

The study of public memory has become increasingly popular in the past several years. Nowhere has public memory had more influence on popular culture, international affairs, and economic development than in East Asia. In particular, "memories" of World War II have cast a long shadow on twentieth (and twenty-first-century) Asia. By analyzing the role of World War II memorials, teachers and students are able to gain a better understanding of the impact of public memory on contemporary East Asia.

DEFINING PUBLIC MEMORY

Public memory refers to culturally accepted depictions of the past as preserved and propagated through popular media. For instance, when many Americans think about World War II, they visualize Tom Hanks saving Private Ryan or they think about the newly constructed memorial on the Washington Mall. Both of these valorize the war and make it real for millions of Americans.

By definition, these memories are not based on elite or scholarly works of history. Instead, they are the products of mass consumed movies, museums, and popular literature (including both fictional and non-fictional works such as *The Greatest Generation*).¹ There have been hundreds of documentaries on World War II, but none have had the formative impact of such well-liked films as *Schindler's List* or *Pearl Harbor*.

For those generations far removed from the actual event, there is no individual memory separate from these media portrayals. Most of us are too young to remember World War II, but thanks to Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg, and Ben Affleck, we have impressions, or "memories," of that war. For many of us, we "remember" it as the last "good war" and honor its participants as the "greatest generation."

Finally, public memories are powerful and difficult to alter. In 1993, Smithsonian officials learned this the hard way. In anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, museum curators announced that they would have a special exhibit featuring that very famous B-29, the Enola Gay. No sooner had they made the announcement, however, than a storm of protest erupted. Veterans groups, in particular, were deeply offended by the Smithsonian's goals for the exhibit. According to one group, the planned display:

... depicted the Japanese in a desperate defense of their home islands, saying little about what had made such a defense necessary. [On the other hand], US conduct of the war was depicted as brutal, vindictive, and racially motivated. . . .

Graphic displays [were planned that would] . . . include Japanese dead and wounded, flash burns, disfigurement, charred bodies in the rubble, and such vignettes as the smoking ruins of a Shinto shrine, a partially-destroyed image of Buddha, a heat-fused rosary, and personal items belonging to school children who died.²

Within weeks, petitions from around the country poured in demanding that the Smithsonian drastically alter the proposed exhibit. In response, museum directors insisted that such criticism was unfair and baseless. Eventually, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the US Congress all joined in condemning the planned display. With the ever-escalating public outcry, the Smithsonian finally conceded, scrapping the original display and replacing it with a less controversial and ultimately more palatable plan that conformed to existing public memories. Because of all of the publicity surrounding the controversy, the Enola Gay exhibit drew millions of visitors, making it the most popular Smithsonian exhibit ever.

As this one example shows, public memory is powerful and real. Furthermore, it can play a tremendous role in influencing current events. Nowhere is this more evident than in Asia. Just as Americans have developed public memories of World War II, Japanese and Chinese citizens have developed their own public memories. As with the United States, museums and memorials play a large role in forming those memories.

HISTORY AND MEMORY

The Role of War Memorials and Museums in China and Japan

By David Kenley

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Top: The Enola Gay on display at the Smithsonian.
Image source: Smithsonian National Space and Air Museum.

Left: Tibbets and the Enola Gay
Image source: The National Archives.

Hiroshima Peace Dome
(Genbaku Dome) as
seen from the Hiroshima
Peace Park.
Image source:
[http://upload.wikimedia.org/
wikipedia/commons/4/43/
Hiroshima_A-Dome.JPG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/43/Hiroshima_A-Dome.JPG).



“... this law aims at the construction of Hiroshima as a Peace Memorial City, a symbol of the ideal of faithfully realizing lasting peace.”



Korean memorial in the Hiroshima Peace Park.
Image source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HiroshimaMonument
KoreanVictims7075.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HiroshimaMonumentKoreanVictims7075.jpg).

