

Ancestor Rituals and Memory Politics in the Construction of Modern Japanese National Identity

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ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to examine the way in which memory politics, through rituals, takes place in Japan and affects East Asia's international relations. The study focuses on the rituals performed at Yasukuni Shrine in honor of war spirits as a critical case for the connection between rituals, history and identity. The study adopts a qualitative research approach based on the review of the literature. In this regard, the study investigates how rituals are integrated in collective memory construction and how they affect both domestic identity and international relations. According to the results, Japan's war commemoration rituals are not only cultural but also political tools used to reproduce specific interpretations of the past from the perspective of nationalism. Nevertheless, this perception is not shared by all states. Neighbor states such as China and South Korea tend to see Japanese officials paying homage at the Yasukuni Shrine as an indication that Japan has yet to properly reflect on its wartime behavior. These activities create diplomatic problems and prove the importance of collective memory as an intangible influence in international politics. The current analysis reveals that culture and symbolism are important factors which are often considered internal affairs but may significantly impact regional peace and security in East Asia.

Keywords: Politics of Memory, Japan, Yasukuni Shrine

INTRODUCTION

Not only does our perception of the past have importance in society, but it is also used as a tool of recreating meaning for the future. The process of remembering is a ritualized event. The concept is essential for international relations since it allows one to understand the identity of a state as well as the manner in which it perceives other countries. Therefore, the use of memory in foreign affairs should be understood, considering that it is always politically charged and never unbiased.

Collective memory has to do with ritual practices that allow individuals and societies to transfer memories across generations. Such rituals are not simply part of the cultural heritage of the nation. They are instruments of transferring certain histories into a ritualized format in which people will learn to reproduce it again and again. Benesch (2024) indicates that ritual space, including shrine locations, functions as a place of production of memory and history narratives.

Yasukuni Shrine constitutes important illustration. From the perspective of the internal affairs of Japan, it is considered to be a memorial for soldiers who lost their lives during the war, yet other countries perceive it differently. Benesch (2024) the connection between Yasukuni Shrine and wartime and nationalism rituals that emerge at some point creates tensions in East Asia owing to different perceptions of the history of the region. Therefore, one can state that ritual practices associated with the shrine affect not only culture but also international politics.

In addition, memory practices in Japan cannot be viewed as something purely national and do not remain within the country since they form part of the transnational phenomenon of memory practices. War victim commemorations and ritual practices are components of memory practices that become a regional collective memory, creating national identity while creating conflicts between the states. Rusneac (2022) show that the impact of cultural memory on international relations should not be underestimated as it affects the mechanisms of international politics. For this reason, this paper focuses on ritual practices used as memory politics in Japan. Employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method, focusing on journal articles and relevant publications to analyze the relationship between ritual practices, collective memory, and international relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

By considering academic literature on the connections between rituals, collective memory, and identity, it is possible to recognize that ritual behaviors not only communicate culture but also actively convey collective stories from the past from generation to generation. According to sociology of ritual approaches, ritual serves as a way for people to connect the past and the present in order to preserve collective memory throughout generations. As Lattu (2019) in those societies where ritual plays an important role in their cultural life, collective memory is created through symbolism and stories about the connection between the past experience and present-day existence. When focusing on the case study of Japan, one can conclude from the research done by Oktaviyanti & Lawanda (2024) that ritual acts performed in Yasukuni Shrine represent a kind of reproduction of cultural memory related to the national story about the war and its heroes. The importance of space in facilitating memories through rituals is underlined by (Breen, 2013).

Aside from its significance during times of wars, studies conducted on the indigenous culture in Japan show that regular cultural practices are significant in maintaining the memory of the nation. For instance, Obon is one of the festivals where there is an existing connection between the past and the present, thus maintaining a link between people of different generations through ritual practices. As mentioned by Wiyatasari (2018), despite the modernization in Japan, Obon remains an important cultural practice, which helps maintain family unity and knowledge about history. In line with this, Haryanti (2013) emphasizes the belief of Japanese in returning to their ancestors through Obon. Furthermore, according to other philosophical views, ritual practices are included in Japan's cultural values that help construct the country's identity. Adha & Hidayah (2020) support this statement and mention that traditional rituals, including Shinto life cycle rites like Kan Kon So Sai, help build the cultural structures of the current era.

METHODOLOGY

The process of conducting research is based on the use of qualitative methods that involve a literature review in order to analyze the relationship between ritual performance and collective memory and national identity, which is

examined from the perspective of East Asian international relations. In this regard, the literature review will involve academic and media texts analyzing the discourse and formation of narratives about ritual performance.

