

The “Unrelated” Spirits of Aoyama Cemetery: A 21st Century Reckoning with the Foreign Employees of the Meiji Period

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Abstract: During the Meiji Period (1868-1912) the Japanese government hired thousands of foreign employees to accelerate modernization. Many employees were buried at Tokyo’s Aoyama Cemetery. In recent times, the government issued notices of delinquent management fees for those graves whose descendants have not continued to pay for the graves’ upkeep. Threatening to re-bury these employees elsewhere, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government has been engaged in a dispute with a small organization committed to retaining the employees’ legacy. Utilizing firsthand interviews with those directly involved, this article analyzes that conflict—of history, economic development, memory, and memorialization—as a struggle between the “spirits” of the foreign employees and the spirit of Japan’s modernization.

Keywords: Meiji, foreign employees, foreign advisors, modernization, memorialization, preservation, Aoyama Cemetery, Civilization and Enlightenment, westernization

Old Japan is dead, and the only decent thing to do with the corpse is to bury it. Then you can set up a monument over it, and, if you like, come and worship from time to time...

- Basil Hall Chamberlain, Things Japanese

In a sense, knowledge, once produced, has the capacity to live its own life autonomously from the original intentions of those who produced it in the first place.

- Federico Marcon, The Knowledge of Nature and the Nature of Knowledge in Early Modern Japan

Why do we not care to acknowledge them? ... All this mourning has veiled the truth... there’s no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it.

- Alan Bennett, The History Boys

The Foreign Employee of Meiji Japan1

With the urgency of seeking out “knowledge throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundations of Imperial Rule,” in 1868 Japan set the decision in motion to begin importing thousands of foreign employees. Yet, in subtle ways, modern Japan continues to diminish the lives and contributions of these immigrants, leaving their legacy to a handful of people determined to preserve their history. The story of the foreign employees of Aoyama Cemetery is as much about their 19th century contributions to Japanese modernization as it is about their 21st century remains. Referred to as the oyatoi gaikokujin, these foreign employees are often associated with the “civilization and enlightenment” (bunmei kaika)

policies of the time. Their most striking remnant is a legacy of rapid, multifaceted development that propelled Japan firmly onto the international stage alongside the west. Less obvious is the issue of the resting place for their physical remains and commemoration.

The final resting place of many of these foreign employees is in the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery in Tokyo. There, we can see their significance, even today, as they lay quietly enmeshed within a complex narrative of continued economic development and modernization.

Recent controversies surrounding the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery allow us to analyze the legacy of the foreign employee within the context of the very modernity that they facilitated.

With an eye to revising the unequal treaties and abolishing extraterritoriality, the Charter Oath of 1868 (*gokajō no goseimon*) dictated an ideology of “catching up with the west” by abandoning “the evil customs of the past,” (*kyūrai no rōshū wo yaburi*) and seeking out “knowledge throughout the world so as to strengthen the foundations of Imperial rule” (*chishiki wo sekai ni motome hiroku kōki wo furiokosubeshi*)². Meiji state leaders and intellectuals wanted the benefits of an industrial society, but wanted to expedite the process by avoiding the mistakes and roadblocks encountered during the peak of initial western industrialization.³ With these goals and convictions firmly in place, hiring of foreign employees with these purposes began.

Over three thousand experts in fields such as politics, education, law, finance, diplomacy, the arts, medicine, industrial architecture, and various other technologies, were hired. At Tokyo University alone we can see evidence of their impact; the *oyatoi gaikokujin* had a hand in teaching over 12,000 Japanese graduates.⁴ In all, it has been suggested that the foreign employees of Meiji Japan contributed the

equivalent of some ten thousand years of service between 1868 and 1912, with much of the progress occurring within the first fifteen years of the program.⁵ Contemporaneously, the salaries of *oyatoi gaikokujin* attest to both the literal and figurative value the Japanese government assigned to them in pursuit of modernization. Foreign employee salaries as a whole accounted for two percent of Japan’s national spending and often exceeded that of contemporaneous Japanese “generals, admirals, chief officials, department ministers, inner council chairmen, or councilors.” Several foreign employee salaries even exceeded that of the prime minister.⁶

Salaries and revised treaties, however, are not necessarily indicative of harmony and goodwill between the foreign employees and their Japanese employers. Often considered nothing more than pragmatic functionaries of national purpose—rented “live machines and living reference books” to be rapidly replaced with dependable Japanese counterparts—friction and cross-purposes are evident in the attitudes of the Japanese who employed these foreigners.⁷ Among the foreign employees themselves there were those who found the relentless march of westernization in Japan distasteful (see epigraph no. 1). Dissent, however, took more definitive forms as well.

