

# Koizumi and the New Nationalism

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**P**rime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō's decision last August to pay his respects at Yasukuni Shrine, dedicated to Japan's war dead, triggered a predictable debate in the media and elsewhere. Asked by a reporter at the time what I thought of the prime minister's announced decision, I expressed my approval, asserting that such a visit raised no constitutional problems. I would like to begin by elaborating on that position.

## SEPARATION OF RELIGION AND STATE

The Japanese Constitution promulgated after World War II calls for the separation of religion and the state. What this means is that the secular institution of the state (including the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government) must operate under the principles of democracy and the law without regard to religious beliefs, which are a matter of an individual's inner values, or to the organized religions and religious institutions that represent those beliefs. This principle is intended to protect the individual's freedom of thought and conscience, while at the same time helping to keep the government's actions on a rational footing. Separation of religion and the state is integral to freedom of religion. The state must never do anything to prevent or discourage an individual from expressing his or her religious beliefs.

Yasukuni Shrine is what is known under Japanese law as a "religious corporation." It is a religious organization with no ties to the Japanese government, supported by the religious beliefs of private individuals. Accordingly, the government is prohibited from interfering with the shrine or with the individuals who visit it as an expression of their religious beliefs or sentiments.

Certainly this principle applies even if the individual in question belongs to or represents an organ of the state. For a prime minister to attend a Buddhist funeral for a fellow politician or Christian memorial services for a deceased friend would never be considered unconstitutional, since he would be attending these as a private citizen, not as a representative of an organ of the state. The same should naturally apply to a visit to Yasukuni Shrine. Any individual's expression of his or her beliefs is clearly a private act and cannot be regarded otherwise.

Some have argued that the prime minister needs to act circumspectly even in a private capacity, since his private actions can have major political repercussions. However, this argument goes counter to the principles of our Constitution. Under the Constitution of Japan, the law applies equally to all citizens, public and private, no matter how large or small their political influence. The idea that something might be constitutionally permissible as long as one is an ordinary politician but impermissible as soon as one becomes prime minister betrays a very confused understanding of the Constitution.

Others have insisted that the prime minister's visit is an "official pilgrimage," not a private one. In fact, this term *official pilgrimage* is a coinage of the mass media, a word with no accepted definition. The word *official* implies an activity planned, paid for, and carried out by a government organ. If the cabinet decided that the visit should occur or supported Yasukuni Shrine with government funds or asked it to perform some ceremony, that would be official involvement in religious affairs and therefore unconstitutional. This not being the case, the term *official pilgrimage* was fabricated by the media to give readers the false impression that the prime minister's visit to the shrine was problematical from a constitutional standpoint.

Another objection to the prime minister's visit was that class A war criminals (convicted in the Allied tribunal after World War II) are among the war dead collectively enshrined there. The prime minister's response to these concerns was somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he argued that the fact that a handful of class A war criminals happen to be enshrined at Yasukuni is no reason to neglect the memory of all the others the shrine honors. On the other hand, he suggested that there is no need to consider people criminals if they have already been punished for their crimes (as most of these people were by being executed).

However, where the issue of constitutionality is concerned, there is no ambiguity. First of all, it is entirely up to Yasukuni Shrine, as a religious corporation, which of the dead it wishes to enshrine; the state cannot interfere with such a decision. Under the Constitution, the government can neither tell the shrine to exclude the class A war criminals from those enshrined nor order it to enshrine them separately. Second, as I have already made clear, a visit to Yasukuni Shrine, even by the prime minister, is the action of an individual and thus in no way expresses the state's attitude toward class A war criminals. Third, the status of

## 先進国攻撃型が主流に

東京工業大 橋爪教授 日本もテロ対策を

東奥情報懇 上十三例会  
東奥情報懇談会九月例会が十二日、十和田市の十和田富士屋ホテルで開かれ、東京工業大学大学院社会理工学研究科教授の橋爪大三郎氏が「教育・改革・民主主義—小泉政権以後を展望する」と題して講演した。橋爪氏は冒頭、十一日に発生した米中核同時テロの背景を解説し、「二十世紀は先進国攻撃型ゲリラが主流になり、危機管理は難しくなっている」と述べた。同氏は「先進国の中でも米国は地球の人口の5割で資源の三四割を使っている。非先進国には資源不均等の不満が蓄積している。人口増に伴い飢餓問題が深刻化する」と、先進国を正義にもと

