



4-18-2012

The Rape of Nanking vs. the incident of Nanking: a Literature Review

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Abstract

The Nanking Massacre has become deeply ingrained in the cultural history of both the Chinese and the Japanese; however it has taken on two perhaps contradictory narratives in each of those communities.

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An American Way of War: Science Technology, and Warfare

9 December 2011

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Preface

“Nations rarely commemorate their disasters and tragedies, unless compelled by forces that will not let the politics of memory rest.”

- David W. Blight, Professor of History

For both China and Japan, “it” was a disaster. China calls “it” the Rape of Nanking because hundreds of thousands of lives were taken without just compensation. Japan calls “it” the Incident of Nanking because China had fabricated a tale that slandered and sullied Japanese honor and integrity. To this day, Nanking remains not only an acrimonious topic of debate but also an inhibitor of a healthy relationship between the two nations.

I first became interested in Nanking when I was in the sixth grade. My dad had just picked me up from Chinese school, and I noticed that he had been shaking his head whenever he glanced out the window, a look of disgust plastered across his naturally calm and stoic face. Before I could ask him what was the matter, words had already left his lips: “Those damn hypocrites”. Such toxic verbiage shocked me into further attention and caused me to wonder what the origin of such heartfelt sentiments was. My dad explained to me that the congregation of Toyota Prius’s and Honda Civics around the outside of the Chinese school was a Faustian bargain that the Chinese community in the area had accepted. Chinese parents had sold their

souls in exchange for cheap Japanese merchandise. In supporting the Japanese economy by purchasing cheap automobiles, the parents had forsaken the memories of the victims of the Rape of Nanking, an ignominy that he would never commit.

At the time, I wondered how an event that had occurred nearly seventy years ago, in December of 1937, could still evoke such potent emotions from people as physically removed as halfway across the earth. The truth is that Nanking remains an integral part of the cultural identity of nearly every Chinese person, and they would wish the same upon the Japanese. Reasons for this include not only the sheer quantity of both military and civilian casualties the Chinese claim the Japanese inflicted on them, but also the brutal and blatantly sadistic manner in which these systematic executions occurred. In addition, Japanese refusal to accept the full scale of the event exacerbates tensions even further.

Unfortunately, the events and statistics that surround Nanking continue to be disputed. Arguments range from the simple issue of falsification of photo evidence to the deeply philosophical debate over the nature of the term “Crime Against Humanity”. Though the commanding officer of the Japanese forces in Nanking, Iwane Matsui, was convicted and hanged almost sixty years ago, new publications on Nanking continue to be generated almost every year, proving that the topic continues to still be of great import to a large number of people. In the words of Radhabinod Pal, one of the justices that presided over the trial of Iwane Matsui (in fact the only justice that defended Matsui’s innocence), “the burning of many a Joan may thus only need half an hour: but several centuries would always be needed to find out the truth”. Thus, the purpose of this review is to uncover the truth by analyzing representative works of literature from both perspectives and reconciling or explaining the differences between parallel elements;

the two works are Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* and Higashinakano Shudo's *The Nanking Massacre: Fact Versus Fiction*.

An Overview of the Chinese Perspective

One historian has estimated that if the dead from Nanking were to link hands, they would stretch from Nanking to the city of Hangchow, spanning a distance of some two hundred miles. Their blood would weigh twelve hundred tons, and their bodies would fill twenty-five hundred railroad cars. Stacked on top of each other, these bodies would reach the height of a seventy-four story building.

- Iris Chang, *Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*

In general, this is representative of the Chinese perception on the happenings at Nanking. Iris Chang states in her novel that "experts at the International Military Tribunal of the Far East (IMTFE) estimated that more than 260,000 noncombatants died at the hands of Japanese soldiers at Nanking in late 1937 and early 1938" (Chang 1997: 4). Though she cites primary evidence from the Red Swastika Society, this figure is a source of contention. Furthermore, Chang uses photo evidence, like the one below, in order to illustrate the barbaric atrocities that the Japanese had inflicted upon the Chinese.



