

## **From Fabric to Diplomacy: Traditional Clothing as a Medium of Soft Power in International Forums**

**Xin Yin<sup>1</sup>, Prof. Madya Dr. Moniza Waheed<sup>2\*</sup>, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ang Lay Hoon<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Mass Communication, Faculty of modern languages and communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Department of Communication, Faculty of modern languages and communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia

<sup>3</sup> Foreign Language Department, Faculty of modern languages and communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia

kdakda226@gmail.com <sup>1</sup>

moniza@upm.edu.my <sup>2\*</sup>

hlang@upm.edu.my <sup>3</sup>

**(Corresponding author): Prof. Madya Dr. Moniza Waheed**

**Abstract:** This study examines traditional dress as a tool of soft power in global diplomatic spaces through an in-depth examination of dress diplomacy practices worldwide. Drawing on soft power theories, symbolic interactionism, cultural diplomacy, and the notion of cultural capital, the study develops a holistic analytical model working at macro, meso, and micro levels to understand the use of traditional dress in diplomatic contexts. Through a set of comparative case studies covering practices in Asian, African, Western, and other regional settings, the study identifies three models of traditional dress diplomacy: assertive (marked by frequent and state-sponsored use), reactive (linked to the articulation of post-colonial identity), and selective (marked by its strategic and context-specific use). The findings show that Asian nations have been particularly successful in leveraging traditional dress as diplomatic tools, as seen in India's kurta diplomacy and Indonesia's batik diplomacy, to challenge Western sartorial hegemony. The use of traditional clothing by African nations helps to counter vestiges of colonial influence and promote cultural autonomy, while Western formal wear remains the global standard, albeit with alternatives arising more frequently. The success of traditional dress diplomacy depends on the diplomatic situation, where negotiations based on environmental and cultural issues are likely to be more promising than those involving economic or security concerns. This study holds that traditional dress diplomacy is a multifaceted expression of cultural soft power, which not only expresses but also shapes the shifting power relations in an ever-widening multipolar international system.

**Keywords:** traditional clothing, cultural diplomacy, soft power, international forums, international relations

## 1 Introduction

In modern global diplomacy, soft power has become an important non-coercive influence, receiving more attention from both government institutions and scholars around the world [1-3]. Joseph Nye's groundbreaking thesis defines soft power as "the ability to get the outcomes one wants through attraction and persuasion and not coercion or payment" [4]. The evolution of this theoretical framework has been carefully chronicled, with Nye contending that soft power is a descriptive and not a prescriptive concept in the study of modern international relations [5]. It has been argued that "soft power has become a hard currency in international relations," especially when many countries recognized the overwhelmingly vital role policymaking plays here [6]. National dress, as an outstanding method of expressing cultural symbolism, is imbued with profound historical and national significance, thus making it an unique tool of soft power in the context of international diplomatic relations [7].

Cultural diplomacy became a central element of modern international relations, described as "a strategic tool governments use to achieve foreign policy goals" through the exchange and promotion of cultural expressions [8]. Current studies suggest that "cultural diplomacy plays a crucial role in increasing a country's soft power by creating mutual understanding, trust, and respect between countries" [9]. Fashion diplomacy, being a key aspect of cultural diplomacy, is "a dynamic form of diplomacy that binds countries together and transcends boundaries" through fashion choices that reflect cultural heritage, national identity, and politics [10]. "Fashion plays a pivotal role in cultural diplomacy by acting as a bridge between heritage and modern elegance, fostering mutual understanding and global engagement" [11]. Symbolic interactionism theory offers a theoretical foundation for understanding the phenomenon by highlighting that "our social world is constructed through the mundane acts of everyday social interaction," where symbolic meanings are created through repeated interactions [12].

Asian countries have significantly distinguished themselves in utilizing traditional clothing as a form of diplomacy. The modern development of cultural diplomacy in East Asia is characterized by the calculated use of cultural symbols, led by China, utilizing aspects of its traditional clothing, the qipao and different variants of the Tang suit, in important diplomatic occasions to promote its cultural heritage and national identity [13, 14]. Japanese officials occasionally wear kimono during cultural exhibitions or when hosting traditional ceremonies for foreign dignitaries [15]. Asian fashion weeks and international summits have increasingly become platforms where material culture conveys messages of prestige and national pride in international relations [16].

Simultaneously, African nations have actively employed traditional dress as cultural diplomatic tools. African fashion has emerged as "a distinctive dialect in this global conversation", where designers across Africa are creating garments that showcase their cultural origins while resonating with international audiences. African fashion weeks have become prominent fixtures on the international calendar, serving as platforms for cultural exchange and diplomacy [17]. Meanwhile, European and American diplomatic practice has predominantly relied on formal business attire as the standard diplomatic uniform, with the suit becoming what scholars describe as "the universal language of diplomacy" that conveys authority, professionalism, and diplomatic norms across cultural boundaries [18].

The significance of fashion in diplomatic communication has been explicitly acknowledged by diplomatic practitioners and scholars alike. However, existing research predominantly focuses on single-region analyses or specific case studies, lacking systematic comparative studies of traditional dress diplomatic practices across different cultural contexts. This study aims to construct a systematic theoretical analytical framework to deeply explore the mechanisms by which traditional clothing serves as a medium of soft power in international forums. The research addresses the following key questions: How does traditional clothing convey cultural information and political intentions in international diplomatic settings? What similarities and differences exist between Asian and African countries in their use of traditional dress for diplomatic practice? How can the effectiveness of traditional dress diplomacy be assessed, and what are its limitations? By providing a systematic examination of these questions, the current research seeks to provide new theoretical perspectives on the role of cultural symbols in contemporary international relations, and also to act as a reference framework for countries that wish to advance their cultural diplomacy strategies.

