Selective Memory and Strategic Forgetting

Japan's Industrial Heritage Tourism

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Site of Japan's first modern steelworks, ***Yawata Steelworks*** *(八幡製鐵所, Yahata Seitetsusho), Kitakyushu. Photo by Shutterstock, used with permission.*

Local and national elites in Japan have turned to the nation's industrial past as a source of cultural and economic capital to boost tourism both domestically and internationally. Similar to other industrialized countries, these leaders are curating their history of industrialization as an economic strategy. They are part of a global consortium of industrial heritage enthusiasts focused on repurposing historic industrial sites—such as factories, shipyards, and mining areas—into tourist

destinations that celebrate technological progress and economic development. In Japan, factory buildings, shipyards, and former mining sites have been transformed into "industrial heritage" attractions, meant to appeal to visitors from around the world.

This repurposing of historical sites is heralded as a dual achievement—preserving Japan's rich industrial history while simultaneously driving economic revitalization in regions facing population decline and economic stagnation. However, beneath this veneer of cultural preservation lies a more complex and problematic reality. The tourism economy built around these sites often prioritizes profit and national pride at the expense of historical accuracy, ethical responsibility, and a comprehensive understanding of the past.

The Commodification of Industrial Heritage

The phenomenon of transforming industrial sites into tourist destinations is not unique to Japan. Yet, it has taken on a distinct character in the Japanese historical context of modernization and empire building. An illustrative example is the way Japan's maritime history, especially the legacy of Nippon Yusen Kaisha (NYK Line), has been crafted to support company public relations and marketing agenda. Established in the late 19th century, the NYK Line played a pivotal role in Japan's industrialization and imperial expansion. The company's extensive shipping routes connected Japan to its colonies, facilitating the movement of goods, people, and, significantly, the machinery of empire and war (Wray, 1984; Gerteis, forthcoming in 2025).

From the early 2000s until the early 2020s, NYK's corporate-sponsored museums, official publications, and digital exhibits focused heavily on the history of technological advancement and the global reach of its fleet, portraying the company as a dual symbol of Japan's 19th-century modernization and 21st-century global integration. These promotional materials highlight the company's pioneering role in establishing international shipping routes and developing luxurious passenger liners that were the pride of Japan's burgeoning empire (Gerteis, forthcoming in 2025).

Yet, this narrative was crafted to emphasize the triumphs of industrialization while strategically downplaying or omitting the company's darker historical roles, such as transporting indentured laborers from Japan to Hawaii and South America in the

1920s and colonial laborers from Korea and China during the Asia-Pacific War from 1931 to 1945 (Lowenthal, 1998; Trouillot, 1995).

The Struggle Over Terminology

This is the locus of problem: the extent to which colonial labor was voluntary. The use of the term "forced labor" to describe Korean workers conscripted by Japan during the 1930s and 1940s remains one of the most contentious historical debates in East Asia. The Japanese government, along with some scholars, often employs terms like "requisitioned" or "mobilized" to describe these workers, reflecting a desire to soften the coercive aspects of colonial and wartime labor policies and practices during Japan's imperial era (Duró et al., 2016).

This linguistic choice is part of a broader strategy aimed at minimizing Japan's legal and moral responsibility for its actions during the war. In contrast, South Korean officials insist on using "forced labor," highlighting the exploitative, involuntary conditions under which Korean colonial workers lived. A 2018 South Korean Supreme Court ruling, which mandated compensation from Japanese companies to victims of what it held to be 'forced labor,' underscores the stark divide in how the two nations perceive and narrate this period (Duró et al., 2016). This debate over terminology is not merely a linguistic difference; it reflects deeper struggles over how the past is remembered, memorialized, and represented in both academic discourse and public memory.

The issue is full of nuances that complicate even the distinction between a 'South Korean' and 'Japanese' narrative. Some South Korean scholars, like Lee Woo-youn, argue that many Korean workers migrated to Japan voluntarily, seeking economic opportunities amidst the broader backdrop of colonial industrialization (Yi, 2020). Lee supports his interpretation by using wage records and documentation, suggesting that at least some Koreans moved freely, lured by Japan's labor needs during its war efforts. However, critics of this view contend that even voluntary migration existed within an overarching system of coercion. They argue that the structural violence of colonial rule and wartime mobilization policies left Koreans with few genuine alternatives. Therefore, the term "forced labor" remains appropriate for describing the overall context (Yi, 2020).

