

Focus II

# UNESCO World Heritage Sites and International Relations

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World Heritage, Why and for  
What Purpose?

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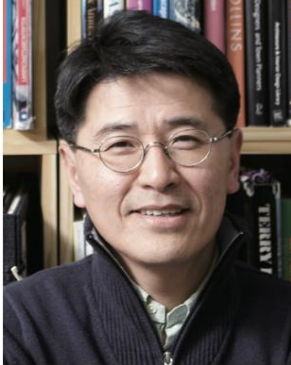
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# World Heritage, Why and for What Purpose?

**Dongjin Kang**, Professor, Kyungsoong University



## 1. Introduction

UNESCO's World Heritage Program is grounded in the 'Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage' (hereinafter referred to as the "World Heritage Convention") adopted in 1972 by the 17th Session of the General Conference of UNESCO. An international campaign to safeguard the Nubian Monuments served as a decisive impetus for the adoption of the World Heritage Convention. The monuments in Nubia, located in Egypt near the Sudanese border, were in danger of being flooded when Egypt began constructing a dam on the Nile Basin to increase the country's electricity generation. UNESCO came to the aid of the Egyptian and Sudanese governments at their request (in 1959) and raised 80 million USD to preserve the Nubian Monuments. This international effort paved the way for the World Heritage Convention. The World Heritage Convention that built momentum for world heritage protection and became a monumental landmark in humanity's history of development became a catalyst for expansion from largely two perspectives.

Why are so many nations in the world intent on preserving world heritage?

Among many possible explanations, the most important reason is changes in the prevailing mindset of the time.

The first change was a transition in the concept of cultural assets from one focusing on them as products to one emphasizing ‘inheritance and sharing’ and the second change was the emergence of the need for ‘international cooperation in cross-border protection of world heritage.’

Since 12 properties were first listed as World Heritage sites in 1978, a total of 1,154 properties (897 cultural heritage sites, 218 natural heritage sites, and 39 mixed heritage sites) have been inscribed on the World Heritage List, with as many as 1,729 nominations on the Tentative List. All things considered, the upward trajectory of inscriptions is likely to hold in the years to come. This welcome trend, however, is undermined by distortions and misrepresentations surrounding some properties nominated for inscription or already inscribed. As a whole, aspirations to add their properties to the World Heritage List are growing among nations around the world, fueled by the increasingly intense behind-the-scenes competition among front-runners like Italy (58 sites), China (56 sites), Germany (51 sites), Spain (49 sites), and France (49 sites) and the late comers like Japan and Iran.

Why are so many nations in the world intent on preserving world heritage? Among many possible explanations, the most important reason is changes in the prevailing mindset of the time. Once, skyscrapers, economic clout, and military might were the principal barometers of a nation’s status in the world.

Today, they are increasingly replaced by the quantity and quality of World Heritage inscriptions a nation possesses, which act as a symbolic representation of the nation's cultural authority. Another factor driving interest in possessing world heritage inscriptions is their positive impact on local tourism and economies that have been ascertained by data and studies. In short, the number of World Heritage inscriptions a country owns has become a critical measure of its cultural power in the world, which is driving the ongoing inscription race, although it is widely recognized that such competition runs afoul of the founding spirit of the World Heritage Convention.

The purpose of this study is to explore the causes behind this competition. More specifically, we will try to unravel the factors behind the overheating inscription race by looking into how diverse World Heritage concepts have expanded along with changes in inscription trends for the past five decades since the adoption of the World Heritage Convention in 1972. In addition, we will examine the issue of distortions and misrepresentations involved in the inscribing of World Heritage properties that have surfaced since the listing of the 'Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining' in 2015.

## 2. Development and Evolution of the World Heritage System

Since the World Heritage Convention was adopted in 1972, it has gone through numerous revisions, which provided the basis for inscribing properties to the World Heritage List. When the World Heritage Committee became fully active in 1977, the operational guidelines to the World Heritage Convention were drafted. The following is an overview of these changes over the years.

The first operational guidelines adopted in 1977 comprises four articles and 28 paragraphs. World Heritage Sites were divided into cultural properties that should meet authenticity conditions and natural properties that should meet integrity conditions. The concept of 'buffer zones,' areas surrounding World Heritage Sites, was also established concurrently.

In 1978, the World Heritage emblem was launched, and 12 properties were first inscribed to the World Heritage List. At the same time, the concept of ‘heritage in danger’ was introduced and in the following year, the ‘Natural and Culturo-Historical Region of Kotor’ became the first to be added to the List of World Heritage in Danger.

In 1980, properties that can be nominated to the World Heritage List were specified as ‘monuments,’ ‘groups of buildings,’ and ‘sites.’ It was also declared that objects of cultural heritage must be immovable. In addition, the concepts of ‘series of cultural properties’ and ‘transnational heritage’ were officially introduced. In 1983, selection criteria (i) to (vi) (including authenticity) and (vii) to (x) (including integrity) were established. Properties inscribed to the List of World Heritage in Danger were classified into two categories - ascertained danger and potential danger. In 1987, a definition was established for ‘groups of urban buildings’ against the backdrop of their increasing presence on the World Heritage List. These groups were further categorized into three classes - towns that are no longer inhabited but provide unchanged archaeological proof, historic towns and centers which are still inhabited, and new towns of the twentieth century. In 1988, the World Heritage Committee introduced a preservation and management system that requires sufficient legal protection and management as a prerequisite for World Heritage sites located within cities undergoing urban expansion.

The years 1994 and 1995 were a period during which the expansion and discussion of World Heritage-related concepts were most prominent. In 1994, the Nara Document on Authenticity, specifying authenticity as an essential element of a heritage site’s outstanding value, was made public, kickstarting discourse on cultural diversity and World Heritage diversity. The Document specified credibility and truthfulness as a requisite basis for assessing authenticity as affirmed in the Venice Charter. In addition, as an add-on to the concept of ‘sites,’ the concept of ‘cultural landscapes’ was newly introduced, adding further momentum to the growing diversity of World Heritage types. Here, cultural landscapes were categorized into man-made landscapes, organically evolved landscapes, and associative cultural landscapes. In addition, as an add-on to the concept of ‘sites,’ the concept of ‘cultural landscapes’ was newly introduced, adding further momentum to the growing diversity of World Heritage types. Here, cultural landscapes were categorized into man-made landscapes, organically evolved landscapes, and associative

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cultural landscapes. At the same time, the World Heritage Committee launched the Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List. The strategy, aimed at increasing cultural diversity reflected in the World Heritage List, marked a turning point in UNESCO's efforts to make the List more inclusive of heritages around the world. In 1996, the criteria for monitoring World Heritage sites were set up, which was followed by a decision in 1997 to extend the condition of integrity to cultural heritage. Furthermore, the World Heritage Committee mandated that other criteria must be fulfilled as well when a property is inscribed on the basis of selection criterion (vi).

In 2005, selection criteria for inscribing properties were integrated into two categories - cultural heritage (i)-(vi) and natural heritage (vii)-(x). A set of ten detailed criteria were established for ascertaining 'integrity' and the concept of mixed cultural and natural heritage was officially adopted. In addition, the Strategic Objectives of the 4Cs (credibility, conservation, capacity-building, and communication) were established following discussions since 2002, which was expanded to the 5Cs by including 'community' in 2007.

In 2015, the World Heritage Committee officially introduced the concept of Upstream Processes, under which advisory bodies (ICOMOS and IUCN) pay visits to states parties to provide upstream advice prior to applications. In the same year, the concept of sites associated with memories of recent (20th and 21st century) conflict was formulated after the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution, a legacy of forced labor, had been awarded World Heritage status. Under this concept, the World Heritage Committee adopted the principle that sites associated with potential international conflict can only be nominated after the associated conflict is resolved. Discussions related to this issue are still ongoing.



**Hashima Island, a site of forced labor (part of the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution) © Dongjin Kang**

In 2019, as a result of discussions that started in 2016, the World Heritage Committee adopted a policy of supporting state parties to have at least one World Heritage listing each. In tandem with this, the Committee decided on a principle of limiting nominations to one per nation, which has been in force since 2019. This particular measure is aimed at preventing nations with large numbers of World Heritage inscriptions from monopolizing the program and expanding opportunities for nations without a single heritage listing (27 countries as of 2022) to get their properties on the World Heritage List. The flip side of this policy, however, is that it increases the odds of properties not fully meeting the selection criteria getting on the World Heritage List.

The foregoing overview shows that since its inception, the World Heritage Convention has undergone diverse changes in keeping with shifts in the global ideological landscape. These changes are most apparent in the gradual expansion of the concept and scope of World Heritage.

This is directly linked to UNESCO's growing emphasis on cultural diversity and the diversification of World Heritage types as mandated by the Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List. In the sense that World Heritage sites are relics of the past, the World Heritage system is at risk of falling victim to authoritarian and entrenched ideologies and practices. To escape this danger, the World Heritage Committee has embraced many changes over the years. In tandem, the Committee deserves credit for its efforts to get as many state parties as possible involved in international activities related to the World Heritage Program.

### 3. Diversification of World Heritage Types and Its Rational

The World Heritage Convention has gone through multiple transformations in accordance with the changing ideology of the times.

These changes are most apparent in the gradual expansion of the concept and scope of World Heritage.

This is directly linked to the diversification of World Heritage sites, stemming from cultural diversification and global strategies.

