

# War Remembrance in Japan's Buddhist Cemeteries, Part I: Kannon Hears the Cries of War

**Brian Victoria**

## Abstract

While the role of Yasukuni Shrine in both commemorating and eulogizing Japan's wartime aggression is well known (and controversial), little to no attention has been paid to a similar role played by a number of Buddhist temples in contemporary Japan. For example, Kōa Kannon (Kannon for a Prosperous Asia) temple (興亜観音寺), located in Atami, a hot-springs resort south of Tokyo, is one such war-eulogizing Buddhist temple. This temple was initially established in the late 1930s at the initiative of Imperial Army General Matsui Iwane, supreme commander of the Japanese attack on Nanjing in December 1937, better known as the "Rape of Nanjing."

In the postwar era, Kannon Bodhisattva, the Buddhist personification of compassion enshrined at Kōa Kannon, has gone on to become one of the main Buddhist figures employed throughout the country to comfort the "heroic spirits" (*eirei*) of all Japanese soldiers who died in the war while, at the same time, valorizing and eulogizing the war they fought in. In addition to Kannon-centric temples, the major Shingon sect-affiliated monastic complex on Mt. Kōya now plays a major role in the remembrance of the war dead, including an effort to transform convicted "war criminals" into national "martyrs" (*junnan-sha*), an effort backed by the current Japanese government.

## Introduction

It is a truism to state that the leaders of every country, even in defeat, seek to portray their

nation's wars, and the soldiers who fought and died into them, in the best possible light. Wars ending in defeat, however, pose special challenges of remembrance, including the question of who was to blame? Nevertheless, win or lose, ordinary soldiers who fought on the battlefield are uniformly eulogized as "heroes" who valiantly and patriotically sacrificed themselves for the nation and its people. At a pragmatic, if not emotional, level these actions are readily understandable, for in their absence it would be more difficult to recruit a new generation of young men, and now women, to fight and die in the nation's next war. Additionally, there is the need to foster 'patriotism/nationalism' among the general populace, especially as they will be required, through their tax dollars, to finance the nation's wars.

Japan, of course, is no exception to this rule. But like Germany with its Nazi past, Japan has a problem if not in remembering its deceased soldiers in the Asia-Pacific War then certainly in eulogizing them. Like Germany, it also has widely recognized war atrocities and soldiers convicted as "war criminals" to contend with. Just how "heroic" were they?

In the 70th anniversary year since war's end, the question of how the war will be remembered has important implications for Japan and its relations with its neighbors, many of whom bore the brunt of invasion and conquest.

In debates both within Japan and internationally, a focus has always been on the attendance of government leaders at Yasukuni

Shrine. On the one hand, this is not surprising in that this shrine was specifically constructed in 1872 (renamed Yasukuni in 1879) to memorialize loyal soldiers officially recognized as having sacrificed their lives for the country. Yet, Shinto is a religion that views death as “pollution” and even today has neither cemeteries in its shrine precincts nor do Shinto priests normally conduct funerals for the laity (with the exception, nowadays, of the emperor). Thus, the great majority of Japanese, soldiers included, have Buddhist funerals and are buried in temple-affiliated graveyards. One result of this is that there are no cremated remains of soldiers enshrined in Yasukuni, only their names (and, it is believed, their souls).

This article examines how deceased soldiers are valorized and eulogized in Buddhist temples and their affiliated cemeteries. Part I, entitled, “Kannon Hears the Cries of War,” addresses the manner in which Kannon, the embodiment of Buddhist compassion, has been incorporated into the process of war remembrance and valorization. Part II, entitled, “Transforming War Criminals into Martyrs: ‘True Words’ on Mt. Kōya,” examines how a similar process takes place on Shingon sect-affiliated Mt. Kōya where war criminals have been transformed into “martyrs” who died for their country.

We begin our examination with a look at the wartime activities of Imperial Army General Matsui Iwane and the temple he had constructed. While certainly not the first in Japanese history to connect Kannon to war, his actions nevertheless mark the beginning of this phenomenon in modern Japan, notably in connection with the Asia-Pacific War of 1937-45.

