

The Rape of Nanking: Historiographical Perspectives From Japan and China

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The Nanking massacre, which is often considered one of the most vicious atrocities committed by the Japanese during the Asian-Pacific War, has stirred up much emotion and controversy in East Asian History.¹ This type of extreme controversy creates several different aspects of the history and historiography of the event as it is viewed in both China and Japan. The efforts of both countries to use the incident as either an ideological tool or for nationalist mobilization have affected the historiographical approaches to the topic as well.² A brief summary of the event and the numbers that are associated as well as the positions of Japan and China internationally, will set the stage for the diverse historiographical approaches to the Rape of Nanking over the sixty five years since the attack.

The Japanese invaded Nanking, the capital city of Nationalist China on December 13, 1937. The events that took place in the six weeks that followed the initial invasion and the resulting international handling of those events following World War II comprise the controversy. Japan joined other nations in the practice of imperialism, the practice of powerful nations seeking to control or influence weaker nations. Imperialism can be exercised either formally or informally, meaning full annexation of a weaker nation or merely asserting some political or economic influence. In the case of China, Japan sought full annexation and control.

In the mid-nineteenth century, China had already been divided into leased colonies belonging to Britain, France, United States, Russia, Germany and other European countries. It had lost two Opium Wars in 1841 and 1856 and had suffered much humiliation because of the sale of opium. China had engaged in an unsuccessful war in 1894 with Japan over Korea and China was forced to pay a large indemnity of 230 taels of silver, and cession of Taiwan, the Pescadores and the Liaotung peninsula. Meanwhile, Japan enjoyed a meteoric rise from third world status to world power with its rapid modernization progress. Japan regarded China's weaknesses with contempt and envisioned all of Asia as a part of the Japanese empire.

China's official modernization began with a revolution in 1911, which resulted in the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a new government. The father of modern China, Sun Yat-sen, became the first provisional president of the developing Republic of China in Nanking in 1911. His successor Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists made the city the official capital in 1928. It is a city of imperial palaces and there is a large stone wall encircling the city. The Yangtze River lies to the west and the Purple Mountain to the east provide beauty and protection for this ancient city.³

On September 18, 1931, the Japanese military blew up railway tracks that were Japanese owned in southern Manchuria. Japanese soldiers killed the Chinese guards and invented a story about Chinese saboteurs. As a result of this contrived action, Japan seized Manchuria. In 1932 a Shanghai mob attacked five Japanese Buddhist priests and killed one of them. Japan immediately bombed the city of Shanghai, resulting in the deaths of thousands of citizens. Japan

¹ Daqing Yang, "Convergence or Divergence? Recent Historical Writings on the Rape of Nanjing," *American Historical Review* (June 1999).

² Joshua A. Fogel, *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: 2000), 1-5.

³ Julius Eigner, "The Rise and Fall of Nanking," *National Geographic* (February 1938).

was criticized for this action by the international community and in 1933 withdrew from the League of Nations. An undeclared war on China had begun.⁴

In 1937 Japan provoked a full-scale invasion of China. In July a regiment of Japanese were conducting night maneuvers near the Marco Polo Bridge. Several shots were fired at the Japanese and a soldier failed to appear during roll call. Japanese troops advanced upon the Wanping Fort and demanded the gates be opened so that they could search for the soldier. The Chinese commander refused and the Japanese shelled the Fort. The Japanese invaded Shanghai in August 1937, and began bombing Nanking on August 15, 1937. The bombings hit schools, hospitals, power plants and government buildings causing thousands to flee the city.⁵

The Chinese soldiers began preparing the city for invasion in December. They burned a mile-wide battle zone around the entire city, and on December 2, all of the palace museum treasures were transported for safer storage outside of the city. On December 8, Chiang Kai-shek, his family and advisors left the city along with the entire Chinese air corps and most of the communications equipment. Tang Sheng-chih was left in charge of a ground army with no method of communication and no air protection. Japanese airplanes dropped leaflets on December 9 demanding that the city surrender in twenty-four hours. On December 11, Chiang Kai-shek sent an order for Tang's soldiers to retreat.

