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Yasukuni Shrine

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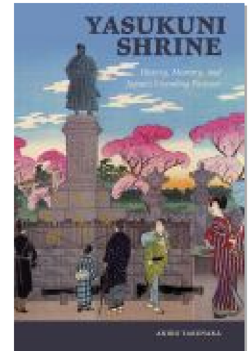

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EPILOGUE
CONTESTING MEMORIES

Yasukuni Shrine as a Countermonument

> As a child I greatly admired the men of the tokkōtai. I don't doubt that their spirit of loyalty and patriotism was true, and I would never want to defame or criticize them. Wartime education was very thorough. It led us to firmly believe that fighting and dying for the emperor was the most honorable deed that we could do.
>
> *A FORMER* GUNKOKU SHŌNEN *(AUGUST 19, 2002)*

> But, you know, nobody believed that we would be honored as gods after we died. I did think that when I die, I could become food for the fish in the coral waters or compost for the jungle trees. I never heard of anyone courageously shouting "long live the emperor" when they died. What I heard instead were accounts of men whispering "Mother" or "Sister" with their last breaths. If they had had the energy to shout for the emperor, they would not have starved to death!
>
> *A SEVENTY-SEVEN-YEAR-OLD VETERAN (MAY 28, 2002)*

On November 29, 2003, under the main *torii* of Yasukuni Shrine, I met up with a group of people ranging in age from a teenage girl to a veteran in his eighties. It was an off-line meeting of a Japanese mailing list that I had been participating in for several years. The main objective of the meeting was to take a tour, led by a list member, of the Yasukuni Shrine grounds and the Yūshūkan Museum. In this short epilogue, I briefly describe this tour as a starting point for ways to think about the shrine's future. Rather than demolishing the shrine or creating an alternative national war memorial to divert attention away from the shrine, creative uses of the shrine grounds can generate opportunities for actively and critically thinking about the issues

from Japan's imperialist past with a focus on Yasukuni Shrine as a key institution of modern Japan. I also briefly discuss some of the mailing list participants in order to further complicate the generational structure I introduced in chapter 6 by dividing the "survivor generation" into two: people who experienced the war as adults and the generation of *gunkoku shōnen* (literally, "boys of a militant nation," i.e., men and women who were part of the national school system, which was established in April 1941).[1] The Asia-Pacific War experience differed greatly depending on the age and the location of the survivor. Furthermore, how memory is shaped also differs based on experiences not only during the war but also in the years following the war. And as I demonstrate throughout the book, Yasukuni Shrine is not, and more importantly, never was, a univocal institution for the Japanese: To some it portrays an inexcusably distorted view of the past; for others, its representation of military death helped them through the difficult postwar years.

The mailing list, "No-More War: Mailing List for Maintaining Memories of War Experiences," was initiated by the late Nishiha Kiyoshi (1933–2010), a self-proclaimed former *gunkoku shōnen* who wished to create a virtual space where participants of all ages could talk about Japanese experiences of the Asia-Pacific War.[2] The list member conducting the tour that day was Hasegawa Jun'ichi, four years Nishiha's junior and a retired Shinjuku district assemblyman. After retiring from the public position in 1999 and until his second retirement to his father's hometown, Kanazawa, in 2010, Hasegawa engaged in peace-promotion activities as the president of the Shinjuku Peace Committee and an organizing member of the "Group to Walk the War Ruins of Tokyo [Tōkyō no Sensō Iseki o Arukukai]."[3] Nishiha, in particular, was an outspoken critic of the wartime state and education and frequently voiced his thoughts through his mailing list and other activities.[4] His messages were in many ways similar to those of the writers of his generation, such as Yamanaka Hisashi, a prolific author who writes about childhood experiences in the final years of the Asia-Pacific War and publishes thorough documentation of the war years.[5] Many Japanese of this generation, who attended the national schools as young children and were educated in a curriculum that revolved around the idea of the emperor as god and Japan as a god's nation, experienced a strong sense of betrayal by authority figures, including the government, teachers, and adults in general, with the news of Japan's defeat in the Asia-Pacific War. Their narrative—that they were thoroughly indoctrinated by the wartime state and therefore that not only those in their generation but also all Japanese, with

the exception of the wartime leaders, are victims—has been persistent enough to become the mainstream voice in Japan today. The mailing list generally took this tone as well.