### **Imperial Army General Matsui Iwane**

Matsui Iwane (1878-1948) first saw combat as a captain during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. He was later sent to Geneva, Switzerland, to attend the World Disarmament

Conference of 1932-37 as an army plenipotentiary. Although Matsui retired from active duty in 1935, he was called back into service in August 1937 at the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War to lead the Japanese forces engaged in the Battle of Shanghai. Following Shanghai’s fall, Matsui was appointed commander of the Central China Area Army, and it was troops under his command who committed the infamous Rape of Nanjing, beginning in December 1937. Matsui once again retired from active military service in 1938. Nevertheless, the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal found him responsible for his troops’ earlier brutality at Nanjing and sentenced him to death.



**General Matsui Iwane**

Matsui’s connection to Buddhism stemmed, in the first instance, from the fact that he came from a traditional samurai family. While the

details are unknown, Matsui's forbearers had been affiliated with the Zen school prior to the Meiji Restoration of 1868. At the beginning of the Meiji period, however, Matsui's father rejected his family's Zen affiliation and embraced Shintō exclusively. Switches of this kind were widespread in an era in which institutional Buddhism as a whole was severely repressed by local and national government officials sympathetic to Shintō. Though this repression (*haibutsu-kishaku*) was relatively short-lived, it had some long-lasting effects. For example, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, it turned many if not most Buddhist priests and leaders into super patriots seeking to demonstrate their loyalty to emperor and country.<sup>1</sup>

Matsui reestablished his relationship with Buddhism as early as 1939. This is evidenced by the fact that he personally ordered the construction of a small Buddhist temple on the hillside behind his summer villa on the outskirts of the seaside, hot-springs resort city of Atami in Shizuoka Prefecture.



Kōa Kannon temple

The temple's connection to Japan's wartime effort was apparent in its name: "Kōa Kannon," i.e., Kannon for a Prosperous Asia." The term "kōa" (興亞), lit. making Asia prosper, was a

key part of the government's propaganda effort to disguise its invasion of China as an act of *beneficence* for that country. Hence, on February 24, 1940 Matsui said the following at the time of the temple's formal dedication:

The China Incident [of 1937] resulted in massive loss of life through the mutual killing of neighboring friends. This is the greatest tragedy of the last one thousand years. Nevertheless this is a holy war (*seisen*) to save the peoples of East Asia. . . . Invoking the power of Kannon, I pray for the bright future of East Asia.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, the *New York Times* was so impressed by Matsui's act that they noted in an editorial: "few Western generals have ever devoted their declining years to the memory of the men who died in their battles."<sup>3</sup> This comment was, of course, made prior to Pearl Harbor.

In addition to a small, 60.6 centimeter (nearly two foot), statue of Kannon enshrined in the temple's main worship hall, Matsui had a second and much larger ceramic statue of Kannon erected on the temple grounds. Placed facing Nanjing, this latter statue was 3.3 meters (almost eleven feet) tall and made from the bloodstained earth the general had brought back from his battlefields in China. He regarded it as a memorial to console the spirits of *both* the Japanese and Chinese war dead in the battle for Nanjing.



**Kōa Kannon statue**

Every morning and evening thereafter he climbed the hill behind his home on which the statue and worship hall were located in order to recite the well-known *Kannon-kyō* (*Avalokiteśvara Sūtra*, aka 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*).<sup>4</sup>

If the connection of Kannon to dead soldiers seems nebulous, it should be understood that the two Chinese characters used to write ‘Kannon’ literally mean: “[one who] perceives sound.” By extension, “perceive” has the meaning of “hear” and sound has the meaning of “cries [of suffering].” Just as the painful cries

of wounded soldiers facing death are well known, so too, it is believed, is Kannon’s ability to reach out compassionately to offer them comfort, even in death.

