

Bridging empires, weaving civilizations: Cambodia as a nexus of Asian cultural diplomacy between India and China

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Abstract

This paper examines Cambodia's historical role as a civilizational intermediary between India and China and its importance today, aiming to understand its diplomatic function within a system of civilizational trade and its role as the ultimate civilizational mediator. Using qualitative and historical-comparative research techniques, the author examines archival and inscriptional sources, as well as ethnographic interviews, to identify patterns of cultural diffusion, hybridization, and historical continuity. The author discovers that a distinct Khmer civilization emerged from Cambodia's synthesis of Indian metaphysical ideals and Chinese models of ethical governance. This synthesis helped Cambodia achieve a balance of spirituality and governance. It turned it into the center of Asian cultural diplomacy, where temples, language, and art became tools of symbolic diplomacy. Negotiated soft power, culturally supportive diplomacy, and diplomatic fencing of cultural heritage continue the same partnerships today as the ancient routes of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation. The author argues that diplomacy is a civilizational function and that it offers a form of safe conduct, free of hostility, to a civilization's borders and provides safe refuge from the dangers of the hostile world. The author suggests the civilizational approach to soft power, cultural diplomacy, and civilizational international relations, and the adaptive hybridity of Cambodia offers a model for sustainable intercultural relations in contemporary Asia.

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1. Introduction

Cambodia, which lies in the middle of Southeast Asia, has always been at the crossroads of three interacting centres of civilizational development: the Indic and the Sinic. From the seaborne networks of the Funan Kingdom (1st–6th century CE) to the cosmopolitan Angkor Empire (9th–15th century CE), Cambodians were active participants, not a passive civilisation, of the integral intersection of Indian and Chinese civilisations (Heng & Schottenhammer, 2024; Stark & Manguin, 2023). Cohen (2023) views the evolution of Cambodian society as a dual inheritance: Indian metaphysical cosmology, expressed through the Hindu-Buddhist syncretic religion, and the Chinese model of administration with its Confucian irrationality. This dual inheritance, as rightly identified, “produced a political culture both devotional and

bureaucratic, divine yet pragmatic,” and is testimony to the early Asian civilizational model of the synergistic coexistence of multiple streams of civilisation (Cohen, 2023, p. 145).

Ray (2020) argues that the maritime Silk Route that connects India, Southeast Asia, and China not only transports goods like silk, ceramics, and spices, but also serves as an artery of civilisation, organising the flow of religions, art, and diplomacy. He posits that Funan and, subsequently, Angkor served as intermediate empires of mediation, in which Indian religious ideas and Chinese imperial ethical thought gave rise to a new, distinct Khmer perspective. When it comes to this continuum, archaeology speaks as well. Along with his contemporaries (Lavy, 2023), in his study of pre-Angkorian sculptures, he noted that Khmer art of the time demonstrated a stylised assimilation of Indic and Chinese influences. The balance between the two systems, contrary to what many believe, suggests mutual assimilation. The same thing goes for the records in the inscriptions of Óc Eo and Angkor Borei (Heng & Schottenhammer, 2024). The presence and mobility of Chinese traders and the Buddhist missionaries reinforce the idea that religion and commerce were intertwined. Using the terminology of cultural geography, Hannerz (1992) refers to these places as transcultural zones, where the circulation of meanings, practices, and power creates new, hybrid cultural forms. Given its location on both the overland and maritime Silk Routes, Cambodia was, and still is, a transcultural zone of sorts. Because of its adaptability in communication, ritual, and architecture, as well as in the sphere of civilizational diplomacy, Cambodia acquired the civilizational attributes of both dominant Asian powers—India and China—and subsequently transformed them into a uniquely Khmer set of civilizational attributes.

The profound nature of Cambodia’s ancient cultural diplomacy and the modern significance of its history cannot be overstated. Nye (2004) articulated soft power as the ability to influence others without coercive means, but rather through attraction and shared value. This is the concept that connects contemporary international relations to cultural diplomacy in ancient Cambodia. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India’s Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) are modern examples that reflect the same civilisation-based inter-relational patterns as those of ancient Cambodia. During this time, Cambodia’s historical significance as “Asia’s civilizational hinge” is still very relevant. The country shows that cultural adaptability, political pluralism, and political evolution are not simply legacies from the past but are actively utilised as strategic elements of diplomacy that interweave historical memory with contemporary soft power and heritage cooperation (Bunthorn, 2022).

