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## **Cultural Heritage is a Tool: The Case of Japanese Imperialism**

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### **Citation**

Kuras, S. J. (2024). *Cultural Heritage is a Tool: The Case of Japanese Imperialism*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3729030>

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# Cultural Heritage is a Tool: The Case of Japanese Imperialism

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MA Thesis

Asian Studies - Politics, Economy and Society of Asia

Dr. Ethan Mark

14 953 words

15/12/2023

## Abstract

The Meiji era is known for being a period of political, economic, and social change in Japan. It is in this era, also referred to as the Meiji Restoration, that Japan laid the foundations for the industrialization and modernization of the country. This way of remembering the Meiji period tends to favor positive views of that era, associating it primarily with notions of progress, rather than imperialism. The goal of the Meiji Restoration was to build a ‘Modern Nation’.

In this era of industrial development, the Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution (SJMIR) have played a significant role, and are today a main point of controversy. Despite their large contribution to the industrialization process that modernized Japan, the sites were also locations of forced labor and suffering. Their nomination on the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL) in 2015 has led to the reopening of the history controversy in East Asia, with China and South Korea firmly opposed to the listing. Japan has especially been criticized by its neighbors for wanting to celebrate such sites, and its intentions have been questioned in numerous instances to this day. For many Japanese scholars and government officials, such as Kato Koko, a big argument in defending the SJMIR against claims of glorifying imperialism is the time frame (Nakano 2021). She insists that the SJMIR are to be understood and considered in the WHL only under the Meiji era, and should thus not be attacked for actions having occurred in the Taisho and Showa eras. However, South Korean and Chinese representatives still argue that the sites are intrinsically linked to imperialist crimes and should not be celebrated this way (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, 2022). Overall, the sites are linked to a controversial historical period of the EA region, and the way they are dealt with by the Japanese government is strongly criticized. This controversial topic reveals how tense EA relations are today, how deep the scars of Japanese imperialism are, and how they continue to affect current geopolitical relations in the region.

The goal of this thesis is to explore this controversy in depth and reflect on the nature and potential impacts of cultural heritage (CH) on international relations. Throughout this paper, I aim to answer the following question: **In what ways does the SJMIR illustrate the intentions and weaknesses of Japan’s cultural heritage governance ?**

Keywords : dark heritage; Japanese imperialism; cultural heritage governance; heritage diplomacy; soft power; East Asian conflicts

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CH: Cultural Heritage

CHD: Cultural Heritage Diplomacy

CHG: Cultural Heritage Governance

EA: East Asia

ICOMOS: International Council on Monuments and Sites

POW: Prisoners of War

SJMIR: Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution

UNESCO: United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization

OUV: Outstanding Universal Value

WHC: World Heritage Committee

WH(L): World Heritage (List)



*“History is a matter of sovereignty. No matter what South Korea and China say, we should not easily give in. Even if the previous government gave in, it is necessary to correct once you notice the mistake. What other countries do or say does not matter.”*

Kato Koko, 加藤康子, 2015<sup>1</sup>

## **1. Introduction**

Hiroshima and Nagasaki are remembered worldwide because of the unprecedented and still unreplicated use of the atomic bomb by the US which marked the end of the Second World War. Allied with the Axis, Japan was one of the three big threats to Western powers, and a growing imperialist actor jeopardizing many Asian countries. To this day, notable crimes committed by Japan during the 20th century deeply affect Japan's politics and relations with other East Asian countries. Among them, forced labor, slavery, and 'comfort women' left a deep scar, hindering trust bonds between countries. These events reached a paroxysm in the Asia-Pacific war and WW2. As such, most discussions of this troubled imperial past of Japan tend to focus on the Showa era (1926-1989), and sometimes even the Taisho era (1912-1926).

While Japanese imperialism peaked in the 20th century during the Showa era, the Meiji era (1868-1912) nonetheless constitutes an important time frame to consider and study. While the Showa era corresponds to Japanese imperialism at its extreme, the Meiji period constitutes its first stage (Conroy 1966).

The Meiji era is known for being a period of political, economic, and social change in Japan. It is in this era, also referred to as the Meiji Restoration, that Japan laid the foundations for the industrialization and modernization of the country. This way of remembering the Meiji period tends to favor positive views of that era, associating it primarily with notions of progress, rather than imperialism. The goal of the Meiji Restoration was to build a 'Modern Nation'. Through many reforms, Japanese leaders of the time attempted to Westernize their customs and policies, pursuing what they considered 'civilized' and the desire to join the 'Great Powers' (Gluck 1985; Segal 2015). The building of the modern state was accompanied by the development of a unified national identity mainly centered around the concept of 'Japanese uniqueness' (Richter 2008; Segal 2015).

While the first two decades of the Meiji period were especially focused on industrialization and institutional change through administrative, political, and economic reforms, the late 1880s were extremely concerned with shaping ideology (Gluck 1985). Japanese leaders reformed the beliefs and values of the Japanese people to foster a strong and unified nation, by implementing a 'civic

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<sup>1</sup> Translation from Nakano 2021, 13.

education' or *kyōkai*. Through careful crafting and fostering of nationalist sentiments and building a unified national identity, the leaders wanted to educate their people according to an ideology that would suit the new status and objectives of the nascent Meiji state (Gluck 1985). However, these reforms and the dissemination of new values to modernize and develop Japan were accompanied by the emergence of imperialist ideas and attitudes, as well as changing concepts of domestic security and foreign policy (Conroy 1966; Mayo 1972). The end of the era is marked by Japan's annexation of Korea in 1905, and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), marking the beginning of Japan's expansionist attitudes mostly through wars of aggression (Conroy 1966; Gluck 1985; Mayo 1972).

In this era of industrial development, the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution (SJMIR) have played a significant role, but are extremely controversial. Despite their large contribution to the industrialization process that modernized Japan, they were also locations of forced labor and suffering. Their nomination on the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL) in 2015 has led to the reopening of the history controversy in EA, with China and South Korea firmly opposed to the listing. Japan has especially been criticized by its neighbors for its governance of the sites. Japan's narrative push for celebration of such sites, and its intentions have been questioned in numerous instances to this day. For many Japanese scholars and government officials, such as Kato Koko, a big argument in defending the SJMIR against claims of glorifying imperialism is the time frame (Nakano 2021). She insists that the SJMIR are to be understood and considered in the WHL only under the Meiji era, and should thus not be attacked for actions having occurred in the Taisho and Showa eras. However, South Korean and Chinese representatives still argue that the sites are intrinsically linked to imperialist crimes and should not be celebrated this way (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2022). Overall, the sites are linked to a controversial historical period of the EA region, and the way the Japanese government dealt with them is strongly criticized. This controversial topic reveals how tense EA relations are today, how deep the scars of Japanese imperialism are, and how they continue to affect current geopolitical relations in the region.

The goal of this thesis is to explore this controversy in depth and reflect on the nature and potential impacts of CH on international relations. Throughout this paper, I aim to answer the following question: **In what ways does the SJMIR illustrate the intentions and weaknesses of Japan's cultural heritage governance (CHG)?**

With this research question, my goal is to investigate the different purposes that CH can fulfill, especially by focusing on its CHG process, using the SJMIR and Japan as a case study. This thesis explores the complexities of defining CH through the study of its governance. The focus on Japan's CHG allows us to displace the discussion away from CH as a way to preserve and celebrate culture and focus on the political scope of CH. Furthermore, I argue that the concept of CH must be understood as constantly changing and reinvented, and considered through the narratives it is rooted in. The study of CH through the case study of a controversial historical period reveals how CH is a practice of the present, and the past becomes a tool.



To conduct this research and analysis, Chapter 2 offers a literature review to analyze and understand the conceptualization of CH, the way it is governed, and how it can be instrumentalized. Chapter 3 demonstrates the methodological process that was used to answer the research question, by introducing the SJMIR in more detail and presenting the 39th WHC session as a significant event for this research. It explains how the 47 sources have been analyzed through an inductive thematic analysis. Chapter 4 is divided into four sections and presents the main discussion points that emerged from analyzing the sample selection. It focuses on discussing the nature of the SJMIR, the instrumentalization of the sites for political purposes specifically, the power imbalance involved in the governance of the sites, and ends by exploring the contribution of SJMIR to international conflicts and disagreements, specifically in the EA region. Chapter 5 discusses the findings presented above to reflect on Japan's CHG through its intentions and weaknesses, and discusses the concept of heritage preservation. Finally, this thesis concludes that Japan has failed to achieve international reconciliation and cooperation through its handling of the SJMIR. The sites' listing on the WHL reveals Japan's intentions to instrumentalize CH as a tool for spreading its political agenda, and shaping its national identity, as well as international image. The approach used by the Japanese government reveals several weaknesses in its CHG. Finally, I conclude that the focus on narratives reveals a disagreement on how heritage should be preserved, and the goals that should be fulfilled by heritage preservation.

