

The UNESCO Debate

Handout B — Student reading

Simulating Silence — Secondary Teacher Resources

KEY TERMS

UNESCO: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation — an international body that decides which sites around the world have special historical importance.

World Heritage Site: A place UNESCO says is so important that the whole world should help protect it. Countries must agree to look after these sites properly.

Inscription: The process of adding a site to the World Heritage List. Countries apply and must meet strict conditions.

Contested heritage: A historical site or monument that different groups remember and describe in very different ways — often because the site is connected to events that are still politically sensitive.

What happened in 2015?

In July 2015, UNESCO added 23 Japanese industrial sites — including Hashima Island — to the World Heritage List. They were grouped under the title “Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution.” Japan celebrated this as recognition of how it became a modern industrial nation. But South Korea objected. Korea said the nomination ignored the history of forced labour at these sites during World War II.

After negotiations, Japan’s representative at UNESCO made a statement. He said Japan would tell the “full history” of each site. He acknowledged that Korean and other workers had been “brought against their will and forced to work under harsh conditions.”

SOURCE

Statement by Japanese delegate, UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Bonn, 5 July 2015

“Japan is prepared to take measures that allow an understanding of the full history of each site... There were a large number of Koreans and others who were brought against their will and forced to work under harsh conditions in the 1940s at some of the sites.”

What did Japan do next?

The day after that statement, a senior Japanese government official said that “forced to work” did not mean “forced labour.” He said the workers had been “requisitioned” — a word that means called up or directed, but without the same meaning as “forced.”

In 2020, Japan opened the Industrial Heritage Information Centre (IHIC) in Tokyo. This was supposed to be the place that told the “full history” Japan had promised. But when UNESCO inspectors visited, they found that the centre did not properly acknowledge the experience of forced labourers. The displays included testimonies from former Japanese residents who said there had been no forced labour on the island.

What did UNESCO say?

In 2021, UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee published a decision saying it “strongly regrets” that Japan had not fulfilled its commitments. In diplomatic language, “strongly regrets” is a serious criticism. The Committee said the information centre’s interpretation was “currently insufficient” in allowing visitors to understand the experience of those who were “brought against their will and forced to work.”

But UNESCO has limited power to enforce its decisions. It cannot force Japan to change the displays. It can only keep expressing concern — and Japan can keep not changing. This raises a question about what international agreements actually mean in practice.

SOURCE

UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Decision 44 COM 7B.30, 2021

The Committee “strongly regrets that the State Party has not yet fully implemented the relevant decisions... the interpretive strategy for the property as a whole does not allow an understanding of the full history of each site.”

Why does this matter?

The Hashima debate is not just about one island. It is about a bigger question: when a country gets international recognition for a historical site, who decides what story that site tells? Japan says the sites are about industrial achievement. Korea says you cannot celebrate the industry without acknowledging the workers who were forced to build it. UNESCO says both stories should be told. So far, only one story is being told at the official information centre.

This is what historians call **contested heritage** — when the same place means very different things to different people, and the argument about its meaning is itself part of the history.

© 2023–2026 Christopher Gerteis. All Rights Reserved.