

Why Nanjing 1937? The Forgetting and Remembering of a Cultural Trauma

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Abstract

China's modern history (1839-) does not lack devastating and traumatic episodes for memorialisation. The nearly two centuries in question are filled with revolution, famine, drought, war, and civil unrest. Why and how then, did 1937's Nanjing massacre rise to the very top of a contemporary Chinese calendar of traumatic remembrance? Applying the theories of sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander, this article will argue that the Chinese Communist Party first actively suppressed, then deliberately chose to reconstruct the events at Nanjing as a national level trauma - an intentional wound on the collective Chinese psyche - to foster nationalism and loyalty during a time of crisis. The key to this traumatic construction has been representation.

Keywords cultural trauma, representation, identity, victim, historiography, memorialisation, nationalism.

The political agents of a nation often use events from history to construct stories and symbols through which citizens come to learn the national narrative.¹ The resulting representations, whether in the form of textbooks, monuments, or museums, combine to form a nation's collective historical memories.² These historical memories mould and shape not only how a nation's citizens regard its past, but also often its present and its future. The large group identities formed through common access to historical memories define the citizens' relationship to the state and are thus often manipulated by its agents to encourage loyalty and feelings of nationalism. Anthony D. Smith has argued "no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation."³

History plays an especially important role in the politics of contemporary China, with the past often being held up as a mirror to explain the present and suggest direction for the future.

¹ Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, (USA: Columbia University Press, 2012), 3.

² Wang, *Never Forget*, 3.

³ Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, (UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 383.

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949, it quickly set about the nationalisation of all culture industries and institutions, and then developed them in ways that would support its ideology.⁴ In the decades following, the CCP has managed to retain a firm grip on both the country and the means of cultural production. It uses this political and cultural power to carefully orchestrate which events from history the Chinese populace is encouraged to ‘remember’, and thereby, which it is encouraged to ‘forget’. That is not to suggest those directly affected by Nanjing 1937 or other historical traumas ‘forgot’ about them, rather their government hoped that the nation as a whole could be directed to collectively forget or remember as appropriate.

China’s modern history⁵ does not lack deadly and potentially traumatogenic episodes for memorialisation and remembrance. China experienced numerous revolutions, two world wars and one of the worst famines any country has ever suffered.⁶ But an examination of the Chinese calendar of historical remembrance reveals the presence of certain historical traumas and the absence of others. A key date in this calendar is December 13th; the anniversary of the commencement of the Nanjing massacre.

The massacre, known variously as the Rape of Nanjing, the Nanjing atrocity, and the Nanjing incident,⁷ is one of the most notorious episodes of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). From 13th December 1937, over what is now generally accepted to be a six-week period, Japanese troops looted and burned Nanjing, and killed and raped its inhabitants. There is to this day considerable debate as to the numbers killed. The Tokyo Trials of 1946-48 put the death toll at 200,000 plus.⁸ The Nanjing Trials which ran concurrently raised the death toll to more than 300,000 and this figure has been consecrated

⁴ Kirk Denton, “Exhibiting the Past: China’s Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 12:20:2, (2014); 1.

⁵ It is telling that (some but not all) mainland Chinese scholars split the Qing era and use the date of the commencement of the First Opium War as the beginning of ‘modern’ Chinese history. See; Zhu Weizheng and Michael Dillon, *Rereading Modern Chinese History*, (Netherlands: Brill, Leiden, 2015).

⁶ ‘The Great Leap Famine’ of 1958-1962 is estimated to have led to the premature deaths of between 15-45 million Chinese. See; Frank Dikotter, *Mao’s Great Famine*, (UK: Bloomsbury, 2011), xii.

⁷ For a full discussion on Nanjing terminology, see David Askew, “New Research on the Nanjing Incident”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 2:7, (2004).

⁸ The Tokyo Trials is the common name given to the International Military Tribunal for the Far East which took place from May 1946-November 1948. See: Takashi Yoshida, “A Battle over History: The Nanjing Massacre in Japan,” in *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel, (USA: University of California Press, 2000), 70-72.

in Chinese memorialisation of the event.⁹ Not only were the killings militarily unnecessary, they were often carried out sadistically with sword and bayonet as well as bullet.¹⁰ Though by no means the only incident of its kind perpetrated by the Imperial Japanese Army, the massacre has become the centrepiece of a Chinese calendar of traumatic remembrance.

