

Japan Focus

Yasukuni Shrine Imposes Silence on Bereaved Families

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[Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's visit to Yasukuni Shrine on August 15, the most controversial date possible, underscored Yasukuni's central place in discussions of Japanese war memory and historical reconciliation in Northeast Asia. Debate typically involves the 14 Class-A war criminals enshrined and worshipped as deities at Yasukuni, despite the late Showa emperor's recently revealed expressions of displeasure, and growing calls from overseas and within Japan to disenshrine them. There are, however, other pressing issues.

Bereaved families of Koreans and Taiwanese are now directly suing Yasukuni and demanding their relatives' disenshrinement, as previous lawsuits against the Japanese government failed to achieve that goal. These families have learned only in recent years that their relatives were officially enshrined by the Japanese state in the 1950s. Although Koreans and Taiwanese died on overseas battlefields as soldiers or civilians forcibly conscripted by the Japanese military, families were informed neither of their deaths nor their enshrinement. Nor were they ever compensated in any way—unlike the families of Japanese soldiers who died beside them. The deaths of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians in the American firebombing campaign of 1944-45 have also gone uncompensated, although these war victims are excluded from Yasukuni.

There are no human remains at Yasukuni, as at all Shinto shrines. In the article below, Utsumi Aiko considers the paradoxical relationship between the Yasukuni enshrinement system and the state's lack of commitment over the past six decades to collecting and repatriating the remains of more than one million Japanese soldiers from across the Asia Pacific. Physical remains are irrelevant to the Yasukuni system, established during the war and still being refined today, of honoring some deaths and dishonoring others while perpetuating a state monopoly over both public and private discourse. Along with Yasukuni's active and best-known role of justifying Japanese war aims and conduct, the shrine has functioned more passively to delegitimize dissenting narratives and stifle calls by bereaved Japanese families for the bones of their relatives.

There is nothing unique about the political manipulation of national mourning and the repatriation of war dead. In the United States issues involving American remains, as well as MIAs and POWs, from the Korean and Vietnam Wars have been regularly politicized. During the ongoing "war on terror" the Bush administration has attempted to suppress media coverage of flag-draped coffins of American military personnel arriving at Andrews Air Force Base from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Official narratives of self-sacrificial death in battle, on behalf of a grateful nation and for the purpose of preserving the communal way of life, represent conversations between the past and present. They reinforce the ideology of state nationalism that is necessary for mobilizing fighting troops for future military campaigns—and for maintaining home-front support that can withstand rising death tolls of soldiers and civilians on all sides. – William Underwood]

I want to talk about what I've felt recently, in walking about Asia. In the state of Papua there is an island, Biak. It's a small island in Indonesian territory on the western side of New Guinea, the island that's shaped like a dinosaur. The very middle of dinosaur-shaped New Guinea is split in two, into east and west, and its easternmost point is the former Hollandia/Jayapura.



Map of Biak

The remains of Japanese troops stationed there

Earlier, when I was studying shrimp, I had walked about there a good bit. On many occasions I encountered the remains of Japanese soldiers stationed there. On Biak there are ditches in which Japanese troops were entrenched, nearly 5,000 men reportedly. In that area today there is a shabby marker erected by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and teeth and parts of thigh bones still remain.

When we went to Biak, the inhabitants told us they had recently discovered the bones of Japanese soldiers, so we went to look. The cave was called Kamarumiya (Five Rooms), and the entrance was less than a meter high. When we crawled in, there were five interconnected rooms and the skulls of Japanese soldiers were set out in a row. Thinking perhaps this might become the next tourist attraction, the inhabitants had arranged things very neatly, and in the back were both canteens and toothbrushes with toothpaste still on them, and boxes of soap in extremely fresh condition. Even fifty years after the war bones like these were being discovered. When I went to Amboina, in a spot facing the bay, there were still artillery emplacements the Japanese army had built.



A Japanese cave on Biak

Walking about Indonesia, in particular the areas said to be the forward-most battle lines, one must, of course, give priority to the issue of war damage suffered by Indonesians, but what I thought odd at the same time was why, even after fifty years, these bones were still here, unrepatriated. What is

it that Japanese think about bones? There were 2,400,000 Japanese military dead—to be sure, Koreans and Taiwanese army recruits are included in that count—and more than 1,160,000 of them are still not repatriated. With close to half of the dead in overseas battle zones, we greeted the fiftieth, then the sixtieth year after the war. Even now some 600,000, it is said, are retrievable.

