



EXPLORING CAUSES OF ATROCITIES IN JAPAN'S OCCUPATION OF CHINA FROM 1931-1937

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Abstract

There is an incredible amount of literature and analysis of the events that transpired in Nanjing during Japanese occupation. In the following essay, I will attempt to add a fresh angle by imposing a framework for understanding the different types of violence that the Chinese suffered through. I will start with a broad overview of Japanese imperial racism and its propulsion of Japan into the Asian continent. This will take me to the Japanese occupation of Manchuria from 1931 to mid-1937 – a relatively tame period of rule – and then into the Sino-Japanese War, which saw exponentially high levels of cruelty in comparison.

In essence, my analysis boils down the violence of Japanese occupation to 1937 as either macro-violence (large-scale killings and massacres) or micro-violence (small-scale killing and rape). I propose that while macro-violence was the primary method of subjugating the Chinese, it provided a platform for the proliferation of micro-violence could occur.

Introduction

An often-forgotten front of World War II is the Sino-Japanese War. Some of the most horrific crimes in mankind's history took place during Japan's invasion of China; examples include burning crowds alive and the spearing of babies thrown into the air. The pinnacle of this cruelty is the Nanjing Massacre - a six-week period in which hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and POWs were believed to have been murdered.¹

Many explanations have been proposed as to why the Japanese acted with such cruelty towards the Chinese. Chinese historian Zhaiwei Sun identifies the "brutal nature of Japanese militarism and the heroic resistance by Chinese troops" as the most fundamental causes; Iris Chang points at "the Japanese capacity for degradation and sexual perversion in Nanking"; and Fujiwara Akira highlights the emperor-centered nationalist belief system.²

All three of these perspectives ground their arguments within ideological and cultural factors; I would like to take a more granular look at the types of violence that occurred and draw distinct explanations for them as well as a coherent relationship between them. The level of violence that took place in Nanjing is not sustained throughout the entirety of Japan's presence in China; rather, the Japanese occupation of Manchuria was quite tame compared to what would manifest after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 1937. If we consider pre-war ideology or inherent Japanese militarism to be the cause of the atrocities that come to follow, then why isn't such a high level of violence constant throughout the entirety of Japan's occupation in China, starting from 1931?

¹ Yang, Daqing. "Convergence or Divergence? Recent Historical Writings on the Rape of Nanjing." *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 842-65. doi:10.2307/2650991.

² Yang, Daqing. "Convergence or Divergence? Recent Historical Writings on the Rape of Nanjing." *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 842-65. doi:10.2307/2650991.

I believe that the atrocities committed in China by Japanese soldiers can be clearly categorized into two types: macro-violence and micro-violence. Macro-violence was the primary type of violence that the Imperial Japanese Army inclined itself towards, in a highly structured and efficient manner. However, when Japanese discipline faltered, countless incidents of micro-violence arose that were senseless in nature. While macro-violence was discernibly encouraged by the need for efficiency by the Imperial Japanese Army, micro-violence was the culmination of multiple factors that were both ideological and part of the waging of war. To tie the two together, macro-violence was a platform from which micro-violence proliferated.

The Imperial Nature of Japanese Racism

As Western nations encroached into Asia, Japan was the most successful country in adapting to Western influence and modernizing. They thus began to see themselves as the power that would unite and lead Asia. Strengthening this belief was the rapid decline of the Qing Dynasty, which lost successive wars to the British in the mid-19th century and then was defeated by Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War - an epic refutation to the long-held belief that China was the leading power in the East.³

At the same time, the Japanese began to engage in active dehumanization of their Asian neighbors, particularly China. John Dower calls their eagerness to distinguish themselves from the rest of Asia “Caucasianization”; Japanese soldiers in Asia, for example, in efforts to show the difference in skin color, repeatedly emphasized how sunburnt they were. Woodblock prints depicting the Sino-Japanese War portrayed Japanese combatants with white, almost Caucasian features, with the Chinese very clearly just yellow Chinese. It is interesting that in Japanese political cartoons, Allied leaders were subject to innocuous stereotypes (America as a thug,

³Makito, and David Noble. *The Sino-Japanese War and the Birth of Japanese Nationalism*. Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2011. ix

Britain as a smoker), while Chiang Kai-Shek alone was likened to a beast with a short, stubby tail. Such racialized thinking compounded the notion that the Japanese were destined to be a leading race.⁴

Ultimately, imperialist racism culminated in an idealistic document released in 1941 - somewhat late for the purposes of the Imperial Japanese Army, but nonetheless a good summary of the envisioned racial relations that the Japanese sought to establish. “An Outline of Information and Propaganda Policies for the War between Japan and the Anglo-American Powers” dictated that Japan’s goal (and indeed, moral obligation) was to create a “new world order” which would “enable all nations and races to assume their proper place in the world...”⁵

What did the Japanese mean by this idea of ‘proper place’? The answer lies in what foreign minister Matsuoka Yosuke called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which constituted Japan’s ultimate goal of establishing hegemony over its surrounding region. As to the nature of this hegemonic relationship, it was very much a model of ‘center-periphery’; Japan would be the central hub of this autarkic bloc, and all international currencies would be tied to yen.⁶

This patriarchal relationship between Japan and the rest of the Co-Prosperity Sphere was an extension of belief in the family paradigm, as elaborated upon in *Cardinal Principles of the National Polity (Kokutai No Hongi)*. In this document issued by the Ministry of Education in 1937, the unique Japanese family system was delineated, and outline the roles parent, child, husband, and wife all took in creating a harmonious community.⁷

⁴ Dower, John W. *War without Mercy Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2014. 209-242.

