

## *Yasukuni, The Soft Power of Clashing Identities*

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### **Abstract**

Yasukuni Jinja, or Shrine for a Peaceful Nation, in Tōkyō was established by Emperor Meiji to commemorate those who gave their lives for the nation. In our contemporary times Yasukuni has however become shrouded by an ideological aura of the pre-war system where it became the “citadel of military ideology” which it is perceived to glorify to this day. Consequently, when one visits Yasukuni the question arises “What does one commemorate?” and although one’s answer may be very clear to oneself, the action itself carries such great ambiguity that other’s preconceptions equally so define its interpretation. China in particular strongly protests against any visits by Japanese officials to Yasukuni and even views it as a threat to the long treacherous path of reconciliation in East Asia as each nation holds a distinct interpretation of its wartime past. Visits and offerings by current PM Shinzo Abe, who has often been labelled as a hawkish nationalist conservative, have come under particular scrutiny as his image is perceived to enforce Yasukuni’s militaristic past. This research therefore sets out to clarify the role of Yasukuni within Chinese-Japanese relations under the prime-ministership of Shinzo Abe by introducing the concept of assertive soft power which seeks to avert another nations’ identity by endorsing its opposite.

Keywords: National identities, soft power, sino-japanese relations, Yasukuni Jinja

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## Introduction

“You and I are two cherry blossoms. Even if we fall apart.  
The capital of flowers is Yasukuni Jinja. We meet each other in the treetops in spring”  
– Lyrical extract of Doki no Sakura

Doki no Sakura, meaning Cherry Blossoms of the same class, is a song devoted to the selfless sacrifice of ‘kamikaze’ pilots who, like a cherry blossom, would bloom in their finest hour to die momentarily. Throughout the world the act of offering your own life for another human being has been regarded as one of the most sacred acts. To commemorate such acts Emperor Meiji founded Shōkonjo, which would later be renamed to Yasukuni Jinja meaning ‘Shrine for a Peaceful Nation’, in Tōkyō (Yasukuni Jinja, 2008) in 1869. In our contemporary times Yasukuni has however become shrouded by an ideological aura of the pre-war system where it became the “citadel of military ideology” (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002, p. 82) which it is perceived to glorify to this day (Lai, 2014, p. 117). Consequently, when one visits Yasukuni the question arises “What does one commemorate?” and although one’s answer may be very clear to oneself, the action itself carries such great ambiguity that other’s preconceptions equally so define its interpretation as the perceived identities of Yasukuni come to clash. Another layer of clashing identities appears if one fulfils this visit while holding a public diplomatic function.

Former Prime Minister (PM) Koizumi for example visited Yasukuni shrine on an annual basis during his term in office between 2001 and 2006 (Breen, 2007, p. 71) claiming his visits were with the purpose of paying respect to those men and women who gave their lives (Breen, 2007, p. 53) and to pray for peace (Breen, 2007, p. 75). These visits were nonetheless followed by strong protests by China and tended to endanger the long treacherous path of reconciliation in East Asia as each nation holds a distinct interpretation of its wartime past. Furthermore, one must not ignore the importance of the image one has been assigned by the other in shaping the other’s perception of the visit. Visits and offerings by current PM Abe, who has often been labelled as a hawkish nationalist conservative who seems to firmly belief Japan was also a victim of World War II (Johnston, 2013), have come under particular scrutiny as his image enforces Yasukuni’s militaristic past. The figure shown below illustrates the clashes of the various identities Yasukuni is perceived to hold.

