
Traditionalist, Centrist, and Revisionist Schools: The Controversy and Debate over the “Great Nanking Massacre”

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I have had to look at so many corpses over the last few weeks that I can keep my nerves in check even when viewing these horrible cases. It really doesn't leave you in a 'Christmas' mood; but I wanted to see these atrocities with my own eyes so that I can speak as an eyewitness later. A man cannot be silent about this kind of cruelty!

—John Rabe

In December of 1937, the Japanese Imperial Army marched into China and began committing acts of aggression upon the lay citizens that many would deem “atrocities.” Eyewitness accounts, diaries, letters, and photographs captured unthinkable crimes against countless men, women, and children. Rape, murder, arson, and looting were rampant, and the city of Nanking became a symbol, to some, of “one of the worst instances of mass extermination.”¹ In the 1970s, a debate began over the actual destruction inflicted upon the citizens of Nanking and other cities. The event received many labels from “The Rape of Nanking” and “The Great Nanking Massacre,” to the “Nanking Incident” and the “Nanking Campaign,” all of which would be important to certain schools of thought that would emerge on the subject.

This essay will seek to explore and explain differing schools of thought, as the “Rape of Nanking” is not a cut and dry issue even some seventy years later. Journalists, historians, scholars, and regular citizens will all disagree on the matter to some extent. Some of the major factions that emerged, and which the author will examine, are the Traditionalists, the Centrists, and the Revisionists. The author will also mention some minor factions as they pertain to the major factions and will investigate other issues such as the timeline argument, and the numbers argument.

The search for objectivity among extreme (and not so extreme) schools of thought will begin with works by investigative journalists, which include newspaper and magazine articles. Eyewitness accounts and family stories passed down from generations receive significant weight when dealing with the subject.

Original research by scholars in Japan, China, and the United States fueled the debate further as the questions “did it really happen” and “why did it happen” force themselves to the forefront.

The Traditionalists

In 1971, a Japanese reporter by the name of Honda Katsuichi traveled to China on an investigative reporting mission, and reported his findings back to *Asahi*, the newspaper for which he worked.² He wrote a series of articles he then converted into a book that detailed enormous atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army on the Chinese people in 1937. In his mind, and according to his evidence, the Rape of Nanking did take place; it was absolutely illegal, countless women and girls were raped, and as many as 300,000 plus people were slaughtered during that period. With the advent of Honda’s writings came an analysis by the scholar Hora Tomio who began the Traditionalist school of thought.³ They both believed wholeheartedly in the findings of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMFTE, 1946-48) which executed two high-ranking Japanese military officers for war crimes.⁴ Honda came to be known as a Traditionalist, taking a position which has also been called “The Avowal Faction,” “The Atrocities School,” or the “Massacre School.” Scholars considered Honda an “Extreme Traditionalist” while they considered Hora Tomio a “Moderate Traditionalist.”⁵ What differed between the two was their belief in the number of people murdered.⁶ According to Yamamoto, Honda was instrumental in researching and discovering primary sources such as letters and diaries, but his goal was to disprove revisionist opinions.⁷ Did Honda have personal motives in wanting to prove his own theory rather than simply to obtain the truth?

According to Gamble and Watanabe, some of his countrymen hated Honda for “outing” the atrocities of the war, but he was “dedicated to revealing the historical truth, no matter how painful or personally risky it may prove to be.”⁸ On the other hand, some felt “Honda’s attitude seemed cavalier to many Japanese—not all of them closet chauvinists—who felt that journalists should get their facts and figures straight and present both sides of the story.”⁹ Those who came to that conclusion did so by analyzing the “100 man killing contest.” According to the story, two Japanese soldiers by the names of Mukai and Noda had a contest to see who would be the first to kill one hundred Chinese. Both were neck in neck in the

race, and at the end, Mukai had killed 107 and Noda had killed 105. Neither soldier could say who killed 100 first, so they kept going until they reached 150.¹⁰ Hora first analyzed this story when he read it in a book published in 1966 by Omori Minoru.¹¹ Since then, one cannot research this topic without reading about this “contest” in nearly every publication on the matter. Traditionalists tended to take the view that this story was fact, but later evidence showed that writers may have exaggerated the story and they had to admit that this particular story was not “as they first depicted it.”¹² Although the Traditionalist school can be broken into sub-factions, they all tend to agree on the guilt of the Japanese Imperial Army.

