# Historiographic Essays

* THESIS:The so-called Rape of Nanking of 1937, a six-week massacre of Chinese civilians in the city of Nanking perpetrated by the invading Japanese army, was presented to a largely uninitiated American mass audience by Iris Chang in her best-selling book The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II (1997). Chang's vivid book spawned international interest and a number of responses from fellow historians worldwide. Western historians generally agreed with Chang's insistence that the event - long a mere footnote in the popular historiography of World War II - deserved larger notice, but some criticized her for displaying personal bias as well as historical inaccuracies and methodological weaknesses of various sorts. The response from a number of Japanese scholars was overwhelmingly negative. They denied her account of a post-war Japanese "cover up," yet at the same time also, to varying degrees, denied that the event had even occurred.
* EXAMPLE (1):Tanaka Masaaki, for example, author of the website "What Really Happened at Nanking: The Refutation of a Common Myth," refers to Chang's work as one of "lies, hyperbole, propaganda." Chang's "mountains of dead bodies," according to Matsaaki, were mountains "that no one saw." Her "Reports of mass murders of prisoners of War [were] fabricated," he claims, offering as evidence that there was "no mention of the 'Nanking Massacre'" - a term he pointedly places in quotation marks - "in Chinese Communist Party Records"; and that "No protests against the 'Nanking Massacre' [was] submitted to the League of Nations [or] ... by the United States, Great Britian, or France." The event, he concludes - if there even was one - was "a massacre with no witnesses" (Masaaki).
* ANALYSIS: Much of Masaaki's criticism smacks of precisely the kind of revisionism Chang critiques in her book, and is easily exposed as such. The fact that Chinese communist party records make no mention of the event, for example, is hardly surprising, as the Chinese communists were at this time in disarray, operating largely underground in the Nanking area. Not until 1949 did the communists begin their rule over China and begin keeping official records: why then should we expect there to exist records dating back to 1937? Nor should the silence of the League of Nations, the United States, Great Britain and France come as any surprise. In the same year that France and Britain stood by as Nazi Germany re-militarized the Rhineland in violation of the Treaty of Versailles; and that the United States and the League of Nation stood by as Franco and Mussolini continued in their campaigns against the rightful governments of Spain and Ethiopia, why would we expect the United States or the League of Nations to have registered any protest over events halfway around the world?
* EXAMPLE (2): Other arguments by Masaaki are more compelling. For example, he notes of one of the many disturbing photographs in Chang's book - a famous one, apparently showing a Chinese prisoner of war about to be beheaded by a Japanese officer brandishing a sword - that its "fakery is easy to detect if you look at the shadow cast by the man at the center [the officer] and that cast by [a lower-ranking] soldier to his right. [The shadows] are facing in different directions" (Masaaki). The photograph does indeed seem to be a composite, and while stopping short of supporting Masaaki's claim that "not a single one of [Chang's photographs] bears witness to a 'Nanking Massacre'," even American historian Robert Entenmann concedes that several of the photos in Chang's book are indeed "fakes, forgeries and composites," including one (also singled out by Masaaki) "of a row of severed heads," which, according to Entenmann, in fact depicts "bandits executed by Chinese police in 1930 rather than victims of the Nanking Massacre" (Masaaki, Entenmann).
* COUNTER-ARGUMENT: Faked though some of Chang's twelve pages of photos might be - perhaps even all of them, as Masaaki suggests - the fact that there exist literally hundreds of photographs of the Nanking Massacre, many of them "souvenir photos" taken by Japanese soldiers themselves, strains the credibility of his larger point and even more so the point made by his stridently anti-Chang colleagues Takemoto Tadao and Ohara Yasuo. In their The Alleged 'Nanking Massacre': Japan's Rebuttal to China's Forged Claims, these writers state that "none of these photos are dated, and the names of places and photographers are not stated. In other words, there exist [no] photos that are rigidly authentic, and definitely, these photos can not be used as evidence of [the] 'Nanking Massacre'" (Tadao and Yasuo 101). In fact, several hundred photographs have been published in one volume - The Rape of Nanking: An Undeniable History in Photographs, by Shi Young and James Yin, many of them showing female rape victims with legs spread and genitalia exposed - graphic photographs it is hard to conceive of as staged. Such pictures, while not settling the matter beyond dispute, offer powerful testimony that speaks for itself.
* EXAMPLE (3): Notwithstanding the many graphic photographs that exist, it is precisely the accusation of widespread rape - most likely because of its abhorrent nature - that Chang's Japanese critics wish to deny. "The number of 'cases of rape' [the Chinese] claim is from 20,000 to 80,000 cases," Tadao and Yasuo note. "Suppose we took this number, there should have been from 500 to 2,000 cases of rapes...daily [during the six week period of the Massacre]. This number is absolutely not trustworthy," they conclude, citing instead the number of only 361 official complaints of rape actually registered during this period (130). Of course, they are parsing numbers here. The fact is, whether there were three hundred rapes, thirty thousand, more, or less, rape perpetrated by an occupying force against a civilian population (and that such was the case is amply documented in Chang and virtually all extant sources on Nanking, including the Japanese sources, although they, of course, acknowledge only 361) is a crime of war. But that it is an individual crime of war, rather than a collective, government-sponsored crime against humanity (such as the Holocaust) is precisely the point for the Japanese historians: "[Holocaust] killings were indeed ... 'crimes against humanity', [but] those crimes are fundamentally different from the 'war crimes' which the Japanese troops are said to have committed. ... Those acts of crimes [were] the responsibility of each individual soldier" (136, 130). Following this line of reasoning, the Japanese government is absolved of any blame for the rapes that did occur in Nanking, the exact number of which remains unknown. (On this issue, see [**Evaluating Contradictory Data and Claims**](http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/writing/history/critical/contradictory.html)).
