

History in a Box: UNESCO and the Framing of Japan's Meiji Era 「箱入り」歴史 ユネスコと明治期の位地づけ

William Underwood

Japan has a great deal to be proud of regarding its rapid modernization and industrialization beginning in the mid-1800s, which launched the nation on the path to becoming the world's second-largest economy scarcely one generation after a devastating war and the third-largest economy today.

But is it possible to tell this impressive, even inspirational, story while skipping over the deplorable middle chapters involving Japan's massive use of forced labor during the Asia Pacific War?

That question is the crux of the [controversy](#) involving "Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution," a Japan-sponsored nomination now before the UNESCO World Heritage Committee that would grant World Heritage status to two dozen mines, ports, factories and shipyards located mainly in the nation's southwest. In [May 2015](#) an advisory body recommended that the UNESCO committee approve the Japanese proposal when it meets in Germany from June 28 to July 8. The advisory report describes a "series of industrial heritage sites ... seen to represent the first successful transfer of industrialization from the West to a non-Western nation."



Video frame from [website](#) of the Consortium for the Promotion of the Modern Industrial Heritage in Kyushu and Yamaguchi to Inscription on the World Heritage, hereafter consortium. (Photo by Hideaki Uchiyama)

South Korea and China, however, have been firmly opposed to the celebratory listing and vigorous lobbying campaigns on both sides of the issue have been under way, injecting international politics into what is normally a low-profile decision about cultural landmarks. History is never easy in Northeast Asia.

The [South Korean](#) government loudly insisted for several months that the 23 Japanese properties fail to display the "universal values" required for World Heritage listing, pointing especially to the seven sites where some 60,000 Koreans were forced to work for Japanese companies in support of the imperial war effort. But in the days leading up to the UNESCO meeting in Bonn, Seoul abruptly announced it now supports Japan's nomination. The reversal apparently resulted from a last-minute

compromise with Tokyo about how the presence of the Korean workers in wartime Japan would be portrayed.


In addition to the Koreans, there were thousands of Chinese and Allied POW forced laborers at the seven industrial sites. Alluding to the unresolved legacy of wartime forced labor, the [Chinese](#) government argues 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 a total of 135 locations. One out of six Chinese died there. Over a longer period of time and with increasing degrees of coercion, around 700,000 Koreans were forced to toil under harsh wartime conditions for private industry in Japan. The Koreans were not properly paid despite being considered subjects of the Japanese emperor; there was little pretense of paying the enemy Chinese at all.

Some 35,000 Allied POWs, comprising the third main group of forced laborers in Japan, typically 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 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 was supplied with wartime workers from the [Fukuoka # 3](#) POW camp. Built by the central government using indemnity payments extracted from China following the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, the foundry was later taken over by Nippon Steel, which operated the mills during the war and still does today. Advocates for former American and British

POWs of the Japanese have called on Japan to ensure [historical accuracy](#) in the event World Heritage recognition is granted. Millions of Indonesians and other Southeast Asians were also forced to work for the Japanese state and companies throughout the vast if short-lived empire.

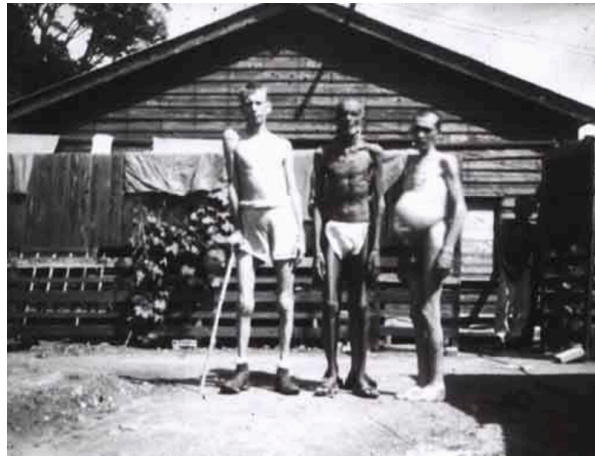


SITES OF JAPAN'S MEIJI INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION: Kyushu-Yamaguchi and Related Areas