(Chang 1997: 146)

It is also important to note who Iris Chang is and why her novel epitomizes Chinese expository writing on the topic of Nanking. When the *Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* first came out, the western world was generally ignorant of Nanking and the tragedy that it had suffered; however, ten weeks atop the New York Times best seller list had brought the issue back into strong focus, inciting perhaps even more outrage from the Japanese than the Chinese. *Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II's* stylistic elements generally mirror Chang's own persona; it is fresh, passionate, and extremely genuine if not a little bit logically unstable at certain spots. Some of the facts in the novel would later be proven erroneous, and Chang would eventually commit suicide in 2004 (due to her depression), leaving behind words that she believed to be "the only way to preserve the essence of a soul" (Chang 2011: 410).

An Overview of the Japanese Perspective

The entrance of the Imperial Army into the capital of a foreign nation is an enterprise of great magnitude, one that will go down in history. Since this event is destined to become known to the entire world, all units are instructed to set a standard for the future by comporting themselves honorably, and by refraining, at all costs, from looting, fighting among themselves, and committing unlawful acts

- General Iwane Matsui, *Nanking Invasion Outline*

Higashinakano Shudo, in contrast to Chang, contends that the Japanese, as a whole, acted honorably and that the few instances of rape, murder, and looting were outliers. Furthermore, he places the death toll of Nanking at a considerably lower number than the one cited by Chang

above. In his novel, he declares “20 days before and immediately prior to the fall of Nanking, the city’s population was 200,000, according to Europeans and Americans who were there at the time. Eight days after the fall and on Christmas Eve, it was still 200,000” (Shudo 2005: ii). This means that according to Shudo, no significant massacre even occurred. The Japanese, of course, generally favor Shudo’s account of the events. Not only does his version of the story of Nanking acquit the Japanese from accusations, but it also paints the Japanese as a kind of generous patron-like figure toward the Chinese. In fact, his novel briefly mentions how the Japanese soldiers transported displaced civilians back to their own cities.

As a history professor, Shudo makes use of many primary documents such as war journals and official orders. In contrast to Chang’s book, which makes use of photo evidence and anecdotes in order to evoke horror and outrage, Shudo’ novel relies less on heated pathos and more on a calm logos. His main purpose in writing the novel, it appears, is to discredit the Nanking advocates and prove that the Nanking massacre was a hoax. Also, having written his novel after Chang’s novel, he has the advantage in that he can rebut the claims made in Chang’s novel. Already on the first page of his novel, he writes, “the western world is beginning to realize that Chang’s book relies on faked photographs and hugely exaggerated accounts” (Shudo 2005: i).

In reading both of these novels, I find that there exist a couple parallel elements and themes that both authors discuss with different spins. The rest of this paper will be devoted toward the analysis of these themes in the context of Nanking and the evaluation of why each author decided to present each concept in a different light. The four themes that will be discussed are the dehumanization of the enemy, the breakdown of rationality under stress, the Lucifer effect and the tendency toward victimization post-conflict. These elements will be presented in

the aforementioned order because they represent roughly the chronological order of occurrence during Nanking.

Dehumanization of the Enemy

By dehumanizing enemies, animal metaphors reduced the sense of guilt about killing human beings in battle. The “lower” the phylum, the lower the sense of guilt, and few phyla ranked lower than insects

- Edmund P. Russell III, *Speaking of Annihilation: Mobilizing for War Against Human and Insect Enemies*

Throughout the history of warfare, dehumanization or demonization of the enemy has been a major technique utilized, and Nanking is no exception.

In her novel *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, Iris Chang cites the diary entry of a Japanese soldier named Azuma Shiro. In it, Shiro describes his observation of the captured Chinese soldiers: “They all walked in droves, like ants crawling on the ground. They looked like a bunch of homeless people, with ignorant expressions on their faces. A herd of ignorant sheep, with no rule or order, marched on in the darkness, whispering to each other” (Chang 1997: 44). This clearly demonstrates how at least one of the Japanese soldiers believed that the Chinese forces were subhuman. Chang attributes this mindset to environmental factors such as the Japanese education system.

In Chang’s opinion, Japanese schools “operated like miniature military units” (Chang 1997: 30). Textbooks functioned as military propaganda and teachers as military recruits. One particular textbook uses the shape of Japan as justification of Japanese superiority: “We appear to be standing in the vanguard of Asia, advancing bravely into the Pacific. At the same time we appear ready to defend the Asian continent from outside attack” (Chang 1997: 30). According to

Chang, it was this flaw in the education system of Japan that facilitated a superiority complex among the Japanese people, justifying mistreatment of the Chinese. Furthermore, Japanese schoolteachers also blatantly promoted hatred of the Chinese. Yelling at one of his students for refusing to dissect a frog, a teacher exclaimed, “Why are you crying over one lousy frog? When you grow up you’ll have to kill one hundred, two hundred chinks!” (Chang 1997: 30). Not only does the term Chink degrade human life, but it also trains the Japanese to feel less guilt at taking human life. In an equal and opposite manner, by describing Japanese dehumanization techniques, Chang dehumanizes the Japanese, likening them to killing machines.