This, however, has not always been the case. In the fifty years that immediately followed them, the events at Nanjing virtually disappeared from public view, all trace being expunged from Chinese collective memory during the Mao Zedong era. This article will chart the convoluted representational journey of the Nanjing massacre, detailing why the episode was first forgotten, then why and how it was subsequently remembered. It will argue that since the late 1970s, Nanjing 1937 has been remembered and represented in a specific manner, for a specific purpose; the massacre has been deliberately reconstructed by the CCP as a ‘chosen cultural trauma.’ This term is a conflation of complementary theories by Johan Galtung, Vamik Volkan and Jeffrey Alexander.

Norwegian scholar Galtung first coined the term “chosenness-myth-trauma complex”¹¹ when describing the multifaceted relationship between national identity, trauma and history. Galtung claims that nation-states form their identity around three planks - their uniqueness, their positive history, and, crucially for this article and the processes it describes, their negative history.¹² This proactive selection of negative history is taken further by political psychiatrist Vamik Volkan who used the term “chosen trauma”.¹³ He defines a chosen trauma as the shared “representation of a massive trauma that the group’s ancestors suffered at the hand of an enemy”.¹⁴ Volkan argues that chosen traumas are a key component of large group identity. He believes that chosen traumas are often resurrected by agents of the state

⁹ See: Mark Eykholt, “Aggression, Victimization, and Chinese historiography of the Massacre”, in *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel, (USA: University of California Press, 2000), 21-22.

¹⁰ Charles S. Maier, “Foreword”, in *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel, (USA: University of California Press, 2000): viii.

¹¹ Johan Galtung, “The Construction of National Identities for the Cosmic Drama: Chosenness-Myths-Trauma (CMT) Syndromes and Cultural Pathologies,” in *Handcuffed to History: Narratives, Pathologies and Violence in South-East Asia*, ed. S. P. Udayakumar, (USA: Westport, 2001): 61-77.

¹² Ibid. 62-64.

¹³ See, for example; Vamik D. Volkan, “Transgenerational Transmission and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity”, *Group Analysis*, 34:1, (2001): 79.

¹⁴ Ibid. 79.

during times of great social or political upheaval. They are used to confirm not only large-group identity in relation to the state and the perceived ‘enemy’, but also used by the individual to confirm their ‘core identity’ within the large group.¹⁵ Volkan’s theory of ‘chosen trauma’ overlays and enhances Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of ‘cultural trauma’.

Over several years, Alexander developed what he termed a “social theory of cultural trauma.”¹⁶ The theory attempts to explain why certain violent events that might be considered traumatic go on to become embedded within a society’s historical consciousness, while others do not. Clearly, by claiming that not every violent event becomes a trauma, Alexander is arguing that violent events are not in and of themselves naturally traumatic. Alexander argues that although the process of cultural trauma formation takes place at the societal level, the society itself does not select its traumas. Rather, the selection is done by social agents with access to and control over the means of symbolic production. They decide which events are remembered as traumatic, and which are forgotten. Thus, the social traumas that affect a nation at the cultural level are both deliberately chosen, and carefully constructed. For both Volkan and Alexander, representation is vital to an event being perceived and understood as a trauma. Indeed, for Alexander, representation is the key difference between a violent event being remembered as a trauma or not. For example, he argues that the loss of many hundreds of thousands of lives in a victorious war is represented and therefore remembered by a collective very differently to the loss of far fewer lives in a lost war.¹⁷ Like Volkan, Alexander links trauma formation to collective identity. He argues that trauma is not the result of a collective experiencing pain, but the result of this perceived injury becoming core to the group’s sense of itself. A cultural trauma is a threat to collective identity.¹⁸ However, he argues that certain basic criteria must be fulfilled for this trauma creation process to be initiated.

Firstly, some form of claim must be made regarding the perceived injury to the collective, then this claim must be broadcast by “symbolic representations”¹⁹ to a wider audience. This

¹⁵ Ibid. 84

¹⁶ Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, (UK: Polity Press, 2012), 6.

¹⁷ Ibid. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid. 15.

¹⁹ Ibid. 16.

broadcasting is done by what Max Weber in his sociology of religion referred to as “carrier groups”.²⁰ These carrier groups can be religious leaders, come from society’s margins, or as in China, be its political elites. Regardless, their goal is to convincingly project the trauma claim onto society by making use of the historical specifics, the symbolic resources available, and the opportunities provided to them by society’s institutional structures.²¹ The carrier group must then comply with four key criteria; first it must firmly establish “the nature of the pain”, i.e. what happened, and to whom. Secondly, the victim of the trauma must be clearly identified. Thirdly, this victim must be relatable to a wider audience. And fourthly, once the trauma and its victim have been identified, and a connection to both established, the perpetrator must be identified, and responsibility attributed.²² It is through this structure of representation that traumatic master narratives are generated, and cultural traumas formed.

