

From the Nanjing Massacre to American Global Expansion: Reflections on Japanese and American Amnesia

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Translation by John Junkerman

In the course of a forty-five year career, Honda Katsuichi has established himself as one of Japan's, and the world's, premier investigative journalists and authors. Hailing from a mountain village in Shinshu (Nagano) and an avid mountain climber throughout his life, Honda's interests extended from nature and the environment to the politics of colonialism and war, with the Vietnam War as a critical moment in his development. In writing for the Asahi Shimbun and in a series of best-selling books, Honda has addressed the most controversial contemporary and historical issues confronting Japan as well as the United States and others. Most famously, he "broke" the Nanjing Massacre story in Japan thirty-four years after the event with first-hand interview reportage from China. His reportage and his book, Nankin Daigyakusatsu, published in English as [The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame](#) inspired a generation of Japanese, Chinese and international researchers who have excavated the Nanjing Massacre. It also touched off fierce polemics in the form of a Nanjing Massacre denial literature.

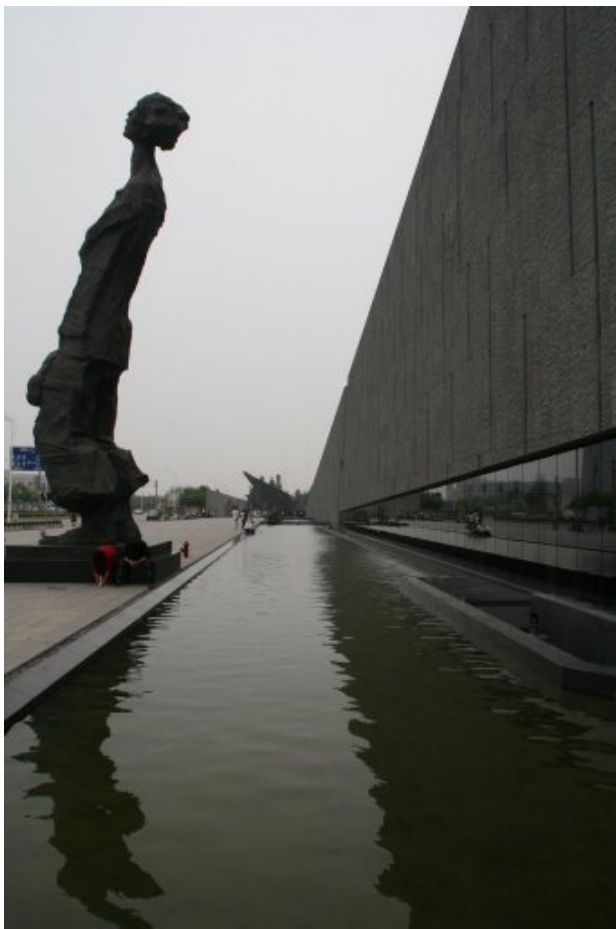
Working with an understanding of aggression

and colonialism that did not yield to nationalist pieties, Honda has investigated not only Japan's war in China and Asia, but also has contributed to understanding of the history of the Ainu, both in his earliest reporting for the Asahi and in his book translated into English as [Harukor: An Ainu Woman's Tale](#). The Ainu were formally recognized by the Japanese government as an indigenous people for the first time in 2008. His writings on Japan extend to the persistence of racist and neocolonial thought and praxis, the ecological costs of Japanese developmentalism, human rights abuses, and the corrupt politics of protracted one-party rule, among others. An introduction to his writing on these and other themes can be found in John Lie's collection, [The Impoverished Spirit in Contemporary Japan. Selected Essays of Honda Katsuichi](#).

