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# The Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall and the Historical Identity of China in Asian and Global History

Guido Abbattista

## ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the historical and political, and not just moral and symbolical aspects of the discourse elaborated in, and the message conveyed by, the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall in its present structure – actually an evolving structure resulting from many important changes that have been realized since its first construction in 1985, making of it both a ceremonial place of remembrance and an authentic laboratory of ‘public history’. The Memorial is in fact a complex, articulated and constantly developing example of ‘public history’ told in several formats, textual, monumental, architectural and exhibitionary. It is not just a memorial site commemorating one of the most cruel episodes of WWII, when the Japanese invading army stormed Nanjing in winter 1937-1938 and exterminated its civil population, but it should be read also in the light of the main aspects of Chinese contemporary public discourse dealing not only with the relationships with Japan, but more generally with post-Maoist PRC’s historic role in the Asiatic and global arena, centred on some key concepts such as ‘friendship’, ‘humanity’, ‘peace’ and ‘harmony’, representing a direct link between contemporary politics and the classic Confucian legacy.

KEYWORDS: Historical memory, public history, historical monuments, Chinese contemporary history, Sino-Japan relationships, international politics, global history.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: A CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC

THE so-called ‘massacre of Nanjing’, also termed the ‘rape of Nanjing’, the ‘atrocities of Nanjing’, or, at least in one case in a more neutral tone, the ‘episode of Nanjing’,<sup>1</sup> is a traumatic event of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945),<sup>2</sup> that

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I owe a quantity of debts to several colleagues and friends who read and commented earlier versions of this essay, since its first drafting as a paper for the 1<sup>st</sup> Conference of the “Associazione Italiana di Public History” (AIPH), Ravenna, Italy, 5-9 June 2017. I would like to thank in particular Teresa Bertilotti and Carlotta Sorba, who coordinated the AIPH Conference panel where the paper was presented and gave valuable comments on it. The present, considerably enlarged and fully redrafted version has been read by Edward Qingjia Wang, Rowan College, Guido Samarani, University of Venice Ca’ Foscari, Dr. Liu Cheng, Nanjing University, and finally by Prof. Rana Mitter, St. Cross College, University of Oxford. I would like to thank them all for their competent and extremely useful observations and suggestions, while the final text is obviously under my entire responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> David Askew, “The Nanjing Incident. Recent Research and Trends”, in *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, 4 April 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The duration of the Second Sino-Japanese war, generally known in China as the “eight-year war of resistance against Japanese aggression”, was recently (in January 2017) subjected to an official revision, when the Xi Jinping government moved the official beginning of the conflict back to 1931, that is to the time of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. This resulted in renaming the conflict the “14-year war of

occurred between mid-December 1937 and the end of January 1938, when the Japanese stormed Nanjing, the then capital of the Republic of China, with an act whose symbolic importance has been stressed by Rana Mitter.<sup>3</sup> The invasion was followed by six weeks of violence carried out by the invading Imperial Japanese Army, leading to the deaths of a very large number Chinese civilians and soldiers (300,000 is the Chinese officially accepted amount), as well as tens of thousands of rapes committed against Chinese women of all ages.<sup>4</sup> For the Chinese living in both China and across the globe, this now has the same symbolic significance as Hiroshima or Auschwitz, and has today become one of the defining elements of modern Chinese national identity,<sup>5</sup> after having been long repressed in both the Chinese public consciousness until the end of the Maoist era and in the Japanese consciousness. What brought this debate back into the limelight were both the political developments in China after the death of Mao, including the significant building of the “Memorial Hall of the Victims in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders” in 1985, and a successful publication by the Sino-American journalist, Iris Chang, daughter of a Chinese couple that escaped the Japanese occupation and emigrated to the US. At the age of 29, Iris Chang, who committed suicide in 2004, wrote *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), which is perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most sold and most controversial, book in English about the facts of Nanjing.<sup>6</sup> Even if there has been no shortage of bitter criticisms about its superficial, emotive and somewhat slapdash, sometimes even fanciful, nature, and even though it is not fiction but a journalistic-historical investigation, this book has nevertheless captured the public imagination like no other about an event that until then was little known in the West. It helped to open a very intense period of controversy, research and debate in Chinese and Japanese historiography and in the works of Chinese and Japanese historians ac-

resistance against Japanese aggression” and history textbooks have been ordered to incorporate this new officially held version (cf. Javier C. Hernández, China, “Fanning Patriotism, Adds 6 Years to War with Japan in History Books”, *The New York Times*, Jan. 11, 2017: [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/world/asia/china-japan-textbooks-war.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/world/asia/china-japan-textbooks-war.html?_r=0); Sian Cain, “China rewrites history books to extend Sino-Japanese war by six years”, *The Guardian*, 13 January 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/13/china-rewrites-history-books-to-extend-sino-japanese-war-by-six-years>; for a full assessment of this matter, see Rana Mitter, “Presentism and China’s Changing Wartime Past”, *Past & Present*, 234 (2017): 263-74 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtw060>>).

<sup>3</sup> “By taking the capital, the Japanese would finally demonstrate their victory over Chinese nationalism, a force they considered pernicious and alien to their vision of East Asia’s future”, see Rana Mitter, *China’s War with Japan, 1937-1945: The Struggle for Survival* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 122, on the Nanjing Massacre see 119-140.

<sup>4</sup> The fundamental Chinese works on this dramatic episode are those coordinated by Nanjing University historian Zhang Xianwen and precisely, 南京大屠杀全史, *Nanjing da tu sha quan shi* (*The Nanking massacre: a complete history*), Editor-in-chief Prof. Zhang Xianwen (Nanjing Shi: Nanjing da xue chu ban she, 2012), 3 vols.; and 南京大屠杀史料集, *Nanjing da tu sha shi liao ji* (*A Collection of the Historical Materials Relating to Nanjing Massacre*), Editor-in-chief Prof. Zhang Xianwen (Nanjing: Jiangsu People’s Press, 2005-2014), the monumental collection of archival records originally published in 28 volumes and now totaling 72 volumes with the collaboration of more than 60 researchers from 7 between universities and archives in Nanjing.

<sup>5</sup> David Askew, “New Research on the Nanjing Incident”, *Asia Pacific Journal*, 2, 7 (2004): 1-38.