The Centrists

The second school of thought on the issue of Nanking is the Centrists, also known as “Minimalists.” Centrists are a group that cannot seem to commit to either side of the argument and they remain in-between. They are “those who criticize or are criticized by both the revisionists and the traditionalists.”¹³ They take heat from both sides for being neutral, and believe that each school has a “political position toward China and other Asian countries.”¹⁴ Kitamura argued that he deemed even the best-intentioned historians to be Centrists when they tried to be objective in their work on the subject. He said that researchers on the subject always take a certain “political position” and naysayers always believe a motive is involved.¹⁵ For example, if he gave evidence of an atrocity, one school may agree with him and the other attacks him as being a part of that school. If he presented evidence leaning toward the other group, the opposite group attacks him again. Since he is a Japanese citizen, they accuse him of not being able to be objective on the subject, and therefore, he must take the approach of an historian and “return to the basics of historiographic research” in order for them to take him remotely seriously.¹⁶

Centrists can be broken into the sub-categories of Traditionalist Centrists and Revisionist Centrists. Both groups believe in the same basic principles; the Japanese soldiers participated in wretched behavior, they executed POWs and it was illegal, but the massacre of innocent civilians did not occur. The only aspect that set the two groups apart, like the Traditionalists, were the numbers of people actually murdered.¹⁷

The Revisionists

The Revisionist group was an interesting school of thought that was conceived and slowly evolved, through evidence, into something completely different. Scholars called the Revisionist camp the “Illusion” faction or the “Denial” group. Certain authors, appalled at the slander of the Japanese Army, government, and way of life, at first, flat out denied that the Rape of Nanking ever occurred. Tanaka Masaasi wrote *Fabrication of the Nanking Massacre* in 1984 that contended that all documents and photos of the event were “faked” and he placed blame for the war on China.¹⁸ Yamamoto Shichihei, who was previously an army officer, wrote under the pen name of Isaiah Ben-Dasan and began to raise valid questions regarding the “killing contest.”¹⁹ Yamamoto would go on to write articles claiming that the Nanking massacre did not take place, and argued that the Japanese should not have to apologize for something they did not do.²⁰ Suzuki Akira was another journalist who denied the atrocities and felt that Chinese and Westerners “exaggerated” reports. Suzuki went on to compile a book of his articles and won literary awards for his work.²¹

The Revisionist camp began to lose credibility with the accusation that Masaaki forged some pages of the diary of Matsue Iwani, a Japanese Imperial Army officer executed for the war crimes of his soldiers.²² Not only was that a blow to the Revisionist school, but when the diary of Japanese Lieutenant General Nakajima Kesago was printed, it held detailed records of his soldiers’ daily exploits and his account “directly destroyed the scheme of the ‘total denial’ group’s credibility such as that of Suzuki, Tanaka and many others.”²³ At this point, Revisionists felt backed against a wall and in order to save their credibility, they felt forced to shift into the category of “partial” deniers.

The Revisionists separate themselves into the sub-categories of “Moderate Revisionists” and “Extreme Revisionists.” Both groups agree that the Japanese Army committed some misbehavior in China, but on the issue of executing POWs, Moderates have no comment on whether it was legal, whereas the Extremes believe that the execution of POWs was legal. Both camps continue to deny the decimation of innocent civilians.²⁴

As recently as 1982, the Japanese government (no doubt with influence from the Revisionist faction) revised public school textbooks. They banned the term “Nanking Massacre” and changed the term “invasion of Korea and China”²⁵ to

“moving into Korea and China.” By using a twisted syntax and tone, the government was able to downplay their factual atrocities in order to save face with their own people.

