

Japan's History Wars and Popular Consciousness

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By David McNeill

Revisionist academics and best selling authors fuel a revival of nationalism that is poisoning Japan's relations with neighboring nations.

Tokyo~ Ko Bunyu's comic book Introduction to China is not for the fainthearted. In 300 graphic pages, it claims that the Chinese are incapable of democracy, practice cannibalism, and have the world's leading sex economy. In one sequence, famous political figures say the country is the source of most of Asia's contagious diseases. In another, illustrated with naked, spread-eagled women, China is said to have exported 600,000 "AIDS-infested" prostitutes.

Mr. Ko spends much of the quieter moments in the comic book developing an unusual historical narrative: that China, not Japan, was the aggressor in the Pacific war.

"The only good thing to come out of that country is its food," says Mr. Ko, a semiretired professor here at Takushoku University, where he teaches comparative culture.



Ko Bunyu (courtesy of Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert)

The Taiwanese-born author is one of the more toxic figures in a burgeoning Japanese revisionist movement that encompasses academe, popular culture, and much of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. The project that unites them is, in effect, a revisionist revolution: an attempt to overturn much of the well-documented historical record that is the foundation for accepted wisdom about what took place during imperial Japan's sweep across Asia in the 1930s and 40s.

If these academic revisionists have their way, the Nanjing massacre of 1937, in which tens of thousands of Chinese civilians were killed by Japanese soldiers, and other notorious incidents from that era will vanish from Japanese history books and consciousness, along with accounts that it was Japan that started a war of aggression in Asia. Tensions over the massacre are bound to sharpen as its 70th anniversary, in mid-December, draws near.

Disputed history, sex, and politics have long been grist for the mill of Japan's small army of comic-book artists, who regularly use the format, known as manga, to tackle taboo subjects or whitewash Japanese war crimes. Introduction to China goes a step further and blames the most brutal of these crimes, the Nanjing massacre, on the Chinese themselves.

"It is absolutely clear that Nanjing is a fabrication," says Fujioka Nobukatsu, who, like Mr. Ko, teaches at Takushoku. Mr. Fujioka dismisses the extensive oral and documentary evidence of atrocities after Nanjing fell to the Japanese army in December 1937.



Fujioka Nobukatsu (Photo David McNeill)

"The Chinese figure of 300,000 civilian deaths is nonsense," says Mr. Fujioka. "There was no massacre of civilians or illegal killings. Perhaps 15,000 Chinese soldiers died." In using the highest Chinese claims of deaths to discredit reports of the massacre, Fujioka and other neonationalists ignore the careful documentation compiled by Japanese and other historians. More important, they ignore the systematic repression in the course of a Japanese invasion and war that took a toll in lives of well over ten million Chinese.

Mr. Fujioka, 63, an education professor who also teaches cultural anthropology, has never written a serious academic history of Japanese war crimes, although he did help write a 1999 book on Chinese propaganda and Nanjing. Like many of the most vocal Japanese revisionists,

he relies mainly on such popular forums as general-interest magazines and newspapers to air his views.

He recently won an award as columnist of the year from the right-leaning Sankei Shimbun, a Tokyo newspaper; previous winners include Ishihara Shintaro, the city's nationalist governor.

Mr. Ko is not a historian, either, but a prolific writer of populist books, sometimes publishing four or five a year, with titles that seem designed to provoke. Recent additions include *The Ugly Chinaman* and *South Korea Was Built by the Japanese*.

Into the Mainstream

People with such views have hovered on the fringes of Japanese academe for years. But over the past decade they have gained popularity with the general public. Twelve of the 18 members of Japan's current cabinet belong to a political forum that backs many of Mr. Fujioka's views and wants to "rethink" Japan's history education. The Society for History Textbook Reform, an organization he helped set up in 1997, has sold about 800,000 copies of a revisionist high-school history book, although protests have kept it out of all but a handful of schools. Before coming to power, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo was one of the society's better-known supporters.

Much of the most sophisticated research on the atrocities committed by Japanese troops during World War II, including the Nanjing massacre and the use of Chinese women as sex slaves — so-called comfort women — occurs in Japanese academe, although only a tiny fraction appears in English. But observers say that peculiarities of Japanese academic publishing, especially the comparative lack of peer review, have skewed the debate.

Many professors publish in in-house journals

that Nakano Koichi, a political scientist at Sophia University, says too often produce junk. "They often publish whatever is produced in the faculty, and they are not reviewed from outside, so the distinction between genuinely academic work and popular work is very thin," he says. "Some academics make a career out of publishing in general publications rather than academic journals as Americans would understand them."

While the details and the number of deaths continue to be debated, most historians agree that the Nanjing massacre — also known as the "Rape of Nanjing" — was an atrocity, in which 80,000 or more Chinese civilians and surrendered soldiers were killed (the International Military Tribunal on the Far East in 1946 considered credible a figure of 200,000) and tens of thousands of women raped following the Japanese capture of the city. Despite compelling documentary evidence, eyewitness accounts and photographic evidence, Japanese revisionists continue to reject charges that war crimes and atrocities occurred there.