<sup>6</sup> Joshua Fogel, “The Controversy over Iris Chang’s Rape of Nanking”, *Japan Echo*, 27, 1 (February 2000): 55-57, then in *Between China and Japan, The Writings of Joshua Fogel* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2015), 394-398; Erik Roper, “Debating History and Memory: Examining the Controversy Surrounding Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking*”, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 8.1 (2017): 77-99.

tive in the West and of Western historians specialised in Chinese and Japanese history, even giving rise to what has been defined as a “filmic legacy”.<sup>7</sup>

The ‘Nanjing massacre’ is a hotly debated topic, subject of a vast amount of literature – starting with *What War Means: The Japanese Terror in China* (London: Gollancz, 1938), written by the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent Harold J. Timperley (1898-1954) – and of representations in many different expressive forms. In particular it is a topic rich in strong emotional, political and ideological undertones that continue to dog Sino-Japanese relations, but also to offer keys to understanding the mentality and public political debate in both China and Japan. It is an event that is so deeply embedded in national memory, both Chinese and Japanese, that it makes it extremely difficult for any historiography to extricate itself from ideological constraints and achieve a true reconstruction of the facts – a necessary precondition of any policy of enduring reconciliation between China and Japan.<sup>8</sup> Controversial issues are the semantic aspect, the number of victims (which is a somewhat obsessive bone of contention between the ‘maximisers’ and ‘minimisers’), the territorial area involved, but also the very legitimacy of the reconstructions made and decisions taken by the post-war military tribunals (Nanjing and Tokyo). While for the Chinese words such as ‘massacre’, ‘rape’ and ‘holocaust’ have by now been subsumed when describing the event, by contrast, since the official version (for all that it was unsatisfactory and non-resolutive) was given in 1949 during the sessions of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in Tokyo, there has been an attempt in Japan to tone down the event’s importance – even to the point of the choice of words used in the history books<sup>9</sup> – with the aim of redeeming the memory and honour of the soldiers of the Rising Sun. However, despite the Japanese war criminals being given the death sentence, this toning down opened rather than closed the dispute in Japan itself<sup>10</sup> surrounding what was later defined “Japan’s national shame”,<sup>11</sup> sparking a difficult process of compensation and assumption of responsibilities.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Damien Kinney, “Rediscovering a massacre: The filmic legacy of Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking*”, *Continuum*, 26, 1 (February 2012): 11-23.

<sup>8</sup> Rana Mitter, “Le massacre de Nankin: Mémoire et oubli en Chine et au Japon”, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 94 (Apr.-Jun. 2007): 11-23. On Sino-Japanese reconciliation through historical memories negotiation, see James H. Liu and Tomohide Atsumi, “Historical Conflict and Resolution between Japan and China: Developing and Applying a Narrative Theory of History and Identity”, *Meaning in Action. Constructions, Narratives, and Representations*, ed. by Toshio Sugiman, Kenneth J. Gergen, Wolfgang Wagner, Yoko Yamada (S. I.: Springer, 2008), 327-344; Mel Gurtov, “Reconciling Japan and China”, Political Science Faculty Publications and Presentations, Portland State University, originally published in *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, January 5, 2008; and more recently Liu Cheng, “Sino-Japanese reconciliation from a peace studies perspective”, *New Paradigms of Peace Research: The Asia-Pacific Context*, ed. by Akihiko Kimijima and Vidya Jain (Jaipur-New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2013), 180-194.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *An Illustrated History of the Nanjing Massacre, compiled by the Memorial Hall of the Victims in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders* (Beijing Shi: Wu zhou chuan bo chu ban she, 2005), 170-171.

<sup>10</sup> James Burnham Sedgwick, “Memory on Trial: Constructing and Contesting the ‘Rape of Nanking’ at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 1946-1948”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 43, 5 (2009): 1229-1254.

<sup>11</sup> Katsuchi Honda, *The Nanjing Massacre. A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan’s National Shame* (Armonk, N. Y., M. E. Sharpe, 1999, reprint New York: Routledge, 2015). For a presentation of the two points of view, Chinese and Japanese, see the brief chapter by Iris Chang, “The Nanking Massacre”, 104-108, in *When Sorry Isn’t Enough: The Controversy Over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice*, ed. Roy L. Brooks (New York: NYU Press, 1999), and the documents in “Japan’s Official Responses to Nanking”, 109-110.

<sup>12</sup> Takashi Yoshida, *The Making of the ‘Rape of Nanking’: History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).



Even though it was not the only massacre suffered by the Chinese at the hands of the Japanese (the bloody suppression of the Wusha Rebellion in Japanese-occupied Taiwan, 1930) nor during the Second Sino-Japanese War (the battles of Wuhan, 1938, and of Changsha, 1939, when the Japanese army employed poisonous gas bombs), and even though it is difficult to establish just how much of an exceptional event it actually was or whether it was simply a variant of the collective violence against civilians perpetrated by the Japanese (Singapore 1942, Manila 1945), the Nanjing massacre has assumed an unquestionable centrality in the political culture, collective memory and in the national historic identity of post-Maoist China. An official consensus has built up around it in China, a real orthodoxy that, despite the very different opinions of experts and commentators, especially in Japan, has established key aspects such as the number and state of the victims and the methods used by the Japanese army, and has developed an interpretation closely linked to national identity elements. One of the most effective discursive and representative tools of this consensus is precisely the mausoleum of the massacre – whose official name is “The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders”, or, more synthetically, “Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall” – built in Nanjing in 1985 as a “national demonstrative educational base for patriotism”.<sup>13</sup> It was restored and expanded in 1995, further expanded in 2007 on the occasion of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre,<sup>14</sup> and subsequently underwent further changes and transformations, the last being in 2015. A document published in 2005, with the subtitle “Compiled by the Memorial Hall of the Victims in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders” declaring its official nature, settled some factual, quantitative, interpretative and linguistic aspects. It affirmed the historical exceptionality of the massacre as “the darkest chapter of the twentieth century [...] in terms of cruelty, few atrocities can compare to this horrible event”,<sup>15</sup> and used explicit terminology – “cruel holocaust”, “bestly atrocities” – carefully chosen with reference to the existing disputes about the true nature of the facts. That it was a violation of “Chinese people’s human rights” carried out against civilians, “ordinary people”, much more than military personnel, put it in the category of war crimes, a “slaughter” comparable to the “cruelty of ancient times” that affected “more than 300,000 Chinese people”, with 200,000 people taking refuge in the Nanjing International Safety Zone: a perennial reminder of the imperative to eliminate the causes of war in the future, a lesson to avoid other tragedies. The illustrated publication produced as an official guide to the Memorial Hall, *The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders*,<sup>16</sup> also used the same concepts, creating a linguistic and interpretative framework of the facts: a “human holocaust”, an “exceedingly horrible massacre” carried out by Japanese troops “in flagrant violation of international conventions and fundamental moral codes”, consisting of “atrocities in

<sup>13</sup> 南京大屠杀图录 / 侵华日军南京大屠杀遇难同胞纪念馆 = *An Illustrated History of the Nanjing Massacre compiled by the Memorial Hall of the Victims in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders*, Chief Editor Zhu Chengshan (Beijing Shi: Wu zhou chuan bo chu ban she, 2005), 185.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the official website for the Memorial Hall: <http://www.nj1937.org/index.html> (Chinese version); <http://www.cngongji.cn/english/index.htm> (English version).

<sup>15</sup> *An Illustrated History of the Nanjing Massacre*, Ye Hao, “Introduction”, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders*, Editor in Chief Zhu Cheng Shan (Nanjing and London: The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders, Chang Zheng Publishers and London Edition, 2010).



the form of slaughter, rape, plunder, arson and destruction”; and it dedicated much space to the work carried out immediately after the war by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East and by the Nanjing War Crimes Tribunal, whose operations are recollected in a special section of the permanent exhibition (sect. IX).

