

The Securitization of Cultural Heritage in ASEAN: Soft Power, Identity, and Regional Security

Khalifa Rabbani Wardhiansyah

University of Darussalam Gontor, Siman, Ponorogo 63471, Indonesia

452024511105@student.unida.gontor.ac.id *

* Corresponding Author

Abstract: Cultural heritage has become increasingly important in contemporary international security studies as a result of the proliferation of non-traditional security hazards in the era of globalisation. In Southeast Asia, cultural identity and legacy are regarded as strategic instruments that serve to reinforce regional stability, societal cohesiveness, and state legitimacy, in addition to serving as historical assets. However, the ASEAN member nations' concerns regarding identity loss and cultural sovereignty have been exacerbated by the intensification of globalisation, digital misinformation, and transnational cultural contestation.. The objective of this paper is to examine the securitisation of cultural assets in ASEAN from the perspectives of soft power theory and securitisation theory. The research utilised a qualitative descriptive technique with a literature study approach, assessing academic journals, books, ASEAN papers, and UNESCO publications that were associated with regional security and cultural diplomacy. The findings indicate that ASEAN member states are increasingly resorting to cultural heritage as a form of soft power to fortify national identity, diplomatic influence, and regional legitimacy. Additionally, the ASEAN cultural diplomacy fosters the resilience of society, regional collaboration, and conflict avoidance in the presence of contemporary non-traditional security threats. Therefore, cultural legacy must be regarded as a strategic factor in the development of ASEAN's identity and regional security, in addition to a cultural asset.

Keywords: Non-Traditional Security; Cultural Diplomacy; Societal Security; Identity Politics; ASEAN Community

INTRODUCTION

The field of international security has grown greatly beyond the conventional military focus. Traditionally security studies concentrated on military threats, territorial defence and the survival of independent governments. Security was usually thought of under a realist paradigm of armed conflict, military capability, deterrence, and balance of power. But globalisation, technological development, transnational interdependence and the growing complexity of international interactions have greatly extended the concept of security. Today, experts agree that security threats can come from not only military aggression but also environmental degradation, cyber assaults, pandemics, migration crises, economic upheavals, and challenges to cultural identity (Buzan & Hansen, 2009).

In this larger conceptualisation of security, culture and cultural heritage have acquired greater importance. Cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible characteristics transmitted from the past, including historical monuments, archaeological sites, traditional arts, languages, rituals, traditions, cuisines and collective historical memories. For most of the twentieth century legacy was seen largely as a subject of preservation, education, tourism and cultural development. However in recent decades heritage has grown more related to matters of identity, legitimacy, diplomacy and political power (Meskell Lynn 2018). States are increasingly actively using cultural legacy as a strategic resource to increase their international influence, boost their internal cohesiveness and further their wider foreign policy aims.

Especially in Southeast Asia, this is a development. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) comprises countries with stark variation in language, religion, ethnicity, political systems, and historical events. The area has a rich diversity of civilisations including Islamic, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and indigenous civilisations. centuries of commerce, migration, colonisation and cultural interaction have affected its communities. Despite this variety, ASEAN has tried to create a common regional character that can strengthen regional stability and collaboration. The foundation of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) acknowledges that regional integration cannot rely exclusively on economic and political cooperation. Shared values, social cohesiveness and reciprocal cultural understanding are also needed for sustainable regional stability (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

In this setting, cultural heritage is extremely significant. ASEAN member nations increasingly promote cultural heritage, not just as a tourism asset, but also as a strategic weapon of diplomacy and identity creation. Indonesia is aggressively promoting batik and wayang as icons of the national creativity and civilisation. Thailand plays up Songkran, its food and Buddhist traditions to improve its worldwide image. Cambodia promotes Angkor Wat as an icon of historical continuity and national resilience. Vietnam showcases the Complex of Huế Monuments and the Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long as symbols of historic legitimacy and cultural refinement. The area has seen cultural heritage used as a method for nations to transmit ideals, legitimacy and attractiveness to foreign audiences.

This is very much related to Joseph Nye's notion of soft power. States may influence each other not just by military or economic means, but also by attractiveness, according to Nye. Appealing cultures, political ideals and institutions of a country may impact foreign choices without force. Soft power is thus fundamentally different from hard power. Soft power is attractive and admiring; it is not coercive. Cultural heritage is one of the most significant elements of soft power, since it helps governments to project favourable images, develop international goodwill and strengthen diplomatic influence (Nye, 2004).

But cultural heritage is not merely a source of attractiveness. It can also be a cause of insecurity. Globalisation has increased cross-border cultural contact but concurrently has created fears of cultural homogenisation, loss of identities and disappearance of local customs. Such issues have been amplified by the use of digital communication technologies that allow the quick dissemination of information, narratives and cultures goods. Social media platforms allow disputes on cultural ownership, historical interpretation and identity politics to span national borders in a matter of hours. Hence, governments are more and more recognising the importance of cultural preservation in building social resilience and national unity (Concepcion, 2025).

This process may be understood with the help of the Copenhagen School of security studies. Security is not only an objective situation, but a social creation. This process is called securitisation, when political players construct certain concerns as existential dangers, therefore demanding exceptional responses. Security is not about issues that actually endanger existence, but rather issues that powerful actors manage to convince audiences are threatening. Originally designed to explain military and political difficulties, securitisation theory has increasingly been used to social security, identity politics and cultural preservation (Barry Buzan et al., 1998).

