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Master Thesis

**COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING:  
MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF MEMORIALS IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN**

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## Introduction

War memory in Japan has been a hot topic for decades now, several scholars have written thousands of words about it and possibly the same will happen in the future. This thesis will explore another dimension of war-memory in Japan: the actual response on online platforms of today's visitors to two sites related to war legacies. The two chosen sites are the Yasukuni Shrine – with its Yūshūkan war museum – and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park – which also includes a museum called Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

As the academic world seems to have focused mainly on the political importance of these places (Cheung 2010, Pollman 2013, Yoneyama 1995), their legacies in today's culture (Han 2012, Hashimoto 2015, Jeans 2005, Yoshida 2007) and their educational value (Lee 2018, Schäfer 2008), but not on the actual response of Japanese people who visited the places and then wrote comments about it either in the museum visitors books or on websites and online blogs, this essay will attempt to cover this gap. The reason for this choice is that places such as the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park have been criticized and analyzed by scholars in the smallest details or in broader international contexts, but since their physical space loses all its value if visitors don't engage with it, a deeper look should be dedicated to how visitors have perceived these sites after their experience. While considering that the two sites produce contested meanings in several levels – social, physical, academic -, we should take into consideration the ideas that visitors have already in mind before entering the two sites and the ideas that they will have when they leave those places.

Places are in fact made by their physical characteristics, their social role and their discursive functions. The world of internet gives now to the scholars much more opportunities to see what the visitors nowadays think of these institutions and what is the virtual counterpart of the physical space in Japan (the museums websites, the videos on Youtube showing only certain parts of the sites, the reviews made by visitors and so on). The final aim of the writer then, is to see this complex and multifaceted world through subjective but critical lenses, not stopping at a simple observation of the perception regarding Japanese war memory of other scholars, but taking a step further by comparing this academic discourse to what seems to be the broader general opinion on the same issues.

Books with grandiose titles such as “The Victim as Hero” (Orr 2001) or “The Wages of Guilt” (Buruma 1994) were probably right in describing the Japanese reaction to the war as a self-victimizing process, but the situation today has slowly changed since the gravity of other issues has overcome the thoughts about the Second World War. Henceforth, there is a need for a research on

more levels. Japanese people today – apart from the oldest generation - have never known the atrocities of war (Han 2016), nor do they see the old “enemies” (namely South Korea, China and America) with the same eyes of their parents or grandparents. Both people in their 50s or in their 20s have certain collective ideas on what Japan is now and what war meant for the country, but they have not lived the war years. Notwithstanding this lack of experience, it must be underlined that they have experienced other powerful collective disasters: let’s take for instance the terrorist attacks such as the one in the Tokyo Subway in 1995, or the terrible natural catastrophes such as the triple one – earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster – in Fukushima now referred to as the “3/11.

These generations are of course educated about history, but being able to create an emotional connection with all those victims from the past becomes everyday more difficult. Not just because of time, but also because of the media bombarding them with information of terrible shootings and bloody wars happening in their “current” world.

Understanding their opinion on what war-related sites mean now, and what message do the latter ones transmit to the society that surrounds them is of crucial importance. This research will involve both the academic point of view on what narratives these places and their museums try to tell, and the visitor’s perception, observing the two sites’ reviews on the web (especially on Tripadvisor’s website). Institutions such as museums can truly become indispensable to reach a hand towards the past. Regarding war memory in particular, the new generations can come into contact with their past and their nation’s steps going to visit war (or peace) memorials and to military museums dedicated to the same thematic. Indeed, in Japan like in other countries, young people are the new main target of these museums<sup>1</sup>.

The two sites this essay will examine are perhaps the most renowned ones in the international and national scenario, and therefore the ones on which more comments can be found on the internet. Unfortunately, on websites such as Tripadvisor the users do not state their age, using nicknames and preferring anonymity. Therefore, it would be difficult to only analyze the comments of millennial visitors. Nonetheless, this analysis won’t lose relevance since taking into consideration a broader sample will reveal the more general ideas on war memory in the Japanese society.

As mentioned before, several researches have already been made on the historical and political background of both of them. However, little attention has been given to the visitor’s opinion on these two places and their museums. Looking at a site with the eye of a curator or of a very knowledgeable scholar can turn into a very critical review of the exhibitions and of anything that is

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<sup>1</sup> Notice for instance that more than one picture that appears in the official webpage of the Dutch National Military Museum shows children happily running among weapons and military tanks (see in particular the Tickets and Prices dedicated page). See <https://www.nmm.nl/en/>.

visible on the site. Despite this being useful for the academic world, what should matter just as much is the actual social and meaning-making response that a museum produces among the visitors' community. This general public is often made out of common people either without a deep knowledge of past war issues or with specific political views that will influence their perception of the visit. Indeed, as Smith (2015) argues, the educational aim of a museum is also too often overrated and put as the first goal by the management and curatorial committee. Museums, as the scholar goes on pointing out through the help of Falk's model (Falk 2005, 266), "are defined as free-choice environments (...). What is learned is not always what is intended by curatorial staff or driven by the exhibition content" (Smith 2005, 462).

I will also engage in a discussion throughout this essay about the different affective impact that the two places have, one being a Shinto shrine and the other being a peace memorial park. Indeed, since the Yasukuni shrine is related to the Shinto practices of yearly festivals and other community-engaging activities, the bond between the place and the Japanese people is strong. Not only through the organization of festivals, but also as the official resting place for the souls of soldiers since the Boshin Wars<sup>2</sup>, Yasukuni Shrine is deeply connected to war memory and commemoration of the people who fought for the country. The Hiroshima memorial on the other hand might be seen more of a bridge between the Japanese tragedy and the world. In the Peace Memorial people focus on the destructive force of the atomic bomb and on the terrible effects it had on the citizens. Visitors go there to feel a connection with the dead, to show empathy and engage with a peaceful atmosphere reminding the message "it shall never happen again".

Real cemeteries or symbolic ones<sup>3</sup> are the most common war memorials. In the absence of such monuments or places through which people could gather and remember their collective tragedy, simple artworks can also play the function of memorials and send a strong political message<sup>4</sup>. Military museums show us a certain narrative which is mostly subjective and patriotic - if not just nationalist, like what we can see in the name itself of the Imperial War Museum in London, which still uses the word "Imperial" without any sign of self-questioning, or the permanent exhibition called "Arsenal of Democracy" in the World War Two Museum in Orleans, U.S.A. These museums

<sup>2</sup> The Boshin War (戊辰戦争, *Boshin Sensō*) was a civil war in Japan, fought from 1868 to 1869 between forces of the ruling Tokugawa shogunate and the ones trying to return political power to the Imperial Court.

<sup>3</sup> See the several monuments to the unknown soldier after the First World War such as the one in Warsaw's Piłsudski Square or the Unknown Warrior's grave in Westminster Abbey in London.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance the statues dedicated to abducted women in Korea reproducing young barefoot women in white traditional hanbok dresses, sitting in buses in Seoul during the commemoration day of Comfort Women, or sitting on a chair in the middle of a square. For more informations see McCurry's article on The Guardian "Buses in Seoul Install 'comfort Women' Statues to Honour Former Sex Slaves".

are usually portraying the past events from the point of view of a specific group. Sponsors too, as the financial supporter of these institutions without whose help the existence of the museums themselves would be at stake, can have a big say in the choice of what narrative should prevail in the exhibitions<sup>5</sup>. Regarding stakeholders, a major difference can be seen in the two museums that this research will take into consideration, one being linked to all the families of the war-dead, the other being more linked to the innocent civilians who lost their life on the 6th of August 1945.