In this essay I would like to focus on the historical and political, and not just moral and symbolical aspects of the discourse elaborated in, and the message conveyed by, the Massacre Memorial in its present structure – which is actually an evolving structure resulting from many important changes that have been made since its first construction in 1985. Therefore, the reflections offered in these pages come from personal experiences gained during three visits to the memorial site and exhibition centre – in 2010, 2014 and in October 2017<sup>17</sup> – and in the light of secondary literature (as well as documentary and film productions) that over the past ten years has been enriched by a growing number of significant contributions. I would like to point out that this is an essay by neither a sinologist nor a historian of China, but rather by a specialist in the early modern history of cultural intercourse between European and non-European countries (India and China most notably) and in global history, and that with it I intend simply to highlight some aspects that in my view should be taken into account for a fuller appreciation of the meaning of the Memorial Hall than appears in recent contributions.

The most important studies, like those of Kirk Denton and Patrizia Violi,<sup>18</sup> have shown how the Nanjing Memorial Hall is an “extremely complex semiotic object” built around a narration dedicated to the definitive overcoming of the “century of humiliation”. It proposes a narration and representation of the facts of 1937-1938 inspired not so much by the “victimhood” of the aggression and violence endured, nor is it exclusively focused on mourning or “memory and healing”.<sup>19</sup> The underlying ideology of the Memorial Hall is, according to Denton, an “emotionally charged state sponsored nationalism”,<sup>20</sup> an idea of “Chinese nationhood”, of identity and Chinese national pride innervated by the universal values of peace, humanity and cooperation that must underpin a future pacific coexistence between peoples in their Asiatic and global diversity. Moreover, the already cited official *Illustrated History of the Nanjing Massacre* is explicit in this regard, establishing a clear link between the political goal of peace in Asia and the achievement of a consensus on the historical truth:

Peace and development are two major themes in the present-day world. We should learn lessons from the past and try to avoid another tragedy. In order to set up a fair and proper world order, people should strive to eliminate the causes of war [...] Without finding common ground on historical issues, it will be difficult to maintain peace in Asia [...] historical truth should be the basis for understanding history [...] History teaches us that world peace can be achieved only when people around the world unite.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> I wish to warmly thank Dr. Lu Yanming, Research Fellow at the Nanjing Memorial Hall, who generously dedicated a whole morning of his to guide me through the Mausoleum, commenting on each single section and giving me precious additional information.

<sup>18</sup> Patrizia Violi, “Educating for Nationhood: A Semiotic Reading of the Memorial Hall for Victims of the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders”, *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*, 4, 2 (2012): 41-68; Kirk A. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Post-socialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing*, ed. by Robert Sabella, Li Feifei, and David Liu (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002, repr. New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 137.

<sup>21</sup> *An Illustrated History of the Nanjing Massacre*, Ye Hao, “Introduction”, 4-5.

To this interpretation I would like to add the observation that, within the exhibitory logic the Memorial Hall offers the visitor today, especially after the 2015 enlargement and re-organization, there are recognisable discursive elements that connect not only to the history of the massacre and to the “Chinese nationhood” and its core values, but more specifically to contemporary Chinese official rhetoric on subjects such as the nature and aspects of the rise of China as well as its importance in the world order, the “place of China” in Asia and the global context: a rhetoric that in many of its manifestations, especially public communication, makes systematic use of the historical argument.

My intention, therefore, is to show how the memorial hall of the massacre is not only a museumisation of the memory through a “theme park” dedicated to a collective trauma and its insertion into a dimension of historical temporality, nor is it simply a means of exhorting an Asian and global order in the name of a peace built on historic truth or a celebration of universal values of humanity and peace. What it suggests is a more complex discourse on the position of the Chinese nation within East Asian and global history, with the aim of building an image of the “Chinese nationhood” in the post-socialist era, with a clear reference to the contemporary debate on “the place of China in the world”.

## 2. MORAL VALUES, PATRIOTIC IDENTITY AND NATIONAL HISTORY

There are more general reasons justifying the focus on the theme dealt with here. China today, with its quest for an international position and the way it openly deals with the issue of its role within global politics, cannot but arouse great interest in any observer, even a non-specialist’s, in the political facts and international dynamics. In connection with this, one can see how much attention and effort in post-Maoist China has been devoted to historical identity, memory, the past, historical traditions and heritage. This happens on many different levels, starting with academic historical research. This was very clearly seen, for example, at the congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences that took place in Jinan in August 2015. The 12<sup>th</sup> in the series and the first to take place in a non-Western country, it represented an accreditation of Chinese historiography in the presence of the global academic world.<sup>22</sup> The same can be observed in public communications, mass media, as well as heritage policies for museums, monuments and the arts. The Nanjing Memorial Hall itself was intended as a “public cultural facility”<sup>23</sup> and also a historical research centre. Its research purpose regards the mere facts of the massacre, and is carried out through the systematic collection of documentary, visual and material sources and eye-witness accounts, through the foundation in 1995 of the “Nanjing Massacre Research Society” and the establishment of a permanent critical supervision of Japanese historical

<sup>22</sup> See Edoardo Tortarolo, “What Globality? An Italian Perspective on the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Congress (CISH) in Jinan” and Guido Samarani, “Revisiting Thirty Years of Chinese Historical Studies”, both in *Storia della Storiografia*, 70, 2 (2016): 129-139 and 141-148.

<sup>23</sup> *The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre*, 89. “As a public cultural facility, the Memorial Hall enables people to pay homage to the victims of the Nanjing Massacre and to voice their sorrow. As well, it organizes academic studies on the history of the Nanjing Massacre and carries out commemorative events both at home and abroad in order to oppose aggressive wars and safeguard world peace”.

textbooks.<sup>24</sup> But the historical research function of the Memorial is performed also by a commitment to representing at an exhibitionary level the more general themes of peace and international cooperation and friendship as key elements of Chinese identity and the role of China in East Asian and global history.

