

The Commemoration of the War Dead and the Reconstruction of Social Consensus:
A Case Study of Post WWII Japan

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate the process of finding reunion over the commemoration of painful issues such as lost wars and the incurrence of war dead. Taking as a back ground previous research into the commemoration of lost wars, this paper studies the alternation of considerably significant components throughout the different stages of the commemorative process.

The establishment of the Memorial Service for the War Dead (=MSWD) in post WWII Japan is introduced in this paper as a relatively successful case of one nation finding consensus over the commemoration of a difficult past. After Japan gained its independence in 1952, the first MSWD had been conducted. Though being highly desirable, MSWD brought a lot of contradictions over the evaluation of war itself and triggered the contradictions over the evaluation of the war dead as well. Thus, MSWD has been conducted on an annual basis only since 1963. Nowadays MSWD became a routine event that hardly meets any arguments or protests.

This paper grasps the alternating perceptions of past events and its reflection in the memorial

Introduction

It is generally accepted that glorious wars as a collective experience sustain an integration of the society and reinforce its national identity (Mosse 1990). However, if a war was politically controversial and ended with defeat, the memories of it are rather disintegrative. Such a “conflict of memories” (Burke 1989:106) over the war and war dead make a commemoration too hard to handle.

The study of the commemoration of lost wars introduces to us three essential components for finding reunion over the commemoration of war dead (Olick 1999, Schwartz 1991). They are 1) vaguely defining the image of war, 2) separating people and the event, 3) finding just reason for evaluating them positively. Though, the importance of these components had been verified by a number of outstanding researches, there is no vivid explanation of how each components works.

Based on these theoretical frameworks, this paper aims to show the role that these above components play in the crystallization of a positive evaluation of the war dead. For the case study, this paper focuses on the establishment of a Memorial Service for the War Dead (=MSWD) in post WWII Japan.

1. The Significance of the Japanese Case Study and Approaches

The case of MSWD in post war Japan has been chosen as a relatively successful one in finding consensus over such a painful issue. Nowadays Japan identifies itself as a ‘peaceful nation’ and officially commemorates its war dead, though at the end of WWII Allied Forces stopped all privileges for veterans and bereaved families as a part of the demilitarization policy, aiming to prevent Japan from becoming an aggressive military power ever again (Orr 2001). For this reason the question of the commemoration of war dead had never been raised during the occupation. The first Memorial Service for the war dead (MSWD) was held on May 2 in 1952. It was one of the first things that had been done by the government after gaining actual independence on April 28 in 1952.

In those days, Japanese society was seeking a way to commemorate the war dead, but at the same time it was divided into two conflicting groups according their attitude towards the evaluation of the war. The discourse within Japanese society can be illustrated by the following table (Tab.1).

Tab. 1 Discourse over evaluating war and war dead in post WWII Japan

Cost	Discourse over evaluating of war		Cost
- Antagonism with allies	Evaluation of war: positive	Evaluation of war: negative	+ Bind Japan with the allies
-Antagonism within Japanese society	↓	↓	- Antagonism with Japanese society over humiliating its own history
-Associating people with prewar policy	Evaluation of war dead: Heroes sacrificed their lives	Evaluation of war dead: Victims misled by the government	+ Distance people from prewar policy
-Implies burden of responsibility for war atrocities	↓	↓	+ Takes burden of responsibility from ordinary people
+ Avoid national trauma	Reason for justification: Sacrificing life is honorable	Reason for justification: ?	+ National trauma

* + positive costs - negative costs

These contradictions didn't allow for the MSWD to become an annual event in 1952; however since 1963 it has been conducted on an annual basis. This illustrates that it had been accepted by society. Though conflicting memories and ambivalence over the perception of prewar policy and war still exist, they are centered specifically on the Yasukuni Shrine commemoration service. In opposition to this, MSWD is a routing event that hardly meets any arguments or protests.

This paper aims to make clear the reasons why MSWD could overcome conflicting memories. In order to grasp the reasoning behind the commemoration of the war dead and the symbolic framework that has since crystallized, this paper will analyze the News Letter of the Bereaved Families Association (=BFA) – Nihon Izoku Tsushin (=IT 1976), the speeches of the officials during the MSWD.

