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Yasukuni: Behind the Torii: From government-run shrine for war heroes to bone of contention

Yomiuri Shimbun

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By The Yomiuri Shimbun

[Introduction

Few institutions in Japan are as contested, controversial, and complex as Yasukuni Shrine. According to a recent editorial (June 6, 2005) in the Asahi Shimbun and published in Japan Focus, "Yasukuni Shrine... in the past served the purpose of providing a site to publicly manifest both grief and admiration for those who perished in conflict. In this sense, it functioned to enhance the will to fight and mobilize the populace for war."

As the 60th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War draws closer, on June 11 to 15, 2005, the Yomiuri Shimbun published a four-part series that served both to educate its 10.3 million daily readers about the Shinto shrine and subtly advance an editorial policy consistent with the paper's conservative vision.

The series, which spans the history of the shrine from its origins in the Meiji era and its close association with war and emperor, through its near abolition during the occupation to the present, is introduced as simply a look "at the history and current situation surrounding the shrine as well as issues relating to Koizumi's visits." It references (but provides little analysis of) key controversies surrounding the shrine.

The first of the articles concerns the history of enshrined spirits of both common soldiers and of Class-A war criminals (installed within the shrine in 1978). The second and third articles examine whether it is possible to relocate these problematic spirits to a new, secular war memorial. The fourth piece focuses on official and private visits to the shrine by a succession of Japanese prime ministers, with a focus on Koizumi's visits during a time of great regional political tension. Finally, there is a rare discussion about the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery, completed in 1959 to hold the unidentified or unclaimed ashes of Japanese soldiers killed in the war, as a possible (though still problematic) site for a more secular and inclusive memorial. The series presents the religious, doctrinal and constitutional case for maintaining the shrine as the repository for the souls of the dead against the proposal to establish a site that would separately enshrine the Class-A war criminals and, according to its proponents, reduce international conflicts over Prime Ministerial visits.

At present, the shrine, as the repository of the souls of the 2.46 million war dead, plays an important symbolic role in fueling a resurgent nationalism in Japan that galls Chinese, Korean, and some domestic sensibilities, notably each time that the Prime Minister pays tribute to the shrine's war dead.

Taken together, the Yomiuri series provides readers of Japan Focus access to an influential perspective on the nature and substance of one of the most divisive topics in contemporary

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Japan and East Asia.

Other recent discussions of Yasukuni shrine, the monarchy, and the conflicts surrounding Prime Ministerial visits include Herbert Bix, Emperor, Shinto, Democracy: Japan's Unresolved Questions of Hitorical Consciousness; Yomiuri and Asahi, Yasukuni Shrine, Natinalism and Japan's International Relations; and John Breen, Yasukuni Shrine: ritual and memory.
John Nelson]

Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's visits to Yasukuni Shrine have caused controversy inside and outside the nation. China and South Korea have strongly opposed Koizumi's visits to the shrine, where Class-A war criminals along with the war dead are enshrined. At home, a number of religious groups have also expressed opposition to the visits. This mounting criticism has renewed calls for the separate enshrinement of these Class-A war criminals and the construction of a secular, state-run memorial for the war dead. This series looks at the history and current situation surrounding the shrine as well as issues relating to Koizumi's visits. The first installment focuses on the role the shrine played before and after World War II.

Part 1.

The origin of Yasukuni Shrine dates back to the Meiji Restoration. In June 1869, a month after the end of the Boshin Civil War--a series of battles that led to the overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate and the restoration of Imperial rule--Emperor Meiji built Tokyo Shokonsha to honor pro-government troops who fell in battle. Located in what is now Kudan-kita, Chiyoda Ward, it was renamed Yasukuni Shrine 10 years later. The Emperor took the name Yasukuni from a phrase in "Chunqiu Zuoshi Zhuan" (Shunju Sashiden) a Chinese classic, meaning "bringing peace to a nation."

Prior to World War II, shrines were usually managed by the Interior Ministry. But Yasukuni Shrine was categorized as a special government shrine and operated by the army and the navy ministries.

The deities enshrined at the shrine are not mythical or historical figures, but the war dead who gave their lives for the nation. Yasukuni is different from a tomb in that it contains neither the remains of the dead nor memorial tablets for them.

The collective enshrinement of the war dead was informally approved by the army and navy, and then given formal approval by the emperor. Not only military personnel and civilians serving with the military are enshrined at Yasukuni, but also bureaucrats, civilians and cadets.

At the end of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), the Japan-China War (1937-45) and World War II (1939-45), a ceremony was held to enshrine the war dead, and bereaved families were invited to the ceremony. The shrine thus became a place to honor the memory of the war dead.

