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Can the Past Serve the Present? The Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall

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Abstract

The memorialization of the Nanjing Massacre, constructed almost fifty years after the event, poses challenges for historians. This article asks the simple question: why? Why has the evolution of memory in China and Japan circumvented the issues of Nanjing for nearly half a century before letting it erupt onto the international stage in the past few decades? By examining the circumstances surrounding the opening of Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall and its ensuing impact, this article not only attempts to shed light on how the memorial has been misconstrued in global historical memory, and the fundamental historiographical debates surrounding it, but also the utility of memory in historical narrative. When dealing with the ghosts of the past in the politics of the present, is it ever possible to purge historiography and memory of government?

Keywords

China – collective memory – Japan – memorial – Nanjing Massacre – Sino – Japanese relations

The nature of historical study means that historians are inextricably confronted with many difficult questions. How does memorialization relate to historical practice (even if memory is at odds with reality)? Does the perpetuation of memory create animosity?

In the context of the Nanjing Massacre, a mass killing of Chinese soldiers and civilians after the city of Nanjing fell to the Japanese Imperial Army in December 1937, these difficult questions pose an even greater challenge. Although historical consensus agrees upon the analytical importance of the

massacre, given its scale and atrocity, ascertaining exactly what we want to achieve in our investigations is unclear: engaging in a straightforward historical analysis of the past—examining “how?” and “why?”—or something much more complex. Sadly, it is not the “uniqueness” of the massacre that necessarily demands our historical attention but, rather, its ramifications and how it has since been perceived. The Memorial Hall for Compatriots Killed in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Forces of Aggression, opened by the Nanjing Municipal Government in 1985 in “memory of the victims” and expanded in 2007, is one of the most important physical tributes.¹ In light of this, the symbol of the memorial poses a number of questions for historians: How could such a horrific event remain so little reported for so long, only to explode into international attention in the past few decades? Indeed, how has the massacre become so profoundly entwined with—even emblematic of—both Japanese imperialism and contemporary Chinese identity, as Ian Buruma suggested?² The answer can be found in the creation of the memorial as not a singular event but, rather, as a provocative action, surfacing causes and consequences. By examining the major movements in public representations of the massacre in postwar geopolitics, this analysis addresses three questions. First, why wasn’t the memorial complex built immediately after the conclusion of the war? Second, what circumstances and whose interests propel the impetus to memorialize? And, third, how has the memorial affected ongoing discourse and relations? This article not only attempts to shed light on these questions but also, in response, demonstrates that the process of memorialization creates a representation of the past that is, in fact, relevant to the demands of the present through the shifting national narratives of the Chinese government.

Because of the upsurge in interest to commemorate mass violence, atrocity, and genocide, we must continuously question the impact of producing selective memories. Do these initiatives advance reconciliation among former enemies, or do they have the opposite effect of preserving or even strengthening divisions that lead to violent conflict? A deeper analysis suggests that memorials are created as much for the present as for the past. In order to fully analyze the role of the memorial, it is imperative to tackle the historiographical debate over whether the turn to memory—to echo Joan Tumblety—poses an unwanted impediment to our historical learning.³ Seeking an “objective”

1 Zhu Chengshan 朱成山, *Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre* (Nanjing: Scala, 2011), 1.

2 Ian Buruma, “The Afterlife of Anne Frank,” *New York Review of Books* 45, no. 3 (1998): 7.

3 Joan Tumblety, *Memory and History: Understanding Memory as Source and Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

or “scientific” approach to Japanese militarism, in an attempt to adequately “historicize” the memorial, would only deprive the topic of its full emotional complexity; to attempt to, as James Sedgwick describes, “divorce” moral relativism from historical inquiry is as futile as it is impossible.⁴ In order to historicize national memory effectively, we should have a self-reflexive awareness of our role on multiple levels—to combine cognitive historiography with our intrinsic moralistic and didactic duty as historians, to henceforth understand how political and ideological circumstances shape global historical memory. Even a cursory look through Chinese and Japanese documents reveals the ubiquitous claim to “historical facts” or “truth,” leaving the impression that distortion and fabrication have been used to delegitimize opposing views.⁵ As Buruma claims, the memory of the massacre is “drenched in politics”; attempts to represent the past are attempts at revisionist history—the “only question being revision to what end, revision with what desires in play?”⁶ Thus, at the methodological level, the memorial poses a considerable epistemological challenge for historians. In this particular case, not only is the memorial’s narrative in question but also the decision and timing of its creation that exemplify Charles Maier’s claim of politics as a factor not outside historical inquiry but, rather, inherent in it.⁷

