

# Issues of Memory and History: UNESCO and the Politicization of World Heritage Site Nominations

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## Abstract

Since its adoption in 1972, the Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and nature heritage has come under increasing pressure. It is no longer enough to choose sites “of outstanding universal values,” but also to respond to increasingly complex objectives such as development, diversity, inclusiveness and the fight against climate change. Choices are also increasingly politicized, and the World Heritage Committee has become the arena for rivalry between the most influent States parties, who see the number of sites nominated as a demonstration of their power and clout. Local economic and development interests are also related to these choices. In this context, the nomination of industrial sites with complex pasts occupies a specific place, raising several questions, including that of the use of history for contemporary geopolitical stakes.

## Introduction

The Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and nature heritage was adopted in 1972 and came into force in 1975. In 2023, 195 State parties are signatories of the Convention and participate to the election of the World Heritage Committee. It reflected at the time of its adoption a preoccupation for the preservation of past heritage, for the education of future generations, that dated back to the League of Nations in 1919.<sup>1</sup> The World Heritage Center, established in 1992 to act as Secretariat, plays the role of coordinator for matter related to the Convention and organizes the annual session of the World Heritage Committee that decides the sites nomination and the reporting on the conditions of the sites.<sup>2</sup> Its 21 members are elected by the State Parties signatories to the Convention. When the first World Heritage List was drawn up at the first session held from June 27 to July 1st 1977 by the then 15-states committee,<sup>3</sup> a number of principles were defined with 10 criteria.<sup>4</sup> The list was to be exclusive, so that places chosen with “extreme care” would remain remarkable and balanced not only geographically but also between cultural and natural sites.<sup>5</sup> Concerns have since then been expressed about the impact of Western conceptions, Eurocentric bias and differences in perception between cultures. The global study carried out by ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) from 1987 to 1993 revealed that “Europe, historic towns and religious

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<sup>1</sup> Jens Boel, “The League of Nations: A Universal Dream that has Stood the Test of Time,” <https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/league-nations-universal-dream-has-stood-test-time>, 27-01-2020.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Meskell, “States of Conservation: Protection, Politics and Pacting Within UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee,” *Current Anthropology*, vol 54, n° 4, 08-2013.

<sup>3</sup> Australia, Canada, Ecuador, Egypt, France, West Germany, Ghana, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Poland, Senegal, Tunisia, USA, Yugoslavia

<sup>4</sup> Six for cultural sites and four for natural sites. In 2005, the criteria were merged into one list of ten criteria.

<sup>5</sup> “Establishment of the World Heritage List,” Decision 1 COM VI. A, [whc.unesco.org](http://whc.unesco.org)

monuments, Christianity, historical periods and 'elitist' architecture were all over-represented on the World Heritage List; whereas, all living cultures, and especially 'traditional cultures,' were underrepresented."

However, in 2023, the balance is still not fully respected despite an evolution since the mid-2010s, with Europe representing 47.12% of sites, Asia-Pacific 24.10%, Latin America 12.4%, the Arab world 8.59% and Africa 7.76%. Cultural sites (35%) far outweigh natural sites (1%).<sup>6</sup> By country, we find heavyweights such as the People's Republic of China (57 sites) and France (52 sites). Japan has 25 registered sites and the Republic of Korea 16.

### **The initial objective: Strict principles based on widely recognized criteria**

The principle of exclusivity in the selection of sites is one of the major points taken into account by the first award committee. The *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (1977) specifies that, to be considered for inclusion in the World Heritage List, proposed sites must have "outstanding universal value."<sup>7</sup> Cultural or natural sites must be of universal or at least widespread importance, or of exceptional interest to the peoples of the world. The text specifies that "only a select list of the most outstanding from a world view point" will be chosen. The criterion of universality, which refers to an "important or significant" part of humanity, far outweighs national interests or interpretations of what constitutes an "outstanding" site.

