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Forgotten Victims? The Historiography of the Nanking Massacre

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The Nanking Massacre, also known as the Rape of Nanking, was conducted within a six week period following the fall of Nanking, China's capital city, to the Japanese army on 13 December 1937 during the second Sino-Japanese war. This conflict would soon become encompassed in the larger context of the Second World War. Despite the vast array of primary sources related to this incident, concrete details, such as what happened, why, and who was responsible, have been seriously disputed since it occurred. Histories of the Massacre range from complete denial of it ever occurring, to graphic accounts relegating the atrocity to the same level as the Holocaust or the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even something as seemingly concrete as the death toll ranges wildly, from estimates of 300,000 to less than 3000.

Indeed, the history of this massacre tends to be exceedingly complicated, and much of what has been written about it has arguably been designed to fit neatly into a specific agenda, political or otherwise. Because of this, the truth about the Massacre is still difficult to grasp. Most of the major histories of the Nanking Massacre are inextricably intertwined with the biased concepts of nationalism and self perception. Although these histories appear to frequently set out in an effort to illuminate the shadows covering the truth of this dark period in Chinese-Japanese relations, they do so in an effort to establish one country as a victim of the other, sometimes skewing the facts accordingly. Surprisingly, this victim/victimizer approach can be

made to go both ways, with some accounts implying that it is in fact the Japanese who have suffered the most on account of the Massacre. To this day, the history of the Massacre remains a victim itself, a victim of multiple national and personal agendas. Because of these nationalistic biases and interferences of different political agendas, the truth about this massacre seems to remain out of reach.

Serious interpretation of the events at Nanking began in 1946 with the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE), a war crimes trial similar to the Nuremberg trials, set up by the Americans in order to prosecute the Japanese for war crimes committed in the Pacific. The IMTFE set the death toll of civilians and prisoners of war killed by the Japanese at 200,000, and the number of rapes committed by the same forces at 20,000.¹ The manner in which the Rape of Nanking was portrayed followed the general aim of IMTFE war trials narratives: “the prosecution seeks to demonstrate that the losers lost ... [partly] because their cause was unjust and their means illegal. The defense must then make its case by challenging that narrative.”² Immediately, the events at Nanking were interpreted in a way that would serve American and Chinese interests. Because of this, historical truth may have been lost in favor of victor’s justice. Furthermore, the events were used to bolster the larger aims of both America and China at the IMTFE as a whole. For the Chinese, the Rape of Nanking was used “to epitomize all Japanese misconduct in China: it was made to stand as the

¹ Takashi Yoshida, *The Making of the “Rape of Nanking”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 51.

² Timothy Brooks, “The Tokyo Judgment and the Rape of Nanking,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (August 2001): 675, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2700106>.

greatest and most representative atrocity.”³ As such, the events at Nanking would by necessity have to be magnified or sensationalized in order to make the Rape outweigh the multiple other atrocities committed by the Japanese forces in China. The Americans chose to approach the narrative a different way, using the event as a “linchpin for the argument that Japan conspired to commit war crimes throughout the region from 1937 to 1945.”⁴ For the Americans, Japanese conduct at Nanking was representative of Japanese conduct in the Pacific as a whole. Again, the event needed to be portrayed in the most atrocious light possible in order for this narrative to work in the American’s favor. The IMTFE set out with two national agendas which aimed to portray the Rape of Nanking in the harshest light possible in order to fulfill the post-war aims of both the Chinese and the Americans. The search for a victim and a victimizer likewise began. For the most part, the assertion that China was the victim remains uncontested, as it was the Chinese who suffered astounding amounts of rape and murder at the hands of the occupying Japanese soldiers. However, the victim/victimizer debate can be taken too far in either direction, sometimes skewing history to aid one side or the other of the debate.

