

Yasukuni Shrine on the Silver Screen: Spirits of the state

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By James L. Huffman

Yasukuni Shrine, home for a century and a half to the spirits of Japan's fallen soldiers, has fueled controversy in every decade of my academic career. When I arrived in Tokyo as the 1970s were about to dawn, great numbers of students and young radicals across the nation were working in concert with writers, professors, and Christian theologians of all ages in opposition to the state's ties to the Shinto institution. In the mid-1980s, I attended a dinner at which Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro sought (and received) the support of several prominent American scholars for his much-criticized visits to Yasukuni as prime minister. While I was visiting Beijing several years ago, Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro made one of his periodic visits to the shrine, touching off a level of anger that I could only grasp by being in China. And today, as I write this from Tokyo, the Chinese assert that they will judge Japan's next political leader by one issue above all others: whether he visits Yasukuni.

What explains the emotional power of Yasukuni, both for Japanese leaders and war veterans, and for the victims of Japan's colonial rule and invasion more than six decades ago? Few symbols in the East Asian cornucopia have greater potential for working devilry, both in Japan's domestic and regional politics. Chinese and Korean hyper-sensitivity over this issue, fully matched by the insensitivity of many Japanese leaders, could undo half a century of progress toward regional cooperation.



Yasukuni Shrine in January

After decades of controversy, it remains the case that outside a narrow segment of internationalist circles in the West, while young people in particular may know a lot about anime, manga and Toyota, they remain sublimely ignorant of Japanese politics—particularly about something as ostensibly rarefied as the Yasukuni issue. This is regrettable, given the controversy's potential for mischief. This makes John Nelson's 28-minute, teaching-oriented film on Yasukuni, "Spirits of the State," both welcome and important.

The visually-attractive video makes a serious effort to present a balanced, sensitive interpretation of both the shrine's historical development and the role it plays in Japan's efforts to construct a viable war memory six

decades after the end of the Pacific War. It begins by introducing Yasukuni as a site where issues of historical memory collide, explaining that the twentieth century, which some have heralded as an epoch of technological and cultural progress was an era in which an estimated “188 million people died because of wars.” War memorials, it notes, raise complex memory issues in all societies.

The film then moves through the historical development of Yasukuni, beginning with its creation in 1869 to memorialize soldiers who died in the civil wars surrounding the Meiji Restoration. It shows the role of the shrine in creating “religious nationalism” and supporting Japan’s march toward imperialism from the Meiji era forward. Discussing the disaster of World War II, “Spirits of the State” explains that the existence of the shrine was “comforting” to soldiers dying far from home who knew that even if their bodies were not returned to Japan, “at least their spirit would be enshrined” there. It notes the close bonds between the Emperor and the shrine, showing members of the imperial family including the Emperor visiting the shrine during the war, and officials from the Imperial Household Agency as well as military officials and prime ministers thereafter.

Nelson’s expertise as a specialist on Japanese religion at the University of San Francisco is apparent in the film’s sensitive discussions of the varied motives that draw people to the shrine: bereaved relatives who still are grieving, veterans who seek respect, politicians after votes, ultra-nationalists, and protesters, among others. The narrator explains the belief of many Japanese that spirits of “the recently departed” can seek retribution on the living if they are not adequately revered—a fact that has made Yasukuni a protector of national security as much as it has been a place of solace for survivors.

The second half of the film focuses on the

shrine’s structures and motives of memory, particularly its Yushukan Museum, which glorifies the war dead as if they were “saints.” The museum shows the role of women supporting the war effort on the home front; it displays “haunting portraits” of kamikaze flyers; it glorifies the suicide of General Anami Korechika who, as War Minister in 1945 staunchly opposed Japan’s surrender and committed suicide immediately after the surrender. Woven through the treatment of these displays are interviews with shrine visitors who convey their ignorance of the war and express, repeatedly, how much the visit moved them. Says a young man, looking at the museum’s display on the Special Attack Forces (the kamikaze): “I don’t have that kind of courage.” Special attention is paid to the “ultra-conservative individuals and groups” whose work has been crucial in keeping the Yasukuni spirit alive. Powerful footage shows their sound trucks blaring nationalistic slogans, while their minions sell literature on the shrine grounds and others sing patriotic songs at the annual August 15 memorial service.



Portraits of kamikaze flyers in the Yasukuni Yushukan museum

“Spirits of the State” concludes with a discussion of the broader issues of war memory. Describing Yasukuni as “a place produced and choreographed by the state,” it argues that the “balancing act” between “myth

and history” is never stable, warning viewers at the end about Yasukuni’s “seductive embrace of nationalism, religion, and selective commemoration.”

We are in Nelson’s debt for taking on a project as daunting as this, a highly charged topic filled with nuances and twists as complex as Japanese society itself. His attempt to balance criticism of the political (and ahistorical) uses to which the shrine has been put with sensitivity to the human needs that motivate visitors is impressive. And the careful selection of visual materials keep the narrative moving in a lively way that will facilitate its use in the classroom.