る悪魔で無差別攻撃していいとする宗教的信念の活動組織が現れる。その兆候でなければいいと思う。効率のいい文明をつくり上げるとき、米國と協力して第三世界にすめていくことが日本に求められる」と持論を展開した。また、霞が関を狙ったオウム真理教を引き合いに出し「サリンプラントを計画通り実行できた

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so-called class A war criminals is a matter outside the purview of the Constitution. Class A war criminals are people who were sentenced to death in the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (the "Tokyo Trial"), whose decisions Japan was obliged to accept under the conditions of the Potsdam Declaration, imposed at the time of Japan's surrender, and of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which allowed Japan to regain its independence after the Allied Occupation. This is an obligation under international law, which puts it in an entirely different dimension from duties imposed by the Constitution.

It was on the basis of the above considerations that I concluded that Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine raised no constitutional problems.

#### EAST ASIAN BACKLASH

The next question is whether Koizumi's action was advisable from a political and diplomatic standpoint. What is the historical and emotional significance of this visit for Japan and its Asian neighbors?

Many felt that Koizumi should call off his visit to the shrine because Japan's neighbors, particularly China and South Korea, were registering strong disapproval of the plan. Of course, one does not wish to offend one's neighbors unnecessarily. But to go to the other extreme and make one's neighbors' potential reaction to a domestic issue the main criterion for one's actions—be it Yasukuni Shrine or new history textbooks—is tantamount to abandoning one's own autonomy. On issues like Yasukuni Shrine or history textbooks—also a major source of friction with China and South Korea—we should of course consider our neighbors' feelings. But we must put principle first.

In the years before and during World War II, all Japanese history textbooks were compiled by the state with the aim of indoctrinating children with the emperor-centered nationalist ideology of the day. The state was directly involved with the textbooks' writing and editing. But today's textbooks are written and edited independently and authorized by the government. Although the government carries out a review designed to catch blatant errors and will insist that such errors be corrected before a textbook can be authorized, it has no role in determining the basic content of a textbook or how it is edited. This is in keeping with the inviolable democratic principles enshrined in the Constitution.

In China, on the other hand, history and most other textbooks are compiled under the direction of the government, which imposes its will directly. In South Korea as well, all textbooks devoted to history or to the Korean language are compiled under government direction. Confusing Japan's process of government authorization with their own process of government-directed compilation, people from these countries tend to conclude that the Japanese government is trying to impose a distorted view of history on the entire nation when it allows works like the one produced by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform.

Of course, history is always subject to a variety of interpretations, and it is a healthy situation to have various different views of history vying with one another. For this reason, the Japanese system of government screening is clearly superior to that of government-directed compilation.

In addition to the points above, my views on history and the history textbook controversy can be summed up as follows.

First, since history is a story, it is possible to interpret or narrate historical events in various ways. There is no single "correct" version of history.

Second, despite this inherent multiplicity, history is an attempt to find a shared past. History creates a shared interpretation of events and thus gives substance to the "us" that shares a single past.

Third, it is not inappropriate to use the history courses taught in a nation's schools and the accompanying textbooks as part of the effort to form a sense of nationhood and of shared history.

Fourth, one should be proud of one's country's history without closing one's eyes to any of it, and one should understand that people in other countries feel the same way about their own history. By working together in this manner, we can resolve such problems as the recent textbook controversy.

When foreign governments protest to Japan regarding its textbooks, we should explain our official authorization system to them and do our utmost to win their understanding. But we can make no commitment to them beyond that.

#### CONFLICTING VIEWS OF HISTORY

Because it is subject to various possible interpretations, history inevitably incorporates the biases of existing peo-

ples. The actual writing of history takes place within individual countries and thus reflects the perspective and interests of specific nations. This means that at times, one country's version of history will contradict another country's version of the same events. What should be done when conflicting perceptions of history become the source of discord and conflict in the international community?

First, we need to recognize that history is not simply knowledge of the past but also a source of wisdom on how to live in the present and in the future. This should be our starting point. Nation-states exist because the grouping called the nation enables people to live better lives. And each of these nation-states has its own history. That these histories should sometimes contradict one another is unavoidable.