#### **(1) Cases that Provided Momentum to UNESCO's Diversification Drive**

In most cases, we have no difficulty endorsing the World Heritage Committee's decisions to add new properties to the World Heritage List, but there are cases that come as a surprise or seem truly extraordinary. Although some may not concur, the author is of the opinion that the following ten listings have contributed significantly to expanding the concept and scope of World Heritage sites.

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### Prominent cases that contributed to the expansion of the concept and scope of World Heritage sites, with accompanying keywords

Name of property	State party	Year of inscription	Selection criteria	OUV-related criteria keywords
Island of Gorée	Senegal	1978	(vi)	The largest slave trade site on the coast of Africa from the 15th to 19th century / historical testimony to human exploitation / first case listed under criterion (vi) (sites of memory)
Nubian Monuments from Abu Simbel to Philae	Egypt	1979	(i), (iii), (vi)	Provided a decisive impetus for the establishment of the World Heritage System / support and cooperation from more than 60 countries / relocated to high land
Auschwitz Birkenau German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940-1945)	Poland	1979	(vi)	The site of a massacre of 1.5 million Jews / a historical symbol of cruelty inflicted by a group of people on other human beings in the 20th century / the starting point of inscribing properties with negative historical values
Historic Centre of Warsaw	Poland	1980	(ii), (vi)	The downtown area reconstructed over 5 years through a citizens' campaign after 85% of it was destroyed during World War II / provided the basis for establishing principles regarding preservation-oriented rebuilding of cities in Europe
Brasilia	Brazil	1987	(i), (iv)	Inscribed only 27 years after the completion of construction in 1960 / the epitome of modern city development based on meticulous planning from the 20th century
Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras	Philippines	1995	(iii), (iv), (v)	First case inscribed as a cultural landscape / cultural traditions related to paddy farming passed down for over 2,000 years
Old Bridge Area of the Old City of Mostar	Bosnia-Herzegovina	2005	(vi)	A bridge destroyed during the Bosnian War / reconstructed beginning in 1998 in cooperation with UNESCO / a symbol of international cooperation and of different cultures, ethnicities, and religious communities in coexistence through reconciliation

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Name of property	State party	Year of inscription	Selection criteria	OUV-related criteria keywords
Bikini Atoll Nuclear Test Site	Marshall Islands	2010	(iv), (vi)	A total of 67 nuclear tests conducted between 1946 and 1958 / symbol of the Cold War era and provided the impetus for international disarmament / showcases the devastating effects of nuclear weapons to mankind, nature, geology, living things, etc.
The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement	Argentina and 7 other countries	2016	(i), (ii), (vi)	A symbol of the invention of internationalist architectural techniques in response to the needs of societies in the 20th century / a transnational collection of 17 related sites
Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site	Brazil	2017	(vi)	A place in South America where more than 900,000 slaves landed after being transported from Africa / evidence of forced migration of Africans and of heinous crimes against humanity

The OUV-related keywords of the sites listed above cover site relocations, conflicts (tension) over heritage sites, negative or difficult heritage, 20th-century heritage, properties inscribed after reconstruction, and Cold War heritage. As such, these keywords provide a window into how the concept and defined values of World Heritage sites have evolved over the years. Most of the properties listed above share the fact that they are modern heritage. Again, this may be just a product of personal judgment, but it can be said with high certainty that the transition from the pre-modern to the modern age marked a watershed point in the evolution of the concept and scope of World Heritage. The cases cited above also provided momentum for the World Heritage Committee to depart from focusing too much on a property's outstanding value to put more emphasis on cultural diversity and the diversification of heritage types.

## **(2) Characteristics Inherent in Inscription Trends**

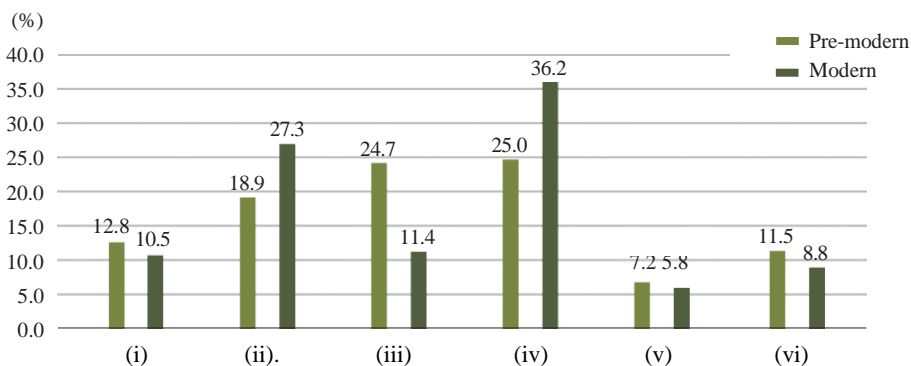
Since the first 12 sites (8 cultural heritage sites and 4 natural heritage sites) were inscribed on the World Heritage List at the second session of the World Heritage Committee held in Washington, D.C., in 1978, a total of 1,154 properties were added to the List until the 44th session of the Committee in Fuzhou, China, in 2021. This remarkable quantitative growth is attributable to the dedicated work of the World Heritage Committee that convened every year since its inaugural session except for 2020 when the Committee was unable to meet in person due to COVID-19. Another big contributing factor to the growth was the surge in the number of signatory states of the World Heritage Convention (from 15 in the inaugural year to 194 today). This quantitative expansion has been matched by qualitative growth through the expansion of the scope of World Heritage, the diversification of heritage types inscribed, and international cooperation. Some distinctive trends emerged from this landscape.

First, transnational heritage has been diversified. Transnational heritage sites attributed to multiple countries presently amount to 67 (accounting for 37% of World Heritage sites). The first case was the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Ohrid region inscribed in 1979, which is jointly owned by Albania and North Macedonia. After that, new transnational heritage inscriptions were intermittent for a while, but since 2010, they have been growing fast at a rate of two to three new listings per year. Of the 67 countries with transnational heritage sites, Germany (10 sites), France (6 sites), and Italy (7 sites) own the largest shares, which seems attributable to their geographical location in central Europe. Another noteworthy fact is that transnational cultural heritage sites are well balanced between cultural and natural heritage. While natural heritage takes up no more than 22% of total World Heritage sites, 44% of transnational heritage sites (including mixed cultural and natural heritage) are natural heritages. This means that the number of large-scale natural heritage sites shared by multiple countries is increasing, which reflects an increasingly broad-based international consensus on environmental conservation and increased urgency about environmental destruction.

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### Comparison of cultural heritages (including mixed cultural and natural heritage) by selection criteria (pre-modern/modern) (As of January 2021)



Second, the proportion of World Heritage listings based on selection criteria (ii) and (iv) (including overlapping inscriptions) are on the rise (limited to cultural heritage, including mixed cultural and natural heritage). As of January 2021, approximately 30% of World Heritage sites have been selected on the basis of selection criterion (iv), which requires the property “to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates significant stages in human history.” Roughly 23% of World Heritage inscriptions have been approved on the basis of selection criterion (ii), which requires the property “to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design.” One thing noteworthy here is that criteria (ii) and (iv) account for relatively large shares of World Heritage sites formed after the industrial revolution (approximately 260 in total). This is attributable to the fact that most of the masterpieces of human creative genius fulfilling criterion (i) have been inscribed on the World Heritage List, and that the number of non-listed properties meeting criterion (iii) of bearing testimony to lost civilizations is visibly diminishing.

On the other hand, inscriptions of industrial processes or historical event-related groups of buildings testifying to exchanges of technologies and techniques (criterion (ii)) and of combinations of multiple technological or architectural properties (criterion (iv)) have been surging.

Third, negative heritage listings are on the rise. Currently, about 60 World Heritage sites fall under this category. Negative values associated with these sites include war, massacres, conflict and resistance, coercion and exploitation, and colonialism. The main justification for the inclusion of these sites as part of World Heritage is that they provide lessons to be learned by future generations, explaining why a certain tragic historical event should not be allowed to be repeated, how a site is significant as a space in which a memorable struggle for independence or democracy occurred, or how a negative historical event linked to a site nonetheless served as a positive factor by pushing the international community toward peace or reconciliation. The growing share of historically negative heritage inscriptions on the World Heritage List also has to do with the emerging trend of ‘dark tourism’ and the growing attention given to ‘negative heritage’ or ‘difficult heritage.’

#### 4. Conclusion

*The Politicization of UNESCO World Heritage Decision Making*, a paper published in 2016 (Enrico Bertacchini·Claudia Liuzza·Lynn Meskell·Donatella Saccone, 2016, *Public Choice* v.167, pp. 95~129), took a critical look at political factors involved in World Heritage inscription processes. Based on an analysis of data on 290 individual nominations of cultural and natural properties, the paper concluded that “the Committee’s final decisions are more likely to diverge from the advisory bodies’ recommendations.” According to the paper, a startling 70.1% of nominations that received recommendations from initial advisory bodies below ‘Inscribe’ were changed in the Committee’s final decisions (96 out of 137 nominations). Also, 80.6% recommended as ‘Refer’ (25 out of 31 nominations) and 65% recommended as ‘Defer’ (52 out of 80 nominations) were upgraded in final decisions.

These findings created a big stir because they provided an academic confirmation of the long-held speculation that the integrity of World Heritage inscription processes was compromised by extensive politicization. In another telling example, the U.S. withdrew from UNESCO after political discord arose over the inscription of the Old Town of Hebron in Palestine in 2017.

