Anis Shivani

Refuting the False Consolations of History: On Ha Jin’s *Nanjing Requiem* (Pantheon, 2011)

The “Rape of Nanking”—or the “Nanking Atrocity”—is one of the most controversial historical events of the twentieth century, and any novel written about it cannot but be interpreted in the light of the well-known disputes about its nature and meaning, its causes and consequences, and the propaganda aims this terrible event has served in its afterlife for China, Japan, and the United States. Though the long Asia-Pacific War started in 1931 with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the fall of Nanking—the capital of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist (Kuomintang) government—represented an ominous harbinger of the total war that was to befall the world until 1945.

Something went terribly wrong in Nanking. When Chiang Kai-shek’s forces surrendered—the generalissimo himself had left earlier—the Japanese embarked on a slaughter of both civilians and soldiers, and raped women of all ages, literally from eight to eighty. The number of deaths varies from a low of a few thousand (according to the most conservative Japanese revisionists) to a high of more than three or four hundred thousand (suggested by the most nationalist Chinese scholars since the 1970s). The International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE)—or the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal—concluded in 1948 that 200,000 people were killed and 20,000 women were raped. This was based on the testimony of survivors and the evidence of key Western observers such as John Magee, and has been the baseline against which all future estimates have been measured.

A precise reckoning is difficult. A lot depends on the boundaries of Nanking defined for the events that took place in the weeks following December 13, 1937, when Nanking fell. To include the environs of the city yields a larger number, and makes the tragedy appear more horrific when total casualties are measured against the short period of time involved. Some proponents of the higher figures have controversially tried to make a case for Nanking as being comparable to, or even exceeding, the Holocaust in its magnitude, since Nanking was compressed in such a short period of time.
The Nanking Safety Zone (NSZ), established by the International Relief Committee (chaired by John Rabe, a Nazi businessman) and responsible for saving many lives, was disbanded in February 1938, after giving refuge to perhaps as many as 200,000 people at its peak. Rabe, incidentally, despite universal recognition for his compassionate services, suffered an ill fate when he returned to Germany and wrote Hitler about the nature of the crimes he’d witnessed in Japan. The Gestapo arrested him, and his life thereafter was miserable, because Hitler didn’t want the Japanese crimes to come to light. The NSZ consisted of several sites in Nanking, including Ginling Women’s Arts & Sciences College, whose acting president, an Illinois Christian missionary named Minnie Vautrin, was called the Living Goddess of Mercy by Nanking inhabitants, and is the subject of Ha Jin’s novel.

At the IMTFE, while two out of twenty-eight Japanese “Class A” (highest crimes) defendants—including Matsui Iwane, the general in charge of the Nanking forces, though he wasn’t present for the initial worst days of the massacre—were sentenced to death, a famous dissenting opinion was rendered by Indian judge Radhabinod Pal. Pal disputed the very idea of war crimes trials, holding that they were compromised by the prejudices of the victor against the loser, and providing fodder for the idea that the Asia-Pacific War must be seen in the context of its larger consequences, i.e., that Asia was no longer colonized by the West. Pal didn’t dispute that an atrocity had occurred, but he fundamentally disagreed with the IMTFE’s jurisdiction and powers.

The Allied Occupation regime decided to shun the more progressive Japanese voices demanding a thundering end to the “emperor system,” and directed responsibility for Japanese imperialism toward the military—particularly General Tojo—rather than the emperor himself. This was the beginning of a historical conversation that has seen all three sides—China, Japan, and the United States—shift their emphasis on the Nanking Atrocity, depending on the needs of the time.

For Americans, after the early days of the Occupation, the need was to elicit Japan as a full partner against the rising Communist threat, especially after Mao’s victory in China in 1949. Stability, not transformation, became the order of the day, as many who had been associated with Japanese imperialism became officials of the new Japanese republic. Thereafter, until the 1970s—when the Vietnam War and the general leftist upsurge forced rethinking—the Nanking Atrocity retreated from American consciousness. But as Japan (reminiscent of today’s worries about China) became an economic threat in the late 1980s and early 1990s,
Nanking became a subject of hot discussion—unfortunately often veering into presumptions about Japanese “national character.” Alleged designs for world conquest became a key theme linking the past and the present. The fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor in 1991 and the *Enola Gay* controversy in 1994-95—to what extent the Smithsonian exhibit should emphasize the casualties of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—further fed the fires.