⁵ Dower, John W. *War without Mercy Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2014. 205.

⁶ Yellen, Jeremy A. *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. When Total Empire Met Total War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. 25-45.

⁷ Gauntlett, John Owen., and Robert King Hall. *Kokutai No Hongi: Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan*. Belmont, MA: Crofton Publishing Corp., 1974.

Similarly, in this Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, each race would have its own proper place through which it would serve the interests of the Japanese. Harsh appraisals were given to different races: the Han Chinese were business ‘flunkies’, or sellouts, that were to be gradually expelled; Filipinos were ‘materialistic, extravagant, duplicitous, imitative, poor at figures, weak in analytical skills’; and Koreans and Formosans were useful only for heavy physical labor and were susceptible to becoming ‘parasites’ within the empire.⁸ It was with this ideological framework that Japan set its sights on the rest of the world – first and foremost, China.

Because racism is such an intangible, it is somewhat difficult to pinpoint its exact role in causing what would occur later on the Asian continent as Japan made its way inland. However, the nature of Japanese racism certainly legitimized imperial ambitions and made the vision of a Co-Prosperity Sphere more realistic. The dehumanization of other Asians also likely had a disinhibitory effect on wartime treatment by the Japanese towards their captives, inclining them towards cruelty – which will be elaborated upon in the following sections.

The Occupation of Manchuria

On September 18th, 1931, a small amount of dynamite was detonated on a railway under the jurisdiction of Japan’s South Manchuria Railway. While the blast failed to cripple the railroad’s function, Imperial Japanese Army commanders seized upon it as a justification to begin pouring troops into Manchuria. While the Japanese Consulate worked desperately to arrange a truce, Kwantung Army Headquarters in Port Arthur almost immediately began to

⁸ Dower, John W. *War without Mercy Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2014. 288.

prepare mobilization efforts, asking General Hayashi Senjuro to send a brigade into Manchuria without delay (Harries 80).⁹

The Imperial Japanese government reluctantly allowed the invasion of Manchuria, with the Kwantung Army seizing the initiative - as demonstrated by Prime Minister Tsuyoshi Inukai's attempts to restrain their military expansion, and his consequent assassination by right-wing extremists. Yet both entities had good reasons to be satisfied with the course of action that was being taken, albeit for different reasons. The Japanese government wanted to reflate an economy that had stagnated in recent years; with Japan now integrated into the world economy, its rural economy bore the brunt of the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Oscillation of key crop prices combined with widespread crop failures in Northern Japan made the early 1930s a calamitous time for the Japanese economy. Expanding industry into Manchuria would provide an answer; advocates for expansion into and colonization of Manchuria placed its *shushoryuku*, or absorptive power, on a pedestal.¹⁰ Tellingly, American Historian George R. Stewart called Manchuria Japan's economic lifeline in 1935.¹¹

On the other hand, the Imperial Japanese Army saw Manchuria's economic potential as a basis from which they would be able to chase their goal of total war. As Harries points out, waging successful total war required a secure source of raw materials and an industrial base to process said materials - and Japan was sorely lacking in the former.¹² Even before occupation of

⁹ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 80.

¹⁰ Young, Louise. *Japans Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism*. University of California Press, 1999. 324-327

¹¹ Stewart, John R. "Manchuria as Japan's Economic Life-Line." *Far Eastern Survey* 4, no. 23 (1935): 182-86. doi:10.2307/3022242.

¹² Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 121.

Manchuria began in 1931, the Northern China territory was the second-greatest supplier of iron to Japan - contributing about 250,000 tons annually.¹³

For a while, Manchuria did become the economic panacea that Japan was seeking. Consider the following visual, which displays figures for Japanese imports, exports, and production.

	Production in Japan	Imports into Japan (in thousand metric tons)	Production in Manchuria	Production at Anshai
1928	1,092.5	569.2	287.5	224.5
1929	1,087.1	654.1	286.7	210.4
1930	1,161.9	405.8	348.0	288.4
1931	917.3	399.4	335.1	269.5
1932	1,010.8	444.4	368.2	287.1
1933	1,598.0	640.9	433.5	317.6
1934	1,935.8	614.4	462.8	346.7

From 1928 to 1933, Manchurian production of iron almost doubled, and exports to Japan increased as well.¹⁴ This was illustrative of a larger trend within what Louise Young calls the Manchurian-Japan Bloc Economy - a growing dependence of Japan on Manchuria for the supplementation of raw materials.¹⁵ Indeed, from 1930-1934, 58.1% of Japan's imports consisted of raw materials.¹⁶

