

Promoting "INTANGIBLE CULTURE"

Japan has a total of 12 World Heritage Sites. What special characteristics define these properties from an international standpoint? What kind of message do they send out to the world? Yukio Nishimura, offers his perspective.

At the 28th Session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee held in Suzhou, China last year, the "Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range" was added to the World Heritage List. With this addition, Japan now has 12 World Heritage Sites, consisting of 10 cultural heritage and two natural heritage properties. This number is by no means comparable to Italy's 38 sites and China's 30 sites, as these two countries were the center of Western and Eastern civilizations, respectively, in ancient times and retain many historical and cultural sites.

However, since Japan signed the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention) in 1992, all of the properties that it has nominated to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee have been inscribed on the World Heritage List. As a result, the number of its World Heritage Sites has steadily increased. The listing of these properties constitutes an international seal of approval that they meet the main criterion of having "outstanding universal value" and also that Japan is conducting "adequate protection and management" of the property. As such, it is a testament to Japan's strength in the area of cultural property protection.

From an international standpoint, Japan's World Heritage Sites are viewed as having specific characteristics. One of their main defining characteristics is the existence of wooden structures, as

exemplified by Horyu-ji Temple, the world's oldest surviving wooden building, and Todai-ji Temple, the world's largest wooden building. Of course, World Heritage Sites defined by wooden structures exist in other countries besides Japan. There is Bulguksa Temple in South Korea, and there are wooden churches in Russia and Northern European countries. However, Japan's wide variety of wooden structures, from Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines to large scale private farmhouses, reflect the diversity of Japanese culture and are noteworthy for the fact that they have been preserved in an extremely good state.

Generally speaking, buildings in Western countries are made of materials known to be long-lasting, such as stone or brick. As a result, with respect to the maintenance and conservation of their cultural properties, these countries have been inclined to adopt the fundamental stance of leaving them in their original state to whatever extent possible with minimal intervention. Many of Japan's cultural properties, on the other hand, are made of wood, which rots easily in the country's hot and humid climate. Accordingly, the general policy in Japan has been to replace structural parts that have rotted due to long-term exposure to wind and rain with new ones.

This difference in stance on conservation practices led to a debate on the inclusion of the "Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji Area" as Japan's first World Heritage Site. Some experts expressed concern, stating that the major conservation work conducted by Japan detracted from the cultural property's authentic artistic and historical value.

It is certainly true that Japan's cultural properties have undergone multiple restorations where old parts were replaced with new ones. In the majority of cases, however, the vital parts making up the building's frame are left in place while undergoing repair. In addition, when manufacturing a replacement part, every effort is made to come as close to the original as possible. Whenever possible, the same raw materials and the same traditional construction techniques are used.

From an international perspective, Japan's standards in the area of cultural property protection, particularly restoration, are at the top of the field. After viewing the results of the requisite on-site

Left: Restoration works at the Main Hall of the 8th century Toshodai-ji Temple, part of the World Heritage Site, Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara. Since 2000, a ten-year restoration project, conducted mainly by the Cultural Properties Preservation Office of the Nara Prefectural Board of Education, has been underway to dismantle and restore the main hall of the temple using the latest technologies.

WORLD HERITAGE FAQ

◆ What is "World Heritage?"

World Heritage refers to the treasures that represent the legacy of the entire world and that are worthy of being passed on to future generations. These treasures range from valuable historic ruins and buildings that represent historic cultural achievements to magnificent natural settings that have emerged over the history of the Earth's formation.

Technically speaking, World Heritage is the term applied to sites that have been registered on the World Heritage List based on the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted at the 17th General Conference of UNESCO in 1972. As of May 2004, the number of countries (referred to as 'States Parties') that had signed this World Heritage Convention totaled 178. In 1992, Japan became the 125th State Party to the convention.

◆ What are the categories of World Heritage Sites and how many properties are listed under each?