The remainder of this article will apply Alexander’s theory of cultural trauma to the recollection and representation of the Nanjing massacre in China from 1937 to 1997. 1997 is chosen as the end date for this article’s investigation as it was the year in which Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking* was published.²³ Chang’s 300-page bestseller proved to be immensely popular with Western and Chinese audiences alike.²⁴ It introduced the “trauma drama”²⁵ of Nanjing to a global audience, adding new Western faces and voices to a previously purely Eastern tragedy.²⁶ In the twenty years since its release it has proved to be a catalyst for the ongoing internationalisation of the representation and memorialisation of the massacre. It has inspired academic, educational and artistic endeavours,²⁷ all of which have advanced and

²⁰ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, (USA: University of California Press, 1978): 468-517.

²¹ Alexander, *Trauma*, 16-17.

²² Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, in Jeffrey C. Alexander et al, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory*, (USA: University of California Press, 2004), 13-15.

²³ Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, (USA: Basic Books, 2011).

²⁴ The book has sold over half a million copies and has been translated into fifteen different languages. See; Peter Gries, *China’s New Nationalism*, (USA: University of California Press, 2005), 90.

²⁵ Alexander coins the term in a 2002 article describing the construction of the Nazi Judeocide as the ‘Holocaust’ in post-war Western society. See; Jeffrey C. Alexander, “The ‘Holocaust’ from War Crime to Trauma Drama”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5:1, (2002): 5-85.

²⁶ Chang brought to light the diaries and correspondence of German businessman John Rabe and American nurse Minnie Vautrin and others. They have since become important new ‘characters’ in the trauma-drama of Nanjing. See; Chang, *The Rape of Nanking*, 105-139.

²⁷ Chang’s book was to be a catalyst for renewed academic and popular interest in the massacre. Most of the works on Nanjing cited here (Fogel, Honda, Minoru) were either written or translated after she published in 1997. She also inspired various films, see; Damien Kinney, “Rediscovering a massacre: The filmic legacy of Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking*”, *Continuum*, 26:1:11-23.

altered the popular knowledge and understanding of the events at Nanjing. As such, 1997 can be viewed as the end of one phase of Nanjing historiography and the commencement of another.

The article will initially use Alexander's theory to explain why Nanjing was forgotten, as indeed Alexander did in his 2012 work with Rui Gao.²⁸ Thereafter, in an original contribution, this article will detail why and how the Nanjing massacre was represented as a national-level trauma, something Alexander and Guo stop short of doing in their work. The first question then is, why did the events at Nanjing fail to become a cultural trauma at the time of their occurrence? Why, when the events were violent, socially disruptive and front-page news²⁹ did they not become imprinted on Chinese historical consciousness? The answer lies in the politics of representation.

Forgetting

When the Japanese attacked Nanjing, China was governed by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party. The Kuomintang (KMT) had been in relative control of China since the Northern Expedition of 1926-28 despite a bitter civil war with the CCP that had raged since the Expedition's completion. In 1937, following the Japanese invasion, the two parties formed an uneasy truce, the so-called 'Second United Front'.³⁰ However, Chiang and Mao's efforts to repel the Japanese invasion did not extend to combined military action.³¹ Consequently, it was the Nationalists alone who defended Shanghai, relatively successfully, and Nanjing, very poorly. In the years that followed, had Chiang and the KMT chosen to consecrate the massacre by emphasising the scale of Japanese atrocities, they would also have emphasised the loss of the capital and their own weakness.³² This would have positioned the KMT as victims and would not have served them in the fight against Mao's resurgent CCP, the civil war having resumed only months after Japanese surrender.

²⁸ Jeffrey C. Alexander and Rui Guo, "Mass Murder and Trauma: Nanjing and the Silence of Maoism", in *Trauma: A Social Theory*, ed. Jeffrey Alexander (UK: Polity Press, 2012).

²⁹ Ibid. 121.

³⁰ Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, 583.

³¹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, Third Edition, (USA: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013), 400-401.

³² Alexander and Guo, "Mass Murder and Trauma," 125.

