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## SHAPING HERITAGE REGIME IN CENTRAL ASIA: BETWEEN NATIONAL NARRATIVES AND GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS

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**Abstract.** This article analyses how cultural heritage politics in Central Asia changed during the transition from Soviet rule to independence, highlighting the interplay between national narratives and global heritage frameworks. Under Soviet rule, heritage policy balanced the promotion of local cultures with their integration into a unifying socialist identity, while selectively preserving sites and figures that fit ideological goals. Late Soviet engagement with UNESCO and ICOMOS introduced international concepts and professional networks that continued to shape the region after 1991. Independence brought efforts to redefine heritage around pre-Soviet history, Islamic traditions, and national distinctiveness. At the same time, UNESCO-led initiatives, particularly the Silk Road project, promoted intercultural connectivity and shared civilisational legacies. The result was a hybrid heritage regime – asserting national sovereignty while remaining embedded in transnational governance structures – reflecting broader tensions and shifts in global cultural politics toward pluralism and the inclusion of non-Western perspectives.

**Keywords:** heritage; heritage history and policy in Central Asia; international heritage institutions; UNESCO; ICOMOS; identity; transit; nation

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## ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДА МҰРА ТӘРТІБІНІҢ ҚАЛЫПТАСУЫ: ҰЛТТЫҚ НАРРАТИВ ПЕН ЖАҒАНДЫҚ ШЕКАРАЛАР

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## ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ РЕЖИМА НАСЛЕДИЯ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: МЕЖДУ НАЦИОНАЛЬНЫМИ НАРРАТИВАМИ И ГЛОБАЛЬНЫМИ СТРУКТУРАМИ

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**Андатпа.** Бұл мақалада Орталық Азиядағы мәдени мұра саясаты кеңестік биліктен тәуелсіздікке көшу кезінде қалай өзгергені қарастырылып, ұлттық әңгімелер мен жаһандық мұра құрылымдарының өзара әрекеттесуіне назар аударылады. Кеңес өкіметі тұсында мұра саясаты жергілікті мәдениеттерді ілгерілетуді олардың біртұтас социалистік бірегейлікке біріктіруімен теңестірді, сонымен бірге идеологиялық мақсаттарға сәйкес келетін орындар мен субъектілерді таңдамалы түрде сақтайды. Кейінірек Кеңес Одағының ЮНЕСКО және ИКОМОС-пен байланысы 1991 жылдан кейін аймақты қалыптастыруды жалғастырған халықаралық концепциялар мен кәсіби желілердің пайда болуына әкелді. Тәуелсіздік мұраны кеңестік дәуірге дейінгі тарих, ислам дәстүрлері және ұлттық ерекшеліктер тұрғысынан қайта қарауға күш салды. Сонымен бірге, ЮНЕСКО бастамалары, атап айтқанда, Жібек жолы жобасы мәдениетаралық байланыс пен ортақ өркениеттік мұраны алға тартты. Нәтиже трансұлттық басқару құрылымдарында ендірілген бола отырып, ұлттық егемендікті бекіткен гибриді мұра режимі болды, ол жаһандық мәдени саясаттағы плюрализмге және батыстық емес перспективаларды қосуға қарай кеңірек шиеленіс пен ығысуды көрсетеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** мұра; Орталық Азиядағы мұра тарихы және саясаты; халықаралық мұра институттары; ЮНЕСКО; ICOMOS; бірегейлік; транзит; ұлт

**Аннотация.** В данной статье анализируется, как политика в области культурного наследия в Центральной Азии изменилась в период перехода от советской власти к независимости, подчеркивая взаимодействие национальных нарративов и глобальных структур наследия. При советской власти политика в области наследия уравнивала продвижение местных культур с их интеграцией в объединяющую социалистическую идентичность, при этом избирательно сохраняя объекты и деятелей, которые соответствовали идеологическим целям. Позднее советское взаимодействие с ЮНЕСКО и ИКОМОС привело к появлению международных концепций и профессиональных сетей, которые продолжали формировать регион после 1991 года. Независимость привела к усилиям по переосмыслению наследия с учетом досоветской истории, исламских традиций и национальной самобытности. В то же время инициативы ЮНЕСКО, в частности проект «Шелковый путь», способствовали межкультурной взаимосвязи и общему цивилизационному наследию. Результатом стал гибридный режим наследия, утверждающий национальный суверенитет при сохранении встроенности в транснациональные структуры управления, что отражало более широкую напряженность и сдвиги в глобальной культурной политике в сторону плюрализма и включения не-западных точек зрения.

