

Zero Fighters in Chongqing and Pearl Harbor:

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Zero Fighters in Chongqing and Pearl Harbor: Yasukuni's war criminals as martyrs?

by Wakamiya Yoshibumi

A fighter of the former Japanese navy is on display on the first floor of the Yushukan war memorial museum at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. It is a Mitsubishi Zero-type shipboard fighter model 52, one of the Zero fighters. The plane can also be viewed from the outside through a glass wall.

An explanation reads: "Its first campaign was in September in the 15th year of Showa (1940). In an air battle against Soviet-made Chinese war planes in Chongqing, China, it shot down most of the enemy planes with no damage on the Japanese side in an unprecedented victory. With its great combat capability and long flying range, it was the world's strongest fighter."

I see. So the Zero made its debut in an air battle over Chongqing in 1940.

The name rings a bell. The city in inland China was the venue of an Asia Cup soccer match between Japan and Jordan this summer. Chinese soccer fans booed the Japanese team and threw garbage at Japanese supporters.

The violent reaction was an outburst of anti-Japanese sentiment harbored by the Chinese people.

Yet Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro continues to visit Yasukuni Shrine in defiance of China's

repeated protest. Looking at the Zero fighter that the shrine proudly displays, I cannot help but feel karmic ties between the two seemingly unrelated events.

Although the shrine museum's explanation makes no reference to the fact, Japanese forces dropped a vast number of bombs onto the city. That's how they won command of the air in Chongqing-the result of "an unprecedented victory" thanks to Zero fighters.

Look history in the eye

Air raids on Chongqing, which started in earnest in May of the previous year, intensified after the September 1940 assault. In three years, Japan bombed the city 218 times, forcing residents to take refuge in air-raid shelters and tunnels. The city was burned down. Approximately 20,000 people died, including those who suffocated to death in tunnels, according to a number of sources, including "Senryaku Bakugeki no Shiso" (Thoughts on strategic bombing) by Maeda Tetsuo.

Chongqing was the wartime capital of the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek. Although he was forced to flee to Taiwan later by the Communist government after the war, he denounced Japanese aggression at that time as "the most barbaric in the world" and put up strong resistance.

American journalists, including Edgar Snow, repeatedly filed angry reports and bloody photographs of the atrocities committed by the Japanese army. As a result, the horror of indiscriminate attacks on civilians became widely known outside China.

This knowledge caused the United States to take a harder stance against Japan. The situation eventually led to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor where the Zero fighters again played the leading role.

On Nov. 21, at the Japan-China summit in Santiago, Chinese President Hu Jintao requested Prime Minister Koizumi to stop his Yasukuni visits. As a victim, China cannot overlook the Japanese prime minister's visits to a place that not only enshrines the war dead but also Class-A war criminals, who were executed for their war responsibility. "Look history in the eye" is China's key phrase.

Koizumi also has his reasons. He says the purpose of his visits is to mourn for soldiers who fought for their country and to pray for peace. With reference to Class-A war criminals, Koizumi told the Diet, "Why keep blaming the dead for the crimes they committed when they were alive? I don't think it befits Japanese thinking not to forgive people even after their death."

But Yasukuni Shrine gives a different explanation. According to "Yasukuni Daihyakka" (Yasukuni encyclopedia), a pamphlet published by the shrine, war criminals are people "who were cruelly executed because they were falsely accused as 'war criminals' in a one-sided tribunal held in form only at the hands of the Allied Forces (the United States, Britain, the Netherlands, China and others) that fought against Japan." It calls them "Showa martyrs."

The shrine stands by the belief that, to begin with, the war "had to be fought in order (for Japan) to prosper together with Asian countries."

Of course, the view of the Japanese government, which accepted the results of the Tokyo tribunal and signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty, is different.

However, quite a few people within the Liberal Democratic Party and other groups share Yasukuni Shrine's outlook on the war. Perhaps it is inevitable that the purpose of the prime minister's visits is doubted.

If so, properly speaking, the United States, which was the leading player in the Tokyo tribunal, is the one that should be raising objections to the prime minister's Yasukuni visits. In fact, although I have seen many Americans and Europeans raise their eyebrows at his Yasukuni visits, I have never heard about U.S. government protests. On the contrary, President George W. Bush keeps on praising Koizumi and Japan.

The tragedy of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States reminded Americans of "Pearl Harbor." However, in a speech in December in the same year to mark the 60th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Bush said, "Today we take special pride that one of our former enemies is now among America's finest friends."

Bush lavishes unstinting praise on Koizumi for supporting his war against terror in Afghanistan and Iraq. In a news conference with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Nov. 12, Bush said with reference to Japan, "It really wasn't all that long ago in the march of history that we were enemies." That is why his close ties with Koizumi are all the more important, Bush implied. He added, "He's an ally because democracy took hold in Japan."

Bases of U.S. diplomacy

According to Bush, the purpose of the Iraq war is the democratization of Iraq. He appreciates Japanese support all the more because of its past history with the United States as symbolized in Pearl Harbor. It seems there is no room in his mind to raise objections to Koizumi's Yasukuni visits.

China is wary of the rise of nationalism in

Japan. By contrast, Bush appears unconcerned because he sees it as a factor that strengthens the Japan-U.S. alliance.

Or perhaps I'm wrong. Bush may be inwardly gloating over the discord between Japan and China over the Yasukuni problem. Come to think of it, taking precautions against major Asian powers developing close ties with one another forms the basis of U.S. diplomacy.

As I stood before the Zero on display at Yasukuni Shrine, I thought: Different countries have different ways of looking at and using history.

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