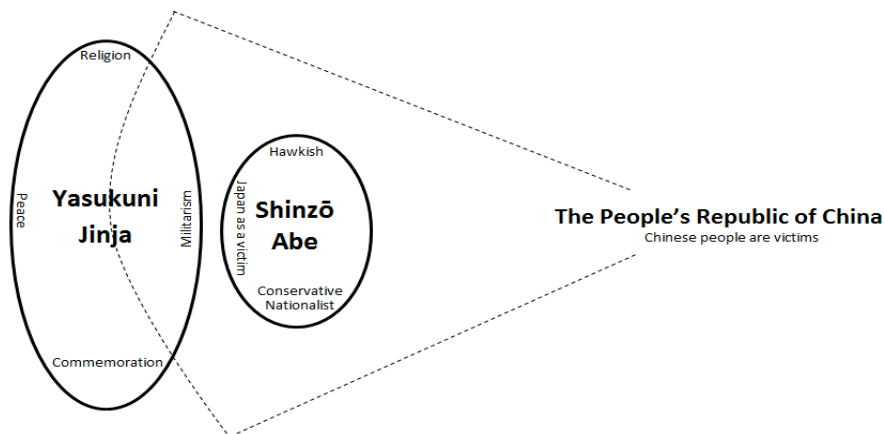


Figure 1: The Clashes of Identities

With these concepts in mind this paper aims at answering the question: "What is the role of Yasukuni Jinja within Chinese-Japanese relations under the prime-ministership of Shinzo Abe (2006-2007 & 2012-present)?" Based on preliminary research this paper claims that under PM Abe Yasukuni's clashing identities have been given a greater role as a place to show assertive soft power towards China. The scope of this paper is limited to the specific role Yasukuni fulfils in Chinese-Japanese relations under the prime-ministership of Shinzo Abe (2006-2007 & 2012-present) as tensions between the two nations as well as the presence of Yasukuni in political discourse has exceptionally increased during this timeframe. The relevance of this paper is to provide a multi-perspective characterization of Yasukuni's identities and analyse its 'soft' power role in China-Japan relations during Abe's term in office. To achieve this goal this paper is structured as follows: a brief introductory section on the concept of 'soft' power, followed by two interrelated sections on the shrine's identities and finally an analysis of PM Abe in relation to his visits and offerings to Yasukuni.

### The Notion of 'Soft' Power

The notion of 'soft' co-optive power was introduced in 1990 as the counterpart of hard command power by Joseph S. Nye Jr., who is an American political scientist and former Dean at Harvard University. Hard power constitutes "the ability to change what others do" (Nye, 2004, p. 7) by "ordering others to do what it wants" (Nye, 1990, p. 166) while soft power "occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants" (Nye, 1990, p. 166), or in other words "the ability to shape what others wants" (Nye, 2004, p. 7). As the table below illustrates, each of Nye's forms of power has distinct characteristics regarding behaviour, primary currencies and governmental policies.

Table 1: Characteristics of Nye's Hard versus Soft Power <sup>1</sup>

		<i>Behaviours</i>	<i>Primary currencies</i>	<i>Government policies</i>
<b>Hard power</b>	<i>Military power</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coercion</li> <li>- Deterrence</li> <li>- Protection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Threats</li> <li>- Force</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coercive diplomacy</li> <li>- War</li> <li>- Alliance</li> </ul>
	<i>Economic power</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inducement</li> <li>- Coercion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Payments</li> <li>- Sanctions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aid</li> <li>- Bribes</li> <li>- Sanctions</li> </ul>
<b>Soft power</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attraction</li> <li>- Agenda setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Values</li> <li>- Culture</li> <li>- Policies</li> <li>- Institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public diplomacy</li> <li>- Bilateral &amp; multilateral diplomacy</li> </ul>

According to Nye's characteristics, soft power depends upon respect and admiration, which requires a degree of mutual peace and trust among nations and flourishes when fear and threats are minimal (Arase & Akaha, 2011, p. 19). The naming as well as the above mentioned characterizations hold positive and negative connotations while in reality both powers hold a duality of positive and negative within themselves.