Heritage diplomacy has become an important element in current international affairs, especially in Asia. Heritage is no longer viewed only as something to preserve, but also as a means of developing diplomatic engagement and international legitimacy (Winter, 2015). Meskell similarly shows how UNESCO heritage listings have gotten entangled in concerns of status, political power and worldwide recognition. Symbolic value of heritage identification goes beyond conservation per se increasingly (Meskell Lynn, 2018). The increasing focus on cultural collaboration within ASEAN at the regional level is indicative of wider attempts to build regional identity and social cohesion. ASEAN identity is developed through frequent interaction, common norms, and institutional collaboration rather than uniformity of ethnicity or language. Cultural exchanges, educational programmes, historic festivals and people-to-people connectivities are fostering a common regional awareness. Although national identities remain dominant, ASEAN efforts are designed to foster a complementary feeling of regional belonging that might be utilised to maintain long-term stability (Rattanasavee Pattharapong, 2023).

At the same time, cultural legacy performs a significant geopolitical purpose. Southeast Asia is a strategically disputed space amongst the great powers of China, the United States, Japan and India. In this regard, ASEAN's promotion of a common cultural legacy promotes regional autonomy by strengthening the sense that Southeast Asia has its own historical continuity, civilisational relevance and normative underpinnings. Heritage diplomacy, therefore, operates as both a tool of cultural promotion and an instrument of regional agency in the face of rising geopolitical conflict. Despite increased academic interest in cultural diplomacy, heritage governance and ASEAN regionalism, substantial gaps exist in the literature. Many of the studies are related to tourism development, cultural preservation or diplomatic branding, without due consideration to security considerations. Other studies investigate securitisation and soft power independently without looking at their interplay. As a result, the role of cultural legacy as a source of soft power, as an object of securitisation, and as a mechanism of regional identity creation in ASEAN at the same time has received very little attention.

This study aims to solve this gap by exploring the securitisation of cultural assets in ASEAN from the combined viewpoints of securitisation theory and soft power theory. More specifically, the study addresses three related questions. How can cultural heritage work as a soft power within ASEAN? Second, why has cultural heritage been progressively included into the non-traditional security rhetoric in Southeast Asia? Thirdly, what is the contribution of ASEAN cultural diplomacy to the stability of the region, social resilience and identity construction?

Answering these problems leads to wider debates on non-traditional security, cultural diplomacy and regionalism. The paper contends that cultural legacy in ASEAN serves simultaneously as a cultural resource, a diplomatic instrument and a strategic element of social stability. Heritage conservation is increasingly tied to questions of identity, legitimacy and resilience, and cultural diplomacy is becoming part of the process of constructing national and regional identities. Therefore, the analysis of cultural heritage via the security lens offers vital perspectives on the changing nature of security in the twenty-first century.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a literature review and discourse analysis; no quantitative or statistical procedures are used at any stage. Data were drawn from secondary sources (peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, ASEAN Secretariat reports, UNESCO publications, and official policy documents concerning cultural heritage, soft power, and non-traditional security) collected through documentation and library research. Two qualitative techniques were applied to these sources. Qualitative content analysis was used to identify recurring themes, policy narratives, and conceptual linkages across the literature, while discourse analysis examined how governments, ASEAN institutions, UNESCO, and scholars construct cultural heritage within official narratives and policy texts. Together, these techniques allow the study to trace how cultural heritage is discursively transformed from a cultural asset into a strategic political and security resource, and they are used consistently in this qualitative sense throughout the remainder of the paper.

The analysis draws on three theoretical frameworks, each assigned a distinct analytical function so that they inform one another rather than run as separate, overlapping narratives. Securitisation theory (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde) supplies the diagnostic function: it identifies whether and how cultural heritage is constructed as a security matter, operationalised through three indicators applied consistently to every case in the Results and Discussion: (i) existential framing, whether heritage loss is portrayed as a threat to national identity or societal survival; (ii) audience acceptance, whether government, media, or public discourse accepts this threat framing as legitimate; and (iii) exceptional measures, the concrete responses, legal protection, UNESCO nomination campaigns, state branding, or diplomatic assertions of ownership, that follow once acceptance is secured. Soft power theory (Nye) supplies the instrumental function: it explains why states invest in heritage promotion, by identifying the diplomatic and reputational goals that this promotion is meant to serve. Constructivism supplies the relational function: it interprets how repeated heritage-based interaction (cultural exchange, joint UNESCO initiatives, ASCC programming) feeds into the socialisation processes that build national and regional identity over time. Read together, securitisation theory explains when and how heritage becomes a security matter, soft power theory explains why states invest in it diplomatically, and constructivism explains how that investment feeds into identity formation. Each case examined below is read against all three dimensions rather than treated under only one framework at a time.

Four ASEAN member states (Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam) were purposively selected as case studies, on three grounds. First, representativeness of heritage type: the cases jointly span the main categories of heritage diplomacy identified in the literature, from intangible cultural heritage (Indonesian batik, Thai Songkran) to monumental and archaeological heritage (Angkor Wat, the Complex of Huế Monuments, and the Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long), which allows the analysis to test whether the securitisation–soft power dynamic holds across different heritage forms rather than only one. Second, density of international recognition: Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand are among the ASEAN member states with the highest number of UNESCO World Heritage List inscriptions, while Cambodia's Angkor Wat is among the most internationally recognised single heritage sites in the region,

which provides sufficient discursive material (official statements, nomination dossiers, diplomatic campaigns) for discourse analysis. Third, diversity of civilisational and political context: the four cases draw on distinct religious and historical traditions: Islamic-Javanese (Indonesia), Theravada Buddhist (Thailand and Cambodia), and Confucian-influenced dynastic (Vietnam), and differing political systems, allowing the study to probe whether heritage securitisation is a general ASEAN pattern or is contingent on national context. The four cases are not exhaustive of ASEAN's ten member states; this bounded scope is revisited as a limitation in the Conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Heritage and Non-Traditional Security in ASEAN

