

Massacre at Nanjing: A Forgotten Tragedy

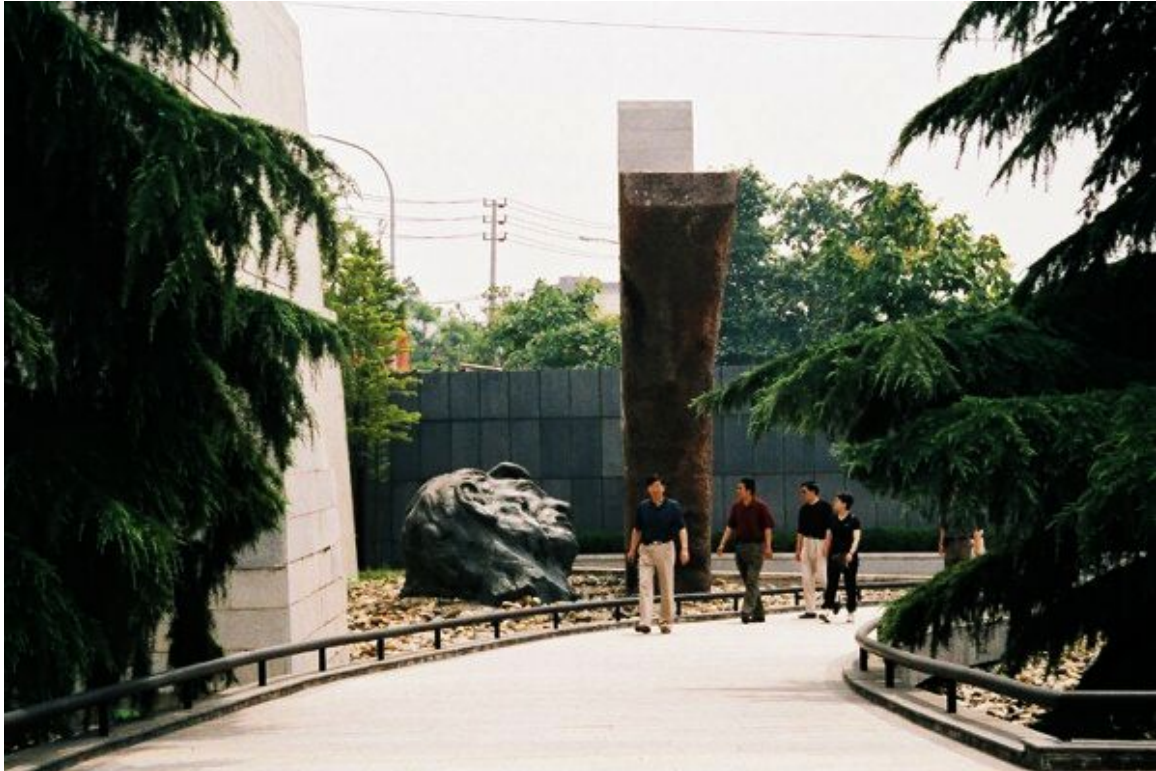
Over recent months, on the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second world war, we have been revisiting many of the triumphs of the tragedies of the conflict. Often with the survivors present, perhaps for the last time. Among the avalanche of media articles and events, little or nothing was heard of the horrific events that took place in Nanking in 1937 that might have served as a warning of the many horrors to follow. This article is dedicated to the memory of the victims, known and unknown; to the few brave foreigners who tried with some success but many failures, to save the citizens of Nanking; and to Iris Chang, who kept the memories alive. - Place names and persons have generally been given in the old spelling, but where appropriate *pinyin* is used or given as an alternative.



From an advert in the Times, 11 October 2003: “China the Beautiful” . . . Day 6: Nanjing - sightseeing includes: Sun Yat Sen Mausoleum, Confucius Temple Area, Market and Yangtze River Bridge.

There is no doubt that Nanking (today more commonly called Nanjing) is still a city retaining much of its old beauty and well worth inclusion in the tourist’s itinerary. However, it also hides the haunting ghosts of one of the worst episodes in the Second World War, an event that ranks with Belsen, Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But unlike these and many other memorials to man’s inhumanity, the atrocities that were committed in 1937-38 in Nanking have fallen victim to both an overt and a covert conspiracy to remove them from the world’s collective memory.

