



John Breen, ed., *Yasukuni, the War Dead, and the Struggle for Japan's Past*

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IT CAN BE DIFFICULT to convey “the real complexity of Yasukuni,” as John Breen, both editor and contributor to this volume, sets out to do (xiv). Breen succeeds at a formal level by bringing together a provocative mix of voices. It is noteworthy to find essays by Nitta Hitoshi and Takahashi Tetsuya in the same volume; anyone who has followed the debates concerning Yasukuni in Japan will recognize that they occupy diametrically opposed positions. The result of juxtaposing these sharply divergent approaches to Yasukuni is a highly polemical book, one that confronts the reader with claims, convictions, and arguments that cannot be reconciled. The

volume succeeds, in a more substantial sense, in avoiding the artificial symmetry of merely opposite positions. The result is a collection that challenges and provokes the reader as it provides an excellent English language entry into the debates surrounding Yasukuni shrine in particular, as well as the intersection between religious propitiation and political commemoration more generally.

Breen's introduction provides an efficient survey of the shrine's history and persuasively indicates why the controversy must ultimately revolve around the memories of the Asia-Pacific War and Japan's postwar politics. The volume also includes two other chapters that contextualize the Yasukuni controversy more than participate in it. Caroline Rose surveys the role the shrine has played in Sino-Japanese relations, presenting the unexceptionable argument that the Yasukuni problem must be examined in light of its instrumentality within Chinese and Japanese domestic politics. Philip Seaton's final chapter employs the Japanese media's coverage of Koizumi's visits to the shrine to map domestic attitudes regarding official visits to Yasukuni. He points to a fundamentally divided Japanese public, including a nationalistic minority unable to overcome a politically conservative establishment committed to an economically pragmatic approach to relations with East Asia.

Between these two chapters by Rose and Seaton come the six polemical chapters that provide the meat of this volume. Kevin Doak begins by offering an explicitly "religious perspective" on Yasukuni and its controversies. Among other points, he defends the prewar operation of the shrine, since "there was freedom of religion even at the height of the war" (48), and questions whether the enshrinement of Class A war criminals provides a meaningful basis for critique. The sacred character of the shrine means that it is concerned with the afterlife of souls, not with judging historical acts: "It is not for us to judge as good or evil such departed souls" (57). The intractable quality of the Yasukuni controversy, in Doak's view, arises from secular and atheist perspectives that cannot admit the "human instinct" to approach life and death through the sacred, as Yasukuni does.

Wang Zhixin in turn approaches Yasukuni from the pain experienced by Chinese victims of Japanese aggression. He insists the anger of these victims and their descendants directed towards Japanese politicians who venerate the shrine is a "natural and universal" emotion (74). That emotion is complemented by the "universal norms of justice and human decency" expressed through the war crimes tribunals and the international community (76). In contrast to such natural emotions and norms, the shrine represents an artificial "policy of unifying ritual performance with politics," a policy closely linked to Japan's modern aggression in China (89). Given that Yasukuni has been part of an effort to solidify Japanese patriotism in the service of aggression, Wang suggests the solution to the contemporary controversy can be found only in pursuing solidarity between the Japanese people and Asian victims of Japanese aggression.

Seki Hei instead explains the controversy surrounding Yasukuni in terms of the Chinese leadership and its deficient understanding of religion. He argues that the

current generation of leaders, raised in the atheist milieu of post-1949 China, cannot comprehend the “essentially religious nature” of Japanese politicians visiting Yasukuni shrine (96). Atheistic materialism prevents the Chinese from seeing anything but political instrumentality where it does not necessarily exist. Because tensions concerning Yasukuni arise from “the conflicting world views” between China and Japan, Seki sees little hope for resolution (103).