The results suggest that cultural heritage increasingly plays a role as part of non-traditional security in ASEAN. The growing process of globalisation, digital communication and transnational cultural engagement has raised worries about identity loss and cultural homogenisation in the societies of Southeast Asia. Governments are increasingly making the case that preserving cultural assets strengthens community resilience, national legitimacy and regional stability. Culture is no longer only a symbolic or historical aspect in modern international relations. Instead, cultural legacy is becoming increasingly political and strategic since it assists in the development of identity and offers diplomatic leverage. ASEAN member states actively promote cultural assets not only for tourism but also for boosting national image and regional legitimacy.

Securitization Theory and Cultural Heritage

One of the most prominent innovations in modern security studies is the securitisation framework developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde. The Copenhagen School challenges the premise that security risks are objective and self-evident. Security is instead viewed as a social and political construction. Securitisation theory argues that topics are securitised when and if powerful players succeed in presenting them as existential risks demanding extraordinary measures. Securitisation has three essential elements: the securitising actor, the referent object and the audience (Barry Buzan et al., 1998). The securitising actor might be a government, political leader, international organization or social movement. What is called the object is what should be protected, for example, national identity, cultural traditions or historical memory. The audience is the people or groups whose acceptance is crucial for a successful securitisation. Cultural heritage is becoming an increasingly relevant item in ASEAN. Governments portray cultural traditions, monuments, languages and histories as the vital components of national identity. Threats to social stability arising from globalisation, cultural homogenisation, foreign cultural influence and the erosion of heritage are therefore being increasingly depicted.

Scholars have steadily extended the scope of securitisation theory beyond the military and political domains. Securitisation is a dynamic political process and so it is influenced by the setting, the institutions and the reaction from the public (Balzacq Thierry, 2010). Likewise, McDonald stresses the need to study the role of social behaviours and cultural stories in the production of security. Securitisation theory has been widely used in recent research for heritage governance (McDonald, 2008). Often heritage buildings are securitised because they embody communal identity and political legitimacy. The loss of heritage is often understood not just as physical harm, but as an attack on cultural memory and the existence of communities (Antonio González Zarandona et al., 2024). This approach has gained special pertinence in areas of rapid social change and globalisation.

Societal security is another part of this approach. Societal security is the ability of a society to maintain its identity amid changing conditions and possible threats. The cultural continuity has become a major problem in this era of globalisation and internet connection. The protection of heritage is consequently a way of preserving not just cultural artefacts but also communal identities and societal stability. It is important to note that securitisation does not always lead to favourable results. Excessive securitisation can lead to exclusionary nationalism, identity polarisation, and interstate competition. Thus, the advantages and hazards of heritage securitisation remain an essential problem for ASEAN policymakers.

Soft Power Theory and Cultural Diplomacy

Securitisation outlines why cultural heritage is a security problem and soft power theory explains why heritage has become a diplomatic resource. Joseph Nye's notion of soft power is one of the most prominent ideas in modern international relations theory. Nye defines power as the ability to affect the behaviour of others. Historically, power has been defined on the basis of military capability and economic resources. These types of influence, Nye calls hard power, because they depend on compulsion or persuasion. Soft power, on the other hand, works by seduction not coercion. Major sources of soft power, according to Nye, include culture, political principles, and legitimacy of foreign policy. Cultural legacy is significant because it shows identity, history, creativity and ideals. Countries with appealing cultural resources can improve their worldwide image and expand their diplomatic influence without depending on military might (Nye, 2004).

Cultural diplomacy is one of the important tools of soft power. Cultural diplomacy is the sharing of ideas, traditions, values and cultural manifestations between civilisations to promote mutual understanding. Cultural diplomacy is the use of cultural means to influence views, establish trust and improve international relations (Melissen Jan, 2005). The significance of cultural diplomacy in ASEAN has increased. Southeast Asian governments do not just compete in terms of military power but often employ historic festivals, cultural exhibits, educational exchanges, tourist campaigns, and UNESCO accreditation to improve their image abroad. These behaviours are part of what Nye calls attraction-based influence.

Thailand is an illustrative case. The international marketing of Thai food, Songkran festivals, traditional arts and Buddhist history has contributed to the shaping of the global image of Thailand. Cultural assets as tools of soft power are being progressively emphasised in contemporary Thai foreign policy (Cogan, 2024). Likewise, Indonesia's promotion of batik, wayang, gamelan and traditional crafts helps to the international image of Indonesia as a culturally rich and varied society. Vietnam has also stepped up its cultural diplomacy through heritage promotion. UNESCO-recognized structures like Vietnam the Complex of Huế Monuments and the Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long are more than tourist attractions. They are emblems of historical continuity and cultural refinement. Vietnam builds narratives of resilience, civilisation and national identity through exhibits, international cooperation programmes and heritage festivals (Hitchcock Michael, 2010).

Cultural diplomacy supports connection development in the long term and normative power. Heritage diplomacy does more than just promote tourism; it impacts views of legitimacy, credibility and international status. Soft power is used in ASEAN to achieve national and regional goals. Individual governments use cultural heritage to elevate their profile on the world stage, while ASEAN as a group promotes Southeast Asia as an area of cultural diversity but also connectedness. Therefore, legacy operates as a national resource as well as a regional asset (Chitty Naren J, 2024).

