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History in a box: A screen grab from the "Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution: Kyushu-Yamaguchi and Related Areas" website shows deserted residences on Hashima Island (aka Gunkanjima) off Nagasaki.

Story of Japan's industrial rise deserves to be told, forced labor and all

BY WILLIAM UNDERWOOD
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On June 28 in Germany, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee will begin considering this year's nominations to the World Heritage list. The 10-day session is normally quiet, and acceptance of the proposals — having been vetted by an advisory body called the International Council on Monuments and Sites — is considered routine.

The 500-page ICOMOS advisory report provides a flavor of the 40-plus nominations slated for approval: rock art sites in Saudi Arabia and Uganda, Viking sites in northern Europe, a bridge in

the U.K., Spanish missions in the U.S., an aqueduct in Mexico, a monastery in Georgia and botanical gardens in Singapore. Then there is Japan's ambitious — even audacious — UNESCO bid.

"Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution" seeks World Heritage status for 23 mines, ports, factories and shipyards located mainly in the nation's southwest but also in Iwate and Shizuoka prefectures. The ICOMOS report released last month describes the proposal as a "series of industrial heritage sites . . . seen to represent the first successful transfer of industrialization from the West to a non-Western nation."

The governments of both 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 UNESCO confab 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 Northeast Asia.

South Korea's objections have focused on the seven nominated sites where some 60,000 Koreans were forced to work for Japanese companies in support of the war effort. Official recognition of those sites, Seoul has contended, would "violate 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."

Beijing has similarly argued that a "World Heritage application should live up to the principle and spirit of promoting peace as upheld by UNESCO." Mostly in 1944-45, nearly 40,000 Chinese men and boys were essentially abducted and taken to Japan to perform punishing work for Japanese firms at 135 locations. One out of 6 Chinese died in Japan, some of them at the would-be UNESCO venues.

Over a longer period of time and with increasing degrees of coercion, a total of 700,000 Koreans were forced to toil under harsh wartime conditions for private industry in Japan. The Koreans were rarely properly paid despite being considered subjects of the Japanese emperor; there was little pretense of paying the enemy Chinese at all.

Allied prisoners of war — 35,000 of them — comprised the third main group of forced laborers within the Japanese home islands (while millions of Indonesians and other Asians were compelled into working for the Japanese state and companies elsewhere in the vast if short-lived empire). The Allied POWs usually arrived at the port of Moji in Fukuoka Prefecture — if they managed to survive the journey from Southeast Asian battlefields aboard the "hell ships" that more than lived up to their name.

Conveniently close to the Kyushu coal mines where Allied POWs were brutally mistreated, Moji port facilities represent one of the properties now slated for UNESCO approval. Moji is even closer to the Yawata (or Yahata) Steel Works, another nominated site that counted among its wartime workforce hundreds of POWs from the Fukuoka No. 3B camp.

Originally known as Imperial Steel Works, the Yawata facilities were built by the central government using indemnity payments extracted from China following the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. The mills were later taken over by Nippon Steel, which ran the enterprise during the war and does so today as Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corp. Advocates for former American POWs of the Japanese have called on Japan to ensure historical accuracy in the event World Heritage recognition is granted.

Japan's global initiative to showcase the remarkable industrial accomplishments of the Meiji Era represents one of its most focused public-relations efforts of recent years. An impressive multimedia website (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.

Its stated theme being "from a small Asian nation to world economic power," the website belongs to the Consortium for the Promotion of the Modern Industrial Heritage in Kyushu and Yamaguchi to Inscription on the World Heritage (hereafter the consortium), based in Kagoshima and representing years of sustained group effort by eight prefectural and 15 municipal governments.

"Emergence of Industrial Japan: Kyushu-Yamaguchi" is a 20-page summary of the original UNESCO proposal prepared by the consortium in 2009. The document lays out an early version of Japan's case for the World Heritage inscription of a "serial national property with component parts that belong to the . . . modern industrial heritage and its socioeconomic setting, of the period 1850-1910." Japan at the dawn of the Meiji Restoration, according to the document, "chose rapid industrialization 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 consortium contends that the nominated set of 23 locales represents a "unique and exceptional affirmation of the cutting-edge, living, industrial cultural tradition of this small Asian nation. Today, conglomerates such as Mitsubishi and Mitsui, their roots firmly in Kyushu heavy industry, achieved global brand and household-name status, but it is to the second half of the 19th century that one must look to begin to understand their transformation."

The fact that Mitsubishi and Mitsui were two of the largest users of wartime forced labor across all victim groups is not mentioned in the pitch. This is reasonable insofar as Japan seeks to bookend the histories of the proposed sites at 1850 and 1910. The latter year, perhaps coincidentally, marked the start of Japan's formal annexation of Korea. Along with science and technology, modern Japan also adopted the Western practice of territorial expansion: Hokkaido, Okinawa and Taiwan preceded Korea in being folded into the empire. Critics have suggested the careful bracketing of the UNESCO proposal seeks to sidestep the issue of colonialism on the Korean Peninsula, noting that the Meiji Era did not end until 1912.