Throughout his career, he has been equally attentive to the identical themes of expansion and aggression by the United States, tracing it from its origins in displacing and massacring the American Indian population through the Philippines war and annexation to the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghan Wars. Thus Honda was among the first to report from the NLF zone during the Vietnam War, documenting the US destruction of Vietnamese villages and slaughter of the civilian population. Following his retirement from the Asahi in 1992, he has continued to write, and is a founding editor and contributor to the lively and provocative Shukan Kinyobi weekly magazine. MS

On December 13, 2007, a ceremony will be held in China's former capital, Nanjing, to

commemorate the renovation and reopening of the Memorial for Compatriots Killed in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Forces of Aggression. The date marks the 70th anniversary of Japan’s invasion of China and the beginning of the massacre in Nanjing. I was asked to give a lecture during the ceremony, and though I am a poor speaker and dislike giving talks, I agreed to do so because of my past involvement with the issue. To assist with simultaneous translation into Chinese, I prepared a draft of the lecture in advance.



Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum

While there have been numerous publications in Japan marking the 70th anniversary of the massacre, the truly irresponsible books of the denial school have overshadowed, by their

sheer numbers, the serious scholarship of volumes like Kasahara Tokushi’s latest book, *Nankin Jiken-ron Shi* (The History of the Nanjing Incident Debate). Since it’s possible that some Japanese who are not well informed about this issue may be swayed by the “quantity over quality” of the denial school, as one who has been involved in reporting on Nanjing for more than thirty years, I would like to present here some extracts of my lecture.

Journalists Must Engage Contemporary History

This is the sixth time I have come to Nanjing since I first visited China in 1971, thirty-six years ago. The first four trips were for the purpose of personally meeting and interviewing victims of the Japanese invasion force, particularly those who had suffered grievous treatment. These reports were later compiled in my book, *Nankin Daigyakusatsu* [The Nanjing Massacre], whose second edition was published in 2001.

I myself was born at the end of 1931, the very year of the September 18th Incident (known in Japan as the Manchurian Incident, and in the West as the Mukden Incident). As a child, of course, I didn’t know the actual circumstances of the invasion, and even after entering grade school, there was no way for a boy living in a valley of the Japan Alps, the country’s highest mountain range, to obtain accurate information. About the only memory I have related to the war of aggression is of the times we grade school students were required to join villagers in send-off ceremonies for young draftees, departing as soldiers of the invading army. They had us sing the “Song for Soldiers Sent to War.”



The Mukden Incident. Japanese forces enter Mukden (Shenyang) in 1931

However, by the time I entered middle school, it appeared increasingly likely that Japan would lose the war, and when Japan finally surrendered on August 15, 1945, I was in eighth grade. In April of that year, a munitions factory had been evacuated to my middle school in the shadow of the Japan Alps, and all of the students had been put to work making parts for weapons.

There is no need to revisit here the conditions that prevailed within Japan or within China after Japan’s defeat, but I would like to explain what led me personally to begin reporting on the Nanjing Massacre.

I entered university with the intention of studying biology, particularly genetics. At university, a group of us students formed Japan’s first “Explorers Club,” and I participated in two expeditions to the Himalayas. After I began working as a newspaper journalist, I continued the explorations of my student days. I visited Eskimos in the Arctic (1963), ancient agrarian villagers in the interior of New Guinea (1964), and nomads in the deserts of Saudi Arabia (1965). Lengthy reports of these journeys were carried in the Asahi Shimbun.

However, as I continued this work, I began to think that this was not the proper role of the journalist, that a journalist should be engaged with contemporary history. The epitome of this was the Vietnam War.

The war began initially after France reinvaded Vietnam in the aftermath of Japan’s defeat in 1945, and Ho Chi Minh and others launched the Viet Minh army. In 1954, France was defeated in the battle of Dien Bien Phu, and Vietnam established its independence. Then the United States intervened.

The History of American Aggression in Asia

From a macro perspective, the history of the US is a continuing series of incursions ever westward, from the late 18th century when the first president, George Washington, began encroachments from the eastern seaboard into Native American territory, throughout the 200-plus years that extend to the present occupation of Iraq.