## **2. Literature Review**

This following chapter is dedicated to reviewing the academic literature available on the topics of cultural heritage, cultural heritage governance, dark heritage, soft power, and Meiji nostalgia. First and foremost, it is important to note that due to the scope of this thesis, this literature review especially focuses on tangible CH, and will not look at intangible heritage closely.

The first section deals with the conceptualization of CH by exploring how the concept is discussed and defined within academic debates. Secondly, the chapter deals with notions of CH and belonging through the concepts of dark and contested heritage.

The second section analyzes how scholarly discussions understand the governance and the politics of CH. First, the discussion starts with the globalization of heritage through UNESCO and a universal approach to CH. Secondly, it focuses on heritage diplomacy, a concept from Tim Winter. Finally, I introduce a discussion on the participatory model of governance, to look at who participates in the use of CH in governance.

The third and final section of this chapter explores the instrumentalization of CH to fulfill specific political agendas. It opens with a discussion on the relationships between CH and soft power. Then, it approaches the ways CH can participate in historical revisionism, with a specific focus on the concept of Meiji nostalgia in Japanese CH.

## **2.1 The Conceptualization of Cultural Heritage**

### **A. Cultural Heritage in Academic Debates**

Heritage is a concept used across different disciplines, especially anthropology, archeology, heritage studies, international relations, tourism, and urban and regional studies (Liu et al. 2020). However, the term itself still carries unclear definitions, and some scholars even disagree on its very nature.

Among scholars of critical heritage studies, heritage is not understood as a ‘thing’ but as a construct that links past to present to future, and that carries meaning through narratives and stories (Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2018; Kisić 2014; Liu et al. 2020; Nakano 2021; Smith 2006; Sokka et al. 2021; Waterton and Watson 2015; Winter 2015). Cultural heritage is both a social and cultural process that aims to communicate specific narratives and meanings through the careful selection and design of the past. In the making of CH, there is a selection of which symbol or message from the past can and must be carried on into the present. Generally, this active choice is made by state authorities and international organizations, such as UNESCO (Sokka et al. 2021). Rodenberg and Wagenaar write that the stories crafted through CH are “carefully selected expressions of an envisioned national identity” (2018, 3). This notion of identity is further developed by Tim Winter. He argues that the process of putting together CH can be considered as an assemblage of values and discourses. This way, CH appears to constitute an inheritance or a source of identity (Winter 2015). This highlights the importance of symbols within the construction of CH. Additionally, this displaces heritage away from materiality and highlights that heritage is not simply the object or monument, but the whole process of constructing, identifying, and promoting it.

Furthermore, in attempting to define CH, most scholars develop the notion of ‘preservation’. The identification and construction of CH generally serve the purpose of deciding what is to be conserved and protected. In most cases, ‘preservation’ is understood as the physical safeguarding of a site, or object, by preventing it from being destroyed or altered (Kuutma 2013). On many occasions, UNESCO has named ‘preservation’ as one of their missions. Through the focus on tangible heritage, the protection and rebuilding of physical monuments, it can be understood that the institution also shares this physical understanding of the word ‘preservation’.

However, as CH is embedded in cultural and social processes, the ‘preservation’ of heritage can also be considered in a less physical way. If the preservation of CH is understood as an attempt to maintain the heritage and its meaning(s) alive, there could be cases in which the alteration of heritage is needed. This way of considering ‘preservation’ is possible when heritage is considered as a process of multiple forces, and thus defined as something that flows and changes, rather than something that is (Liu et al. 2020; Macdonald 2013; Smith 2006). Furthermore, it allows us to understand why heritage is constantly changing and reinvented even if such alterations are claimed to work in favor of

protecting heritage. Heritage must be considered as constantly changing, and rooted in narratives rather than in tangible things, as well as a practice of the present in which the past is used as a tool. This possible instrumentalization of CH means that different actors or ‘users’ can use CH to serve different ends. This discussion will be developed more in depth in Chapter 5.

Overall, the process by which CH comes to be constructed reveals that it holds significant socio-political power. As mentioned earlier, CH can contribute to the forging of a common identity of a people, reinforcing their bonds, either through a discourse of ‘uniqueness’, or a ‘universal’ one. While it connects the past with the present and thus links communities to their histories, the CH construction process of selecting which stories are to be protected and remembered, and which aren’t reflects CH’s potential to serve contemporary agendas. Heritage is thus defined as a discursive practice that renegotiates the understanding and belonging of the past in order to serve present human activity (Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2018; Smith 2006).

For such reasons, several scholars argue that the construction process of CH can be regarded as a political act to illustrate the idealized national identity of a government (Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2018; Sokka et al. 2021). As a ‘value-laden concept’, CH can potentially become instrumentalized by and for an ideology (Kuutma 2013; Sokka et al. 2021). In other words, this means that the process of CH allows its creators to embed value, symbol, discourse, or narrative into their ideological and political designs.

## B. Dark Heritage

Within heritage studies, CH has sometimes been referred to as ‘dark heritage’ or ‘contested heritage’ among other terms, and often in relation to discussing ‘dark tourism’. Dark heritage remains a vague term, but it is generally used to talk about heritage that is linked to negative, sad, cruel, inhuman events or practices. Thus, such a term often refers to sites of death, suffering, and disasters (Clarke et al. 2020; Koskinen-Koivisto 2016; Sather-Wagstaff 2011; Thomas et al. 2019). Dark heritage can also be referred to in terms of ‘difficult’ heritage, ‘contested heritage’, ‘negative heritage’, or ‘dissonant heritage’. In most cases, such types of CH can cause controversies or disagreements because meanings are given by and interpreted in different manners by different actors (Thomas et al. 2019).

The Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp is one of the most famous examples of dark heritage. It is a site of suffering and inhuman practices. While this site was mostly referred to as a place of dark tourism - a tourist site linked to pain and suffering- it is actually better to consider it as dark heritage (Biran et al. 2011). This site is given meaning by its past, but also by the educational initiative that seeks to inform and denounce what happened. The preservation of this site is not just done on a physical level but also through the protection and dissemination of its history and meaning.

As mentioned previously, the fact that dark heritage is looked at as a concept on its own confirms that the universal approach to heritage cannot successfully stand. In reality, most scholars

agree that the universalist approach pushes one of the many narratives forward, and dismisses other voices. This point of view is especially developed within the criticism of authorized heritage discourse (AHD) coined by Laurajane Smith (2006, 13). Following this argument, Kuutma writes that “the ways in which we write, talk, and think about heritage issues matter a great deal: this discourse privileges some social actors while disengaging others from their active use of heritage (2006).” (Kuutma 2013, 1; Smith 2006).

Several scholars argue that dark heritage is particularly important to consider in terms of how it can affect a country’s engagement with the international sphere (Clarke et al. 2020; Logan and Witcomb 2013; Winter 2015; Young 2009). Overall, Clarke et al. mention two main outcomes of engaging with and managing dark heritage sites. It can be a significant turning point in helping states reconcile, while it can also deepen diplomatic disputes (Clarke et al. 2020, 4). These are confirmed by Tim Winter’s argument that dealing with CH either leads to cooperation or dispute (2014; 2015).

Furthermore, scholars are focused on other reasons why a country would heavily engage with its dark heritage, knowing that it comes with a lot of possible bad press. Scholars such as Clarke et al. argue that dark heritage can tremendously contribute to a state’s soft power (2018).

## **2.2 The Governance of Cultural Heritage**

This second subsection focuses on the analysis of the governance of CH, especially by looking at agency. The following part explores how each actor defines, identifies, and understands CH, and what framework they implement to work with CH.

### **A. UNESCO and the Globalization of Heritage**

A widely renowned influential actor of CH is UNESCO. Originally, it was engaged in an educational mission taking its roots in the desire to prevent the destruction and suffering that was experienced in conflicts during the twentieth century (Eriksen 2001; Kuutma 2013; Stoczkowski 2009). Nowadays, the institution is particularly invested in a worldwide mission for CH, especially through the establishment and protection of sites that constitute ‘World Heritage’. On its website, heritage is defined by the institution as a ‘legacy of the past’ that carries ‘irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration’ (UNESCO d). The mission of UNESCO is defined by and bound to several official documents such as the international treaties called the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), or the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies (1982) (Gfeller and Eisenberg 2016; Sokka et al. 2021).

Numerous scholars have agreed that UNESCO works according to a normative agenda that aims to promote and protect cultural and natural heritage common to all humankind, mostly through the establishment of criteria for what they call OUV, which stands for ‘outstanding universal value’.

(Alasuutari and Kangas 2020; Gfeller and Eisenberg 2016; Nakano 2018; Sokka et al. 2021). Furthermore, UNESCO is important to consider when talking about the governance of CH because its mission contributes to setting international normative standards that policymakers are encouraged to follow and implement in their own framework (Sokka et al. 2021). Through the nature of UNESCO's missions and agenda, heritage has a tendency to become globalized. While CH is defined by most scholars as a cultural and social process that is linked to communities and identities, UNESCO claims to work in favor of universal values that encompass humankind as a whole.