But what really made the issue explosive again was the rise of a new generation of the Chinese diaspora in the West. Here no figure looms as centrally as the late Irish Chang, who wrote *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (BasicBooks, 1998). The title alone, evoking comparisons to the Holocaust, was controversial, escalating a growing scholarly division over the meaning and application of “genocide,” since Chang’s implication was that Japanese policy toward China, both before and after Nanking, was no less than genocidal, and that this was a reflection of deep-rooted problems in the Japanese character.

Aside from scores of factual inaccuracies in Chang’s book, what offended historians was her presumption that Nanking was a forgotten issue in Japan, that textbooks had written the incident out of memory, and that a collective amnesia prevented the Japanese from addressing their imperialism. For Chang, the Nanking Atrocity was as brutal as the Holocaust, if not more so. The publication of Chang’s book in Japan was canceled in 1999 when she wouldn’t agree to amendments to her Japanese publisher’s satisfaction. In America, *The Rape of Nanking* became a bestseller, getting ecstatic reviews in the press, and spawning an academic Nanking Holocaust industry that shows little signs of abating.

The Japanese took it as an assault on their national character, and for good reason. Even in the quiescent 1950s and 1960s, a number of Japanese scholars built on the findings of the IMTFE and kept the issue alive in the Japanese consciousness. In 1971, with the rise of progressive political forces, a sustained attention to Nanking became the order of the day, as historians called on the nation to come to terms with its past misdeeds. Later, particularly in the 1980s, some conservative Japanese scholars would consider the calls for accountability as having exceeded the bounds of reason, lapsing into “victimizer consciousness,” a form of masochism. In 1982, the famous textbooks controversy raged, involving the degree of coverage and culpability toward Nanking; this controversy remains alive till today, sparked by leftist criticism whenever a Japanese textbook minimizes the magnitude of the horror. Politicians’ fortunes have sometimes risen or fallen in correlation with their stance toward Nanking.
The Japanese revisionist camp minimizes the nature of the atrocity, blaming it on the fog of war, calling it incidental and not systematic, estimating the casualties to be as low as a few thousand, and assigning some responsibility to Chinese soldiers for shedding their uniforms and blending in with the civilian population, leading to these “unlawful combatants” being ruthlessly hunted down. But the revisionist camp is small and mostly marginal.

As for China—the victim itself—until Deng Xiaoping’s opening, it was the party most reluctant to talk about Nanking. Prior to the Communist takeover, the Nationalist government didn’t exactly have a strong position from which to mount a vigorous accounting of Nanking. There were missed possibilities for a negotiated truce which perhaps might have spared lives. Once the Communists took over, it became inconvenient to talk about that kind of national weakness; moreover, the Chinese government wanted good relations with Japan, being in no economic position to challenge its richer neighbor. It was only in the 1980s that economic transformation gave new focus to patriotism, and Japan appeared less of an economic hegemon. Resurgence in interest in Nanking also correlates with the crackdown following Tiananmen, as a consequence of the bunker mentality. For the Chinese, the politics of Nanking vary according to perceived external and internal challenges, and changes in relations with Japan and the United States.

The novelist entering this fray would have to avoid a number of potholes. The novelist would have to avoid the easy categorization of Japanese as evil, Chinese as victims, and Westerners as saviors. The novelist would have to convey the brutality without desensitizing the reader. The novelist would have to shed some new light, more than what we can obtain from the diaries of principal NSZ protagonists like John Rabe and Minnie Vautrin, not to mention the enormous documentary work continuously in production since the IMTFE. In short, a successful novel about the Nanking Atrocity would take the facts as given, but lead to a broader understanding than what we already have. Especially for a writer of the Chinese diaspora in America, for some of whom the Chinese massacre—like the Bangladeshi massacre or the Bosnian massacre—has almost become a point of nationalist glory (the bigger the numbers, the greater the sense of national aggrievement, and in a perverse way, pride as well!), the subject is fraught with additional difficulty.

The biggest challenge for Jin is with regard to the depiction of his heroine. Vautrin was a delicate character who devoted her life to China after having broken off her engagement. Her constitution eventually...
could not handle the pressure of having to deal with Japanese soldiers who constantly intruded into the NSZ, assaulting refugees, seeking to identify soldiers, and seizing people without permission despite official Japanese recognition of the NSZ. Vautrin was everywhere in those first few weeks after December 13, and she was responsible for saving many lives and preventing many rapes. She was on good terms with certain Japanese officials, such as the consular officer Tanaka, and had to keep pleading to recover women or children from Japanese custody.

Accommodating as many as 10,000 refugees—when Ginling College was supposed to hold less than 3,000—was a challenge Vautrin handled well. The management of grief was a daunting task for Vautrin and her associates, Chinese and Western, and this is the part where the diaries are somewhat reticent, and whose hints and subtleties Jin expands on, to bring out Vautrin’s vulnerability. Yet he must not fall victim to idolizing her, he must not strip her humanity by raising her to godhood.