In this fashion, by the time of the infamous massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, just 100 years after Washington’s inauguration as president, the United States had overrun the entire North American continent, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Within eight more years, the US had made inroads into the Pacific, with the agreement to annex Hawaii, followed by Guam, the Philippines, and other territories annexed following the Spanish-American War.



American Indian occupation of Wounded Knee in 1873

What I want to stress here is the historical fact that the aggression visited upon the native peoples within the American continent over the course of a hundred years extended directly into the Pacific and from there into Asia. The very same soldiers continued their incursions into the Asian mainland, with the US joining the international forces that marched on and occupied Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900.

While forty-one years later, the Japanese military attacked Pearl Harbor, it is necessary to understand that the history of American incursions into Asia was deeply interwoven into the background of that attack.

Let me describe one characteristic set of historical facts. The United States has often used trumped-up incidents as a pretext for war, and in the case of the Spanish-American War that led to the annexation of the Philippines it was sensationalized reports of a fabricated “attack on a US warship in Havana Harbor” that initiated the war. This was exactly the same means—the bogus “Tonkin Gulf Incident”—that was used to initiate the bombing of North Vietnam in 1964 at the beginning of the Vietnam War. When the commander of the US military in the

Philippines, General Elwell Otis, proved unable to suppress the guerrillas of the Filipino independence force more than a year after hostilities commenced, he was replaced by General Arthur MacArthur. This was in 1900. The latter general was none other than the father of General Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander of the American occupation after Japan’s defeat.

In other words, the occupation of Japan was simply another incident in the course of the history of America’s worldwide expansion. What is the fundamental distinction between Japan’s war in China and its war with the US? In the former, Japan was clearly the aggressor, while the latter was simply a conflict between two aggressor nations. However, Japanese mass media have not given proper weight to this fact in their reporting, and it is thus not the common perception in Japan. Japan’s defeat in 1945 was in fact two defeats: the failure of its aggression in China, Korea, and throughout Asia; and its loss in the conflict with the Western powers (particularly the US). But the two are conflated in the minds of the Japanese people.

For example, the very fact that Asian countries were pleased to see the indiscriminate massacre caused by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki comes as no surprise, given the history of Japanese tyranny. Nonetheless, the American use of the atomic bombs can never be forgiven. The bombings were an act of indiscriminate massacre targeted on ordinary people who bore no responsibility for the war. Further, the use of the bombs as a demonstration aimed at the Soviet Union was also a major goal of the US.

It was my reporting on the Vietnam War that led to this understanding of history. The United States, taking over after France’s defeat, expanded the scope of aggression until there were 500,000 troops stationed in the country. My initial reporting in Vietnam involved

accompanying US troops to the front lines. I reported concrete details of conditions at the front, bringing to light such things as the practice of US soldiers cutting off the ears of dead National Liberation Front soldiers and keeping them as “souvenirs,” which caused a major controversy in Japan as well as the US when it became widely known.



US forces in Vietnam

I then went underground with the forces of the National Liberation Front and published the first detailed reports in the world of the fighting from the other side. The concrete images of a just war of independence in the face of US aggression aroused great sympathy and helped spur the growth of the antiwar movement in the US.

Research and Reporting for the Sake of Japan

As I was engaged in this reporting, I began to wonder, “What did Japan do during its aggression in China?” The kind of reporting I was doing on the conduct of American soldiers really needed to be done with respect to the conduct of Japanese soldiers during the war. Reporting from this perspective was virtually nonexistent at that time, aside from the work of a handful of scholars like Hara Tomio (concerning subjects like the Nanjing Incident

within the context of the Tokyo war crimes tribunal).

At that time, in 1971, China was still in the midst of the Cultural Revolution. When I applied for permission to report there, the only Japanese newspaper with a bureau in Beijing was the Asahi. The series that I produced then, “Travels in China,” ran in the Asahi and consisted mostly of reports from northeastern China. Feature stories from such places as a village in Hebei province where residents were massacred under Japan’s scorched earth policy resonated deeply with people throughout Japan. The series won the praise of many readers, but cowardly, unpatriotic, fake right-wingers (I call them fake, because I like to call myself a “true right-winger”) began coming by my home and placed my family at risk, until I was forced to move and keep my address secret.