There are two main issues in enforcing heritage as a universal reality. First, it fails to adequately recognize the local and national essence of heritage. This is especially the case for dark and transnational heritage. A global approach to such heritage can be dismissive of its complex and sensitive nature (Clarke et al. 2020; Wakefield 2017).

Secondly, the universal approach of UNESCO when dealing with heritage comes with a form of 'neutrality' in intent and agency. As a scholar specializing in international relations, Nakano explains how UNESCO wishes to keep 'inscription' and 'endorsement' separate because the institution is not willing to allow its brand to serve as "authentication of a particular historical view" and desires to avoid politicization (Nakano 2018, 9). This is an important approach to note when considering UNESCO and its work. By wishing to stay away from the political narratives that come with CH, UNESCO fails to acknowledge the complexities of CH and its inherent connection to politics (Kuutma 2013; Nakano 2018; Wakefield 2017; Winter 2015). As a process of constructed meaning, CH intrinsically comes with narratives and interpretations given by the multiple actors that interact and create it. By aspiring to deal with heritage in a universal way and with the desire to operate outside of politics, UNESCO fails to remember that the essence of heritage itself can "never assume a neutral ground of connotation" (Kuutma 2013, 1; Nakano 2018). Furthermore, scholars such as Thomas Schmitt argue that the practices used in the decision-making of global institutions can negatively affect their credibility (Schmitt 2009).

Overall, scholars across many disciplines criticize UNESCO for their universal aspirations and globalization of heritage because of their failure to include and represent more local voices in the dealing of the CH. By attempting to deal with such issues in a universal way, UNESCO nonetheless engages in politics as it is indissociable from CH. Some scholars have accused the institution of promoting a Eurocentric view of heritage, in which the West still decides what makes heritage, through the instruments they have put in place. Meskell denounces the excessively simplistic approach of UNESCO and the narrow conceptualization of 'universal' (Hølleland and Niklasson 2020; Meskell 2018; Oyaneder 2019). Furthermore, she illustrates how UNESCO is one of the influential actors with the power to shape and make the past, through the selection of narratives that are promoted.

## B. Cultural Heritage Diplomacy

Defining the concept of CH above in 2.1.A has highlighted the importance of its political dimension. As a constructed process, there are narratives, goals, and power involved in CH. Building upon definitions of soft power by Joseph Nye and cultural diplomacy by Milton Cummings, Tim Winter has put forth the term of ‘heritage diplomacy’ (Winter 2014, Winter 2015).

Heritage diplomacy can be considered as another attempt at defining the concept of ‘heritage’. While most scholars offer vague terms and explanations, others believe that heritage is a set of practices, including laws and regulations (Carman and Sorensen 2009; Smith 2006; Winter 2015; Winter 2016). Through heritage diplomacy, Winter sees heritage as an arena of governance, a space for both cooperation and contestation. This political lens through which to consider heritage is supported by Smith’s AHD theory, where she explains that “‘there is no such thing as heritage; but rather a discursive construction of it that does cultural and political ‘work’” (2006, 13). Heritage thus becomes institutionalized in the international sphere (Winter 2015). Lähdesmäki and Čeginskas (2022) agree that the complex nature of CH means it holds significant potential to influence diplomatic relationships, in one way or another. Additionally, CH can also be used to promote a certain national identity, and can even be co-opted by ideology (Kuutma 2013; Sokka et al. 2021; Winter 2016). Talking about CH through the framework of heritage diplomacy allows us to explore exactly how politics come into play through the negotiation of symbols, past and present, and narratives (Winter 2016). Further, Smith and Waterton (2012) argue that it is the discourses in which heritage operates that can be studied through the national and international contexts in which they are mentioned. While discussing international relations and institutions, it becomes more evident that heritage can be instrumentalized for the purpose of nation branding and promoting soft power. Winter even further argues that beyond serving as a tool, CH is a form of governance itself, thus justifying the need to talk about heritage *diplomacy*.

## C. Participatory Models in Heritage Governance

The creation and governance of CH includes multiple actors, each having the potential to enforce specific narratives and discourses. The governance of CH is still a complex process, which can be seen through the difficulties in implementing regulations and legal frameworks (Bruncevic 2021). Additionally, governance models can reflect the complex hierarchical power relationships that continue to exist through the creation and dissemination of meanings in CH.

According to Sokka et al.’s (2021) analysis of the participatory models of CHG, the most commonly established one is the ‘governmental’ one. This model is highly institutionalized and includes considerably low citizen participation. Issues in the administration processes and lack of involvement from actors outside of the government create a situation in which CH can easily be

constructed as a narrow concept and instrumentalized for ideological and political purposes (Paquette, 2012; Sokka et al. 2021; Waterton and Smith 2009). This model is especially criticized for not being suitable for the task of CH nowadays.

In an institution like UNESCO, governments are in charge of defending and dealing with their CH. This can become dangerous when governments use CH as a way to spread their desired narratives and support their political agenda. Governments are given a lot of power and responsibility in dealing with their CH, which presents high risks for the politicization and instrumentalization of CH.

The website's homepage states that the institution's five strategic objectives, also known as the 5Cs are: Credibility; Conservation; Capacity-building; Communication, and Communities. The 'Community' goal is to "Enhance the role of communities in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention" (UNESCO d). However, while the institution has shown efforts to include all ranges of actors in its mission to safeguard and celebrate CH, governments still play a central role in CHG.

Many scholars suggest that a 'co-creative' method of governance could offer more transparency; inclusion of marginalized voices, more respect for identities in dealing with CH, as well as a less narrow definition of heritage (Agger and Lund, 2017; Sokka et al. 2021). Such a model aims to enhance the cooperation between governments and communities to increase people's participation in defining, identifying, and preserving CH. This model of governance could reduce the risks of CH's instrumentalization for political agendas.

### **2.3 The Instrumentalization of Heritage**

While most scholars agree that CH is linked to politics and notions of power, many are focused on the risks and potential that can emerge from such entanglement (Lähdesmäki and Čeginskas 2022). The scholar Višna Kisić insists on defining CH as "a process of the creation or preservation of a desired image of the world" (Kisić 2014; Sokka et al. 2021).

While politics, power, and identity are intrinsically part of heritage, scholars are concerned with the degrees to which it becomes instrumentalized and put at the service of political agendas and ideological goals. These themes especially surface when dealing with dark and contested heritage that often present hierarchical power relations. In such cases, the governance of heritage can become especially dangerous and cause conflicts in the international sphere.

This subsection introduces different ways in which CH can become instrumentalized. First, it introduces the notion of soft power, and how it relies on myths and symbols, both central elements to the narratives constructing CH. Secondly, it focuses on Meiji nostalgia, criticized for embodying harmful historical revisionism.

### A. National mythmaking

Soft power is a concept coined by Joseph Nye and defines an actor's ability to influence others' behavior in order to align their interests with their own (Nye 1990). There are several tools that can help a country shape its own soft power, and most of all, make it effective.

First, Nye (1990) notes that the main way to influence others' behavior is to appear attractive and to circulate an image that will help your own purposes, while positively affecting others in your favor.

The creation of national myths can be instrumentalized by ruling elites in order to influence the remembrance of the past and reshape national identities through collective memories (Yinan 2006). National mythmaking is often denounced for revolving around themes of victimization, self-glorification, and whitewashing the past (Van Evera 1994; Yinan 2006). This practice is thus a way to enhance one's image by rewriting the past in order to spread a positive image in the international sphere. The recourse to opposite themes such as victimization and self-glorification reveals that the instrumentalization of a state's image is constantly renegotiated in order to increase its power, and influence and help its political agenda. Appearing as a victim can soften the remembrance of the state's offensive actions, while self-glorification can contribute to challenging narratives from other states.

The practice of national mythmaking can be one of the tools for nation branding. CH, as a concept linked to memory and identity, constitutes a very prized instrument for reshaping a state's image and enhancing its soft power. As mentioned earlier in section 2.1.B, dark heritage is defined by its painful or deadly past. Depending on how it is handled and celebrated, this kind of heritage can be hard to handle for governments because of the negative memories it is linked to, and can negatively affect the state's soft power, as a reminder of cruelty and past actions.

### B. Meiji Nostalgia

As explained above, soft power strategies are sometimes criticized for including national branding that instrumentalizes CH, for example through the abusive use of national mythmaking. Historical revisionism is one of the main reasons behind criticisms of the practices of national mythmaking (Yinan 2006).