<sup>1</sup> Nye, 1990, p. 167; Nye, 2004, p. 31

Japan's foreign relations perfectly exemplify this duality as its hard power is very much constrained due to Japan's constitutional limitations as well as the prohibition to act 'aggressively', yet Japan's armed forces have both domestically and abroad been involved in disaster relief and peacebuilding missions contributing to Japan's positive image on the diplomatic stage. With regards to soft power Tsuneo Akaha, who is director at the Center for East Asian Studies with the Monterey Institute of International Studies, acknowledged the presence of a "deficit of soft power" due to the conflicting historical interpretations and lack of trust between East-Asian nations (Arase & Akaha, 2011, p. 63). These conflicting historical interpretations, or clashes of identity, in fact lie at the core of the lack of trust between East-Asian nations as their representatives at times endorse their nation's interpretation. If one regards soft power to also hold a duality it would be fair to identify these endorsements as a display of assertive soft power. Whereas positive soft power seeks to attract other nations through its positive connotation, assertive soft power seeks to avert other nations' identity by endorsing a nation's own identity or by even conveying the other's as a threat. The main difference with nationalism is the principle that assertive soft power does not merely directly speak to a domestic audience, but in fact speaks to both as it seeks to provoke a reaction by other nations. To enhance its effects shows of assertive soft power are particularly undertaken during conflicting events, such as territorial disputes or tensions in the sphere of security, to heighten its provocative effectivity. Furthermore, depending on the nature of conflicting identities as well as the degree and manner of a nation's endorsement of its own identity, internationally shared norms and values of tolerance are at risk of being ignored. As this paper will exemplify through the Yasukuni controversy, assertive soft power has been a driving force behind the diplomatic stand-off between Japan and China under PM Abe in particular.

### **Commemoration and the Sacred**

When Emperor Meiji founded Yasukuni its goal was 'for the worship of the divine spirits of those who sacrificed themselves for the country' and equally so to be 'a place for the Japanese people to pray for peace' (Yasukuni Jinja, 2008). According to Kevin Doak, who advocates Yasukuni's religious role, to commemorate and show the utmost respect to the selfless actions of those enshrined in the form of prayers that transcend the earthly for the sacred world are essential (Doak, 2007, p. 54). In his view Yasukuni can therefore be foremost regarded as a place of mourning (Breen, 2007, p. 55). One should, however, not ignore the fact that these souls have been enshrined obligatorily as the shrine determined to do so without the need for the family's consent (Saaler, 2005, p. 95). From a domestic political perspective Yasukuni has been assigned distinct roles by two dominant groups, the rightists/nationalists, and pacifists/leftists. Daiki Shibuichi, who specializes in identity politics, states that the former consider Yasukuni as a "heart-warming symbol of self-sacrifice and patriotism" representing the essence of "Japan's historical identity as a modern nation-state" (Shibuichi, 2005, p. 199) while the latter regards it as "a symbol of cruel militarism and scoff at the notion that it honours the 'spirit of the fallen' " (Shibuichi, 2005, p. 203). At the core of the perception in which many scholars and much of the media portray the controversy surrounding Yasukuni emphasizing the presence of the 14 Class A War Criminals who were secretly enshrined there in 1978 (Lai, 2014, p. 117). When this was revealed later that year it cascaded into domestic outrage as well as the diplomatic row with China that continues to this day.

They also weighed heavily on Emperor Hirohito and led to his decision to no longer visit Yasukuni, a decision which Emperor Akihito has continued to uphold. This motive was however not public knowledge until 2007 when two diary fragments written by Ryogo Urabe, who served as the Emperor's chamberlain during this troubling period, were published by the Asahi Shinbun. In response to this unveiling the Japan Society for the War Bereaved, who is the single largest sponsor of Yasukuni, set up a study group to examine the possibilities of removing and relocating those souls (Breen, 2007, p. 5). This option proved religiously impossible as according to the rituals at Yasukuni "You can transfer the flame of one candle to another, but the original candle continues to burn" meaning that even if the paper which has the soul's name inscribed upon it would be removed the person's soul would still remain with the shrine (Breen, 2007, p. 5-6). Furthermore, one could shed doubt on its effectiveness in the relations with China as in the eyes of the Chinese the Tokyo war trials were inadequate (Teo, 2007, p. 118). One could therefore envision that to truly 'purify' Yasukuni, the past of every single enshrined soul would have to be closely scrutinized by standards, which may (partially) be determined by China. Such a notion could only be perceived a grave loss of dignity for Japan as a sovereign nation (Breen, 2007, p. 63) and as such only worsen the relationship even further.