Following World War II, Japan was put under American occupation. The American forces which arrived in Japan for this occupation brought with them the American perception of the Rape of Nanking, and soon “the Nanking Massacre became a subject of broad discussion in Japan.”⁵ It was in the Americans’ best interest to keep the Rape of Nanking in Japanese memory, and they continually did so. The Supreme Allied Powers (SCAP) occupying Japan “fostered the integration of Nanking

³ Ibid., 676-77.

⁴ Brooks, “The Tokyo Judgment,” 677.

⁵ Yoshida, *The Making of*, 45.

into Japan's official history," with a focus on the Japanese as aggressive victimizers.⁶ During the occupation SCAP prohibited public criticism of the IMTFE judgment and the victim/victimizer perception by Japanese historians.⁷ The people of Japan were made well aware of the events which took place at Nanking immediately following the end of World War II. The Rape of Nanking was taught in schools and advertised under occupational forces.⁸ It wasn't until the Cold War began that things began to change from the traditional perception of the Massacre to a more revisionist approach.

Immediately following the withdrawal of occupational forces from Japan, Tanaka Masaki, an acquaintance of Matsui Iwane, the commander of Japanese forces at the time of the Rape of Nanking who was hanged for his involvement in the Massacre, published a book called *On Japan's Innocence: The Truth On Trial*, in which Masaki "argued strenuously that Japan was innocent and that it was the Allied countries that were responsible for war crimes."⁹ He bases his argument on the dissenting opinion of a juror at the IMTFE, Radhabinod Pal, although he twists Pal's opinion to serve his own agenda, abandoning the true reasoning of Pal's dissent in an attempt to cast Japan as the victim of the Nanking legacy. This argument was based on the fact that the Allies were not tried for their war crimes; instead they used the IMTFE to ignore their own faults and victimize Japan.¹⁰ At the same time, conservative war time leaders who had earlier been purged by the occupational forces returned to the Japanese government in an effort to keep

⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁷ Yoshida, *The Making of*, 51.

⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 52.

communism out of Japanese politics. During this period, “the Nanking Massacre ... disappeared almost completely from history textbooks.”¹¹ As a result of the fear of communism, wartime leaders who had no wish to relive the atrocities of the past were allowed back into government and were in a position to remove the Nanking Massacre from Japanese memory. At the same time, American interest in the Massacre diminished in order for the country to distance itself from Communist China. Knowledge and understanding of the Massacre, however, never did disappear from Japanese memory.

By the 1960s, Japan had developed a postwar identity based around the idea that the country had “moved beyond armed conflict,” in contrast to the militaristic nationalism of the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1970s, the “images of Japanese troops as victimizers” were a part of mainstream Japanese culture.¹² In the 1960s, a series on the History of Japan was published and aimed at popular audiences. It included a detailed account of the Rape of Nanking, and continued to represent the Japanese as victimizers.¹³ Therefore, Japanese knowledge of the Rape of Nanking was never nonexistent. History textbooks included the Rape, and books aimed at popular audiences did as well. Despite the nationalistic agenda of a government which wanted the Rape of Nanking suppressed, memory of the event continued as part of a stronger agenda: the move towards an anti-war theme that helped to shape postwar Japanese identity.

¹¹ Ibid., 53.

¹² Matthew Penney, “Far From Oblivion: The Nanking Massacre in Japanese Historic Writing for Children and Young Adults,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22, no.1, (Spring: 2008): 31, http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/journals/holocaust_and_genocide_studies/v022/22.1.penney.html

¹³ Ibid., 30.