Kamikaze pilots reportedly placed a Yasukuni amulet under their headbands and pledged to meet again at Yasukuni Shrine. One sent a

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letter to his young daughter saying, "Come to Kudan whenever you want to see me after you're grown up."

Following Japan's defeat in World War II, GHQ issued the Shinto Directive in 1945, abolishing state sponsorship of Shintoism. Some GHQ officials suggested that Yasukuni Shrine be burned to the ground. However, this did not happen, and in 1946 it was designated an ordinary religious corporation under a state ordinance.

In 1952, the year sovereignty was restored to the nation, a campaign for the collective enshrinement of the war dead was spearheaded by bereaved families. There were about 2 million war dead who had yet to be enshrined at the time.

In 1956, the Health and Welfare Ministry's bureau for aiding repatriation issued a notice on collective enshrinement at the shrine to all prefectures. The notice said that those who were acknowledged as having died in the line of duty would be enshrined at Yasukuni. A list of names of these war dead was compiled and sent by the ministry to the shrine and was subsequently enshrined. The acknowledgement was made under the law on pension and the law on assistance to bereaved families of those who were injured or killed in the war.

At the same time, demands increased that the shrine be placed under state management. In 1969, the Liberal Democratic Party submitted a bill to the Diet to place the shrine under state control. But the bill was withdrawn amid fierce confrontation between conservative and progressive forces in the Diet.

Similar bills were submitted to the Diet five times through 1973. But all of them failed.

In 1975, Prime Minister Miki Takeo visited the shrine, saying he was doing so in a private capacity. Groups such as the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association then lobbied to have prime ministers pay official visits to the shrine. Since then, a private group with ties to the shrine--Eirei-ni Kotaeru-kai (Association to Acknowledge the Divine Spirits of the Dead) as well as a number of bereaved families have pushed for official prime ministerial visits to the shrine on Aug. 15, the anniversary of the end of World War II.

June 11, 2005.

Part 2.

Japan's Class-A war criminals were the political, diplomatic and military leaders found guilty by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, also known as the Tokyo Tribunal, of crimes against peace and other wartime atrocities in the planning and execution of wars of aggression. Twenty-eight Japanese wartime leaders were indicted as Class-A war criminals, including Prime Minister Tojo Hideki.

Seven of these war criminals received the death sentence, 16 were sentenced to life imprisonment and two were imprisoned. But before the rulings were handed down in November 1948, two of the defendants had died and one was acquitted due to reasons of insanity.

One of the seven war criminals executed on Dec. 23, 1948, was Tojo. He was the general in charge of the Kwantung Army in Manchuria at the time of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937. This clash between Japanese and Chinese troops, which took place southeast of Beijing, was the fuse that ignited the Sino-Japanese War, which lasted until 1945. When Tojo was army minister under the administration of Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro, he pushed for a tripartite pact with Germany and Italy and supported the war against Britain and the United States. As prime minister, Tojo led the nation into the Pacific War in 1941.

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Other Class-A war criminals included Itagaki Seishiro, who was a general in the Kwantung Army at the time of the 1931 Manchurian Incident, and Doihara Kenji, who was in military intelligence in Manchuria at the time of the same event.
In addition to the 28 Class-A criminals, 5,700 people were convicted as Class-B and -C war criminals at courts inside and outside Japan for abusing prisoners of war and murdering civilians. Of the accused, 920 were sentenced to death and executed.

Move to forgive and forget

When the San Francisco Peace Treaty came into effect in 1952 and the Allied Occupation ended in Japan, there was a nationwide movement for the release of war criminals, and more than 40 million people signed a petition for their release.

In 1953, the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors adopted a resolution calling for a pardon for the nation's war criminals. In the same year, a law to assist bereaved families of those wounded or killed during the war was revised so that bereaved families of war criminals would be eligible for pensions and compensation.

In 1954, the Public Officials Pensions Law was revised to widen and improve measures to assist war criminals. The government designated the executions of war criminals as deaths incurred in the line of duty and did not establish provisions that would disqualify Class-A war criminals from seeking public office.

Clause 11 of the San Francisco Peace Treaty states that Japan should accept verdicts handed down by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East and other war crimes courts in and outside Japan and carry out the sentences imposed by the courts. The clause urged Japan to implement the sentences passed down on war criminals, even after Japan regained independence.

Under this clause, any decision based on Japan's recommendation to pardon or parole Class-A criminals and commute their sentences required a decision by the majority of countries that sent representatives to the Tokyo Tribunal.