However, despite these initial encouraging signs, Japan's expansion into Manchuria rapidly became a financial sinkhole. While the Kwantung Army and Imperial Japan partnership did squeeze some profit out the territory, the economic situation began to sour in the mid-1930s. As mentioned before, Japan had been in dire financial straits prior to the invasion of Manchuria with a national debt of six billion yen - about one-fifth of its annual state revenue.¹⁷ It took disproportionately large gambles in making a profit from Manchuria, pouring enormous amounts of capital into its development - from 1932 to 1941, about 5.9 billion yen of public and private

¹³ Stewart, John R. "Manchuria as Japan's Economic Life-Line." *Far Eastern Survey* 4, no. 23 (1935): 182-86. doi:10.2307/3022242. 186.

¹⁴ Stewart, John R. "Manchuria as Japan's Economic Life-Line." *Far Eastern Survey* 4, no. 23 (1935): 182-86. doi:10.2307/3022242. 186.

¹⁵ Young, Louise. *Japans Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism*. University of California Press, 1999. 220-221

¹⁶ Stewart, John R. "Manchuria as Japan's Economic Life-Line." *Far Eastern Survey* 4, no. 23 (1935): 182-86. doi:10.2307/3022242. 183.

¹⁷ Peffer, Nathaniel. "The Price of Japanese Imperialism." *Foreign Affairs* 16, no. 1 (1937): 21-33. doi:10.2307/20028825. 26.

capital was invested in Manchuria.¹⁸ Should Manchuria falter, the Manchuria-Japanese Economic Bloc would quickly feel the effects.

And falter it did. A gaping trade deficit rose between Japanese consumer imports into Manchuria and heavy industry exports out of Manchuria; the former increased from 167 yen in 1932 to 660 million yen in 1939, but was dwarfed by the increased of the latter from 37 million yen to 539 million yen in the same time period.¹⁹ The Kwantung Army, which originally had been hindered by the demands of Japanese capitalists and businessmen for fostering growth-oriented policies in Manchuria, no longer had to view Manchuria simply within an economic lens.

Within the larger context of preparation for total war, the IJA began to see Manchuria a strategic stepping stone for military expansion. Global conflict loomed on the horizon, and Japan saw Russia and the United States as its primary rivals - as delineated by the Imperial Defense of Policy of 1918.²⁰ Building a strong presence in China would create a buffer region that protected against a possible invasion from Russia. Escalation of events in Russia also heightened a sense of urgency from the Japanese perspective. The number of Soviet divisions in the Soviet Far East increased eight in 1932 to thirty in 1939, totaling 450,000 troops and 2,000 aircraft - an alarming trend for Japanese war planners.²¹ The faster that Japan could establish this buffer zone, the more prepared that they would be for the inevitable conflict against Russia.

¹⁸ Young, Louise. *Japans Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism*. University of California Press, 1999. 214.

¹⁹ Young, Louise. *Japans Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism*. University of California Press, 1999. 209.

²⁰ Drea, Edward J. *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army*. Lincoln (Neb.): University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 28.

²¹ Drea, Edward J. *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army*. Lincoln (Neb.): University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 30.

On July 7th, 1937, the Sino-Japanese War began in earnest through the Marco Polo Bridge Incident; the events are hazy, but Japanese soldiers on the Yunting River were supposedly shot at and had one of their unit kidnapped. Chiang Kai-Shek wrote in his diary on July 8th: “The time was come now to make the decision to fight.” Both sides immediately began mobilizing for all-out war.²²

Two Types of Violence in China

When it comes to the acts committed by the Japanese, I argue that there is a certain structure to the progression of intensity. To borrow terminology from historian Frank Jacob, we can divide the acts committed by the Japanese into two categories: macro-violence and micro-violence. He defines macro-violence as any violent act affecting more than 10 individuals, and micro-violence as anything less; I would like to define them a little more fluidly.²³ In categorizing violent acts under these two, large-scale massacres fall under the former, while more exceptional acts of cruelty such as rape and ‘recreational’ killing fall under the latter.

I hold that the Imperial Japanese Army primarily resorted to macro-violence; as it came into the command of thousands of surrendered Chinese troops, macro-violence solved the issue of having to sustain a sizable POW population. Where micro-violence primarily occurred is when slack Japanese discipline allowed the proliferation of other intangible factors to boil over — usually *after* the spread of macro-violence.

Macro-Violence

Macro-violence, or the large-scale killing of Chinese, became normalized because of the speed with which the Imperial Japanese armies progressed throughout China. Here is a passage

²² Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 201.

²³ Jacob, Frank. *Japanese War Crimes during World War II: Atrocity and the Psychology of Collective Violence*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2018.

from the diary of Lieutenant General Nakajima Kesago, Commander of the 16th Division of the Shanghai Expeditionary Force:

For the most part, it is our policy not to take prisoners, so we have decided to tidy up. If we capture a group of one thousand, five thousand, or ten thousand, we can't even divest them of their weapons. It's just that they completely lost the will to fight and come after us in big groups, and even though they are safe, once they do make a disturbance, finishing them off is a problem, so I get reinforcements with trucks, and make them responsible for guarding and guidance. On the evening of the 13th, we need the trucks for large-scale operations. Even so, since it is just after our victory, we are quite unable to implement things very quickly. From the beginning, I never imagined that we would have to deal with it in this way, so the staff officers are extremely busy...