Takahashi Tetsuya provides an abridged presentation of his book-length consideration of Yasukuni shrine. He refuses to place any discussion of the shrine outside the arena of politics and situates the current controversy in the context of conservatives attempting to revive the “triadic system” of Japan’s prewar state: the military, Yasukuni, and patriotic education. Using the concept of “the alchemy of emotion,” Takahashi argues that the shrine has functioned to manage the emotions of bereaved families, turning them from anger, disappointment and loss towards pride, celebration, and eager sacrifice (120). That alchemy relied and continues to rely on counterfeiting history, ignoring the stories of Taiwanese recruits, Okinawan civilian casualties, and the majority of Japanese war dead who starved to death. Takahashi also sees hope in moving beyond the Yasukuni controversy in the interaction between Japanese individuals and Asian victims of Japanese aggression.

Nitta Hitoshi offers, in the form of his “personal opinion,” perhaps the most passionate defense of Yasukuni shrine and of visits by the Japanese Prime Minister. He addresses religious freedom and the separation of church and state, as well as the enshrinement of Class A war criminals in defense of Yasukuni. Underlying that defense is Nitta’s firm belief in the duty to pay respects to “those who sacrificed their lives for the nation” (126). Nitta defends the shrine and the historical memory it represents by disputing the validity of the war crimes tribunals as well as more recent revelations concerning the comfort women. Ultimately, he defends the historical narrative presented by the shrine and its Yūshūkan museum by invoking “religious sensibilities”: It “goes against traditional Japanese religious sensibilities to introduce, or stir up, negative feelings of bitterness and hatred at a place whose purpose is consoling the spirits of the deceased” (135). Only a respect for such sensibilities, Nitta suggests, can resolve the Yasukuni issue.

John Breen’s contribution takes the ritual character of Yasukuni seriously while remaining critical of its relation to historical memory. The shrine, Breen observes, is an institution that utilizes three mnemonic strategies to construct historical memory—text, display, and ritual. He critiques those strategies, employing Eric Santner’s concept of “narrative fetishism” to identify in Yasukuni a narrative that avoids confronting the trauma of the past (161). Even the rituals of Yasukuni, to the extent that they privilege a relationship between the imperial household and the war dead, strategically employ the dead as a means to generate and regenerate respect for the emperor. Breen suggests that a politically open-ended form of commemoration will be possible only by severing the act of mourning from the tether of such mne-

monic strategies. He concludes that constructing a new, non-religious site for honoring the war dead may be the best means to put the Yasukuni controversy to rest.

The six essays that make up the polemical core of the book are equally divided between those who defend Yasukuni as a legitimate site for national mourning and those who are critical of the shrine as a flawed commemorative institution. Editorial footnotes avoid a simple binary split by effectively guiding the reader to points where the polemics intersect and diverge. It is striking how these essays collectively indicate that any meaningful discussion of Yasukuni cannot skirt the fundamental question of what is essentially religious and what claims it can make on the political, or vice versa. We often see the religious invoked in order to dismiss it from the realm of legitimate political discourse or, as a corollary, to shield the religious from political disputation. Both approaches are evident in these polemics: either the specifically religious concerns of Yasukuni (ritually mourning and propitiating the souls of the war dead) are subordinate to political and diplomatic considerations, or they are immune to political and diplomatic critiques by virtue of being “religious.” The source of conflict and controversy, as these authors would present it, appears to arise from the divergent understanding of what it means to ritually propitiate the souls of those who fought and died for the Japanese Empire. Wang, Takahashi, and Breen seem to agree that the clear instrumentality of Yasukuni’s ritual practice must be acknowledged and appraised: what does the ritual manipulation of emotion and memory accomplish? Wang suggests that it has always been a key component of nationalist mobilization; Takahashi argues that it has functioned to guide the emotions of the bereaved away from criticism toward support of state goals; and Breen indicates that it works to close the door to true mourning and the working through of trauma. Doak, Seki and Nitta, on the other hand, appear to agree that the act of expressing respect for and gratitude towards the dead, especially those who died in service to the nation, is an essential part of human nature and society, valuable and justifiable on its own terms, regardless of diplomatic and political calculation. Anyone interested in Yasukuni, memory, and commemoration, and the politics of religion in contemporary Japan will find this a provocative read, one that introduces voices rarely heard in English translation. I, for one, am eager to see how students in my undergraduate seminar on history and memory will respond to these essays.

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