There are three categories of World Heritage Sites, all of which cover different types of land and building properties. As of August 2004, a total of 788 properties were registered as World Heritage Sites.

Category 1 – Cultural Heritage: Monuments, groups of buildings, historic ruins, cultural landscapes and other cultural sites that are of outstanding universal value (611 properties)

Category 2 – Natural Heritage: Geological and physio-graphical formations, ecosystems, physical landscapes, habitats of threatened wildlife species and other natural areas that are of outstanding universal value (154 properties)

Category 3 – Mixed Properties: Properties that derive their value from both their cultural and natural features (23 sites)

◆ What are the main conditions for registering a property as World Heritage?

In order for a nominated property to be inscribed as a World Heritage Site, it must first satisfy the fundamental condition of having "outstanding universal value so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries." As the standard for fulfilling this condition, the property must meet at least one of the selection criteria listed in the World

Heritage Convention.

Another important condition is for properties to have "adequate protection at the national, regional, municipal and/or traditional level." (e.g. the Cultural Properties Protection Act or the Natural Conservation Law in Japan).

◆ What is "World Heritage in Danger"?

The term "World Heritage in Danger" officially refers to World Heritage Sites that are facing threats to their existence or intrinsic value.

World Heritage Sites that are in danger due to such problems as armed conflict, natural disasters, large-scale construction work, uncontrolled urbanization and tourist development, and commercial poaching are inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger. This listing allows funds to be allocated for immediate assistance, and efforts are then initiated to protect and restore the property through international cooperation.

As of August 2004, there were 35 properties inscribed on the list. Once a property is considered to be out of danger, it is removed from the list. Unfortunately, the number of endangered properties inscribed on the list has been increasing on an annual basis.

survey, even the experts who had originally questioned Japan's methods based on their differing conservation ethic were astounded by Japan's in-depth techniques and ultimately gave a positive evaluation of many of Japan's sites.

There are several important factors that underlie the techniques that enable conservation without undermining the value of a cultural property. The need for extensive academic expertise about cultural properties is a given. In addition, it is crucial that the culture and traditions surrounding the cultural property are accurately passed down, as epitomized by the craftsmen who constantly aspire to emulate the traditional methods of construction.

Although the accumulation of culture and tradition has no concrete or visible shape, its value is no less than that of tangible cultural properties and is certainly worth passing down to the next generation. Japan's philosophy concerning cultural property protection has long been accepted by experts in Asian and African countries, where there is a rich tradition of passing down culture from one generation to the next. As Western experts have come to recognize the high standard of Japan's cultural property protection efforts, they have also gradually accepted its philosophy.

In fact, the Nara Document on Authenticity, which reflects Japan's opinion on the subject, was adopted at the Nara Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention that was held in Nara, Japan in November 1994. This document paved the way for actively incorporating a property's cultural dimensions—namely the transmission of techniques and knowledge of rituals and customs—in the assessment of its authenticity, in addition to looking at how well it has been physically preserved. In this document, Japan's concept of giving weight to intangible cultural heritage gained international consensus.

In the initial period after the World Heritage Convention was adopted in 1972, the cultural properties being inscribed on the

World Heritage List were mainly grandiose palaces, imposing religious buildings and other similar properties. Many of these sites were located in Western countries, which held leadership roles in UNESCO and other international cultural organizations.

In recent years, however, the concept of "cultural landscapes"—referring to the physical and spiritual relationship that has developed over time between man and nature—has gained favor, and the number of registered World Heritage Sites falling under this category has increased. In fact, as of July 2004, there were 48 such sites, including Japan's "Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range," the Philippines' "Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras" and Portugal's "Landscape of the Pico Island Vineyard Culture." Japan's influence has undeniably come into play in this development, as it involves finding value in intangible factors such as the accumulation of culture and history within the cultural property. One might even say that Japan has helped to add value to

world heritage by calling the attention of the world to the value of intangible culture. ■



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