At the conclusion of the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, held from 1946-48, seven defendants, including Matsui and Imperial Army General and wartime Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki, were found guilty of having committed war crimes. Having previously mourned both Chinese and Japanese war dead, Matsui was perhaps the best prepared of the seven to admit his own guilt. Matsui did this in a confession he made to the prison chaplain, Hanayama Shinshō, a Buddhist priest affiliated with the True Pure Land (*Shin*) sect. In their fourth conversation two weeks before his execution, i.e., on the afternoon of December 9, 1948, Matsui spoke at length about the events at Nanjing:

I am deeply ashamed of the Nanjing Incident. After we entered Nanjing, at the time of the memorial service for those who had fallen in battle, I gave orders for the Chinese victims to be included as well. However, from my chief of staff on down no one understood what I was talking about, claiming that to do so would have a disheartening effect on the morale of the Japanese troops. Thus, the division commanders and their subordinates did what they did.

In the Russo-Japanese war I served as a captain. The division commanders then were incomparably better than those at Nanjing. At that time we took good care of not only our Chinese prisoners but our Russian prisoners as well. This time, however, things didn’t happen that way.

Although I don't think the government authorities planned it, from the point of view of *Bushidō* or simply humanity, everything was totally different. Immediately after the memorial service, I gathered my staff together and, as supreme commander, shed tears of anger. Prince Asaka was there as well as theatre commander General Yanagawa. In any event, I told them that the enhancement of imperial prestige that we had accomplished had been debased in a single stroke by the riotous conduct of the troops. Nevertheless, after I finished speaking they all laughed at me. One of the division commanders even went so far as to say, "It's only to be expected!"

In light of this, I can only say that I am very pleased with what is about to happen to me in the hope that it will cause some soul-searching among just as many of those military men present then as possible. In any event, things have ended up as they have, and I can only say that I just want to die and be reborn in the Pure Land.<sup>5</sup>

For those Japanese political leaders and historians who even today continue to deny that major atrocities occurred in Nanjing, Matsui's admission makes sober reading (though all of them ignore it). Yet, at the same time, Matsui clearly sought to distance himself from any personal responsibility for what had taken place even though, as supreme commander, he was in charge of the troops. Had he wished to, he could, for example, have resigned his commission or even directly approached the emperor. Choosing either of these courses, however, would have been

unprecedented.

Despite having lost 23,104 Japanese troops in the battle for Nanjing, Matsui returned to Japan in triumph, and on February 26, 1938 he was summoned to the imperial summer villa in Hayama. There, in the company of Hirohito's granduncle, Prince Asaka Yasuhiko, and General Yanagawa Heisuke, the emperor personally awarded each man with a pair of silver vases embossed with the imperial chrysanthemum. Matsui would later repay this imperial kindness when, in a pretrial deposition, he shifted blame for events at Nanjing to lower ranking division commanders, thereby protecting Prince Asaka, a member of the imperial family. In reality, Matsui's actions were unnecessary, for as James Hartfield noted, "Prince Asaka . . . was not charged because of the informal agreement that members of the Royal Family had immunity from prosecution."<sup>6</sup>



**Prince Asaka**  
**General Yanagawa**

None of this suggests that Matsui's faith in Kannon was anything less than sincere. His parting words to Hanayama on December 9th were: "I recently told my wife that the reason I am able to be reborn in the Pure Land is due entirely to the compassion of Kannon, something for which I must be grateful."<sup>7</sup> Matsui also mentioned he had told his wife to return the family to the Buddhist faith from Shintō, conducting all funerary rites accordingly. Moreover, once his wife had died, his summer villa was to be donated to the temple he had established to provide for its upkeep.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that Matsui was not the only one of the seven who felt a special affinity to Kannon. While perhaps not with the same intensity, Tōjō Hideki also expressed his faith in this *bodhisattva*<sup>8</sup> though

in a most unusual way.

That is to say, after having told Hanayama just how evil he was, Tōjō removed a handkerchief from his pocket and said:

Kannon came to visit me unexpectedly in the form of this handkerchief that was recently given to me. Kannon kindly changed herself into this form though I must admit I find the whole thing very strange. I don't mean to be superstitious, and it may only be an accident, yet from the Buddha's point of view nothing is an accident.

