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# The Hundred Head Contest: Reassessing the Nanjing Massacre

By Suzuki Chieko

Translation by James Orr

*Japan Focus introduction: In late 1937, a Tokyo newspaper reported on a "hundred head contest" in which two Japanese imperial army officers competed to see who could lop off one hundred Chinese heads first during the campaign to take the Chinese capital city of Nanjing. The contest is symbolic of the perversion and loss of military discipline during the Japanese capture and occupation of the city that has come to be known variously as the Nanjing Massacre, the Rape of Nanjing, or simply the Nanjing Incident. The event belongs to a long list of 20th century atrocities, and is emblematic of Chinese suffering at the hands of a barbarous Japanese military as well as of Japanese predations across wartime Asia and the Pacific.*

*As part of what one might call a "canon" of horror, various groups have interests in how the event is remembered not only in China and Japan, but also internationally. Estimates of the numbers killed at Nanjiing vary from several thousand to over 300,000, depending on national and political persuasion and the parameters one puts in terms of time, place, and ethnicity of victim. (See David Askew, "New Research on the Nanjing Incident," available at http://www.japanfocus.org/109.html).*

*The essay by Suzuki Chieko is a self-conscious part of Japanese discourse over how remembrance of Japan's wartime past will structure current and future Japanese state policy. In this polarized discourse, wartime predations abroad are linked to a potential return of an oppressive domestic order in the present, so those who seek to defend postwar Japanese democratic as well as pacifist ideals, as Suzuki does, fear denial of Japanese atrocities in the past.*

*Although Japan's postwar Constitution was drafted by Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Occupation staff, most Japanese welcomed its guarantees of civil liberties and its renunciation of war as an instrument of foreign policy. As Suzuki notes, however, the ban on the dispatch of troops overseas has weakened since the first Gulf war in the early 1990s, when many Japanese felt unfairly criticized for failing to contribute more than money to that international effort. With attitudes toward the postwar pacifist settlement shifting, conservative political forces led by Prime Minister Koizumi have succeeded in gradually legitimizing the dispatch of Self Defense Forces abroad. As in the post 9/11 United States, under the rubric of special counter-terrorism measures the government has steadily expanded the range of activity in the name of national security. And, for only the second time in the postwar era there are concrete measures being taken to revise the constitution. The first effort at constitutional revision in the late 1950s and early 1960s failed. Conditions now make revision seem more likely.]*

*Shukan Kinyobi editor's introduction: When the Japanese army occupied Nanjing in December 1937, the Tokyo Nichinichi Shinbun newspaper (the present-day Mainichi Shinbun) carried four reports -- printed November 30 and December 4, 6, and 13 -- on a "hundred head contest" between two army lieutenants to see who could first kill one hundred Chinese with their swords.*

*After Honda Katsuichi mentioned this "hundred head contest" in his 1971 Chugoku no tabi (Travels in China), a debate arose in the journals between Honda and Hora Tomio (then a professor at Waseda University) on one side, and Yamamoto Shichihei (aka Isaiah Ben Dasan) and Suzuki Akira, who challenged the account. This debate more or less came to an end with the 1977 publication of Honda's edited volume, Pen no inbo (Conspiracy of the Pen), but recently Sankei shinbun, Seiron and like newspapers and journals have once again taken up the issue charging that the "hundred head contest" was a fabrication.*

*This is the background against which the two lieutenants' surviving families have lodged an appeal in court. Specifically, theirs is a libel suit calling for an injunction on publication, lodged against the Mainichi Newspapers Company (successor to the Tokyo Nichinichi Shinbun) that reported on the competition, the Asahi Shinbun Publishing Company that published Honda's Chugoku no tabi and Nankin e no michi (Road to Nanjing), Kashiwa Shobo, publisher of "Suemono kiri ya horyo gyakusatsu wa nichijo sahanji datta" (Using corpses for sword practice and prisoner atrocities were an everyday event) and the essay collection Nankin daigyakusatsu hiteiron 13 no uso (13 Lies in Denials of the Nanjing Massacre), and against author Honda.*

On April 10, 2003 the Tokyo Supreme Court issued a verdict in favor of Nanjing Massacre survivor Li Xiuying in her defamation suit against claims that she was a fraud. But immediately afterward, on April 28, the "hundred head" suit was brought.

