

# ***Constructing the Image of a New Leading State: Leveraging Chinese Underwater Archaeological Heritage Development and Protection for Heritage Diplomacy***

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**Abstract:** Heritage diplomacy has gained prominence as a strategy for strengthening diplomatic ties and enhancing national image. This paper examines the intersection of heritage diplomacy and underwater archaeological development, specifically within China's involvement. While heritage diplomacy holds the potential for cultural exchange and cooperation in heritage preservation, its political utilization raises ethical concerns. Chinese scholars often overlook the significance of material culture in diplomacy, and cultural heritage experts focus more on preservation principles than international cooperation. This study emphasizes the role of heritage diplomacy in underwater archaeological development and protection. China's successful image as an advocate for cultural exchange and pioneer in underwater cultural heritage protection, exemplified through projects in Kenya, offers valuable insights for global governance. This research aims to provide a theoretical framework for future studies, assisting policymakers in effectively utilizing underwater archaeology to construct China's national image as a global leader in the new era.

**Keywords:** Heritage diplomacy, underwater archaeological development, cultural exchange

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, heritage diplomacy has become popular in international relations, with countries using their heritage to strengthen diplomatic ties and elevate their national image. China, with its rich cultural heritage, has actively engaged in heritage diplomacy. Underwater heritage, referring to submerged cultural and historical artifacts[1], has become significant, particularly with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) highlighting underwater cultural resources in the South China Sea. Heritage diplomacy, promoting cultural exchange and understanding, can facilitate underwater heritage protection within the BRI context as heritage gains political significance.

However, Chinese scholars of international relations often overlook the importance of material culture in diplomacy due to the limited focus on the material world. Similarly, Chinese cultural heritage experts primarily concentrate on preservation methods, neglecting theories and practices related to international cooperation, such as governance and globalization. These limitations highlight the need for greater attention to heritage diplomacy.

Heritage diplomacy can promote cultural exchange and cooperation but also serve political purposes, raising ethical concerns about the motivations behind these initiatives, especially with China's increasing involvement. Heritage diplomacy in underwater archaeological relics development offers China a chance to build a new "leading image," beyond projecting hard power. This research aims to address these gaps.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars offer varied definitions of cultural heritage diplomacy. Winter sees heritage as a non-human actor connecting providers and recipients of heritage protection, making it a diplomatic tool. The concept of diplomacy helps analyze heritage protection's international governance, revealing its structure within political discourse [2]. Lähdesmäki and Čeginskas emphasize the need for interdisciplinary research to understand heritage diplomacy comprehensively[3]. Luke's work highlights the role of networks among archaeologists in US cultural diplomacy in Honduras[4]. These scholars stress the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to fully grasp heritage diplomacy's potential and its relationship with international politics.

Heritage intersects with soft power in international relations. Governments use heritage to achieve objectives and assert control. Chitty views the leveraging of heritage, including landmarks like the Pyramids, as a form of soft power in diplomacy[5]. Authorities are driven to publicize their heritage sites as noteworthy symbolic destinations, incorporating them into cultural excursions and promotional endeavors[6]. Cultural heritage goes beyond seeking global recognition; it becomes a tool for nation-branding, requiring coordinated communication and engagement with the international community to shape a country's image[7]. The strategic crafting of historical narratives related to heritage can generate empathy and support from the global audience[8-9]. For example, China has employed heritage diplomacy to strengthen its portrayal as a nation with extensive transnational mobility and interconnectedness[10].

Underwater cultural heritage (UCH) includes material evidence of human activities submerged for at least 100 years[11]. UNESCO defines UCH to include sites, structures, artifacts, and their natural surroundings[12]. Governments recognize UCH's political implications. China's "Maritime Archaeology Law" asserts sovereignty over UCH in its territory, continuously improving to enhance marine resource preservation[13]. UNESCO's "Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage" allows countries to enhance their international status through heritage conservation collaboration, promoting cultural diversity, human rights, and peace-building[14-16]. UNESCO cooperation benefits nations internally and externally, contributing to national identity and citizen loyalty[17-18].