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Soft Power Theory in International Relations**

The concept of soft power has greatly changed contemporary understanding about influence and the power dynamics in the field of international relations. In academic literature, soft power is defined as the ability to bring about desired outcomes through techniques of attraction and persuasion, as opposed to coercive or material incentives. This non-coercive influence is articulated through a range of factors, including cultural attractiveness, political ideology, and credibility of a nation's foreign policy, which all serve to form a system of global influence, as postulated by many scholars. Soft power has become "a research programme in the making," as scholars work hard to extend its conceptual boundaries and empirical uses [19]. Its effectiveness lies in the ability to influence preferences and bring about voluntary compliance, as a result of which it is highly effective in dealing with complex global issues that require multilateral consensus and long-term engagement.

The following facts demonstrate that the modern age of the internet has widened the definition of soft power, thus fundamentally changing the ways in which countries exert influence and reach out to large global audiences. Technological advancements have opened new channels for disseminating soft power, enabling states to engage global communities at a speed and scale unheard of before [20]. The change has created both benefits and problems, as digital technologies promote instant cultural engagement while, at the same time, exposing soft power programs to instant global monitoring. Analytical analysis underscores inherent limitations to the effectiveness of soft power. The "ideational value of soft power" has to be understood in specific geographic and cultural contexts, which means that soft power influence greatly varies in different geopolitical environments [21].

The nexus between soft power theory and cultural diplomacy offers clues to the centrality of traditional dress within diplomatic arenas. The continued theoretical innovation adds more sophisticated elements to the analytical perspective as quantum models of international relations propose that the mechanisms of soft power work according to "principles of entanglement" rather than a linear causal model [22]. According to this perspective, the power of cultural symbols creates intricate webs of meaning that

transcend the simplistic sender-receiver model. Cultural symbols, such as sports and fashion, constitute powerful tools for "bridging divides" and articulating national identity in international terms [23]. The increasing sophistication of soft power theory thus brings useful perspectives towards examining traditional dress as an instrument of influence within the arena of international relations, thus questioning received wisdom in diplomatic practices.

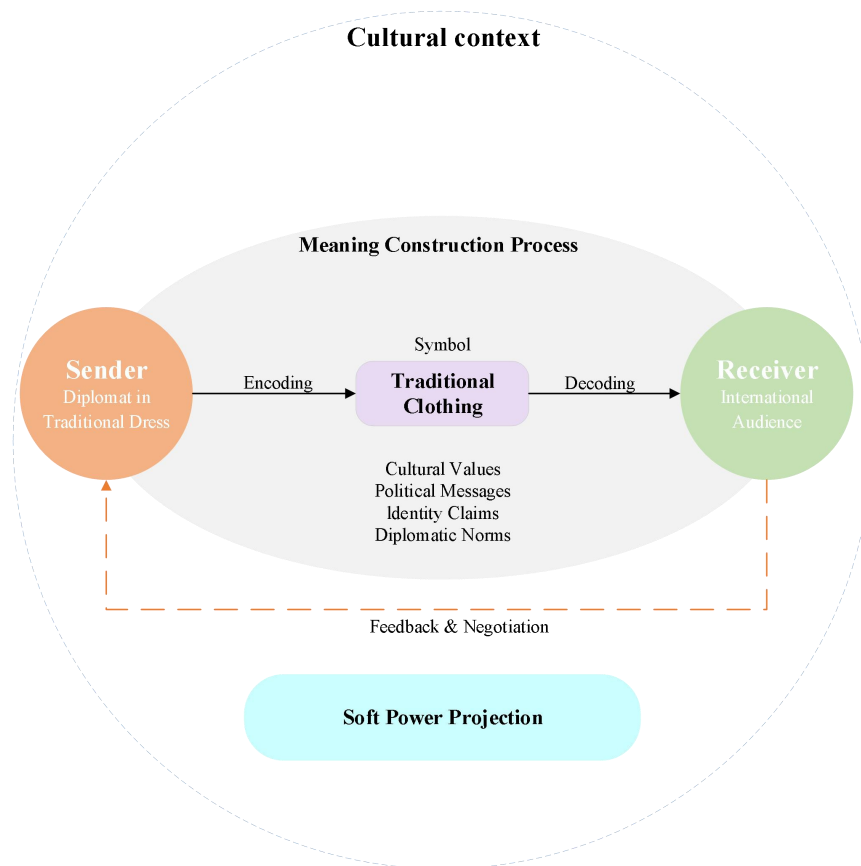
## 2.2 Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Communication

Symbolic interactionism is one major theoretical approach to examining the role of traditional clothing as a communication medium in the context of global diplomatic interactions. In the symbolic interactionist perspective, the importance attached to objects is not inherent but instead is constructed and negotiated during social interaction and interpretative schemes. In the context of traditional dress diplomacy, clothing is a changing symbol whose meaning is drawn and constantly shaped by intercultural communication [24].

As depicted in Figure 1, symbol generation takes place within a complex communicative structure, where conventional clothing serves as the main mediating symbol bridging the sender (the diplomat) and the receiver (global audiences). Yuan's intercultural communication identity management model explains how people intentionally use symbols to influence others' perceptions and meanings [25]. Symbol generation involves assigning cultural meaning to clothing choice, which is then decoded and interpreted by different audiences within specific cultural contexts that guide understanding.

Cultural communication through traditional dress operates within Nadeem et al.'s suggested framework of intercultural engagement stages: effectiveness, competence, adjustment, and adaptation [26]. Diplomatic encounters involve stages where the participants negotiate cultural differences to achieve mutual communication. Cultural dress carries powerful symbolic meanings, with the ability to convey a wide range of messages, such as political meaning, cultural values, identity claims, as well as diplomatic behavioral protocols. This complex mode of communication promotes cultural understanding and mediates relationships in international environments.

The effectiveness of traditional clothing as a communication medium depends on the complex relationship between intention and interpretation. The processes of negotiation and feedback illustrate the dynamic nature of meaning as generated in and through continuous interaction. Development communication studies have shown that "cultural framing of messages" represents the crucial factor in determining audience reception and consequent behavioral reactions [27]. In diplomatic settings, this implies that good traditional dress diplomacy requires deep scrutiny of both the symbolic meanings of the clothes and interpretive schemata of international audiences, thus making the exercise of soft power possible through culturally appropriate communicative approaches.