The history of the Japanese nation is something that affirms the existence of the country we call Japan and teaches the Japanese how to live in the present and the future. It is natural and proper that history should foster a sense of national identity and national self-respect. Since World War II, Japanese schools have dwelled at length on the sins of the past, forgetting that this version of history alone can foster neither a national identity nor national autonomy. The reason the new history textbook compiled by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (against which the Chinese and South Korean governments, along with some Japanese, have strongly protested) has garnered a certain level of public support is doubtless that many people in Japan are feeling that it is time we corrected that bias.

Postwar Japan is a democracy in name, but it is doubtful whether it has been a democracy in substance. Today the postwar Japanese are attempting to redefine themselves as a truly democratic and autonomous nation. First, however, it is necessary to define Japan's national interests autonomously and to create a shared view of history. There is no need for people to regard this development with suspicion or alarm. By enhancing the governing capacity of its democratic institutions, Japan will be enhancing its capacity to take preventive action against international disorder, something from which our neighbors can only benefit.

#### KOIZUMI AND THE NEW JAPAN

A great deal has been said about the special qualities of the Koizumi administration. Here I would like to focus on what it symbolizes for the Japanese nation.

Unlike the vast majority of prime ministers in Japan's recent history, Koizumi secured his position not through backroom deals and strategic alliances but by gaining the overwhelming support of the people and winning an open party election. And even though much of his public support came from voters with no affiliation to the Liberal Democratic Party, Koizumi's immense popularity ultimately gave him the leverage he needed to assume leadership of the LDP.

There is no telling how long this situation will last. Koizumi's administration could collapse before the year is

out. But even if it does, the advent of the Koizumi cabinet will be remembered as an epoch-making event in postwar Japan's political history. Koizumi was a maverick within the LDP and enjoyed little party support. Ironically, he conducted his campaign for LDP president on an anti-LDP, reformist platform, and in so doing won the support of the uncommitted voters, a bloc that had grown to huge proportions. Armed with this popular support, Koizumi forced the beleaguered LDP old guard to support him as well. This is the paradox by which Koizumi came to power. And the essence of his administration since then has been its effort to resolve the paradox—seemingly an act of self-destruction. This is one reason the Koizumi cabinet can be considered revolutionary. Another is that, in the metamorphosis it has been attempting to complete since it took power, many people here perceive something emblematic of Japan itself.

Plainly put, Prime Minister Koizumi is a symbol of the Japanese people as they struggle to build an identity for themselves amid the contradictions and confusion of a new era.

In this capacity Koizumi must be a reformer, and he will maintain his support among the people as long as he remains one. This explains why he has so insistently advocated the privatization of the three postal services: mail, savings, and life insurance. Why did he decide to choose this particular reform? The reasons are, first, that no other politician was advocating it, and second, that he recognized intuitively that privatization of these services would sever ties between the LDP and some key interest groups, disrupting its vote-getting apparatus and forcing much-needed change within the party. By consistently advocating this policy from the time he was minister of posts and telecommunications, Koizumi earned the reputation of an eccentric and a reformer within the LDP. That image is now part and parcel of his political persona, and there is no turning back.

But the Koizumi administration will not be able to carry out genuine reforms unless the prime minister's personal dynamism proves more powerful than the dynamics within the party. How likely is this? Judging by the recent elections for the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly and the House of Councillors, Koizumi's coattails are far more effective in getting candidates elected than the endorsement of the LDP or the campaign cooperation between the LDP and the New Kōmeitō. That being the case, let us suppose that Koizumi's reforms encountered resistance and that the prime minister responded by dissolving the House of Representatives and calling a general election. After bolting the LDP and announcing the formation of a new party, Koizumi could screen all the candidates for the lower house nationwide and endorse those of whom he approved. Given his proven clout with voters, his endorsement would probably be a decisive factor in determining the outcome of the races in local districts. He should thus be able to ensure the election of a large enough number of like-minded politicians to put together a huge reform faction transcending party

lines and backed by a popular mandate. With this realignment of political forces, the contradictions and contortions within the Koizumi administration would resolve themselves, and the “1955 setup,” a political configuration grounded in Cold War dichotomies, could finally be pronounced dead. Of course, all of this may not actually come to pass, but if anyone can bring it about, it is Koizumi.