A BLAST FURNACE BEGINS STEEL PRODUCTION
JAPAN JOINS THE RANKS OF MODERN NATION-STATES

Yawata Steel Works in 1900, a centerpiece of the new industrialism then owned by the Japanese central government. Nippon Steel, a heavy corporate user of wartime forced labor, still runs the facilities today. (Video frame from consortium website)

South Korea and Japan sit on the 21-member UNESCO World Heritage [Committee](#), but China does not. The other current members are Algeria, Colombia, Croatia, Finland, Germany, India, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Senegal, Serbia, Turkey and Vietnam. Approval by two-thirds of member nations is required to accept nominated listings, but decision by consensus is the norm. With South Korea now on board, despite previously suggesting it might demand a roll call vote this time, the Japanese nomination is nearly certain to be approved.



The Fukuoka #3 POW camp housed around 1,200 Allied prisoners of war and provided labor for the Yahata steel mills. Photo by U.S. marine Terence Kirk, who used a pinhole camera to secretly record the horrors of camp life.

Japan's global initiative to showcase the superior industrial accomplishments of the Meiji era represents one of its most focused public relations efforts of recent years. A content-rich multimedia [website](#), with an unusually well-presented [English](#) version, 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. The broader UNESCO bid reflects sustained groundwork over a decade or more by Japan's public and private sectors at the local, regional and national levels.

"Emergence of Industrial Japan: Kyushu-Yamaguchi" is a 20-page summary of the original 2009 proposal that can be found [here](#) and at the [website](#) of the Kagoshima-based consortium. 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 socio-economic 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 paper goes on to describe the "outstanding universal value" of the individual properties with respect to the UNESCO listing criteria.

The consortium document contends the collection of 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 nineteenth century that one must look to begin to understand their transformation."



One spur of the sprawling Miike mine in Omuta, Mitsui's Miyahara coal pit opened in 1898, using a labor force of prison inmates who dubbed it the

“demon’s pit.” (Video frame from consortium [website](#))

The fact that Mitsubishi and Mitsui were two of the largest users of wartime forced labor across all three groups of victims is not mentioned in the proposal. 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 nomination 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 couple of decades later. The validity of this premise is questionable. The promotional literature’s chronological break – skipping from 1910 to the achievement of “global brand and household name status” today – also may involve a logical fallacy. How can Japan’s current economic success be firmly rooted in the late nineteenth century but yet disconnected from the period during the twentieth century when forced labor became widespread in the context of colonialism and war?



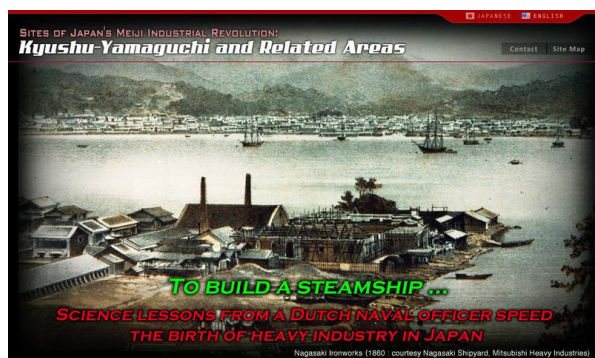
Two Chinese survivors of forced labor in the Miike mines and supporters outside the Fukuoka High Court in 2004, after a lower court’s compensation order against Mitsui Mining Corp. was overturned. Mitsui used thousands of forced laborers but has never acknowledged its corporate history. The sign at right reads “unfair verdict.” (Photo by Fukuoka Lawyers Group for Chinese Forced Labor Lawsuits)

The more concrete problem is that, concerning wartime forced labor and its aftermath, Japan’s government and corporations over the past 70 years have done a very poor job in terms of 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 victims.

