

INDUSTRIAL GHOSTS

Interview with Shigeaki Ishikawa, Director of the Yubari Coal Mine Museum

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Translated by Xinrong “Cindy” Ye from the original Japanese

CCF: Is there an estimate of how much money would be required to digitize/scan all the material? Additionally, beyond digitization, what would you think is the most urgent next step for the museum? If sufficient resources were available, how would you like to expand the museum’s role in documenting or revitalizing Yubari’s industrial heritage? Essentially, what would the ideal vision for the museum be and what it could bring to Yubari.

SI: The vast amount of paper materials (books, photographs, drawings, etc.) to be digitized are stored in repositories and archives in the same state as when our NPO took them over. In order to promote the utilization of these materials, it is essential to first make a list of the materials, but this task is outside the scope of designated management, and the volume is too large to be carried out independently.

From a medium- to long-term perspective, we believe that maintaining and continuing the museum is extremely important for passing down to future generations the image of Yubari, which prospered through coal, mining, and related industries in the history of our nation’s modernization. On the other hand, since our NPO has undertaken the designated management of the facility under a five-year contract, we have not considered long-term expansion of the museum’s functions or planning based on sufficient resources (funding).

CCF: How do you feel about preservation vs. adapting industrial structures? Would you rather see structures be maintained as they were to show how they were originally used or adapted towards other uses in order to be able to preserve the building but perhaps not the complete memory of it? Alternatively, is there an inherent beauty in the ruin of the structure in itself and do you think that could be useful? An example being the Kitazawa Flootation Plant in Sado Island.

SI: Unlike small cultural properties, the preservation of industrial structures involves risks that threaten people’s safety, such as collapse due to aging. In particular, for most coal mining facilities that have been closed for more than half a century, even maintaining their current condition is extremely difficult, and in many cases, restoring them to their original operational state is considered highly challenging.

That said, we believe that especially valuable facilities (such as cultural properties) must be subject to appropriate preservation measures. However, for structures where conservation measures are difficult, so-called “watchful preservation”

(minimal intervention conservation) can be one possible approach. In addition, when multiple structures of the same type exist, it may be necessary to make selective choices, such as preserving a representative example.

When renovation of structures is possible, we believe that assigning them new roles and promoting initiatives for regional sustainability (including economic activities, if feasible) is an effective approach. However, in coal-producing areas facing population decline, there are concerns that even the operation and management of renovated facilities may become difficult in the short term. In particular, in Hokkaido, heavy snow and cold weather pose a major obstacle to year-round use.

Depending on the type of industrial structure and the degree of deterioration, the following kinds of selective approaches will need to be taken (and in fact are already being taken):

- 1. Preserve the facility and repurpose it for new uses (e.g., commercial use) → Example: Ebetsu City's brick factory converted into the commercial facility "EBRI"*
- 2. Preserve or restore the facility and utilize it in its original function or appearance → Example: The simulated mining tunnel at the Yubari Coal Museum*
- 3. Temporary use (such as for artistic activities or special openings that require entry permission) → Example: The Shimizusawa Thermal Power Plant in Yubari City*
- 4. Watchful preservation (no maintenance or management possible) → Example: The hopper at the Ponbetsu Coal Mine in Mikasa City, which is valued for its presence (scenic, design, and scale).*

CCF: Are you familiar with the Inujima Seirenscho Museum or the Setouchi Triennale? As a case study in my project I am trying to see how art and architectural intervention has managed to bring new life to the original structure through new use rather than as a museum of industry. I am, for instance, drawing a comparison to the Sado Island Gold Mine model of bringing tourism to the area.

SI: *I am familiar with both the Inujima case and the Setouchi Triennale. I understand them both as good examples of utilizing existing facilities and working with companies that support artistic activities genres closely attuned to those structures and facilities.*

In the Sorachi region, including Yubari, various artistic activities are being carried out at coal mining heritage sites, although they are not well known nationwide. As with other areas across the country, this initiative makes use of the affinity between coal mining facilities and art.

The Sado Gold Mine, as a consolidated subsidiary of Mitsubishi Materials, manages the mining facilities and operates tourism-related businesses. Meanwhile, the Osarizawa Mine in Akita Prefecture, also operated by the company, will shift to a business model limited to group reservations starting in the spring of 2026 due to staff shortages and aging personnel.

It is clear that there is a significant difference in the level of effort devoted to utilization between the Osarizawa Mine, which has been open to the public for decades, and the Sado Gold Mine, which gained novelty after being registered as a World Heritage Site in 2024. Just as visitor numbers at the World Heritage Site of Iwami Ginzan dropped by half within a few years, attention should also be paid to how long the popularity of the Sado Gold Mine can be sustained, as well as to the extent of the company's efforts—together with the local community of Sado City—in maintaining the facility through its ability to attract visitors, disseminate information, and provide financial resources.

In terms of sustaining popularity and building relationships with people who have no direct connection to mining heritage (through outreach efforts), I believe that interaction with different industries—beyond just artistic activities—is important.

CCF: In relation to the previous question, if an artist or architect proposed a project within Yubari's industrial landscape, what conditions or principles would you insist on preserving? If what they proposed kept the original structure but greatly changed the look of it and kept little of the original history would it still be acceptable if it could bring something new to the city?

