

## World Heritage, Secularisation, and the New “Public Sacred” in East Asia

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### Abstract

The category ‘heritage’ is quickly gaining importance for the study of religion, not least in East Asia. Since the 1990s, Japanese governments, entrepreneurs, and NGOs have invested heavily in heritage preservation, production, and promotion, and other East Asian countries have followed suit. UNESCO recognition is sought after by various state and private actors, who see it as a useful tool for validating and popularising select historical narratives and for acquiring national and international legitimacy. These developments have led to far-reaching transformations in worship sites and ritual practices. Drawing on recent Japanese examples, and comparing these to cases elsewhere in the region, this article constitutes a first step towards a theory of the heritagisation of religion in East Asia. It argues that the heritagisation of worship sites often entails a process of deprivatisation, turning them into public properties that are simultaneously secular and sacred. The article distinguishes between three patterns, which many worship sites and ritual practices that have been inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage or Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists, in Japan and beyond follow: 1) heritage-making constitutes a type of secularisation, 2) it gives rise to new processes of sacralisation, and 3) this enables mass tourism that can lead to far-reaching transformations. Focusing on the first two patterns, the article shows how heritage-making leads to the reconfiguration of sites and practices as national, public, and *secular sacred* properties.

### Keywords

Deprivatisation, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Japan, Shinto, UNESCO, Vietnam

### Introduction: The Age of World Heritage

Since the 1990s, East Asian governments, entrepreneurs, and NGOs have invested heavily in heritage preservation, production, and promotion. National and local authorities alike are actively involved in a competition to get as many sites as possible registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and to have their ritual and artistic practices listed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Throughout East Asia, UNESCO recognition is sought after by various state and private actors, who see it as a useful tool for endorsing and popularising selected historical narratives and for acquiring national and international legitimacy. The World Heritage label is also widely perceived as a marker of excellence for tourist destinations and actively used for branding sites and commodities. Accordingly, Japanese scholars have referred to the contemporary period as the “Age of World Heritage” (*sekai isan no jidai* 世界遺産の時代) (Iwamoto 2013), and the number of academic and popular books on the topic is rapidly increasing. This trend is not limited to Japan but can also be observed in other East Asian countries such as

China (PRC), South Korea (ROK), and Vietnam, which likewise compete for UNESCO recognition for their national treasures and traditions.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, considering the importance attributed to heritage preservation and promotion domestically, East Asian states are also among the most active participants in international heritage diplomacy. The PRC ratified the World Heritage Convention in 1985, and is currently serving its fourth term as a member of the World Heritage Committee.<sup>2</sup> The Republic of Korea joined three years later, and has served three terms so far. Japan was relatively late, but it caught up quickly: it did not ratify the World Heritage Convention until 1992 but has since become one of UNESCO's most ardent and influential supporters. In the past 25 years, it has served three terms on the World Heritage Committee, for a total of 14 years: 1993-1999, 2003-2007, and 2011-2015. Vietnam ratified the Convention early on, in 1987, but did not show much interest in World Heritage until the early 2000s; in recent years, however, the government has actively been seeking UNESCO recognition for national historic sites and traditions, doing its best to catch up with its northern neighbours. It served its first term on the WHC from 2013 to 2017. In sum, East Asian national governments currently assign great importance to World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage, and invest many resources in the promotion of national sites and traditions.<sup>3</sup>

The influence of Japan on UNESCO and the World Heritage apparatus has been especially high. The Nara Conference on Authenticity in 1994 contributed significantly to overcoming Eurocentric notions of heritage as something constituted primarily by physical buildings and ruins (i.e., churches and classical temple ruins, usually made of stone). It led to an increasing awareness of heritage as “lived culture” and, accordingly, to far-reaching changes in UNESCO practices and listings.<sup>4</sup> Since the 1990s, promoting “traditional culture” and “heritage” has become central to Japanese diplomatic efforts, not only domestically but also elsewhere in Asia. Heritage diplomacy is seen as an important tool for promoting Japanese national interests and gaining “soft power” internationally (Akagawa 2015). From 1999 to 2009, UNESCO was led by a Japanese diplomat, Matsuura Kōichirō. Not coincidentally, it was during this period that the International Convention

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnam is a member of ASEAN and therefore part of Southeast Asia, geopolitically speaking. Historically, culturally, and linguistically, however, it is an East Asian nation. Vietnam is part of the Sinosphere, just like Japan and the Koreans; it was located within the ancient Chinese sphere of influence and has been shaped by Confucianism, Mahayana Buddhism, classical Chinese script and literature, et cetera. Moreover, like Korean and Chinese, modern Vietnamese has incorporated many Meiji period Japanese concepts. As a result, when it comes to contemporary notions of religion, national culture, and the role of the state, Vietnam arguably has more in common with Japan and China than with most Southeast Asian nations.

<sup>2</sup> The membership of the World Heritage Committee rotates between different UN member states. The Committee is made up of twenty-one states, who serve four- or six-year terms. The members meet annually and decide which sites will be granted World Heritage status, based on the recommendations of the advisory bodies International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). In recent decades, there has been an increasing pressure on the WHC to overcome Eurocentric notions of heritage, and a corresponding change in power balance within the Committee. Critics have argued that the Committee and its decision-making processes have become increasingly politicised. For discussions of WHC politics, and the role played by Asian countries, see Bertacchini, Liuzza and Meskell (2017); Brumann (2019); Hølleland (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> The exception is the DPRK (North Korea), which ratified the World Heritage Convention in 1998, but which only has two listings and has never served as a member of the WHC. The ROC (Taiwan), meanwhile, is not a UN member, and has no World Heritage listings. However, it does have an elaborate domestic system for heritage classification and conservation.

<sup>4</sup> See Stovel (2008) for an in-depth discussion of the Nara Document of Authenticity and its impact.

for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was implemented, which was largely based on pre-existing Japanese practices of intangible heritage classification and preservation (Aikawa 2004; Akagawa 2014; Teeuwen and Rots forthcoming). As a result, ritual practices (e.g., *matsuri* 祭), performing arts, traditional games, crafts, and even national cuisines (e.g. *washoku* 和食) are now granted UNESCO heritage status.