In 1993 I visited Nanking and enjoyed the various sights listed above. I found it one of China's most delightful cities. It seemed to have adapted to the late 20th century without tearing itself apart and still retained many of its old buildings and its quiet dignity. When in 2002 I had an opportunity to revisit the city, I insisted to my hosts that along with everything else, I wished to visit the Memorial to the victims of the "Rape of Nanking".



Visiting the memorial

The Memorial Hall and garden are set in a dusty side road to the south of the city, in an industrial area at Jiangdongmen. Originally part of an army barracks, for six weeks in 1937-38 it was the scene of an unbelievable horror. We parked in the large empty car park. At the corner of the high walls a narrow, nondescript entrance past the pay desk opened out onto a wide landscaped path flanked on one side by grass supporting a large flock of white doves and on the other by the high wall. I noted at once that the normal city noises were much subdued. The path led up to a large white sculpture of a tormented male head struggling to rise out of the ground and flanked by walls scarred with hundreds of enlarged bullet holes.

We turned left onto a series of steps that curved and rose over a large mound, then brought us down into a large, sloping, grassed walled garden, where the path led around the perimeter. There a series of bronze plaques, some laid on the ground, others set into the wall, detailed other sites, dates, and numbers killed in the course of the massacre. At the lowest part of the garden the stone wall was faced with white marble engraved with the thousands of names of those who could be identified. The path then turned back to

the main shrine, towards a large glass-walled enclosure set into the mound with a small shrine and shop to the left. The glass walls protected the excavated skeletons of hundreds of males, females, and children, all lying where they were murdered and buried, all numbered, some with a short note of sex, age, and means of dispatch - such as a six-year-old killed by nails being driven into his body.

In a quieter, reflective mood, the visitor moves past the enclosure into the main exhibition area, which is comprised of a series of curved halls, with a cinema at one side near the exit. The halls detail the history of the Japanese Imperial Army (JIA)'s attack, with eyewitness reports and many photographs, including films; it finishes with findings of the Allied commission of 1945-46 and the outcome of the trials of the few individuals identified as being involved. The whole memorial is a very moving testimony to the suffering inflicted on the city by the JIA, a history that needs to be better known. It is beholden on our generation, with our memories of the war, to help keep alive the memory of the senseless suffering inflicted on countless millions, for those who forget or ignore history are destined to repeat it.

The Nanking memorial, as living proof of these memories, deserves to be placed high on the tourist map rather than, as it is, being relegated to a footnote, or even airbrushed out of history as the Japanese would prefer. A few details jarred on my visit - some easily fixed, such as the English notes to some of the exhibits being wrongly placed. Numbers on the exhibits and a corresponding ones on the notes would be helpful to staff and visitors. The management should see the site as visitors do - a place of contemplation and peace - but the use of megaphones by the young guides conducting groups of visitors just jars. Other faults are less easily fixed. The bronze plaques placed along the path convey the correct sentiments, but I wished a native English speaker had corrected the text before the final casting, as most contain grammatical and spelling errors.

Young Chinese have a fair knowledge of this period and know of the massacre, but they are not always aware that this monument exists. However, in Japan the government and shadowy figures from the extreme right have attempted to remove from their history books and the nation's memory any reference to the events in Nanking and to other atrocities carried out by the JIA, with such success that many young Japanese today believe that China and the Allies were the aggressors and Japan the victim in the 1930s and '40s; some are even reported to be confused about who actually won the war.



Nanking, December 1937

In the summer of 1937 the Japanese army forced war on China. After a few rapid victories in the northeast and around Peking, they turned their attention southward, starting with Shanghai, where they already controlled an area in the southeast of the city and expected another quick victory. Instead, they were defeated in the initial assaults and the battle raged on, lasting into early November. When at last the Chinese lines were broken, three army groups, led by Generals Nakajima Kesago, Matsui Iwane, and Yanagawa Yaguta, made for Nanking. On December 2nd Emperor Hirohito replaced the Buddhist General Matsui promoting him to commanding general of the whole Central China Theatre, his uncle Prince Asaka Yasuhiko now took command of the attack on Nanking. Nakajima approached the city from the north, Asaka through Suzhou in the middle, and Yanagawa through Huzhou from the south

What was in store for Nanking could be seen from the first reports. From Suzhou the *China Weekly Review* stated: "The Japanese entered on Nov 19 and after a few weeks of wreaking violence on the city and its inhabitants, its population had fallen from 350,000 to 5000." A British correspondent noted at the same time in Sungchiang (Songjiang) in the south that "smouldering ruins and deserted streets presented an eerie spectacle, . . . in Sungchiang, which should have contained a densely packed population of approximately 100,000, I only saw five Chinese, hiding in a French mission compound in tears." When the Japanese troops smashed through the walls of Nanking in the early hours of December 13, they entered a city in which historians later estimated that more than half a million civilians and 90,000 Chinese troops were trapped. The Chinese government had

declared Nanking an open city and all their troops left behind were expected to surrender (most of the officers and NCOs had already fled).