Heritage Diplomacy: Connecting Culture, Identity, and International Relations

One of the most important developments in current international relations studies has been heritage diplomacy. In traditional methods heritage was typically regarded as a domestic cultural question. However, modern scholarship is more attuned to the importance of heritage in diplomacy, international cooperation and global governance.

Winter describes heritage diplomacy as the "use of heritage resources, historical narratives, and cultural practices to enable international engagement and relationship-building." Heritage diplomacy is not the same as traditional cultural diplomacy; it stresses the importance of historical continuity, communal memory, and civilisational narratives (Winter, 2015). Imagine two families next door to each other, whose grandparents were good friends many years ago. It establishes a basis of collaboration and confidence. Heritage diplomacy works the same way on an international level, shared cultural experiences frequently making diplomatic interaction easier.

An example of this metamorphosis is the increasing relevance of UNESCO. UNESCO heritage status is one of the most coveted kinds of worldwide cultural acknowledgement. Although UNESCO's stated aim is about preservation and education, being a cultural site also comes with political, economic and diplomatic perks. Increasingly World Heritage designation is a type of symbolic capital. Countries constantly seek for recognition since heritage designation increases worldwide awareness, status and

validity. World heritage sites are widely recognised as symbols of national identity and historic importance. This tendency is especially visible in the South East Asia. ASEAN member nations are actively pursuing UNESCO accreditation for cultural monuments, traditional customs, festivals, cuisines and creative traditions. Such acknowledgement simultaneously helps to the development of tourism, economic growth and diplomatic influence, as well as enhancing the home identity (Meskell, 2018). The worldwide acknowledgement of Indonesian batik, Thai Songkran festivals, Cambodian Angkor Wat and Vietnamese imperial legacy exemplifies how heritage diplomacy works in practice. These examples demonstrate that legacy is no longer exclusive to museums and archives. Rather, it has become an active part of international participation. Recent studies also further underscores the relationship between heritage diplomacy and soft power. Harrison also contends that heritage governance has gotten enmeshed in current global issues such as identity politics, environmentalism and international collaboration. Heritage diplomacy in ASEAN serves both national and regional aims. At the national level nations use heritage to increase legitimacy and worldwide recognition. Shared heritage projects encourage cooperation and identity formation at the regional level (Harrison, 2013). Heritage diplomacy finds itself in a unique position at the confluence of culture, security and international relations.

Constructivism and ASEAN Identity Formation

Constructivism is among the most essential theoretical concepts to describe ASEAN cultural cooperation. Whereas realism emphasises material power and liberalism on institutions, constructivism emphasises the importance of ideas, identities, norms, and shared meanings.

Alexander Wendt's famous comment that "anarchy is what states make of it" captures the central constructivist thesis that international politics is socially produced, not preordained (Wendt, 2003). States act on meanings and identities that are produced via social interaction. Another major issue is the development of identity, for there is an astonishing variety throughout Southeast Asia. ASEAN nations are quite different in language, religion, political systems, historical experiences and growth. ASEAN, unlike the European Union, has a solid cultural homogeneity base on which to build integration. Thus, cultural collaboration is vital in the construction of identity. ASEAN identity is constructed via the repetitive socialisation processes of educational exchanges, cultural festivals, policy collaboration, and people-to-people contact. Shared heritage efforts help generate a larger regional awareness gradually (Rattanaseevee Pattharapong, 2023).

Cultural legacy is consequently a bridge between national and regional identities. People might be very devoted to their national traditions, but at the same time acquire a sense of belonging to a larger Southeast Asian group. ASEAN cultural diplomacy advances this dual identity by emphasising common historical experiences and intertwined histories of civilisations. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is the institutional manifestation of this concept. Through cultural preservation, educational collaboration, youth exchanges and heritage promotion, the ASCC aspires to promote regional cohesion with due regard to cultural variety. Heritage diplomacy therefore helps to the worldwide visibility and social formation of ASEAN itself.

Indonesia illustrates the securitisation pattern most clearly around batik. Existential framing appears in Indonesian public and official discourse after neighbouring Malaysia was perceived to have claimed batik as part of its own heritage promotion in the late 2000s: the episode was framed domestically not as a minor branding dispute but as a threat to Indonesian cultural ownership and national dignity. Audience acceptance was evident in the strength of Indonesian public reaction and government response, which treated the claim as warranting a national defence of identity rather than indifference. The exceptional measure that followed was Indonesia's accelerated push for UNESCO inscription: batik was formally recognised as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009, after which the government mandated National Batik Day and promoted batik in schools and civil-service dress codes, measures that go beyond ordinary cultural preservation and function as a state-led assertion of ownership. Wayang and gamelan have been promoted through similar, if less contested, diplomatic and educational channels.

Thailand shows a comparable pattern centred on Songkran. Existential framing is present in Thai government and media discourse concerned that rapid commercialisation and international tourism were diluting the festival's religious and communal meaning, alongside broader anxiety about the

erosion of Buddhist tradition under globalisation. Audience acceptance is visible in the popular and institutional support for state-led “cultural safeguarding” campaigns tied to the festival. The exceptional measure was Thailand's formal UNESCO nomination effort, culminating in the 2023 inscription of “Songkran in Thailand, Traditional Thai New Year Festival” on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, accompanied by state-sponsored codification of “authentic” Songkran practices for international audiences, an exceptional measure that reframes a religious festival as a matter of managed national image.