SI: *This year in Yubari City, an organization that runs cosplay events recruited participants and, with permission, held a one-day event in which photos and videos were taken at several facilities in the city. About 200 people took part, providing an opportunity for individuals who normally would not visit Yubari or its coal mining heritage sites to come.*

When accepting such activities at our museum, we conveyed the following points of caution:

- 1. Do not engage in actions that would diminish the dignity of the museum or cultural properties.*
- 2. Do not provide explanations or comments in works that disparage Yubari.*
- 3. Do not interfere with ordinary visitors.*

Although we received a few opinions saying that the event was “not suitable for Yūbari,” I felt that participants taking photos in cosplay within the extraordinary setting of the underground mining tunnels could represent a new form of value and possibility.

In this way, even people who have no particular interest in coal mines or industrial heritage can become fans of the region through combinations with other interests.

While from the perspective of strict preservation and transmission of coal mining heritage this may feel somewhat incongruous, I believe it is nevertheless an important initiative for the future.

CCF: Is there organization between the different cities and museums (for instance perhaps the Mikasa City Museum) of the Ishikari region and could greater regional organization and promotion of the area's heritage aid in outside interest rather than individual groups and cities acting independently?

SI: I think the distinctive feature of the Japan Heritage "Coal, Iron, Ports" initiative is that, unlike the typical government-led approach often seen in our country's tourism and community development, it has become natural for public and private sectors to collaborate and work together.

Six years have passed since "Coal, Iron, Ports" was designated as a Japan Heritage site in 2019, and I feel that regional cooperation has advanced. This is not only in terms of collaboration among museums, but more significantly in the sense of cooperation across both the public and private sectors as a whole.

The target area of "Coal, Iron, Ports" covers roughly 100 square kilometers. About ten years ago, events were promoted and held individually, but through the overarching story of "Coal, Iron, Ports," a sense of unity has gradually been fostered. Among the most significant effects is that it has become easier for people to reach out to one another.

Building on that effect, we held the "Coal, Iron, Ports 3-Days" for the first time this year. During the three-day holiday in October, facilities that are normally closed to the public were opened and special guided tours were offered, encouraging circulation across the wider region and attracting many participants to explore it.

Unlike World Heritage sites, which are intended for strict preservation, Japan Heritage places greater emphasis on practical utilization. For that reason, I feel it is an effective initiative for connecting the scattered coal-related industries and their remains to the future.

CCF: Are you from Yubari? If so, do you have any memories or anecdotes about how the city and region has changed over your lifetime? Or, do you have any that you've heard from other people from the city?

SI: I am from Tokyo.

Carrying out work across a wide range of fields in various regions means gaining an understanding of the lives and needs of local residents, as well as the technologies and economic conditions that can be applied there. Therefore, my interest was not limited to coal mining areas alone; rather, I have been viewing regions from a multifaceted, overarching perspective.

I became directly involved with Yubari eight years ago. At present, there are people at the museum who worked in the coal mines until their closure, and although their knowledge is limited to what they know, I am expanding my understanding by listening to their accounts of the conditions during the period when the mines were in operation.

CCF: Do you think that Yubari's decline was inevitable the moment it grew around a single industry and didn't diversify or can there also be urban planning choices that were made that accelerated it?

SI: As for the changes in the Yubari region, I believe they were not the result of autonomous local transformation, but rather changes unique to a region that was inevitably dependent on national policy and global energy circumstances—namely, the decline of the coal industry and the resulting population decrease.

CCF: Is there anything that personally drew you to the museum from working in a different field?

SI: I became interested in the unique history and geography of Hokkaido within Japan and decided to move there. Because my parents were frequently transferred for work, I lived in four different places from childhood until graduating from university, and I enjoyed observing the characteristics, changes, and folk traditions of each region. Although I was interested in geography and history up through high school, I went on to pursue the field of transportation engineering.

After graduating from university, I worked for five years in ski resort development, and then joined a construction consulting company where I was involved in regional planning, transportation planning (roads, railways, ports), and projects for the preservation of historic structures. In the course of this work, members who were committed to sustaining various memories of coal mines and mining regions came together to form an NPO, and I became deeply engaged in its activities.

Three years ago, the former NPO director and museum director suddenly passed away, and I was asked to take on the role of director because of my expertise in Hokkaido's history, geography, and industrial heritage. As mentioned earlier, the museum's designated management does not include curatorial duties, nor does it require curator qualifications, so I accepted the position of director.

CCF: From my experience when I visited, the grand majority of people in the museum seemed to be visiting from Japan. Does the museum get much foreign visitors?

SI: Because the region is inconvenient to access, visitors from overseas are extremely few—probably around 0.5% (about 150 people) per season. Still, compared to a few years ago when it was only about 0.1%, I feel the number has been increasing.

Since there are coal mines near Taipei and Keelung in Taiwan, it seems that more people there are becoming interested.

CCF: Are most of the Japanese visitors from Hokkaido or is there interest from other areas too?

SI: As a characteristic of residents in coal mining regions, many people have little interest in (or even dislike) coal mines. Although we hold a free admission day for citizens once a month, attendance remains at only about 20 visitors each time.

I estimate that around 50–60% of visitors come from within Hokkaido, while about 40% come from outside the prefecture. Despite being such an inconvenient location, people from all over the country visit out of interest, and in that sense I believe this is an important place for Japan.

CCF: Additionally, have you or the staff noticed any differences between how visitors from different areas engaged with the museum and its content?

SI: I feel that people with ties to Yubari (such as ancestors or relatives there) are often interested in learning about the city's changes and its past. Those without such connections tend to be drawn to the coal mining facilities and remains that cannot be found in other regions, or they visit with the specific purpose of experiencing the mock mine tunnel that reopened this year. Although our museum is located in an inconvenient place, domestic travelers generally perceive it as a spot that can be easily reached while touring Hokkaido by car or rental car—since it is just over an hour's drive from New Chitose Airport.