In the case of Japan, the government has been blamed multiple times for whitewashing its history and encouraging historical revisionism to rewrite its past. This includes the downplaying or ignoring of suffering linked to the imperialism of the Meiji period. The Meiji era is a particularly sensitive period to analyze. On one hand, it corresponds to the moment that Japan successfully industrialized, and came to be known in the West as the first industrial country of Asia. This has been a source of 'Meiji nostalgia' (Nakano 2018; Nakano 2021). Viewed from the perspective of



neighboring countries, on the other hand, Meiji also witnessed the rise of modern Japanese imperialism. The aggression and exploitation that occurred during this period were responsible for the suffering of Koreans, Chinese, and Taiwanese populations.

Nostalgia is intrinsically linked to the past and thus plays a significant role in the construction of heritage narratives and national identity (Elgenius and Rydgren 2022; Lowenthal 2015; Nakano 2021). Through the use of nostalgia, a specific part of the past becomes embedded in the national narrative. However, nostalgia aims to resonate with the country's domestic audience and its future generations. In cases where nostalgia plays a central role in the construction of either or both national identity, and national heritage, it is thus not a priority to cater to external actors' opinions, nor would it be effective. This can have compromising impacts on a country's diplomatic relations (Nakano 2021).

In the context of Japan, the Meiji nostalgia is central to the construction of the national identity. It wishes to celebrate the impact that the Meiji period still has on contemporary Japan and all the ways in which this past contributed to the greatness of Japan (Nakano 2021; Prough 2021). In doing so, Meiji nostalgia is also criticized for its tendency to inaccurately retell history by attenuating the wrongdoings of Japan and glorifying its actions (Nakano 2021).

This thesis is focused on analyzing a specific Japanese CH that is rooted in notions of historical revisionism, Meiji nostalgia, and whitewashing history. For these reasons, these concepts will be discussed and analyzed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

### **3. Case Study Introduction and Methodology**

This chapter aims to present the methodological process that has been adopted throughout this research and reveal why the SJMIR are at the center of this thesis. First, I present the Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution, listed on the World Heritage List by UNESCO in 2015. Secondly, I introduce the nomination process of the SJMIR on the WHL, with a focus on the 39th WH session. Then, I present my sample of sources used for my case study, by explaining the choice to use a case study of a variety of documents, revealing how they were selected and why they serve a purpose in answering my research question. Finally, I explain my decision to use a thematic analysis in approaching and discussing each document.

#### **3.1 Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution**

The SJMIR are part of the industrial heritage of Japan for having played an important role in the country's industrialization process between 1850 and 1910, dates corresponding to the Bakumatsu (1853-1868) and Meiji eras. The sites are celebrated for serving as a testimony of the technological change in Japan, specifically through the development of the iron and steel industry, shipbuilding, and

coal mining (UNESCO c). Officially, 1910 was chosen as the cut-off date for the listing, because while the sites continued their activity after, it no longer proved the process of the establishment of the Japanese industrial system.

The SJMIR are composed of twenty-three components, registered within eleven sites and eight areas of the country, mainly in the Kyushu-Yamaguchi region of southwest Japan. There are five in Yamaguchi; three in Kagoshima; one in Shizuoka; one in Iwate; one in Saga; eight in Nagasaki; two across Fukuoka and Kumamoto; and two in Fukuoka. The details of each site can be found in Appendix A. In addition to being listed on the WHL of UNESCO, more than half of these sites are classified by the Japanese government as a ‘Historic site’ of Japan (史跡, shiseki), ‘Groups of Traditional Buildings’ (伝統的建造物群, Dentōteki Kenzōbutsu-gun) or Important Cultural Property (重要文化財, jūyō bunkazai).

The Japanese government has chosen to present these sites for the WHL in order to celebrate the unique prowess of the process that allowed Japan to become the first non-Western country to reach modernity and industrialization. The main figure behind the SJMIR project is Koko Kato, strongly criticized for her radical revisionist views (Johnsen 2021; Palmer 2021; Nakano 2021). She is accused of projecting overly celebratory and inaccurate narratives of 20th-century Japan. A main point of contention is her denial of the experience of Korean, Chinese, and Allied Prisoners of War (POW) and their forced labor that occurred in several of the SJMIR (Johnsen 2021; Miyamoto). She publicly argued that Korean workers could not be considered POWs because they were Japanese citizens at the time (National Congress of Industrial Heritage).<sup>2</sup> This comment, among many others, is part of a historical revisionist intent to glorify Japan’s past and deny its crimes. The SJMIR are thus perceived by many actors and scholars as “Japan’s national project for globalizing a glorious historical narrative of Meiji Japan.” (Nakano 2021, 1).

### **3.2 Nomination process**

The World Heritage Committee (WHC) reunites once a year to discuss the inscription and deletion of sites on the WHL or the WH in Danger, discuss financial funds, and investigate how sites are being taken care of. Members of the Committee consist of representatives from 21 of the States Parties to the Convention elected by their General Assembly.

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<sup>2</sup> The website has published her comment concerning the 44th UNESCO resolution, in which Japan is accused of not respecting UNESCO’s conditions about the SJMIR listing.

The SJMIR were first submitted to the Tentative List of the WH in 2009, arguing that the sites qualified for the list according to criteria ii, iii, and iv.<sup>3</sup> It took until 2015 for the WHC to agree that the sites should be listed on the WHL.

The 39th session of the WHC took place in Bonn, Germany in 2015. The Committee has agreed that the sites: “*represent the first successful transfer of industrialization from the West to a non-Western nation. The rapid industrialization that Japan achieved from the middle of the 19th century to the early 20th century was founded on iron and steel, shipbuilding and coal mining, particularly to meet defence needs. The sites in the series reflect the three phases of this rapid industrialisation achieved over a short space of just over fifty years between 1850s and 1910.*” (UNESCO 2015b, 177). The WHC accepted the SJMIR on the basis of criteria ii and iv and has agreed that the sites successfully reunite elements to convey OUV. After a careful study of the nomination request submitted by the government of Japan on January 14, 2014, ICOMOS decided that the sites did not qualify for criterion iii (UNESCO 2015c, 95).

Despite securing the ICOMOS recommendation, Japan’s project faced large opposition from the South Korean and Chinese governments, as well as from numerous NGOs (Chan 2020; Nakano 2021). Controversy was especially focused on the Hashima island being part of the SJMIR, because of the forced labor that took place, and is accused of embodying Japanese aggression. During the 39th session, South Korea firmly opposed the nomination. After a debate between the two parties, an agreement was reached, based on the following statement made by the Delegation of Japan: “*Japan is prepared to take measures that allow an understanding that 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, and that, during World War II, the Government of Japan also implemented its policy of requisition. Japan is prepared to incorporate appropriate measures into the interpretive strategy to remember the victims such as the establishment of information center.*” (UNESCO 2015d, 222).

This statement has been explicitly referred to in WHC’s final statement nominating SJMIR to the WHL. By 2017, Japan was requested to submit a report proving that such a measure has been sufficiently implemented, to be examined during the 42nd WH session. To this day, Japan has failed to satisfactorily honor UNESCO’s recommendations.

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<sup>3</sup> Criterion ii: “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;”

Criterion iii: “to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;”

Criterion iv: “to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.” (UNESCO b)

### **3.3 Sample of Sources and Thematic Analysis**

I have decided to conduct my research through a qualitative and inductive approach. I started by the collection of 47 sources to build my case study, and have then resorted to a thematic analysis. The goal of this analysis is to explore Japan's handling of this specific case and reflect on how it is part of a political project that impacts its regional diplomatic relations.

My sample consists of testimonies, paintings, official UNESCO reports and statements, state officials' interviews and speeches, websites, and online newspapers, between 2015 and September 2023. The documents are French, American, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean, and are written in French, English, or Japanese. I decided to mainly include Japanese, Chinese, and Korean sources, and use American and French media sources to get a non-regional point of view on the topic. All sources are randomly listed in Appendix B and numbered from 1 to 47. For practical reasons, they will be referred to by their ranked number in the following chapters. This sample is a non-exhaustive collection of sources about the topic of the SJMIR listed in UNESCO's WHL, and the EA history controversy it is part of.

Using an inductive thematic approach in analyzing all the documents allows me to identify and highlight the patterns in which the governance of the SJMIR is discussed and presented. Due to the variety of nature of the documents analyzed, this method of analysis seems the most relevant to point out the main trends and differences in how different actors react to the SJMIR inscription and the effects it has on EA geopolitics. At the start of my thematic analysis, I have identified 'codes' from elements, words, or concepts, that are recurrently used across a majority of sources from my sample. During my coding process, I have grouped together codes that I deemed similar under four main themes. The establishment of these themes allows me to show how I have interpreted the codes, and what arguments I want to highlight. Not all sources will be referred to, even when they include codes mentioned, because the goal is to present the examples that best illustrate the argument. Additionally, I do not show my coding process in this thesis, but what matters is the way they are interpreted into themes.

Through these four main themes, this research offers my interpretation of the different ways that the SJMIR are talked about across the 47 sources. Chapter 5 aims to establish a link between the themes, and the research question. I will explain how these themes highlight the intentions and the weaknesses of Japan's CHG.

