





Essay

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From “Departures” to “Yasukuni Shrine:” Caring for the Dead and the Bereaved in Contemporary Japanese Society **



In February 2009, *Okuribito* (“Departures”) received the Oscar for the best foreign language film at the 81st Academy Awards. This was cause for celebration in Japan, a nation hungry for good news after many months of gloomy reports about the downturn in the economy and financial troubles at even the most successful Japanese companies. One knows the situation is grim when even an auto giant like Toyota is forced to ask the government for loans in order to make it through the recession. The precipitous decline in exports over the past year has obviously meant serious trouble for many other Japanese companies and factories, which translates into profound personal suffering and insecurity. Temporary workers, the first to be let go in an economic downturn, have been hit particularly hard. During the first week of January alone over 300 homeless and unemployed found their way to a tent village set up by volunteers and labor unions in Tokyo’s Hibiya Park. Volunteers and the Welfare Ministry have been scrambling to locate other resources and accommodations, knowing full well that the situation is only going to get worse in the months ahead. In this dismal economic environment, it was a welcome diversion to celebrate the Oscar and escape to the theatre.

Care for the Dead in Okuribito

Okuribito, directed by Takita Yōjirō, is a film that addresses universal human concerns and understandably resonates with many people outside the Japanese cultural context. The story revolves around a young married couple who are clearly in love, but are struggling with major life issues, including unemployment, familial estrangement and death. Kobayashi Daigo, played by Motoki Masahirō, is a down-and-out musician, who decides it is time to sell his cello and look for another job when his orchestra is shut down. He returns to his small hometown in northern

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Japan to search for work and live in the house left to him by his mother. It is here that he stumbles upon a very unlikely career. The “travel agency” job he thinks he is applying for turns out to be part of the funeral business, one that is responsible for the preparation of the dead for their final “journey.” Daigo’s wife, played by Hiroshige Ryōko, is so offended by his new line of work that she abandons him and flees back home to her own family. Although she returns, the struggle continues as she thinks about the future impact of her husband’s new occupation on their unborn child. She is finally won over when circumstances bring her into a family gathering in which Daigo’s graceful skill and sensitive care of the deceased is experienced as a great comfort to the bereaved family.

It has been over two decades since Itami Jūzō’s *Osōshiki* (“The Funeral,” 1984) brought the issue of death and family relationships to the Japanese screen in such a powerful and entertaining way. This earlier film also dealt with Japanese religious sensibilities (or lack thereof), but the focus was on how an urban family struggled to cope with a death because they had become so disconnected and unfamiliar with the Buddhist traditions and rituals that had guided generations of Japanese through the process of grief work over the centuries. In contrast to *Osōshiki*, ritual care of the dead in *Okuribito* is cast in a more positive light and, interestingly, without a direct connection to any particular religion. This comes as a bit of a surprise since the book on which the film is based—Aoki Shinmon’s *Nōkanfu Nikki* (1993, 1996)—is so preoccupied with religious concerns. (Aoki 1993) As Elisabetta Porcu (2008: 139) recently noted, this volume “is imbued with elements taken from the Shinshū tradition” and “Shinran’s teaching constitutes the major part of the foundation of Aoki’s reflections.” In fact, this work, which appeared in English as *Coffinman: The Journal of a Buddhist Mortician* (2002), was selected for translation because it provided such a concrete example of Buddhist insight and Shin-shū spirituality.¹ As these religious elements were dropped from *Okuribito*, some tensions emerged between the author and those involved with making the film. Various news reports, interviews, and an article on Aoki’s home-page reveal that he was quite concerned that the story depicted in the film did not address the issue of the ultimate fate of the dead (*ningen wa doko ni iku ka*), which is what he claimed to have learned through his encounters with the deceased and bereaved in his work as a coffinman.²

Veteran actor, Yamazaki Tsutomu, who also starred in *Osōshiki*, appears again in *Okuribito*, this time as Daigo’s mentor and the veteran undertaker (*nōkanshi*) from

1. Translated by Wayne S. Yokoyama. (Aoki 2002)

2. This is apparently one of the reasons the author did not allow the title of his book to be used for the film. Also, Aoki was disconcerted that the location for filming was shifted from Toyama—his hometown and stronghold of Shin-shū Buddhism—to Yamagata. See <http://www5a.biglobe.ne.jp/~shinmon/news.htm> (accessed December 26, 2009).

whom the young apprentice learns the art of preparing a body for encoffinement. This is a richly choreographed ritual event and process that includes bathing, dressing, and make-up—all conducted with great care in the presence of the family. It concludes with a presentation of the body for viewing and an opportunity for those present to offer final words before cremation and the "departure" of the deceased to the other world. The protagonist is presented as someone who has learned to treat each body with dignity and respect, and as a person who is sensitive to the particular needs and wishes of bereaved family members and friends.