Why was a suit like this, one that challenges the existence of the hundred head contest, brought immediately after the court ruling in Li Xiuying's favor? It was not brought simply out of spite for the lost litigation, nor due to a stubborn refusal to admit defeat. To begin with, 11 of the 17 lawyers who jointly filed for plaintiffs had given support to those who had accused Li of being a fraud. Next, during the first two days of the trial, supporters for the plaintiffs jammed into the confined courtroom in numbers double those normally allowed. And, although other news organs carried only short reports on details of the suit, the Sankei shinbun, known for its narrowly nationalistic editorial policy, allotted extensive coverage amenable to the plaintiff's point of view. Accordingly, we can consider the "hundred head" litigation to have been systematically planned.

So why are reports from 66 years ago being litigated now? The attack on reporting about the "hundred head contest" isn't new; it has been going on for 30 years.

30 Years of Rhetoric

Attack began with Honda Katsuichi's 1971 Asahi shinbun series "Travels in China." "Travels in China" was a revolutionary series, revealing to wide numbers of Japanese the reality of wartime predations that he learned about during his travels, heard from survivors of atrocities committed by Japanese military in China. Although before then history texts might have described wartime sufferings of the Japanese people, they hadn't touched on Japanese predations in Asia. These reports had a great impact on Japanese who learned the truth about the past from them.

In reaction, a sense of crisis arose among those seeking to glorify the war of aggression and revise the postwar constitution. The attacks on Honda began with the immediate target being the "hundred head contest,' what one might call the "overture" of the

incident most representative of Japan's war of aggression, the Nanjing Massacre.

The first to act was Yamamoto Shichihei (Isaiah Ben Dasan), who persisted in attacking Honda for over three years in the journal Shokun!, beginning in 1972. Considering the influence such attacks might have, Honda engaged in a public debate with Yamamoto in Shokun!'s pages. But this so-called "hundred head debate" ended with Yamamoto's complete defeat as so many of his assertions were slipshod and ripped apart by Honda.

Next was Yamamoto's pinch hitter, Suzuki Akira. Suzuki also reported on the "hundred head" problem in the pages of Shokun!, later bringing his findings out in a book titled "Nankin daigyakusatsu" no maboroshi (Illusion of the "Nanjing Massacre"). As it turned out, this book was awarded Bungei Shunjusha's Oya Soichi prize in nonfiction. Based on a visit to the presiding judge of the Nanjing military tribunal, and on their prison writings and defense memoranda, Suzuki argued that the two officers had been unjustly executed on the basis of false reports. The prize selection committee swallowed his argument that the "hundred head contest" was a ruse. However, this book was part of a scheme to cast doubt on the truth of the whole of the Nanjing Massacre.

In reaction to such attacks, Honda dug up and thoroughly refuted their claims with testimonials that: showed the "hundred head" contest to have been an atrocity committed against prisoners of war (not battle killings) ("Shishime testimony") [1]; undercut the blunt Japanese sword theory that held that swords would not hold their edge through so many decapitations (Uno testimony) [2]; and made clear that the contest was not just a war correspondent's fabrication (Sato testimony). [3] Then Hora Tomio wrote Nankin daigyakusatsu: "maboroshi" ka kosaku hihan (The Nanjing Massacre: Criticism of the Making of an Illusion) [4], which refuted Suzuki point by point. In particular, Hora used the testimonies to thoroughly lay bare a false "alibi" report that the two officers had met war correspondents at the foot of Nanjing's Zhongshan mountain.