You see, the brand name for this handkerchief is "Cannon," signifying an artillery weapon in English. However, pronounced in Japanese, the same sounds properly stand for "Kannon." It is for this reason that I say that Kannon kindly changed herself into this form.<sup>9</sup>

If in these words Tōjō appears to be grasping at straws, it must not be forgotten that he was, after all, facing imminent death. Thus, any signs of supernatural intervention, real or otherwise, were likely to have been welcomed. Additionally, Tōjō was by no means alone in believing that Kannon is capable of assuming a variety of forms in order to compassionately save human beings in the midst of suffering. The *Kannon-kyō* describes a number of these forms though an American-made handkerchief is certainly unique.

Further, as incongruous as Tōjō's identification of artillery weapons with the boundless compassion of Kannon may have been, it should be remembered that during the war years the Rinzai Zen sect as a whole had done likewise.

That is to say, it revived the medieval sectarian practice of bestowing the traditional military title of *Shōgun*, i.e. Generalissimo, on this *bodhisattva*. Thus, Tōjō, like Matsui, was by no means alone in identifying the personification of compassion with war.



**Tōjō Hideki**

In fact, the Rinzai sect had good reason for attributing this traditional military title to Kannon, for the title had not originated with them. On the contrary, it is to be found in both the *Lotus* and *Śūraṅgama Sūtras* where it designates one of Kannon's thirty-three incarnations. For example, in Chapter 25 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Kannon is described as manifesting himself as a great divine general: "To those who must be saved in the body of a great divine general, he appears as a great divine general and preaches the Dharma to them." Later in the same chapter, we read: ". . . in fear in battle array, if he thinks of the Cry

Regarder [i.e., Kannon's] power, all his enemies will be routed."<sup>10</sup> Given this, it is not surprising that as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the great warlord, Minamoto Yoritomo, founder of the Kamakura Shogunate, always placed a small statue of Kannon under his helmet (inserted in his hair topknot) before going into battle.

Finally, for those readers familiar with Japanese Buddhism who find it strange that Matsui looked to Kannon rather than Amida Buddha for rebirth in the Pure Land, Hanayama described a letter that he had received, on Matsui's behalf, from Mitsunaga Taiyū, abbot of Zenkōji temple in Nagano Prefecture. After pledging to worship Kannon for as long as he lived, Mitsunaga wrote: "Kannon is identical with Amida Buddha; Amida Buddha is identical with Kannon." Upon hearing of Mitsunaga's words as relayed by Hanayama, Matsui replied, "Please tell that priest that it's just as he said."<sup>11</sup>

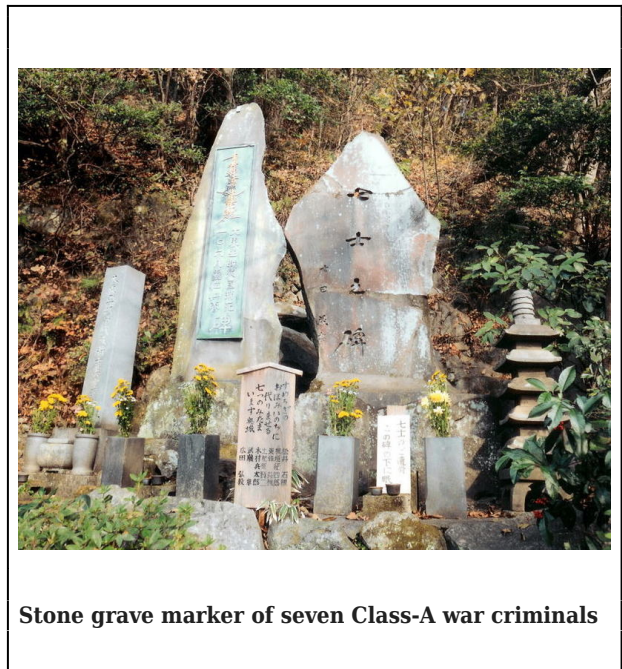
### Kannon in Postwar Japan

In postwar Japan, Kannon became widely used in memorial sites and rituals dedicated to all Japanese soldiers who had died in the course of the Asia-Pacific War, including Kōa Kannon temple in Atami. In 1959 a small portion of the cremated remains of Matsui and the six other executed Class-A war criminals were enshrined in the temple's precincts.<sup>12</sup> Additional memorials were erected on the temple grounds to the 1,618 Japanese convicted as Class-B and Class-C war criminals.