As Marilyn Ivy writes, the newfound modernizing rhetoric and policies of Meiji Japan gave rise to “new kinds of political associations and groups” that clashed with the state’s vision: “The state became increasingly aware of the destabilizing social forces that modernization could unleash and came to temper its calls for advancement with appeals to time-honored ‘tradition.’”⁸

With the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Commerce and Navigation (*nichi-ei tsūshō kōkai jōyaku*) in 1894 came the end of extraterritoriality and the unequal treaties in Japan, and along with it the end of the foreign

employee program in 1899. While in China extraterritoriality left a “legacy of deeply felt suspicions towards international law, international organizations, and more recently, human rights,”⁹ in Japan—perhaps as a result of the rapid-pace of modernization partially induced by Japan’s foreign employees—it served as a foundation for what one scholar calls the “historically formed character of the [modern-day] conservative elite” in Japan—namely, pragmatism, realism, and opportunism. Put another way, the Meiji elites’ awareness of, and willingness to get ahead by internally emulating advanced, industrialized nations in the name of the “external goal of catching up with the West”—as partially evidenced by the oyatoi gaikokujin—represents not an isolated moment in Japan’s international relations, but a shift towards what is recognizable today as a characteristic of Japan’s national and international posturing.¹⁰

The influence of the foreign employees of Meiji Japan was problematic both during their time and beyond. One would think that being dead would make the oyatoi gaikokujin less troublesome for the Japanese elite, but the opposite is true. In general, the problematic specters of both their modernizing and destabilizing influence is evident, even today, at Aoyama Cemetery’s Foreign Section.

Aoyama Cemetery

According to Tokyo Parks Commission (tōkyōto kōen shingikai), Aoyama Cemetery was initially used for nobility immediately following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and transitioned to a space for Shinto funerals during the Abolish Buddhism, Destroy Shakyamuni (haibutsu kishaku undō) movement shortly thereafter. In 1872 it was designated as an official Shinto cemetery and then a public cemetery where many government officials were buried.

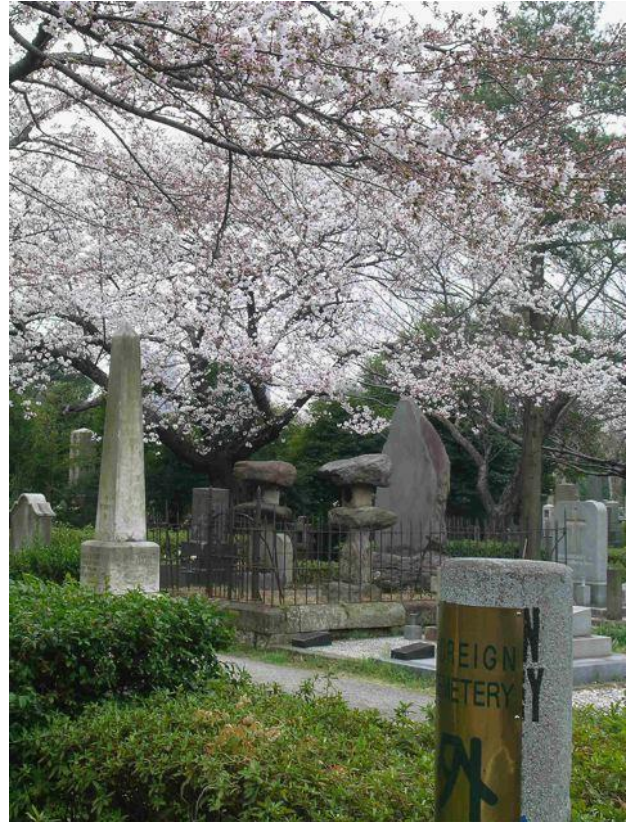


Image 1

Aoyama Cemetery's Foreign Section.

Image credit: [Foreign Section Trust website](#)

In 1876 Tokyo Prefecture took control of the land, and with that acquisition a debate about how best to use the space emerged. At the end of World War II it was proposed to turn the graveyard exclusively into a park, but by 2003 the government decided instead on a policy of treating the land as both a “park” and a “cemetery.” Such a proposal, however, set in motion large-scale development that can be broken into three basic categories: 1) the consolidation of empty graves and/or graves without relatives (muen funbo); 2) the creation of plazas; and 3) the promotion of specific sites as historically significant.¹¹ In spite of this dual cemetery-park designation, today benches have

been removed, hanami (flower-viewing) has been banned for years, and park security routinely patrols the Foreign Section to “move people along.”¹² Yet the Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s decision to become the unilateral arbiters of historical significance in this manner is what’s most problematic.

Though there is debate over how best to utilize the space where the oyatoi gaikokujin are interred, there is no comparable debate over the financial implications. It is no surprise that Aoyama Cemetery, bordering on the bustling Roppongi district of Tokyo, is subject to ceaseless reimagining, rebuilding, and general development. In 2015, the Mitsubishi Jisho Property Management Company constructed a seven-story condominium called the Parkhouse Gran Minami Aoyama near Aoyama Cemetery; and this development sold out on the first day of sales with an average of 9.6 buyers vying for each apartment. Current resale prices in the building range from 2.4 to 3.95 million yen per square meter.¹³ These prices are high, even for the most populous and central wards of Tokyo, where four-bedroom apartments with kitchens and a living/dining area (sometimes referred to as 4LDK) rent for an average of 1 million yen per month.¹⁴