Although research on Cambodia’s bilateral relations with India or China has produced a sizeable body of literature, studies that compare them and consider the overlapping civilizational impacts remain few (Po & Sims, 2022). Cambodia experienced civilizational influences from both India and China; Chheang (2021) notes that, like the rest of the world, in the 21st century, Cambodia’s economy has aligned with China’s, but civilizational influences are mostly absent from their work. Likewise, the study of Indianization has concentrated on the religious and artistic (Henderson, 2016), but has not explored how these Indic models of governance interacted with Sinic models during Cambodia’s medieval and post-Angkorian periods. According to Hendrickson et al. (2023), Cambodia’s archaeological records show layered Indic, Sinic, and indigenous civilisations. However, the majority of international relations scholarship treats each of these as separate civilisations and cultures, rather than as integrated or mutually reinforcing civilizational processes. This separation reveals both a theoretical blind spot and a practical constraint, particularly in cultural diplomacy and soft power scholarship.

Analyses of Cambodia's cultural relations with India and China often simplistically reduce cultural diplomacy to either economic dependency or geopolitical imperative. Gill and Huang (2023) remark that current comments about Chinese soft power leave out its Confucian moral persuasion, while Hall and Whitmore (2020) pointed out that cultural diplomacy with India remains anchored in its ancient, civilizational, religious, and linguistic pluralism. This study, therefore, seeks to move beyond these interpretive silos by locating the ancient cultural imprints that have transformed into modern diplomatic practices. Theoretically, this study counters the linear diffusionist model that views Cambodia as a mere receiver of external impulses, proposing instead, through a constructivist approach (Wendt, 1999), that Cambodia has, through active, albeit selective, formation of composite political and cultural structures, self-constructed hybrid political and cultural identities. In practice, it addresses the lack of an integrated approach that incorporates historical cultural flows and contemporary diplomatic practices. In this regard, the research is an attempt at apprehending, in a more refined way, civilisation as diplomacy, which has, to this point, been less than fully articulated.

This study aims to explore, within the time span of recorded history, Cambodia's role as a civilizational bridge in the cultural exchange and communication of the Indian and the Chinese, and to analyse how the religious, artistic, and political components of the two civilisations were disseminated, adapted, and transformed into sustainable tools of diplomacy. This study, along the lines of Rogers's (2003) cultural diffusion and Pieterse's (2019) cultural hybridity, seeks to position Cambodia's historical development as selective internalisation and reinterpretation of the alien, as opposed to simply being a recipient and copy of the technology. Therefore, the research aims to:

1. Identify and describe the historical pathways through which Indian and Chinese cultural components entered Cambodian civilisation.
2. Analyse how Cambodia adapted and transformed these components into innovative political and religious structures.
3. Examine the cultural components that meld Cambodia's present-day diplomatic identity with ASEAN, China, and India.

From this perspective, the study offers a defence of the civilizational nature of diplomacy, one that anchors itself in the long-standing, politically stable, and culturally integrated diplomacy. For this study, the following research questions will guide it:

1. What cultural and institutional gateways, if any, have historically connected India and China to Cambodia?
2. How did the Khmer religious, political, and artistic traditions impact the reception and assimilation of the above influences?
3. How, if at all, do Cambodia's contemporary diplomacy and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the cultural diplomacy of India in Southeast Asia, reflect the above-mentioned civilizational legacies?

These questions help fill current gaps in the historiography and explain how ancient inter-civilizational relations, particularly in the context of contemporary soft power, are reconfigured. The study's originality stems from reconceptualising cultural diplomacy as intersystem and civilizational. Placing Cambodia not only as a peripheral receiver of culture and power, this study also shifts the debate to the centre of the evolving Eurocentric systems of international relations and soft power.