Yet another memorial was erected to honor Radhabinod Pal, the representative of India who had served as a judge during the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. Pal alone dissented from the verdict of the other Allied judges, contending that all twenty-five Japanese charged as Class-A war criminals were innocent. He also rejected other charges made during the Trials against the Japanese government. As Herbert Bix noted, "[Pal] ended up arguing the innocence of

Japan and strongly endorsing the official Japanese view of wartime history."<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Pal and others like him, these memorials today allow the temple to claim on its website: "We think it is clear that the Great East Asia War was a war of self-defense."<sup>14</sup>

This is not to say that everyone agreed with the way in which the temple was used in postwar Japan. There was one group that vehemently disagreed, the "East Asian Anti-Japanese Armed Front" (Higashi Ajia Han-nichi Busō Sensen). From its beginnings as a radical left wing group of students at Hōsei University, it went underground to specialize in detonating bombs at prominent sites associated with Japan's wartime past. The group's first act of terrorism was to blow up the massive stone grave marker erected in 1959 to commemorate the seven, executed Class-A war criminals, Matsui and Tōjō included.



**Stone grave marker of seven Class-A war criminals**

The three pieces into which the stone marker broke were subsequently cemented together, and it was restored to its original position. When viewed carefully, however, the lines where it was shattered are clearly visible. Concurrently, the same group attempted to



blow up the outdoor statue of Kannon, but the fuse shorted and the charge failed to detonate. This is one of the few times, if not the only time, in Japanese history when Kannon was the object of a terrorist attack.

### Other Kannon temples

In 1955 the Special Attack Peace Kannon temple (Tokkō Heiwa Kannon-dō) was built in the town of Chiran in Kagoshima Prefecture on land formerly part of the Imperial Army's Chiran Air Base.

The statue of Kannon enshrined there, modeled on the famous Yume-Chigai Kannon at Hōryūji temple, contains within its body a list of names of the approximately one thousand pilots who departed on suicide missions from the Chiran base in the final months of the war.

Additionally, numerous lanterns have been placed on the temple grounds in honor of the pilots.



**Chiran Kannon temple**  
**Chiran Kannon statue**

Next to the temple, a plaque, erected by Chiran Mayor Iino Takeo, reads in part:

In March 1942, the Tachiarai Army Flight School Chiran Branch was established here, where pilot training took place day after day. Eventually in 1945, as the tense international situation became critical, Chiran became the Army's last special attack base as the mainland's southernmost air base. This is a land with deep feelings toward the about one thousand young brave men who died far beyond the flowing clouds as they set off on a bold mission and did not return. We honor the sincere, pure spirits of these young men, and we pray for eternal rest of their spirits as they died a glorious death in the everlasting skies. The Special Attack Peace Kannon was made with donations from former officers and men related to Chiran in order to contribute to the restoration of eternal peace in their homeland. Now, through persons closely connected to Chiran with this same wish, we enshrine Kannon at the site of the former airfield in Chiran Town.<sup>15</sup>

While the reference to the bravery of these young men may be appropriate, the question of how well the words “special attack” fit together with “Kannon,” not to mention “peace” is certainly open to debate as is the question of whether they “died a glorious death in the everlasting skies.” Historian Tanaka Yuki would certainly disagree with the latter point, for he asserts the real significance of their death lies in forcing us “to contemplate the sheer madness of war, regardless of the method used to take human life and regardless of whose lives are sacrificed.”<sup>16</sup>

## A Kannon Temple in Tokyo

Setagaya Kannon temple is located in Tokyo's Setagawa ward, hence the temple's name. This temple, first established in the postwar era, is dedicated to the memory and care of the spirits of *all* members of the Special Attack units wherever they were based. A form of Kannon known as Shō-kanzeon is the principal image (*honzon*) enshrined here and is often referred to as the Tokkō Heiwa (Peace) Kannon-sama. This non-sectarian temple holds monthly and annual memorial services, including chanting of the *Kannon-gyō* and Dharma talks given by a priest from Sensōji, another Kannon-related temple.