In 2017, the same developer began work on a “new luxury apartment building” just 300 meters from The Parkhouse Gran Minami Aoyama. Referred to as the “Parkhouse Gran Minami Aoyama 4 Chome,” this new low-rise apartment building was completed in 2019 and is directly opposite the cemetery-park. Rent runs as high as 1.85 million yen (over 17,000 USD) per month, and land values at nearby survey sites were reported by the government as 2 million yen per square meter in 2016 and as much as 6.68 million yen per square meter as of 2019. The proximity to Aoyama Cemetery’s greenery in both cases contributes to the worth of the new properties. The draw, it seems, is to the rarified combination of both natural greenery and easy access to bustling

Tokyo modernity rather than any attraction to the area’s historical significance.¹⁵

Being buried in Aoyama Cemetery in more modern times is similarly exclusive (and expensive). In 2017, CNN published an article titled “Asia’s Futuristic Take on Death,” which contrasted the new and high-tech mechanisms of dealing with the deceased; in particular the article characterized burials at Aoyama as backward, cost-ineffective, and requiring an investment of as much as 10 million yen (100,000 USD) per plot.¹⁶ In late 2003, a “rare, public sale of burial plots [at Aoyama Cemetery] attracted more than 40 applicants for every available space despite prices,” wherein 2,205 people applied for only 50 plots (some as small as 1.6 square meters) with “winners” determined by drawing lots. One article ironically referred to this public sale as the “opportunity of a lifetime”: The last time Aoyama Cemetery had available space for new “residents” was in 1960.¹⁷ This trend has continued as recently as 2020, according to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government website, when a lottery was held for 54 new plots at the Aoyama Cemetery. Spaces between 1.5 and 3.5 square meters sold for between 4.5 million yen and 10 million yen and was restricted to people who have resided in the city continuously for more than 5 years.¹⁸

While these instances are in sharp contrast to a recent trend in Japan among younger generations to both view traditional “funerals as unnecessary” and to seek out less expensive and more eco-friendly alternatives, reforming and consolidating the valuable Tokyo cemeteries for the purposes of continued development is not a new problem.¹⁹ Even during the Meiji Period, “re-building Tokyo was one of the most urgent requirements to ‘modernise’ the nation. In the process, many existing structures had to be removed. Moving burial grounds presented special problems.”²⁰ With the ceaselessly expansionist and opportunistic tendencies of developers ever

encroaching on, and benefiting from, the greenery of the cemetery-park, the question becomes: Where did the new space at Aoyama Cemetery come from?

Consolidating the Dead

One answer seems to be, as in the past, the “special problems” of dealing with burial sites: the removal, or consolidation, of existing graves. The Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery is home to several hundred oyatoi gaikokujin and their immediate families. In October 2004, almost one hundred white eviction notices, otherwise called delinquency or meun (“unrelated,” or “without relatives”) notices, were publicly posted on the sites of those foreign employee graves that had failed to pay their maintenance fees. The signs—which listed then Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō as the “reburial authority” and came from the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building in Shinjuku—read as follows:

Notice from the City of Tokyo. In order to maintain the cemetery, unattended graves will be reburied. Persons with a rightful connection to the deceased and the grave are asked to please contact the office listed below within one year from the date listed below. In cases where no one comes forward during the timeframe, please understand that the remains will be considered unattended and subject to reburial. Date: October 1, 2004.²¹



Image 2

Example of a notice on a grave in the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery.

Image credit: Foreign Section Trust website.

On February 18, 2005, a brief article in the Yomiuri Shimbun titled “Delinquent Administrative Fees of the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery” (Kanrihi minō no aoyama gaikokujin bochi) referenced the situation, quoting Takahashi Yūzō, a science historian at the Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology: “Forgetting those who devoted themselves to the modernization of Japan would be unbearable. It would be welcome if it were preserved. In the case of foreigners, being in arrears with the payment of the administrative fees is unavoidable. I would like the targets of [the Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s] preservation to be as broad as possible.”²²

In early 2005, a member of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Construction Cemeteries Division noted that Aoyama Cemetery had been subject to various plans for reclaiming, revising, converting, and “cleaning up” since as early as 1950, but the Foreign Section was not a part of those plans until 2003. In 2004 the meun notices went up.²³

The same representatives openly admitted that there was “a financial incentive to reclaiming the land.”²⁴ The connection between the delinquency notices on the foreign employee’s graves and the sale of more than fifty new burial plots is difficult to disregard.

At the heart of the controversy are the bookkeeping postures of the Meiji state. One major issue of studying the oyatoi gaikokujin in general, is the “fragmentation of existing records and the futility of transliterating kana.” That is, in spite of contemporaneous directives to use romanization when cataloguing foreign names, much of the Meiji Period bookkeeping excluded given names and used the Japanese syllabary (kana) exclusively. The result being that determining the accurate spelling and full names of many foreign employees is often impossible.²⁵ With complications stretching into the current era and to the unknown graves at Aoyama Cemetery’s Foreign Section, the issues extend far beyond the realm of arbitrary historical concern.