**Figure 1.** The Process of Symbolic interaction in Traditional Dress Diplomacy

### 2.3 Cultural Diplomacy and National Image Projection

Cultural diplomacy emerged as an important strategy for countries aiming to build and strengthen their global image and gain their place in a reciprocally interdependent international system. As an integral part of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy involves the deliberate use of cultural resources to build mutual understanding and express an attractive national image. Cultural diplomacy is also an important tool for the enhancement of a country's soft power by building mutual understanding, confidence, and respect between nations [9]. Cultural diplomacy also goes beyond conventional diplomatic means by engaging international publics actively through cultural exchange, artistic collaboration, and symbolic engagement.

The connection that prevails among cultural diplomacy and the representation of countries is expressed in "systematized cultural policies and diplomatic initiatives," which play a significant role in defining other countries' perceptions of states' images and countries' locations in international rankings [28]. Traditional means of cultural expression, like national dress, are significant tools for communicating national values and identities. Effective cultural diplomacy assists nations in "gaining competitive advantage in exports, foreign trade, attracting inward investment and tourism" [29]. The digital transformation has fundamentally altered these practices, as "online communication through different platforms, where people from different cultures and countries exchange messages, has changed the nature of traditional cultural diplomacy" [30].

While public diplomacy serves political functions, nation branding focuses on economic outcomes, though both work synergistically in projecting national identity [31]. The effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends on consistency, authenticity, and cultural resonance. In traditional dress diplomacy, this balance manifests in strategic choices about when to wear traditional attire and how to present cultural heritage while facilitating international understanding and appreciation.

## **2.4 Traditional Clothing as Cultural Capital**

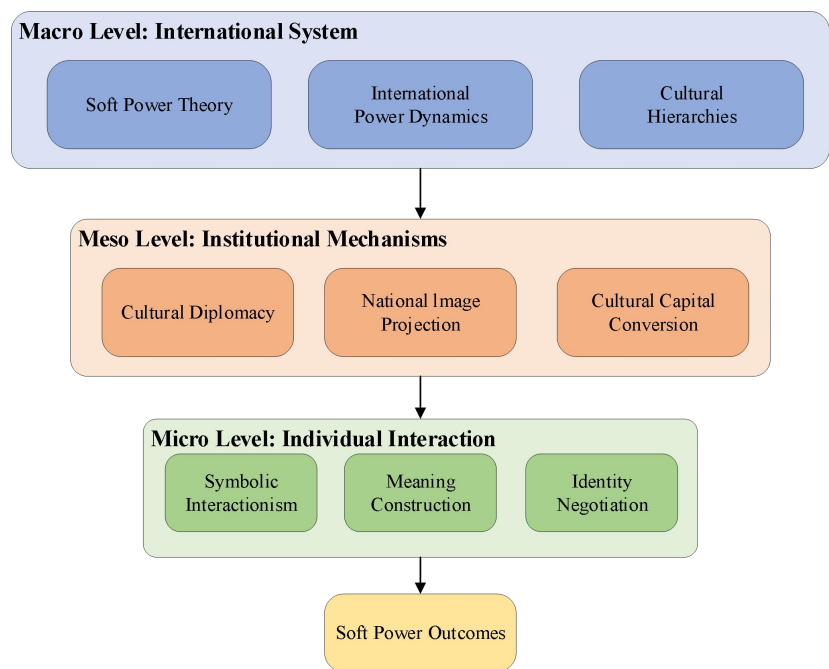
Traditional clothing functions as a powerful form of cultural capital in diplomatic contexts, embodying what Bourdieu conceptualized as accumulated cultural resources that confer status, distinction, and social mobility. Traditional clothing serves as a visual marker of social position and cultural resources, closely connected to patterns of social inclusion and exclusion [32]. In international diplomatic settings, traditional dress operates as embodied cultural capital—knowledge and competencies literally worn on the body—that signals cultural authenticity, national pride, and diplomatic sophistication. This accumulated value enables diplomats and leaders to deploy traditional dress strategically, converting cultural heritage into diplomatic influence and international prestige.

The transformation of traditional clothing into cultural capital occurs through complex processes of valuation and recognition. "Fashion is more than a mere industry; it is a vibrant reflection of identity, history, and innovation" that embodies centuries of craftsmanship and cultural significance [11]. Traditional clothing gains considerable symbolic value because of its association with national heritage, high-quality craftsmanship, and the maintenance of cultural traditions. The effectiveness of traditional clothing as cultural capital is predicated on its recognition within specific arenas of influence. For diplomacy, traditional clothing adds value by expressing authenticity, garnering respect, and fostering cultural exchange while adhering to established diplomatic protocols and prevailing global standards of formality.

## **2.5 Analytical Framework**

This study formulates a holistic analytical framework that synthesizes soft power theory, symbolic interactionism, cultural diplomacy, and cultural capital theories in analyzing the importance of traditional dress as a vehicle for soft power in international relations. As illustrated in Figure 2, this framework demarcates traditional dress diplomacy as a multifaceted process that unfolds in three interconnected levels. The macro level refers to global power structures and cultural hierarchies that are conducive to soft power theory, constituting necessary context to understand how states transform cultural capital into diplomatic capital. The meso level focuses on the institutional settings in which traditional dress is deployed, comprising cultural diplomacy programs, attempts to project national identities, and the transformation of traditional dress into various forms of cultural capital. The micro level looks at interpersonal encounters, where symbolic interactionism represents the key explanatory framework for meaning-making processes, identity negotiation, and cultural exchange. Traditional dress is the bridging factor between the levels, making it possible to translate cultural heritage into a diplomatic tool and, finally, into an act of communication. This framework highlights the dynamic interdependencies between the levels, where the effects of soft power stem from their complex

interrelations, with each level affecting and being affected by the others. The multi-level approach allows for the in-depth analysis of traditional dress as a tool of soft power and considers both the systemic constraints and the agency of the participants involved in diplomatic efforts.