China has new opportunities to preserve underwater cultural heritage. Guo suggests that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could serve as an archaeological platform for international cooperation, fostering mutual understanding and trust. The exchange of information and expertise can lead to best practices in UCH protection[19]. Wu emphasizes the importance of protecting UCH sites to understand the Asia-Pacific region's maritime history, advocating for international collaboration and public awareness[20]. In conclusion, underwater archaeological heritage development and protection have the potential to be diplomatic tools. This study aims to analyze how China's maritime underwater heritage can serve as a diplomatic tool, identifying pathways and stakeholder interactions to enhance future UCH cooperation (Below, "underwater archaeological heritage development and protection" will be abbreviated as "underwater archeology".)

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Processing Tracing

Process tracing is a method used in social sciences to understand causal mechanisms, which are complex systems producing results through their components' interactions. It identifies causal processes between variables and outcomes, enhancing understanding of structural causes and their effects. This method helps build strong inferences within specific cases and is crucial for theory-building, as it constructs generalized explanations from empirical evidence. In this research, China's overseas underwater archaeological projects, particularly the China-Kenya joint project starting in 2005, are analyzed using process tracing to establish a causal chain explaining China's image-building efforts through archaeology.

#### 3.2. Theoretical Framework

The "lens model of perception" is a widely accepted theory in social science, explaining how people perceive things through cognitive processes(see Figure 1). This model can be applied to cross-cultural communication to understand how national images are constructed. An external object (distant stimulus) is perceived through mediators, transforming into a proximal stimulus and processed by the brain into cognition. Wu adapted this framework to cultural diplomacy, where cross-cultural activities (distant stimuli) are mediated and processed, leading to a constructed national image(see Figure 2) [21]. However, current confidence in this model is relatively low due to insufficient evidence from China's archaeological projects, necessitating an updated model.

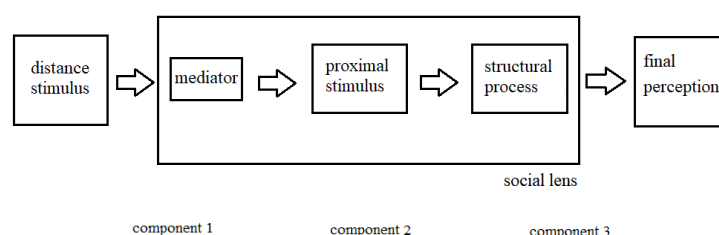


Figure 1: Lens model

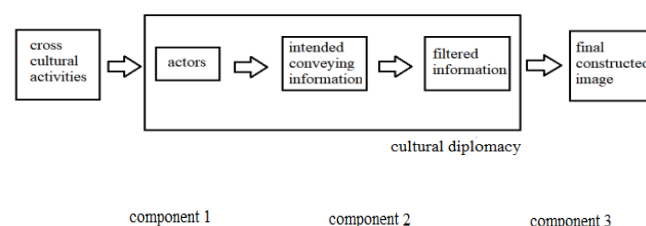


Figure 2: Lens model in cultural diplomacy

#### 3.3. Types of Evidence

Process tracing in this study involves three types of evidence: sequence, trace, and account evidence. Sequence evidence examines the timing of events to validate causal mechanisms. Trace evidence confirms the existence of parts of a mechanism, such as meeting records. Account evidence includes materials like meeting minutes, transcripts, images, and videos.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Theory Building Process Tracing

The selected case in the theory-building process tracing is the China-Kenya Joint Underwater Archaeology Project. The China-Kenya Joint Underwater Archaeology Project, starting in 2005 and officially launched in 2010, concluded in 2014 after three excavation waves. This was China's first overseas underwater archaeological mission, investigating and excavating cultural relics in Kenya's Lamu Islands and Malindi. The project provided evidence of historical exchanges between China and Africa, such as the Malindi Kingdom and Zheng He's landing site. Many locals believe they are descendants of Zheng He's crew. This was a government-sponsored, inter-governmental cooperation aimed at building a shared historical narrative in Kenya to support China's political image. The China-Saudi Arabia Joint Underwater Archaeology Project was not selected due to insufficient data, with information available only up to 2017, making the China-Kenya project the best case study for this research.