Muen (literally: “unrelated”) graves, as described by Sebastien Boret in *Death and Dying in Contemporary Japan*,

constitute...an antithesis to benevolent and proper ancestors. The dead that have not been properly cared for by the living members of their households are said to be wandering around their grave in a state of perpetual melancholy. In some cases, unrelated spirits are considered as threatening. In this vein, communities and temples have traditionally, out of compassion and/or fear, held special rituals for the uncared-for dying in their vicinity.²⁶

For the “unrelated” spirits of the oyatoi gaikokujin at Aoyama Cemetery, this role, typically unfillable by unreachable ancestors, seemed likely to remain unaddressed.

Preserving the Dead

The February 2, 2005 article in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, as well as the newly posted eviction notices, caught the eye of a few concerned citizens and led them to establish a group called the Foreign Legacy Society and, subsequently, to establish an entity called the Foreign Section Trust. Their express purpose was to find a way to preserve and maintain Aoyama Cemetery’s Foreign Section. And yet, only a few short years later, the associated websites and emails for these associations were all but defunct.

In a 2018 interview, founding member and historical preservation advocate Jonathan Wilder explained that the early efforts by the Society were “naïve” to think they could simply raise funds and pay for the maintenance fees. In spite of the ensuing complications and bureaucratic roadblocks, the group had humble beginnings:



Image 3

Monument unveiling at the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery, April 2007.

Image credit: Foreign Section Trust website.

My connection to the Foreign Section in Aoyama Cemetery started around 1993. It's a history of many years taking walks through the cemetery and holding hanami (cherry blossom viewing parties). In my circle of friends, my wife and I were the first to notice the 'muen' signs—notifications of grave removal for non-payment of fees. The Foreign Section Trust was established by a group of volunteers, mostly our friends, that felt it was important to preserve the cemetery in its entirety, as all of its 'members' form a fabric representing those who came to Japan for many reasons, including to lend their expertise in its drive for modernization. Each grave tells a story and together they form a community.²⁷

The Society, comprised, at times, of more than thirty members, eventually approached the management of Aoyama Cemetery directly about their cause. The management office insisted that they “had their hands tied in this incident and kept referring us to the Bureau of Construction...” Pressured by the Foreign Legacy Society, Aoyama Cemetery management eventually claimed that the whole thing had become an “international incident.”²⁸

To Wilder, the predominant problems that still face the Foreign Section at Aoyama Cemetery is the constant governmental emphasis on deciding which graves were and which were not important enough to warrant preservation. The Society met with the Bureau of Construction (Tōkyōto kensetsukyoku) in 2005 and shortly thereafter with the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, then led by Governor Ishihara; in that meeting, the government elaborated a plan to “preserve the important graves, remove the unimportant ones, and build a monument.”

When questioned as to how they would determine who was and was not important, “the response was an acknowledgment that it

would be difficult to do so.” And yet, in spite of those difficulties, the city was able to make these determinations and old, now publicly unavailable maps of Aoyama Cemetery divided the graves into those categories.²⁹ Wilder is quick to point out the minor inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and what he calls “injustice[s]” of these unilateral decisions:

For decades the city had waived the fees, but after a couple of generations of relatives drifting off, it would be difficult to find relatives, especially for those who were not famous, and so we continued our efforts... [but then] initial interest faded.³⁰

The Foreign Section Trust broadcast their grievances: They were interviewed and cited in several articles, on several websites, and even produced a podcast showcasing notable “residents” of the Foreign Section in order to bring attention to the issue.

In a newspaper article published in Scotland, Wilder asked: “Who is to say who was important? Who is going to decide whether this infant here or that missionary’s wife were not important? They were all important to someone.”³¹ As a result of the Foreign Legacy Society’s efforts, former British Ambassador to Tokyo Sir Hugh Cortazzi was quoted as being “appalled” at the situation, noting that “the relatives after over a century are almost certainly untraceable and the bureaucrats who issued the notice must have realized this and thought this would ensure the graves could be removed.”³²

Furthermore, the Society was aware that similarly euphemistic “renovations” and “cleaning up” of parks and public spaces in the Tokyo area had become semi-permanent, multi-year endeavors; the results of which succeeded only in driving a wedge between the citizens who used the space and the government’s agenda.³³ History was not the only thing at stake. To circumvent similar fates befalling

Aoyama Cemetery, the Foreign Legacy Society even went so far as to offer to shoulder all of the costs of muen grave maintenance.³⁴

Members of the Bureau of Construction, however, cited regulations that stipulated only relatives could pay muen fees. According to the Foreign Section Trust website, the Bureau representatives could not cite the legal source of their claims. Undeterred, the Foreign Legacy Society continued to be, as Wilder put it, a “thorn in the side” of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.³⁵ The Trust filed to become a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) or a Non-Profit Organization (NPO) and began meeting with lawyers and filing Freedom of Information Act requests with the intention of legally being able to provide a “safety net” for the unclaimed graves. Only after the Tokyo Metropolitan Government had “issued a tender, received bids, and chose a contractor” did they comply. Responding to their aggressive campaign, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government refused to communicate further with the Society.³⁶ In spite of these efforts, the government plans indicated that the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery would be “remodeled” and a memorial installed.³⁷