In Japan as well as elsewhere, a significant proportion of the sites listed as World Heritage are places of worship. These include places that are legally registered as religious organisations (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法人): mostly Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, but also Christian churches (in the Nagasaki region). In addition, Japan's World Heritage properties include a number of sites which may not be perceived as “religious” by most visitors – i.e., they are not typically associated with the modern societal category *shūkyō* 宗教, or with particular religious institutions – but which are widely considered as ‘sacred places’ (*seichi* 聖地),<sup>5</sup> and which are home to various worship traditions: sacred islands (e.g., Okinoshima), mountains (e.g., Mount Fuji), groves (e.g. Sēfa Utaki), and pilgrimage trails (e.g., those in the Kii Peninsula). Furthermore, many of the Japanese practices on UNESCO's Intangible Heritage List are ritual traditions and festivals. In sum, whether classified as ‘religion’ or not, a majority of Japan's UNESCO World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage listings are places and practices centred on the worship of divine beings. In many cases, this has led to their transformation – into tourist destinations, commodified performances, and reinvented symbols of “national tradition.” Similar patterns can be observed in other East Asian countries.

This situation raises questions about authority, ownership, and patronage. To what extent does a religious institution that becomes a World Heritage Site remain the property of its clerical leaders? To what extent does it become ‘public property’ in the popular imagination, if not legally? Who has the responsibility to pay for maintenance and repair: the authorities (national, prefectural/provincial, or municipal), the religious institution that ‘owns’ the heritage site, or private organisations? What does UNESCO recognition mean for the power of the state and other stakeholders, such as corporate sponsors – does their influence on institutional decision-making increase? And what does this all mean for the constitutional separation of state and religion (*seikyō bunri* 政教分離), which is such a contested field in post-war Japan (Larsson forthcoming; Rots and Teeuwen 2017)? Furthermore, these transformations raise a number of questions about the nature of ritual practice. When a local *matsuri* is listed on UNESCO's Intangible Heritage List, and its rituals are standardised, commodified, and performed for new audiences (e.g., Foster 2011; Kikuchi 2013), is it still the same practice? Or has it become a secularised tourist spectacle, a purely performative affair, from which personal devotion has largely disappeared (Salemink 2007)? Is commodification an effective strategy for preservation, even if it leads to a decline in devotional elements? Put differently: when does a ritual or worship site cease to be ‘real’?

Of course, there is no single answer to these questions, if only because there is significant diversity on the ground. In some cases, the consequences of World Heritage or Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter, ICH) registration are severe, leading to the *de facto* exclusion of local residents and worshippers. In other cases, the consequences may be limited, as clerical (e.g., Buddhist or Christian) authorities remain largely in charge, and find effective ways to manage rising visitor numbers. There is no single model that can predict the consequences of World Heritage status on worship practices, for the simple reason that much depends on local dynamics. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>5</sup> In other words, “religious” is not synonymous with “sacred.” I will explain the difference between these two terms in more detail below.

fact that there is significant diversity does not mean that there are no similarities between different cases. I argue that it is possible to discern certain recurring patterns and trends, which may not pertain to every individual case, but which nevertheless can be observed widely and in different contexts. In this article, I distinguish three patterns, which apply to many East Asian worship sites that have been turned into World Heritage or ICH:

- 1) “Heritage” allows for the deprivatisation of religious sites and ritual practices, and for secular authorities to establish or strengthen their control over those sites or practices. Through World Heritage or ICH, worship sites and rituals acquire a new *public* character. As such, they undergo a process of institutional and/or discursive secularisation.
- 2) Heritage-making and secularisation often go hand in hand with new processes of *sacralisation*, whereby worship sites acquire new meaning as places associated with the origins of the nation, significant historic events, and collective identity, but not private ‘religion.’ Thus, heritage often signifies the formation of a new “secular sacred.”
- 3) World Heritage and ICH designations can bring organisations and authorities new capital, not only political but also financial. Mass tourism is of crucial importance in this respect. While tourism can be a way to gain recognition and income, it also leads to the transformation of worship sites and practices. In some cases, these transformations are far-reaching, but much depends on the local actors involved.

In this article, I focus primarily on the first two patterns, while only briefly touching upon the third because of space constraints.<sup>6</sup> The article constitutes a first step towards a theory of the heritagisation of religion in East Asia. It addresses the significance of heritage for processes of secularisation – in particular, the ways in which it contributes to the deprivatisation of sites. World Heritage, I argue, represents a new kind of secular (i.e. non-religious) public property, in the public imagination if not legally. Importantly, secularisation in this case does not equal disenchantment in the sense of a declining belief in the existence and power of spirits and deities, and in the efficacy of rituals addressed at such supernatural actors – throughout East Asia, such beliefs continue to be widespread, even though the societies in which they are found are among the most secular in the world in terms of religious membership rates and the legal separation of state and religion (see for instance Bubandt and Van Beek 2012; Madsen 2011; P. Taylor 2007). Heritage-making often constitutes a type of secularisation, but it goes hand in hand with new types of sacralisation, as World Heritage status often entails the attribution of new sacred qualities to sites and practices, adding to their symbolic power. In order to illustrate this argument, I will briefly discuss a number of cases of ‘public sacred’ World Heritage Sites and Intangible Cultural Heritage traditions.

Thus, this article does not offer a case study of one particular World Heritage Site. Rather, it provides some general observations and theoretical suggestions. Although Japan constitutes my main focus, I will also refer to examples from other East Asian countries, where similar processes are at play. That is, my hypothesis is that the three patterns outlined above – heritage-making

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<sup>6</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to present a comprehensive theory of heritagisation in relation to tourism development. Suffice to say that the relationship between heritage-making and mass tourism, and the various financial, institutional-political, ritual, and ecological consequences of heritage tourism constitute an increasingly important field of study. Some research has been done on this topic in Asia (e.g. Brumann and Berliner 2016; Di Giovine 2009; Reader forthcoming; Rots 2019b), and as the scale and impact of tourism are ever-increasing, more case studies will undoubtedly follow.

constitutes a type of secularisation, it gives rise to new processes of sacralisation, and thus enables mass tourism that can lead to far-reaching transformations – are widely applicable not only to Japan, but also to many cases in South Korea, China, and Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> They may also apply to other Asian countries, and possibly elsewhere, but such a wider comparison is beyond the scope of this article.

The remainder of this article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I discuss my core concepts, explaining how I use the terms ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ in this context. Here, I will elaborate upon my argument that heritage-making constitutes a type of secularisation *as well as*, in many cases, sacralisation. Next, I will illustrate this argument by discussing some examples from mainland Japan, suggesting that heritage can function as a strategy for deprivatising “public sacred” properties associated with the nation state. As I will show, such attempts are in accordance with the notion that Shinto should reclaim its role in the centre of public space, which has gained traction in recent years. Third, I will compare this to other examples from East Asia, especially Korea and Vietnam. By doing so, I will show how heritage can serve to re-sacralise certain sites and practices, linking them explicitly to the nation-state, while dissociating them from private ‘religion.’ However, this may simultaneously serve as a strategy for excluding certain actors from those sites, and establishing government control over ritual practices. Thus, I suggest, the conceptualisation of a site as ‘sacred’ national heritage may paradoxically go hand in hand not only with its secularisation, but also with the exclusion of worshippers.