**Kamikaze pilot statue  
Eternal Divine Land monument**

Upon entering the temple precincts one immediately encounters a monument depicting a youthful *kamikaze* pilot, many of whom were still in their teens. Walking a little further on the temple grounds brings one to a second monument. The inscription at the top of this monument reads: “Eternal Divine Land Special Attack Forces Monument.” By using the wartime reference to Japan as an “eternal divine land” (*shinshū fumetsu*) the intent to eulogize the suicidal attacks of the *kamikaze* pilots is clear. This becomes even clearer in a second nearby monument dedicated to a particular *kamikaze* unit.

The second monument is inscribed with the names of the individual members of the “Divine Attack Unit” (*Tenzan-tai*). In the inscription to the right we are told that during the battle for Okinawa in April 1945 these pilots “resolutely attacked the enemy’s task force, hurling themselves against warships and either sinking or badly damaging two aircraft carriers, five warships and three other vessels. They accomplished great fruits of battle while perishing in the process.”

After passing these two monuments one finally arrives at the temple building built to honor all *kamikaze* pilots, named the *Setagaya Tokkō Kannon-dō* (Setagawa Special Attack Kannon Hall). The hall enshrines not one but two Kannon statues. The one on the left is called the “*Kamikaze Tokkō*” while the one on the right is “*Tokkō Kannon*.” Each statue has in its interior the names of *kamikaze* pilots who served in one of wartime Japan’s two military branches, i.e., 2000 in the Imperial Army and 2615 in the Imperial Navy.<sup>17</sup> Clearly visible on the wall behind the two statues is an Imperial chrysanthemum. This symbol not only establishes a connection between the temple and the emperor but serves to valorize the deaths of the *kamikaze* pilots, i.e., they sacrificed their lives on the emperor’s behalf.



**Setagaya Tokkō Kannon-dō  
Two Setagaya Kannon statues**

**Additional Sites**

Finally, in addition to these explicitly religious sites, Kannon has also been incorporated in a number of secular, war memorial/peace parks in places that suffered most in the final stages of the war, including Okinawa, Nagasaki, and Hiroshima. A Kannon statue was placed at the Hiroshima Memorial Mound, which contains the ashes of unidentified victims of the atomic bomb. A similar statue was placed in the Hall of Mourning built in 1995 in the Nagasaki Peace Park, dedicated, as in Hiroshima, to unknown victims of the atomic bombing. While the connection to war remains, at least in these instances Kannon is not being used as part of the effort to eulogize the war.

John Nelson provides a helpful analysis of

Kannon in these contexts, observing that Kannon has "been so widely dispersed in Japanese culture, like the air one breathes, she has become part of the social and cultural landscape in ways that transcend sectarian doctrine." He goes on to add, "Surely it makes as much sense in the context of the Peace Park and Japanese religious culture to see her role as similar to that of a Shintō *kami*: specific to the situation of one place and its people, attentive to sincere petitions, and with an ability to restructure violence and chaos to restore harmony and social stability."<sup>18</sup> It appears the only thing Kannon can't do is *prevent* violence and chaos.

## Conclusion

How should the war-related roles of Kannon in Japan be characterized? Should, for example, General Matsui, or the Japanese military in general, be criticized, or even condemned, for having incorporated Kannon's universal, all-embracing compassion into a devastating war of aggression? If so, should institutional Buddhism as a whole in Japan, particularly the Zen sect, be equally criticized or condemned for the way in which Buddhist priests embraced Kannon as a martial figure?