### 4.2. The Conceptualization of Causal Mechanisms

Based on the current data, causal theory can be conceptualized as the mechanism consisting of four components (entities participating in an activity) through which causal forces are dynamically propagated. Here, it's advisable to conceptually transform the theory into a capital system with four different components: 1. The Chinese government takes the lead and contact with the relevant stakeholders of the target country in the name of the Cultural Relics Bureau, thus establishing the concept of "nationality" as a recognized subject (corresponding to component 1 in Figure 2). 2. After the establishment of joint archaeological projects, a common "shared history" between China and the target country is established through the project (corresponding to component 2 in Figure 2) 3. After the completion of the archaeological work, archaeological findings are shown to the public through three specific channels. 4. Finally, the external world forms the final national image of China through the way of "re-expression", including media reports and comments by foreign authorities, officials, and the public (corresponding to component 3 in Figure 2). The newly established causal mechanism is shown as follows (see Figure 3). Compared with the lens model used by Wu in the previous section, this updated mechanism makes the following improvements by adding component 3, which demonstrates the channels and pathways that may be involved in information filtering. This change focuses the perspective on the filtering process itself, emphasizing the media of information transmission. The following discussion also shows how this mechanism can be operated into a case-by-case set of predictions about the evidence one should expect to find.

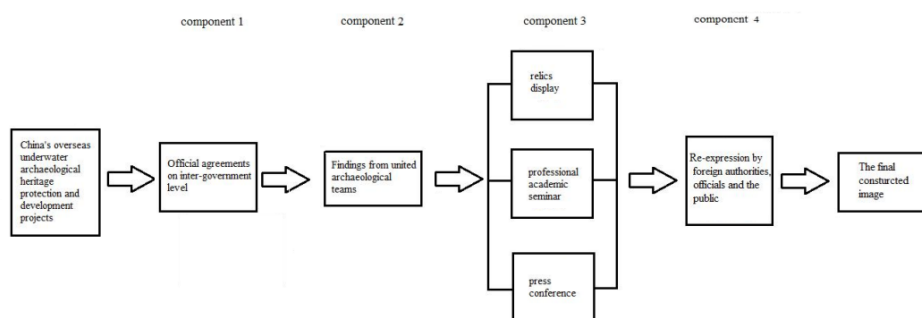


Figure 3: The revised framework

### 4.3. Operationalization of Causal Mechanisms

#### 4.3.1. Operationalization of Component 1

Component 1 refers to that, the Chinese government takes the lead at the very start, engaging with relevant units of the target country in the form of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, to create a cognitive subject for the target countries.

Valid evidence is as follows: 1. The cooperating parties should be official governments. The cooperation statement or agreement should mention or emphasize the leading or paradigmatic role of the “Chinese government.” (account evidence from internal documents submitted by ministries and commissions) 2. Furthermore, before the formal establishment of an official intergovernmental cooperation agreement, no form of non-governmental or civil archaeological cooperation project should be observed. (sequence evidence) Of all the two cooperation contracts signed during the Sino-Kenya underwater archeology project, the contracting parties, as well as the signing parties, are all the Chinese Cultural Heritage Bureau. The “Agreement between the State Administration of Cultural Heritage of the People’s Republic of China and the National Heritage Department of the Republic of Kenya on Cooperative Archaeological Excavations in Lamu Archipelago” signed in 2005 is an agreement between the State Administration of Cultural Heritage of the People’s Republic of China and the National Heritage Department of the Republic of Kenya regarding cooperative archaeological excavations in the Lamu Archipelago, Kenya. Shan Jixiang, the Director of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage of the People’s Republic of China, and Suleiman Shakombo, the Minister of National Heritage of the Republic of Kenya, signed According to the agreement, the two parties will establish a joint archaeological team to collaborate on archaeological excavations, cultural heritage preservation, and personnel training in the Lamu Archipelago. Similarly, identical patterns can be identified in the following contracts.