2. Literature review

2.1 Diffusion of culture theory

The first theoretical pillar, the Diffusion of Culture Theory, as developed by Rogers (2003) in *Diffusion of Innovations*, describes the systematic and structured interdisciplinary approach to the diffusion of cultural ideas, technological advances, and institutional practices across various societies as a function of established communication channels and social hierarchies. Rogers (2003) argues that diffusion is not a random process; it is facilitated by social elites and by social prestige and trust. When focusing on Southeast Asia, Hall and Whitmore (2020) attempted to expand the maritime diffusion theory by stating that cultural diffusion of India, China, and the Mekong region was mainly through trade guilds, monastic circuits, and diplomatic missions.

Regarding Cambodia, diffusion theory explains how elite-mediated exchange channels, royal delegates, Brahmanic scholars, Buddhist monk networks, and merchant networks contributed to the diffusion of religious, linguistic, and political ideas. The Funan polity is a case in point to illustrate this: it received Indian cosmological ideas of dharma, moral ruler, and mandala (sacred monarchy) through emissaries and pilgrims, while it also assimilated Chinese administrative practices through tributary missions to the Tang and Song dynasty courts (Heng & Schottenhammer, 2024; Ray, 2020).

Despite Rogers's (2003) assertion that diffusion of innovation does not entail wholesale adoption, it speaks to what the Cambodian elite did in constructing a legitimate, selective appropriation of what diffusion offered in a culturally predictive way. This makes Cambodia a cultural node as a place of invention and diffusion of Indian and Chinese civilizational frameworks refracted through an indigenous Khmer lens, resulting in unique socio-political constructs in the absence of mere cultural influences.

2.2 Soft power and cultural diplomacy

The second framework is based on Joseph Nye's (2004) formulation of soft power, where the influence of a country can be formulated not by military force or economic means, but through attraction. In the case of Cambodia, both India and China, in their historical context, have, through their religious and educational exchanges, closed the gap of modern diplomacy through the projection of soft power.

Nye (2004) indicates that soft power depends on spreading certain universal values and winning appreciation for culture. In premodern Asia, value systems that aided non-violent state control included the Confucian ethics of China and the Buddhist teachings of India. Gill and Huang (2023) build on this when they describe cultural diplomacy, the positive perception of education, religion, and the arts, and define it as an operational component of soft power. For the Cambodian case, these dynamics are most pronounced. In Confucian soft power, the Cambodian court and bureaucracy (Chan, 1996) were influenced by Chinese hierarchical and ritual propriety. Indian soft power, in contrast, operated through Buddhist monastic networks that incorporated moral governance and compassion as politically integrative virtues (Bunthorn, 2023). The Angkorian temples are diplomatic and archaeological representations of soft power, depicting Hindu and Buddhist iconography, ethnocentric to the cosmogonic foreign emissary (Lavy, 2023) of the temples. Furthermore, in today's diplomatic landscape, these ancient mechanisms take on new forms in the Confucius Institutes and the ICCR cultural centres in Phnom Penh, which continue to showcase, respectively, Chinese and Indian soft

power, civilizational legacy, and modern foreign policy. Therefore, the soft power paradigm not only encompasses Cambodia's ancient civilizational interactions but also invites comparison with today's cultural diplomacy, which reiterates the legacy of influence through attraction.

2.3 Hybridisation and localisation

While diffusion and soft power capture the influence of culture, Hybridisation and Localisation Theory focus on how externally sourced ideas and practices are absorbed, transformed, and localised by a society. Hannerz (1992) speaks of cultural creolization, where the global cultural flows are interpreted through a local lens and reconstituted into new hybrid forms. Pieterse (2019) has further elaborated this as a global *mélange*, in which the synthesis of mutually interacting cultures is produced rather than dominance or subordination.

In Cambodia, this theoretical approach clarifies the Khmerisation of the Indic and the Sinic influences. The Khmer polities did not simply assimilate and adopt the Hindu-Buddhist doctrines and the Chinese bureaucratic systems in their entirety. They localised and integrated them into their own indigenous worldviews, languages, and arts. The Devarāja cult has been viewed as an Indian import; however, it is a Khmer amalgamation of Indian divine kingship and local ancestor worship (Stark & Manguin, 2023). The same is true of the ethical systems of Confucianism, which were incorporated into the Khmer Buddhist system and local Khmer systems as a moral code of filial piety, respect for the social hierarchy, and the harmony of the community (Chan, 1996; Deth, 2020). The architectural embodiment of this hybridisation is found in the temples of Bayon and Angkor Wat, where the Indic fusion of the essence of cosmic order (mandala) is integrated with the Chinese system of structure and geomantic harmony (Lavy, 2023) of the Bayon and Angkor Wat temples. Politically, the Khmers are said to have expressed their political identity and awareness through the hybridisation of the Khmer script with Sanskrit and Pali, and with the local phonetic systems of the Khmers.