The first chapter of this thesis will give first of all a general background knowledge of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. Secondly, I will engage in an audio-visual analysis of the main commemoration practice on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August that takes place in the park every year, and then I will focus on the several changes that the museum in it had to undergo mainly due to social pressures from minority groups such as the Koreans and international criticism. In the second chapter I will do a similar type of analysis of the Yasukuni Shrine and its Yūshūkan museum. Since there is not just a singular important commemoration practice in this shrine, I will analyze its double identity as a religious and commemorative place, which is reflected in its official website and in particular in the Youtube promotion videos that the Yasukuni uses on its platform. Then, in the third and last part of this essay, I will analyze the online response of visitors who went to both sites and visited the two museums. This work of comparison then, does not aim to put the two sites in opposition, but rather to use them as tools to understand better the relationship that the Japanese visitors seem to have with the war-related sites.

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<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Yūshūkan this particular issue is more evident, since the Japan War Bereaved Families Association, or Nippon Izokukai, has always been the major stakeholder and financial supporter of both the Yasukuni Shrine and the related museum.

## The Hiroshima Peace Memorial

Hiroshima, as known universally, was bombed and destroyed totally on the 6th of August in 1945. Nevertheless, after just few weeks from that terrible day, on the 2nd of September, the prefecture of Hiroshima announced publicly a plan to keep enough space for a commemoration site in the reconstruction process (Schäfer 2008, 155). Indeed, it took much more time afterwards to see the construction works begin. It was finally in 1949 that, as a result of a public competition, the project was decided. This all process was supported by the Diet which had already defined Hiroshima as a Peace Memorial City in the previous year (Lee 2018). The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park (with its internal museum) was built on the old ruins of the city, and was opened in 1955. Despite the 10 years period (from the bombing to the opening of the park) without a proper memorial, the citizens decided to mourn their dead in the meantime at the Gokoku Shrine in the “Peace Recovery Festival” (*Heiwa Fukkō Sai*) (Schäfer 2008). The debuting architect designated to be in charge of the project was Tange Kenzō. Tange’s design, interestingly enough, had a double identity. It was meant to be a post-war design for the memorial, but it presented several traits coming from a different architectural style “which recalled to a ‘return to Japan’ according to the traditionalist ideology of wartime Japan”, as Schäfer (2008, 157) points out. The parts that resemble a lot this conceptually very different style are the ones recalling the concept of the *haniwa*<sup>6</sup> and the *azekurazukuri*<sup>7</sup> for instance. What is also worth mentioning when talking about the park’s design - since the way a visitor lives the experience is also deeply connected to how a place evolves around him or her - is that it is not by chance that the two styles were similar. It could be in fact that Tange reused an old design from 1942 he had made for the Commemorative Building Project for the Construction of Greater East Asia, meant to be a Shinto site to glorify the *daitō-a kensetsu kinen eizou keikaku* (Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere) (Giamo 2003; Schäfer 2008).

It is indeed curious that either for manifest or hidden reasons both sites this thesis focuses on are connected to Shinto practices. It is not a surprise though, taking into consideration that their function of memorials links them directly to the traditional practices and festivals that are common in Japan to remember the dead<sup>8</sup>.

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6 Terracotta clay figures made during the Kofun period (3rd cent to 6th cent AD) for ritual use and buried afterwards with the dead as funerary objects.

7 Typical Japanese architectural style in the Yayoi and Jōmon eras, mainly making use of cypress timber in joined-log structures of triangular cross-section.

The whole site in Hiroshima has been developed into an isosceles shape, with a clear taste for white and purity. In the site we can find a Cenotaph, a monument dedicated to the “Flame of Peace” (a monument with a fire always burning at its center) and a lake, called “Pond of Peace” as well. In the background, we can then see the Bomb-A Dome.

The Cenotaph is arch-shaped and it is meant to protect the souls of the dead. Under this arch, there is another piece of stone containing a 111 volumes registry<sup>9</sup> of the names of all the people (regardless of their nationality) who have died because of the bombing by August 6, 2016 (110 volumes contained 303,195 names, while one volume was dedicated to unrecognized people). In the epitaph we can find an inscription reads “Let all the souls here rest in peace, for we shall not repeat the evil” (Giamo 2003, 705; Buruma 2015, 92). It is useful then to recall here how terrifying the power of the bomb was: it destroyed everything in a 3-km radius of the epicenter, and made almost 92 percent of the buildings within a 4-km radius not functioning (Schäfer 2016, 353).

The Peace Memorial Park is situated right in the area of the epicenter of the explosion. The bomb left the population to starvation and homeless so it is no wonder that there could be resentment from the Japanese population. Despite this, several scholars seem to be eager to point out that this is not the right way of portraying the past of Hiroshima. Various critics are aimed at attacking for instance the sentence written in the Cenotaph, arguing that it’s not clear enough or that it only focuses on the victim side of Japan, leaving aside the fact that Hiroshima was for years a military city, hosting the Second Army Headquarters, which commanded the defense of the southern part of Japan.

Nevertheless, I think it is inspiring to see how the Japanese were also able to renounce the war and turn into a pacifist country. It is undeniable that if this happened, it was of course also because of the article 9 of their Constitution<sup>10</sup> and thanks to a major collective feeling of rejection towards the war. To evaluate the totality of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park’s identity it is necessary to consider at least the main yearly recurrence taking place in it, which attracts thousands of visitors and gives the site its present dimension. The site has an emotional impact on the people

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8 See for instance the Obon Festival, happening every year in August to remember the dead. On this occasion many people from the big cities go back to their *furusato* (hometown, often in the countryside) to commemorate the recent deaths in their family or to simply pray for their ancestors. The ancestors are actually seen as one unifying entity once they die, becoming one big sacred identity.

9 Explore HIROSHIMA. (n.d). *Cenotaph for the A-bomb Victims (Memorial Monument for Hiroshima, City of Peace), A-bombed Buildings & Cenotaph, etc.* Explore HIROSHIMA: Hiroshima City & Regional Area Official Tourism Website. Available at: <https://www.hiroshima-navi.or.jp/en/post/007122.html>. Accessed on May 15, 2018.

that walk in it, and this is reinforced by the Memorial Day in August, which functions as a reminder for what the site stands for. A place without its related practices and audience loses its meaning.

The practice of the yearly commemoration on the 6th of August in the Peace Memorial stands as a message to humanity. Not only it is broadcasted nationally, but it has gained throughout the years also an international relevance. The ceremony is full of symbolic meanings: from the doves getting freed from cages to the young children called to speak in front of everyone. I argue that the choice of letting the young generations (usually they choose a boy and a girl of young age) speak is a great way to convince the audience that war should not happen ever again for the sake of a brighter future. It could be possible that choosing old people or simply adults could have changed the emotional effect on people. Indeed, the final aim of commemoration is always in a sense to actually maintain the memory in the people that are left on earth, and perhaps to have some type of change in their hearts as well. Talking about feelings and affection might seem sometimes irrelevant since it lacks objectivity and measurability. However, when speaking of war memories and commemoration practices, one has to bear in mind that feelings, along with political and social reasons, are the greatest factors that affect the view of visitors and a more general public.

A more careful analysis of the ceremony can be useful to trace the main ways that are chosen to convey the principal messages of peace and hope in Hiroshima. I think that the most significant vehicles to communicate the ideals of the ceremony are not the speeches by the politicians (the Prime Minister, the Major of the city and so on) in this case. We can definitely recognize instead a certain power in the rest of the ceremony: the choir all dressed in white singing traditional songs, a woman and a child slowly tolling together the bell to start the one minute of silence dedicated to all the victims, the flight of white doves in the sky (ceremony which is repeated also in Nagasaki), the faces of the two brave children remembering by heart the speeches about peace and about who died in the past.

The ceremony I will take in consideration in particular for this audiovisual analysis is the one that took place in 2017<sup>11</sup>.

The ceremony takes place in front of the Cenotaph. The general public and VIPs are protected from the August sun under large white marquees. Everyone is wearing formal clothes, the international audience can be seen wearing translating devices in their ears. The footage focuses both

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<sup>10</sup> The article 9 of the constitution states: “(1) Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.(2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized”. Several critics have been raised by politicians of the Liberal Democratic Party since the Constitution was written under the American occupation after the World War II.

on shooting Japanese people and foreigners, perhaps with a certain focus on Japanese old people which could be victims or relatives of victims.

