

15 Yasukuni Shrine's Yūshūkan museum as a site of contents tourism

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In February 2021, a social media storm erupted when voice actress Kayano Ai, star of numerous anime including the 2020 hit *Demon Slayer*, said she visited Yasukuni Shrine on YouTube. Following heavy criticism, particularly from Chinese fans, Kayano withdrew the video and posted an apology for her 'lack of knowledge' (*chishiki busoku*) on her website (Kayano 2021). This is not the first such controversy. From 25 March to 6 April 2017, the Chiyoda Sakura Festival held a stamp rally in collaboration with the popular game *Tōken Ranbu-ONLINE* (Chapter 8). Yasukuni Shrine was one of the places to collect a stamp, eliciting strong criticism from some fans on social media, especially in China. Even so, Yasukuni Shrine is considered a sacred place by many Japanese fans of *Tōken Ranbu* because its museum, Yūshūkan, displays Japanese swords.

Yasukuni Shrine apotheosizes the souls of 2.46 million people who died during wars from the Meiji Restoration to the Pacific War and is a flashpoint in Sino-Japanese and Korean-Japanese relations. The Kayano and *Tōken Ranbu* furores indicate the tensions that can flare when the 'history issue' clashes with the Cool Japan policy (Chapter 1). It is conceivable, however, that some Kayano fans of a nationalistic persuasion became bigger fans as a result of the controversy and took the opportunity to (re)visit Yasukuni. Conversely, some Chinese fans of either Kayano or *Tōken Ranbu* might visit Yasukuni Shrine in the future to understand better this controversial war-related site for themselves. In both scenarios, visitation to Yasukuni Shrine contains an element of contents tourism.

We make an important distinction here between contents tourism and media tourism. Media tourism, in our formulation, includes tourism induced by non-fiction media such as television news, travel shows, documentaries (including the 2007 documentary film *Yasukuni* by Chinese director Li Ying), and social media. Contents tourism, by contrast, is

induced by creative works of entertainment that have no specific aim of inducing tourism. Such works may be historically accurate but appeal to fans because they are entertaining rather than because they are accurate. Contents tourism at Yasukuni Shrine, therefore, occurs when people visit Yasukuni Shrine as a setting for a scene in a movie, or as a shooting location, or as a site that is somehow significant within a ‘narrative world’ created by a (semi-) fictionalized work of entertainment.

Despite its contemporary image as a controversial war-related site, Yasukuni Shrine actually has a history as a place of entertainment. It was founded in 1869 as Tokyo Shōkonsha to commemorate those who fell in the cause of the Meiji Restoration. The Shrine quickly became a *meisho* – ‘famous place’ or tourist attraction (Takenaka 2015: 57–73). Yūshūkan, the Shrine’s military museum, opened in 1882 in a building resembling a medieval Italian castle. The grounds hosted festivals, circuses, horse racing, and sumo competitions. After Japan’s major victories in the First Sino-Japanese War and Russo-Japanese War, the Shrine put on victory spectacles, although the heavy casualties during these wars accentuated the Shrine’s original function of honouring the war dead. Swollen with new exhibits captured during Japan’s victorious wars, Yūshūkan attracted over 10 million visitors per year in 1904–1906 (Takenaka 2015: 67).

Yasukuni’s popularity meant it featured in the popular culture of the day. ‘Yasukuni’s circuses are well known for the literature they inspired, such as Kawabata Yasunari’s “Shōkonsai ikkei” (A View of the *Shōkon* Ritual) and Yasuoka Shōtarō’s “Sākasu no uma” (The Circus Horse)’ and the Shrine is an important location in Futabatei Shimei’s 1906 novel *Sono omokage* (The Adopted Husband) (Takenaka 2015: 62, 64). Such novels may continue to inspire visitation to Yasukuni today, as do modern works that use Yasukuni as a setting. One such work is Kuramoto Sō’s 2009 play *Kikoku* (Returning home), which was made into the TBS war end special drama broadcast on 14 August 2010. A group of Japanese soldiers who died in a *gyokusai* (banzai charge) return as *eirei* (lit. ‘glorious spirits’, i.e. the war dead enshrined at Yasukuni) to see what has become of the places they knew as young men, and to reflect on whether present-day Japan is really what they thought they were dying to protect. One place the soldiers visit is Yasukuni Shrine, which appears as both the historical site to which Japan’s soldiers were told their souls would return if they died and as a shooting location. Unsurprisingly, given that Yasukuni Shrine allowed filming on its grounds, the drama is conservative in tone. In one scene shot at the Shrine, two soldiers express frustration that today’s political leaders cannot pay their respects at the Shrine without causing controversy.