Korean workers forcibly conscripted to places like Mitsui’s coal mining complex at Miike or

Mitsubishi's undersea coal mine at Hashima island 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 penultimate American act of the war.)

After the war, Japanese companies 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, 2015, according to figures supplied to *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 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.



1860 scene of Nagasaki's historic shipyard, owned by Mitsubishi since 1887 and still producing ships

today. The nomination for World Heritage status of operational industrial enterprises is considered atypical. (Video frame from consortium [website](#))

In recent years the Japanese government has furnished its Seoul counterpart 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 2012 paid pension refunds of **99 yen** (about one 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 perceived a national insult. Lawsuits against Japanese companies remain very much alive in South Korean courts, as the nation's Supreme Court ruled in 2012 that the 1965 treaty that normalized relations with Japan does not block such legal action. On June 24, 2015, in the latest of a string of similar rulings at the district and high court levels, the Gwangju High Court upheld a ruling that Mitsubishi must compensate five plaintiffs for forced labor.



Japan in March 2010 finally provided South Korea with payroll and pension records for Korean labor conscripts whose salary arrears and other funds have been held in the Bank of Japan

since the late 1940s. The South Korean government is using the data in order to compensate its own citizens. (Photo by Yonhap News Agency)

The case of Chinese forced labor perhaps most vividly illustrates Japan's postwar avoidance of responsibility. In 1946, expecting war crimes prosecutions and attempting to downplay the cruelty of the program, the 35 Japanese firms that used the 38,935 Chinese males, aged 11-78, exhaustively documented all aspects of the labor importation scheme. The Japanese government used that source material to compile the 646-page "Foreign Ministry Report," which concluded the program was a major financial burden on companies and failed to alleviate Japan's manpower crisis as intended. Related to this finding, Japanese corporations received generous indemnity payments from the central government after the war's end, while the Chinese workers received little or nothing in wages.

Kishi Nobusuke, czar of Japan's wartime labor system and the grandfather of current Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, was imprisoned until 1948 as an unindicted Class A war crimes suspect before being released and eventually becoming prime minister from 1957 to 1960. Kishi's striking reversal of fortune unfolded with the imprimatur of the U.S. government, which due to Cold War political realities had lost the will for war crimes prosecutions related to Chinese forced labor. The Americans were never informed of the existence of the Foreign Ministry Report, and during the Kishi administration high-ranking Japanese officials conspired to [cover up](#) the facts of the Chinese labor program by destroying the report altogether.



Chinese men support each other during a 2005 trip to Takashima island in Nagasaki, where the company now known as Mitsubishi Materials once forced them to dig coal. There were also Korean labor conscripts at the Takashima mine, set to become a UNESCO World Heritage site. (Photo by Nagasaki Support Group for Chinese Forced Labor Lawsuits)

The Foreign Ministry Report [resurfaced](#) in Tokyo in the early 1990s, however, providing a strong basis for a slew of lawsuits in Japan by Chinese victims and family members. Although the Japan Supreme Court eventually ruled in 2007 that Chinese plaintiffs could not bring such suits under the terms of the Joint Communiqué signed by China and Japan in 1972, lower Japanese courts routinely found that the state and companies illegally brought the workers from China and illegally forced them to work under horrendous conditions. Several courts issued compensation orders that were later overturned, while even Japan's top court stated that a settlement should be achieved outside the judicial arena. Only Nishimatsu Corp., having obtained legal immunity as a result of the 2007 Supreme Court ruling, has chosen the path of reconciliation by compensating workers at its wartime construction sites in a pair of settlements in [2009](#) and [2010](#).