**Figure 2.** Integrated Analytical Framework for Traditional Dress as Soft Power Medium in International Forums

### 3 Case Studies and Analysis

#### 3.1 Asian Traditional Dress in International Conference Diplomatic Practice

Asian nations have become major proponents of traditional dress diplomacy in the international sphere and thus transformed their cultural heritage into effective tools for promoting soft power. The deliberate use of traditional wear by Asian delegates to international summits and conferences is a sophisticated tool for cultural diplomacy that not only reinforces national identity but also challenges Western dominance in the fashion world and facilitates diplomatic ties. The trend has become particularly prevalent in multilateral settings like APEC summits, ASEAN meetings, and the East Asia Summit, where traditional wear not only acts as a unifying factor but also as a symbol of cultural distinctiveness. This sophisticated use of traditional attire as a diplomatic tool reflects the broader evolution of cultural diplomacy practices in Asia [33].

**Table 1.** Comparative Analysis of Traditional Dress Diplomacy Strategies in Asian Countries

Country	Traditional Attire	Frequency of Use	Key Diplomatic Contexts	Strategic Objectives
India	Kurta, Nehru jacket,	Consistent/Regular	G20, BRICS, UN General Assembly, bilateral summits	Project cultural authenticity; modernize Indian image; assert civilizational identity
	Bandhgala, regional variations			

China	Zhongshan suit (Mao suit), Tang suit, modified traditional jackets	Selective/Strategic	APEC summits, major state visits, Belt and Road forums	Balance modernization with tradition; project continuity of Chinese civilization
Indonesia	Batik shirts, Peci hat, regional textiles	Very Frequent	ASEAN meetings, East Asia Summit, G20, bilateral meetings	Promote batik as UNESCO heritage; assert regional leadership; cultural diplomacy
Malaysia	Baju Melayu, Batik, Songket	Frequent	ASEAN summits, Islamic cooperation meetings, Commonwealth events	Project Islamic-Malay identity; regional solidarity; cultural pride
Japan	Kimono, Hakama, modified traditional elements	Ceremonial/Rare	Cultural events, imperial ceremonies, specific bilateral meetings	Emphasize cultural uniqueness; maintain modern image with traditional roots
Thailand	Chut Thai, Royal Thai silk shirts	Moderate	ASEAN forums, Buddhist conferences, royal diplomatic events	Royal prestige; Buddhist identity; regional cooperation
Philippines	Barong Tagalog, Maria Clara dress	Frequent	ASEAN meetings, APEC, state functions	National identity; post-colonial assertion; regional integration

As shown in Table 1, Asian countries employ diverse strategies in their use of traditional dress for diplomatic purposes, ranging from India's consistent deployment of kurtas and Nehru jackets to Japan's more selective ceremonial use of kimono. The practice of traditional dress diplomacy in Asia operates through multiple modalities and strategic approaches. During major diplomatic gatherings, the coordinated yet individualized wearing of traditional attire creates what scholars describe as "sartorial sovereignty"—the use of clothing to assert cultural independence while participating in international dialogue [10]. This practice has become particularly prominent in Southeast Asian diplomacy, where batik has evolved from national heritage to regional diplomatic uniform.

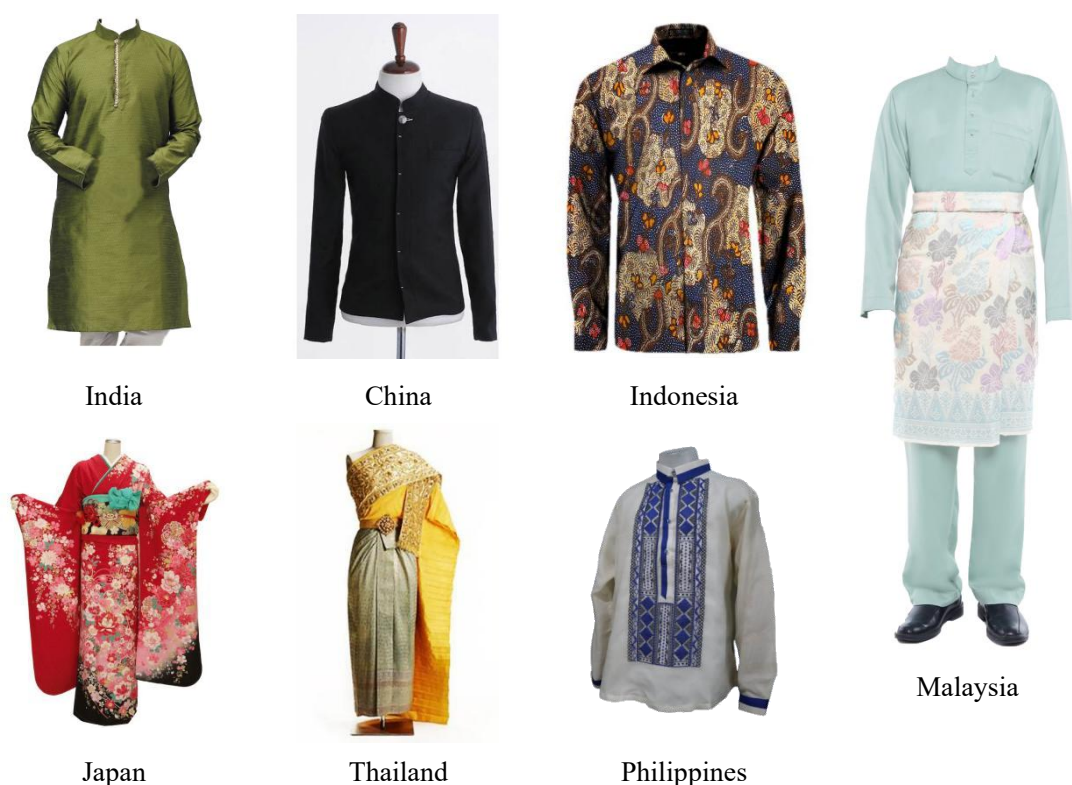
Different Asian nations have developed distinctive approaches to traditional dress diplomacy that reflect their historical experiences and contemporary diplomatic objectives (see Figure 3 for visual examples). India's policy of always wearing traditional dress on international stages communicates a message of cultural authenticity and the continued legacy of its civilization [34]. Chinese leaders consciously incorporate traditional features, represented by the Zhongshan suit in important diplomatic interactions, thus serving as a balanced ratio between current practices and historic tradition. Southeast Asian countries, in particular Indonesia and Malaysia, have embraced batik not only as a symbol of national identity but also as a tool of regional diplomacy. The transition of batik from a heritage-based craft to a platform for creating diplomatic relations is representative of strategic incorporation of cultural heritage in modern-day soft power efforts [7].