First and foremost, it is imperative to closely analyze the reasons why the memorial complex in China was not built immediately after the atrocity, for they reveal much about how the massacre has been appropriated. The lack of attention immediately after the massacre has been attributed to the attitude of the government in Beijing. Post-World War II global policy included a national unwillingness to play the victim: “if the country is not wealthy and strong, its people suffer.”⁸ Furthermore, the “War of Resistance against Japan” scholarship and public memory was under particularly strict control by the

4 James Burnham Sedgwick, “Memory on Trial: Constructing and Contesting the ‘Rape of Nanking’ at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 1946-1948,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 43, no. 5 (2009): 1232.

5 To give but one example, John Rabe’s diary was published in Japan under the title *The Truth about Nanking*.

6 Ian Buruma, “Memories of the Nanjing Massacre Are Drenched in Politics: War and Remembrance,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 153, no. 36 (September 5, 1991): 51-52; Adam Phillips, “The Forgetting Museum,” *Index on Censorship*, 2 (2005).

7 Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 32.

8 Zhu Chengshan 朱成山, ed., *Qin-Hua rijun Nanjing datusha xingcunzhe zhengyanji* 侵華日軍南京大屠殺倖存者證言集 [Collection of Testimonies by Survivors of the Nanjing Massacre during the Japanese Army Invasion] (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 1994), 4.

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during this period.⁹ After its victory in the civil war, the CCP emphasized its leadership in military resistance against Japan rather than the suffering of the Chinese people. Noting a “virtual absence of public commemoration of the massacre before 1982,” Daqing Yang explains that any investigation was criticized for “stirring up national hatred and revenge.”¹⁰ Reflecting this disparity between political and public voices, an eight-chapter manuscript by historians at Nanjing University was held hostage to the political ideology of the time. The Chinese government declined to publish the classified manuscript.¹¹ The country had rid itself only recently of its last foreign influence in the Sino-Soviet split, and the government wanted to build up the nation’s newly developed self-esteem. Memorializing the massacre would have brought unwanted attention to a past of suffering and invasion, thereby diverting attention from China’s emerging revolutionary progress.

Although extensive media coverage is a recent phenomenon, what is crucially important to our debate is the complexity of the “bloodbath” and efforts at countering official amnesia.¹² Although the memorial was not constructed until nearly half a century after the atrocity, it was the war crimes trials in the years after the war that placed the massacre at the forefront of historical concern. Significantly, these trials brought together the narratives of victims, bystanders, and perpetrators for the first time. A shortcoming was the limited focus of the trials, which provided the illusion that after the individual criminals were punished for their actions, everything would be resolved.¹³

Pinning sole responsibility on the Japanese high command pushed the limits of rational scholarship to emotionalism and political agendas. Representations of the massacre diverged after these trials, although they did not conflict with one another again until two decades later. In the meantime, the massacre shaped opinions in China and Japan under different political and ideological circumstances. The response to the “numbers game”—debating the final

9 James Reilly, “China’s History Activists and the War of Resistance Against Japan: History in the Making,” *Asian Survey*, 44, no. 2 (2004): 276-77.

10 Yang Daqing, “Convergence or Divergence? Recent Historical Writings on the Rape of Nanjing,” *American Historical Review*, 104, no. 3 (1999): 858.

11 Gao Xingzu, Wu Shimin, Hu Yungong, and Cha Ruizhen, “Ribei diguo zhuyi he Nanjing datushua 日本帝國主義和南京大屠殺 [Japanese Imperialism and the Nanjing Massacre: Brutal Killings Committed by the Japanese Invasion Force in the Safety Zone],” trans. Robert Gray, *China News Digest*, March 26, 1996.

12 “Nanking Horror,” *North China Herald*, December 29, 1937, 477, 484.

