

UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, at a meeting in Christchurch, New Zealand in June this year, decided to register the remains of the Iwami silver mine in Japan on the World Heritage List as a cultural property of outstanding universal value, despite an earlier recommendation to the contrary by an advisory panel.

In May, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, known as ICOMOS, recommended the postponement of the proposed registration on the ground that "there is not enough cause to demonstrate the universal value of the Iwami silver mine." Therefore, residents of the registered area literally went wild over the reversal of the recommendation. The mine was formally registered in July under the title of the "Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine and its Cultural Landscape."

The silver mine thrived from the second half of the 16th century through the first half of the 17th century. Silver produced there, it is said, was used in trade between Asia and Europe through Europeans who had advanced eastward and reached Asia by that time. The remains of the Iwami silver mine, immersed in beautiful nature, constitute a historic relic reminiscent of the Grand Age of Discovery.

The remains of the silver mine are situated in the Omori town of

silver production amounted to approximately 600 tons per year. Japan exported 150 to 190 tons, of which about 40 tons came from Iwami. Because the Iwami mine was also called Sama Silver Mine, some ancient foreign literature refers to its product as Soma Silver.

Wood was used as fuel for cupellation. Therefore, people engaged in silver production in those days were not remiss in planting numerous trees. Thanks to their effort for afforestation, the Senno-yama area is still covered with deep, beautiful verdure, and a small stream running through the area is clear to the bottom.

The Cerro Rico silver mine in Bolivia, also on the World Heritage list, started production about the same time as the Iwami mine. Nonetheless, the two mines are distinctly different in that the former was under colonial rule and lacked greenery, while the latter was in an independent country and covered with abundant verdure. The registration of the Iwami mine on the World Heritage list despite a recommendation to the contrary is presumably due to the appreciation of two factors – its historical significance for Japan's interchange with the world during the Grand Age of Discovery and its production in harmony with nature.

The registration covers a total area of about 3,663 hectares, including

Iwami Silver Mine: Reminder of Grand Age of Discovery A Vestige of Old Japan Added to World Heritage List

By ADACHI Isao

Ohda City at about the center of Shimane Prefecture in southwestern Japan. The existence of the ancient silver mine is well known in Japan but it is not a spectacular cultural relic. It therefore appears that not many Japanese were fully aware of its exact location, to say nothing of its significant role in world history, until its registration as a World Heritage site. For this reason, its registration on the World Heritage List came as all the bigger surprise. Nevertheless, a perusal of data about the silver mine available on the websites of Shimane Prefecture and Ohda City makes us realize afresh how little we knew about the mine.

According to the data, a legend has it that the Iwami mine was discovered in 1309 during the *Kamakura* Period. However, it was during the *Sengoku* (Warring States) Period that silver production was started there on a full scale. It is said that Kamiya Jutei, a merchant in Hakata in the northern Kyushu region to the west, spotted a glittering mountain in 1526 during a voyage across the Sea of Japan and found a silver mine while investigating the area.

The "glittering mountain" was 537-meter-high Senno-yama some 7 km from the coast. At first, silver was produced directly from outcrop, but later shafts and galleries were dug for mining. All work, from mining to smelting, was done by hand. The introduction of a smelting technique, known as cupellation, from the Korean Peninsula made it possible to produce high-grade silver in large quantities.

Toward the beginning of the 17th century, it is said, the world's

Senno-yama and historic rows of houses that stretch along its valley, the ports of Tomogaura, Okidomari used to ship silver, and a main road for carrying silver to the two ports. As many as 600 shafts and galleries, known as *Mabu*, which remain in Senno-yama, never fail to intrigue visitors. Above all, however, visitors are enthralled by the ancient townscape and rich nature that remind them of Japan's good old days.

The Iwami silver mine is only a 40-minute drive from the Grand Shrine of Izumo, a popular tourist spot. Its registration on the World Heritage list has triggered a notable rise in visiting tourists. Accordingly, how best to reconcile the promotion of tourism with the protection of the historic relic poses an important problem for the future. **JS**



Photo: AFL O

An old street near Iwami silver mine

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