The complexity of this debate shapes not only how historians and scholars interpret the past but also how contemporary diplomatic relations and legal proceedings

unfold between Japan and South Korea (Ha, 2019). The South Korean perspective prioritizes historical justice and moral responsibility, framing Japan's colonial labor policies as intrinsically tied to imperial exploitation. For Japan, however, the preference for more neutral terminology such as "mobilization" reflects an attempt to mitigate the historical narrative of victimization and frame the period as one of mutual necessity driven by wartime exigencies.

The Connection to Industrial Heritage

These debates over terminology are not isolated to academia; they are closely linked to how historical sites tied to Japan's industrial and wartime legacy are curated and presented. In the context of industrial heritage tourism, such as at sites like the Sado Island Gold Mines or the Miike Coal Mine, the use of specific terms like "forced labor" or "mobilized labor" carries significant implications for how these sites are remembered and interpreted (Johnsen, 2022).

South Korea's insistence on acknowledging forced labor at these sites as part of their UNESCO World Heritage designation underscores the importance of historical accuracy and accountability in heritage tourism. Conversely, Japan's hesitancy to fully embrace this terminology reflects a broader discomfort with confronting the darker aspects of its industrial past, especially as these narratives intersect with national pride and economic interests.

The debate over forced labor intersects with broader issues of historical memory and heritage. By framing the labor practices of the colonial period as "mobilization" rather than "forced labor," Japan's UNESCO inscribed heritage sites present a version of history that aligns with nationalistic narratives of progress and technological achievement, downplaying the exploitation and suffering of colonial workers and their families. The term "mobilization" implies voluntary participation, obscuring the coercive realities faced by the colonial peoples. Here, Trouillot (1995) offers insight into how inconvenient truths are minimized to maintain control over historical narratives, noting that what is remembered and what is forgotten are shaped by those in power. Consequently, the debates over terminology are not just about historical facts but also about who gets to control the narrative of Japan's industrial and imperial past (Gerteis, 2024).

Ultimately, these terminological debates highlight the tension between historical interpretation and the commodification of heritage. Industrial heritage sites in Japan

often focus on technological achievements and economic growth, but to avoid confronting the exploitative practices behind this progress risks distorting public memory and obscuring the full scope of historical events. For heritage tourism to be ethically responsible and historically accurate, it must engage with the full complexity of the past, including uncomfortable truths like forced labor, colonial exploitation, and the darker aspects of Japan's imperial legacy.

Heritage as Selective Memory

David Lowenthal (1998) distinguishes between heritage and history, providing critical insight into the commodification of Japan's industrial past. Heritage, Lowenthal argues, is not a neutral reflection of the past but an active construction that serves the needs of the present. It often involves strategic omissions, creating a sanitized, marketable version of history. This is particularly relevant in the context of Japan's industrial heritage sites, where narratives of technological achievements and national pride are emphasized. At the same time, the darker aspects of history—such as labor exploitation, colonialism, and environmental degradation—are downplayed or ignored.

The debates over "forced labor" further illustrate this selective memory. The contentious terminology reflects deeper questions about historical responsibility and the legitimacy of Japan's colonial rule over Korea. South Korea's insistence on using the term "forced labor" is closely tied to its view of Japan's colonial policies as exploitative and coercive. At the same time, Japanese scholars and officials often frame labor mobilization in more neutral terms, focusing on modernization and economic development (Yi, 2020). The choice of language in historical narratives thus becomes a tool for shaping collective memory and influencing public perceptions of historical justice.

Sado Kinzan (Sado Gold Mine), Niigata. Photo by Shutterstock, used with permission.

The Sado Gold Mines, inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2023, offers a poignant example of the tensions between heritage preservation and historical accountability. These mines, which date back to the 12th century, were central to Japan's economic development for nearly four centuries. The site is often celebrated for its technological advancements and historical significance. Still, such celebrations obscure the darker aspects of its past, particularly during World War II when Korean colonial subjects worked under brutal conditions.