As far as cultural sites are concerned, the examples chosen in the Guidelines as representing "masterpieces of human creativity," which have had a lasting influence on art and human development, are particularly representative of a cultural, intellectual, social, artistic but also technological and industrial development, are associated with particularly ancient forms threatened with extinction or are sites of great historical importance in relation to personalities, philosophical schools of thought, events or religions meet this then relatively consensual definition of "world heritage site." Examples given include Borobudur in Indonesia, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, the Pantheon in Rome, the Plaza de Puebla in Mexico, the Château de Vaux le Vicomte in France, the Mayan pyramids, downtown Leningrad, the walled city of Avila in Spain, the longhouses in Indonesia, the Dogon villages in Mali, the Machu Picchu, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Mecca and the Cape Kennedy site in the USA. The list of indicative examples is intended to be both relatively diversified and geographically balanced, choosing only places recognized as exceptional.<sup>8</sup>

However, the nomination issue has become progressively more complex—and expensive to constitute a dossier with a sufficient degree of expertise—with the inclusion of proposals that are less consensual or raise problems of definition and interpretation. There are six criteria for selection to be included in the World Heritage List but the relative importance of these criteria seems to have evolved in recent years. In particular criterion six led to questions expressed by the World Heritage Committee in its definition: "Criterion VI concerns sites to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria)"<sup>9</sup>

### **A more complex selection process since the 2000s and the risk of politicization**

Progressively, the conditions for nominating UNESCO heritage sites have become more complex

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<sup>6</sup> whc.unesco.org

<sup>7</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/1977/cc-77-conf001-8reve.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> "Establishment of the World Heritage List," Decision 1 COM VI. A, whc.unesco.org

<sup>9</sup> whc.unesco.org

and less consensual, with an evolution in the concept of “world heritage”: the sites chosen can no longer simply be the expression of “outstanding universal values,” but must also serve a cause.<sup>10</sup> Choices can also serve the more direct economic or political interests of a particular state or interest group. To some experts, it should be noted that every decision taken by the World Heritage Committee is increasingly politicized, and that recommendations made to the Committee by ICOMOS or IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) are not systematically taken into account.<sup>11</sup> In 2003 the convergence factor between ICOMOS and IUCN recommendations and decisions by the Committee was 90 %. It fell to 40 % in 2012.<sup>12</sup> Increasingly, members of the World Heritage Committee, composed now of 21 members, are not experts such as archaeologists or naturalists but ambassadors or politicians sent to represent the State parties leading to backstage bargaining to obtain nominations.<sup>13</sup> An UNESCO audit published in 2011 concludes that the approach is increasingly more “political” rather than “heritage” oriented.<sup>14</sup> Some principles reflect the concerns and urgencies defined by the United Nations at a more global level. This is for example the case for the goal of sustainable development 2030. In 2021, the World Heritage Convention and sustainable development adopted a policy document for the integration of a sustainable development perspective into the process of the World Heritage Convention.<sup>15</sup> Nomination criteria must now also take account natural disasters, contribute to poverty reduction and promote a sustainable way of life for rural communities.

Allocation must also take account social inclusion issues and strengthen the influence of local communities, including young people, women and indigenous peoples. Finally, the nomination of sites must promote peace and security and facilitate cooperation.<sup>16</sup> These are major challenges, which make the nomination of world heritage sites more complex and potentially more controversial, and can also pave the way for a “nomination race” designed to legitimize—or denounce—historical episodes that do not meet with consensus.<sup>17</sup>

Some consider that UNESCO has strayed from the objectives of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, which was to protect sites perceived as the common property of mankind, to transform into a political approach to get more sites accepted as a way to bolster prestige and sovereign interests.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), who ratified the Convention in 1985, proudly proclaims on the website of one of its embassies, that “China ranks second in the world” in the number of sites.<sup>19</sup> China has 57 sites, and Italy, ranking first, 59.

But requests for nominations also have a performative function when sites are chosen for their symbolic value. In Europe, for example, the aim of the European Heritage Label, different from World Heritage but with connections to the UNESCO world heritage sites, launched in 2011,

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<sup>10</sup> Simon C. Woodward, Louise Cooke, *World Heritage: Concepts, Management and Conservation*, Routledge, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Idem

<sup>12</sup> Lynn Meskell, op.cit.

<sup>13</sup> Lynn Meskell, op.cit.

<sup>14</sup> Lynn Meskell, op.cit.

<sup>15</sup> “World Heritage Convention and Sustainable Development,” Decision 44 COM 5 D, whc.unesco.org

<sup>16</sup> Idem

<sup>17</sup> Enrico Bertacchini et al, “The Politicization of UNESCO World Heritage Decision Making,” *Public Choice*, April 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Somers Cocks, “How the War in Ukraine Reveals the Heightened Politics of UNESCO,” *The Art Newspaper*, 09-12-2022.