Timeline

The three previously examined schools of thought all differ on not only the number of casualties, but also the timeline in which the atrocities took place. Those who asked each faction and sub-faction for their opinions would receive a separate answer from each. Honda, of the Traditionalist camp, believed that the Japanese atrocities began when they landed at Hangchow Bay in November, not at their arrival in Nanking on December 13-17, 1937.²⁶ He felt it was important to include the destruction taking place between their landing in China and actually claiming victory on December 17. A fellow Traditionalist, Hiraoka Masaaki, in his work *What Did the Japanese Do In China?*, agreed that the timeline should be expanded to include what happened before December 17, but he goes so far as to say the atrocities began in August during the Shanghai Incident.²⁷

Not only was there an argument as to the beginning point of the Japanese atrocities, but to the end as well. Honda argued that not all of the heinous acts by the Japanese soldiers ended when Nanking fell. In the introduction of his book, Honda says the horror continued until February of 1938.²⁸ From eyewitness accounts compiled throughout his work, he argued that the end-point could easily be the day the Japanese surrendered—August 15, 1945.²⁹

One may ask if there is a difference in adding or subtracting a few days from the timeline, and would it really make a world of difference? It absolutely did when it came to the body count. The timeline of the Rape of Nanking may seem trivial, but it is quite important in the grand scheme of analyzing the separate schools of thought.

Playing the Numbers Game

The trend shown so far indicated that time and numbers separated the different factions. The ideology of each school depended on the timeframe and number of victims, as well as whether or not each individual school felt the Japanese Army was acting legally or illegally. It is obvious from the evidence that

the Traditionalist school had the greatest number of casualties. They believed the numbers were upward of 300,000 in the few short weeks aforementioned.³⁰ Included in the body count were not only Chinese soldiers (during fighting), but the murders of POWs and ordinary citizens. Moderate Traditionalists used a more conservative number (although still staggering) of 150,000 to 300,000 dead.

The Centrists' numbers were much lower compared to the Traditionalists. The reason being, they did not include the murders of citizens because they denied those specific atrocities ever took place. The numbers ranged from 10,000 to 42,000 victims.³¹ The Revisionist numbers, on the other hand, were incredibly and unbelievably low. They ranged anywhere from fifty victims to a maximum of 7,000.³² Revisionists believed that atrocities against citizens were nonexistent, and the murder of POWs was legal under wartime rules, which eliminated many thousands from their count. A former Japanese Army officer, Unemoto Masami, organized a gathering of ex-officers in order to devise a number that they believed was consistent with the number of casualties witnessed. The figure they came up with was from three to six thousand killed.³³ This paltry estimate would have insulted even a Centrist.

Earlier, this paper mentioned that Honda revised his timeline to include weeks rather than the mere five days the Japanese Army was in the city of Nanking alone. Revisionist scholars were able to twist to their convenience that Honda would have needed a longer timeframe to allow for the murder of over 300,000 people, since five days was simply not long enough to complete the task. Revisionists saw this point as Honda failing to win the argument while playing the numbers game.³⁴ On the polar opposite side of this argument, Iris Chang argued that during the war against China, more than nineteen million people perished. She based her numbers not only on the Rape of Nanking, but also on the entire war. Included in this count were the victims of biological and chemical warfare, "medical experimentation," starvation, displacement, and disease.³⁵ Brooks argued that the "death toll in Nanking was higher than those of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined" and "it is higher than the total number of civilians who died in England, France, and Belgium for the entire WWII period."³⁶ If correct, put into this perspective, the numbers are astounding.

