

# THE BRIEF HISTORY OF YASUKUNI- JINSHA

BY

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It has from ancient days been an established usage and practice of Nippon to build sacred edifices which should be dedicated to all persons who, endowed with a spirit of burning loyalty and patriotism, have given their lives for the Tenno ("Emperor") and for the Country. They have been looked up to and revered as deities or gods. In the particular case of the *Yasukuni* Shrine, it is proper in the first place to mention that it was brought into being at the gracious instance of Meiji Tenno, 1852-1912, grand father of the present Tenno. So it should justly be stated that the *Yasukuni* Shrine is a sanctuary whose festive celebrations and Shinto ritual services are to be everlastingly performed at the costs of the National Treasury. No person is eligible to be here enshrined unless his public services merit that honour.

The origin of the *Yasukuni* Shrine dates back to more than eighty years ago. For a certain period after the unexpected appearance of the "black fleet", composed of six American warships, under Commodore Perry, at Uraga Bay in the Sixth year of Kaei (1853), a considerable number of loyalists and patriots, representing various feudal clans, were killed by their opponents or by their rivals because of their fidelity and faithfulness to the cause of Monarch and State. They had no regard for their personal interests nor for the welfare of their families. They held their life of no account.

The State had so far no means of conducting any service in commemoration of their fidelity and in appreciation of their merit.

When the so called *Boshin* Campaign, (internal disturbances at the time of the Meiji Restoration), was still being fought in the Tohoku Provinces in May of the First year of Meiji, 1868, Meiji Tenno was still in the old Imperial City, Kyoto. His Majesty then instructed his court dignitaries that *Goshisai*, or the ceremony of deification for endless ages of loyalists and patriots as a collective whole, who had given their lives for the great and noble cause in the course of the Restoration Movement since 1853, should be conducted at Higashiyama, Kyoto.

Meiji Tenno on that occasion granted a gracious message on the 10th May accompanied by a statement appreciating the merit achieved by his loyal subjects. The following is an extract from that Imperial message:—

“Not a few patriotic subjects both of good social standing and of low origin, taking lead of the national movement, were put to death for no established serious offence subsequently to the Sixth year of Kaei (1853). They lost their lives because of their faithfulness to the principle of loyalty and patriotism and also because of their leadership in the movement started for the cause of Tenno. They had no energy left to spare for the care of their parents, they deserted their homes, relinquishing their feudal fiefs, they found themselves refugees in strange corners of this land, they were homeless wanderers throughout this land where they once had homes, they underwent hardships of all descriptions. This was their life. They were aggrieved at the maladministration of the Shogunate Feudal Government. They made vehement appeals to the feudal authorities, at the risk of their personal safety, drawing their attention to

the wide spread suffering of the people, they tried hard to persuade the court nobles to rise to the occasion, they earnestly remonstrated with their feudal lords on their conduct relative to national affairs. Personal ease was of no concern to them. They were all patriotic workers, always ready to sacrifice themselves for the good of the people. They did all this only to bring every member of the nation to the knowledge of those noble principles of which they should be consistently observant. They were actuated by their earnest sincerity to undertake the restoration of the Throne to its old prestige, dignity, and, sovereign power. They must be accorded justice with due honour; their noble achievements should be properly repaid. Those who rendered valuable services with silent efforts and whose achievements constituted a cause of the increase of national prosperity and the enhancement of the Imperial fortunes, must not be left to remain in obscurity."

His Imperial Highness Prince Taruhito Arisugawa, at that time Commander-in-Chief of the Expedition against the Kwanto clans, announced his desire in April of the First year of Meiji, when the disturbance in Kwanto was quelled, to conduct a Shinto ritual service for the commemoration of patriotic souls who fell on the field of action. That service was conducted solemnly on the 2nd June that year inside the walls of the Yedo Castle.

The Throne was transferred from Kyoto to Yedo, now Tokio, in the Second year of Meiji, 1869, the year next to that in which the above mentioned public Shinto ritual service was conducted simultaneously in both cities. Soon after the removal of the Imperial City, the *Shokonsha* was built at the present site upon Kudan Hill. Shinto services on a grand scale were then held during five days commencing on the 29th June of the same year.

The persons deified at the *Shokonsha* on that occasion were all officers and men killed in action for the cause of Tenno. They numbered 3,588 in all. The officers and men deified in the *Shokonsha* in Kyoto on the former occasion and other hero-martyrs deified on other occasions have all been translated to the *Shokonsha*, Kudan, for *Goshisai*, the ceremony of deification for endless ages of loyalists and patriots as a collective whole, all hero-martyrs to the great and noble cause, after careful establishment of their respective merits.

