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A crop of new movies released to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre is set to again dredge up the controversy about one of the 20th Century's most notorious events. How will Japan react?

One way to learn what happened in one of history's most noxious but disputed episodes is to ask Mizushima Satoru. After what he calls "exhaustive research" on the seizure of the then Chinese capital by Japanese troops in 1937, estimated to have cost anywhere from 20,000 to 300,000 lives, Mizushima offers a very precise figure for the number of illegal deaths: zero.

"The evidence for a massacre is faked," explains the president of right-wing webcaster Channel Sakura. "It is Chinese communist propaganda." For support, he brandishes a book containing what he says are dozens of doctored photos. One shows a beheaded Chinese corpse with a cigarette stuck in its mouth. "Japanese people don't mistreat corpses like that," he says, stabbing the page for emphasis. "It is not in our culture."

The world will soon have a chance to assess these claims when Mizushima's movie, *The Truth of Nanjing* hits the cinemas. The documentary is supported by over a dozen lawmakers, including Nariaki Nakayama, a former education minister under ex-Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and a panel of academics led by Higashinakano Shudo, a

history professor at Asia University in Tokyo who provides much of its thin intellectual gruel.

Courts in China and Japan recently ruled that Higashinakano libeled survivors (Xia Shuqin and Li Xiuying) of the massacre in two books that documented their experiences of atrocities in Nanjing as fantasies.

Arguments over what occurred in Nanjing began almost as soon as Imperial soldiers marched into the city on Dec. 13, 1937 and have only grown in ferocity since. They are played out for the digital generation on YouTube, where hundreds of clips, including *Who Witnessed Nanjing* and *China Could Not Prove Nanjing Massacre Happened* (sic) are posted, along with the foulest racist comments.

These smoldering disputes are finally set to cross over into mass "entertainment" on the 70th anniversary of the massacre, with nearly a dozen new movies backed by US, European and Chinese money set to pick again at Nanjing's scabs. Most are still being filmed or are in post-production so it is too early to say what to expect, but one thing is certain: Japanese neo-nationalists have little hope of winning the propaganda war second time around.

Mizushima's reputed \$2-million budget for *The Truth* (funded by a network of 5,000-odd supporters) is dwarfed, for example, by the \$53-million Purple Mountain (named after the picturesque peaks around the east of Nanjing) currently filming in China. Adapted from the bestseller *The Rape of Nanking* by the bête noire of Japanese conservatives, Iris Chang, the US-Chinese production is aiming for nothing less than an Asian version of *Schindler's List*,

Director Simon West (of *Con Air* fame) told *Variety* magazine in the summer.

Award-winning Japanese actors Kagawa Teruyuki and Emoto Akira will appear in John Rabe, a German movie also starring Steve Buscemi and Ulrich Tukur (*The Lives of Others*) as the eponymous Nazi, dubbed the “Schindler of China” for his role in rescuing thousands of Chinese civilians in the so-called Nanjing Safety Zone. Rabe is also the subject of another German documentary, “John Rabe: The Schindler of Nanjing,” produced by public service broadcaster ZDF. “There is a lot of fascination with Rabe right now,” says director Annette Baumeister. “For us, we are interested in whether it was possible to be a good Nazi, you know?” As yet, her movie has no Japanese distributor. “We tried to sell the movie to (public service broadcaster) NHK in Japan,” “They said they will make their own movie about the subject. And maybe they will, someday (laughs).”



John Rabe (front left) with members of the International Safety Zone Committee

The \$35-million *Nanking Xmas 1937*, helmed by Hong Kong art-house director Yim Ho, meanwhile, will depict the efforts of the small community of foreigners in the wartime city to protect civilians from rampaging Japanese troops. Then there is *Nanking! Nanking!*, reportedly starring some of the biggest names

in Chinese cinema, including Liu Ye and Feng Wei.

The fact that various arms of the Chinese state are involved in all these productions will doubtless fuel the suspicions of Japanese neo-nationalists that this is a Beijing-steered plot designed to drag Japan through the international mud. Some are already muttering darkly about Chinese “black propaganda.” “China is trying to control what the world thinks of Japan,” said Mizushima.

But the directors and writers behind the movies claim they were forced to tone down content by nervous Chinese censors fretting about their impact on relations with the country’s biggest Asian trading partner.

The makers of *Nanking! Nanking!*, for example, reportedly endured months of vetting before getting permission to shoot, and then on condition that the state-owned China Film Group be allowed to jump aboard. “The movie touches on the sphere of diplomacy,” Director Lu Chuan recently told the Associated Press, hinting that his script was shuffled across the desks of the Foreign Ministry and the Communist Party’s Central Propaganda Department before being given the green light.

