

# Anatomy of the Yūshūkan war museum: educating Japanese youth?

In celebration of its 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Yasukuni Shrine renovated its war museum Yūshūkan. Reopened to the public in July 2002, the new museum features an exhibition space twice its previous size. The shrine hopes that the museum will play a central role in educating Japanese youth, as it did during wartime. But can it?

Takashi Yoshida

During the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, members of the Japanese nobility donated approximately 30,000 yen to the military for the care of wounded soldiers. Some money was left over, and the nobles agreed to allocate the remainder to build an Exhibition Hall of Weapons. Giovanni Vincenzo Cappelletti (1843-87), an architect employed by the Japanese government during the early Meiji period, designed a two-story Romanesque-style exhibition hall. It was named the Yūshūkan, or the hall in which one may study under and commune with a noble-minded soul. The medieval Italian castle-like the Yūshūkan, a symbol of modernization, coexisted alongside the traditional Shinto-style Yasukuni Shrine.

In 1923 the Great Kantō Earthquake destroyed much of the building, and the government decided to build a new exhibition hall of weapons. The design of the hall was no longer European, but was instead crafted in 'a modern Asian style' (Yasukuni Jinja 1983:70-72). In 1931, the new Yūshūkan was opened, and, in 1934, the annexed Kokubōkan (National Defense Hall) was added.

The focus of the new museum was no longer limited to the wars against Qing China and Russia. In the 1938 arrangement, visitors were first conducted upstairs to see artifacts from pre-history through to the late Tokugawa period (1600-1868). They were then guided to the first floor, where they saw materials related to the Meiji Restoration (1868), the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), the armed conflict in north China (1928), and the Manchurian Incident (1931). At the end of tour, the visitors saw cannons, shells, paintings, and fighter planes placed in a large exhibition hall.

In contrast, the annexed Kokubōkan was exclusively dedicated to modern warfare. One of its objectives was to enable visitors to experience modern warfare. It not only exhibited high-tech weapons of the time, such as radio, radar, fighter-mounted machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, and chemical agents; visitors were able to shoot air rifles at small tanks, fighters, and enemy combatants. These were real rifles modified to use compressed air instead of gun powder. Elsewhere, patrons were invited to don gas masks before being subjected to an actual tear gas assault. The Tōkyō Gas Co. was in charge of building the room, while the Institute for Science supplied the necessary equipment (Yūshūkan, 1938:161, 183, 306, 308).

The Kokubōkan's emphasis on entertainment and hands-on experience was maintained in other sections. Visitors, operating a control stick, were able to drop virtual bombs from a heavy bomber. Once they had selected a target and pushed a button, a flashing light appeared to indicate where the bomb had hit. The model bomber also had a seat for a gunner, who was able to operate a mounted revolving machine-gun and shoot enemy fighters. In sum, by the late 1930s, both the Yūshūkan and Kokubōkan had taken on the function of reinforcing nationhood, explaining the technology of modern warfare, and inspiring visitors to join the military. The shrine continued to perform these functions until Japan's defeat in 1945.

During the Occupation, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers closed the museum. In 1961, however, the administrators of the Yasukuni Shrine began to display a limited number of artifacts from the museum, though it remained trivial in scale compared to its predecessor. In 1986, the restored Yūshūkan and Kokubōkan were opened to the public as the Yūshūkan museum. In 1999, the Yasukuni Shrine, celebrating its 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary, decided to renovate and expand the antiquated museum, leading to the opening of a new and larger museum in 2002 featuring visual libraries and devices more attractive to young visitors, trying to entertain them as it once did during the pre-war period.

The current Yūshūkan has two major goals. First, it is designed to honor and comfort the souls of the 'enshrined gods'. Second, it is designed to convey the 'true' history of

modern Japan (Yasukuni Jinja 2003:2). The lobby contains symbolic artifacts of the Pacific War, such as a zero fighter. The panel that explains the fighter reads: 'With its excellent maneuverability and long range, the Zero was the best carrier-based fighter in the world'. The panel fails to mention a major reason why the Zero was so light and maneuverable: the designers had reduced the plane's defensive armor, leaving pilots highly vulnerable to enemy gunfire.

As typified by the laudatory description of the Zero, the museum is filled with erroneous and manipulative representations of Japanese history. Near the entrance of the exhibition halls, a theater continually runs a fifty-minute film entitled 'We Will Never Forget: To Thank, To Pray, and To Be Proud'. The female narrator condemns the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (1946-48) which found Japan guilty of 'crimes against humanity' and 'crimes against peace' and claims the empire acted justly in seeking to liberate Asia from Western aggression.

