Volume 4 | Issue 12 | Article ID 2297 | Dec 02, 2006

The Nanjing Massacre. Changing Contours of History and Memory in Japan, China, and the U.S.

Takashi YOSHIDA

The Nanjing Massacre. Changing Contours of History and Memory in Japan, China, and the U.S.

By Takashi YOSHIDA

In Japan, China, the United States and beyond, arguably no Japanese wartime atrocity against China is more widely known than the Nanjing Massacre. [1] Whatever the significance of mere name recognition, however, the history and memory of the Nanjing Massacre are profoundly complex. Indeed, even the phrase "Nanjing Massacre" (hereafter NM) remains contested, and to this day there are circles within which the words cannot be spoken without stirring deep feeling and disagreement.

To make matters still more complicated, the definition and the meaning of the NM have continually changed over time. When the NM occurred in 1937, the duration of the atrocities considered was a week or less, and the scope of the atrocities was limited to the area inside and around the walled city. [2] In addition, the line between acts of war against combatants and unlawful acts of violence against civilians was not very clear.

Since 1937, however, commentators in Japan, China, and the United States have wrestled with the NM, and, in each country, every passing generation has offered new interpretations. Not altogether surprisingly, the accepted meanings of the NM have changed in accordance with the shifting international and domestic political climates of the times. From 1937 to 1945 the Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War shaped the history and memory of Nanjing in the three nations. From 1945 to 1971 Japan's defeat, the civil war in China, and the cold war triggered successive revisions of the understanding of the NM in Japan, China (both the People's Republic and the Republic of China), and the United States. During the period between 1971 and 1989, the Vietnam War, U.S. and Japanese recognition of the People's Republic of China, and the dispute over Japanese history textbooks provoked further revisions. From 1989 to the present, the end of the cold war, the death of Hirohito, and the rise of ethnocentrism not only in Japan, but also in China and the United States prompted yet more altering in international understandings of the NM. The present article focuses primarily on the changing perspectives and contentious debates over the NM in Japan.

In presenting this fourfold periodization of the history and memory of the NM, I do not wish to foster the impression that the changes have been linear or progressive. Nor do I wish to suggest that the changes in the interpretations of Nanjing within the three nations have always been consciously orchestrated. For example, the dispute over the NM was rather contained, the issues little discussed, in Japan prior to the early 1980s. Since the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989, however, the dispute over Nanjing has become vituperative across national boundaries as well as among Japanese intellectuals. In all three nations, numerous authors and commentators on the subject have emerged, ranging well beyond academe to include journalists, former soldiers and politicians. Frequently, the chief objective in the intensifying debate seems not to have been reaching consensus as to truth, but the

assertion and preservation of national pride and a positive sense of ethnic identity. Given the insistence of Japanese revisionists that the NM is essentially a lie concocted to disparage Japan, it is impossible for Chinese or American participants in the debate to find significant common ground. Since the 1990s, accounts of NM that grossly simplify the history of the atrocities and tend to provoke animosity toward the perceived Other have flourished in all three nations.

Tracing the history and memory of the NM in Japan, China, and the United States not only reveals the impact of social and political contexts of the time on the accounts of Nanjing, but also reveals how these narratives have placed differing values on human lives according to nationality and perceived ethnicity. The contested history and memory of the NM in Japan from 1989 to the present illustrates how and why the dispute has become so passionate and poignant.

By the mid-1990s, awareness of wartime Japanese atrocities, including the NM, may have reached its peak. The sharp rise in interest was reflected in public discussions, politics, museums, textbook treatments, and court cases. Two historical events particularly amplified public consciousness regarding Japan's wartime past: the illness and death of Emperor Showa (Hirohito) and the emergence of non-Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro. These events contributed to an unprecedented rift between those who hoped to include the sufferings of non-Japanese in Japan's national history and those who believed that Imperial Japan fought for good and there was no basis for highlighting atrocities.

Hosokawa Morihiro

The end of Hirohito's reign offered an opportunity for many to reconsider Japan's role during the Fifteen-Year War (1931-45) and the emperor's responsibility for the war. As the emperor lay ill, citizen groups and academic institutions organized public meetings and lectures to examine Japanese wartime atrocities in Asia. In municipal assemblies in such cities as Tokyo and Nagasaki, critics raised questions concerning not only Japanese atrocities but also Hirohito's war responsibility. When Hirohito died in January 1989, the public gatherings and debates over Japan's responsibility for the war were far from over.