According to what I learned later, the Sasaki Unit alone dealt with fifteen thousand; the one company commander assigned to guard Taiping Gate dealt with thirteen hundred; seven or eight thousand gathered in the vicinity of Xianhao Gate; and still they keep coming to surrender. In order to dispose of seven or eight thousand people, quite a large trench is needed. So as not to be seen in the act, one plan is to divide them into groups of two hundred, lead them to a suitable place, and deal with them there. This final disposition of the defeated enemy in general has fallen to the 16th division, and we have no time to enter the city or arrange for lodgings. We are really in a rush.²⁴

Nakajima's 16th Division was assigned to the Northern China Area Army, and participated in conflicts in Shanghai, Beijing, and Nanjing - as well as being on the military units assigned guilt in the Nanjing Massacre - suggesting that it was an seasoned Japanese army that represented the experiences of most on the Chinese front.²⁵

Nakajima's diary reveals several aspects of the nature of Japan's presence in China. It seems that a sense of urgency pervaded their march southwards. Nakajima writes, "We are really in a rush" - and indeed, the IJA was in a rush. From the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in July 1937 at Wanping to the siege of Nanjing in December 1937, a distance of over 1,000 km was covered. Quickness of foot was a key element of Japanese military strategy in China; a military-issued booklet titled *Criticism of China at War* highlighted rapidity and daring as essential to successful combat.²⁶ The Japanese's lightning advance was also helped immensely by the Chiang Kai-

²⁴ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japanese National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. 195.

²⁵ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 210.

²⁶ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 215.

Shek's repeated decisions to strategically retreat, and a vast Chinese countryside that was difficult to contiguously defend.²⁷

Further fostering this sense of urgency was a distinct lack of logistical preparation for Japanese armies surging towards Nanjing. A constant theme of Japanese military operations was their shoestring investment in logistical planning - possibly engendered by the irrational belief that the IJA had in the fighting spirit of their men, which would supposedly help them overcome any strategic or technological inferiority to their enemies.²⁸ Lack of preparation was also demonstrated by projections of IJA war advisors as to how quickly the Chinese conflict would be resolved; at the time of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the Imperial Japanese Army anticipated but a short campaign. War Minister General Sugiyama Hajime confidently told Hirohito that war with China would be over in a month.²⁹ The Japanese armies in China were also not the most well-equipped - again testifying to the lack of effort put into their preparations. New military technology was not uniformly distributed to Japanese infantry divisions, and the armies in Manchuria found themselves neglected; the 47 mm antitank gun became the offensive nucleus of troops fighting in the Pacific War, but units stationed in Manchuria were foregone with this upgrade and relegated to the continued use of the 37 mm weapon.³⁰

Lastly, basic supplies and resources that were needed to sustain armies that were expeditionary in nature were deficient as well. One IJA soldier's scavenging experience when landing at Jinshanwei (near Shanghai) exemplifies this:

Suddenly, our boat stopped as if it had hit something... <after wading their way to land> the area was full of salterns and dry fields. These were secure positions, but the enemy seemed to have

²⁷ Drea, Edward J. *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945*. Place of publication not identified: Univ Pr Of Kansas, 2016. 196.

²⁸ Drea, Edward J. *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945*. Place of publication not identified: Univ Pr Of Kansas, 2016. 10.

²⁹ Drea, Edward J. *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945*. Place of publication not identified: Univ Pr Of Kansas, 2016. 191.

³⁰ Drea, Edward J. *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army*. Lincoln (Neb.): University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 7.

abandoned them and fled in the face of our attack. A goat and two or three chickens emerged from the two huts that were there. The chickens ignored us completely as they pecked for food. Private First Class Takahashi suddenly took off after them, caught a chicken, and brought it back. He wrung it back and began plucking it with practiced hands. "We've got something to go with our rice tonight," he laughed.³¹

This soldier was part of the 10th Army, formed on September 20th, 1937 and immediately mobilized to supplement the invasion of China. The landing of the 10th Army at Jinshanwei took place on October 3rd - meaning that within 20 days of its formation, the 10th Army was already living off of the land.³² This is also a partial explanation as to why looting was so widespread in the Sino-Japanese War.