## **4. Findings**

This chapter's purpose is to expose and discuss the results of the thematic analysis I conducted. Among the 47 sources, I have highlighted four main themes: 'Celebration of the past' ; 'A dark

heritage'; 'Failures of Japan' ; 'Damages of the SJMIR'. The two first themes are focused on the nature of the SJMIR and their values. The last two themes deal more with the political context of the sites.

#### **4.1 Celebration of the past**

This first section aims to reflect on the first theme that emerged from my thematic analysis. It presents the ways in which the SJMIR are part of Japan's celebration of its past. This theme includes all the codes used by the 47 sources to contextualize the SJMIR as a testimony of Japan's exceptional accomplishments. Under this theme, I have decided to group together codes that mention glory, accomplishments, exceptional, pride, and industrial heritage. It is important to note that while many sources from the sample mention this theme, it is solely Japanese sources that actively celebrate the past through the mentions of the SJMIR. While the theme appears in non-Japanese sources, they mention it to denounce the narrative spread by the Japanese government.

First of all, many Japanese sources present the SJMIR as a symbol of the industrial prowess of Japan during its modernization process. Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs presents the sites as "*a series of heritage sites that played central roles in Japan's industrialization of the heavy industries such as iron and steel, shipbuilding and coal mining, from the 1850s through 1910.*" (34). This reveals that Japan has submitted the SJMIR to the WHL to spread this narrative.

Additionally, the Japanese government does not just insist on the industrial value of the site, but also that "*they tell a story of uncommon historical value.*" (30). They use this nature to emphasize the uniqueness of the sites, and thus present a narrative of pride and inspiration for the past governments' achievements. This notion of uniqueness is reinforced throughout the whole narrative built around the SJMIR. It embodies the pride of Japan and aims to foster inspiration on a worldwide scale. Further marking Japan's individuality and difference, the article writes: "*As opposed to developments that relied on foreign funding, Japan's industrialization was fueled from within—the Japanese people energetically and proactively took it upon themselves to learn about Western technology.*" (30). This reveals that the SJMIR narrative is built on notions of national identity and pride, referring to concepts often linked to Japan: uniqueness, hard work, and modernization. Japan is shown in all its glory, as a self-made and innovative power.

Furthermore, the sites are celebrated for their universal value. While 'unique' and 'universal' are usually opposite terms, they complement each other in the case of the SJMIR. Because the process of development is so special, it comes to "*hold universal value and is worthy of being the common heritage of mankind.*" (28).

After the inscription was official, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared "*The Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution*" *tell the story of Japan's efforts to become an industrial nation from the end of the Edo Period to the Meiji Period (from the 1850s through 1910), during which time Japan*

*sought to incorporate Western technologies, foster the necessary human resources on its own, and achieve industrialization (...). Today I would like to express anew my determination to preserve and pass on to the next generation these wonderful heritage sites, which represent the starting point of Japan's development into a major manufacturing nation and the tremendous accomplishments of our ancestors.*" (28). Through this message only mentioning accomplishments and efforts, Abe reinforces and encourages positive memories of Japan's past governments. He focuses on notions of hard work, innovation, and modernization, and presents the sites as inspiring. The vocabulary he uses is overly positive and praising. This shows that the SJMIR are not just an isolated project, but that it is part of a wider desire to spread an image of Japan that is built upon its industrial developments. Moreover, insisting on the inspiration for future generations, it reinforces the universal value of the sites, as a testimony of a special unique period in time that must be recognized by all of humanity. Denouncing this behavior, *The Diplomat* writes that "*the selective telling of their history is part of the Abe administration's broader policy of restoring Japanese pride in their past.*" (14).

Overall, this first theme "Celebration of the past" reveals efforts to present the SJMIR as an embodiment of Japan's past glory. It shows that by focusing on the sites' industrial value, uniqueness, and universal value, Japan's government takes pride in and encourages the celebration of its past. However, while most Japanese sources are focused on defining the SJMIR solely through industrial accomplishments, other sources denounce this narrative as an intentional selective telling of history.

#### **4.2 A dark heritage**

This second section aims to present another and more popular version of defining and understanding the SJMIR's nature and the values it embodies. This theme 'A dark heritage' includes all the codes used by the 47 sources to contextualize the SJMIR as a landmark of the suffering inflicted by Japan during its colonial past. Under this theme, I have decided to group together codes that refer to notions of pain, death, slavery, deportation, and war.

First of all, most sources denounce the forced labor that occurred in many of the SJMIR, especially on Hashima island, in Nagasaki prefecture, and the Miike Coal Mine, in Fukuoka (8; 15). The forced labor is especially mentioned in relation to Koreans' experiences. China's government website reports that "*about 57,900 Koreans were enslaved, with 94 of them dying.*" (22). In another source, South Korea affirms that they have confirmed at least 122 Koreans died (9). While numbers differ concerning deaths and enslaved workers, none of the non-Japanese sources deny the simple fact that Koreans were enslaved and suffered tremendously.

Furthermore, Koreans were not the only ones that suffered from forced labor. The sites held Allied POW camps from at least 13 countries which "*provided slave labor*" (14). The conditions of work are described as extremely harsh. *The Diplomat* reports that "*Nearly 2,000 Allied POWs suffered capricious brutality and starvation in deadly and primitive conditions. Hundreds died. American*

*POWs were so desperate for a respite from the coal pits that they traded their meager rice bowls for someone to break their arms or legs.*” (15). This further raises awareness of the history of the sites, one that is not clearly shared by Japanese government sources.

Additionally, even in cases where forced labor is not explicitly mentioned, there are still mentions of the harsh conditions under which miners especially had to work. In Sakubei Yamamoto’s collection of paintings and writings, there are clear depictions of foreign workers, women, children, and the harsh conditions workers were subjected to. To cite a few, the drawings and comments in Sakubei’s work describe challenging physical labor, dangerous tasks, unpaid or underpaid labor, hostile relations between workers, tiring hours, lack of clothes and shoes to protect their bodies, and punishments (31; 20).

Finally, a Korean newspaper reporting on the SJMIR controversy wrote that: *“After much diplomatic wrangling, South Korea and Japan ultimately reached a compromise, with South Korea promising not to oppose the facilities’ addition to the World Heritage list as long as Japan acknowledged that Koreans had performed forced labor there. Koreans accepted the argument that even sites with dark pasts — such as the Auschwitz concentration camp, which was registered with UNESCO in 1979 — deserve to be on the World Heritage list.”*(9). This statement reveals the important context in which the theme of this chapter must be understood. The repeated attempts to contextualize the SJMIR within their colonial past aim to question the nature under which Japan currently promotes the sites. The comparison of the SJMIR and the Auschwitz camps shows that dark heritage deserves to be preserved, but in a way that respects victims and their suffering. While Japan insists on presenting it solely as a testimony of the country’s industrial heritage, other actors argue that the sites should be defined as a ‘dark heritage’. When asked about Japan’s recent submissions to the WHL, the PRC’s Foreign Ministry’s Spokesperson publicly declared: *“Forced recruitment and enslavement of laborers is a grave crime committed by the Japanese militarism during its overseas aggression and colonial rule. It shall not be denied or whitewashed in any way.”*(13). These two quotes highlight that the main issue surrounding the SJMIR and their listing on UNESCO’s WHL is the current narrative spread by Japan. It is accused of purposely omitting an important part of history by failing, or refusing, to acknowledge the painful and traumatic experience of POWs and forced workers. American newspaper, *The Diplomat*, calls this the *“act of forgetting”* (14).

Overall, this theme reveals a significant trend in the ways the SJMIR listing has been received by the world. While the listing itself is not the main issue, many have voiced their concerns about the framing of the sites. Through detailed depictions, many sources reveal that it must be considered first and foremost as a dark heritage and must include more information about the workers’ experiences and the actions of Japan’s imperialism.

### **4.3 The Failures of Japan**

This third section focuses on the ‘Failures of Japan’ theme. It includes codes used by the 47 sources that discuss the ways in which Japan failed to adequately handle the listing of the SJMIR. Under this theme, I have decided to group together the following codes: promise, insufficient, trust, silence, and honesty.

One of the main issues expressed is that Japan did not respect its promise to sufficiently address forced labor in its commemoration of the sites. During the submission of the SJMIR to the WHL, Japan had issued a statement assuring they were willing to address the forced labor of Koreans and “others” (2).

This failure to do so is especially discussed through criticism of the Industrial Heritage Information Centre that opened in Tokyo in 2020. Sources agree that this center “*is becoming the new flashpoint of history distortion between Korea and Japan*” (16). While the entire narrative spread by Japan through the SJMIR is criticized as overly positive and dismissive of its painful experiences, the focus is mainly on “*Japan’s failure to provide sufficient information about its wartime policy of conscripting laborers from the Korean Peninsula.*”(44). This is because Japan officially stated in UNESCO meetings that they would address the Korean issue in order to get South Korea to compromise and agree to support the SJMIR nomination.