Koizumi expressed his resolve to visit Yasukuni Shrine within a short time of taking office. His determination to make this visit was another sign of how different he is from his predecessors in his firm adherence to his own principles as a politician.

In truth, it hardly seemed politically prudent for a prime minister whose fate hinged entirely on the good will of the voters to bring up an issue that continues to divide the Japanese people while eliciting harsh criticism from both our Asian neighbors and the domestic media. Groups associated with the old Imperial Army and relatives of the war dead constitute one dependable component of the LDP’s vote-getting apparatus. For years, conservative LDP politicians have made conspicuous visits to the shrine to remain in these groups’ good graces, invariably eliciting criticism from the opposition and the media. Swept to power as a liberal reformer, Koizumi could easily have remained silent on the issue instead of taking the risk of alienating his support base. His decision to speak out doubtless reflected an awareness of the new mood among the Japanese people—seen in the historical controversies that have escalated in recent years and in the movement to create a new kind of history textbook—as they struggle to reclaim their national identity.

The controversies over visits to Yasukuni Shrine and revisionist textbooks raise fundamental issues that must be faced if Japanese politics is ever to break through its present impasse. That is because this impasse derives from the failure of the Japanese to recognize that the conditions that gave birth to postwar Japanese politics, with its neat

conservative-reformist dichotomy, are not eternal and immutable but have in fact given way to the very different conditions of the post-Cold War world. By visiting Yasukuni Shrine, Koizumi the reformer confronted the issue of history head on and in so doing implicitly called on Japan to demolish the wall between conservatism and reform once and for all.

#### UNDERSTANDING YASUKUNI SHRINE

To confront the matter of history is to reflect on the conditions that created the postwar Japan we know. And to do this, we need to discuss the issue of Yasukuni Shrine in a broader context than its relationship to the postwar Constitution.

News reports on CNN and elsewhere described Yasukuni as a “war shrine” dedicated to Japan’s war dead, including war criminals. These reports have served to convey the impression that Koizumi is a reactionary insensitive to the lessons of history. Although CNN’s coverage contained no blatant errors, it was extremely superficial, ignoring all but the most obvious facts. To understand Yasukuni, it is necessary to dig deeper.

The precursor to Yasukuni Shrine was Tōkyō Shōkonsha, established in the Kudan district of Tokyo in 1869, the second year of the Meiji era, to honor the warriors and soldiers who had died for the cause of the imperial restoration. Here priests would summon the spirits, or *rei*, of these fallen heroes, conduct a ceremony in their honor, and send them off again. Later, it was decided to provide a permanent home for the spirits, and the structure was rebuilt as Yasukuni Shrine. Thus, at least at its inception, Yasukuni was not intended as a war shrine. It was, rather, a shrine to the heroes of the revolution, that is, the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

In the history of Shintō, the concept of *rei* is a very recent one—in fact, it seems to have emerged only with the founding of Yasukuni Shrine. The idea is that each person who dies has a *rei*, with its own name and individuality, which exists eternally. *Rei* can be summoned to our world and sent off again to their own through Shintō ceremonies. A number of *rei* can be collectively enshrined to dwell together in a single sacred object (the sacred mirror of Shintō), but even thus enshrined they remain distinct individuals. It was a concept—probably influenced by Christianity—devised with the aim of honoring, through Shintō ceremonies, the sacrifices individuals had made for their country.

Let us examine why the Meiji government felt it necessary to invent the concept of *rei*. Each of the warriors of the restoration would have belonged to a household that adhered to one or another sect of Buddhism. When one died, according to custom, a Buddhist funeral ceremony would have been performed, a posthumous Buddhist name conferred, and the remains interred in a grave that already held previously deceased family members and ancestors, going back generations. This was a tradition that had con-

tinued through much of the Edo period (1600–1868), and even the Meiji government could not abolish it and take over the entire task of conducting funeral ceremonies for all of the dead fighters and interring their remains. How, then, could the new government honor these fallen heroes? *Rei* provided the answer. If such spirits existed, then even though the individuals’ remains were interred in family plots according to Buddhist tradition, Shintō priests could summon the *rei* whenever they wished through the appropriate rituals and honor them with Shintō ceremonies. This was one factor necessitating the strict separation of Shintō and Buddhism in Meiji Japan, after many centuries of syncretism.