In fact, Japan's inscription of the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution in 2015 was preceded by a political consensus reached between Japan and Korea. Japan advocated the sites as the place where an industrial revolution first occurred in Asia. The sites, however, were also linked to a negative view of the world that inspired Japan to mobilize people of other nations for forced labor and destroy their dignity as human beings. The row between Korea and Japan was mediated by Germany, the host nation of the 39th session of the World Heritage Committee that deliberated on the case. While no other state parties other than Korea and Japan were allowed to speak or ask questions, the Japanese ambassador to UNESCO admitted that forced labor had occurred at those sites, and Korea's acceptance of the statement opened the door to the inscription of the contested sites. Japan, however, made an about-face in its position right after the inscription was made and distorted the ambassador's remark that had acknowledged forced labor. To this day, seven years after the inscription, Japan is still refusing to deliver on the promise it made to the international community that it would take steps to publicize the full history of the sites, a condition that compelled Korea to agree to the inscription.

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A V-shaped crevice created by an explosion during the Meiji period (Doyuno Wareto)  
© Dongjin Kang

A point to be kept in mind here is that the Japanese case above suggests that the current overheated competition among world powers - countries that have had great sway over international order in the modern era - to get their properties inscribed as World Heritage sites can result in whitewashing or rationalizing past negative activities they are responsible for (such as colonialism, slavery, war of aggression, forced labor, etc.). Furthermore, these types of properties with negative associations could potentially trigger international disputes and conflicts among the concerned parties with different views. Since World Heritage sites are recognized by UNESCO, an organization that promotes global harmony above all else, acknowledgment of objective and historical facts and conflict resolution must precede any inscription bid for a property with the potential of sparking conflict.



An iconic structure in the Sado Mines built during the Shōwa period (flotation plant)  
© Dongjin Kang

In addition, World Heritage sites must flawlessly pass the tests of authenticity and integrity conditions, which means that everything about them must be authentic and truthful on top of being grounded in mutual trust among the state parties concerned.

In this light, Japan deserves criticism for mounting another bid to get the Sado Mines recognized as a World Heritage site, which it made official on February 1, 2022. Despite the undisputable historical fact that Koreans were forced into labor at the Sado Mines during the Pacific War, Japan is pushing ahead with the bid, a move strongly endorsed by former Japanese Prime Minister Abe who argues that the inscription bid has nothing to do with Korea.

Presently, Japan is set to go down the same path that it took with the inscription of the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution. It appears that Japan will try to sidestep Korea's objection by limiting the historical period associated with the Sado Mines to one from the late Senkoku period to the Edo period, thereby excluding the period during which forced labor occurred. The Sado mines fall under the cultural heritage category where the property to be inscribed must be immovable. The Sado mines as they exist in material form today were created throughout the Meiji and Showa periods, a fact that Japan admits itself. It is, therefore, preposterous that Japan is selectively excluding some solid remains of the mines and trying to rely on what is underground and other traces of remains to explain the property's OUV as a prospective World Heritage site. Such an attempt will only result in a distortion of its true significance as heritage.

In light of the current dispute, it is only rational that Japan pursues its inscription bid for the Sado Mines on the basis of objective research by relevant agencies and experts and in close consultation with international NGOs and organizations. Doing so is also a choice in keeping with UNESCO's ideals. A nation should be condemned when it seeks to exploit the World Heritage Program as a political instrument for distorting historical facts.

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For the past five decades since its inception in 1972, the World Heritage Program has remained steadfastly committed to preserving its integrity against tumultuous changes in the external environment, thereby contributing to enriching human culture and the natural environment we live in. Particularly, the Program deserves credit for having laid the foundation for preserving the cultural and natural heritage that has shaped the lives of people around the world by incorporating diversity as a key value to make the program more inclusive and make sure that no ethnic group or nation is excluded. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention. To make this landmark year more meaningful, we will hopefully be able to make important headway in ensuring that the values of truthfulness and integrity are upheld along with increased diversity in heritage inscription processes.

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Dr. Kang received his Ph.D. in Engineering from the Graduate School of Environmental Studies, Seoul National University. He teaches courses in urban design with a focus on history, culture, nature, and landscape. He is also extensively involved in local cultural activities and research in areas related to industrial, modern and world heritage. He has served as a member of the Cultural Heritage Committee of the Cultural Heritage Administration, a director of the ICOMOS Korean Committee, a director of the Korea National Trust, and a director of the Plan B Culture and Arts Cooperative.

# Japan's Push to List Sites Linked to Forced Labor as World Heritage Sites: Updates and Issues

**Gun Cho**, Researcher, Northeast Asian History Foundation



## 1. The Seed of the Problem: Hashima (Battleship) Island

Not far off the southeastern coast of Nagasaki in Nagasaki Prefecture on the Nagasaki Peninsula in Japan, is Hashima Island, better known as Battleship Island. The island used to be a promising site for developing undersea mines. Recognizing the potential, the Mitsubishi Corporation, a key supplier for the Japanese war machine during the Pacific War, mobilized its capital to purchase the island and turned it into a man-made island by reclaiming land from the sea and encircling the island with castle-like concrete walls. The island, seen from a distance, resembles a battleship, hence, the nickname Battleship Island. It looks as if it were fossilized remains of Japan's militaristic past afloat on the sea.

However, coal was excavated from the island in the early 19th century. In 1970, the undersea coal mines were closed down because they lost profitability. The glory of the island's past quickly faded away, with the crumbled concrete walls around it testifying to its fall from glory. Hashima was thrown into the spotlight again in Japan when it was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2015.



Hashima Island listed as a World Heritage site © Northeast Asian History Foundation

At that time, Japan combined 23 sites scattered across eight prefectures on the Japanese archipelago and nominated them collectively as the ‘Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution.’ This came about 200 years after coal was first mined from Hashima and 40 years after the coal mines were closed down. Then, how was Hashima, which is now a ghost shell of its former self, able to get listed as a World Heritage site? Who was behind it, and when did the project begin?

It was in November 2006 that Nagasaki City submitted an application to the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs for the listing of Hashima on the World Heritage Tentative List. At that time, Hashima was submitted as part of a collection called the ‘Modern Industrial Heritage Sites in Kyushu and Yamaguchi.’ Among those sites on the application list was the Shokasonjuku Academy in Hagi City, Yamaguchi. The Academy is a small-size private school founded by Yoshida Shoin, an intellectual known as the spiritual father of the Meiji Restoration.



**Shoka Sonjuku, a World Heritage Site © Northeast Asian History Foundation**

The reason this small school was included as one of Japan's modern industrial heritage sites is that it is credited for having produced many figures who played a key role in Japan's modernization and industrialization. Nevertheless, the Shokasonjuku Academy is nothing but a scanty pre-modern educational facility. The credit given to it for having produced many great contributors to modernization is just a manufactured pretext for including it among the Modern Industrial Heritage Sites.

Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe played an important part in getting the academy added to the list. It is no secret that Yoshida Shoin was a historical figure whom Abe respected the most. This has to do with the fact that the Shokasonjuku Academy is located in Yamaguchi Prefecture, Abe's political hometown and constituency. It is also no coincidence that the Shokasonjuku Academy was added to the Modern Industrial Heritage Sites in 2006 when Abe took office as Japan's 90th Prime Minister. In short, Abe's rise to Japan's top job is closely related to the inclusion of the Shokasonjuku Academy in the Modern Industrial Heritage Sites. Put differently, it can be said that the academy was the core of the list with other true industrial sites in Kokura and Nagasaki thrown in to make up the list.

This is an important reason why we should not lose sight of the small academy in Yamaguchi while criticizing Japan for adding Hashima to the World Heritage List. Lurking behind the fact that Hashima and the Shokasonjuku Academy were put on the World Heritage List at the same time as part of this same package are the political agenda and ambitions of Japanese conservative hardliners.

Ultimately, it is up to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to decide which site has enough value to be a World Heritage property whether it is the Shokasonjuku Academy or Hashima Island. Nevertheless, we cannot turn a blind eye to the facts that Hashima and other industrial heritage sites in Japan were important parts of Japan's machinery of aggression against and colonial dominance of Korea, and that a countless number of Koreans were forced into labor at those sites. Along a similar vein, the Shokasonjuku Academy was the home base of those Japanese scholars who advocated the 'Jeonghan theory,' which is a theory of conquering Korea. In other words, the academy was where Japan's history of invading and colonizing the Korean peninsula began. This fact eliminates any basis for recognizing the place's value as a World Heritage site.

Reversely speaking, the inscription of Hashima Island and the Shokasonjuku Academy as two connected components of a World Heritage site has the effect of lending legitimacy to Japan's history of aggression and colonialism on top of acknowledging their value as World Heritage.

Lurking behind the fact that Hashima and the Shokasonjuku Academy were put on the World Heritage List at the same time as part of this same package are the political agenda and ambitions of Japanese conservative hardliners.

For this reason, the addition of the two sites to the World Heritage List cannot simply be dismissed as an effort to preserve local cultural heritage and revitalize the local economy. Rather, it is an unmistakable sign of resurrecting dying imperialism. Considering that the inscription of Hashima Island on the World Heritage List was a calculated move engineered by the Japanese right wing to achieve their political agenda, there is a good chance that similar attempts could be made down the road.