### **Heritage as the new secular sacred**

Until recently, there was little dialogue between heritage studies and the study of religion. Few scholars of religion investigated the impact of heritage-making on worship sites; meanwhile, few heritage experts seriously addressed questions pertaining to religious authority and identity. This is now changing. In 2015, Birgit Meyer and Marleen de Witte published a special issue titled *Heritage and the Sacred*, which took up a number of important themes central to the study of religion in the contemporary world (Meyer and De Witte 2015). It included the question of how heritage relates to processes of secularisation and sacralisation, and the articles discussed some of the tensions and conflicts that can emerge as a result of religion being turned into heritage. The international EU-funded project “Heriligion: The Heritagisation of Religion and Sacralisation of Heritage” addresses similar issues, as it “seeks to understand the consequences of the heritagization of religious sites, objects and practices” in the European context, while the University of Groningen has established a new research centre for the study of religion and heritage, which likewise focuses on Europe.<sup>8</sup> The present article draws upon some of this existing

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<sup>7</sup> Some readers may disapprove of my choice to propose a theory of the heritagisation of religion in *East Asia* in a journal devoted to the study of religion in *Japan*, and prefer me to limit my analysis to the modern Japanese nation-state. However, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Rots 2019a), I think the study of Japanese religion suffers from insularity, and would benefit greatly from more transnational approaches and intra-Asian comparative studies. This article is an attempt to practise what I preach, however limited in scope. Thus, I will draw not only on Japanese but also on Vietnamese and, to a lesser extent, Korean and Chinese examples, because I believe that many of the same interests and issues are shaping sacred heritage sites and ritual practices throughout the region, even though state-religion configurations differ from state to state. I am by no means an expert on Korean or Chinese religion, so I welcome conversations with scholars working in those fields, in order to develop this theory further.

<sup>8</sup> See the project and centre websites, respectively <https://heriligion.eu/> and <https://www.rug.nl/research/centre-for-religious-studies/centre-religion-heritage/?lang=en> (accessed 17 June 2019).

research, and my ideas on this topic have been shaped by recent conversations with colleagues who are involved in these projects.<sup>9</sup>

For the time being, European cases and theories continue to take centre stage in most of the research on heritage and religion. Yet I would argue that the topic is gaining importance not only in Europe but also in other regions of the world, because heritage has become a core societal category that is quickly acquiring global significance. Heritage production and preservation profoundly affect religious institutional and ritual practices today, and is therefore central for understanding contemporary configurations of the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘the secular.’ This does not mean, however, that these categories are configured the same way in different places; nor does it imply that trends first emerge in Europe before finding their way to other parts of the world. Quite the opposite, in fact: East Asian countries may well be considered trendsetters in some crucial respects (Teeuwen and Rots forthcoming). This is especially visible when it comes to the reclassification of ritual traditions as Intangible Cultural Heritage: this creates space for secular authorities to (re)establish control over those practices, as Asian state actors have discovered some time ago (Salemink 2016), and as European authorities are currently discovering (Wagenaar 2019).

Thus, the purpose of the present article is to contribute to this important emerging field of study by offering some relevant insights from East Asia. As Tim Winter has argued, even though scholars of heritage now study cases in the global South as well as the North, the main theories of the field are still predominantly drawn from Euro-American contexts (Winter 2014a; 2014b). According to Winter, there is no unified “Japanese” or “East Asian” body of heritage theory that can serve to counterbalance what he perceives as lingering Eurocentric tendencies in heritage studies. However, this lack of a single unified theory does not mean that East Asia is not a fruitful area for studying the interplay between heritage, religion, and the sacred. This is not only because Asia offers some fascinating case studies, as illustrated by the various recent edited volumes on heritage policies and practices in the region (Daly and Winter 2012; Hsiao, Hui and Peycam 2017; Matsuda and Mengoni 2016; Silva and Chapagain 2013), which can serve to confirm, challenge, or add nuance to theories that have been developed in Euro-American academia. More importantly, East Asia has become one of the global centres of heritage-making, and countries in the region are now shaping policies elsewhere – Japan’s role in establishing the Intangible Cultural Heritage List is but one example. Looking at the dynamics of religion and heritage-making in East Asia may therefore help us develop new theoretical models. Put differently, developments in China or Japan may help us understand transformations in the global South, and perhaps even shed light on trends in the West. This could lead to the development of a new theory on religion and heritage that no longer takes the modern European heritage experience as its main standard or frame of reference. Of course, this is not to suggest that we should not make use of Western concepts and theories at all. But looking at East Asia as a global centre, from which new ideas and policy trends emerge, may help us rethink some of those concepts and theories.

Like ‘heritage’ and ‘religion,’ the terms ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ have been developed in Western academic settings, and are not uncontroversial, especially when applied to so-called ‘non-Western’ contexts. These concepts each have their own genealogies, they carry a multitude of meanings, and they are employed by various actors for different purposes. In other words, these are not neutral analytical terms. That does not make them any less relevant, of course. For instance, as recent scholarship has shown, the categories ‘religion’ and ‘secular’ have been actively appropriated and

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<sup>9</sup> In particular, I have learned much from recent conversations with Birgit Meyer, Oscar Salemink, Irene Stengs, and Todd Weir, all of whom are conducting ground-breaking research on the interplay between religion and heritage.

adjusted by Japanese actors (scholars, priests, politicians, and worshippers) in modern times, in accordance with changing political circumstances (e.g., Josephson 2012; Maxey 2014; Rots and Teeuwen 2017). Today, secularism is a core component of statehood in all East Asian countries, even if some states interfere with religious issues more actively than others. The same, clearly, applies to ‘heritage,’ which has become a core concept in contemporary East Asian politics and society.<sup>10</sup>

As mentioned, one of my main arguments is that heritage-making allows for the deprivatisation of religious sites and, consequently, their secularisation. By this, I do not mean that all devotional elements disappear (not necessarily, at least), nor does it mean that religious actors are no longer involved in the daily management of sites. What it means is that sites are reconceived as public property, and that religious actors have to compromise and negotiate the demands of secular authorities, NGOs, and entrepreneurs. There may still be some space for worship and faith, but they become optional, and cease to be central. The value attributed to worship sites and practices is no longer primarily a matter of divine presence or ritual efficacy; instead, value now lies in their significance for preserving national (or local) ‘culture’ or ‘tradition.’ Thus, heritage-making leads to the establishment of an ‘immanent frame’” in the Taylorian sense (C. Taylor 2007), in which value and meaning are grounded in this-worldly considerations, while devotion and faith in divine interference are sidelined or even marginalised. Meanwhile, decision-making processes change accordingly: when a site is listed as World Heritage, the number of stakeholders tends to increase, secular authorities may impose policies that cause tensions among priests and worshippers, and commercial or educational considerations may interfere with religious ones. In other words, secularisation can lead to changes in ownership and belonging, in practice if not legally.