Another issue arises due to the fact that Yasukuni has been a private organisation since 1952 through the separation of religion and government, meaning it acts outside of government control. One may conclude that "the element of political ideology is too strong" making Yasukuni "inappropriate for a religious institution" (Lai, 2014, p. 117) and state the same regarding its role as a place of mourning. In much of the discourse regarding Yasukuni alternative locations such as the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery, which commemorates the unknown soldiers of WWII, as well as the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Memorials, which commemorate the victims of the atomic bombings, are often mentioned. The former, however, lacks public recognition and has become more known as a place for *hanami*, cherry blossom viewing. In 2001 has it also only received 180,000 visitors versus the over six million who visited Yasukuni (Saaler, 2005, p. 102).

A reason for the lack of recognition is firstly due to the fact that it is officially labelled as a 'park' under the Ministry of Environment (Ministry of Environment, n.d.) and secondly visits by high ranking officials, even members of the Imperial family, gain little attention in the media. PM Abe's visit together with the Prince Akishino and his wife Princess Kiko on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2015, for example, only received a 100-word article on JapanToday (JapanToday, 2015, May 25<sup>th</sup>). It would therefore be adequate to state that Chidorigafuchi fulfils a complementary role to Yasukuni for those who do not wish to avoid its clashes of identities as U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel did in 2013 (The Japan Times, 2013, October 3<sup>d</sup>). Nonetheless, one must always keep in mind that Yasukuni does not merely commemorate WWII militarist fanatics and some souls resting in the shrine are there by obligatory enshrinement. The clashes of identities within Yasukuni due to its religious constraint and unchangeable past, result in a vicious circle of it being a religious institution with a nationalistic past yet with there being no suitable counterpart for people to turn to.

## **Vivid War Memories**

For the Chinese people the aforementioned vicious circle constitutes Yasukuni as a physical embodiment of the painful memories of WWII bringing forth another dimension to the clash of identities. In his PhD Victor Teo EE-Leong, amongst others, provides an in-depth analysis of the role of memories in Chinese politics. According to Teo, these memories have become so ingrained in Chinese national identity that “its elites tend to utilize it as a deterrent to reconcile nationalistic expectations and protect the nation’s sovereignty, pride and dignity” (Teo, 2007, p. 110). These perceptions can be derived from the fact that the Communist Party portrays itself as the victorious party over the Nationalist Party (Taiwanese Kuomintang) and the Japanese Imperial Army. The former ceased to be a principal enemy when the U.S. and China normalized their relations in 1979, leaving only the victory over Japan the communists’ historic pillar in saving the Chinese nation (Teo, 2007, p. 117).

This victory as well as its cost is very much kept alive in Chinese national consciousness as every year the Nanjing Massacre and the Japanese surrender are commemorated. New generations are taught in national museums such as the one at Tiananmen Square about the country’s “unfortunate” or humiliating history (Teo, 2007, p. 123; Breen, 2007, p. 63). Within these museums Japan is portrayed from two perspectives in particular. The first views Japan as a cultural protégé who “benefited tremendously from China’s cultural advances and technological development for an immeasurably long time” (Teo, 2007, p. 112). The fact that the protégé turned against the teacher has led to the perspective that “Japanese people use hatred to repay debts of kindness” (Teo, 2007, p. 112) and creates a sense of moral “debt”, or rather “debt of blood”, owed to China by the Japanese (Teo, 2007, p. 114). The second view has been developing for decades as a process of “dehumanisation” has set in, whereby the Japanese Imperial forces have become ‘horrors’ in China’s past. This perceived “horror” has become embedded at the core of Chinese identity, which consequently provides a moral judgment on the Japanese (Teo, 2007, 113) and perhaps even a sense of moral superiority. A degree of hypocrisy within this view may be observed as while the Chinese government tends to propagate anti-Japanese sentiment within their national museums they strongly condemn the exhibition of the privately owned Yūshūkan at Yasukuni (Breen, 2007, p. 63).

