

The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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Island of Horror: Gunkanjima and Japan's Quest for UNESCO World Heritage Status

恐怖の島—日本、軍艦島をユネスコ世界遺産に

The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 13, Issue. 26, No. 3, June 29, 2015



Hashima Coal Mine (Gunkanjima)

Japanese government photo of Gunkanjima in Nagasaki Bay included in "Evaluations of Nominations of Cultural and Mixed Properties to the World Heritage List" (ICOMOS Report for the World Heritage Committee," 39th ordinary session, Bonn, June - July 2015). During the war hundreds of Koreans and Chinese were forced to work, with either partial payment or no payment at all, at depths of up to 600 meters.



A Chinese survivor of forced labor at Mitsubishi's Hashima coal mine tosses flowers into Nagasaki Bay in 2004, during a shipboard memorial ceremony for fellow Chinese workers who died at the site that Japan wants to see recognized as a world cultural landmark. The prefectural government rejected the mourners' request to hold the service on Hashima Island. (Photo by Nagasaki Support Group for Chinese Forced Labor Lawsuits)

William Underwood and Mark Siemons

Seventy years after the end of World War Two, Germany enjoys mostly excellent relations with the rest of Europe, where the history of wartime hostilities is largely a non-issue. The same cannot be said for Japan and its neighbors in Northeast Asia. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee will begin meeting in Bonn on June 28 to consider this year's nominations for World Heritage status, and a Tokyo-sponsored package called "Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution" is attracting intense attention. Seven of the two dozen properties that make up Japan's proposal, carefully defined as covering the years from 1850 to 1910, later became the scene of wartime forced labor by Koreans, Chinese and Allied POWs, a history unmentioned in the proposal. For this reason South Korea and China are urging that the UNESCO committee reject the Japanese nomination.

The article below appeared in German in the May 17, 2015, issue of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, as the Sunday edition of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (or FAZ) is known. The FAZ is said to have the widest overseas circulation of any German newspaper, and Berlin-based reporter Mark Siemons formerly served as an East Asia correspondent. The Asia-Pacific Journal is providing this English translation of the article, which explores why Japan's World Heritage bid has become so divisive. The piece focuses on the undersea coal mine beneath Nagasaki's Hashima Island, popularly known as Gunkanjima (Battleship Island) due to its distinctive shape.

Three days after the FAZ article was published, the German government [announced](#) it plans to pay a total of 10 million euros (about \$11 million) in symbolic compensation to some 4,000 surviving soldiers of the Soviet Union who became prisoners of war under Nazi Germany. Each survivor is set to receive 2,500 euros (about \$2,800) for his suffering. Postwar Germany has reportedly paid out more than 72 billion euros (roughly \$80 billion) in total damages for Nazi wrongdoing, with much of the [compensation](#) going directly to individuals. Indeed, in recent years it has seemed as if Germany is running out of victim groups to compensate. Japan, on the other hand, has largely evaded facing up to the legacy of the Asia Pacific War. Not surprisingly there is much less warmth in the neighborhood. – William Underwood

- World War II ended in 1945, but there is a place where it still continues.
- The South Korean and Japanese governments are engaged in disputes over the proposed inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List of a place where Koreans were exploited in forced labor during World War II. Japan emphasized that the site is a memorial of its industrialization.
- UNESCO is to make a decision on this matter at the end of this coming June in Bonn, Germany.

There is a legitimate reason that Hashima Island was described as the "Island of Horror" in the James Bond film, Skyfall. These ruins soaring from the sea served as an inspiration for the lair of the villain, Raoul Silva, in the film. It is a perfect location to represent an enigmatic place that harbors all kinds of scary secrets. It is no wonder that many companies have found this forgotten island off the coast of the Japanese mainland suitable for their purposes. When filming for Street View, Google showed footage of a lone Google employee wearing a camera on his head and groping his way out of the ruins, which could collapse at any time. Sony chose this island as a location to show how well its aerial drone could function even in an extremely hazardous place.

The Japanese government actually intends to use Hashima Island for a different purpose: a cultural project. It wants to list 22 industrial facilities from the 19th century as UNESCO World Heritage sites. These include the island as well as coal mines operated by Mitsubishi from 1890 to 1974. The final decision on whether to accept them as World Heritage sites will be made in a UNESCO Committee meeting in late June in Bonn, Germany. About 15 km from the coast of Nagasaki, the island is now deserted as it had been before industrial facilities were built here. In its heyday, it was inhabited by more than 5,000 workers who lived in the high-rises constructed in 1916. They were the first high-rise buildings built in Japan. The Japanese government is pressing for the island's designation as a World

Heritage site because this and other such industrial facilities provide excellent evidence of the industrial revolution achieved by Japan during the Meiji period. Japan was the first non-Western nation to introduce European technology, economy, and social principles. It achieved the most rapid modernization in the 19th century and emerged as a leader in East Asia.

Nevertheless the tragic fact remains that Hashima Island has a completely different significance to some East Asian nations. On Hashima and at six other facilities proposed for World Heritage listing, Korean and Chinese laborers [as well as Allied POWs] were brought in and forced into labor under deplorable conditions. Many of them did not survive World War II, which is why the South Korean government officially opposes Japan's proposal.

The South Korean government takes the position that, "designating such a place as a World Heritage site violates the dignity of the survivors of forced labor as well as the spirit and principles of the UNESCO Convention. World Heritage sites should be of outstanding universal value and be acceptable by all peoples across the globe."