Still, the significant role of other Chinese Bureau in the project can be identified. The Ministry of Commerce of China regarded it as an important foreign aid project and invested about 20 million yuan to cover the expenditure. According to Athman Hussein, the assistant director of antiquities, sites, and monuments at the National Museums of Kenya, the underwater cultural heritage of Kenya has gained increased prominence as a result of an archaeological initiative in which the National Museums of Kenya received significant financial support from the Chinese government.

Thirdly, after analyzing the annual historical records of the Chinese Underwater Archaeological Work Report, it can be found that, before all forms of civil and official archaeological expeditions and surveys, official contracts were signed ahead. In chronological sequence, the first official contract was signed on December 22nd, 2005, and later on April 28th, 2006. The first wave of civil and official archaeological expeditions and surveys took place in 2007, when Zhang Wei and Zhao Jiabin from the National Museum of China Underwater Archaeology Center, along with Deng Qijiang from the Jingzhou Museum, visited Kenya upon a delegation by the Chinese Cultural Heritage Bureau. They, together with their foreign counterparts including Kiriama and Matin from the National Museums of Kenya Coastal Archaeology Center, and Mchulla from the Lamu Museum, conducted underwater archaeological surveys in the waters of the Lamu Archipelago in Kenya.

#### 4.3.2. Operationalization of Component 2

After establishing a joint archaeological project with official permission, cooperation between the Chinese archaeological team and the Salvaged artifacts and the target country’s archaeological team is established. Through archaeological excavation, valuable archeological information can be captured including salvaged artifacts. These expeditions foster a sense of “shared history” to bridge the gap between the two parties.



Valid evidence is as follows: 1. The archaeological project involves cooperation between the archeology teams from both parties. None of the surveys and expeditions were conducted unilaterally (trace evidence). 2. From the official display of relics related to the archaeological achievements of the Sino-Kenya underwater archaeological project, a large number of Chinese porcelain and artifacts beneath the water were salvaged during the archaeological process. This confirms the long history of maritime communication between China and Kenya (account evidence).

Of all archaeological projects conducted from 2007 to 2014, it can be found that these projects were bilateral cooperation between the archaeological teams from both China and Kenya. At the commission of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, Zhang Wei and Zhao Jiabin from the National Museum of China's Underwater Archaeology Center, along with Deng Qijiang from the Jingzhou Museum, visited Kenya. They joined their foreign counterparts, including Kiriamu and Martin from the National Museums of Kenya's Coastal Archaeology Center and Mchulla from the Lamu Museum, to conduct underwater archaeological surveys in the waters of the Lamu Archipelago. The Chinese archaeological team is also committed to helping their counterparts. Under the commission of the Chinese Cultural Relics Bureau, the National Museum of China's Underwater Archaeology Center hosted the "4th National Training Program for Underwater Archaeology Professionals." Thirteen participants, including Caesar Bitu from the National Museums of Kenya and Philip Wanyama from the Jesus Castle Museum in Kenya, attended the training program, which consisted of both Chinese and international students. The composition of the archaeological team can also testify to this fact. According to the China-Kenya Underwater Archaeological Cooperation Agreement, from November 26, 2010, to January 23, 2011, the National Museum of China organized a team of 12 underwater archaeologists from across the country to collaborate with three professionals from the National Museums of Kenya. Together, they formed the Kenya Underwater Archaeological Team and conducted the first-year underwater archaeological survey primarily focusing on the Lamu Archipelago and the Malindi waters. From November 27, 2012, to January 12, 2013, the National Museum of China's Underwater Archaeology Center organized a team of 19 domestic underwater archaeologists and three professionals from the National Museums of Kenya to conduct the second-year collaborative underwater archaeological work between China and Kenya. From November 20, 2013, to January 8, 2014, the National Museum of China's Underwater Archaeology Center organized a team of 18 domestic underwater archaeologists and three professionals from the National Museums of Kenya to conduct the third-year collaborative underwater archaeological project between China and Kenya.