First, several old men offer water in front of the Cenotaph, then three people (a woman and two men) present under the Cenotaph the registers of the names of the victims of the atomic bomb. The first one to speak is Nagata Masadori, the chairman of legislative assembly of Hiroshima. He asks for a world where nuclear bombs don't exist anymore. He talks about countries where nuclear power is used or countries "under the nuclear umbrella" (*kaku no kasa no shita*). Then the offerings are made: several representatives offer their homage to the dead by bringing crowns of yellow and white flowers. First, we see the Japanese representatives of the bereaved families' association, the major, the Prime Minister Abe and so on, then, we see the international political figures making their offers. As the last homage, small bouquets of flowers are brought also by several rows of citizens: there is a symbolic succession in this phase, one or two rows of children bring as firsts their bouquets, then it's the turn of adolescents and then of adults. It is indeed a great love for details that articulates the whole ceremony. The message sent through this chronological shift of age-groups seems to show that all the citizens, no matter of what age, are sending their condolences and praying for peace. The music during the whole part of the ceremony is rather sad and austere, with a melody that suggests almost anger rather than hope for the future. As the sound of a bell interrupts the sad melody, another type of melody starts, much more gleeful and triumphant. At a quarter past eight, the minute of silence begins. Of course, the time chosen is symbolic as well, being the precise time in which the bomb named "Little Boy" has fallen in 1945. To start the minute of silence, a child and a woman (that must be the relative of someone who has died because of the bomb) toll the big Buddhist bell with a long red wooden rod. In the background, a huge choir of young people stands still to pray in silence. The whole country participates to the minute of silence: in the streets of small cities, the loudspeakers usually used for emergencies, inform the citizens of the procedure. As Pierre Nora notices, "the observance of a commemorative minute of silence, an extreme example of a strictly action, serves as a concentrated appeal to memory by literally breaking a temporal continuity" (1989, 19). Then, the Major of Hiroshima comes to the stage and makes his speech. This again, focuses on how wrong the nuclear power can be and shares some opinions of young atomic bomb victims. As his speech ends, the ritual release of the doves takes place. The doves, being the international symbol of peace, are a fundamental element in such a ceremony. Just after the doves

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11 The entire footage of this ceremony shot by FNN (Fuji News Network) is available on Youtube on their official channel with partial subtitles in Japanese: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLvF5LgoWQE&list=PL1xJ3MWNpt1z-\\_6TYBeXm2-t-PECwRUA7&index=30](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLvF5LgoWQE&list=PL1xJ3MWNpt1z-_6TYBeXm2-t-PECwRUA7&index=30). Accessed on June 10, 2018.

have flown away, two children, both in their sixth grade (so aged around 11 years old) come to give their speeches. The two voices start separately, only to join successively together in a unique speech by the end. It is almost impossible not to get emotional seeing them taking their courage and delivering their talks/performances, as the video of the ceremony also points out by getting a shot of old people in the audience nodding, lost in their memories, and young people crying.

When the ceremony is at the maximum of its climax in emotional and symbolic terms, the Prime Minister Shinzo Abe comes to the stage to deliver his speech. He talks about the usual themes of peace and health of the citizens, while also reminding the exceptional visit of Obama in 2016 in Hiroshima<sup>12</sup>. His political speech is followed by the one of a woman dressed in a very simple kimono. The loud speaker introduces this very composed figure as the spokeswoman for the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres, Izumi Nakamitsu (an important figure in the UN herself). After her final speech in Japanese, the choir sings a joyful song: “*Hiroshima no uta*” (Song of Hiroshima). The ceremony comes to an end, the VIPs leave the site after bowing and the video stops. The whole footage is shown without any type of commentaries, but there are subtitles which are used both for the speeches and to introduce the several “characters” (the politicians, the kids and so forth) when they make their appearance on the screen.

The symbols of peace such as the dove, or the overwhelming presence of white connect the local experience of Hiroshima to the international stage, while some others such as the origami crane are very locally related. The crane in Hiroshima has an emotional connotation. It is connected to the story of Sadako Sasaki, a young girl who died at the age of 12 after ten years from the explosion, due to leukemia. Sasaki had decided to make 1000 cranes before dying while she was in the hospital, and that’s why her beloved cranes have become the center of another ceremony dedicated to peace in Hiroshima. Not only did the city decide to make a ceremony, but they also built a monument in the Peace Memorial Park representing the young girl holding up in the air a massive paper crane.

This continuous link to the victims of the past, especially to the young ones, can be observed as well in the several sketches and drawings made by children, or the other ones made by adult artists but in a childish style, hanging in the Museum’s showcases or on the walls. To emphasize this heart moving issue even further, the monument to Sadako Sasaki (defined as the Children Peace Monument) has been surrounded by glass boxes containing thousands of colorful paper cranes made

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12 In the same speech, Abe focuses on the uniqueness of Japan, and emphasizes its victim role by saying “As the *only* country to have experienced the horror of nuclear devastation in war, Japan will continually make efforts to steadily advance along the path towards bringing about ‘a world free of nuclear weapons’” (italics not in the original). To read the whole speech see the official page of the Prime Minister of Japan and its Cabinets, under the voice “Speeches and Statements of the Prime Minister”. See [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97\\_abe/statement/201708/1223996\\_11583.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201708/1223996_11583.html) .

by people from all over the world (it is possible to send them even from far away following the procedures online).

This proves an extensive engagement with the community, both in the national and international scene, in a tentative to strive for World Peace. It is indeed a way of showing Japan as the ultimate victim, being the only country to have been the victim of a nuclear attack in the whole world. Nevertheless, perceiving the ceremonies and projects brought on by the Hiroshima city council and by the Japanese government as a materialistic move to promote the city in the tourism sector, as some scholars have done<sup>13</sup>, sounds sometimes slightly excessive. Perhaps, we should perceive it more as a strategy to preserve what could be preserved and receive some more funds to make the city live again.

At the end of the day, when the sun has set, people in Hiroshima usually engage in the *tōrō nagashi* ceremony, which literally means “lantern flow”. This again, recalls the ancient roots of dead people’s cult in Japan. The lantern flow is in fact very common during summer, specifically during the Obon festival<sup>14</sup>. On the lanterns people can write their messages and wishes. This as well, is indeed a fairly familiar theme in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan, as can be seen on the written wooden blocks hanging usually in front of these sacred buildings or in the paper fortune messages knotted on trees branches. The shape of the lanterns is the same as the one used in the much bigger event in Hawaii, hosted on the American Memorial Day.

To conclude this articulated analysis of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, we should not forget to mention the museum inside the park. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum was opened together with the park, but it went through several changes during these decades.

As Schäfer (2008) and Lee (2018) noticed, the museum’s exhibition tends to be very emotional, showcasing mementos which belonged to children and families who died in the explosion, with the stories of the owners written beside them. Often, pictures of these civilians are shown as well, bringing most visitors to tears. One of the most drastic remodelings (Figure 1), which took place in June 1972, was as well a strategic curatorial move to make the visitor engage affectively even more than before. The display dummies that had been used to showcase the clothes of the victims were substituted, leaving place to some new hyper-realistic wax statues who looked

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, Schafer does indeed come to the conclusion that “tourism played a pivotal role in the formation of Hiroshima memoryscape” (Schafer 2016, 353).