Instead, as Pieterse (2019) explains, hybridisation is creative negotiation, where a culture like Cambodia's can maintain a distinct cultural self-definition while engaging with a wider transregional cultural system. Hybridisation theory, therefore, interprets Cambodia's civilizational history as a history of selective appropriation and creative recompositing, which serves as the basis for Cambodia's cultural diplomacy and the politics of identity.

2.4 Constructivist international relations theory

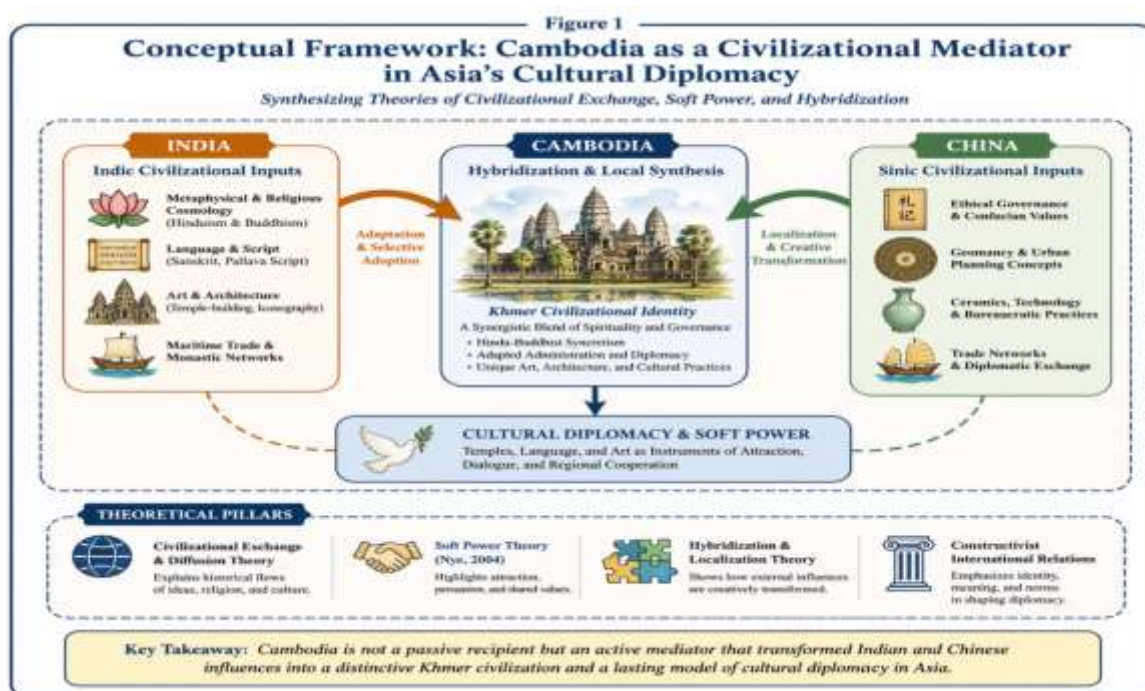
The fourth framework is Constructivist International Relations Theory, which places cultural transmission in the context of identity and intersubjective understanding. In Wendt's view (1999), the international system is "what states make of it", which implies that the exercise of power and the regulation of states' behaviour are not solely determined by materialist considerations, but rather by ideational constructions, shared norms, and collective meanings. In this vein, Katzenstein (1996) argues that the cultural and institutional framework is central to the formulation of regional security and diplomacy, particularly in Asia, where the politics of history, identity, and ethics are still relevant to the articulation of public policy.