Cambodia uses Angkor Wat as both a historical emblem and a diplomatic instrument, and it offers the starkest case of existential framing: Angkor is persistently invoked in Cambodian political discourse as inseparable from national survival, most visibly in the recurring territorial and heritage disputes with Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple, where loss of recognition was explicitly framed as a threat to Khmer sovereignty and historical continuity. Audience acceptance is unusually strong and durable, as Angkor's status as an object requiring protection is written into national symbolism itself, appearing on the Cambodian flag and in school curricula. The exceptional measures that followed include the creation of a dedicated national authority (APSARA) with extraordinary legal and administrative powers over the Angkor site, sustained international lobbying around its UNESCO status, and the use of heritage claims in formal diplomatic and legal disputes with a neighbouring state, responses well beyond routine site management.

Vietnam uses imperial heritage, such as the Complex of Huế Monuments (inscribed 1993) and the Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long (inscribed 2010) to project historical legitimacy and continuity. Existential framing is expressed less as a response to an external claim than as an anxiety about post-war and post-colonial discontinuity: state discourse presents the restoration of dynastic sites as necessary to reconnect a modern, unified Vietnam with a historical political order that war and revolution had disrupted. Audience acceptance is reflected in sustained domestic investment in restoration and in the prominence given to these sites in state commemoration and education. The exceptional measures include large-scale, state-funded restoration programmes, the designation of Huế and Thăng Long as flagship sites in international cultural diplomacy and festivals, and their consistent use in official narratives of sovereignty and resilience, treatment that exceeds ordinary heritage conservation and positions the sites as instruments of state legitimacy.

These examples support Nye's concept of soft power, which explains how culture functions as a source of attraction and influence in international relations. Through cultural diplomacy, states attempt to shape positive international perceptions and strengthen diplomatic relationships without relying on military coercion.

Table 1 summarises, for each of the four cases, the flagship heritage item discussed above, its primary diplomatic function, and its associated security implication; it is illustrative of the qualitative analysis rather than a numerical count.

Table 1. ASEAN Cultural Heritage and Diplomatic Functions

Country	Cultural Heritage	Diplomatic Function	Security Implication
Indonesia	Batik and Wayang	National branding	Identity cohesion
Thailand	Songkran Festival	Cultural attraction	Soft power expansion
Cambodia	Angkor Wat	Historical legitimacy	National resilience
Viet Nam	The Complex of Huế Monuments and The Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long.	Tourism diplomacy	Regional visibility

Note: Batik and Wayang (Indonesia) and the Songkran Festival (Thailand) are inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; Angkor Wat (Cambodia) and the Complex of Huế Monuments and Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long (Viet Nam) are inscribed on the (tangible) World Heritage List. The two lists are governed by separate UNESCO conventions and are not numerically comparable. Source: UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (2024). *World Heritage List*; UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists. UNESCO.

The results suggest that cultural heritage has been securitised in ASEAN as well. Governments increasingly argue that cultural preservation is vital to safeguard national identity and social cohesiveness in the face of globalisation and digital cultural competition. Cultural heritage is securitised and linked to larger security issues such as social resilience, governmental legitimacy and regional stability. Also, UNESCO heritage status increases worldwide exposure and regional validity with ASEAN member nations. UNESCO listing may boost a country's tourist potential and its diplomatic standing and enhance global knowledge of its cultural character. Heritage designation brings economic advantages, tourist growth and diplomatic influence. ASEAN countries are actively competing to promote cultural heritage worldwide.

Several cultural disputes in Southeast Asia illustrate how cultural heritage can become a political flashpoint: neighbouring states have clashed over batik, traditional dances, culinary customs, and historical claims, generating nationalist sentiment and diplomatic friction, and social media has accelerated how quickly such disputes cross borders and shape public opinion. None of these disputes has escalated into armed conflict; ASEAN's characteristic response has instead been diplomatic clarification, heritage-branding campaigns, and preservation strategies pursued through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), consistent with the bloc's broader norm of consensus-building over confrontation. This pattern answers the study's first research question, which is that cultural heritage functions as soft power in ASEAN precisely because governments manage its securitised dimension through cooperative rather than coercive means, converting a potential source of interstate tension into routinised diplomatic practice.