Here it is worth recalling the work of sociologist José Casanova, who famously discussed three meanings of the term ‘secularisation’ (Casanova 1994, 2006). First, Casanova suggested, the term is often used to refer to a “decline of religious beliefs and practices.” Until the 1990s, this was a common understanding of the term; until that time, the gradual decline of religion was widely perceived by sociologists of religion to be an inevitable result of the modernisation of society. As is well known, this teleological, deterministic understanding of the inevitability of religious decline has lost its paradigmatic status. It has ceased to be the main definition of ‘secularisation,’ even though some scholars continue to equate the term with religious decline (e.g. Reader 2012). One of the problems is that ‘religious decline’ itself is notoriously difficult to measure and substantiate – especially in societies such as Japan and China, where the term ‘religion’ is contested, and where many worship practices are not classified as such. I will not elaborate upon this issue here; for the purpose of this article, I merely wish to point out that heritagisation – i.e., the reclassification of certain sites and practices as ‘(World) Heritage,’ and corresponding institutional and physical changes – may lead to the transformation of “religious beliefs and practices,” and to their loss of self-evidence, but not necessarily their *decline*. In fact, heritage designation can contribute to the survival of religious institutions that have financial difficulties, if it leads to more public funding (for instance, for the maintenance of buildings and sacred objects).

More relevant in this context are the second and third meaning of ‘secularisation’ distinguished by Casanova. As he describes, secularisation can also refer to the “privatisation of religion” – in

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<sup>10</sup> It should be pointed out that some countries distinguish between different types of heritage. In Japan, there is a subtle yet significant difference between *bunkazai* 文化財, national cultural properties, and *isan* 遺産, which refers to ‘heritage’ in the UNESCO sense of the word. Similarly, in Vietnam, there is a difference between *di tích* – historic cultural sites, recognised by municipal or provincial authorities – and *di sản*, which is used for World Heritage as well as for intangible heritage.

other words, the limitation of the political influence of religious institutions, and the normative idea that religious activities should be limited to the private realm, out of the public sphere. Secularist ideologies prescribe such limitations; they are not necessarily anti-religious, but they seek to demarcate and restrict the societal space allocated to religion. This is clearly visible in Japan, where ‘religion’ (*shūkyō*) is widely perceived as an intrinsically private affair; religious institutions have constitutionally guaranteed freedom, but religious involvement with politics and other public affairs is contested (Larsson forthcoming; Rots and Teeuwen 2017). Accordingly, religious institutions who seek to assert their public significance, such as the Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honchō), typically downplay their ‘religious’ character and evade the term religion. Instead, they redefine themselves in alternative terms, such as ‘traditional culture,’ ‘science/scholarship,’ or ‘heritage’ – a process I have previously referred to as ‘discursive secularisation’ (Rots 2017a; cf. Gagné 2017). In a society where religion is subject to far-reaching privatisation (Casanova’s second meaning of ‘secularisation’), discursive secularisation may serve as a strategy for religious institutions to reassert their public character. In other words, by becoming ‘heritage,’ worship places may be dissociated from private ‘religion,’ and transform into public (i.e., secular) ‘culture.’ This may be a strategy for religious institutions to reacquire public recognition and, more importantly, state funding. But it is not without risks, as it can lead to a loss of autonomy.

The third meaning of ‘secularisation,’ Casanova explains, is “the differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science), usually understood as ‘emancipation’ from religious institutions and norms ... [I]t refers to the transfer of persons, things, meanings, etc., from ecclesiastical or religious to civil or lay use, possession, or control” (Casanova 2006, 7-8). Societal fields that have been secularised in this sense, and differentiated from ‘religion’ – in Europe, in Japan, and elsewhere – include the market economy, fine arts, spectator sports, and of course modern academia. Arguably, ‘heritage’ is another such modern secular field, which has been differentiated – indeed, reified – in the twentieth century, and which has quickly acquired global significance in recent decades. Through ‘heritage,’ a disparate variety of places and practices are reconfigured into public, national property, the value of which is assumed to be universal rather than subjective. In the process, some local stakeholders may profit from increases in tourist numbers, but others – including, in some cases, worshippers and clergy – may lose control over the site. Local actors may end up becoming part of the heritage-scape (Di Giovine 2009), adding an air of ‘authenticity’ to places deemed ‘traditional,’ and become objectified under the tourist gaze (Urry 2002) – as illustrated by the cases of Buddhist monks in Luang Prabang, fishers in Hôi An, farmers in Shirakawa-gō, Okinawan worshippers at Sēfa Utaki, and local shop owners in World Heritage listed ‘old towns’ throughout the world. In other words, heritage is an important, relatively recently differentiated societal field, closely connected to the global proliferation of mass tourism. The reclassification of religious sites and practices into ‘heritage’ leads to their differentiation, their deprivatisation and, hence, their secularisation.

Importantly, however, heritagisation does not imply standardisation. The category ‘heritage’ has been successfully universalised, but that does not mean it has the same shape everywhere; it is configured differently in different locales (Brumann and Berliner 2016; Rots and Teeuwen forthcoming). In the *Multiple Secularities* project, secularity is defined as “institutionally as well as symbolically embedded forms and arrangements for distinguishing between religion and other societal areas, practices and interpretations” (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2016: 3). Following this, we can conceive of heritage-making as a type of secularity, as it distinguishes (i.e., differentiates) between ‘religion’ and the societal field of ‘cultural heritage’ (material and/or intangible). This is



inherently plural, because what counts as ‘heritage’ differs from place to place; there are multiple configurations of heritage, just as there are multiple secularities, all of which are contingent upon the social, political, and economic circumstances of the locales in question. Nevertheless, although the exact shapes of ‘heritage,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘secularity’ vary, there are a number of general patterns that can be observed throughout East Asia, and possibly beyond.