Urgency, lack of preparation, and lack of supplies presented a costly and draining problem that Nakajima recognized in his diary - maintaining sizable number of POWs as thousands of Chinese soldiers laid down their arms in the face of the Japanese. The brutally logical solution, then, was to not keep a POW population at all. Perhaps the best illustration of this dilemma and its solution took place in a short-lived POW camp managed by the 16th Division, under General Nakajima himself. A private first-class who asked to go unnamed testified the following in an interview:

Itamoto <a pseudonym> was assigned to guard duty outside the city. During this time, he sometimes ate lunch near a building that was evidently the barracks of an artillery school. Japanese troops seemed to be living in the barracks, but in the yard were about a thousand men surrounded by barbed wire and being treated as prisoners... According to the soldiers standing guard, the prisoners were Chinese soldiers who had surrendered. When feeding the prisoners, the guards would pack the rice into artillery shells and hand it over to them, saying that the large shells were for three people and the small shells were for two people. "It makes us mad that we have to feed our provisions to this bunch when there isn't even enough for our troops", the guards grumbled. Itamoto later learned that the prisoners were all killed at the Yangtze.³³

³¹ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japanese National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. 16.

³² Dorn, Frank. *The Sino-Japanese War, 1937-41: From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor*. MacMillan.

³³ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japanese National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. 213.

The Japanese armies had neither the time nor the resources to manage the swell of Chinese soldiers that fell under their authority. Nor did they have the choice to release them, for they would either have returned to combat as guerrillas or bandits - either option meant that they would have to be dealt with once again later down the line by the Japanese.³⁴

Macro-violence became the solution. The Imperial Japanese Army engaged in systematic, efficient, and structured butchering of Chinese - contrary to the spasmodic micro-violence that is closely associated with the Nanjing massacre. Journalist Honda Katsuichi penned these killings as “assembly-line massacres”, and the stories of multiple Chinese survivors attest to this label. Luo Zhongyang survived a massacre in which almost 10,000 Chinese perished, and he described the coldly efficient manner in which they were killed; after herding a crowd against a riverbank, the Japanese tied them together ‘bead-style’. They would then be bayoneted together, pushed into the river, and followed immediately by another chain of Chinese. Tang Guangpu was a survivor of a massacre in which about 3,000 Chinese prisoners were assembled by Japanese soldiers, who then surrounded them with dry grass and ignited it - effectively trapping them with fire. They were then fired upon indiscriminately. Wu Changde witnessed a group of 2,000 Chinese prisoners being killed in similarly routine manner - successive groups of 100-200 were led away and shot.³⁵ Among all three of these massacres, there was a chillingly industrial process behind it - reminiscent of the fate the Jews faced in Nazi death camps.

We must ask ourselves: if Japan was so thorough in exterminating Chinese soldiers, then why did they also do the same towards Chinese civilians? This can also be linked to efficiency.

Consider the following statement of Tokugawa Yoshichika, writing about the massacres:

³⁴ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 229.

³⁵ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. 215-245.

Several days after I finished my inquiries and returned to Japan, the Japanese military carried out a huge slaughter in Nanjing.... Fujita Isamu told me that the ringleader of the massacres was Lieutenant Colonel Cho Isamu, a member of Commander Matsui Iwane's inner circle. I was also well acquainted with him. He is supposed to have told Fujita this:

A crowd of fleeing civilians that included women and children was surging along the banks of the Yangtze, and there were a lot of Chinese soldiers mixed in among them. If the Chinese soldiers were allowed to get away, they could later influence the course of the war. This is why Lt. Colonel Cho ordered the soldiers who had set up machine guns along the front line to shoot them. The soldiers hesitated, because even if there were some Chinese troops mixed in, it was a largely civilian crowd, but Cho lost his temper, roared "This is how you kill people!", drew his sword, and killed some of the soldiers with blows through the shoulder. Shocked, the other soldiers opened fire, and that's how the slaughter took place.³⁶

From Cho's reasoning, it appears that the reason why Chinese civilians were also massacred was because they were often perceived as one and the same with soldiers by the Japanese. Chinese soldiers commonly practiced guerrilla warfare against the Japanese, disguising themselves in commoner plainclothes.³⁷ In fact, in the proclaimed Safety Zone in Nanking, Chinese soldiers dressed up as civilians in hopes of launching a counter-attack.³⁸ While that may have provided a fighting advantage at the time, it also meant that the Japanese had to either differentiate between civilians and disguised soldiers or dispose of them all. And while Japan at times did make half-hearted attempts at identifying soldiers (they would look for calluses, pale foreheads, and red shoulder marks from rifles on able-bodied men, which they took as sure signs of being a soldier), they saved valuable time and resources by simply killing all of them.³⁹

Micro-Violence

Japan's military progress into China progressed quickly; as mentioned before, they neared Nanjing within the span of a few months. This was helped by the Chinese armies' repeated willingness to retreat and regroup, often abandoning key cities and outposts; consequently, Japan

³⁶ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japanese National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. 169.

³⁷ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japanese National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. 186.

³⁸ Li, Feifei, Robert Sabella, and David Liu. *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002. 96.