## 2. Calculated Distortion of Facts by the Tokyo Industrial Heritage Information Center, Established in March 2020

Despite numerous issues raised about the matter, the World Heritage Committee approved Hashima Island and the Shokasonjuku Academy as part of the ‘Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution’ in 2015. In the lead up to the decision, the Korean government used diplomatic channels to convey its objection to the proposed listing of Japan’s Meiji Revolution sites to UNESCO member nations and the World Heritage Committee. In the end, Japanese ambassador to UNESCO, Kuni Sato, acceded to Korea’s demand and acknowledged that Koreans and people from other nations were “mobilized against their will and forced to labor under harsh conditions.” Additionally, he promised follow-up measures including setting up an information center publicizing information about the cruelty Japan inflicted on foreign nationals at the contested sites.

*Acknowledging that in the 1940s large numbers of Koreans and people from other nations were **mobilized against their will and forced to work under harsh conditions** at some facilities, Japan is ready to take actions to publicize the fact that during World War II the Japanese government implemented a forced labor policy. Along these lines, Japan is prepared to include in the interpretation strategy for the candidate heritage sites appropriate actions including the **establishment of an information center in commemoration of the victims** of the policy (as recommended by the World Heritage Committee).*

The promise, however, was not kept in 2015. It was not until March 2020 that the information center opened in Tokyo, and no information was displayed at the center about historical facts relating to Japan’s forced labor and the pain it inflicted on the victims as promised by the Japanese ambassador.

To the contrary, testimony was displayed that there was no forced labor and that “Korean laborers enjoyed the same quality of life.” What little expectation there was for Japan to keep its promise was squashed.

The Tokyo Industrial Heritage Information Center<sup>1</sup> is divided into three exhibition spaces. The first space is the 'Introductory Exhibition,' which displays an overview of the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution and information about the process through which the sites were inscribed to the World Heritage List. The second space, the 'Main Exhibition,' consists of five sections under the theme of the 'Trajectory toward an Industrialized Nation,' which covers the Cradle period, Shipbuilding, Iron and Steel, and Industrialized Nation. The third and final space is the 'Archives.'

On display in the 'Introductory Exhibition' hall is Sato Kuni's remarks. Here, what was originally recorded as 'forced to work' is mistranslated into 'ended up working.' This is clearly a deliberate distortion of facts. Fact distortion is even more serious in the Main Exhibition hall. Here, displayed panels show alleged testimony from people who worked on Hashima that people felt proud about working in the mines or that there was no discrimination against Korean workers compared to their Japanese counterparts. This is a blatant disregard for or distortion of the testimony by most victims about the existence of forced labor and racial discrimination on the island.

<sup>1</sup> The Industrial Heritage Information Center was closed immediately after opening in March 2020 and it was not until June that it was opened to public.

In July 2021, the 44th World Heritage Committee reviewed Japan's follow-up actions after the listing of the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution and stated the committee "strongly regrets, however, that the State Party has not yet fully implemented the relevant decisions."

The Korean government immediately protested that the recommendations of the World Heritage Committee and follow-up measures promised by Japan were not implemented at all. Along with a statement of protest issued by the spokesperson of the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry summoned the Japanese ambassador, Koji Tomita, to Korea calling on the Japanese government to faithfully fulfill its promises to the international community. Along the same lines, the Northeast Asian History Foundation in Korea held expert seminars in 2020 and 2021 to discuss problems about information displayed at the Industrial Heritage Information Center as well as countermeasures. In addition, the Foundation set up a web page to convey accurate information to the Korean public about facts distorted by Japan with regard to the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

The World Heritage Committee also made a point about Japan's failure to fulfill its promises and deceptive information displayed at the Industrial Heritage Information Center. In July 2021, the 44th World Heritage Committee reviewed Japan's follow-up actions after the listing of the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution and stated the Committee "strongly regrets [...] that the State Party has not yet fully implemented the relevant decisions." Additionally, the Committee demanded that the Japanese government submit another report on the fulfillment of its promises by December 2022.

**2** Northeast Asian History Net, "Japan's Industrial Heritage, the Sites of Distortion and the Hidden Truths" (contents. nahf.or.kr/item/item.do?itemId=isjs).

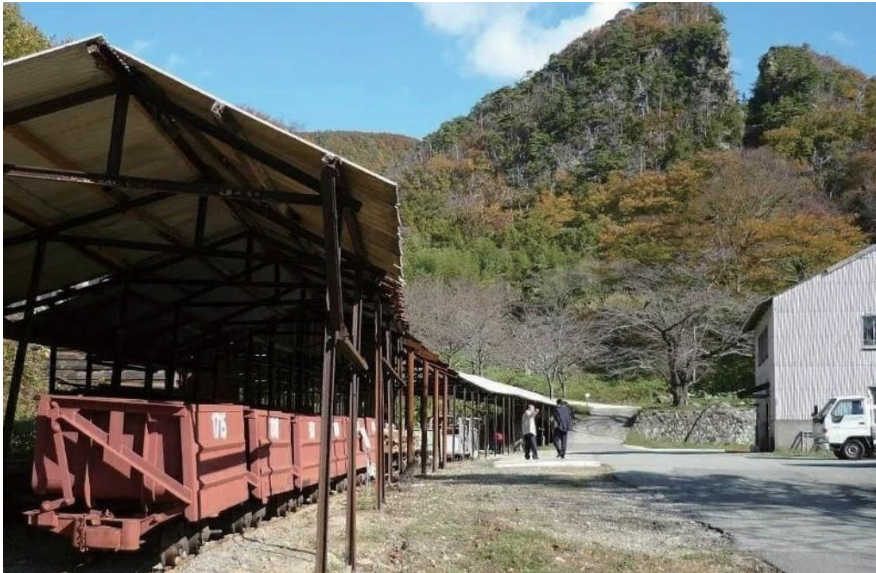
Japan is in the hot seat, facing criticism for failing to make good on its promises to the international community. Will it acknowledge the injuries it inflicted on many Koreans who were shipped to Hashima Island against their will and put into forced labor and faithfully implement its promises?

### 3. Mobilized Korean laborers in the Sado Mines - another attempt at erasing historical facts

The World Heritage Committee was objective and unequivocal in its evaluation of the information displayed at the Industrial Heritage Information Center. The case the Japanese government made for itself was far from convincing. With the Committee's strong admonition of Japan, the issue over Japan's forced labor at some of the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution seemed to have reached a turning point. It appeared difficult for Japan to disregard the World Heritage Committee's demands that it live up to its promises. Yet, the situation took an unexpected turn when Japan nominated the Sado Mines on Sado Island in Niigata Prefecture for inscription.

Japan's push to get the Sado Mines on the World Heritage List began around 2010. Since then, the push never ceased, although the mines were passed over several times in favor of other heritage candidate sites in Japan. The Korean government and academia protested this move, repeatedly pointing out that the Sado Mines were another site where Koreans were forced into labor. The objection was supported by facts uncovered by the 'Committee for Investigation of Japan's Forced Mobilization of Koreans During Colonial Occupation and Support for Victims of Forced Mobilization,' which identified 148 Korean nationals put to forced labor at the mines. The identities of these Koreans were confirmed by lists produced by the Japanese Government-General of Korea and Mitsubishi Mining.

Under these circumstances, Japan's push to add the Sado mines to the World Heritage List appeared rash in many respects. On top of the verified facts about Koreans put to forced labor at the mines, Japan was already under a lot of heat from the international community for failing to follow through on its promises in connection with Hashima. Until the end of January 2022, the news from the Japanese press was that the Japanese government had decided to hold off on nominating the Sado Mines as a World Heritage Site.



**Doyuno Wareto, a symbol of the Sado Mines, and mining carts**  
© Northeast Asian History Foundation

However, hardliners in the Japanese parliament, led by Shinzo Abe, strongly pressured Fumio Kishida's cabinet to submit an application to add the mines to the World Heritage List.

On January 19, 2022, Sanae Takaichi, Chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party's Political Affairs Investigation Committee, with the strong backing of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, said that the nomination of the Sado Mines was "a matter of Japan's honor" and called on the government to submit a letter of recommendation for the mines to the World Heritage Committee. On January 26, Abe openly threw his weight behind the call with a message on a social media platform that said, "Since Korea has started a historical war (against us), it cannot be avoided."

In the end, Kishida's cabinet overturned the decision to suspend the application process. On February 1, 2022, the Japanese government submitted a recommendation to the World Heritage Center in Paris, France, for the inscription of the Sado Mines. And on the same day, a task force for the listing of the Sado Mines headed by Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Shigeki Takizaki, held their first meeting.

On March 28, this was followed by the launch of a committee for the listing of the Sado Mines as a World Heritage Site, which was composed of LDP parliamentarians. Former Foreign Minister Hirofumi Nakasone, the eldest son of Yasuhiro Nakasone who served as Prime Minister three times in the 1980s, was elected to head the committee. More than 100 lawmakers joined the committee including major hardliners from the LDP such as Shinzo Abe, Taro Aso, Yoshihide Suga, Toshimitsu Motegi, and Toshihiro Nikai.

This development was quite an unexpected turn of events. After reversing its course, the Japanese government was relentless in pursuing its goal. It kickstarted its push to inscribe the Sado Mines on the World Heritage List before taking any action to address the issue of its failure to deliver on its promises with regard to the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution. The Japanese government officially denies facts about forcibly mobilized Korean workers at the Sado Mines. Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether the Sado mines will be added to the World Heritage List as desired by Japanese conservative hardline politicians including former Prime Minister Abe.