Following the implementation of the treaty in 1952, the government asked the countries that had been involved in the tribunals to pardon or commute the sentences of all Class-A, -B and -C criminals.

In the end, Class-A war criminals, and Class-B and -C war criminals, including suspects, were released by 1956 and 1958, respectively.

Earthly and spiritual rewards

Of the Class-A war criminals, Shigemitsu Mamoru became deputy prime minister and foreign minister under the administration of Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichiro, and Kaya Okinori became justice minister under the administration of Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato. Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke was himself a Class-A war crimes suspect.

In 1959, Yasukuni Shrine began to enshrine Class-B and -C criminals, together with the war dead, as martyrs on the basis of a list of names compiled by the Health and Welfare Ministry, which was sent to the shrine in 1966. An association of representatives of worshippers, which had influential ties with the shrine, decided in 1970 to enshrine Class-A war criminals along with the war dead, but the timing of the enshrinement was left up to the chief priest. Matsudaira Nagayoshi, who was inaugurated as chief priest in 1978, confirmed the enshrinement at a meeting of the association and enshrined 14 Class-A war criminals who had been hanged or died in prison.

According to the diary of Tokugawa Yoshihiro,

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the grand chamberlain for Emperor Showa, Aoki Kazuo, who was minister for the Greater East Asia Coprosperity Sphere during the war, asserted at the 1978 meeting that if Class-A war criminals were not enshrined at the shrine, it would be tantamount to agreeing with the judicial rulings handed down by the Tokyo Tribunal.
Yomiuri Shimbun, June 12, 2005.

Part 3.

The government and ruling parties have often discussed shifting 14 Class-A war criminals enshrined with other war dead at Yasukuni Shrine to another facility due to criticism from China and other nations relating to prime ministers' visits to the shrine.
When diplomatic relations were normalized between Japan and China in 1972, the Chinese government did not ask Japan for war reparations because, according to a People's Daily editorial, Chinese people strictly distinguish a small number of militarist elements from other Japanese people, with whom they deeply sympathize over their misfortune in the war.

The Chinese government has said prime ministerial visits to the shrine hurt the feelings of Chinese people.

The fact that Class-A criminals are enshrined along with the nation's other war dead at Yasukuni Shrine came to light in 1979. The Chinese government first began to criticize the move on Aug. 15, 1985, when former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro paid an official visit to the shrine.

Nakasone stopped visiting the shrine in 1986 and searched for a way to enshrine the 14 elsewhere, but his efforts fizzled out due to opposition from the shrine and bereaved families.

In 1999, then Chief Cabinet Secretary Nonaka Hiromu under the administration of Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo said, "We have Class-A war criminals who have been held responsible for World War II, and they should be enshrined separately from Yasukuni Shrine." But discussion on this proposal did not continue.

Yasukuni Shrine said it would be impossible to enshrine Class-A criminals elsewhere due to Shinto doctrine.

Procedures by which war dead are collectively enshrined are as follows:

-- Their names and addresses are written in India ink on traditional Japanese washi paper.

-- A ceremony is held to invoke the spirits of the dead and connect them with their names on the paper so that a list can be made.

-- The list is placed behind the main shrine.

Yasukuni Shrine has two artifacts in which spirits are enshrined.

The spirits of Class-A criminals were enshrined with more than 2.46 million others in one artifact, while the other enshrines the spirits of Imperial Prince Kitashirakawa Yoshihisa and Prince Kitashirakawa Nagahisa and their families.

According to Yasukuni Shrine, some observers say all the shrine needs to do to move the Class-A criminals is to erase their names from the list. But shrine officials do not agree. The shrine says it is as impossible to extract the spirits of the Class-A criminals as it is to return liquid to a cup after pouring it into a tank of water.

In terms of Shinto doctrine, spirits can only be enshrined separately when they already have been enshrined in a separate artifact, which can be at the same shrine, as there is no way to retrieve specific spirits that already have been

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enshrined.

Spirits enshrined at one shrine can be moved to another through a procedure that copies them, in a sense. But this procedure can only copy the entire group rather than specific spirits and therefore, does not provide a solution to the problem, the shrine said.

If bereaved families ask the shrine to separate the spirits of the 14, shrine officials said they would tell them that such an action was impossible under Shinto doctrine.

The government would be in violation of Article 20 of the Constitution, which stipulates the separation of religion and state, if it forces Yasukuni Shrine as a religious corporation to enshrine the Class-A criminals separately.

Support for separate enshrinement still exists within the ruling parties, as proponents say such action could be taken after the plan has been discussed with relevant family members and the shrine.