If any country should be accused of forgetting or altering the incident, that country is China. With the Communist takeover in 1949, the Chinese government set about rearranging the history of the Nanking Massacre to fit their own nationalistic agenda. Contrary to the Chinese approach to the Massacre at the IMTFE only a few years prior, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) "did not emphasize the uniqueness in scale and brutality of the massacre."¹⁴ Until 1971, China barely acknowledged the Massacre unless it contributed to a nationalistic agenda. The Chinese Nationalist government ignored the victim/victimizer debate because it was attempting to form an alliance with Japan, while the Communist government focused on fostering "an image of national pride and strength among its people" and therefore was not interested in appearing victimized.¹⁵ In fact, the PRC preferred to cast a negative light on the US during this period, accusing the Americans living in Nanking who had helped save lives during the Massacre of "being more concerned with preserving American property than saving Chinese lives" and arguing that they had set up the safety zone as a "convenient slaughtering pen ... enabling the Japanese invaders to kill [Chinese civilians] more efficiently."¹⁶ Once again, the truth of the Massacre was shunned in an effort to further a national agenda, this time an agenda aimed at establishing communist China as strong and noble in contrast to the scheming, corrupt, democratic USA. Interestingly, the PRC does still admit to being the victim despite its attempts to appeal to national strength. By switching the role of victimizer from Japan to the USA all China did was reiterate its victimization in terms of the Cold War as opposed to World War II. It was not

¹⁴ Yoshida, *The Making of*, 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

until 1987, following a decade of revisionist publication in which China again became a victim of terrible Japanese aggression, that the original interpretation of the event as it was at the IMTFE again became part of Chinese national memory.¹⁷

The scholarly interpretations of the Nanking Massacre have always been attached to these nationalistic agendas and the need to portray a victim and a victimizer as starkly as possible. On one end of the spectrum sit the conservative revisionists. Carrying on the tradition and beliefs of Tanaka Masaki, they categorically deny that atrocities were carried out on a large scale against Chinese civilians by the Japanese troops.¹⁸ The other end is home to the traditionalists, those who take their cue from the American interpretation of the Nanking Massacre at the IMTFE and argue that the Japanese army committed atrocities in Nanking so terrible as to place the Nanking Massacre among the other most atrocious acts of World War II, such as the Holocaust. This side argues for a death toll of over 300,000, making the scale of civilian death greater than that caused by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and thus once again painting the Chinese as greater victims than the Japanese when it comes to war crimes and atrocities as a whole.

The conservative revisionists have been largely discredited. In March 1985 the journal *Kaikôsha* asked for testimony from Japanese veterans who had served at Nanking in an effort to establish the conservative revisionist side as correct by “publishing great numbers of eyewitness testimonies that denied major misdeeds.”¹⁹ The testimonies they received,

¹⁷ Ibid., 107-113.

¹⁸ Fujiwara Akira, “The Nanking Atrocity: An Interpretive Overview,” in *The Nanking Atrocity 1937-38: Complicating the Picture*, ed. Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 47.

¹⁹ Ibid., 52.

however, only affirmed that wanton rape and murder had indeed taken place in the conquered city. The editors published the magazine and admitted that the Massacre had indeed taken place. As Fujiwara Akira, a leading traditionalist, states, “as a scholarly argument, denial was dead.”²⁰ A brief but dismissible resurgence of this school of thought returned in the 1990s, but only insofar as it again served Japan’s national self interest. This time the Japanese had to deny the atrocities by necessity. They again wished to assert themselves as a world military power, and could not do so until the postwar Japanese identity of anti-militarism was dissolved. This in turn cannot be done until the Nanking Massacre became an illusion created by the Allied forces as opposed to the symbol of Japanese aggression it had been for years, a symbol which helped create the Japanese aversion to war in the first place.²¹

One of the most ardent champions of conservative revisionism in recent years is Higashinakano Shudo, a Japanese historian who has written extensively on what he believes to be inflated myths of Japanese aggressiveness. He implies that it is in fact Japan who is the victim of the Nanking Massacre, as its legacy continues to haunt the country to this day. The idea that Japan’s world standing is suffering at the hands of China and America for something the country did not do is self evident throughout his works. Shudo is one of the last deniers of the Nanking Massacre. He argues that “no records exist to confirm evidence of a “Nanking Massacre. Anyone who insists that a

²⁰ Ibid., 52.