Why in the world don't we retrieve them? Why aren't the bereaved families urgently concerned about the bones of their relatives? I came to think that in Japan perhaps religious ideas don't focus on remains. The U.S. provides a contrast. Even now on occasion articles appear in the press about the ongoing U.S. search for the remains of missing soldiers, of POWs in the Korean War of the 1950s.

The repatriation of the remains, the repatriation of the bodies of POWs and MIAs—that is, prisoners and missing soldiers—is taken to be the first order of business that must be dealt with if the U.S. is to restore diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. And the same can be said of the Vietnam War.

We can't draw parallels with this commitment of the U.S. to the remains without considering it in connection with American nationalism and what the state is, but the U.S. is committed to the very last to searching out the bones of its soldiers. In comparison, Japan greeted the sixtieth year after the war with close to half of its war dead still unrepatriated. When I entered the Biak cave and saw the bones lined up, I really wondered: what on earth does this mean?

Yasukuni and the compulsion to die honorable war deaths

I think Yasukuni likely plays a major part here. Even when there's no body, they put gravel or mementos, sometimes scraps of paper, in an unvarnished wooden box and hand it to the family. "He's become a kami at Yasukuni." Thereby they have stifled survivors' thoughts of demanding the return of the body, and the power to turn the sword against the leaders, government and authorities of this war that turned their relatives into bones are stifled. By enshrining the dead in Yasukuni, the relatives are constrained to silence. Or perhaps made content. It's not the case that all are enshrined in Yasukuni; some war dead are not. For example, deserters and those who died dishonorable deaths; those people aren't enshrined. So we might say that Yasukuni divides bereaved families into two camps: the "honored dead" enshrined in Yasukuni and the "dishonored dead" not enshrined there. Through this division of death, this discrimination, the bereaved families are compelled to silence.



*Yasukuni 75th Anniversary
Commemorative Stamp*

In 1937 when the Sino-Japanese War began, a circular from the Justice Ministry replaced the previous practice of writing in family registers simply “dead” with the honorific phrase “war dead.” The next year, in the case of the war dead, the site of the wounds and death was noted. So the registers came to list “dead of war wounds” and “war dead.” This made it possible to tell from the registers not simply the dead but the honorable dead. At the local government office “war dead” and “dead of war wounds” and simply “dead” were noted publicly, so the following happened.

At the time of the Imphal campaign, the divisional commander gave as his last instruction that anyone who committed suicide was to be treated as war dead. Conversely, a wounded soldier taken prisoner who died as a prisoner was a not-honorable death; suicide by pistol was an honored war death. Thus Japanese soldiers were forced into the situation in which they could never allow themselves to become POWs. In an interview Kojima Kiyofumi, taken prisoner at the fall of Mindanao in the Philippines, recalled that for a Japanese soldier to be taken prisoner was as difficult as for a male to become a female. Better to die a war death even when the possibility of survival as a prisoner existed. Such soldier deaths occurred throughout the war.

Yasukuni and the bereaved families

It appears Japan has no laws stating that the remains of the dead must be repatriated. In 1952 the Diet passed a “Resolution on the Recovery and Repatriation of the Remains of War Dead in Overseas Territories.” This resolution simply states that remains are to be repatriated quickly. But the government/state authorities are not tasked with the repatriation of remains. And for MIAs, family registers were treated with a notation that the person had been declared dead in wartime. This was not simply a declaration that a given person was MIA, but the declaration of a wartime death as a result of being mobilized in war. It was an arrangement that noted, “This was not an ordinary death.”

During and after the war bereaved families were made to carry empty plain wooden boxes and, unable to vent their anger against government or military, forced into silence. And if a dishonored war dead was not accepted into Yasukuni, families were forced into silence in the village. In the light of this dilemma of the bereaved, Yasukuni seems to have functioned sometimes to play to the sense of honor, sometimes to compel a sense of dishonor—in either case imposing silence on the bereaved families.

There are problems for the people of Asia. But we also have to ask, for our part, what Yasukuni meant, after all, to Japanese soldiers and what Yasukuni meant for bereaved families. Rethinking once again the function Yasukuni plays from this angle, what issues emerge today, sixty years into the postwar era, when 1,160,000 remains still lie across the sea?

One final thought: in 1959, at roughly the same time as the provision for declaring MIAs ‘wartime dead,’ the enshrinement began of war criminals in Yasukuni. In 1959 and 1960 the government disposed of the war in this fashion. The issue of Yasukuni Shrine as a state-maintained shrine arose in 1969-1970, but for the previous decade the state had been handling this issue of the remains and war dead in this fashion. Nevertheless, the retrieval of remains is still not treated as the responsibility of the government.

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