Shuda counters this himself by demonizing the Chinese. He cites ancient Chinese historical literature to support the notion that barbarity also courses through Chinese veins: “the Empress Dowager cut off Madame Qi’s arms and legs, put out her eyes, burned off her ears, forced her to drink a potion that made her deaf, caged her in a tiny room, and named her the ‘human pig’” (Shuda 2005: 8). Again, animal imagery is used, which demonstrates how savagery and dehumanization techniques are not unique to the Japanese. He provides a further example of dehumanization when he explains how Chinese soldiers treated each other: “According to *Nanking Incident Source Material, Vol. 1: American References*, Durdin recanted, admitting that there was a confrontation at Yijiang Gate between Chinese soldiers attempting to escape. Some of them were trampled to death” (Shudo 2005: 56). In using the adjective trampled, Shudo likens the Chinese to a herd of cattle, not much different to how the Japanese soldier called the Chinese “a herd of ignorant sheep”.

Clearly, dehumanization played a large role in promoting the events that occurred in Nanking. According to Chang, the Japanese labeled the Chinese as subhuman due to their belief in their own superiority. This notion of superiority the Japanese acquired through propaganda,

received through the medium of school. In his novel, Shuda himself demonstrates the continuation of this trend by demonizing and degrading the Chinese.

Breakdown of Rationality

Dehumanization of the enemy happened before the war. The breakdown of rationality occurred in Chiang Kai Chek's decision to defend Nanking "to the last man", but first the event that started the war must be discussed in order to fill in the gap between these two themes. Between the two authors, there exists extensive disagreement.

Chang states in her novel that the war started with Japan when "the Japanese army blew up the tracks of a Japanese-owned railway in Southern Manchuria...and fabricated a story for the world press about Chinese saboteurs" (Chang 1997: 29), giving the Japanese an excuse to invade Manchuria. This incident, which occurred on September 18, 1931, is commonly referred to as "The 9.18 Incident". According to Chang, it was this unjust event that led to the unlawful occupation of China by Japan, which later escalated up to war.

Of course, Shudo does not place the start of the war at this point. Instead, he suggests that the war began on July 7, 1937 (just five months before Nanking) with The Marco Polo Bridge Incident. During this conflict, Japanese soldiers were engaging in final maneuvers, practicing with blanks, when they "were attacked without warning by Chinese troops, who were using live ammunition" (Shudo 2005: 2). This places the blame on the Chinese for the start of the war.

Though the two novelists disagree on this point, they seem to agree that Nanking was an untenable situation. The overall sentiment expressed by the narration suggests desperation in face of chaotic management and overwhelming enemy power. Chang herself even gives credit to the massive disparity in the technological capabilities of both nations by mentioning the Meiji Restoration in which Japan transformed into a military nation: "Schools were not run for the

benefit of the students but for the good of the country” (Chang 1997: 31). In fact, when General Tang defended Nanking, he did it without an air force. This is because when “Chiang and his advisors left the city, so too did the entire Chinese air corps” (Chang 1997: 71). Clearly, the Japanese possessed a large military advantage over the Chinese. In addition to the physical military advantage, the Japanese also possessed an advantage in morale. This leads to the question of why the Chinese would defend such a hopeless situation.

Chang contends that it was political pressure that swayed the Chinese into defending Nanking to the last man: “Singling Tang out, Chiang presented him with an ultimatum: ‘Either I stay or you stay’” (Chang 1997: 68). What actually drove Chiang to leave an army in defense of Nanking while at the same time pulling out the entire air force?