* EXAMPLE (4): More trenchant criticism of Chang than that offered by Japanese historians comes from the American academy. Robert Entenmann, for example, a China expert and senior faculty member in the History department at St. Olaf College, faults Chang on the very premise of her book. He denies that there is a conspiracy of silence surrounding Nanking in Japan; maintains (in contradiction to Chang's claims) that Japanese textbooks do address the event (it is rather quaintly referred to as an "incident" in Japanese historiography, if at all, rather than a massacre, far less a rape); states that those textbooks that do mention it offer fatality rates listed between 150,000 to 300,000 (the Western consensus is around 250,000; Chang claims 300,000); and that 80% of respondents to a 1994 opinion poll in Japan found "that their government had not adequately compensated victimized peoples in countries Japan had colonized or invaded" (Entenmann). On this last count, it is worth noting that the specific wording of the question does not appear to address Nanking explicitly, and that the opinion poll's finding thus bears little relevance to the question at hand. We might also be skeptical of Entenmann's generous appraisal of Japanese textbooks: on its role in World War II, Japan's high school textbooks in particular are subject to constant revision, much of it aimed at mitigating the government's role in wartime atrocities, as a 2007 New York Times article reminds us (Onishi 12).
* EXAMPLE (5): Entenmann's more fundamental criticism of Chang's work and perspective, however, goes deeper. As the granddaughter of former Nanking residents who barely escaped the city, she is guilty, he writes, of having fallen victim to "her own ethnic prejudice. ... Her explanations are, to a large extent, based on unexamined [anti-Japanese] ethnic stereotypes." Furthermore, she engages in "implausible speculations," according to Entenmann, for example, her claim that Emperor Hirohito himself exulted in the news of the Rape of Nanking (see Chang 179). In fact, Entenmann points out, Hirohito's response is unknown, and Chang may be guilty here of "confus[ing] Japanese leaders' delight in the fall of the Chinese capital with exulting in the massacre that occurred afterward" (Entenmann).
* ANALYSIS: Such sleights of hand (which Entenmann himself indulges in, as his opinion poll example above shows) are perhaps conscious on Chang's part, or perhaps a function of her not being a professional historian and therefore applying a less-than-rigorous methodology in her efforts to tell a good story. She is after all, a popular (rather than an academic) historian, whom another bestselling historian, Stephen Ambrose, whose scholarship has also been faulted on several counts, once called "the best young historian we've got because she understands that to communicate history, you've got to tell the story in an interesting way" (Ambrose qtd. in Sullivan B6).
* CONCLUSION: It is this zeal to tell a good story and back it up with sensational evidence (even if - like some of her photographs - it is faked), as well as her occasionally emotional prose, sometimes bordering on hyperbole, that remains Chang's greatest liability. In an effort to place the Rape of Nanking into historical context, for example, she states that "[u]sing numbers killed alone" it "surpasses much of the worst barbarism of the ages." Its casualties exceeded those of the Carthaginians at the hands of the Romans, the victims of the Spanish Inquisition, and those of the Mongolian leader Timur Lenk, she writes in a series of specious comparisons that culminate with the observation that "the deaths at Nanking far exceeded the deaths from the American raids on Tokyo ... and even the combined death toll of the two atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (Chang 6). In The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography, an anthology generally sympathetic to Chang's project (if not to her methodology), George Washington University history and international affairs professor Daqing Yang, himself a native of Nanking, notes that "such a comparison [as Chang's] is methodologically sterile" and "morally misguided" (Yang 161). Indeed, it is precisely the sort of parsing of numbers for which Chang herself would most likely challenge the above-mentioned Japanese historians in their effort to deny the extent to which rape occurred at Nanking.
Despite these failings, Chang's book ultimately emerges as a more persuasive argument of what did in fact happen at Nanking than those offered by her Japanese detractors. The enduring controversy surrounding the event, however, and the specific criticism against Chang from even those who support her premise, point both to the endlessly debatable nature of history, and to the need for a more rigorous, analytical approach in its telling. As Joshua Fogel notes in his introduction to The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography, "The Massacre and related events must be lifted beyond the popular level ... to be studied with greater nuance and with a wider range of sources" (Fogel 1). In such a project, the [**contradictory data and claims**](http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/writing/history/critical/contradictory.html) of Chang and her critics need not necessarily be mutually exclusive but, instead, might help [**establish a broader context**](http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/writing/history/considerations/context.html) within which the event can be understood more fully, from all sides.