The effectiveness of traditional dress diplomacy in the Asian context lies in its ability to operate on multiple symbolic levels at once. Al-Mujahed expounds that when political leaders wear traditional clothing at international gatherings, they engage in a practice he calls "bridging heritage and modern elegance," thus creating visual stories that express cultural values in diplomatic spheres [11]. This has been especially effective in multilateral summits in Asia, where the diversity of traditional clothing can



serve as a visual representation of the diversity of the region. For instance, the use of traditional clothing in ASEAN summits sends a message of unity at the regional level while allowing every country to maintain its distinct cultural identity.

A comparative examination of these countries identifies significant variation in the prevalence and situational use of traditional dress among Asian countries, which is indicative of divergent paths of modernization and dissimilar degrees of accommodation to Western diplomatic norms. In contrast to their East Asian counterparts, diplomats in South Asian countries make more extensive use of traditional dress in a wider range of diplomatic occasions. Within the ASEAN context, there is a hybrid approach to the use of traditional fabrics like batik, which are both national symbols and regionally unique identifiers. The variance of these practices illustrates the flexibility of traditional dress diplomacy as a multifaceted tool that responds to specific national conditions and diplomatic goals, thus facilitating the ability of Asian countries to amplify their cultural resonance in international affairs in a difficult geopolitical environment.



**Figure 3.** Traditional Diplomatic Dress of Selected Asian Countries

### 3.2 African Traditional Dress and Identity Expression in International Forums

African states have made the choice to utilize traditional clothing as a powerful tool for communicating cultural identity and expressing political aspirations within the forum of international diplomacy, thus using garments as a tool for post-colonial representation and cultural legitimation. The symbolic adoption of traditional clothing by African representatives at international arenas is a subtle indicator of the complex dynamics of interplay between cultural preservation, political communication, and

diplomatic strategy that asserts itself against Western epistemological dominance while affirming distinctive African voices on modernity and tradition. This process has been in place since the early stages of independence struggles and has developed into a complex expression of cultural diplomacy functioning on various levels of symbolism, communicating messages related to the African renaissance, decolonization of diplomatic spaces, and true representation of the continent in global governance systems.

**Table 2.** African Traditional Dress Diplomacy Strategies in Post-Colonial Context

Region/Country	Traditional Attire	Historical Context	Diplomatic Messaging	Key Examples
South Africa	Madiba shirts	Post-apartheid reconciliation	Accessibility, unity, progressive governance	Mandela's international appearances
West Africa	Grand boubou	Islamic-African heritage	Regional solidarity, regal authority	ECOWAS summits
East Africa	Habesha kemis, Kanzu	Indigenous traditions	National sovereignty	Regional summits
North Africa	Djellaba, Kaftan	Berber-Arab heritage	Mediterranean-African identity	Arab-African dialogues

As illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 4, different countries across Africa employ different strategies towards traditional dressing that are consistent with their own post-colonial realities and diplomatic goals. The symbolic functions of traditional clothing in the contexts of African diplomacy go beyond aesthetic values; they are important symbols of national independence and cultural legitimacy. Recent scholarly research on African commemorative textiles argues that dress acts as "mirrors of local cultures expressing social status, political power, and economic value," which are crucial for constructing collective memory and building communal identity [35]. When African leaders appear in traditional dress at international summits, they engage in what scholars describe as "vestimentary resistance"—using clothing to contest colonial legacies and assert African agency in defining appropriate diplomatic presentation. The power of these sartorial choices lies in their ability to simultaneously honor ancestral heritage while projecting contemporary African leadership. As England et al. identify, African fashion has emerged as "a distinctive dialect in the global conversation," where garments communicate complex messages about identity, history, and aspiration [17].

Nelson Mandela's adoption of the Madiba shirt as diplomatic attire exemplifies the transformative potential of traditional dress in reshaping international perceptions of African leadership. The brightly colored, batik-inspired shirts became Mandela's signature diplomatic uniform, replacing Western suits with a garment that embodied South African cultural fusion while projecting accessibility and warmth. This sartorial choice represented a deliberate strategy to humanize African leadership and challenge stereotypes, with the Madiba shirt becoming an internationally recognized symbol of reconciliation and progressive African governance. The global embrace of Mandela's style demonstrated how traditional dress could transcend cultural boundaries to become a universal symbol of dignity and moral authority, illustrating what Akinbileje identifies as the "symbolic values of clothing and textiles art in traditional and contemporary Africa" [36].

West African nations have developed particularly sophisticated approaches to traditional dress diplomacy through the strategic deployment of the grand boubou and other regional garments. The flowing robes worn by leaders from countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, and Mali serve multiple diplomatic functions: asserting Islamic-African identity, projecting regal authority, and creating visual unity among West African nations while maintaining national distinctiveness through specific fabric choices, embroidery patterns, and styling variations [37]. Within regional summits and global conferences, the collective exhibition of elaborate boubous by West African delegations transmits unambiguous visual symbols of regional unity and shared cultural heritage. As Akinwumi has pointed out, the value of African textiles has gained higher levels of significance in diplomatic circles, where the inherent value of indigenous clothing outweighs that of industrially mass-produced counterparts [38].