²¹ Akira, “The Nanking Atrocity,” 52-53.

“Nanking Massacre” occurred must present proof” that Chinese POWs and civilians were massacred by Japanese forces.²²

Shudo’s logic is shaky at best. Throughout his article lie multiple logical failures, two of which signal what could only be described as willful ignorance on his part. Shudo states that “almost all the citizens inside the city wall had taken refuge in the Safety Zone ... this means that any persons found “outside” the Safety Zone would have been Chinese soldiers.”²³ By Shudo’s reasoning in regards to Japanese acts of war in the city, this means that anyone found outside the Safety Zone was summarily executed on legal grounds. However, he says “almost all.” Nanking was a large city and was under fire. The possibility of all citizens making it to the Safety Zone before the Japanese forces began their “mop-up operations”²⁴ is nonexistent. This does not mean that citizens still trying to make it to the Safety Zone were automatically soldiers and therefore casualties of war, although that is in essence what Shudo argues here.

Furthermore, he argues that only seven cases of rape could reasonably have occurred because most cases were reported to Europeans and not the Japanese forces.²⁵ The fact that the rapes were carried out by those same Japanese forces, and thus anyone raped would not have been likely to approach them hoping for aid, does not figure in his analysis. Nonetheless, the Japanese Embassy did hear about these rapes, from a missionary and professor at Nanking University named Miner Searle Bates. In his letters to the Japanese Embassy between 14-27 December 1937 from his position within the Safety Zone,

²² Higashinakano Shudo, “The Overall Picture of the ‘Nanking Massacre,’” in *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing*, ed. Fei Fei Li, Robert Sabella, and David Liu (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 114.

²³ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁴ Shudo, “The Overall Picture,” 96.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

Bates accounts for forty nine specific incidences of rape and refers multiple times to other groups of women being taken from the Safety Zone and not returned. In his letter on Christmas day he writes, “in our Sericulture Building alone there are on the average of more than ten cases per day of rape or of abducting women.”²⁶

Shudo alleges that there were few, if any, actual accounts of rape and murder at Nanking during the period that it was under Japanese occupation. He twists some facts and ignores others in an attempt to disprove the “myth” of the Nanking Massacre. He claims there is no evidence for such high handed claims dealt out at the IMTFE, that if anything did happen at Nanking, it was on a miniscule scale. He wants proof. But not enough to go to the Japanese veterans who were there and ask them what occurred. If he wants proof, he need look no farther than the *Kaikôsha*, the journal that stood on his side of the debate until it was forced by the veterans to admit that the conservative revisionist view is itself a belief in a myth.

The *Kaikôsha*, however, did not move all the way to the traditionalist side. Instead, it became a part of the emerging centrist schools, which include traditionalist centrists, revisionist centrists, and moderate revisionists. The *Kaikôsha* belongs to the moderate revisionist camp, claiming approximately 50,000 – 70,000 deaths.²⁷ The centrist schools are still largely attacked by both the traditionalists and revisionists, especially in the west, where “the few Westerners who have paid attention to the

²⁶ Zhang Kaijuan, ed., *Eyewitnesses to Massacre: American Missionaries Bear Witness to Japanese Atrocities in Nanjing*, (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 6-10.

²⁷ Masahiro Yamamoto, *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 254.

Japanese revisionist and centrist positions have refused to accept them.”²⁸

On the other end of the spectrum sits Iris Chang’s monumental work, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. Chang relies on eyewitness accounts, survivor interviews, and other primary documents from the event to paint a picture of devastation and terror. She investigates the claims of multiple different historians who have examined burial records and other evidence, and leans towards a death toll upwards of 300,000.²⁹ While Chang certainly does not attempt to hide the truth in the manner of Higashinakano Shudo, she does have some faults. While Shudo tried to turn the tables to make Japan out to be the victim of the “myth” of Nanking, Chang sets out to establish how tremendously victimized the innocent Chinese civilians and POWs were at the hands of the Japanese. The extent of her research is insurmountable and she surely has done one of the best jobs of presenting the Nanking Massacre to the public at large, but in her quest to establish a clear victim and a clear victimizer she skews some pertinent details.