The country's undigested war history continues to poison one of the world's most important bilateral relationships. Recent anti-Japanese riots in China have forced Beijing and Tokyo to set up a joint education panel to narrow major differences of interpretation over wartime events. Some on the Japanese side argue that Nanjing has become so politicized — particularly the often-cited figure of 300,000 deaths — that measured academic discussion has become almost impossible.

"It is very difficult indeed," says Kitaoka Shinichi, a law professor at Tokyo University who is part of the Japanese delegation to the panel. "But we have to find some way of narrowing the gap between us."

Mr. Fujioka opposes such discussions, arguing that Japanese academics have nothing to gain

by talking to their Chinese counterparts. "There is no point in talks," he says. "The Chinese government has decided there was a massacre — so what good can come out of them?"

At least half a dozen movies on the Nanjing massacre are in the pipeline, including one sponsored by the Beijing government and based on Iris Chang's 1997 nonfiction best seller, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*.

In response the Japanese director Mizushima Satoru says he will draw on the revisionist work of Higashinakano Shudo, a professor of intellectual history at Asia University, in Tokyo, to argue that the rape of Nanjing is a hoax. The movie has the support of a group of 12 lawmakers and a panel of academics.

Mr. Higashinakano, who declined to comment for this article, and Mr. Fujioka are the leading figures in what has been called the *maboroshiha*, or illusion school, of Nanjing research, which rejects all allegations of war crimes in the taking of the city. Mr. Higashinakano says 30,000 published photos of events from the massacre are faked. The two professors' work is opposed by many academics in Japan and even by some within the revisionist school, who say that while there are doubts about the casualty figures, their research lacks credibility.

"There are a lot of crazy people on both sides who collect around the Nanjing debate," says Hata Ikuhiko, a history professor at Nihon University who wrote the seminal 1986 book *Nankin Jiken* (The Nanjing Incident), one of the few serious revisionist publications on the event.

Hata argues that roughly 40,000 Chinese died in the taking of the city, although he disputes that the term "massacre" can be applied to the simultaneous killing of captured soldiers and

says wartime Chinese propaganda inflated the casualty figures.



Hata Ikuhiko (photo David McNeill)

Mr. Hata points out that many of the most active revisionist war-crimes scholars are not historians. Still, he thinks, there is room for them in the intellectual bazaar.

"They're often ridiculous, but the level of understanding by ordinary Japanese people about this issue is very high," he says. "I trust public opinion when it comes to judging for themselves." He says the illusion-school faction is a *hakeguchi* — an outlet for frustrations in Japan after years of what are seen as inflated claims about Japanese war crimes.

No Debate

Harsher critics of the illusion school say its members do not belong in any serious scholarly discussion. "These academics are not interested in a debate," says Mr. Nakano, of Sophia University. "What they do is to smear and undermine existing research. They cast doubt rather than illuminate."

Mr. Nakano says that while the revisionists have helped popularize a once-taboo discussion, their pulp publications, with huge readerships, are "pushing the trained historians out of the public debate about war crimes."

Unlike Germany, which criminalized the denial of gross crimes of genocide, in Japan, denials of well-documented atrocities have repeatedly come from leading politicians. Mr. Abe, the prime minister, recently sparked outrage in Asia and the United States when he said there was no evidence that Japan's wartime government or military had enslaved thousands of comfort women, despite overwhelming documentation and a 1993 admission by Tokyo that it had.

Few universities have taken action against revisionist academics. Once tenured, professors are difficult to remove from Japanese faculties, which in any case are seldom openly confrontational.

Mr. Ko says he is well liked by Takushoku University administrators, although he adds that he has been attacked by student protesters. A spokesperson for Takushoku, which has hundreds of Chinese students and a campus song with the words, "I will not discriminate by color of race or border of place," says the university does not wish to comment.



Ko Bunyu with his introduction to China

Most observers say trying to silence the deniers would play into their hands, allowing them to

argue that their right to free speech has been denied.

"Freedom of expression in Japan is one of the most important differences with China," says Mr. Hata, the history professor at Nihon. "We have no need for laws to regulate what Mr. Higashinakano and others say."

The revisionists, then, are free to keep sharpening their rhetorical blades, whatever the consequences. What started out as an apparent effort to play down a dark period in Japanese history has become an exercise in outright denial.

"Some of the older [revisionist] academics may be overwhelmed by what is happening," says Mr. Nakano, of Sophia University. "They may have created a monster that is out of control."

This is a revised version of an article that appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education on April 27, 2007. Posted at Japan Focus on April . . .

David McNeill writes regularly for the Chronicle of Higher Education, the London Independent and other publications. He is a coordinator of Japan Focus.

Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert is a Tokyo-based photographer. His photographs can be found [here](#).

The debate over the Nanjing Massacre is examined by David Askew at [New Research on the Nanjing Incident](#).

See also Takashi Yoshida, [The Nanjing Massacre. Changing Contours of History and Memory in Japan, China, and the U.S.](#)

Find a partial list of manga [books by Ko Bunyu](#).