



Arlington National Cemetery and Yasukuni Jinja: History, Memory, and the Sacred

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By Andrew M. McGreevy

Arlington National Cemetery and Yasukuni Jinja (The Shrine of the Peaceful Land) are symbols of the histories of the United States of America and Japan. Arlington National Cemetery and Yasukuni Jinja have a common purpose—to honor the war dead—but the two are very different. Arlington National Cemetery, which was created in controversy, is today a place of peaceful repose. Yasukuni Jinja had very dignified origins, yet now is embroiled in disputes.

The “Yasukuni Problem” (Japanese remorse for its actions in World War II and the survival of militarism), continuing war-related litigation, and territorial conflicts with China and Korea whose roots also lie in earlier wars all remain issues in 2005. In the U.S., World War II, but not Arlington National Cemetery, was the subject of intense debate in 1995 and 2003 over the “Enola Gay” exhibit at the Smithsonian on the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the end of World War II. However, American debates hardly compare to the ferocity and protracted character of the war-related issues that continue to stalk Japan.

Arlington National Cemetery, in Washington, D.C., grew from the bitter circumstances of the American Civil War, 1861-1865. Some of the early fighting of the war was very close to Washington, D.C., and Arlington, an estate owned by Mary Anna Custis Lee, the wife of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, was near the battle sites. Union Army officials confiscated the estate and used the land as a hastily improvised military graveyard, in effect punishing Lee for his role in the Civil War. After the war, Custis Lee, Robert E. Lee's son, successfully sued the federal government for the loss of the family estate. The federal government established Arlington National Cemetery in 1883.

Yasukuni Jinja, located on Kudan Hill in Tokyo, was created as a Shinto religious shrine in 1869 to honor soldiers who fought in a civil war to bring the Emperor Meiji to power in 1868. The formal title of “Yasukuni Jinja (The Shrine of the Peaceful Land) was bestowed in 1879 to proclaim that Japan was at peace because of the sacrifice of its war dead. Those enshrined are revered as deities, i.e. kami, “noble gods.” Honors were extended beyond military personnel to include civilians who worked for the military and women and children who died in certain war-related circumstances.

Established with elaborate imperial and Shinto ceremonies, Yasukuni Jinja became a major national institution as Japan fought in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), World War I, the Manchurian Incident (1931) and then the second Sino-Japanese War and World War II, known in Japan as the Greater East Asian War (1937-45). Yasukuni Jinja was revered as the site honoring Japan's military who gave their lives in the service of the emperor. The names, rank and places of death of fallen veterans and others to be honored were preserved for veneration. Yasukuni Jinja today is controversial because of its close association with the monarchy, and particularly with the wars fought in the name of the emperor. Above all, the fact that fourteen Class A war criminals, and numerous Class B and C war criminals, have been enshrined as gods at Yasukuni Jinja is a source of anger to Chinese and Koreans. Chinese casualties in the Fifteen Year War (1931-45), are estimated to be ten to twenty million or more, while Korea experienced half a century of harsh Japanese colonial rule.



1. A group of war veterans salute the ragged colors as they pay homage to the souls of the war dead enshrined in Tokyo, Aug. 15, 2002 as Japan observed the 57th anniversary of its surrender in World War II. (AP Photo/Tsugufumi Matsumoto)

Although both Arlington National Cemetery and Yasukuni Jinja are located in their respective national capitals, the two memorials differ in many ways.

Arlington National Cemetery is a 657 acre graveyard of some 260,000 burial plots marked by crosses. Numerous monuments and memorials, the visitors' center and administrative buildings are spaced along driveways.

The smaller grounds of Yasukuni Jinja are on approximately twelve acres, with a long, narrow walkway entrance to the east dominated by two large Torii gates. A military museum, an office building, a theatre, a festival site, a sumo wrestling ring and gardens and tea houses supplement the Divine Gate, Hall of Worship, Main Hall and Worshipper's Hall. The military museum is named The Yushukan, meaning a place to commune with a noble soul. The Main Hall and the Hall of Worship are at the symbolic center of the complex. Yasukuni Jinja also contains the Chinreisha (The Spirit Pacifying Shrine), a hidden structure behind a locked fence, which has a small place to honor all the war dead—Japanese and Allied. But the public ritual activities of the shrine center on the Japanese military dead.