There was only one way to get out of the city since the Japanese were converging on the city in a semi-circular front from the southeast. That one exit was through the northern harbor of the Yangtze River. There was a small fleet of junks remaining for those who could get there first.

When Tang gave the orders for the military to retreat, utter chaos broke out in the city as soldiers and civilians alike tried to reach the boats and exit.⁶ The population that was left to face the Japanese were those that were the most defenseless: women, the poor and physically weak, children, the elderly, and migrants who had fled the countryside to escape the Japanese onslaught in what they assumed would be the safety of the city. On December 13, the Japanese soldiers entered the city.

When Miner Searle Bates, a history professor at Nanking University, testified at the International Military Tribunal of the Far East regarding the number of deaths at the Nanking massacre, he stated, "The total spread of this killing was so extensive that no one can give a complete picture of it."⁷ Therein lies one of the biggest controversies of the massacre.

Estimates of the death toll range from near 400,000 to fewer than 38,000, and sources vary between Chinese and Japanese archival material. Judges at the International Military Tribunal of the Far East concluded that 260,000 were killed.

In addition to the horrific murders of the Chinese soldiers such as decapitation, burning them alive and using them for bayonet practice, the Japanese raped an estimated 20,000 women. These ranged from girls under the age of ten to women over the age of seventy; pregnant women and nuns were also raped. The international outcry over the rapes in Nanking caused the Japanese to put forth a solution. Their response was the establishment of the infamous comfort houses.⁸ The first official comfort house was established near Nanking in 1938.

⁴ Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 6-63.

⁵ Stephen S. Large, *Emperor Hirohito and Showa Japan* (London: Biddles, Ltd., 1992) 56-76.

⁶ Chang, 77.

⁷ International Military Tribunal of the Far East, Miner Searle Bates testimony, pp.2629-2630.

⁸ Yoshiaki, Yoshimi, "The Japanese Expeditionary Force in Central China: Historical Understandings on the Military Comfort Women Issue", *War Victimization and Japan: International Public Hearing Report*, (Osaka-shi, Japan: Toho Shuppan, 1993).

In addition to the murder of the soldiers and the rape of the women, the Japanese soldiers attacked civilians in the city. One documented example was of 200 civilians who were stripped naked, tied to columns and doors of a school and then stabbed with small needles all over their bodies including mouth, throat and eyes. Babies were tossed into the air and bayoneted or eviscerated. Many vivid photographs of these horrors exist, having been smuggled out by foreign correspondents, confiscated from Japanese soldiers who took pictures of their victims or hidden by Chinese film shop employees who had been forced by the Japanese to develop them.⁹

A small band of Americans and Europeans created the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone. The Japanese refused to honor the Safety Zone. The Safety Zone consisted of twenty refugee camps that accommodated from 200 to 12,000 people in each camp. During the six weeks of the massacre, the leaders of the Safety Zone had to provide the refugees with food, shelter and medical care. They also constantly protected the refugees from harm. Many of the people in the Safety Zone documented and broadcast these occurrences to the world. The Safety Zone is a topic of much controversy as well.

At the time of the massacre the only recorded evidence of the brutalities that took place were the writings of a few Chinese and westerners who had stayed in Nanking. These writings were then smuggled to the outside world, but the stories became just a part of the many war stories that filled the media reports of the time.

A brief overview of the history and conduct of the military trials also lay a further foundation for the differing historiographical approaches to the Rape of Nanking. The Chinese government was active throughout the war preparing to demand justice for the aggression of the Japanese.¹⁰ As early as 1941, the government was collecting data on physical losses due to the aggression of Japan. The Chinese signed the Allied Declaration of St. James concerning the future disposition of war criminals in 1942 and this helped to establish The United Nations War Crimes Commission in 1943.¹¹ At the end of the war, the war crimes trials in Tokyo began and China contributed massive records of burials, interviews, diaries, and damage statistics.

From the beginning, the United States used the office of General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, to dominate all phases of the trial.¹² Eleven judges were chosen, but only three came from Asian countries. The International Prosecution section chose to charge only twenty-eight of 250 high Japanese officials. Americans were appointed to help Japanese lawyers on the defense team.

