

# Introduction: Re-examining Asia-Pacific War Memories: Grief, Narratives, and Memorials

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**Abstract:** *Articles in this special issue re-examine Asia-Pacific War memories by taking a longer and broader view, geographically, temporally, and spatially. A diverse, global team of thirteen authors highlights subjects across a wide geographical area spanning the Asia-Pacific region especially. In the process, articles question common assumptions and narratives surrounding Asia-Pacific War memories by highlighting crucial, in-between spaces and remembrances. These range from Japanese military cemeteries in Malaysia, to the experiences of Filipino residents living near a Japanese POW camp, and to Japanese veterans' personal narratives of guilt, trauma, and heroism. Articles also draw attention to the ongoing significance of Asia-Pacific war memories, partly as personal struggles to confront and to find meaning in the past, and partly through memory's political instrumentalization in Cold War and post-Cold War power struggles.*

**Keywords:** *Asia-Pacific War, memory, sites of memory, narrative, grief, trauma, veterans, cemeteries, memorials*

This special issue emerged from a conference titled “Re-examining Asia-Pacific War Memories: Towards a Cross Textual, Global Dialogue” held in December 2020 at the

International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto. The year was notable not only for witnessing the worst pandemic in a century but also for being the 75th anniversary of the conclusion of the Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945). The simultaneous mandatory isolation in response to the virus, juxtaposed with the global nature of COVID-19 made the conference organizers and participants acutely aware of the paradoxical presence of national boundaries on the one hand and the urgent need for transnational cooperation on the other. This realization also mirrored conference presenters' thoughts on the concurrent necessity for dialogue on the transnational nature of Asia-Pacific War memories.

Prior studies have noted the impossibility of grasping the consequences of a global war from purely national standpoints (Fujitani et al. 2001). Similarly, past research has shown how the effects of past and present empires and the memory regimes they engender continue to linger on long after conflict has officially ended (Yoneyama 2016). Articles in this special issue build on these findings by exploring the making of Asia-Pacific War memories as a complex trans-national, trans-Pacific and ongoing process of negotiation between private individuals, nation-states, and larger geopolitics. The editors were especially cognizant of three main re-examinations that essays in this special issue undertake.<sup>1</sup>

The first of these is geographical. Namely, the

articles widen the scope of the war beyond just the United States and Japan, two hegemonic players who have tended to dominate postwar memory largely due to Cold War politics and maneuverings. The end of the Cold War and onset of a “transborder redress culture” wherein previously marginalized victims, groups, and regions have increasingly pressed for recognition and compensation for past historical injustices has gone a long way toward building a more transnational memory of the war (Yoneyama 2016, viii, also Frost, Schumacher, and Vickers 2019). Consequently, English-language scholarship has increasingly come to incorporate memories beyond Japan and the US, including China and South Korea and a range of other countries throughout East and South-East Asia and the Pacific (for example, Fujitani, White, and Yoneyama 2001; Morris-Suzuki et al. 2013; Saaler and Schwentker 2008; Twomey and Koh 2017). Articles in this special issue continue this trend by focusing on previously overlooked areas including Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, and the Philippines. They also examine the cross-border movement of people such as Japanese war brides to New Zealand in the immediate postwar, and marginal spaces including the perspectives of residents living near prisoner of war (POW) camps in the Japanese-occupied Philippines.

The second re-examination is temporal; specifically, it entails taking the Asia-Pacific War beyond the narrow confines of the years of combat and re-framing it in the longer process between the pre- and postwar continuum. Contrary to popular belief, the end of the Asia-Pacific War was in no way a radical rupture from the pre-war era. For many around the Asia-Pacific, rather, the war never really ended, but carried on in various forms such as anti-colonial struggles, personal battles with the scars of war, and ongoing civil war and democratization processes. Neither did empires disappear overnight—the process of decolonization was long and slow for many,

while, speaking more generally, hegemonic dominance in the Asia-Pacific entered a period of neo-imperialist struggle between America and China especially. The history of colonialism and Cold War alliances provides an apt lens for observing historical continuity and the transforming utility of Asia-Pacific War memories. Though this special issue does not claim to be an extensive account of the history of decolonization in the region, individual papers do implicitly grapple with the issue. For example, Arnel Joven’s discussion of the changing contours of war memory at a Japanese POW camp in the Philippines reflects the country’s sometimes fraught relationship with both Japan and the United States. His findings especially resonate with scholars who have shown how US and Filipino elites utilized the idea of America as liberator from Japanese occupation to downplay its own history as colonizer there (Woods 2020).

