WHAT’S IN MEMORY? AN ANALYSIS OF THE NANJING MASSACRE

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On the 13th of December, 1937, the Imperial Japanese Army conquered Nanjing, the capital city of China at the time. Within the next six weeks, Nanjing civilians and soldiers were victims of the nightmarish actions of the Army, which included large-scale rape, murder, and looting. While no words can describe the sickening degree to which the atrocities occurred, the estimated 200,000-300,000 deaths, may put it into perspective. Japanese soldiers would often blame the environment of war for their actions, as demonstrated by former sergeant Ide Junji who said, “human beings are capable of being god and demon. It is war that induces human beings to become demons.” Perhaps there is some truth to this; the routine physical abuse by superiors in the military and the engrained teachings of the dehumanization of Chinese individuals can explain their behaviours during the massacre. Despite their environment, these soldiers still had agency, and thus, must still be held accountable. Furthermore, the Nanjing Massacre was not entirely a frenzy of chaos and violence. There was some order to the mass destruction. For example, when raiding the city, special teams were created for the sole task of looting rare antiques and documents for collectors. It was extremely telling that no Westerners were seriously harmed while the atrocities played out.

In the end, the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal convicted General Matsui Iwane, Commander of the Central China forces, and Foreign Minister, Hiroto Kōki, to death in relation to the Nanjing Massacre. China’s own military trials only sentenced four more to the same crime. If this historical event was like any other, it would have been commemorated with a monument and slowly forgotten as time progressed. However, the remembrance of the Nanjing Massacre follows a different trajectory; initially it was talked about during, and immediately after the Second World War, subsequently forgotten, and then brought back to life at the end of the 20th century. This event is an extremely powerful tool, as it triggers the collective memory of victimhood. Collective memory, which is the combined memory of a group of individuals, and the emotions elicited from the memory of victimhood are ultimately what help people identify with each other and define their enemies. Through the selective acts of remembering and forgetting, governments have used the collective memory of victimhood to create a specific meaning behind a historical event and thus, feed into their portrayal of the state. In this particular case, the memory of the Nanjing Massacre has been manipulated differently in Japan, China, and America to perpetuate their own ideas of national identity.

Although the atrocities committed in Nanjing were executed by Japanese forces in China, authority figures in the homeland were not completely oblivious. They learned of the Army’s actions through two modes: foreign media press, and grievances reports sent to the Japanese embassy and consulates. For example, on the 18th of December, the International Committee for the Nanjing Safety Zone, which
was created by foreigners for the sake of Chinese refuge, submitted a letter to the embassy to inform them on the capture of about one hundred uniformed and volunteer police, as well as the considerable number of rapes occurring. However, the general public knew almost nothing about the negative sides of the war due to the strict censorship enforced. Following their surrender, Americans remained in Japan to rebuild a government that stood for everything the wartime nation did not. They had a deep influence on not only the course of the nation but also how they remembered the war. Due to their support of militarism, almost 200,000 wartime leaders and 5000 school staff were purged, and subjects, such as history, were temporarily banned from being taught. When this ban was lifted in 1946, textbooks, for the first time ever, briefly mentioned the events of Nanjing. However, they did not go into extensive detail. To educate those outside of school, the Americans published a series of articles titled “The History of the Pacific War,” which outlined events such as the Nanjing Massacre from the western perspective, in all of the national newspapers.

The majority of Japan’s population was deeply remorseful about the war. This is reflected by the members of the Historical Science Society of Japan who at the end of 1945, agreed on the value of history and education in promoting peace and pacifism. Unfortunately, a small but incredibly vocal minority of the Japanese population arose post-American occupation to challenge the established narrative of the war. In terms of casualty estimates, they tended to significantly understate figures. Some reported fewer than one hundred killed and even less who were raped. By diluting the atrocities, they endorsed the idea that the Massacre was not worthy of being remembered and thus, had no place in Japan’s history or national identity. In an attempt to protect the way their country was perceived, this small group of individuals either denied past wrongs or directed attention to injustices committed by other countries.