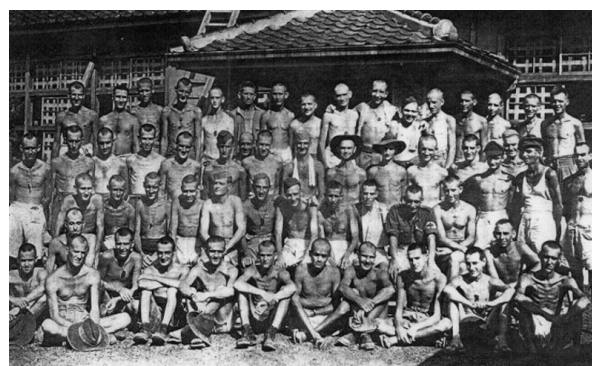
Mitsubishi has indicated that it would be open to the establishment of a joint state-corporate fund to compensate Chinese victims of forced labor, but the Japanese government has expressed zero interest in the concept. Wartime Japan's largest munitions maker, Mitsubishi has also been discussing compensation with representatives of Chinese workers for several years, but no deals have been reached. The Chinese government, meanwhile, announced more than a decade ago that it would permit the filing of forced labor lawsuits in Chinese courts; the first plaintiff – a survivor of the Mitsui Miike mine – was even named. But such suits have made little apparent progress due to Beijing's ambivalence toward forced labor reparations, as the Chinese state presumably does not want to encourage redress claims for more recent domestic violations of individual human rights.

Allied POWs, whose legal quest for redress failed in the court systems of Japan and various Western nations, have received tangible conciliatory gestures in recent years. In early 2009 the administration of Prime Minister Aso Taro twice issued an apology in the Diet to "all POWs." That same year the Japanese ambassador to the U.S. apologized in person to survivors of the Bataan Death March and announced that American ex-POWs would start being included in Japan's Peace, Friendship and Exchange initiative. Since 1995 more than one thousand former Allied POWs and family members have visited Japan with all expenses paid by the Japanese government, typically touring the sites where they once worked and attaining some measure of healing and closure.

Yet Aso Taro, currently deputy prime minister and finance minister and long one of Japan's loosest canons in terms of provocative war-related gaffes, is hardly a model of historical awareness. *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 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 flatly 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.

Prime Minister Aso declined to meet the [Australian](#) ex-POW who had worked at Aso Mining during his 2009 visit to Japan. The 88-year-old veteran was able to meet with officials of the company's successor firm, known as Aso Corp. and headed by Aso's brother, but they would not confirm the presence of POWs at Aso Mining despite being shown records produced by the family firm in 1946. The Aussie returned home with a company lapel pin but no apology. Some 10,000 Korean conscripts also worked at [Aso Mining's](#) numerous coal pits, but Aso Taro has made clear he believes there was no forced labor involved. At times he has appeared to intentionally antagonize Koreans and Chinese over sensitive historical matters. Japan's UNESCO application was originally filed when Aso was prime minister.



Late August 1945 photo of 57 recently liberated Australian POWs forced to work at Aso Mining's Yoshikuma coal mine. For more than two years Aso Taro refused to admit there were 300 Allied POWs at his family's mine, despite foreign media accounts based on official records. (Photo courtesy of Tony Griffith, son of Arthur Griffith, who is in front row

at far left)

Returning to the controversy involving the probable listing of the Japanese facilities as world landmarks, Seoul and Tokyo have been holding high-level bilateral meetings to seek a compromise that would prevent open acrimony at the normally staid UNESCO session beginning on June 28. South Korean officials are focusing on one recommendation in the [advisory report](#) by the International Council on Monuments and Sites. While urging approval of the Japanese proposal, ICOMOS 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.”

The Korean side has suggested an appropriate interpretive strategy might involve signage or other educational elements that forthrightly describe the forced labor at seven of the sites beginning roughly one generation after 1910. Indeed, by portraying the “full history” of the contested 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 longstanding disavowal of the term “forced labor,” and of the even stronger “slave labor,” stems from its 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. South Korea argues the annexation, and the wholesale conscription of Koreans that flowed from it, violated international law.