Nanjing did briefly return to local and international consciousness towards the end of the KMT's rule on the mainland. The American-led Tokyo Trials and the KMT-organised Nanjing Trials, both sought to attribute responsibility and mete out justice for Nanjing and other Japanese military transgressions. At the Tokyo Trials, General Matsui Iwane (one of three commanding Generals of the Nanjing assault) was tried with several others for war crimes. However, only seven Japanese including Matsui were executed for their crimes. During the Nanjing Trials, the KMT were far more interested in prosecuting Communist collaborators than Japanese war criminals.³³ And, when the KMT's rule of the mainland came to an abrupt halt with the Communist victory on 1st October 1949, there ended the Nationalists' chance to memorialise Nanjing as a nation-defining trauma.

What then of the possibility of the CCP consecrating the events at Nanjing, incorporating them into their own narratives and eventually Chinese historical consciousness? The CCP had considerable control over the means of symbolic production in the aftermath of Nanjing, with no shortage of support and a range of media outlets both at home and abroad.³⁴ The CCP was well used to generating traumatic representations; Alexander and Guo argue that the CCP have long considered the history of their party as a series of traumatic events.³⁵ However, these were always within a clearly defined political binary, and the Nanjing massacre therefore did not fit into the CCP's pre-existing framework of cultural representations.

Mao very much defined the CCP against his nemesis, the arch-traitor of revolution, Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalists. Communist texts are full of narratives of traumas, historical injuries perpetrated by the KMT with the victims either being the Communist collectivity or the Chinese people themselves.³⁶ To have refocussed on Nanjing would have forced the CCP to reframe its conception of both victim and perpetrator. As mentioned, there were no Communist troops at Nanjing. However, Volkan and Alexander agree that empirical accuracy often has little impact on the power of a cultural script. Indeed, cultural traumas may be

³³ Eykholt, *Chinese historiography*, 20-22.

³⁴ Alexander and Guo, "Mass Murder and Trauma," 124.

³⁵ Jeffrey C. Alexander and Rui Gao, "Remembrance of Things Past: Cultural Trauma, the 'Nanking Massacre' and Chinese Identity" in *Tradition and Modernity: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Kang-I Sun Chang and Meng Hua, (China: Peking University Press, 2007), 271-272.

³⁶ Alexander and Guo, "Mass Murder and Trauma," 126.

narrated from completely imagined origins.³⁷ There was still therefore an opportunity to portray those killed as victims. But to consecrate the Nanjing massacre and its victims would have involved the consecration of victims of all classes, and a fair number of Nationalist troops. To comply with CCP traumatic narratives, any victims had to be not just Chinese compatriots but also the forces of progress. And to cast the Japanese as the perpetrators and therefore the enemy would have been equally counterproductive. Defeat of the Japanese army and the end of hostilities would have resolved the trauma without the need for the glorious social revolution that was the CCP's *raison d'être*. So, both Nationalists and Communists had more than enough time and opportunity to construct Nanjing as a chosen, and potentially nation-defining, cultural trauma, but their pre-existing narratives prevented them. The carrier groups did not carry.³⁸

There was of course a third possible carrier group for the generation of a national level, traumatic master narrative centred on Nanjing - those who witnessed the events directly, the local population. However, after Nanjing fell in December 1937, it remained under Japanese occupation until their eventual surrender on 15th August 1945. Thus, for more than seven years, the potential carrier group, and with them the trauma creation process, were under the control of the perpetrators. Evidence of the massacre was destroyed and counternarratives disseminated within the Japanese occupied territories, effectively silencing these potential carriers.³⁹ It was impossible for the massacre to be consecrated at anything beyond an immediate, local level when the perpetrators were in control of the means of symbolic production. Next, this article asks what changed that the CCP felt they needed to construct, or more properly reconstruct the events at Nanjing as a chosen cultural trauma.

In the forty years since the death of China's Great Helmsman, Mao Zedong, one phrase has come to dominate the way the Chinese view their nation's history. 'Never Forget National Humiliation' (*wuwang guochi*)⁴⁰ has become a mantra for nationalistic Chinese both young and old. The humiliation referred to relates to a period from 1839, the date of the

³⁷ Ibid. 13

³⁸ Alexander and Guo, "Mass Murder and Trauma," 123-127.

³⁹ Ibid. 123.

