

“JAPAN HERITAGE”: AN EXEMPLARY PROJECT
PROMOTING LOCAL DEVELOPMENT
THROUGH JAPANESE CULTURAL PROPERTY

1. Introduction

The history associated with heritage protection in Japan represents a relatively concise legislative evolution, interspersed with periods of stagnation and intensified efforts towards legal safeguarding of heritage. Over several decades, Japan has witnessed the enactment of pivotal laws aimed at expanding the scope of heritage protection, including the preservation of historical sites, scenic locations, and national monuments. Despite periods of economic decline and global conflict, the commitment to heritage preservation has endured, exemplified by legislative actions such as the Act on the Protection of Cultural Property in 1950¹ – a watershed document that introduced critical categories and frameworks for the safeguarding of tangible and intangible cultural assets.

This legislative development underscores Japan’s unwavering dedication to preserving its cultural heritage and the ongoing evolution of legal instruments designed to foster appreciation, conservation, and promotion of the nation’s diverse cultural tapestry. The legislative milestones reflect not only a commitment to safeguarding tangible remnants of the past but also a profound recognition of the intangible traditions and narratives that define Japan’s cultural identity. Through these legislative endeavours, Japan continues to navigate the dynamic intersection of heritage preservation, community revitalization, and global cultural engagement, ensuring the enduring legacy of its cultural heritage for generations to come.

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¹ Act No. 2014 of 30 May 1950 on the Protection of Cultural Property (文化財保護法 – *Bunkazai hogo-hō*). The translation of the Act from Japanese into English was prepared by the Japan Centre for International Cooperation in Conservation, Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties.

Unlike Europeans, the Japanese prioritize the authenticity of their heritage based on form rather than substance.² It is grounded in two primary foundations: cultural and natural conditions. Shintoism and Buddhism teach that all material in the world is imbued with equal spiritual significance. Therefore, the original building material of a monument does not hold priority value in heritage protection. Essentially, a centuries-old temple element is considered as valuable as its modern counterpart under these principles.³

According to Japanese religious beliefs, each element possesses equal spiritual strength and value. Additionally, the intersecting principles of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism view immortality through cycles and repetition rather than constancy, reflecting eternity in Japanese culture. Japanese culture also emphasizes the non-material aspects of life. This leads to the core of its understanding of cultural authenticity. Japanese heritage preservation mirrors this approach to religion and life, valuing the intangible essence of culture over its physical form. Japanese perceive a cultural property's essence through its function, which often dictates its form.⁴ Also, it has to be noted that in Japan, wood has been the primary building material as a result of the country's terrain and climate.⁵ Using such unstable building materials exposed to harsh weather and frequent fires would make it impossible to preserve monuments for more than a few centuries, if the European approach to cultural heritage authenticity were followed. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize the Japanese methodology for comprehending the authenticity of cultural property as a suitable one. It is prudent to incorporate the unique natural and cultural circumstances of each region into the legislative development process.

A compelling example of raising broader awareness about the essence of Japanese cultural heritage – focusing not just on its physical form but also on its creation techniques, building materials, associated customs, and the individuals involved – is the Japan Heritage initiative, led by the Agency for Cultural Affairs since 2015. Unlike World Heritage Sites, which primarily prioritize site protection, the Japan Heritage program transcends this approach by highlighting the narratives and historical contexts that underlie cultural assets. Since its inception, the Japan Heritage program has played a leading role in recognizing and supporting local communities as they demonstrate their rich cultural heritage through unique historical elements and cultural properties. Through Japan Heritage, local communities are empowered

² K. Schatt-Babińska, “Europocentryczne i dalekowschodnie spojrzenie na wartość autentyczności zabytku – dokument z Nara jako próba pogodzenia odmiennych poglądów” [A eurocentric and Far Eastern look at the value of authenticity of a monument – a document from Nara as an attempt to reconcile different views], *Gdańskie Studia Azji Wschodniej* [The Gdańsk Journal of East Asian Studies] 2016, issue 10, pp. 28–39.