13 Mark Eykholt, “Aggression, Victimization and Chinese Historiography of the Nanjing Massacre,” in *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 23.

total of victims of the massacre—planted the seeds of national narratives that dominated historiography in both countries: the first motivation was to garner international sympathy and support by rendering the massacre as one of the most horrific events ever witnessed; the second was to normalize the crime, purposefully taming the horrors and thus giving this mass murder no specific place in history.

Moreover, as Sino-Japanese friendship became integral to China's plans for economic development, the Chinese government actively avoided criticism that dwelled upon Japan's wartime aggression and divergent constructions of memory in order to avoid disrupting relations between the two countries. The Japanese government downplayed the degree of its militaristic advances in the immediate postwar aftermath, while the Chinese government in China purposefully overlooked the massacre as it focused on building up its international standing, which relied upon a strong relationship with Japan and the West. Hardly the unifying event that it has become today for the Chinese, the massacre was dismissed because of political and economic interests. After the two countries signed a formal Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978, the normalization of relations was defined by peace, not war. Although Japanese imperialism was not swept completely under the rug in public discourse, Chinese leaders' comments made it appear inconsequential for present-day relations. For example, a speech by Deng Xiaoping in August 1975 dismissed militarists as a "minor factor" in Japanese development.¹⁴

The decision to build the memorial was made in the complicated atmosphere surrounding war and Sino-Japanese relations in the present day rather than the past. As the national narrative of the CCP shifted to encompass the contrast between its past "victimized" status with its present strength, the impetus to memorialize the massacre emerged. The century-long competition over power and primacy became part of the larger context of the Chinese government's diplomatic maneuver with Japan; at the same time, the collective memory of the massacre considered by many to be a "genocidal rape" is intimately linked to Chinese identity.¹⁵

The new effort to memorialize was a product not only of a changing China but of changing international relations. The year 1985 marked the fortieth

14 "Teng Hsiao-ping Comments on War, Japan Peace Accord," *China Daily*, August 18, 1975, A3; Robert Sabella, Fei Fei Li, and David Liu, ed., *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), xxiii.

15 Adam Jones first described the Nanjing Massacre as "one of the most savage instances of genocidal rape," in his *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 329.

anniversary of China's victory over Japan, and memorialization threatened the amity between those who admit and those who downplay wartime atrocities. For the Chinese, the massacre is a larger multilayered symbol of foreign imperialism visiting upon Chinese soil (consequently joining a string of events—including the Opium Wars and the burning of the Summer Palace). So, to the public this is a highly sensitive event, inspiring debate and stoking emotions when it is doubted and misconstrued. After 1960, the “revisionist” reaction, doubtless present from the outset, became potent enough to dominate government policy, including Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's visits to the Yasukuni shrine, which is condemned for glorifying Japanese militarists.¹⁶ Even more significantly, the fight over memory was restarted by the 1982 controversy over revisions to Japanese textbooks, which attempted to whitewash wartime imperialism by changing the term used for pre-1945 Japanese activities from *shinryaku* [invade] to the neutral *shinko* [enter].¹⁷ Within days, the renaming of the “incident” (reduced from “rape” or “massacre”) escalated into an international diplomatic crisis, as formal protests were filed against the “unprovoked and unconscionable Japanese attempts to exterminate the Chinese spirit.”¹⁸ Despite the Japanese apology and willingness to “study the matter seriously,” this controversy revived a concerted public effort to strengthen the memories of war aggression.¹⁹ The government struggled to balance the pillar of nationalism with friendship in the name of establishing capital and technology for economic reform.²⁰ Despite the government control over “how people commemorate the war with Japan,” as the state faces an increasingly restive