But this was evidence that my work was highly “valued,” and if that was the case, I decided to continue. I returned to China numerous times, focusing on the Nanjing Massacre. It is now already 36 years since my initial research trip, and many of those I interviewed who experienced the war have passed away, while I myself turned 76 at the end of this year. I often think I am glad I documented those stories when I did.

In November 2, 2007, the Tokyo District Court upheld a suit filed by Xia Shuqin, a victim of the Nanjing Massacre. Xia was from a family of nine, seven of whom were killed during the massacre, when she was eight years old. Only she and her four-year old sister survived. Xia was stabbed three times with a bayonet and lost consciousness, while her sister, hiding under bed quilts, went unnoticed. However, fake right-wing “scholars” who seek to deny the Nanjing Massacre argued that Xia’s testimony was fabricated, and it was her suit against these writers for defamation of character that the Tokyo court upheld.

There were two previous court cases relating to the Nanjing Massacre, both of which also resulted in favorable rulings. These were the Li Xiuying defamation of character suit and the Hundred Head Contest case. In the former, a member of the denial school wrote in a book that Li was a “fake victim.” Arguing that she had been victimized during the massacre and was now being victimized a second time, Li sued the writer and his publisher, and the court ruled in her favor.

The latter case concerned a contest, reported in the Nichinichi Shimbun (now Mainichi Shimbun), between two Japanese army officers to see who could be the first to behead one hundred of the enemy during the invading army’s march on Nanjing. What this actually entailed was the illegal, cowardly act of lining up prisoners of war and cutting off their heads. After Japan’s defeat, the two officers were executed by Chiang Kai-shek’s government.

able to prove everything in court and won a verdict in our favor.

In sum, all three of the recent court cases involving the Nanjing Massacre ended in defeat for the denial school. As Watanabe Harumi, the lead attorney in all three cases, puts it, our side is now “three for three.”

But as much as we are three for three, the very fact that such trials and “debates” take place today is something that would be inconceivable in, say, Germany, which was also defeated in the war. This is a reflection of the irresponsibility and intellectual shallowness of the Japanese people, the low level of journalism, and the impotence of scholars and intellectuals in recent and contemporary history.

What this means is that little has changed between the Japan of 70 years ago, when the Nanjing Massacre occurred, and the Japan of today. My research and reporting on the massacre was done for the sake of that Japan, but by all rights, this was work that should have been done by an official body of the Japanese government. As long as Japan does not change, it will remain isolated (again, in contrast to Germany) from its neighboring countries in Asia.

However, the countries of Asia are no longer the colonies of Japan and Western imperialist powers, as they were before the war. Unless Japan undergoes genuine change, it’s possible that it is headed down the road to ruin. This is the spirit in which I mean that my work around the Nanjing Massacre was done “for the sake of Japan.”

The Nanjing Memorial, having completed large-scale renovations, stands for the principle that friendly relations between China and Japan should be grounded in recognizing, not forgetting, the concrete reality of Japanese aggression and the tragic relations of the past.



The beheading contest reported in the Nichinichi Shimbun

I had written about this incident, and the families of the two officers sued me, on the grounds that there was no factual basis for the reports. However, in this case as well, we were

This is a slightly abbreviated version of an essay that appeared as three installments of Honda Katsuichi's weekly column, "The Impoverished Spirit," in [Shukan Kinyobi](#), December 7, 14, and 21, 2007. Posted at Japan Focus on February 1, 2009.

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Honda Katsuichi, longtime investigative journalist with [Asahi Shimbun](#), has reported from China, Vietnam, the United States, and the Arctic among other areas. His many books include [The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame](#).