The Tokyo trial failed to satisfy Chinese hopes for retribution, and China never was really the focus of the trial. Professor Yu Xinchu of Nanking University lamented at a 1983 Tokyo conference on the trial that the Pacific War was emphasized at the expense of everything else. The fighting with the United States only lasted four years and there had been a half-century of aggression against the Chinese from Japan that the trials did not fully take into account.¹³ It became a showcase to avenge Pearl Harbor and exonerate the United States government in the eyes of the Chinese.

The Japanese and Chinese have approached the historiography of the Nanking massacre in differing ways, and the response or methodology from one has often sparked a different

⁹ The Avalon Project at the Yale Law School (database online) Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1997, available from <http://www.Yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/wwii/j4htm.>, accessed 4/4/2002.

¹⁰ Mark Eykholt, "Chinese Historiography of the Massacre", *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: 2000) 11-70.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

methodology for the other. It is recently becoming apparent that over time some convergence has taken place, because there seems to be a developing trend towards the studies becoming more international. There still remain the difficulties of political, cultural and linguistic barriers, though, as we will see in the following overview of the methodologies.¹⁴ The Japanese conception of the Nanking massacre has had an evolving historiographical approach. According to the scholar, Takeshi Yoshida, there have been five distinctive phases in the process.¹⁵

The first phase was the history of the massacre during the Asia-Pacific War, approximately 1931 to 1945. During this period of time there was no Nanking massacre in the public Japanese awareness.¹⁶ Lantern parades took place throughout Japan to celebrate the capture of Nanking and the military was highly praised in the media for bravely fighting against the Chinese forces. The soldiers in most publications were praised as humane and courageous and the assault on China was viewed as the liberation of Asia from the western invasion.¹⁷

When the Japanese were defeated in 1945, a second phase of the massacre in historiography began. At the Tokyo War Crimes Trial from 1946 to 1948, the Japanese public learned of many atrocities committed by the soldiers in China, including the Nanking massacre. The trial was recorded in detail in the newspapers. Headlines read, "Horrible acts of the Japanese Army were first revealed to the people," (*Asahi*) and "Children, too were massacred." (*Mainichi*).¹⁸ The trials served to inform the Japanese public about the massacre, but the massacre did not become a symbol of Japanese war crimes against the Chinese. It merely served as a reminder of a Japanese military that dragged Japan into a reckless war with the United States that cost the Japanese enormous sacrifices.

The history of the massacre as well as other Japanese atrocities during the war became a standard in Japanese history. The accounts of the atrocities appeared in elementary and junior high school textbooks that were edited by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Historians reflected upon a national education during wartime that was able to facilitate the peoples' support of the war. At this point the historians rejected historical education that was used to teach unscientific imperial myths and morals justifying national sacrifice for the emperor and Japanese imperialism.¹⁹ These historians, most of whom were Marxists, were able to publish studies that had been suppressed during the war. They were active and influential at the time and also participated in the peace movements. It has been these progressives who have been the most influential historically. Conservatives and nationalists have been challenging the progressive version of history. They view the progressive version of history as demonizing wartime Japanese history.²⁰ It is noteworthy to distinguish the term "revisionist" in Japan as an historical approach that is associated with conservatism and is at odds with the progressive view of history. This is different from the United States, where the same term often refers to liberals who are fighting against conservatives.

With the beginning of the cold war, the Japanese revisionists began to gain influence. America did not want Japan to become a communist country but a country that could buffer the

¹⁴ Yang, 860.

¹⁵ Takashi Yoshida, "A Battle over History: The Nanjing Massacre in Japan", *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: 2000) 70-133.