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- 16 For details of the Chinese reaction, see “Nakasone Visit to Yasukuni Draws Criticism,” *China Daily*, August 19, 1985, D1-2; “Xinhua Commentary Condemns Yasukuni Shrine Visit,” *China Daily*, August 22, 1985, D1-2; “Yao Yilin Answers Reporters' Questions,” *China Daily*, August 27, 1985, D1.
- 17 Ienaga Saburō, “*Misshitsu*” *kentei no kiroku* [Records of Authorization behind “Closed Doors”] (Tokyo: Kyokasho kentei shosho o shiensuru zenkokurenrakukai [National League for Support of the School Textbook Screening Suit], 1993), 95-102; Kimijima Kazuhiko and Inoue Hisashi, “Nankin daigyakusatsu hyōka ni kansuru saikin no doko [Recent Developments Concerning the Evaluation of the Great Nanjing Massacre],” *Rekishī hyōron*, 433 (1986): 29; “Distortion of Japanese History Textbooks Cited,” *China Daily*, July 7, 1982, D2; “*Renmin Ribao* Criticizes Japan's Revised Textbooks,” *China Daily*, July 21, 1982, D3-4.
- 18 “Kyodo: PRC Protests Japanese History Rewrite,” *China Daily*, July 27, 1982, D1.
- 19 Chalmers Johnson, “The Patterns of Japanese Relations with China, 1952-1982,” *Pacific Affairs*, 59 (1986): 402-20.
- 20 “Wang Zhen Meets Japanese Corporation Delegation,” *China Daily*, August 14, 1985, D3; “Wang Zhen Attends Anti-Japanese War Exhibition,” *China Daily*, August 13, 1985, D1-2.

population, it is not clear how much autonomy the state still has.²¹ Nanjing had once again become a battlefield, this time in a war of words. The denial by certain Japanese has contributed to a revival of Chinese anger toward both Japan and the CCP regime for not pursuing an investigation of the event earlier and exposing it to the world.²² To reclaim history as a public memory after decades of neglect has proven to be a difficult task, for we cannot come to the same conclusion as Higashinakano Osamichi: “it was not recorded because it did not happen.”²³

China’s reaction to the shift in US policy after the cold war became deeply embroiled in historical polemics when public discourse framed the massacre as a solely political, rather than moral, matter. Because of Nanjing, Japan had to rebuild itself as a pacifist nation, symbolized by Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, which renounced the sovereign right to wage war.²⁴ By excluding Beijing from the peace settlement with Japan and encouraging Japan to remilitarize, the US political agenda shifted from the international sympathy of “99 and a half percent of the American people” in 1938 to posing a direct threat to the new government in China.²⁵ Because of this context, therefore, the massacre came to be invested with a very different meaning. This movement reflects revived public anger at Japan’s wartime atrocities, inflamed by publicized accounts of Japanese historical revisionism, right-wing activism, and potential remilitarization. The use of history as a means to a political end in the present could not have been more blatant.

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- 21 Eykholt, “Aggression, Victimization and Chinese Historiography,” 36; Daqing Yang, “The Malleable and the Contested: The Nanjing Massacre in Postwar China and Japan,” in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, ed. Takashi Fujitani, Geoffrey White, and Lisa Yoneyama (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 76; Lucian W. Pye, “Memory, Imagination, and National Myth,” in *Remembering and Forgetting: The Legacy of War and Peace in East Asia*, ed. Gerrit Gong (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 1996), 26.
- 22 Denials on record by Professor Nobukatsu Fukioka and the mayor of Nagoya, Takashi Kawamura.
- 23 Higashinakano Osamichi, “Aratamete ‘Rabe no nikki’ o tettei kensho suru [Thoroughly Examining the Diaries of Rabe Again],” *Seiron*, April 1998, 289; idem, “*Nankin gyakusatsu no tettei kensho* [Solid Examination of the “Nanjing Massacre”] (Tokyo: Tentensha, 1999), 227.
- 24 Robert Barnett, “China—America’s Ally,” *Far Eastern Pamphlet*, 5 (1942): 9; Patrick Hein, *How the Japanese Became Foreign to Themselves: The Impact of Globalization on the Private and Public Spheres in Japan* (Berlin: LIT, 2009), 118.
- 25 Thomas W. Lamont to N. T. Johnson, Papers of Nelson Trusler Johnson, the Manuscript Division, LC, container 35, February 26, 1938.