The Japanese knew they didn't have the manpower to control vast tracts of land with millions of civilians and captive troops, so they decided to rely on deception. Their strategy for control was to use mass butchery involving several steps: Promising the Chinese fair treatment in return for an end to resistance, they coaxed them into surrendering, then divided them up into manageable groups of one to two hundred men before moving them to areas where they could be killed. It proved easier to achieve than the Japanese had anticipated - instead of the dogged resistance they had met in Shanghai, the Chinese forces surrendered to them in groups of up to 20,000.

One Japanese wrote of his group of 7,000: "They were a ragged assortment of men and boys wearing blue cotton military uniforms, cotton overcoats and caps." He also observed that "though there should have been a considerable number of officers for these troops, not a single one remained." Kurihara Riichi, a Japanese soldier noted: "They then split the troops up into smaller and smaller groups, moving them into areas designated for the massacre. . . . Suddenly all kinds of guns fired at once. . . . The sounds of firearms mingled with desperate yelling and screams until there were few sounds coming from the groups, we then bayoneted the bodies and the living, one by one."

General Nakajima complained in his diary that it was hard to locate ditches large enough to bury heaps of seven to eight thousand corpses. Cremation also presented problems, as the Japanese lacked enough fuel to do a proper job. After the Mufu (artillery forts just N of Nanking) massacre the gasoline ran out before the fire could reduce the remains: "The result was a mountain of charred corpses," a Japanese corporal wrote. "Many bodies were then simply dumped into the Yangtze."

The Japanese were also accompanied by their war correspondents. A *Nichi Mainichi Shimbun* reporter watched as troops lined up the prisoners on top of the wall near Chungshan (Zhongshan) Gate and "charged at them with fixed bayonets. One by one the prisoners fell down outside of the wall, blood splattered everywhere." Imai Masatake, a military correspondent, noted:

On Hsiakwan wharves there was the dark silhouette of a mountain made of dead bodies. About fifty to one hundred people were toiling there dragging bodies from the mountain of corpses and throwing them into the river. On the pier was a field of glistening mud under the moon's dim light. Wow! that's all blood! After a while, the coolies had done their job and the soldiers lined them up along the river, machine gun fire was heard, and they all fell and were swallowed up by the raging currents.

An officer at the scene estimated that 20,000 people had been executed. Yukio Omata saw the prisoners brought to Hsiakwan and lined up along the river.

Those in the front row were beheaded, those in the second row were forced to dump the severed bodies into the river before they were beheaded. The killing went on non-stop from morning until night, but they were only able to kill 2000 in this way. The next morning,

tired, they set up machine guns, the prisoners tried to flee into the water but no one was able to escape.

Photo-journalist Kawano Hiroki recalled, “I remember there was a pool just outside Nanking. It looked like a sea of blood - with splendid colours. If only I had colour film . . .”

The Japanese then turned their attention to the women. “Women suffered most,” Talokoro Kazo recalled.

No matter how young or old, they could not escape the fate of being raped. We sent out coal trucks from Hsiakwan to the city streets and villages to seize women. And then each one was allocated to 15-20 soldiers for sexual intercourse and abuse. After we raped them, we would also kill them. Those women would start to flee once we let them go. Then we would “bang!” shoot them in the back.

Officers at all levels indulged in the orgy; some not only urged soldiers to commit gang rape but warned them to dispose of the women afterward to eliminate evidence of the crime.

Once the Chinese soldiers had surrendered en masse, there was virtually no one left to protect the civilians. The Japanese poured into the city on December 13, occupying the main buildings and shooting people randomly in the streets, many in the back as they ran away. They fired on crowds of wounded, elderly, women, and children and killed civilians in every section of the city. As their victims toppled to the ground, moaning and screaming, the streets, alleys, and ditches of the fallen capital ran with rivers of blood.