Nakasone, who supports separate enshrinement, said: "Shinto priests at Yasukuni Shrine oppose separate enshrinement. I think that after the Meiji era (1868-1912), the priests became narrow-sighted. I wish Shinto doctrine would return to a broader world view, as it had before."

Yomiuri Shimbun, June 13, 2005.

Part 4.

Yasukuni Shrine became an ordinary religious corporation in 1946 under a directive issued by GHQ that banned state Shintoism and mandated the separation of politics and religion.

In October 1951, one month after Japan signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Yoshida Shigeru visited the shrine as the first prime minister to do so after the GHQ order. Yoshida went to the shrine during an annual autumn rite, which pays homage to Japan's war dead.

During his premiership, Yoshida visited the shrine during ordinary festivals in spring or autumn. Proxies also made visits for him.
The Chinese and South Korean governments made no objection to Yoshida's actions, and no controversy arose over whether the visits were made in an official or private capacity.

However, disputes broke out over the nature of a visit to the shrine by then Prime Minister Takeo Miki after 1975, when Miki visited the shrine on Aug. 15, the anniversary of the war's end.

Miki said he had visited the shrine as a private citizen as he did not use a government car, he offered cash to the shrine from his own pocket, did not write his title in the visitors book and was not accompanied by government officials.

However, the Japan Socialist Party and other opposition parties were critical of the timing of Miki's visit.

Since then, questions have surrounded prime ministerial visits, focusing on in what capacity they were made due to the separation of politics and religion, turning the visits into a political issue.

Emperor Showa visited the shrine eight times after the war, his last visit occurring on Nov. 21, 1975.

In 1978, Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shintaro of the Fukuda Takeo Cabinet said at a question-and-answer session at the Diet that a prime minister was free to visit shrines and temples as a private citizen.

Even when a prime minister made a private visit, he could use a government vehicle for security reasons, in case of an emergency for

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identification purposes, he also could enter his title in a visitors book and allow cabinet members to accompany him, Abe said.
The government still follows these guidelines for prime ministerial visits.

Prime ministers Ohira Masayoshi, Suzuki Zenko and Nakasone Yasuhiro continued to visit the shrine after it was made public in April 1979 that Class-A war criminals had been enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine.

In 1980, Chief Cabinet Secretary Miyazawa Kiichi of the Suzuki Cabinet said during interpellation at the Diet that the government could not dispel doubts about the possibility of violating the Constitution by official visits as the basic law calls for the separation of politics and religion.

However, Prime Minister Suzuki did not clarify whether his visit was made in an official or private capacity when he went to the shrine in 1982.

In an attempt to settle the matter once and for all, Nakasone made efforts toward gaining acceptance for such visits.

In 1985, Chief Cabinet Secretary Fujinami Takao said at the Diet bowing at Yasukuni Shrine's main area did not run counter to the spirit of the Constitution as such actions constituted paying respect to the war dead.

Based on the government's guidelines, Nakasone decided to visit the shrine on Aug. 15, 1985, saying it was an official visit as prime minister.

He went to the shrine's main hall, but did not perform the Shinto ceremony in which a person must purify himself by offering a sprig of the sacred sasaki tree, bow twice, clap hands twice and bow again.

Nakasone offered a silent prayer in front of bouquets of flowers and instead of donating cash, he used public funds to pay for the flowers he offered.

China strongly protested Nakasone's actions, and Nakasone did not visit the shrine thereafter in consideration of Japan-China relations.

Prime ministers Takeshita Noboru, Uno Sosuke, Kaifu Toshiki, Hosokawa Morihiro, Hata Tsutomu, Murayama Tomiichi, Obuchi Keizo and Mori Yoshiro did not visit the shrine while in office.

In 1996, Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro visited the shrine on his birthday.

In April 1993, Miyazawa told his entourage he had visited the shrine, but his office refused to confirm the information.

Since making a visit on Aug. 13, 2001, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has visited the shrine every year.

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He only bows in front of the altar and uses his own money to buy flowers, but does not perform the ritual.

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The series is presented here in slightly abbreviated form. Posted at Japan Focus July 11, 2005.

John Nelson is a cultural anthropologist and associate professor of East Asian religions at the University of San Francisco. He is the author of several articles on Japanese nationalism and commemoration--including "Social Memory as Ritual Practice: Commemorating Spirits of the Military Dead at Yasukuni Shinto Shrine" in the Journal of Asian Studies (2003). He will release this August a 27-minute documentary film on Yasukuni titled "Spirits of the State," to be distributed by Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

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