As mentioned earlier, the memorial was built as a response by the Chinese government and the Chinese people to the Japanese textbook revision. Historians of the massacre must be aware that “memory making” and “history writing” are carefully cultivated by the state. These memories are not static but, rather, have evolved over time in postwar history according to the profound shifts in China’s domestic and international politics. Yet these factors alone prove insufficient to explain the movement’s emergence and growth. As an illustration that memorialization is a process that reflects the will of those in power, Peter Gries noted that after the death of Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976, treatment of the war markedly shifted, from “heroic resistance” to “victimization.”²⁶ As Chinese influence (and, arguably, the ability for economic independence) grew, the government maintained a nation-centered narrative history of suffering while contrasting China’s newfound status.²⁷ Although the shift in CCP leadership as the sole turning point is not a convincing argument, Fogel potently articulates an interesting debate: Chinese identity has been questioned by the increasing rift between Taiwan and the People’s Republic and increasing numbers of Chinese living abroad.²⁸ As the diaspora searches for a unifying voice with which to articulate its distinct identity, the Chinese are superficially latching onto a negative event as a self-perceptive definition of what it means to be inherently “Chinese.” Eviatar Zerubavel argues that the physical structures of memory tell narratives that “help us string past events in our minds, providing them with historical meaning.”²⁹ Once a historical event becomes part of contemporary identity formation, it becomes difficult to challenge its key assumptions, discuss it logically, and, in short, act as a responsible historian. We may lay claim to memory for part of our identity but to relate it entirely to the present is to lose ourselves. The way in which a society remembers its past often shapes the way a nation handles conflict in the future.³⁰ But the more a country feels the need to insist on memory to construct its past, the more memory seems to be in danger.

26 Peter Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 79.

27 Tang Meiru 湯美如 and Zhang Kaiyuan 章開沅, ed., *Nanjing: 1937 nian 11 yue-1938 nian 5 yue* 南京：1937年11月—1938年5月 [*Nanjing: November 1937 to May 1938*] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Sanlian Bookshop, 1995), 16.

28 Joshua A. Fogel, “Introduction: The Nanjing Massacre in History,” in *The Nanjing Massacre*, 3.

29 Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 13.

30 Judy Barsalou and Victoria Baxter, “The Urge to Remember: The Role of Memorials in Social Reconstruction and Transitional Justice,” *Stabilization and Reconstruction Series*, 5 (2007).

Lastly, as the narrative shifts once again, the postwar growth of the massacre as a symbolic event in Chinese consciousness and the impact of memorialization has been orchestrated to affect Sino-Japanese relations today.³¹ Differences in opinion are not encouraged in China, and the memorial does not invite critical debate. The efforts at fortifying the collective memory through visual images and emotive diction, describing victims as “national martyrs” [*guo shang* 國殤], have fed into the extensive discourse of the “three alls”—loot all, burn all, kill all—committed by Japanese troops against the Chinese soldiers, mothers, and children.³² According to a poll conducted by a Chinese newspaper in early 1997, for example, when asked what respondents associated with Japan, nearly 84 percent of the 100,000 people surveyed chose the massacre.³³ Instead, the failure to separate nation from commemoration demands repentance from the Japanese and patriotic loyalty from the Chinese to, as a slogan on the museum puts it, “redouble their efforts to strengthen China and support its foreign policy of peace and independence.”

Chinese historians who study the massacre, however, still face a task even more formidable than that of their counterparts in Japan. One overseas Chinese writer admitted that “the Japanese have produced more works [on the massacre] that are systematic and persuasive, while the Chinese publications use more emotional language but lack detailed analysis and comment.”³⁴ Thus the limitation of massacre historiography may lie in the sweeping and highly emotive macrohistory. As microhistorical theory would assess, the use

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- 31 Thomas Berger, “The Power of Memory and Memories of Power: The Cultural Parameters of German Foreign Policy-Making since 1945,” in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 76-84; Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain, *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 2.
- 32 “Shizhi buwang qiyuan heping 矢志不忘 祈願和平 [Never Forget the Past, Pray for Peace],” *Guangming ribao*, December 13, 2015; F. Tillman Durdin, “All Captives Slain,” *New York Times*, December 18, 1937; Durdin, “Japanese Atrocities Marked Fall of Nanking after Chinese Command Fled,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1938; Archibald Steele, “Nanking Massacre Story: Japanese Troops Kill Thousands,” *Chicago Daily News: Red Streak Edition*, December 15, 1937; C. Yates McDaniel, “Nanking Horror Described in Diary of War Reporter,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 18, 1937.
- 33 “Survey by *Zhongguo qingnianbao* [China Youth Daily],” *Asahi shinbun*, February 17, 1997.
- 34 Yang Qiqiao 楊啓樵, in *Riben de Zhongguo yimin* 日本的中國移民 [Chinese Immigrants in Japan], ed. Zhongguo zhongri guanxi yanjiuhui 中國中日關係研究會 [Chinese Association for the Study of the History of Sino-Japanese Relations] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1987), 340-41.

