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Nara Prefecture, Japan

Special Feature

The Attraction of the ‘Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara’ — Religious Rituals as a Living Culture —

In this part we introduce religious rituals and traditional events which today remain a highly significant feature of the ancient capital city of Nara and its cultural treasures.

These religious rituals and traditional events can be considered elements of intangible cultural heritage properties, as detailed in Criterion (vi), due to their outstanding universal value.

Firstly, let's look at the details of Criterion (vi) of the 6 World Heritage cultural criteria.

※ There are, in fact, a total of 10 criteria; 6 cultural and 4 natural.

‘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.’

During the late 1990s, when ‘Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara’ was registered, meeting the conditions of Criterion vi was very strict indeed. A previous application had, in fact, been rejected, but in the end the application was approved following deliberations concerning revisions to the criteria themselves. The important aspect then recognized by Criterion (vi) was the remarkable universal value of the ‘Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara’.

Upon its acceptance for registration in 1998, Criterion (vi) stated:

‘The Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines of Nara demonstrate the continuing spiritual power and influence of these religions in an exceptional manner.’

The following are specifically cited in the nomination in respect of their spiritual power and influence, aspects which continue to this very day.

- Various architectural structures demonstrate unique aspects of Japanese religious spaces.
- Unique Japanese cultural landscapes where particular natural mountains and forests are considered sacred
- Properties which are meaningful in the daily lives and spiritual practices of the people, and religious rituals and events which live on in the culture

Religious rituals kept alive by temples and shrines which form the ‘Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara’

Todai-ji Temple

The Shuni-e Ceremony is held every year in March at the Nigatsudo Hall. It has been held every year since its inception in 752 and has never been cancelled. It is a religious ceremony in which people repent for the wrongs they have committed before the Eleven-headed Kannon Bodhisattva, the main image in the Nigatsu-dō Hall.

An event held by priests known as Rengyōshu for two weeks from 1 March, when various rituals devoted to happiness and well-being are performed which, at times of national disasters, epidemics, and strife, will help overcome these afflictions, and ensure ‘protection for the state’, ‘peace’, ‘benign seasonal weather’, ‘bountiful harvests’, and ‘joy for all’. Commonly referred to as ‘Omizutori, at dawn on the 13 March, water known as O-Kōzui (sacred water) is drawn from the Wakasa-i Well and dedicated to the main image. And, to light the way for the Rengyōshu priests conducting the ceremony, every evening during Shuni-e from 1 to 14 March, O-Taimatsu torches are hoisted aloft.



Tōdai-ji Temple Shuni-e taimatsu torches
(Photo by Akihiko Kimura Courtesy of Tōdaiji and Nara Prefecture Visitors Bureau, General incorporated foundation)



Top left
Kohfuku-ji Temple's Jion-e (Courtesy of Kohfuku-ji and Asukaen)

Top right
Kasuga-Taisha Mantōrō (Courtesy of Kasuga Taisha Photo by Yoshihiro Matsui)

Left
Gango-ji Temple Jizō-e (Courtesy of Gangoji Photo by Hidefumi Kuwabara)

Kohfuku-ji Temple

The Jion-e Ceremony is a service, held on 13 November, dedicated to the teachings of Priest Jion Daishi, founder of the Hossō Sect in Tang China. Focused on question and answer sessions, or *mondō*, one can glimpse the unique nature of Nara Buddhism. It is said that the Jion-e began in 951AD, with the services today being observed at Yakushi-ji Temple in years with even numbers, according to the western calendar, and at Kohfuku-ji in odd years. This year, 2023, it will be held at Kohfuku-ji.

About once every 10 years a ceremony known as Ryugi is held after the Jion-e Ceremony.

Ryugi is an oral examination which Hossō Sect priests can participate just once in their lifetime. It is truly unique to see answers during debates about exam questions being intoned and acted out in a manner which has been handed down from ancient times.

Kasuga-Taisha Shrine

In addition to about 2,000 stone lanterns within the Kasuga-Taisha shrine precincts, there are about 1,000 lanterns suspended from the eaves of the corridors surrounding the main shrine building. All the lanterns have lights which are lit annually during the seasonal Setsubun ceremony in February, and a shrine event known as the Mantōrō Festival held on 14 and 15 August.

The many lanterns were donated by the noble Fujiwara family that venerated Kasuga-Taisha as the guardian god, and later by samurai, as well as local businesses and townsfolk appealing for prosperity and safety in the home respectively. It is said that the Mantōrō was observed, in earlier times, in supplication for seasonal rains, but today people come with prayers of all sorts.

