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Yasukuni Shrine at the Heart of Japan's National Debate: History, Memory, Denial

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Tomita Tomohiko, former grand steward of the Japanese imperial household, recorded in his diaries (1) that Emperor Hirohito ceased visiting the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo when it decided to honour certain men sentenced to death by the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal (2). Seven of the 14 class A criminals condemned, including the prime minister, former general Tojo Hideki, were executed; the others died in prison.

The Shinto Yasukuni shrine was built in 1869 on the sacred order of the Emperor Meiji, to glorify the deeds of soldiers who fell during the overthrow of the shogunate and the restoration that inaugurated the new imperial state of the Meiji period (3). Subsequently this shrine honoured all the soldiers and auxiliaries from the former Japanese armed forces -- 2,460,000 "heroic souls" -- killed in foreign wars from modern Japan's first overseas deployment, the Taiwan Expedition of 1874, up to the Pacific war of 1941-45.



Yasukuni Shrine

During Japan's colonial period the emperor was the sovereign and religious power, and commanded its armies. The populations of Japan and its colonies were all regarded as his servants, with a moral duty "to dedicate themselves to the emperor and the state in times of national crisis, with no regard for their own lives." Soldiers who died during these wars, which were considered holy, were an example to the nation and it was the responsibility of the Yasukuni shrine to raise military morale and foster the spiritual mobilisation of the nation for war.

At the end of the Second World War, the shrine, seen as a "symbol of Japanese militarism", a "shrine to war" and even a "shrine to invasion", was neutralised. In December 1945, under the Shinto Directive issued by the occupying allied forces, it was removed from state control. In accordance with the separation of politics and religion, introduced under the 1946 Japanese constitution, it was administered as a private religious association, like Christian churches and Buddhist temples. This remains the situation today.

During his term as prime minister, from 2001 to 2006, Koizumi Junichiro paid annual visits, the last on 15 August, the day that Japan commemorates as the end of the second world war -- celebrated by China as a day of victory, and by South Korea as a day of liberation from colonial domination. These visits became the most sensitive diplomatic issue between Tokyo, Beijing and Seoul. Koizumi rejected protests and presented himself as a politician defending Japan's position against foreign pressure.



Prime Minister Koizumi

visiting Yasukuni Shrine

A number of politicians and newspapers suggested that the class A war criminals might be excluded from the shrine. Citing Tomita's journals, they suggested that "if even Emperor Hirohito refused to visit . . . because [the shrine] honoured these war criminals, then prime minister Koizumi should also stop." That suggestion covered up many aspects of the story.

'Profound remorse'

The Yasukuni shrine and the official visits clearly represent a denial of Japanese responsibility for the war. To be fair, no postwar prime minister who went there has openly denied that responsibility. Speaking on behalf of the government, Koizumi reaffirmed the validity of a 1995 declaration by then Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi, expressing "sincere regret and profound remorse for the enormous suffering and damage that [Japan] inflicted upon its neighbours during the all-too-recent past, through colonial domination, invasions and misguided policies."

This did not prevent officials at the shrine from insisting that these wars had been conducted "for the defence and survival" of Japan, in an attempt to free Asia from western colonial domination, and from asserting that the "falsely accused" war criminals, from classes B and C, as well as A, had been unjustly categorised as such by the winning side.

If the presence of class A war criminals at the heart of this communal commemoration were the only problem, their removal would end the controversy. This solution will not satisfy. The concept of class A allowed Japan's leaders to be judged for alleged crimes committed from the Manchuria incident of 1931 (4), even its preparation in 1928, to the end of the Pacific war in 1945. In the process, Japan's earlier history of colonial aggression against Asia, including Korea and Taiwan, has been overlooked. It is fair to add that among the allied countries that passed judgment on Japan, the United States, Britain, the Netherlands and France were all themselves colonial powers and had neither the desire nor the ability to judge Japanese responsibility for colonial oppression.

The shrine honours all Japanese soldiers who have fallen in combat since the 1874 Taiwan Expedition and the subsequent repressions first of Taiwanese of Chinese origin and then of native peoples [of Hokkaido and Okinawa] who resisted Japanese occupation. Japan attacked Korea in 1876 and put down a series of rebellions. Japanese soldiers and all those who died in combat during this period are recognised as divinities at the shrine. Their glorification, beside the class A war criminals, represents a continued denial of colonial aggression.

