



# The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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## [Response to Herbert P. Bix, "Remembering the Nanking Massacre"](#)

by Joshua a. Fogel

I have just read Herbert Bix's long and thoughtful Japan Focus review essay of a new contribution to the recent spate of books and articles concerned with the Nanjing Massacre (also known as the Nanjing Atrocity or Incident). I found much food for thought there and much that I would like to have seen fleshed out more fully. There were as well a number of points that I found more questionable or even irresponsible. For these reasons, I have chosen to air several points of agreement and disagreement in the interest of widening an important debate. Let me note from the outset, however, that this is not meant as another review of the book discussed by Bix, but of the issues he raised in his review.

The book that Bix reviews, *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing* (ed. Fei Fei Li, Robert Sabella, and David Liu; M. E. Sharpe, 2002), is the result of a conference held in 1997 on the sixtieth anniversary of the events analyzed; it was convened at Princeton University and received some press coverage at the time, including indications that a number of speakers were shouted down or had their talks disrupted by activist students and others who (obviously) sharply disagreed with their points of view. It is a credit to the editors that they managed to put together the volume and include such differing points of view.

Most of my own views on the Nanjing Massacre can be found in my introduction and in the essays (by Mark Eykholt, Takashi Yoshida, and Daqing Yang) in the volume I edited for the University of California Press, *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, and in a number of reviews of others' work (such as the books by Iris Chang and Yamamoto Masahiro). I gave a faculty lecture just a year ago at the Institute for Advanced Study on the phenomenon of Chinese historical memory of the massacre, the essence of which will be found in a chapter of a book presently being edited by Bob T. Wakabayashi of York University. Thus, I will not rehearse my own views here, except insofar as they pertain to specific points being made.

In his second paragraph, Bix makes the sort of statement I find so troubling in much work done by Chinese ethnonationalists (of which, of course, Bix is not a member). Describing the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Chinese capital, Bix states: "An unprecedented rampage of arson, pillage, murder, and rape ensued." There is no doubt that great amounts of all four "ensued," but was it "unprecedented"; and does this mean unprecedented in 1937-38 or unprecedented ever? He must mean the former, for (unless you swallow Iris Chang's version of the events hook, line, and sinker) there's no denying that the mass slaughter that followed Nanjing throughout central and eastern Europe overwhelms that of Nanjing's winter of 1937-38. But, let's look more closely at the former. In terms of sheer numbers, many more Armenians died on Turkish terrain during that genocide from 1915, more Africans in the Atlantic slave trade, and far more kulaks in the Soviet collectivization; and certainly later, more Cambodians at the hands of their own people, and more Hutus and Tutsis just a decade ago than the entire death toll in Nanjing—and more peoples could be added to this appalling list. Thus, whatever show of solidarity with our friends and colleagues such a statement as Bix's may be intended to convey, it is largely at the expense of accuracy, and, in fact, only opens progressive people everywhere to assault by rightwing revisionists who trawl about waiting for errors of this sort as a means of dismissing entire arguments altogether. In a piece such as this one by Bix that offers such intriguing ideas about comparative genocide, this was not a happy place to begin.

Two sentences later, Bix enters the minefield of the numbers game. Concerning the death toll, he writes: "Chinese sources range as high as 340,000; the best Japanese estimates put the figure as 'no fewer than 200,000.'" This sort of statement invites the conclusion that death toll estimates are based on and slanted by the nationalistic concerns (or nationality) of the estimator. However, only someone seriously deluded, irrespective of ethnicity, or whose point of view has irreparably been skewed by nationalistic concerns now argues a figure near 340,000. And, who are the authors of "the best Japanese estimates"? Bix does not tell us. Kasahara Tokushi who is cited below for his fine work on the subject and who is, indeed (in my estimation), one of the finest scholars, Japanese or otherwise, working on the war years and the Nanjing Massacre in particular, estimates roughly 100,000 for the immediate Nanjing area and rising to as high as twice that figure for the much wider region. I would wholeheartedly endorse Bix's next sentence, though, for "[f]uture collaborative research could well alter the latter [200,000] figure." I'm not sure if Bix means by this that 200,000 may later be shown to be too low an estimate, but in any event "collaborative research" on this topic would be a salutary development, to say the least. A recent conference on the military history of the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-45, in which Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars came together for four intense days of scholarly exchange, demonstrated that this sort of collaborative work is now certainly possible without dissolving into vitriolic attack, defensiveness, and polemics. The numbers remain in doubt among serious Japanese researchers, both academic and journalistic. Even as sympathetic a figure as Honda Katsuichi told Frank Gibney that he (now) estimates a death toll of one hundred and several tens of thousands (see Gibney's introduction to Honda Katsuichi, *The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*, M. E. Sharpe, 1998, p. vii).

