

Revising the Past, Complicating the Future: The Yushukan War Museum in Modern Japanese History

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I. Introduction

In this three part series, we introduce historical museums in Japan and their role in public education. Following this introduction to peace museums, Ms. Nishino Rumiko, a founder of the [Women's Active Museum on War and Peace \(WAM\)](#), introduces WAM's activities and the 2000 Citizens Tribunal on the 'comfort women'. The final article is by Mr. Kim Yeonghwan, the former associate director of [Grassroots House Peace Museum](#) who describes the peace and reconciliation programs that the Museum sponsors.

Both museums are privately funded and modest in size. One may perhaps call them micro museums, as their exhibition spaces are limited. What is noteworthy, however, is that both museums display artifacts that preserve memories of the victims of Japan's colonialism and devastating atrocities during the Asia-Pacific War; that is, the war that began in 1931 when Imperial Japan invaded Manchuria, and ended with Japan's defeat in 1945. The Women's Active Museum is dedicated to the women forced into sexual slavery. The displays of the Grassroots House Peace Museum relate not only to the so-called comfort women, but also to Japanese atrocities in China, such as the

Nanjing Massacre. Both museums often organize public forums to educate the public about the atrocities committed by the Japanese state during the war.



Women's Active Museum on War and Peace



Grassroots House Peace Museum

The fact that these museums candidly address Japanese colonialism and wartime atrocities makes them by no means unique in Japan. From the late 1980s until the late 1990s, Japan

witnessed the establishment of many such museums, both public and private, that more or less characterized Imperial Japan as a perpetrator of criminal wrongs. But the opinions expressed by these museums are not shared by all. Certainly, Japan has a number of war museums that either avoid questioning Japan’s war responsibility or actually glorify the sacrifices of the soldiers who fought for the Japanese empire.

According to one study, more than 220 museums in Japan deal, in whole or in part, with the wars that Japan fought between 1868 and 1945.[1] The majority of these museums concern the Asia-Pacific War. The impressive number of diverse museums devoted to the Asia-Pacific War suggests that Japanese society has yet to achieve a consensus on the history and memory of the war. To put that matter more precisely, in recent years it has become more difficult and more controversial than in the immediate postwar years to build a consensus on the war among Japan’s residents.

In the past, the extremely strong anti-war sentiment that prevailed in Japanese society left little room for pro-Imperial revisionists to popularize their accounts among the public. Although strong anti-war sentiment still appears to be dominant, revisionist accounts that tend to whitewash wartime atrocities and colonialism have lately found a significant audience, particularly among Japanese youth. With revisionist claims gaining popularity, the ideological clash between museums that lament or condemn the war and those that exalt and glorify militarism arguably merits more attention than ever before. The struggle concerns not only the best way to expose the museum-going public to historical events; it is also, in a significant sense, a contest to refashion the conscience of a nation.

I would like to examine the changing role of the [Yushukan War Museum](#), a symbol of Japan’s wartime militarism, in public education both

during the war and the postwar, as well as its position within the broader context of Japanese museum culture.



Yushukan War Museum

II. Yushukan During the Asia-Pacific War

During the Asia-Pacific War, a culture of militarism prevailed in Japanese society. Many Japanese supported the war effort in Asia and the Pacific, and the popularity of the Yasukuni Shrine’s Yushukan War Museum reflected the social and political context of the time. The Yushukan War Museum originally opened to the public in 1882. After a devastating earthquake in Tokyo destroyed much of the museum 1923, a newly constructed Yushukan opened in 1932. Two years later, an additional building, the National Defense Hall, was added to the museum complex. Whereas Yushukan proper was essentially an ordinary war museum that displayed artifacts such as swords, military uniforms, and weapons captured from the empire’s military adversaries, the National Defense Hall was a hands-on amusement facility that enabled visitors to experience what modern warfare was like. The visitors were invited to sit in the cockpit of a bomber, operate a miniature tank with radio controls, and fire an air rifle at a target. The highlight of the Defense Hall was a “gas experience room” where visitors wore gas

masks and were exposed to tear gas. *Boy's Club*, a popular monthly magazine for children, described the Defense Hall as follows:

Inside the Defense Hall, new modern weapons, such as a tank, search light, machine gun and bomber, are exhibited. The display includes a huge panoramic diorama that depicts a future war and an impressive mechanical device that appears to drop bombs from the sky. Among all the exhibits, a particularly unique feature is the gas experience room. The room will be filled with a gas that irritates your eyes, causing a cascade of tears. When you enter the room wearing a gas mask, you will clearly learn the power of gas and the effect of a gas mask. Everyone enjoys the experiments in the Defense Hall, and it has become extremely popular [among children].[2]

Indeed, the Yushukan complex was popular. Following Japan's 1931 invasion of Manchuria, it received more than a half million visitors annually. Its popularity further increased after the war against China commenced in 1937. In 1938, more than 1.4 million people, including some 225,000 students, visited the museum complex, whereas in 1940 the museum welcomed nearly 1.9 million visitors, including 161,000 students.[3]

III. Yushukan in the Postwar Years

After Japan's defeat in 1945, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers ordered the closing of the Yushukan War Museum, including the National Defense Hall. Only in 1961 did a limited number of exhibits begin to be displayed once more at the museum. In 1986, after a thorough restoration, the whole of the Yushukan War Museum was reopened to the public, though visitors were no longer able to don gas masks, fire air rifles, sit in the cockpit of a bomber, or drop simulated bombs on imagined foes. In 2002, the museum was

again renovated and further expanded.



Zero fighter displayed in the Yushukan

The changes seem intended to make the museum more visually appealing to young visitors. Nevertheless, from its opening in July 2002 through May 2003, only 226,000 people visited the museum.[4] The Yushukan War Museum has not regained its wartime popularity even to this day.

In the immediate postwar years, anti-war sentiment was particularly strong. Even sixty years after the end of war, anti-war feeling is still relatively strong in Japan. Throughout the postwar years, anti-war museums such as the [Hiroshima Peace Museum](#) and the [Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum](#) achieved enormous popularity. In recent years, for example, more than 1.5 million people have visited the Hiroshima Peace Museum annually, while the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum welcomes approximately 1 million people every year.[5]

The Hiroshima and Nagasaki museums were among the earliest anti-war museums in postwar Japan. In 1949 a modest exhibition of the effects of the atomic bomb opened in Hiroshima. In 1955, another atomic bomb museum opened in Nagasaki. In 1967, Maruki Iri and Toshi, artists who lost family members in the attack on Hiroshima, opened their [anti-](#)

war art gallery in Saitama, exhibiting their murals commemorating the atomic bombings.



Maruki Gallery houses Hiroshima murals

Until the 1980s most anti-war museums focused on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Taken out of context, this emphasis may not seem to illustrate clearly a broad anti-war feeling on the part of the Japanese public. The full story is more complex, since other anti-war expressions in Japan have long displayed a national consciousness of Imperial Japan as an aggressor. In the 1950s, for example, the Japan-China Friendship Association (Nit-Chu Yuko Kyokai) excavated remains of the forced laborers who died in Hanaoka, sent them to the People's Republic of China, and built a monument to remember the victims and atone for the atrocity.[6]



Monument in Hanaoka to eternal peace between Japan and China, erected 1966

In 1965, Park Kyong Sik, a Korean-born historian who moved to Japan in 1929 at the age of seven, published a monograph that examined the forced mobilization of Koreans--the first major study of Korean forced labor to become available in postwar Japan.[7] Nevertheless, since the death of fishermen exposed to nuclear fallout at Bikini atoll in 1954, anti-nuclear activism largely prevailed in the nation. It was not until the 1970s that those who called attention to Japan's wartime role as a perpetrator began to receive considerable notice from the public.

America's war in Vietnam and Japan's normalization with the People's Republic of China in 1972 signaled what are arguably the two major turning points in the historiography and memory of the Asia-Pacific War. From the early 1970s, many more accounts by and about survivors of Japanese atrocities in China and

Korea became available in Japan. This trend was echoed in museum presentations. It was in 1970 that the Marukis, the painters of the atomic-bomb murals, came to see themselves not only as victims of Hiroshima, but also as parties to Japan's wartime aggression and colonialism. Although they had not enthusiastically supported the war effort in the 1930s and the 40s, the Marukis felt that they shared responsibility with Japan's wartime leaders for the crimes committed by the Japanese state. In 1975, they completed "[The Rape of Nanking](#)," a 13 by 26 foot mural that illustrates atrocities committed by the Japanese military in Nanjing in 1937-38. In the painting, the artists portrayed soldiers beheading a Chinese prisoner and raping women. Dead bodies and various body parts are strewn all over the painting. Students visit the Marukis' gallery to learn the importance of peace, and the painting has a particularly strong impact on many young visitors.[8]

