**How to remember our fallen heroes? Decontesting the past at the Yasukuni Shrine**

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*Abstract*

*This essay will take the example of the Yasukuni Shrine and the adjacent Yushukan museum in Tokyo to discuss the meaning and use of memories of war dead. Memories of fallen heroes are deemed important for the Japanese Nationalist Right not only because of the intrinsic worth in remembering sacrifice, but also as a key strategy in the maintenance of one vision of the nation. It will be shown how, in order to move beyond 'post-war thinking', this vision calls for a return to a 'truer' mode of Japanese-ness that existed sometime before the post-war period. This strategy necessitates a re-remembrance of those who died in the war. Through a discussion of a video presentation at the Yushukan museum this essay will examine the form of this vision and detail the logic of remembrance used by the right in Japan in order to achieve a decontested past that can be used to achieve goals for the (future) nation.*

## Introduction[1]

This essay will take the example of the Yasukuni Shrine and the adjacent Yushukan museum in Tokyo to discuss the meaning and use of memories of war dead. Memories of fallen heroes are deemed important for the Japanese Nationalist Right not only because of the intrinsic worth in remembering sacrifice, but also as a key constitutive strategy in the maintenance of one vision of the nation. Here it will be shown how this vision calls for a return to a 'truer' mode of Japanese-ness that existed sometime before the post-war period. But successful return necessitates a decontested remembrance of those who died in the war for the nation to function 'properly'. Using a short video presentation found in the last room of the Yushukan, and other examples of arguments from the right, this essay will analyse the logic of remembrance displayed by the right in Japan in attempting to realise these goals.

## *Ouka*

The winding path that takes visitors through the Yushukan military museum opens out into a colossal room devoted to weapons of war in the form of full size relics and exquisitely detailed models. Nestled in one corner of the room is a small TV screen playing a documentary film on continuous loop. When it begins, pumping rock music introduces the faces of Japanese pilots, who slide into view before being replaced with bold Japanese characters. 特 –special- 攻-attack-隊-force: *tokkōtai*. Interspersed are images of old Japanese men, faces cast in stone, and grainy black and white shots of pilots sitting ready to go to war. We see model planes as the word *kamikaze* and *jinraibutai* (the name of the special attack force) drift across the screen. Finally the camera rests on one aeroplane, a bomber, with a small white plane attached to its belly. Characters appear: 桜花, *ōka*, cherry blossom. We are then introduced to an elderly man, Hideo Suzuki. He is small, well dressed in a suit with swept back white hair. He looks at the camera: 'My friends were smiling as they left. We were smiling as we said goodbye.'

There are many video presentations at the newly re-imagined Yushukan, and the opening sequence of the video described above is placed next to models of the Japanese *ōka*, a piloted missile that was introduced in the closing stages of the war. The presenter is Judith Morinosuke, a freelance writer and TV presenter based in Tokyo. In her introduction, Judith sets out the problem as she sees it:

> …I really really love living in Japan because the Japanese people welcome me and treat me so well every single day. And I think this country is just amazing, very well developed and safe, and really fun to live in. Everything is great except one thing: I don't feel that Japanese people appreciated their own country enough, and especially I feel that they sort of lack a thankful heart for the previous generation…I think it is really time to thank them for their efforts.

The dilemma Judith is trying to address is this: how can a country recognise and celebrate the deeds of its war dead when they are at best seen as having wasted their lives or have at worst been vilified by history and parodied by western cinema? She is, of course, approaching this subject from a distinct perspective. As part of a general movement by the Japanese right, the video tries to recast a version of Japanese

[1] All translations are my own.

wartime history, simplifying the narrative to one of sacrifice for the greater nation. The video portrays a singular vision of death, honour and sacrifice; it also ventures this narrative as a 'truth' of the war. But this is not simply about recognition without guilt; there is also a greater articulation of 'proper' treatment of the past with current social and political ills.