I participated in the tour several times, each tour led by a different volunteer, beginning in fall 2003 and most recently in March 2012. With Hasegawa no longer based in Tokyo, a middle-school history teacher or a graduate student of modern Japanese history typically conducts the tours. This Yasukuni Shrine tour is not officially approved by the shrine.[6] Its objective is to "examine the shrine grounds and the museum exhibits from the perspective of Asia as a peaceful community and to think about the problems of Yasukuni Shrine."[7] The guides thus attempt to use the shrine grounds, its monuments, and the museum exhibits as tools to discuss what they consider the "true" history of Yasukuni Shrine, namely, the history of the shrine as the culprit that coerced millions of Japanese to participate in a destructive and self-destructive militarism. This attempt, then, is a use of the shrine grounds as what James Young has coined a "countermonument": a monument that is meant to be self-critical and challenges the very premise of its own being.[8] In his discussions of countermonuments, Young was examining a new kind of artist-designed monuments in Germany (Holocaust memorials for the most part), which challenged the conventional premise of monuments—to commemorate historical events—and attempted to push viewers to think critically about the past. Young was also critiquing the process of monument construction, which, in his opinion, takes away the task of remembrance upon completion. "In shouldering the memory work," he argues, "monuments may relieve the viewers of their memory burden."[9] The Yasukuni guides do not have to construct their own countermonument; they appropriate the space of the shrine itself in order to narrate an anti-Yasukuni version of history. At the same time, both the supporters and opponents of Yasukuni Shrine are allowing the shrine to take over their memory work: Regardless of whether it represents the brave sacrifices the 2.6 million enshrined there made to create a peaceful Japan or symbolizes Japan's past aggressions and desires for future remilitarization, Yasukuni Shrine seems to have only one, correct meaning for each interest group. My insistence throughout this book is that the shrine has had varying and often shifting meanings to the Japanese over the years and that the shifts reflect larger trends in society. Even today it is a site to remember family and friends for some; for others it is a symbol of Japan's military aggressions. It therefore can have new implications and different roles in the future by producing novel meanings and spaces, as I discuss in the Introduction.

Highlights of the shrine tour include various spoils of war and large items donated by Japanese corporations. Rather than boast of Japan's imperial victories, the spoils of war now stand—for the purposes of the tour—as proof of Japan's aggressive imperialism. The donations, such as the stone *torii* at the south entrance and the impressive main shrine gate, demonstrate the large corporations' complicity with the shrine. Most of the items examined on the tour are meant to demonstrate ways that Yasukuni Shrine exercised and, more importantly, still promotes emperor-centered imperialism. For example, the tour always stops at the pair of large stone lanterns outside the main shrine gate. Eight copper panels etched with scenes from key moments of the Imperial Navy (left side facing the gate) and the Imperial Army (right side) encircle the base of each lantern. The traces of dried concrete at the edges of some panels, according to the tour guides, are proof of the shrine authorities' defiance of the city of Tokyo in the postwar period. In February 1947, cognizant of the occupation forces, the Tokyo City Department of Education and the Security Department of the Metropolitan Police Department instructed the shrine to remove these panels. The panels still remain because shrine authorities, instead of removing the panels, covered them with concrete, which they removed at the end of the occupation. According to the tour guides, the panels also reveal the shrine's continued insistence on glorifying Japan's military past.

The most important stop on the tour of the inner grounds is the two small shrines hidden behind tall trees to the left of the worship hall. One is the Motomiya, the original shrine, which I introduced in chapter 1. The other, the Chinreisha, or "spirit-pacifying shrine," is the focus here. According to the shrine's website, this small memorial was "built in 1965 to console the souls of everyone who died in wars that were fought anywhere in the world."[10] It thus seems to be a place for everyone who was not eligible for inclusion in the majestic structure next door and provides the tour guides an opportunity to emphasize the selectivity and politics of Yasukuni Shrine's memorialization process. The Chinreisha was conceived by then head priest Tsukuba Fujimaro after he returned from his travels in Europe, accompanying members of the Peace Mission of Religionists for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (Kakuheiki Kinshi Shūkyōsha Heiwa Shisetsu-dan). The shrine's official narrative is that through his trip Tsukuba came to realize the importance of universally memorializing all war dead. Historian Hata Ikuhiko has suggested that Tsukuba, who was strongly opposed to the enshrinement of Class-A war criminals, may have conceived of this shrine as a resting place for their spirits.[11] But for the tour, the main point of this

memorial is its size and location. It is a small, simple shrine tucked away in the woods, out of sight, and does not even have a *torii*. Until 2006, an iron fence prevented visitors from approaching it. The tour guide also emphasizes that its year of completion, 1965, was when Izokukai and the Association of Shinto Shrines were attempting to reinstate state support for Yasukuni Shrine.[12] Thus, in the narrative of this tour, the Chinreisha was constructed to direct attention away from the fact that Yasukuni Shrine is a political space that commemorates only selected people in an attempt to secure state support for itself.