⁴⁰ Wang, *Never Forget*, 3.

commencement of the First Opium War, to 1949, the year of the Communist revolution. The CCP claim their victory brought to an end what is referred to as China's 'Century of National Humiliation' (*bainian guochi*).⁴¹ Schoolchildren are taught, not just the phrase, but to recall a long list of historical events whereby late-Qing and early-Republican China was forced to acquiesce to European, Russian, American and, crucially, Japanese military and economic might. This narrative of historical humiliation and victimhood is in stark contrast to the "China as victor"⁴² narrative of glorious, inevitable revolution and class struggle which dominated state-sanctioned historiography during the Mao era.⁴³ Indeed, China scholar William Callahan has referred to humiliation as the new "master narrative" of modern Chinese history.⁴⁴ But why the historiographical shift? What changed that the CCP's national narrative altered so dramatically? And why did the CCP think that claiming the status of victimhood on behalf of the Chinese nation was to its advantage? The answer lies not with a single event but with a combination of factors that shook the CCP's ontology and legitimacy to the core.

From Victor To Victim

With Mao's death in 1976 the CCP lost not only their figurehead but also a primary source of cultural legitimacy; the cult of personality which had been structured and developed around Mao.⁴⁵ The Chinese people, exhausted after twenty years of repression and economic stagnation, and the decade-long tumult of the Cultural Revolution, openly expressed their displeasure at the party.⁴⁶ Mao's 'anointed' successor, Hua Guofeng, despite his best efforts to copy Mao's personal style, including his haircut,⁴⁷ was not the solution. He survived less

⁴¹ Emma Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions After Trauma*, (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 215.

⁴² Peter Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, (USA: University of California Press, 2005), 79.

⁴³ Huaiyin Li, "From Revolution to Modernization: The Paradigmatic Transition on Chinese Historiography in the Reform Era" *History and Theory*, 49, (2010): 337.

⁴⁴ William A. Callahan, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives*, 29, (2004): 204.

⁴⁵ For a complete examination of this personality cult, particularly from 1966 onwards, see; Melissa Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge: The Creation and Mass Consumption of a Personality Cult*, (USA: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ Richard Baum, *Burying Mao; Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping*, (USA: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 51-52.

than two years and has been consigned to history as a mere interregnum. Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership⁴⁸ from 1978 onwards, China began the long and ongoing process of 'reform and opening up'.⁴⁹ China's formerly socialist economic structures and relationship to the means of production began to morph into something much more akin to capitalist relations. The euphemistic label applied to this new economic system, "Socialism with Chinese characteristics,"⁵⁰ could perhaps disguise the processes behind reform, but could not disguise the changes which were becoming apparent within Chinese society. The country, which in theory at least, had been classless for thirty years, soon began to stratify as those positioned to take advantage of reforms did so, and made sums of money previously beyond their comprehension.

As the ideologies of Marx, Lenin and Mao which had underpinned the CCP's claims to the rightful governance of China faded into history, so too did the party's political legitimacy. Combine this waning legitimacy with increasing inequalities, and the potential for social unrest, a long-time feature of Chinese life,⁵¹ became manifold. The CCP's worst fears were realised in May/June of 1989 when student protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square steadily escalated over a period of several weeks. The decision to send in the People's Liberation Army on 4th June led to a bloody crackdown which was broadcast to the world and still frames Western understandings of China.⁵² However, the historical trauma of Tiananmen Square is one event conspicuously absent from the calendar of remembrance in China.⁵³ With the subsequent fall of the Berlin Wall, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the CCP's need for a new source of legitimacy went from urgent to desperate.

⁴⁸ Despite appointing younger, better qualified men to the top jobs within the Politburo, Deng was 'paramount leader' and the real power behind the CCP from 1978 until Jiang Zemin was appointed first Secretary General of the CCP in 1990, then President of China in 1993. See; Linda Benson, *China Since 1949*, Second Edition, (UK: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2011), 4 and 64.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 5.

⁵⁰ Yeonsik Choi, "The Evolution of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics": Its Elliptical Structure of Socialist Principles and China's Realities", *Pacific Focus*, 26:3, (2011).

⁵¹ Modern China has a long and sometimes proud history of social movements/social unrest. From the Taiping and Boxer Rebellions which tore Imperial China apart, to the nationalistic and progressive May Fourth and May Thirtieth Movements. See; Frederick Wakeman Jr., "Rebellions and Revolutions: The Study of Popular Movements in Chinese History", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 36:2, (1977): 201-237.

⁵² See for example; Wang, *Never Forget*, 1. Wang cites 'Tank Man' as a popular Western image of modern China and the relationship between people and the state.

⁵³ There is similarly no place for any of the so-called 'dark anniversaries' such as the *Taiping Rebellion*, or the disastrous *Great Leap Forward* and *Cultural Revolution*. See; Hutchison, *Affective Communities*, 223.