³⁹ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japanese National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. 253.

took Beijing in July, went Southward and took Shanghai by November, and turned inwards towards Central China, encircling Nanjing in December.⁴⁰

It took less than 48 hours of bombardment to convince Chinese General T'ang Sheng-Chih that defending Nanjing was futile. On December 12, 1937, the route of Nanjing's defenders began, Japanese soldiers streamed in, and the Rape of Nanjing commenced. The American director of the Nanking Refugee Committee wrote this about what he experienced:

In these two short weeks we here in Nanjing have been through a siege; the Chinese army has left defeated and the Japanese Army has come in. One that day Nanjing was still a beautiful city we were so proud of, with law and order still prevailing; today, it is a city laid waste, ravaged, completely looted, much of it burned. Complete anarchy has reigned for ten days - it has been a hell on earth. Not that my life has been in serious danger at any time - though turning lust-mad, sometimes drunken, soldiers out of houses where they were raping the women is not perhaps altogether a safe occupation; nor does one feel to sure of himself when he finds a bayonet at his chest or a revolver at his head and knows it is handled by someone who heartily wishes him out of the way. For the Japanese Army is anything but pleased at our being here... They wanted no observers. But to have to stand by while even the very poor are having their last possession taken away from them - their last coin - their last bit of bedding (and it is freezing winter), the poor rickshaw man his rickshaw; while thousands of disarmed soldiers who had sought sanctuary with you, together with many hundreds of innocent civilians, are taken out before your eyes to be shot or used for bayonet practice and you have to listen to the sound of guns that are killing them; and while a thousand women kneel before you crying hysterically, begging you to save them from the beasts who are preying on them; to stand by and do nothing while your flag is taken down and insulted not once but a dozen times, and your own home is being looted; and then to watch the city you have come to love... deliberately and systematically burned by fire - this is a hell I had never before envisaged.⁴¹

While macro-violence was routinized and could be linked to a primary cause, explaining micro-violence defies such simplification - countless factors all contributed to an utter disregard for human life, and at times borderline psychopathic enjoyment from killing.

It is important to recognize the chronological order in which these two types of violence occur in Nanjing. The initial stages were characterized primarily by macro-violence, with large-scale massacres frequent in the first few days of the occupation as surviving Chinese soldiers were flushed out. There was a certain element of calculated cruelty upon entering the city; upon

⁴⁰ Coox, Alvin D. "Effects of Attrition on National War Effort: The Japanese Army Experience China, 1937-1938." *Military Affairs* 32, no. 2 (1968): 57-62.

⁴¹ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 222.

entrance, Japanese soldiers began working towards key objectives: securing the city, finding food, fuel, and shelter, killing any remaining Chinese soldiers, and destroying the industrial and commercial sectors on Nanjing.⁴² In killing soldiers, some accounts do acknowledge that the Japanese made efforts to separate civilians from plain-clothed soldiers - but these were half-hearted attempt at best.⁴³ In the spirit of total war, it was a cornerstone of Japanese occupation to deliberately target key cogs of Nanjing's industrial production; according to Harries, 80% of commercial and industrial buildings were destroyed.⁴⁴

Japanese treatment quickly began to spillover these flimsy guidelines into micro-violence. On December 16th four days after entrance into the city, the first rapes were reported; three days later, Chinese servants at the American embassy were killed.⁴⁵ While violence rarely affected Allied or Axis civilians in Nanjing, that Japanese soldiers attacked the embassy suggested increasing disregard for the watching international powers and an emboldened Japanese army.

Several factors eased and encouraged the transition of the occupation into random displays of micro-violence. As Japanese troops neared Nanjing, Chinese resistance stiffened and Japanese progress stalled - Chiang Kai-Shek staked a strong defensive force along the Yangtze River near Shanghai, in between the Japanese and Nanjing. This force constituted of the 'flower' of his army: three German-trained and equipped divisions and 8,000 marines of the Special Landing Force, a group trained specially in urban warfare that proved a fierce force to fight against in the streets of downtown Shanghai.⁴⁶

⁴² Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 227.

⁴³ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. 211.

⁴⁴ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 229.

⁴⁵ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 221-230.

⁴⁶ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 214.

Drea likens the Japanese' faltering progress along the Yangtze to a meat-grinder; by the end of 1937, Japan had almost 700,000 men in China, dwarfing its total prewar standing army of only about 180,000 men.⁴⁷ As the IJA advanced through Shanghai, it suffered 40,000 casualties - a mere fraction of the 600,000 casualties that the Japanese amassed throughout the Sino-Japanese War.⁴⁸

Worsening the average soldier's outlook on the conflict was the fact that many of them entered the war with unrealistic expectations of their service. I touched on the expected length of the war earlier, with Sugiyama telling Hirohito that the war would be over in a month; this brazen confidence was also present within the soldiers on the ground. Reservists were conscripted in the summer of 1937 to replenish the army, and many of them expected to be home by New Year's to be with their family. As a result, the reality of warfare hit them even harder; as battles in and around Shanghai dragged on, defeatism thus became widespread among Japanese troops. One soldier captured this perfectly in a letter he sent back home: "Fighting and death everywhere and now I am also wounded. China is limitless and we are like drops of water in an ocean. There is no purpose in this war. I shall never see my home again".⁴⁹ It was with this defeatist mentality that these troops entered Nanjing and therefore were more inclined to lose their sense of discipline. Indeed, quotes from Japanese soldiers in Nanjing support this sense of revenge that quickly spiraled out of control. Another soldier of the 13th Division who served in both Nanjing and Shanghai said this about the killings:

I'd like to remind you that the assault on Nanjing took place as an extension of this fighting. It just wasn't the atmosphere in which you'd immediately forgive and release your prisoners, merely

⁴⁷ Drea, Edward J. *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army*. Lincoln (Neb.): University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 30.