The effectiveness of diplomatic initiatives involving African traditional clothing can be understood through the frameworks of post-colonial cultural politics and the constant struggles to secure meaningful representation in global governance mechanisms. Traditional clothing is an expression of "cultural sovereignty," allowing African countries to represent themselves on the international platform on their own terms, thus defying the implicit expectation to adopt Western fashion standards as a condition of diplomatic authority. This is consistent with Grincheva's depiction of the significant shift in cultural diplomacy post-Cold War, whereby soft power has replaced hard power [39]. The wearing of traditional dress can thus be seen as an expression of diplomatic agency that redresses prevailing power imbalances while at the same time enabling sincere cultural engagement—an exercise that is vital as African states seek to rebalance their past relations with erstwhile colonial powers and take leading roles in shaping world concerns.

Modern-day African diplomacy, which combines traditional garments in practice, is marked by both innovation and diversity. The leaders transform heritage wear to meet the demands of contemporary diplomatic encounters without compromising on cultural authenticity. An example is the use of Kente cloth by Ghanaian diplomats, as well as the elaborate embroidery on North African djellabas, which demonstrates how different countries have developed distinctive dressing traditions that resonate with specific historical periods, prevailing culture, and diplomatic agendas. These fashion choices operate within the theoretical framework of Akdemir, who argues that they are "visible expressions of social identity," thus situating clothes as powerful drivers of cultural identification and political belonging [40]. The success of African traditional garments within diplomatic settings is not due to the strict adherence to historical fashion; instead, it is a product of creative reinterpretations that celebrate cultural heritage while also addressing modern diplomatic requirements, thus demonstrating the dynamic nature of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century.



South Africa



West Africa



East Africa



North Africa

**Figure 4.** Representative Traditional Attire of African Nations in Diplomatic Practice

### 3.3 European and American Formal Dress Traditions in Diplomatic Settings

The hegemony of Western formal wear as the normative dress code for diplomatic etiquette is considered one of the most lasting legacies of European colonialism and American dominance in codifying norms for global interactions. Researchers have described the business suit as "the universal language of diplomacy" (see Figure 5), a convention of dress that, though superficially neutral, has far-reaching connotations for cultural power relations [18]. This fashion dominance operates through the willing adherence of its advocates, demonstrating settled power relations that link Western canons of beauty with professionalism and diplomatic respectability.

**Table 3.** Western Formal Dress Strategies in Diplomatic Contexts

Country/Region	Formal Dress Elements	Distinctive Features	Diplomatic Messaging	Key Examples
United Kingdom	Savile Row suits, morning dress, military uniforms	Institutional ties, royal protocols, ceremonial elements	Tradition, hierarchy, imperial heritage	Royal state visits, Commonwealth summits
United States	Business suits, power dressing	Flag pins, university ties, "shirt-sleeve" diplomacy	Democracy, accessibility, corporate power	Presidential summits, trade negotiations
France	Haute couture influence, tailored suits	Designer elements, sophisticated accessories	Cultural refinement, soft power through style	EU summits, cultural diplomacy events
Italy	Luxury tailoring, designer suits	Superior fabrics, impeccable fit	Craftsmanship, aesthetic excellence	G7 meetings, fashion diplomacy
Germany	Conservative business attire	Understated quality, minimal accessories	Efficiency, reliability, economic power	EU leadership meetings, economic forums

Despite the seeming homogeneity, complex national variations still make themselves felt as subtle forms of identity in diplomatic situations. As shown in Table 3, Western nations have diverse tendencies towards their taste for formal dress. The United Kingdom's diplomatic dress preserves aspects of Savile Row tailoring, combined with institutional associations that promote an identification with aristocratic tradition [41]. The diplomatic dress of France, on the other hand, emphasizes aspects of haute couture in its formal dress, thus expressing cultural refinement through stringent sartorial standards. American diplomatic dressing typically follows traditional business protocols, guided by democratic values; however, subtle cues, such as flag pins, express certain political affiliations [42].

The interaction between differentiation and adherence allows us to clarify the subtle negotiations being undertaken between institutional norms and national identity concepts. European countries utilize a pattern of "distinction within conformity," where the strategic use of superior design and advanced tailoring skills is deployed to convey superiority, while remaining within the adopted standards of diplomatic dress. One good example of such soft power is presented by the precisely tailored suits worn by the Italian delegation, which convey themes regarding cultural heritage and superior craftsmanship in certain contexts [43]. The British royal family's sartorial codes represent Western diplomatic formal wear, with each piece of clothing carrying meaning within complicated systems of sartorial discourse. Formal state visits are a prime example of how formal wear may carry symbolic meanings similar to those in traditional dress [44].

The international adoption of American business suit diplomacy has successfully turned professional clothing into a diplomatic uniform representative of modern democratic values. The shift from conventional diplomatic wear to business wear is a result of pragmatic reasons aimed at increasing accessibility; however, critics view this shift as a mere disguise for cultural imperialism, thus setting American business culture as the dominant world standard [45]. The latest era of American diplomatic fashion can be defined as one of "intentional informality," as reflected in efforts like "shirt-sleeve diplomacy," aimed at projecting both friendliness and a sense of authority.

The ongoing prevalence of Western formal wear as the norm in diplomatic settings signifies the enduring inequalities of power in global governance. The non-Western states are caught in a difficult dilemma: they must either adopt Western dress styles or wear traditional clothes that could be seen to signify divergence. This dichotomous structure renders a position of neutrality and universality to Western dress, but alternative modes of dress are described as cultural expressions that require explanation. Recent claims by Asian and African nations promoting traditional dress represent notable disruptions, but the dominance of Western formal wear remains largely maintained in international institutional settings.



**Figure 5.** The Universal Diplomatic Uniform: Western Business Suit

### 3.4 Other Regional Dress Diplomacy Practices

Beyond the well-documented traditions of Asian, African, and Western dress diplomacy, other regions have developed distinctive approaches to traditional attire in international forums. As shown in Table 4, these regional practices demonstrate diverse strategies reflecting unique cultural identities and geopolitical positions. Middle Eastern nations employ traditional dress as powerful symbols of religious and cultural identity, with the thobe, bisht, and keffiyeh serving multiple diplomatic functions. Gulf state leaders' consistent wearing of traditional robes at international summits projects messages about Islamic identity, oil wealth, and regional solidarity while maintaining distinctions through specific design elements. The diplomatic deployment of Middle Eastern traditional dress has gained particular significance in contemporary contexts, where traditional dress issues intersect with complex questions of religion, society, and government [46].