The essentially mutually exclusive views of

Japan’s harsh colonization of Korea and the resulting system of forced labor suggest the surprising compromise struck on the eve of the UNESCO meeting was a case study in delicate diplomacy, although few details were immediately made public. Once a UNESCO listing gets the official green light, it is not clear how much leverage regarding “interpretive strategy” other countries may retain. Certainly there are reasons for skepticism regarding how earnestly Japan would implement the ICOMOS recommendation for portraying the complete history of the nominated sites.



British sailors and marines in 1864 after capturing the Maeda gun battery in Shimonoseki during military clashes between Western naval forces and the Choshu feudal domain. Rebellious Choshu and Satsuma leaders opposed both the weak Tokugawa government and the presence of foreigners in Japan, hastening the Meiji Restoration. The Maeda Battery was included in the first version of Japan’s World Heritage proposal, which termed the Shimonoseki hostilities “a turning point in the exchange of Western and Eastern cultures,” but it has since been dropped from the bid. (Video frame from consortium [website](#))

Japan under Prime Minister [Abe Shinzo](#) 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 confession of wartime wrongdoing, as well as the Kono Statement of 1993 that acknowledged the Japanese army had forced the so-called "comfort women" to work as prostitutes in military-run "comfort stations." In [May 2015](#) an "Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan" was circulated in response to a widely perceived rise in historical revisionism extending well beyond the [comfort women](#) issue to include new guidelines for high school history textbooks and other contested issues. [Unbroken](#), the factual account of the remarkable life of American POW Louis Zamperini, has never been screened in Japan due to a rightwing 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, producing the relatively progressive premierships of Hatoyama Yukio and then Kan Naoto. But the [sea change](#) in Japan's approach to war responsibility [never materialized](#), due to weak leadership as well as regional eruptions involving comfort women and territorial boundaries that overwhelmed any good intentions. The hawkish Abe and the 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 World Heritage gambit. An 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.



Left: Japanese community activists in 2006 describe a former Mitsubishi coal mine in Iizuka, Fukuoka, to South Korean government researchers and Korean relatives of a forced laborer who died in a wartime explosion there. Right: Historical rendering of the Mitsubishi Iizuka mine tower from the landmark's signboard. (Photos by William Underwood)

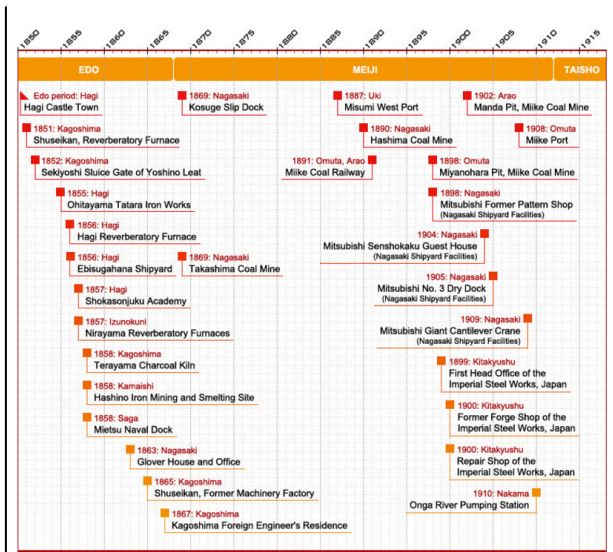
So do the pair's deep ties to the influential and assertively revisionist group known as *Nippon Kaigi*, or Japan Conference, which rejects the "masochistic view" of World War II and seeks to restore national pride in Japan's accomplishments throughout the entire first half of the twentieth century. Focusing UNESCO attention on sites connected to the last half of the nineteenth century may represent a backdoor strategy to pursue that aim.