In response to Tokyo’s new plans, the Society had one last meeting and made one last attempt at diplomacy with a multifaceted letter cataloguing their arguments and concerns. The letter, sent in January, 2007, addressed various issues: the schedule, the environmental impact, physical preservation, and dissemination of historical information at the site, among others. The letter placed the Aoyama Cemetery Foreign Section renovation plans in line with Japan’s tendency to turn a blind eye to its own history, stating: “Japan is sometimes criticized for not paying enough attention to its history. ... A focus on infrastructural improvement can be perceived as another instance of that habit.” Regarding the proposed monument itself, the Trust’s letter stated:

We are grateful for Governor Ishihara's attention and sincerely appreciate his initiative to recognize the contribution of foreigners to building Japan. However, we believe than monuments have some unexpected consequences. ... It is a common practice to replace historic sites with historic monuments. We worry that the existence of a monument will justify the future removal of the graves so honored... We recommend preserving the Foreign Section as a historical site, rather than memorializing it. [This] would serve the city and country better than a monument.³⁸

In response (according to the Foreign Section Trust) the Tokyo Metropolitan Government explained that “the only way to temporarily stop the construction is if a bomb is found on the site, or if a politician talks about it in the Diet, or many people demonstrate in front of the office in charge of construction.”³⁹ In other words, there was no further recourse for the Foreign Legacy Society.

Memorializing the Dead

In April 2007, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government unveiled a stone monument to the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery. The memorial cost approximately forty-five million yen; the event was attended by a few relatives, functionaries from the Parks and Cemeteries Construction Bureau, and members of the press. Governor Ishihara, whose name adorns the memorial itself, was notably absent.⁴⁰ The monument reads, simply (in English and Japanese):

Laid to rest here in the Foreign Section of the Aoyama Cemetery are men and women who came to Japan in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of them played leading roles in contributed greatly to the modernization of Japan. We have erected

this monument to commemorate their achievements and ensure their memory is passed on to posterity.

Shortly thereafter, the Foreign Section Trust website criticized Governor Ishihara’s absence as representative of his “well-documented xenophobic, anti-foreigner” tendencies, arguing that the memorial would be used to “quietly subsume the graves of ‘unimportant people,’ which is the intent of erecting the stone to begin with.”⁴¹ Following up on this statement, Jonathan Wilder explains:

The city made a brilliant move in making a memorial. It acknowledges the role of foreigners, but it comes from a notorious foreigner basher, Ishihara. He didn’t attend the unveiling ceremony, which speaks to his actual level of involvement. Typically, in Japan, when a bunch of graves comprising a single group of people becomes ‘muen,’ the organization behind the group of graves can ‘consolidate’ all the graves into one memorial. I suppose since there is no single organization that is common to all the foreigners, the Ishihara-signed memorial could conceivably be employed for just that purpose a hundred or so years from now when many more graves will become ‘muen.’ After all, Aoyama Cemetery is prime real estate and the city plans are not just in one- or five-year increments.⁴²

The foreign employees of the Meiji Period, for all their contributions, were decidedly out of sync with the spirit of Japan. As Basil Hall Chamberlain (himself an oyatoi gaikokujin) noted in Things Japanese: “There is nothing picturesque in the foreign employé [sic]. With his club, his tennis-ground, and his brick house, and his wife’s piano, and the rest of the European entourage which he strives to create around him in order sometimes to forget his exile, he strikes a false note.”⁴³ Such thinking seems to parallel the stance the Tokyo

Metropolitan Government is taking towards the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery.



Image 4

Memorial stone installed in the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery. Image credit: Foreign Section Trust website

In late 2007 an additional metal sign and map of the Foreign Section was erected next to the memorial stone. This sign, written entirely in Japanese, contains general historical information, a map of the space, and a list of names. Notably, the sign states that “The graves are maintained by their descendants and relatives. It has been decided that the graves whose relatives have returned to their home countries and no longer have anybody to manage them after 2006 are to be maintained

by the city of Tokyo.”⁴⁴



Image 5

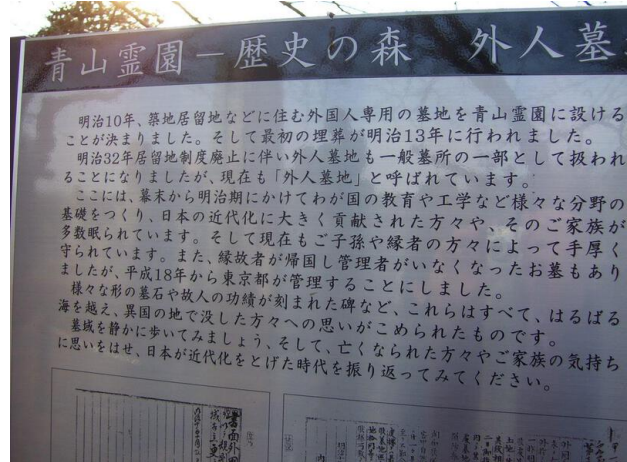


Image 7

Images of the metal sign erected in the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery.