<sup>19</sup> [http://no.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zngx\\_1/whjl/zx/201704/t20170411\\_3072435.htm](http://no.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zngx_1/whjl/zx/201704/t20170411_3072435.htm)

is to “revive European heritage” and thus promote European integration. The label conveys an ideological belief, with emphasis on the values of “peace,” diversity, mobility and inclusion.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, one of the challenges is the race for numbers, and the fact that commitment to conservation, the original objective of the World Heritage List, has been too often replaced by an acquisitive practice of inscriptions, with pressure exerted on commission members.<sup>21</sup> China, again, is particularly active in this field, with 13 of its 57 sites nominated since 2014, when the composition of the 21 committee was changed to become more inclusive of the “Global south.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The question of sites associated with memories of recent conflicts and other negative divisive memories.**

In 1979, Auschwitz-Birkenau was designated a world heritage site, but the nomination committee stressed the exceptional nature of this type of nomination, recommending an “extremely selective” approach for the future.<sup>23</sup> Auschwitz occupies a symbolic place representing other similar sites. However, from the 1980s onwards, and even more so after the end of the Cold War, we saw the global emergence of a trend in favor of gestures of remembrance, focusing on the duty to remember mass crimes in order to avoid their repetition.<sup>24</sup> This “global culture of memory” emphasizes the importance of memorial activities to remember the victims of recent conflicts or other negative and divisive memories. This “duty to remember” is supposed to facilitate reconciliation. However, there are also risks of reviving divisions or exploiting this duty to remember for contemporary political or geopolitical ends.<sup>25</sup> Faced with an increasing number of requests for the nomination of controversial sites, in 2018, the World Heritage Center commissioned a report from a group of experts.<sup>26</sup> This group of experts defines the term “conflict” very broadly, including wars, battles, but also massacres, genocides, torture or massive violations of human rights. The second point addressed is that of extreme selectivity, so as not to diminish the exemplary value of the sites, and also to take account of the “political difficulties” potentially raised.<sup>27</sup> The expert committee points out that certain nominations concerning historical events could be strongly influenced by nationalism, “in contradiction with the objectives of WHC.”<sup>28</sup>

The creation of “Sites of Conscience” in 1999, for educational purposes, was intended to take into account difficult or divisive places of remembrance, but the list of “Sites of Conscience” does not coincide with the sites designated as World Heritage. Moreover, some of these sites of conscience, such as the “Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace” set up in Tokyo in 2005,

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<sup>20</sup> Alessandra Quarta, “The European Approach to Culture: the European Heritage Label” in *Forever Young : Celebrating 50 years of the World Heritage Convention*, 2023, <https://cris.unibo.it/handle/11585/923051>.

<sup>21</sup> Lynn Meskell, Claudia Liuzza, “The World is Not Enough: New Diplomacy and Dilemmas for the World Heritage Convention at 50,” *International Journal of Cultural Property*, vol29 (2022).

<sup>22</sup> Tom Seymour, “Worried about Chinese Influence, the US Agrees to rejoin UNESCO,” *The Art Newspaper*, 12-06-2023.

<sup>23</sup> The worry expressed by ICOMOS was that this would lead to a reduction in the value of the sites. whc.unesco.org.

<sup>24</sup> Olwen Beazley, Christina Cameron, “Study on Sites Associated with Recent Conflicts and Other Negative and Divisive Memories,” <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2021/whc21-44com-inf8.2-en.pdf>, 02-05-2020

<sup>25</sup> Idem

<sup>26</sup> “Expert Meeting on Sites Associated with Recent Conflicts and Other Negative and Divisive Memories Report,” whc.unesco.org.

<sup>27</sup> Idem

<sup>28</sup> Idem

whose main objective is to make the Japanese government “accountable for sexual slavery during the war,” are open to question.<sup>29</sup>

Among the 18 World Heritage Sites of negative memories, some are not controversial, such as Gorée Island in Senegal, nominated in 1978, linked to the slave trade, or the other sites related to slavery, or Auschwitz, in 1979. But the nomination of Hiroshima in 1996 was opposed by both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the United States, for different reasons. China was concerned that some would try to “whitewash” Japan for its role in the Second World War by emphasizing its victim status. The United States criticized the lack of contextualization of the atomic bombings, and demanded that all war sites be excluded from the scope of the Convention, so as not to see themselves singled out for their actions in Japan, but also in Vietnam or France during the deadly Allied bombings at the end of the Second World War.<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that the majority of the sites chosen in that category are related to slavery or the predatory role of the West on non-Western and indigenous populations.<sup>31</sup>