Latin American nations have developed varied approaches reflecting the region's complex colonial history and indigenous heritage. While most Latin American leaders adopt Western formal wear,

strategic deployment of traditional elements occurs during specific cultural moments. Bolivian President Evo Morales's wearing of indigenous textiles at international forums represented a radical departure from diplomatic norms, projecting messages about indigenous rights and anti-colonial politics. Mexican leaders occasionally incorporate guayaberas or embroidered shirts during regional summits. The relative rarity of traditional Latin American dress in high-level diplomacy reflects tensions between European-influenced elite culture and indigenous traditions.

Pacific Island nations increasingly assert cultural identity through traditional dress in international forums, particularly in climate change negotiations where their vulnerability lends moral authority to cultural presentations. Wearing tapa cloth, island prints, and traditional garments at UN climate summits creates powerful visual narratives linking cultural heritage to environmental advocacy. Indigenous leaders worldwide utilize traditional dress as rights assertion in global forums, with research documenting how indigenous development intersects with rights, culture, and strategy [47]. The effectiveness of such dress diplomacy depends on specific forums and audiences, with environmental and human rights venues proving more receptive than formal state diplomatic settings.

**Table 4.** Other Regional Traditional Dress Diplomacy Practices

Region	Traditional Attire	Frequency of Use	Key Diplomatic Contexts	Strategic Objectives
Middle East	Thobe, bisht, keffiyeh, agal	Very Frequent	Arab League, OIC summits, OPEC meetings	Islamic identity; regional solidarity; oil diplomacy
Latin America	Guayabera, indigenous textiles, ponchos	Selective/Rare	OAS summits, regional meetings, indigenous forums	Cultural heritage; indigenous rights; anti-colonial messaging
Pacific Islands	Bula shirts, tapa cloth, island prints, sulu	Moderate/Strategic	Climate summits, UN forums, Pacific Islands Forum	Environmental advocacy; oceanic identity; climate justice
Indigenous Global	Various tribal dress, ceremonial attire	Context-specific	UN Indigenous Forums, human rights sessions, environmental summits	Rights assertion; cultural survival; land sovereignty

### 3.5 Comparative Analysis: Global Patterns in Traditional Dress Diplomacy

A cross-regional comparison of approaches to the use of traditional dress in diplomacy identifies three distinct models. The "assertive model," exemplified by Asian and Middle Eastern practice, involves regular and frequent use of traditional clothing, bolstered strongly through state programs. The "reactive model," characteristic of African and indigenous nations, uses traditional clothing mainly to reclaim agency and resist colonial legacies. The "selective model," found in settings across Latin America and the Pacific, holds traditional dress in reserve for critical junctures in which cultural identity is used to augment negotiating leverage. These models reflect deeper relationships between sources of soft power, international positions, and diplomatic objectives, consistent with the idea that cultural diplomacy is a foreign policy tool [8].

One of the key success factors is the notion of "sartorial capital accumulation," or the way clothing gains recognition and worth in diplomatic settings. Indian kurta and Indonesian batik have gained high sartorial capital due to their regular usage and careful promotion, making them easily recognizable. This demonstrates the operation of cultural diplomacy through "structured cultural policies and diplomatic efforts" that shape global understanding [31]. Less salient traditional wear, on the other hand, requires more effort to impart intended meanings, meaning that effective dress diplomacy requires persistent effort instead of sporadic use.

As shown in Table 5, the relationship between economic power and use of traditional dress shows unexpected patterns. Middle-tier powers and emerging economies have the highest levels of usage, with a desire for differentiation in diplomatic settings where they cannot compete purely on economic terms. This finding aligns with research showing cultural diplomacy as alternative channels of global influence for emerging economies [9]. Conversely, great powers seem to use traditional dress more selectively, with their established positions granting them the freedom of choice instead of the need for differentiation.

The evolution of traditional dress diplomacy reflects broader transformations in international affairs. After the Cold War, experimentation was on the rise as the pressures of ideological sameness subsided. Social media have raised the visual profile of traditional wear, but created new problems as photos spread beyond contexts. Climate diplomacy has created settings in which traditional clothing from less dominant nations has increased moral stature. New trends suggest a move towards "diplomatic sartorial multilateralism," which reflects an increasing acceptance of diverse dress codes in response to a multipolar world; however, the inherent benefits of Western formal wear remain dominant in most contexts.

**Table 5.** Comparative Models of Traditional Dress Diplomacy

Model	Frequency	Key Characteristics	Representative Regions/Countries	Primary Objectives	Effectiveness Factors
Assertive	High/Consistent	State-backed, systematic deployment; high investment in quality and branding	Asia (India, Indonesia), Middle East (Gulf states)	Project civilizational confidence; establish cultural parity with West; economic soft power	Strong state support; economic growth; regional influence
		Response to marginalization; identity reclamation; post-colonial assertion	Africa (across regions), Indigenous peoples globally	Challenge colonial legacies; assert sovereignty; cultural preservation	Historical resonance; international sympathy; forum receptivity
Selective	Low/Context-specific	Reserved for strategic moments; issue-linked deployment	Latin America, Pacific Islands	Enhance specific negotiations; moral authority on key issues	Issue relevance; timing; international climate
Hybrid	Variable	Combines Western and traditional elements;	Japan, South Korea, Mexico	Balance modernization with tradition;	Sophistication of deployment; quality



#### 4 Discussion

This scholarly examination of the use of traditional dress diplomacy within different cultural contexts is critical in terms of understanding the changing nature of soft power in contemporary international relations. Three different models for the use of traditional dress—assertive, reactive, and selective—spanning geographic locations and revealing important convergences between cultural resources, historical context, and diplomatic objectives, are outlined in the text. The assertive model, used largely by Asian and Middle Eastern nations, illustrates how the extended, state-sponsored use of traditional clothing has the potential to confront Western sartorial hegemony while expressing confidence in one's cultural heritage. The reactive model, illustrated through African and indigenous peoples, highlights how traditional dress is a powerful medium for expressing post-colonial identity and reasserting cultural sovereignty. The selective model, evident in Latin American and Pacific cultures, highlights the strategic considerations regarding the moments when cultural identity supports particular negotiating positions. The findings of the present study add to the theory of soft power by showing that cultural symbols work not through simple dissemination but through complex processes of meaning-making that differ significantly in relation to different power relations and diplomatic contexts.