Jin could not have chosen first-person narration from Vautrin’s point of view—that would have been too close to the diaries and posed insurmountable difficulties. Third-person narration from Vautrin’s point of view would still have created difficulties in disassociating from the sheer weight of Vautrin’s presence. Jin chose the solution of narrating the book from the point of view of an imagined loyal assistant, Anling Gao, who loves and admires Vautrin and yet is sufficiently detached enough to note when Vautrin is being too hard on herself or is unable to keep things in perspective. The task with most historical subjects who have accomplished great things is to show their humanity; with Vautrin, the task is to bring her down from her saintly pedestal a notch or two, and Jin knows well that to humanize her is a way to calibrate the Nanking incident toward a level of comprehension that cannot any longer be achieved with the ample historical documentation. Jin’s Vautrin is petulant, impulsive, argumentative, willful, oversensitive, and often hurt, to a greater extent than in the diaries.

The novel is saturated with levels of grief, from the minor to the colossal, and Vautrin’s person reflects the myriad. For example, Anling must come to terms with her son Haowen’s death at the hands of the Japanese, whom he has been serving as a menial physician. Her husband Yaoping must leave Nanking, because of an offer of collaboration which he can neither refuse nor accept, if he is to have a future in post-occupation China. Anling is also caught between the bureaucratic Miss Dennison, the new president of Ginling—her character is a stroke of genius on Jin’s part, substituting her patronizing persona for the actual Matilda
Thurston—who has managerial skills but lacks vision, and the endlessly compassionate Vautrin, who wants to think beyond the moment, tragic as it was, and alter the nature of the patron-client relationship between Chinese and Westerners, to the extent possible. Anling, for reasons of survival, must sometimes side with the narrow-minded Miss Dennison, if her heart always sides with Vautrin. In a sense, Vautrin and Anling become mirror images, since the major events touch them both directly, and it is in the fine shades of their interaction that Jin excels at deep characterization.

This passage well illustrates the mix of beauty and terror, hope and fear, that characterizes Anling’s feelings as she beholds the assaulted imperial city:

The campus, no longer guarded by the Japanese police, was now pretty with blooming flowers—lilacs, magnolias, crocuses, white spirea—and birds kept singing, as if determined to burst their throats with grief. There were so many flowers that once a young Japanese officer came to ask for a bouquet, and Minnie was pleased to get Old Liao to cut a mixed bunch for him. Every day some soldiers would turn up in twos or threes, but few were violent now. They were impressed by our classroom buildings, which combined the Chinese and the Western architectural styles, with high-columned front portals, flying eaves, and gargoyles on the edges and ridges of the roofs. I treated them with courtesy in hopes that one of them might help me find my son in Tokyo. We hadn’t heard from Haowen for ten months and couldn’t stop wondering if he was still alive, but I never went so far as to ask any of the soldiers to help look for him. I hadn’t met one I could trust.

Consider also the example of the mad girl Yulan—only hinted at in the diaries—which Jin builds as a continuing motif:

For days, she’d been thinking about going to the northeast personally, fantasizing that her visit might help Yulan out of that place. Minnie revealed her thoughts to no one but me.

I vehemently objected to her plan…

Finally Minnie saw the logic of my argument, so she agreed to drop the plan. Yet thoughts about Yulan kept eating away at her. She couldn’t help but imagine other possibilities of rescuing her and often discussed them with me. “Don’t be so obsessed,” I reminded her. “Sometimes we must learn to forget. This is a way to keep us going.”
This dramatizes the absurdity of calculation per se in war time, when it comes to whom to save and whom not to save. The whole calculus is profoundly deceptive and useless, reflecting the collective insanity of the project of domination and conquest. Aside from Vautrin, everyone else—even Anling—desires to set limits to the amount of activism on behalf of the poor insane girl Yulan. Yet in relating Vautrin’s grief at finally being unable to help Yulan, Jin opens a dark window onto the unmentionable.

The engaged reader of Nanjing Requiem will acquire a thirst to explore the legal, conceptual, philosophical, and practical meanings of genocide. While this concept is not explicitly mentioned in the novel, it is never far from the mind. The Japanese come across in this novel as ruthless, brutal, and invincible, as we know from the historical record, but Jin’s directness—no forced attempt at lyrical language, no excessive description of rape or murder—also allows us to become curious about the Japanese, their motivations and reasoning (or lack of it), their particular form of discipline and desire and will.