Beijing faces a tricky balancing act. Nanjing occupies a central place in the foundational myths of post-1949 China and the success of the Communists in defeating both the Japanese invaders and the nationalists who failed to protect the country from them. The government hopes -- quite legitimately -- to ensure an event that was for decades all but ignored in popular culture is not forgotten, while harnessing it to its own nationalist ends. At the same time it must avoid damaging bilateral ties just as its growing power in Asia butts up against a declining Japan.

Only time will tell if it succeeds. But one sign that the horrific events of December 1937 to

March 1938 are no longer only a bilateral issue is the growing interest of foreign filmmakers. Oliver Stone is reportedly in script development for a movie about Nanjing, and James Bond director Roger Spottiswoode is in post-production with *The Bitter Sea*, about a British journalist who witnesses the massacre. The movie, which stars Brendan Fraser, is scheduled for release in March next year.

The powerful Documentary film *Nanking*, directed by Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman (Twin Towers) and released earlier this year, is already the most watched documentary in Chinese film history, claim its makers. The movie will make extremely uncomfortable viewing for deniers: it is constructed entirely from archive footage of atrocities and witness accounts of survivors narrated by actors such as Woody Harrelson and Muriel Hemingway.



“Hands up”, a photograph included in Guttentag and Sturman’s *Nanking*

“I know about the book’s controversy in Japan,” explains producer Ted Leonsis, who was inspired to put the movie together after reading Chang’s book. “So we hired 38 people who spent 18 months all over the world doing research. Our conclusion was we should have no point of view, to just document what happened.”

“We felt we should only have words from people who were there. We were able to interview Chinese and Japanese survivors and

these accounts are so rich. You know, [Minnie Vautrin](#) wrote 1,100 letters home. So we had all that material.

Leonsis was motivated to make the movie after reading about Iris Chang’s account of the Rape. “Chinese people and Western people teamed up to defend thousands of civilians and their story had never been told. At a time when we’re not very popular outside the US I thought it was fascinating that here were Americans who are considered gods and goddesses in China.”

Most frustrating of all for Mizushima and co., however, is a documentary by Canadian husband-and-wife team William Spahic and Anne Pick. *The Woman Who Couldn’t Forget: The Iris Chang Story*, focuses on the author of the book credited with dragging what she called “the forgotten holocaust” back into the daylight and igniting a movement to remember the massacre among the Chinese Diaspora in North America.



Iris Chang

Chang, who committed suicide three years ago, is the inspiration and unofficial patron saint to most of the new movies, a galling development for her enemies in Japan. Her book was picked apart by conservatives here who accused her of exaggerating, sloppy research and – the biggest sin -- failing to distinguish between the truth and wartime Chinese propaganda. She also largely ignored the work of courageous Japanese scholars and journalists such as Honda Katsuichi, who authored a Seventies (Japanese) bestseller based on interviews with survivors and witnesses, and Fujiwara Akira, until his death the dean of Nanjing scholars. Japanese publishers cite her errors as the reason why the book, released in 1997, has never been translated into Japanese.

The damage runs deep, say historians. “Iris Chang reopened the issue and brought it to the

attention of the international community,” says Mark Selden, research associate in the East Asia Program at Cornell University. “But her careless research and overstatements opened the way for neo-nationalists to discredit (in Japan) not only the book but – guilt by association – much of the solid scholarship that Japanese researchers were producing,”

Whatever about the book’s faults, it did dig up a stinking political corpse that had been buried for years, and drew attention to the overlooked Rabe diaries, another key source for many of the new film projects. “The Nanking holocaust was swept under the carpet by all concerned for geo-political reasons,” Spahic told journalist Thomas Podvin this year. “Her book more than any other event changed that forever.”

For better or worse then, Chang has helped push the issue out of academia and into popular culture, where its impact will be far less predictable, or manageable. At the very least, anti-Japanese sentiment is likely to be inflamed in China, where nationalist passions are already high. A tsunami of bad publicity is also certain to come from Europe and America, as Tokyo is fully aware.

“It is a delicate issue so we hope filmmakers will not create negative emotional reactions,” says government press secretary Sakaba Mitsuo. He says a joint academic committee set up with China to study the issue in a “non-political way” will clarify what happened in Nanjing. “We expect much of this study group, so we hope the movies don’t make the work of the experts difficult.”

That seems unlikely. Few of the millions who will see the movies are likely to appreciate that much of the most sophisticated research on the atrocities committed by Japanese troops during World War II occurs in Japanese academe, although only a tiny fraction appears in English. Or that decades of official censorship and fudging have left many young Japanese

woefully ignorant of what took place. No doubt the movie makers will retort that Japan is reaping what it sows by allowing a small clique of ultra-nationalists, emboldened by support in Kasumigaseki, to hold sway over the debate about Nanjing.