It was not only the residents of the city who were systematically killed; the Japanese army also massacred the population in the nearby suburbs and countryside, targeting especially any young male on the presumption that he could have been a former soldier. But they also murdered people who could not possibly have been soldiers - being Chinese was reason enough.



Western observers of the massacre

In the middle of this horror, a small group of Westerners set up the International Nanking Safety Zone, intending to recreate an earlier model. Just after the fall of Shanghai, Father Jacquinet de Bessage had successfully established a neutral area in the city to shelter up to 450,000 refugees.* In Nanking William Plumer Mills, a Presbyterian missionary, with the help of 21 others, designated an area slightly west of the city centre as a safety zone; it was assumed that once the invading troops had established control and created order, the zone could be shut down, possibly in a few days. The Japanese, however, flatly refused to honour it. The American embassy then urged the zone organisers to join its staff and other diplomats on board the *USS Panay*, and when they refused, it sailed away on 9 December. The refusal turned out to have been a wise move, for on 12 December the *Panay* was deliberately bombed, sunk, and the survivors machine-gunned in the water.

The Nanking safe area soon became packed with hundreds of thousands of refugees, and the committee found it hard to provide for so many people - food, shelter, and medical care in the middle of winter for over six weeks. The most difficult task, however, was to protect them from the Japanese. Inadvertently, they also became the witnesses to and the main voice for the Chinese in describing what took place. One of the foreign eyewitnesses of the 1937 massacre wrote: “We were more prepared for excesses from the fleeing Chinese . . . but never, never from the Japanese. On the contrary, we had expected that with the appearance of the Japanese the return of peace, quiet and prosperity would occur.”

A number of these exceptional individuals later went on to expose the full extent of the Japanese military's massacre, in thousands of pages from personal diaries, letters, photographs, and even a film. The most unusual of the leaders was John Rabe a business man, the leader of the Nazi party in Nanking, who at one point wrote to Hitler asking for "his kindly intercession in asking that the Japanese Government grant the building of a neutral zone" - which in turn brought him to the attention of the Gestapo when he returned to Europe.

After Rabe found that complaints to Japanese consular officials were ignored, he made it his personal task to prevent as many rapes as possible. He began to roam the streets, chasing soldiers away from their prey, once even bodily lifting a soldier sprawled on top of a young girl. He knew these expeditions were highly dangerous. "The Japanese had pistols and bayonets and I . . . had only party symbols and my swastika armband."

In the streets he passed scores of female corpses, raped and mutilated. "Groups of 3 to 10 marauding soldiers would begin by traveling through the city and robbing whatever there was to steal," Rabe wrote in a report to Hitler.

They would continue by raping the women and girls and killing anything and anyone that offered any resistance, attempted to run away from them or simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. There were girls under the age of 8 and women over the age of 70 who were raped and then, in the most brutal way possible, knocked down and beat up.

We found corpses of women on broken beer glasses and others who had been lanced by bamboo shoots. I saw the victims with my own eyes - I talked to some of them right before their deaths and had their bodies brought to the morgue at the Kulo hospital so I could be personally convinced that all of these reports had touched on the truth.

As he walked the burning streets of the city he loved, Rabe could read, on every corner, colourful Japanese posters that proclaimed, "Trust our Imperial Japanese Army - They will protect and feed you."

From the diary of Minnie Vautrin, Head of Studies at Ginling Girls College, 16 December 1937:

There probably is no crime that has not been committed in this city today. Thirty girls were taken from the language school last night, and today I have heard scores of heartbreaking stories of girls who were taken from their homes last night - one of the girls was but 12 years old. Food, bedding and money have been taken from people. . . . I suspect every house in the city has been opened, again and yet again, and robbed.

Tonight a truck passed in which there were eight or ten girls, and as it passed they called out "Ging ming! Ging ming!" - "Save our lives". The occasional shots that we hear out on the hills, or on the street, make us realize the sad fate of some man - very probably not a soldier. . . . Djang Szi-fu's son, science hall janitor, was taken this morning, and Wei has not returned. We would like to do something but do not know what we can do - for there is no order in the city, and I cannot leave the campus.

Mr. John Rabe told the Japanese commander that he could help them get lights, water and telephone service, but he would do nothing until order was restored in the city. Nanking is a pitiful broken shell tonight - the streets are deserted in darkness and fear.