of “traditional” historical approaches have, overall, obscured the complexity of its reality; the memorial depends too greatly on sweeping metanarratives to describe the big bureaucratic structures and large processes that ultimately orchestrated the killing of the inhabitants of nearly an entire city. To even begin to tackle such a statistical enormity is a difficult and daunting task for the massacre historian, so it is unsurprising that, given the monstrousness of the event, they aim simply “to render it coherent.”³⁵ To achieve this, the massacre has often been contrasted with the moral benchmark of the Holocaust in the rhetoric of scholarship.³⁶

However, “coherence” should not necessarily remain at the forefront of our historical concern if the massacre, in all its horror, is to be made understandable; indeed, to do justice to its intricacies something more is required than comparative history or historical facts. Asserting uniqueness does not mean that we cannot suggest a typology of such mass atrocities; it just means that the massacre should be historically and morally distinctive, to be firmly embedded in multinational memory as exceptional. The close links between history and collective memory make it all the more important that we ensure macro generalizations do not prevail and that our memorialization of the massacre is hence a fair one, doing adequate justice to its moral complexity.

The ethics of commemoration are focused on justice for the victims, only on making the Japanese admit the CCP version of “historical truth,” achieved to varying extents through the “authentic reconstruction” of the memorial. The memorial transcended the state narrative by integrating indisputable documentation of victims’ voices and qualitative data (as documented in International Safety Zone eyewitness accounts, photos, among others) into an overall historical narrative.³⁷ However, historians should be wary of the tendency to overmoralize and sentimentalize. The decisions about when and where to memorialize ultimately depend heavily on the narratives memorials weave. In order to evoke the authenticity of the tragedy that they commemorate, memorials enhanced by the inclusion of tangible documentation at the actual site, as the memorial was built over the *wanrenkeng* [pit of ten thousand

35 Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), 212, 224.

36 Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 6; Ian Buruma, *Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1995).

37 John Rabe, *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe*, trans. John Woods (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); Hua-ling Hu and Zhang Lian-hong, ed. and trans., *The Undaunted Women of Nanking: The Wartime Diaries of Minnie Vautrin and Tsen Shui-fang* (Chicago: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010).

corpses], a mass execution site.³⁸ The curators honor the identified victims in a burial chamber, specifying around 20,000 names individually in an extensive list on the wall so as to humanize the “300,000” figure that is displayed.³⁹ In the same breath, however, by preserving corporeal remains, the memorial does not assuage concerns over truthfulness. In fact, some argue that this sensational display of human remains has an inherent representational inadequacy: artistic reconstructions cannot give form to the horrors they represent.⁴⁰ Moreover, the sites “feel spatially illogical; they are dwarfed by the historical significance of what took place.”⁴¹ Given the heavily debated concerns and the perilous evidence to which the memorial pays tribute, it is not surprising that the site is contested. We must grapple with the extent to which the memorial fulfills multiple and competing purposes to varying degrees of success—a structure to reassert one’s own historical truth, a device for nationalism, and a reminder to prevent future horrors of war.

Ample scholarship exists that successfully argues the use of collective national memory for ontological security purposes to assert CCP control over war commemoration. Student protests against Japan and the United States for perceived slights against Chinese national pride have demonstrated that nationalist propaganda issued by the government has fallen on receptive ears.⁴² The power of doctoring memory was reaffirmed in 1996 when the CCP, fearful that the Chinese were ignoring this act to “verify history,” added mandatory visits to the memorial to schoolchildren’s curriculum.⁴³ As Adam Phillips argues, “enforced memory is fear of memory, of what it might come up with, so to speak, when left to itself.”⁴⁴ Patriotic education was a product of the larger measure to reenergize loyalty to the CCP among Chinese citizens; consciousness among young people was developed to “never forget this painful history” and campaign for a “Nanjing Genuflection.”⁴⁵ Tsuchida Ryushi of the Liberal

38 Zhu, *Memorial Hall*, 1.

39 Observation made by the author upon visit to the memorial on December 29, 2015.

40 Paul Williams, “The Atrocity Exhibition: Touring Cambodian Genocide Memorials,” in *On Display: New Essays in Cultural Studies*, ed. Anna Smith and Lydia Wevers (Wellington, NZ: Victoria University Press, 2004), 197–204.