***Threat***

The question posed above has become more salient in recent times for a number of reasons. Numbers of those who fought in WWII are dwindling and there is a rush to get their stories on tape. But the question is also asked in the context of growing concern over the course being charted by Japanese society. Until the 1980s, Japan performed economic miracles that gave a new source of national pride and cohesiveness. The post-bubble years, however, have not been kind: Japan continues to dip in and out of recession and birth rates continue to plunge. Just as the corporate restructuring and mass layoffs of the 1990s seemed to be over, economic uncertainty has resurfaced and cast a shadow over the Japanese national economic project. Indeed, as for many other nation-states, global flows of commodities, culture and capital call into question the viability of any sort of national enterprise, seen in this sense as a bounded group of people occupying the same territorial and ideological space, working together towards some common goal. It is in this context that calls for a reassessment of the Japanese nation have arisen.

While globalisation takes its fair share of blame, some on the Japanese right have attributed the associated sense of loss in part to Japan's 'masochistic' relationship with its own history, coupled with the infiltration of alien western ideology. An example of this reasoning comes from the recent hit book by Fujiwara Masahiko (2007: 6), *The Dignity of Nations*:

> After the war we have been educated in a way that has taken away our pride and confidence in our mother country. Weak Japanese have forgotten the feeling and form of the great traditions of our country; overtaken by market capitalism they have sold themselves to the logic and rationality of the west.

Western ideology has brought Japan to the precipice, and the danger can only be resolved by a return to a 'truer' Japan. The answer is defined in terms of the transcendental properties of a unified national history and culture. However, Japan's past has been tarnished by the events leading up to and including WWII – as it stands it is forbidden territory. Therefore to achieve a truer Japan, that period must be re-imagined: Japanese war dead must be remembered for their sacrifice for the nation. This process is already underway: for instance, a revised junior high-school history textbook has been produced by an independent body with the stated aim of creating a history that enables children to have pride in, and responsibility towards, their nation. In their manifesto they argue that current textbooks contain 'uncontested propaganda from former enemies'. They pointedly observe that 'there are no other countries in the world with textbooks like this' (*Atarashii rekishikyōkasho wo tsukurukai*, 1997).

Fujiwara's concept of a Japan of 'feeling and form', fundamentally different from a reified 'west', has a long history, being part of the crystallisation of the Japanese nation after the 1868 Meiji restoration. At the turn of the last century, Okakura Tenshin juxtaposed a spiritual Asia, Japan at its apex, with 'maritime peoples of the

Mediterranean and the Baltic, who love to dwell on the Particular, and to search out the means, not the end, of life' (1905: 1). The construction of this imagery was, however, not solely the occupation of Japanese writers. After it was translated into Japanese, and in spite of being written as a reference book for the US occupation, Ruth Benedict's seminal post-war anthropology, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, was instrumental in the construction of a collective Japanese identity based on a holistic uniqueness. In the boom years, EF Vogel's (1979) book, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America*, cemented that uniqueness and recognised its success against the perennial American antagonist. And the glut of *Nihonjinron* (cultural commentaries of the nature of the Japanese) texts, to which Fujiwara's book is a recent offering, have long argued for a kernel of Japanese-ness that stands apart for the rest of the world (see Yoshino, 1992). In these texts success is attributed to something unique to Japan. It is the cohesiveness of this particular (self) imposed Orientalism, and the imagery of social harmony it conjures, that is seen as disappearing.

***Escape Route?***

Returning to the video it is possible to locate other examples of routes from this post-modern, post-traditional and above all post-war malaise. This is also through recourse to a carefully constructed history that lays down a set of foundational truths in order to anchor Japanese identity to an unwavering past. There is a tacit assumption that in order to love one's country there needs to be a simple, positive narrative to believe in. A way of activating that narrative is to recognise and celebrate those who have died for the nation. Such activation is critical as the nation is not a primordial given; it is a process of continual definition, articulation and categorisation, kept alive by repeated performance and enactment. Cataclysmic events – including wars – can bring a nation of people together and facilitate negation of the time, space and difference that would otherwise necessitate fragmentation. Recognition of those who went before is a key method of the nation in the sense that it provides a positive sense of belonging across time. The salience of this linkage is theoretically universal: death 'for the nation' may cut across internal divides in an act of unification based on the one thing all citizens hold in common - their national affiliation.

