

WHY CHINA OPPOSES JAPANESE  
POLITICIAN'S  
VISIT TO YASUKUNI SHRINE  
SERIES



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# WHAT’S THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YASUKUNI SHRINE AND JAPANESE CULTURE AND RELIGION?

Bu Ping



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## 靖国神社与日本的文化、宗教有什么样的关系?

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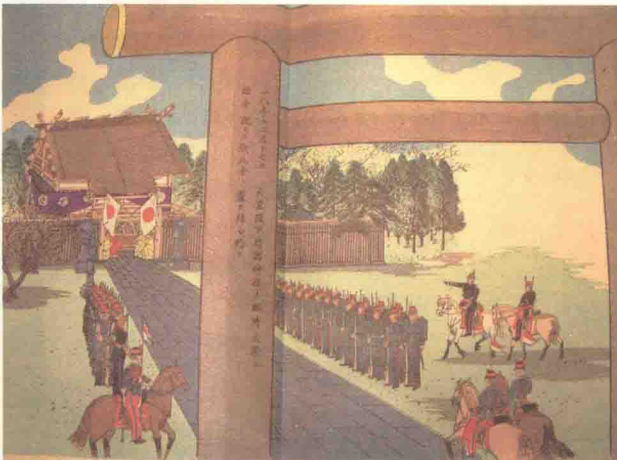
### **II. Shrine Shintoist and State Shinto / 12**

### **III. The Difference between Yasukuni Shrine and Common Shrines / 15**

What is the real Yasukuni Shrine? This puzzles many people, including Japanese. That Yasukuni Shrine remains a controversial issue in Japan and affects the relationship between Japan and other Asian countries closely relates to people's understanding of its nature.

On the surface, Yasukuni Shrine seems the same as other common shrines in Japan and embodies some Shintoism color. It interlaces with Japanese tradition, nationalism, and memory. In fact, Yasukuni Shrine is fundamentally different from other shrines. Rather than a common religious site, it is a political organization that maintains special relationship with Mikado System and Japanese politics after Meiji Restoration, and directly associates with the invasive wars Japan launched. Indeed, religiously and culturally, Shinto does not directly relate to politics, war, or invasion. We may ask: How does Yasukuni Shrine become a cultural phenomenon in Japan via Shinto? How does Shinto, a religion, connect Yasukuni Shrine and Japanese society?

To answer the questions, we must examine Yasukuni Shrine at the cultural, religious, and ideological levels to understand its nature in spite that Japanese seldom concern such issues.



Japanese painting: after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 ended, Meiji Mikado worshipped the Japanese soldiers who died in the invasion of China in the Yasukuni Shrine.



## I. SHINTO

### 1. Prehistoric Religion: Emergence of the Idea "God"

Shinto represented early Japanese view on the natural environment where they lived and labored. Originating from the magic power in nature, Shinto expressed Japanese reverence and gratitude to the nature and their worship toward the creatures in nature. As their life was diversified, the doctrines in Shinto were enriched and enlarged.

In this sense, the early Shinto closely related to Japanese life and production. In fact, the reverence and gratitude to nature and the worship toward the creatures in nature were not unique in Japan, but common in the development of human society. However, to Japanese who mainly grew rice in the ancient Japan, the agricultural activity demanded the coordination among people (hard work), favorable climate (wind and rain), and sunshine in particular. That was, the co-existence among the sun, weather, and plants and animals. In the time when



Japanese Shintoist ceremony. The offering made by tying saw-shaped paper to a worshipping stick symbolizes cloth dedicated to the spirits of nature or the souls of the dead. People think this offering becomes deities' spirit tablet during worshipping.

productivity was low, Japanese hoped there was a kind of power that supplied them with sufficient rice. To them, god was a powerful ruler who managed the collective labor effectively. Gradually, the harmonious co-existence among god, nature, and human formed. Any power that gave Japanese harvest was seen as god. As Japanese worshipped the sun most, the sun became the greatest god in Shinto, Amaterasu. In the ancient Japan, the belief in the sun was based on the self-consciousness that nature and human were connected via god, which developed into the sacrifice for god.

## 2. From God in Nature to God for People: Emergence of Shinto

Originally, the sacrifice for god was rude. Gradually, it was standardized and shrine, the special sacrificial site, was constructed. Accordingly, the sacrifice in shrine and its rule were called Shinto, and the sects that held activities in shrine were called Shrine Shintoist. They constituted Shinto. To legitimize their rule, Mikado and other clan leaders made use of Shinto and god's authority, claiming that they conveyed the will of god. In addition to the gods in nature, people should offer sacrifice to the personified god (the Mikado) via Shinto. In a word,



Japanese mythological painting: the younger brother of Amaterasu Omikami (Sun Goddess) created havoc in Takamagahara, so Amaterasu Omikami hid in Ama No Iwato and made the whole world dark. Various deities danced to lure Amaterasu Omikami to open the gate of Ama No Iwato and let the world regain brightness.

god in nature transformed into God for People, which enriched the sacrifice for god: People should not only worship the god, but also understand the will of god. As descendant of god, the Mikado certainly conveyed its will. As a result, the will of Mikado was political order, law, and god's will. Before Taika Reform (645), Japan established God-Mikado System that totalized religion and state.