2. Controversy in the BFA over the Recollection of the War and the War Dead during the Occupation Period

The BFA of those days was highly controversial in regards to their attitude towards the war and to the war dead. This controversy is screened on the pages of Izoku Tsushin, where opinions of members are published without any remarks. These opinions vary from treating the war dead as heroes to treating them as victims of misled policy and goes even further to treating them as cowardly people who could not protest a questionable war (IT 1949.12.25). Nevertheless, in spite of this controversy, all members of the BFA desired some service for commemorating their war dead. Some of them recon that is worthy to commemorate those who “burning with feeling of patriotism dedicated their precious life to the country” (IT 1949.12.25), and some of them insisted that the government should take the responsibility for the victims of its mistaken policy (IT 1951.12.1).

It was obvious that neither dedicating one's life for one's country nor treating the war dead as victims of a political mistake would ever meet with full consensus in the BFA. This controversy made it problematic to find an acceptable positive framework for the commemoration of the war dead.

3. The first Memorial Service for the War Dead in 1952

The first MSWD had been held on May 2 in 1952. Official speeches during the service had been made by the Prime Minister, the Chairman of the House of Councillors (=Chairman HC), the Chairman of House of Representatives (=Chairman HR) and the Chief Justice of the

Supreme Court. From their speeches we can guess that there was no consensus among them in attitude towards the war.

Two of them – the Chairman of HR and the Chief Justice - acknowledged war as a fatal mistaken policy that had been committed (IT, May 5, 1952). Positive evaluation of the war could not be shared in public by the officials, but the fact that both the Prime Minister and the Chairman of HR skipped this item signals that they were not sharing the opinion of the other two speakers.

There was no consensus among them in their evaluation of the war dead as well. The Chairman of HC worships the war dead as heroes. The other three speakers treat them as loyal citizens who gave their lives for their country. But if war was to be considered morally questionable, this explanation seems not enough to glorify the war dead based solely by their participation in a war. Here an interrelation of the war dead and peace appear to redeem the war dead. For example, in his speech, Prime Minister Yoshida Sigeru refers to the war dead as a “cornerstone of peace and democratic development” (IT 1952.5.5).

After analyzing the speeches we can understand that the reasons MSWD had not become an annual event till 1963 were implicated in the service itself. First, there was no consensus about the evaluation of the war. Second, the service failed to give an explanation as to why the war dead lost their lives. The symbol of peace was used for evaluating them, though because of ambiguity over the war evaluation, the interconnection of the war dead and peace was quite unclear.

4. A Change in the Perception of the War and the War Dead in BFA after 1952

The group most concerned about the restart of the memorial service was the BFA. Since basic laws providing aid, pensions and condolence payment for bereaved families had been established in 1953, their main activity shifted to receiving official recognition (KE 1997:36-37), and then since 1956, worshiping spirits of war dead in the Yasukuni Shrine turned to be one of BFA's main aims (Nihon Izokukai 1976). This change meant that the BFA was getting closer in its position to the right wing.

Nevertheless, an obvious contradiction among members over evaluating the war and war dead still remained. The edge of this contradiction coincided with the generation gap and can be illustrated through the following examples.

Literary critic Tanaka Tadao argued that he would never agree with the assertion that people who died fighting in this war died for nothing. He assumes that the evaluation of the war must be put aside, because in case of war all countries involved are equally responsible for it, and to consider Japan alone responsible for this war is unfair (IT 1956.6.30).

In the report from the workshop of the children of bereaved families we can find an absolute opposite opinion. In the article “Strong will for Peace” it is argued that the older generation had been glorifying the principle of sacrificing one’s life for one’s country as an unquestionable rule for everyone. The article blames previous generations for trying to deceive themselves by finding grace in those that actually had been mistaken in the policy making (IT 1959.9.30).