One incident briefly mentioned in Vautrin’s diary of December 24—her handing over of twenty-one women in response to Japanese pressure to hand over a hundred “prostitutes”—is expanded by Jin into a major source of guilt:

Somehow we both felt that some of the abducted women might come back, that it might be too early to fully gauge the weight of the incident. What’s more, we were certain that among the twenty-one women there’d been at least two or three former prostitutes. Deep down, we both knew that most of the twenty-one women were unmarried and innocent. If only we had some information on them. If only we could find a way to bring some of them back. Those young lives had been ruined. No matter how we tried to reason away our responsibility, we were somewhat implicated, since by now everyone knew that Minnie had granted the Japanese permission…. The more Minnie ruminated on this, the more remorseful and distressed she became. I urged her to stop thinking about it. There was so much to worry about at the moment that we mustn’t let our sense of guilt paralyze us.

We are thrown back to judge Pal’s metaphysical speculation on the opaque politics of it all—which the IMTFE tried to make explicit, only succeeding in sparking more than six decades of disputation over the very data of the event and its surrounding political large print. What happened? How could
it have happened? The facile slogan Never Again, adopted by well-meaning humanitarians but repeatedly violated in repetitions of Nanking in the decades since (as Samantha Power has pointed out with regard to Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda), presumes a certitude of knowledge about human motivation which we probably don’t possess. The interstices where life-and-death decisions are made—both on the micro and macro level—are penetrated by the most terrible darkness; it is where sociologists and historians fear to tread. The magnitude of numbers in a particular genocide or atrocity replaces the work of asking the hardest questions; it is understandable and forgivable, but it only leads to stasis.

Herein lies perhaps the meaning of Vautrin’s suicide—it is possible to read it as the final most compassionate act on her part, the most necessary one; to be able to save herself (particularly for a Christian missionary) when she could save many but not all lives is a contradiction in terms. When one witnesses so many senseless deaths, after what point does the willingness to do good become itself an act of collaboration?

According to Jin’s novel, Vautrin desired badly to return to China from the U.S. to continue her good work—she is particularly incensed about Miss Dennison’s disinterest in continuing and expanding industrial training for indigent Chinese women, and her focus on the elite scholarly desideratum of the institution—and being repeatedly thwarted in this desire may have contributed to Vautrin going “mad” and taking her life in the U.S. in 1940. To his credit, Jin never suggests that Vautrin could simply have returned to China and picked up where she left off. All lives are damaged or destroyed to one extent or another in war, from the victor’s and vanquished’s point of view, but also from the observer’s point of view. We can perhaps view Iris Chang’s suicide from the same prism of the inevitability of sacrifice, the inability to stop in the act of empathy after a certain prescribed limit. This is a difficult thing to say, but Jin’s novel does prompt us to such considerations.

Jin refuses the temptation of conceptualizing Japanese as beasts, Chinese as passive victims, and Westerners as saviors. The Westerners we meet in the novel, as they prepare for the invasion and as they pull no stops to save lives once the invasion starts, emerge as people driven by humanitarian duty; it is no small irony that Rabe was a committed Nazi and that some of the reason for his success in dealing with the Japanese and in being appointed head of the International Committee was precisely his credibility as a Nazi. Nevertheless, duty at its most intense—at the cost of all personal comfort—drives the novel from beginning to end, while Chinese self-protection assists it and sometimes impedes it,
creating a ferocious complexity. As for the Japanese, there are some who
are sympathetic, and some, particularly among the lowly soldiers, who are
more ruthless, but there is no attempt to paint them in uniform colors as
animalistic, as the delusions of history sometimes do.

The IMTFE is more than sixty years old, the atrocity more than sev-
ent——yet the controversy in Japan and China, and increasingly in the
United States, suggests that ultimately its meaning is indiscernible. We get
a hint of this too from Jin, which saves his novel from collapsing into
facile notions of good and evil. To assign good and evil has been the
force behind the long tussle between traditionalists and revisionists, max-
imalists and minimalists, empaths and deniers, and the fight plays out at
the level of numbers above all, as if only empirical data can save us from
oblivion. We have come to believe perhaps too strongly in the power of
memorializing as an antidote to repetition of the inhuman. The life and
death of Vautrin, as depicted in Jin’s novel, gives the lie to this febrile
game of numbers, this senseless war between forgetting and reliving.

As Vautrin says to a Japanese officer defending the Imperial Army:

Do you think they can simply slam the brakes on violence?...
The atrocities will continue to take place in the victims’ minds for
many years. They’re not something that can be put behind easily.
Hatred begets hatred as love begets love.