As noted above, long before being introduced to Japan in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, Kannon was described in Chapter Twenty-five of the *Lotus Sutra* as having the ability to save suffering sentient beings in the form of a "divine general." Thus, we may ask whether Japanese Buddhists should be faulted for having incorporated Kannon into Japan's modern wars? As Chün-fang Yü notes of the spread of Buddhism in China, Kannon (Ch. Guanyin) "became domesticated to serve the interests and needs of host societies that adopted him/her."<sup>19</sup> In Japan, Mark Mullins notes, as early as the Nara period (710-794) Kannon "became a central element of 'state-protecting Buddhism' (*chingo-kokka bukkyō*)."<sup>20</sup> What state has not used war as a means of protecting

(if not expanding) itself? Equally, what state has not used religion, including allegedly *universal* religions, to justify its actions no matter how brutal or self-aggrandizing they may be?

Although there is not yet a consensus among scholars as to Kannon's origins, Alexander Studholme suggests that Kannon's origins can be traced back to either Shiva or Vishnu, deities today identified with Hinduism, not Buddhism.<sup>21</sup> If Studholme is correct, the influence of these deities helps to explain such features as Kannon's multiple arms. In any event, the purpose of incorporating Kannon into Buddhism was to introduce a personification of perfect compassion. "Perfect compassion" in turn helps us to understand why, at least in East Asia, Kannon is typically portrayed as an androgynous if not female figure. While Kannon does not date from Buddhism's earliest days, s/he may well be another example of later "skillful means" (Skt. *upaya*), i.e., giving concrete form to an intrinsically Buddhist value. In fact, the employment of "skillful means" on behalf of suffering sentient beings is one of Kannon's chief characteristics.

On the one hand, it is clear that Buddhist ethics places a premium on the *intent* of the actor. Thus, in Matsui Iwane's case, it is possible to praise, or at least acknowledge, the compassion he demonstrated in having had a statue of Kannon made of earth from Nanjing containing the blood of *both* Chinese and Japanese soldiers. That is to say, Matsui, like Kannon, appears to have heard the cries of both Chinese and Japanese soldiers who fell in battle and attempted to console or pacify their spirits. Yet, should these soldiers have died in the first place? And what of the subsequent rapes and deaths of the many thousands of civilians in Nanjing at the hands of rampaging Japanese soldiers? Matsui's confession suggests he was more concerned about the mistreatment of Chinese prisoners of war than he was about the

fate of civilians. Even the debasement of “Imperial prestige” seemed to be of more concern.

In Japan, Matsui was far from the first figure to advocate showing equal compassion toward both friend and foe (*onshin byōdō*). As early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century Zen Master Dōgen, founder of the Sōtō Zen sect in Japan, instructed his disciples on the importance of practicing this Buddhist principle in his masterwork, the *Shōbōgenzō*.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, as Matsui notes, by the time of the Asia-Pacific War, the ethical treatment of enemy soldiers and civilians had all but disappeared from the consciousness of Imperial military leaders even though it had been widely practiced during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5.

Matsui’s ongoing adherence to the proper treatment of prisoners of war and civilians certainly makes him unusual, if not ‘old-fashioned,’ among his contemporaries. On this basis it can be argued that he was wrongly convicted of having been a war criminal. Yet even if this were true, it does little to lessen the karmic (or moral) responsibility he bears for the tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of deaths that occurred at Nanjing.<sup>23</sup> Still less does it remove the karmic responsibility of the leaders of a nation who sent Matsui to launch an unprovoked invasion of China. Yet even today, many if not most Japanese leaders refuse to acknowledge the very existence of the “riotous conduct of the troops” Matsui spoke of.

It is understandable in light of the horrors perpetrated by the Japanese military in China that those Japanese who seek to portray Matsui (and Japan) in the best possible light focus on his expression of compassion for Chinese soldiers killed at Nanjing, not just Japanese war dead. However, Matsui subsequently accepted a pair of embossed silver vases from the emperor for having captured Nanjing. And thereafter he once again entered an honorable,

financially comfortable, *and silent* retirement (at least through the end of the war).