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee takes the stand that when a nation's candidate property is disputed by other nations, consultation among the relevant states parties must precede all other procedures. Ironically, it was Japan that initiated a modification of UNESCO's rules of examining World Heritage site nominations when it strongly objected to China's nomination of a collection of documents related to the Nanjing Massacre in 2015. Having played a leading role in changing the procedures, the Japanese government knows better than any other nation the challenges it is up to with the Sado Mines application. It should know that the application's chance of being approved by the World Heritage Committee is slim with objections from Korea.

The trick the Japanese government came up with to sidestep this obstacle was to be selective about the remains of the Sado Mines it nominated to the World Heritage register. The Japanese government left out properties related to the post-modern industrialization period from the list submitted to the World Heritage Committee, arguing that the Sado Mines' value as a prospective World Heritage Site lay in their gold production system based on traditional handcraft techniques.

By resorting to this ruse, however, Japan made a mockery of its own history by refusing to allow the Sado mines to be appreciated for their full historical significance. Japan's blatant disregard for historical facts and its aggressive push to get the mines listed as a World Heritage site in the face of criticism from the rest of the world suggest arrogance and foolhardiness.

It followed from this argument that facts about Koreans forced into labor at the mines could not be part of the description of the heritage site because they belonged to the post-modern industrialization period.

By resorting to this ruse, however, Japan made a mockery of its own history by refusing to allow the Sado Mines to be appreciated for their full historical significance. Japan's blatant disregard for historical facts and its aggressive push to get the mines listed as a World Heritage Site in the face of criticism from the rest of the world suggest arrogance and foolhardiness.

#### 4. Preparing for Future Cases Similar to 'Hashima Island' and the 'Sado Mines'

Will the Sado mines be inscribed to the World Heritage List as the Japanese government hopes? The best we can do at this juncture is to prepare effective counter strategies as ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) is getting ready to review Japan's application and carry out on-site surveys so that the advisory body can come to a conclusion aligned with the aims of the World Heritage Program. ICOMOS is planning to conduct an on-site assessment of the Sado Mines in the second half of 2022. Based on this process of due diligence, ICOMOS will provide the World Heritage Committee with its evaluation of the nominated property, recommending the Committee to inscribe, refer back, defer, or not to inscribe. The best outcome we can hope for is ICOMOS recommending the Committee not to inscribe the Sado Mines, but our goal should be making sure that ICOMOS' recommendation to the Committee is at least 'refer back' or 'defer.'



UNESCO World Heritage Flag © UNESCO World Heritage Center

The 46th session of the World Heritage Committee scheduled for June 2023 will review ICOMOS recommendations and make the final decision. The caveat here is that an ICOMOS recommendation is just that - a recommendation to be taken into account by the World Heritage Committee in making a final decision. The World Heritage Committee can decide to inscribe the Sado Mines to the World Heritage List even if ICOMOS recommends it not to do so. Accordingly, we need to keep up our efforts to communicate with the member states of the World Heritage Committee, supplying them with the necessary information and trying to bring them around to our point of view, while preparing for the ICOMOS' scheduled on-site assessment.

Recently, however, a new development has occurred that can disrupt the aforementioned schedule. The Russian invasion of Ukraine derailed the 45th session of the World Heritage Committee scheduled for June this year in Kazan, Russia. Last April, 46 nations including Korea, Ukraine, the United States, and the United Kingdom spoke out against holding the session in Russia as a way of protesting the Russian invasion and its destruction of cultural heritage in Ukraine.

They demanded that the 45th session be relocated to another country on schedule. Russia also reportedly proposed the World Heritage Committee sessions be put off in Russia indefinitely. All this led UNESCO to decide to postpone the 45th session of the World Heritage Committee indefinitely. What happens to the Committee's postponed 45th session is likely to affect next year's schedule.

There is another variable at play. There is speculation that the souring of relations between Russia and Japan over territorial disputes and Russia's invasion of Ukraine is likely to affect the World Heritage Committee's decision about the Sado Mines. Namely, growing animosity between the two countries may push Russia to veto the inscription of the mines. Russia's objection can be fatal to Japan in view of the fact that the Committee's decision to inscribe a property has customarily been made through unanimous consent.

Nevertheless, foiling Japan's attempt to put the Sado Mines on the World Heritage List is still an uphill battle. It is no secret that Japan wields strong influence over UNESCO commensurate with its monetary contributions. If Japan wages a fierce campaign to sway Committee member states to vote for its bid, the final outcome can be unpredictable. What is more alarming is that Japan's history war provocations through World Heritage inscriptions are unlikely to stop at the Sado Mines.

Japan is already moving to inscribe several of its industrial heritage sites during the modern period. Hashima Island the Sado mines are just the beginning. There is a chance that many other Hashima- or Sado-like sites in Japan can be nominated to the World Heritage List down the road.

Japan is already moving to get several of its modern industrial heritage properties listed as World Heritage Sites. Hashima Island and the Sado Mines are just the beginning. There is a chance that many other Hashima- or Sado-like sites in Japan can be nominated to the World Heritage List down the road. Aware of this possibility, the Korean government is surveying and collecting data about such prospective sites in Japan, but much more needs to be done. One thing is for certain, though. Japan will not give up trying to get other controversial sites in Japan inscribed to the World Heritage List. Is there any way to break this seemingly endless cycle of conflict over World Heritage inscriptions?

**Gun Cho, Researcher, Northeast Asian History Foundation**

Dr. Cho received his Ph.D. in Korean Modern and Contemporary History from Dongguk University. He served as an expert member of the Committee on Japan's Forced Labor Mobilization during Colonial Occupation and a research professor at Korea University. He has been conducting research on Japan's colonial rule and forced labor mobilization. His on-going research projects concern Japan's forced labor mobilization at the Sado Mines and the old Japanese Army Armory in Incheon.

# Inscription of World Heritage Sites Overseas

## Conflict and Reconciliation

**Yeonkyung Lee**, Professor, Incheon National University



Following the listing of the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution which include Hashima (Battleship) Island, Japan's push to get the Sado Mines inscribed to the World Heritage List is giving rise to rows with neighboring nations including Korea, China, and Russia. Yet, it is not just here in East Asia that UNESCO World Heritage sites have become a source of conflict between nations, regions, and peoples. This article discusses how disputes over World Heritage sites were brought about and resolved in other parts of the world by looking at two cases - Cambodia's Temple of Preah Vihear embroiled in an ongoing dispute and Bosnia's Stari Most Bridge that has overcome disputes to serve as a peacemaker.

It is not just here in East Asia that UNESCO World Heritage Sites have become a source of conflict between nations, regions, and peoples.

### 1. A Case of an On-going Disputes over Ownership: Temple of Preah Vihear

The Temple of Preah Vihear, located in the northern highlands of Cambodia, was built as a dedication to the Hindu god Shiva.

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## Focus II



**Temple of Preah Vihear**

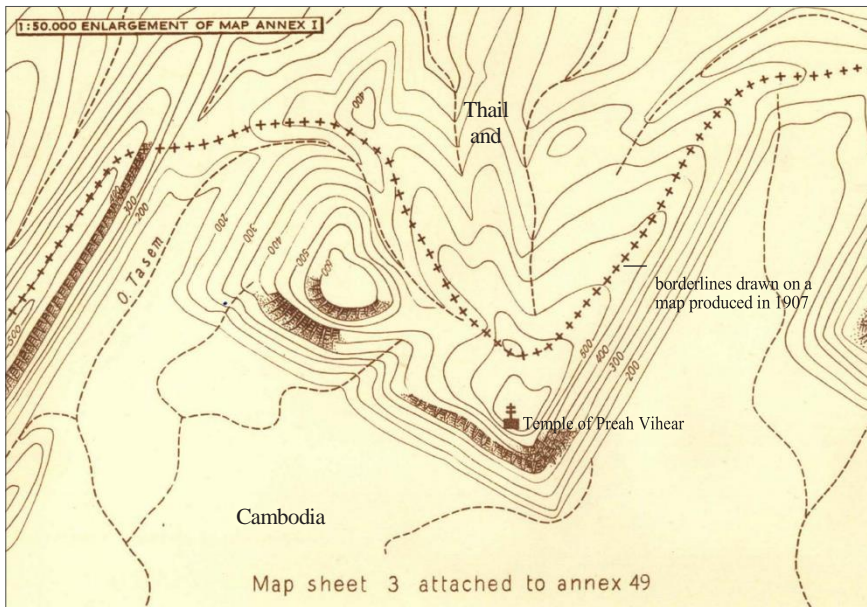
© UNESCO

This temple, consisting of a set of sanctuaries connected by a system of pavements and staircases that extend over an 800 meter-long axis, is considered a masterpiece of Khmer architecture featuring elaborately carved stone ornaments in a fantastic display of harmony with the surrounding natural landscape. The temple, originally built as a Hindu hermitage, has been embroiled in a lengthy ownership dispute since the 20th century because it is located on the border between northern Cambodia and southern Thailand and due to political situations involving Cambodia, Thailand, and France.