That the latter is one of the main points of interest and objectives of the Nanjing Memorial was demonstrated by the establishment in 2003 of the Nanjing International Peace Institute and by important related events and conventions, such as the “Peace Forum on History and East Asia”, which was attended by 150 historians from China, Japan and Korea.<sup>25</sup> This is hardly surprising. China is a country where historical memory has always played a key role in the official definition of the nation’s identity, in feeding patriotic feelings and in promoting a nationalism that is currently one of the most evident features in public discourse and in education programmes promoted by the party and the government, as well as dominating ideology in general.<sup>26</sup> Particularly in the post-Tiananmen era, there have been clear official efforts to promote national pride as well as confidence and self-esteem in relation to the Western world, through ambitious programmes aimed at raising awareness of the country’s modern and contemporary history, especially among the younger generations,<sup>27</sup> and through historic heritage valorization. How this found expression in terms of “public history” is shown by both the key documents<sup>28</sup> produced in the 1991 official campaign for patriotic education and the public statements made in 1991 by Jiang Zemin, acting as General Secretary of the Communist Party and then President of the PRC,<sup>29</sup> and it was subsequently confirmed by the “100 Patriotic Model Sites” programme, launched in 1995 by the Ministry of Propaganda (now Central Publicity Department).<sup>30</sup> It can be seen in particular in the huge efforts made to promote policies for museums and exhibitions at various levels (think of the 2008 Olympics, the 2010 Shanghai Universal Expo or the opening in 2011 of the renovated National Museum of China in Tiananmen Square as a “leading showcase of history and cul-

<sup>24</sup> It is also the subject of the courageous Japanese reflection initiated by the “history textbook controversy”, cf. Ienaga Saburo, *Japan’s Past, Japan’s Future: One Historian’s Odyssey*, trans. Richard H. Minnear (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), on the work of Ienaga Saburo, see Yoshiko Nozaki, *War Memory, Nationalism and Education in Postwar Japan: The Japanese History Textbook Controversy and Ienaga Saburo’s Court Challenges* (London-New York: Routledge, 2008), see also, still on the theme of Japanese historical textbooks, Christopher Barnard, *Language, Ideology and Japanese History Textbooks* (London-New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003) and Gi-Wook Shin and Daniel C. Sneider, *History Textbooks and the Wars in Asia: Divided Memories* (London-New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> *An Illustrated History of the Nanjing Massacre*, 170-171.

<sup>26</sup> See Laura De Giorgi and Guido Samarani, *La Cina e la storia. Dal tardo impero ad oggi* (Roma: Carocci, 2005), especially 41 ff.

<sup>27</sup> Zheng Wang, “National Humiliation, History Education and the Politics of Historical Memory”, *International Studies Quarterly*, 52 (2008): 783-806.

<sup>28</sup> Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, “Notice about Conducting Education of Patriotism and Revolutionary Tradition by Exploiting Extensively Cultural Relics”, 1991, and the Ministry of Education, “General Outline on Strengthening Education on Chinese Modern and Contemporary History and National Conditions”, 1991, cit. in Zheng Wang, “National Humiliation”, 789.

<sup>29</sup> “We should conduct education on Chinese modern and contemporary history and national conditions to pupils (even to the kids in kindergarten), middle school students and to the university students. The education should go from the easy to the difficult, and should be persistent” (English text from Zheng Wang, “National Humiliation”, 789, who edited the translation from Chinese).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 143 ff.

ture”<sup>31</sup>), with an avowed awareness – expressed in official documents from the early 1990s – of the communicative, informative and educational value of cultural artefacts of various kinds aimed at attracting and influencing the public, often with a propaganda discourse that is all the more effective because it speaks directly to the senses.

There are two elements to be kept in mind when discussing China’s relationship with her past. The first concerns the persistence in the public consciousness of the idea, current in both the Maoist and post-Maoist eras, of the dramatic cleavage in historical time coinciding with the so-called “century of humiliation”, 1839-1949.<sup>32</sup> The second element, which differentiates post-Maoist China from the communist era and that is particularly visible in recent times, concerns the efforts made for the full recovery of the memories of dynastic glories as well as the Confucian ethics characteristic of the Imperial state.<sup>33</sup> One witnesses, therefore, a memorial connection between the post-Maoist, socialist-à la chinoise present and the dynastic past through the exaltation of centuries-old continuity in Chinese history, without denying the communist experience even if with a complicated and highly controversial reappraisal of the figure of Mao Zedong.<sup>34</sup> These two elements will be taken into account in the course of the analysis on the Nanjing Memorial Hall. Before proceeding, however, it is important to neatly distinguish two objects of investigation. The first is the massacre of Nanjing as an historic fact, which fuelled a long controversy with a clear negationist propensity on the part of Japanese historiography. This latter is represented, for example, by Tanaka Masaaki in his 1984 book *The Fabrication of the Nanjing Massacre*.<sup>35</sup> The second, and most relevant for the present purpose, is the construction, representation and communication of the memory of the event, which naturally implies that there was a preliminary elaborate and far-reaching effort to define, construct, contextualise and transpose the event through different media – from the cinema to documentaries, from memorial, commemorative and ceremonial sites to, of course, historical publications, in particular textbooks. This means that the event was placed at the centre of an official operation in which the most important political and institutional subjects came into play and with national pedagogy, on several levels and by multiple means, as its clear goal. Exploration of this historical-memorial dimension of life and public communication in China has intensified greatly in the last 10-15 years, clearly showing how important it has become in a society that has changed profoundly and that is still changing in terms of openness, participation and life styles. The assessment that I would like to propose here is limited to a single aspect of the many possible perspectives from which to study the memory of the Nanjing massacre. This aspect

<sup>31</sup> Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 33 ff., Ian Johnson, “At China’s New Museum, History Toes Party Line”, *New York Times*, 3 April 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), David Scott, *China and the International System, 1840-1949: Power, Presence, and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> The official interpretation proposed by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, according to which Mao was 70% in the right and 30% in the wrong – the so-called ‘3/7 theory’ –, has been submitted to much criticism aiming at desacralizing the figure of Mao, though paradoxically this is experiencing a “second coming” (Kerry Brown and Simone van Nieuwenhuizen, *China and the New Maoists*, Zed Books, 2016, 156 ff.).

<sup>35</sup> A book containing arguments that have been defined as “childish” and “silly” by Ian Buruma, “The Nanking Massacre as a Historical Symbol”, in *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing*, 3-9.

is represented by the historical narrative underlying some recently added parts of the Nanjing Memorial Hall.

Comprehensive analysis of the memorial site, as has already been said, has been carried out separately by scholars such as Denton and Violi. They covered every single feature that makes up the monumental complex in the (provisional) form it assumed until the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But it is important to think of the Memorial Hall as a greatly evolving architectural artefact, that has reached its present monumental configuration after three decades, thus inevitably rendering partial and incomplete any analysis published in the late 2000s. In fact, today the Memorial looks like a massive theme park studded with rather stylistically incoherent artworks such as statues of various dimensions, inscriptions, low reliefs, fountains and pools, squares and grand ceremonial and symbolic areas. The main museum and exhibition hall were originally built in 1985 in the shape of a characteristically triangular pavilion reminiscent of a “peace boat” or a “broken sword” – symbolically referring to the conversion from the arts of war to the arts of peace – while the outdoor exhibits of sculptures and the cemetery area next to the main entrance were added in 1995. The new exhibition rooms, together with the “garden of peace”, were a 2007 extension. Finally, in the so-called “Phase III”, planned in 2015 and as yet incomplete, entirely new parts – an “expansion section” – were added to the Jiangdong Gate Memorial. The designers of the latest additions describe the new monumental complex as a “spatial sequence [consisting of] the Broken-Knife, the Memorial Square, the Death Chamber, the Sacrificial Courtyard and the Peace Park, which open a complete narrative chapter of the Jiangdong Gate Memorial. It is an important urban memory of Nanjing”.<sup>36</sup> In the description of the architects, “The expansion section focuses on the arduous journey of the Anti-Japanese War, the joy of victory, and vision of mankind’s peaceful fulfillment”. In fact, this expansion consists of a great pavilion which can be accessed at the end of the itinerary through the main Memorial site and whose façade on the city front presents an arcade of “fair-bare concrete columns in the face of the urban space”. Accessing the pavilion from inside the Memorial site, the visitor comes across an entrenched, “earth-sheltered architecture” behind a semi-circular, arc-shaped front wall faced by an oval lawned surface meant to inspire harmony and inclusiveness. The interior of the pavilion hosts a very large, rich and ambitious historical exhibition on Chinese history from the first Sino-Japanese War (1895), China’s participation in the anti-Japanese War in 1931-1945<sup>37</sup> and the place of China in the reconfigured world relations after WWII and in the post-Mao era.<sup>38</sup> This new historic exhibition is actually the result of the considerable enlargement of the historic sections originally located at the second floor of the main 1985 pavilion, afterwards transferred and made autonomous and much more substantial,