However, sites associated to recent conflicts or difficult memories can reveal or awaken very different historical narratives, so their nomination risks going against UNESCO’s objectives of peace and reconciliation, by themselves being sources of reactivated conflicts.<sup>32</sup> In 2014, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights considered that post-conflict societies produce parallel interpretations that limit the possibilities of reconciliation and are detrimental to peaceful international relations.<sup>33</sup> If a State attempts to put a site of this type on the World Heritage List, the risk of tensions may increase. The fear of political recuperation is thus one of the major issue.<sup>34</sup>

Among the sites listed, some make no mention of human rights abuses that occurred at these sites, such as forced labor, slavery or confinement. For example, when the German Rammelsberg and Goslar mining site was nominated in 1992, it referred only to the exceptional industrial past of this region of Germany, which dates back over a thousand years. However, more recently, work on forced labor in the Rammelsberg mines during the 1939–1945 second world war, and the organization of an exhibition, were carried out, in cooperation with the World Heritage List.<sup>35</sup> Also in Germany, although not a world heritage site, celebrations to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the first launch of a missile into space at Peenemünde in 1942, which focused solely on the aspect of technological prowess, had to be cancelled due to international protests.<sup>36</sup>

In view of all these issues, and the potential tensions involved, the world heritage site committee is not in favor of listing sites linked to a conflict-ridden past or difficult memories.

### **The case of Japan’s world heritage Sites**

Japan’s bid for the Sado mining site, submitted in 2022 and then 2023, which follows the inscription on the World Heritage List of the Meiji era industrial sites in 2015, is one example

<sup>29</sup> Olwen Beazley, Christina Cameron, op.cit.

<sup>30</sup> Simon C. Woodward, Louise Cooke, op.cit.; “ICOMOS Second Discussion Paper on Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts and the World Heritage Convention,” whc.unesco.org.

<sup>31</sup> “Appendix E, World Heritage Sites Associated with Recent Conflicts and Other Negative and Divisive Memories Inscribed under Criteria VI,” whc.unesco.org.

<sup>32</sup> Idem

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/regular-sessions/session27/regular-session>

<sup>34</sup> “Expert meeting on Sites Associated with Recent Conflicts and other Negative and Divisive Memories Report,” op.cit.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.rammelsberg.de/en/exhibition/living-and-working-under-duress-forced-laborers-at-the-rammelsberg-ore-mine-1939-1945>

<sup>36</sup> Leilei Li, Dietrich Soyeze, “Transnationalizing Industrial Heritage Valorizations in Germany and China— and Addressing Inherent Dark sides”, *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 2016.

that lies at the crossroads of these social and geopolitical issues, opening the way to obstruction strategies developed by other countries, but also to a necessary reflection on this type of candidacy and the way it must be dealt with in a mature, model democracy. As at the global level, there has been an evolution in the sites nominated in Japan, from cultural sites that bear witness to a very ancient and culturally rich history (Kyoto 1994, Nara 1998, Nikko 1999), to more recent sites linked in particular to the industrialization and development of the country under Edo and insertion into the world system under Meiji (Iwami Ginzan silver mine 2007, Tomioka Silk mill in 2014, Meiji industrial sites in 2015). There is also a desire to cover the whole geographical scope of Japan, from Hokkaido (Shiretoko 2005) to Okinawa (2000 and 2021) to the archipelago of the Ogasawara Islands (2011).<sup>37</sup> The world heritage site of the Hidden Christians in the Nagasaki Region, nominated in 2018, refers to a painful memory, shared with the West, however, there are no sites or references to sites that share that kind of memories with neighbors with whom Japan has more complex relations, such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Korea.