Constructivism, in the study of Cambodia's regional diplomacy, illustrates how a state's civilizational legacy shapes its self-perception and diplomatic behaviour. For over a millennium, how Cambodia sees itself, as the inheritor of the Indian spiritual civilisation, and as a participant in the Chinese world order, has influenced how it does regional politics. Cambodia's foreign policy, as noted by Po and Sims (2022), has swung from one side of the

pendulum to the other, which, as a result of Cambodia's long self-definition as a regional intermediary and a cultural one at that, is a direct lack of geopolitical subordination. The memory of the Buddhist heritage of Cambodia-India relations, and of a historical friendship in all talks related to Cambodia and China, reflects the diplomatic value of memory and, as a result, is a classic example of the use of a collective self as a strategic asset in diplomacy. Therefore, since Cambodia's diplomacy is value-based, in that it is a matter of symbolic recognition, and that recognition operates at the level of culture, reciprocity, diplomatic symbols reinforce the trust and legitimacy of the two states.

In this sense, diplomacy is more than a process of direct bargaining among state actors; it is, in fact, an elaborate historical and social process of meaning creation that is historically and socially limited. Most prominently, as a bridge civilisation, it is an active instrument of the constructivist theory of international relations. Such a design reflects the synthesis of Cambodia's culture, encompassing all the civilizational elements of India and China. In the current geopolitical context, it continues to serve as a mediator and balancer between the two countries. The synthesis of four theoretical perspectives offers a more complex understanding of the role of civilisation in Cambodia. Diffusion theory accounts for the flow of cultural ideas; soft power theory demonstrates the moral and diplomatic influence of these ideas; hybridisation theory explains the localisation and reconfiguration of foreign traditions by Cambodia; and the constructivist theory of international relations focuses on how the historical continuities of the past shape Cambodia's current international identity and diplomacy.

All of these theories take Cambodia as a flexible context for cultural synthesis, including civilizational interchange and diplomatic mechanisms. Civilizational diplomacy is woven from the diffusion, adaptation, and institutionalisation of cultural values. This diplomacy stretches from ancient maritime pilgrimages to contemporary regional cooperation, expressed in the ASEAN, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation. In a nutshell, these theories explain how culture becomes strategy, heritage becomes policy, and, in essence, civilisation becomes diplomacy. This continuity casts Cambodia as one of the most culturally understanding and politically balanced mediators in Asia, as illustrated in Figure 1.



Source: Author

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study used a qualitative, historical-comparative framework to analyse Cambodia's role as a civilizational bridge between the Indian and the Chinese cultural spheres. The framework integrated archival historiography, ethnographic field research, and interpretive cultural studies. The research operated within an inductive interpretive framework, isolating patterns of civilizational transmission and hybridisation within documentary and oral data. While archival resources presented the macro-historical narrative, ethnographic forums focused on the micro-historical narratives of heritage, identity, and diplomacy. The twin approach provided both historical depth and contextual accuracy to the study, allowing the researcher to map the impact of ancient cultural flows on contemporary diplomatic practices.

3.2 Data collection

For this project, primary data were collected over twelve months, from June 2023 to May 2024, through 20 semi-structured interviews in the three major cultural and political centres of the Kingdom of Cambodia: Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Battambang. Data collection participants were purposively selected to include all relevant dimensions of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy and its civilizational heritage. Interviewees included five Cambodian senior monks who are specialists in the Buddhist-Chinese tradition, six university teachers and historians of Khmer studies, four cultural officers from the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, three heritage specialists, and two Sinologists from the Confucius Institute in Cambodia. Each interview lasted 45 to 90 minutes and was guided by a loose structure that allowed for the greatest degree of divergence and reflection on issues of historical memory and cultural response, as well as on positive and negative perceptions of Indian and Chinese influence. The interviews, which were conducted in Khmer and English, were recorded and later transcribed. The interviews were then coded and processed thematically to trace continuity, dialogic negotiation, and cultural reinterpretation of the issues in Cambodia's cultural and diplomatic history.