State-sanctioned historiography thus shifted as the CCP turned to the painful past to obfuscate the painful present.

Emma Hutchison has argued that trauma can “be politically appropriated to strengthen prevailing forms of community.”⁵⁴ Representations of trauma which fostered national unity through shared suffering would therefore serve the state well in this new China with its consumerism and class distinction. Japanese atrocities were morally unambiguous and had the potential to focus social discontent on an external other, separate from the party/state.⁵⁵ And so it was that after fifty years in the shadows Nanjing, and a selection of historical injustices at the hands of foreign ‘others’, were suddenly thrust into the spotlight.⁵⁶ The CCP had begun the construction of the massacre as a chosen cultural trauma some years before but the project took on a new urgency in light of these recent events. A shocking historical episode which had resurfaced in the 1980s as a means of political point scoring against the economically superior Japan was now transformed into something altogether more potent.

Remembering

In the explication of his theory, Alexander details the “institutional arenas”⁵⁷ which can be brought to bear in the construction of a cultural trauma. These include religious, legal, aesthetic, scientific, mass media and state bureaucracy.⁵⁸ Ordinarily, any group wishing to use these institutional areas for traumatic construction would be subject to the limitations of what Alexander calls “stratificational hierarchies”,⁵⁹ their access to said institutions limited or constrained by the uneven distribution of power and resources within a society. However, in the Chinese case, due to the nature of the authoritarian political system, these institutional areas are in the full control of the party/state. The CCP can therefore use them at will to mediate powerfully the representational process and thus create a master narrative of social

⁵⁴ Ibid. 57.

⁵⁵ Kirk A. Denton, “Heroic Resistance and Victims of Atrocity: Negotiating the Memory of Japanese Imperialism in Chinese Museums”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, (5:10), 2007: 2.

⁵⁶ For a chronology of China’s “Century of National Humiliation”, see; Hutchison, *Affective Communities*, Table 6.1, 217-219.

⁵⁷ Alexander, *Trauma*, 19.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 20–24.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 25.

suffering. This process began in earnest in 1979.

It was in this year that after a fifty year absence, the first references to Nanjing began to appear in the very essence of bureaucratic cultural authority: school textbooks.⁶⁰ Ever since the rise of the nation-state, history textbooks have been used by the body politic as instruments for the glorification of the nation, to consolidate national identity, and to justify social and political systems.⁶¹ An examination of a nation's school texts therefore reveals not only the state's preferred version of the past, and with it national identity, but by their absence, the events that the state would rather its citizens forget. Indeed, it was bureaucratic historical revisionism, this time from Japan, which stimulated efforts to construct Nanjing as a chosen cultural trauma.

It is an oversimplification to argue that whereas the Germans perhaps remember too much, the Japanese perhaps remember too little of their WWII transgressions.⁶² There have always been politicians and scholars, particularly from the Japanese progressive left, who have fought to raise consciousness of Nanjing and other atrocities. Indeed, some of the best Nanjing scholarship has come from these sources.⁶³ However, there has also been an ever-present counter-narrative emanating from the conservative side of Japanese politics. This ranges from complete denial to concerted efforts to downplay the severity of crimes committed, and the number of Chinese casualties.⁶⁴ It was conservative forces like these that attempted to purge, or at minimum to soften, references to WWII atrocities, including Nanjing, from school texts in 1982.⁶⁵ News of the amendments generated a storm of public protest in China that was to background Sino-Japanese relations for the next fifteen years. It was also to provide a catalyst for traumatic cultural construction by the CCP using their considerable influence over aesthetic, mass media and bureaucratic institutional areas.

As a direct response to the so-called 'textbook controversy', the CCP immediately drew up

⁶⁰ Alexander and Guo, "Mass Murder and Trauma," 122

⁶¹ Wang, *Never Forget*, 23.

⁶² See; Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt*, (UK: Jonathan Cape, 1994).

⁶³ Arguably the most prominent Japanese scholar of the massacre is journalist Honda Katsuichi who pioneered Japanese research into Nanjing in the 1970s. See: Honda Katsuichi, *The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*, (UK: Routledge, 1999).

⁶⁴ See: Kitamura Minoru, *The Politics of Nanjing: An Impartial Investigation*. (USA, University Press of America, 2007).