³ A. Buchaniec, *Autentyzm – podstawa wartości w konserwacji zabytków architektury*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Faculty of Architecture, Cracow University of Technology, Kraków 1999, p. 116.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

⁵ Approximately 90% of cultural goods are made from timber.

to share their distinctive stories with the world, contributing to cultural preservation and promoting Japan's national heritage on a global stage. In subsequent sections of this article, I endeavor to discuss this topic, exploring its intricacies to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

2. Legislative history of heritage protection laws in Japan

The legislative history of heritage protection laws in Japan represents a pivotal evolution spanning over a century, culminating in a sophisticated framework aimed at preserving the nation's rich cultural legacy. The journey commenced in 1897 with the inaugural legal act addressing Japan's cultural heritage protection, signifying a concerted effort to systematize the diverse cultural assets of the country. This legislative endeavour gained further impetus following Japan's victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895),⁶ which instilled a renewed sense of patriotism and national identity. As historical sources indicate, Japan experienced a mental awakening following this triumph, redirecting its ambitions towards global leadership and reigniting patriotic sentiments among its populace: “The defeat of a formidable China by a Japan that had previously been perceived as underdeveloped underscored Japan's emergence as a mature partner or adversary to nations with imperial aspirations. This conflict profoundly heightened Japanese awareness of their national identity (...).”⁷ Consequently, there arose a pronounced emphasis on safeguarding Japan's national heritage, prompting legislative measures from 1897 to allocate funds for conservation and to enact laws for the protection of ancient temples and significant cultural artifacts. The significance of this act is underscored within the context of Japan's current cultural heritage protection laws, notably for introducing the concept of “national treasure” (*kokuhō* 国宝) into the lexicon, a term still in use today. Over subsequent decades, Japan witnessed the enactment of pivotal laws aimed at expanding the scope of heritage protection, including the preservation of historical sites, scenic locations, and national monuments (1919, 1929, 1933).

The following several years were characterized by a period of stagnation in terms of the protection of Japan's cultural heritage.⁸ This lasted until the tragic consequences of the fire that occurred in 1949, which damaged part of the Hōryūji Temple in Nara Prefecture.⁹ This event led to a renewed focus on the issue of

⁶ J. Tubielewicz, *Historia Japonii*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1984, pp. 372–374.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 373.

⁸ The outbreak of World War II and the diminished morale among the Japanese population resulting from the war's outcome influenced this issue.

⁹ The Act on the Protection of Cultural Property in 1950; see more: G.R. Scott, “The cultural property laws of Japan: Social, political, and legal influences”, *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 2003, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 315–402.

heritage protection in Japan and resulted in the issuance of the Act on the Protection of Cultural Property in 1950.

Initially, the Act distinguished three major classes of cultural property. Tangible Cultural Property is listed as the first class and is divided into two subclasses: tangible property, including works of fine arts and artistic crafts, such as paintings, sculptures and others; and real estate, including buildings and other structures. The second major class in the Act includes intangible cultural goods, including performing arts and music. The third class defines the most important monuments – thus creating the most discretionary category of all those indicated in the Act – including those of particular historical and aesthetic value, including entire historical areas, such as historic cities or their districts.¹⁰ The Act of 1950 on the Protection of Cultural Property has been amended many times (1954, 1968, 1975, 1996, 1999, 2004, 2007). At the same time, the catalogue of cultural property grew with new classes.¹¹

3. The Role of Tradition and Local Community in Tangible and Intangible Cultural Property

Considering the unique nature of Japan and how customs and folk traditions have profoundly shaped its culture, it is important to emphasize the influence of folk elements on the Japanese cultural heritage. In 1954, a significant step was taken when the category of folk cultural property was included as a distinct class in art. 2 of the Act of 1950 on the Protection of Cultural Property. Initially, only the material aspects of folk cultural property were legally protected. However, about twenty years later, in the 1970s, amendments to the law reflected the rapid changes in Japanese lifestyle by extending protection to the intangible aspects of this heritage. As a result, folk cultural property under the law was categorized into tangible elements (such as costumes, instruments, and traditional architecture) and intangible elements (including etiquette, customs, traditions, and performing arts). In Japan, culinary practices, food production techniques, folk religious beliefs, and traditional residential architecture are also considered intangible aspects of folk culture.

Within the context of this discussion, a specific type of legally protected property that deserves attention is conservation techniques, which were introduced into the law through an amendment in 1975. While the logical classification of this category among legally protected cultural property may raise some concerns due to its

¹⁰ The Act on the Protection of Cultural Property in 1950; G.R. Scott, “The cultural property laws...”, pp. 315–402.

¹¹ See more: K. Zeidler, L. Kliczkowska, “Prawna ochrona dziedzictwa kultury w Japonii – zarys tematyki”, *Azja-Pacyfik* 2021, issue 24, pp. 117–128.

unique nature – neither strictly tangible nor intangible – it is important to note that this aspect was acknowledged by the Japanese legislator.¹²

As was noted in the introduction, Japanese cultural property is defined as a tangible representation of history, initially focusing on the physical remnants of the past. The true value of the heritage is seen in the process of creation, in function, and in the story behind it.

