The Nanjing Massacre in History

More than sixty years have passed since the series of historical events now called the Nanjing Massacre (also known as the Nanjing Atrocity and the Rape of Nanjing). Although historians have analyzed from every conceivable angle other aspects of World War II ranging from the Manchurian Incident of September 18, 1931—now considered the beginning of the war in the Asian theater—to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, this literature pales in comparison with that focused recently on what happened in Nanjing in 1937–38. There are journals and now a list of Worldwide Web sites devoted solely to the Nanjing Massacre and associated Japanese atrocities committed in East Asia during World War II, and Iris Chang’s recently published book, The Rape of Nanking, has enjoyed astounding sales. At no time during the six decades since the event have tempers been more inflamed or research on this subject more intense than now. The Massacre and related events must be lifted beyond the popular level, however, to be studied with greater nuance and in consultation with a wider range of sources.

How could such a horrific event lay quietly for so long and only in the past few years explode with such force? How did the Nanjing Massacre become a metonym for Japanese behavior in China over the entire half century before the end of the war? Indeed, how has the Nanjing Massacre become so profoundly entwined with—even emblematic of—contemporary Chinese identity, as Ian Buruma has suggested it has?1

Until recently the atrocities that took place in Nanjing in 1937–38 have not been accorded the importance or status they warrant in modern history, except by scholars. Certainly, this has increasingly become the perception of many Chinese, especially in the diaspora. This lack of attention to the Massacre has been partly attributable to the pride and determined self-reliance of the government in Beijing. The post-World War II world witnessed an extraordinary efflorescence of nationalism throughout East and Southeast Asia, and a concomitant unwillingness to play the victim any longer. After the collapse of the Sino-Soviet alliance the Chinese Communist regime assiduously rejected foreign aid or assistance of any kind, even in the face of a starving population and natural disasters (such as the Tangshan earthquake) of historically

unprecedented proportions. Postwar East Asia’s newly developed self-esteem has militated against countries, blaming others for their own failings. Thus, although the Chinese regime made the Japanese jump through any number of political hoops to reestablish diplomatic and trade relations, it did not demand reparations for the devastation that the Japanese had wrought during the war.

The denial by certain Japanese of the Nanjing Massacre over roughly the past two decades has contributed to a recrudescence of Chinese anger primarily at Japan but also at the Chinese regimes for not encouraging research on the subject earlier and exposing it to the world. The Japanese deniers of the atrocities are themselves part of a recent Japanese revival of nationalism that has cleaved to right-wing politics and rejected any foreign role in the articulation of Japanese identity. What actually happened in Nanjing is almost irrelevant in and of itself to these people—all that matters is that Japan’s image not be stained, and therefore the atrocities must be denied.

With the rift between Taiwan and the People’s Republic after 1949 and with increasing numbers of Chinese living in other Asian countries, the United States, and Canada, the complex issue of Chinese identity has been thrown into question. Unlike other peoples who have been exiled from their homelands and have had to forge an identity within a diaspora, the Chinese have had relatively little experience in this realm until recently. In roughly the past decade the Chinese diaspora has begun to speak in an altogether new voice. Where once it was split between those supporting Taiwan and those supporting the People’s Republic, it now embraces a multiplicity of voices—embracing, for example, Tu Wei-ming’s idea of cultural China, meaning all of those Chinese (living anywhere) who contribute to the growth of Chinese culture. The Communists and the Guomindang no longer control the discourse. As the diaspora searches for a distinct voice with which to articulate its distinct identity, it is finding that many issues have been swept under the carpet by both regimes. The Nanjing Massacre has become the most prominent of these.

The role that the Chinese diaspora has played in attempting to return the Nanjing Massacre to center stage may be attributable to yet another factor. One by-product of the modern era has been a kind of cultural deracination. Despite its obvious merits, the melting pot has led to the unfortunate result that few of us living in diaspora are well grounded in the sources, languages, and histories of the cultures putatively our own. Many are returning to a search for an identity without the tools necessary to acquire it, often latching onto negative events in their history as elemental to their identity. Many Jews, no longer knowledgeable of their own traditions, languages, and texts as were their grandparents or great-grandparents, who learned them as a matter of course, cling to the state of Israel and the sanctity of the Holocaust as basic to their identity. Similarly, many Chinese in the diaspora with considerably