I wonder how many innocent, hard-working farmers and coolies have been shot today. We have urged all women over 40 to go to their homes to be with their husbands and to leave only their daughters and daughters-in-law with us. We are responsible for about 4,000 women and children tonight. We wonder how much longer we can stand this strain. It is terrible beyond words.

The "strain" would continue for eight more weeks. In 1940, still in China, Vautrin suffered a nervous breakdown. When she returned to the U.S., she was admitted to a mental institution and underwent electroshock therapy. She committed suicide in Indianapolis in 1941. According to relatives, Vautrin never recovered from her experience in Nanking. She is considered a heroine by the Chinese today.

In December 1937 Plumer Mills the American director of the Nanking Refugee Committee wrote:

It is now Christmas Eve . . . In these two short weeks we, here in Nanking, have been through a siege; the Chinese army has left defeated and the Japanese army has come in. On that day Nanking was still the beautiful city we were so proud of, with law and order still prevailing; today it is a city laid waste, ravaged, completely looted, much of it burned. Complete anarchy has reigned, for ten days it has been a hell on earth.

Not that my life has been in serious danger at any time, though turning lust mad, sometimes drunken, soldiers out of houses where they were raping the women is not perhaps altogether a safe occupation, nor does one feel too sure of himself when he finds a bayonet at his chest or a revolver at his head and knows it is handled by someone who heartily wishes him out of the way. For the Japanese Army is anything but pleased at our being here . . . They wanted no observers.

But to have to stand by while even the very poor are having their last possession taken away from them, their last coin, their last bit of bedding (and it is freezing winter), the poor rickshaw man his rickshaw; while thousands of disarmed soldiers who had sought sanctuary with you, together with many hundreds of innocent civilians, are taken out before your eyes to be shot or used for bayonet practice and you to listen to the sound of the guns that are killing them; and while a thousand women kneel before you crying hysterically, begging you to save them from the beasts who are preying on them. To stand by and do nothing, while your flag [the U.S. flag] is taken down and insulted not once but a dozen times, and your own home is being looted; and then to watch the city you have come to love deliberately and systematically burned by fire, this is a hell I had never before envisaged.



The film of the massacre

The Reverend John Magee, an American Episcopalian minister, made film about the Nanking massacre. It is believed to be the only film about the incident. With the others he tried to protect as many Chinese as possible during the Japanese occupation, and he saved thousands from being raped, bayoneted, and shot by the Japanese soldiers. He also filmed many of these victims on 16mm black-and-white silent film and recorded how the victims were injured in a diary that became a valuable historical record of the massacre. According to his diary, he could only record on film a very small part of what he saw. He was too busy helping the victims to do more filming.

The Reverend Magee's film was smuggled out of Nanking to the United States by another American, George Fitch. On January 19 he received a permit to leave Nanking and took a Japanese military train to Shanghai, where he shared a third class coach with “as unsavoury a crowd of soldiers as one could imagine.” Sewn into the lining of his camel’s hair coat were eight reels of movie film of the Nanking atrocities. There was no doubt in his mind, he told his family later, that if he had been searched and caught with the film, he would have been killed instantly.

Luckily, Fitch made it to Shanghai, where he took the negatives to the Kodak office and developed four sets of prints. At least two sets went to the United States and one was shown to certain members of the U.S. Congress, the U.S. army, and the Red Cross. To protect Reverend Magee, who was still in Nanking, the film was shown anonymously. Some scenes from the film were printed in the May 1938 issue of *Life* magazine. The two "China Invaded" films in the American National Archives today are believed to be

copies of the film brought back by Fitch. The German diplomats John Rosen and John Rabe sent another copy of Magee's film to the Nazi government of Germany to demonstrate their anger about the Japanese atrocities. They also included a long report, which claimed that the whole Japanese army was a violent killing machine. In it, they requested that the film be shown to Hitler.

After he returned to Europe, Rabe attempted to lecture in wartime Germany about what he had seen and submitted the amateur film taken in Nanking to the Nazi party, intended for Hitler, who confiscated the film and ordered Rabe barred from pursuing his lectures. Rabe was denounced both by the Nazis and, later, by the Allies, until he was finally exonerated and "de-Nazified" by the Allies in June of 1946. He died, impoverished, in 1950.