4. Japan Heritage: stories behind the national treasures

Japan Heritage is a unique initiative spearheaded by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, focusing on the recognition and celebration of stories that embody Japan's rich cultures and traditions. Unlike World Heritage Sites and designated Cultural Properties, Japan Heritage emphasizes the revitalization of local communities by linking narratives, regions and cultural properties to create collective spaces of cultural significance.¹³ While World Heritage Site listings focus mainly on site protection, Japan Heritage goes beyond by introducing stories and historical contexts behind them.

The key aspect of Japan Heritage is the recognition of Cultural Narratives, which are stories rooted in historically unique traditions and local customs that have been passed down through generations. These narratives highlight the core themes of an area's cultural appeal, incorporating tangible and intangible cultural properties. The main purpose of initiating the Japan Heritage program was to significantly enhance the recognition and distinctiveness of the featured areas, promote local identity and foster community pride. The designation as Japan Heritage aims to be a catalyst for cultural engagement and tourism development, exploiting the unique narratives and traditions associated with these regions. Through strategic promotion and preservation efforts, Japan Heritage plays a pivotal role in revitalizing local economies and safeguarding Japan's diverse cultural heritage, ensuring its enduring legacy for generations to come.

However, to qualify for Japan Heritage status, narratives must meet specific criteria. There is also a strict application process to be followed. The applicant can be an individual or organization committed to regional revitalization initiatives through Japan's cultural heritage. This may include a Regional Tourism Development Corporation (DMO), a Tourist Association, or other entities affiliated with the Council engaged in regional revitalization efforts. Depending on the above, Japan Heritage status is categorized into local and collective narratives. It is required that a subject of the application must consider at least one nationally designated Tangible or

¹² See more: *ibidem*, pp. 117–128.

¹³ See more: “Japan Heritage”, https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/cultural_properties/japan_heritage/ (accessed: 27.04.2024).

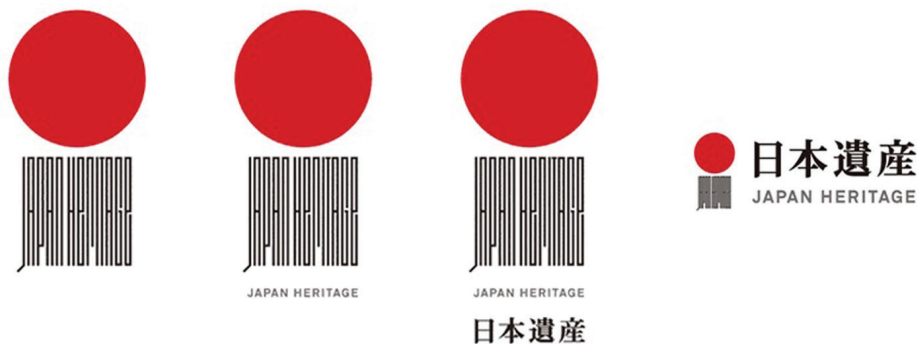


Fig. 1. Japan Heritage logo¹⁴

Intangible Cultural Property. The other key criterion is the appropriateness of the cultural narrative, ensuring it reflects the community's history and distinctive characteristics.

Submitted narratives undergo rigorous screening by the Japan Heritage Review Board. Criteria for review include the narrative's historical distinctiveness, future development strategy using cultural properties and making efforts toward local revitalization through effective domestic and international promotion.¹⁵ Recognized communities receive financial support and expert guidance for three years to further promote their cultural stories. Moreover, The Agency for Cultural Affairs appoints Ambassadors of Japanese Heritage, who collaborate in promoting Japanese Heritage extensively both domestically and internationally.

The Agency for Cultural Affairs has been promoting this project since 2015, recognizing and supporting local communities' efforts to demonstrate their rich culture and traditions through unique historical elements and cultural properties. Municipal and prefectural governments across Japan submit applications detailing their cultural narratives, which highlight local sites, architectural structures, industries, and customs.

¹⁴ The logo is designed by the graphic artist Takashi Sato and can be displayed on pamphlets that present the narratives designated as Japan Heritage by the Agency. Agency for Cultural Affairs, <https://japan-heritage.bunka.go.jp/ja/about/logomark/> (accessed: 27.04.2024).

¹⁵ See more: *ibidem*.