Many cultural events are held at Yasukuni Jinja, especially the Spring Grand Festival in April and the Fall Grand Festival in October, when an Imperial Message (Gosaiman) to honor the spirits of the dead is delivered by a special messenger. Ceremonies include the rituals of bowing and the clapping of hands to summon the spirits—simple acts that pack symbolic weight. Yasukuni Jinja is a memorial to over 2,400,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and a small numbers of civilians, not a military graveyard. The largest number of Japanese military dead were killed in China, and it was impossible to bring most home for final services. However, their spirits are enshrined. The annual number of visitors to Yasukuni Jinja is reported to be 8,000,000.

The uproar over Yasukuni Jinja, peaking annually around August 15, the anniversary of the end of the war, and periodically with each visit by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, and his predecessors, is linked to the feelings of the victims of the Japanese military. The military museum contains pictures and displays of weapons that are especially disturbing to some foreign visitors. The museum contains tributes to kamikaze pilots and photographs of Japanese in World War II uniforms, with weapons and battle flags, parading at Yasukuni Jinja. The names of Japanese convicted and executed as war criminals, including Prime Minister Tojo, are among the honored spirits.



2. Holding the ragged Japanese imperial army colors, an army veteran stands at attention as he pays homage to the dead at Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine Wednesday, Aug. 15, 2001 on the 56th anniversary of Japan's World War II surrender. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

At least two picture books on Yasukuni Jinja are available. These are The 130th Anniversary Book of the Yasukuni Temple and The Museum of Relics of Japanese Soldiers in the Yasukuni Temple. They contain hundreds of pictures of elderly Japanese war veterans singing songs at reunions, people praying for peace, children crying for lost fathers, the Pearl Harbor attack and poems written by kamikaze pilots. One photograph shows a group of kamikazes with a puppy. The pictures move on through the war, the dropping of the atomic bombs, and the burning of Japanese battle flags in surrender.

Post-war photographs include pictures of an Australian priest who returned Japanese army swords, a German priest who helped to preserve Yasukuni Jinja from abolition by the Allies, and ceremonies to mark the passing of Emperor Hirohito. Many foreign delegations make official calls at Yasukuni Jinja, including U.S. military groups.

The environment and design of Arlington National Cemetery convey an impression that is both celebratory and somber. The seemingly endless rows of tombstones are emblematic of heroic sacrifice.

In short, Arlington National Cemetery is dominated by 260,000 visible grave sites, while at Yasukuni Jinja the spirits of the dead are housed and revered without individual grave markers. American grave markers are explicitly physical objects, the Japanese memorial is symbolic.

There are other differences and similarities in the two memorial sites: Arlington National Cemetery is a United States Army facility, while Yasukuni Jinja is a religious organization that is administered by the Japan Association of Bereaved Families. The American military presence at Arlington National Cemetery is clearly celebrated in a very open, public and visual manner. The Japanese situation is more complex. As John Breen has explained, the Defense Agency is first in line to celebrate, followed by the Society for the Bereaved, the Glorious War Dead Society, the National Shrine Association and lastly the Yasukuni Worship and Tribute Society. The military enjoys precedence at a supposedly religious site.

Arlington National Cemetery reflects the diverse nature of the United States—it is obviously a place where concern for gender, multiple religions and numerous races and ethnic groups are manifest by the variety of memorials, including those for Women in Military Service for America, Indigenous People of America/Vietnam Era Veterans, Tomb of the Unknowns, and the U.S. Colored Troops and Freed Slaves Memorial. Going back to the Civil War, some 4,000 former slaves are buried near soldiers. The grounds include the burial places of several honored foreign dignitaries and even a few Italian and German World War II prisoners of war. A few plots contain no remains. Japanese connections with Arlington National Cemetery are especially thought provoking.

During World War II, thousands of Japanese-Americans served, most of them in the much-decorated 442nd Regimental Combat Team, many of whom served in the army while family members remained in internment camps. At least fifty-five Japanese-Americans are buried at Arlington National Cemetery, and every year the Japanese American Citizens League conducts a Memorial Day service to honor those who died for America. Their number now includes Japanese-American veterans of the Korean War and the Viet Nam War, but the largest number served in World War II.

The combat performance of the Japanese-Americans is legendary for their high casualty rate and numerous awards for heroism. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team served in Europe, while Nisei interpreters of the Military Intelligence Service (M.I.S.) were attached to "Merrill's

Marauders," the 5307th Provisional Composite Unit, which is known for its attack on the Imperial Japanese Army in Burma. Ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery should remind us that Japanese people found themselves on both sides of the epic conflict of World War II.

We might expect Yasukuni Jinja to reflect the much-vaunted homogeneity of Japan. However, the complexity of a large empire resulted in some surprises. Shrine authorities have included some 50,000 Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean soldiers of the imperial armed forces; approximately 57,000 women, most of them nurses, and about 2,000 children. It also includes 1,068 soldiers convicted by the Allies as Class A, B and C war criminals.