**Ключевые слова:** наследие; история и политика наследия в Центральной Азии; международные институты наследия; ЮНЕСКО; ИКОМОС; идентичность; транзит; нация

## Introduction

Cultural heritage protection has long been recognised as a tool of cultural power, used across different political systems and economic models. As Laurajane Smith observes, material heritage objects are not merely relics of the past; they symbolise identities, embody values, and convey prestige through their association with the ability to control the symbols of power (2006, p. 53). One of the paradoxes in developing heritage protection policies lies in their dual function: they serve both as a tool for consolidating cultural traditions of the nation and as an important platform for international engagement. Major political and social changes worldwide have shaped how heritage is defined, valued, and managed.

This article examines the transformation of cultural heritage politics in Central Asia during the transition from Soviet rule to independence, situating these changes within both domestic nation-building agendas and evolving global heritage policies and discourses. It explores the major factors that shaped the approaches to cultural heritage in Central Asia within the Soviet Union and after its disintegration and reveals the complex interplay between the global politics and local cultures, the international frameworks and state ideologies that informed the development of the cultural heritage field both before and after 1991. The article argues that the resulting post-Soviet heritage regimes emerge as hybrid in nature - simultaneously asserting national sovereignty and remaining embedded in transnational heritage governance - reflecting broader shifts in global cultural politics towards pluralism and counter-hegemonic narratives.

The evolution of heritage concepts and policies was initially studied from the perspective of its European roots and trajectories, asserting the Western roots of cultural globalisation in the field of conservation and preservation of heritage (Walsh, 1992; Swenson, 2013; Swenson, 2016; Harvey, 2001). From the late 1960s, however, these approaches became increasingly questioned as newly independent states of the Global South joined the conversation on the wave of decolonisation. UNESCO became an important arena where different regions challenged dominant norms and developed more culturally specific understandings of heritage. While the idea of universal heritage value remained, interpretations and protection methods became more diverse and locally adapted.

For Central Asia, the collapse of the Soviet Union opened the door to joining these global discussions on equal terms. Cultural heritage became central to the idea of “national revival” (Rampley, 2012), as independence promised both emancipation from external dependencies and a break with communist ideology. Domestically, heritage policies aimed to promote national narratives; internationally, they were shaped by debates on cultural diversity and global interconnectedness. Membership in the UN and UNESCO in the early 1990s allowed Central Asian policymakers to join established international networks, where organisations like UNESCO and ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites, est. in 1965) offered policy models, technical support, and new conceptual frameworks (Dekalchuk, Grigoriev, & Starodubtsev, 2023).

One early paradox of the post-Soviet heritage field was the contrast between a strong focus on “national” uniqueness narratives within state policy and the transnational vision promoted by UNESCO projects. While national governments framed heritage as a marker of distinctive

identity, UNESCO and other international actors presented it as part of a shared civilisational space and intercultural exchange. This tension echoed the Soviet period, when heritage served both to reinforce national identities and to promote internationalist ideals. Understanding this historical layering is essential for analysing how heritage's status was shaped during the independence transition and the factors - both global and domestic - that influenced it.

### **Before the transition: defining heritage, class, and nation**

The move to independence required dismantling the heritage narratives created under communist rule. In the Soviet Union, heritage was framed through the idea of "class culture" and the goal of building a unified socialist society that erased past class divisions. Secular monuments were stripped of their original social associations, and religious sites lost their sacred meaning (Smith, 2015, p. 184). This process of "museification" detached heritage from its original values and reframed it as evidence of revolutionary progress.

From the early post-revolutionary years, Soviet heritage policy was guided by a balance between continuity and change. The state aimed to preserve selected parts of the past to educate the masses in line with socialist ideals (Shchenkov, 2004; González, 2016). This approach evolved during the 1960s, a period scholars call a "new heritage revolution" (Deschepper, 2018), marked by the adoption of new laws, the creation of new institutions, and the development of professional networks. Heritage protection policies after the Second World War were shaped by collaboration between cultural elites, experts from the national republics, the Soviet state, and international bodies such as UNESCO and ICOMOS (established 1965), in which the Soviet Union and other socialist states played an active role (Bekus & Cowcher, 2020).