Three memorials in particular have influenced public memories in East Asia. The first, the Hiroshima Peace Park, is located in Hiroshima, Japan. The second, the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, is located in Nanjing, China. The third, the Yasukuni Shrine, is located in Tokyo, Japan. These memorials and museums are extremely popular, yet they portray radically different interpretations of World War II for their respective audiences. These divergent memories continue to influence Chinese-Japanese relations to the present day.

HIROSHIMA PEACE PARK

By far the most widely visited World War II memorial in Japan is the Hiroshima Peace Park, with over one million visitors a year for the last twenty years. It commemorates the victims of the August 1945 atomic bombing. The Truman administration decided to drop the bomb knowing it would kill thousands of unarmed civilians, but hoping it would dramatically shorten the war (and, perhaps, frighten the Russians). The bomb was devastating for Hiroshima, leveling the city and destroying most buildings within 2.5 kilometers of the epicenter. At the point of explosion, temperatures reached 300,000 degrees centigrade and people as far away as 3.5 kilometers experienced thermal burns to their skin. For several years afterward, Hiroshima's residents suffered the effects of radiation exposure.

Shortly after the war, Japanese politicians began debating the future of Hiroshima. Since the city center was essentially flattened, this was a unique opportunity to rebuild from the ground up. Eventually, they decided to reserve several acres at the epicenter to use as a peace park. In the early 1950s, city planners passed the Hiroshima Peace Memorial City Construction Law. The first article states, “... this law aims at the construction of Hiroshima as a Peace Memorial City, a symbol of the ideal of faithfully realizing lasting peace.”

Within the sprawling complex, there are roughly five dozen monuments, two museums, one library, and an International Conference Center dedicated to promoting world peace. Since its creation, the peace park has changed in many ways, with the addition of new monuments and the altering of existing displays. There are a few themes, however, that have remained relatively constant throughout.

First, for most of the post-war period, the peace park has emphasized *Japanese* suffering. Of the roughly 100,000 people killed by the bomb, there were about a dozen Americans POWs, several thousand Japanese-Americans, and about 35,000 Korean forced laborers (perhaps more than one-third of the total killed). None of these groups, however, were initially memorialized. In the 1970s, Koreans living in Japan gathered private funds to construct a commemorative plaque dedicated to the Korean victims of the bomb. Unfortunately, public officials refused to allow them to place it within the park boundaries. The Hiroshima Peace Park, they explained, was meant to commemorate only Japanese victims. Instead, the Koreans settled for a location just outside of the park grounds. It was not until 1999—twenty-four years after their first attempt and fifty-four years after the dropping of the bomb—that a Korean memorial was built in the interior of the park.

Another recurring theme discernable within the park is Japan's innocence. Rather than discussing Hiroshima's military and industrial targets (of which, it must be pointed out, there were very few), the displays focus on non-combatant civilian casualties. Hiroshima is depicted as an isolated city, with its residents far removed from any war responsibility. To point out this innocence, many of the displays within the Peace Park highlight

children, unquestionably the most innocent members of society. In one museum, for instance, life sized wax figurines of young children reach out in grotesque gestures, the flesh of their arms falling away as a result of the atomic blast. In the same museum, you will find relics from children who were killed—including lunch boxes, notebooks, and small toys—that they were carrying on their way to school the morning of the bomb attack.

By far the most famous display in the Peace Park is the memorial to Sasaki Sadako. Even in America, her story is well known. Sadako survived the initial bomb blast, only to develop leukemia from radiation poisoning in the early 1950s. Believing that if she folded 1,000 origami cranes she would survive, Sadako folded day and night until her death. Today, there is a statue of Sadako, and pilgrims from around the world hand deliver millions of paper cranes to the park. If you are unable to travel to Hiroshima, you can send your paper cranes to the Peace Promotion Division of the Hiroshima City Government. City officials will deliver the cranes for you and register your name in the city's paper crane database. By making Sadako and other children the focus of so many exhibits, the Peace Park has effectively created a memory of Japanese innocence regarding the war.