Cognizant of these facets, articles in this special issue by Mahon Murphy, Mo Tian and Collin Rusneac tease out the changing contours of national and imperial commemorations of wars over decades. Similarly, the lasting memories of the war make central themes of several of our contributors. Justin Aukema and Ryōta Nishino highlight Japanese veterans’ writings as attempts to make sense of the war retrospectively from the present-day standpoints of Western (-inspired) civilization and liberal-capitalism while pitting them against putatively primitive forms of civilization. The long war in the minds of the veterans manifested itself in different guises in public realms such as commemorative sites whose exhibits and significance altered to meet the demands of the present as well as shifting geopolitical alliances (see articles by Arnel Joven, Daniel Milne and David Moreton, and Alison Starr). At the same time, Japanese veterans returning to former battlefields in New Guinea nearly twenty-five years later illustrated that processes of mourning and repair work were ongoing, lifelong projects for

many (see Beatrice Trefalt’s article).

The third re-examination is spatial – in the sense of re-examining the nature of specific spaces of commemoration. Namely, the articles move discussion of war memory beyond traditional binaries and divisions that persist in the spaces of commemoration and narratives and propose interrogating the in-between spaces. In this way, too, they interrogate established dichotomies of “us vs. them” or “victim vs. perpetrator” to highlight problematic, often thorny grey areas and points of overlap and contention. In terms of memorial sites, as recent Japanese scholarship has argued, the point is not just to show how alternative sites of memory in Japan functioned simply as “mini-Yasukunis” (Shirakawa 2015, 8, 13).<sup>2</sup> A more pressing concern is to examine how memorial sites expressed their own unique histories and problems vis-à-vis official, state-sanctioned ideology. Thus, building on this observation, essays in this special issue highlight cemeteries containing the bodies of Japanese and non-Japanese in the Asia Pacific (Rusneac, Starr), and of a privately built, ostensibly Buddhist site of memorialization for the war dead (Milne and Moreton) as examples that awkwardly juxtapose with the rather linear narrative of heroic glorification promoted by the state’s premier site of war-dead worship, the Yasukuni Shrine. Regarding narratives, another novel strategy that essays utilize is to focus on veterans’ experiences. Veterans are the key players in war, but their views in discussions of postwar memory are often glossed over because their actual experiences and trauma of seeing the effects of violence and death do not mesh well with beautified and sanitized narratives of the war. On top of this, veterans are often both victimizers (having committed acts of violence and killing) as well as victims (of the state-military apparatus and other institutional or social forms of exploitation) in war. But this can make their experiences problematic for monolithic or revisionist accounts which try to reframe the

war as purely a black-and-white contest between “good” and “evil.” Thus, articles in this special issue examine how veterans maneuvered the complex landscape of competing ideologies and justifications of war (Aukema, Nishino); they examine veterans as active agents in shaping national narratives of mourning which both complemented and contradicted state attempts to use their sacrifices to beautify war (Trefalt); they show how veterans’ narratives can make uneasy bedfellows with state instrumentalization of war memory (Tian); and they demonstrate how past commemoration of military sacrifice often competes with contemporary notions of how to remember the war dead (Rusneac).



**Figure 1: An image of Ryōzen Kannon in Kyoto’s Higashiyama area. The imposing structure is largely overshadowed by nearby World Heritage sites such as Kiyomizu Temple, while its function and history as a war memorial are perhaps even less well known. The complexities of the site are examined in detail in the essay by Daniel Milne and David Moreton in this special issue. Photo by David Moreton, 2017.**

## The Structure of this Special Issue

With these themes in mind, and in order to better flesh out important points of convergence and divergence between them, the articles in this special issue are not ordered geographically, chronologically, or according to well-established sites and binaries, but within three general, though overlapping, themes: (1) sites of mourning, (2) personal narratives, and (3) commemoration and memorialization.