As part of my ethnographic research, I used secondary data from various archival, epigraphical, and literary sources. To gain better historical and analytical understanding, this focused on sources such as Chinese history books from the Song and Ming Dynasties, which discuss tributary trade relations and cultural diplomacy of the Chinese dynasties with the Khmer kingdoms; the Angkorian period, which has Sanskrit and Khmer inscriptions; and other source materials that include bas-reliefs, temple murals, and iconography depicting the divine king and moral order. This also meant utilising the existing literature on cultural diffusion and regional diplomacy (Cohen, 2023; Heng & Schottenhammer, 2024; Stark & Manguin, 2023) as well as the policy documents from UNESCO (2021), ASEAN, and the Confucius Institute (2010-2024). All these sources, both textual and material, enabled the study to cross-check different interpretations of historical records, cultural documents, and current policy documents, thereby increasing its analytical depth and validity.

3.3 Data analysis

The data analysis utilised thematic coding, comparative synthesis, and cross-cultural analysis, harmonising with the interpretivist approach of the research design. All interview transcripts and documentary data were organised and analysed with NVivo 14, which facilitates coding and pattern retrieval. The analytical approach unfolded across three interrelated phases. In the first phase, open coding, several ideas and phrases were identified in the data corpus, namely

diffusion, hybridisation, continuity, and moral governance. This was followed by axial coding, where these ideas were organised into dominant thematic groups that exemplified recurring civilizational dynamics. Civilizations, such as diplomacy, localized Confucianism, and spiritual governance. The last phase, selective coding, blended these themes into interpretative categories that connected historical civilizational exchanges with contemporary articulations of cultural soft power and diplomatic practice.

To present the structural analytical insights, a comparative analytical matrix (Table 1) was created. The comparative analytical matrix illustrates the thematic correlation between the ancient patterns of cultural transmission and their contemporary diplomatic reflections. Specifically, it demonstrates how Cambodia's cultural interactions with India and China developed from ceremonial and artistic exchanges to modern cultural diplomacy and transnational collaborative frameworks.

Table 1. Analytical matrix of cultural diplomacy patterns

Analytical focus	Description	Illustrative example
Cultural transmission	Tracing the routes and agents that enabled the spread of civilizational ideas through trade, pilgrimage, and diplomacy.	Maritime routes of the <i>Funan</i> kingdom, transmitting Buddhist texts and Chinese silk; royal embassies to Tang China.
Localization	The process of acculturation of foreign cultural and political systems, such as philosophies, fits within Khmer cosmology and political structures.	The Devarāja cult incorporates Confucian ideas of virtue and rank into the Hindu-Buddhist royal theocracy.
Hybridization	The incorporation of Indian and Chinese elements into Khmer religious art and governance.	Temple architecture combining Indian mandala layouts with Chinese geomantic alignment principles.
Continuity	The persistence of ancient civilizational links into contemporary forms of diplomacy and soft power.	Confucius Institutes, Mekong–Ganga Cooperation, and China-funded restoration of Angkor temples.

This interpretive matrix showed how the exchange of Ancient Civilisations was recontextualised within Cambodia's cultural diplomacy and identity formation across different historical periods. All ethical requirements for cultural and qualitative research were met across all research activities. Participants were informed, and consent was obtained before the interviews. Participants were able to exercise their right to anonymity. While pagodas and temples were approached with the local gatekeepers, the indigenous interpretive authority was respected. As a result, the use of visual and archival materials was carried out in accordance with the institution's guidelines to honour both living and historical cultural heritage. No political data that is considered confidential was collected or disclosed.

4. Findings and discussion

Both historical and archaeological records verify that Cambodia was a cultural and trading crossroads between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Cambodia has been, from the time of the Funan Kingdom (1st-6th century CE), a crucial point of both direct and indirect (aided by the movement of monks, diplomats and scholars) transmission, through the Maritime Silk Routes, of rituals, and religious and artistic traditions, from India and China, and also of the unembellished flowing of culture (Heng & Schottenhammer, 2024).

Ray (2020) asserts that there is trade, and then there is what he terms civilizational dialogue, in which the elements of commerce, religion, and politics are integrated and work together. Cambodia's location was already a vital point of such civilizational dialogue when the early Indian Buddhist missions and the Chinese pilgrim missions, such as those of Faxian and Yijing, religiously and diplomatically moved across the region (Sen, 2006).