Bix moves immediately to note that the Nanjing Massacre did not enter public consciousness in Japan until the Tokyo Trials and "even then the story was not followed up and the issues soon disappeared from public consciousness." It is, of course, difficult to say anything firm about what does or does not enter "public consciousness," but the Nanjing Massacre was not absent from Japanese publications from 1948 through the entire Cold War, as Bix argues. As Daqing Yang is now discovering, the author Hotta Yoshie (1918-98) wrote a series of pieces of historical fiction in the 1950s about the atrocities in Nanjing and leftwing journalists began researching the events in the late 1960s, in certain instances inspired by the contemporaneous American war in Vietnam. Some of the work of the most famous of these, Honda Katsuichi, has even appeared now in English. In any event, the statement, "[t]hrough four long decades of cold war, issues of war responsibility were covered up," is at best inaccurate, at worst an insult to all those hard-working Japanese scholars who are principally responsible for having the seamier side of events of the Sino-Japanese War brought to life at all: comfort women, poison gas, human experimentation, drug dealing, and the Nanjing Massacre, among others.

Bix handles the discussion of the essays by Ian Buruma and Richard Falk generously. He notes Buruma's disinclination to hold the Nanjing Massacre up for comparison with the Nazi Holocaust and Buruma's suggestion that the scholarly desideratum of learning the truth of the events that transpired in Nanjing strongly militates against forging a Chinese identity around such a symbol of victimization. Buruma made similar arguments in the *New York Review of Books* shortly after the conference in Princeton, and they still ring true. Bix's criticism of Falk's ignorance of the Tokyo Trials and other items of native knowledge were highly measured; Falk should consider himself lucky. However, the discussion of the Tokyo Trials' Justice Radhabinod Pal (1886-1967) quickly becomes skewed along polemical lines. Pal may not have been a "neutral analyst," as Falk depicts him, but to dismiss his views as Bix does because of his political support for Chandra Bose and company is not arguing a point but assessing guilt by association. Pal's juridical decision at the Tokyo Trials, which runs to hundreds of pages, is utterly fascinating reading. Tanaka Masaaki, to be sure, has turned Pal into a hero for his own nefarious endeavor to whitewash Japanese behavior on the Mainland during the war, because Pal had serious reservations about the decisions reached at the Tokyo Trials, but Pal deserves better than odious creatures such as Tanaka. Timothy Brook, no rightwing sympathizer, has written sensitively and sensibly on Pal in a recent issue of the *Journal of Asian Studies* and in the introduction to his edited *Documents on the Rape of Nanking* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999). Dismissing Pal in this way would be comparable to dismissing Anwar Sadat's (1918-81) ability to make an important decision because he supported the Germans during World War II. Of course, support for the Axis powers is reprehensible by any standard, but there are different circumstances and different levels of complicity. Neither Justice Pal nor President Sadat served as a guard at a death camp, nor did either send anyone there. They, like nationalist leaders and their followers throughout Southeast Asia, made common cause with admittedly loathsome regimes in the cause of anti-colonialism. If we abhor the manner in which rightwing critics use guilt by association to dispense with an uncomfortable argument thrown their way, then consistency demands that

we insist on at least the same standards for liberals, leftists, progressives, and the great mass of the unaffiliated.

When Bix moves next to a look at an essay by Sun Zhaiwei, he makes some highly salient points. Sun is China's best known scholar of the Nanjing Massacre, and this is his maiden work to appear in English. The point Sun stresses, as Bix enumerates it, is that the root cause of the Massacre was "Japanese militarism and ideological indoctrination" combined with mass murder aimed at eviscerating Chinese resistance. Few would disagree that militarism and indoctrination contributed to Japanese behavior in Nanjing, though it is unclear just what is specifically or operationally meant by these terms; however, use of mass murder to further strike fear into an invaded populace may imply that the deaths in Nanjing were planned in advance by the Japanese leadership, and few (aside from the usual suspects) believe this line of argumentation any longer. If we tweak the argument a bit, though, few would disagree with the notion that on the field of battle Japanese troops and their immediate superiors—though apparently not their commanders-in-chief—were aiming to punish the Chinese for their ferocious resistance at Shanghai in which many Japanese soldiers lost friends in a battle they believed they would win quickly and easily. As a Japanese foot soldier later recalled in an interview with Honda Katsuichi: "[T]he assault on Nanjing took place as an extension of this fighting [i.e., in and around Shanghai]. It just wasn't the kind of atmosphere in which you'd immediately forgive and release your prisoners, merely because they had surrendered to you. The mood was one of avenging your dead comrades" (The Nanjing Massacre, p. 240). I agree wholeheartedly with Bix that the Princeton conference volume would have been a marvellous opportunity to use the data drawn by Sun here from Nanjing to explore similar instances of mass murder occurring during total war. To date, the Chinese have been extremely reluctant to make this move, and the few that do generally jump to facile comparisons with the Nazi Holocaust, as Buruma laments.