According to Snyder (2019) research using academic sources requires a structured procedure that includes several sequential steps. The first step of the study consists of data collection, during which it is necessary to gather all the appropriate sources concerning the ritual practices, collective memory, and national identity of Japan. At this stage, it is important to collect various materials, such as scientific articles from scholarly journals, books, and research reports dedicated to the chosen topic. In the second stage, selection should be made in order to choose the most suitable literature and separate it into groups according to their relevance, credibility, and association with memory politics and identity construction. As the third step, data analysis is required. Qualitative methods of interpretation will help identify the relationship between ritual practices and collective memory. Finally, the results will be interpreted in terms of international relations.

In general, the described methodology follows the methodological framework presented by Snyder (2019), according to the author, a systematic approach to working with academic literature is crucial since it cannot be considered just an overview and evaluation of the existing sources.

DISCUSSION

The ancestral veneration rituals practiced in Japanese society act as an important means of the reproduction of collective memory, where the past experiences of a group continue to be linked to the current sense of identity of the individuals. In this case, collective memory continues to be produced by social practices as an ongoing process that shapes both individual and collective identities in Japanese culture.



Figure 1. Japanese Obon Ritual Practices

As depicted in Figure 1 above, ritual practices in Japan are characterized by the interaction between memory and culture. One such example is the Obon festival, which constitutes one of the important practices of ancestral commemoration in Japan. This festival is traditionally understood as the return of the spirits of the deceased to the realm of humanity, whereby family members conduct rituals of welcome and reverence towards them. This indicates the role of rituals as a means of reproducing intergenerational continuity and fostering cultural and familial identification in society. It follows that collective memory does not just emerge from narratives of the state but is equally created by cultural practices.



Figure 2. Yasukuni Shrine Ritual Site

As illustrated in Figure 2 above, ritual sites constitute another important dimension in terms of constructing historical narratives in Japanese society. An example of this is the practice of commemorating the spirits of fallen soldiers at Yasukuni Shrine, a site of memory that embodies Japan's war memory and narrative as a whole. Narita (2024) The shrine has evolved into a symbolic space that represents Japan's wartime memory and national narrative.



Figure 3. Ritual Visit by Japanese Officials

Nevertheless, as indicated in Figure 3, such stories told in the process of ritual performance are not always perceived positively, especially within the East Asia region. Conflicting understandings of historical memory have turned Yasukuni into an object of controversy between Japan, China, and South Korea. Oktaviyanti & Lawanda (2024), ritual visits by Japanese officials, combined with media representation, have been shown to reinforce conflicting historical narratives among these countries. Moreover, Benesch (2024) shows that ritual places, such as a museum, are involved in the creation of contentious historical story-telling at the regional level. Thus, ritual practices can have substantial implications for international relations when connected to a controversial historical past.

The constructivist approach can offer further insights into the process of national identity development and the role played by ritual practices in the process. As noted by Wendt (1992), national identity is built upon ongoing social processes where the role of historical perception and shared collective understanding is important. Within this

framework, it can be argued that ritual practices performed at Yasukuni Shrine can be interpreted as symbolic actions that are instrumental for shaping Japan's post-war identity.



Figure 4. Media as Interpretation

As it can be seen from Figure 4, national identity creation in Japan is highly dependent upon the process of interpreting historical experience, primarily that related to World War II. As mentioned by Putri et al., (2024) an examination of China's cyber strategy should account for the interdependent nature between the identity formation process and national reevaluation of historical experiences. Continuous referencing to certain events that have happened throughout history such as battles and challenges faced by the Japanese nation show that memory politics have become one of the primary tools used by nations to maintain or challenge their identities. Indeed, it is possible to observe similar phenomena taking place all around the world and thus highlight a rather strong connection between memory politics, identity, and international politics.

In summary, the above discussion suggests that rituals involving remembrance of ancestors and struggles experienced by the Japanese society should be viewed from the perspective of memory politics. The aforementioned process is significant not only for identity construction in Japan but also for international relations between states. Therefore, rituals which are usually associated with internal affairs can produce concrete implications on the level of international politics.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of the research suggest that rituals in Japan have become an essential tool for reproducing collective memory and national identity through the development of rituals such as Obon Festival and visits to Yasukuni Shrine. The former appears to be a rather harmonious tradition, as it fosters strong connections across generations and enhances social cohesion, whereas visits to Yasukuni appear to generate controversies and even cause international tensions with neighboring nations, such as China and South Korea. Based on the insights obtained, it can be recommended to develop Obon as a cultural tradition that would emphasize universally accepted cultural aspects of remembering ancestors and family, as well as avoid politicizing it. At the same time, the Japanese government should demonstrate more care when visiting Yasukuni Shrine, since such actions may create unfavorable international perceptions. Apart from this, using less controversial commemorative forms and engaging in dialogue on the issues related to historical events are suggested as potential strategies to ease historical controversies in East Asia.

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