Image credit: Foreign Section Trust website

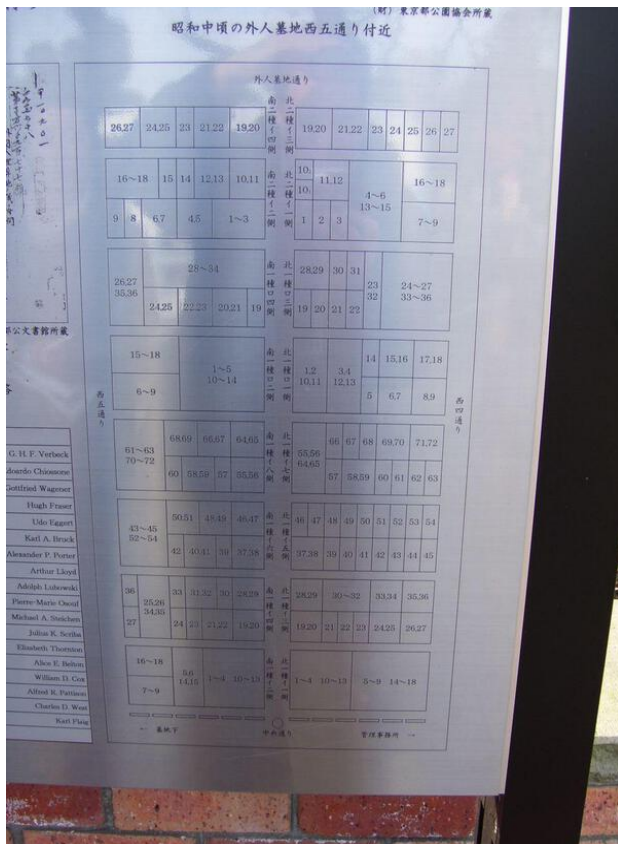


Image 6

One might think that having both of these memorials in the Foreign Section, ostensibly suggesting a degree of recapitulation by the government, would assuage any remaining concerns on the part of the Foreign Legacy Society. However, to the contrary: the 2007 sign validated their worries. Older maps of the Foreign Section at Aoyama Cemetery once divided graves into “important” and ostensibly “unimportant” categories; although the delineation was precisely the concern voiced by the Foreign Legacy Society, it implied, in the very least, a chance at historical redemption. The new sign, however, permanently laser-etched in metal, does not attempt to acknowledge those unidentified or “unimportant” graves. “Certainly graves have been removed...[and] future removals are always possible as [more] graves become muen,” Wilder noted in a 2021 interview.⁴⁵ During the same conversation he further commented that he did not know “how long the government said that maintenance fees did not

have to be paid on the graves in the foreign section,” and indicated that, regardless, all of the graves were still subject to possible relocation—or even “mass removal....after a certain number of generations, unless they have historical importance—the government reserves the right to pick and choose.”⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the way has been paved—or erected—so that progress can quietly march on as suggested by the trend of treatment of the foreigners who were buried there and the removal of the less important names from the signage. Given the loss of organizations like the Foreign Legacy Society and the Foreign Section Trust, the vulnerability and implicit challenge to the sanctity of the graves of those unidentified individuals remains.

In other words, it is reasonable to argue that this 21st century challenge should not come as overly surprising, given Japan’s historical approach to international relations and its treatment of the nation’s foreign population. These tendencies are evident in the struggle at Aoyama Cemetery. The overall historical legacy of the foreign employees of the Meiji Period seems to be recognized as one of rapid, sweeping reforms for Japan, yet their influence was as much one of industrial and economic reform as it was of the Japanese government willingly destabilizing its internal makeup in the name of long-term opportunity.

Likewise, just as there is clearly long-term opportunity and financial incentive that may contribute to further changes in Aoyama Cemetery, there is a clear history of treating the oyatoi gaikokujin as “use-and-discard” machines in the name of national development.⁴⁷ Two possible paths have thus become evident. Will the foreign employees interred in the Foreign Section of Aoyama Cemetery continue—even in the 21st century, even in death—be exploited, consolidated, and replaced as they were during the Meiji era? Or will their graves come to demarcate a place of

worthy of historical preservation and acknowledgement?

Simply put, the question remains whether or not those buried at Aoyama Cemetery will be forever unrelated “foreigners,” “advisors,” and “employees,” or if their final resting place will be a quiet nod to the pivotal contributions, both “important” and “unimportant,” of those who helped to transform Japan.