The tour of the Yūshūkan Museum for the most part consists of a close reading of representative wall texts to highlight the one-sided representation of historical events. The selected depictions not only situate Japan as the victim of Western imperialism but also ignore Japan's aggression against its colonial subjects. Although the wall texts are written in both Japanese and English, not all of the information is available in English. This suggests the shrine's attempt to present a message for international visitors that differs from what it tells Japanese visitors. The tour often ends in the central atrium, where larger items are on display, including the Ōka, a *tokkō* glider, hanging from the ceiling, and Kaiten, the manned midget submarine that was designed to collide with enemy ships. The midget sub seats only one person and has no windows. It is operated by relying on visual information obtained through a periscope. It is a "moving coffin in which men were shut in alive," the guide emphatically tells the audience. Constructed during the final years of the war, the tank on display appears to have been built with inadequate materials that could not have protected the man inside. All of the displays are interpreted to support the argument that the Japanese government did not value human life and that Yasukuni Shrine justified reckless decision making by military leaders.

The argument presented throughout the tour posits the Japanese people as victims of their wartime state. This view coincides with the epilogue's first epigraph. The quote is from an e-mail by a list member, who was born in 1933 and indoctrinated as a young boy by the national school system, which was established in 1941. Many of his generation firmly believed the nationalistic lessons they learned in school, one of which was that the emperor was god. And many felt an intensely painful sense of betrayal at the end of the war. Unlike the postmemory generations, which tend to embrace the ultraconservative argument that Japan fought a war of self-defense, members of the former *gunkoku shōnen* generation are, for the most part, extremely critical of the wartime state. They strongly oppose the presence

of Yasukuni Shrine and Yūshūkan on the grounds that they reinforce the official wartime narrative, which presents the Asia-Pacific War as a battle to liberate Asia from Western imperialism. Theirs are the voices that most Yasukuni opponents are familiar with. But, as I have argued throughout the book, these voices, which cast the political and military leaders as the perpetrators and the rest of Japan as victims and fault Yasukuni Shrine for Japan's problematic relationship with its wartime past, interfere with the work of coming to terms with the past. This stems from the ease with which critics conflate Japan's war crimes with Yasukuni Shrine. According to this scenario, Yasukuni Shrine becomes the scapegoat. It then is simply a matter of pointing a finger at Yasukuni Shrine as the wrongdoer.

The second epigraph, however, presents a starkly different view. Here, the author is aware that he will not become a god even if he dies at war. Further, he argues that those around him have also never really believed in the ideology propagated by Yasukuni Shrine. How do we reconcile these competing voices? The author of the second epigraph was seventy-seven years old when he wrote the message to the list. Thus, he was born around 1925. Many Japanese of his and older generations did not receive the intensely nationalistic education of the *gunkoku shōnen* generation. They did not go to war because they believed that they needed to die for the emperor and that they would be rewarded with a god status. They went to protect their homeland and their family. For many, enshrinement at Yasukuni Shrine was an inevitable outcome, not the motivating factor. It is said that many promised each other that they would meet at Yasukuni (i.e., after they were killed). If these words indeed were spoken, for many they were an expression of comradeship. But for the most part, the men of this generation, who served in the military and survived to return home, did not talk or write about their experiences. By the time some began to voice their thoughts decades later, many of their generation had died. Although this generation has provided narratives and representations of their war experience, they are less prominent than those about the *gunkoku shōnen* experience. The availability of such narratives today also affects the shaping of war memories.

The use of the shrine for the presentation of a counternarrative is not only an innovative use of the shrine grounds but also a relevant factor in accessing and understanding competing historical interpretations. But the currently prevailing counternarrative, with its focus on Yasukuni Shrine as culpable for the Asia-Pacific War, reinforces the positing of a simplistic dichotomy of victim and perpetrator. There are a variety of ways to push the discussion further to include questions of what it means to be a victim,

to be deceived, to be responsible for being a part of something without fully understanding the implications—all in the context of an all-out war. These are useful discussions for thinking about ways to move forward with issues of war responsibility and reconciliation, on both domestic and international levels.

The physical presence of Yasukuni Shrine, as well as the memory of events that transpired there, should stand as a testimony to the variety of Japanese war experiences over time. Furthermore, the competing narratives of wartime Japan, whether personal experiences or larger issues of the roles the Japanese people or the state played in the war, do not have to be used as evidence for one side to condemn the other. Rather, the narratives can serve as lessons for working through the past. Both recognizing and exploring the reasons behind shifts in the prevalence of the kind of memory expressed by the first epigraph, in preference to the kind of memory expressed by the second, help us think about the structure of memory and the relationship between memory and time, between memory and space. Just as media and institutions, including Yasukuni Shrine, variously functioned as institutions of memory keeping in wartime Japan—the kind of memory examined here—postwar publications and museums associated with war memory are now developing into institutions that will similarly shape the memory of postwar Japan for future generations. Instead of a monument to be demolished or ignored because it imparted imperialistic messages during the Asia-Pacific War, Yasukuni Shrine can serve as a reminder of the tumultuous history of modern Japan, facilitate debate on the ways in which the war is remembered over time, and, in particular, become a reminder of the ongoing need to examine the concept of postwar responsibility (*sengo sekinin*) as it applies to past, present, and future generations.