⁶⁵ Eykholt, *Chinese historiography*, 28

plans for the preeminent aesthetic representation of the massacre, an official site of memorialisation in Nanjing itself, the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum⁶⁶ (NMMM). Museums such as the NMMM have played an important role in the promulgation of a “discourse of victimization”⁶⁷ in modern China. Nothing in the museum is left to chance. Every component delivers a carefully calculated message designed both to appeal to, and shape nationalist sentiments. Even the date chosen for the opening was significant, the 15th August 1985 was the fortieth anniversary of Japanese surrender, a reminder to Chinese visitors, in Volkan’s words, of the “massive trauma that the group’s ancestors suffered at the hand of an enemy”.⁶⁸ Visitors to the museum are confronted with the number 300,000 carved in stone into the entrance wall, and the word *Victims* in eleven different languages.⁶⁹ There can therefore be little doubt as to the scale of the atrocities committed, and the depth of Chinese suffering. The focus on empirical evidence continues inside the museum, its location chosen to sit atop one of the many mass graves uncovered in the years following the massacre.⁷⁰ Visitors are presented with exhibits including gruesome photographs, testimonies, and the bones of the many victims uncovered, leaving no doubt as to the identity of both victims and perpetrators.⁷¹ This rather blunt-edged drive to prove the veracity and scale of the massacre was mirrored by the first wave of state-sponsored mass media representations which appeared on the Chinese mainland in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Xu Zhigeng’s *Lest We Forget: Nanjing Massacre, 1937*⁷² is typical of this first wave. The author’s photo appears on the inside cover in full military garb, making no secret of his relationship to the state. Published in 1995, the emotionally charged *Lest We Forget* features the same selection of grainy black and white images displayed in the museum. The use of these photographs, taken by Japanese soldiers,⁷³ was almost ubiquitous for the first tranche of books and movies. Indeed, the plot of Lou Guanqun’s 1987 film, *Massacre in Nanjing*, is

⁶⁶ The museum goes by several different names including *Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall* and *Memorial Hall to the Victims in the Nanjing Massacre*. See; Denton, “Heroic Resistance”.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 3.

⁶⁸ Volkan, “Transgenerational Transmission,” 79.

⁶⁹ Denton, “Heroic Resistance,” 13.

⁷⁰ Denton, “Exhibiting the Past”, 9.

⁷¹ Ibid. 9.

⁷² Xu Zhigeng, *Lest We Forget: Nanjing Massacre, 1937*, (China: Chinese Literature Press, 1995).

⁷³ Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in modern Chinese literature and film*, (USA: Columbia University Press, 2008): 115.

centred on the photos themselves. The film documents the efforts of local photographer Fan Changle and others to smuggle the now notorious photos out of the occupied Nanjing.⁷⁴ Fan eventually succeeds but at a terrible cost to himself and those who aided him. A second film, 1995's *Black Sun: The Nanjing Massacre* by T.F. Mou, also uses the photos to weave a powerful cinematic representation of the massacre. Mou splices the photographs into meticulous filmic re-enactments of the scenes immortalised by them. *Black Sun* was particularly gruesome in its representation of the massacre. When it was eventually released in the United States in 2003, it was by a low budget distribution company specialising in schlock horror movies.⁷⁵ However, as crude as some of these early films and books were, their power in forming the popular understanding of the massacre in the minds of the Chinese people should not be underestimated. As Michael Berry notes, "memories, perceptions and impressions of atrocity are often shaped not by the actual events of history but rather by how those events are represented, re-created, reconstructed, and, in some cases, deconstructed through the lens of popular culture".⁷⁶

After its initial attempts at bureaucratic traumatogenesis with textbook revisions in the late 1970's, the CCP's inculcation of Chinese youth became altogether more intensive in 1991 with the launch of Jiang Zemin's Patriotic Education Campaign. The campaign urged schoolchildren to 'Never Forget National Humiliation', with the massacre being a central plank of this humiliation narrative. The official middle school history textbook uses numerous photos, statistical tables and graphs, the eyewitness accounts of survivors, and often gruesome personal anecdotes to recount the massacre.⁷⁷ This state sanctioned bureaucratic representation goes into great detail of how innocent Chinese were killed *en masse* at various organised execution sites, and the great lengths which the IJA went to dispose of the bodies in their attempts to conceal the atrocities. Again, the nature of the pain, the victims, their relatability, and the perpetrators all clearly identified. The Patriotic Education Campaign also saw more than 10,000 memory sites either constructed or remodelled across China with a hundred of those, including the NMMM, being elevated to

⁷⁴ Ibid. 116.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 128.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 112.