The Khmer polity's political culture was shaped by a hybrid of internalised Indian and Chinese ideologies. According to Chan (1996), the fusion of Hindu cosmology and Confucianism grounded the Khmer belief system of the Devarāja monarchy. While the Hindu system of thought viewed the King as the supreme, earthly representation of the divine, with all of the reverence attached to that role, Confucianism emphasised the virtuous ruler, moral authority, and the political supremacy of a pyramidal hierarchy. Bunthorn (2022) describes the result of such a fusion as a moral monarchy, in which the Angkorian ruler exercised authority through divine right and administrative control over the state. The Angkorian inscriptions that reflect both Brahmanical traditions and Buddhist traditions capture this duality. Furthermore, the Confucian ideal of a just ruler complemented the Khmer administrative system, especially in the law and the temple economy. Therefore, Cambodia's ancient kingship was more than simply a divine and religious rule; it was a spiritually and politically rationalised power that integrated Indic and Sinic traditions.

Looking at the visual and textual aspects of Cambodia's civilisation, one can see a unique fusion of Indian and Chinese influences in Khmer. As Lavy (2023) noted, the fusion of Chinese ceramic artistry, Indian iconography, and Khmer architectural structure, as a first of its kind, can be identified as visual diplomacy, an artistic representation of the merging of cultures. This can be seen in the temple complexes at Angkor, more specifically at Angkor Wat and Bayon. While the temples reflect the captured Hindu-Buddhist cosmological principles of India, their cross-axial and celestial alignment demonstrate a focus on China's geomantic alignment. Additionally, Chinese influences in calligraphy can be found in Khmer inscriptions, while the Indian tradition of epigraphy persisted in Sanskrit royal titles. All these blended elements, in the architecture and artworks, communicated to the outside world the different roles Cambodia played as a civilisation mediator. It offered a sense of legitimacy, unity, and a moral order to the diplomacy of the region and beyond.

In the 21st century, the role of Cambodia's ancient civilisation is once again being incorporated into contemporary means of cultural diplomacy. Po and Sims (2022) state that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China, and India's Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) have pragmatically utilised the revived historical trade and cultural routes to pursue inter-regional soft power dominance. Bunthorn (2022) argues that civilizational diplomacy, as a means of cross-border soft power, has already been practised at the early stages of inter-Asian connectedness through the restoration of temples, cultural diplomacy through festivals, and the mobility of scholars. Additionally, the Confucius Institute in Phnom Penh and the Indian cultural centres established by the ICCR in Southeast Asia exemplify Nye's (2004) soft power

theory, whereby influence is exercised through the assimilation and voluntary cross-border movement of people, without the use of force. Consequently, Cambodia's temples, cultural traditions, and historical narratives are used as a diplomatic asset to achieve a heritage-based diplomacy that fosters inter-regional collaborative relations.

According to Cohen (2023), Cambodia's current position can be described as strategic syncretism, as the country diplomatically balances the competing cultural and geopolitical influences of India and China through sophisticated, strategically positioned diplomacy, with both powers having historical ties to the region. Instead of choosing one of the competing powers, Cambodia's two civilizational heritages seem to aid her in sustaining foreign relations, strategically placed, what Nye (2004) calls soft balancing by attraction. Cambodia's participation in both the Chinese-led BRI and the Indian-led MGC initiatives is a manifestation of this balance, illustrating once again how the historical legacy of hybridisation informs contemporary statecraft. The enduring legacy of civilizational diplomacy is a clear indication of Cambodia's ability to mediate between the past and contemporary empires by transforming and utilising its heritage into a means of political bargaining and cultural diplomacy, as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Continuum of civilizational diplomacy in Cambodia

Dimension	Historical period	Nature of interaction	Modern parallels
Cultural transmission	Funan–Chenla maritime exchange (1st–7th CE)	Trade and monastic exchange between India and China via Cambodia	ASEAN–China–India cultural forums
Religious hybridization	Angkor period (9th–13th CE)	Synthesis of Hindu–Buddhist–Confucian thought in state ideology	Buddhist diplomacy and interfaith initiatives
Artistic symbolism	Angkorian architecture	Fusion of Indian cosmology and Chinese geomancy in temple design	Cultural heritage diplomacy and UNESCO cooperation
Modern cultural diplomacy	21st Century (2010–2024)	Revival of heritage through BRI and MGC projects	Cultural institutes and joint restoration programs
Civilizational mediation	Ongoing	Balancing the influence of India and China	ASEAN centrality in regional diplomacy