This drastically opposite views, published in the news letter of the BFA of those days, illustrated that those views were not just a single opinion, but had been shared widely among the members of the BFA. This ambivalence in the BFA is the cornerstone for understanding “The report on the worshiping of the war dead” that had been accepted as a BFA’s policy line in 1962 (Nihon Izokukai 1987:205-208), where the change on their perception of the war and the war dead was reflected.

First of all, the definition of war turned out to be too vague. The war was referred to as a “fatal disaster that overcame the destructiveness natural disaster” (Nihon Izokukai 1987:39). The evaluation of the role of the war dead was also quite ambiguous. According to this report, the war dead were “honorable victims dedicating their lives for peace and safety of the country” (Nihon Izokukai 1987:39).

Here we can see two achievements that were gained in the process of finding consensus between the members. War, in the report, is depicted as an event that is uncontrolled by human will, which makes it possible not to question the role Japan played in it. The war dead are taken as a victims and their death evaluated positively through the symbol of peace.

5. MSWD in 1963

In the 1960’s, the sustained economic growth of Japan changed the consciousness of the Japanese people. They were no longer treating Japan as a former military power in need of recognition by the international society. This triggered an interest in the creation of a national identity, reevaluating the past and the war dead and their place in Japanese history.

Talks about the service for war dead in the Diet were restarted in 1963. The Minister of Welfare, Mr. Nishimura, assumed that in the budget of 1963 the expenses for conducting the service had been built-in, because those who dedicated their lives to the country were to be remembered irrelevantly to the evaluation of the war (KG, Nishimura 1963.7.5). There was a consensus over the necessity to conduct the service between the ruling party, the LDP, and its opposition – the SDP. Furthermore, both parties treated the service as a “prayer for peace” (KG, Nishimura 1963.7.5). The only contradiction was about the predominance of the military servants in the MSWD over the number of civilians that were present. This unbalance in representation had not been resolved and as a result, the service for war dead that had been held

on August 15 was ignored by representatives of the SDP.

Nevertheless, the service took place and it was patterned in its procedure on the service that had been held in 1952. The speeches were made by the same actors, but the content of the speeches articulated during the service in 1963 changed significantly.

The most drastic change happened in the perception of the war. All speakers depicted war as a vile atrocity, emphasizing its cruelty, while underlining the sufferings of the Japanese people during the war. The War was articulated rather as a cause of the death, but there were no mentionings of the role Japan played in this war.

The ambiguity over the evaluation of the war dead still remained. Some of the speakers treated them as heroes, while some treated them as victims. What significantly changed from the previous service was an interconnection between the war dead and the symbol of peace that appeared to be more obvious and unquestionable.

Those who treated the war dead as heroes emphasized that the current peace and prosperity were the direct result of the courage and dedication of the war dead (IT 1963.9.15). Those who treated the war dead as victims, as did Chief Justice Yokota Kisaburo, emphasized that remembering the war dead is the only way to make certain the atrocities of war will never happen again (IT 1963.9.15). Though, controversy over the evaluation of the war dead still exists, there was a consensus among the people of different political views over accepting gained peace as justification for glorifying the war dead. It happened because peace as a symbol is quite ambivalent and accommodates a wide span of commemorative meaning.

Thus, the importance of evaluating the role Japan played in WWII decreased after the war became depicted as an uncontrollable harmful action regardless of any human intervention. This change in perception eliminated the need for separating the event from its participants, as they were easily interrelated to the symbol of peace.

6. Conclusion

Through an analysis of the two MSWD's, we can notice that the components considered to be of importance when finding reunion over the commemoration of war dead are significant, but their importance has been altered through the process of settling on a common policy in regards to the establishment of a memorial service.

On the stage, when a society is divided by contradictions over the evaluation of a war, a separation of both the event and its participants plays an essential role in regards to how one conducts a memorial service.

However, when the image of war has been blurred, a separation of the event and its participants is no longer critical. As seen in the MSWD that took place in 1963, when the

perception of war became one of war as an uncontrolled disaster, the moral aspects of one's participation in war were no longer being questioned. Instead, the role of the symbolic framework for a more positive evaluation of the war dead gains its importance. It is here that the potential for the symbol to accommodate a wide span of commemorative meanings becomes significant.

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