As for Mizushima and other deniers, how will they react to taking such a monumental beating in the propaganda war? "I think that it will reinforce their siege mentality," says Nakano Koichi, a political scientist at Tokyo's Sophia University. He says that many of the people behind Mizushima's production overlap with those who took out a full-page paid advertisement in the Washington Post in June this year, rebutting accusations made against the Japanese government and on the issue of sex slaves.

"They seem to think that they are the sole possessor of "truths" and "historical facts" under siege (by the anti-Japan Chinese among others), and that those "truths" will prevail, if only they are widely and correctly disseminated in the international community, particularly to the American audience. Of course, they are only deluding themselves, and they end up digging a deeper hole for themselves."

Will any of these movies be seen in Japan? As yet, none is scheduled. A spokesman for a major distribution company, who wished to remain anonymous, said releasing them here would be "difficult" though not impossible. "It will depend on the impact they have abroad."

Sakura's Mizushima, meanwhile, says his movie does not have an official release date, although the company plans to show the first two-hour installment to invited journalists in mid-December. The documentary is one of a three-part series, starting with the disputed Tokyo Trials and the 1947 execution of seven war criminals by the US occupation, including Matsui Iwane, the man accused of orchestrating the Nanjing invasion. Mizushima

could be found filming the executions in a Tokyo studio this month in the Nikkatsu Studios. His set designer had recreated the execution gallows and actors were rehearsing by being dropped through trapdoors. "It is very emotional. I hope this will make the Americans regret what they did," he said. "But I don't suppose it will."



Mizushima Satoru in front of a mockup of the gallows used to hang Japanese war criminals convicted at the Tokyo trials

What might we expect from parts 2 and 3? He gives some hints in his reply to a key question: Was the Imperial Japanese Army guilty of *any* war crimes? "None," he replies. "In war, atrocities will always be carried out by a small number of individuals, but did the Japanese army systematically commit war crimes? Absolutely not."

Sidebar: The Nanjing Massacre

While the details and the number of deaths continue to be debated, most historians agree that the Nanjing massacre — also known as the "Rape of Nanjing" — was an atrocity, in which 80,000 or more Chinese civilians and surrendered soldiers were killed (the International Military Tribunal on the Far East in 1946 considered credible a figure of 200,000) and tens of thousands of women raped following the Japanese capture of the

city. Despite compelling documentary evidence, eyewitness accounts – including some by Japanese soldiers -- and photographic evidence, Japanese revisionists continue to reject charges that war crimes and atrocities occurred there. The country's undigested war history continues to poison one of the world's most important bilateral relationships. Recent anti-Japanese riots in China have forced Beijing and Tokyo to set up a joint education panel to narrow major differences of interpretation over wartime events. Some on the Japanese side argue that Nanjing has become so politicized — particularly the often-cited figure of 300,000 deaths inscribed in the Nanjing memorial — that measured academic discussion has become almost impossible. "It is very difficult indeed," says Kitaoka Shinichi, a law professor at Tokyo University who is part of the Japanese delegation to the panel. "But we have to find some way of narrowing the gap between us.



Nanjing Memorial: 300,000 victims

"Neo-nationalist scholars such as Higashinakano and Fujioka Nobukatsu oppose such discussions, arguing that Japanese academics have nothing to gain by talking to their Chinese counterparts. "There is no point in talks," says Fujioka. "The Chinese government has decided there was a massacre — so what good can come out of them?"

Higashinakano and Fujioka are the leading

figures in what critics have called the maboroshi-ha, or illusion school, of Nanjing and Asia Pacific War research which rejects all allegations of war crimes in the taking of the city and indeed the fifteen-year war. Higashinakano says 30,000 published photos of events from the massacre are faked. The two professors' work is criticized by many academics in Japan and even by some within the revisionist school, who say that while the casualty figures remain disputed, their research lacks credibility. "There are a lot of crazy people on both sides who collect around the Nanjing debate," says Hata Ikuhiko, a history professor at Nihon University who wrote the seminal 1986 book *Nankin Jiken* (The Nanjing Incident). Hata argues that roughly 40,000 Chinese died in the taking of the city, although he disputes the application of the term "massacre" to the simultaneous killing of captured soldiers and says wartime Chinese propaganda inflated the casualty figures.

The following lawmakers are listed as supporters of The Truth of Nanjing on the Sakura Channel's website:

House of Representatives

Nishimura Shingo (ex-DPJ), Matsubara Jin (DPJ), Toida Toru (LDP), Watanabe Atsushi (LDP), Akaike Masaaki (LDP), Washio Eiichiro (DPJ), Ryu Hirofumi (DPJ), Matsumoto Yohei (LDP), Inada Tomomi (LDP)

House of Councilors

Matsushita Shimpei (independent), Oe Yasuhiro (DPJ), Nakayama Nariaki (LDP)

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