Shudo’s text actually provides an explanation for this intriguing question. He reports that during a meeting with his generals, Chiang spoke out: “Nanking is our capital. The father of our nation [Sun Yatsen] is buried here. We simply cannot retreat from the city without putting up any resistance. I am personally in favor of defending Nanking to the death” (Shudo 2005: 25). Thus, Shudo contends that Chiang suggested installing a puppet force under Tang (one of his rivals to the leadership of China) in order to demonstrate that he was Sun’s true successor. It would look like Chiang was fighting to defend the city, but he would withdraw the important part of his force (the main body and the air force) so that his army would not be jeopardized. This demonstrates that political motives can impede practical rationality during a time of high stress.

Lucifer Effect



(Yin and Young 1996: 148)

Now, before the specific atrocities that occurred in Nanking are discussed, it is important to note a particular experiment performed by Philip Zimbardo in 1971, the Stanford Prison Experiment. In the experiment, volunteers assumed the roles of either a prisoner or a guard. Prisoners had to obey the guards, and guards had to keep prisoners in check. By the end of the experiment, Zimbardo was surprised to find that both the prisoners and the guards had lost themselves completely in their roles. Prisoners would go on hunger strikes and suffer from depression and nervous breakdowns. Guards would sadistically torment the prisoners through various actions such as stripping them naked or unleashing fire extinguishers on them. This experiment is significant and relevant to the study of Nanking because it describes the conditions

under which normally kind people can turn sadistic (hence the term “Lucifer Effect”). While this experiment does not provide an explanation for why such an event occurs, it does provide an observation of a phenomenon that accurately models the roles that the Japanese and Chinese played during the Nanking massacre.

In her novel, Chang splits the evil actions performed by the Japanese into three groups: cruel and unusual methods of killing, murder of prisoners of war, and the mass rape of women. While in this paper, they are listed as separate events, it is important to note that there is considerable overlap between these three categories. Chang, in her novel, describes cruel and unusual punishments using vivid and gruesome imagery. One particular method of killing stood out as particularly sadistic and cruel: “Another group of two hundred Chinese soldiers and civilians were stripped naked, tied to columns and doors of a school, and then stabbed by *zhuizi*-special needles with handles on them- in hundreds of points along their bodies, including their mouths, throats, and eyes” (Chang 1997: 87). If this is in fact a true occurrence, it is hard to predict the motives behind such a cruel action proving how even today, not everything is known about man’s descent into sadism. The Japanese, according to Chang, also enjoyed staging one hundred man-killing contests. Chang cites an article by the *Japan Advertiser* under the headline “Sub-Lieutenants in Race to Fell 100 Chinese Running Close Contest”:

Sub Lieutenant Mukai Toshiaki and Sub-Lieutenant Noda Takeshi, both of the Katagiri unit at Kyong, in a friendly contest to see which of them will first fell 100 Chinese in individual sword combat before the Japanese forces... the “score according to the Asahi, was : sub-Lieutenant Mukai, 89, and Sub-Lieutenant Noda, 78

Chang attempts to explain this phenomenon by again analyzing the Japanese psyche. She points out that since the soldiers believed that their own lives were worthless, the lives of their enemies

were worth even less: “‘If my life was not important,’ Azuma wrote to me, ‘an enemy’s life became inevitably less important...This philosophy led us to look down on the enemy and eventually to the mass murder and ill treatment of the captives’” (Chang 1997: 58). This ill treatment of captives meant executing them. In a December 13, 1937 order issued to the Japanese 66th Battalion, the authorities command the death of the prisoners of war: “TO COMPLY WITH ORDERS FROM BRIGADE COMMANDING HEADQUARTERS, ALL PRISONERS OF WAR ARE TO BE EXECUTED” (Chang 1997: 41). According to international law, this is a crime. If this document is to be believed, it demonstrates that the Japanese lost themselves in their role as the volunteers in the Zimbardo experiment lost themselves as well. Finally, Chang claims that the Japanese soldiers raped large quantities of women. Again using a first hand account from Azuma Shiro, Chang records: “As we pulled the string, the buttocks were exposed... After a while we would say something like, ‘It’s my turn to take a bath’ and we would take turns raping them. It would be all right if we only raped them... But we always stabbed and killed them. Because dead bodies don’t talk” (Chang 1997: 49).