⁴⁸ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 216.

⁴⁹ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 258-260.

because they had surrendered to you. The mood was one of avenging your dead comrades. Honda 240.⁵⁰

Itamoto, the soldier in the 16th Division that was cited earlier, described the actions of two of his sergeants in a similar vein:

Sergeant Onishi and Sergeant Imoto, the guys who were the most worked up took tree branches and electrical wire and came at them <captured Chinese soldiers> with all their might. 'Look at all the trouble you bastards are putting us into!' Bang! 'Do you know how many of our comrades sacrificed themselves, all because of you?' Whoosh! Crack! 'Don't you know how many of our people are crying because of you?'⁵¹

The Chinese that remained in these occupied areas quickly became the target for Japanese frustration, which is a partial explanation of why such horrifying crimes took place.

Japanese military leadership also failed to restrain their troops, thus contributing to the ensuing chaos; while there were a few genuine attempts to restrain their troops, disciplinary laxness was widespread. There were no more than 17 *kempetai* (IJA military police) in Nanjing throughout the duration of the massacre - meanwhile, in Hanchow (today known as Hangzhou), a distinctly stronger network of *kempetai* and the set-up of Korean and Chinese brothels restored a relative order.⁵² It is also questionable as to what degree *kempetai* genuinely wanted to maintain order; Dr. Robert O. Wilson, an American surgeon who treated wounded Chinese in the Nanjing Safety Zone, described how the International Safety Zone Committee - an impromptu ruling body of the Safety Zone - tried to bring a rape case to the attention of the *kempetai*:

They brought her back to our house at about ten o'clock last night and listed five points of error in her story. These pertained to the color of the walls, the number of steps she went up, the position of the lamp in the room and the time of her abduction. As to the main points of the story there seemed to be no division of opinion. By bringing out these errors they saved their face, the woman was returned and I guess the incident is closed.⁵³

⁵⁰ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japanese National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. 240.

⁵¹ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japanese National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. 208.

⁵² Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 235.

⁵³ Jacob, Frank. *Japanese War Crimes during World War II: Atrocity and the Psychology of Collective Violence*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2018. 51.

Nor was Imperial High Command able to reel in offending troops. Vice-chief of the General Staff, General Tada, had previously ordered Matsui to halt the advance on Nanjing, and now tried to halt the fighting in Nanjing once more - to little effect.⁵⁴ Matsui himself expressed regret as to the deeds his troops committed: on December 18th, he confided to one of his aides, "I now realize that we have unknowingly wrought a most grievous effect on this city".⁵⁵

An explanation of Nanjing is incomplete without a discussion of rape; it is estimated that 20,000 to 80,000 Chinese women were raped in this brief period.⁵⁶ The majority of the China Army soldiers came from the countryside, where women had abjectly low positions in society. They were not permitted to own property or initiate divorces, and peasant daughters were commonly sold into prostitution. Considering that the Japanese already perceived the Chinese as subhuman, rape became an easy extension of this contempt for women held by the Japanese.⁵⁷

A final factor that I want to bring into consideration is what political theorist Maruyama Masao called a 'transfer of oppression', indirectly caused by abusive treatment of Japanese soldiers by their superiors.⁵⁸ In the documentary *Riben Guizi*, IJA soldiers testified to the sadistic methods of discipline that they faced: one soldier spoke about another being bullied into nervous breakdown and wetting his bed. The testifying soldier helped roll up his bed to avoid being seen, but was caught by his superior; as punishment, they repeatedly struck him in the face with tacked soles and taunted him.⁵⁹ Drea points out that discolored, swollen faces were characteristic of newcomer

⁵⁴ Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *Soldiers of the Sun: the Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army*. New York: Random House, 1994. 232.

⁵⁵ Chang, Iris. *The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. London: Penguin, 1998. 61.

⁵⁶ Jacob, Frank. *Japanese War Crimes during World War II: Atrocity and the Psychology of Collective Violence*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2018. 53.

⁵⁷ Honda, Katsuichi, Frank Gibney, and Karen Sandness. *The Nanjing Massacre: a Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. xx-xix.

⁵⁸ Matsumura, Janice. "Combating Indiscipline in the Imperial Japanese Army: Hayao Torao and Psychiatric Studies of the Crimes of Soldiers." *War in History* 23, no. 1 (January 2016): 79-99. doi:10.1177/0968344514547444.