As early as 2010, Japan included the Sado mining complex on its tentative list of places that could be nominated to the World Heritage List, acting upon a proposal coming from the prefectural level of Niigata dating back to 2006. In its presentation, it is the dimension of industrial history and innovation in the Edo period (1603–1868) of the mines presented as “an outstanding example of Asian mining heritage,” as well as the role of gold extracted from the Sado mines in world trade, that is put forward to justify a possible nomination. The Sado Gold Mine has a long and rich history of gold and silver mining dating back to the 17th century. The site played a crucial role in Japan's economic and cultural development during the Edo period. These sites are also considered to have outstanding cultural value, representing the technological advancements in mining, smelting, and refining during the Edo period. The preservation of traditional mining techniques and infrastructure contributes to the cultural heritage of the region. The Sado Gold Mine also features a distinctive and well-preserved mining landscape, including tunnels, water channels, and processing facilities. The nomination also emphasizes the importance of the Sado Gold Mine in enhancing the global understanding of mining history, technology, and the economic significance of precious metal extraction lending the site its universal value criteria. The nomination also emphasizes the cultural and social significance of the Sado Gold Mine for local communities. And of course, the economic benefits from tourism for the island and the region are also taken into account. The contemporary period is mentioned only in reference to the nationalization of the gold mines under Meiji, then their sale to the Mitsubishi Limited Partnership Company at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>38</sup> The Sado mines site, presented in 2022 for nomination by Japan, with additional documents presented in 2023, focusing on gold mine history under Edo, like the Meiji era industrial sites, nominated in 2015, is thus not related to a conflict or a difficult memory under the criteria defined by the World Heritage Committee.<sup>39</sup> However, these sites, and particularly the sites of the gold mines in Sado can also be remembered in relation with the harshness of the working condition, for Japanese as well as foreign contracted laborers. In Ancient times, under the Shogunate, Sado island was also known as a place of relegation. This dimension is also part of the history of Sado island, the main theme of the great movie by Mizoguchi Kenji, *Sansho dayū* (1954). In 2022, in relation with the Sado Gold Mines proposal, the Republic of Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, focusing on the situation of Korean workers in Japan under the colonial rule, protested, demanding that Japan mentions “the full

<sup>37</sup> Japan has 25 World heritage sites. whc.unesco.org

<sup>38</sup> Idem

<sup>39</sup> Importantly, in 2022–2023, Japan will be part of the 21-member World Heritage Committee. In 2014–2015, the Republic of Korea was a member of the committee.

history which contains the painful history of people who were forced to work during wartime.”<sup>40</sup> Like all industrial sites in Japan until 1945, working conditions in the mines were particularly difficult, both for the Japanese and the Korean people employed there and the issue of “forced labor” versus “contract labor” is controversial.<sup>41</sup> The fate of Korean workers, from a country colonized by the Japanese Empire, can indeed be examined and considered from a historical and scientific point of view.<sup>42</sup> However, beyond these legitimate historical questions, South Korea’s contestation also—or mostly—answers to domestic Korean political issues and prevents this necessary neutral historical analysis.

For Tokyo, the choice of these sites also corresponds to Japan’s legitimate desire to retake the control of its own History, prior to the Second World War, by highlighting periods, such as the Meiji era, during which Japan opened up to the world and joined the concert of nations by laying the foundations of a liberal international order of which it was an important part. In 2018, in a speech to the Diet, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared: “Countless human resources were fostered in the new Meiji era for the modernization of Japan.”<sup>43</sup> 2018 marked the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Meiji era, during which, “Japan amazed the world as the first non-western country to ride the wave of an industrial revolution, to transform into a modern state without becoming a colony.”<sup>44</sup> In that context, world heritage sites are indeed important soft power sources in public diplomacy strategies, provided they do not generate controversy and opposition that can be counterproductive.<sup>45</sup>

However, in 2017, following Japan’s challenge of China’s application for inclusion of so-called “Nanjing Massacre” documents in the international memory of the world register in 2015, UNESCO rejected this inscription and adopted a principle that excludes any recognition or inscription by one country if another country challenges it. This position has been tacitly extended to the nomination of world heritage sites, which is decided by consensus.

This is further proof of the risks involved in politicizing these issues, far removed from the initial principles established in 1972. Another example of the more or less open politicization of these issues is the debate concerning the inclusion of the Loire Valley (France) as a world heritage site in 2000. It was initially rejected and required a secret ballot because of the site proximity to a nuclear power station. In that case, one wonders whether only the landscape issue was at stake, or whether we were faced with a principled opposition to nuclear energy, which France, for its part, firmly defends.<sup>46</sup>

In the case of the Sado Gold Mine, the opposition of the Republic of Korea could also lead to a non-decision.<sup>47</sup> In Japan, some made it a matter of national honor, with the desire to claim Japan’s

<sup>40</sup> “National Assembly Adopts Resolution Urging Japan to Withdraw UNESCO Bid for Sado Mine,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 28-2-2023.