A final theme that pervades the peace park can be summarized by the phrase "special victim status." The peace park emphasizes the uniqueness of the atomic bomb experience. As display after display points out, Japan is the only country ever attacked with a nuclear weapon. This bestows upon Japan "special victim status," comparable or even superior to the victimization of the Jews in the Holocaust. This "special victim status" provides Japan with unique authority and, by extension, superior morality. Since only the Japanese can claim to understand the effects of nuclear warfare, only the Japanese have the moral high ground to argue for a nuclear-free world. For this reason, Hiroshima has become the Mecca for anti-nuclear advocates the world over, making it—and by extension all of Japan—a holy site.³

The Peace Park is very large and has changed over time. It is difficult to make sweeping generalizations about it. Nevertheless, these themes—centering on victimization and innocence—have created indelible memories of the war for millions of Japanese and other park visitors.

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Photograph of the Sasaki Sadako memorial as seen on the cover of *Education About Asia*, 11.1, Spring 2006.
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Sasaki Sadako (front row, center) with some of her classmates, October 1954, Nobori-cho Elementary School.

Photo source: http://www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp/virtual/VirtualMuseum_e/exhibit_e/exh0107_e/exh01071_e.html.

Judging from the memorial, it is not enough to simply remember China’s suffering, it is just as important to emphasize Japanese brutality.

NANJING MASSACRE MEMORIAL HALL

Chinese public memories of World War II are very different from Japanese public memories. Nevertheless, as with Japan, museums have created and perpetuated many of these memories. Ironically, many Chinese also remember World War II as a period of victimization. However, they choose to see themselves as victims of Japanese barbarism and cruelty.

Though nearly all Americans are familiar with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, most are less familiar with the Rape of Nanjing. In 1937, Japanese troops invaded China and captured the capital city of Nanjing. The city surrendered without a fight, but enraged Japanese troops were not content with simply occupying the city. Instead, they initiated a six-week reign of terror during which they killed, mutilated, and raped thousands of individuals. Historians frequently refer to this incident as the Rape of Nanjing. The accounts of this six-week period are truly horrific.

Ironically, it is a well-documented event, since many of the Japanese troops took photographs of themselves torturing and raping Nanjing’s civilians. Additionally, Westerners living in the city corroborated Chinese accounts. John Rabe, a German Nazi party member living in Nanjing at the time, provided one of the most descriptive accounts of the massacre. Drawing on the evidence, the post-war military tribunal concluded that Japanese troops killed over 200,000 unarmed non-combatants *after* the city surrendered.

For many years, the Nanjing Massacre was not featured in Chinese accounts of their modern history. Embarrassed by their humiliating defeat, and eager to gain Tokyo’s recognition of their communist government, China’s political leaders did nothing to memorialize the event, instead sweeping it under the historical rug. By the early 1980s, however, political circumstances had changed, and the Nanjing municipal government set aside a parcel of land for the construction of a memorial hall for the Nanjing massacre. In 1985, officials expanded the park, and today it covers an area of about 28,000 square meters. It includes a large marble museum, a coffin shaped building, and a subterranean display, all surrounded by serene gardens. Located at one of the primary execution and burial sites used by the Japanese, the memorial is much smaller and less visited than the Hiroshima Peace Park. It is, however, just as haunting and just as graphic.

As with the peace park in Hiroshima, there are a few discernable themes. Most notably, the park reminds its visitors of Japan’s naked aggression and barbaric acts during the war. Judging from the memorial, it is not enough to simply remember China’s suffering; it is just as important to emphasize Japanese brutality. Even the official name of the memorial—The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Troops—points out the perpetrators as “Japanese invaders.”

Upon entering the park, one of the first sculptures you will see is that of a large hand reaching out to you from underneath the greenery. Approximately

eight feet in length from the elbow to the finger-tips, the arm is covered with taut muscles and appears to be writhing in pain. With its palm turned downward and the fingers extended outward, it looks as if it is crawling out from beneath a shrub. Perhaps it is reaching out from the hidden and forgotten past.