41 *Ibid.*, 204.

42 Eykholt, “Aggression, Victimization and Chinese Historiography,” 42–43.

43 Su Donghai, “Museums and Museum Philosophy in China,” *Nordisk Museologi*, 2 (1995): 61–80; “Nanjing Students Forced to Visit Massacre Memorial Hall,” *San Jose Mercury Press*, November 6, 1996.

44 Phillips, “The Forgetting Museum.”

45 Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 95–96; Zhu Chengshan

Democratic Party noted that the pervasive effort to educate and foster “anti-Japanese sentiments” among youth have resulted in debates initiated by those suffering from “apology fatigue” to influence the content of the memorial.⁴⁶ The Japanese consul in Shanghai lodged a protest against the “unbalanced” portrayal of the past to serve present-day relations.⁴⁷ The superfluous claims that the Chinese made, Ryushi emphasized, only provide a pretext for an opponent to dismiss their entire validity.⁴⁸ During the autumn of 2007, three photos deemed “improper” were removed after thirteen bilateral negotiations to placate Japanese concerns.⁴⁹ The new exhibition, “organized so that a small section on postwar Sino-Japanese friendship came last,” seems out of place amid the reconstruction of violence until we consider the government’s narrative.⁵⁰ This echoes the quotation found in the bold print on the concluding wall of the memorial, which reads simply as “past experience serves as a guide for the future.”⁵¹ Though this is a statement directed at a junior-level readership, it can be easily assimilated into our historiographical approach, as historians realize that this phrase should, according to the CCP, be the point of departure for Sino-Japanese relations. By ending visits to the memorial in this way, the government successfully valorizes the massacre by placing it within China’s revolutionary development—a journey through the imperialism, aggression, and suffering in the war, but the focus is on connecting this journey to the CCP’s leadership in today’s China.⁵²

朱成山 and Zhang Qingbo 張慶波, *Qin hua rijun Nanjing datusha yunan tongbao jinianguan chenzhan tuji 侵華日軍南京大屠殺遇難同胞紀念館陳展圖集 [A Pictorial Collection from the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre at the Hands of the Japanese Military]* (Beijing: Changcheng chubanshe, 2008), 292.

- 46 Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Diet Session 154, Foreign Affairs Committee Meeting 17 in Karl Gustafsson, “Memory Politics and Ontological Security in Sino-Japanese Relations,” *Asian Studies Review*, 38, no. 1 (2014): 79; Daniel Chirot, *Confronting Memories of World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 164.
- 47 Katō Takanori, “Nankin daigyakusatsu kinenkan baransu kaku tenjibutsu nitchūkan hatten no samatage [Damage Caused by the Unbalanced Interpretations of the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Exhibition],” *Yomiuri shūnban*, January 25, 2008.
- 48 Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Diet Session 154, Foreign Affairs Committee Meeting 17 in Gustafsson, “Memory Politics,” 79.
- 49 Hiranuma Takeo, *Han'nichi kinenkan [Anti-Japanese Memorial Halls]* (Tokyo: Tendensha, 2009), 2-3.
- 50 Gustafsson, “Memory Politics,” 71-86.
- 51 Loosely translated by author from the original 前事不忘, 後事之師.
- 52 “Shizhi buwang qiuyuan heping.”

To conclude, the shifting political agenda of the Chinese government allowed the symbol of the memorial to claim power and primacy today. The difficulty for the historian, however, is that we are constantly involved in a dialogue with the past that has implications for the present: the framework of memory is largely a “struggle over power and who gets to decide the future.”⁵³ This debate raises important questions about historical methodology, the role of politics and moral judgment, and of historical truth and who is entitled to it. History—what happened in the past and what it is made to mean in the present—is written by human beings, interpreted by our judgments, and leveraged by our objectives. Political exploitation, seeking to mold a monotone voice of “history” into a single truth with a capital T, presents it as devoid of human interaction and agency. Even if memory is skewed, we must try to fill in the context for, and do adequate justice to, the massacre’s complexities.

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53 Alexandra Barahona de Brito, Carmen González-Enríquez, and Paloma Aguilar, eds., *The Politics of Memory: Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38; Paul Connerton makes a similar point in *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1.

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