The *Shokonsha* changed its appellation in June in the 12th year of Meiji, 1879, and since that time it has been called the *Yasukuni Shrine*. It is a *Bekkaku Kampeisha*, i.e., a shrine of specially high standing, maintained at the state's expense. An Imperial messenger was then at the instance of Meiji Tenno ordered to proceed to this shrine. The duty entrusted to that messenger was to inform the deities with appropriate Shinto solemnity of the elevated status of the shrine. The messenger then read aloud before the deities a *Saimon*, a Shinto ritual, prepared by His Majesty.

This paper reads:—

“Since the dawn of the Meiji Era, loyal and patriotic subjects whose noble self-sacrifice quelled disturbances, far and near, have been innumerable. Nippon now finds herself safe by virtue of their patriotism. This consideration induced Us to change the appellation of *Shokonsha* into *Yasukuni Shrine*—a shrine of high standing, that is to say *Bekkaku Kampeisha*.”

We shall not be wrong in saying that the term *Yasukuni* conveys the meaning of “the country in permanent and settled peace and safety”. It may also be observed that the phrase selected is suggestive of the noble wish of His

Majesty.

The subjects of Nippon who gave up their lives for the cause of Tenno and people in every war or grave national event are now installed as deities in the Shrine. Patriots such as those to whom we have referred alone deserve the honour of having the *Yasukuni* Shrine dedicated to them. For the long period of seventy years after the first *Goshisai* was conducted for fallen patriots in June of the Second year of Meiji, Shinto ritual services of a similar description have been conducted on fifty-one occasions. The number of persons, who are venerated and installed as deities in the *Yasukuni* Shrine, now amount in all to 135,500.

As those who are devoted to martial professions are always in the first line of defence, they are naturally the most numerous of those who are deified in the Shrine. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that a certain number of men whose pursuits are of various descriptions other than martial professions are also revered as deities therein. We must also state that there are forty-nine ladies to whom the *Yasukuni* Shrine is dedicated. It must be pointed out for general information that the *Yasukuni* Shrine is not consecrated exclusively to officers and men of the Imperial Army and Navy alone. It is a sanctuary open for all members of the nation who fell in the cause of their Monarch and Country. The *Yasukuni* Shrine is a sanctified place where the spirit of the Yamato race is sacredly preserved—an embodiment of the genuine fundamental national principles of Nippon.

Genuine loyalty towards Meiji Tenno persuaded his subjects to entertain the project of building the Meiji Shrine in commemoration of their illustrious Monarch. It may be worth mention, as a contrast, that the *Yasukuni* Shrine was built at the instance of Meiji Tenno, whose sympathy for

his subjects was profound and whose heart was always with them. This is a good instance of an exceptional characteristic, demonstrating that mutual sympathy has always existed, still exists, and will eternally exist between Monarch and subjects. This furnishes also a good demonstration of Nippon's fundamental national principles. On the festive occasion in January in the Seventh year of Meiji, His Majesty Meiji Tenno was so pleased that he paid a formal visit in person to the *Yasukuni* Shrine. Overwhelmed by deep feeling, His Imperial Majesty then took up a writing brush in order to commit a short poem to paper. Reproduced in ordinary prose, it reads as follows:—

The merit and honour of fallen loyalists will be retained in the permanent memory of the people by means of a shrine.

This short Imperial poem is placed in a frame and kept preserved in good condition inside the sacred edifice. There are many more short poems by His Imperial Majesty, all indicating that his heart was always with his people. In ordinary prose, they are as follows:—

The mirror kept sacred in the front-hall of the *Yasukuni* Shrine reflects the real spirit of the Yamato race.

The patriotic souls given for the noble cause of the Country seem to reflect their images in the brilliant mirror placed in the shrine.

Souls of men fallen in action may be seen protecting men on the fields of battle.

Spring! Thou art a season for the populace to throng the shrine compound in the enjoyment of recurring warmth under cherry flowers in full bloom.

Sincere hearts, beautiful as the red maple

leaves in autumn, may be a delight for the divine souls in the Yasukuni Shrine.

There are two short poems flowing from the tender feminine heart of *Shoken Kotoigo*, Consort of Meiji Tenno, when Her Majesty visited the shrine in the Thirty-ninth year of Meiji, 1906. Both pieces bear the title "A Visit to the *Yasukuni Shrine*".

May you safeguard as deities the fatherland with truth and fidelity as intense as the patriotism with which you fought for your noble cause!

Parents and wives, who anxiously waited for the safe return home of their sons and husbands, are seen offering before the shrine their earnest prayers in tears of gratitude and worshipping the departed souls, now venerated as deities there.