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Representing the National Past for Future Generations: The Yûshûkan War Museum at
the Yasukuni Shrine and the National Showa Memorial Museum

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Introduction

For Japan a crucial moment in which to transmit the history of its imperial past into the future has arrived. On one hand Japan's position in East Asia is being challenged by the rise of China. By transmitting and reinterpreting its imperial past, Japan is not only taking a stand against China but is also trying to define its future role in Asia. On the other hand, the post war generations now exceed three-quarters of Japan's population. Even though Japan has the highest life expectancy worldwide, eyewitnesses to the Second World War are fast disappearing. In the near future schoolbooks, museums and memorials will be the only items transmitting the imperial past for future generations. In recent years, efforts have already been taken to define an official interpretation of the imperial past. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that in the last decade a wide range of museums and memorial places have been constructed or renewed. And – so my hypothesis - such efforts will even be strengthened in the coming years.

I will take a closer look at the process of transmitting the past into future by asking: How does Japan represent its imperial past? What kinds of narratives are being told and how are they being transmitted to future generations? To shed light on these two issues I will concentrate on two museums: *Picture 1: Map of Tokyo*. First, the Yûshûkan War Museum, located on the grounds of the famous Yasukuni Shrine. Secondly, the Shôwakan or “Showa Memorial Museum” not within the shrine grounds, but in the close neighbourhood of the Yasukuni Shrine.

Why did I choose the two examples? First, both of them can be seen as an officially supported interpretation of Japan's past in the imperial period and during the Second World War, respectively. Both are located next to the extensive imperial palace grounds in the centre of Tokyo, a symbolically charged location. The second reason is that both museums are explicitly aimed at transmitting the Imperial past into the future. *Picture 2:*

Screenshot of Yûshûkan Homepage. Here you see a screenshot from the Yûshûkan homepage. It speaks of: “these profound emotions that we wish to convey to the generation that does not know war.” And the headline for the Yasukuni shrine reads “Yasukuni jinja – a message for the future”. The third reason is that both museums have been built or rebuilt in the last years. Therefore, one could argue that the Yûshûkan and the Shôwakan form somehow the latest and most central attempt to transmit Japan’s imperial past to future generations.

I will discuss the issue by examining these two institutions because in the recently emerging memorial studies field, museums have been largely neglected. In Japanese historical studies, there has been a wide scientific discussion about the schoolbook issue. Similar research had not been done yet on the issue of museums. It is very difficult to find any current and independent research on the Yûshûkan, even in Japanese. In Europe and America the Yûshûkan is almost unknown and the Shôwakan is completely ignored. This is surprising, because there has been ongoing political discussion about the schoolbooks issue as well as the Yasukuni shrine – both are perceived as being a heavy burden on Japan’s relationship with China and Korea. In the last four years for example, the Yasukuni Shrine had been mentioned in German magazines and newspapers almost 500 times, however mention of the Yûshûkan appears only 6 times. These Yasukuni articles have been mostly about political issues in conjunction with the annual visit to the shrine by the prime minister.

To summarize: there are no studies on the representation of Japan’s Imperial past in two of the most important memorial museums in the country today. I will now continue with a short history of the Yûshûkan museum and then discuss its current exhibition. Let me look back to the Meiji-era in the 19th century, in the years after the forced opening of the country by American gunboats in 1853.

The Yûshûkan

Until today the controversial Yasukuni shrine is operated in conjunction with the Yûshûkan war museum. Their history cannot be separated. *Picture 3: Map of the Yasukuni/Yûshûkan.* This is a map of the shrine grounds nowadays: You can see the

entrance with two big *tori* and the main shrine where the war dead are worshiped - as well as the Yûshûkan museum on the right. This setting has stayed almost unchanged for over 130 years.

The establishment of the Yasukuni Shrine coincided with the Meiji-Revolution of 1868. It was founded to remember the dead of the civil war of the 1860s in accordance with Shintoistic rituals. In 1879 the emperor gave the shrine its actual name “Yasukuni”, which means “peaceful country”. Three years later, an Italian architect built the first museum on the shrine grounds. *Picture 4: Yasukuni in Meiji-Era*. Here we have a Japanese woodblock print showing Shrine and Museum in the Meiji-period, around 1890. The Yûshûkan was a two storied Westernized brick building – like most of the prestigious official edifices of that period. It served as a museum for the display of weapons from all over the world and gave its visitors an idea of “modern”, “Western” war. The coincidence of the Meiji-Revolution and the establishment of the Shrine and the Museum is not astonishing. Both are projects directed towards building Japanese “modernity” - a modernity, which the new leader tried to implement in Japan after 1868. National memorial shrines for the war dead or museums did not exist before the Meiji-Revolution, and the Yûshûkan was Japan’s first permanent museum.