Gango-ji Temple

The Jizō-e Ceremony is performed on 23 and 24 August with a Jizō Bodhisattva statue placed on the Shumidan altar in the Gokuraku-bō. Continuing a tradition upheld by the faithful, prayers in memory of ancestors, and for household protection and the health and development of children, as well as world peace, are offered to Jizō.

In addition to this memorial service, the Tōba-kuyō memorial service is held in front of the Futo-den, which is lined with many stone pagodas, and the Mantō-kuyō memorial service is held around the Hondō (Main Hall) and Zenshitsu (Zen Hall), where lantern dishes are lit. In addition to services dedicated to Jizō inside the hall, a Tōba-kuyō memorial service with many lit stone lanterns is held in the precincts in front of the Futo-den, along with a Mantō-kuyō with rows of lamps lit around the Hondō (Main Hall) and Zenshitsu (Zen Hall).

The Gango-ji Jizō-e is a religious ceremony revived in 1948. For various reasons in recent times, many events which had been held by the shrines and temples listed as World Heritage 'Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara' no longer existed. However, as with this Jizō-e, there are many beliefs which continue and events which have been revived.



Yakushi-ji Temple Hana-eshiki (Courtesy of Yakushiji)



Tōshōdaiji Temple Mochidangi Ceremony (Courtesy of Tōshōdaiji Photo by Eisuke Ueda)

Yakushi-ji Temple

The Yakushi-ji Shuni-e Ceremony is also widely known as the Hana-eshiki. In 1107, Emperor Horikawa prayed for the recovery of the empress from illness at the Yakushi-ji Shuni-e. When she recovered, the following year, artificial flowers were made from Japanese paper dyed with medicinal herbs and offered before the Buddha. This is the origin of the Hana-eshiki Ceremony.

Today, ten types of artificial flowers are made: camellia, plum, cherry, peach, Japanese kerria, peony, Japanese iris, wisteria, lily, and chrysanthemum. A total of 1,696 artificial flowers are arranged in 12 vases and offered in front of the three Yakushi images. The priests who perform the Rengyōshū conduct services from 25 to 31 March, confessing their sins before the three Yakushi images and praying for a flourishing nation, wealth and happiness for all people, peace on earth, rains in season, abundant harvests, and recovery from illness.

Tōshōdai-ji Temple

The Shushō-e Ceremony is a new year's event said to have originated at the time Tōshōdai-ji was established in the 8th century. At just past midnight on New Year's Day, sutras are recited in the Rai-dō Hall and a fire ritual performed at the same time as the Joya no Kane (bells ringing out the old year) is rung. A stupa containing Buddha's ashes brought to Japan from Tang China by Priest Ganjin is placed in the Rai-dō Hall, when as well as penitence for deeds over the previous year, a ceremony known as the Service of Repentance is conducted to pray for world peace and abundant harvests.

On the night of 3 January, a ceremony known as Mochi-dangi is held before many *Kagamimochi* (round rice cake) offerings placed on the Rai-dō Hall altar, and the names of the worshippers and the names of 48 types of well-known *mochi* rice cakes from all round Japan are read out in high pitched voices and with a unique intonation.

MOTONAKA Makoto Mini lecture

Various values associated with the wooden structures spanning ancient to early modern times, archaeological sites, cultural landscapes, and all of their connections with intangible cultural assets, are recognized in their classification as 'Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara'. We consulted Makoto Motonaka, who has long been engaged in World Heritage preservation about the important features of the 'Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara'.



MOTONAKA Makoto, Ph.D.

He has been involved in various aspects of World Heritage as a Specialist in Cultural Properties of the Agency for Cultural Affairs and a Counselor to the Cabinet Secretariat, and has been Director of the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties since 2021.

Q1. When it comes to evaluating the outstanding universal value of the 'Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara', what is the particular significance of applying Criterion (vi)?

What is established by Criterion (vi) is whether or not the 'Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara' can be identified as places representing events, ideas and beliefs which are of 'outstanding universal significance'. In this case, 'Buddhism', with its relevance to global ideas and religion, and which was transmitted to the Japanese archipelago, situated on the easternmost borders of Asia, fused with the indigenous Shinto faith, fulfilling a role today with its collections of temples and shrines as a 'major religious center'.

Q2. While the 'Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara' as a whole are a rare example of groups of existing structures and archaeological remains, where does the Heijō Palace, the only example of archaeological remains amongst the 8 properties, fit?