The Yūshūkan, being a non-governmental institution, is perceived to portray an ‘affirmative’ perspective of the war, whereby Japan fought a just war to liberate Asia from Western imperialism (Kingston, 2011, p. 187; Rose, 2015, p. 27-28). When interviewing several of the visitors to the Yūshūkan in early June with regards to whether they recognized this ‘affirmative’ perspective many of them answered negatively, yet did note that sensitive issues such as comfort women and Nanjing receive far too little attention (Koolen, observation, June 5-6, 2015). It is this very perspective of the war which clashes with China as it induces Chinese memories of past humiliations and suffering, which consequently triggers a clash of identities (Lai, 2014, p. 118). Surprisingly, a key figure in post-1949 Chinese identity, Mao Zedong, himself had once made remarks to visiting Japanese delegates that “China should not seek reparations because it was due to Japanese aggression that the CCP was able to defeat the Nationalists” (Friedman, 2001, p. 106).

Some scholars would however claim that the Chinese government has utilized this clash of identities to exert moral pressure as a diplomatic strategy to obtain economic or diplomatic concessions (Teo, 2007, 114). Whether one agrees with this statement or not, it cannot be denied that memory politics has become one of the most critical foreign policy questions in East-Asia (Fukuoka, 2013, p. 28).

### **Yasukuni As a Source of ‘Soft’ Power**

Having established the various identities of Yasukuni as a religious institution, place of commemoration and embodiment of war memories, one starts to wonder how these clashes have become the major obstacle for Chinese-Japanese relations. The missing piece of this puzzle lies in the perception of the person visiting Yasukuni. According to Jeff Kingston, commemorating at Yasukuni means one embraces an affirmative war memory of Japan’s actions during WWII (Kingston, 2011, p. 187). Such a narrow perception could be seen a direct insult to both those non-militarists enshrined at Yasukuni as well as those who pay their respects there. The visitors to Yasukuni are in fact of a diverse nature and encompass all layers of Japanese, and international, society and hold widespread political beliefs. They visit the shrine for a variety of personal motives including praying for their fallen family members as well as genuinely praying for peace. Nonetheless, because of the presence of these perceptions such as these the profile of the person who visits Yasukuni is of far greater importance in terms of enforcing the Chinese-Japanese diplomatic ‘stand-off’ as well as the potential of visits serving as a show of assertive soft power. To present a thorough analysis in determining whether or not certain visits and offerings to Yasukuni by Abe constitute as assertive soft power this section of the paper is divided in several subsections. The first subsection presents the timeframe before Abe took office as PM for his second term. The second subsection determines a pattern during this second term in office while the subsequent subsections elaborate on those events which qualify as a show assertive soft power considering the characteristics mentioned in the first section of this paper. It is, however, paramount to state that visits by officials tend to be shrouded in the ambiguity of whether they are performed in an official or private capacity. Although one might argue the capacity determines the transcendence of one’s visit from a domestic to a diplomatic issue, for the Chinese, as shall be discussed in greater depth momentarily, capacity does not change the act.

#### ***From restraint to the clash***

Before taking office for the first time as PM Abe held the position of Chief Cabinet Secretary under PM Koizumi and joined him in his final annual visit to Yasukuni in 2006 in the midst of heightened tensions with South Korea on territorial disputes. Koizumi’s visits were highly controversial amongst Japan’s neighbours while domestically the following sentiment took root “Japan has apologized for the war on many occasion ... but the neighbours will never be satisfied” (Tamagi, 2009, p. 40). When Abe himself took office as PM of Japan for his first term in 2006 he seemed to break away from the controversy when he stated “I have no intention whatsoever to make a declaration that I will go to the shrine” and in his view “it is important that we can genuinely communicate in a future-oriented manner”(Tamagi, 2009, p. 43).