As mentioned, these processes of heritagisation, institutional secularisation, and deprivatisation do not necessarily imply a decline in beliefs and rituals, even though the people who participate in worship practices may have to compete with (other) tourists for access to certain sites. Significantly, World Heritage listing can also lead to a type of secular re-enchantment, providing sites with a new status and legitimacy that adds to their appeal as places of great historical, cultural, and spiritual significance. In other words, heritage-making may go hand in hand not only with secularisation, but also with sacralisation, “the process by which the secular becomes sacred or other new forms of the sacred emerge, whether in matters of personal faith, institutional practice or political power” (Demerath 2007: 66). This point was also made by Meyer and De Witte (2015: 277), when they wrote that “certain heritage forms become imbued with a sacrality that makes them appear powerful, authentic, or even incontestable.” Of course, this is not a matter of sacrality spontaneously emerging; the term ‘sacralisation’ refers to dynamic and active processes of signification and demarcation (both physical and discursive), in which various actors are involved. ‘The sacred,’ then, is not a natural given, nor is it fixed; the term refers to places and objects set apart from the ordinary, singled out as possessing a certain non-negotiable value, which is necessarily subject to change (Anttonen 2000; Knott 2005). Conceptualised thus, the sacred ceases to be something unique to ‘religion.’ Although religious institutions are often involved in processes of sacralization, it is also possible to speak of ‘secular sacred’ symbols and sites, such as those associated with memories of the nation state (e.g. Chidester and Linenthal 1995). Indeed, I would argue that, in many cases, heritage constitutes a new type of secular sacred. Heritage is *secular* as it is public and immanent, and *sacred* as it is imbued with notions of authenticity and existential importance, often linked to the nation as a whole.

In sum, secularisation and sacralisation are not necessarily conflicting processes; they may coexist and even reinforce each other, as in the case of contemporary Shinto ideology (Mullins 2012). In contemporary East Asia, the heritagisation of worship sites entails a process of secularisation. Simultaneously, however, it provides them with a new status as extra-ordinary, non-negotiable sites, closely connected to national identities and modern mythologies. Thus, in many cases, it also leads to processes of sacralisation. Heritage is the new secular sacred, intrinsically public and closely connected to national memory and political legitimacy.

### **World Heritage as the new ‘public sacred’: examples from Japan**

From 30 June to 10 July 2019, the World Heritage Committee met for its forty-third annual session in Baku, Azerbaijan. Perhaps unsurprisingly, among the sites that were then granted World Heritage Status are one in China, one in the Republic of Korea, and one in Japan.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, all three sites are closely related to official national histories, and are imbued with sacred properties. China nominated the Liangzhu Archaeological Site in Zhejiang province, which it presented as a remnant of “the Chinese civilization of prehistoric rice agriculture”; the jade ware

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2019/whc19-43com-18-en.pdf> for an overview of all the decisions made at the forty-third session of the WHC (accessed 6 November 2019). It should be noted that states are not allowed more than one World Heritage nomination per year.

excavated here is said to exhibit “the religious features of the agricultural civilization in the Yellow River and Yangtze River basins.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the value of the site as it was framed by the national authorities lies in its alleged importance as a cradle of Chinese civilisation. South Korea nominated Seowon, Confucian academies that played a central role in the ideological and ritual state apparatus of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), and in the creation of Korean nationhood. Confucian institutions are prime examples of sites that are *secular* in the sense of having an essentially public function and this-worldly orientation, while also functioning as *sacred* places, presented as non-negotiable and set apart from the ordinary, where rituals are conducted for the benefit of the community and the nation. Revealingly, ritual continuity was one of the arguments used by the Korean state to justify the nomination of these academies for World Heritage status, and assert its superiority vis-à-vis similar sites in neighbouring countries: “Seowon is known for its rituals that keep taking their original form with high formality almost unchanged up to date, comparing with those other Confucian academies around East Asia.”<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, Japan nominated a sacred site that is closely associated with the purported origin and development of the nation: the Mozu-Furuichi Kofungun Ancient Tumulus Clusters, burial mounds from the Kofun Period (third-sixth century CE) in Osaka Prefecture. These include three sites managed by the Imperial Household Agency, which are presented as the tombs of three mythical emperors: the Nintoku-tennō-ryō Kofun, the Richū-tennō-ryō Kofun, and the Ōjin-tennō-ryō Kofun. According to the Imperial Household Agency and the conservative Shinto establishment, these are the tombs of the ancient emperors Nintoku, Richū, and Ōjin, which are believed to have lived and reigned from the third to the fifth century CE. Such claims are historically problematic, and critical archaeologists and historians have questioned the attribution of Kofun Period burial mounds to ancient emperors, pointing out that this attribution was the product of Meiji-period mythmaking rather than sound scholarship. Surprisingly, however, the Agency for Cultural Affairs has opted to use the imperial names of the burial mounds in its UNESCO World Heritage application, instead of the more neutral names favoured by most scholars working on the topic (Loo forthcoming). To the Imperial Household Agency, the Association for Shinto Shrines, and the current Abe government, however, these tombs are not just valuable as historical artefacts; they are sacred sites, embodiments of the divine imperial legacy, closely connected to the (re)birth of the divine nation (*shinkoku*) of Japan (Breen 2010; cf. Kuroda 1996). The choice to nominate these sites for World Heritage status is indicative of a wider trend to reposition Shinto in the centre of public space (Mullins 2012; Rots 2017a), but it also shows that UNESCO has become a powerful provider of legitimacy for particular historical narratives and claims – even if the “experts” at the advisory bodies who consider these nominations are unaware of domestic ideological intricacies and contested claims, such as those associated with the names of burial mounds.

The latter development is of recent date. Until the early 2000s, Shinto institutions did not show much interest in World Heritage applications. The Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1994, include three shrines (in addition to thirteen Buddhist temples and a castle); however, the shrines themselves do not appear to have been actively involved with the application, and their World Heritage status is not central to their institutional identity. Itsukushima Jinja (listed in 1996), Kasuga Taisha (listed in 1998 as part of the Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara), and the shrines of Nikkō (listed in 1999) are also registered on the

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<sup>12</sup> On <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5805/> (accessed 17 June 2019).

<sup>13</sup> On <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5648/> (accessed 17 June 2019).

World Heritage List, but this appears to be a consequence of their long-standing status as prominent tourist destinations rather than active institutional lobbying. Until recently, the number of World Heritage-listed Japanese Buddhist temples far exceeded the number of Shinto shrines. Leading shrines such as Ise Jingū and Izumo Taisha are not listed, despite their status as some of Japan's most important places of worship. In the case of Ise, this may have to do with the fact that the shrine authorities do not want to allow archaeologists to conduct excavations on sacred shrine grounds. It also indicates that they are not dependent upon UNESCO recognition for attracting visitors – not yet, at least.