⁵⁹ Matsui, Minoru, and Ken'ichi Oguri. 2000. *Riben guizi = Japanese devils : confessions of Imperial Army soldiers from Japan's war against China*. San Francisco, Calif: Center for Asian American Media.

soldiers - and they could not retaliate, for fear of being court-martialed. These soldiers that bore the brunt of their superiors' chagrin were no longer bottom feeders upon entering Nanjing, and ruthlessly took out their pent-up anger on the Chinese.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Several lessons can be learned from Nanjing, beyond conclusions on racism and nationalism that have already been drawn out. The acts of the Japanese armies to a degree were born out of necessity – and while it was an utter contempt for the Chinese that allowed their mass execution to happen, the massacres that took place also indicate the importance of war planning and increased emphasis on logistics.

It should be mentioned that the Japanese armies were not a monolith; for the convenience of this paper, they were mostly referred to as a whole. Nor is this paper a condemnation of the Japanese race of the early 20th century; rather, they were victims of several different converging factors that did put them at a unique historical junction. Ultimately, the cruelty inflicted upon the Chinese people during the Sino-Japanese War was unique for its simultaneously structured and spasmodic nature.

⁶⁰ Drea, Edward J. *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army*. Lincoln (Neb.): University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 87.

Bibliographic Essay

In writing this essay, there are three sources that I relied heavily on: the Harries' *Soldiers of the Sun*, Edward Drea's *In the Service of the Emperor*, John Dower's *War Without Mercy*, and Honda Katsuitchi's *The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*.

Soldiers of the Sun is an incredibly detailed survey of the Imperial Japanese Army throughout the course of the Sino-Japanese War and World War II. Meirion and Susie Harries both have lived in Japan before, and used their knowledge of Japanese culture and language to consult a wide variety of Japanese sources. However, the Harries effectively consider the events of the Pacific War in congruence with other fronts; for example, taking into account how the Communist-Nationalist conflict might have implications for the Japanese war effort.

I primarily relied on this book's narration of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the subsequent attack on Shanghai, and the 'Carnival of Death' that took place in Nanjing. In evaluating the Nanjing Massacre, the Harries' strength lies in grounding seemingly random series of events along a set chronological scale. Particularly helpful is their day-by-day progression of witness testimonies, which is a structure that I have to see in other documents of the Nanjing Massacre. They also have a good understanding of the bigger picture; by bringing in international perspectives of the Massacre both during and after the conflict, we as readers gain a larger picture of the conflict within a global picture.

In the Service Emperor consists of 12 different essays that consider different aspects of the Imperial Japanese Army. The majority of them center around the war years of 1937-1945, but a few do fall back into a larger historical context. While the book doesn't directly discuss the Nanjing Massacre, I found that many of the psychological traits Drea identifies within the IJA

provide for compelling storytelling as to why the Japanese were so desensitized to killing, both in China but also throughout the rest of World War II – especially useful was the chapter *Trained in the Hardest School* for understanding how notions of racism were heavily compounded by other intangibles.

John Dower's *War Without Mercy* is an explanation to why both sides of the Pacific War (being the Americans and the Japanese) saw each other as inferior and subhuman, which would perpetrate atrocities further down the line; he posits racial fear and hatred as the primary factors. He depicts a very nuanced understanding of Japanese racism within an imperial context, recognizing that the Japanese both elevated themselves and dehumanized those around them as part of a grander narrative of imperialism.

Dower also demonstrates an excellent understanding of Japanese culture and language, drawing from Japanese and English resources – his success in doing so can be seen in the fact that the majority of his books have been translated into Japanese. His knowledge of Japanese language allows him to consult a highly inaccessible document: *Global Policy with the Yamato Race as the Nucleus*, a declassified Japanese government document published in 1943 that few scholars have considered. He uses an enormous battery of evidence to back up each point he makes from this wealth of sources. Dower's book is enormously helpful in understanding the baseline racism with which Japan entered China.

Perhaps the most central source to the claims I make is Honda's *The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*. This source is likely the most controversial of the sources I depended on; his work has been repeatedly denigrated by Japanese revisionists as Chinese propaganda. In assembling this book, Honda extensively interviewed Imperial Japanese soldiers and Chinese survivors of the Nanjing Massacre to debunk certain

notions about the events that conspired. While there isn't a central narrative to this piece, a silver lining is the transparency with which he writes; his writing style is objective, almost devoid of emotion, and an excellent portrayal of the views of both sides of the war. At multiple points, he recognizes the fallibility of his interviewees' testimonies due to trauma, elapse of time, and other reasons. With each interviewee, he takes care to make an evaluation to the trustworthiness of their words. I make heavy use of these testimonies in gleaning reasons for Japanese cruelty.

Honda's obtained testimonies only help partially cover a gap in my paper – that is, the huge need for firsthand evidence from the eyes of the Japanese in Nanjing, particularly Japanese military leadership and their thought processes. I possibly could have consulted their testimonies at the Tokyo War Crimes Trial, but in retrospect that would require a few grains of salt; these commanders may have seen themselves as taking the fall for their men and purposely incriminated themselves.

Another weakness to my paper is my failure to consider the actions of Japan outside of Nanjing. Harries points out that Nanjing is just one piece of wider Japanese cruelty throughout China, and my analysis presently focuses on Nanjing while ignoring Chengchow, Hangchow, and other cities that also fell prey to the Japanese.

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