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Unesco and the story of Japan's Meiji Era



If badly handled, the World Heritage listing could serve to recouple the impressive Meiji industrial revolution to the slumbering concept of Japan as the glorious "light of Asia". (Above) Japanese robot machinery packing lunches and making pizzas at an international exhibition in Tokyo early this month. -- PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

BY WILLIAM UNDERWOOD FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

THE Unesco World Heritage Committee yesterday began considering this year's nominations to the World Heritage List. The 10-day session is normally quiet, and acceptance of the proposals - already vetted by an advisory body called the International Council on Monuments and Sites (Icomos) - is considered routine.

The 500-page Icomos advisory report provides a flavour of the 40-plus nominations slated for approval: rock art sites in Saudi Arabia and Uganda, Viking sites in northern Europe, a bridge in Britain, Spanish missions in the United States, an aqueduct in Mexico, a monastery in Georgia and the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

Then there is Japan's ambitious - even audacious - Unesco bid.

"Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution" seek World Heritage status for two dozen mines, factories, ports and shipyards located mainly in the nation's south-west. The Icomos report released last month notes the properties represent the "first successful transfer of industrialisation from the West to a non-Western nation".

The governments of South Korea and China, however, have expressed opposition to the listing, and vigorous lobbying campaigns on both sides of the issue have injected international politics into the upcoming discussion about cultural landmarks.

Critics of the Japanese package view Meiji Era (1868-1912) nation-building as inseparable from 20th-century empire-building, which led inexorably to Japanese colonialism and the Asia-Pacific War. History is never easy in North-east Asia.

Resistance to Japan's plan stems from the fact that some 700,000 Koreans, 40,000 Chinese and 35,000 Allied prisoners of war (POWs) performed forced labour for private industry in wartime Japan.

But there have been almost no corporate acknowledgments, no apologies and no compensation to individual victims.

Fully one-third of Japan's would-be Unesco sites can be directly connected to forced labour, and groups representing US and British former POWs are also sceptical about Tokyo's application.

These nominated venues include port facilities at Moji in Fukuoka prefecture, through which tens of thousands of workers bound for the Kyushu coal mines involuntarily passed. Their toil produced profits for companies like Mitsui and Mitsubishi, the zaibatsu twin pillars of wartime production that owned - or still own - several of the properties slated for Unesco's imprimatur. In fact, Mitsubishi has operated the Nagasaki shipbuilding yard - where hundreds of forced labourers perished in the American atomic bombing that ended the war - for the past 128 years.

Yawata (or Yahata) Steel Works, originally known as Imperial Steel Works, was built by the central government using hefty indemnity payments extracted from China following the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. The mills were later taken over by Nippon Steel, which ran the enterprise using forced labourers during the war and runs it today as Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corp. The inclusion in a World Heritage application of working sites belonging to private firms is considered atypical.

Japan's initiative to showcase the remarkable industrial achievements of the Meiji Era represents a focused, sustained public-relations effort. Its stated theme being "From a small Asian nation to world economic power", the Kagoshima-based official website for the global push (with an English version at www.kyuyama.jp/e) recounts the rise of modern Japan beginning with the Opium Wars, which presaged a regional geopolitical upheaval that rightly alarmed the foundering Tokugawa shogunate.

"Emergence of Industrial Japan: Kyushu-Yamaguchi" is a 20-page summary of the original Unesco proposal prepared by Japan in 2009. Japan at the dawn of the Meiji Restoration, according to the promotional piece, "chose rapid industrialisation as a strategy to preserve national independence, free from foreign political and economic subordination. Japan was determined to join the modern world economy on its terms rather than those of a colonial power. It was to become the master of change rather than its victim".

The World Heritage submission bookends the histories of the proposed sites at 1850 and 1910, with the latter year marking (perhaps coincidentally) the start of Japan's formal annexation of Korea. Since the Meiji emperor reigned until 1912, this bracketing may seek to sidestep the contentious history of

colonialism on the Korean peninsula, which set the stage for the annexation of Manchuria in 1931 and eventually for total war with China and the West.

To some observers, the nature of Japan's unusual "serial nomination" of 23 sites spread across eight prefectures, intended to highlight 60 years of relatively recent national emergence, suggests an ulterior motive. So does the pending listing of Shokasonjuku Academy in Yamaguchi prefecture. This property, according to the Icomos report, was "one of the bases of the respected royalist teacher, Shoin Yoshida, who aspired to progressive ideas based on Western education, science and industry but with respect to Japanese traditions".

Yoshida himself was executed for his revolutionary activities by the Tokugawa regime in 1859, but he provided the philosophical compass for the core of young samurai leaders who engineered the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Later, however, ideas first expounded at Shokasonjuku Academy morphed into a wellspring of motivation and justification for Japanese militarism and expansion on the Asian mainland - and beyond. Yoshida and his followers were held up as a dynamic contrast to the "backwardness" of other Asians who had not successfully responded to the challenge of Western domination.

There may be a mismatch between the Icomos finding that Japan's package meets the Unesco requirement for "outstanding universal value" and the portrayal in Japan's own pitch of a "unique and exceptional affirmation of the cutting-edge, living, industrial cultural tradition of this small Asian nation".

Similarly, the Japanese website's headline for the boosterish section on Imperial Steel Works reads: "Mighty national enterprise remains testimony to dauntless Meiji spirit."

Unesco is set to confirm the Meiji industrial sites at a moment when historical revisionism related to the Asia-Pacific War is increasing under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has challenged interpretations of Japan's imperialism, colonialism and prosecution of the war that have been accepted as mainstream since 1945.

The World Heritage application was originally submitted during the premiership of Mr Taro Aso, the current Cabinet member who wrote a 2007 book called Japan The Tremendous. In the book, Mr Aso contends Japan is a "fount of moral lessons" for Asia.

The Icomos advisory report, while urging approval of the Japanese bid, also calls on Japan to prepare an interpretive strategy that "allows an understanding of the full history of each site".

By holistically depicting the forced labour-linked sites and adopting best practices for inclusive historical narration, Tokyo's Unesco project could potentially become a model for transnational exchange, understanding and reconciliation.

If badly handled, the World Heritage listing could serve to recouple the impressive Meiji industrial revolution to the slumbering concept of Japan as the glorious "light of Asia". The story of modern Japan might then degenerate into a nationalistic narrative about Imperial Japan's overseas aims and actions. That's the last thing the region needs now.

The writer is an independent researcher who completed his PhD at Kyushu University on reparations movements for forced labour in wartime Japan.