Although Abe did not visit Yasukuni in his first term he did not avoid the controversy entirely due to his continuous association with the following political groups in particular:

Table 2: Shinzō Abe’s affiliations <sup>2</sup>

Groups	Advocating
Jimintou rekishi kentou iinkai (Abe was a key founding member in 1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Affirmative representation of history.</li> <li>- Retraction of the Kono Statement on comfort women as well as PM Morihiro’s general apology to victims of Japanese aggression.</li> </ul>
Nippon no zento to rekishi kyokasho wo kangaeru giin no kai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Textbook revisions regarding issues such as Nanking and comfort women.</li> <li>- Cultivation of patriotic values.</li> </ul>
Shintou seiji renmei kokkai giin kondankai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To “restore Japanese-ness” by promoting Shinto values.</li> <li>- Official visits by prime ministers to Yasukuni Shrine.</li> <li>- Opposed the construction of a non-religious site of war commemoration.</li> <li>- Opposed to the ‘removal’ of the spirits of war criminals from Yasukuni.</li> <li>- Patriotic and moral education.</li> </ul>
Minna de Yasukuni Jinjya ni sanpai suru giin no kai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Annual joint visits to Yasukuni to commemorate the war dead in August.</li> </ul>

The first two groups are generally labelled as ‘revisionist’ groups as they wish to reinterpret wartime memories as well as several inheritances of the Occupation, such as the Constitution. Abe’s revisionist beliefs manifested itself when he published his book “*Utsukushii kuni e*”, which translates to “*Toward a Beautiful Country*” in English. In his book, Abe presents a revisionist claim regarding the unfairness of the Tokyo War Tribunals (Arase & Akaha, 2011, p. 64-65). These ‘revisionist’ interpretations of Japan’s wartime past lay at the core of the use of assertive soft power when they are challenged by China as many of the conservative politicians believe that China uses wartime memories as a diplomatic strategy.

Nonetheless, during his first term Abe did set out to mend relations with China and South Korea which was a reasonably popular policy amongst the Japanese public (Arase & Akaha, p. 78-79). However, when looking back on his first term during his campaigning for the LDP presidency in 2012 Abe stated that he regretted not having visited Yasukuni at the time (Nakamoto, 2012). The tensions between Japan and China flared up during these times as Japan bought out the private owner of the three Senkaku Islands it did not yet control. This action led to anti-Japanese riots throughout mainland China. Abe at the time strongly advocated taking a tough stand against China over this territorial dispute (McCurry, 2013). When he was elected by the LDP as party president he kept both these promises by visiting Yasukuni for the first time since his visit under Koizumi in 2006. Having avoided a clash with China

<sup>2</sup> Japan Focus, 安倍内閣 所属団体を通してのイデオロギー的分析, 2013



during his first term it is undeniable that Abe knew all too well how this action would be perceived by China. His visit did therefore not merely serve to harness the endorsement of the revisionist LDP supporters, but also to show assertive soft power to China as a symbolic break from his former restraints as well as his willingness to take a tough stand on conflicting issues.

