Establishment of Shrines for the War Dead in the Former Feudal Clans: 
The Example of the Oura Gokoku Shrine in Gunma Prefecture

IMA I Akihiko

This paper is a part of a series of research by the author on “Religious rites for the war dead in modern Japan”. The shrines for the war dead (gokoku-jinja) scattered throughout the country are considered subordinate shrines of Yasukuni Shrine. However, there is very little research on these shrines. Therefore, I would like to provide one example by following the process of the establishment of the Oura Gokoku Shrine (currently in Tatebayashi City) in Gunma Prefecture, which originated from a small shrine (shokonshii) built by the Joshu Tatebayashi Clan (new government army) in the last days of the Tokugawa shogunate, and reviewing the functions and roles played by this shrine, which was regarded as the “local Yasukuni.”

In the last days of the Tokugawa shogunate, the Joshu Tatebayashi Clan dispatched troops to fight as the government army in the Boshin War and these Clan soldiers took part in battles as far as the Toboku region, resulting in a loss of 39 lives. After the Boshin War, in September 1869, Clan leader Akimoto Hirotomoto built a small shrine in Tatebayashi to invoke the spirits of these 39 soldiers. However, with the abolition of clans and the inauguration of the prefectural system, the shokonshii was faced with destruction. The situation changed in April 1875 when the shrine was renamed the Kansai Tatebayashi Memorial Shrine and escaped destruction. After the Seinan War, the shrine was moved to its current location (in an urban district) in 1881.

After the Seinan War, Japan made the transfer from an age of civil wars to the age of external wars, bringing about more deaths from war. This led to the Yasukuni Shrine taking on the form of a special government shrine enshrining as deities those killed in the external wars and by 1924 the Kansai Tatebayashi Memorial Shrine also enshrined those killed in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars. Here were enshrined the soldiers killed in external wars, excluding former clan army members and the shrine came to be regarded as the “local Yasukuni”. In the Showa Period, those killed in the Chinese-Japanese War were also enshrined, and in April 1939 the shrine was renamed the Oura Gokoku Shrine as its role became more established through its communal enshrinement of those killed in the Asia-Pacific War.

After Japan’s defeat, the role of Oura Gokoku Shrine reached its peak around the time of its centennial in April 1968, after which it declined and the religious services for the 39 former clan soldiers also buried in various locations in the cemetery became neglected. The fact that the graves of many soldiers killed in war are left without anyone to lock after them is a serious problem today.