Since the early 2000s, however, shrines and related Shinto organisations are increasingly looking at UNESCO as a source of legitimacy. In 2004, the Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range, which include the famous shrines of Kumano, were inscribed on the World Heritage List. This registration was the outcome of active lobbying and cooperation between prefectural authorities, local corporate stakeholders, and religious institutions (McGuire 2013). The Mount Fuji listing (2013) includes several small shrines, and the mountain is strongly associated with Shinto, Japanese aesthetics, and nature spirituality.<sup>14</sup> But the emerging interest of Shinto actors in UNESCO became especially visible in the case of the Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region, which were listed as World Heritage in 2017.

The island of Okinoshima, located off the coast of Kyushu in south-western Japan, is associated with the Shinto shrine Munakata Taisha on the mainland, and off-limits for anyone except for a single resident priest and (until recently) a small number of male worshippers once a year, who had to pay a fee and undergo ritual purification before they could visit the island. The site is associated with the Three Goddesses of Munakata. According to mythical chronicles, these goddesses were born out of a confrontation between the god of the underworld Susanoo and his sister, sun goddess Amaterasu. The entire island is said to possess the 'nature of sacred place' (*seichisei* 聖地性), and has been referred to as the largest *iwakura* (sacred rock 岩倉) in Japan (Nomoto 2009). In addition, it has received ample attention from Japanese archaeologists, who have described it as a unique ritual site containing large numbers of pre-historical objects, some of which come from other parts of Asia. In addition to its apparent historical and archaeological value, the sacred character of Okinoshima was used as an argument for listing it as a World Heritage Site. According to the original nomination text, the island possesses "outstanding universal value as a property where the original forms of Japan's unique nature worship directed towards islands has been preserved, and where the rituals associated with it have continued down to the present day."<sup>15</sup> This statement may be questioned: after all, the notion of Shinto as "unique Japanese nature worship" is a relatively recent invention (Rots 2017b). Yet what is special about the island is that it is one of the few remaining 'sacred' places in Japan where women are not allowed to set foot. Clearly, this gender prohibition has not prevented UNESCO from listing Okinoshima as a World Heritage Site (DeWitt 2018, forthcoming).

The listing is the outcome of years of lobbying by local authorities, as well as by Munakata Taisha's head priest, an influential figure with close ties to the Shinto establishment. After the shrines' inscription on the Tentative List in 2009, a promotion committee was established; among other things, it organised international conferences, invited scholars and students from different countries on study tours, and published coffee table books and research reports with the purpose of convincing the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) that the shrines of

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1418> (accessed 24 June 2018).

<sup>15</sup> On <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5400/> (accessed 26 November 2016).

Munakata were worthy of World Heritage status. Despite all this, ICOMOS eventually advised against listing the main shrine; only Okinoshima Island was deemed to possess the outstanding universal value necessary for becoming a World Heritage Site, because of the many archaeological findings made there – including artefacts from different parts of Asia – more than its purported sacred character. Following this partially negative advice, the Japanese government started lobbying World Heritage Committee members, providing them with additional information intended to convince them to overrule ICOMOS and list all proposed sites (DeWitt, personal communication). These lobbying activities turned out to be successful, and at the forty-first session of the Committee, in Krakow in July 2017, it was decided that all proposed sites be listed, contrary to what ICOMOS had recommended.

Why was this shrine so eager to gain World Heritage status? Why did Munakata get so much support from powerful state actors? Does such support not violate the constitutional separation of religion and state? Attracting tourists may well have been a concern on the part of local authorities, but there is more at stake here. My hypothesis is that heritagisation served as a strategy for Munakata Taisha to raise its standing within the shrine world, but also to acquire institutional support from outside. In other words, it is precisely *because of* the ‘heritage’ category – which, as I have argued, is used to deprivatise (i.e., secularise) worship sites and practices – that a shrine such as Munakata can reassert its role in the public sphere.<sup>16</sup> Such a strategic redefinition is completely in accordance with contemporary Jinja Honchō ideology, which likewise stipulates the public character of Shinto shrines. According to former Jinja Honchō president Tanaka Tsunekiyo, shrines are foundational to Japanese culture and society; they are the natural (in the literal as well as metaphorical sense) meeting places of the local community (*kyōdōtai* 共同体), which operates as a collective body. In contrast to their Buddhist and Christian colleagues, Shinto priests always perform rituals *for the public good*, Tanaka claims (Tanaka 2011). According to him, considering their intrinsically public function, it is only natural that shrines receive support from the authorities. In this scheme, shrines become public, secular, and sacred community centres (Rots 2017a). Reframing them as ‘heritage’ fits this model perfectly, and may become an institutional strategy for overcoming limitations imposed by post-war secularism – especially in the case of ‘World Heritage,’ which provides international legitimacy for the ‘outstanding universal value’ of Japanese tradition.

### **Comparative notes: sacred heritage and the nation-state in East Asia**

Munakata Taisha is by no means unique. Other World Heritage applications are likewise framed in terms of ‘national tradition,’ and subject to dual processes of secularisation and sacralisation, not only in Japan (cf. Meyer and De Witte 2015). Such sites are not necessarily classified as religious. The Mozu-Furuichi Kofun are promoted as sacred national sites by the Imperial Household Agency as well as by the Osaka prefectural authorities, but they are not a religious institution, legally speaking. Likewise, the Gusuku Sites and Related Properties of the Kingdom

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<sup>16</sup> Thus, in the case of Japan and other politically secular countries in East Asia, ‘public religion’ is a contradiction in terms. ‘Religion’ is configured as an essentially private enterprise, demarcated from the state and ‘public,’ secular societal fields such as politics, the economy, and academia. Of course, the reality is more complicated, and religious actors make various attempts to engage in political decision-making or higher education, but they can only do so by actively downplaying their religious character, asserting their commitment to the public good, and translating their concerns into secular vocabulary (e.g. Lindgren 2016; Rots 2017a). By contrast, throughout the region, public rituals – e.g., those associated with the imperial institution in Japan or the cult of heroic martyrs in Vietnam – are configured as ‘non-religious.’

of Ryukyu in Okinawa (inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2000) include a number of sacred sites – most notably, the grove Sēfa Utaki – which are not managed by any religious institution, but which continue to function as places of worship for Okinawan ritual practitioners (Rots 2019b). Here, heritagisation has arguably served to incorporate Ryukyu Kingdom-period (1429-1879) traditions into the framework of the Japanese nation-state, turning sites that used to be subject to various taboos into public, ‘secular sacred’ tourist destinations. Yet processes of secular sacralisation are not only limited to places of worship; the ‘heritage’ label can also be employed to sacralise sites not at all associated with religion. As Chidester and Linenthal (1995) have demonstrated, sacred sites in the US include places closely linked to the nation such as Mount Rushmore or Independence Hall, and places of grief and suffering such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Ground Zero. Similarly, ‘secular sacred’ heritage sites in East Asia include the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese nominations for World Heritage status in 2019 discussed above, all of which are linked to the nation, and none of which are classified as ‘religious.’ They also include sites of commemoration and ‘dark heritage,’ such as the Memorial of the Nanjing Massacre in the PRC, the Cù Chi tunnels in Vietnam, and the World Heritage listed Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Japan.