### 3. Shinto and Japanese Mythology

Like Greek mythology, Japanese mythology is an independent system with the core idea that Amaterasu is the ancestral god of royal family, the Mikado is god, and Japan is a god-ruled country. It is notable that there is strong political color in Japanese mythology. As the most prominent feature, it legitimizes the Mikado's rule. As the genealogy of Amaterasu and her descendants suggests, the gods in Japanese mythology directly relate to the origin of the present royal family and other clans. This endows the Mikado with god-man feature.



20<sup>th</sup> century painting: Jimmu-Tenno was the first mikado in Japanese legends and the earliest ancestor of the Japanese imperial family.



In Japanese mythology, the original god in nature is present, but is greatly changed. Compared with the god in nature, there are more gods for people that cannot be comprehended or controlled. The "8 million gods" are mainly gods for people, and they are worshiped in the shrines.

Amaterasu is both the ancestral god of the royal family and the grand god that gives Japanese rice. She is widely glorified as "symbol of the 8 million gods" that brings vernal light to the heaven and earth. Obviously, the mythology is crucial for consolidating the legitimacy of the Mikado and has been used by Japanese rulers resultfully. For instance, Ise Grand Shrine (in Mie Prefecture) worships Amaterasu and keeps special relationship with the royal family. The sacrifices are all chaired by the members from royal family.

According to Japanese mythology, Mikado Jimmu was the descendant of Amaterasu and the first Mikado of Japan, who established the status for Mikado. It was clarified in Japanese mythology that Mikado Jimmu ascended the throne in 660 BC, when the genealogy of Mikado commenced. Mikado Akihito is now the 125<sup>th</sup> Mikado in Japan.

As stated above, an independent system as it is, Japanese mythology differs from the Greek counterpart: Agamemnon, descendant of Zeus was the king, but none of his descendants inherited the throne; the Mikado, descendant of Amaterasu, did. It is also essentially different from Jesus who is worshiped as the only god in Christianity and the gods in Islam and Judaism.

#### **4. The Influence of Buddhism and Confucianism on Shinto**

Buddhism had great impact on Shinto when it spread to Japan. For a long time, many sects viewed Buddha as the greatest god in Japan and interpreted it according to their doctrines. This was because the Mikado and other rulers realized that Buddha and god both could consolidate and protect their rules. Besides, Buddhism was maturer than Shinto and more closely related to the Mikado's power then. At first, Buddhism was prior to Shinto and likely to be the national religion in Japan.

As an indigenous religion in Japan, Shinto advocated the idea multi-god and



16<sup>th</sup> century Japanese painting: pilgrims went on a pilgrimage to the Naigai Shrine. Before making their pilgrimage, pilgrims must wash themselves in the river and cross the front gate of the shrine via the wood bridge to go to the temple.

remained the dominative status until it was challenged by Buddhism. To maintain its status, Mikado Yomei, the 31<sup>st</sup> Mikado, firstly used the idea Shinto: The Mikado believed Buddhism and respected Shinto. Here, the Mikado juxtaposed Buddhism and Shinto but took different attitudes toward them: accepting the former and revering the latter.

In Seignior-Shogun Period, Tokugawa shogunate valued Cheng-Zhu



School in China and stressed Japanese spirit, which became the ideological and educational foundation for the shogunate, or what was called *Kokugaku* in Japanese. Japanese *Kokugaku* concentrated on Chinese Confucian classics and attempted to connect it with Japanese tradition and use it to interpret pure Japanese spirit. Meanwhile, to value Japanese tradition was in conflict with Buddhism, and the clash between Shinto and Buddhism intensified. As Confucianism became the official ideology and expanded rapidly, Shinto tried to separate from Buddhism and develop new doctrines by borrowing from Confucianism.

Organizationally, the shrines were mainly chaired by Buddhist teams, who practiced the rites of Buddhist sacrifice, chanted scriptures, and held Buddhist assembly. While relying on Buddhism, Shinto developed and deepened its doctrine. Some Shintoist scholars integrated ideologies of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism and established their Shintoistic theories, for instance Ise Shinto and Yoshida Shinto in the 14-15 century. Although those Shintoist scholars advocated the equal status among Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism, they actually highlighted Shinto and found theoretical support to separate Shinto from Buddhism. After Edo Period (1603-1867), Buddhism became outdated and less influential as it depended on the feudal rule of shogunate in spite of its wide reputation. By contrast, Japanese Confucianism separated from Buddhism and supported Shinto theoretically, which developed into Japanese Confucianist Shinto.