<sup>36</sup> See <https://www.archdaily.com/878779/the-memorial-hall-of-the-victims-in-nanjing-massacre-by-japanese-invaders-phase-iii-architectural-design-and-research-institute-of-south-china-university-of-technology>.

<sup>37</sup> See above footnote n. 2.

<sup>38</sup> This new part of the Memorial was realized by the Architectural Design & Research Institute of South China University of Technology and several photos, descriptions and plans of it are available at the website: <https://www.archdaily.com/878779/the-memorial-hall-of-the-victims-in-nanjing-massacre-by-japanese-invaders-phase-iii-architectural-design-and-research-institute-of-south-china-university-of-technology>.



thus conferring a greater centrality to the theme of twentieth-century Chinese historical memory.

The Memorial is therefore an extremely complex semiotic artefact that also exhibits a significant permanent 'live' dimension represented by the grand commemoration ceremonies performed from time to time in dedicated scenic areas of the Memorial, and their continuous re-enactment for the visitors through film clips and photographic reproduction. Both Denton and Violi have insisted on defining the Memorial a monument to nationhood, to national belonging, and on its constituting an important step in the construction of modern Chinese political identity, centred on the idea of the greatness of the Chinese people and their ability to self-rehabilitate by overcoming great suffering from the past. In essence, it is a metaphor for a salvific path and redemption inspired by ecumenical, universal and trans-confessional religious symbolisms, from the cross to the dove of peace, the perennial flame of memory and the monumental representation of maternal protection and love. But beside this symbolic set, as already noticed, visitors encounter other associated discourses possessing an essentially historical character, and these discourses, through successive modifications over at least one decade, have attained quite a central role in recent years.<sup>39</sup> One of these historical discourses is naturally the one that, from the first opening of the Memorial, has aimed at demonstrating and insisting on the Massacre's undisputable historical reality and proportions, supported by physical and visual reconstructions of historic sites and scenarios of the city of Nanjing under Japanese occupation, an array of documental evidence and in particular a collection of non-Chinese testimonies, enquiries and studies on the massacre, such as in the temporary exhibition "Common Witness" (2017.05.2017-11.30.2017). Another, much more articulated historical discourse is the one we hinted at above concerning China's role in East Asian and world history during the late Qing and Republican periods, and China's international position not only in its past and present relations with Japan, and within the Asian context, but also in terms of the wider international, global community: it is not surprising that the latter has become a crucial point of view as China's foreign policy and her attitude toward the wider world have been and are still undergoing important changes at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

I believe that the changes introduced in 2007 and 2015 represent not simply a material and logistic-architectural enlargement of the Memorial Hall, but also a true conceptual expansion, aiming to integrate the commemorative function – the memory of the 1937-1938 massacre – into a wider historical narrative framework focussed on the two Sino-Japanese wars, and to develop the coordinated concepts of China as a peaceful nation and 'peace' as a core-value of Chinese long-term history in the wider Asian context, in accordance with one of the fundamental ideas, with 'unity', 'harmony' and 'cosmic order', of the Confucian worldview from antiquity.<sup>40</sup> This

<sup>39</sup> Recent architectural expansions are described and illustrated here: <https://www.archdaily.com/878779/the-memorial-hall-of-the-victims-in-nanjing-massacre-by-japanese-invaders-phase-iii-architectural-design-and-research-institute-of-south-china-university-of-technology>.

<sup>40</sup> Zhang Yongjin, "System, Empire and State in Chinese International Relations", *Review of International Studies*, 27 (2001), 43-63, see especially 51; see also Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 10, 14, and Mary

point – which, it is worth noticing, surprisingly harks back to the image of an ancient and stable (because it is harmonious), peaceful and non-aggressive empire that is well established in seventeenth-century Jesuit representations – was alluded to by Patrizia Violi when she asked:

What exactly is the historical story this museum recounts to us? Essentially, it is the story of a secular conflict between Japan and China and its resolution, which involves not only the defeat of the enemy but also, and first and foremost, the restoration of a set of universal values such as peace and harmony between peoples, allowing the opening up of a new, temporally unending, phase of peace and harmony to be projected into the future.<sup>41</sup>

Violi's analysis therefore suggests that the ideas of peace and harmony, as the conceptual focus of the Memorial, represent the universal values upon which a vision of the future is proposed and translated into a monumental language. What has been brought centre stage by the extensions realized in the years after Violi and Denton made their observations, in 2012 and 2013, is the importance of the historical and political foundations upon which the discourse on peace is intended to rest.

### 3. THE MEMORIAL HALL AND CHINA'S STATUS IN THE GLOBAL ORDER

The Nanjing Memorial Hall, especially in its recently opened pavilion hosting the new permanent historic exhibition, seems to reflect very precisely this type of evolution. It embodies an ideological concern to proclaim to a national and international audience that Chinese national identity is founded as much on the primacy of national interests as on universal principles and values of peace, friendship and humanity transcending the national boundaries.

This is a discourse on the present and the future whose capacity for persuasiveness is reinforced by a retrospective vision of Chinese history, at the heart of which lies the idea of China as a barycentre of a continental equilibrium, of order and of peace, and in which the external aggressors act as troubling historical factors. It is to be observed that – as far as the historic exhibition in the Nanjing Memorial Hall is concerned – such a retrospective historical discourse on a traditionally peaceful China is not extended backward to include – as one could rightly expect – any reference to the violent aggression by the selfish European nation-states that burst into Qing China during the nineteenth century. The reason for removing European imperialism from the Memorial's public history may be easily explained. If the main preoccupation is to emphasize China's special contribution to the liberation of the world from Japanese imperialism and militarism, Nazism and Fascism, censorious references to nineteenth-century Western aggression would simply be inappropriate (and even defocussing the Memorial's main intent) for a China that during WWII fought on the same side as the Western powers (and Russia of course) and that is now mainly concerned with underlining its cooperation in the rebuilding of world peaceful relations after the defeat of Nazi-Fascism. A close analysis of the historical itinerary presented by the new historic exhibition can support this interpretation.