### *Sites of Mourning*

Jay Winter popularized the term “sites of mourning” in his pioneering study of personal grief and the commemoration the First World War (2000; 2014). Modern nation states were unique in that they mobilized individual civilians to fight and die in their wars. To justify these actions, states created the “myth of the war experience” which often beautified and gave meaning to private citizens’ war deaths for the nation (Mosse 1990, 7). But the task from the outset was beset by an inherent tension and contradiction: the dual competing desires to publicly commemorate and to privately mourn. By managing memories of the war dead through publicly constructed monuments and memorial institutions, states were partly able to instrumentalize and channel private grief over lost loved ones into patriotic affect and nationalism. Yet personal sadness and suffering (Acton 2007; Choi 2001), including that expressed through resistance (Figal 2018; Fryer et al. 2021), often clashed with states’ inherent need to beautify and heroize war in support of national aims. As contributions in this special issue reveal, this tension has been most clearly apparent when

bereaved family members and veterans negotiated with the state over how to handle the physical remains of the war dead. The arena for such negotiations, moreover, have included numerous “sites,” especially cemeteries for the war dead and at former battlefields where slain soldiers’ remains lay fallen. Articles in this special issue highlight such sites of mourning not only as spaces where personal grief becomes highly politicized, but also as potential transnational sites of either geopolitical dispute or reconciliation.

First, Collin Rusneac explores the notion of the national war cemetery as a transnational space of mourning, education, and memory. He concentrates on two Japanese war cemeteries, one within Japan’s national borders in Osaka, and the other outside, in Malaysia. Through his focus on these two sites, he posits an alternative to Japan’s national memorial landscape which is often dominated by the Yasukuni Shrine. While Japan has an official commemorative infrastructure, it is relatively decentralized and disjointed. Accordingly, Japanese war cemeteries built either inside Japan or elsewhere rely on local operational infrastructure. As Rusneac shows, this has allowed for a variety of commemorative practices and created spaces to discuss Japan’s wartime and imperial past away from the hegemonic narrative and political controversies of Japan’s more well-known sites of mourning.

The role of war cemeteries as sites of transnationalism and diplomacy is further developed in Alison Starr’s discussion of dual Japanese and Australian war cemeteries in Cowra, Australia. These cemeteries were originally built to inter over two-hundred Japanese and five Australians who died due to a breakout by Japanese prisoners from the nearby POW camp but were extended to include civilian and military Japanese who died in Australia during the war. As Starr explains, town leaders and visiting Japanese officials

have developed these cemeteries and a series of interlinked memorial spaces and events to transform Cowra more widely into a space of grief and reconciliation for veterans, locals, and diplomats, and as a site of domestic and international tourism and binational diplomacy.

While cemeteries are emblematic sites of mourning for grieving veterans and public, Beatrice Trefalt's article reminds us that former battle sites present another realm of mourning with immediacy especially to veterans and the bereaved. In teasing out the various symbolic meanings in visual representations of sites of mourning, Trefalt highlights acts of collective remembrance that help us understand what groups of people are trying to achieve, both politically and personally, when they act in public to conjure up the past. At the heart of her analysis is a photographic book compiled by a group of Japanese veterans who embarked on a bone collecting trip to New Guinea in 1969. Exploring how the book is designed to elicit emotional responses in the reader, Trefalt highlights the role of affect in war memory, specifically in efforts to arrest the forgetting of the war dead and of campaigns in the war not canonized in collective memory.

### *Personal Narratives*

Articles in this section explore how the personal narratives of wartime survivors attempt to reconcile their experiences, memories, and senses of "self" against officially sanctioned remembrances. Various studies have highlighted both the importance of cognitively ordering individual experiences, i.e., memories, into coherent narratives for the construction and assertion of self-identity

(Hunt 2010), and the necessity of transforming memories into narrative form to convey them to others and facilitate their cross-generational transmission (Assmann 2008). Moreover, wartime survivors have often been compelled by a "need to narrate," not only to repair a psyche and identity fractured by traumatic past experiences, but also from various feelings of either obligation to the dead or other forms of "survivor guilt" (Aukema 2016). Working their experiences into coherent narratives frequently allows wartime survivors to make sense of and provide meaning to the past.

