

A statement calling for revision of the letter of recommendation for “Sado Island Gold Mines” to be recognized as a World Heritage Site

On 30 January 2022, the Japanese government decided to recommend “Sado Island Gold Mines,” the former mine on the island of Sado in Niigata Prefecture, for listing as a World Heritage Site. The letter of recommendation was submitted to UNESCO the following day, but at that point the details had not yet been disclosed to the public.

Niigata Prefecture and Sado City had already been aiming for World Heritage registration. In 2010, the Sado mine was approved for the Tentative List under the title, “The Sado complex of heritage mines, primarily gold mines.”^{1, 5} and officially became a candidate for designation as a World Cultural Heritage site. The Sado complex consisted of 9 sites, including gold and silver mines, the vertical shaft, the port, the hydro power plant, and the quarries. However, in 2020, the government renamed the Sado complex “Sado Island Gold Mines,” focusing on just the Aikawa gold and silver mine, Tsurushi silver mine and Nishimikawa placer gold mine, and eliminating the other sites. Based on this plan, on the condition that it would be considered comprehensively within the government, the Japanese government and the Council of the Agency for Cultural Affairs selected Sado Island Gold Mines as a candidate for designation as a World Heritage site at the end of December 2021. The Japanese government was initially planning not to attempt to register the sites due to concern about provoking a backlash from South Korea relating to the issue of Korean forced labor during World War II. In spite of this, the recommendation was made due to pressure from nationalists in the Liberal Democratic Party who deny the existence of Korean forced labor and who also insisted that this was a situation that “relates to the honor of Japan”.

The letter of recommendation (“Asset Overview”) by the Japanese government provided the following description:

Sado Island Gold Mines is the only gold mining site in the world where the following features can be found in one place; 1) gold mines; 2) mining by manual operation only until the middle of the 19th century; and 3) not only mining zone but also settlement zone remains which illustrates its social systems.”²

There is evidence of both the technical systems, such as mining and drainage tunnels, and the social systems, such as

mining villages and the magistrate's office sites, has been preserved in excellent condition.

Sado Island Gold Mines represents the final advanced development stage of the unmechanised gold production system in history:

In its heyday, Sado Island led the world in both the quantity and quality of its gold, producing the largest amount of the precious metal, at the highest purity, of any mining site."

The technical system of *Sado Island Gold Mines* was "the world's largest amount and highest purity, exceeding that of mechanised mines." "*Sado Island Gold Mines* meets UNESCO's criteria which is an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble."

The social system which was "long-term, strategic mining management by the Tokugawa Shogunate" and "culture based on mining created by the local community" meets the criteria of being the "testimony to a cultural tradition." This is confirmed in a large number of historical documents remains to this day, giving a detailed perspective of gold mining on Sado Island.

There are, however, some serious problems with the explanations provided in the letter.

First, by limiting the scope to gold mine production, the history of mining silver and copper was excluded. Second, the period was limited to the Edo era without providing information on the full history. Third, the Tokugawa feudal system was described in a positive way, ignoring the problems of forced labor and the class system under the control of the Shogunate. Fourth, the explanation sings the praises of traditional manual mining techniques but fails to mention the fact that Sado mines were developed through the introduction of Western technology. Finally, it contains exaggerated praise such as "the highest purity of all mining sites," or "the most advanced stage in the history of the development of gold production systems before the introduction of mechanization."

The point is that in order to go forward with the registration procedure for the World Heritage site, the letter of recommendation presented a distorted view of the history of Sado Mines by just focusing on the story of the manufacturing technology of gold production in the Edo period. Thus, it did not contain anything about the people's history of the mining town Sado-

Aikawa during the Edo period, the background of the management of Mitsubishi and labor history in the modern era, and the history of Korean forced labor during war time. It made no mention of the decline of mining in the late Edo period, instead proudly emphasizing only the good points such as “long-term, strategic mining management by the Tokugawa Shogunate,” and “the final advanced development stage of the unmechanised gold production system in history.” Information about such aspects of life as the people’s culture, religious rituals and festivals related to the mines was merely tacked on at the end.

It should have first been explained that Sado Mines was the production site for gold, silver, and copper. The smelting method used in Sado mines, cupellation, was transmitted through Korea, and the mercury amalgamation process was developed by Spain and used in mines in South America before being introduced to Sado. The Archimedean screw, a machine for raising water, and the surveying techniques to construct the Minamizawa Drainage Tunnel were both Western technologies. There were a lot of traditional manual mining technologies imported to Sado mines from the West or through China and Korea. The mining management controlled by the Shogunate in the Edo period imposed an excess burden of taxation on local peasants, leading to farmers' uprisings in Sado Island. The class system under the rule of the Tokugawa solidified the outcast group, Buraku people, and furthermore, the Shogunate abused this system by having them work keeping peace and order or as prison guards. In the late Edo period, the homeless wanderers in Edo (present-day Tokyo) or other regions were also mobilized and taken to Sado mines as forced laborers to remove the water from the mines. And what is more, a memorial to 28 of the drainage workers who lost their lives in an underground fire in 1853 still remains. Many miners had short lifespans due to silicosis, effects of smoke pollution, or industrial accidents.

As mentioned above, when relating the history of Sado Mines in the Edo period, it is important to include such aspects as the scope of mining products produced, introduction of foreign mining technology, exploitative taxes imposed by the Shogunate and governance by the class system, forced labor under Tokugawa rule and mining labor history. In fact, the letter of recommendation of “*Sado Island Gold Mines*” did not provide these

explanations. Further, it told nothing about the modern history of Sado Mines despite the fact that several examples of modern mining heritage, such as the vertical shafts and the mine mills, remain on site.

In proceeding with the recommendation for the World Heritage site, the Japanese government made clear its position of denial of Korean forced labor in war time, saying “South Korea's own claims were not accepted” at the end of January, 2022. At that time, the historical denialists were emphatically trumpeting their denial regarding the use of Korean forced labor. However, it is a historical fact that eighty years ago, the Japanese government implemented a labor mobilization plan and mobilized more than 1,500 Korean people to work at Sado Mines. There is no denying that for Korean people under Japanese colonial rule, that amounted to forced mobilization and forced labor. The commendation of the gold production in the Edo period and the denial of Korean forced labor in war time are two sides of the same coin.

The stance of the Japanese government in support of historical denialism reveals its continuing colonialism, evoking distrust from countries around the world that have experienced and are trying to overcome the impact of colonial rule. It also goes against the philosophy of UNESCO which was established after reflection on past wars of aggression.

In consideration of the above, we call for drastic revision of the details of the “*Sado Island Gold Mines*” letter of recommendation, disclosure to the public of all material related to the recommendation, and recognition by Japan of Korean forced labor.

May, 2022

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