Processes of sacralisation can even be observed at the Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2015, which are hardly religious but which have arguably taken on sacred connotations in recent years. They are a clear example of the selective nature of heritage-making, as pointed out by David Lowenthal and others (Lowenthal 1998; Underwood 2015). The sites are framed in terms of Japan’s great modern achievements, while the history of forced labour is completely absent from the narrative, as I observed in 2017 when joining a tour of the former mining island of Hashima (or Gunkanjima, “ Battleship Island”) off the coast of Nagasaki. This site, incidentally, provides an interesting example of the way in which heritagisation can go hand in hand with sacralisation: in 2014, just before the World Heritage inscription, Shinto priests performed a ritual at the local shrine, re-inaugurating it as a place of worship.<sup>17</sup> Thus, they reaffirmed the site’s sacred character and protective function, several decades after the last ritual had been performed. Soon thereafter, the official (and highly selective) narrative of Hashima as an embodiment of Japan’s impressive industrial achievements during the Meiji Period (1868-1912), and its equally impressive economic resurrection in the post-1945 period, was enshrined on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Within a few years, the island became a popular tourist destination, visited by hundreds of people every day, who join the obligatory guided tours in which they are told the story of Japan’s modern success. The suffering and death of thousands of Korean and Chinese labourers is left unmentioned, demonstrating that the island has been turned into a monument to the modern nation-state and its industrial glory, not a ‘dark heritage’ site at which violence is commemorated.

The association of sacred World Heritage with the nation-state is not limited to Japan, but can be observed in other countries as well, especially in East Asia. A striking example is the World Heritage listed Jongmyo Shrine in Seoul, a large Confucian place of worship where the kings and queens of the Joseon dynasty are enshrined. As with other Korean sacred sites (e.g., prominent Buddhist temples), the World Heritage logo is displayed prominently at the entrance and in publication materials, employed to provide the site with additional legitimacy. At documentaries shown at the site, as well as signposts, the sacred, ritual character of the site is strongly emphasised. The terms ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ are not used, however. The ongoing significance of the place

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<sup>17</sup> See <https://blog.goo.ne.jp/o-project/e/372f0d8209f0874a28fd2be63044a6d9> (last accessed: 24 June 2018).

as a national worship site – and not merely a site of historical interest – is illustrated by the fact that Confucian ancestral ceremonies are still performed annually. Visitors to the site are informed that this is the only place in East Asia where “original” Confucian ceremonies have been conducted uninterruptedly. Thus, at Jongmyo Shrine, the same argument is made as in the case of the Seowon academies mentioned above: Confucianism may have originated in China, but it was perfected in Korea, and only in Korea has it been preserved as a living ritual tradition until today. Indeed, Confucianism here functions as national, public, and sacred heritage – complementary and superior to the various institutionalised religions that Koreans privately adhere to (including Protestantism, Catholicism, Pentecostalism, Buddhism, and numerous new religions).

Jongmyo Shrine is not only inscribed on the World Heritage List; the ritual ceremonies conducted here are also listed by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Established in 2008, the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is a relatively recent addition to the World Heritage apparatus, which has quickly gained global popularity in recent years – starting with East Asia, where the category is used for promoting festivals, ceremonies, and other ritual traditions, and turning them into public property.<sup>18</sup> ICH status apparently adds to the appeal of the Jongmyo rituals, providing them with an air of authenticity, as well as international acknowledgement. Again, we see that heritage listing serves to support the *public sacred* character of a ritual site and practice that is strongly associated with the nation – while being clearly differentiated from ‘religious’ practices, which have a more private and optional character.

In Vietnam, too, World Heritage has recently been discovered as a strategy for sacralising the nation and for gaining international recognition. Vietnam’s earliest World Heritage listings were the result of initiatives by foreign (European and Japanese) heritage experts and include a number of impressive natural sites, an important Champa (pre-Vietnamese) worship centre, and the historic port town of Hội An. However, in the last ten years or so, the state has become much more actively involved with the selection and nomination of potential World Heritage Sites. Consequently, all sites listed since 2010 are located in the north of the country, and all are closely related to the historical narrative prescribed by the state: The Central Sector of the Imperial Citadel of Thăng Long in Hanoi (2010), the Citadel of the Hồ Dynasty (2011), and the Tràng An Landscape Complex (2014). These sites are all associated with Việt ethnic history, and thus with the official historical narrative endorsed by the national government. Significantly, they all include monuments or temples associated with (national) ancestral deities. As with the Mozu-Furuichi Kofungun or Jongmyo Shrine, these sites are not classified as religious. Vietnam has a number of recognised religions, including Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, but worship sites associated with local ancestral spirits and deified national heroes do not count as ‘religion’ (*tôn giáo*). Yet they clearly have a sacred character, not only because they are the location of communal rituals and festivals, but also because they embody notions of the nation as a divinely ordained and protected entity.

The involvement of the state with heritage production, and the use of heritage as a strategy for secularising and deprivatising ritual practices, is even more visible in the case of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Since the early 2000s, the Vietnamese authorities have been actively involved

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<sup>18</sup> On the establishment of the ICH List, and Japan’s role in the process, see Aikawa (2004); Akagawa (2014). For examples of the effects of ICH inscription on particular ritual traditions, see Foster (2011); Kikuchi (2013); Salemink (2016, forthcoming). More can be said about the successful universalisation of the category ‘intangible heritage,’ and its consequences for state-religion relations in different contexts, but it is beyond the scope of the present article to do so. This will be the subject of future publications.



with the heritagisation of various ritual and artistic traditions. They have sought the UNESCO ICH label not only in order to attract international funding and tourism, but also to establish or increase state control over ritual practices, turning them into government-sanctioned and sanctified spectacles (Salemink 2016). This is clearly visible in the case of the annual festival of the Hùng kings in Phú Thọ, inscribed in 2012 – a ritual celebration of the mythical and elusive prehistoric Hùng kings, who play a central role in modern nationalist historiography. The sacred, national character of this festival is asserted in the official description of the festival on the UNESCO website, which states that “the tradition embodies spiritual solidarity and provides an occasion to acknowledge national origins and sources of Vietnamese cultural and moral identity.”<sup>19</sup>