<sup>14</sup> The obon festival is a Buddhist custom to remember the death of the family ancestors. The ancestors are said to come back in summer to the world of the living from the mountains which represent the world of the dead. Several festivals and practices are organized to calm their spirits and to guide the newly deceased ones to the afterworld. At the end, it is a common practice to put small lanterns or simple paper/wooden boats in the water to let the souls go back to their reality.

like real-life zombies. However, the new mannequins rose several controversies as well, being too “realistic” but fake at the same time (not representing real objects or people from that time, but only mere reproductions), since as Nakaoka Shōgo – the first curator of the museum – said in opposition (Schäfer 2008, 158-159). Despite having been showcased in the museum for over forty years, these dummies will disappear as well at the new opening of the museum (since it is undergoing some renovation once again since the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2017). The decision has been taken on 2013 but it took some time to make everyone agree on this decision since several visitors had reportedly found the mannequins very useful for the purpose of imagining the past (Mainichi Japan 2017).

Figure 1: The hyper-realistic mannequins after the renewal. The Mainichi 2017.



In 1987 some non-governmental organizations started to question the museum’s narrative, stating that it was showing only one side of the story, talking about the victims of the bomb and the destructive power of it, but not acknowledging that there had been a reason for this particular city to be chosen in the nuclear attack: Hiroshima was one of the central military centers in Japan having a big harbor and being a strategic point in the South of the Japanese Peninsula. As the supporters of this project claimed, “the atomic bomb could not be described satisfactorily unless it was depicted within its imperialistic, racist and capitalist frame work” (Schäfer 2008, 163). The NGOs were asking for a recognition of the Koreans’ suffering for instance, but a real policy-change in the desired direction seems to have taken place only seven years later, in 1994, with the election of a new mayor of Hiroshima, Hiraoka Takashi, who was also the head of the Peace Culture Foundation.

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum has now very balanced and politically correct expositions which, through the massive use of technology and an extensive mementos collection, connect the perpetrator and victim side of Japan.

## The Yasukuni Shrine

While the Hiroshima site, as we have extensively analyzed, commemorates civilians not involved in the war, the other site (namely the Yasukuni Shrine and its war museum) we will take into account has instead a deep connection with soldiers who died fighting.

The Yasukuni Shrine has long been seen as a controversial site. The shrine represents the resting place of thousands of souls of soldiers who fought from the Boshin War to the Second World War. Having such a long history as a cemetery, and having a religious identity, it's difficult then to perceive it only as a political entity. The religious place has assumed a strong political connotation throughout the years, especially after the disclosing of some secret information regarding the enshrinement of fourteen Class-A war criminals that took place in 1978<sup>15</sup>. As Takenaka (2015) narrates in her detailed book "Yasukuni Shrine", since the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) members had decided to sever all ties between the state and the Shinto religion<sup>16</sup>, the Yasukuni shrine as well had lost its state financial support, becoming entirely dependent on the support of the *izokukai* (war-bereaved military families association). Apart from the financial aspect of course, there was a strong emotional backlash, as "for war-bereaved military families, it suggested that the Japanese state no longer officially recognized the death of their loved ones." (Takenaka 2015, 132).

Several legal battles have been fought to restore the state support between the 1960s and the 1970s, backed up usually by the LDP politicians who sought some support in the elections among the *izokukai* members. This eventually has escalated in a series of international and national protests by the neighbor countries (China and Korea) and by the pacifist left wing opponents. Prime ministerial visits have become contradictory events, and have been analyzed under several points of view<sup>17</sup>. This, might have mutated the public perception of the place. This "public perception" that we see reflected on newspapers, in the media and in scholars' reports, might as well be just a fragment of

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15 These were judged as criminals by the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal after the Second World War. Several Japanese people, mainly coming from the right-wing parties, think that it was an unfair judgement since the whole tribunal was ruled by the winners of the war. The priest Matsudaira Nagayoshi, responsible for the enshrinement, was one of them.

16 The choice to divide state and religion was a strong message to the Japanese. The *kokka shinto* (state shinto) had become a powerful vehicle for the nationalist propaganda and thanks to it the image of the Emperor as a god had been reinforced.

17 See the articles by Mong Cheung (2010) and Pollman (2016) for a further insight in the political meaning of the prime ministerial visits to the shrine.

what it really is. A vast public visits the shrine, goes to the matsuri (Japanese local festivals) every year, takes picture of the cherry blossoms blooming in the inner courtyard and perhaps prays for all the war dead. Rather than focusing on the international issue of whether it is wrong or not to visit the shrine because of its fourteen convicted criminals, this thesis will focus on issues of memorialization in such a complicated scenario. The reason for this analysis to happen is that a comparison between what the institution aims at communicating and what is instead perceived by the public can't take place without an introduction to all the issues at stake. The Asia-Pacific War for Japan was a defeat in the end. Nevertheless, should the states be able to commemorate their war dead only in the case of victory? It is true indeed that the war was condemned as a war of aggression, however, as in any other nation, several soldiers were brainwashed by propaganda, many others were very young and forced to go to serve their country. In such a situation, could it be a solution to put aside all the ethical issues and let the dead be commemorated by their families, regardless of their political stance or their past doings?

As Hashimoto suggests in her long analysis of different aspects of the post-war approaches to defeat memories, “overcoming defeat requires this type of *moral recovery* work which is just as important as economic recovery to revitalize postwar society” (2015, 123) and precisely because of this need for a reason to be proud of their own identity, recovering from the stigma has been a suffered path for the Japanese. The scholar indeed suggests that this is why there is still now the will to remain a pacific country, not changing the constitution and not adhering to the “normal countries” standards<sup>18</sup>. However, as she goes on arguing, another parallel path to reach this fatidic recovery is the nationalist approach. The nationalists such as the Prime Minister Shinzo Abe strongly believe that the younger generations should rebuild their national pride. Studies show in fact that national pride in Japan has been decreasing through generations and it has been stably lower than its American and Chinese counterpart (Hashimoto 2015, 126). The other question that is often raised is then whether or not it is possible to build a new memorial without a religious characterization. Since it's not a state-funded institution, it also happens that unconstitutional acts take place, such as the representatives' refusal to remove, under the families' request, those who are enshrined (Takenaka 2015, 5). It should be indeed a choice of the relatives to move their beloved ones who passed away to another resting place. However, this as many other issues is an ethical dilemma that probably won't easily find a solution.

Considering the issue of memorialization, the theories of Halbwachs and Nora should be introduced in this chapter. As Nora points out, there is a noticeable difference between “true

<sup>18</sup> A normal country is supposed to have its own army to defend itself and attack. Japan is instead defended by the Self-Defense Forces alone and relies on the US military umbrella.

memory” and the “memory transformed by its passage through history” (1989, 13). What does this mean though, and how can it help us understand better the dynamics of collective memory? What he defines as true memory, is nothing less than what is left in our minds of gestures and habits, a mixture of unspoken traditions and unstudied reflexes. The transformed memory instead, is voluntary, deliberate but never collective or encompassing. In this theory itself, there are contradictions that are difficult to ignore at a first glance. What is interesting though, is that in the end talking about memory is indeed always a narrative full of oxymorons. Transformed memory, I believe, could be even more collective than the true one. A memory that is written on books and studied by generations that never experienced the real facts, could be perceived and remembered more homogeneously than a set of gestures being passed down through generations by unspoken rituals. The rituals at Hiroshima and at the Yasukuni shrine then, are a transformed memory, an imposed act to remember. The need of remembering is typical of our society, preserving, cataloguing and reproducing are the key to our new approach to memory. Visiting memorials, places where collective memory is preserved and transmitted, often now is a reason to take pictures and write reviews about it (whether online or on personal notebooks). People feel the need to tell others that they have been somewhere meaningful and that now they remember. They supposedly remember the history of the world, the history of their grandfathers, a history that was never part of their own memory. The purpose of remembering in several cases related to war memorials is rather to use memory as a warning for the future. People have to see what a war looks like and what horrible atrocities it causes to understand that is it not worth the risk to enter another one in the future. At least this is supposedly the message that museums such as the Yūshūkan say they want to convey. In this context, remembrance per se becomes a tool, rather than a memory to keep in our hearts. The memory of the loser nation evolves in a particular narrative, a discourse built on peace and hope for the future. As Lowenthal reminds us, “defeat can be as potent a heritage as victory; misery forges lasting bonds” (1996, 74). The scholar points out that for a strange twist of fate, sometimes winners “now aspire to a legacy of defeat” (1996, 78): could it be the case of nowadays Japan? Partly a winner, partly a defeated, in some way a subjugator and in others a victim. It is too difficult to define a parting line between the two faces of this country, and its war-related museums just show the same dilemmas.