The postwar aftermath

After the war attempts were made to bring the perpetrators of the massacre to justice. However, many of those involved appear to have been protected by the agreement made by the Allies to protect the Emperor. General Matsui, a devout Buddhist who was nominally in command, had been ill during the worst days and, after resuming command, had been distraught by what had transpired in his absence; he castigated his officers, only to be treated as an object of ridicule, and after the war was hanged by the War Crimes Tribunal. According to his Buddhist confessor Matsu said. "...I assembled the higher officers and wept tears of anger before them, both Prince Asaka and Lieutenant General Yanagawa were there, I told them everything had been lost in one moment through the brutalities of the soldiers, even after that, those soldiers laughed at me." Another ex

general Fujio Masayuki not only escaped punishment but became minister of education in the 1960s - and was removed from office when his efforts to remove all mention of Nanking from school history books became public. A few junior officers and soldiers were executed and a number jailed for their part in the massacre. The vast majority escaped and many today still play their part in Japanese attempts to deny and prevent recognition of what took place.

Unlike the Germans, who, whatever their faults, have kept the memory of the holocaust and the crimes of the Nazis to the forefront in their histories of the war, the Japanese have always refused to recognise that the war was other than a justified reaction to Western imperialism. They argue that, although a few unfortunate "incidents" may have occurred, the behaviour of their troops during the war left no cause for guilt and the sentencing and execution of some members of the imperial forces constituted an act of barbarism by the triumphant victors, turning those executed into heroes who died a noble death for emperor and country. To say otherwise in Japan today is very risky. Witness the fate of the mayor of Nagasaki, Motoshima Hitoshi, a former soldier who in 1988 stated that he believed Emperor Hirohito bore some responsibility for the war. He was hounded by right-wing groups who attempted to have him removed; on 7 January 1989 he was shot in the back by a fanatic, and although he survived, the deed was acclaimed as nothing less than "divine punishment."

It is my belief that Japanese intended that the attack on Nanking and the surrounding areas, including their behaviour, should from the beginning be widely reported - hence the reporters - in order to demoralise the Chinese. In the occupied areas it most certainly worked: I have no knowledge of any resistance in any occupied city or area, even after the Japanese surrendered. At the same time it meant that the Chinese armies had no doubt about what fighting the JIA meant. Thereafter the best fought expecting no quarter and giving none. This message, however, was totally ignored by the West until they experienced Hong Kong, Singapore, and Pearl Harbour.

The actual numbers killed in Nanking during the 6 weeks of the massacre, will never be absolutely accurately calculated, however the experts at the International Military Tribunal of the Far East (IMTFE) estimated that more than 260,000 non combatans died, other experts adding the military figures place it at over 350,000 - The Memorial puts it at 300,000. The Japanese now claim in 1991 text books it was 15,000 to 25,000 "The Sasaki unit disposed of 15,000 people". However in Nov 1937 the JIA estimated that during their attack the City would contain around 600,000 civilians and possibly 100,000 troops. In March 1938 they estimated that Nanking now contained 250,000 - 300,000 people.

Set on a scale with the total number of deaths during the Second World War, the 300,000 killed in the Nanking Massacre may not seem so horrific. But it should be kept in mind that the slaughter was accomplished in only six weeks. At Auschwitz just over one million were killed over four years, under a regime of industrial killing, starvation, and disease. In Nanking the killings were often perpetrated by individual Japanese soldiers encouraged by their officers and peer's, day after day, and it was done willingly, many photographing the carnage as they went. This is the real significance of the Nanking Massacre.

Euan Petrie 05 10 2005

Notes

* George Wang in his co-authored book 'Shanghai Boy - Shanghai Girl' with Betty Barr, gives an excellent description of the Japanese attack on Shanghai, and his families escape to the International Shanghai Safety Zone, he also vividly relates the conditions of life for Chinese under the Japanese.

A fuller detailed version of this article can be found in Iris Chang's book 'The rape of Nanking' Penguin Books 1998 ISBN 0-14-027744-7

On the internet Google gives a list of 123,00 sites and references to the Massacre, some of the best sites are detailed below, it is also possible to download the photographs and films that were made at the time including the transcripts of the IMTFE findings.

<http://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/NanjingMassacre/NM.html>

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/nanking.html>

<http://www.gotrain.com/dan/nanking1.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanjing_Massacre