'Ancient Nara' is highly acclaimed example, based on Criterion (vi), for the zoning of the Heijō Palace and the positioning of the architecture, the design of the groups of temple and shrine buildings were evaluated as being an outstanding example of architecture and planning of an ancient city in Asia. In other words, not only were the collection of buildings found in the extant temples and shrines remarkable, but the groups of structures and layout which came to light when the Heijō Palace remains were excavated were also outstanding examples from the 8th century.

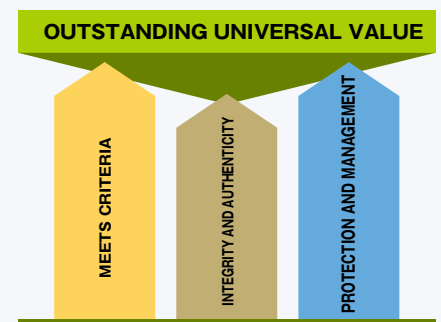
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What is ‘authenticity’

The theme of Part 6 - ‘Learning more about World Heritage’ - is ‘Authenticity’. ‘Authenticity, along with ‘Integrity’, is an important concept, and considered as being one of the important 3 pillars supporting OUV (Outstanding Universal Value). ‘Authenticity’.

Authenticity is one of the essential conditions for being nominated for inscription as a World Heritage site, and is regarded as an indicator demonstrating the intrinsic value of cultural heritage. Matters relating to ‘Authenticity’ are specified in the ‘Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention’. The details and concepts are extremely complex.

I’d like to summarize what these are by offering the following explanations:



The 3 pillars of Outstanding Universal Value

- ◆ Properties nominated based on the World Heritage criteria must meet the authenticity condition.
- ◆ All cultures must be equally respected. The most important thing is that when considering cultural heritage and making decisions, these must be based on the context of each and every aspect of the culture itself.
- ◆ The authenticity condition may be deemed to have been met if the cultural value of a property can demonstrate, in the various attributes noted below, it is authentic and credible.

Asking whether or not the condition of authenticity, in particular, is met, attention is drawn to eight attributes. Depending on the characteristics of the cultural heritage, appropriate attributes can be selected to evaluate the authenticity (whether or not something is ‘real’) of the asset with reference to specific artistic, historical, social, and scientific aspects. Next, let’s explain these attributes.

1. Form and design

That features of a property, including its structure and design, retain their original architectural form is important. The question is whether the appearance has remained unchanged and accurately preserved since its original construction. If there have been modifications, it is necessary to clarify when, to what extent, and how they were made.

For example, when observing the buildings of Kohfuku-ji Temple, it becomes evident that despite being rebuilt multiple times due to repeated fires, the form and design of the structures incorporate techniques from the reconstruction periods while inheriting ancient architectural styles and intricate details.



Kohfuku-ji Temple five-storey pagoda rafters
(Courtesy of Kohfuku-ji)

Looking at the ends of the rafters of the five-storey pagoda, completed in 1426, one sees that short rafters above are rectangular, but the lower base rafters have rounded corners, and are elliptical. It is thought that this is because in ancient times the shape of the base rafters was round, and work in the Middle Ages copied the design of the old architecture.

① Short rafters ② Base rafters

2. Materials and substances

Ideally, the components and raw materials used in the buildings and memorials which form a property should be original. However, certain changes in order to make it possible to manage them properly in society today may be unavoidable. In this case, it will be necessary to show clearly the extent of the changes.

For example, with Western historical remains, the same stone materials can be used for structures. However, with wooden structures of the type found in Japan, there may be a need to replace materials with new materials in order to manage and maintain a property. It is important that these materials are of the same quality as the original.

3. Use and function

Mainly in the case of existing properties, studies are made to see whether the purposes and ways in which it is used, and which define a property, are retained and have not changed since it was originally constructed.

Likewise with the 'Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara', the Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines which together form the properties have, as religious establishments, remained unchanged since they were built in the 8th century, performing their respective uses and functions.

4. Traditions, techniques, and management systems

Inherited traditions and techniques are the background to, and form the basis for, the form and design of the properties. The repair and management are based on a common understanding, established by international conventions, as to whether traditional materials and techniques and their culture attributes have been used for individual properties. The clearest example of this is the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage inscription, in 2020, of 'Traditional skills, techniques, and knowledge, for the conservation and transmission of wooden architecture in Japan'.