The tentative made to strive for peace by talking about war, the message of hope for future generations in contrast with the several mementos belonging to dead people, melted kitchenware, burnt clothes; everything leads to a strong self-victimizing view. The heritage of defeat is indeed stronger than the pride of the several past victories in Asia, but as we can see in some parts of the collection in the Yūshūkan, the nationalist dream does indeed come back hunting the present: it is a

nuanced national reality enclosed and mirrored in one site. Nevertheless, if the memorial and this museum in particular are lieux de mémoire, as Nora (1989) would define them, it is then even more important to deeply think about the actual reaction that these sites provoke in the visitors' minds. The visitors, are in the end, the final bearers of memory. The places might store memories for a longer time frame, but it is up to the people of various times to take what is in there and make it into a new recycled remembrance. Is it in the end more relevant to analyze this kind of site for its historical background, or analyze it for its social relevance at the moment? By social I don't mean political, but rather in what way these sites could affect people's thoughts regarding the past and the future.

For instance, let's consider the pictures of kamikaze and their handwritten letters showcased in the Yūshūkan: do Japanese people see these pictures and interpret them as a reason to go to war again and sacrifice themselves just like their predecessors did? Lee (2018) interprets the Yūshūkan museum's collection as a threat to future peace instead of a reconciling tool. Indeed, she strongly affirms that "those who subscribe to the view of the Yūshūkan see war as a step toward peace" (2018, 28) and that is not the only time the scholar mentions this theory throughout her essay. This drastic vision assumes that the young Japanese visitors might see their country in a new different way after their visit, and that they could perceive the past wars fought bravely by valorous men as a necessary path to today's peace. Needless to say, this essay will not agree with Lee's vision. Coming to terms with one's own tormented past and embracing its conflicts, or simply watching it from afar with a strange lack of empathy, does not imply that we should see it as a necessary path to reach peace.

Not to mention the fact that a defeated country would sell this idea with great difficulty, while winning ones do it in a much easier way<sup>19</sup>.

Regarding the power of the winners - in this specific case the Americans - and the weight that the loser Japanese had to bear, we should take in consideration a small but disturbing section of a footage. The documentary called "White Light, Black Rain"<sup>20</sup>, directed by the Oscar-winning filmmaker Steven Okazaki gives the spectators an intimate insight of the aftermath of the bombings for instance. Focusing on the direct experience of survivors, the documentary shows interviews to both Japanese and Americans who were involved in the bombing situation. At the minute 1:07:14 of the documentary, the aforementioned short scene starts: we can see some Japanese survivors, taking

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance the glorified figure of the Americans, who "bring peace" to so many countries through decades of war abroad. Since they do represent the winners in a situation such as the Second World War where they bombarded Japan countless times - including even the two nuclear bombs -, their war is always seen as a needed step to peace.

<sup>20</sup> See the complete footage on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17dcFaZSvok>.

part in the “Hiroshima Maiden” project<sup>21</sup> taking part in an American tv show called “This is your life”. Two of these girls are hiding behind a curtain, leaving only their silhouettes to be seen. On a sofa, the Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto, the leader of this project, is sitting silently, visibly surprised and perhaps confused by all these attentions given to him. Then an unexpected visit to the show: the co-pilot of the Enola Gay airplane, Captain Robert Lewis, makes his appearance. What is slightly disturbing then, is the atmosphere surrounding the scene: there is an audience applauding, the presenter Ralph Edwards of the show asking readily: “Would you tell us sir, of your experience on 1945?”. As the captain starts to speak directly to Tanimoto, his voice shakes, and as he pronounces the words “my God, what have we done?” he starts almost tearing up. A moving scene, an act of repentance. The captain then goes on giving in front of everyone on television the first check to the reverend to finance the project. There is a moment of humanity, encapsulated in a bigger frame of opacity and superficiality. It seems that the whole point of the program was to show the good side of Americans, who are able to feel sorry even though what they did was “necessary” to stop the evil Japanese.

When talking of war-memory and its relationship with the Yasukuni, the Yūshūkan is a fundamental piece to understand the whole picture. The Yūshūkan museum was built before the war, and received a substantial support during the years of the Pacific war. After the Japanese invasion to Manchuria it had reached more than half million visitors annually, numbers that only went increasing through the years with the war against China starting in 1937. Today, the museum is less visited than during the war years for obvious reasons, but it still attracts quite a large audience - around 30,000 people visited annually as of 2014 (Lee 2018).

The first “version” of it had been built much earlier, in 1882, but because of the terrible earthquake in Tokyo in 1923 it had to be rebuilt and could only open again to the public in 1932. After Japan’s defeat in the Second World War the SCAP issued an order to close down both the Yūshūkan and the National Defense Hall (Yoshida 2007). In 1961 the Yūshūkan was reopened but not its entirety. This meant that the visitors had to wait until 1986 for the official opening of whole museum. The last important renovation took place later on in 2002, to expand the collection and to appeal more the new generations (Lee 2018).

The museum tries to outline the most important periods in the war history of Japan, starting from the showcasing of samurai swords to the actual reconstruction of an entire Zero Fighter airplane in the entrance hall. This in particular, as we’ll see afterwards, is one of the main attractions that

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21 The Hiroshima Maiden Project was meant to give the possibility to have plastic surgery to several young girls who had been injured by the explosions in Hiroshima. The girls had to go to America for the surgeries and the project became very famous thanks to its publicity on tv and radio shows in the West.

visitors recommend online about the whole museum. Several rooms in the museum are not at the center of critics, since they focus on a historical period of intestine battles and wars not defined as “war of aggression”. The rooms dedicated to the samurai world are always just quickly mentioned in both academic articles and reviews of the site by visitors, as probably it is a theme often directly connected to the idea of the Japanese history, and a reason to be proud of the country. What is instead mostly criticized in the academic and newspaper world is the complete lack of empathy for the suffering of many innocents in the war. Since the museum’s goal is to reanimate the national pride of Japanese people, it focuses more on the victories and on the brave sacrifice of young soldiers who decided to die for their country. The same critique is made for the Zero Fighter’s description and the one for the steam locomotive C56 of the Thai-Burma Railway. For instance, a harsh review of these description tags by Gianni Simone can be read on the Japan Times (2014), stating that “the description fails to mention that around 90,000 Asians and more than 12,000 Allied POWs died in the process due to maltreatment, sickness and starvation.”

A similar statement is given by Lee (2018, 15), which points out how much the descriptions of these objects could affect the perception of the visitors regarding the war in an overly positivist perspective. The plaque presenting the locomotive brings out the argument that it was an unbelievable success to be able to complete such a long railway - 415 km long, built in a record time despite the hard weather conditions but actually later defined by many as the Death Railway. It mentions the previous failure by the British in succeeding at finishing such a railway and suggests a victory in a non-existing competition through a comparison with another Imperial power. The narrative that museum proposes to tell tries desperately to see only the unifying moments and historical facts that could be a new reason to make young people interested in their own country’s power. It is done both by silencing the voices of the oppositions and of the people that only suffered from the war. It is curious how war museums often fail to mention the sufferings produced by it. Probably the consensus to go to war and to strive for supremacy would decrease if people could be reminded in such a museum too how many damages it would bring. Nonetheless, we must consider once again the current condition of Japan: a pacifist country with low national pride percentages, no official army and several problems in the southern regions (such as Okinawa) due to the American military bases presence. If this sense of everlasting defeat could be smoothed it could be beneficial for the current generations. However, this process should include more awareness of the past wrongdoings indeed. Nevertheless, the concept of a strong national pride is not something that can be easily created from the scratch.

