



Yasukuni: an American view by David G. Brown

The Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo has been a source of controversy within Japan and between Japan and its Asian neighbors. According to the shrine's website, "The Kami (deities) enshrined in Yasukuni Jinja are noble gods who offered their lives for the sake of Japan with the sincere hope for eternal peace in the same manner as His Imperial Majesty." Its sponsors compare the shrine to Arlington Cemetery and other sites where a nation's war dead are commemorated. However, while Yasukuni was originally established by the Meiji emperor, it is no longer formally a government institution.

Despite the controversies in Japan and Asia, the Yasukuni Shrine has gone almost unnoticed in the United States. The U.S. government has chosen not to become involved in the issue. However, as the shrine does raise issues that should be considered from a U.S. perspective, it is appropriate and timely for Americans to take a fresh look at Yasukuni.

From an American perspective, one issue has been created by the decision in 1978 to enshrine the class-A war criminals convicted at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, most prominently Gen. Tojo, in Yasukuni Shrine. Thus Yasukuni became a place where not only the ordinary soldiers who lost their lives in the service of their country are commemorated but also the military officers who led Japan into World War II. The decision to enshrine the war criminals was a political decision taken in the context of postwar criticism by some in Japan disputing the justness of the War Crimes Tribunal. As the shrine's website puts it, these "martyrs of Showa" were "cruelly and unjustly tried as war criminals by a sham-like tribunal of the allied forces." That the shrine now is explicitly a place to commemorate those responsible for the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor that brought Japan into World War II should create a problem from an American perspective.

Yasukuni Shrine is not just a shrine. It is colocated with the Yushukan, or War Memorial Museum. The first thing one sees inside the entrance of the museum is a World War II "Zero" fighter. One can get a flavor of how the Zero is presented by visiting the Yasukuni Shrine website at www.yasukuni.or.jp and clicking on War Memorial Museum. While the museum in part commemorates the stories of those who died serving their country, it also tells the history of the wars in which their lives were lost. In fact, retelling that history is an important mission of the museum. As the museum website proudly headlines, "The truth of modern Japanese history is now restored."

How that history is viewed is what Japan's Asian neighbors call the "history issue" and is part of what has made the shrine controversial in Japan. The museum's view of that history is reflected in the individuals the museum chooses to highlight in its exhibits and how their stories are portrayed.

Inevitably, those soldiers were killed by foreign forces. Unfortunately, little is said about the circumstances that led to the conflicts in which their lives were lost. For example, one room in the museum is devoted to the period leading up to the September 1931 Manchurian Incident in which Japanese military officers trumped up an incident which was then used as a pretext for Japan's occupation of all of China's northeastern provinces. The individual chosen in this section was Maj. Nakamura who it is reported was taken prisoner and executed by the troops of Zhang Xueliang in June 1931. No objective observer would see this choice as representative of the import of the Manchurian Incident. The choice does however fit neatly with the museum's view that circumstances justified Japan's entry into various wars.

The shrine's website states, "Allow me to say a little about the Greater East Asia War that ended 50 years ago. When the American forces invaded Okinawa they were met by soldiers of Japan, among whom were also intermediate school students." Old Japan hands will recognize this as a version of the old story that World War II began when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, as if nothing had occurred before. Here again the museum's recounting of history does not meet standards of objectivity and contributes to the impression that many in Japan do not acknowledge Japan's responsibility for aggression. As the website sums up, "to maintain the independence and peace of the nation and the prosperity of Asia, Japan was forced into conflict."

Another issue concerns the war museum's website's practice of publishing each month a letter left behind by a soldier commemorated at the museum. These letters were most often letters written by World War II officers to be given to their family should they die in combat. These pre-war letters invariably reflect the ultra-nationalist ideology of the period, with an emphasis on obedience, duty, and sacrifice for the emperor. These letters are presented without any context or effort to explain that the ideology reflected in the letters was part of the environment that led Japan into the series of aggressive actions in China and Southeast Asia culminating in Japan's attack on the U.S.

In short, Yasukuni is not just a memorial to service members who gave their lives for Japan but a venue for propagating a warped and politically motivated view of Japan's modern history. Therefore when Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and many leading figures "pay their respects" at Yasukuni, they are inevitably identifying themselves (at least in the minds of many observers) with this version of history. This in turn raises questions about the sincerity of official apologies for Japan's past aggression. These implications could be avoided if Japan established a site solely devoted to commemorating service members. This possibility has been considered but not adopted.

One recent public opinion poll in Japan indicates that a majority of respondents believe it is not appropriate for Prime Minister Koizumi to pay homage at the shrine on Aug. 15, the day commemorating the end of World War II. The great majority of Japanese may well reject the version of history portrayed in the museum. So to raise questions about Yasukuni is not to criticize Japan as a whole or its people.

For these reasons, the Yasukuni Shrine and its war museum should be a matter of concern for Americans. The distortions of history reflected in the war museum need to be addressed constructively because they misrepresent important events in U.S.-Japan relations. The decision by Japanese government officials to pay their respects at a shrine that misrepresents this history and asserts that Class-A war criminals were treated unjustly should be a matter of concern to the U.S. government.

Rather than ignore Yasukuni, Americans should participate in the debate about it, doing so from a U.S. perspective. The U.S. government should quietly discourage Koizumi and other officials from visiting Yasukuni. The government should also encourage Japan to reconsider establishing a nonpolitical memorial dedicated solely to commemorating those who gave their lives, which would not include war criminals.

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