Before World War II, Yasukuni Shrine was a state institution, under the joint jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Army, the Ministry of the Navy, and the Home Ministry. This setup will seem bizarre to people in countries where separation of church and state is the rule, and indeed, even the Meiji government felt obliged to justify it by sophistically declaring that Shintō was not a religion. State Shintō was made “a religion that transcends religion,” something in a completely different category from the various sects of Buddhism, Christianity, or traditional Shintō.

The three ministries sent rolls of “those who died in the service of their country” to the shrine, which in turn carried out the enshrinement of all those listed. The rolls included only those who had died in the line of duty, whether soldiers or policemen. The three ministries were responsible for screening candidates to make sure they qualified as “fallen heroes.”

Yasukuni was thus a “community of remembrance,” whose purpose was to encourage living individuals to devote themselves to the state. The deceased individuals whose spirits were gathered there obviously had no say in the matter, and they included people of every religious, political, and ideological persuasion. They need not have fought and died on a World War II battlefield in the name of the emperor and his state. Some enshrined there opposed the war but were drafted anyway, torn from their families, and died tragic deaths. If we can find one commonality among them all, it is the fact that they died while performing their duty to their country.

Those enshrined at Yasukuni Shrine performed their duty as citizens, and in this sense their actions were consistent with the values of modern civil society. For this reason, these war dead hold some significance for postwar Japan. The real problem lies in the fact that at present a single religious corporation, Yasukuni Shrine, holds a monopoly on all these spirits, and the Japanese people have no other means of honoring them. Koizumi’s visit helped draw attention to this problem.

Of course, if one denies the existence of *rei*, that problem ceases to exist. However, for the Japanese Empire and its sovereign, the emperor, *rei* did exist. And the Japanese Empire and its emperor are what gave the current Constitution its legitimacy. They provided the historical conditions without which postwar Japan would not exist. Since

*rei* are an integral part of this background, they are also an inescapable premise for postwar Japan. Thus, Yasukuni Shrine, where the *rei* are enshrined, is more than just a religious corporation to which the Japanese Constitution grants existence. It is one of the historical conditions that grant existence to the Constitution.

#### THE FINAL DILEMMA

The enshrinement of class A war criminals together with the other war dead has made the issue of Yasukuni Shrine all the more complex. Among those that the shrine classifies as having “died in the service of their country” are General Tōjō Hideki and the 13 other wartime leaders found guilty at the Tokyo Trial and sentenced to death. Because the “crimes against humanity” of which they were accused were conceived after the fact, and because there was little hard evidence of guilt, some historians regard the postwar tribunal as problematical, and from this standpoint, one might argue that there are no real grounds for distinguishing these 14 from the rest of the war dead. On the other hand, as stated above, acceptance of the verdicts handed down by the international tribunal was a legal obligation imposed on the Japanese nation by both the Potsdam Declaration and the San Francisco Peace Treaty.

Some have insisted that the treaty does not require Japan to accept or recognize the legitimacy of the Tokyo Trial, noting that, although the Japanese translation of Article 11 states, “Japan accepts the International Military Tribunal,” this is a mistranslation of the original English, which states only that “Japan accepts the judgments of the International Military Tribunal.” By common logic, however, one must accept the legitimacy of a court and the laws governing it in order to accept its verdict. The logic of international law does not support such an argument either, and it goes without saying that the victor nations would never accept it. The fact is that no one has adequately rationalized mourning the sacrifice of people whom one recognizes as class A war criminals.

The problem of Yasukuni Shrine could be solved by thinking of some way to mourn the spirits of the war dead enshrined there independently of the shrine and its Shintō rituals, or else by creating a ceremony of some sort to honor all those who have died in the service of their country, without reference to the *rei* of Yasukuni Shrine. If the Japanese people were able to accept such a solution, the issue would be resolved. However, before this can be done, we must adopt a broader perspective and apply ourselves to reestablishing the connections between postwar Japan and prewar history going back to the Meiji Restoration. This effort has barely begun, and it must continue until it is finished, however long it takes. For only in this way will we find a vision and direction for postwar Japanese society.

Translated from “‘Shushō sanpai’ wa gōken de aru,” in Shokun, October 2001, pp. 69–77; abridged by about one-third. (Courtesy of Bungei Shunjū)



Yasukuni Shrine was originally established in 1869 to honor those who died fighting for the 1868 imperial restoration.