Conclusion

During the Meiji Period, the removal of a foreign employee from service, either through death or retirement, was no small matter. The 1870 official guidelines set out by the Meiji government on Instructions for Hiring Foreigners, as well as the 1873 revisions to those guidelines, both included articles specifically explaining the gravitas surrounding the death of a foreign employee, including posthumous grants to their families.⁴⁸

The contrast with the present day is striking. The government now appears to be less committed than in the Meiji Period to protecting the sanctity of the cemetery and its deceased foreign employees. With the kind of money at stake with property in Aoyama and elsewhere in Tokyo, as well as the trajectory of diminishing identity in the Foreign Section thus far, it is difficult to say that the Tokyo Metropolitan Government’s unwillingness to completely lock “themselves into the something they can’t change when circumstances are favorable”⁴⁹ is surprising. Memorialization, in other words, is not the same as historical preservation. According to the Foreign Section Trust, the signs erected in Aoyama Cemetery do not guarantee permanent preservation of the physical remains, but indicate a further step towards potentially consolidating and removing some graves with the establishment of a memorial.⁵⁰ In the absence of a more solid guarantee from the Tokyo Metropolitan

Government, and over the course of further generations, the ancestors of those “unrelated” graves at Aoyama Cemetery’s Foreign Section will become ever more obscure, and the physical remains themselves more likely to be reburied so the land could potentially be sold.

Not surprising is the fact that the two memorials dealt a major blow to the Foreign Legacy Society and the Foreign Section Trust, who hoped, in a sense, to function as surrogate ancestors for the muen and “unrelated” graves of Aoyama Cemetery. As the founder of the Society recalls, those initial members “who were qualified to negotiate” with high-ranking Japanese bureaucrats “came to the conclusion (rather quickly) that it was futile” to gain elite Japanese support.⁵¹ In light of the high value of the land, as well as the governor’s position and the perspective of Japanese bureaucrats, the group was never granted NPO or NGO status. Updates on their website became more sporadic, eventually stopping altogether. Senior members of the group “had positions in society they needed to protect and didn’t want to rock the boat”; others were volunteers “solely in the group for one of the graves and didn’t really care about the Foreign Section as a whole. Once those graves were protected—that is, somebody eligible to pay the maintenance fees was found—those people drifted off.”⁵²

The initial passion and zeal seems to have died down as the reason to continue fighting for the Foreign Section was obscured more and more by the memorials installed there. Likewise, what remains of the Foreign Legacy Society, isolated and fragmented by government initiatives and bureaucratic roadblocks, dedicates itself now quietly to cataloguing and researching the remaining oyatoi gaikokujin and their families. In a sense, the memorials are what one scholar calls “monument[s] to an absence, to a loss that must be perpetually recovered.”⁵³ Although subsequent to the Society’s dissolution a comprehensive analysis of any parcels that may

have been removed from Aoyama Cemetery seems unlikely, members of the Society retain their concern that, unbeknownst to them, graves could have been, or will be, removed.

Regardless of Tokyo’s continued maintenance and acknowledgement, the events at Aoyama Cemetery’s Foreign Section signal both a worrying trend towards historical loss and a shift in the way foreign communities are perceived in Japan. As Koga Yukiko puts it, “historical preservation policy has a double face: if one face preserves...the other relentlessly demolishes [that which does] not fall within preservation policy.”⁵⁴ More specifically, these developments indicate a dehumanizing challenge to the legacy, history, and physical record of those foreign employees who played such a vital role in Japan’s modernization. From the Foreign Section Trust’s perspective, the matter is relatively straightforward: “Every grave in the Foreign Section is a part of the community of our forebears,” Wilder says, “and when graves are removed, holes are torn in the fabric of that community.”⁵⁵ Viewed through the lens of these controversies and catalyzed by the economic conditions present in the area surrounding Aoyama Cemetery, it seems that the oyatoi gaikokujin, once proud symbols of modernization, have in effect come increasingly to signify, rather, “imperial debris”⁵⁶ that must be cleared away along with the “evil customs of the past” that they were explicitly hired to overcome.

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Notes

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² Marius B. Jansen, *The Cambridge History of Japan, Volume 5: The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 467, 495; Kenneth Pyle, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1996), 86.

³ Kenneth Pyle, “Advantages of Followership: German Economics and Japanese Bureaucrats, 1890-1925,” in *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1974), 127-129.

⁴ Edward R. Beauchamp and Akira Iriye, *Foreign Employees in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 21.

⁵ Pyle, *The Making of Modern Japan*, 86.