One of the most common ways wartime survivors have narrated their experiences has been through writing. For centuries literature, fictional or otherwise, has provided a means for individuals to articulate and represent the subjective and emotional aspects of war that are often masked by official histories and impersonal statistical data. In the modern era, diary writing became a nearly universalized tool for soldiers to record their battlefield experiences. These often provided the raw material for many subsequent veterans' literary writings and tales (*senkimono* in Japanese) in the postwar (Moore 2013). Soldiers' written narratives were highly complex, many times mixing platitudes and other common lingo from the era which seemingly glorified war on the one hand, with often brutal and horrifically vivid descriptions of battle, and at times probing accounts of personal responsibility on the other (Takahashi 1988; Yoshida 2005; Yoshida 2011). The mass-mobilization of total war meant that civilians also wrote about the Asia-Pacific War. Japan's atomic-bomb literature as well as "war experience writings" (*sensō taiken kiroku*) are notable examples. The diversity of war experience writings makes generalized statements about a singular "war literature" difficult. Yet, as essays in this special issue remind us, it is perhaps more helpful to investigate each individual work as a unique attempt to situate the authors' personal experiences in the context of the broader social

construction of memory.

Not all wartime narratives are written down or published, however. Oral narratives voiced within familial or friendship groups or in public, such as when wartime survivors and victims give speeches or open testimony, are also significant forms of war narrative. Stories told within families, for instance, have formed a key part of the intergenerational transmission of wartime memories, and have enabled generations of “post-memory” wherein survivors’ children internalize their parents’ or relatives’ memories as their own (Hirsch 1992). Post-memories of war and atrocity, some have argued, can remain so strong in society that they even live on as kinds of cultural trauma (Hashimoto 2015). Oral histories can also shed invaluable light on hitherto unexplored or neglected aspects of the past, and can either challenge or reaffirm dominant, hegemonic historical narratives and memories of the past (Perks 1998). The academic researcher, too, through the process of recording and documenting oral histories, shares in this production process, and published oral-history compilations continue to inform our understanding of the Asia-Pacific War (e.g., Cook and Cook 2000).

Essays in this section explore these and other multifaceted aspects of Asia-Pacific War memories as expressed through personal narratives and literature. First, Justin Aukema’s article compares war-themed literary works written by two Japanese veterans Furukawa Shigemi and Kamiko Kiyoshi. In searching for hope in defeat and their Cold War-era presents, both authors deployed what Aukema identifies as a kind of literary “modernization theory” whereby they attributed the Japanese defeat to the pervasive feudal mindset of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA). This message is symbolically emphasized and illustrated by the stories’ protagonists, Japanese soldiers whose disgust with what they see as the IJA’s outdated tactics and ethos leads them to desert

mid-battle. In this way, Aukema argues, the novel’s protagonists function as what he calls “anti-hero heroes,” since, while their military desertion would have been considered shameful during the war, they were justified *post hoc* in the postwar when Japan’s military apparatus and empire were thoroughly disgraced and denounced. The ultimate objective of the anti-hero hero, therefore, in this milieu, is not to decry the horror of war, but rather to recast Japan’s substantial wartime defeat as a symbolic victory of the forces of “modernity” over those of a discredited feudalism-militarism.

While Aukema focuses on the political utility of modernization to support a proposal for national rehabilitation, Ryōta Nishino’s article illustrates the potential of the memoir to bring psychological healing to an individual veteran. Nishino, in his analysis of the writings of the Japanese veteran and memoirist, Ogawa Masatsugu, traces the personal trauma of war. For Japanese troops and other defeated soldiers coming to terms with the shift from winning to losing a war in which psychology, war memoir and life history converge was a difficult undertaking. Through tracing his initial personal trauma in China to his war experience in New Guinea, Ogawa’s memoir highlights an inner struggle between that of victim and perpetrator that troubled many veterans in Japan and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Matthew Allen looks at another personal struggle: this one a veteran-author’s grudge against the cynical ethos of the IJA. His source for textual analysis is Maetani Koremitsu’s 1962 comic, *Robotto tokkōtai*, whose protagonist, Robotto, is a clumsy robot who unwittingly joins Japan’s infamous unit of “kamikaze” Special Attack Force (*tokkōtai*) pilots. While these pilots were glorified and even deified during the war and by nationalists in the postwar, Maetani critically mocks this image through his humorous portrayals of Robotto’s follies. Namely, Robotto proves time