Although the ritual care and preparation of a body for this last journey is presented as a carefully crafted ceremonial form approaching that of a traditional Japanese tea ceremony, the negative associations connected with death-related rituals and occupations place it in a very different category. My enthusiasm was tempered somewhat by a Japanese colleague's reminder that the idealized image of "grateful families" portrayed in the film is far from the reaction most Japanese would have toward those who make a living off the dead. The stigma attached to this job and disdain felt towards those in this business is probably best represented by the initial response of the young wife to her husband's new occupation. This scene captured the real life experience of Aoki Shinmon, who quickly realized from the reactions of his family and friends that there "is nothing lower on the social scale than the mortician, and the truth of the matter is that we fear the coffinman and the cremator just as much as death and the corpse."³ Any viewer familiar with HBO's series "Six Feet Under," which reveals the trials and tribulations of a family in the funeral home business in the United States, will be reminded that such attitudes and responses are not unique to Japan.

As I left the theatre in February 2009, I was struck by the silence of the audience as they made their way to the exit. In spite of the stigma attached to the protagonist's occupation, it is apparent that many viewers considered this a life-affirming story that left them with much to contemplate.⁴ Given that it addresses such universal human concerns as love and death, estrangement and reconciliation, and the renewal of familial bonds, it is not surprising that it would connect with viewers beyond Japan. For those of us who make our life in this country, the ritual

3. Here I am quoting from the English translation, *Coffinman: The Journal of a Buddhist Mortician*. (Aoki 2002: 10)

4. It is interesting that Aoki—in spite of his reservations about the film—recognized that it had effectively captured central aspects of human life, particularly love, grief, and healing. After *Okuribito* was awarded the Oscar, the revised edition of his book, *Nōkanfu*, which had already sold some 200,000 copies, had a surge in sales with as many as 30,000 sold in the first few days after the Academy Awards. Aoki expressed his hope that new readers of the book would be able to reflect more deeply about the meaning of death and the final destination of the dead (*okurareta saki*), an important

care and sensitivity to the needs and wishes of the bereaved depicted in *Okuribito* are reminders of the more general social etiquette, politeness and civility that we experience and take for granted on a daily basis.

Yasukuni Shrine, the War Dead, and Religious Minorities

In stark contrast to this soft side of Japanese culture, there exists another way of dealing with the dead in Japan that many bereaved families experience as uncaring and unbearable. During the time that *Okuribito* was attracting international acclaim and being celebrated, the courts in Japan were busy processing lawsuits against Yasukuni Shrine and the Japanese government for their alleged disregard for the personal rights and concerns of bereaved families and violation of the constitutional separation of religion and state. Media coverage of these cases has been minimal, but they deserve some attention since they reveal another side to life in contemporary Japan.

Court cases related to Yasukuni Shrine—the controversial site dedicated to Japan’s military war dead—have been going on for some time now. Most recently they were provoked by Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō, who stirred public controversy by following through on his campaign promise to LDP members that he would visit Yasukuni Shrine in his “official” capacity if elected, which he did a number of times between 2001 and 2006. There was considerable domestic opposition to Koizumi’s visits, and eight different court cases were launched against him across the nation. Over 900 plaintiffs claimed that his behavior violated the constitutional separation of religion and state, caused them mental anguish, and demanded compensation. Although some district courts dismissed these lawsuits, both the Fukuoka District Court in April 2004 and the Osaka High Court in September the following year ruled that the Prime Minister’s visits did violate the constitution, but denied compensation for damages. These decisions did not seem to discourage Koizumi, however, as he returned to Yasukuni during the autumn festival (*shunki reitaisai* 春季例大祭) on October 17, 2005. Emboldened by the Prime Minister’s actions, 195 Diet members made a group visit to Yasukuni the following day; these politicians belong to a group within the Diet organized in 1981 to encourage regular visits and support of Yasukuni Shrine.

