Surviving comrades of the fallen in the Pacific war, and bereaved family members, head to Yasukuni Shrine 靖国神社 to mourn and commemorate at its great spring and autumn festivals; they may also visit on days of special importance to their regiments. The bereaved often tell how, at Yasukuni, their loved ones appear clearly before them, and give them much comfort (Breen 2004: 88–90). Yasukuni serves in this way as a prompt to very personal memories. However, like all memorial sites Yasukuni engages actively in the construction of a more public memory that often conflicts with, and always seeks to accommodate, the personal and private. The mnemonic function of the shrine, that is to say the strategies with which it reconstructs the past so as to accord it significance for the present, is vital and obvious, but it merits more attention than it has so far been accorded.¹ This chapter sets out to identify and explore the several strategies Yasukuni Shrine deploys to this end; it is also concerned to ask why Yasukuni does what it does mnemonically. Note that while Yasukuni commemorates the war dead from all imperial Japan’s conflicts, the focus in this essay falls uniquely on Yasukuni’s construction of Pacific war memory.

Yasukuni Shrine appeals to three mnemonic strategies. The first is ‘textual’: shrine priests and shrine apologists publish pamphlets, posters, books and a multiplicity of web pages to articulate their understanding of the Pacific war. A second strategy is that of display: the shrine compound accommodates the Yūshūkan 遊就館, ‘Japan’s first and oldest war museum’ whose exhibits, in their selection and arrangement, construct a powerful and persuasive historical narrative of war. Finally, there is the ritual strategy. Yasukuni is before all else a ritual site; ritual performance

¹ For a pioneering study of Yasukuni as a site of memory, see Nelson 2003. Since the publication of the original version of this essay, Mark Selden (2008) has published a fine article on Yasukuni and memory.
is the shrine’s, and the priests’, raison d’être. As Connerton (1989: 3–4) insists, a fundamental operation of ritual is the conveying and sustaining of ‘recollected knowledge’, that is, of images of the past. Any exploration of the shrine as a mnemonic site might usefully, therefore, begin with its ritual operations.

This chapter does not, in brief, seek to engage directly with the two arenas that have dominated what is known as the ‘Yasukuni problem’. The first of the two concerns the constitutionality of prime ministerial visits to the shrine, while the second concerns the presence of Class A war criminals in the Yasukuni pantheon. These individuals include people like Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki who lead Japan to war, and Generals Matsui and Mutō, who commanded the Imperial army in Nanking and the Philippines respectively. While acknowledging these thorny and persistent issues in passing, this chapter sets out to identify the shrine’s mnemonic operations as a third problem in its own right.2 Yasukuni is legally recognized as a ‘religious juridical person’ (shūkyō hōjin 宗教法人), and is entirely free to construct whatever memory and tell whatever historical tales it wishes. This goes without saying; but its operations become problematic when the state, in the form of the Prime Minister or, indeed, any of his ministers, patronizes the shrine, thus according it the guise of a ‘national’ site and the shrine’s memory that of ‘official’, public memory.

Ritual Propitiation as Mnemonic Strategy

Yasukuni priests perform rites every morning and evening of every day of the year; their ritual purpose is to propitiate and honor the war dead. These rites are known as ireisai 慰霊祭 where irei means ‘propitiate’ or ‘comfort’ and sai means ‘rite’. There is a second category of rite, rarely performed today, namely reiji hōansai 霊璽奉安祭 which are dynamic rites of apotheosis that transform the war dead into sacred beings (Breen 2004: 80–81). At Yasukuni, these sacred beings or kami 神 are typically referred to as eirei 英霊 (glorious spirits). Of the many rites Yasukuni priests perform throughout the year, the most important and the most solemn by far are the two seasonal rites, the Great Rites of Spring and Autumn (shunki reitaisai 春期例大祭 and shūki reitaisai 秋期例大祭). Their distinguishing feature is the dominating presence of the chokushi 勅使

---

2 For an attempt to understand the problem of Yasukuni from a multiplicity perspectives, see Breen 2011.