Chang claims in her epilogue that the truth of the Massacre is not known in Japan. In fact, that the Massacre is barely known at all and that the government must “educate future generations of Japanese citizens about the true facts of the massacre.”³⁰ Even leaving the Massacre itself behind, she still signals Japan as a victimizer for ignoring the past, but this is simply not true. Japanese citizens have been made aware of their part in this massacre through the IMTFE, the Kaikôsha, and

²⁸ Ibid., 262.

²⁹ Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 103.

³⁰ Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 225.

multiple other magazines and journals aimed at popular consumption. It seems Chang would like her readers to believe that all of Japan is happily ignorant of the past. This is simply not the case.

Another issue is her assertion that Nanking is the “forgotten Holocaust of World War II.”³¹ The Holocaust was a racial war meant to murder every man, woman, and child of the Jewish faith. It was systematic and purposeful in its wanton destruction of a group of people for no other reason than that it was a group different from the Nazi “Aryan” ideal. As Ian Buruma points out, “even the most ferocious Japanese ideologue wanted Japan to subjugate China, not kill every last Chinese man, woman, and child.”³² What happened in Nanking was an atrocity, but by no means was it a “forgotten Holocaust.” It is this type of sensationalizing that situates Chang slightly farther to the left than the rest of the traditionalists. Overall, however, her facts and book do represent the general popular understanding of the Massacre, at least in the West, today.

Masahiro Yamamoto marks a slight mediation point between Shudo and Chang. He falls close to the centrist revisionists. Yamamoto concludes in his book, *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*, that during the six weeks of the Rape of Nanking 15,000 to 50,000 people, mostly adult men, were killed.³³ Although he does rightly criticize the attempt of some traditionalist historians to establish parallels between the Rape and the Holocaust,³⁴ his conclusions as to what happened and why still lie far from the beaten path, and he has been criticized

³¹ Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, np.

³² Ian Buruma, “The Nanking Massacre as a Historical Symbol,” in *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing*, ed. Fei Fei Li, Robert Sabella, and David Liu (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 7.

³³ Buruma, “The Nanking Massacre,” 282.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

for lack of research³⁵ and his assertion that the actions of the Japanese were “criminal” but were “engaged in as individuals outside the supervision of the military command and did not result in a huge number of deaths.”³⁶ Although Yamamoto does, unlike the other two authors examined, work away from a nationalistic agenda and victim/victimizer perspective, he, as any other, still has faults. As such, his stance on the conservative side of the debate is still in the minority, although he certainly does not lean towards denial like many of his colleagues in that camp.

Perhaps the most telling account of where the Nanking Massacre sits in the victim/victimizer debate today is not found in the works of a historian, but rather in a blockbuster film. World famous Chinese director Zhang Yimou, known for such films as *House of Flying Daggers* and *Hero*, recently released *The Flowers of War*, which takes place during the Nanking Massacre. The film focuses on a group of schoolgirls who take shelter in an abandoned church outside the Safety Zone with an alcoholic American mortician who poses as a priest to protect himself and, eventually, them. The church also becomes home to a group of prostitutes, and conflict constantly arises between the two groups of young women. Japanese soldiers invade the church and attempt to rape the schoolgirls, unaware of the prostitutes hiding under the floorboards. They are stopped by their commanding officer, who provides a civil figure in an army of brutes. However, he later requisitions the girls for use at a “party.” Knowing what will happen to the schoolgirls, the

³⁵ See Joshua Fogel, review of *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*, by Masahiro Yamamoto. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no.2 (May 2001), 519, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2659717>; James L. Huffman, review of *Nanking, Anatomy of an Atrocity*, by Masahiro Yamamoto. *Historian* 64, no.3/4 (Spring/Summer 2002), EBSCOhost.