Ironically, by removing the explicit class element from monuments, Soviet heritage policy reproduced a logic similar to Western Europe's: the nationalisation and traditionalisation of culture, which implies a culturally homogeneous, socially unified society (Hall, 2005). Thus, in Britain, the 1970s–80s saw aristocratic estates reframed as part of national heritage to justify public preservation funding (Deckha, 2004). In the USSR, elite estates and religious monuments were taken over by the state, stripped of their original functions, and displayed as isolated cultural objects, disconnected from their historical contexts (Kaulen, 2012).

Stephen Smith's comparative study of Soviet and Chinese heritage policy shows that the socialist approach to heritage was shaped by uncertainty about the relationship between national identity and socialism. Over time, the national interpretation of heritage ultimately prevailed over the class one (Smith, 2015, p. 211). The dominance of the 'national' frame in structuring the societal conception of cultural heritage in the Soviet context was, however, complicated by the multinational configuration of the Soviet Union. Heritage policy did not simply promote a 'unified' Soviet history; it also emphasised the diversity of national traditions. In the perspective asserted by heritage discourses, Central Asian nations were linked to Mongol, Persian, and Turkic civilisations (Tuyakbayeva, 2008), the Baltic states to German heritage (Shchenkov, 2004, p. 217; Glendinning, 2013, p. 376), and Belarus to Lithuania and Poland rather than to Russia and Ukraine, as in the conventional Soviet interpretation of unity of East Slavic people. These associations connected Soviet republics to histories that crossed, or lay

outside, Soviet borders, symbolically undermining the idea of Soviet unity and revealing its politically conditioned status.

Heritage protection thus evolved at the intersection of Soviet domestic cultural politics and international cultural cooperation. It mirrored the logic of the Soviet system with its hierarchical structure of matryoshka-nationalism that allowed the broader frame of an all-Union Soviet identity to operate alongside the ethno-cultural identities of multiple nations (Bremmer, 1993). At the same time, the diverse cultural traditions within Soviet borders allowed the USSR to present itself as a meeting point between Eastern and Western civilisations, as seen in UNESCO's *Major Project for Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values* (1957–1966). This system already contained the seeds of post-independence tensions between national particularity and international universality. The global rise of cultural particularism (Robertson, 1992) further encouraged local elites to use international heritage discourse to support the preservation and promotion of their own cultural resources and traditions.

An important limitation of Soviet approaches to the heritage of Central Asian peoples lay in their selective emphasis on historical figures, objects, and sites that could be more readily aligned with the Soviet narrative of national identities shaped to fit communist ideology. After independence, revisiting these narratives and redrawing heritage maps became central to nation-building. In Uzbekistan, for example, the national heritage narrative shifted to celebrate Alisher Navoi (1441-1501) and Ulugh Beg (1394-1449), while sidelining Timur, whose illiteracy, piety, and attempted conquest of Moscow made him unsuitable in the Soviet readings of history. Consequently, the archaeological sites and structures of his era were never explicitly preserved in his honour under Soviet rule. The revisions of such ideological distortions of the historical narrative across Central Asia after became central to the formation of new, independent heritage regimes. These changes were part of a broader search for authentic national traditions and identity, serving what Sally Cummings (2010) calls “symbolic legitimization” – a crucial means of maintaining political authority and fostering national belonging.

### **Global Engagement: Soviet Nations' Patrimonies in International Arenas**

From the mid-20th century, heritage protection in the Soviet Union developed through complex exchanges between three levels: the national republics, Soviet central institutions, and international organisations. Unlike in fields where prestige flowed mainly from higher to lower levels in a strict hierarchy (Adams, 2008, p. 619), heritage often followed different dynamics. In some cases, local initiatives influenced higher-level structures. In others, regional networks within historically connected areas enabled cooperation outside the centre-periphery framework. Heritage professionals from the republics also participated directly in international cultural networks, sharing knowledge and experience without Soviet central mediation (Bekus, 2020).

