contextually reflect their cultural diplomatic aims and relations with the countries they represent. As global audiences shift and cultural competition intensifies, nations must reconcile their traditional legacies with their current global identities. The museum, once a static repository, can be seen as a cultural diplomatic stage. The effectiveness of that performance depends on a country's ability to balance authenticity, narrative, and innovation in its cultural self-representation.

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