

Phillip A. Cantrell
Longwood University
USA

The Nanking Atrocity, 1937-38: Complicating the Picture

Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, editor. Asia Pacific Studies Series. New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. 456 pp., \$95.00 U.S., ISBN 978-1-84545-180-6 (cloth), \$39.95 U.S., ISBN 978-1-84545-500-2 (paper).

In *The Nanking Atrocity, 1937-38*, Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi has provided an excellent service to the profession by editing a comprehensive collection of essays on the infamous Nanking Atrocity, which marked the prelude to the Pacific War of the mid-twentieth century. Wakabayashi is Professor of History at York University in Toronto, Canada. He specializes in and teaches Japanese politics and World War Two in East Asia. His previous publications include *Anti-Foreignism and Western Learning in Early-Modern Japan*, *Japanese Loyalty Reconstructed*, and he has edited *Modern Japanese Thought*. In this present offering, however, Wakabayashi has gathered a collection of essays reflecting the scholarship of some of the leading experts on a topic frequently misunderstood by historians in the West and elsewhere. The result is a volume that goes far in clearing up many of the issues surrounding the historiography of the Nanking Atrocity, even while, as the title states, “complicating the picture.”

In what turned out to be one of the opening actions of the Second World War in Asia, the Japanese military occupied the Chinese city of Nanjing in December, 1937, with the result of an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 Chinese deaths and thousands of sexual crimes committed against Chinese women. In the post-World War II language of the West, the occupation of Nanjing has variously and at different times been referred to as the “Rape of Nanjing”, the “Nanjing Massacre”, or the “Nanjing Atrocity”, which the book’s title uses. For Japanese and Chinese historians, however, the precise details and true intentions of Japan have been the subject of much debate and attempts at revisionism. Wakabayashi’s collection of essays attempts to move beyond the often incorrect, politicized and nationalistic assertions by both sides over what really happened at Nanjing to “give readers a more reliable, less emotionally distorted basis for reaching their own conclusions and moral judgments about what this tragic event was, and what it was not” (p. 24). In this endeavor, the work is a success.

One potential difficulty for readers unfamiliar with the context and background of what happened at Nanjing, or with the general history of Sino-Japanese relations in the 1930s, is that the book provides very little historical background at the start. This is somewhat understandable, however, as too much “history” provided by the editor would run the risk of placing the volume on one or the other sides of the very debate that the volume seeks to elucidate and balance. Indeed, the subject is so contentious for historians from both countries that the volume seems to have little choice but to preserve its own integrity by allowing the historiographers to speak for themselves.

Rather than delving then into the roiling waters of Nanjing’s history, Wakabayashi leads the book with his own essay in the Introduction, titled “The Messiness of Historical Reality.” In this introductory essay, Wakabayashi discusses the history of the debate itself, noting that for over seventy years the dialogue between Chinese and Japanese scholars over the incident was almost absent. In the case of Japan, Inoue Kiyoshi and others used only generalized terms to describe the event, referring to it as *daigyakusatu* (or, “Massive Butchery”) and citing death tolls that avoided break-downs among civilian and soldier deaths (pp.3-4). In the case of China, the initial post-war period was dominated by the Civil War and concomitant accusations of betrayal between Chiang’s KMT and the Communists. The author notes, for example, that from 1945-1947, Chiang’s regime “indicted 38,280 Chinese for treason as opposed to 883 Japanese for war crimes” (p.3). Following the KMT’s flight to Taiwan and the period of power consolidation on the

mainland, accusations over Nanjing and other events continued to be leveled at other Chinese rather than Japan. It was not until the 1980s that the vitriolic arguments began between Japanese and Chinese scholars over the events of Nanjing. Fugiwara Akira provides an additional chapter on the historiography of the debate in the introductory section, titled “The Nanjing Atrocity: An Interpretive Overview.”

The remainder of the book is divided into three sections: “War Crimes and Doubts”, “Agressors and Collaborators”, and “Another Denied Holocaust?” In these sections, thirteen essays by Japanese, Chinese, and Western historians highlight different aspects and accounts of the atrocity. In several cases, the authors analyze primary source accounts or critique previous research methodologies for the purpose of arriving at greater clarity and accuracy. Several of the authors delve deeply into analyzing numbers and statistics from the event. Indeed, disputes over the numbers, numbers of civilians killed, numbers of women raped, numbers of soldiers involved, provide one the greatest areas of contention between Japanese scholars who seek to minimize or deny altogether what happened at Nanjing and the historians from every country who seek truth and accuracy.

What is obvious from the pages of the essays is that Wakabayashi chose his sub-title well, “Complicating the Picture.” The book does in fact offer a voluminous amount of detail and information regarding the Nanking Atrocity, even if much of it is highly complex and subject to differing interpretations. Moreover, as the final section, “Another Denied Holocaust?” makes clear, the vociferous debates over what happened at Nanjing are far from over. Wakabayashi’s book has provided an admirable starting point however for approaching the subject with balance and as much objectivity as can be gathered. This reviewers’ experience in teaching undergraduates suggests that the volume is too detailed and complicated for the general student population or public. Nonetheless, professional historians and researchers of the period, especially Western historians, would do well to consult *The Nanjing Atrocity* in their efforts at gaining a more complete picture of the event.