⁷⁷ Wang, *Never Forget*, 208.

national-level status.⁷⁸ To underline the pedagogical importance of Nanjing in the hearts and minds of young Chinese, in 1996 the CCP made school visits to the museum compulsory for local children.⁷⁹ To cope with the influx of school groups, the museum was expanded considerably the following year, the sixtieth anniversary of the massacre. Floor space nearly doubled to 54,000 square metres.⁸⁰ More than 80 schools and organisations have affiliation partnerships with the museum, and it has become not only an important site of traumatic memorialisation, but also firmly enmeshed with the apparatus of the state, the museum now playing host to various CCP inaugurations and party ceremonies unrelated to the massacre. More than 10 million have passed through its gates since 1985.⁸¹

And so it was that by 1997 when Iris Chang's *The Rape Of Nanking* began in earnest the – still ongoing – current phase of the internationalisation of the traumatic narrative of the massacre, the CCP had carefully positioned the events of 1937 as a key element in the national program of traumatic remembrance. This was a complete transformation in status for the recollection and representation of Nanjing. Consecrated by neither Nationalists nor Communists in the years immediately following the massacre, representations of Nanjing then all but disappeared during the Mao era. Memorialisation would have run counter to the pre-existing narratives of glorious, inevitable revolution, the mainstay of Chinese historiography from 1949-1976. But changes in leadership and ideology, with concomitant questions of legitimacy, saw the massacre resurrected for political use, and resurrected with the full cultural power of the apparatus of the party/state. The carrier groups that had failed to carry at the time of the massacre now used all their considerable symbolic resources to create a master narrative of cultural trauma around the Nanjing massacre.

This article has examined the convoluted representational journey of the Nanjing massacre within mainland China between the years of 1937 and 1997. It has argued that the events at Nanjing were first deliberately 'forgotten', then deliberately 'remembered', their forgetting and remembering directly linked to perceived political gains, or to mitigate potential political

⁷⁸ Ibid. 104-107.

⁷⁹ Eykholt, *Chinese historiography*, 36.

⁸⁰ Denton, "Exhibiting the Past", 8.

⁸¹ Wang, *Never Forget*, 107.

losses. It has also argued that when the CCP chose to remember Nanjing from the late 1970s, they did so in a specific manner, as a cultural trauma. The CCP's China is by no means the only nation state to use the past to serve the present. In Jeremy Black's *Using History*,⁸² countries as far afield as Spain and South Africa are cited for their at times calculated and considered use of history for political ends. However, given the CCP's near total control over, not just the normal apparatus of state, but also the popular media, their ability to mediate, institutionalise, and represent historical trauma for political purposes domestically is considerable.

Theorists including Galtung, Volkan and Alexander have described the reasoning behind a state choosing to inculcate a narrative of historical trauma within its body politic, and the methodology required to do so. Indeed, Alexander's social theory of cultural trauma describes in some detail the processes required, a veritable 'how-to' guide for any state so inclined. It is striking how neatly his theory overlays with the manner in which Nanjing has and has not been represented in China since 1937. It is therefore somewhat surprising that Alexander and Gao chose to apply the theory only to the forgetting of the massacre in their 2007 article, and not its subsequent remembering. According to Alexander's theory, traumatic master narratives are formed when carrier groups use the institutional areas available to them to project a trauma claim onto society at large. By applying this theory for the first time to the remembering of the massacre, this article has demonstrated that aesthetic, bureaucratic and mass media institutional arenas have all been powerfully mediated by the CCP to inculcate and promulgate Nanjing as a chosen cultural trauma at a national level. The massacre thus went from a trauma which had directly affected the residents of Nanjing in 1937, to one which by 1997 affected the entire Chinese nation.

China today is very different from the China of 1979-1997 when the traumatogenesis discussed was taking place. The CCP is arguably more in control of the country now than ever before, and the social unrest of Tiananmen Square 1989 is but a fading memory. A party/state more confident of its hold on the country, and more confident of China's increasingly important role in the global political economy, perhaps no longer needs to

⁸² Jeremy Black, *Using History*, (Hodder Arnold, UK, 2005).

traumatise its populace to encourage their loyalty. In her 2016 volume, Emma Hutchison spoke of the need for a “turn to grief”⁸³ if the Chinese people are to heal and move on from the trauma of Nanjing and their century of humiliation. However, for that to happen, the CCP will have to fundamentally alter their approach to China’s tumultuous modern history. They may also have to fundamentally alter pre-existing representations of that modern history, such as the museum in Nanjing.

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⁸³ Hutchison, *Affective Communities*, 228-247.

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