and time again, often quite humorously, incapable of carrying out his “sacred” duty to sacrifice his life for nation and emperor. Yet the humor works because this military ethos was indeed discredited in the postwar period. In this way, Allen shows how Maetani’s *Robotto* character was not only an “anti-hero hero” but also how the comic compromises notions of “post-memory” by portraying the war itself as a tragic farce. Thus, he proposes the idea of “counter-post-memory” instead to characterize such works as Maetani’s.

Additionally, Elena Kolesova and Kanazawa Mutsumi highlight important aspects of women’s experiences of war and its aftermath. The authors ask how Japanese war brides in New Zealand responded to the challenges of international marriage in an era in which prejudice to a former foe lingered. The stories they told generally follow the arc of triumph over adversity in which the women found confidence as they gained more skills, expanded their social networks, and climbed the career ladder. Furthermore, the authors show how a few war brides were highly instrumental in the rapprochement and the reinvention of the New Zealand-Japan relationship, and that their new environment allowed them to exercise agency beyond the confines of the domestic realm. However, behind their “success stories,” the testimonies underline the internalization of Japanese gender expectations to be “good wives and wise mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo*) and of equivalent expectations in New Zealand. Most significantly, perhaps, the article points to the residual ambivalence beneath the veneer of putatively successful migrant stories told and heard across generations.

### *Commemoration and Memorialization*

The third theme of the special issue pertains to commemoration and memorialization. While both these terms indicate the preservation of memory, here “commemoration” refers especially to intangible ceremonies and practices, and “memorialization” refers particularly to tangible objects such as memorial markers, monuments, and statues. Each indicates a form of what Maurice Halbwachs called “collective memory,” meaning that they extend beyond the individual, subjective psyche and contain public aspects as means of social remembering (1992). They are also forms of what Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka termed “cultural memory,” wherein memory becomes crystallized around objects, texts, and rituals as a prerequisite of its intergenerational transmission (1995). Additionally, they can serve as what Pierre Nora referred to as “sites of memory” (*lieux de mémoire*), specially designated spaces and places of remembrance that serve as loci and focal points of group memory and identity (1989). Commemoration and memorialization are closely related to mourning. Yet, unlike private gravestones or expressions of grief, commemoration and memorialization are especially and explicitly public expressions of remembrance. Moreover, memorials and rituals once they enter the cultural realm can facilitate the transmission of shared remembrances long after the actual events have passed and far beyond any single individual. Furthermore, while, for some, commemoration and memorialization may occur in tandem with expressions of grief, they are distinguished at the same time by their overt emphasis on honoring and celebrating the past.

Commemoration and memorialization are also highly contested. This is because they are commonly markers to reaffirm self-identity, celebrating and remembering either the pain or heroism of typically a single memory group, e.g., the heroism of the victors, or the suffering of the victims (Gillis 1996). Modern war

monuments and ceremonies, for instance, have been especially tied to the nation-state and have therefore tended to focus on remembering only the national war and military dead rather than the transnational and civilian victims of conflicts (Mosse 1990). And commemoration and memorialization often reaffirm the nation as an “imagined community,” through shared remembrances (Anderson 2006). Within this process, nation-states wield their inordinate power to exercise what Ashplant et al. called a “hegemonic framing of memory,” wherein selective historical remembrances themselves are used to include or to *preclude* equal membership rights within the national body (2000, 53).