The Americans for instance, as Doss (2008) and Billig (1995) notice, have an infinite series of commemoration practices that are actually meant to thank the veterans, the soldiers that are still

-serving the country or to transmit a sense of unity that works on symbols and slogans. The Japanese people instead, might feel united and different from everyone else, but not to the point of risking their lives again to protect such a unity. The Japanese flag is not an omnipresent symbol like the American one instead, nor it is the advertisement to join the Self Defense Forces - despite the increased support towards them after their consistent help in the 3/11 disaster.

Going back to the museum's collection, it should be noticed that it's indeed a huge quantity of mementos. The showcasing style is rather simple but it's meant to give as many details as possible about each object present in the glass cases. Letters, signed contracts, treaties, swords and guns are all mixed up, aiming to bring back to life the shreds of the past. Several pictures in black and white show all the soldiers who took part in the battles: from the high-grade commanders standing all together in official pictures, to the simple soldiers in small pictures of their faces only. Something that might be greatly appreciated by historians or even more perhaps by people who are not keen on geography is the massive presence of maps throughout the collection. Every room is dedicated to different historical periods and each glass case has a map showing both the war lines and the territory where the war took place.

For instance, let's examine the part describing the battle of Iwo Jima in the 14 room<sup>22</sup>: first, there is a detailed description in terms of numbers and figures on the battle's casualties and on the forces spent in the mission. These figures seem to be neutral and casually put there to be descriptive, but indeed in the end they appear to be showing quite some pride despite the defeat and a victim perspective on the Japanese side. A neat comparison shows that approximately 21.000 Japanese men were sent to fight against 61.000 Americans, 9 infantry battalions fought against 27 American ones, but the casualties in the two armies were approximately the same - more Americans were actually killed (28.686 people) than the Japanese (20.933 people). Next to this information we can find other mementos, some letters that have been enlarged and re-printed to be more legible and some clothes of the soldiers. The human side of the battle prevails indeed in this narrative, to engage the spectator and make him feel sorry for the dead soldiers.

Figure 2: Showcasing style of the Yushukan. Yasukuni 2008.

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22 The room is the fourth one dedicated to "Greater East Asian War" (*daitō a sensou*). To see a footage with a brief explanation of the museum by the historian Akinori Takamori, representative of the Japanese institute for general research on culture (*nihon bunka sōgō kenkyūsho daihyō*), see the full footage on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcmBUPyd3BQ>.



The aim of the museum is openly to promote peace and national pride. However, whether this is accomplished or not is difficult to say. Scholars and journalists, such as the aforementioned ones, have clearly stated their doubts on such educational and pacifist intentions. But if “remembering is simultaneously a collective forgetting” and “nations forget the violence which brought them into existence” (Billig 1995, 38), it is also difficult to judge the museum still nowadays, since the more we move past this event, the more the nation forgets the violence inflicted. If the mission of the curators and the sponsors is really not to glorify the past mistakes but to see a glimpse of pride in the nation’s army and to commemorate the people that died – whether or not they were in the right to go to war at the time – it might be stimulating to analyze more in detail the museum for its curatorial choices (prevalent colors, symbols and objects displayed for instance). In the museum the color grey is used everywhere, giving a sense of sadness and seriousness to the rooms. On the walls are hanging timelines with information on politicians and army officers, and these as well are in shades of grey, black and white. Another medium often used to give an insight in the past are the pages of old newspapers.

It is a huge amount of materials and this is why the museum itself proposes from the beginning some “routes” to take (the 60 minutes “souls of the dead” course, the 90 minutes “Greater East Asian War” course and the 120 minutes complete course), based on the visitors’ available time. Still, it is difficult to imagine these visitors taking their time to read so much of the historical data, unless they are historians or history-lovers. We might almost assume that for this reason, whether the museum writes about a one-sided view of history or not, the ignorant visitors will almost skip the written parts or read them quickly, while the visitors that already know enough facts will either skip

these parts, read them to deepen their knowledge or be critical about them. This reconnects us to the question on the use of museums: are they meant to be made for the audience, and built around the visitors' needs, or are they made to tell a story, whatever the story might be?

The Yasukuni Shrine builds its own narrative in a masterful way: its website (in the Japanese language version) features several videos that can be also found also on Youtube, where the gentle voice of a woman tells the story of the shrine, describes the festivals and the ceremonies taking place in it in each season, and explains as well how to worship Gods in the shrine. It's clear that a huge effort was made to make the site more appealing to new generations that use internet more and more. The message that is often repeated in the videos, is that the Yasukuni Shrine is a place where soldiers who fought for the peace of the country can rest peacefully and can be visited by their families. The website specifies that soldiers, "regardless of their rank or social standing, are considered to be completely equal and worshipped as venerable divinities of Yasukuni"<sup>23</sup>. The choice to divide the videos into seasons in the Japanese version and to make instead a united but shorter video for the international community is again a sign that a lot of care was put even in reaching different types of audiences. To make the religious site furtherly appealing, the message in the videos never mentions war, but focuses instead on sacrifice, peace and on the divinities' resting future. Knowing that perhaps most of the people nowadays are not connected anymore very deeply to the *izokukai* or to the theme of deceased soldiers in general, the shrine uses its second entity of religious site to attract visitors for other reasons. The choice to divide the videos into seasons in the Japanese version and to make instead a united but shorter video for the international community is again a sign that a lot of care was put even in reaching different types of audiences. Some might call it nationalist propaganda, others simply a strategic move to be able to sustain the museum and the whole site now that it can't receive the financial support of the state.

Regarding the exposure of the Japanese audience to patriotic (or should we say nationalist?) contents related to the messages of the Yasukuni in the media nowadays, two songs released in 2018 should be mentioned<sup>24</sup>: "*Hinomaru*" by the famous band Radwimps (who reached a global recognition after their soundtrack for the blockbuster animation movie *Kimi no na wa* or "Your Name") and "*Gaikokujin no Tomodachi*" by Yuzu. With the excuse of the Rugby World Cup in 2019 and the Olympics of Tokyo approaching in 2020, several songs are being released to root for Japan, or to make Japanese people more proud of their country, however, the words chosen for these two

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23 For the English version see: <http://www.yasukuni.or.jp/english/about/index.html>, for the Japanese videos visit <http://www.yasukuni.or.jp/movie/>.

24 For further information on the two songs and the comments that they received, see the Japanese article on The Huffington Post ([https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2018/06/08/radwimps\\_a\\_23454012/](https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2018/06/08/radwimps_a_23454012/)).

songs in particular assume some heavy nationalist tones. *Hinomaru* is the name of the Japanese flag, while *Gaikokujin no Tomodachi* literally means “Foreigner Friends”. Both of the song texts present a strong attachment to the national flag, but while the first one is talking about it in a loving and proud way, the second one uses it to show strong resentment. The song by Yuzu says in the end “In this country I’ve cried and laughed, been angry and happy. But I’ll keep my national flag stored deep in my dresser”. What can be observed in such a text is the heavy weight that even some young people still feel in Japan regarding the past wars and the inability to proudly and openly state that for them Japan is the best country without risking sounding nationalist. Yuzu mentions directly the Yasukuni Shrine, saying that “Things always sound so serious on TV, talking about the left and right. But the cherry blossoms I saw with you at Yasukuni were so beautiful!”. Indeed, this seems to suggest an ulterior division of visions between what is the Japanese political world and the reality of the other citizens belonging to the rest of the job sectors. As in many countries, Japanese people seem to have shown less and less interest for their countries politics, as many have lamented in this decade<sup>25</sup>. However, as Tsukada (2015) points out in his research, the situation might be much more complicated than this. After a study of several polls and interviews, what he came across was indeed a final paradox: Japan, like many other democracies, presents a “seemingly motivated, but a politically detached, citizenry”.