This failure has been repeatedly pointed out by the international press, the South Korean and Chinese governments, but also UNESCO itself (7, 13, 14, 16, 39). In 2022, it was reported that “*Last year, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee expressed deep disquiet that the Japanese government had provided insufficient information about those brought from the Korean Peninsula when it was a Japanese colony to work at the coal mine.*” (27). First, this shows that Japan has managed to avoid respecting the WHC’s requests for several years. Secondly, another source reporting on the issue points out that “*A Foreign Ministry official noted that it is rare for an international organization to use such strong language as “strongly regret,”*” (7). This highlights how deep the failure is. UNESCO is openly voicing discontent and disappointment in the way Japan has decided to handle its management of the sites, despite warnings from the international community.

On many occasions, EA governments have voiced their discontent. In 2022, China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson declared “*Japan admitted that there was forced labor at some of the sites involving workers from China, the Korean Peninsula and other Asian countries, and promised to set up an information center to display historical records and honor the victims, but it never fulfilled the promise.*” (13).

However, there seems to be slow attempts from Japan to address the issue. In September 2023, the WHC once again urged Japan to follow up on its promises, but it did so while acknowledging that “*Japan took new steps in this direction, and called on it to continue such work,*



*possibly by incorporating "new testimonies" of relevant parties. It asked Japan to submit a report to the committee on its efforts by December 2024."* (8).

Furthermore, these numerous complaints about Japan's lack of respect for UNESCO's requirements highlight a broader failure. The criticism from governments and other actors reveals that the SJMIR listing has not managed to spread the desired image worldwide. After the nomination, the Japanese government has repeatedly voiced its satisfaction and desire to see the SJMIR embody positive and inspiring values of Japanese accomplishments. Shinzo Abe declared he "*would like to express anew my determination to preserve and pass on to the next generation these wonderful heritage sites*" (28). However, the focus on the failed promise shows that the international community is more concerned with the SJMIR being accurately presented as a site of suffering than focused on its wonderfulness. While the sites' nomination translates into a desire to promote outstanding industrial development, the focus on its controversial history shows that Japan has failed to convince the international community of the nature of the SJMIR. This is mostly because the narrative that Japan has chosen to endorse is denounced for its inadequacy with the worldwide trend to condemn colonial history (16).

Overall, Japan has failed in two ways through its handling of the SJMIR nomination. First, by not respecting its promise and following UNESCO requirements. Secondly, it failed to spread a convincing narrative of the SJMIR. Even if recent Japanese efforts have been acknowledged by UNESCO to reflect on its narratives of the past, the repeated mentions of a failed promise prove it is still an ongoing and unresolved issue.

#### **4.4 The Damages of the SJMIR**

This final section focuses on the 'Damages of the SJMIR' theme. It reveals the consequences that the listing and how it has been handled by Japan has affected its international relations and the concept of CH itself. This theme covers the following codes: debates, UNESCO, backlash, disputes, hindering trust, and values.

After the SJMIR nomination and the way the sites have been managed since, several sources report its negative effects on Japan's diplomatic relations. The sites' management has exposed "*the desires of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and other members of the Japanese right-wing to relive Japan's "glory days" in the Meiji Restoration*" (9). This perception of Japan's intentions, coupled with failures to comply with international demands have contributed to hindering Japan's relations, with its EA neighbors especially. There is a special focus on the 'diplomatic brawl' between South Korea and Japan specifically (9, 16, 44). Beyond the mentions of disputes over the nomination, many sources argue that the SJMIR issue has left marks on the trust bonds between the two countries. Japanese newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*, goes as far as saying that with no action from Japan to prove its willingness to correct its historical narrative, it would be "*impossible to build mutual trust between the*

*two countries.*” (44). This reveals the importance of historical issues within the EA region and highlights how severe the consequences can be. The same worry is expressed in *The Diplomat*, where the US-Japanese alliance is said to be jeopardized by Japan’s silence over its colonial past (14). Hua Chunying, China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, claimed that if Japan refuses to acknowledge its full history, it “*should further lose the trust of its Asian neighbors and the international community.*” (13).

This reveals that the SJMIR nomination not only revived discussions of the controversial history of the EA region but also resulted in Japan losing the trust of several international actors.

Additionally, this loss of trust has already affected Japan’s CHG. Japan’s Prime Minister Fushi Kishida has decided to submit the Sado mines for the WHL in 2023. South Korea has firmly voiced its opposition, claiming that these sites also have a history of forced labor. In many instances, South Korea’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson has declared that “*the ROK government again urges Japan to first implement the follow-up measures that it pledged*” (39). This position has been officially supported by China during the Foreign Minister Spokesperson conference: “*We fully understand and support the ROK’s attitude.*” (13). After mentioning Japan’s failure to honor its promise concerning the acknowledgment of forced labor, the spokesperson affirmed that “*Now again ignoring the painful memories of its neighbors, Japan is trying to make a similar new bid. Naturally other sides will question its true intention.*” (13). This further reveals the deep scar that the SJMIR has left on EA trust bonds. This statement is a way to call out Japan and present the government as not trustworthy. The EA countries had already made the effort to compromise with Japan on the 2015 nomination, but they explicitly expressed that they are no longer willing to do so.

Furthermore, the SJMIR issue leads to more general questions regarding the role of UNESCO itself. Japan’s attitude towards the committee’s recommendations has been interpreted as a lack of respect and an undermining of the missions and values that the institution embodies (14, 16, 22, 25). Many sources have pointed out that the current narratives spread by Japan through the SJMIR do not represent the values that UNESCO stands for, and even violate them. A Korean newspaper has even argued that the WH status of the SJMIR should be revoked (16). Additionally, when asked about the Sado mines listing, Hua Chunying has urged Japan to “*comply with UNESCO’s principle of “building peace in the minds of men and women” and should not glorify colonial history*” (22). By this statement, she means to argue that the current SJMIR nomination does not achieve that and that it is therefore incompatible with the institution’s values and mission.

Overall, the SJMIR are discussed as a way to expose the negative effects of Japan’s current CHG. The Chinese and South Korean governments have openly voiced their lack of trust in the way Japan deals with their shared history. Moreover, many are questioning the legitimacy of WH status of the SJMIR, by arguing that they do not comply with UNESCO’s mission and values. This highlights that the ways in which Japan has chosen to handle its CH is a source of controversy, and badly hinders its regional relations, as well as its reputation in the international community.

To conclude, this thematic analysis has revealed four main themes in the way the SJMIR nomination on the WHL is talked about. First, they represent Japan's desire to celebrate and glorify its past. This is done through the focus on industrial and innovative developments and accomplishments that the sites display. On another hand, sources are especially focused on highlighting the dark history that is linked to the sites, by mentioning the need to recognize the forced labor and the suffering it inflicted on thousands of victims. Additionally, the analysis identified the failures of Japan as a popular theme. Most sources mention the SJMIR through their nomination process and Japan's statement promising to acknowledge forced labor in its preservation of the sites. However, they focus on criticizing the government's failure to respect its commitment, revealing that the Japanese narrative of the SJMIR has not managed to erase its painful colonial nature. Finally, the analysis has shown that the nomination and the way it was dealt with by Japan have negatively impacted its international relations and its reputation.

## **5. Discussion**

The thematic analysis has allowed me to identify four main themes within the 47 sources. In this chapter, I contextualize my findings within the academic theories explored in Chapter 2, in order to answer my research question. This chapter highlights how the four themes revealed in Chapter 4 contribute to discuss the intentions and the weaknesses of Japan's current CHG through the case study of the SJMIR on the WHL. The third section of this discussion aims to explore the concept of heritage preservation through the results of the findings.

### **5.1 Intentions of Japan's CHG**

The analysis reveals Japan's intentions through different elements. It is also important to note the difference between the intentions of the government itself, and the ways in which other actors have interpreted its intentions.

The government of Japan has explicitly claimed that the SJMIR are a source of pride and aims to celebrate Japan's industrial accomplishments. As demonstrated in this thesis, Japan has constructed the narrative of the SJMIR through a careful selection of symbols, elements, and messages. The value of the SJMIR relies on Japan's uniqueness, pride, Meiji nostalgia, and Japanese identity. This reveals that the sites are presented in a way that appeals to a domestic audience because it is rooted in elements of national identity. This focus on national narrative is a good illustration of the CH definition given by heritage studies scholars. The story of the SJMIR is put together through the intentional selection of elements that express Japan's envisioned national identity, and contribute to its national agenda (Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2018; Winter 2015). Based on the nature of the SJMIR's

narrative, it appears that Japan uses this CH as a way to feed into the creation of national myths in which Japan is glorified and its past whitewashed (Van Evera 1994; Yinan 2006). The use of myths and nostalgic elements in the construction of the SJMIR narrative shows Japan's intent to instrumentalize the sites as part of its political agenda intending to reshape its national identity and influence the way the past is remembered.