Shudo specifically counters the claims made in each of these three categories. First, he claims that it was the Chinese that committed cruel and unusual acts, not the Japanese. In describing the Tongzhou massacre, in which Chinese forces overran a small Japanese town, he cites from Volume 5 of the *Reports of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East*: “Behind the café was a house where a Japanese family lived. There I saw a mother and child who had been slaughtered. The child’s fingers had been hacked off” (Shudo 2005: 7). Also, he responds to the accusation that the Japanese had slaughtered prisoners of war by analyzing the war journal of Nakajima Kesago, which reads, “Since our policy is, in general to take no prisoners, we attempted to dispose of them. However, they continued to surrender in droves, first

1,000, then 5,000, then 10,000” (Shudo 2005: 77). Shudo makes the argument that the term “dispose of” did not mean executing the prisoners because “the sound of gunfire would certainly have been audible. Would ‘1,000, then 5,000, then 10,000’ prisoners have surrendered after hearing the gunshots?” (Shudo 2005: 78). Shudo’s argument makes sense logically, but if the prisoners had fallen into the mindset of the prisoners in Zimbardo’s experiment, they would have obeyed the Japanese regardless of what they ordered. And finally, Shudo responds to the Chinese claim that countless women were raped by stating “the absence of any mention of a rash of illegitimate births in *Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone* discredits the argument that 20,000 rapes were committed in Nanking” (Shudo 2005: 178). Rapes could not have occurred without the birth of illegitimate children. In fact, “a total of seven rapes or attempted rapes were reported to Japanese military authorities” (Shudo 2005: 170).

Clearly, there remains a large discrepancy in the number of casualties in Nanking according to the Chinese and Japanese versions of the story. Whether acts of cruelty and sadism occurred also remains under debate by both sides. This demonstrates the chaotic and unpredictable conditions of warfare that warp both statistics and man’s sense of morality.

Victimization

It has been said that a victor can dispense to the vanquished everything from mercy to vindictiveness; but the one thing the victor cannot give to the vanquished is justice. At least, if a tribunal be rooted in politics as opposed to law, no matter what its for and pretenses, the apprehension thus expressed would be real, unless ‘justice is really nothing else than the interest of the stronger

- Radhabinod Pal, Justice of the Tokyo Trials

Judgment following a conflict usually sees a transformation; in hindsight, the aggressor sees himself as a victim. The Tokyo War Crimes trials, which convened during the April of 1946, resulted in the hanging of seven defendants and in the life sentence of sixteen others. Certainly, the outcome of the trials demonstrated that the Japanese possessed at least a minimal amount of culpability, but were they really guilty of so called “Crimes Against Humanity”? Chang and other believers in the Rape of Nanking definitely seem to believe so, but Justice Pal, as one of the only advocates of Japanese innocence, believes that the war crimes trials are an inherently broken system due to an innate bias toward the side of the victor.

Toward the end of his novel, Shudo attempts to define Nanking based on the evidence that he had gathered throughout his self-proclaimed “quest for the truth”. He concludes that Nanking cannot be defined as an “atrocious” because no “cruel, shocking action” (Cobuild English Dictionary) had occurred. The only atrocity the Japanese were guilty of was ransacking. Shudo also acquits the Japanese of slaughter because a slaughter in the context of Nanking would have to be a massacre, and Nanking was not a massacre because “Chinese troops did not surrender en masse” (Shudo 2005: 144) (thus Nanking was an act of war). In fact, the Japanese stated during the war crimes trials that they felt as if they were the victims due to the use of the atomic bomb:

The losses and damages then inflicted on human lives and material things in Nanking, are almost insignificant when compared to those which the principal cities of Japan suffered in consequence of the war. More so, would it be, if compared to the indescribably horrors to which countless innocent Japanese women and children and other civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were subjected by the atomic bomb

- Iwane Matsui’s defense team

This transition of the Japanese from the aggressor in Nanking to a victim of the atomic bomb represents an interesting argument; however, the court eventually decided “the *tu quoque* defense of using an atrocity on one side to cancel out an atrocity on the other side was not allowed in the context of the law” (Brook 2001: 682). Thus, Matsui was sentenced to hang.

Conclusion

In four days, it will be the seventy-fourth anniversary of Nanking. As the passage of time widens the gap between the victims of the massacre and us, it becomes ever more imperative that we not forget their story because as Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel contends, “to forget a holocaust is to kill twice”. And although the accuracy of “facts” may never be certain, it is discussion and debate that root out the erroneous bits of data and keep the pool of knowledge even cleaner than before. For this reason, I implore you to remember Nanking and keep the souls of the innocent alive.

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