UNESCO's inscription of the Sado Mines has drawn significant global attention, positioning it as a must-visit destination during the 2024 foreign tourism boom. However, as with many industrial heritage sites, the focus on technological achievements and cultural significance comes at the expense of addressing the contentious history of the people who worked the mines.

The Japanese government had promised to enhance the historical interpretation of the site, including the history of Korean workers, but this effort remains fraught with controversy. South Korea initially opposed the registration of the mines as a UNESCO site, underscoring the deep historical wounds that persist between Japan

and its neighbors over the unreconciled history of colonial labor under Japanese imperialism (Yano & Kim, 2023).

This conflict over how the Sado Gold Mines should be presented to the world highlights the broader struggle over how Japan's industrial past is remembered and interpreted. For South Korea, acknowledging the labor of Korean workers as involuntary is crucial to historical justice and reconciliation. Japan's hesitation to fully engage with this aspect of the site's history reveals the selective nature of national memory construction.

The Politics of Remembering and Forgetting

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* (1995) adds significant depth to our understanding of industrial heritage tourism in Japan by highlighting how certain narratives are deliberately constructed to benefit those in power. At the same time, inconvenient facts are minimized or entirely omitted. In the context of Japan's industrial heritage tourism, Trouillot helps explain how historical narratives are carefully curated to emphasize Japan's technological advancements and economic progress while downplaying or ignoring darker elements such as involuntary labor, environmental degradation, and colonial exploitation.

Japan's industrial heritage sites emphasize narratives of technological progress and national achievement while downplaying darker aspects such as forced labor and colonial exploitation. By choosing to frame the labor practices of the colonial period as "mobilization" rather than "forced labor," these sites effectively silence the history of exploitation and suffering at that defined the experience of colonial labor regimes worldwide. Debates over terminology and representation in Japan's industrial heritage are not just about historical facts but also about who gets to control the narrative of Japan's industrial and imperial past.

Trouillot argues that the production of historical narratives is not a neutral process but one deeply influenced by power dynamics. Those who control the narrative—whether governments, corporations, or other elites—can "silence" certain aspects of the past, particularly those that might undermine national pride or economic interests. In Japan's case, the emphasis on technological achievements at industrial heritage sites, such as the Sado Island Gold Mines or the Miike Coal Mine, serves to reinforce a positive image of industrial progress and modernization. However, this

narrative often "silences" the suffering of forced laborers and the imperialist contexts in which these sites operated.

The debates around the use of the term "forced labor" underscore how these power dynamics manifest in historical discourse. The Japanese government's preference for terms like "requisitioned labor" reflects a desire to mitigate responsibility and shape public memory in a way that aligns with national interests (Duró et al., 2016). Meanwhile, South Korea's insistence on the term "forced labor" represents an effort to bring the voices of victims to the forefront and confront the historical injustices committed during Japan's colonial rule. These debates are not merely academic; they influence how nations deal with historical accountability and reconciliation, shaping the collective memory of both countries (Ha, 2019).

Economic Interests and Heritage Tourism

The rise of industrial heritage tourism in Japan is closely linked to economic imperatives. Local governments and businesses, particularly in regions experiencing population decline and economic stagnation, have embraced heritage tourism as a strategy for revitalization. The financial benefits of increased tourism—such as job creation, infrastructure development, and the rebranding of local economies—are frequently cited as justification for these projects. However, the focus on economic gain often comes at the cost of historical integrity.

In the rush to develop these sites for tourism, the narratives presented are often simplified and sanitized to appeal to a broad audience. Historical complexities—such as the connections between industrialization and colonialism or the exploitation of forced laborers—are downplayed or ignored. Instead, the emphasis is placed on stories of technological innovation and national progress, narratives that are more likely to attract tourists and generate revenue (Bourdieu, 1986).

For example, at the Yawata Steelworks in Kitakyushu, the story presented to visitors emphasizes its role as a symbol of Japan's industrial prowess. Yet, this narrative largely omits the environmental damage caused by steel production processes (a global phenomenon) and the harsh working conditions endured by women and men who mined the coal and iron ore that fed the furnaces, including those from Japan's colonies - also a global phenomenon. The result is a tourism package offering a palatable version of the past that supports contemporary economic and political

objectives while obscuring the more complex realities of Japan's industrial history (Gerteis, 2025).