The importance of the Yasukuni and the Yûshûkan grew with the Chinese-Japanese and Russian-Japanese wars. Between 1894 and 1905 the numbers of annual visitors to the Yûshûkan increased from 40 000 to over 400 000. But also the content of the museums changed. For the first time the museum exhibited the personal belongings of fallen Japanese soldiers. Two decades later the Great Kanto earthquake destroyed the Yûshûkan. It took the government eight years to reopen the museum. *Picture 5: Main building from 1931*. The new museum, in which the latest weapons were shown, consisted of a two-storey building in a neo-Japanese style and with an ample hall in its centre. Two years later the *Kokubôkan*, or ‘National Defensive Hall’ was opened to the public. As the name indicates, this part of the museum displayed civil defensive measures to the population. Also this building, which today houses the library of the Yasukuni Shrine, was constructed in a neo-Japanese style, which is characteristic for the period of Japanese fascism in the 1930s.

The Yasukuni shrine became the central place for the representation of Japanese militarism and nationalism during the years of the war with China and World War Two. The family members of the dead soldiers, who were invited for the great spring and autumn festivals at the shrine, also visited the museum as part of their program. So for the decade between 1935 and 1945 the restored Yûshûkan became the most visited and most significant museum of Imperial Japan

For this reason the Americans closed the Yûshûkan after the Japanese defeat in 1945. The museum remained closed until 1986, when the old main building was reopened, again under the name of Yûshûkan. While the museum was forgotten for about 40 years, the Yasukuni shrine was not. In fact, the shrine was privatised in 1945 and until today it has been funded privately. The Emperor, members of Imperial family, as well as some of Japan's prime ministers restarted visiting the shrine in the late 1960s. And in the 70s fourteen of the so-called A-class war criminals were clandestinely enshrined by Yasukuni priests, joining the other around 2.5 million Japanese war dead. The International Military Tribunal for the Far East put these A-class war criminals on trial after the war . Upon learning about their enshrinement Emperor Hirohito refused to visit the shrine from then on, also his son Emperor Akihito does not worship at the shrine nowadays. But the war criminal problem does not restrain lesser members of the Imperial family from visiting the shrine.

The so-called Yasukuni problem gained international attention when former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirô started to visit the Yasukuni Shrine in 2001. From then on, he repeated his visits once a year on the 15th August, the day of the Japanese capitulation. This marked a rupture within Japanese post-war policy, as none of the other Prime Ministers had visited Yasukuni more than once during their terms and since 1985 not one of them had been there. The international reaction (mainly from China) to Koizumi's visits was strong. And the damage to Japan's international relations was so severe that even a conservative newspaper like the *yomiuri shinbun* started to question Koizumi's visits. But Koizumi's Foreign Minister Asô Tarô went even further by saying that it would be desirable for the emperor to restart visiting Yasukuni. At the moment we do not

know yet if the new Prime Minister Abe Shinzô will continue visiting the shrine, beginning this summer.

As the Yasukuni shrine once again became a part of Japan's official policy, the Yûshûkan was extended: To celebrate the 130th anniversary of the Shrine, a new main building made of glass was opened in 2002: *Picture 6: New Building outside*. Here we see the extension on the right side of the old building, with the entrance to the museum. The new building has two cinemas and twenty exhibition rooms with a total of over 11,000 square meters. The entrance hall is, as we can see, dominated by a Mitsubishi zero fighter: *Picture 7 Zero Fighter*. This plane is described as a masterpiece of Japanese aesthetics and is compared to the beauty of the temples of Nara and Kyoto. And it is the same discourse of Japanese tradition and uniqueness with which the exhibition starts. The first two rooms show Japanese samurai swords from the Middle Ages and poems, which “express the refined spirit of the Japanese people”. Afterwards the visitors go through a dozen rooms, with exhibits in chronological order of Japanese military history from the Meiji-Revolution to the end of the Second World War. The visit ends in a large exhibition hall, where among other items a Kamikaze plane and a manned torpedo are shown. *Picture 8: Submarine*. Finally you pass a shop with publications, in which the Nanking massacre is denied. The new building attracts a lot of visitors. Around 1000 people pass through the exhibition daily and on the days of the Yasukuni spring or autumn festivals the museum is very crowded. Among them are many foreigners, because the new exhibition has extensive explanations in English of Japan's military history. Thus, the Yûshûkan has developed in the last 130 years from a technical war museum showing modern, Western weapons to a memorial museum, re-interpreting and transmitting Japan's imperial past for future generations.