For example, in August 1993, when Hosokawa Morihiro became the first non-Liberal Democratic Party prime minister since 1955, he was asked about his view of the war. He responded by calling the conflict an aggressive war (shinryaku senso). In August 1995, Murayama Tomiichi, a Socialist prime minister, expressed his "deep remorse" (tsusetsu na

hansei) and “heartfelt apology” (kokoro kara no owabi) for Japan’s colonial rule and wartime aggression. Lawmakers who believe that Imperial Japan liberated Asia and that postwar education unfairly demonized Imperial Japan fiercely attacked Hosokawa and Murayama, and the members of the Diet found themselves divided by their understandings of the past war. Yet Hosokawa’s and Murayama’s remarks probably expressed a large share of popular opinion, emblematic of the progressive tenor of the time.

Many public local museums as well as private museums, both large and small, were opened or renovated from the late 1980s on. They commemorate not only the sufferings of Japanese war victims, but also the losses and hardships of non-Japanese. These museums include the Okunoshima Poison Gas Museum in Hiroshima prefecture(1988), the Osaka International Peace Center (1991), the Kyoto Museum for World Peace at Ritsumeikan University (1992), the Kawasaki Peace Museum (1992), the Peace Museum of Saitama (1993), the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (1994), Oka Masaharu Memorial Nagasaki Peace Museum (1995), and the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum (1996). In addition, a number of “mobile peace museums” — that is, special exhibitions that underscore Japanese wartime atrocities—traveled across Japan and attracted tens of thousands of visitors.

Okunoshima Poison Gas Museum, site of poison gas production during the Pacific War

These museum exhibits reflected the trend of the historical academy of the time. [3] Local historians and teachers examined the effects of the war on ordinary people in the region. They not only discussed the experience of American fire bombings and atomic bombings that took so heavy a toll on Japanese civilians, but also explored how ordinary Japanese cooperated with the state and military to victimize other Asians during the war. They published numerous studies which challenged through documentation the notion that ordinary Japanese were merely victims of the war. Studies of local sites relating to the war, such as abandoned underground tunnels and military factories and mines where Chinese and Korean laborers were enslaved, became common during this period. [4]

Meanwhile, lawyers filed actions on behalf of victims of Japan’s wartime atrocities. Between 1991 and 1995, more than twenty-seven such cases were brought in Japanese courts. Since the mid-1990s, more than 200 lawyers nationwide have participated in war-related lawsuits against the government and private companies, nearly all working without fees. Although these lawyers obviously hope to recover damages for their clients, they also

wish the Japanese government to formally acknowledge the nation's responsibility for the alleged crimes. Onodera Toshitaka, one of the leading members of the plaintiffs' legal team, is one of many who believe that publicizing the suffering of the survivors of Japanese atrocities and securing long overdue payment of wages and reparations is a key to promoting reconciliation between Japan and its neighboring countries, bringing to an end the poisonous legacy of war and colonialism that continues to roil the waters of the diplomacy of East Asia. [5]

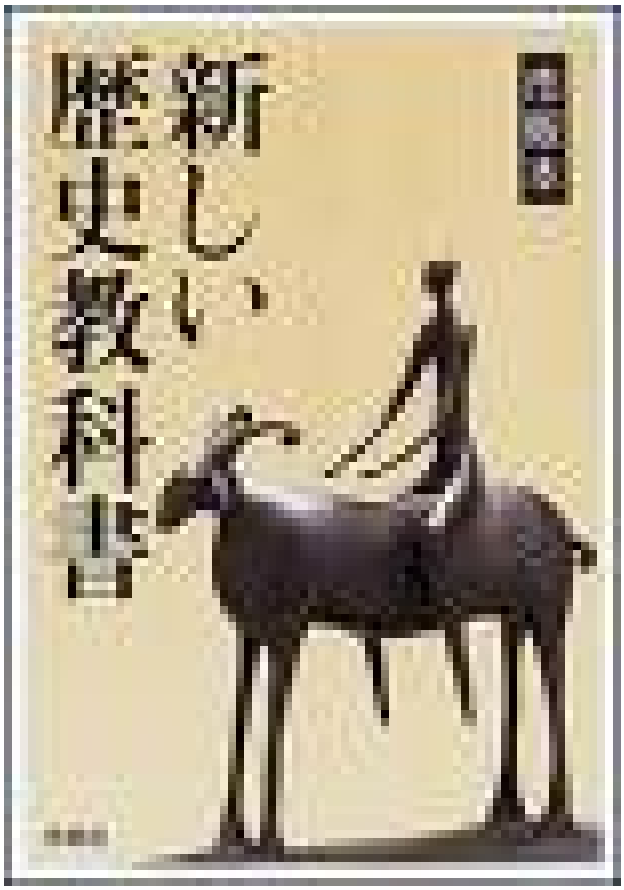
In the 1990s, history textbooks became more inclusive of sufferings of non-Japanese victims of the war and discussed Japan's wartime atrocities in greater detail than previously. This is also true of the NM. Six out of seven junior history textbooks available in 1997 stated that the Japanese military killed between 100,000 and 200,000 Chinese during and after the Battle of Nanjing. Four of them also gave the Chinese official estimate of 300,000. Estimates of the victims of Nanjing, as well as the treatment of the event, in junior high and high school textbooks have fluctuated throughout the postwar era, but compared to the previous and later editions, the 1997 editions tended to provide the most detailed discussion of the event and present the highest death totals.