The barbarity of the situation in China went far beyond the murder that was occurring on a daily basis. Rape, arson, and looting were widespread and caused just as much damage to citizens as taking the life of a member of their

families. Revisionists tended to brush aside the fact that rape was occurring in extraordinary numbers, and brushed it under the carpet as nothing more than sexual “shenanigans.” Eyewitnesses such as John Rabe reported rapes occurring all day, everyday, and the Japanese military set up “comfort stations” in order to curb the mass rapes that were occurring. According to author Yuki Tanaka, “Tinamura Mamoru ordered Lieutenant Colonel Cho Isamu, his junior staff officer, to carry out this task.”³⁷ The accounts from members of the Japanese Army discredit certain Revisionist factions who deny that rapes ever occurred.

The question of “did it (the Rape of Nanking) really happen” seemed to have consensus from all factions (considering the evolution of the Revisionist school), that indeed, something took place, although the spectrum is broad on what exactly occurred. In the United States, support for Japan was failing after 1931; and by 1939, Americans were more likely to sympathize with the Chinese plight.³⁸ The mass media was reporting in favorite avenues such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Reader’s Digest*, and *Time Magazine*, so the average American was aware of the goings on in China; after all, “The Rape of Nanking” was a label given by the American media.³⁹ By the time the debates heated up again in the 1970s, it would have been difficult to say that the subject, discussed widely in the 1930s as well as again in the 1970s, was taboo.

For a journalist, an historian, a scholar, or an average person, when does the quest for the truth mutate into a war of who is “right?” Is the dividing line a fine one, or an obvious one? The schools of thought mentioned in this essay sought to explain the differing views from one extreme to the other. These factions continue to butt heads over who is correct, rather than moving forward to assure no repetition of what took place. It is far from romantic to discover a world of mass decapitation, babies bayoneted to death, innards springing forth from pregnant women, and forced rape among family members.⁴⁰ It is enough to make one sick to the stomach, although denying the events ever occurred can also induce the same effect.

Notes

1. Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 5.

2. Adam Gamble and Takesato Watanabe, *A Public Betrayed: An Inside Look at Japanese Media Atrocities and Their Warnings to the West* (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 2004), 265.

3. Minoru Kitamura, *The Politics of Nanjing: An Impartial Investigation*, trans. Hal Gold (Lanham: University Press of America, 2007), 5.

4. Timothy Brook, "The Tokyo Judgement and the Rape of Nanking," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (August 2001): 673.

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

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 249.

8. Gamble, *A Public Betrayed*, 254.

9. Bob Wakabayashi, "The Nanking 100-Man Killing Contest Debate: War Guilt Amid Fabricated Illusions, 1971-75," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 316.

10. Ibid., 310.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 309.

13. Yamamoto, *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*, 251.

14. Kitamura, *The Politics of Nanjing*, 4-5.

15. Ibid., 11.

16. Ibid., 12.

17. Yamamoto, *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*, 254.

18. FeiFei Li, Robert Sabella and David Liu, eds., *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 6.

19. Wakabayashi, "The Nanking 100-Man Killing Contest Debate," 316.

20. Li, *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing*, 59.

21. Ibid., 59-60.

22. Ibid., 61.

23. Ibid.

24. Yamamoto, *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*, 254.

25. Li, *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing*, 60.

26. Yamamoto, *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*, 246.

27. Honda Katsuichi, *The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*, ed. Frank Gibney, trans. Karen Sandness (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 135.

28. *Ibid.*, xxv.

29. *Ibid.*, 135.

30. Yamamoto, *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*, 254.

31. *Ibid.*

32. The numbers of victims in this section were taken from Yamamoto's chart 7.1 "Rape of Nanking Controversy in Japan: Schools and Their Opinions," 254.

33. Li, *Nanking 1937*, 62.

34. Yamamoto, *Nanking: Anatomy of an Atrocity*, 246.

35. Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 216-217.

36. Roy L. Brooks, ed., *When Sorry Isn't Enough: The Controversy Over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 104.

37. Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During WWII and the U.S. Occupation* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 13.

38. Takashi Yoshida, *The Making of the "Rape of Nanking" History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 37.

39. *Ibid.*, 38.

40. Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 81-99.

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