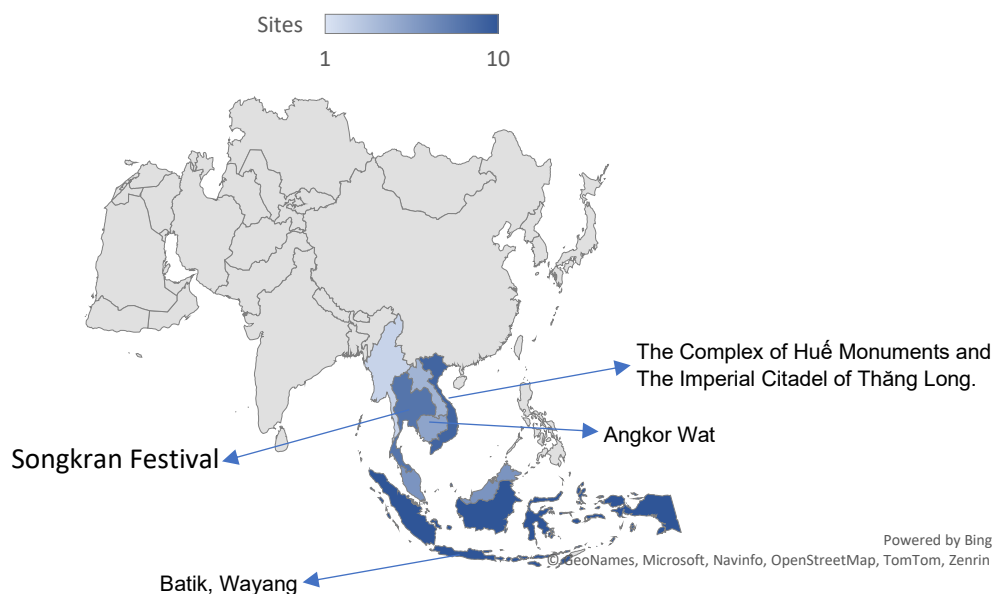


Figure 1. Number of UNESCO World Heritage List Inscriptions (Tangible Cultural and Natural Sites) by ASEAN Country

How Does ASEAN Cultural Diplomacy Contribute to Regional Stability and Identity-Building?

ASEAN cultural diplomacy is important in fostering regional collaboration, peaceful engagement and collective identity-building among member states. ASEAN's promotion of cultural preservation, educational collaboration, intercultural communication, and people-to-people connectedness is conducted through the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). ASEAN, as a whole, prefers to resolve cultural conflicts via diplomacy and regional collaboration rather than confrontation. This is in line with the long-standing ASEAN ideal of consensus-building and peaceful conflict management. Though the area is culturally diverse, shared heritage efforts, cultural festivals and educational exchanges serve to build a greater ASEAN identity.

The UNESCO heritage status enhances the legitimacy and worldwide exposure of the area among the ASEAN member nations. Recognition of heritage may promote tourism growth, enhance diplomatic

prestige, and elevate international knowledge of the richness of Southeast Asian cultures. But, excessive securitisation of cultural assets may entail hazards, should cultural identity be too aggressively defined within a nationalist rhetoric. Such situations might deepen the exclusionary identity politics and regional hostility. Hence, ASEAN member states need to combine heritage conservation with inclusive regional collaboration. Cultural diplomacy in the form of festivals, educational exchanges, heritage conferences, tourism diplomacy, and UNESCO-centered collaboration in the promotion of cultural heritage adds to what constructivist theorists call identity socialisation. Repeated cultural engagement eventually familiarises ASEAN cultures with each other's customs, histories and symbolic narratives, and reduces sentiments of distance, creating a larger regional consciousness. This process is especially essential in the context of Southeast Asia, because the region is characterised by incredible diversity, including Islamic, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and indigenous civilisations, as well as different colonial legacies and governmental systems. In such a fragmented context, cultural diplomacy operates not only as a symbolic representation, but also as a vehicle for the production of social cohesiveness and normative legitimacy at the regional level.

Another crucial feature often missing from the debates on ASEAN cultural cooperation is the role of heritage in balancing uneven influence among major countries in Asia-Pacific. Southeast Asia is a geopolitically disputed space between China, the United States, Japan and India, all of which fight fiercely for political, economic and normative dominance. In this geopolitical context, promoting the regional cultural identity by ASEAN indirectly serves as a strategy of protecting regional autonomy and preventing over-dependence on foreign forces. Heritage diplomacy also enhances the international credibility of ASEAN. The international recognition of Southeast Asian cultural heritage through UNESCO, international exhibitions, and transnational cultural festivals allows ASEAN states to showcase the image of Southeast Asia as a place of historical depth, cultural diversity, and civilisational importance. This strategy, in turn, reinforces ASEAN's soft regional identity in global politics. Southeast Asia is no longer only a geopolitical domain of strategic contestation between greater powers such as China and the United States. It increasingly represents a regional community of cultural interconnection with its own historical continuity and normative ideals.

Read across the four cases, the securitisation pattern is structurally consistent but differs in intensity and trigger. Indonesia's and Cambodia's episodes were reactive, triggered by an external claim or dispute, Malaysia's promotion of batik, and Thailand's rival claim over Preah Vihear, producing rapid, high-visibility state responses. Thailand's and Vietnam's securitisation was comparatively anticipatory, driven less by a rival state than by domestic anxiety over commercialisation (Thailand) or historical discontinuity (Vietnam), producing slower, institution-building responses such as UNESCO nomination dossiers and restoration programmes rather than diplomatic confrontation. Across all four, however, UNESCO inscription functions as the common exceptional measure: it converts a domestic identity claim into an internationally certified status that is harder for other states to contest, which is why ASEAN member states compete so consistently for World Heritage List and Intangible Cultural Heritage List recognition. This pattern shows that UNESCO listing does two jobs at once. Toward the outside world, it works as soft power, making the country look good and attractive. Toward people at home, it works as a securitising move, since the public already accepts the idea that their heritage was under threat. So the two functions that were treated separately in the Methods section actually come together in this one policy action.

But the strategic use of cultural assets also highlights the limitations and tensions of ASEAN regionalism. ASEAN supports cultural collaboration and regional unity, but legacy narratives may also ignite nationalist conflict as governments vie for exclusive possession of cultural traditions. In Southeast Asia, cultural legacy typically does not remain inside country borders, due to centuries of migration, commerce, and shared civilisational contact. This often causes diplomatic difficulties over disputes over batik, traditional dances, culinary traditions, and historical symbols. Consequently, the cultural interconnectivity that fosters regional identity may also give rise to the competition for authenticity and symbolic ownership.