Cambodia, sandwiched between two Southeast Asian powers, Vietnam and Thailand, waned heavily in power through the 15th and 16th centuries. To keep Vietnam and Thailand in check, Cambodia became a protectorate of France in 1863, which eventually set the stage for a border dispute over Preah Vihear. In a treaty signed between France and Thailand in 1867, Thailand renounced its suzerainty over Cambodia. In return, it was allowed to occupy the northwestern part of the Khmer kingdom, which includes Preah Vihear. However, as France gradually expanded its power on the Indochina Peninsula, Thailand had to give up a significant portion of its territory to France. In that process, the two nations signed the ‘1904 Treaty,’ which planted the seeds of today’s ownership dispute over the Temple of Preah Vihear.

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**A 1907 map showing the Temple of Preah Vihear located on the border between Cambodia and Thailand**

[Source: ICJ Pleadings, Annex 49, map sheet 3 (Sept. 8, 1961) notations on the map made by the author]

Following the signing of the '1904 Treaty,' a committee jointly organized by France and Thailand formed a team to survey the northwestern part of Cambodia, which led to the production of a map in 1907. On the map made under France's influence, the borderline runs north of Preah Vihear as set forth by the Treaty, not along the watershed line of the Dângrêk Mountains. At that time, Thailand approved this map, which served as an official map of borders on the Indochina Peninsula. Amid the decline of France's power during the Second World War, Thailand recaptured the Temple of Preah Vihear and attempted to get it registered as a national monument under the name of Khao Phra Wihan. The attempt, however, was foiled when the war ended in 1945.

When Cambodia gained independence from France in 1954, Thailand mobilized an armed force to re-occupy the temple. The long-standing dispute between Cambodia and Thailand was brought to an end in 1962 when the Court of International Justice (ICJ) ruled in Cambodia's favor. During the trial, Thailand argued that the 1907 map was inaccurate. Yet, the ICJ accepted the map's validity on grounds that Thailand had failed to raise objection for a long time. In the succeeding years, the temple was completely isolated from the world due to political turmoil within Cambodia. The anti-government Khmer Rouge army captured the temple and planted mines around it, essentially cutting off access. This situation continued until the withdrawal of the Khmer Rouge forces in 1998.

On July 8, 2008, UNESCO inscribed the Temple of Preah Vihear as a World Heritage Site in Cambodia. Nevertheless, disputes over the ownership of the Freya Vihear Temple continued in the ensuing years, which at times provoked armed conflict.

The dispute over the ownership of the Temple of Preah Vihear flared up again in 2007 as Cambodia geared up to get the temple added to the World Heritage List. Thailand demanded that the temple be listed as a heritage site jointly owned by Thailand and Cambodia, but on July 8, 2008, the temple was inscribed as a heritage site that belongs to Cambodia.

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## Focus II



**Temple of Preah Vihear back in peace after armed conflicts over its ownership © UNESCO**

That, however, did little to put the dispute to rest as the two nations continued to butt heads over the temple, which at times resulted in armed confrontations. In 2013, the ICJ again ruled that Cambodia had sovereignty over the temple and its surrounding areas. Following the ruling, Thailand pulled back its troops from the area surrounding the temple. This ended a long period of armed conflict over its ownership and returned peace to the temple. Today, the temple, which used to be a peaceful and scenic place for Thai and Cambodian Hindu hermits, has sustained immense damage from long-standing armed clashes. With armed soldiers stationed around the temple to guard it instead of hermits, the temple still remains a potential flashpoint of conflict between Thailand and Cambodia.

## 2. From a Place of Conflict to Peacemaker: Stari Most Bridge

The historic city of Mostar deep in the valley of the Neretva River and the Stari Most bridge overlooking the river are together a symbol of reconciliation that has risen over destruction stemming from a long period of civil war. The city and bridge have been reconstructed to heal the wounds of the conflict and efforts have been undertaken to create a community of peaceful co-existence among diverse cultures, ethnicities, and religions.

Mostar is a major city in the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina that has effectively served as the capital of Herzegovina. The Federation, better known to the Koreans as ‘Bosnia-Herzegovina,’ is home to a blend of diverse ethnicities, religions, and cultures. The formation of this hybrid character is attributed to the historical background of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnia-Herzegovina, located in the Balkans, was part of the Western Roman Empire until the fourth century following the spread of Christianity in the first century. After that, the area fell under the rule of the Germans, Slavs, and Hungarians before being occupied by the Ottoman Empire for 400 years from 1463. However, rebellion after rebellion forced the Ottoman Empire to withdraw from the region in 1831, which led to the region’s incorporation into the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1898. In 1918, the region became part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was replaced by the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the aftermath of World War II. Following the secession of Slovenia and Croatia from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991, Bosnia-Herzegovina was swept into conflicts between the Orthodox Serbs who wanted to remain part of Yugoslavia and the Islamic Bosnians and Catholic Croats who wanted to be independent of Yugoslavia, which eventually erupted into the Bosnian War in 1992.

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The original Stari Most Bridge before destruction  
(Source:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mostar\\_The\\_Old\\_Bridge\\_-\\_Stari\\_most\\_1979\\_g\\_-\\_panoramio.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mostar_The_Old_Bridge_-_Stari_most_1979_g_-_panoramio.jpg))



Temporary bridge installed in 1993 after destruction  
(Source:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stari\\_Most\\_temporary\\_cable\\_bridge\\_1997.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stari_Most_temporary_cable_bridge_1997.jpg))

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## Focus II



**Mostar Town and Stari Most Bridge**

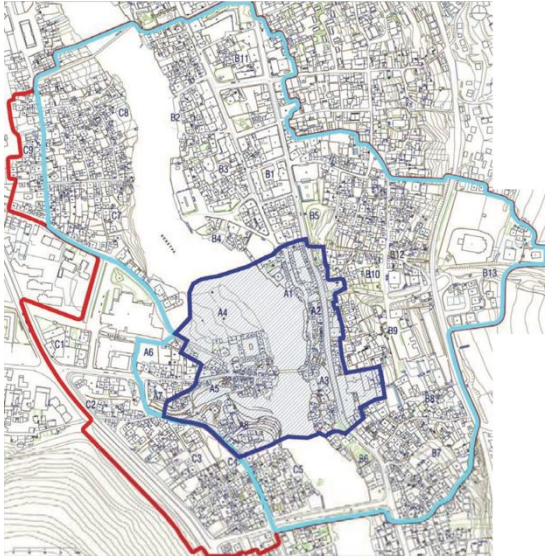
(Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stari\\_Most\\_viewed\\_from\\_North.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stari_Most_viewed_from_North.jpg) )

The Serbs, Bosnians, and Croats each established republics and committed genocide against each other in the course of conflict. The Bosnian War was brought to an end in 1995 after the Dayton Agreement was signed, which resulted in the present-day Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

It is against this background that Mostar became a tapestry of three different cultures - the Muslim culture of the Bosnians, the Catholic culture of the Croats, and the Orthodox culture of the Serbs. Mostar is home to mosques, Turkish houses, baths and a market dating back to the Ottoman Empire and the Stari Most Bridge designed by Hayr-uddin, a student of the famous Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan. The city also boasts Roman Catholic churches and monasteries as well as Mediterranean and Western European houses and urban structures. This rich mixture of architecture is a testament to the city's long and colorful history.

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A UNESCO map showing the Stari Most Bridge and the Mostar region (the red line marks a buffer zone, the sky blue line shows the boundaries of Bosnia-Herzegovina's old downtown, and the blue line encircles the UNESCO World Heritage Site.) © UNESCO

The heart of Mostar, where the Stari Most Bridge is located, was the center of the Ottoman Empire. In the wake of World War II, ethnic segregation intensified in the city so that Muslim Bosnians mostly resided east of Neretva and Catholic Croats south of Neretva. The Stari Most Bridge, located in the center of Mostar, was built between 1566 and 1567. At that time, the arched bridge was a representative specimen of Balkan Islamic architecture spanning 28 meters long with a height of 20 meters and two fortified towers on both ends. In May 1993, during the Bosnian War, it was completely destroyed by bombardment from Croatian forces. After the Bosnian War ended in 1995, UNESCO and the World Bank formed a supervisory committee to oversee the reconstruction of the Stari Most Bridge and the Old Town of Mostar. Preparations for the restoration of the Stari Most Bridge kicked into high gear in October 1998. Construction began on June 7, 2001, using construction materials and technology from the Ottoman Empire, and was completed on July 23, 2004. The restored bridge was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2005.

Compared to other UNESCO World Heritage sites, the unique value of the Stari Most Bridge along with the Old Town of Mostar lies in the fact that it represents a symbolic reconnection of the city's east and west that used to be completely divided ethnically, religiously and culturally.

Compared to other UNESCO World Heritage sites, the unique value of the Stari Most Bridge along with the Old Town of Mostar lies in the fact that, although deprived of the 'value of originality,' it has retained the original structure as possible using the same construction materials and technologies used during the Ottoman Empire and represents a symbolic reconnection of the city's east and west which was once completely divided ethnically, religiously and culturally. As such, the Stari Most Bridge has risen above the traumatic memories of 'ethnic cleansing' and 'war' to become a symbolic space of 'peace' and 'reconciliation.' In other words, it has been reborn as a 'peacemaker.' Although a restored structure, the Stari Most Bridge may be a heritage site most in line with UNESCO's mission.

### 3. Can the Mt. Geumgang Electric Railway Bridge in Cheolwon, Korea, become another peacemaker?

The case of the Temple of Preah Vihear and Stari Most Bridge reminds the author of another place in Korea that carries similar symbolic significance. It is none other than the Mt. Geumgang Electric Railway Bridge (a National Registered Cultural Heritage) in Cheolwon. Popularly referred to as a 'severed bridge,' it is a place fraught with memories of past conflict and potential for future conflict.

