



**Akiko Takenaka.** *Yasukuni Shrine: History, Memory, and Japan's Unending Postwar.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 287 pp. \$57.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-4678-7.

**Reviewed by** Philip Seaton

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**Commissioned by** Simon Nantais (Simon Fraser University)

A history of Yasukuni Shrine has long been overdue. The shrine is a central element of the so-called history issue in East Asia and the debates concerning it cannot be understood properly without a solid grounding in its history. This monograph by Akiko Takenaka (associate professor, Japanese history, University of Kentucky) expertly plugs that gap, and contributes a much-needed second major book on the topic after John Breen's 2008 edited volume *Yasukuni, the War Dead, and the Struggle for Japan's Past* (which focused much more on the contemporary controversy).

Takenaka identifies “three components of ‘Yasukuni’: Yasukuni the belief (Yasukuni shinkō), Yasukuni the site (Yasukuni Jinja), and Yasukuni the issue (Yasukuni mondai)” (p. 6). These themes are developed over six chapters and a short epilogue. The first three chapters cover the years from the shrine's founding in 1869 as Tokyo Shōkonsha (renamed Yasukuni Jinja in 1879) through to the 1920s. Chapter 4 covers the war years, 1931-45, when Yasukuni the belief reached its zenith. Chapters 5 and 6 cover the postwar years and the emergence of the Yasukuni issue within both domestic and international politics.

Rather than craft a linear historical narrative, Takenaka draws on Michel Foucault and takes an “effective history” approach, to “isolate the differ-

ent scenes where they engaged in different roles” (p. 15). The vivid case studies—ranging from the treatment of the bodies of fallen soldiers in Aizu domain during the Boshin War to the lawsuits brought by Okinawans during the 2000s for the removal of their relatives from enshrinement—have the double benefit of being both insightful and engaging to read. However, while the book is rich in detail on specific themes, other important issues (such as prime ministerial visits) are dealt with in relatively little detail. I thought, therefore, that adding a chronology of the main events as an appendix (particularly for the postwar years) would have been helpful for giving readers a broad historical overview without needing to change in any way Takenaka's approach throughout the book.

The first three chapters are where the material most unfamiliar to an English-speaking audience is to be found. The explanation of how Yasukuni was transformed from a shrine utilizing the practices for commemorating the dead in Chōshū domain into a site of popular festivity and entertainment during the late Meiji Period, and eventually into an institution that coopted the commemoration of the dead for the purposes of the state, is the scholarly heart of this book. The argument about the relatively weak imperial presence at the shrine until 1937 (p. 65) and the

statement “it was not until the final years of the Asia-Pacific War that the shrine took on the ideologically charged qualities that we are familiar with today” (p. 67) will come as something of a surprise to many of those who are most familiar with the modern Yasukuni issue, but the arguments made to support these assertions are convincing.

The chapter about the Asia-Pacific War focuses on the story of one fallen soldier, Kurokawa Umekichi. This personal history from battle death to apotheosis is the prime example of “effective history.” Takenaka trods a nuanced path between demonstrating how the state maintained its control over its subjects even in death and how the bereaved relatives negotiated expressions of public and private grief. In this analysis, Yasukuni the belief was not simply the repression of private grief by the state, although it could also have that function. On occasions, Yasukuni provided genuine solace to the bereaved. Through such stories of individuals, Takenaka highlights the plurality of responses among the bereaved families and thereby the complexity of Yasukuni’s meanings to people into the postwar.

The latter chapters on the postwar era and the Yasukuni issue focus on lawsuits seeking the removal from enshrinement of relatives and the presentation of Yasukuni’s version of history. The judicious focus on Okinawan, Taiwanese, and Korean plaintiffs allows for discussion of the complicated issues of war and colonial responsibility via discussion of the lawsuits. The shrine’s own views on history are presented through analysis of Yūshūkan, the shrine’s museum. By juxtaposing analysis of the prewar and postwar incarnations of this museum, Takenaka roots the discussion of the modern Yasukuni issue against the backdrop of the shrine’s ideological position.

Given Yasukuni’s own highly ideological version of history, it is all too easy for researchers to position themselves as pro- or anti-Yasukuni and engage in polemics rather than aspire to an ideal

of scholarly neutrality (indeed, the highly polemical nature of some essays is a feature of John Breen’s book). Throughout the book, Takenaka does a good job of steering clear of polemics. She engages critically the arguments of both Yasukuni supporters and detractors, and always has the reassuring tone of someone comfortable in her own scholarly perspective and approach.

In sum, this book is simply a pleasure to read. I felt the chapters on the postwar period left scope for further research using this approach, and given the sheer range of issues and incidents relating to Yasukuni in the postwar I wanted one or two additional chapters—for example, a detailed study of a politician’s engagement with the shrine. But, this book’s heart was in the prewar and wartime eras, on which it will be a definitive text in English for years to come.

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