At the same time, it is the search for balance that is most elusive. The web site promoting “Spirits of the State” promises an examination of how “the ‘invented traditions’ of this Shinto shrine have served the interests of the Japanese state from 1868 to the present day,” and the film itself begins with references to both the progress/destruction paradox and the troubling issue of Yasukuni’s role in venerating “the military dead of a state responsible for one of the bloodiest wars of the 20th century.” One expects, from all of this, that the treatment will be either carefully balanced or skewed toward the anti-Yasukuni positions that have been prominent among progressive intellectuals in Japan and some Western scholars of Japan.

The film, however, conveys quite different messages. While the narrator refers to state control of memory, to the unconstitutionality of prime ministers’ visits, and to political uses of the shrine, most of the video visual and aural messages convey the views of those who find either comfort or political succor in the shrine. The one academic expert interviewed in the film, historian Yutaka Yoshida, a leading authority on the emperor system, speaks only about why so many Japanese find the shrine comforting. Other interviews follow—with veterans, a Y?sh?kan official, grieving relatives

and other visitors. Many of these interviews are quite moving. A veteran who criticizes schools for not teaching about the war comes through as neither a demagogue nor an extremist. Another who questions why it is all right for American politicians to visit Arlington but not acceptable for Japanese prime ministers to come to Yasukuni exudes sincerity and gentleness. A housewife who “can’t stop tears from coming” as she remembers the death of her brother in Burma evokes genuine empathy.

These interviews are likely to have a powerful impact on American and international students, the intended audience. They also are appropriate in a video about Yasukuni. Indeed, they not only add a human factor that often is missing from most Western scholars’ analyses but convey strongly held Japanese ideas that may be absent in many works by international scholars. The problem is that they are not balanced by anything comparable from the victims of Japanese war and colonialism.

There is no response to the veteran’s comparison of Yasukuni and Arlington, no discussion of fundamental—and crucial—differences between the two. Footage on the anti-shrine movement consumes at most 35 seconds—and is among the weakest in the film. There are no interviews with scholars, activists, politicians, or family members who explain their opposition to the uses to which the shrine has been put: none of the voices that show up in works such as Norma Fields’s *Realm of a Dying Emperor*. And no interviews with Chinese, Koreans or Southeast Asians, that is, those who bore the brunt of Japan’s war. The issues of war memory and political uses of the shrine are left to occasional, somewhat sketchily developed comments in the narration.



Koreans protesting Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine

There are other disappointments: particularly the unexplained use of contradictory figures about the number of Japanese who died in the war, and near-total silence about the intensity and political importance of East Asian reactions to the Yasukuni issue that have so profoundly shaped conflicts in the region in recent years. But far the greatest problem is that a film that raises hopes for a serious discussion of the issues of war and nationalism, and of the state's control of historical memory, focuses instead on the emotional and human factors that make Yasukuni thrive. Shown without interpretation and discussion, I would expect my conservative but intelligent undergraduate students to come away from "Spirits of the State" having largely missed the reasons that make the Yasukuni issue so troubling to many observers today.

Does this problem rend the film ineffective for use in the classroom? Far from it. Its strengths are many, and I intend to use it when I teach postwar Japanese history next fall. The film contains valuable material that should make it a valuable tool for classroom discussion, one that can be utilized by instructors of various views on Yasukuni and the war.

The film is appealing visually, the historical material effectively presented, the music well

chosen and appropriate. The shots of both the shrine and the visitors humanize a place that often seems bigger-and colder-than life, and the footage moves in ways that should keep students engaged. The division of the video into two halves, the first related to the development of the shrine, the second to war memory, makes it useful for teaching too.

The narration, moreover, introduces key issues regarding state, politics, and memory, even if lightly (and if the documentary footage slights them). The controversial enshrinement of the Class-A war criminals' spirits in 1979 is mentioned; so is the intensity with which the right-wing uses shrine-related issues to promote nationalism, as is the use of the shrine for political ends, and the contrast between the nostalgic remembrance of the war dead and the suffering those very men caused in Asia. While I would have preferred fuller treatment of those issues, the instructor is provided with a springboard for what should be a lively discussion.

The film's most impressive achievement is its nuanced, humane discussion of the varied motives of those who come to Yasukuni. Officials who use the shrine for political gain are given a limited hearing, and right wing agitators are described with the coolness they merit, but veterans, griever, and general visitors are treated with the seriousness and respect more politicized approaches often lack. Hearing a uniformed veteran profess his desire to console his comrades who were less fortunate than he, or the sister who feels that her dead brother is at least remembered with respect here will not alter one's views about selective memory, but such scenes do provide a new level of understanding of the complex, often deeply human, motives that propel the pro-Yasukuni movement.

I frequently tell students that any historian wanting to understand another epoch must treat its people with respect-must assume that

even people guilty of grievous and censorious deeds most likely operated out of what they themselves thought to be worthy motives. Watching the varied, earnest visitors to Yasukuni in “Spirits of the State” makes such empathetic understanding easier. It helps one understand the complex forces that drive the pro-shrine movements. It complicates the picture, even as it organizes it. To the teacher, that is a gift.

["Spirits of the State: Japan's Yasukuni Shrine"](#),

2005, produced by John Nelson of the University of San Francisco, is available from Films for the Humanities and Sciences. Material about the video may be found through the web page of the USF Center for the Pacific Rim.

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