5. Contextualizing cultural heritage: Deepening appreciation through historical narratives

Mitsunobu Nakajima from the Agency for Cultural Affairs explains that Japan Heritage aims to recognize the broader historical and geographical contexts of local cultural properties, moving away from isolated interpretations.¹⁶ The project seeks to deepen appreciation for cultural heritage by contextualizing it within broader historical narratives. “We want to send out information on the attraction of Japanese culture in and outside the country, and press for regional revitalization,” said Hakubun Shimomura, minister of education, culture, sports, science and technology.¹⁷ The initial selection of Japan Heritage sites spanned 24 prefectures and was chosen from 83 proposals submitted by 40 prefectures. This list continues to expand annually, with a current count of 104 designated positions. The list comprises various types of cultural heritage with unique narratives regarding towns, buildings, education institutions, sacred places, and portable artifacts (such as Japan’s First “Travel Book,” *Travels in Sunshū* relating the journeys of Yaji-san and Kita-san, #094 on the list), associated with nationally designated Tangible or Intangible Cultural Property.

It is important to emphasize that the Japan Heritage program aims to highlight the multifaceted value of Japan’s Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage by showing local impact within the context of national heritage. This program promotes both national and local sites, which mutually contribute to cultural preservation and promotion. Let us examine specific instances from Japan’s Heritage list to illustrate how the program highlights the extensive breadth and profound cultural significance associated with Japan’s Cultural Property.

Consider, for instance, the entry ranked 15 on Japan’s Heritage list, featuring “Henro: The Pilgrimage Route and 88 Temples of Shikoku.” It is linked to temples designated as National Treasures and highlights the cultural and historical significance of the traditions and customs related to them. The Shikoku Pilgrimage is a revered journey that encompasses 88 Buddhist temples associated with the monk Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi) on the island of Shikoku. During this pilgrimage, participants seek enlightenment while surrounding themselves with the sacred temples, natural landscapes, local climate, people, culture, and stone Buddhas along the route. This profound process, integral to Japan’s National Treasures, was deemed significantly

¹⁶ T. Yamabe, “Japan Heritage: Telling the Tales Behind Historical Sites”, *Highlighting Japan*, February 2019, https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/201902/201902_09_en.html (accessed: 27.04.2024).

¹⁷ Kyodo, “Government names 18 ‘Japan Heritage’ sites in tourism drive”, *The Japan Times*, 24.04.2015, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/04/24/national/government-names-18-japan-heritage-sites-tourism-drive/> (accessed: 27.04.2024).

important and designated as Japan Heritage. The spiritual pilgrimages of the Japanese are a longstanding tradition handed down from generation to generation. Today, it still remains a popular and distinctive element of the island's cultural landscape, attracting a diverse array of pilgrims (including foreigners), known as *henro*, who embark on the journey for ascetic, spiritual, and tourism-related reasons.¹⁸

Another example from the Japan Heritage list is “Kakaa Denka: The Silk Story of Gunma” (#002 on the list), from Gunma Prefecture. The tangible properties associated with this heritage site include the Tomizawa Family Residence, the Nagai Method Sericultural School Laboratory House, the Former Obata-gumi Silk Production Brick Warehouse, the Former Model Factory, and the Kiryū Nenshi Gōshi Gaisha Office Building.¹⁹ In 2014, it was also designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.²⁰ The Tomioka model complex and its related sites played a crucial role in revitalizing sericulture and the Japanese silk industry in the late nineteenth century, marking a significant milestone in Japan's transition to the modern industrialized era. The narrative behind it, recognized as Japan Heritage, underscores the profound impact of local women on the silk production process in Gunma. When the Tomioka Silk Mill was established in 1872, girls from across the country were brought in to work as silk workers, while large quantities of cocoons were collected from the region as raw material. This Japan Heritage narrative stands as a testament to their crucial role, dedication, and hard work in facilitating Japan's transition to the modern era; it embodies an image of women active both indoors and outdoors.²¹

Overall, Japan Heritage serves as a platform to explore the interconnectedness between history, culture, and local communities, offering visitors new ways to experience Japan's rich cultural tapestry. The project not only celebrates cultural diversity but also revitalizes local communities by promoting their unique heritage on a global scale.

6. Japan Heritage: A success story

The impact of Japan Heritage initiatives is exemplified by the notable increase in tourism and international attention achieved by recognized communities. A compelling illustration can be found in Misasa Town, located in Tottori Prefecture, which experienced a substantial influx of international visitors following the incorporation of its historical narrative into tourism promotion efforts. In 2015, Misasa Town

¹⁸ I. Reader, “34. Legends, Miracles and Faith in Kōbō Daishi and the Shikoku Pilgrimage” [in:] *Religions of Japan in Practice*, ed. G.J. Tanabe, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1999.

