

Meeting at Yasukuni Shrine

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Located a short walk from the moat surrounding the Imperial Palace, Yasukuni Shrine is an oasis of green in the concrete, steel, and asphalt of Tokyo. Two enormous torii arches soar over the expansive path coming up the hill from Kudanshita. Tall trees rise on both sides. The particular, almost indescribable sound of feet treading on the small stones of the pathway accompanies one all the way to the wooden entrance doors of the Outer Shrine gate. These bear the Imperial crest in gold. Suspended beneath the Outer Shrine's massive copper roof is the sixteen-petaled Imperial chrysanthemum on a white cloth. Beyond is the Inner Shrine.

The people who make their way to and from the shrine today are few in number, and most seem very old, their backs bent and their gaits unsteady. Except for the two black sound trucks bearing the names and slogans of right-wing patriotic organizations parked next to two huge tourist buses in a lot near the path, there are no obvious signs that the shrine is a place of controversy. Yet, since 1945 it has been at the center of often heated political arguments about the relationship between religion and the state in a democracy, centering on the role this shrine played in the last war as the resting place of the "guardian gods"—those military men who had given their lives in service of their Emperor.

*Founded in 1869 to enshrine the 6,971 who had fallen in the then-recent war that ended the Tokugawa Shogun's rule and brought the Imperial family to power in the Meiji Restoration, it was given the name Yasukuni Jinja in 1879. Yasukuni means "To govern the state peacefully." As the place where all those who have perished in war to defend the Imperial state were enshrined, it became one of the most important symbols of the then official Japanese religion of State Shintō. The war dead were enshrined as kami, meaning gods or spirits. Beginning with the Emperor Meiji, the "living god," the reigning Emperor, paid tribute to them personally. In the Second World War, to be enshrined at Yasukuni and prayed to by His Imperial Majesty was considered the highest honor that could be bestowed on a loyal subject. According to the figures provided by the Shrine, 2,465,138 "pillars" were enshrined here as of 1987. Of these, 191,074 were from the China Incident and 2,132,699 were from the Greater East Asia War.**

The Yūshūkan, a memorial hall, was established in 1881 to exhibit items related to Japan's Imperial history. It was largely destroyed in the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, but rebuilt in 1931 at the present site. It was reopened in 1986, after having been used for company offices after 1945. It now contains about 30,000 historical documents or items for display. Among the more spectacular are an actual Kaiten—a human torpedo, on loan from the American Army Museum in Hawaii—an Ōka (Cherry Blossom) rocket-powered piloted flying bomb, a diorama showing the Thunder God squadron approaching Okinawa for their final attack, a Type-97 medium tank used on Saipan, and C-5631, a locomotive used on the Burma-Siam railway.

Deputy High Priest Kiyama is the Gon-no-Gūji, the second-ranking official of Yasukuni Shrine. He wears a purple hakama over a pure white kimono. His office is completely Western in style. Behind his large desk is an immaculately clean glass wall, brilliant in sunlight with the autumn leaves flashing outside. The door to the hallway remains open and people pass by carrying on hushed conversations. He speaks in a voice damped down and under control. During the war he was an army air-corps reserve officer. He was in Indonesia at the end.

The Yasukuni Shrine has followed a policy of not agreeing to interviews by journalists. The rationale for this policy is that the fundamental reason for the existence of the shrine is simply to pray to the gods.

* Yasukuni Jinja Yūshūkan, ed., *Yasukuni Jinja Yūshūkan, Shahō to sembotsusha no ihō*. [Yasukuni Jinja Yūshūkan. Shrine Treasures and Articles Left Behind by the War Dead.] Tokyo: 1987. p. 3

If we do anything else, we find ourselves involved in various political issues. After the defeat in the war, relations between Yasukuni and the state and between the shrine and the people's consciousness have been treated as if they were political issues. When the prime minister comes here to pray, it becomes an issue whether he's at the shrine as a private or a public personage. From the Yasukuni Shrine's perspective, it is not our intent to be involved in political issues. We merely pray and express our thanks to the spirits. So I will not discuss the true essence of the rites of the shrine, or how the state is involved, or the shrine's relation to the Imperial family, for the reasons I have given. I am able to speak only about my own personal experiences, as distinct from my position.