The beginning of the Cold War created an environment that allowed those who wanted to bury Japan’s crimes to grow. However, it is important to note that from the 50s-70s, they did not receive as much attention as they would later in the century. The Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, who led the American occupation, deeply feared a Communist revolution in Japan, especially after the Chinese Communist Party came to power. This led to the Red Purge, which saw more than 10,000 Communists and their sympathizers removed from positions of power and replaced with the wartime leaders who were ousted earlier. With the return of conservatives and war supporters, the meagre references to the Nanjing Massacre practically vanished from textbooks, and thereby, the general public’s mind. During this period, a debate occurred largely within academia between progressives who recognized the significance of preserving Japan’s wartime atrocities, and revisionists who denied the extent of these events. For example, the Association for Historical Liberalism Studies authored papers that denied the truth to redeem the “honour” of modern Japanese history.

In 1971, Katsuichi Honda published his ‘Travels in China’ which brought more awareness to the debate by unveiling what really happened in Nanjing, something he felt the government and media failed to properly do. Inspired by what he witnessed as a war correspondent during the Vietnam War, Honda sought to spread the truth by explaining the atrocities Japan committed and providing survivor testimonies as well as photographs. The increased awareness of the Nanjing Massacre in public
consciousness allowed for the limited return of this event to textbooks. For example, while junior high school textbooks, published by Nihon Shoseki and Kyōiku Shuppan in 1975, stated that 42,000 people were killed, they failed to mention the total death toll. Further, elementary school textbooks continued to neglect the event altogether. Honda’s writings exacerbated the debate and for the first time in a long time, the Nanjing Massacre was widely publicized in the media.

This battle of wits gained international attention with the 1982 Textbook Controversy, where the Ministry of Education created a stricter screening process for textbooks in an attempt to bury Japan’s war crimes. For example, they changed “full-scale aggression against China” to “full-scale advance on China,” and justified the Nanjing Massacre by claiming intense resistance to their colonial hold. This not only profoundly offended those in Japan, but also the Asian countries that were victimized by Japan’s militancy. The strong international criticism pressured cabinet minister Miyazawa Kiichi to issue a statement promising the amendment of textbooks which fiercely angered revisionists and heightened tensions between the two schools. Before 1982, the Nanjing Massacre had never received so much deliberation. It was at this time the event truly became a symbol of Japanese aggression towards China, which is perhaps why revisionists grew in numbers and volume. This was not just a fight over words in a textbook but a fight for Japanese identity. For the revisionists, it was a matter of pride and nationalism, and at the expense of victims, they strove to create a perfect image of Japan. On the other hand, progressives recognized the importance of correcting past wrongs to build a better future. For these two factions, the Nanjing Massacre was a method used to construct the nation as they saw fit.

Like Japan, the Nanjing Massacre did not receive as much thought in China during, and immediately after, the occurrence as it would in the next few decades. Due to the fact the city was on strict lockdown, Chinese reporters relied on the little information obtained by western media. Following April 1938, some accounts from those who were able to escape started appearing in the news but these stories were part of a larger collection of war stories that were used to inspire patriotism among the Chinese people. The Tokyo Trial and the Nanjing War Crime Tribunal were what provided the catalyst for true discussion around the Nanjing Massacre. These trials were widely popular in the media, with articles being published on new developments, people’s opinions on judgements, and on what really occurred during the Massacre. Most importantly, after eight years of being silenced by the Japanese occupation, survivors could finally tell their side of the story. However, this does not mean investigations into the event were exhaustive. The shame and stigma surrounding rape were very strong so when it came down to a survey of the crimes committed in Nanjing, only thirty-six of the more than 2700 cases were about rape. This lack of special attention surrounding the Massacre would continue throughout the mid-20th century as the new Chinese government attempted to gain its footing. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) first came into power, their biggest enemy was not in fact the Japanese, but rather the nationalists who were the only other contender for China’s rule, and capitalist America who was backing them. This is reflected in how they chose to remember, and mostly forget, the Nanjing Massacre. A prime example is the monument for the power station in Nanjing. Titled the “Monument to Fellow Workers Who Died in the Line of Duty,” this me-
morial was created in 1947 to remember the workers killed by the Japanese Army. A few years later, the CCP not only changed the title to the “Monument to Workers Who Died for Their Country” but also, it put more stress on the ‘role’ of Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Nationalist Party, and the Americans in their deaths. In addition, fear of America’s involvement in the Korean War prompted the government to spread propaganda about how American missionaries in the Safety Zone were not only “more interested in preserving American property,” but also how they actually aided the Japanese in their crimes. To legitimize the CCP, the government felt the need to demonize competing administrations while also highlighting their own greatness.