### ***The formation of an annual pattern***

A few weeks later the LDP regained its dominance in the Diet and Abe became the next Prime Minister of Japan. In his victory speech he again emphasized that regarding Chinese-Japanese relations "We must strengthen our alliance with the US and also improve relations with China, with a strong determination that there is no change in the fact that the Senkaku Islands are our territory" (McCurry, 2013). Abe from this point onward would regularly send offerings to Yasukuni. These offerings are sent during key annual Yasukuni events, being the Spring Festival and the Memorial Service of the War Dead. Although some of these offerings are presented at times of heightened tensions between China and Japan over wartime inheritance issues, these dates do hold important religious and commemorative meanings. The former, for example, has a strong religious nature as it is a type of festival common in Shintō while the latter mostly carries a commemorative function. Furthermore, Abe presents these offerings annually and one could state that they are at the base of his annual pattern of reaching out to Yasukuni. The offerings presented in April and August therefore do not hold a sense of irregularity to constitute them as a means of assertive soft power. Nonetheless, reactions from both sides regarding these offerings have set a 'status quo' in their discourse on the issue. In April 2013 for example, after several members of Abe's cabinet visited the shrine China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokeswoman Hua Chunying stated that it "doesn't matter how or in what role Japanese leaders visit the Yasukuni shrine ... We feel it is in essence a denial of Japan's history of militarist invasion". A few days later during a parliamentary debate in the Japanese Diet Abe stated that "It's only natural to honor the spirits of those who gave their lives for the country. Our ministers will not cave in to any threats" (Sekiguchi, 2013). This last remark in particular reveals that Abe's perceives the visits as well as the offerings to Yasukuni as being a matter of showing the resolve of his cabinet.

### ***The first clash***

The offering presented a few months later, during Yasukuni's autumn festival in October 2013, is a first irregularity in Abe's pattern as it has been the only reported offering from Abe for this festival. From a political perspective one must consider it as an occasion for Abe to show assertive soft power at times tensions with China are heightened or in expectation of them becoming so. It is the latter which would fit to describe this offerings as Abe in an interview with The Wall Street Journal only a few days later would make the bold statement that Japan is ready to stand up against China. In this interview he for example stated that "Japan is expected to exert leadership not just on the economic front, but also in the field of security in the Asia-Pacific" and that "there are concerns that China is attempting to change the status quo by force, rather than by rule of law. But if China opts to take that path, then it won't be able to emerge peacefully." (Baker & Nishiyama, 2013).

By following up the irregular offering with such a bold statements it reveals Abe's intended assertive soft power towards China. Its specific message being that Abe's government will stand vast on their determination for Japan to play an increasing role and even take up a leadership role in the security sphere in the Asia-Pacific.

### ***The backlash***

On December 26<sup>th</sup> 2013 to celebrate his Cabinet's first year in office Abe visited Yasukuni for the first time as PM and also making it the first visit by a Japanese PM since Koizumi's last annual visit seven years before. As a surprise to Abe his visit did not only stir up Japan's relationship with China but also caused a minor row with Japan's longstanding ally the U.S. In response to the visit the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo stated that "Japan is a valued ally and friend. Nevertheless, the United States is disappointed that Japan's leadership has taken an action that will exacerbate tensions with Japan's neighbors". A senior fellow at the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations added that the visit "will hurt Japan, especially since it came at a time when there were signs of improvement in Japan's future prospects". Furthermore, according to an article in The Asahi Shimbun on the matter some specialists in the U.S. view the visit as "an intentional snub against the Obama administration" (Oshima, 2013).

Abe's visit also resulted in numerous Chinese officials fiercely condemning his visit. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the visit had pushed Japan in an "extremely dangerous" direction and that "Japan must bear full responsibility for the serious political consequences". The situation even led the Japanese embassy in Beijing to warn Japanese nationals "to stay away from any demonstrations and to not congregate in big groups" as well as issuing a surprisingly assertive message to Abe himself stating that: "In dealing with Chinese people, pay attention to your behavior and your language." (Slodkowski & Sieg, 2013). This broad international critique truly came as a surprise as Abe's special adviser Isao Iijima admitted in his book "Pressure Points in Politics" (Seiji no Kyusho) stating that at the time they were convinced that "... Xi Jinping, Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party, is a leader who is beyond complaining about this and that over issues like these" and a visit could engage China in a bilateral dialogue (Hayashi, 2014). Using the visit to serve this purpose exemplifies the misconceived concept of soft power on these men's part as, after more than a decade of highly emotional bilateral dialogues, China's resolve on the issue should have been clear. Spokesperson Qin formulates this sentiment very clearly in his press conference stating that due to "Abe's hypocrisy" it is "[i]n fact it is Abe himself who shuts the door on dialogue with Chinese leaders.

