



NANJING MASSACRE MEMORIAL HALL

Nanjing, China

32.03556, 118.74348



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Executive Summary

The Nanjing Memorial Hall commemorating the six weeks of Japanese occupation in the Sino-Japanese War remains a key point of contention in Sino-Japanese relations. This case study explores how contested historical events can lead to the construction of national identities and the impact and tension this can cause in spaces meant to commemorate these foundational events. Showing how memorials can have immense political ramifications.

Introduction

The Nanjing Memorial commemorates the six-week Japanese occupation of the city of Nanjing in Jiangsu Province between 13 December 1937 and January 1938 during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The memorial has been open since 1985 and has faced numerous protests from Japanese politicians and the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Areas of disagreement mainly concern the death toll of the massacre estimated by China and the content of the memorial exhibition, particularly what was seen by Japanese right-wing groups as uncharitable and pedagogically harmful depictions of Japanese troops. While some of those concerns have been addressed, the narrative of the Nanjing memorial has remained largely unchanged. Both countries saw the memorial as intimately connected with the construction of national identity, whether past, present, or future.

Background

The Japanese occupation of Nanjing was a key event in the Second China-Japan War, a result of the rising militant, imperialist Japanese nationalism and expansionism in Asia. Following full-scale battles near Shanghai earlier in the year, Japanese troops under the command of General Matsui Iwane paved the way towards the occupation of Nanjing by December 1937 and occupied the much-abandoned capital of Nationalist China by the second week of the month.



Figure 1: "The Front Wall of the Memorial" Image by tonbabydc via Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

In the following six weeks, there was widespread looting, murder and rape of Chinese civilians and disarmed soldiers by the Imperial Japanese Army: what Rana Mitter referred to as 'an uninterrupted spree of murder, rape and robbery', reducing the city to 'utter chaos'.¹ These were recorded by accounts not only from Chinese citizens but also a small number of Westerners who established a 'Safety Zone' within the city.²

The trauma of the war and the massacre itself had been diluted from the public mind following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 and the decades of political instability and economic difficulties that followed. In 1972, the diplomatic relations between China and Japan

¹ Rana Mitter, *China's War with Japan, 1937-1945: The Struggle for Survival* (London: Penguin, 2013), 130.

² *Ibid*, 131-2.

were normalised and improved by signing a joint communiqué. By the 1980s, however, the massacre was once again brought to the forefront of public attention as the Chinese government sought to strengthen the nation's patriotic education. Furthermore, this clashed with the controversial approvals made by the Japanese government since the 1950s to change the contents of several history textbooks on the war of 1937-45. What sparked the Chinese decision to establish a memorial was the approval in June 1982, reportedly, to change the term 'invasion' of Chinese cities and territories to 'entry' in certain textbooks.³

To Chinese authorities, this was seen as an attempt to rewrite history and cover up Japanese war atrocities. By the end of 1983, the Nanjing municipal government prepared for the construction of the memorial museum, coined by then-leader Deng Xiaoping as 'The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Invading Japanese Troops.' The complex was eventually built on the site of a killing field where much of the massacre took place, near what previously was a mass grave.

The memorial's first phase was completed in August 1985 and opened on the 40th anniversary of the Second World War. In China, this event is more commonly known as the 'Chinese War of Resistance Against Japan.'⁴ It was designed by Qi Kang, a Nanjing-based architect who also designed other museums and memorial sites for the Chinese government, including the Yuhuatai Martyrs Memorial Park and the Zhou Enlai Memorial Hall in Huai'an.⁵ A second phase of the museum opened in 1997, coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the massacre, and the third phase was completed in May 2007.⁶

The Nanjing Memorial is the most popular history museum in China, receiving five million visitors each year since its final addition in 2007.⁷ In 2015, a second museum site opened at Liji Lane in Nanjing, a former site of a "comfort women" station, with the exhibition focused on highlighting



Figure 2: "Women in Pain" Image by tonbabydc via Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

³ Long Gao (高龙) "曾"消失"的南京大屠杀" [The once 'disappeared' Nanjing Massacre], *南方都市报* [Southern Metropolis Daily], December 18, 2013.