Some Japanese appreciated the openness of the social and political environment that produced such textbook descriptions in the 1990s. But others were far from welcoming it, indeed, they fiercely challenged the notion that Imperial Japan was an aggressor, still less that it perpetrated war crimes. In their eyes, Japan fought a just war and liberated Asia from Western imperialism. The proponents of this view have powerful allies in Japan, and even some abroad. Many of the representatives of the other Asian governments, who participated in "Celebration of Pan-Asian Unity" (Ajia kyosei no saiten), held in Tokyo in 1995 by the National Committee for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the End of World War II (Shusen gojusshunen kokumin iinkai) openly expressed gratitude for Japan's contribution to Asian independence. They include the former Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Thailand, Vice Chancellor of the National University of Malaya, and Ambassador at Large to Africa from Indonesia. These were social and political elites who did not remember Japanese wartime occupation as being particularly cruel. Between 1993 and 1995, the committee waged a nationwide campaign to protest Premier Hosokawa's characterization of the war and prevent the Diet from issuing apologies for Japan's aggression and colonialism.

This revisionist movement, whose evident goal was to challenge the negative characterization of Imperial Japan and to tone down, if not whitewash, Japan's wartime atrocities and colonialism, was not new in the 1990s. It has existed throughout postwar Japanese society, but the magnitude and collaborations among different leading professionals was a new phenomenon in the 1990s. In 1995, Fujioka Nobukatsu, a professor at the University of Tokyo, and his supporters established the Association for the Advancement of the Liberal View of History. They soon founded the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Atarashii rekishi kyokasho o tsukuru kai) in order to combat the junior and senior high school history textbooks that detailed Japan's wartime colonialism and atrocities such as the NM. Fujioka staunchly resisted a view of the era that detailed such war crimes, considering it damaging to the self-esteem and patriotism of Japanese youth and producing a mindset that was masochistic and self-derogatory

Fujioka and some of his colleagues in the Society claimed that no ordinary citizen in Nanjing was killed illegally. They argued that the chaotic situation that occurred in Nanjing was not the fault of the Japanese army, but resulted from the fact that Chinese leaders deserted the city leaving chaos in their wake.

He claimed that the NM—that is, the event defined as the killing of 200,000- 300,000 civilians—was a fabrication and lashed out at school textbooks that provided such baseless casualty estimates. To him, Japan was engaging in a battle, in which killings of the enemy were justified, and slaughtering prisoners of war was also acceptable as keeping them alive could have endangered lives of the Japanese troops. Therefore, in contrast to the conclusions drawn by many historians, including Japanese historians, Fujioka concluded Japanese troops had committed no "massacre." In response to what Fujioka deemed the masochistic message of the educational mainstream, the Japanese Society for Textbook Reform proceeded to author their own alternative text, titled New History Textbook (Atarashii rekishi kyokasho). While the authors were required to include a brief statement regarding the Japanese killing of civilians in Nanjing in order to secure government approval of their textbook, they tried to offset this compromise by stressing that the dispute over the Nanjing incident is ongoing and that various views exist on the subject. [6]



The New History Textbook

Both sides of the argument rightly regard the stakes in the debate as enormous for Japan's future. The on-going battle over Nanjing can be seen not only in history textbooks, but also in films, courts, in the academy and in political debate. Don't Cry, Nanjing (1995), made by Chinese and Hong Kong filmmakers, that depicted atrocities in Nanjing, traveled across Japan in 1997 and 1998. A Japanese response to Don't Cry Nanjing was Pride: The Moment of Destiny (Puraido: unmei no toki; 1998), a film that suggested that the chief prosecutor of the Tokyo Trial fabricated the atrocities in Nanjing. Legal battles have also been waged by both sides. On the one hand, the Li Xiuying case was brought to recover the honor of a Chinese woman who was stabbed nearly forty times by three Japanese soldiers during the atrocities. Simultaneously, another action was filed to

restore the reputations of two Japanese officers who, in 1937, were reported to have engaged in a contest to see who could kill more Chinese in what came to be known as the 100-man beheading contest. The divisions are not only those between nations. They are also played out within Japan. Since its foundation in 1984, the Research Committee on the Nanjing Incident (Nankin jiken chosa kenkyukai) has published in-depth studies documenting the atrocities in Nanjing. In contrast, the Japan Association for "Nanjing" Studies (Nihon "Nankin" gakkai) has zealously published revisionist accounts denying the NM since its founding in 2000.