Koizumi’s behavior also provoked widespread international concern. The governments of South Korea and the Peoples’ Republic of China issued strong

issue that had not been clearly addressed by the film (see Aoki’s homepage <http://www5a.biglobe.ne.jp/~shinmon/news.htm> [accessed December 26, 2009] and the online *Kita Nippon Shinbun*, March 6, 2009. <http://www.kitanippon.co.jp/contents/knpnews/20090306/19999.html> [accessed December 26, 2009]).

official statements and criticisms of his actions. It did not escape notice in the United States either. At a hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on International Relations on September 14, 2006, Republican Henry Hyde and Democratic member Tom Lantos, a holocaust survivor, both expressed their concerns about Japan's "historical amnesia." In their statements they urged future prime ministers to avoid visits to the shrine out of concern for peace in the region, and urged them to do something about Yūshūkan, the museum adjacent to the shrine, which promotes a revisionist history that especially disturbs Japan's nearest neighbors. "For the survivors of World War II in Asia and America," Lantos explained, "visits to the Yasukuni Shrine where 14 Class A war criminals are interred would be the equivalent of laying a wreath at the graves of Himmler, Rudolph Hess and Herman Greer in Germany. My message to the incoming Japanese prime minister is very simple; paying one's respects to war criminals is morally bankrupt and unworthy of a great nation such as Japan. This practice must end." Both Hyde and Lantos are now deceased.⁵

In light of the widespread criticism and legal action against Koizumi, it is not surprising that his successors in this office—Abe Shintarō, Yasuo Fukuda, and Aso Tarō—avoided visiting Yasukuni Shrine during their brief terms in office. Aso has been a particularly outspoken supporter of Yasukuni over the years and in February 2008 clearly stated his view that prime ministers "should" visit the Shrine.⁶ Given the dire economic situation and his low approval ratings, however, he did not chance a visit during his short and difficult term; rather, he tried to fulfill his obligation with an offering to the Shrine in the name of the Prime Minister on the occasion of the spring festival in April 2009. Even this expression of support was picked-up up by the press and attracted attention and concern prior to his China visit.

The landslide victory of the Democratic Party in the August 2009 election, which essentially ended half a century of domination by the Liberal Democratic Party, has some significant implications for Yasukuni Shrine. Even before assuming the office of Prime Minister, Hatoyama Yukio made it clear that he thought it was inappropriate for government officials to visit Yasukuni and indicated that he was in favor of re-starting discussions about the creation of an alternative memorial site,

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5. The views and statements of Hyde and Lantos are available on the U.S. government House of Representatives homepage in the Hearing Record entitled "Japan's Relationship With Its Neighbors: Back to the Future," September 14, 2006 http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa29883.000/hfa29883_0f.htm (accessed December 2009).
 6. See Miyazaki Tetsuya's interview of Aso Tarō in *Shokun* 諸君 (February, 2008: 31). Aso's personal homepage also contains a clear statement of his strong support for Yasukuni and his proposal for restoring direct government support. See: <http://www.aso-taro.jp/lecture/talk/060808.html> (accessed December 2009).

one that would be religiously neutral and unencumbered by the negative history and association with Class A war criminals.⁷

My interest here is not so much with the question of prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni, but the way in which the war dead have been unilaterally enshrined in the postwar period without regard for the wishes or feelings of many bereaved families. Although State Shintō was disestablished by the Occupation authorities at the end of the war, Yasukuni Shrine survived in the postwar period as a voluntary religious organization supported by the faithful and without direct financial aid from the government. In some respects, however, it has operated “as if” nothing had been changed by the Occupation policies or the postwar Constitution, which established religious freedom and the clear separation of religion and state (Articles 20 and 89).