⁴ Yan He, "Remembering and Forgetting the War: Elite Mythmaking, Mass Reaction, and Sino-Japanese Relations, 1950-2006," *History and Memory*, 19 no.1 (2007): 43-74.

⁵ Kirk A Denton, "Museums, Memorial Sites and Exhibitionary Culture in the People's Republic of China," *China Quarterly*, 183 (2005): 565-586.

⁶ 侵華日軍南京大屠殺遇難同胞紀念館 [The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders website], "館史事跡" [Museum History].

⁷ Karl Gustafsson, "Memory Politics and Ontological Security in Sino-Japanese Relations," *Asian Studies Review*, 38 no. 1 (2014): 71-86.

this part of the second Sino-Japanese war.⁸ More recently, the Chinese legislature has designated December 13 to be the annual state commemoration day of the massacre, and the memorial hall complex has served as its main venue since 2014.⁹

Physical and Symbolic Appearance

The Nanjing Memorial is built predominantly out of light grey marble. On the front wall of the memorial, the phrase '300,000 victims' is carved in different languages; on the inner wall is a reminder to visitors: 'Never forget national humiliation' (Figure 1).¹⁰ The first phase of the memorial features an enclosed plaza with walls of panel sculptures representing the victims of the massacre. (Figure 3) At the centre of the plaza is a sculpture of a woman crying out in pain, symbolising the anguish of the 'six weeks from hell'. (Figure 2)

For Qi Kang, the central idea of the first phase was built around the idea of 'to live and to die', showcasing the grief of the massacre.¹¹ The first phase ends with a stairway leading up from the plaza onto a grass lawn, symbolising resistance and life. The second phase of the memorial focuses on pain and hatred as organising themes, and the third phase (which occupies triple the space of the existing museum compound) is centred around a detailed multimedia 'experiential' view of Japan's invasion and occupation. The memorial ends with a Peace Square and a 'Wall of Victory'.¹²

The museum exhibit contains photographs, written documents, eyewitness testimonies, and even human skeletons to commemorate the lives lost during the Sino-Japanese conflict. There is also information pertaining to China's wartime resistance and the experiences of 'comfort women,' who were forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese imperial army. The entire memorial area spans 28,000 square meters, with the museum taking up 5,000 square meters.

History of the Contestation

Historiography Debates

The memorial's highly contested nature stems from its role in wider historiographical and political debates regarding the Nanjing massacre. For decades after the Second World War, the Nanjing

⁸ 侵華日軍南京大屠殺遇難同胞紀念館 [The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders website], "館史事迹" [Museum History]

⁹ 新華社 (Xinhua). "全國人大常委會關於設立南京大屠殺死難者國家公祭日的決定" [The National Congress decides to create a national day of mourning for victims of the Nanjing massacre]. 共产党员网, Accessed 7 December 2018.

¹⁰ Yinan He, "Remembering and Forgetting the War: Elite Mythmaking, Mass Reaction, and Sino-Japanese Relations, 1950-2006," *History and Memory*, 19 no.1 (2007): 58.

¹¹ William Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 176.

¹² *Ibid.*, 179.

Massacre was not at the forefront of Sino-Japanese political discourse, let alone known by the Western world.¹³ Attention towards the massacre in China was not prominent until the 1980s, against the complex backdrop of the construction of Chinese national identity. This was intensified by controversial Japanese history textbooks, which were seen to have erased the country's wartime atrocities, while right-wing Japanese politicians denied the event's occurrence altogether.¹⁴ Within this context, several key contestations related to the site have emerged.



Figure 3: "Panel Sculptures Depicting Victims of the assacre" Image by tonbabydc via Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Contestation over the Death Toll

One of the major controversies is the dispute between the two countries over the extent of violence and the life lost during the six-week occupation. A widely cited estimate puts the number of deaths at 200,000 to 300,000, a statistic often invoked by the Chinese government, with the 300,000 figure being used for the memorial itself. However, some Japanese academics and politicians have disputed that this death toll was a result of the Japanese occupation, as well as denied the Chinese government's claim that the occupation was a form of systematic killing.¹⁵ One

¹³ The Nanking Massacre is widely understood to be brought attention to the Western world by Iris Chang's 1997 book *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War Two*. However, while the best-selling book received general acclaim, it also received considerable criticism from historians regarding the selective treatment of source materials and essentialization of Japanese interest groups.