To promote loyalty and nationalism, they chose to praise heroes while suppressing victims. From their point of view, Japan’s war on China represented the country’s weakness, something the CCP wanted to eliminate. Their nation’s honour was on the line, and they needed to defend it at all costs. In 1962, Nanjing University completed a manuscript on the Massacre that included testimonies from survivors, photographs, and new research. Although it conformed to the political ideals of the time, specifically about America’s new role in the Massacre, the manuscript was kept confidential instead of being published. It was regarded as dangerous to morale because it harkened back to a time of victimization and ineptness. Although the Nanjing Massacre affected many people in a significant way, it was deemed too detrimental to be part of China’s history.

Following the end of Mao’s era, China strived to improve their relationships with the West and Japan. For the development of the country, trade with Japan became vital. Thus, in 1978, the two countries officially signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship. To maintain Sino-Japanese relations, China ensured any criticisms of their new ally, including mentions of the Nanjing Massacre, were kept under wraps. This temporary amnesia would be disturbed by the 1982 textbook controversy. Harsh criticisms of Japan emerged in unprecedented numbers and as opposition to Japan’s concealment, Chinese people responded by reviving these memories in the public’s consciousness. For example, the Nanjing Massacre was the main subject matter of a seminar that was held in August 1982 to commemorate the anniversary of Victory Day. To highlight the significance of the Massacre, the seminar took place on the waterfront of the Xiaguan District, which was where the Japanese Army had slaughtered Nanjing residents en masse. Although Japan’s apology ended criticisms, the controversy created a monumental shift in which the war and its horrors could finally be commemorated in China. This is reflected in the opening of the Nanjing Massacre Memorial almost half a century after the atrocities. It was built for the purpose of immortalizing the past and educating the public by inscribing in the monument that 300,000 Chinese fell victim to this event.

The 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square rocked the CCP and the government scrambled for a way to re-consolidate its control. Through the initiation of a patriotic education campaign, the CCP changed the previous narrative that emphasized their victory in the war to one that highlighted China’s victimhood. By capitalizing on the suffering experienced during the war, the government sought to rally the population behind a common history. Furthermore, it underlined how the CCP freed the Chinese people from this wretchedness, thus reminding the country why their administration should stay in power. They accomplished this through
multiple mediums, including new ones such as movies.

The 1995 film Don’t Cry, Nanking is a perfect example of this. It follows the fictional story of Chengshen and his family as they try to survive the horrors occurring in Nanjing. While attempting to get to the safety zone, Chengshen is captured by Japanese soldiers but is saved by a Taiwanese soldier who betrays the Japanese Army for the sake of Chinese solidarity. Aligning with the image of China as the victim, the film neglected to mention how General Tang Shengzhi fled instead of defending his city and how the 36th Division opened fire on their troops so that he could leave safely. It is clear that the Nanjing Massacre has been manipulated to suit the political needs of the same government in two different eras. At the crux of it, the erasure and subsequent recollection became tools with which the CCP built their nation. It was mobilized as a means of promoting unity and patriotism among the Chinese population.

Americans played a crucial role in the Nanjing Massacre, particularly in the accumulation and dissemination of information. Contributors to sources include journalists, government workers, and civilians, most of whom were missionaries. The Americans in the Nanjing Safety Zone were instrumental in collecting eyewitness accounts and survivor testimonies as well as attempting to negotiate with the Japanese. Unfortunately, their powers were extremely limited due to their reliance on some kind of Japanese cooperation to keep the refugee camp functioning. This meant documents were limited to ‘smaller’ crimes such as looting and rape as opposed to large-scale massacres. Another barrier was that they were restricted to the Safety Zone, which only made up one-eighth of Nanjing, so they were not exposed to the full extent of the atrocities.