5. Location and setting

'Setting' refers to a surrounding environment, and rather than a single property which is part of World Heritage site, this is a highly important element relating to the location in which it is set and the surrounding environment. The surrounding environment and the connections to it, whether there have been no changes since the time the property came into being, and if there have been changes, the nature of these and what impact this has had on the property, will be considered. Most of the buildings constituting the 'Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara' are on their original sites. It has been judged that all the constituent properties were sited, and remain, within Heijōkyō, the old 8th century capital of Japan's environment.

6. Language and other forms of intangible heritage

Whether or not the language, lifestyle, and many other intangible aspects characteristic of those who created the culture which formed the properties, still exist in that area today, will be considered. However, that these remain is not an essential condition. The reason for this is that among the cultural heritage sites are civilizations which are already extinct and an extremely large numbers of national historical remains.

7. Spirit and feeling

Spirit and feeling are features relating to human spirituality which go above and beyond the cultural and social framework. How beliefs and emotions closely linked to traditions inherited in sites where properties exist, and to cultural continuity, are reflected in the values characterizing the property will be considered.

An example is the 'Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki and Amakusa Area' (2018 inscription). Here, as demonstrated by what became the places symbolizing belief following the end of the time churches were forbidden, faith in Christianity, saved in this area during the time it was banned in the Edo Period, has most important attributes concerning the authenticity of this property.

8. Other internal and external factors

One of the many attributes, 'Authenticity' is evidence that the diverse range of cultural properties registered as World Heritage sites are, indeed, genuine.



Yakushi-ji Temple's East Pagoda disassembly and repairs (Courtesy of Yakushi-ji)

Disassembly and repair work on damaged parts, and replacing these with new materials, jobs which involved using architectural techniques used when the structure was first built, being carried out by The Nara Prefecture Cultural Properties Preservation Office.

MOTONAKA Makoto Mini lecture Part 2

Q3. 'Authenticity' in the context of World Heritage is, for most of us, a very difficult concept. Could you enlighten us as to the main points?

'Authenticity' is an indicator when considering whether or not the values characterizing a cultural property are 'genuine'. These indices vary, depending on the nature of the property.

In the case of 'Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara', what was considered was whether the groups of buildings and the remains inherited designs, structures, and materials, which continued unchanged from the time they were constructed, and had not changed location, whether they were characterized by a high degree of spirituality in the beliefs they represented, and whether the precincts and the areas around them preserved their spirituality. Whether or not the values from these points of view demonstrated 'integrity'.

Making “Asuka-Fujiwara” a World Heritage Site!

Introduction to Asuka-Fujiwara, a candidate property Part 4 The Fujiwara capital

Birth of the first full-scale capital of Japan

Against a background of international tension in ancient East Asia, developments in the country were promoted by delegations and diplomatic missions which introduced cultures and the latest technologies. As part of this effort, instead of relocating the palace with each imperial succession, a decision was made to establish the Asuka Basin as the capital and fix the location of the palace. The Asuka Okamoto Palace was constructed in 630AD, then moved, and up until 694AD, the Asuka Itabuki Palace, Nochino-Asuka Okamoto Palace, and the Asuka Kiyomigahara Palace were built in more or less the same location. These form what is known as the Asuka Palace site.

However, palaces and offices were then built one after the other on the Asuka Plain, which is not a particularly big area, and with Buddhist temples being constructed by powerful local families on their lands, neither a systematic city plan nor land-use were effectively managed.

It was Emperor Tenmu, who became emperor in 673AD, who achieved something of a breakthrough, beginning the building of a new capital city along the lines of a so-called Jōbōsei grid pattern based on the Ritsuryō legal code system. After Emperor Tenmu's death, Empress Jitō continued with city building, and in 694AD finally relocated the Asuka Palace to the Fujiwara Palace. On the first day of the new year in 701AD, the year in which the Taihō Code was promulgated, her subjects assembled in front of the Daigoku-den Hall at the centre of the Fujiwara Palace, and a ceremony held to mark the establishment of a centralized scheme which featured institutions and systems, rules and regulations, and cultural matters, and which was to be announced throughout the state. Furthermore, in the following year, 702, the first mission to Tang China in 33 years, dispatched from the Fujiwara Palace, declared the birth of Japan to the outside world. The Fujiwara Palace Site, which we introduce this time, became a historically very significant one, a setting for the birth of Japan.

The Fujiwara Palace Site and Suzaku-ōji Avenue Site of the Fujiwara-kyo Capital

The Fujiwara Palace site is located at the center of the Fujiwara capital, which was constructed across a wide area of approximately 5 kilometers square per side on flat land northwest of Asuka Palace. It has, on its east, north, and west sides, the Yamato Sanzan (Three Mountains of Yamato): Mt. Kaguyama, Mt. Miminashiyama, and Mt. Unebiyama. The location reflected the new beliefs in Sanzan-chingo (protection of the land by the three mountains).