Cambodia's evolving civilization as a continuum illustrates how successive interactions of centuries of religion, art, and ethics influenced ancient statecraft and modern-day diplomacy. From the diplomatic practices of today's Cambodia to the temples of Angkor, Cambodia's entire cultural continuum forged a testament to Asia's interconnectedness, whilst also showing that diplomacy resides in the core of a civilization.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

This study shows that Cambodia's evolving civilizational identity was not a product of cultural subordination, but of a unique synthesis through creative mediation of Indian and Chinese influences. This synthesis formed the basis of Khmer political, religious, and artistic expression. The historical trajectory of Cambodia, from the Funan and Chenla to the Angkorian Empire, demonstrates how Indic metaphysics and Sinic ethics were integrated into a Khmer worldview of harmony, legitimacy, and cosmological order. Through the assimilation of Hindu–Buddhist spirituality and Confucian–Daoist elements, Cambodia developed a civilizational grammar that was both hybrid and transgressive.

As a civilisation that actively integrates and transforms external influences into its own less rigid frameworks of understanding, Cambodia is a middle, or intermediary, civilisation. Diplomacy and worship were integrated into the same buildings, and transcultural understanding was inscribed into language, art, and ritual. In today's world, these legacies are shaping Cambodia's engagement in heritage-based diplomacy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), and ASEAN's cultural initiatives. These partnerships show that civilisation, in the form of trust, balance, and continuity, is an act of diplomacy. This is indicative of Cambodia's ability to show the world that the integration of cultural heritage into diplomacy is an effective method of utilising a shared civilizational memory and is critical in establishing a framework for modern regional collaboration and peaceful relations:

- Cultural diplomacy: In the 21st century, Cambodia can act as a cultural crossroads by facilitating trilateral heritage initiatives with India, China, and the ASEAN region, including the construction of cultural corridors that connect Angkor, Nalanda, and the Silk Road.
- Policy: Cultural diplomacy should be adopted by governments as a primary tool in the framework of ASEAN's contemporary multilateral diplomacy, through collaborative heritage preservation and museum restoration projects, and through the establishment of regional dialogue centres.
- Education: For scholarly diplomacy and youth engagement, develop comparative civilizational studies centres in Phnom Penh, New Delhi, and Beijing for the interdisciplinary study of trans-Asian exchange, historical linguistics, and intercultural philosophy.
- Technology: Preserve and provide universal access to civilizational heritage through the application of Artificial Intelligence to the digital preservation of Khmer and Sanskrit inscriptions, 3D mapping of temple iconography, and creation of open-access archives.

The above implications, taken together, show that cultural diplomacy is the opposite of an abstract and idealistic notion; it pragmatically illustrates that cultural diplomacy can, and does, convert shared legacy into enduring international collaboration based on cultural respect. The focus of future studies on comparative civilizational studies should be:

- Comparative regional studies: To better contextualise and explain the role of Cambodia as an intercultural facilitator in Southeast Asia, examine the civilizational synthesis in cultural crossroad areas of Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam.
- Digital humanities: Apply artificial intelligence and the digital humanities to the inscriptional and visual iconography of languages to study and visualise the historical patterns of diffusion and localisation.

- Contemporary civilizational diplomacy: Investigate the role of Buddhist and Confucian soft power in the contemporary diplomatic triangle of the ASEAN-India- China relations, particularly in education, travel, and cultural exchange.

This research contributes to the understanding of culturally diverse diplomacy and coexistence from Cambodia's civilisation. The research also provides insights into gaps in Cambodia's civilisation, which can be addressed through contemporary soft power to provide a more holistic approach to the use of heritage, ethics, and diplomacy in the maintenance of regional peace and the fostering of global cooperation.

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Declaration of AI usage

The author used ChatGPT to generate Figure 1 by using his own ideas and Grammarly to polish the language in some parts of the article. However, he declared that the article's content is entirely his.

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