Nevertheless, accounts slowly trickled their way out of Asia and became conscious in the minds of Americans. Before the Nanjing Massacre, Japan’s popularity in America was already on the decline. A few months prior to Nanjing, during the attack on Shanghai, some Americans started boycotting Japanese products. Naturally, the Massacre, along with other atrocities, were mobilized in support of China and disapproval of Japan. Especially after Pearl Harbor, Nanjing was used to generate a particular image of Japan that foregrounded the savagery of the Japanese community. In particular, accounts of indiscriminate mass killings with bayonets invoked the stereotypical picture of the primitive samurai warriors. Throughout the war, racist interpretations of Japanese atrocities put forth the notion that all Japanese people were genetically disposed to cruelty and lack of civilization.

When the Nanjing Massacre was revived in Japan and China, some Americans also experienced a renewed interest in the event. During the textbook controversy, journalists made biased statements that grouped all of Japan into a nation that wanted to forget its past, even though in reality, revisionists only represented a small minority in Japan. For example, writing for the New York Times in 1985, Susan Chira completely disregarded the fierce debates occurring in Japan and universally presented the Japanese as uninterested in their wartime history. By and large, those who participated in discussions surrounding the Nanjing Massacre were mostly immigrants and their descendants.

Most notable of all was Iris Chang, who in 1997 published the best-selling book, The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II. This piece was incredibly controversial due to its biased and error ridden text, but it was
crucial in sparking American academic interest in Nanjing. The misrepresentation of the withdrawal of a Japanese publishing company to create a Japanese edition, further fed into the myth that all of Japan was unwilling to confront their country’s wrongdoings. An email correspondence, taken out of context, made it seem as though the publisher wanted to add annotations because of threats from right-wing extremists when really, they wanted to correct inaccuracies to take away potential ammunition for revisionists. By projecting their own ideals, Americans clearly used the Nanjing Massacre to oversimplify the complexities of Japan as a nation.

How the Nanjing Massacre is remembered has changed over time in different places to comply with certain people’s desires in orchestrating how a nation is perceived. In Japan, the atrocities became the core of the debate between progressives and revisionists on how the country should proceed post-Second World War. Should Japan remember their crimes in order to learn from past mistakes, or should it hide them for the sake of protecting its honour and identity? The Chinese Communist Party deployed what happened in Nanjing to legitimize their rule. In the Maoist era, forgetting meant securing an image of strength and heroism instead of victimization. Post-reforms, memories were revived to remind the population of the hardships Chinese people experienced before the CCP were able to save them. This consolidated their power in a time of turbulence and attempted to unite the population under a shared trauma. Reflecting American ideals, discussions of the Nanjing Massacre created a n image of Japan as innately barbaric during the war, and insensitive to its history after the war.

The ever-changing memory of the Nanjing Massacre is just one instance of many in which history has been used by those with influence, to warp people’s perception of nationhood. As shown, the past can be harnessed to instil pride, nationalism, and identity. On the other hand, it is an extremely powerful tool that can sow the seeds for hate and ‘othering.’ Thus, it is important to recognize the context behind history. Who is writing it? What does their cultural and political environment look like? Why are they writing it? Critical thinking can save readers from simply accepting facts at face value. This is why history is remembered and should be met with both care, and scrutiny.

5 Eykholt, 15.
6 Eykholt, 20.
7 Eykholt, 22.
10 Fengqi Qian and Guo-Qiang Liu, “Remembrance of the Nanjing Massacre in the
11 Qian and Liu, “Remembrance of the Nanjing Massacre,” 84-86.
21 Eykholt, 53.
26 Yoshida, “A Battle Over History,” 89.
27 Yoshida, “A Battle Over History,” 86.
30 Li and Huang, *The Nanjing Massacre*, 53-54.
32 Eykholt, 139-140.
34 Xiaokui, “Historical Shifts,” 328-329.
36 Qian and Liu, “Remembrance of the Nanjing Massacre,” 86
38 Eykholt, 25.
40 Qian and Liu, “Remembrance of the Nanjing Massacre,” 87.
41 Qian and Liu, 87.
42 Qian and Liu, 90-91.
48 Sheng, 282.
49 Sheng, 282.
50 Sheng, 282-283; Yang, “The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre,” 139.

**Bibliography**