¹⁴ William Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 165.

¹⁵ Yuki Miyamoto, "The Ethics of Commemoration: Religion and Politics in Nanjing, Hiroshima, and Yasukuni," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80 no.1 (2012): 34-63.

reason for the disputed death toll is a lack of accurate information, given the wide burning and destruction of official Japanese wartime documents. The lack of information is also a result of the absence of a credible and comprehensive population census in China during that time. These disputes over the death toll and the extent of violence are ongoing in the present day. In a 2018 speech where Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that 300,000 people were killed in the Nanjing Massacre, the Japanese government was quick to respond, retorting that it was 'difficult to determine the concrete number of victims.'¹⁶

Importantly, disputes over death toll estimates should not be conflated with right-wing Japanese individuals and groups that have denied the massacre altogether or have minimised the suffering caused by the imperial Japanese army as a matter of military necessity.¹⁷ In 1987, Masaaki Tanaka, former secretary to General Matsui Iwane, who was commander-in-chief of the Japanese army stationed in Nanjing during the occupation, published a book named *What Really Happened in Nanking: The Refutation of a Common Myth*.¹⁸ In the book, Tanaka claims that no indiscriminate killings by the Japanese government were conducted against Chinese civilians during the occupation and that 'the so-called Nanjing Massacre was a fabrication, mere propaganda manufactured by the Tokyo Trial and the Chinese government.'¹⁹ Following denials of the massacre by Japanese conservative revisionists, Nanjing University announced in the mid-1980s that it would cooperate with historical archivists to form the 'Committee to Compile Materials on the Japanese Military's Nanjing Massacre.'²⁰

Strategic Motives Undergirding Contested Claims

Scholars and politicians have argued that the Chinese state's timely interest in uncovering the violence of the period of Japanese occupation can be attributed to the rise of China as a world power, which emboldened it to confront Japan in contrast to its historical position, where it would have previously been reluctant to do so.²¹ While the official state aims to delineate the memorial

¹⁶ Japan Times, "Japan complains after China says 300,000 died in Nanking Massacre," *Japan Times*, January 14, 2015.

¹⁷ Such conservative denial of Japanese wartime atrocities can be similarly seen in the continued commemoration of other Japanese imperial sites such as the Yasukuni Shrine, where Japanese military figures are heralded as 'war heroes' as opposed to war criminals.

¹⁸ Prior to publishing his own book in 1987, Tanaka was found to have altered General Matsui's Battlefield Diary in several hundred places as its publication editor. The diary was published in 1985. For more on Japanese conservative revisionist works regarding the Nanjing Massacre, See; Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi's, "The Nanking Massacre: Now You See It,....," *Monumenta Nipponica*, 56 no.4 (2001): 521-544.

¹⁹ Yuki Miyamoto, "The Ethics of Commemoration: Religion and Politics in Nanjing, Hiroshima, and Yasukuni," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80 no.1 (2012): 45.

²⁰ Alternatively, some other revisionist studies of the Nanking occupation period have confirmed the extensive scale of violence and death, but rooted it not in deliberate Japanese state policy but military mismanagement, lack of discipline, and the emergence of ultra-nationalist sentiment and ideology. Combined, these factors led the Japanese troops in the Shanghai-Nanjing front to conduct a kind of 'scorched earth' campaign in order to avenge fallen soldiers in other war fronts. See; Richard Bush, "Thoughts on the Nanjing Massacre," *Brookings*, December 1, 2007.

²¹ Yuki Miyamoto, "The Ethics of Commemoration: Religion and Politics in Nanjing, Hiroshima, and Yasukuni," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80 no.1 (2012): 45.

for preserving historical memory and promoting knowledge of China's experience of wartime occupation, it has been argued that the Nanjing Memorial also serves a Chinese nationalist agenda. Such arguments are supported by the temporal context of the Chinese state, which only began to place emphasis on the massacre in the 1980s when the uneven economic development in the country necessitated a new foundation for national identity which was not tied to economic class but rather unified through a common enemy of Japan.²²

Such a basis of national identity could not only unite Chinese citizens beyond class lines but also serve to unite mainland Chinese with their Taiwanese neighbour, in line with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 'One China' vision. Indeed, the 1980s were temporally significant given that China and Japan had already established strong economic relations, but they also coincided with controversies surrounding Japanese textbook guidelines. During this period, textbook outlines were influenced by the Japanese government, which advised using softer language regarding Japan's imperial past as part of a state operation to construct a pacifist Japanese identity.