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It is a place currently inaccessible to the public, a point beyond which no one is allowed to travel from the south. In addition, there are places in Korea that were sites of forced labor during Japanese colonial occupation that are comparable to places in Japan like Hashima (Battleship) Island, such as the old Japanese Army Armory in Bupyeong and the Okmae Mine in Haenam. Can these places become peacemakers like the Stari Most Bridge? Or will they spark conflict as in the case of Preah Vihear? It may be up to all of us as we put our heads together over what kind of places we want them to be.

**Yeonkyung Lee**, Research Professor at the Regional Humanities and Information Convergence Research Institute of Incheon National University

After graduating from Yonsei University with a B.A. in Architectural Engineering, Dr. Lee received her master's and doctoral degrees in architectural history theory at the same university. She conducted research on post-19<sup>th</sup> century modern urbanization and architectural changes in Seoul and Incheon. Her on-going research topics include industrial cities and industrial heritage.

# UNESCO World Heritage Sites at the Center of International Disputes. How Can They Be Resolved?

**Hyunkyung Lee**, Research Professor, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies



## 1. Are UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Service of Peace or Conflict?

The year 2022 will mark the 50th anniversary of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. Since the Convention was promulgated, the UNESCO World Heritage Program has been both a rescuer of global heritage sites endangered by natural disasters and a cultural diplomat disseminating information about the presence and value of heritage sites scattered around the world. Additionally, the Program has contributed to promoting globalized perspectives that regard valuable regional heritages as assets shared by all humanity instead of simply being private or national possessions, and to enhance a sense of a global community inspiring collective efforts to protect and benefit from such assets. As a result, UNESCO World Heritage Sites have been serving as a conduit of intercultural communication, enhancing global understanding of diverse cultural values among nations. This, in turn, has boosted the Convention's role as a vehicle for communicating UNESCO's founding spirit of peacebuilding to the world.

Every summer, the World Heritage Committee announces new additions to the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. The announcements come as a great honor and a delight to the nations that have had their sites newly listed, and the new listings are welcomed and celebrated by the rest of the world in hopes that they will be conducive to world peace. However, there have been some exceptions to this. A good example is the UNESCO ‘Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining’ (hereinafter referred to as “Meiji Industrial Revolution Heritage Sites”) that were added to the World Heritage List in 2015 at the 39th session of the World Heritage Committee held in Bonn, Germany. The announcement was not welcomed by all nations. The Meiji Industrial Revolution Heritage Sites, encompassing a total of 23 serial properties, were recognized by UNESCO for their ‘outstanding universal value’ as the birthplace of Asia’s first industrial revolution. Accordingly, Japan was eager to promote the heritage around the world as a place of glorious memories associated with industrial development during the Meiji period. However, Hashima or Battleship Island, one of the 23 serial properties, is a place scarred by the pain of Korean and Chinese nationals and Allied POWs who were put to forced labor there during the Pacific War. Against this background, Korea and relevant states parties as well as surviving individuals of forced labor on the island condemned Japan for trying to distort history by taking advantage of the UNESCO World Heritage Program. This controversy escalated into a memory war and historical disputes between Japan and East Asian countries. In February 2022, Japan announced its nomination of the Sado Mines as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, emphasizing the industrial heritage elements from the Edo period. This move is expected to fuel another dispute between Korea and Japan within the framework of UNESCO following the one over the Meiji Revolution Heritage.

International disputes over UNESCO World Heritage sites are not unique to Korea and Japan. International disputes over UNESCO World Heritage sites that were brought to the fore by the inscription of the Meiji Industrial Revolution Heritage Sites are witnessed in different forms in Europe, Africa, and the wider world.

International rows over UNESCO World Heritage sites are witnessed in different forms around the world including in Europe and Africa.

That brings us to the question, what causes UNESCO World Heritage sites to be at the center of international disputes? In the following, I will identify three types of disputes involving UNESCO World Heritage sites and analyze the underlying causes.

## 2. Types of Disputes Over UNESCO World Heritage Sites

The first and most frequent type of international dispute involving World Heritage sites is when the candidate site is associated with recent international conflict. According to a 2018 ICOMOS report, an advisory group to UNESCO, a steep increase in the share of “sites associated with memories of recent conflicts” on the Tentative List has prompted discussions about whether these sites conform to the purpose and scope of the World Heritage Convention.<sup>1</sup> Here, the scope of ‘recent conflicts’ covers the 20th and 21st centuries, with the term ‘conflict’ encompassing “wars, battles, massacres, genocide and other negative events involving opposing views of several parties.” Cases in point include the ‘Funeral and Memorial Sites of the First World War (Western Front),’ a joint nomination by Belgium and France, and Rwanda’s push to inscribe sites associated with the Rwanda Genocide.

<sup>1</sup> ICOMOS, 2018, COMOS Discussion Paper: Evaluation of World Heritage Nominations related to Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/167810>).

UNESCO and ICOMOS maintain a cautious stance regarding such movements. The aforementioned Outstanding Universal Value of a site is determined on the basis of its tangible and intangible values and attributes combined with its visual integrity and authenticity. However, UNESCO and ICOMOS are concerned that, in the case of a place of memory, the historical 'memories' associated with the site are the chief factor constituting its value, which means it may overshadow the tangible significance. To be sure, there are cases where such places of memory were listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites such as Poland's 'Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp' (1979) and 'the Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Atomic Bomb Dome)' (1996). However, UNESCO and ICOMOS make it clear that these cases are exceptions.<sup>2</sup>

UNESCO is of the view that listing a place of memory as a World Heritage site runs the risk of provoking political disputes among concerned parties that have vastly different interpretations of the property's significance, which runs counter to UNESCO's mission of safeguarding peace.

**2** ICOMOS, 2018, ICOMOS Discussion Paper: Evaluation of World Heritage Nominations related to Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts (<https://whc.unesco.org/document/167810>).

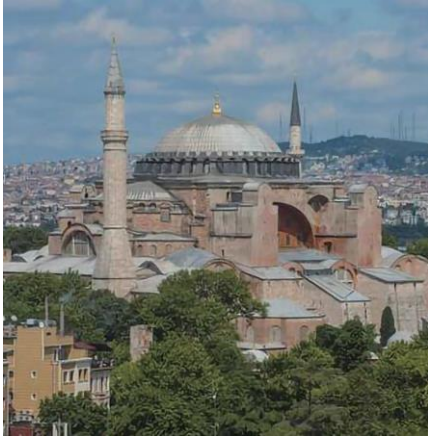
UNESCO World Heritage experts concluded that since most parties pushing for the listing of places of memory are victimized nations in historical conflicts, it is difficult to ensure objectivity in their description of their merits. This makes such properties unfit for inclusion in the scope of World Heritage sites.<sup>3</sup> This prudence on UNESCO's part seems to stem from earlier disputes among nations that have different memories about sites recognized as World Heritages such as the Meiji Industrial Revolution Heritage Sites. The experience has taught UNESCO that listing places of memory as World Heritage sites risks putting itself under the pressure of having to act not only as a mediator in an international dispute but also as a judge of historical justice. In addition, most countries that have a controlling influence on UNESCO are industrialized nations that used to be colonial powers and aggressors of war. These countries are unlikely to be favorable to having places of memory in victim nations related to their past colonial or war activities recognized as World Heritage sites and promulgated to the rest of the world as memorial sites for the victims. All these indicate that the UNESCO World Heritage Program has become a locus of conflict between neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism despite its professed purpose of preserving humanity's valuable heritage and that the process of selecting World Heritage sites is marred by behind-the-curtain power struggles.

3 ICOMOS, 2018, ICOMOS Second Discussion Paper: Evaluation of World Heritage Nominations related to Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts and the World Heritage Convention (Reflection on whether and how these might relate to the purpose and scope of the World Heritage Convention and its Operational Guidelines)(<http://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2368/>).

The second type of dispute occurs when a place already listed or close to being listed as a World Heritage site is exploited for political purposes.

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Hagia Sophia in Turkey  
© M&G Therin-Weise from UNESCO



Interior of Hagia Sophia in Turkey  
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The second type of disputes [are] ... a manifestation of a clash between nationalism pursued by individual nations and internationalism espoused by UNESCO in the interest of promoting harmony around the world.

This is often a manifestation of a clash between nationalism pursued by individual nations and internationalism espoused by UNESCO in the interest of promoting harmony around the world. A case in point is the conversion Hagia Sophia in Turkey from a museum into a mosque after the building was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Hagia Sophia located in Istanbul, Turkey, was originally built as an Orthodox Christian cathedral. Later, it was converted into an Islamic mosque by the Ottoman Empire and then into a museum by the Turkish Republic after World War I. Since then, the place became Turkey's most visited attraction for its unique cultural, religious and architectural values shaped by an encounter between European and Asian civilizations.