Far more important than the guilt or innocence of figures like Matsui is the question *all* Buddhists, not just adherents of the Mahāyāna sectarian traditions, must now ask themselves. The fundamental question is *not* the nature of the relationship of Kannon’s compassion to violence and war, for there are no objective criteria to indicate the extent, or even the abuse, of that compassion. Instead, the question is the nature of authentically *Buddhist compassion* (or Christian “love” or Islamic “mercy,” etc.). In other words, will the minority of “heroes of the faith” who reject violence in Buddhism, or any other major world religion, ever grow to become the majority? These questions and more will be addressed in Part II of this article.

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**Brian Daizen Victoria** holds an M.A. in Buddhist Studies from Sōtō Zen sect-affiliated Komazawa University in Tokyo, and a Ph.D. from the Department of Religious Studies at Temple University. In addition to a 2nd, enlarged edition of [Zen At War](#) (Rowman & Littlefield), writings include [Zen War Stories](#) (RoutledgeCurzon) and [Zen Master Dōgen](#) coauthored with Prof. Yokoi Yūhō of Aichi-gakuin University (Weatherhill). He is a Visiting Research Fellow at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For details, see Victoria, *Zen at War*.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, pp. 186-7.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Yamamoto, *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*, p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> Although forming a part of the *Lotus Sutra*, in Japan the *Kannon-gyō* was treated as an independent text as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>5</sup> Hanayama Shinshō, *Eien e no Michi – Waga Hachijū-nen no Shōgai*, p. 310.

<sup>6</sup> James Hartfield, *Unpatriotic History of the Second World War*, p. 392.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, p. 188.

<sup>8</sup> In Mahāyāna Buddhism a *bodhisattva* is a

person who is able, or qualified, to enter *Nirvana* but delays doing in order to compassionately reach out to all suffering beings.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, trans. Kato Bunno. Chapter 25: “[The All-Sidedness of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World.](#)” (accessed 12 February 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, pp. 188-89.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that just as in the case of Osama Bin Laden many year later, the US was concerned that the cremated remains of these executed war criminals might become a pilgrimage site for those Japanese who continued to believe in the justice of the war. Thus, nearly all of the cremated remains were dumped in the sea except for a small portion that had accidentally fallen out of their containers at the crematorium. It was this small portion that was enshrined at the Kōa Kannon temple.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, p. 611.

<sup>14</sup> Available on the Web [here](#) (accessed 15, February 2015).

<sup>15</sup> English text available [here](#) (accessed 9 June 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Tanaka, “Reflections on the Commemoration of the Kamikaze Pilots in Pearl Harbor and Chiran,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 13, Issue 22, No. 2, June 8, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> These numbers are taken from [the temple’s website](#) (accessed 23 July 2015). The Imperial Army and Navy are known to have been fierce rivals. This may explain why even in death the *kamikaze* pilots from the two branches of the military had to have their own separate Kannon

statues. In any event, two Kannon statues, side by side, make for an unusual configuration.

<sup>18</sup> John Nelson, "From Battlefield to Atomic Bomb to the Pure Land of Paradise: Employing the Bodhisattva of Compassion to Calm Japan's Spirits of the Dead," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 1, no. 2, 2002, pp. 160-61. Quotations available on the Web at:

<http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/kannon.shtml#six>

<sup>19</sup> Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Mullins, "The Many Forms and Functions of Kannon in Japanese Religion" in *Dharma World* (April-June 2008) (accessed 17 June 2015).

<sup>21</sup> See Alexander Studholme, *The Origins of Om*

*Manipadme Hum*, pp. 52-54, 57.

<sup>22</sup> See the "Bodaisatta-Shishō-bō" (Four Practices by which *Bodhisattvas* Urge Sentient Beings to Proceed toward the Buddha Way) chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*.

<sup>23</sup> The total number of Chinese victims at Nanjing remains highly contentious. The most reliable and widely agreed upon figures currently place the total within the broad range of 40,000 to 200,000 victims in the entire Nanjing Special Administrative District. See Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, "Leftover Problems," in *The Nanjing Atrocity, 1937-38: Complicating the Picture*, ed. Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), pp. 377-384. See also: James Leibold, "Picking at the Wound: Nanjing, 1937-38." *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* (November 2008) (accessed 15 February 2015).