¹⁹ F. Dallas, *Meiji Revisited: The Sites of Victorian Japan*, Weatherhill, New York 1995, pp. 4–22.

²⁰ Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1449/multiple=1&-unique_number=1992 (accessed: 27.04.2024).

²¹ *Kakaa Denka* is associated with the slogan “girl power” known all over the world.

was designated as a Japan Heritage site centered on the theme “A Site for Purifying the Six Roots of Perception and Healing the Six Senses – Japan’s Most Dangerous National Treasure and a World-Famous Radon Hot Spring.” This designation integrated the challenging mountain paths and steep slopes leading up to Nageiredo, a small Buddhist temple designated as a National Treasure, into its narrative, highlighting the town’s rich cultural and natural heritage. As a result, the number of international visitors staying in Misasa Town grew by nearly 3 times compared to the time before Japan Heritage recognition.

Many Japanese local communities harbour unique stories related to Japan’s national cultural heritage; yet these narratives often remain relatively unknown, both domestically and internationally. The Japan Heritage program was established to address this issue. As part of the application process, there is a requirement to present a comprehensive promotion plan following recognition. This step is crucial for achieving increased tourist engagement, which is a primary objective of the Japan Heritage Program. Another notable success story is that of Tsuwano Town in Shimane Prefecture, recognized for its narrative presenting “100 Views of Tsuwano” from the late Edo period to the present day. The town’s promotional strategy included establishing a guidance centre featuring images and panels that elucidate this historical narrative, as well as introducing new ways to explore the town. Consequently, it experienced nearly a twofold increase in tourist traffic within just one year of receiving Japan Heritage recognition.²²

In conclusion, the impact of Japan Heritage initiatives on local tourism economies is profound and transformative. The notable increase in tourism and international attention experienced by recognized communities like the two mentioned underscores the success of this program. Japan Heritage serves as a beacon of cultural appreciation and community revitalization, offering immersive experiences that celebrate Japan’s diverse cultural tapestry. Through this program, local communities are empowered to share their unique stories with the world, contributing to the promotion and preservation of Japan’s national cultural heritage on a global scale.

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SUMMARY

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“JAPAN HERITAGE”: AN EXEMPLARY PROJECT PROMOTING LOCAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH JAPANESE CULTURAL PROPERTY

The article presents a concise overview of Japan’s legislative evolution spans from early efforts in the late nineteenth century to modern initiatives like the Japan Heritage initiative launched by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2015, reflecting Japan’s adaptive and progressive approach to heritage preservation. The author also explores the philosophical foundations underlying Japan’s unique perspective on heritage authenticity and examines the influential role of tradition and local communities in shaping Japanese Cultural Properties. Furthermore, the Japan Heritage program is introduced, along with an analysis of its local and global impact. The author underscores Japan’s ongoing commitment to navigating heritage preservation within the dynamic interplay of tradition, local community engagement, and global cultural exchange.

Keywords: cultural heritage protection in Japan, cultural heritage law, Japanese cultural properties, Japan heritage

STRESZCZENIE

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„JAPAN HERITAGE”: PROJEKT WSPIERAJĄCY ROZWÓJ LOKALNY POPRAZ PROMOWANIE JAPOŃSKIEGO DZIEDZICTWA KULTURY

W artykule zaprezentowano pokrótce ewolucję legislacyjną Japonii, począwszy od wczesnych działań podejmowanych pod koniec XIX wieku po nowoczesne inicjatywy, takie jak inicjatywa Japan Heritage uruchomiona przez Agencję ds. Kultury w 2015 r., która odzwierciedla adaptacyjne i postępowe podejście Japończyków do ochrony zabytków. Zbadano również filozoficzne podstawy unikatowego spojrzenia Japończyków na autentyczność zabytków oraz wpływ tradycji i społeczności lokalnych na kształtowanie się japońskich dóbr kultury. Ponadto bardziej szczegółowo przedstawiono założenia dotyczące programu Japan Heritage, z uwzględnieniem jego lokalnego i globalnego wpływu. W podsumowaniu zwrócono uwagę na trwale zaangażowanie Japonii w ochronę zabytków, co wiąże się także z dynamiczną interakcją tradycji, zaangażowania społeczności lokalnych i globalną wymianą kulturową.

Słowa kluczowe: ochrona dziedzictwa kultury w Japonii, prawo ochrony zabytków, zabytki japońskie, zabytki niematerialne