In the early 1980s, these experts helped create regional committees of ICOMOS within the Soviet Union. The Baltic and Caucasus committees were founded in 1981, followed by the Central Asian group in 1982, which included all Central Asian republics and the Karakalpak Autonomous Republic. They aimed to foster cooperation among heritage specialists in the region and to promote their work internationally. They regularly presented projects at global meetings

and published in professional journals (Pugachenkova, 1982). These networks opened access to international debates on authenticity, preservation methods, and community involvement—though Soviet ideological priorities still shaped how such ideas were applied.

Many of the same experts led heritage policy and institution-building after independence in 1991. For example, the Kazakh ICOMOS initiative, headed by architect and conservation scholar Bayan Tuyakbayeva, later became the ICOMOS Regional Council for Central Asia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan (1984–1996). This group helped manage the transition to new cooperation frameworks in the post-Soviet era. Through ICOMOS, conservators from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan working on the Ahmad Yasawi mausoleum in Turkistan made important contributions to understanding Timurid architecture, securing the monument's recognition as a key site of the Timurid world.

By the late 1980s, the USSR was well integrated into the global heritage governance system, though its participation was selective and politically strategic. This engagement created a paradox. On one hand, it reinforced the Soviet image of unity and progress; on the other, it exposed domestic heritage practice to competing values, such as cultural pluralism and the importance of local stewardship. These ideas later influenced the post-Soviet shift towards national heritage narratives, even as Soviet-era internationalist language continued to shape the discourse.

### **After Independence: Reframing Heritage in Central Asia**

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a sharp change in how heritage was valued and used. In Central Asia, independence triggered a deliberate effort to re-anchor national histories in pre-Soviet traditions, Islamic heritage, and older civilisational links. Soviet-era narratives, which had placed heritage within a socialist and pan-Soviet framework, were recast to highlight national uniqueness and continuity with ancient states and empires.

International cooperation with UNESCO began even before the Central Asian republics formally joined in 1992. The region took part in the Integral Study of the Silk Road: Road to Dialogue (1988–1997), launched as part of UNESCO's World Decade for Cultural Development. This project was built on earlier efforts, such as the East–West Major Project (1957), which aimed to increase the influence of non-Western states within UNESCO. Central Asia's historical role as a bridge between Asia and Europe made it central to the Silk Road programme.

As part of the project, the “Steppe Route in Central Asia” expedition took place from April to June 1991. It brought together 46 foreign experts from 22 countries, 74 Soviet specialists, and 26 media representatives. Travelling from Ashkhabad (Turkmenistan) to Almaty (Kazakhstan), the team visited 43 towns, archaeological sites, and monuments included in local conservation programmes (Demchenko, 2011). Two international seminars followed: one in Khiva (May 1991) on caravanserais and Silk Road cities, and another in Almaty (June 1991) on the relationships between sedentary and nomadic cultures. These events underscored Central Asia's key role in understanding the Silk Road's diverse heritage and laid the groundwork for the republics' integration into UNESCO's structures after independence.

The Silk Road project was praised internationally as an exemplary model of “interculturality,” showing that identities are shaped by interactions between peoples (UNESCO Courier, 2023).

However, this view contrasted with the nation-focused policies of the new Central Asian governments, which sought to correct Soviet-era distortions, strengthen ethnic identities, and legitimise statehood. Heritage became part of what scholars call “the affective politics of sovereignty” (Gullette & Heathershaw, 2015; Laruelle, 2007). Paradoxically, these efforts often continued practices imbued in the Soviet nationalities politics that were introduced to consolidate the borders of Soviet national republics and strongly focused on ethnic identities, calling to substitute the religious and local identities across the region previously characterised by fluid borders and mass migration (Wimbush, 1984; Shaw, 2011, p. 49).

With the collapse of the USSR, heritage sites became important symbols of national traditions and identities, and their preservation and conservation allowed states to display both the national past's artefacts and showcase the physical materialisation of progress in nation-building, attracting tourists both domestically and internationally (Haydaraliyeva, 2023, p. 286). By contrast, UNESCO's projects aimed to foster regional inter-state cooperation, emphasising countries' shared heritage and the cultural interconnections of Turkic, Mongol, and Persian legacies. The Silk Road programme was among the first to promote this idea of intercultural heritage in the region. This hybridisation produced a distinctive post-Soviet heritage regime in Central Asia - one that projected national sovereignty while remaining embedded in the institutional and discursive frameworks of global heritage politics.