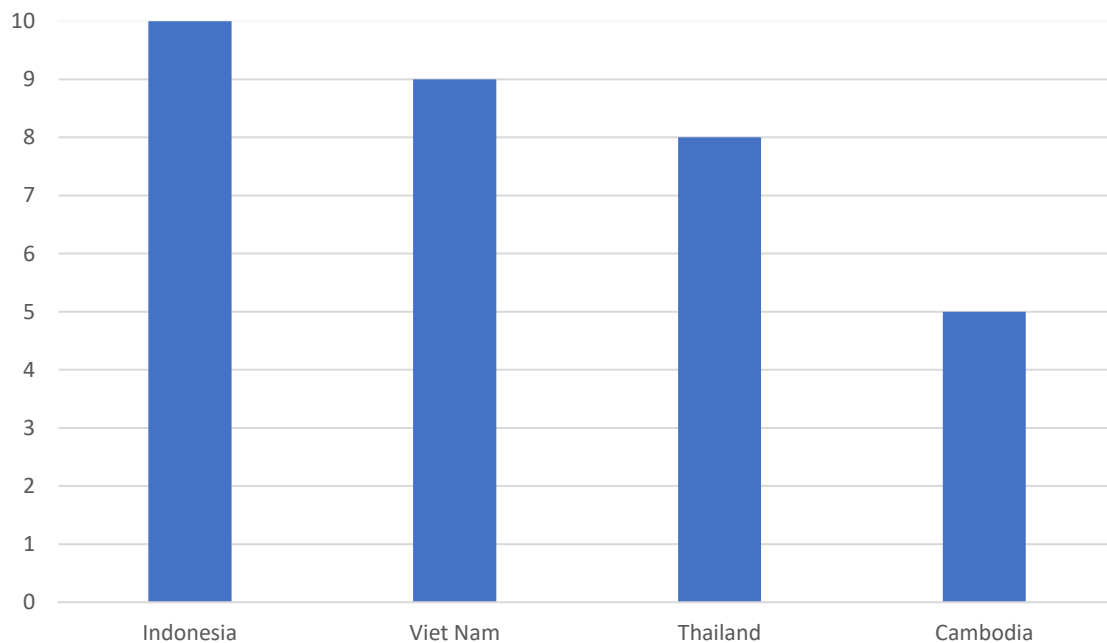


Figure 2. Number of UNESCO World Heritage List Inscriptions (Tangible Cultural and Natural Sites), Selected ASEAN Countries.

The rising institutionalisation of historical preservation is part of the greater effort by ASEAN members to manage modernisation without completely jettisoning indigenous cultural bases. Rapid urbanisation, digitalisation and economic integration put pressure on traditional social structures and historical landscapes across Southeast Asia. Thus, cultural preservation is increasingly framed by governments as part of the protection of social continuity in the context of fast modernisation. This presents a major political contradiction. As ASEAN members embrace globalisation and economic liberalisation, they simultaneously increase attempts to retain symbols of historical continuity and cultural authenticity. Heritage therefore provides a reference point which contributes to the stabilisation of communities undergoing rapid economic and technological development.

Another important observation relates to the connection between legacy and postcolonial legitimacy in South East Asia. Many of the ASEAN member nations have had a colonial history that disrupted indigenous political institutions and redefined local identities through externally imposed boundaries and administrative systems. In the post-independence period, cultural legacy became an essential tool to recreate national narratives and to regain historical agency. Through restoring ancient sites, promoting indigenous customs and reviving pre-colonial symbols, nations may demonstrate a connection between present day sovereignty and past histories of civilisation. This approach promotes domestic legitimacy as governments may portray themselves as the custodians of national memory and historical identity.

This postcolonial factor also augments ASEAN unity at regional level. Southeast Asian republics have a shared historical experience of colonial control, Cold War interference and outside geopolitical pressure. Thus, ASEAN regionalism is partly born out of a collective desire to avoid repeated external dominance and retain regional autonomy. This aim is indirectly supported by cultural legacy that emphasises the historical depth and civilisational resilience of Southeast Asia in their own right, rather than in relation to external powers. Heritage diplomacy therefore helps not just to the promotion of culture, but also to the symbolic building of Southeast Asia as a historically cohesive and politically independent area within the international system.

Furthermore, globalisation and digital communication complicate the process of identity creation in ASEAN more and more. Social media fuels the transnational spread of nationalist narratives, arguments over cultural appropriation, and historical issues. Public responses to cultural conflicts now travel swiftly through internet media, frequently compelling governments to respond more forcefully in the sake of protecting national character. That is, a cultural heritage is inscribed not only in the diplomatic discourse, but also in the domestic political mobilisation and popular nationalism.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the securitisation of cultural heritage in ASEAN through the combined lenses of securitisation theory, soft power theory, and constructivism, using qualitative discourse and content analysis of four cases: Indonesia (batik), Thailand (Songkran), Cambodia (Angkor Wat), and Vietnam (the Complex of Huế Monuments and the Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long). The findings show that cultural heritage in ASEAN simultaneously performs three functions: it operates as soft power, attracting international goodwill and diplomatic standing without coercion; it is subject to securitisation, in which perceived threats to heritage (whether from rival claims, commercialisation, or historical discontinuity) are framed as existential, accepted as such by domestic audiences, and answered with exceptional measures such as UNESCO nomination campaigns, dedicated legal authorities, or state-branding programmes; and it feeds into constructivist processes of identity-building, both national and, through mechanisms like the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, regional. Across the four cases, UNESCO inscription emerged as the common exceptional measure, functioning at once as a soft power instrument directed outward and a securitising move directed inward.