Many of the foreign soldiers were added without permission of their families. A large number of the Class B and C war criminals were Koreans and Taiwanese. Okinawan civilians, military auxiliaries and Japanese civil servants, plus members of the post-war Self Defense forces are also among those counted as kami at Yasukuni Jinja. Secret procedures were used to include the Class A war criminals, including several who were executed after the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. Even animals used by the military, war dogs and horses, have been honored at the shrine. The inclusion of foreigners, at times in violation of family wishes, have contributed to the acrimony of the "Yasukuni Problem."



3. Japanese war veterans in Imperial Navy uniform parade with the navy flag after offering prayers at Yasukuni Shrine, Aug.15, 2000, on the 55th anniversary of its World War II surrender. Every summer the shrine becomes a battlefield pitting those who claim it symbolizes the desire to placate the souls of fallen soldiers against those who see it as proof of the country's refusal to own up to its brutal past. (AP Photo/Tsugufumi Matsumoto)

Arlington National Cemetery offers surprising perspectives on U.S.-Japan relations that transcend war. It contains, for example, a unique reminder that many Japanese came to the U.S. as immigrants. Makoto Hagiwara was among those who came here after 1850, prospered, and in 1894 built the famous Japanese Tea Garden in San Francisco, California. Subsequently, members of the Hagiwara family on the West Coast were interned during World War II.

Nevertheless, in 1994, to mark the centennial of the Tea Garden, the Gift of the Hagiwara-Nagata Flowering Cherry Trees was presented to Arlington National Cemetery. The planting of 1,100 flowering trees (a number signifying good fortune), was organized by Mr. Eric Sumiharu Hagiwara-Nagata. Explaining that the gift reflected Japanese aesthetics, Mr. Hagiwara-Nagata expressed the wish that the gift might help coming generations to "find peace and enjoyment, perhaps find healing and lessening of their grief." The Japanese Cherry Trees should remind us of the possibility that the higher aspirations of humanity can help to overcome the bitterness of war.



4. Emperor Akihito, accompanied by Empress Michiko, gives a speech, before an altar decorated with chrysanthemums to pay respect to Japan's 2.5 million war dead during a memorial ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II at Tokyo's Budokan Hall, Aug.15, 1995. (AP Photo/Katsumi Kasahara)

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"The Enola Gay, the Atomic Bomb and American War History," Lawrence S. Wittner, Japan Focus, Article 312.
Living With the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age. Laura Hein and Mark Selden, Editors, M.E. Sharpe, 1997, Armonk, N.Y. provides excellent background information on debates about museums and memorials in Japan.

Yasukuni Jinja

There is no English language monograph on Yasukuni Jinja; however, the shrine is mentioned in a wide variety of books and articles, for examples, see Japan Focus articles 333, 331, 302, 293, 137, 135, 108 and Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan. Herbert P. Bix, Perennial Books, 2001, N.Y.; and The Making of Modern Japan, Marius B. Jansen. Belknap Press, 2000, Cambridge, Mass.

Herbert Bix has written that, "The postwar Yasukuni represents the prewar view of Japan's modern wars and actively combats the results of the Tokyo Trials." Japan Focus Article 308.

Articles by John Breen are exceptionally valuable, see: "Yasukuni Shrine: Ritual and Memory," John Breen. Japan Focus, Article 293. Breen points out that the Chinreisha is "unknown" to most Japanese war veterans and is kept hidden.

See also: "The Dead and the Living in the Land of Peace: Sociology of the Yasukuni Shrine." John Breen. Mortality, Vol. 9, No. 1, February, 2004. This article contains a map of building locations, including the Chinreisha.

See also John Nelson, "Social Memory as Ritual Practice: Commemorating Spirits of the Military Dead at Yasukuni Jinja Shrine," John Nelson, Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 62, No.2. This article explores many aspects of "social memory."

Yasukuni Jinja Information Publications and Internet Site: <http://www.yasukuni.or.jp>.

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The information about the numbers of kami, categories and the inclusion of foreigners can be found in:

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Other Research

Email and phone conversations with Mr. James Peters; emails with Mr. Eric Hagiwara-Nagata; emails with Mr. Thomas Sherlock—Historian at Arlington National Cemetery; email and FAX correspondence with Mr. Tumer Kobayashi—Japanese-American Citizens League; email and Internet information from Mr. Russell Nakatsu and Mr. Robert Passanisi—World War II veteran's organizations.

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