Between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s, in the run up to the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Asia-Pacific War, museums that displayed the sufferings inflicted by Japanese militarism on peoples in Asia and the Pacific flourished. In 1988, a public museum that remembers both Japanese and non-Japanese victims of Japan's chemical warfare was opened on Okuno Island in Hiroshima, where chemical weapons were produced during the war. In 1989, high school biology teacher Nishimori Shigeo opened Grass Roots House Peace Museum in Kochi. In 1992, Ritsumeikan University, a private university in Kyoto, erected [the International Peace Museum](#), whose artifacts point to the responsibility of ordinary people for the Asia Pacific War; its featured displays include images of civilians on the home front reveling in the fall of Nanjing in December 1937.



**Kyoto Museum for World Peace,
Ritsumeikan University**

In 1993, Saitama Prefecture opened [the Saitama Prefecture Peace Museum](#). For many years in Nagasaki, a Protestant minister and city assembly man named Oka Masaharu advocated the importance of remembering the victims of Japanese colonialism and atrocities. After his death in 1994, city residents who shared his views succeeded in opening the Oka Masaharu Memorial Nagasaki Peace Museum. The displayed photographs and other materials are meant to remind visitors of the lives of forced laborers and sex slaves from China and Korea, as well as Japanese atrocities in China and other parts of Asia.



Oka Masaharu Memorial Nagasaki Peace Museum

In the mid and late 1990s, pro-Imperialist revisionists became more visible in Japanese society. The establishment of numerous peace museums was one stimulus that prompted revisionists to speak out aggressively and to combat the trend toward national self-criticism that they branded as masochistic and inimical to the cultivation of national pride among the youth. By the late 1990s, Japanese bookstores were stocked with revisionist accounts that glorified sacrifices made by Japanese soldiers, denied the wholesale atrocities in Nanjing, exaggerated the beneficial influence of Japan on its former colonies, and argued that “comfort women” were willing prostitutes rather than sex slaves.[9]

By the late 1990s, the construction of public museums that critically evaluated Japan’s colonialism and aggression noticeably slowed, and most of the new museums that were established avoided controversies. A symbolic case was a dispute over the first national peace memorial, which was eventually named the Showa Hall (<http://www.showakan.go.jp/>).



Showa Hall

The Ministry of Health and Welfare initially intended the memorial to commemorate only the 3.5 million Japanese war dead. However, the Communist and the Socialist parties urged that the memorial should acknowledge the devastations and destructions inflicted on other Asian countries by the Japanese empire.[10] The resulting compromise is a facility that commemorates the suffering of all Japanese both during and immediately after the war and exhibits artifacts with as few explanations as possible to avoid any controversy. The museum library carefully balances its collection to present different perspectives of the Asia Pacific War, varying from arguments that the war contributed to liberating Asia to studies that detail and decry Japan’s wartime atrocities.

IV. Conclusion

Although revisionist accounts of the war have gained popularity among youth in recent years, the Yushukan has yet to regain its wartime popularity. Indeed, the museum itself is aware that its perspective currently represents a challenge to, rather than an expression of, mainstream public opinion. The newly renovated Yushukan that opened in 2002 has two major goals: the first is to honor the war dead who sacrificed themselves for the state, and the second is to communicate an allegedly “true” history to counter the fact that Japanese education in the postwar era emphasized

Japan's wartime wrongdoings.[11] The museum articulates the position that the "Greater East Asian War" contributed to liberating Asia and that the war was not an act of imperialist aggression.

To understand the politics of Yushukan, one needs to recognize a shared feeling among many veterans in postwar Japan. In 1988, for example, Kawano Kiichi established a [small private museum](#) to honor the memory of the 2,500 students at the Naval Preparatory Flying School who died while committing suicide attacks during the war. In the eyes of Kawano, who also attended the school, Japan's postwar education has unfairly demonized all those who took up arms for Japan.