Challenges, Strategies, and Prospects

The Tomioka Silk Mill in Gunma Prefecture serves as a compelling case study highlighting both the potential and challenges of industrial heritage tourism in Japan. Established in 1872 as the country's first modern silk reeling factory, it played a pivotal role in modernizing Japan's silk industry. Its historical significance was formally recognized in 2014 when it was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Following its UNESCO designation, visitor numbers at the Tomioka Silk Mill surged to 1.34 million in 2014, reflecting a common pattern among Japan's World Heritage Sites where inscription leads to an initial spike in tourism. However, this was followed by a sharp decline, with visitor numbers dropping to approximately 170,000 in 2023—a fraction of the peak (Ishikawa, 2024). This boom-and-bust cycle underscores the challenges of maintaining long-term interest in such sites. A 2016 survey by Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs revealed that this pattern is typical for World Heritage Sites in Japan: visitor numbers increase leading up to inscription, surge immediately after, and then gradually decline over the next four to five years. This trend highlights the need for sustainable tourism strategies to maintain interest beyond the initial excitement (Japan Tourism Agency, 2024).

Financial challenges further compound the difficulties faced by the Tomioka Silk Mill. Between 2014 and 2021, its financial reserves plummeted from ¥990 million to just ¥50 million, largely due to high maintenance and repair costs—a common issue for large-scale industrial heritage sites. This financial strain raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of industrial heritage tourism in Japan (Ishikawa, 2024).

These challenges occur against a backdrop of changing tourist preferences and broader shifts in the tourism industry. Modern travelers increasingly seek authentic, immersive experiences and show a growing interest in sustainable tourism practices. In response, the Japanese government has implemented initiatives like the "Tourism Nation Promotion Basic Plan" and is exploring digital technologies for improved tourism management and promotion (Japan Tourism Agency, 2024).

The experience of the Tomioka Silk Mill mirrors broader issues faced by industrial heritage sites globally. Financial sustainability is a common concern, as many sites struggle to generate sufficient revenue to cover maintenance and preservation costs. The boom-and-bust cycle of visitor numbers following World Heritage inscription is also observed internationally, though its severity may vary. Additionally, sites worldwide grapple with balancing preservation and development, aiming to adapt historical structures for modern use without compromising their integrity.

Concluding Thoughts

As local and national interests continue to develop industrial heritage tourism as a part of their economic policy, it is crucial to reflect on the broader implications of this trend. The selective memory and strategic forgetting employed in these narratives do more than distort historical facts; they actively shape how the past is remembered and understood by both domestic and international audiences. By prioritizing economic gain and national pride over historical accuracy, these practices reinforce existing power structures and obscure the realities of Japan's industrial and imperial past. The debates over the term "forced labor" exemplify this struggle, as they highlight the tensions between memory, accountability, and national interests. South Korea's insistence on confronting the full context of labor during Japan's colonial period contrasts with Japan's reluctance to fully engage with this painful history (Ha, 2019; Yi, 2020).

For heritage tourism to be educational and ethical, it must engage with history in all its complexity, acknowledging both the achievements and the injustices of the past. This means confronting the darker aspects of Japan's industrial history—its connections to colonial exploitation, environmental degradation, and labor abuses—and integrating these into the narratives presented to the public. Only by delivering a more accurate narrative can industrial heritage sites serve as spaces for critical reflection rather than mere commodities in the tourism economy. This would not only provide a more accurate representation of history but also encourage a deeper understanding of the social, political, and economic forces that have shaped Japan's development. In doing so, it would offer a more meaningful and respectful way of engaging with the past, one that honors all aspects of history, not just those that are convenient or profitable (Lowenthal, 1998; Bourdieu, 1986; Foucault, 1980).

Industrial heritage tourism needs to move beyond the confines of national pride and economic goals. The historical narratives presented must be inclusive of those whose

experiences have often been erased or minimized. Only by embracing the full complexity of Japan's industrial and imperial past can heritage tourism move beyond being a blunt tool for economic policy and nationalist politics. Such a transformation would not only enhance Japan's reputation in the global community but also encourage domestic audiences to grapple with the difficult chapters of their national history, fostering a more informed and empathetic public discourse and perhaps furthering historical reconciliation in East Asia.

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