We confront a similar problem across the Strait of Taiwan with the next essay by Lee En-han. Lee has been working for some time to demonize Japan in the prewar and war years, and I would be extremely wary of being led into the trap set here. Bix states: Lee "rightfully laments the efforts of those he calls the 'total deniers' such as Tanaka Masaaki and the 'partial deniers,' of whom historian Hata Ikuhiko is the most notorious, to 'use every possible tactic to resist the figures.'"

To speak of Tanaka and Hata in the same breath in this regard borders on the seriously irresponsible—unless one's aim, as it appears is Lee's, is to discredit by associated guilt everyone with which one disagrees. Tanaka is a fairly despicable character who has fabricated documents and built a career around spreading lies to vindicate a lost cause. Hata, no matter how much one may disagree with him, is an eminent scholar who has for over forty years been writing numerous excellent studies of Japan at war. He was certainly writing about the Nanjing Massacre before Iris Chang or Lee En-han were, and his book on the subject, first published in 1986 and translated into Chinese, is still an authority in the field. The problem is that he comes up with a death toll much lower than Chang, Lee, Sun, and many leftwing Japanese historians—on the order of 40,000. The harsh political attacks on him may also be responsible, in part, for forcing him into the arms of figures on the right in Japan with considerably less scholarly interest in the debates over wartime atrocities. Hata refuses to rescind what these others consider a low figure, and he refuses to back down under pressure, shouting, and cat-calls. In fact, he gives just as good (or bad) as he gets, often making unwarranted (or, at least, unwanted) counterclaims, such as his irrational comment at a trilateral (US-Japan-China) meeting of scholars at International House in Tokyo several years ago that the Chinese claims of 300,000 murdered at Nanjing must be including those killed in the Cultural Revolution. Most Japanese who, at least, admit that widespread killing went on in Nanjing that winter bow their heads and take their bashing, but Hata dishes it back out. Neither side is particularly attractive, but at least Hata is a serious scholar. To claim that his research is motivated by Japanese nationalist concerns thus strikes me as fairly silly.

Hata is largely responsible for discrediting virtually every one of the photographs that adorn the pages of Iris Chang's book and probably are as responsible as her prose for winning admirers among English-language readers. His piece of several years ago in *Sekai* subjected each and every one of them to withering criticism. Several Japanese historians, such as Kasahara Tokushi, subsequently apologized for having accepted the validity of one or more of them. One important point that thus emerges is that, like it or not, progressive historians also allow their politics to take command and override their good sense. It is to Kasahara's credit that he has recognized this. That Bix finds Kasahara's fine piece in this volume "one of the best in the book" is not at all surprising. He has been working for years on the war years; he knows Chinese well and uses numerous Chinese sources; and he has published a large volume of works on the Nanjing Massacre and other Japanese campaigns during the war.

Bix dispenses with Higashinakano Shudo (the given name is often rendered as Osamichi) in a brief sentence, although the editors go to pains to note that he is a member of the revisionist camp. Although not a "total denier" (he's close, having admitted in one piece to a total of forty-seven civilian deaths in Nanjing), he has devoted much energy to discrediting the evidence concerning the mass killings at Nanjing as mere rumor or anti-Japanese plot. On a simplistic political spectrum, he is well to the right of Hata Ikuhiko, but he cannot be ignored or written off simply because of his politics. He is the rarest of figures in the revisionist camp—an actual historian who knows how we work and what counts as evidence. Thus, if one is interested in getting to the bottom of what actually transpired in that terrible winter in Nanjing, then one can safely ignore the likes of Tanaka Masaaki—I would argue—but not either Higashinakano or Hata.