What is the main narrative of the exhibition? Primarily the exhibition claims that “The Truth of Modern Japanese History is now restored”, to convey it to future generations. *Picture 9: Screenshot of the Yûshûkan homepage*. To accomplish this task the exhibition is based on three different narratives: The first is about Japan's relationship with its Asian neighbours. In the view presented by the Yûshûkan, Japan was a victim of Western colonialism and sought only to protect the rest of Asia from such colonialism. Or in other

words: The Japanese Empire fought in the first half of the 20th century against Western colonialism and imperialism. This fight ended in military defeat. But while Japan suffered a devastating loss and a long and shameful occupation, a new and independent Asia was born out of the ashes. Therefore Japan is presented as the liberator of Asia. In order to tell this narrative Japanese ferocities are not to be mentioned. Secondly and following on from the first point, Japanese military expansion from the late Meiji Era until the 1940s is interpreted as a fight for peace. The message to the future generations is that Japanese overseas aggression was in reality a contribution to world peace. Therefore you can find doves depicted everywhere on the grounds of Yasukuni, as indicated by the white doves painted on the map of the Shrine shown earlier. And thirdly, the Yûshûkan museum tries to convince its visitors that the sufferings and sacrifices of the Japanese soldiers laid the foundations for the post-war era of prosperity. In other words, it is due to the engagement of the Japanese army in the Second World War – including the hopeless fighting in the last months of the war and the Kamikaze attacks – that Japan had become a rich and peaceful nation. So the main message to future generations is: The deaths of your ancestors in Japan’s imperial wars had a meaning and is something to be proud of. Let us see if we can find similar messages in another memorial museum.

The Shôwakan

To discuss Japanese memorial policy one could also take a closer look at the well-known Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum or the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum. But I chose the Shôwakan or National Showa Memorial Museum for three reasons. First, its location: It forms together with the Yûshûkan a kind of landscape of museums in the centre of Tokyo. Secondly, the Shôwakan is dedicated not to a single event – like the museums in Nagasaki and Hiroshima – but to the period from 1935-1955. Like the Yûshûkan the narrative of the Shôwakan is told as a chronology. Thirdly, it is a very new museum, where recent tendencies in memorial politics are clearly visible. Here a picture of the museum building. *Picture 10: Shôwakan form outside.*

The Shôwakan opened in March 1999 as a “national facility” run by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. Therefore the Shôwakan is named in English as the “National Showa Memorial Museum”. In Japanese Shôwakan simply means “Shôwa

hall” and the era name Shôwa can be translated as “enlightened peace”. Emperor Hirohito’s choice in 1925 to give his reign the motto of *Shôwa* or “enlightened peace” turned out to be bitterly ironic in the first twenty years of this period.

The Shôwakan is – similar to the Yûshûkan - dedicated to transmitting the history of the past to future generations. The main target audience is high-school students who are visiting the museum together with their teachers and classmates. The Shôwakan portrays the home front, particularly the contributions of women, as the backbone of the war effort. I will quote here from an English brochure, which is a translation of the Japanese one: “Showakan is a national memorial museum to commemorate Japanese suffering during and after World War II and to pass on this historical commemoration to later generations.”

From the outside the museum looks somehow like a can, without any windows or inscriptions. The only thing that can be anticipated from outside are the seven floors of this big block, which borders the gardens of the imperial palace. This opacity is rather rare for modern museum buildings, which are often built with huge transparent glass surfaces. But what can we find inside? Here is a picture of the objects on the different levels. *Picture 11: Japanese pamphlet*. The Shôwakan is an interactive museum with a lot of multimedia facilities. It focuses on the lives of ordinary Japanese people during the World War II and the early post-war years. One floor is dedicated to the years of the war, starting from around 1935. The second floor depicts the hardship of daily life in the first ten years after the war. But not only is the history of suffering exhibited, wherever possible so too are the small daily joys.

At first sight, the elements of the storyline told differ from the storyline of the Yûshûkan. Above all, the museum tries to be strictly neutral. The Yûshûkan discourse of Japan as the saviour of Asia is absent, as well as the one of Japan as peacemaker. But this is not the only thing absent in this exhibition: The Shôwakan says nothing about Japan’s war responsibility, about war crimes or the rule of the emperor. And by looking at these omissions we can find a lot of similarities with the Yûshûkan: First, as in the Yûshûkan the sufferings of Japan’s neighbours - mainly Korea, China but also some Southeast Asian countries - are not mentioned. The Shôwakan describes the hardships of war as an

exclusively Japanese experience. The historical context of the Second World War is neglected. Tsuyuki Fuji from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, who is in charge of the Shôwakan, described the policy of the national memorial museum as follows: “The government decided to avoid judging the war in its historical context. This kind of controversy does not, in our view, suit the mission of a national museum.”