The theoretical framework developed in this study deepens the understanding of traditional clothing as a type of cultural capital in the practice of diplomacy, thus applying Bourdieu's theoretical concepts to international relations. The application of a multi-layered analytical framework clarifies the dynamics of traditional dress diplomacy at macro (international system), meso (institutional), and micro (interpersonal) levels, and reveals the soft power dynamics emerging from the complex interactions between layers. This model questions the conventional state-centered approach inherent in soft power theory, arguing that successful cultural diplomacy requires skillful coordination on all levels of interaction. Adding "sartorial capital accumulation" as a new analytical tool to this study provides a new ground for studying the process by which certain traditional clothing gains international recognition and diplomatic power over the years, and others are left behind and misrepresented. These qualities do not come naturally; they require tireless dedication to perfection, consistency, and calculated promotion, as seen in the success of Indian kurta diplomacy and Indonesian batik diplomacy.

The effectiveness of traditional dress as a tool of soft power shows vast discrepancies in diverse diplomatic settings, thus complicating the premise of universal applicability that underlies cultural diplomacy efforts. Settings like environment summits, cultural festivals, and regional conferences are more conducive to traditional dress than strictly defined Western formal dress codes that are common in financial conferences and security gatherings. The presence of such differences means that the performance of soft power through traditional dress takes place within unique "fields of reception," each unique in having its own set of norms and expectations that shape the cultural meaning of symbols. The ever-pervasive use of Western formal dress as the diplomatic standard, in the midst of increased cultural diversity in international settings, emphasizes the presence of structural limitations on the

potential transformative power of soft power. While traditional dress can effectively express cultural identity, counter deep-rooted stereotypes, and build rapport, its power to break the entrenched power dynamics inherent in international institutional structures is limited. The binary framework that universalizes Western dress while requiring justification for non-Western dress reinforces colonial hierarchies, thus limiting the potential for genuine cultural pluralism in diplomatic practice.

The findings of this study have important implications for the practice of diplomacy and cultural strategy building. Those countries wanting to leverage traditional dress diplomacy to promote their soft power are recommended to undertake full and integrated approaches instead of fragmented activities. Success in this area does not only rely on the quality of traditional clothing on offer but also on such factors as knowledge of best timing, appropriate settings, and efficient modes of implementation that can maximize and enhance their effects. The study demonstrates that regional cooperation, as indicated by ASEAN batik diplomacy, can extend a country's cultural reach without undermining the uniqueness of each country. In addition, findings urge Western countries to rethink their assumptions about the putative universalism of formal wear, thus shedding light on the possibilities of more creative involvement in dress diplomacy that respects cultural specificity instead of applying a universal norm.

The idea of "diplomatic sartorial multilateralism" offers promising visions for the peaceful coexistence of multiple dress codes; however, the actualization of such a vision requires initiatives to decolonize diplomatic practices and promote more inclusive institutional cultures.

Follow-up research should explore several promising directions that emerge from the present study. Longitudinal studies would test the processes by which particular traditional clothing acquires or loses its diplomatic value over time, thus shedding light on the complex interaction of cultural capital in the field of international relations. Comparative studies of successful and failed projects related to traditional clothing would determine the constitutive elements that make them effective. The role of digital media in the diplomacy of traditional dress requires serious scrutiny, considering that social media open up new channels for cultural communication and exchange, while also making evident the potential for miscommunication or cultural appropriation. Additionally, investigations into the relationship between gender and traditional dress diplomacy are needed, considering the fact that the current study focuses mainly on male political leaders, thus overlooking essential elements of women's traditional clothing in diplomatic settings. The study of new emerging hybrid forms combining traditional and modern aspects may uncover new developments in the process of cultural diplomacy.

Lastly, as climate change reshapes the priorities of the global agenda, research needs to address whether or not traditional clothing from ecologically sensitive areas can gain new types of moral authority and diplomatic influence. Such studies would advance our understanding of cultural soft power in an increasingly multipolar international environment, where old hierarchies face increasing challenges from various cultural expressions.

## 5 Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of traditional dress diplomacy underscores the development of attire into a powerful tool for the exercise of soft power in modern international relations. Traditional dress

diplomacy comes in many forms, ranging from strong promotion of native attire by Asian nations, post-colonial representations by African nations, and strategic adoption by nations in Latin America and the Pacific. Asian nations, however, have been notably productive in these efforts, with India's kurta diplomacy and Indonesia's batik diplomacy representing outstanding examples of using cultural heritage as an effective tool for raising international profile. Their sustained, government-funded campaigns, undergirded by economic growth and changes in geopolitical alignment, have been successful in challenging Western fashion standards while providing venues for alternative expressions of diplomacy. Traditional dress diplomacy has remapped the contours of international interaction and national identity construction, conveying subtle messages of values and identity that transcend language barriers. Traditional dress diplomacy also makes an important contribution to the rapid development of diplomatic culture, where dominance of Western formal wear is increasingly challenged by the colorful diversity of traditional attire practices. With the international order evolving toward multipolarity, traditional dress diplomacy seems especially well placed to achieve greater visibility, supported by virtual platforms that provide new paths for the visual expression of diplomacy. The development of dress diplomacy not only responds to but also accelerates broader changes in international relations, actively working to bring about a more sophisticated global order in which traditional attire is a critical medium for the expression of identity and the exercise of soft power.

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