Around the same time when the Central Asia states joined UNESCO, a strong trend towards a more culture- and region-sensitive approach to heritage began to develop at UNESCO. A collection of essays as a part of Dossier, published by the UNESCO Sources (1996) called for liberation of the notion of “heritage” from its predominantly Western vision and overly structured approach. It called for breaking away from a “monumental” conception of heritage, attributing it to the European tradition that dominated the guidelines that rule the application and inscription of properties on the World Heritage list (Boukhari, 1996). It criticised the prioritisation of the monuments of “defunct” civilisations over living cultures and called for the recognition of the complex nature of heritage that incorporates belief systems and traditional knowledge. It also proposed reconnecting artificially separated categories of natural and cultural heritage by introducing the new classification of “cultural landscape”. These debates ultimately resulted in several steps undertaken by UNESCO aimed at integrating the diverse visions of heritage across the globe. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) was a response to the appeals of many countries in Asia, Africa and America and indicated a move from a “monumentalist” to a more ‘anthropological’ interpretation of the heritage (Aikawa, 2004)<sup>1</sup>.

For post-Soviet Central Asia, this approach resonated strongly. Under Soviet rule, heritage had been managed through a universalist modernisation model shared by both Marxist and liberal frameworks. Soviet conservation practices were often praised for their technical quality but criticised for focusing too narrowly on individual monuments and treating them as isolated from their social and cultural contexts (St John Simpson and Herrmann, 1991; Haydaraliyeva, 2023). This “separation of monuments” reflected the socialist vision of a forward-looking society, in which the past was preserved but kept apart from everyday life.

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<sup>1</sup>It was followed by the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2007), which further indicated the willingness to revisit the ideas of culture and heritage to create more space for diverse forms of heritage and culture at UNESCO.

A major structural change after independence came when UNESCO placed Central Asia in its Asia-Pacific region. This shifted the networks, knowledge exchange, and policy influences shaping heritage governance, connecting the region more directly to Asian heritage debates. Central Asian states were not merely passive recipients of aid from UNESCO and other international agencies, which aimed to assist in protecting their national or regional heritage. The engagement of the Central Asian region in various intercultural projects concurred with the global civilisational shifts in rethinking the concepts of culture and heritage. The inclusion of five new countries from Central Asia as independent actors in various transnational conservation and heritage protection projects coincided with what some scholars see as the beginning of the “Asian age” in heritage regimes, which became especially evident after the US and the UK withdrew from UNESCO in 1985 (Wiktor-Mach 2019, 1605). It had an essential effect on heritage-making strategies, strengthened the criticism of Eurocentric approaches, and emphasized the plurality of heritage paradigms and countering hegemony in defining its parameters.

## **Conclusion**

The history of heritage politics in Central Asia reveals both rupture and continuity across the Soviet and post-Soviet divide. Soviet heritage policy embedded the region in a centralised, ideologically driven system that balanced the promotion of local cultures with their integration into an overarching socialist narrative. Late Soviet engagement with UNESCO and other international bodies brought exposure to global heritage discourses, but within tightly controlled parameters that subordinated pluralism to state unity.

After independence, the newly sovereign states reframed heritage to emphasise pre-Soviet histories, Islamic traditions, and national distinctiveness. Despite the rhetoric of a new start in interactions between the international community and heritage professionals in Central Asian states after 1991, most of the projects demonstrated continuity in the work in heritage protection, conservation of cultural monuments, and systematisation of implementations of conservation projects. Furthermore, the mode of regional collaboration and joint programmes initiated by UNESCO in Central Asia put emphasis on the shared heritage and interculturality of countries’ past, which in many ways contradicted their strategies of utilising the cultural heritage as a nation-building toolkit.

In the 1990s, the voice of Asia became evident in global heritage diplomacy, with Japan and China becoming leading actors in influencing global culture governance. The emergence of the cluster of Central Asian countries strengthened Asia’s voices in the global arena, and their participation in the Silk Road UNESCO projects and further initiatives were instrumental in advancing counter-hegemonic narratives of heritage and broadening the heritage discourse to include diverse voices and experiences.

## **Conflict of interests**

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests

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