The demonisation of Japanese military forces and the positioning of the CCP (and the Chinese people at large) as the heroic victims is a clear narrative adhered to by the Nanjing Museum and Memorial. Significant emphasis is placed on the strength of the Chinese in resisting the Japanese occupation. Another emphasis is the role of the Chinese Communist Party in leading this heroic resistance.²³ In the descriptions of panel sculptures within the museum, Japanese imperial troops are repeatedly referred to as demons/devils (恶魔) and beasts (禽兽).²⁴ At the end of the memorial near the Peace Square, a Chinese soldier is strategically placed, standing with a foot on a Japanese helmet, signifying China's victorious resistance against the demon-like invaders of the city. (Figure 4)

There are clear Chinese state-defined aims that undergird the Nanjing Memorial site. The Chinese Ministry of National Defence states that the memorial is important for 'internal patriotic education'



Figure 4: "Chinese Soldier" Image by felibritu via Flickr CC BY-NC 2.0

²² William Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²³ Patrizia Violi, "Educating for Nationhood: A Semiotic Reading of the Memorial Hall for Victims of the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders," *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society* 4, no. 2 (2012): 41-68.

²⁴ The memorial translated the latter into 'brutal devils'.

and 'external promotion of peaceful relations.'²⁵ The massacre is continually commemorated in Chinese state politics today. In 2014, the Seventh Session of the 12th National People's Congress declared December 13th 'a national day of mourning for the victims of the Nanjing Massacre.'²⁶ On the museum's official site, visits by world leaders, notable figures²⁷ and extensive commemoration regulations are all publicly listed and memorialised.²⁸ According to the curator of the Nanjing Memorial, the commemorative day 'reconfirms the fact of the Nanjing Massacre in a legal form' and that the 'holding of national commemorative ceremonies for the victims is a means to refute shameless claims of some Japanese' and 'maintain the historical truth and promotion of peace for all.'²⁹ While the commemoration of the massacre has been politicised to some extent, genuine notions of remembrance are reflected, contrary to the claims of some Japanese nationalist groups.

Contestation Regarding the Content of the Memorial Exhibition

Numerous conservative Japanese politicians and civil society groups have spoken out against the memorial's contents, arguing that the demon-like depiction of Japanese troops has negatively impacted Japan's national image abroad and damaged the national identity formation of Japanese children.³⁰ Prominent among these civil society groups is the 'Citizens Society for Removing Improper Photos from China's Anti-Japanese Memorial Halls', and a group consisting of Japanese Parliament (Diet) members named the 'Diet Members' Society for Removing Improper Photos from China's Anti-Japanese Memorial Halls'. These groups not only contest the contents of the Nanjing Memorial but also other sites, such as the 9.18 (九一八事变) Exhibition Museum (alternatively called the Mukden Incident) and the Ping Ding Shan Massacre (平顶山惨案) monument.

These groups have published books arguing for removing photos from the exhibition, arguing that some are decontextualised while others are inauthentic. The removal of what these groups declared as 'improper' photos was argued to be critical for protecting the 'honour of the homeland.'³¹ However, other segments of the Japanese public, including pacifist groups, object to the actions of these groups and have even published guidebooks for Japanese school visits to such sites.

²⁵ 中华人民共和国国防部 [Ministry of Defence, People's Republic of China]. "侵華日軍南京大屠殺遇難同胞紀念館" [The Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall], December 15, 2014.

²⁶ 新華社 (Xinhua), "全國人大常委會關於設立南京大屠殺死難者國家公祭日的決定," [The National Congress decides to create a national day of mourning for victims of the Nanjing massacre] February 27, 2014.