At the same time, commemoration and memorialization can also be sites of “counter-memories” used by civic or marginalized groups to challenge dominant narratives and discourses of the past (Misztal 2003, 64). Similarly, it has been the function of “counter-monuments” “not to console but to provoke” and “instead of monumentalizing [...] rather encourage people to think for themselves and motivate them to constantly remember” (Young 1992, 276, 274). Furthermore, as John Bodnar noted, memorials always beautify and aestheticize the dark and painful aspects of war; yet at the same time they can never *completely* hide that fact that real people nevertheless died, a facet often reflected in the names of the dead that are carved on many memorials (2010, 123).

The essays in this special issue dealing with the general topic of “commemoration and memorialization” deal directly with these and other prescient questions and features as they relate to public remembrances of the Asia-Pacific War. First, Daniel Milne and David Moreton investigate Ryōzen Kannon, a giant statue of the Buddhist goddess of mercy built in Kyoto in 1955 by business entrepreneur Ishikawa Hirosuke to memorialize war dead of the Asia-Pacific War. Through the lens of

Ryōzen Kannon, Milne and Moreton trace the shifting landscape of Japanese war memory and commemoration of the war dead, identifying points of convergence and divergence between the pre- and postwar eras, and tracing the complex relationship vis-a-vis memorialization between civic and state actors. In the authors’ analysis, Ishikawa and his pet project, Ryōzen Kannon, are a mini-drama for a larger transformation in Japanese nationalism and patriotism in general. On the one hand, Ishikawa and Ryōzen Kannon carried over from the prewar the desire to worship the war dead and to absolve them of wrongdoing via religious purification. Yet on the other hand, Ishikawa strove to distinguish his memorial from earlier forms of Yasukuni nationalism and to achieve a broader view that emphasized Japan’s commitment to postwar liberal internationalism. As the authors show, however, sites of memory such as Ryōzen Kannon are temporally bounded not only by the lifespan of their memory communities, but also broader geopolitical memory regimes, here specifically that of the Cold War.

Next, Arnel Joven shifts the focus to commemoration in the Philippines. Namely, he zooms in on the shifting historical remembrances of an American-Filipino POW camp, Camp O’Donnell, run by the Japanese military on Luzon Island. Like other articles in this special issue, Joven’s essay highlights the dominant role of Cold War geopolitics in shaping memories and narratives at the site. Namely, this was the construction of a “canonical narrative” which focused on the shared suffering of Filipino and American prisoners at the camp, a facet that resonated nicely with the ruling-class characterization the Cold War Philippine-American alliance as a joint and “equal” partnership. Yet as the Cold War geopolitical dynamics shifted and the regime of Ferdinand Marcos lost its popular legitimacy, local activists called for greater recognition of the suffering of Filipinos, who had outnumbered US POWs at the camp. But



the influence of the geopolitical maneuverings of trans-Pacific empires had not yet dissipated. This was evidenced in 1991, when the pro-US Philippine President Corazon Aquino opened the Capas National Shrine to commemorate the Allied soldiers who died at Camp O'Donnell. As Joven shows, this too indicated the ongoing instrumentalization of historical memories and narratives for contemporary political purposes, since the construction of the shrine was partly used to silence widespread popular anti-America and anti-US-base sentiment.

Meanwhile, Mo Tian shows how the instrumentalization of Asia-Pacific War memories has been a trans-Pacific affair, and subject to neo-imperialist desires on both sides of the Asia-Pacific. Tian focuses on the ways in which Cold War and contemporary geopolitical alliances have influenced changes to official war remembrances and narratives in the People's Republic of China (PRC). One is the way that the PRC has characterized the war, initially portraying it as a Communist-led "war of resistance" and victory of the proletariat class over imperialism, only later to abandon this in favor of an emphasis on shared national humiliation and suffering at the hands of the Japanese. Along with this, Japanese war crimes, which had initially been largely downplayed in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remembrances, eventually came to receive much more attention and to gain prominence amidst growing regional nationalism. And, in the same way, the representation of the role of the Kuomintang nationalists went from negative toward positive, reflecting the CCP's desire to win support for Taiwanese reintegration with the Chinese mainland.