C. Wright, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: the Tung-chih Restoration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 60.

<sup>41</sup> Violi, "Educating for Nationhood", 55.



“The Victory of Justice, Peace and People will Prevail” is the title of the “Exhibition of the History of the Victory of the Anti-Fascist War and the Trials of Japanese War Criminals in the China Theatre” set up in the new pavilion.<sup>42</sup> This is an extremely rich and multifaceted historical exhibition that showcases a great quantity of visual material and printed documents collected in a graphically capturing, enthralling form of presentation with large-format maps, posters, photographs, reproductions of documents and newspapers, objects, bilingual explanatory and narrative texts, which catches the visitor’s attention thanks also to a lightning system that spotlights the objects on display, as if isolating them from the surrounding space. The nature of the documentary and explanatory materials collected in this new exhibition produces, at the end of the visitor’s itinerary, a sort of re-equilibrating and reinforcing effect on the side of rationality and solid historical information with respect to the prevailing “emotionally charged”<sup>43</sup> exhibitory language of the monumental part of the Memorial Hall.

The main objective is on the one hand to emphasize China’s, or, to be more precise, “the Chinese people[’s]” lengthy resistance to Japanese cyclical aggressions upsetting an East Asian harmony for which China had been allegedly a traditional safeguard. Japanese aggressions and related crimes, from the earlier nineteenth century instances – dating back to the Meiji Restoration when “Japanese militarists made China the target of their aggression” – to the 1931 invasion of Manchuria and to 1937-1938, are a leading motivation. However the exhibition also aims to vindicate China’s fundamental contribution, with a particular emphasis on a national dimension including KMT (before its “betrayal of the revolution”) and the role of the Chinese people, to the final victory over twentieth century Nazi-Fascist, militaristic and imperialistic tyrannies, in full cooperation with the antifascist powers. It is worth recalling that in the museum of the “Great Patriotic War” in Moscow, a separate section recently added presents a sort of confirmatory complement to this discourse from a Russian viewpoint. Here, the Eastern theatres of WWII are illustrated with a strong emphasis on the role and the great contribution by China to the final victory. Likewise, the Nanjing Memorial historical exhibition’s intent is clearly to stress the Axis powers’ “hazarding the world” and their committing “atrocious massacres [...] atrocities [and] unforgivable war crimes”, and, most of all, to exalt the Chinese people’s “joint efforts”, under the guide of a patriotic CCP able to bring together “all Compatriots” in a “nationwide war of resistance” fought by the “Chinese United Front”, to which KMT gave its recognizable contribution. Japanese aggression, Chinese national resistance and its merging into the world anti-fascist alliance, therefore, appear as foundational sources of Chinese national identity, but also of the “rescuing of human civilization and safeguarding of world peace”. In a quite overtly teleological discourse, the exhibitionary narrative of the downfall, struggle, recovery, victory and finally the punishment of war criminals after the post-war processes, result in the final “chapter” dedicated to “Striving for everlasting peace”, whose main objective is to credit an image of China as a country committed to peace on a global level: “a major force to safeguard world peace and order”.

<sup>42</sup> The following quotations in the main text, if not specified otherwise, come from the texts of the exhibition’s panels.

<sup>43</sup> Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 137.

These aspects of Chinese public historical discourse in the Nanjing Memorial are neither isolated aspects nor peculiar to the Nanjing Mausoleum. The same elements can be seen, for instance, in other important national museums, memorials and exhibitions, such as the “Museum of the War of Chinese People’s Resistance Against Japanese Aggression”, opened in Beijing in 1987, and are based on the need to resort to patriotism to fill the ideological gaps of the post-Maoist era in a neo-nationalist sense. An even more ambitious though controversial discourse, for its selective and biased use of historical memories, inspires the two permanent exhibitions at the National Museum of China in Beijing, one on “Ancient China” and the other, “The Road to Rejuvenation”, on China’s history from 1840 to the present.<sup>44</sup> The latter is particularly revealing, as it is inspired by an official reading of national history summarised by the explanatory, party-approved texts addressing the public.<sup>45</sup> Those texts amount to a schematic synthesis of China’s emergence as an independent, multi-ethnic, modern and developing nation. They show how this course started from the chaos and revolutions that brought about the end of the feudal monarchy, the “first bourgeois republic”, the continuing struggle against the reactionary forces of “imperialism and feudalism”, the liberating effects of the “New Culture Movement”, Marxism and the October Revolution, the “earth-shattering” foundation of the CCP, the anti-Japanese War of Resistance and the final “liberation of the people”: a representation of history that “inevitably” led to the birth of Socialist China. In the illustration of the subsequent phase of the “New China”, where the great sufferings of the country and its population during the 1950s and 1960s are simply ignored and concealed under the self-absolving idea of the “four modernizations” aimed at “painstakingly explor[ing] the laws of socialist development”, great relevance is given to foreign policy and China’s effort to consolidate its independent and autonomous initiative for peace and international respect, a course of action confirmed and reinforced by the successive Chinese leaders of the post-Mao era. The latter pursued the country’s economic development and opening up: from Den Xiaoping’s “Three steps theory” to Jiang Zemin’s theory of the “Three Represents”, and from Hu Jintao’s “Scientific Outlook on Development” to contemporary “socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

The Nanjing Memorial historical exhibition is intended to contribute to this representation by focusing on East-Asian international relations on the basis of the dual logic of downfall and rescue. It puts forward a vision in which Japan plays the role of the rogue-nation protagonist of the triple aggression of 1894-1895, 1931 and 1937 that left the deepest and most scathing mark on the “century of humiliation”:

[...] given China’s historical superiority to its tributary neighbours [...] succumbing to a local power was a much greater blow.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> See Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 33 and 38 ff.; Johnson, “At China’s New Museum”; Suisheng Zhao, “Reconstruction of Chinese History for a Peaceful Rise”, 13 June 2017 <<https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/reconstruction-chinese-history-peaceful-rise>> [accessed 4 December 2017]. See also Marzia Varutti, *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation After Mao* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), especially 89-129.

<sup>45</sup> The texts can be read in full in “The Road to Rejuvenation – the full text of China’s Party approved history”, in *China Change. News and Commentary from those who work for change*, 11 May 2012 (<https://chinachange.org/2012/05/11/the-road-to-rejuvenation-the-full-text-of-chinas-party-approved-history/>). All the quotations in this paragraph are taken from here.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, “Chinese Realpolitik: Reading Beijing’s World-View”, *Foreign Affairs*, 75, 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1996): 37-52, v. 45.