Yushukan war history exhibits at Yasukuni Shrine

While most revisionist accounts are available only in Japanese, some have also appeared in English since the 1990s. As the history and memory of the NM became internationalized, the Japanese revisionists have attempted to convince the world that what is known as the NM has been falsified. The spirit of these revisionist versions has much in common with some equally emotional, nationalistic, and ethnocentric statements about Nanjing that have emanated from China and the United States. Indeed, each has fed off the others. In China, many accounts and museum exhibits dealing with Nanjing have fostered a self-congratulatory nationalism, calculated to strengthen loyalty to the government while paying scant attention to the facts, as opposed to reiterating an iconic position such as the 300,000 deaths. The same may be said, from across the ideological barricades, of the Yasukuni Shrine's museum presentation of the Pacific War with its complete lack of reference to Japanese atrocities. Moreover, some American works on Nanjing have ascribed the atrocities to an alleged Japanese racial character or unique cultural behavior, ignoring the widely shared racist thought that lay behind the war's savagery. [7]

In my view, such approaches in their failure to engage the evidence, whether through denial or exaggeration, are every bit as harmful as the Japanese revisionist accounts. Grounded in xenophobic hatred and enduring suspicion, they are no less tendentious than the wartime propaganda that preceded them. It seems doubtful that any useful assessment of the NM will ever emerge from assumptions that begin and end with reifications of national stereotypes, an approach which makes it impossible to clarify why the NM occurred and how it fits into the larger pattern of Japanese military behavior in China. To the contrary, such responses serve only to marginalize carefully researched and more complex historical analyses of the NM. Because their definitions of "massacre," "victim," and "perpetrator" differ in fundamentals, it is unlikely that Japanese revisionists and their counterparts abroad can ever reach a consensus on what happened at Nanjing. In such an environment, the dispute over the NM will never achieve closure, and nationalistic and ethnocentric narratives will continue to attract a popular audience. The consequences of such an outcome can only be to further

poison relations between China and Japan.

In my book, I portray the NM as an event that has been severely politicized and distorted from several directions. I show how the subsequent treatments of an historical event across national boundaries can reveal more about the anxieties, prejudices, and political agendas of its commentators than about the event itself. In exploring this ongoing instance of uses and abuses of history and memory, I hope to provide an antidote to the poisonous tendency of the NM literature to provoke hatred rather than reasoned analysis, understanding rather than mutual recrimination, and make it possible to approach a truer understanding of one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century.

Takashi Yoshida is assistant professor of history at Western Michigan University and author of The Making of the "Rape of Nanking": History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States. This article was written for Japan Focus. Posted on December 19, 2006.

Notes

[1] This essay summarizes Chapter 10 ("War Over History and Memory") of my The Making of the "Rape of Nanking": History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 129-153.
[2] Tilman Durdin, for example, reported that at least 33,000 Chinese were killed during the Battle of Nanjing. See "Japanese Atrocities Marked Fall of Nanking After Chinese Command Fled," New York Times, 9 January 1938, p. 38. In contrast, in The Nanjing Incident (Nankin jiken), published in 1997, Kasahara Tokushi defined the NM as the atrocities which occurred during both the Battle of Nanjing and the ensuing occupation, namely from December 4, 1937, until March 28, 1938. He estimated that the Japanese Army and Navy killed between 100,000 and 200,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians in Nanjing and its six counties. See Kasahara Tokushi, The Nanjing Incident (Nankin jiken), (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1997), pp. 214-28.
[3] These numerous "masochistic" museums provoked the neonationalist backlash in many spheres including the call for textbook revision and the decision by the Yasukuni Shrine to renovate its war museum, the Yushukan. Until the first national war museum, the Showakan was built, these museums highlighting Japanese atrocities had few competitors.
[4] Kasahara, The Nanjing Incident, p. 224, n46 and n47.
[5] Onodera Toshitaka, Sengo hosho saiban toso no kadai to tenbo (Problems and Prospects in Postwar Legal Struggles over Compensation), pp. 13-15.
[6] Nishio Kanji, et al., eds., New History Textbook (Atarashii rekishi kyokasho), (Tokyo: Fusosha, 2001), pp. 270, 296.
[7] See, particularly, Iris Chang, The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II (New York: Basic Books, 1997). For a more detailed analysis of Chang's volume, see Takashi Yoshida "Refighting the Nanjing Massacre: The Continuing Struggle over Memory," in Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing, eds. Fei Fei Li, Robert Sabella, and David Liu (M.E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 166-71. On the role of racism in wartime Japan and the United States, see John Dower, War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).