ESSAY FILM REVIEWS

SPIRITS OF THE STATE
Japan's Yasukuni Shrine

BY JOHN NELSON

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Opening of the Yasukuni Shrine gates. Screen capture from the film.

One of the most difficult issues to teach and explain, whether in the classroom, in public forums, or in friendly conversations, is the seemingly implacable rift between Japan and its neighbors. Sixty years after a catastrophic war in the region, when one would think time would have healed at least some of the wounds, the divisions between the countries in East Asia appear to be growing wider rather than narrowing. Political concerns go a long way to explicate these divisions—the rise of China, rising nationalism as national borders are reified rather than erased, the calculation that Japan needs to hew closely to the US to counter the growing power of China, and the unpredictable outcome of the Korean mess next door—but they are not enough.

The 2005 film, *Spirits of the State*, by John Nelson, an anthropologist of Japanese religion at the University of San Francisco (whose Center for the Pacific Rim produced the film), is a welcome—if flawed—addition to our teaching toolbox. I look forward to using it in the classroom, in public discussions, and in teacher training, but a number of caveats are in order. This film has inexplicably uneven "production values" (its unlevel sound and jumpy film action are acknowledged in an unusual apologetic note by Films for the Humanities and Sciences packaged inside the DVD cover), along with often jarring and unexpected lapses in content and interpretation. Thus it must be used carefully and, I would suggest, only in conjunction with other resources. I will certainly use this film, but I will also continue to have students read Bix and Breen on Yasukuni, as well as Hardacre's work on Shintō and Nelson's own work on shrines.[1]

Most scholarly accounts of Yasukuni Shrine revolve around its politics and the political implications of official Japanese visits to it, an approach that leaves out its private significance and deep emotional meaning for many Japanese. An anthropologist's perspective, it turns out, can be just as limited as the dominant political one. The two must be carefully combined to make sense of the power and intransigence of the shrine and its museum's hold on public—and private—memory in Japan. The film's narrative—easily downloaded from the Web address at the end of the film—was written to be "balanced." This is probably one reason it is being distributed and touted by the low budget and firmly middle of the road Films for the Humanities and Sciences. It takes quite a critical view of the Japanese state—as in an opening quote unabashedly linking the militarized Japanese state to one of the worst wars of the twentieth century—but leavens the criticism with an almost exclusive look at the faces and voices of shrine visitors. Perhaps this is an attempt to explain the source of the often reprehensible behavior of political and military officials concerning the shrine. Political forces by themselves do not produce the intense private feelings expressed so powerfully in this film, but they do manipulate and push them in particular directions.

At the outset, the author/filmmaker makes his argument clear. The title itself suggests a dichotomy of state and religion, and the author, juxtaposing Yasukuni Jinja with other contested war monuments in Europe, Asia, and America, poses the question: "How can we assess fairly one of Japan's most important religious institutions, the Yasukuni Shrine, that venerates the military dead of a state responsible for one of the bloodiest wars of the twentieth century?" Not an easy project, we would all agree, and the question thus posed identifies the film's central concerns: the link between the shrine and a Japanese state responsible for wealth and prestige on the one hand, militarism and war on the other—and the shrine's primary private identification (in Nelson's view) as a *religious* institution. The film's strengths and difficulties reflect both points.

Spirits of the State is divided into six sections, or "chapters." The first begins with a wonderfully dramatic opening of the shrine's huge wooden doors; they fill the frame and serve as an historical introduction (although having the sequence coincide with the phrase "as we go further into the shrine" is a bit clichéd). It harks back to 1869, with paintings and drawings nicely illustrating the period when Yasukuni Shrine was founded *by the Meiji state* to reward those loyal soldiers who died for the new nation's cause and who continued to be enshrined there in the wars of pacification and expansion that followed. Thus, from its founding, Yasukuni Shrine was essentially a political project and has never been separable from the state purposes that it serves, from offering symbols to unify the nation to emphasizing national pride and self sacrifice as key values to be inculcated in every individual in Japan's emerging modern nation state. Yet it is the religious significance of the shrine that Nelson wishes to emphasize and add to the debate, as he has underscored both in his work on other shrines and in his scholarship on Yasukuni (see note 1).