¹⁶ Takashi Yoshida, "A Japanese Historiography of the Nanjing Massacre," <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cear/issues/fall99/text-only/yoshida.htm>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

United States against the spread of communism in Asia.²¹ In the 1950s it was agreed that the Japanese government should foster patriotism that would bring the nation together. At this point, the representation of Japanese aggression was very extensively toned down in school textbooks. Instead of using words like aggression, phrases like advance were used in its place in the textbooks of the late 50s and early 60s. The description of the Nanking massacre disappeared altogether from the textbooks.²²

China was reopened to the world in the early 1970s, and a third phase of the history of the massacre in Japan began. Newspaper journalist, Katsuichi Honda wanted to examine Japanese atrocities during the Asia-Pacific War. In a forty-day trip to China, he visited war memorials and interviewed the survivors of the attacks of the Japanese. His research included many photographs that were very sensational. Honda received harsh criticism from revisionists such as Shichihei Yamamoto and Akira Suzuki regarding his accounting of the killing competitions between the soldiers. They claimed that the killing competitions were something like an urban myth. Suzuki's efforts won him various awards in Japan.

Many historians were outraged at these denials and sympathetic to the victims. They responded by pointing out the multiple inaccuracies in the challenges to the long-standing accounts of the atrocities.

In the 1970s, the some of the atrocities, including the Nanking massacre appeared again in school textbooks, due to the work of Saburo Ienaga, who edited textbooks and challenged those disqualified for use by the Ministry of Education. The Tokyo high court ruled in favor of Saburo Ienaga.

The textbook controversy arose again in 1982 and opened another phase of the massacre's history in Japan. A renewed campaign by the Japanese Ministry of Education to tone down the representation of war crimes brought about international protests on this occasion. Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese governments submitted protests to the Japanese government.²³

In 1984, Masaaki Tanaka wrote "Fabrication of Nanjing Massacre" which claimed that the massacre was merely a myth created by the Tokyo trial and the Chinese government. He had some support from distinguished scholars such as Shoichi Watanabe and Keiichiro Kobori, who were both history professors. In retaliation, the progressives established The Study Group on the Nanking Incident. The members of this group have published twelve books exclusively discussing the massacre. These publications forced the revisionists to realize that it was impossible to deny the atrocities completely, so they subsequently altered their strategy.²⁴ They made the concession that the massacre was over-exaggerated by the Tokyo trial and the Chinese government because relatively few people were killed, and that most of the deaths that did occur were not illegal under the laws of war. They determined that the event in Nanking did not deserve the special attention it was receiving.

The fifth phase of the history of the massacre in Japan occurred after the death of Hirohito and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The revisionists began to gain new supporters such as Nobukatsu Fujioka, professor of education at the University of Tokyo.

The final analysis of the revisionist claims is that they are not based on historical materials that confirm mass atrocities in Nanking in 1937-1938. Their objective is to tell a history that describes a "just" Japan that was just standing up against the western invasion for the sake of the

²¹ Yoshida, "A Battle Over History," 100.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Asian people. They regard progressive accounts of imperial Japanese history, especially as they appear in textbooks as full of masochism, darkness, and apologies.²⁵ It is their view that this destroys national pride. They desire a telling of history that instills national pride.

Today all Japanese school textbooks mention the massacre. In six out of seven of the junior high books published since the spring of 1997, the estimate of the Chinese that were killed is at least 200,000.

Revisionists, although they remain active, have enemies not only in Japan but also in China and the United States. Their representation of history actually increased the number of published historical accounts of the massacre around the world in an effort to discredit them.

The revisionists remain in the "nation-state" orientation, but the good side of this historiographic conflict in Japan is that the history and memory of the massacre have indeed been internationalized, and people have been working to remember the Nanking massacre in order to prevent other massacres in world history.

China's historiography of the massacre at Nanking has had differential approaches but China has also used the incident for political ends in the world arena as well. The massacre began in China as a specific incident experienced by hundreds of thousands of Chinese. Those who survived the horrors had no concept of the overall event but did feel the loss of family and people who suffered. It was hard to imagine the extent of all of the atrocities.²⁶

After 1945, the extent of the massacre was revealed and so did its consequences because it became part of both official and popular histories and China. The massacre was transformed from a war atrocity experienced by Chinese in Nanking on a local scale to an international symbol of suffering that brings together all who identify with China or oppose Japan.²⁷ On this level, the Nanking massacre serves as a unifying event for all of the Chinese people. The nation-state orientation is evident here as it was with the revisionists in Japan.