What if then people of the new generations cared less and less of what Yasukuni meant for their predecessors and what it still means in the international political arena? The museum and the entire shrine are targeting more and more the youngest, however, instead of turning into a nationalist propaganda, the visit to the museum might be for them simply a way to get to know their country’s war history more and to get to know the horrible aftermath of destructive actions. This analysis doesn’t aim to show a superficial view on the power of museums, but rather tries to see them as tools to story tell. If people that visit the site go with a pacifist mindset, they will react strongly to the stories told in the exhibitions, they will just re-confirm their own pre-assumptions and leave the place with a heart at peace, having seen just what they wanted to see in it from the start. The nationalist visitors instead, might go and do just the same as their pacifist counterparts, meaning that they would possibly only see the greatness of war in the exhibition and the bravery of all the dead soldiers. Regarding this particular point of view, talking about memorials at former concentration camps related to the Shoah, Marcuse (2001, 391) suggested that despite being a fundamental tool to

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25 See for instance the articles by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (<https://www.asiapacific.ca/blog/japanese-youths-political-engagement-now-or-never>) and the Japan Times (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/04/29/national/media-national/voter-apathy-can-threaten-democracy/#.Wxvgb0iFPIU>).

preserve memory of the Shoah, these sites play a different role than the educational one. Their mission and duty is rather to engage emotionally than to provide an intellectual learning experience. Both the Yūshūkan and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum are what Gurian (2002) defines as “Narrative Museums”, museums such as the Holocaust museum in Berlin that deal mainly with objects that don’t have a clear background, or an academic research behind it. These objects are dealt with as being part of a story that the museum, as a storyteller is explaining to the visitors and to the community supporting this narrative. The narrative museum is often defined as an institution lacking objectivity, but this critic is itself often vain, since the main goal of these museums is to be subjective. Since the emotional aspect is fundamental in such places, these museums make a great use of technology to engage the audience affectively. The Yūshūkan does indeed make use of several footages which show the greatness of the country through black and white images that might recall a nostalgic feeling to the past. This is precisely why pictures are extremely important as well in such museums: the pictures of kamikaze for instance, give a face to the unknown past that the visitors have always heard about. Seeing the faces of these young adults taking their lives “for the sake of today’s peace” engages the visitor much more intensely than a simple description on a history book. Both museums then choose sometimes to put pictures of the dead right next to the objects that were belonging to them, to increase the scenographic effect and give a tangible dimension to their narrative.

## The Visitor's Opinion

For this analysis of the visitor's reception of the museums' messages and perception of their visit, I decided to analyze the reviews of Japanese visitors on Tripadvisor<sup>26</sup>. I personally translated from Japan to English so some nuances of the original language might be lost in the translations process. Since analyzing all the reviews written on the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum would be an infinite work, I chose to analyze the latest 50 reviews about it, to also have a roughly equal amount of analysis data for the two sites.

Firstly, it must be noticed that there is a significant difference in terms of numbers of reviews and that the reasons for this phenomenon might be more complicated than it seems. To begin, we should consider the size of the site and its relevance in the international scenario: the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park is in fact a UNESCO site, which helps greatly to advertise the memorial in the tourism sector. The Yasukuni on the other side is not as famous, possibly because of its bad reputation or because of the size - which is fairly extended but not as much as the Hiroshima counterpart. People going to Hiroshima leave messages of hope and peace on their reviews, as I will analyze more in depth afterwards.

Secondly it should be pointed out that while in the Yasukuni case visitors seem to appreciate more some parts of the exhibition and care about stating it clearly in their reviews to encourage other visitors to go and have a look without prejudices, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum visitors care more about expressing their overall impressions and their personal reflections on what it means to live in a peaceful era and on how destructive atomic bombs could be. Visitors feel the urge to spread the positive idea of stopping future wars by denuclearizing the world, either due to some social duty pressuring them to express their opinion regarding war after their visit in Hiroshima, or due to the strong message that the city itself tries to send. This could be perhaps comparable to other movements in social media that have raised in these years and are spreading consistently<sup>27</sup>.

Thirdly, similarly to what Cohen's research (2011, 197) calls attention to, there is a fundamental difference in the two "dark heritage" sites which can bring more tourists to one rather than the other, and this difference can be defined as "locational authenticity". While Hiroshima, like

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<sup>26</sup> There are 46 reviews on the Yushukan by the current date (11<sup>th</sup> June, 2018), and 1.035 reviews on the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

<sup>27</sup> See for instance the #metoo movement or the #jesuicharlie movements. These phenomena demonstrate how people show more and more their support on social platforms to raise awareness or to simply imply that they belong to a certain social group.

the concentration camps in Germany and Poland is a place that has lived those tragedies people want to know more about, and is a direct testimony of what happened, the Yasukuni Shrine is a memorial that doesn't represent itself a ruin of the past. It is controversial indeed, but not as "dark" as the site in Hiroshima. The attractiveness of the Hiroshima park is also of course framed in a bigger touristic scenario since Hiroshima is itself as a city a dark heritage destination, while the Yasukuni, being in Tokyo, among thousands of other shrines and attractions, is not as visible or famous.

This analysis of comments and reviews will start with the Hiroshima case. Hundreds of messages in the Tripadvisor's page dedicated to this site appear to be a showcase of emotions rather than a much more critical review of the museum or the memorial in general. The cybernetic response to this museum is strongly tied to wishes for a better future, rather than a focus on past. Strangely enough, several people even said they felt more calm and peaceful after having visited the site, instead of expressing feelings of sadness or hatred for Americans who dropped the two bombs in 1945. The user taekos2016 clearly states that being in the museum "calmed his heart"<sup>28</sup>. Other written impressions show a strong emotional impact on the visitors, which eventually brings them to tears: Kten2016<sup>29</sup> for instance, says that seeing the small three wheeler exposed there and then reading the explanation related to it made him/her cry, Mukaibaba<sup>30</sup> says that looking at an American visitor crying heavily moved her heart as well, You h<sup>31</sup>, similarly to Mukaibaba, appears to have been surprised by the attention given to the exhibition by "white" foreigners (as he/she calls them) and by their seriousness. A very common wish that is reiterated at the end of several comments is expressed with the words "*ni do to attehanaranai*" or "*ni do to kurikaesanai*" which means "it shouldn't happen anymore". People also tend to say that this visit made them appreciate more the current peaceful situation in Japan and learn how to cherish it in daily life.

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28 Taekos2016, May 23, 2018. "□□□□□□" (ichido wa ikitai, I wish to visit one time).

[https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g298561-d320360-Reviews-Hiroshima\\_Peace\\_Memorial\\_Museum-Hiroshima\\_Hiroshima\\_Prefecture\\_Chugoku.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g298561-d320360-Reviews-Hiroshima_Peace_Memorial_Museum-Hiroshima_Hiroshima_Prefecture_Chugoku.html)

29 Kten2016, March 19, 2018. "8 □□□" (hachi gatsu rokka, August 6).

[https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g298561-d320360-Reviews-Hiroshima\\_Peace\\_Memorial\\_Museum-Hiroshima\\_Hiroshima\\_Prefecture\\_Chugoku.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g298561-d320360-Reviews-Hiroshima_Peace_Memorial_Museum-Hiroshima_Hiroshima_Prefecture_Chugoku.html)

30 □□□□□, March 13, 2018. "□□□□□□□□□□". (kodomo no koro mita eiga no saigen, reappearance of a movie from my childhood).

[https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g298561-d320360-Reviews-Hiroshima\\_Peace\\_Memorial\\_Museum-Hiroshima\\_Hiroshima\\_Prefecture\\_Chugoku.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g298561-d320360-Reviews-Hiroshima_Peace_Memorial_Museum-Hiroshima_Hiroshima_Prefecture_Chugoku.html)

31 You h, May 6, 2018. "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□○□□□□□□□□□□" (saiten nante dekinai yuiitsumuni no basho, maru wo tsukeru shisutemu wa fuyou, a place that can't be graded, the grading system is unnecessary".  
Tripadvisor.