In the early Edo Period, Japanese Confucianist Shinto that combined Shinto and Confucianism flourished and many sects formed. Both Japanese Cheng-Zhu scholars and Shintoist scholars interpreted Shinto from Confucianism. In the late Edo Period, some Shintoist scholars rejected Japanese Confucianism and opposed to explain Shinto with foreign theories. They proposed to explore Japanese spirit with Japanese classics and develop pure Shinto. The sect was called Reactionist Shinto.

In Sonno-joi Movement, to mobilize Japanese citizens, politicians combined the resistance against Western oppression with the restoration of Mikado's power and claimed to revere the Mikado and expel the barbarians. Certainly, revering the Mikado meant to restore and strengthen the political status of the Mikado;



14<sup>th</sup> century Japanese religious painting: a minister sitting at the foot of the Shintoist God of War Hachiman. Hachiman as the ancestral god of the Japanese is regarded as Ojin-Tenno. From the Heian Period, Hachiman became a Buddhist protector god under the influence of integration of Shinto and Buddhism, and was called "Hachiman Great Bodhisattva." In the Meiji Period, under the policy of separation of Shinto and Buddhism, this Buddhist deity title was banned.

expelling the barbarians meant to resist against external invasion. However, which doctrines could explain the slogan and provide theoretical support for the resistance against the West? Confucianism and Buddhism came from abroad and could not. It must be found in Shinto tradition. Therefore, the pioneer spirit of Mikado Jimmu in Shinto accorded with the political aim of establishing modern country to some extent and became the theoretical support for the slogan. Fukuzawa Yukichi, a Japanese thinker, proposed the idea "Yamato Spirit and Western Technology," which meant to combine Japanese tradition with Western culture.

Considering the importance of Shinto, the new Japanese government

resumed the *Jingi-kan* system based on the rule of god-Mikado after Meiji Restoration. Consequently, Shinto was prior to Buddhism. The monks were excluded from shrines that were de-Buddhistized totally. In some places, excluding Buddhist and destroying Buddha occurred. According to the rule of "One Shrine in One Village," the shrines were standardized. Besides, it was ordained that the sacrifice was directly related to the Mikado and royal family, which gave Shinto a special status beyond the religious sense. These aimed to establish the idea in Japanese citizens that Japan was a god-ruled country and that the Mikado was god. So far, Shinto was no more a common religion but an inseparable part in the Mikado System. Finally, the idea "State Shinto" was formed, in which Yasukuni Shrine played a unique role.

## II. SHRINE SHINTOIST AND STATE SHINTO

There were many Shintoistic schools after Shinto appeared in Japan. According to Shinto, gods existed in people's heart and accompanied them everywhere at any time. For many people, however, the abstract spiritual idea was not enough. They needed a special site to offer sacrifice to gods and communicate with them. Therefore, yard-like shrines were constructed to facilitate the communication. Shrines were mostly people's residences and divided by clan or district. As shrines just undertook the sacrifice for various gods in nature and gods for people, they did not favor any sects or follow any religious doctrines. In Japan, shrine could be constructed in the place where people assembled, and all people could be *Shi Zi* (believers of *Ujigami*, a clan's god) for a certain shrine. Shrines varied with the gods they worshiped. There were various gods: the god who created the nature, the god who created the sun, moon, fire, and water, the god who created land, mountain, and river, the god for animals and plants, and the ancestral god and protection god of royal family, etc. Accordingly, there were diverse shrines. Now, there are more than 82,000 shrines in Japan and *kamidana* in citizens' families. These were called Shrine Shintoist.





The status of the spirit-inviting shrine preceding the Yasukuni Shrine was not high, and was the site of circus performances in 1871.

In the feudal Japan that was rigidly stratified, shrines were classified based on the rule of god-Mikado and the ranks of gods, or we call “Rank of Shrines.” Firstly, there were Heavenly Shrine and Earthly Shrine that worshiped heavenly god and earthly god. Later, shrines were divided into Governmental Shrines (ruled by government) and Civilian Shrines (ruled by citizens). The former was sub-categorized into Imperial Shrine (funded by royal family) and National Shrine (funded by government).

After Meiji Restoration, to highlight Shinto, Meiji government issued the “Shinto-Buddhism Separation Edict” and suppressed other religions. Buddhism was the first to be affected and greatly harmed in Excluding Buddhist and Destroying Buddha Movement. So was Christianity. In Nagasaki-shi, “Urakami Christian Incident” occurred in Urakami Cathedral, the First Cathedral in East Asia. Meanwhile, Meiji government launched “Shinto Popularization,” declared the Mikado as god, Shinto as national religion, and Japan as god-Mikado