

UNESCO World Heritage Sites

Industrial heritage—legacies of Meiji Japan

Japan is known today for its advanced technology, but there was a time when the country felt itself to be lagging behind and the ruling clans and government of the day made a conscious decision to catch up with America and European countries and adopt the latest industrial advances.

The first phase in this process (1850s-early 1860s) was when Japanese experimented through second-hand knowledge, largely using Western textbooks, with limited success. The second stage was from the 1860s onwards, when the new Meiji Government actively supported the importation of Western technology and welcomed foreigners with expertise. The final phase was in the late Meiji Period (between 1890 to 1910) when those with the expertise to develop industries were local Japanese, and the Western technology was not just adopted but rather adapted to local needs and materials.

In 2015, a series of industrial heritage sites was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site—“Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining”. In the previous year, the “Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites” had been similarly inscribed.

Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining

Together these sites are “an outstanding reflection of the way Japan moved from a clan based society to a major industrial society with innovative approaches to adapting western technology in response to local needs and profoundly influenced the wider development of East Asia” (from UNESCO’s Brief Synthesis). Japan was the first non-Western country to industrialise successfully. As such, the property and its components are of Outstanding Universal Value.

There are 11 sites spread over 8 separate areas; six of the areas are in the south-west of Japan, with one each in the centre and north of the main island, Honshu.

Some sites speak clearly of their industrial past, such as the Nirayama Reverberatory Furnaces used to smelt or refine metal in Izunokuni City [centre image] in Shizuoka Prefecture. Other sites at first glance are not as obvious: the former foreign engineer’s house in Kagoshima City still stands as a testament to the history of Japan’s industrialisation [top image].

An interesting consideration posed by this particular inscription is the management of several of the sites which are still privately owned and operational sites. There are multiple stakeholders in the case of this property. To address this, the Japanese Government established a new partnership-based framework to enable the conservation and management of the sites.



Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites

Silk manufactured in modern Japan is a high-quality product. Indeed, silk has long been a luxury item in Japan and has been produced since ancient times. For centuries silk worms were raised in individual households, and silk production was time consuming and demanded great expertise.

The Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites property is located in Gunma Prefecture, a region which has a long tradition of sericulture (silk production). The silk mill itself is remarkable for its authenticity having retained its complete textile machinery. Only closing in 1987, the Tomioka Silk Mill dates from the early Meiji Period. Together with two sericulture schools and an egg storage site, the property is a remarkable example of Japan’s industrialisation and illustrates the transfer of French industrial sericulture techniques to Japan.

Established in 1872, the mill [bottom image] was built by the Japanese Government and the machinery was imported from France. The expertise was also brought in and foreign experts trained the Japanese staff.

Thanks to this investment, the Tomioka mill became a model for the country and Japan’s previously declining sericulture boomed to the point that in the last part of the 19th century, Japan became the world’s largest exporter of raw silk.

Since 2005, the Tomioka Silk Mill has been open to the public.

Learn more :

whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/jp | www.japansmeijiindustrialrevolution.com/en/index.html | www.tomioka-silk.jp

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