These comments are a perfect depiction of a population that has moved forward in a very different future made of pacifist beliefs and has decided to leave its violent past behind. Even though only approximately 70 years have passed from the end of the Second World War, the world has gone through so many changes – and Japan with it – that it is difficult to expect people now to still feel guilty for their ancestors’ mistakes. It is true that Japan didn’t undergo an extremely self-critical phase like the Germans did instead (perhaps more similarly to Italy), but instead of criticizing a place such as the Yasukuni, it might be more useful to push for a new museum that would explain the sufferings caused by Japan during the war. However, it seems unlikely to see this process taking place in the future.

The users commenting on the page dedicated to the museum in Hiroshima are far more concerned by the current tensions with America, China and North Korea and their nuclear arsenals than by the hostilities caused by the past. A very similar result will be seen in the Yūshūkan’s reviews analysis, bringing us to interesting conclusions on this comparison. The reviews on the Yūshūkan are extremely fascinating, since as we will see in this analysis, they seem to reflect much more the official message sent by the museum itself, rather than a disapproval of the institution’s tools of communication and narrative, as suggested instead by the scholars and journalists. The most common reaction is overwhelmingness and astonishment: visitors tend to speak first of all about the presence of the zero-fighter at the entrance and many of them stress the fact that it is a unique opportunity to see in person such an old airplane. Comments often point out that the entrance is free, at least to see the zero fighter and the locomotive in the main hall, encouraging other people to go even just for this reason.

Figure 3: Showcase of kamikaze mementos and letters.  
Yasukuni 2008.



It is rather common to see people talking about the letters left behind by the young kamikaze. However, the use of vocabulary such as “suicide”, “kamikaze” or “soldier” are not as popular as the more general word *eirei* which means “spirits of war”, *tamashii*, namely “soul”, or the longer definition “dead people” (*nakunatta kata*). It makes an attentive observer wonder about the reasons behind such a word choice. Perhaps, the word *eirei* is perceived as more tactful or respectful, since the dead soldiers are believed to have become now deities in the shrine. Some visitors, such as yt5678<sup>32</sup> (this is the nickname chosen on the website by the commenter), sustain that the visit to the museum can make the visitors feel strong emotions regarding the past and can become a lesson. Because of this reason, this commenter sustained that even though it might be difficult (to understand) for small children, it should be still a good experience for middle and high school students. As other supporters of the site, yt5678 mentions the negative comments regarding glorification of war supposedly proposed by the museum’s narration, and points out that she totally disagrees on such matter. The same reaction can be seen for instance in the comment of Sousuke

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32 Yt5678, 17th March 2017 “□□□□□□□□” (mazu wa shiru koto, first of all understanding), Tripadvisor. [https://www.tripadvisor.it/Attraction\\_Review-g1066443-d9974357-Reviews-or20-Yushukan-Chiyoda\\_Tokyo\\_Tokyo\\_Prefecture\\_Kanto.html](https://www.tripadvisor.it/Attraction_Review-g1066443-d9974357-Reviews-or20-Yushukan-Chiyoda_Tokyo_Tokyo_Prefecture_Kanto.html)

Yuu<sup>33</sup>, who wrote a strong statement accusing the critics of not having seen in person the exhibition before talking badly about it.

Another comment<sup>34</sup> expresses perhaps in a more open way what the visit is worth for: the commenter points out that the museum's core exhibition is the one dedicated to the Pacific War and that in this part of the collection as well, there is something that touches the hearts of the visitors more than anything else. The letters of the *eirei* and their messages of gratitude to their mothers prevail indeed in the end over the rest of the exhibition, which does show both the good and the bad things that the Japanese have done, as the comment cares about mentioning. The educative aim of the museum is often remarked in the notes, which sometimes wish for young people to visit to understand better the country's history or to face it in a much more direct way after having studied it for many years only at school. A few comments even go as far as to expressing their worries on the present situation of Japan and wish for future peace (*heiwa wa negau*<sup>35</sup>).

Coming to some conclusions from this analysis, it can be argued that the Japanese users seem to be attached to the sad and melancholic idea of their past during the war. This sense of new discovery of their own footsteps through the contact with the old letters is pervasive in the notes left in the website. No comment in Japanese agrees on the war-glorifying image that the museum has been attributed by the opposition party and the newspapers. It must be noticed that many of the criticizing people could have never visited the two memorials for personal ideology-related matters or because of the idea they already have about it. The several objects shown seem from these results to be almost meaningless, or simply used to build up an emotional crescendo which finds a final outbreak only at the sight of the kamikaze's letters.

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33 ユウ ユ (sousuke yuu), 15th March 2017. “[https://www.tripadvisor.it/Attraction\\_Review-g1066443-d9974357-Reviews-or20-Yushukan-Chiyoda\\_Tokyo\\_Tokyo\\_Prefecture\\_Kanto.html](https://www.tripadvisor.it/Attraction_Review-g1066443-d9974357-Reviews-or20-Yushukan-Chiyoda_Tokyo_Tokyo_Prefecture_Kanto.html)” (imeiji ga hitoriaruki, the image stands on its own), Tripadvisor.

34 ユウ, April 5, 2018. “[https://www.tripadvisor.it/Attraction\\_Review-g1066443-d9974357-Reviews-Yushukan-Chiyoda\\_Tokyo\\_Tokyo\\_Prefecture\\_Kanto.html](https://www.tripadvisor.it/Attraction_Review-g1066443-d9974357-Reviews-Yushukan-Chiyoda_Tokyo_Tokyo_Prefecture_Kanto.html)” (bu no rekishi to kaiko no rekishi, war history and retrospective history). Tripadvisor.

35 ユウ, July 17, 2018. “[https://www.tripadvisor.it/Attraction\\_Review-g1066443-d9974357-Reviews-or20-Yushukan-Chiyoda\\_Tokyo\\_Tokyo\\_Prefecture\\_Kanto.html](https://www.tripadvisor.it/Attraction_Review-g1066443-d9974357-Reviews-or20-Yushukan-Chiyoda_Tokyo_Tokyo_Prefecture_Kanto.html)” (omiyagebutsu ni omoshiroi mono ga aru node hikken, there are amazing souvenirs so it's a must-see). Tripadvisor.



## Conclusions

The social function of memorials, as I have extensively proved, is fluid and multilayered. Not only do the memorials, with their internal museums, face socio political challenges and showcasing-related hardships, but they do also have to take into account that the curatorial choices might collide with the general public vision of the past. These memorials' relevance does not stop at their physical presence, to which most of the political and academic criticism has been directed to. Instead, the ways in which these sites produce meaning in the Japanese society is much more discursive, and should also be extended to include the community of visitors. Visitors should be considered bearers of memory just as much as these sites are, and therefore what meanings they take out of their visit is in the end what should not be ignored by the curators and the scholars in their researches. The actual analysis of the reviews written by the visitors of both sites on Tripadvisor has shown a generalized feeling of sadness when having to face the past deaths of youth - whether they were kamikaze or innocent civilians -, a wish for the nation's peace and an appreciation of today's lifestyle conditions (compared to the tough lifestyle of people back then during the war). In the comments there is a lack of self-awareness in some sense, or perhaps it would be better to say that I could not find any comment written in Japanese that would specifically show a feeling of repentance for the war atrocities inflicted by Japan to the neighboring countries, nor did anyone write that they had found out about a dark past they did not know about before. It can be assumed that either because of an unspoken taboo about their own faults - even on the internet -, or perhaps because of the feeling that today's pacific Japan is different from the bloody past version of itself. This research did also once again underline the strategies used by these type of memorials (and their museums in particular) to enhance emotions and hide a deeper historical retrospective. The limits of this research, due to a lack of time and funding to visit Japan and interview the visitors in person, could be probably overcome during future researches by direct interviews with both visitors and curators. Further investigations about the different perspectives of the visitors based on their sex or their age (millennials and people from their 40s to their 60s for instance) might as well give some more insights in this field of memory studies.



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