The Truth and Glory of the Coal Mines: The Fabrication of Korean Forced Labor is the title of a book written using a middle-school language level and published in 2005 by the Nippon Kaigi chapter in Chikuhō, the region at

the heart of Kyushu's now-defunct mining district. The book's author, Satani Masayuki, is a retired front-office employee of Mitsubishi's coal division and a member of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, or *Tsukurukai*, which publishes textbooks that downplay and at times deny Japanese war misconduct and atrocities. Satani previously self-published a book called *Wake Up from the Brainwashing of the Tokyo Trials View of History*.

The editor of *Truth and Glory* is a former head of the municipal history museum in Iizuka, Chikuho's main city, and co-author of *The 100-Year History of Aso*, published in 1975 when Aso Taro headed the family firm. The 1,500-page Aso corporate history contains a single cryptic reference to wartime forced labor. As Japanese miners left for military service, the book says, "people like Korean laborers and Chinese prisoners of war filled the void" in Japan's mining industry.

The Japanese consortium's 2009 summary of its UNESCO vision states that accessible collections of historical records are a "crucial element of demonstrating authenticity" of the sites. The proposal identifies the coal mining museums in the Chikuho cities of Tagawa and Nogata as primary archives for such records. A fundamental problem, however, is that these local museums mostly omit the histories of non-Japanese miners, as well as *burakumin*, who once lived and worked throughout the area in the tens of thousands.



Timeline from consortium website including cultural properties slated for World Heritage approval. Japanese colonialism and military aggression began during the Meiji era (1868-1912) and peaked during the first two decades of the Showa era (1926-1989). This reality, existing alongside Japan's admirable industrial achievements, is at the root of the UNESCO controversy.

The table of contents of the 500-page report prepared by ICOMOS for the upcoming World Heritage Committee meeting confirms the ambitious, even audacious, scale of Japan's UNESCO bid. The other 44 nominations this year include rock art sites in Saudi Arabia and Uganda, Viking sites in northern Europe, a bridge in the UK, Spanish missions in the U.S., an aqueduct in Mexico, a monastery in Georgia and botanical gardens in Singapore. The more conventional Japanese cultural properties recognized in the past two years consisted of Mount Fuji and a silk mill in Gunma Prefecture.

To some observers, the very nature of Japan's present "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.”



Map from consortium report showing locations of nominated sites in Kyushu-Yamaguchi region of western Japan.

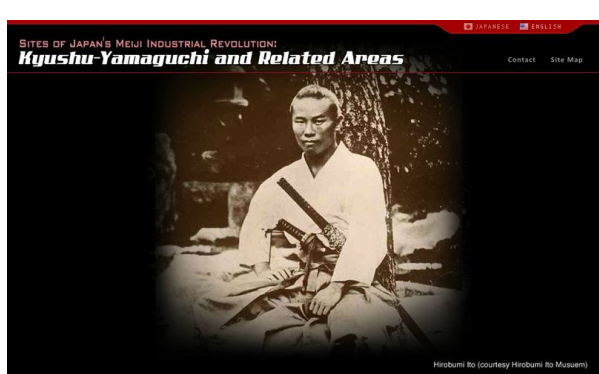
The visionary Yoshida (1830-1859) has also been accurately described by one reference source as a “samurai, instructor and martyred revolutionary.” His small but influential school in Hagi, Yamaguchi Prefecture, located in what is today the electoral district of Prime Minister Abe, provided the philosophical compass for the core of young leaders who affected 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, Ito Hirobumi, 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, considered a founding father of the modern Japanese 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 Northeast Asia’s memory wars, given such implications for national identity in a region with no shared version of twentieth-century history.



A samurai and student of Yoshida Shoin, Ito Hirobumi became an architect of the Meiji Constitution and a respected Japanese leader and statesman. Today Ito and his Korean assassin are remembered very differently in different countries of the region. (Video frame from consortium [website](#))

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 tourists 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 story of Japan's modernization and industrial expansion after 1850 deserves to be told – warts and all.

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