The fact that Japan has chosen sites of dark heritage while refusing to label them as such and rather, present them as industrial heritage only reveals an important motive: Japan has intentionally selected a part of its history to spread the glory of Japan. Through the use of the SJMIR specifically, Japan has taken the decision to celebrate its CH through the glorification of its old governments' actions. In addition to building the SJMIR on notions appealing to the Japanese national identity, the government has crafted a specific version of the past, choosing to praise the modernization process, without mentioning all the facts and events that happened within those sites.

This glorification is interpreted by most of the international community as an intentional and calculated attempt to whitewash the past of Japan and rewrite history. Having recourse to nostalgic feelings about the Meiji era, Japan is accused of instrumentalizing CH and the WHL in order to help its image and erase the colonial and imperialist past. The international community identifies the SJMIR as a national myth-making tool and denounces its inaccurate historical discourse.

Beyond the narrative itself spread by Japan, it is the government's actions that reinforce the international community's understanding that its CH is instrumentalized and politicized to fulfill a political agenda. By failing to respect UNESCO and its recommendations, Japan has shown a lack of cooperation and appeared dismissive of the forced labor issue. This unwillingness to comply with the numerous demands highlights that the SJMIR have been handled purposely by Japan solely through its industrial value. Furthermore, such a way of governing CH is called out as incompatible with the CH's missions and values that UNESCO actively seeks to promote.

Overall, the research of this thesis has revealed that Japan's submission of the SJMIR was part of its CHG using CH to celebrate and glorify its past. Japan intends to instrumentalise cultural elements in order to boost its image. This is done through a focus on the changes and developments that have contributed to Japan's greatness, but also a dismissal of all the dark elements of this same past. As such, Japan's CHG's intentions are seen as uncooperative, dismissive, and incompatible with the definition of CH embodied within UNESCO. However, such intentions have considerable consequences for Japan's diplomatic relations, and reveal several weaknesses in Japan's approach.

## **5.2 The weaknesses of Japan's CHG**

The identification and interpretation of themes in the analysis have revealed numerous weaknesses in Japan's current CHG.

First of all, the main weakness of Japan's CHG is the message it seeks to spread. The various criticisms mentioned in the analysis, especially through the third theme, point out that Japan's current way of governing its CH is tone-deaf. Japan uses its past as a mere tool to support its present and future political agenda. This is seen as part of Abe's administration policy focused on restoring Japanese pride and glory. The narratives spread are deemed inadequate with UNESCO values, with worldwide trends condemning colonialism, and with EA neighbors' sentiments. The objectives Japan tries to fulfill through the promotion of its CH are too rooted in national discourse and fail to appeal to and convince the international community. The issue is not that the SJMIR are a dark heritage, but rather that Japan fails to identify it as such, and thus fails to acknowledge the existence of its dark past.

Secondly, the SJMIR and the glorification of the Japanese past hinder the international and diplomatic relations of the country. Instead of boosting Japan's image, the narratives have revived blame against Japan and its imperialist past. This reveals a weakness in Japan's communication, and method to convince others to support their objectives. Based on Nye's theory of soft power, this suggests that Japan's CHG lacks enough soft power to successfully influence others to support their objectives and their version of history (Nye 1990).

These two weaknesses show a common point. According to Winter's heritage diplomacy, CH is to be understood as an arena of governance with two outcomes: cooperation or contestation (Winter 2015). Japan's current governing approach to its CH suggests its diplomacy is rather lacking, and instead of contributing to international cooperation, the decisions made by the government put Japan at the center of contestations. In this context, international cooperation is better understood as "reconciliation" (Clarke et al. 2020). Japan's failure to use the SJMIR as a way to reconcile with EA neighbors negatively affects the country's diplomatic relations and the way it is perceived by other actors. Rather, the government's narrative choice is isolating them even more on the diplomatic scale.

Furthermore, the analysis has revealed that governments spoke up during WHC to represent the voices of the communities that suffered in the SJMIR and wish acknowledgment. The weakness in Japan's approach is that it failed to consider that this CH does not only belong to Japan, but to all the actors that share experiences and identify themselves through it. By overly celebrating the SJMIR as industrial heritage, Japan actively "disengages others from their active use of heritage" (Kuutma 2013, 1; Smith 2006). The narrative dictated by Japan is intended to act as a lens through which the sites are to be perceived. However, in this case, it actively erases other actors' narratives of this CH. Japan has failed to represent communities, and its political design through the use of the SJMIR is thus not subtle enough. By framing the SJMIR as a symbol of abundance and success, victims' voices are ignored (Kim 2022). However, the focus on including communities in CH is a mission stated by UNESCO as one of their strategic objectives (UNESCO d). The case of the SJMIR reveals that this mission is not always respected, and leads several actors to question UNESCO's intentions and priorities.

These findings suggest that the governing model of CH, in Japan but also in UNESCO is not yet inclusive enough, and allows governments to enforce their narratives. The controversy surrounding the SJMIR highlights a desire, and even a necessity for the politicization of heritage to lessen. Because, while the voices of people are not represented nor implemented in the current way that SJMIR are celebrated, they are heard and broadcasted by the international community. This case reveals the fragility of CH governing and agency. As introduced in a previous chapter, this confirms that governing CH at a governmental level presents risks of high politicization and instrumentalization (Sokka et al. 2021). I believe that there should be an active change in the participatory model of CHG, that would be more inclusive of local voices, in order to favor a better representation of the embeddedness of social, cultural, and identity forces within CH. The current mechanisms of CHG illustrate the strong link between power and CH, in which powerful actors are more able to impose their narrative and influence the preservation of CH (Kisić 2014; Lähdesmäki and Čeginskas 2022). The overwhelming amount of voices challenging Japan's narratives suggest a need for change.

### **5.3 A Reflection on Heritage Preservation**

In the context of defining CH, these findings reveal how the SJMIR are an example of the use of heritage to fulfill political purposes and celebrate a very calculated narrative of history. The controversy surrounding the sites show that CH is a construct that can be constantly changing and reinventing itself, depending on the negotiations of elements and discourses it seeks to promote. CH is defined by the interaction of social and political forces. Moreover, each actor struggles to enforce its own narrative in order to reinforce and legitimize its identity. Japan has chosen to promote SJMIR to celebrate its past achievements. However, this method of governance has failed to convince the entire international community. South Korea sees the SJMIR nomination as a way to remember its victims and encourage Japan to acknowledge the impacts of its colonial past, a first step towards sharing a common understanding and remembrance of the past.

These two opposite narratives offer a reflection on the definition of the preservation of heritage. Already discussed in chapter 2, preservation of heritage does not have to be on a physical and tangible level only. When heritage is understood as a process shaped by the interaction of multiple forces and experiences, CH preservation can define the attempt to maintain heritage and its meanings alive, in memory and history (Liu et al. 2020; Macdonald 2013; Smith 2006). Japan and South Korea's narratives reveal different goals through the use of the SJMIR, and thus different ways in which it should be preserved. These disputes over the narrative of the SJMIR are not just based on how to define the sites, but how to preserve them. The whole debate is in fact centered on the meanings vehiculated by the SJMIR, and which purpose it should fulfill as part of the WHL.

Overall, this research shows Japan's desire to instrumentalize its past as a way to establish its own desired national narrative in an attempt to preserve heritage. Japan wishes to preserve its

heritage through a telling of success and achievement. On the other hand, South Korea has shown their desire to preserve the memory of the victims embedded within the history of these sites. The SJMIR have highlighted that Japan's CH governance methods do not manage to convince the international community, and remain too weak to result in a successful cultural heritage diplomacy, meaning one that reinforces Japan's nation branding and soft-power. They have worsened Japan's position in the region and international community by altering its diplomatic relations, questioning its trustworthiness and dismissing worldwide trends condemning colonial past and acknowledging victims. However, these effects are mostly experienced by Japan on a regional diplomatic level.

## **6. Conclusion**

After analyzing the way the SJMIR have been handled by Japan and received by international actors, I conclude that CH is a practice of the present, in which the past becomes a tool. The goal of this thesis was to explore how Japan manages its CHG, in order to find out its intentions and weaknesses. To do so, I conducted a thematic analysis to highlight the main themes under which the SJMIR nomination to the WHL was discussed in French, American, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese sources. The analysis showed Japan's efforts to promote the CH as a way to spread its narrative of its past, and legitimize its national identity. However, this has been revealed to be done in a dismissive and tone deaf way. Other actors have criticized the way Japan has chosen to represent a small part of history, focusing only on the industrial success context, and totally ignoring the violence and suffering that are also part of this heritage. South Korea and China in particular have expressed on many occasions that they wished Japan would acknowledge the SJMIR as a dark heritage. They agree on its belonging to the WHL but only on the conditions that the victims' experiences are acknowledged and given a voice. This controversy illustrates the important role that narratives play in the construction of CH, and its potential impact on diplomacy. Japan's refusal to adequately and sufficiently mention victims have led to accusations of historical revisionism and selection of memory and history. This further reveals the process of CH construction in this case. Japan has resorted to symbols appealing to a Japanese domestic audience, such as nostalgia, uniqueness and pride, to further encourage national identity and ideology. However, this approach fails to appeal to the international community.