Further into the gardens, statues, sculptures, and carvings are interspersed among cypress trees. Many of these are stark and shocking. For instance, a large decapitated head lies on a bed of river



The “atonement wall.” Photo courtesy of ImagineChina, © 2008.



Hand coming out of the ground sculpture in the memorial park. Photo courtesy of ImagineChina, © 2008.

rocks, staring blankly into space. Nearby is a statue of a woman. It is apparent that her clothes have been partially torn off her body, yet she clings to them as she valiantly holds off her would-be rapist. From the title of the statue, we learn that the woman is a mother.

Interestingly, another statue near the entrance looks like a large Christian cross with the dates of the massacre written on the crosspiece. Since the cross symbolizes other public memories for the Chinese, it is more likely meant to portray a large sword thrust into the sacred ground of Nanking, symbolizing a wound to not only the Nanjing inhabitants, but to the nation as a whole.

One of the more subtle indictments of Japanese brutality is inside the memorial museum. There you will find a display commemorating John Rabe, the card-carrying German Nazi who was living in Nanjing during the massacre. In addition to providing testimony of Japanese atrocities, Rabe also sheltered thousands of Chinese civilians in his self-proclaimed “safe zone.” For this reason, the memorial refers to Rabe as “the good Nazi.” It does not take much imagination to see the implied comparison. While the Nazis are often remembered as cruel murderers, the memorial implies that the Japanese were, by comparison, worse.

In many ways, the park seems designed as much for Japanese as for Chinese consumption. The memorial continually reminds its visitors that Japan has ignored the Rape of Nanjing or, worse yet, denied it ever happened. Consequently, it directly challenges Japan’s citizens to confront their own repressed memories. For instance, the entire garden area is referred to as the “mourning square,” and one of the key features of the square is the “atonement wall.” The wall lists thousands and thousands of names of the known massacre victims. By using such terms as “mourning” and “atonement,” memorial planners make it clear that there has been insufficient mourning and atonement from the perpetrators of this horrible crime.

The most direct challenge to Japan’s public memory is carved into the side of the main building. As you ascend the steps to the museum, you notice a very large “300,000” carved into the wall. According to many Chinese sources, Japanese troops murdered 300,000 non-combatants. Several Japanese historians, politicians, and business leaders deny that the number was anywhere near that high, suggesting that the actual count is much, much lower—perhaps as low as 2,000. Death tolls vary according to the parameters used by different scholars. Some, for example, count only those victims who died within the city walls while others suggest you must look also at the suburbs and the surrounding villages. Some focus on a well-defined period between December 1937 and January 1938, while others expand that time frame. Some historians have gone to great lengths to discredit every piece of evidence that exists; others have used flawed statistical analysis to come up with inaccurate, inflated figures.⁴ Consequently, the number has become a symbol of competing public memories. By making the number of victims so prominent in the park, the Memorial Hall challenges the Japanese public to come to terms with its own past.

By far, the emotional apex of the memorial is the coffin-shaped display hall. Inside the hall are thousands of bones retrieved from the excavated area. Since its creation, historians have continued to excavate the grounds surrounding the park. Eventually they recovered too many bones to fit in the hall, so a second, larger display room was added. This second room is a subterranean display, requiring visitors to descend into a dark abyss in order to view the entombed human remains. Needless to say, the sight of all of these bones is tremendously moving. The message of the museum has all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.



Severed head sculpture in the memorial park. Photo courtesy of ImagineChina, © 2008.

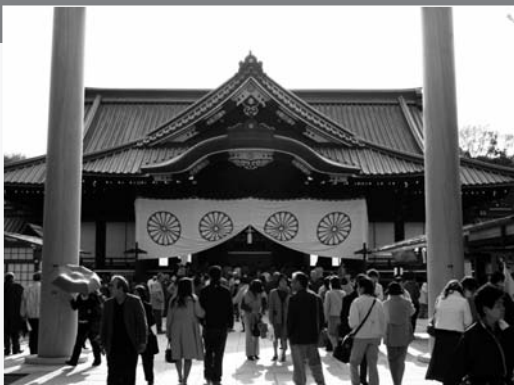


Cross that dates the massacre. Photo courtesy of ImagineChina, © 2008.