This incident is much more than a matter of academic discussion among historians. It represents the ever-intensifying conservative shift and historical revisionism that have occurred in Japan since the inauguration of the Abe administration as well as the vigilance of the nations once ruled by Japan. Japanese Prime Minister Abe and his cabinet insist on paying respects to Japan's war dead at the Yasukuni Shrine, where a number of Class A war criminals of World War II are enshrined. They are publicly declaring a "new Japan," according to which view, "Japan should dismiss a historical viewpoint that ideologically torments it." The Abe government is also attempting to strip its Constitution of the peace clause that was required of Japan after 1945.

Vague, contradictory arguments are ongoing in Japan over the criminal acts by Japan against Korea, China, and other nations starting in the late 19th century. During his visit to the US in late April this year, Abe was unable to offer anything more than uncertain "feelings of deep remorse" over Japan's role during the Second World War. Just a short time before the US visit, he criticized the description in US textbooks of the comfort women of the Japanese military, namely, the Korean women who were forced into prostitution within the military during the war. It seems that historical revisionism is now widely accepted in Japanese society.

Under undisguised pressure, one Japanese prefecture has already removed a memorial stone that honored Korean forced laborers who died. The stone had been erected in 2004 by a civilian human rights organization and bore the following inscription: "We solemnly pledge that we will not repeat this kind of mistake and remember and deeply ponder the fact that our nation inflicted horrible pain on Koreans in the past." Apparently, such determination and views are now retreating. In no other country in the world does the Second World War remain an ongoing issue and disputes over the war are yet to be resolved.

The latest front of these disputes is, of all places, an organization that symbolizes solidarity among nations and upholding of mankind's universal values: UNESCO. On this past May 8 when all of Europe commemorated the end of the war, on this day when it seemed that the war could not assume any more significance, an envoy presented in Berlin South Korea's position on one of the unresolved disputes from the war. The true measure of the great significance the South Korean government places on this issue can be discerned from the

fact that Choi Jong-mun, former ambassador and presently a special aid to the South Korean Foreign Affairs Minister, has handled all matters involving UNESCO since March.

He has travelled around the world to meet politicians, diplomats, and members of the press to let them know about the Korean forced laborers. The Committee session in late June will be attended by 19 nations in addition to Japan and South Korea. The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), which offers advice to UNESCO on World Heritage sites, already made a recommendation last week to accept Japan's proposal. Thus, the South Korean government still has much persuasion to do. This is why not only Ambassador Choi but also an appropriate Foreign Affairs Ministry official, and a councilor and two staff members of the South Korean Embassy in Germany, came to an interview with just one German journalist to fully explain the issue. This testifies to the importance of the issue to South Korea.

Ambassador Choi emphasized the case of Germany. The Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex (German Zeche Zollverein) in Essen was listed as a World Heritage site in 2001. There, many people were forced into labor during the war. According to Choi, however, there is a difference between Germany and Japan. Germany has squarely faced the injustices it had committed during the war and strived to compensate the victims for their sufferings. Ambassador Choi's intent in mentioning this difference is to show that Japan's proposal is being called into question not merely because of historical truths. This is related to South Korea's criticism of Japan: that is, if Japan does not use the island only as an instrument of propaganda about its past glory as it does now and instead recognizes its complex history, the name of Hashima Island will be cleared.

In 2012, the South Korean Supreme Court found invalid the argument by Japanese companies that the right to claim compensation by Korean forced laborers had been rescinded through the South Korea-Japan treaty in 1965, which normalized bilateral diplomatic relations. Since this ruling, many Koreans have claimed damages from Japanese companies such as Mitsubishi and Nippon Steel and South Korean courts have already ruled in favor of some of them.

The South Korean government said in a statement that these compensations for Korean forced laborers are "not related" to Japan's World Heritage proposal but reveal an aspect of Japan's attitude toward its history.

Not only disregarding these claims by Koreans, Japan argues that the criticism against its proposal is logically flawed. Several ministers of the Japanese government attribute the blame for the criticism to South Korea and they nonchalantly put a "political spin" on it. They argue that the proposal for Hashima only concerns the time period until 1910, not what happened afterwards. Like China, South Korea also has made efforts to normalize relations with Japan over the last few months. Thus, a polite suggestion was made to Japan to have a bilateral dialogue about the World Heritage proposal. "We hope Japan will appropriately respond to our flexible suggestion," remarked Ambassador Choi.

Western nations also have a role in the dispute between South Korea and Japan on this issue. The success of Japan in the 19th century was attributable to its acceptance of European technology and modernity. Initially defeated by the Western powers, Japan vigorously pushed forward under the banner of national prosperity and military power. China ventured along the same path as Japan only decades later. Sometime later, after having learned from European imperialism, Japan proceeded to expand its sphere of

influence by annexing other nations. Now, in 2015, Japan is only inclined to talk about its history of modernization in a very selective way; negative aspects are swept under the rug. Furthermore, Japan argues that others do not properly understand it. Consequently, Hashima Island, also called Gunkanjima (" Battleship Island"), remains a dismal place.

The article by Mark Siemons originally appeared in German as "Insel des Grauens" (Island of Horror) in Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung (www.faz.net) on May 17, 2015. English translation posted at The Asia-Pacific Journal on June 29, 2015. The original German article is available [here](#).

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Recommended citation: Mark Siemons with an introduction by William Underwood, "Island of Horror: Gunkanjima and Japan's Quest for UNESCO World Heritage Status" The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 13, Issue 26, No 3, June 22, 2015.