Finally, according to the salvaged artifacts, the overlapping "shared history" of maritime sailing between China and Kenya is confirmed. Among the many artifacts on display in 2012, are a large number of porcelain fragments from the Qing dynasty. These artifacts include blue and white as well as polychrome bowls, plates, and bowls produced by the Dehua kiln in Fujian province. Since then, other pieces of porcelain from ancient China have been discovered (See Figure 4).



Figure 4: Images of porcelain shards

#### 4.3.3. Operationalization of Component 3

After the archaeological work is completed, archaeological findings will be presented to the public either through press conferences, academic seminars, or exhibitions of archaeological findings. This is a chance for China to get its voice heard by the public. Through these platforms, China implements its underwater archaeological discourse construction.

Valid evidence is as follows: 1. After three waves of cooperation excavation, both press conferences, academic seminars, and exhibitions of archaeological findings can be identified where the archaeological finding of China-Kenya cooperation was presented (trace evidence). 2. Both Chinese scholars and officials took part and addressed it. (account evidence)

On December 24, 2013, with the support of the Kenyan Ministry of Culture, Sports and Arts and the Chinese Embassy in Kenya, the Sino-Kenyan Underwater Archaeology team held a press conference on the results of its three-year work in Malindi, which received wide attention from domestic and foreign media. Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International, Kenya's Malindi TV, Kenya's Malindi Radio, Kenya International Press and other media participated in the underwater archaeology press conference of the project, interviewed the joint archaeologists on-site, and filmed the archaeological results during the whole process. Zhao Jiabin, the Director of the Underwater Archaeology Research Center at the National Museum of China and the team leader of the China-Kenya collaborative underwater archaeology project, attended the press. During the conference, the Chinese side stated that this was the first collaboration between China and Kenya in conducting underwater archaeological work along the Kenyan coast. It was also the first large-scale project undertaken by the Chinese underwater archaeology team in a foreign country, showcasing the expertise of Chinese underwater archaeology. In his remarks, Chinese Ambassador to Kenya Liu Guangyuan said that the seminar is of special significance as it is held after the just-concluded Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. In the past, the cooperation between China and Africa mainly focused on the political, economic, and trade fields and has achieved fruitful results. In the future, the two sides should further strengthen people-to-people cooperation and promote people-to-people exchanges, which will inject new vitality into the sustainable development of China-Africa relations. At the Ningbo Forum in 2014, Zhao elaborated on the detailed results of the investigation project. An overview of the investigation and excavation of the China-Kenya collaborative underwater archaeological project in Lamu Islands from 2012 to 2013 was presented. He specifically highlighted the excavation findings of the Shela underwater site and the Ngomeni shipwreck. He stated that The Chinese government pays great attention to the protection of the World's Underwater heritage and has played an active leading role. These discoveries provide valuable archaeological evidence for exploring ancient overseas trade and external interactions in Kenya.

#### 4.3.4. Operationalization of Component 4

The final image of China constructed in the overseas underwater archaeological projects is shaped through "re-narration" via media coverage and evaluations by foreign authoritative figures, officials, and the public, especially from the target country.

Valid evidence is as follows: Through relevant data on media coverage and evaluations from authoritative figures, officials, and the public overseas, the impact of the re-narration of China's national image on public perception and understanding is analyzed(account evidence).