In yesterday's evening edition of the *Sankei* newspaper, a letter appeared in the "Hot Line" column addressing the issues of why people might wish to visit Yasukuni Shrine. The writer, a former medic, sixty-seven years old, was at the front on the Chinese continent. The watchword of his unit's war-comrade association has been, "Meet you at Yasukuni," and they have been meeting annually at the shrine. This year, about three hundred of them gathered here in October. During that meeting, he says, in the shrine waiting room he met an old woman, eighty-four years old, to be exact, and the bride of her eldest son. They were from Saga prefecture, Kyushu. Her daughter had gone to the front as a military nurse and died on her repatriation trip to Japan after the war, at the age of twenty-one. Her second son died in action in the South. Because of her age, the author believed this would be her last visit to Yasukuni Shrine. The old woman tells him how good it was of the bride to bring her, and how indebted she feels to her. The bride speaks quietly about it, saying only, "It is so natural to accompany her." The letter-writer comments on how warm and comforted he felt to meet a person who still so wants to come to Yasukuni from so far away, at such an age.

In an ordinary family today, even if the old man has this desire, the young bride will oppose him. She'll just say, "Oh? So you were a victim of the war," and she'll criticize the war. "If you have that kind of money, buy toys for your grandkids." That's the typical Japanese family, today. But this Saga family! Supporting an old woman's wish so! They're probably a Buddhist family. They have their own family temple, and I'm sure they have a Buddhist service at *O-Bon* [the festival of the Dead]. Yet they have the consciousness that the spirit of her daughter and her second son remain in Yasukuni Shrine.

War-bereaved families come here, pay reverence at the Outer Shrine, then proceed to the Inner Shrine, where the spirits reside. There they call out, "My son, I'm here." They believe they are able to communicate directly with their dead ones. To express their feelings of gratitude,

they come from far away and present the harvest of their land to them. It's as if living people are here. Don't you see? It's not a matter of religion anymore. Normally speaking, shrines conflict with temples, or exist parallel to churches. Normally, they're of this or that faith, this or that sect, this or that founder, text, secret scripture, and that's what the believers pray. But these people who come here are not thinking of secret scriptures. The sentiments of those who come to Yasukuni Shrine and of those who serve here are not religious.

I attend the rites. I often speak with such people. I myself was in the military. My war comrades and my seniors at school all perished, too. When I meet these people, I always feel I might be meeting one of their family members. I know their friends, their families, their subordinates are enshrined here. I myself am alive only by accident. If I were dead, of course, I would have been enshrined here. When I am here, the difference between the living "I" and my enshrined war comrades disappears. When these people come to worship, I feel that they might have been coming to greet me. I welcome them with that kind of deep thought. That is why the shrine values such people so highly. I deeply understand their feelings and their memories of a young daughter, a young son, who remains unchanged. I am sure that their youthful pictures are placed on the Buddhist altars in their homes. While meeting these people, I realize how serving here fills my own heart.

I dress as a Shintō priest and I conduct the rites. Sometimes various arguments are stirred up about those rites—that they are Shintō rites and Shintō is a religion—so they say. They claim that Yasukuni is one sect within a religion, but we don't think that way. We simply welcome worshipers who come here with a certain set of feelings. When we talk to those who come, we mainly speak of their remembrances. How their sons went in good spirits, or how their grandchildren are doing today. The talk rambles. Sometimes, I even meet those who were in the same war zone as I was. I'm now getting old myself, of course, but when I was younger and met parents, they would sometimes look and speak with me as if I were their son. We want them to return home satisfied.

Some people misrepresent the Yūshūkan as a war museum. In that war, teenagers and youths in their twenties perished. We are trying to decorate it with testaments written by, clothes worn by, and relics of those who perished. We endeavor to provide a background explanation for each. A human being does not have two lives. A single valuable life is extinguished in that exercise of national state authority called "war," today, just as in ancient times, in the East as in the West. To perish in war is a tragic thing, but if you assume that their spirit remains behind,

then it's your duty to comfort them to the greatest extent possible. Criticism of the war comes from a time after they perished for that state-society. So we still must express our gratitude to and worship them. Today, fifty of us, including the head priest and the *miko* [vestals], have to pray to make their minds rest easy. In the world after death, they must rest as if they had died among their loved ones.

We Japanese have always been this way. Even in civil wars, battles between daimyo, they built tombstones or five-tiered gravestones for the dead, whether friend or foe. We can still view those ancient ones in the form of stone Buddhas—we Japanese have been carrying out this practice for years, just as we have been eating rice. This custom was given a national form in the Meiji period when Yasukuni Shrine was established. These feelings are connected to the deepest emotions of the Japanese. This way of living, this way of thinking, is deeply rooted in this nation. As long as we continue to live according to a Japanese way, this will not change.

Before and during the war, Shintō shrines belonged to the country. *Kokka Shintō* [State Shintō], it was called. The state was deeply involved, so priests were officials. I myself studied at the Jingū Kōgakukan, in Ise City, where they trained both people to serve the gods and teachers for girls' schools, middle schools, and normal schools. My father was a priest for the gods, but I was going to be a history teacher.