Given the postwar legal framework, one might assume that those among the bereaved families who wished to have a family member enshrined would indicate this to Yasukuni and request that the ritual be conducted. In fact, however, Yasukuni Shrine officials contacted the Ministry of Health and Welfare—without consulting any families—to request assistance in the preparation of lists for all of the war dead so that enshrinement rituals could be completed. After the war, this ministry was responsible for veterans’ affairs, repatriation of Japanese from overseas, and Yasukuni Shrine, which had been managed by the Army and Navy. The paper trail revealing cooperation between Yasukuni Shrine and government offices stretches back to 1956. That year the Ministry of Health and Welfare sent instructions to city and prefecture offices to assist with Yasukuni Shrine’s administrative needs related to enshrinement plans. At least 20 meetings between shrine representatives and government officials occurred over the years to discuss and arrange for the paperwork required. Extensive documentation that reveals the extent to which government offices were involved in assisting with this process is now preserved in the National Diet Library.⁸

While those who belong to the Japan Association of War-bereaved Families (Nihon Izoku-kai 日本遺族会) are strong supporters of Yasukuni and pleased about the enshrinement, there are many who belong to alternative associations of bereaved families—the Shin-shū Izoku-kai (Buddhist) and Heiwa Izoku-kai (Christian), for example. They are appalled that their family members have been enshrined and deified, and are now worshipped as a “kami” (god) along with the Class A war criminals enshrined several decades ago. Over the years, a number of individuals

7. Reported in the *Asahi Shinbun*, August 11, 2009.

8. For an English overview of the Yasukuni-related materials preserved in the National Diet Library, see: http://www.ndl.go.jp/en/news/fy2007/1173395_903.htm (accessed December 2009); and for a helpful introduction to these materials, see Haruyama (2006).

have made personal visits to Yasukuni Shrine and requested that enshrinement be cancelled and the names of their family dead be removed from the shrine register. In addition to appeals from Japanese families, there are also Koreans and Taiwanese who have been dismayed and angered to learn that Yasukuni's generous enshrinement policy extended even to individuals from former colonial domains who had been conscripted and mobilized for Japan's war efforts and later died "on behalf of the Emperor and nation." While Shrine representatives no doubt believe they are honoring their memory and sacrifice, these Korean and Taiwanese families feel they have been exploited by Japan in both life and death, with their ancestors still spiritually under "colonial rule" symbolized by enshrinement in Yasukuni.

In spite of their numerous personal appeals, Yasukuni priests have insisted that "de-enshrinement" is impossible. Families have never been consulted in advance, they explain, since all are enshrined according to the "will of the Emperor" and the tradition established in the early Meiji period. It has nothing to do with the will or desires of the deceased or the bereaved families. In other words, Yasukuni is engaged in "business as usual," and "usual" here means according to the norms established in the prewar period. The "will of the Emperor," according to priestly interpretation at Yasukuni Shrine, still trumps individual choice and family religious tradition.

Much to the dismay of many Yasukuni supporters, however, it was revealed in 2007 that even Emperor Hirohito was not pleased with the shrine's handling of the war dead in the postwar decades. According to the diaries of Chamberlain Urabe and Chief Steward Tomita, both of whom served the late Emperor, he was opposed to the plan to enshrine Class A war criminals.⁹ No doubt nervous about being too closely associated with those held responsible for Japan's wars of aggression, he stopped making visits to the shrine from 1975. While many Japanese may be offended that their relative has become part of such a questionable pantheon, those who belong to the alternative associations of bereaved families are opposed to all that Yasukuni Shrine stands for, particularly the glorification of so many tragic deaths and promotion of the view that Japan's past wars were all about liberating Asia from Western colonialism and oppression.

Legal Action against Yasukuni Shrine and the Japanese Government

Since Yasukuni Shrine has been unwilling to comply with requests for cancellation of enshrinement and removal of names from the register, a number of individuals decided to pursue legal action against both Yasukuni Shrine and the Japanese government. Since 2006 several different lawsuits have been successively launched by three different groups and are now being processed by the courts

9. Regarding the diaries, see Breen (2008: 3-5).

in Tokyo, Osaka and Okinawa. Unlike the issue of prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni, these court proceedings have received minimal media coverage. While the proceedings for the lawsuits in Tokyo and Okinawa are ongoing, the Osaka District Court handed down its ruling on February 26, 2009, just three days after *Okuribito* received the Academy Award. The decision of the three judges in this case revealed another accepted and legal way in which Japanese treat the dead and bereaved.