Chapter 2 focuses, as most discussions of Yasukuni do, on World War II, with its death of more than a million soldiers whose names (and souls, not bodies) have been enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine. Horrific details and even more horrific images of corpses scattered throughout the empire culminate in a striking photograph of family

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members in a tram seated stiffly upright in neat rows, carrying on their laps identical white boxes that contain the ashes of their loved ones. An interview with the historian Yutaka Yoshida of Keiō University underscores their terrible deaths and the fervent desire by their loved ones to believe that these deaths were not in vain. Of course, the state is never absent from this discussion: from the granting of pensions to affected families, to the visits to the shrine by officials and top ranking military (again, the personal and the political are merged). In an interview, a visitor from the "Glorious War Dead" organization excoriates Prime Minister Murayama (1994–96) for NOT visiting the shrine, given that, in his view, US presidents easily visit Gettysburg.

It is in chapter 3 that the voice of Nelson the anthropologist is loudest: the focus shifts to the personal devotional and ritual aspects of the shrine itself, from the (usually limited) role of Shintō in death practices (Nelson nicely concludes that Yasukuni in this sense is an "invented tradition") to beliefs about the dangerous souls of the dead. In the narrator's voice:

> *Military dead—those vibrant young men and women cut down in their prime—are highly volatile and unstable entities . . . many believe that these spirits—which are confused, lost, or neglected on some distant battlefield—might seek retribution from the nation . . . Yasukuni shrine [thus] pacifies these spirits and keeps the nation secure.*

This point maintains center stage, although the script includes a caveat—"when observing what goes on among visitors to Yasukuni, we must allow for diverse levels of participation and beliefs." There is also at least an acknowledgment of powerful protests against the August 15 annual commemoration, particularly after the 1979 enshrinement of those convicted as WWII war criminals (identified at the shrine as the "1,068 Shōwa martyrs)." Images in the film focus particularly on veterans and bereaved family association members whose concerns have been closely allied with—many would say manipulated by—right-wing nationalist groups. The emphasis remains on the concerns of ordinary visitors and the role that the shrine plays in reifying deaths, making them "valorized, legitimized, and even sacred." Similarly, the costs of the war to others are alluded to in an aside, but the nations are not named (the accompanying images are not identified and could be from anywhere in East Asia) and the complicated issue of numbers killed by the Japanese (as in Nanjing) is not addressed in the film.

The Web site suggests breaking the film at this point for discussion, an excellent idea. The second part turns from the shrine itself to other aspects of the site. Next to Yasukuni Shrine is the Yushukan War Museum. Both, by the way, are no longer paid for or officially supported by the state, but are financed by conservative private individuals and groups, such as the Bereaved Families Association, a crucial point not made in this film. The museum, the subject of chapter 4, was extensively renovated in 2002, but this film, released in 2005, inexplicably includes only images from pre-renovation 1995. This is unfortunate since the new museum—which I visited in 2005—powerfully reinforces Nelson's point about the mixing of state and religion: after climbing stairs, one now enters a high, hushed foyer, with hanging scrolls and objects dramatically lit. Both the dramatic setting and the intensely patriotic and poignant poems reinforce the sense that one is in no ordinary museum but instead entering a sacred space. Reverence is the mood; unacknowledged Japanese sacrifices and lofty ideals—particularly the liberation from Western imperialism of first Japan and then of the rest of Asia, aided by Japan—is the theme. The Russo-Japanese War is the center and climax of the pre-World War II part of the new museum, ending in Japan's military triumph over the European powers that had threatened it. When I visited in 2005, there was much attention being paid to its centenary.