This discourse is not simply intended to affirm and sacralise universal values of peace and morality as the main requirements of future coexistence, but it also lays claim to the traditional role of stability, order and peace that China has played through history. The ghost of the 1894-1895 defeat is a looming reminder of an historic event that is deeply inscribed in China's historical memory as a sign of the waning of China as a dominant power in Asia and the advent of Japan with its militarism and imperialist expansionism, which continued into World War II and the return of which is in some way still feared today.<sup>47</sup> Twentieth-century Chinese history, therefore, is revisited not in the name of victimization, but, as many official statements assert today, in the name of the continuity in the role of guarantor of a 'global' order which seems to have a clear background in the historical cosmic vision of China's position as the centre of the world. The final section of the exhibition is significantly dedicated not only to underline China's contribution to the building of post-war order, but also to the efforts at reconciliation and China's commitment to the restoration of diplomatic relations with Japan in 1965 and more generally to the reestablishment of good Sino-Japanese relations since then. Official and non-governmental Japanese visits to the Nanjing Memorial Hall are shown as celebrating the Memorial itself as a nearly sacred place of reconciliation, in a way reminiscent of the idea of China's historical role as a pacifying agent and a supreme guarantor of peaceful coexistence that evokes the imperial greatness of dynastic history.

This seems to be essentially a discourse of historical continuity, representing modern Chinese history – roughly starting from the late nineteenth century – as a progressive, if highly tormented path of liberation and gradual participation in the building of a peaceful world order and the life of the international community.

#### 4. CHINA, HISTORY AND THE POLITICS OF PEACE

'Peace' is certainly one of the dominating ideas of the whole mausoleum: the main building – also called the "broken sword" – is described in the official guidebook as an "Ark of peace"; the entire mausoleum depicts the contrast between a past of war and a future of peace, the "turning of swords into ploughshares", and is a symbol of "Home for Humanity and Peace for the World".<sup>48</sup> This insistence on the theme of 'peace' is hardly surprising and, at the same time, not without paradoxical aspects. As a matter of fact, in the Memorial Hall an uneasy coexistence is perceivable between a public discourse in which China's call for peace and the vindication of China's peaceful attitude in Asian and global politics rests on a negative depiction of Japan historical legacy. The understandably disturbing consequences of an acrimonious insistence on Japanese aggressiveness, atrocities and historic responsibilities tend to keep alive controversies, reciprocal condemnations and an extremely nervous sensitivity about how hot topics and historiographical issues are dealt with not only in Asian,

<sup>47</sup> S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The importance in China of the memory of the first Sino-Japanese war is also shown by the recent book by Zeng Yuelin, *The Meditations of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 to 1895 (In Memory of the 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895)* (Ningbo: Ningbo Publishing House, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> *The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre*, 7.

but also in global academia.<sup>49</sup> As far as the exhibitory semantics of the mausoleum is concerned, this ends up creating an odd contrast between the dramatic and exhibited resonance of peace values and a pacifist ideology and persisting anti-Japanese sentiments, barely tempered by the memory of episodes and ceremonies of reconciliation occurred throughout more or less recent times. To what an extent is then an ideology of peace and the peaceful power of the nation – so much embedded in a memorial place such as the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall – to be taken at face value? This is a point hotly disputed in current politics and historiography especially by international commentators and I would like to finish this reflection on the Nanjing Memorial Hall by examining some issues from which any discussion of the mausoleum should not be separated.

There is no doubt that the concept of ‘peace’ has a central role in contemporary Chinese public discourse on international relations, something that offers inspiration even to academic historical research and which can be found in other aspects of public communication of a historical character. An example of the latter is the blockbuster production by China Central Television (CCTV) *The Rise of the Great Powers* (2006), resulting from a project inspired by the very top of the Communist Party of China and Hu Jintao’s personal initiative for “An Historical Investigation of the Development of the World’s Main Powers since the Fifteenth Century”.<sup>50</sup> The ten hours, twelve episodes of this documentary achieved spectacular success with considerable media repercussions in China and abroad. The story of the rise of the West and its expansion overseas in the early modern age is retraced with clearly didactic intentions and intellectual attitudes of historical pragmatism and *realpolitik*, investigating the essential reasons for a successful historical course deterministically connected to ideas of leadership, technical supremacy and a capacity to grasp historical opportunities. That the Western powers are presented not in their character of imperialist aggressors but as examples of historical success to meditate upon, descends from the same ideological worldview that in the Nanjing Memorial’s new historical exhibition – as we shall see shortly – explains the removal of any negative reference to nineteenth-century Western imperialism and, on the contrary, gives place to an outspoken acknowledgment of Sino-Western cooperation in the WWII battle against world fascism. The importance of the Western ‘lesson’ in *The Rise of the Great Powers*, therefore, is brought to public attention in order to exhort the Chinese people “to understand the worldwide process of modernization” and to reflect on such themes as democracy, individual rights, laws, market economy but also on ideas of national greatness, patriotism and “peaceful rise” with the idea of definitely and reassuringly

<sup>49</sup> See for instance the incomprehensibly violent reactions on the part of Chinese students and scholars to the alleged Japanese-exonerating and groundlessly presumed racist way the first Sino-Japanese War was supposedly treated by the authoritative MIT “Visualizing Cultures” website, as Peter C. Perdue has explained in “Reflections on the ‘Visualizing Cultures’ Incident”, *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, 18, 5 (May-June 2006), online at <http://web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/185/perdue.html>.

<sup>50</sup> See Liu Xiaobo, “Behind the Rise of the Great Powers” [2007], in *Guernica. A Magazine of Global Arts and Politics*, 1 January 2012; Ming Ye, “L’Eessor des grandes puissances: un documentaire-fleuve à la télévision chinoise”, *Hérodote*, 2007/2 (n° 125), 51-61. DOI: 10.3917/her.125.0051. URL: <http://www.cairn.info/revue-herodote-2007-2-page-51.htm>; Joseph Khan, “China, Shy Giant, Shows Signs of Shedding Its False Modesty”, *The New York Times*, 9 December 2006.

dismissing what still survives of the “sick man of East Asia” complex.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, through a massively successful television program, strongly supported by the State and Party authorities and with full participation of the academia, the discourse on peace, harmony, and on China’s historical distinctiveness, or exceptionality, makes itself manifest by pointing out the nation’s “peaceful rising” and “soft power” as a response to the growing international, particularly American, concerns for China’s growth and the importance of the commitment to building perpetual peace, common prosperity and an harmonious world.

The image of the Chinese nation as a supreme patron of order, stability and peace in the vast Asian region is certainly one of the main aspects of the official vision for post-socialist China’s international position and is strongly supported by a long-term wave of neo-Confucianism whose key-values of social and world harmonies inspire the concept of an Asiatic modernity as opposed to Western primacy and dominance.<sup>52</sup> It constitutes at the same time an element of continuity, if referring to Asia, and discontinuity if referring to relations with the West, compared to the foreign policies of the Maoist era.<sup>53</sup> It is also accompanied by a specular discourse on Japan as a traditionally aggressive and geo-politically destabilising subject. Such a discourse on peace is as important as the Japanese tendency to scale down – especially in terms of wide-spread historical culture and education – colonial and imperial aggression as a historic factor of its own foreign policy is persistent.<sup>54</sup>

Among several descriptions and theorizations, which were upheld by the officially recommended turn from the concept of ‘rise’ to the more reassuring concept of ‘development’ in the mid-2000s under Wen Jiabao’s State Council premiership,<sup>55</sup> this

<sup>51</sup> Liu Xiaobo, “Behind the Rise of the Great Powers”.