Japan's "history in a box" approach assumes contemporary observers can grasp the full meaning of key events that occurred at a particular location in the past while ignoring other key events that happened at the same place a few decades later. The promotional literature's chronological break — skipping from 1910 to the achievement of "global brand and household name status" today — raises another question: Can Japan's current economic success be firmly rooted in the late 19th century but decoupled from the period during the 20th century when forced labor became widespread?

The more concrete problem is that, concerning the legacy of wartime forced labor, Japan's government and corporations over the past 70 years have mostly avoided truth-telling and accountability — and Japan's track record of historical responsibility in general is getting worse. Tokyo has consistently rejected redress claims stemming from forced labor on the legal ground

that postwar settlements at the state level included the permanent forfeiture of the rights of individuals to pursue justice.

Japanese companies, with a very small handful of exceptions, have simply pretended forced labor never happened. There have been virtually no corporate acknowledgments, no apologies and no compensation to individual victims.

Korean workers forcibly conscripted to places such as Mitsui's coal mining complex at Miike or Mitsubishi's undersea coal mine at Hashima island (aka Gunkanjima) in Nagasaki Bay — both of which are part of the present World Heritage nomination — had the bulk of their pay deposited by their employers into bank accounts to which they did not have access. (The still-operating Mitsubishi shipbuilding yard in Nagasaki, where hundreds of Koreans died in the 1945 atomic bombing, is on Japan's pending UNESCO list too. Chinese and Allied POWs also perished in the city in the final American act of the war.)

After the war, Japanese firms funneled the Koreans' unpaid wages, pension contributions and related monies into Japan's national Treasury, where the funds remain today. The failure in the Japanese court system of dozens of redress lawsuits brought by Korean victims was one reason the South Korean government enacted a law in 2007 that compensates former labor conscripts and their families using Korean taxpayer money. Under the program as of April 30, according to figures supplied to The Japan Times by the South Korean government, approximately 598 billion won (about $532 million) has been disbursed in 71,825 cases for three purposes: consolation payments for workers killed or injured in Japan, compensation for workers who were not paid their salaries due to Japan's defeat and medical support payments.

In recent years the Japanese government has furnished its Seoul counterpart with the welfare pension records and worker name rosters necessary to implement the South Korean redress law, but only after decades of refusing to cooperate with basic fact-finding efforts. When Japan's Social Insurance Agency in 2009 paid pension refunds of ¥99 (about $1 dollar) to each of seven elderly Korean women who had been deceived as teenagers into working at a Mitsubishi aircraft factory in Nagoya, many Koreans saw it as a national insult. Lawsuits against Japanese companies remain pending in South Korean courts, as the nation's highest court has ruled that the 1965 treaty that normalized relations with Japan does not block such legal action.

Japan's UNESCO application was filed in 2009 during the premiership of Taro Aso, currently deputy prime minister and finance minister. The Japan Times first published official documentation in 2007 proving that 300 Allied POWs worked at a Kyushu coal mine owned by Aso's father. Then-Foreign Minister Aso denied and even challenged the reports, conceding the wartime reality only after he had become prime minister and multiple records were discovered in his own government's possession. Some 10,000 Korean conscripts also worked at Aso

Mining's numerous coal pits, but Aso has made clear he believes there was no forced labor involved.

Seoul and Tokyo have been holding high-level bilateral meetings to seek a compromise that would prevent open acrimony at the UNESCO session beginning on June 28 — and according to news reports, a last-minute deal may have been struck. South Korean officials are focusing on one recommendation in the ICOMOS report. While urging approval of the Japanese proposal, the advisory group also calls on Japan to prepare "an interpretive strategy for the presentation of the nominated property, which . . . allows an understanding of the full history of each site."

Seoul has suggested that an appropriate interpretive strategy might involve signage or other educational elements that forthrightly describe the forced labor that took place at one-third of the sites from roughly a generation after 1910. Indeed, by portraying the "full history" of the sites in a holistic fashion and adopting prevailing best practices for inclusive historical narration, Japan's UNESCO project could potentially become a model for transnational exchange, understanding and reconciliation.

Japan's presumable objection to this approach stems from its bedrock conviction that Korea was legally annexed in 1910, making Koreans during the colonial period subject to the same conscription policies affecting Japanese within the home islands. Japan's stance is thus that there was never any "forced labor" to explain or apologize for, even if discrimination against Koreans may have resulted in differential treatment.

However hard the two parties may attempt to finesse the "interpretive strategy" aspect of the pending listing, UNESCO is an unpromising venue for bridging the chasm separating historical worldviews that are at a basic level mutually exclusive. And there are real reasons for skepticism regarding how earnestly Japan would implement the ICOMOS recommendation for portraying the complete history of the facilities.