In 694AD, Empress Jitō relocated the Asuka-Kiyomihara Palace to the Fujiwara Palace. Following that, in the seventeen years up until the palace was moved to Heijōkyō by Empress Genmei, three emperors or empresses - Empress Jitō, Emperor Monmu, and Empress Genmei - used this as their imperial residence.

The Fujiwara Palace Site remains cover an area of one kilometer square per side, and are surrounded by a ditch and a large wall. Inside this was the Dairi, the imperial living quarters, the Daigokudenin, which served as a space for imperial ceremonies, and the Chōdōin, the place where officials worked. The Kanga, which housed offices, concentrated official business, which had been divided into internal and external and internal affairs during the Asukanomiya period, in one place.

Starting with the Daigokuden, which was at the center of the palace, and the Daigokudenin and Chōdōin, which were located along the central axis, these were the very first imperial halls which had tiled roofs and stone foundations. However, the palace building standing to the rear of the Daigokuden, as well as the office buildings located to the east and west of the palace featured structures supported by pillars dug directly into the earth, as they had been during the Asuka Palace time.

The Fujiwara-kyō layout was based on the Chinese city grid pattern. Which



Bottom left Model of Fujiwarakyō (Courtesy of Kashihara City)
Top right Panoramic view of the Fujiwara Palace site

meant that the Suzakuōji street, the main street, led south from the Suzaku Gate which lay on the south side of the Fujiwara Palace at the centre. From archaeological surveys, we can estimate that the width of the Suzaku-ōji was about 24 meters.

The structure and location of the buildings on the Fujiwara Palace, with the Suzaku-ōji along the central axis of the planned city layout, was later carried over to Heijōkyō and Heiankyō, becoming a template for city planning.

Excavations are still conducted annually at the Fujiwara Palace site, with new discoveries reported each time.

Yamato Sanzan (The Three Mountains of Yamato) Mt. Kaguyama

Kaguyama is situated to the east of the Fujiwara Palace site. It is a subsidiary hillock, formed by the erosion of a ridge that extends from Mount Tōnomine, lies to the southeast. Kaguyama is 152.4m high.

There is a saying, recorded in the Fudoki and Manyōshu, compiled in ancient times, 'The mountains descended from heaven'. Kaguyama was hence regarded as sacred. Moreover, in the Manyōshu poetry collection are poems documenting the ascent of Kaguyama, by Emperor Jōmei, to look over the land. It was thus assumed to have been considered the most important of the three mountains.

Sunrise over Kashihara City and Kaguyama
(Courtesy of the Asuka-Fujiwara World Heritage Inscription Promotion Council)



Yamato Sanzan (The Three Mountains of Yamato) Mt. Unebiyama

Unebiyama is small, distinct peak, 199.2m in height, situated to the west of the Fujiwara Palace. It is the highest of the three mountains, and is assumed to have been formed by the erosion of volcanic rock formed during volcanic activity two million years ago.

The name Unebiyama appears frequently in the Kojiki, the Nihon Shoki, and the Manyōshu. Prince Naka-no-Ōe (later Emperor Tenji), in a poem in the Manyōshu he is supposed to have written, it says that Kaguyama and Miminashiyama are personified as being female, and quarreled over Unebiyama which, having the highest profile of the three mountains, was thought to have been felt by those living in ancient times as being most valiant.

Distant view of Unebiyama
(Courtesy of the Asuka-Fujiwara World Heritage Inscription Promotion Council)



Yamato Sanzan (The Three Mountains of Yamato) Mt. Miminashiyama

Miminashiyama is a low mountain, 139.7m high, situated to the north of the Fujiwara Palace. It has a beautiful conical shape from whichever direction it is viewed and, like Unebiyama, it is assumed to be a mountain with a form created by the erosion of volcanic rock.

Explanations as to how the mountain got its name 'miminashi', or 'without ears', include that the shape of mountain being conical and its base not extending outwards, gave it the appearance of having no appendages or 'ears'. In articles written in the Nihon Shoki in 601AD, the 9th year of Empress Suiko's reign, there is reference to an institution called the Miminashi Temporary Palace and it is possible that there was this area which, from those ancient times, was considered highly important.

Miminashiyama reflected in a pond
(Courtesy of the Asuka-Fujiwara World Heritage Inscription Promotion Council)