The study is limited in three respects. First, its qualitative, discourse-based design privileges official and scholarly narratives and does not capture how ordinary citizens or minority communities within each country experience or contest these heritage narratives. Second, the four cases, while selected to represent a range of heritage types and civilisational contexts, cover fewer than half of ASEAN's ten member states, so the pattern identified here should be treated as indicative rather than representative of the whole region. Third, reliance on secondary and documentary sources means the analysis cannot verify how heritage narratives are received by the international audiences they target, only how they are constructed by securitising and soft-power actors. Future research using interviews, media reception studies, or a wider set of cases could address these gaps.

Theoretically, the study contributes by showing that securitisation theory and soft power theory, generally applied separately in the heritage literature, are better understood as two faces of a single policy act when read through a constructivist lens: the same UNESCO listing that reassures a domestic audience that a threatened identity has been defended is also the instrument used to project that identity abroad. This integrated framework offers a more parsimonious account of ASEAN heritage diplomacy than treating securitisation, soft power, and identity-building as independent processes.

For policymakers, the findings suggest two implications. First, because heritage securitisation is most often resolved through UNESCO recognition and cooperative diplomacy rather than confrontation, ASEAN institutions such as the ASCC are well placed to pre-empt heritage disputes by supporting joint nomination and cross-border heritage cooperation before rival claims harden into nationalist contests. Second, because excessive securitisation risks tipping into exclusionary nationalism, member states have an interest in pairing heritage promotion with inclusive regional narratives that acknowledge shared or overlapping cultural traditions, so that heritage diplomacy continues to serve regional cohesion rather than undermine it.

REFERENCES

- Acharya, A. (2003). *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia*. Routledge.
- Acharya, A. (2025). *The Once and Future World Order: Why Global Civilization Will Survive the Decline of the West* (1st ed.). Basic Books.
- Antonio González Zarandona, J., Cunliffe, E., & Saldin, M. (2024). *The Routledge Handbook of Heritage Destruction* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- ASEAN Secretariat. (2016). *ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025* (1st ed.). ASEAN Secretariat.
- Baba, G. (2016). Regional Commonalities and Regional Identities: Forging a Normative Understanding of Southeast Asian Identity. In *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* (Vol. 1). www.asbu.academia.edu

- Balzacq Thierry. (2010). A theory of securitization: origins, core assumptions, and variants. In *Securitization Theory, How security problems emerge and dissolve* (1st ed., pp. 1–13). Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Barry Buzan, B., Weaver, O., de Wilde, J., & Skidmore, D. (1998). *International Relations Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Buzan, Barry., & Hansen, Lene. (2009). *The evolution of international security studies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chitty Naren J. (2024). An experiential theory of attraction-based influence (unintended and intended). In *The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power* (2nd ed., pp. 6–19). Routledge.
- Chotisarn, N., & Phuthong, T. (2025). Place Branding as a Soft Power Tool: A Systematic Review, Bibliometric Analysis, and Future Research Directions. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, 15(4), 123–142. <https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.18519>
- Cogan, M. S. (2024). Thailand's new soft power focus and the makings of a paradox. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 51(2), 4,5-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2024.2333684>
- Concepcion, G. P. (2025). Constructing ASEAN Identity through Shared Cultural Heritage and Socio-Cultural Solidarity: A Proposal. *International Conference on ASEAN-ROK Cultural Heritage Cooperation*, 16–19. <https://doi.org/DOI:10.22801/svn.2025.17.1.7>
- Giorgallis, A. (2025). The idea of protecting cultural heritage for the benefit of future generations in international cultural heritage law. *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 32(1), 76–99. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0940739124000171>
- Harrison, Rodney. (2013). *Heritage : critical approaches*. Routledge.
- Hitchcock Michael, K. T. V. and P. M. (2010). *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia* (1st ed.). NIAS Press (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies). www.niaspress.dk
- Huot, S. (2025). Cultural Diplomacy across the Mekong Subregion: Cambodia's Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia. In *Literary Enigma The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture* (Peer-reviewed and Indexed) (Vol. 1, Issue 6).
- Jönsson, K. (2010). Unity-in-Diversity? Regional Identity-building in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 29, 41–72.
- Martel Stéphanie. (2022). *Enacting the Security Community ASEAN's Never-ending Story* (1st ed.). Stanford University Pres. <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022004025>
- McDonald, M. (2008). Securitization and the construction of security. *European Journal of International Relations*, 14(4), 9,14-587. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066108097553>
- Melissen Jan. (2005). The New Public Diplomacy Soft Power in International Relations. In *Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations* (1st ed., pp. 21–22). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meskell Lynn. (2018). *A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Nye, J. S. . (2004). *Soft power : the means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs ; Perseus Running.
- Rattanasavee Pattharapong. (2023). Understanding and Prospect of Identity Construction in ASEAN Integration. *Journal of The School of International Studies*, 60(4), 7–29. DOI: 10.1177/00208817231213500
- Waever, O. (1995). Securitization and Desecuritization. In *On Security* (1st ed., pp. 46–87). Columbia University Press
- Wendt, A. (2003). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

- Wicaksana, I. G. W., & Karim, M. F. (2023). How regional organisation survives: ASEAN, hedging and international society. *Contemporary Politics*, 29(5), 659–679. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2023.2216031>
- Winter, T. (2015). Heritage diplomacy. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21(10), 999–1000. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2015.1041412>