Activities of the Study Group on the Nanjing Incident

Afterwards, unsubstantiated denials of the Nanjing Massacre continued unabated, in places like the Sankei shinbun and Seiron in addition to the Bungei shunju and Shokun!. The Study Group on the Nanjing Incident (Nankin Jiken Chosakai), founded in 1984 in response to these activities denying the Massacre, has contributed greatly to illuminating the Nanjing Massacre.

The denial thesis became increasingly bankrupt in the late 1980s. First, it came to light that Tanaka Masaaki had altered the text in as many as 300 places when he published the field diary of General Matsui Iwane, [the officer in charge of Japanese troops in Nanjing]. [5] Second, the editors of Kaiko, the publication of Kaikosha, the fraternal organization of former Imperial Army cadets, recognized in print that "the Japanese army committed illegal murders in Nanjing." And third, a decision in the Ienaga Saburo textbook suit recognized the existence of the "Nanjing Massacre."

In this way the theories denying the Nanjing Massacre were totally discredited, but they were prominently touted again in the late 1990s. That is, by repeatedly emphasizing the denial theories, proponents hoped to persuade people that no massacre had occurred, or if it had, it wasn't so bad. Treating surviving witness Li Xiuying as a fake and filing the current "hundred heads" libel suit can be seen as part of this effort. These developments are deeply connected to the intensification of reactionary attacks since the beginning of the 1990s.

Japan has become increasingly reactionary since the passage of the PKO International Peace Cooperation Law [1992] and the dispatch of troops abroad at the time of the first Iraq War (Gulf War) in 1991. As if in parallel with these currents, there has arisen a camp aiming to remake Japan into a country capable of waging war, with the formation of Fujioka Nobukatsu's Liberal View of History Association [sic] (Jiyushugishikan Kenkyukai) and the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Atarashii Rekishikyokasho wo Tsukuru Kai). Also, 1999 saw preparation of the infrastructure for war in earnest with the passage of laws making Kimigayo and the hinomaru the official national anthem and flag, and laws related to establishing new guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation.

Reverse Course in Popular Opinion

Nowadays not just the Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) but also the major opposition Democratic Party is advocating constitutional revision in its party manifesto, under the rubric of "constitution creation". And, if the dispatch of the SDF to Iraq becomes a reality, it will be the first time since defeat in World War Two that Japan has sent troops into a battle zone. [Trans. note: SDF units were dispatched to Iraq to provide "reconstruction assistance" in January 2004.]

The current "hundred heads" libel suit is one prong of an attack that ought to worry the democratic forces that have resisted the militarization of the Japanese state. By rehashing the "hundred head" issue that ought to have been settled, they are trying to plant among the people a view of history that glorifies and affirms aggression in Asia.

We ought to lay bare the truth that most of the victims who lost their heads in this "hundred head contest" were unresisting prisoners in an atrocity that was a murderous game to see who could kill the most. But rather than condemn the two officers who wielded swords in this atrocity, we should reveal and broadcast the truth that the core problem was in the Japanese militarist education that fashioned this kind of soldier. Doing so will also serve to foster trust and friendly relations for Japan in Asia and the world.

1. Shishime Akira, "Nitchu senso no tsuioku -- 'hyakunin giri kyoso'" (Remembering the Sino-Japanese War -- the "Hundred Head Contest"). Chugoku (Tokuma Shoten: December 1971).

2. Uno Shintaro, "Nihonken enkonbu" (Japanese Sword Record on Hate). In Pen no inbo, (Conspiracy of the Pen), edited by Honda Katsuichi. Ushio Shuppan, 1977.

3. Suzuki Jiro, "Watashi wa ano 'Nankin no higeki' wo mokugeki shita" (I Witnessed that Nanjing Tragedy). Maru (November 1977).

4. Gendaishi Shuppankai, 1975.

5. Tanaka Masaaki, ed., Matsui Iwane taisho no jinchu nisshi (Field Diary of General Matsui Iwane). Fuyo Shobo, 1985.

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