- ⁶ Shigeru Nakayama and Gustav Ranis, “Science and Technology in Modern Japanese Development,” in *Science, Technology, and Economic Development: A Historical and Comparative Study*, edited by William Beranek (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1978), 205; Hazel J. Jones, *Live Machines: Hired Foreigners and Meiji Japan* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 11.
- ⁷ Jones, *Live Machines*, 1.
- ⁸ Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity Phantasm Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 70.
- ⁹ Par Kristoffer Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 182.
- ¹⁰ Kenneth Pyle, *Japan in the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 18, 357.
- ¹¹ Kate Wildman Nakai, “Aoyama bochi no enkaku,” *Ohaka no enja sōsaku purojekuto, Kokusai isan wo mamoru kai*, Accessed: September 26, 2020, ; Tōkyō-to kōen shingikai, “*Kubu reien no kanri ni tsuite’ tōshin, aoyama reien ~rekishi no mori, toki no nagare ga tsumikasanaru akima~*,” December 5, 2002,
- ¹² Plung, Dylan and Jonathan Wilder. “Follow-up Interview with Foreign Section Trust Founding Member Jonathan Wilder.” Digital correspondence. April 6, 2021.
- ¹³ “[New Luxury Apartment Building for Omotesando in 2019](#),” *Japan Property Central*, February 7, 2017; “[The Parkhouse Gran Minami Aoyama 4 Chome Reaches Completion](#),” *Japan Property Central*, February 25, 2019.
- ¹⁴ National Association of Real Estate Transaction Associations, “Average Monthly Rent in Tokyo 23 Wards in JPY - With Breakdown by Central Six Wards and Other 17 Wards - By Layout” quoted in *Real Estate Japan*, “[What is the Average Rent in Tokyo: 2020 Ranking by Ward and Layout](#),” July 6, 2020.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Kate Springer and Junko Ogura, “[Floating Cemeteries and Space Burials: Asia’s Futuristic Take on Death](#),” CNN, Cable News Network, December 4, 2017.
- ¹⁷ Associated Press, “[Tokyo Grave Plots Hot Commodities](#),” *The Japan Times*, August 25, 2003.
- ¹⁸ Tokyo Metropolitan Government, “[Reiwa 2-endo toritsu reien no shiyōsha wo boshū shimasu](#)” *Tosei Jōhō*, May 26, 2020.
- ¹⁹ For a discussion of modern understandings of funerary practices in Japan, see Hikaru Suzuki’s “Price of Mortality - Reinvention of Japanese Death Rituals” in *Death and Dying in Contemporary Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 226.
- ²⁰ Yohko Tsuji, “Death Policies in Japan: The State, the Family, and the Individual,” in *Family and Social Policy in Japan: Anthropological Approaches*, ed. Roger Goodman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 180.
- ²¹ Translation provided by the Foreign Section Trust, “[News and Events](#),” February 22, 2004.
- ²² Quoted in “[Kanrihi minō no aoyama gaikokujin bochi](#),” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, February 2, 2005.
- ²³ “[News and Events](#),” Foreign Section Trust
- ²⁴ Steve Trautlein, “[Resting in Pieces](#),” *Metropolis*, Accessed: September 26, 2020.
- ²⁵ Jones, *Live Machines*, 6.
- ²⁶ Emphasis mine. Sebastien Boret, “A Japanese Tree Burial,” in *Death and Dying in*

Contemporary Japan, 186.

²⁷ Dylan Plung and Jonathan Wilder, “Interview with Foreign Section Trust Founding Member,” May 16, 2018.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*; “News and Events,” Foreign Section Trust.

³⁰ Dylan Plung and Jonathan Wilder, “Interview.”

³¹ “[Japans Plan to Evict Foreign ‘Residents,’](#)” *The Scotsman*, May 10, 2005,

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Monty Dipietro, “[Welcome to Misery Park,](#)” *The Japan Times*, January 30, 2007,

³⁴ Dylan Plung and Jonathan Wilder, “Interview.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ “News and Events,” Foreign Section Trust; “Japan Plans to Evict Foreign ‘Residents,’” *The Scotsman*.

³⁷ “News and Events,” Foreign Section Trust.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; Governor Ishihara’s xenophobic tendencies are well documented on an international level. See: Calvin Sims, “Tokyo Chief Starts New Furor, on Immigrants,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2000; Mark Mackinnon, “Tokyo’s Hawkish Governor Stirs the Pot,” *Foreign Policy*, August 14, 2012; Uli Schmetzer, “A Champion of Bigotry has Tolerant Audience,” *The Chicago Tribune*, April 13, 2000, etc.

⁴² Dylan Plung and Jonathan Wilder, “Interview.”

⁴³ Basil Hall Chamberlain, *Japanese Things: Being Notes on Various Subjects Connected with Japan: For the Use of Travelers and Others* (Tuttle, 1994), 184.

⁴⁴ *Soshite genzai mo go shison ya enja no katagata ni yotte teatsuku mamorareteimasu. Mata, enkosha ga kikokushi kanrisha ga inakunatta ohaka mo arimashita ga, heisei 18-nen kara tōkyōto ga kanri suru koto ni shimashita.* “News and Events,” Foreign Section Trust.

⁴⁵ During this 2021 interview, Wilder indicated that some graves had been removed or relocated in order to create open space for benches. Additionally, a group of nuns in the Foreign Section had been relocated in 2020 at the behest of their convent. The full scope of removals and relocations within the Foreign Section, however, has yet to be fully assessed.

⁴⁶ Plung and Wilder, “Follow-up Interview.”

⁴⁷ See Hazel Jones, “Live Machines.”

⁴⁸ Jones, *Live Machines*, 69, 157, 162.

⁴⁹ Plung and Wilder, “Follow-up Interview.”

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Plung and Wilder, “Interview.”

⁵³ Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 95.

⁵⁴ Yukiko Koga, *Inheritance of Loss: China, Japan, and the Political Economy of Redemption After Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 52.

⁵⁵ Plung and Wilder, “Follow-up Interview.”

⁵⁶ Koga, *Inheritance of Loss*, 16.