The Shôwakan creates the impression of a homogenous Japanese society and the exclusivity of its sufferings and sacrifices. For this it is also interesting to see the period chosen: The narrative starts in 1935 and not in the 1920s, to which historians often refer to as the “era of Taishô democracy”. If the story would start there, the museum would have to explain how Japanese society changed between 1925 and 1935, how Japan became a militarised and fascist dictatorship. And then the story goes on over the epoch-making rupture of 1945. Half of the exhibition is dedicated to the post-war reconstruction and the first sign of economic and social recovery in the 1950s. The appearance of new consumer goods such as refrigerators or radios is shown. And here we have once again the same tenor as in the Yûshûkan: The sufferings of the war generation, of the soldiers and their families, were not meaningless but mark the starting point for the prosperity from the mid 1950s onwards.

The narrative of the Second World War told in the Yûshûkan as well as in the Shôwakan is a very selective one: First, it is mainly centred on Japan, neglecting East Asia and the rest of the world. In the Yûshûkan, for example, the only information about Hitler and the Nazi regime is that their rise was due to the Treaty of Versailles. Militarism, fascism or the alliance with Germany is not mentioned in both cases. Therefore, both exhibitions do not explain the broader historical context of the Second World War. Secondly, they focus on the sufferings and sacrifices of the Japanese population - in the case of the Yûshûkan of the soldiers, in the Showa War Museum of the civilian population. Thirdly, the question of Japan’s war responsibility is marginalized in both museums. And finally, both museums not only tell a history focusing on the Japanese sufferings, but also stress that these sacrifices were necessary to build a wealthy nation.

Similar tendencies can be found in other well-known war memorial museums all over Japan. For example, the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, which shows the history of the

atomic bombing without any historical context. Another example would be the recently built Shôkeikan museum, situated next to the Shôwakan. This museum is dedicated to the wounded and sick retired Japanese soldiers. Once more it is the individualising story of Japanese suffering that is told.

Conclusion and outlook

The memorial museums discussed in this paper are all government institutions or have at least a strong connection to official Japanese policy. In the case of the Yûshûkan, even though privately funded, it becomes largely official due to the visits of the prime minister and members of the imperial family, and due also to the continuity of the museum, which was under the same name as a national museum for over 60 years until 1945. Together these museums present the Japanese state's representation of World War II. Against this backdrop, the denial of any war responsibility must be seen as part of current official policy - policy which aims to transmit only a partial picture of Japan's Imperial history to future generations.

Allow me to end my paper with three theses: First, with the enlargement of the Yûshûkan and its reorientation, which is aimed at "restoring the truth of Japanese modern history", this museum will become a point of contention for China and Korea. With the new Yûshûkan the whole Yasukuni issue has become more complicated. Because even if the new Prime Minister Abe would not visit the shrine anymore and the war criminals would be taken away from the shrine, the Yûshûkan will still be there. Francis Fukuyama pointed this out too, some months ago in an article on the Yasukuni question. I quote: "The problem is not the war criminals interred at the (Yasukuni) shrine; the real problem is the Yushukan Military Museum next door." So, while for China and Korea the Yasukuni shrine will continue to serve as a symbol of Japanese nationalism and colonialism their attention might shift more and more to the Yûshûkan; and more generally to Japanese memorial policy as visible, for example, in the Shôwakan.

Secondly, there is a long continuity in the Japanese claim of being a peace-bringer to Asia. It was one of Japan's main justifications for colonial expansion. Still today, the story told in the main memorial museums is that the country aimed simply at the

establishment of the so-called "Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere". In this view, the Second World War was for Japan a war of self-defence. Future generations should forget about Japanese aggression and only remember Japan as a peacemaker. Such a narrative can only be told without referring to the historical context of Japanese Imperialism.

Thirdly, Japan's new Prime Minister Abe Shinzô has published a book with the title "Toward a beautiful country: My vision of Japan". Abe is Japan's first prime minister to be born after the end of the World War Two. In his book he states he is seeking to evoke a "new Japanese self-confidence, a new Japanese nationalism". In February of this year, the Yûshûkan organised a symposium under the title of Abe's book. The reinterpretation of Japan's past – as at the Yûshûkan and the Shôwakan – seems to be only one part in a much broader program, which aims to build a new Japan on the foundations of its imperial past. If future Japanese generations refer to Japan's role in Asia based on the narratives shown and propagated in Japan's memorial museums such as the Yûshûkan and the Shôwakan, their claims will not be acceptable to the Koreans or the Chinese. And this will be a heavy burden for the future Japanese generations to bear. Thank you.

Daniel Hedinger, July 17, 2007.