The Chinese government has also used the massacre for political ends as a national fervor developed around this and other war atrocities. The Chinese government has used the media, protests and diplomatic threats to try and intimidate Japan and see that Japan accords it the respect it feels it is entitled. China was one of many victims of Japanese nationalism. Now China uses its own nationalism to intimidate Japan and also play up China's victimization.

The Chinese government has had a difficult time of balancing the intimidator/victim issue, as Chinese students have been willing to use anti-Japanese protests as a basis for their own antigovernment protests. In the 1980s, hard-nosed political oppression silenced dissent within China, while voices that moved abroad stirred others to spread the information about Nanking and other atrocities in the west and to protest the continuing textbook controversies that kept coming up in Japan.²⁸

The Nanking massacre has the tendency to overshadow some of the other atrocities, such as the comfort women and the biological experiments of Unit 731, for several reasons. Information regarding the massacre has existed since the day it began, and more information has appeared yearly to hold attention. The information includes Chinese records, Japanese reminiscences, and western accounts, and therefore gives the incident a legitimacy that expands national borders. The Nanking massacre has proven to be an enduring symbol for Chinese grievances and a source of Chinese unity. It also calls up anti-Japanese emotions that remain

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Eykholt, 56-58.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

strong in other nations that fought with the Japanese during World War II. This emphasis takes it from a nation-state orientation to an historical event of international importance. The resulting treatment of the Nanking massacre in Chinese historiography remains essentially that of the colonial story of China as an innocent nation and Japan as the evil imperialist power/invader.

A timeless element remains in the historiography of Nanking because the largest protest concerning the massacre and against Japan comes from Chinese who were born after the war. The information that they gather comes from family stories, school lessons and newspaper accounts. It comes without much of the wartime context, and a tendency to ignore the situation surrounding the wartime event and the way the telling of it has changed for political benefit following the war.

China's evidence requires much more critical analysis to move beyond the description of the horrors to a better understanding of the meaning and implication of the massacre. Current Chinese historiography still lacks the depth of inquiry that an incident of this nature requires.²⁹

The histories in these two countries regarding the Rape of Nanking still seem to be very "nation-state" oriented. They give privilege to the role of their own particular nation's subjects and they undervalue or virtually ignore the horrific experiences of others involved in the considered event.

In recent times, such publications as Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* have brought about more of an international discourse regarding the incident. Communication has played a part in narrowing some of the differences and while historians studying the topic are nowhere near forming a community, discussion is ongoing.

New evidence continues to come to light and an excellent example is the study of the Japanese veteran's organization *Kaikosha*. In the mid-1980s, the organization launched a major effort to gather information from its 18,000 members to dispute the Nanking massacre. It had to reverse its original stand of complete denial because of the evidence it compiled. The 1998 publication of *The Good Man of Nanking, The Diaries of John Rabe*, has added additional information regarding the circumstances of the International Safety Zone.

Several legal battles have been initiated since 1995 to force the Japanese to accept accountability for the crimes that were committed and to force them to make reparations. POWs from all nations and on behalf of the Comfort Women of Korea have filed the suits. As of December 7, 2000, a total of eighteen class action lawsuits have been filed in the United States.

In December of 2000, President Clinton signed U.S. Public Law 106-567, the Intelligence Authorization Act for F/Y 2001, in which original S 1902 of "Japanese Imperial Government Disclosure Act of 2000" is included as Title VIII. It allows the public for the first time to have access to classified U.S. documents regarding the war crimes committed by the Japanese imperial government during World War II. As additional information continues to be presented, new perspectives will undoubtedly continue to develop.

Several historiographical perspectives on how both China and Japan have handled the Nanking massacre have been presented. A large number considering that the Nanking massacre happened in what is considered very recent history. It is an excellent example of how different peoples view one incident in history in so many different perspectives and how only an ongoing critical and investigative analysis of even a small piece of history is necessary. It also demonstrates how a single incident in history can take on such a large international perspective and is used so effectively in international politics.

²⁹Ibid.