Far-right revisionists are not the only problem. Although progressive intellectuals recognise the responsibility of class A war criminals, they view the Meiji period as a remarkable success that allowed Japan to match western powers. In their view, only after the 1920s did Japan turn bad: until the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, and the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05, the Japanese army was wholesome. The turning point was the aggression against China after 1931.

Media coverage of the Tomita journals emphasised that the emperor had stopped visiting the shrine because he disapproved of its glorification of class A war criminals. The effect was to heap all responsibility on to the criminals and to exonerate the emperor; that had also happened at the Tokyo Tribunal, when Hirohito was not called to account, although he held supreme power and was the commander in chief of the armed forces. The US, afraid of Japan falling to communism, kept him in place as a "symbol of Japan and the unity of the people" (5). His responsibility was again denied during the controversy over visits to the shrine.

The denials don't stop there. The shrine abuses the memory of the combatants by transforming their miserable deaths into sublime acts of heroism. This falsification ignores some 50,000 soldiers from colonised countries who died in combat, including 20,000 Koreans and almost as many Taiwanese. As part of its policy of empire building (or assimilation), Japan required Koreans and Taiwanese to "serve and die for the emperor and the state." Many were forcibly mobilised.

Many supposed volunteers were actually trying to escape ethnic segregation and they did not embrace Shintoism.

An 'unacceptable disgrace'

In 1978, for the first time, the descendants of a dead Taiwanese requested the removal of his name from the shrine. A subsequent request by Korean families led to legal proceedings. The commemoration of the dead, the families claimed, "at the heart of this symbol of an aggressor's militarism, alongside aggressors who invaded and occupied our countries through colonialism, constitutes an unacceptable disgrace."



Taiwan aboriginal protesters at Yasukuni Shrine, 2005

So far the shrine's priests have refused to give a positive response, insisting: "They were Japanese when they died, so they can't stop being Japanese now they are dead." (6)

There is also the issue of civilians killed during the battle for Okinawa in the spring of 1945. Okinawa, an independent kingdom and part of the Ryukyu islands that stretch between Japan and Taiwan, was annexed by Japan in 1879, during the first period of colonisation. In the last days of the Pacific War, the Japanese army involved non-combatant civilians in the name of a supposed "unity between people and army." About 100,000 died in the battle for Okinawa; they were shot as spies or killed themselves in collective suicides incited by the soldiers. By commemorating many of them, the shrine turned the army's victims into its collaborators. Out of the 2,460,000 dead commemorated, two million died in the Pacific war, but only 40% of them in combat. Many died of hunger -- most of the soldiers sent to New Guinea, for example, died after exhausting their food supplies, lost in the depths of the jungle, their bodies left to rot where they fell.

An attempt has been made to use Tomita's diaries to end official visits to the shrine. In the longer term they may have the opposite effect. Some influential politicians, most prominently the foreign minister, Aso Taro, have called for the renationalisation of the shrine and the resumption of imperial visits. The ruling Liberal Democratic party (LDP) introduced a parliamentary bill for state patronage of the shrine in 1968 and 1970-73. The opposition defeated them at the time, pointing out the risk of a return to militarism.

But 30 years later influential LPD politicians argue: "There is only one way to obtain a state order for the removal of the class A war criminals, to placate China and South Korea, and finally to secure the resumption of prime ministerial and, above all, imperial visits; and that is to nationalise the Yasukuni shrine."

This relates to the proposal for a new constitution that revises the current article nine, which renounces war and refers openly to an army of self-defence. The ban on the use of armed force would end, in order "to preserve world peace." The current prime minister, Abe Shinzo, has clearly expressed his

desire to pursue this constitutional change during his term of office.

When Japan sent its defence forces to Iraq in 2004, there was debate among the soldiers: should any of their deaths be commemorated at the shrine?

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(1) The existence of these diaries was revealed by the Tokyo newspaper *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*.

(2) In 1945 the allies set up three categories of war crime: class A, crimes against peace; class B, conventional war crimes; and class C, crimes against humanity.

(3) After the civil war that overthrew the shogunate (military dictatorship), imperial government was fully restored in January 1868, marking the beginning of the Meiji period, which lasted until 1912.

(4) In September 1931 Japan falsely accused Chinese dissidents of blowing up a section of railway as an excuse for the annexation of Manchuria.

(5) Article 1 of the Constitution of November 1946.

(6) 1978 declaration by the second priest in charge of the Yasukuni shrine.

For a more extended statement by Takahashi, see

[The National Politics of the Yasukuni Shrine](#)