However, this is not necessarily the case. For the above formula to work one key assumption must be made: that the narrative constructed can transcend political and ethical schism with a universal message. This is where decontestation becomes vital. Wars happen for myriad complex reasons, and conflict spawns the most terrible atrocities as well as acts of selfless bravery. Those who died may also be those who killed, those who sacrificed themselves may also be those who tortured and maimed. The Great Pacific War was no exception to this; Japanese soldiers working under the banner of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere carried out massacres, just as they sacrificed themselves for their country, culture, friends and family in suicide attacks. This presents a number of dilemmas nestled within the socially held conception of the war dead itself. The resolution of these dilemmas needs a point from which to make sense of the narrative: a socially, politically and temporally situated vantage point.

This ideological vantage point is well defined for the right and this enables the video to assemble a number of diverse themes into one cohesive argument. This articulation

comes in an extended interview with Mr. Suzuki, where he asked by Judith how he feels about the post-war education system. Mr. Suzuki presents an argument that resonates with the thesis put forward by Fujiwara. Whilst Japan was once a country where the weak were helped by the strong, it is now left with a survival of the fittest mentality without cohesion and obligation to society. This statement is directly followed by Judith opening a 'typical' high-school history text book, where she notes with incredulity that there is only one tiny segment written about the *tokkōtai*. She exclaims, 'no matter how you look at this, it is strange isn't it? Are Japanese history books okay like this?' When Judith asks Mr. Suzuki why he felt he needed to speak out, he replies that staying silent would take away the meaning of the deaths of his friends. He argues that if people today understood that his friends fought and died for their country Japan would be a better place.

This strategy of memory politics, then, shows a careful assemblage of a number of notionally unrelated themes into one, simplified and cohesive script that proposes to deal with the raft of social issues faced by Japan and the Japanese people. It is an ideological construction that delimits the boundaries of interpretation both of the current political and social climate, as well as the history needed to address the present. There is first an underlying intertextual appeal to and affirmation of the body of masochistic social autopsies that have proliferated since the economic bubble burst in the 1990s. This is distilled into a vision of Japan as having lost its way. Blame is placed on the infiltration of another (simplified) version of market capitalism and liberal democracy; indeed earlier in the video Mr. Suzuki argues that Japan has been under ideological occupation by the US, and this is later reaffirmed by Judith in her closing argument. Following this logic, Japanese social ills can be overcome through the act of engagement with a newly imagined past of sacrifice for the nation. The focus is on the individual and their act; inculcation of greater obligation to the nation is the goal. The context of the video, the interjections from the presenter about loving Japan and comments on the state of Japanese history textbooks frame this discussion about remembrance in terms of a solution to current problems facing the country.

### ***Conclusion***

According to Connerton (1989) a new start requires a new form of remembrance. In this sense to overcome perpetual post-war thinking, the nationalist argument posits reverent memory of those who died for the nation as an ontological social anchor able to provide the Japanese with confidence in their actions on the global stage. In the video it is significant that Judith carefully frames of the deployment of the *tokkōtai* by producing wartime production statistics to show why Japan had to resort to such measures. That the Japanese had to fight on is taken for granted, ignoring any political question of why the Japanese were at war, as well as neglecting issues of state manipulation and the propaganda that made such sacrifice logical. This throws up more dilemmas. Can death be separated from the narrative it is woven into? Or does celebration need more than just remembrance of individuals?

There are, of course, other alternatives. John Breen (2008: 162) echoes philosopher Tetsuya Takahashi's argument for a new site of commemoration without grounding in either state Shinto or imperial ideology, noting that such a site would allow for 'unencumbered mourning' devoid of politics and ethics, and a place that would allow leaders from around the world to 'stand side-by-side' as they reflect on the horrors of

war. This intervention still needs a new form and content of remembrance: of mourning, loss and the futility of war. To break the link with the past the monument would need to be decoupled from the nation-state and its establishment would also demand a decontested focus: on war as horror and tragedy. But does one master narrative have to prevail? A perspective that values social cohesion might argue yes. But another direction would be to recognise Japan as a pluralistic society, one that takes the presence of contestation and difference as part of the process of the nation.

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