³⁶ Yamamoto, *Anatomy of an Atrocity*, 7.

prostitutes cut their hair, don school uniforms, and go to their brutal deaths in the schoolgirls' place. The American and the girls then escape the city.

From the outset it is clear who the victims in this situation are. The movie is filled with exceedingly graphic depictions of rape and murder all perpetrated against innocent civilians by unruly and unrepentant Japanese soldiers. Of the three nationalities presented, two make progress and one retreats into the dark ages. The American gives up drinking and becomes a strong leader and role model. The prostitutes put aside their selfishness and sacrifice themselves, and the schoolchildren put aside their ideas about societal standing and mature intellectually. The Japanese dissolve into ruthless barbarism. Even the token civil Japanese commander moves backwards, from saving the girls from rape at the beginning to demanding they be handed over at the end, even though he could have chosen to keep them safe instead. The movie has no qualms in establishing that there is a very clear line between the victims and the victimizers and there are no exceptions on either side. The American, the schoolgirls, the prostitutes, and the army official are all given a test. Only the Japanese official fails.³⁷

This movie was tremendously well received in China and won multiple awards.³⁸ It is clear that this victim/victimizer perspective is still extremely prevalent when examining the Rape of Nanking, regardless of whether it is examined historically or artistically. Furthermore, the fact that multiple Japanese actors took part in the film speaks to the fact that, contrary to what Chang believes, the Japanese public is aware of what happened

³⁷ *The Flowers of War*, DVD, directed by Zhang Yimou (Beijing New Pictures Film Company, 2011).

³⁸ IMDB, "Awards for *The Flowers Of War*," <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1410063/awards> (accessed 3 November 2012).

at Nanking and repentant of their actions. This comes as a result of years of publications teaching the Japanese population about the Rape. If this were not the case, surely Japanese actors would not have chosen to portray their veterans and countrymen in such a light as seen in this movie.

The historiography of the Nanking Massacre is exceedingly complicated. The scale and barbarism of the atrocity, how it occurred, and why, are still hotly debated. While the traditionalist view is generally the most accepted and has been ever since the IMTFE in 1946, conservative revisionists do still appear on occasion to assert that the Massacre never happened or, if it did, that it was by no means on such a grand scale as is popularly believed. The emerging centrist schools provide a relief from these polarized standpoints, but are still in the process of establishing themselves completely.

Today, especially in China and the West, the prevailing view of the Massacre generally falls into the traditionalist camp. While Japan does contain some historians and politicians who hold the conservative revisionist viewpoint, years of publications aimed at popular consumption have shaped a populace which does not deny and is often repentant of the events perpetrated at Nanking. This does not mean that Japan is as far to the left as the West and China, however. Textbook controversies and recent calls for “a more patriotic education,” along with a mass media that has started to lean towards conservatism,³⁹ situates Japan more in the middle of the spectrum.

Masahiro Yamamoto is not far from the mark when he states that “the absence of solid historical study has so far reduced all the discussion about the Rape of Nanking to a simple

³⁹ Claudia Schneider, “The Japanese History Textbook Controversy in East Asian Perspective,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617, no. 1 (May, 2008), 119.

moral outcry, resulting in less clarification of the truth.”⁴⁰ The Massacre’s history has by now been a pawn of several nationalistic and victimizing agendas. It has been completely denied both to allow Japan to once again assert herself as a world military power and to allow communist China to appear united and strong. It has been exploited to help America win a war crimes trial and to provide an Asian equivalent to the Holocaust. Regardless of the multiple interfering biases which plague the historical study of the Nanking Massacre, there can be no doubt of at least one thing: something terrible happened during those six weeks, and no amount of politically inspired revisionism or traditionally inspired victimization can refute that.

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⁴⁰ Yamamoto, *Anatomy of an Atrocity*, 284.

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