Overall, the thematic analysis revealed that Japan's intentions are to promote its past according to its very own specific narrative, and does not wish to compromise and collaborate with other voices. While it had initially promised to address South Korea's wishes, it repeatedly failed to do so, even while under pressure from EA neighbors and UNESCO representatives.

This controversial case study highlights Japan's inaptitude to transform its CH promotion as a way to reconcile with its neighbors. This suggests that Japan does not use its heritage as a way to enhance diplomatic relations, but rather as a way to reinforce its national identity and its own perception of history. This is mostly achieved by resourcing to elements inherent to Japanese

nation-branding and nationalism. However, while these symbols appeal to a domestic audience and can fulfill Japan's domestic agenda to foster more pride, it does not resonate within the international community. Other countries and actors have their own identities and are not convinced by mechanisms that are designed for internal nationalism.

Furthermore, this reveals a broader issue in the way CH is governed generally. This case clearly illustrates the dismissal of victims, permitted through a system that gives governments more power in governing CH. I argue that such controversy could have been better prevented through a model of governance that includes higher community participation, and would thus give governments less power and opportunity to carry its political agenda through the instrumentalisation of the past. As it stands, even if Japan's narrative is not supported worldwide, the sites nonetheless remain listed as a WHL and the way Japan governs them does not address the full story.

Through this thesis, I do not argue that Japan always instrumentalizes its CH this way. This research is a non-exhaustive thematic analysis based on 47 sources. It is important to understand that my findings and what they reveal are thus based on these specific methodological elements. While other sources could offer a different perspective, it does not change the fact that Japan's relations have suffered from the way the government has chosen to endorse its imperialist past through a glorifying and selective narrative.

Beyond revealing some intentions and weaknesses of Japan's CHG, this thesis' findings have shown how CH is intrinsically constructed on narratives. The thematic analysis revealed that the SJMIR are a way for Japan to promote its own version of its past. For South Korea, it was a way to confront Japan on its controversial past and hold it accountable. This shows how political discourses and objectives can be reinforced through the use of CH. More than this, it reveals how the construction of CH must be carefully crafted. In the case of Japan, it has failed to appropriately enforce its narrative through its CH, and to convince the international community. On an international level, its methods of management have not allowed Japan to successfully and convincingly instrumentalize CH.

This has highlighted that narratives are important because of how they impact the role that CH can play, especially when listed on the WHL. In the case of the SJMIR, there is a disagreement on how the sites should be preserved. Japan wishes to preserve them as a symbol of unique achievement, while the international community, and mostly South Korea, sees their listing on the WH as an opportunity to preserve the history of pain and traumatism inflicted by Japan's imperialist era.

Overall, this thesis has revealed that Japan's intentions through the nomination and governance of the SJMIR are to fulfill a political agenda that instrumentalizes the past. However, its governing approach has been criticized on many levels, and have led to hindering Japan's diplomatic relations, and negatively affected its credibility. The analysis has revealed that the controversy is especially focused on the elements used to define and present the sites. The two opposing approaches



to presenting the SJMIR have allowed me to identify that the dispute is centered on the preservation of heritage.

To this day, the controversy has remained unresolved, and it would be interesting to follow how UNESCO will deal with the listing if Japan does not show sufficient results in the next WHC meeting. Moreover, the impact of the SJMIR governance currently directly affects another element of Japanese CH, the Sado mines. It could be relevant to focus future research on the new dispositions that UNESCO and EA neighbors will take to make sure that Japan improves its methods of cultural heritage governance.

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## **Appendix A - Listing of all twenty-three components of the SJMIR**

### Area 1 : The Hagi sites in Yamaguchi

They are composed of the Hagi reverberatory furnace (萩反射炉, Hagi hansharo); the Ebisugahana shipyard (恵美須ヶ鼻造船所跡, Ebisugahana zōsenso ato); the Ōitayama-tatara iron smelting works (大板山たたら製鉄遺跡, Ōitayama tatara seitetsui ato); the Hagi castle town (萩城下町, Hagi jōkamachi); and Shōkasonjuku Academy (松下村塾, Shōkason juku).

Some of these sites are also classified as Historic sites of Japan (史跡, shiseki), and Hagi castle town is classified under Groups of Traditional Buildings (伝統的建造物群, Dentōteki Kenzōbutsu-gun).

### Area 2: The Shūseikan pioneering factory complex in Kagoshima

They are composed of the Former Shūseikan (旧集成館, kyū Shūseikan), that includes the Remains of Shūseikan Reverberatory Furnaces (旧集成館反射炉跡, Shūseikan hansyaro ato), the Shūseikan machine factory (旧集成館機械工場, Shūseikan kikai kōjō), and the Former Kagoshima spinning engineer's residence (旧鹿児島紡績所技師館, kyū Kagoshima hōsekijo gishi-kan); the Terayama Charcoal Kiln (寺山炭窯跡, Terayama sumigama ato); and the Sekiyoshi Sluice gate of Yoshino leat (関吉の疎水溝, Yoshino no sosuikō).

Some of these sites are classified as Historic sites of Japan, or Important Cultural Property (重要文化財, jūyō bunkazai).

### Area 3: the Nirayama proto-industrial reverberatory furnace in Shizuoka

Nirayama Reverberatory Furnace (萑山反射炉, Niirayama hansharo).

This is classified as a Historic Site of Japan.

### Area 4: the Hashino iron mining and smelting site in Iwate

Hashino iron mining and smelting site (橋野鉄鉱山, Hashino tekkōzan).

This is classified as a Historic Site of Japan.

### Area 5: the Mietsu shipyard in Saga

Mietsu Naval Dock (三重津海軍所跡, Mietsu kaigunsho ato).

This is classified as a Historic Site of Japan.

### Area 6: the Nagasaki shipyard facilities, coal mining islands and associated sites in Nagasaki

They are composed of the Kosuge Slip Dock (小菅修船場跡, Kosuge shūsenba ato); Mitsubishi No.3 Dry Dock (三菱長崎造船所 第三船渠, Mitsubishi Nagasaki Zōsenjyo Daisan Senkyo); the Mitsubishi Senshokaku Guest House (長崎造船所 占勝閣, Nagasaki Zōsenjyo Senshōkaku); the



Mitsubishi Giant Cantilever Crane (長崎造船所 ジャイアント・カンチレバークレーン, Nagasaki Zōsenjyo Giant Cantilever Crane); the Mitsubishi Former Pattern Shop (長崎造船所 旧木型場, Nagasaki Zōsenjyo Kyuu Kigataba); the Takashima Coal Mine (高島炭鉱, Takashima Coal Mine); the Hashima coal mine (端島炭坑, Hashima tankō) and the Glover House and Office (旧グラバー住宅, kyū Gulabā jūtaku).

Some of these sites are classified as Historic sites of Japan or Important Cultural Property.

#### Area 7: Miike coal mines, railway and ports in Fukuoka and Kumamoto

They are composed of the Miike Coal Mine and Miike Port (三池炭鉱、三池港, Miike tankō, Miike-kō) that includes the Miike tankō Miyanohara Pit (三池炭鉱 宮原坑, Miike tankō Miyahara kou), the Miike tankō Manda Pit (三池炭鉱 万田坑, Miike tankō Manda kou), the Miike tankō coal mine industrial railway (三池炭鉱 専用鉄道敷跡, Miikekō・Miike tankō senyō tetsudō ato) and the Miike Port (三池港, *Miike-kō*); Misumi West Port (三角西港, Misumi nishi-kō).

These sites are all classified as Important Cultural Property.

#### Area 8: the Yawata steel works in Fukuoka

They are composed of The Imperial Steel Works, Japan (旧官営八幡製鐵所関連施設, kyū kanei Yahata seitetsusho kanren shisetsu) that includes The Imperial Steel Works: Office (八幡製鐵所 旧本事務所, Yahata seitetsusho kyū-jimusyo), the Imperial Steel Works: Repairing factory (八幡製鐵所 修繕工場, Yahata seitetsusho syūzen-kōjō), and the The Imperial Steel Works: Metalsmith factory (八幡製鐵所 旧鍛冶工場, Yahata seitetsusho kyū-kaji-kōjō); and the Onga river Pumping Station (遠賀川水源地ポンプ室, Onga-gawa suigenchi ponpu-shitsu).

## Appendix B - Bibliography of the Sample

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