He has argued that many of the youth he called friends earnestly desired to serve and protect their homeland, but Japanese society in the postwar period has largely disregarded these noble sacrifices because Japan waged an aggressive war.[12]

Perhaps the revisionist campaigns of the late 1990s were so successful because they appealed to those frustrated with the self-critical tone of postwar history education in Japan. Yushukan will no doubt continue to publicize its message of the revisionist perceptions through its exhibits. It would not be surprising if museums similar to Yushukan open in Japan in the near future. But museums that highlight Japanese colonialism and aggression could also be built in the future. Will the myriad museums, with their profoundly different messages, contribute to reconciliation in East Asia?

I would argue that they will. In order to accomplish reconciliation, it is urgent for

Japanese society to continue candid discussion of the meaning of the Asia-Pacific War. These museums will continue to provide opportunities for visitors to realize that the need for building consensus is an urgent matter for Japan. Visitors would be wise to consider that the issues concerning the history and memory of the Asia-Pacific War have ramifications beyond Japan. To the extent that Japan fails to settle its history problems, it will continue to cause needless friction in its relations with neighboring countries and the United States.

Notes:

[1] Terabayashi Nobuaki, "'Nihon no hakubutsukan ni okeru Meiji-ki iko no senso kankei shi tenji no genkyo to kokusai kankei ninshiki no kadai ni tsuite' ni kansuru hakubutsukan ankêto chosa ichiran" (A Survey of Museum Exhibitions Regarding "Contemporary Exhibits of the History of Wars Since the Meiji Period in Japanese Museums and Their Perceptions of International Relations"). This report, funded by the Japanese government, was printed in 2004.

[2] "The National Defense Hall: A Newly Opened Museum in Kudan Where You Can Learn Everything about Weapons," *Boy's Club* 21:6 (June 1934), p. 37.

[3] Yasukuni jinja Yushukan, *Yushukanshi* (The History of the Yushukan), 1938, p. 477. Yasukuni jinja Yushukan, *Yushukan* (The Yushukan War Museum), 1941, p. 23.

[4] Ohara Yasuo, *Yasukuni jinja Yushukan no sekai* (The World of Yasukuni Shrine's Yushukan War Museum), p. 96.

[5] Toshifumi Murakami, "The Role which Peace Museums Should Play," in *Exhibiting Peace: The Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Peace Museums*, ed. Ritsumeikan University, 1999, p. 50.

[6] Hanaoka no chi Nit-Chu fusaisen yukohi o mamorukai (Association to Preserve the Hanaoka Monument in the Name of Friendship and Peace with China), *Hanaoka jiken goju shunen kikanshi* (A Booklet Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Hanaoka Incident, pp. 191-209).

[7] Park Kyong Sik, *Chosenjin kyosei renko no kiroku* (Record of Forced Mobilizations of Koreans), (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1965).

[8] See, for example, Jon Junkerman, *Hellfire: A Journey from Hiroshima* (First Run Features, 1986), a 58 minutes DVD.

[9] See, for example, Fujioka, Nobukatsu and Nishio Kanji, *Kokumin no yudan* (Negligence of the Nation), (Tokyo: PHP kenkyujo, 1996). Kobayashi Yoshinori, *Sensoron* (On War), (Tokyo: Gentosha, 1998).

[10] Tanaka Nobumasa, *Senso no kioku* (Memory of the War), (Tokyo: Rokufu shuppan), pp. 246-95.

[11] A leaflet titled "Invitation to the Society of the Friends of the Yushukan" (Yushukan tomo no kai no shiori), available at the Yushukan in 2003.

[12] See a statement on the museum website [here](#).

For other articles on *Japan Focus* on Japanese and East Asian museums and history education illuminating issues of war, peace and war atrocities, see:

- [Kirk A. Denton, "Heroic Resistance and Victims of Atrocity: Negotiating the Memory of Japanese Imperialism in Chinese Museums"](#)
- [Frederick R. Dickinson, "Biohazard: Unit 731 in Postwar Japanese Politics of National "Forgetfulness" "](#)
- [Laura Hein and Akiko Takenaka, "Exhibiting World War II in Japan and the United States"](#)
- [Philip Seaton, Family, "Friends and Furusato: "Home" in the Formation of Japanese War Memories"](#)

Takashi Yoshida is assistant professor of history at Western Michigan University and author of The Making of the "Rape of Nanking": History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States. This article was written for Japan Focus. Posted on December 2, 2007.