²⁷ 侵華日軍南京大屠殺遇難同胞紀念館 [The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders website], "館史事迹" [Museum History].

²⁸ 侵華日軍南京大屠殺遇難同胞紀念館 [The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders website], "國家公祭保障條例" [National Commemoration Regulations].

²⁹ Chengshan Zhu, "Why has China Set a Memorial Day for the Nanjing Massacre?" *Beijing Review*, March 20, 2014.

³⁰ Karl Gustafsson, "Memory Politics and Ontological Security in Sino-Japanese Relations," *Asian Studies Review*, 38 no. 1 (2014): 80.

³¹ *Ibid.* 79.

For these conservative groups, memorials such as the Nanjing Memorial Hall pose an ontological threat towards what Japanese identity is and how it is formed. A member of the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Morioka Masahiro, argued that the 'masochistic experience' depicted by Chinese war museums would mean that 'Japanese children would not be able to take pride in being Japanese' with Yamatani Eriko, another LDP member argued that the museums will mislead foreign visitors in regard to Japan's image when they visit China.³² The Nanjing Memorial remains a prominent site of contestation, given the ongoing debates on the scale of human life lost in the massacre and the politicised role the massacre plays in Chinese nationalist rhetoric.

Decision-Making Processes

Following domestic pressure from the Japanese Parliament, the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) repeatedly requested measures to be taken against the exhibition in light of these image concerns. This resulted in creating a 'friendship corner' towards the end of the memorial, a common feature in other Chinese wartime museums. In Autumn 2007, Japanese government representatives (including the Japanese ambassador) met with Chinese government personnel to discuss the Nanjing memorial thirteen times, as the Japanese consul in Shanghai repeatedly criticised the museum's contents as problematic.³³

The 'friendship corner' established includes pictures of four PRC leaders (Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao) in photos with various Japanese Prime Ministers and outlined the normalisation of Sino-Japanese relations. Giving a timeline of the most significant events, including the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signing, the China-Japan joint declaration, and a panel of economic and cultural exchange and people's diplomacy. The 'friendship corner' includes a panel display outlining the official development aid given by the Japanese Government to the PRC in the immediate post-war period. The three most 'improper' photos critiqued by Japanese groups were ultimately removed from the exhibit.

However, the demands from conservative factions of the Japanese Parliament and civil society groups did not alter the basic narratives and interpretations of the exhibition, and the depiction of Japanese Imperial troops as demon-like entities remains. Further, the central narrative of the heroic leadership of the CCP and the brave resistance of the Chinese people remains the dominant narrative within the site.³⁴ Moreover, the sections on Sino-Japanese friendship at various Chinese wartime museums and memorials remain a very small element within the museum exhibitions. Despite a domestic power shift in Japan where the Democratic Party of Japan became the ruling party (which was previously the LDP) between 2009-12, demands for altering the contents of

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 81.

³⁴ Ibid.

Chinese war museums remain unchanged. To this day, lobbyist groups in Japan continue to ask such museums to stress Japan's peaceful post-war trajectory and the friendly Sino-Japanese relations that exist today.³⁵

Summary and Conclusions

Ultimately, the Nanjing Memorial has been and remains a contested site for constructing Chinese and Japanese national identities. The deep entanglement of the massacre with what it means to be Chinese and Japanese and the timely appearance of the massacre to the public eye (during a period where China needed a new common denominator to unite its people) have given rise to politicised and gendered portrayals of the massacre. While right-wing Japanese groups have pushed for alterations of the exhibitions regarding the portrayal of Japanese troops and the enhancement of Japan's now 'peaceful' international image, the narrative of the exhibition remains largely unchanged.

Monolithic, essentialising accounts that fit the Nanjing occupation and massacre into meta-narratives may have limitations for observers, academics, and the public due to the complexity and contested nature of the events. China's political utilisation of its past victimisation is not necessarily in conflict with genuine intentions of remembrance, just as the contestations from conservative Japanese groups with regard to the massacre exhibition (and the massacre itself) are not necessarily representative of Japanese understandings and memories of history at large. The imperial history of East Asia continues to be a highly complex and contested subject, the legacy of which means that sites such as the Nanjing Memorial Hall will continue to come under renewed contestation.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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