We students never really argued about the war among ourselves. We accepted it as it was, part of one great flow. We never thought differently about it. We youths had to go. The education we had received up to that point was completely dedicated to that principle. Today, there are multiple values, many parallel views of life and the world. You can think objectively, but then this wasn't so. Since Meiji times, Japan had been advancing in that direction. In order to enrich the nation, Japan had to strengthen the army. Population increased, so to increase the nation's productive capacities, the country had to expand. For the sake of the development of the race. All nations of the world would have done this. Japan was not the only nation that expanded aggressively. We were already moving in that direction. There was an ideology that served to justify this course of action. There were some partially developed ideas that conflicted with that notion, but they were merely bubbles in the great stream.

When we were ready to graduate from school in 1942, we thought, "Let's go!" For the sake of the nation, for the sake of the government. I, who was studying history, look back now and recognize that that was only one way to view things historically, but at that time we all looked and

said, "Japan must take this course." Today, were my child to say, "I want to enter the military," I would reply, "Don't do it!" Of course. But at that time we didn't have that kind of choice. We only had one course open to us.

I was in the air corps, myself. I went to China, Manchuria, Manila, Luzon, the Celebes, Makassar, Java, and finally Bandung. I faced many, many occasions where I survived just by going one way rather than the other. Those days were full of hostility and hatred toward the enemy. We didn't know much about America. They were simply "the enemy." It didn't occur to us that behind the enemy there were governments, people, Christians, anything. We just thought, "they are here, we must fight them." We had no knowledge of how America was founded. What races made up America. Nothing. We just had the expression "*Kichiku Bei-Ei*"—American-English Demons. We saw them as lower animals. These terms were widespread in Japan. We would be invaded. Persecuted. Made to suffer. The race called "Japan" would be extinguished. That's the way we felt.

August 15, 1945. The Imperial Rescript came through by telegram. We all lamented the situation. The feeling that Japan faced extinction was very strong. The education I received would disappear. I drove a car up to the top of the mountain in Bandung [Indonesia], where the best astronomical observatory in Asia was located. I took my pistol with me. I really don't like to mention this. I thought Japan was done for. My life was over. I lay down on the lawn. The stars were unbelievable, overwhelming. While I was looking at the Southern Cross, the image of the shrine at Ise appeared to me. Speaking religiously, I was saved by the gods. I came down the mountain. Even today, I believe the gods of Ise called me back, "Don't throw your life away." I was a twenty-four-year-old army second lieutenant.

I feel my wartime experiences were my most valuable experiences. I dream of them even today. They are that deeply etched in my mind. I still see myself walking in Manila or driving a car in Java. I've been at Yasukuni for more than thirty years now and pretty soon I must face my retirement age. I was in the war, and I have prayed for the war dead since my return. I suppose I've been dragging the war with me all my life.

There are two million four hundred sixty-five thousand pillars of the nation enshrined here, including some from even before the Meiji Restoration, some dating back to the time when the American Commander Perry appeared off Uruga. The patriot Yoshida Shōin is here. Only the Self-Defense Forces who die on active duty do not meet our criteria. This means the list of those enshrined ends with the ones who perished in the last Pacific War.

Originally, the state established Yasukuni Shrine at the direction of the Meiji Emperor, but today it has nothing to do with the state. Under the new constitution, the state and belief are separate matters. It is not correct to say that the Emperor does not come here to pray. Though He has not done us the honor of an Imperial visit recently, the Imperial Envoy appears at the spring and autumn festivals, in proper formal attire, bringing offerings from the Emperor. Every year, twice a year, without fail. Besides, imperial family members come on their own. An emperor's last visit was in 1977.

We have eight million worshipers annually. I can probably classify them into three types. First are the mere sightseers. Then there are the war comrades and the bereaved families. Naturally, each year, membership in their associations has been dwindling. Then there is a third group, those who come here in search of some meaning. There are many in that category who feel we have to appreciate the war dead because they perished for the sake of the nation. To convey that message to history, to enshrine the war dead here means to them an assurance of the resurrection of the Japanese mind and spirit. They feel they must do that. People who have been thinking like that ideologically come here. Their numbers have gradually been increasing. Education has accomplished this.

Today, young people come here. I see many in the Yūshūkan, although today's Japan Teachers' Association has, up to now, taught that war is wrong. So they say those who died in war should just be thrown out. They have raised today's youth with those ideas. Yet despite that, quite a few youths come here to worship. Japan has established economic stability. As its educational system undergoes changes, I think the feeling that we have to value the war dead more highly will spread more and more widely. I think the official approval of textbooks exists so that there will be no mistaken schoolbooks. If a time comes when education rooted in Japanese tradition can be established, I believe the number who feel this way will grow.