The nine plaintiffs in the Osaka case are a group of seniors—ages ranging from 64 to 82—composed of eight Buddhists and one Christian. Two have written extensively about their personal struggle with Yasukuni Shrine over the years. Sugahara Ryūken 菅原龍憲, a Jōdo Shin-shū priest (Honganji-ha) and head of the Shin-shū Izoku-kai, provides a critical Shin-shū perspective in his “*Yasukuni*” to *iu ori kara no kaihō* 「靖国」という檻からの解放 (Liberation from the Cage of Yasukuni, 2005).¹⁰ In the same vein, Nishiyama Toshihiko 西山俊彦, a Catholic priest of the Osaka Diocese, records his unsuccessful efforts to have his father’s enshrinement revoked in an interim report published in 2006. (Nishiyama 2006) While their philosophical and theological reasons for opposing Yasukuni Shrine may differ, the plaintiffs are united in their view that ritual enshrinement without permission is a violation of their personal right to remember the deceased without interference from a third party. Individuals and families, the plaintiffs maintain, should be protected from actions and labeling that bring dishonor to a person’s name and memory.

Although Buddhist and Catholic anti-Yasukuni activists are not that common, both Jōdo Shin-shū denominations and the Catholic Church in Japan have issued critical statements for decades regarding the LDP efforts to renationalize Yasukuni and expressed strong opposition to prime-ministerial visits (*kōshiki sanpai* 公式参拜). In connection with this most recent Osaka court case, a representative of the Japan Catholic Council for Justice and Peace, Bishop Matsuura Gorō, also wrote a letter in 2006 to express support for Fr. Nishiyama and his legal struggle, which was published in *The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan Yearbook* (2008). In this document, Bishop Matsuura recognizes that Yasukuni Shrine—as an independent religious organization (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法)—has every right to conduct religious activities as long as it remains separate from the government. He also maintains, however, that “the unilateral enshrinement of people of other religions and creeds against their will is not proper conduct.”¹¹

10. More recently, Sugahara has published an additional short booklet *Gōshi torikeshi: Yasukuni mondai no kakushin o tou* 合祀取消:靖国問題の核心を問う (2007).

11. See the “Nishiyama Toshihiko shinpu no Yasukuni gōshi torikeshi soshō teiso ni attate” 西山俊彦神父の靖国合祀取り消し訴訟提訴にあたって (Statement on Filing a Suit by Fr. Toshihiko Nishiyama Demanding Revoking Enshrinement in Yasukuni Shrine), 11 August 2006.” (Katorikku Chuō Kyōgikai 2008: 108-110)

While the plaintiffs made it clear that they were opposed to their family members being “used” by Yasukuni Shrine to legitimize and beautify Japan’s past wars of aggression, they were primarily concerned in this case with the actions Yasukuni took with regard to people who do not belong to the Shrine. The plaintiffs demanded that the enshrinement be cancelled and the names of the family members be erased from the shrine register. The judges regarded the plaintiffs’ claim that the self-image and memory of the deceased was damaged by Yasukuni’s actions to be too “subjective” and “abstract” to be taken seriously by the Court, and their demands for compensation were denied.

The plaintiffs also argued that the enshrinement of their relatives was an illegal action carried out with close cooperation between the government and Yasukuni Shrine, which is clearly prohibited by the postwar Constitution. In their view, the government violated their right to privacy and provided information to the shrine, which enabled it to proceed with the enshrinement ritual. The judges ruled, however, that the government could not be held responsible for the enshrinements, reasoning that the Health and Welfare Ministry routinely provided information regarding the deceased to various parties (in connection with pension inquiries, for example), and it would have been discrimination against a religious organization if the government offices refused to provide the requested information to Yasukuni. Although the government did provide information, in the end the decision to enshrine was made by Yasukuni officials according to their accepted tradition and practice, and did not involve the government.¹²