In 2011, an International Online journalist interviewed Mr. Kiriama, an underwater archaeology expert in Kenya. Mr. Kiriama, a senior official of the National Museums of Kenya and a UNESCO officer, led the Kenyan team in a joint underwater archaeological project in the Lamu Archipelago region of Kenya, implemented by China and Kenya. During the interview, Mr. Kiriama expressed

gratitude for China's assistance in the project, and he emphasized the long-standing friendship and exchanges between Kenya and China. He highlighted that this historical relationship serves as a foundation and plays a positive role in the current bilateral relations. The goal now is to further strengthen and develop the existing friendly relations between the two countries. Mr. Kiriama also mentioned the positive perception of the Kenyan people towards China. He noted that the Chinese engage in fair trade and treat the Kenyan people with friendship. Historical records indicate that when the ancient Chinese fleet led by Zheng He arrived in Malindi, they had close interactions with the Sultan of Malindi. Importantly, throughout history, the Chinese people visiting Kenya have never sought to rule over the Kenyan people. At the Ningbo Forum in 2014, Dr. Urik Galen, Secretary General of the Underwater Convention Secretariat, praised China's efforts in this regard. She introduced that the Underwater Convention is the most important international convention on the protection of underwater cultural heritage. The convention does not involve territory or sovereignty, emphasizes the protection of underwater cultural heritage and international cooperation, and opposes fishing expeditions for commercial interests. She pointed out that China's booming underwater archaeology has made remarkable achievements. Many international organizations sincerely hope to strengthen cooperation with China and earnestly hope that China, as a major country of underwater cultural heritage, can join the convention at an early date. In 2017, during an exclusive interview with Xinhua News Agency, Mzalendo Kibunjia, the Director-General of the National Museums of Kenya, expressed his desire to connect the present-day Kenya-China relationship with the historically friendly interactions between the people of Kenya and China. He aimed to unearth the history of over 600 years ago when China engaged in friendly exchanges with Africa through the Maritime Silk Road and make this history known to more people. He also mentioned that the National Museums of Kenya, where he serves, is currently in the process of organizing the significant artifacts unearthed from the China-Kenya joint underwater archaeological project that concluded three years ago. He hopes to showcase these artifacts to the world at the earliest opportunity.

## 5. Findings

First of all, the China-Kenya overseas underwater archaeology project is a typical case of heritage diplomacy. China's underwater archaeology project in Kenya can typically be classified as part of heritage diplomacy. First of all, there is an official inter-governmental transnational cooperation agreement. Secondly, it was sponsored by the Chinese official government. The Ministry of Commerce of China regarded it as an important foreign aid project and invested about 20 million yuan to cover the expenditure. According to Athman Hussein, the assistant director of antiquities, sites, and monuments at the National Museums of Kenya, the underwater cultural heritage of Kenya has gained increased prominence as a result of an archaeological initiative in which the National Museums of Kenya received significant financial support from the Chinese government. Third, the fundamental purpose of this archaeological project is that China is attempting to establish a shared historical narrative and tangible maritime trade historical evidence in Kenya, a country with the closest historical ties to China on the African continent. This is aimed at providing a more persuasive cultural foundation for China's political agenda of global governance.

Furthermore, within the entire causal mechanism, there are four crucial actors. The interaction among these actors enables the causal mechanism to function properly. Chinese National Cultural Heritage Administration represents the Chinese government and establishes cooperation agreements with the host country. Then archaeological teams from both parties collaborate to complete the archaeological work. Then, archaeological findings are disseminated to the public through media press conferences, academic seminars, exhibitions, and other means. Finally, foreign authoritative officials, scholars, and the general public establish the 'Chinese national image' within the target audience through re-articulation.