Carving on the wall of the main building of The Memorial Hall of the Victims in the Nanjing Massacre. Photo courtesy of ImagineChina, © 2008.

The most controversial aspect of Yasukuni, however, is that it has enshrined 1,068 individuals convicted of war crimes by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East following World War II



Yasukuni Shrine.

Photo source: http://www.japaneselifestyle.com.au/tokyo/yasukuni_shrine.htm.



Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visits the Yasukuni Shrine.

Image source: YaleGlobal, 4 April 2005.

<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=5516>.

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YASUKUNI SHRINE

Historical memories have more significance for our current world than most of us realize. Certainly, this is the case for contemporary Asia. The example of the Yasukuni Shrine demonstrates this significance. Located in downtown Tokyo, the shrine was built in 1869 to commemorate Japan's war dead. Though not owned by the government, the Imperial household had long used the shrine to promote State Shinto and to inspire nationalism. Following World War II, the 1947 constitutional requirement of separation of church and state forced the government to relinquish control over the shrine, passing it into the hands of a privately funded religious group. Since that time, the shrine has become inextricably tied to World War II. For example, while the adjoining museum portrays Japanese wars prior to 1931, many of the displays are related to Japan's involvement in World War II. Furthermore, the displays provide a revisionist perspective of the war, depicting the Japanese as Asian liberators and the United States as the aggressor. Predictably, the museum claims that many of the atrocities associated with the Rape of Nanjing were instigated by the Chinese themselves, claiming that Japan's soldiers have been wrongfully accused. The most controversial aspect of Yasukuni, however, is that it has enshrined 1,068 individuals convicted of war crimes by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East following World War II (including fourteen Class A criminals).⁵

Understandably, the shrine has become a flashpoint for public memories regarding the war. Nevertheless, political groups frequently use the shrine and museum to incite nationalism among potential voters. For example, in an attempt to shore up his political base among conservative voters, Japan's recent Prime Minister—Junichiro Koizumi—visited the shrine at regular intervals to pay his respects. Claiming to be acting as a “private citizen,” Koizumi wanted to appeal to Japan's more nationalistic voting bloc without offending opposing political groups. While this approach worked at home, where Koizumi remained overwhelmingly popular, the Chinese felt his visits to the shrine were intolerably offensive.⁶ Because of their conflicting public memories, the Yasukuni Shrine became the most powerful symbol of Sino-Japanese tensions.

Despite repeated international requests to terminate his visits, former Prime Minister Koizumi continued visiting the Yasukuni Shrine. During the summer of 2004, following one of his visits, emotions reached an explosive level. Tens of thousands of angry protestors took to the streets in numerous Chinese cities. In addition to shouting anti-Japanese slogans, the protestors burned Japanese flags and carried placards. Within days, the protests had grown larger and larger, affecting every major city in China. Eventually, the demonstrators became violent, roughing up Japanese tourists and destroying Japanese-owned businesses. Still, the Japanese government refused to apologize for the Prime Minister's visits to the shrine. Quite the opposite, the Japanese ambassador demanded that the Chinese government apologize for the demonstrations. Not surprisingly, neither side would back down. Many Japanese citizens responded to the riots with shock and disbelief. Why, many of them asked, do the Chinese hate us so much? Such incredible disconnect comes from their radically different public memories of World War II.

Following the riots, the Chinese government suspended all high-level communications between Beijing and Tokyo. Japan responded by discontinuing government-sponsored loans to Beijing. Needless to say, relations between the two countries reached their lowest level in over thirty years. These nations have two of the largest economies and two of the largest militaries in the world. Therefore, the repercussions of their actions can have a truly global impact.