Following the success of this inscription, the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism decided to nominate an even more diverse and popular worship tradition: Mother Goddess spirit medium practices, unified (or reified) under the label Đạo Mẫu (literally, ‘the Way of the Mother’). Until the 1990s, this tradition was classified as ‘superstition’ (*mê tín*) by the Vietnamese government, and spirit medium rituals (*lên đồng*) were banned. Since then, however, the state has invested in the promotion of a variety of rituals and festivals as ‘national culture,’ local Mother Goddess traditions have been associated with mythical national heroes and heroines, and spirit medium worship has been reclassified as Vietnamese heritage (Endres 2011). Eventually, in 2016, Đạo Mẫu was listed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, leading to some significant transformations in worship practices, including the development of standardised ‘trance’ performances, enacted by professional theatre groups (Hüwelmeier 2018). The tradition has been discursively dissociated from ‘religion’ (Salemink forthcoming), and turned into a ‘public sacred’ tradition, strongly associated with the nation. This has provided the state with an opportunity to sanction and control certain ritual expressions, while condemning those that are considered ‘superstitious’ as they involve potentially subversive practices (e.g., communion with spirits) not deemed appropriate for the intangible heritage of a modern, secular state. In other words, heritagisation may serve to provide purportedly secular authorities with a strategy for controlling and pacifying popular devotional practices, turning them into state-sanctioned standardised performances.

### **Concluding remarks**

Since the late twentieth century, ‘heritage’ has become a core epistemic category in societies around the world. The categories World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage have come to represent social, symbolic, and often financial capital, and have taken on profound political significance, not least in Asia. This has had far-reaching implications for international diplomacy, tourism industries, conservation practices, national ideologies, historical narratives, and local livelihoods, as well as for state-religion relations and ritual practices. Today, ‘heritage’ constitutes a field where secular (national authorities, international advisory bodies, and NGOs) and religious actors (worshippers, priests, and spiritual entrepreneurs) can meet and re-negotiate the meanings – and, importantly, funding – of worship sites such as temples or churches. Therefore, studying the formation and negotiation of ‘heritage’ is crucial for understanding religious transformations in the contemporary world.

The global proliferation of the World Heritage brand, which is especially pronounced in East Asia, forces us scholars of religion to rethink some of our core categories. Heritage-making may lead to changes in religious practices, not only because worship sites are turned into tourist

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<sup>19</sup> On <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/worship-of-hung-kings-in-phu-tho-00735> (accessed 23 June 2019).

commodities, but also because it provides new opportunities for secular authorities to assert authority over religious places, and for religious institutional actors to reclaim a place in the public sphere. In other words, heritage challenges contemporary category formations, including the religion-secular dichotomy – not by making the dichotomy irrelevant (quite the opposite, as I have demonstrated), but by creating space for religious and political actors to renegotiate the boundaries between them. Therefore, I argue, it is important that scholars of religion study the consequences of World Heritage listings on religious institutions as well as ritual practices, on a local as well as national and transnational level. Some noteworthy research initiatives have been undertaken in recent years in this respect, but more work remains to be done, in terms of empirical studies as well as theoretical reflection.

In this paper, I have made some suggestions for rethinking secularisation and sacralisation in the ‘Age of World Heritage.’ I have drawn primarily on José Casanova’s classic distinction between secularisation as, first, a decline of religious beliefs and practices; second, the privatisation of religion; and third, the differentiation of religion from other societal spheres, such as politics and the economy. As for the first meaning, it is hard to substantiate a “decline of religious beliefs and practices” in an East Asian context, where many ritual practices (e.g., those connected to the nation and to ancestral spirits) are classified as non-religious, and where the category boundaries of the adjective ‘religious’ are notoriously problematic. In any case, heritagisation does not necessarily lead to such a decline, even though it may lead to transformations in ritual practices.

The second and third meanings are arguably more relevant. In Casanova’s model, the second meaning of secularisation is the *privatisation* of religion. As a result of this privatisation, in secular societies, religion has not disappeared, but the space allocated to it is limited, and it has been largely confined to the private sphere. In such societies, the boundaries between ‘private religion’ and a ‘public secular sphere’ are clearly demarcated – or, at least, attempts are made to actively protect those boundaries. Japan is one such society where ‘religion’ is generally considered as a private affair, and where religions’ ‘trespassing’ in the public sphere – as in the case of Sōka Gakkai’s involvement with politics, for instance – is met with widespread suspicion. Likewise, the nominally socialist regimes of China and Vietnam have clear secularist principles, allowing religious activities within certain limits, but restricting their public roles. As a consequence, religious institutions who wish to reclaim their position in public space actively seek to redefine themselves in alternative, non-religious terms. This is the case for Jinja Honchō, for instance, which has never felt at ease with Shinto shrines’ post-war status as private religious institutions. Heritage, I have argued, provides a means for such institutional secularisation, allowing for sites of worship to become ‘public sacred’ sites, discursively removed from the realm of ‘religion.’

The third meaning of secularisation, in Casanova’s model, is the *differentiation* of religion from other societal realms, such as political decision-making and the market economy. Such differentiation can never be complete – after all, religion is an intrinsically political and economic affair (McLaughlin et al. forthcoming) – but the notion that religion is, and ought to be, ontologically different from politics and economics is widespread, not least in contemporary academic and public discourse. As I have argued in this article, ‘heritage’ is a relatively new, recently differentiated societal category, which has quickly acquired political significance, especially but not solely in East Asia. Heritagisation, therefore, can serve as a strategy to re-signify worship sites and institutions, differentiating them from the societal realm of ‘religion.’ This may be a tactic on the part of religious institutions (e.g. Munakata Taisha) to attract paying visitors and strengthen ties with secular sponsors. However, it can also be employed as a strategy for the state



to assert authority over worship sites or ritual traditions (e.g. Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam). By deprivatising them and turning them into official ‘heritage,’ such practices are more easily controlled and appropriated for national purposes. As a consequence, however, local ritual practitioners (e.g. spirit mediums) may be stripped from their authority and agency in ritual affairs. Thus, heritagisation is not necessarily empowering for all; in many cases, it leads to the exclusion of (some) local stakeholders. The sacralisation of a site as a centre of national, public importance may go hand in hand with the exclusion of those worship practices that do not correspond to the dominant narrative.

In sum, as I have demonstrated in this paper, heritagisation often goes together with dual processes of secularisation and sacralisation. It forces us to rethink religious authority, religion-state relations, notions of ritual ‘authenticity’ and transformation, and the relationships between religion and mass tourism. ‘Heritage’ is central to contemporary configurations of ‘religion’ and ‘the secular,’ and of ‘public’ and ‘private.’ Therefore, more comparative work on the ‘secular sacred’ character of heritage is needed, looking at heritage-making processes on different scales: local, national, and transnational.

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