The last article in the special issue, by Mahon Murphy, points to future paths for research about commemorating the Asia-Pacific War through comparison with the twentieth century's other "World War." While most of our contributors reflect on the future of Asia-Pacific War memory, Murphy provides a vital

intervention by urging us to look back in time to alert us to what we might have overlooked. Murphy's article explores some common themes between commemoration of the First and Second World Wars, and the potential for linking historiographical developments in studies of both conflicts. The shift in the geographical lens of studies of the First World War away from the Western Front in France ushered in new ways of thinking about war, empire, and its impact on the so-called peripheries of the globe. Looking at modern commemoration practices from a comparative perspective of both world wars helps to not only understand the broader development of these practices but also to re-integrate the peripheries into a truly global narrative.

## Conclusion

We began our introduction to this special issue under the heading of "re-examination" and highlighted three ways in which contributing essays go about this. We, therefore, would like to close by making a final appeal for the process of re-examination itself. Perhaps the main reason for re-examination is that once is never enough: memory is always changing and never static. We are constantly updating and revising our memories to meet contemporary needs and desires (Hunt 2010, 116; Lowenthal 1985, 348; Munslow 2006, ix). Moreover, as Viet Thanh Nguyen astutely noted in the title of his 2016 book on memories of the Vietnam War, with memory "nothing ever dies." That is to say, battles for the ownership of the past continue on long after the original conflicts have ended. And this phenomenon is not limited just to recent events either; remembrances even of ancient events often continue to inform contemporaneous notions of identity and global geopolitics today. Much of this is tied up with social context, and what we remember and forget is constantly changing as generations pass and political regimes rise and

fall. Yet still nothing is ever really “finished” nor even *forgotten* in this sense. As St. Augustine observed one and a half millennia ago, memory is a “vast, immeasurable sanctuary” whose depths can never be fully plumbed (1961, 216). It is the very present-day utility of memory in combination with its sheer limitlessness that makes it so: insofar as they have needs and desires to fulfill, future generations and groups will always find something to remember.

Still, the passage of time makes a difference for *how* we remember. In particular, time has the tendency to smooth over memory’s rough edges, and its most contested and problematic elements, into a generally simplified and easily condensed narrative. As memory scholars, thus, we must be particularly attentive to the granular details and to *what* precisely is lost along the long route of remembrance. Added to this, today, we can also note shifts in the ways in which remembrance occurs. For instance, Pierre Nora mused on the effects of modernity and technology on memory which he thought had led to an abundance of preservation and proliferation of memories (1989). Supercomputers, to take one contemporary example, enable us to preserve and record vast amounts of information. But we can also observe the opposite effects and trends. Globalization and technology have not just led to an abundance of memory but also a memory deficit. Just as capital and power are centralizing around a few tech giants, memories have undergone a process of centralization, concentration, and simplification. Twitter feeds for example amplify some messages to astounding proportions but the actual number of messages in fact decreases. We can see the same trend with Asia-Pacific War memories and narratives, which center around a few hot button issues that fan the Twitter flames. The effects of this mnemonic centralization are the marginalization and even erasure of alternative memories and narratives, especially ones which

occupy complicated gray zones or are not easily reduced to simple messages such as “good vs. bad” or “us vs. them.”

Memory work, therefore, is a never-ending, infinite process that necessitates continued critical examination as contemporary technology, society, ideology, and geopolitics shift and transform. This is the salient point that we wish to highlight through this introduction and the broader special issue, as contributing essays open new avenues for exploration and highlight the ever-shifting contours of Asia-Pacific War memories.

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This article is the introduction to **The Special Issue: Re-examining Asia-Pacific War Memories: Grief, Narratives, and Memorials**. See the Table of Contents [here](#).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Of the twelve papers presented at the conference, two could not be included in this issue. One was on war memorials in Thailand by Nipaporn Ratchatapattanakul and another by Caroline Norma on wartime Australian and Japanese sexual violence in New Guinea. We thank the vital contribution the two presenters made to the conference and to the evolution of this special issue and look forward to their future publication.

<sup>2</sup> Shirakawa, in fact, uses, variously, the phrases “local versions of Yasukuni” (*Yasukuni jinja no chihōban*) and “village Yasukunis” (*mura no Yasukuni*) (2015, 8, 13). However, in keeping with Shirakawa’s original nuance, we have translated these together as the slightly more natural-sounding “mini-Yasukunis.”