After the war, Yasukuni lost its image as a tourist site, except as a spot for cherry blossom viewing. Yūshūkan was closed and only reopened in

1986. Following refurbishment in 2002, the entrance hall contains four main exhibits: two artillery pieces, a Zero fighter, and a locomotive. The locomotive was one of the first to travel the Thai–Burma Railroad, which some visitors might connect to the 1957 film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* or the 2013 film *The Railway Man*, although any contents tourism is likely to be incidental or serendipitous: i.e. visitors make the connection on seeing the engine rather than specifically going to Yūshūkan to see it. The Zero fighter, however, is of interest to fans of aviation movies ranging from the numerous naval action adventure films made since the 1950s to Studio Ghibli's 2013 anime *The Wind Rises*. Similar comments can be made about the other exhibits of military hardware in the Great Exhibition Hall, and the samurai swords on display in Exhibition Rooms 1 and 2.

The greatest opportunity for war-related contents tourism, however, is when one of the enshrined war dead has featured as a character in works of entertainment. The following heroes/characters/*eirei* are profiled in *Record in Pictures of Yasukuni Jinja Yūshūkan*, the official museum English guidebook (Yasukuni Shrine 2009):

- Sakamoto Ryōma, Yoshida Shōin, and other imperial loyalists of the Meiji Restoration feature extensively in television dramas, historical novels, and other works, and are widely utilized as tourism resources in their home prefectures.
- The two major heroes of the Russo–Japanese War, Nogi Maresuke and Tōgō Heihachirō, are not enshrined at Yasukuni because they did not die in battle. But, a scene of Nogi receiving notification of the death of his two sons is a staple of Russo–Japanese War films and Nogi's sons are profiled in Yūshūkan. There is also a memorial to Hirose Takeo, a major character in *Clouds Above the Hill* (Chapter 12).
- The 'Three human bombs' of the 1932 Shanghai incident, who blew themselves up to make a hole in a barbed wire obstacle, were eulogized in plays, films, and patriotic songs in the 1930s. This generated contents tourism at Yasukuni Shrine decades before the term was coined.
- Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet and mastermind behind Pearl Harbor and Midway, died in April 1943. He has featured in many navy films and screen biopics.
- The stories and final letters of members of the kamikaze, kaiten, and other special attack units are displayed prominently in Yūshūkan. Kamikaze films have also generated considerable contents tourism at sites in southern Kyushu (Chapter 18).

- Kuribayashi Tadamichi was in command of the garrison on Iwo Jima. He was played by Watanabe Ken in the 2006 film *Letters from Iwo Jima*.
- The Himeyuri Corps of student nurses has featured in numerous films and dramas about the Battle of Okinawa. The girls who died are enshrined at Yasukuni and commemorated in the museum exhibits.
- The nine telephone operators of Maoka Post Office on Karafuto (now Sakhalin) who committed suicide in the face of the Soviet advance on 20 August 1945 have featured in various films and dramas, such as the 1974 film *Karafuto 1945-nen natsu, Hyōsetsu no mon* (Karafuto Summer of 1945: Gate of Ice and Snow).
- What Yasukuni Shrine calls the ‘Showa era martyrs’ are better known in English as the class-A war criminals. Tōjō Hideki and others executed after their conviction at the Tokyo Trials have featured in various works including the nationalistic 1998 film *Pride: unmei no toki* and a four-part NHK television drama in 2016. And while he is not an enshrined *eirei*, Indian judge Radhabinod Pal, who gave a famous dissenting judgement at the Tokyo Trials and was a major character in *Pride*, is honoured with a monument close to the entrance of Yūshūkan.



Figure 15.1 The temporary exhibition in Yūshūkan about composer Koseki Yūji.
Photo: Yamamura Takayoshi.

- There is an exhibition of bridal dolls given to the museum by bereaved families of soldiers who died before getting married. These dolls represent a common trope of Japanese war stories: the sweetheart left behind on the home front by the soldier who goes off to war. One such character appeared in *Kikoku* described above. When the spirit of the soldier returns to visit the sweetheart he promised to marry, he finds her as an old woman who never loved another man. The dolls, and such characters in war stories, epitomize a conservative trope of a woman's pure love for a soldier who sacrificed all for family and nation.

Finally, in addition to its permanent exhibits, Yūshūkan has temporary exhibitions. From September to December 2020, there was an exhibition about composer Koseki Yūji, who composed the 1964 Olympic March, but also numerous patriotic songs before and during the Second World War. Koseki was the model for the main character in NHK's morning drama *Yell*, which aired from 30 March to 27 November 2020. This exhibition was created to attract contents tourists interested in the morning drama.

Yūshūkan, therefore, is full of 'contents', namely the stories of individuals who have featured as characters in works of popular culture entertainment. This makes Yasukuni Shrine and Yūshūkan into *seichi* or 'sacred sites' in two senses: the first is nationalistic, namely Yasukuni as a place where national martyrs are enshrined; the second relates to contents tourism, namely a place where fans of war-related entertainment can further their interest in via tourism. For Japanese with nationalistic inclinations, these ideas of *seichi* are compatible and mutually reinforcing. However, as the Kayano Ai and *Tōken Ranbu* controversies at the start of this chapter indicated, political ideologies and fandom can clash, such as when a Chinese fan's favourite Japanese voice actress visits the reviled Yasukuni Shrine. Nowhere more than the sacred site Yasukuni Shrine better reveals the tensions inherent between Japanese popular culture representations of war, the Cool Japan strategy, and contents tourism.

References

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