To be fair, the 2004 row between China and Japan was complicated and multifaceted. In many ways, it was also rather artificial, created and perpetuated by government leaders for political gain. Prime Minister Koizumi knew that his visits to the Yasukuni Shrine would risk Chinese censure, but at the same time, those

visits helped him score political points among his conservative voters. On the other side, China's political leaders allowed for massive protests to take place, knowing it would divert some public attention away from their own domestic challenges. Nevertheless, the anger and frustration from the general public was (and is) very real and very dangerous. To ignore this powerful force would be foolhardy.

So, what is the significance of these diverging public "memories?" Is it wrong for both the Chinese and the Japanese to remember their victimization? Are China and Japan's memorials historically inaccurate, perpetuating lies? Why should contemporary politicians, educators, and community leaders worry about public memory?

The Hiroshima Peace Park, the Rape of Nanjing Memorial, and the Yasukuni Shrine play powerful roles in constructing and perpetuating public memories of World War II. Together, they remind us, as William Faulkner explained, "The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past." This is certainly the case in East Asia. In the case of both Japan and China, public memories of World War II center on victimization and innocence. Obviously, these memories are at great odds with one another and will continue to shape Asian and global events for many years to come.

IDEAS FOR TEACHERS

Teachers might want to assign students to "design" a museum of their own. Alternatively, they might "redesign" the museums and memorials discussed in this article. Encourage students to think critically about the role of memorials in public memory. You may wish to discuss the following questions with them:

Which individuals or organizations should influence the creation of museums and exhibitions? Should they be privately or publically owned? Who owns the museums/memorials mentioned in this article, and how does that affect each of them?

What sources—academic or otherwise—should museum curators rely on for their interpretations? What role should patriotism play in designing historical exhibitions? How do particular museums and memorials change over time and what causes these changes?

In what ways do museums and memorials reflect public views of historical events? In what ways do they actually help shape them? ■

NOTES

1. Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 2005).
2. John T. Correll, "The Smithsonian and the Enola Gay," *Air Force Magazine* (March 15, 1994) as posted on the Air Force Association official Web site at <http://www.afa.org/media/enolagay/03-001.asp> (Accessed November 14, 2008).
3. Interestingly, Nagasaki also has a memorial site commemorating the atomic bombing of that city on August 9, 1945. For a variety of reasons, though, the Nagasaki site receives far less attention than the Peace Park in Hiroshima. Furthermore, in comparison to the Hiroshima Peace Park, the Nagasaki site is far less focused on Japan's "special victim status."
4. According to the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, the death toll was at least 200,000. Most scholars suggest that the actual number of victims was between 150,000 and 250,000. For more information on the numbers debate, see Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, ed., *The Nanking Atrocity 1937–38: Complicating the Picture* (New York and London: Berghahn Books, 2007); Yoshida Yutaka, *Tennō no guntai to Nankin Jiken: mō hitotsu no Nitchū Sensō shi* (The Emperor's Military and the Nanjing Incident: One More Sino-Japanese War History) (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1998); Fujiwara Akira, *Nankin Jiken o dō miru ka: Nichi-Chū-Bei kenkyūsha ni yoru kenshō* (How to Perceive the Nanjing Massacre: Verifications by Japanese, Chinese and American Researchers) (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1998).
5. Soon after the war, officials began discussing the fate of the convicted war criminals. They were eventually enshrined in 1978. At the time, administrators kept the enshrinement ceremony a secret from the public.
6. In addition to the Chinese, the Yasukuni Shrine is offensive to South Koreans and other Asians who suffered at the hands of the Japanese during the war. Not surprisingly, these other nations also have memorials, each preserving and perpetuating different public memories of the conflict.

The Hiroshima Peace Park, the Rape of Nanjing Memorial, and the Yasukuni Shrine play powerful roles in constructing and perpetuating public memories of World War II.

FURTHER READING

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- Takashi Yoshida, *The Making of the "Rape of Nanking": History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
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