This is more acutely the case because current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has challenged interpretations of Japan's imperialism, colonialism and prosecution of the war that have been accepted as mainstream since 1945. Abe has distanced himself from both the Murayama statement of 1995, representing Japan's clearest admission of wartime wrongdoing, as well as the Kono statement of 1993 that acknowledged the Imperial Japanese Army had forced the so-called comfort women to work as prostitutes in military-run "comfort stations."

Last month, an "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan" was circulated internationally in response to a widely perceived rise in historical revisionism extending to the Tokyo Trials, the Nanjing Massacre, history textbooks and other contested issues. "Unbroken," the factual

account of the fascinating life of American POW Louis Zamperini, has never been screened in Japan due to a right-wing campaign to depict the big-budget Hollywood film as anti-Japanese.

Abe's neonationalist course has been especially conspicuous because it is unfolding in the wake of the electoral victory in late 2009 of the Democratic Party of Japan, which campaigned on an Asia-first foreign policy and promises of greater sincerity in addressing historical grievances. But the sea change in Japan's approach to war responsibility never materialized, due to weak leadership as well as regional eruptions over comfort women and territorial boundaries that overwhelmed any good intentions. The hawkish Abe and an emboldened Liberal Democratic Party, pledging to be especially resolute in the face of a rising China, ended the DPJ interlude in 2012.

Amid the backsliding on history, it is worth asking what the Japanese government hopes to achieve with its UNESCO gambit. One innocuous goal is to boost tourism in largely rural locations with depressed economies and dwindling populations. But the titles of books penned by Abe in 2006 ("Towards a Beautiful Country") and Aso in 2007 ("Japan the Tremendous," wherein the author calls Japan a "fount of moral lessons" for Asia) hint at a grander objective.

So do the pair's deep ties to the influential and assertively revisionist group known as Nippon Kaigi, or Japan Conference, which rejects the "masochistic view" of World War II and seeks to restore national pride in Japan's accomplishments throughout the entire first half of the 20th

century. Focusing UNESCO attention on sites connected to the last half of the 19th century may represent a back-door strategy to pursue that aim.

To some observers, the very nature of Japan's atypical "serial nomination" of 23 sites spread across eight prefectures, intended to highlight 60 years of relatively recent national emergence, suggests an ulterior motive. "The Shokasonjuku Academy," states the ICOMOS report about an outlier property not directly related to economic development, "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."

The visionary Yoshida (1830-1859) has also been accurately described as a martyred revolutionary. His small but pivotal school in Hagi, Yamaguchi Prefecture — located in what happens to be Abe's electoral district today — provided the philosophical compass for the core of young samurai leaders who helped engineer the Meiji Restoration in 1868. By that time Yoshida himself had been executed for anti-Tokugawa activities.

Later in the Meiji Era, ideas first expounded at the Shokasonjuku Academy gradually morphed into a wellspring of motivation and justification for Japanese militarism and expansion on the Asian mainland. 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.

One of Yoshida's students, Hirobumi Ito, became Japan's first prime minister in 1885 and then the first resident-general of Korea in 1905, the year Korea was made a Japanese protectorate following Japan's stunning victory in the Russo-Japanese War. Ito was assassinated at the train station in Harbin, China, in 1907 by a Korean named An Jung-geun.

In 2014 the Chinese government opened a memorial hall honoring An inside the train station where Ito, widely respected by Japanese as a founding father of their modern state, was killed. This prompted sharp exchanges between Japanese officials and their South Korean and Chinese counterparts about the meaning of An's act and whether he was a heroic independence activist or a criminal terrorist.

The UNESCO flap has inevitably become the new front line in East Asia's memory wars, given its implications for national identity in a region with no shared version of 20th-century history. This does not disqualify the properties Japan has nominated and ICOMOS has recommended for World Heritage listing, but there are serious doubts about Japan's willingness or ability to present the forced labor-linked sites in a manner acceptable to Koreans, Chinese and others. Certainly it would not be easy for non-Japanese — either overseas tourists or residents of

Japan's foreign community — to maintain a mental firewall blocking out awareness of inhumane events that occurred after 1910.

Japanese visitors, especially younger generations, would have less difficulty because they tend to know very little about the forced-labor legacy. A primary goal of the UNESCO bid, in fact, may be to provide a vehicle for repackaging and retelling modern Japan's story to the Japanese themselves.

If badly handled, the World Heritage listing could degenerate into a boastful nationalistic project for rehabilitating the domestic narrative not only about forced labor in wartime Japan, but also about Imperial Japan's aims and actions across the Asia-Pacific. That would be unfortunate because the extraordinary, even inspirational, story of Japan's modernization and industrial expansion after 1850 deserves to be told — warts and all.

William Underwood, a California-based independent researcher, completed his Ph.D. at Kyushu University while researching reparations movements for forced labor in wartime Japan. He can be reached at kyushubill@yahoo.com.
Comments: community@japantimes.co.jp