But the bulk of the film—as well as the museum and the number of *kami* (spirits) enshrined next door—is devoted to World War II (or the "Greater East Asian War," according to the museum). As he does throughout the film, Nelson focuses on the ordinary person: the daily stream of veterans and family visitors who, he says, "might bring to the shrine a paradox of emotions . . . it's the role of the museum to structure these feelings and memories into a more stable perspective." Unfortunately, he does not go the extra mile and indicate how or what that would look like.

Museum spokesperson (his role at the museum is not clear) Mr. Furukawa Nobuyuki laments the lack of modern history taught in

schools and implores young people to visit and learn. "Just to say we are anti-war doesn't bring peace," he argues, implying that only knowledge and hard work can do that. In filming the exhibits themselves, Nelson emphasizes the photographs and "things left behind" of the average soldier—picking up on the reverent atmosphere and nicely likening these images to icons (not far from the truth; the museum Web site describes them as photographs of the kami).[2] Youth and those most vulnerable are the dominant focus of the museum. Women who dedicated themselves to the war effort, such as young nurses, are even granted space. The often adolescent "special attack forces"—kamikaze pilots—are singled out for special attention. The museum's extraordinary display of weaponry, equipment, and airplanes, like a Zero fighter, includes a *kaiten*, or manned torpedo, in effect a waterborne sneak bomber. Images of officers and the things they "left behind" (the odd locution used by the museum) are exhibited, but it is their loyalty and death, rather than their prowess, that is emphasized. From thousands of figures, Nelson selects the story of a General Anami Korechika, who committed suicide rather than surrender, in the process splashing his blood on his final poem on display, "producing a powerful emotional message for the visitor about loyalty and the tragedy of Japan's defeat."

Chapter 5 moves to the right-wing groups whose message is dominant at the shrine and museum. Their presence is a constant both inside and out, with ear-splitting sound trucks, and books, brochures, memorabilia, and tokens sold on the grounds. Groups like the Japan Association are directly affiliated with the shrine. Likewise, veterans and war buffs form an important group of visitors and supporters of the shrine and site; Nelson nicely captures the scene on August 15 when they don their (own or borrowed) war uniforms, in the words of one man he interviews, "to console the spirits of the dead [and] to try and feel what they felt." It is the act of what Nelson calls "selective remembrance" that best describes the right's use of the space, a place "produced and choreographed by the state, where individual, family, and collective memories intersect" but where only the far right's voice holds sway.

To this reviewer, it is in chapter six, the conclusion, that the narration reaches its most complex and compelling point. The images, unfortunately, do not match up to the level of the script; often mundane and literal images accompany the nuanced words of the narration. Arguing that the shrine is hostage to a state whose position on the war is "contradictory and unresolved," Nelson sees the Japanese state at a crucial crossroads today. In order to move on, as Germany has done, he argues, somewhat paradoxically, the Japanese government needs to confront its past, and to "promote an equally empowering and more emotionally satisfying position" than the nationalist right offers so vividly at Yasukuni Shrine and Yushukan Museum.

As many have argued, we all *remember* history at our peril. To move forward, Japan, caught between victimhood and defeat in its remembrance of times past, needs to think about settling its spirits with images of peace rather than with the glorification of war. The nation's kami deserve no less—as this flawed but important film urges persuasively. ■

NOTES

1. Herbert Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (Perennial Books, 2001); John Breen, "Yasukuni Shrine: Ritual and Memory," *Japan Focus*, Article 293; Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State 1868–1988* (Princeton University Press, 1991); John Nelson, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* (University of Washington Press, 1996); Nelson, "Social Memory as Ritual Practice: Commemorating Spirits of the Military Dead at Yasukuni Shinto Shrine," *Journal of Asian Studies* (May 2003).
2. The extensive Web site devoted to the shrine and museum is easily accessible at www.yasukuni.or.jp/english/.

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