However, in July 2020, the Turkish government announced plans to convert the museum back into a mosque. UNESCO and the international community, including the EU and US, responded by expressing concern and regret about the Turkish government's unilateral decision.<sup>4</sup>

The Turkish government's decision is seen as a political maneuver by the Islamist President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to mobilize the religious conservatives to evade his political crisis. This is to say that the Turkish government's decision was motivated by political calculations, which is unsurprising in light of the fact that governments around the world have often used their UNESCO World Heritage sites as a political instrument for establishing a positive national identity and gaining public support. Nevertheless, Hagia Sophia as a UNESCO World Heritage site is bound by the World Heritage Convention which requires it to be managed and maintained in accordance with its provisions. As mentioned earlier, when a place is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, it becomes a heritage of humanity that transcends national boundaries. Under this rule, the host nation of a World Heritage site is liable to exercise stewardship to preserve the site's values so that they can be enjoyed by the rest of the world. As emphasized by UNESCO's statement, Hagia Sophia's outstanding universal value as a World Heritage site lies in the fact that it is a space symbolic of cultural diversity in communication. The repurposing of the building risks destroying that value.

<sup>4</sup> Orla Guerin, 2020, Hagia Sophia: Turkey turns iconic Istanbul museum into mosque, BBC NEWS, 10 July (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53366307>).

Additionally, converting the building into a religious place means it is transformed from a space open to everyone such as a museum to a space frequented only by a certain group of people. The Turkish government, however, refuses to honor the terms it agreed to under the World Heritage Convention, claiming ownership over the heritage site in question on grounds that it is located within its territory.

The Meiji Industrial Revolution Heritage Sites and the Sado Mines in Japan are other examples of attempts to use World Heritage sites as a means of achieving political goals at the risk of provoking conflicts with other nations. Japan is intent on promoting those sites as heritages of its glorious industrial development by getting them officially recognized under the UNESCO World Heritage Program. In doing so, Japan is deliberately highlighting select periods related to the sites while trying to exclude the memories associated with them when they used to be places of forced labor during the Pacific War. This appears to reflect the historical revisionism of Japan's right-wing, which seeks to utilize the World Heritage Program as an instrument for promoting a nationalist worldview. Japan's disregard for objection from other nations with negative memories of the sites in question poses a threat to UNESCO's internationalism.

Disputes surrounding UNESCO World Heritage sites occur when diverse stakeholders seek to get involved in the management of a property ... in an effort to expand its meaning.



**Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park**  
© Emmanuel Pivard from UNESCO

Lastly, disputes surrounding UNESCO World Heritage sites occur when diverse stakeholders seek to get involved in the management of a property already inscribed in an effort to expand its meaning. Recently, indigenous peoples in New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and Southeast Asia are raising their voices, calling for a re-evaluation of properties already listed as World Heritage sites. A good example is Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park in Australia. The park features unique geological formations dotting vast sandy plains in central Australia.<sup>5</sup> This national park was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987 under the name of Ayers Rock-Mount Olga National Park.

**5** UNESCO, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, World Heritage List (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/447/>) (Accessed on April 21, 2022).

In 1983, the Australian Prime Minister transferred ownership of the national park from the Commonwealth government to the aboriginals of Anangu. Afterwards, the aboriginals demanded that the national park be renamed in the aboriginal language. They also emphasized that this park was not only a place of scenic beauty but a cultural property forming part of a long-standing traditional belief system. This spawned a protracted dispute between the Australian government and the aboriginal people, which led UNSECO to review the significance of the heritage site. As a result, in 1994, criterion (vi) was added as a basis for assessing a candidate site's outstanding value, accounting for the national park's uniqueness of being associated with the aboriginals' lives and traditions. Concurrently, the park was renamed in the aboriginal language.

In a similar vein, there are voices demanding a reinterpretation of the significance of Vietnam's Phong Na-Keh Bang National Park, which was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2015. The place was originally classified as a natural heritage, but efforts are being made to link the site to the stories of the indigenous people who lived in the area. Most cultural heritage experts agree on the need to foster a multi-layered understanding of World Heritage sites by incorporating stories about indigenous peoples, women, slaves, and victims of forced labor hidden behind beautiful natural sceneries and cultural prowess. This is in line with the necessity of incorporating the history of forced labor into the description of the Meiji Industrial Revolution Heritage Sites and the Sado Mines. However, UNESCO and its advisory bodies expressed concerns that such re-evaluations can negatively affect the established outstanding universal values of the sites in question and that the process of bringing the relevant stakeholders to an agreement about adding new interpretations can result in political disputes. This may be seen as a reaction on UNESCO's part to the new challenges being posed by the rising voices of diverse stakeholders to the traditional Europe- and elite-dominated World Heritage mechanisms. Such discordance is expected to continue for the time being.

### 3. The Key to Peace: Reinterpreting Disputes Surrounding World Heritage Sites

Above, we have identified three types of disputes surrounding World Heritage sites. The primary factor that has turned World Heritage sites from a symbol of peace into a source of diverse international disputes is the shifts that have occurred in the international environment surrounding them. At the time the World Heritage Program was launched, its main goal was to protect heritage properties from armed conflicts. Seen from that perspective, peace equaled an absence of armed conflict. Today, however, we are living in an era of cultural warfare. This shift in the international landscape requires peace to be redefined accordingly. World Heritage sites carry high value as a global cultural brand officially endorsed by an international organization. The inscription of a national property as a World Heritage site can draw global attention to the country, providing it with an effective means of conveying certain national images to the world. World Heritage sites are no longer just subjects of protection. They have become key weapons of public diplomacy. Against this backdrop, international disputes over World Heritage sites are likely to intensify in the years to come. Other factors expanding such disputes at the international, national, and regional levels include the increasing diversity in the class of people enjoying World Heritage sites and the growing influence of regional communities that in the past had little say in issues relating to heritage properties.

Does this mean the World Heritage Program is trapped in an inescapable structure of conflict? Are the days when UNESCO World Heritage sites contributed to world peace over? In lieu of directly answering these questions, I would like to offer a reinterpretation of the meaning of heritage site-related disputes from three different perspectives. First, disputes over World Heritage sites provide an opportunity to re-conceptualize ‘peace’ as envisioned by UNESCO in the context of the evolving international order.

Disputes over World Heritage sites provide an opportunity to re-conceptualize ‘peace’ as envisioned by UNESCO in the context of the evolving international order [...] disputes over World Heritage sites can be construed as a sign of the maturity of the World Heritage Program. [...] the growing trend of disputes over World Heritage properties [...] has served as the impetus for fostering citizen’s voluntary participation in their management.

Traditionally, UNESCO has understood peace as a state of absence of conflicts or clashes. This concept of peace makes disputes over World Heritage sites intolerable to UNESCO. However, we need to face the fact that, in this era of cultural warfare, international conflicts are inevitable. In other words, peace should be understood as an action verb rather than a static noun, and as a process rather than a single right answer. In a similar vein, international disputes need to be viewed as an opportunity to appreciate the complexity of situations at multiple levels and as an initiator of communication.

Next, disputes over World Heritage sites can be construed as a sign of the maturity of the World Heritage Program. In other words, they reflect the Program’s broadened understanding of heritage sites that not only considers their aesthetic beauty but also pays attention to the stories of suffering hidden behind them. In this sense, disputes over World Heritage sites have provided the impetus for nations to move away from a blind race to get their properties listed on the World Heritage List to having great appreciation for the diverse aspects of heritage properties.

Lastly, the growing trend of disputes over World Heritage properties points to UNESCO’s limitations in overseeing heritage sites and has fostered citizen’s voluntary participation in heritage management. So far, the significance of World Heritage sites has been defined top-down within UNESCO’s framework and a site’s outstanding universal value was key to determining its significance.

Over the years, this mechanism has been criticized as unfit to incorporate the diverse values and narratives associated with properties, and at times as the source of international disputes. When the Slate Landscape of Northwest Wales was added to the World Heritage List at the 44th session of the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO and the UK stressed that the landscape is testimony to the unique aspects of the British slate industry. However, in an article contributed to the Guardian, Dr. Steve Cushion, a descendant of the Pennant family, stressed that the growth of the slate industry in the region was made possible by the profits the family made from slavery work in Jamaica and that the suffering of slave workers hidden behind the beauty of the landscape should be remembered. This case exemplifies how citizens' involvement can add new meaning to heritage properties that have been omitted by UNESCO and the host country's government.

A series of disputes over World Heritage sites have led UNESCO to seek new changes. Earlier, UNESCO ruled that properties of memory do not conform to the scope and purpose of the World Heritage Convention. This decision was contested at the 44th session of the World Heritage Committee in 2021 by representatives of the African Union and Brazil who urged the Committee to reconsider. Currently, an open-ended working group made up of signatory nations to the World Heritage Convention is looking into whether places of memory are compatible with the Convention's scope and purpose and whether the scope and purpose can be expanded to incorporate places of memory by accommodating more diverse perspectives.

**6** Steve Cushion, The links between Welsh slate and slavery. The Guardian, July 30, 2021 (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/30/the-links-between-welsh-slate-and-slavery>).

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## Focus II

Such efforts by UNESCO to resolve disputes through dialogue and be more flexible in defining the boundaries of World Heritage sites are understood as positive responses to the changing global environment. In tandem with these efforts on UNESCO's part, the public attitude toward World Heritage sites needs to change as well. Most people are either uninterested in international disputes over World Heritage properties or quick to blame UNESCO. However, if we accept the premise that World Heritage properties are jointly owned by the entirety of humanity instead of being UNESCO's possessions, each and every one of us should feel responsible for their well-being. In this context, global citizens are required to take a more active role in the World Heritage Program's efforts to chart its course for another 50 years down the road. Such public engagement will pave the way for achieving peace as a process and a product of communication as envisioned by UNESCO.

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