The Osaka District Court dismissed the case as “groundless” and reduced it to the issue of religious freedom. In addressing this issue, the judges clearly followed the precedent established by the 1988 Supreme Court decision regarding a similar case, which involved the enshrinement of Nakaya Takafumi, a Self-Defense Force officer, in the Yamaguchi Prefecture Gokoku Jinja (“state-protecting shrine”) in 1972. The Self-Defense Force Veterans Association had the enshrinement conducted in spite of opposition from the surviving spouse, Nakaya Yasuko. Nakaya filed a civil law suit against the government for violating both her religious rights and Article 20 of the Constitution, which prohibits government involvement in religion. She also sought compensation “for mental damages allegedly caused by the enshrinement of her dead spouse.” Although Nakaya won her case at the Yamaguchi District Court in 1979, and again at the Hiroshima High Court in 1982, these earlier decisions were overturned by the Supreme Court in 1988. The Court ruled that the Veterans Association was not a “State Agency” and,

12. Here I am only summarizing some key points elaborated by the Osaka District Court judges in their final decision (81 pages) on 26 February 2009.

therefore, no violation of the separation of religion and state could have occurred. Furthermore, Nakaya's religious rights had not been violated since she was not required to participate in the enshrinement ritual. Finally, the judges found no legal basis "for giving priority to a surviving spouse over surviving parents or children with regard to mourning and honoring the memory of the deceased." In the end, Nakaya was required to repay with interest the one million yen that had been awarded by the Yamaguchi Court.¹³

Following the logic of the Supreme Court decision, the judges in the Osaka case concluded that the religious freedom of both parties—Yasukuni Shrine and bereaved families—must be protected. Yasukuni Shrine's "freedom" to remember and worship the dead according to their own tradition must be recognized. The Court is not in a position, they argued, to interfere with a religious organization and dictate what is appropriate belief and practice. While the judges conceded that it is clearly advisable to have the permission of the bereaved families, they concluded that the enshrinement did not violate their rights in any way since they were not forced to participate. Each party must allow the other to freely memorialize the dead in their own way and according to their respective faith tradition. Representatives of Yasukuni Shrine and the government were obviously pleased with the Court's decision, but the plaintiffs vowed to carry on their struggle to liberate their family members from the "cage" of Yasukuni Shrine.

Hishiki Masaharu, a Buddhist priest and scholar, and leader of the support group for the plaintiffs in the Osaka case, finds it ironic that Articles 20 and 89 of the postwar Constitution, which were meant to establish religious freedom and "protect" people from the coercive practices of State Shintō—such as forced shrine visits during the war—are today being used to "protect" the religious freedom of Yasukuni Shrine over the rights of individuals. In stark contrast to the judges' perspective and reasoning, Hishiki argues that religious organizations do not have unlimited freedom. The government can intervene without violating the constitutional separation of religion and state if a religious organization is involved in illegal activities. In fact, the courts have intervened in cases of tax evasion, fraudulent fund-raising activities, harassment of individuals through high-pressure membership recruitment activities, and when religious groups engage in acts of violence and murder (the most extreme example in recent Japanese history is the Tokyo subway gas attack by Aum Shinrikyō members in 1995, which was legitimized by religious doctrine). All of these cases reveal that the courts and the Japanese public recognize there are some "limits" to the freedom of religion. In spite

13. For helpful overviews of the Nakaya case, see Hardacre (1989: 153-157) and Reid (1991: 52-54). The full statement of the Supreme Court decision on June 1 may be found in *Minshū* 民集 42 (5), 1988.

of all this, Hishiki maintains that the courts have given Yasukuni Shrine a “free pass” to conduct business as usual even though their activities bring dishonor and shame to the name of the deceased and contribute to the suffering of the bereaved families concerned.¹⁴

Limited media coverage of the Osaka trial and the ongoing cases in Tokyo and Okinawa means that the vast majority of Japanese are oblivious to their situation. In stark contrast to the happy office party and “Christmas” celebration scene in “Departures,” where Daigo’s mentor explains their “tolerance” policy and acceptance of the dead from any religious faith, the “politics of inclusion” as practiced by Yasukuni Shrine reveals a harsher reality that still faces individuals and minorities in contemporary Japan. It is clearly difficult to break with the precedent established by the Supreme Court, so it will come as a great surprise to most observers if the Tokyo and Okinawa Courts reach a different conclusion at the end of their deliberations.

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14. This brief synopsis draws on an interview with Hishiki Masaharu 菱木正晴 (October 22, 2008) and personal conversations following the Osaka High Court decision (February 26, 2009). For a more detailed treatment of his views regarding Yasukuni Shrine and religion-state issues, see Hishiki (2007).

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