The Chinese people do not welcome him" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs – PRC, 2013). The Chinese state news agency Xinhua even went further claiming that "Instead of a pledge against war, as Abe has claimed, the visit is a calculated provocation to stoke further tension." (Slodkowski & Sieg, 2013), or in other words a show of assertive soft power. Perhaps in preparation to this international critique or through early warning Abe sought to defend his action by releasing a statement named "*Pledge for everlasting peace*" the same day. In his statement Abe emphasized that his visit was to express his condolences and renew his "determination ... to firmly uphold the pledge never to wage war again" (Kantei, 2013). Interestingly he also mentions that he visited Chinreisha, a small shrine to the south of Yasukuni's main hall which commemorates all war dead regardless of their nationality.

The existence of Chinreisha within the Yasukuni precinct is not well known due to its somewhat 'hidden' location outside the main complex (Koolen, observation, June 5-6, 2015). In his closing remarks Abe expressed that it is "regrettable" that visiting Yasukuni has become a diplomatic issue but "[it] is not my intension at all the hurt the feelings of the Chinese and Korean people". This statement, however, even worsened the situation further as China reacted even more fiercely a few days later. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang in his regular press conference claimed that "Abe has been playing a double game in China-Japan relations ever since he took office" and that Abe's actions in fact "jeopardize the overall interests of China-Japan relations and hurt the feeling of the Chinese people" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs – PRC, 2013). Such a fierce reaction from China as well as the U.S.' 'disappointment' seem to have convinced Abe to be more careful in his visits as he has not visited Yasukuni or made any irregular offerings up till this paper's time of writing.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the conflicting historical interpretations, or clashes of identity, which lie at the core of the troubled relationship between China and Japan physically manifest themselves in Yasukuni Jinja. Once ‘a place for the Japanese people to pray for peace’, this identity clashes with its unchangeable wartime identity as ‘a citadel of militarism’. Today this clash has become so fierce that Yasukuni to some has become inappropriate to fulfil a role as a religious institution or place of mourning. For those supporting an ‘affirmative’ interpretation of Japan’s wartime history Yasukuni remains a “heart-warming symbol of self-sacrifice and patriotism” while for the Chinese people the shrine induces painful memories of past humiliations and suffering. These memories have become ingrained in their own national identity and are very much kept alive, which brings forth another clash of identities whereby both China and Japan claim to be a victim of World War II. In Japan some have even come to argue that the Chinese government has utilized this clash to exert moral pressure as a diplomatic strategy. As this paper has, however, shown the Japanese government under PM Abe has, through Yasukuni, used this very same clash to show of assertive soft power towards China.

When Abe took office as PM of Japan for his first term in 2006 he avoided visiting Yasukuni, yet his continuous association with ‘revisionist’ groups supporting the affirmative interpretation remained very much present and continued to enforce his hawkish, nationalistic image. When looking back on his first term in 2012 Abe stated that he regretted not having visited Yasukuni at the time and it would in fact be from this moment onward that Yasukuni became ever more incorporated in both his domestic and diplomatic strategy of showing assertive soft power. Whenever the tensions between Japan and China heightened over for example territorial disputes or security issues visits or offerings to Yasukuni symbolized Abe’s willingness to take a tough stand on conflicting issues. These assertive manoeuvres tend to be followed by China’s strong condemnation of any form of association with the above mentioned affirmative identity manifested in the shrine. The backlash of the December 26th 2013 visit, however, came as a surprise to Abe. Although he sought to defend his action with his “Pledge for everlasting peace”-statement it only worsened the situation further as for the Chinese it confirmed their perception of it being a show of assertive soft power against them. As the clashes between the identities of Yasukuni, China and Japan through assertive soft power take an ever-growing role on the diplomatic stage, the question remains whether China and Japan in their struggle choose to brush aside the internationally accepted value of tolerance amongst people.

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