Skipping over Bix's brief treatment of the essays by Haruko Cook and Takashi Yoshida, with which I basically agree, he comes next to Vera Schwarcz's comparative exploration of Chinese and Jewish historical memory in the wake of a horrific tragedy. But, in this instance, Schwarcz actually warns us again oversimplifying comparisons, of everyone declaring their own ethnic "holocaust" in a frenzy of victimization, all connected in intriguing ways with nation-building. Bix appears to quite like this piece and encourages readers to see how Schwarcz's quasi-psychoanalytic approach to telling of past suffering is somehow connected to the beginnings of healing. While I always benefit from reading Vera Schwarcz's work, I have never understood how verbalizing is linking to healing. I think it is based on a somewhat religious belief system that necessitates a leap of faith in the psychoanalytic relationship. If you accept that relationship as instructive and the extroversion of personal pain as curative, then it will be for you. Although he is not mentioned in this context, Dominic LaCapra has also in a recent book offered a psychoanalytic model for confronting the Holocaust (see his *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, Cornell University Press, 1994).

It all sounds rather nifty, especially in Schwarcz's brilliant hands, but she still panders to the notion that Nanjing is somehow, some way a "holocaust" that can sit in a comparison with the Shoah. This is precisely where the social scientists among us need to enter and the humanists among us need to exit center stage. A social historian by the name of Henry Huttenbach has been working for several decades to draw up a typology for genocide. He warns us, though: "How do we prevent ourselves from moving glibly from Auschwitz to Hiroshima and back, from the Death Camps to the Gulag, from genuine genocide to non-genocide, from lumping victims of bona fide extermination together with victims of massacres?" ("Locating the Holocaust on the Genocide Spectrum: Towards a Methodology of Definition and Categorization," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 3.3 [1988]: 291.) In other words, we need comparisons to make sense of those things which strike us as absolutely evil, but even more important is the need for a sound analytical framework from which to make such comparisons. In my view, psychoanalysis is not it.

Bix ultimately offers mixed praise for Nanking 1937 as a whole. It presents a wide panorama of viewpoints on the Nanjing Massacre, "war responsibility," and comparative suffering, but fails to plumb their depths with insights from more recent events of "human depravity" and mass murder. This would not be to demote or depariclarize the events in Nanjing, but just to make them more comprehensible. Such an approach is, of course, precisely why Iris Chang and others of her persuasion would like us to see the massacres committed by the Japanese military in Nanjing during the winter of 1937-38 as a "forgotten holocaust." The trope of the "forgotten holocaust" was already well used by the time she seized upon it, having been employed for the Gypsy (Roma and Sinti peoples) genocide at the hands of the Nazis, the Poles under Nazi occupation, Armenians by the Turks, and others, and reasons for its exhumation for contemporary utilization are too obvious to need explanation.

Bix suggests placing the events of the Nanjing Massacre in light of the mass rapes of German women by the invading Russian army at the very end of WWII and the immediate postwar years, the French torture of Algerian civilians, and the United States' army's killings at No Gun Ri in the Korean War. As horrific as each of these complex of events was, they are also qualitatively different, and none approaches the numbers even remotely posted by the Japanese military in Nanjing. But, Bix is not through, for next we are told—the imperative is actually used—to compare Japan's aggression against China with “the American colonial war of aggression in Iraq” and several other incidents of US mistreatment or murder of prisoners. And, if that's not enough, we are again instructed in the imperative not to “forget the lessons of the atrocities in Nanking when reading of the atrocious policies that Israeli governments (past but especially present) pursue against the Palestinians for the sake of Israeli ‘settlements’ and ‘outposts’ built illegally on stolen land.” It is one thing to tell readers to think critically about the contemporary crimes and misdemeanors of their own government, but when the whole world is opened up, why is it always Israel that is singled out for such wholesale condemnation? Certainly the ethnic cleansings of the former Yugoslavia, the Rwandan genocide, Chechnya, and elsewhere have given us numerous instances of mass murder (often accompanied by mass rape) that far outstrip anything the Israelis (past, present, or combined) have done. Furthermore, why do “progressives” so often fail to mention Cambodia and various other Stalinist and Maoist regimes and groups, such as the Shining Path, who have committed mass murders in our time of almost (with apologies to Vera Schwarcz) unspeakable proportions. Genocide—real mass murder that reaches genocidal proportions—knows no left-right distinction, and putting little Israel into that group is, frankly, preposterous.

*The original review by Herbert Bix is [Remembering the Nanking Massacre](#)*