<sup>41</sup> Nikolai Johnsen, “The Sado Gold Mine and Japan’s ‘History war’ Versus the Memory of Korean Forced Laborers,” *The Asia Pacific Journal*, vol 20, issue 5, N° 1, 04-03-2022.

<sup>42</sup> “Japan Refiles Request to List Divisive Gold Mine on Unesco,” *The Associated Press*, 21-01-2023.

<sup>43</sup> “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 196<sup>th</sup> Session of the Diet,” 22-01-2018. See also: Ryoko Nakano, “Mobilizing Meiji Nostalgia and Intentional Forgetting in Japan’s World Heritage Promotion,” *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 2020 1-18, 12\_07\_2020.

<sup>44</sup> “Policy Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the 196<sup>th</sup> Session of the Diet,” op.cit.

<sup>45</sup> “In this respect, Japan could have responded more enthusiastically to the condition placed by Germany, which acted as mediator between Tokyo and Seoul, on the listing of Meiji-era industrial sites in 2015 by explaining the issues related to the conditions of Korean workers from the colonies during the Second World War” in Leilei Li, Dietrich Soyeze, op. cit.

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.worldheritagesite.org/connection/Controversial+at+inscription>

<sup>47</sup> Idem

right to its own history, which must not remain forever a hostage to a past instrumentalized by hostile parties. This position is legitimate. Others however, perhaps more aware of the rules of complex international diplomatic game, and the reputational risks attached to the politicization of the World Heritage List nomination process, tend to show greater caution.<sup>48</sup> This debate reflects the difficulties and the risks of a paralysis or of deviation of its principles the World Heritage Convention is increasingly facing by taking into account more criteria that question the concept of “outstanding universal value” as defined by the initiator of the Convention.

## Conclusion

The debates and diplomatic games surrounding the work of the World Heritage Committee and the selection of sites for inscription on the World Heritage List reveal growing difficulties. These difficulties concern the definition of criteria: what does “universal value” mean, for whom, in whose name? In the case of industrial sites that represent an important development in human history, such as the Sado or Rammelsberg mines in Germany, where does industrial history end and social history begin? Should places where work under duress happened for nationals and foreigners alike be only remembered as places of industrial interest, or of a “darker” history? Increasingly, the nomination or inscription of sites on the list of world heritage in danger such as the Old City of Jerusalem and its walls presented by Jordan, becomes hostage to contemporary tensions from which it is difficult to escape.<sup>49</sup> For some countries, such as the People’s Republic of China (PRC), history is mainly a weapon that can be used to achieve geopolitical gains and Japan has often been the target of political campaigns that tend to deny the legitimacy of a country considered as an adversary, by constantly using the past. In this context, the tentative list of sites proposed for nomination should, as far as possible, avoid the risks of controversies that are difficult to combat. Faced with the majority principle and the diplomatic games played within the World Heritage Committee and the United Nations, it is difficult for States to distance themselves from decisions, however unfair they may be perceived. To do so is to risk even harsher criticism and the ostracism of the responsible nations. In this respect, the Committee’s recommendations on nominations and the list of endangered sites cannot be lightly dismissed, including recommendations concerning the explanations related to sites. And therein lies the difficulty: satisfying vested interests that see in certain nominations the possibility of serving local political, tourist or economic interests, while at the same time meeting the requirements of the World Heritage Committee and its critics. Many States have had to make these choices, which also reflect the difficulties that the World Heritage Convention is increasingly facing in its very principles. Today, geopolitics often prevails over conservation, and number over quality, further undermining the original principles. States are trying to impose their supremacy at all levels of the UN, including within the World Heritage Committee, which cannot escape these power strategies, at the risk of rendering the original objectives unrealistic. And it is the most responsible States parties that have the charge to preserve these original principles as best they can by freeing themselves from harmful power strategies, and focusing on the more elevated original principles of preserving the past for the benefit of the future.

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<sup>48</sup> “Japan Should Proudly Push for Sado Gold Mine’s UNESCO Listing,” Sankei Shimbun, 31-01-2022. According to Sanae Takaichi: “If the recommendation had been differed it would have lent credibility to South Korea unjustified claims.”

<sup>49</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/5284/>