Rightwing nationalists outside Yasukuni Shrine



The new Yūshūkan has 20 exhibition halls, starting with 'Spirit of the Samurai' on the second floor. Artifacts suggest that the nation was created by Emperor Jinmu in 660 BCE and that many samurai had fought against foreign enemies to defend the nation since then. The second floor covers the passage of time from the Stone Age up to the full-scale war against China that started in 1937. Nearly the entire ground floor is dedicated to the 'Greater East Asian War', including 3,000 individual photographs of the 'enshrined gods'. All of them are said to have fought and died for the empire, and their letters and wills are exhibited. The large hall featuring kamikaze pilots and human torpedoes remains virtually unchanged from its predecessor. In general, the Yūshūkan's version of true Japanese history is a three-dimensional rendering of the views expressed in Kobayashi Yoshinori's *On War* (Sensōron) and Nishio Kanji's *History of the Nation* (Kokumin no rekishi), both of which argue that Imperial Japan liberated Asia from Western aggression. These volumes are available in the museum shop.

## Can the Yūshūkan accomplish its mission?

The popularity of the Yūshūkan museum rose on several occasions prior to Japan's defeat, particularly in periods of war and imperial expansion. After the museum began to exhibit confiscated weapons from the Qing military, visitors skyrocketed from 50,000 to 250,000 a year. In 1905, the year that the Russo-Japanese War ended, more than 480,000 people visited the museum. After the war began with China in July 1937, visitors again increased significantly, with more than 910,000 visiting the museum that year (Yūshūkan 1938:477-89).

Particularly after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the Yūshūkan museum became popular among children. The average annual number of juvenile visitors between 1894 and 1930 was 21,474, while in 1937 more than 110,000 children passed through. Young visitors especially liked the participatory features of the Kokubōkan (*Ibid.*: 484-89). For example,

the June 1934 issue of *Boys' Club* (Shōnen kurabu) informed its readers of the opening of the hall and its popularity among the visitors. Indeed, the wartime years were the heyday of these facilities, which enjoyed a substantial number of visitors and played a significant role in educating youth.

The Yūshūkan never recovered its prewar popularity. Although the current museum seems to attract more visitors than the preceded one, from its opening in July 2002 till May 31, 2003, 226,000 individuals visited the museum, while both the Hiroshima Peace Museum and the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum have received more than one million visitors every year for over two decades. A leaflet available at the entrance of the Yūshūkan urges visitors to encourage their children and grandchildren to join a club called the Friends of the Yūshūkan. According to the leaflet, schools in Japan do not teach the 'true' history of modern Japan and often dispense a masochistic view of history that demonizes Imperial Japan.

Can the Yūshūkan play as powerful a role in conveying its view of modern Japanese history to young Japanese as it once did? It seems that the Yūshūkan's influence will remain limited, mainly due to its extremely negative, nationalistic image and the association that exists in the public mind between the shrine and right-wing extremists. Indeed, the Yūshūkan continues to serve as a Mecca for ultra-nationalist groups, who arrive at the shrine in trucks armed with loud speakers and who rarely hesitate to resort to violence and intimidation in pursuit of their political goals.

As the editor of the conservative journal *Seiron* regretfully pointed out, many Japanese are allergic to the Yasukuni Shrine, and few teachers would advocate including the Shrine as a part of a school excursion. Indeed, Japanese high schools now often choose overseas destinations for field trips. In 2002, for example, more than 38,000 students visited South Korea. Although exact figures are unknown, some schools have visited such places as the House of Sharing and the Seodaemun Prison History Hall, both of which condemn Japanese colonialism in Korea.

It seems unlikely that, at least for the present, the Yūshūkan will be able to play as significant a role as it did during the war in spreading a heroic and ethnocentric narrative of the war among Japanese youth. Japanese peace education has often been criticized for focusing on Japan's own victimhood rather than the destruction and atrocities inflicted by Japan on other nations. Nevertheless, Nikkyōso (Japan Teachers Union) teachers and anti-war activists deserve credit for inspiring Japanese citizens with a sentimental aversion to war and right-wing extremism. Conservative politicians, including prime ministers and senior politicians, visit Yasukuni Shrine and try to imbue the site with a more positive image. However, the public relations problems of the Yūshūkan are unlikely to be neutralized by such appearances. So long as the public continues to identify the Yūshūkan with the groups of violent reactionaries, the shrine stands little chance of appealing to the Japanese mainstream. Nor are the new Yūshūkan's attempts to attract youth with pre-war like hands-on attractions likely to have much impact in furthering its interpretation of Imperial Japan. ◀

## Works cited

- Yasukuni jinja. 1983. *Yasukuni jinja hakunen shi* (One Hundred-Years of the Yasukuni Shrine). Vol. 2. Tokyo: Harashobo.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. *Yūshūkan zuroku* (Pictorial Records of the Yūshūkan Museum). Tokyo: Yasukuni jinja.
- Yushukan. 1938. *Yūshūkanshi* (The History of Yūshūkan). Tokyo: Yushukan.

Takashi Yoshida is assistant professor in the Department of History at Western Michigan University. His research has focused on war and memory in East Asia and the United States. His book *The Making of the Rape of Nanking: The History and Memory of the Nanjing Massacre in Japan, China, and the United States* will be published by Oxford University Press in October 2006.