Through its underwater archaeology project in Kenya, China has successfully constructed three “leading images”: an advocate of cultural exchange, a forerunner of underwater cultural heritage protection, and a charismatic global governor. Each cultural image is elaborated on below:

**Advocates of cultural exchange:** China is actively promoting cultural exchanges in Kenya’s underwater archaeology project. First, China is working with Kenyan archaeologists, cultural institutions, and the government to study and protect underwater cultural heritage jointly. Such cooperation has promoted academic and cultural exchanges between different countries and deepened mutual understanding and friendship. Secondly, China has communicated the value and significance of Kenya’s underwater culture to the public through exhibitions, cultural events, and cultural exchange programs. Through the promotion activities, China has strengthened people’s understanding and respect for different cultures and promoted international cultural exchanges and cooperation.

**Pioneers in underwater cultural heritage protection:** China has taken a pioneering role in protecting underwater cultural heritage in Kenya’s underwater archaeology project. China has invested a lot of resources and technology to support archaeological research and cultural conservation in Kenya. Chinese experts and technicians are actively involved in the excavation and conservation work, sharing knowledge and experience with their counterparts in Kenya.

By providing advanced technical equipment and expertise, China has assisted Kenyan archaeologists in underwater excavation and conservation work. This collaboration not only contributes to the preservation of Kenya’s underwater cultural heritage but also provides learning and development opportunities for Kenya’s archaeologists.

**A new era global governor:** China’s underwater archaeology project in Kenya presents an image of global governance mediated by the sea. Through this project, China seeks to build a common historical narrative in Kenya, excavate the history of China’s friendly engagement with Africa, and provide a more persuasive cultural basis for China’s political agenda of global governance such as the Maritime Silk Road.

The archaeological project demonstrates China’s leadership role in global governance. Through conducting underwater archaeological projects in Kenya, China showcases its global governance approach with the ocean as a medium. This approach emphasizes promoting international understanding, friendship, and common development through cultural exchange and cooperation.

By establishing a shared historical narrative in Kenya, China highlights the connections and mutual influences between different cultures. By revealing the history of friendly interactions between China and Africa, China seeks to break down cultural barriers and promote cross-cultural dialogue and cooperation. This global governance approach emphasizes respect and inclusivity, providing an example for establishing a more harmonious, equal, and mutually beneficial international order.

Furthermore, China’s active participation in the underwater archaeological project in Kenya demonstrates its responsibility and commitment to protecting underwater cultural heritage. Chinese experts and technicians work closely with Kenyan archaeologists to jointly develop conservation plans and measures to ensure the proper preservation and inheritance of cultural heritage.

By promoting the protection of underwater cultural heritage on a global scale, China sets an example in marine environmental governance and sustainable development. This ocean-based global governance approach not only focuses on economic interests but also emphasizes cultural heritage and environmental protection, reflecting China’s comprehensive and sustainable thinking in global governance.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has explored the concept of heritage diplomacy and its application in the field of underwater archaeological development and protection. Throughout the discussion, several

key elements are presented. Heritage diplomacy emerges as a new model for archaeological protection, serving as a bridge between nations and fostering cultural exchange. Through the underwater archaeological project in Kenya, China has successfully established the image of being an advocate for cultural exchange, a pioneer in the protection of underwater cultural heritage, and a global governance leader in the new era with the ocean as a medium. These images not only strengthen the friendly relations between China and Kenya but also provide new ideas and practical examples for global governance. It is also worth mentioning that, there is a systematic limitation of this research that can by no means avoid. Due to the scarcity of Chinese overseas underwater archaeological cases and the impact of the Chinese government's pandemic control policies since 2020, most foreign-related archaeological work has been forced to halt. As a result, the conclusions drawn from this research case may have a significant time lag. However, this is not a reason for scholars to refuse engagement in this field of research. Hope this study can provide a more fundamental theoretical framework and analytical model for future global governance research on China's overseas underwater cultural activities. This will enable policymakers in the future to utilize underwater archaeology and the development and protection of underwater cultural heritage more reasonably and effectively and to better construct China's national image as a "leading nation" in the new era.

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