<sup>52</sup> Rosita Dellios and R. James Ferguson, *China’s Quest for Global Order: From Peaceful Rise to Harmonious World* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012), in particular Ch. 1, “Introduction: China’s ‘Peaceful Rise to Harmonious World’ Outlook”, 1-10.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Valdo Ferretti, *La questione della sicurezza nell’evoluzione della politica estera della Repubblica Popolare Cinese* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2006), especially 24-27.

<sup>54</sup> Barnard, *Language, Ideology and Japanese History Textbooks*. On the flip side, Japanese self-criticism toward military expansionism in the first half of the 20th century is demonstrated by books such as Yutaka Kawashima’s *Japanese Foreign Policy at the Crossroads: Challenges and Options for the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> See for instance the 2005 PRC State Council white paper on “China’s Peaceful Development Road”, see the full text in *People’s Daily* 2005-10-22, online at [http://en.people.cn/200512/22/eng20051222\\_230059.html#](http://en.people.cn/200512/22/eng20051222_230059.html#) (accessed 12 January 2018). The transition from one concept to another is visible in Zheng Bijian’s work: see for instance his 2005 essay on “China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great-Power Status”, *Foreign Affairs*, 84 (2005), 18–24 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/20031702>>, and his following “China’s Path of Peaceful Development in the Second Decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, *China Institute of International studies*, Aug. 2013 ([http://www.ciiis.org.cn/english/2013-08/14/content\\_6209091.htm](http://www.ciiis.org.cn/english/2013-08/14/content_6209091.htm)). The international debate on China’s “grand strategy” and the related terminology is extremely vibrant and rich: see on this Hiroko Okuda, “China’s ‘peaceful rise/peaceful development’: A case study of media frames of the rise of China”, *Global Media and China*, 2016, 1 (1-2): 121-138; Jaewoo Choo, “Ideas Matter: China’s Peaceful Rise”, *Asia Europe Journal*, 7 (2009): 389–404 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-009-0241-3>>; Ming Xia, “‘China Threat’ or ‘Peaceful Rise of China’?”, *New York Times* <<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/college/coll-china-politics-007.html>>; De Jesús Rocha Pino, Manuel, “China En Transformación: La Doctrina Del Desarrollo Pacífico”, *Foro Internacional*, 46, no. 4 (186) (2006): 693-719; Barry Buzan, “The Logic and Contradictions of ‘Peaceful Rise/Development’ as China’s Grand Strategy”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7, 4 (2014): 381-420. See also The National Bureau of Asian Research Project Report, October 2009, *China’s peaceful development doctrine. Views from China* (a summary by Shulong Chu and Xiao Ren is available at <http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=444>) (accessed on 12 January 2018).



standpoint has been clearly and authoritatively expressed in a more recent lecture entitled “China is a Force for Peace and Stability in Asia”, held by the Chinese ambassador Liu Xiaoming in February 2014 at the prestigious Chatham House, London.<sup>56</sup> It is a view of great interest not only because of who proposed it and the venue chosen, but also because of the way in which the position of China and other countries, first and foremost Japan, has been presented within the Asian context. Liu’s intention was to rebut the thesis, sustained by, amongst others, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, that contemporary Asia, with its internal differences and potential conflicts, is in a similar situation to the one Europe was in before the First World War, a thesis that Liu believed was like mistaking the woods for the trees. According to Liu, in reality, contemporary Asia presents a picture that – with a typical Chinese predilection for didactic schematization – could be summed up with a formula of three ‘S’s’: stability, shining, solidity. Stability is guaranteed by the improvement of relations with both Russia and the US, and by solid cooperation with the ASEAN states. ‘Shining’ refers to the continuing dynamism of emerging Asian economies that are growing at a rate that is more than double the world average (6.3% in 2013). And finally, the solidity of the foundations of peaceful coexistence is guaranteed by regional cooperation, especially in trade, transport and security. However, the most interesting part is where Liu discussed the persistent conflicts and the destabilising initiatives that threaten the security across Asia and that he considers a legacy of the Second World War. The reference is explicitly to Japan and her actions that created tensions with neighbouring states, which Liu linked to an undeniable historical aggressivity despite the negationism officially espoused by Shinzo Abe himself. With regards to this, Liu underlined China’s strong commitment to peace and friendly relations with all Asian neighbours, presenting the Chinese nation as a guarantor of stability and peace. Liu’s, therefore, was an official display of the fundamental features of Chinese–Asian diplomacy, in particular of the “neighbourhood policy” summarised in the three principles of (1) partnership relations with neighbouring states, (2) a friendly, peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood, and (3) affinity and sincerity as guarantees of inclusiveness.<sup>57</sup> Sincerity, continuity, mutual benefit, shared traditions, an interweaving of interests, all these are seen as the foundations of mutual development and the prosperity of China and her neighbouring countries. However the objective on which Liu insisted the most was the assumption of responsibility by China for maintaining the peace and regional stability, while safeguarding and respecting differences, through diplomatic efforts to find the solution to ongoing issues such as Korea’s nuclear power and Afghanistan, and, through a policy of cultural exchanges capable of reinforcing the bonds of friendship with individual nations, to pursue a model of intercultural dialogue in Asia that favours harmonic coexistence. Extending the logic to a global level, China as described by Liu – the champion of peace and Asian stability – thus becomes guarantor of world peace, according to a

<sup>56</sup> Full text available at the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China: [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbd\\_665378/t1125906.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1125906.shtml).

<sup>57</sup> In particular, Liu had stressed the role of China as a country able to stimulate Asian economic growth with initiatives of cooperation destined to have a positive impact on the entire network of neighbouring countries: the Silk Road economic area, the Maritime Silk Road, an Asian investment bank for infrastructure, the expansion of the ASEAN free trade area, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor, the China-Pakistan economic corridor.

perspective that tends to take on historic dimensions, to invoke the recognition of the crucial historical role played by Asian nations in the fight against Fascism and in the victory of the Second World War. Hence the request for a public admission of responsibility by the Japanese as a preliminary step towards the definitive overcoming of the militarist, imperialist and colonial aggressiveness which has long inspired Japan's foreign policy, a country perceived as the main historical threat to China and the one responsible for the most infamous aspects of the 'century of humiliation' in that they were caused by an Asian rather than a Western power.<sup>58</sup>

The lessons of Japan's past of militarist aggression and colonial rule must be learned. The tribulations of Chinese people, and the people of other countries, caused by Japanese fascism must not be forgotten.<sup>59</sup>

In particular it is within history that Japan's sincerity and will to cooperate can be verified, first of all through acknowledgement of past mistakes. To this end, and in several ways, China invokes the collaboration of not just the Asian community but also the international one, to not connive with the "rising militarism" of Japan and to not tolerate attempts to play down in terms of historic awareness the importance of the global struggle against Fascism, to which China has made a significant contribution. There are, in fact "certain countries" – the reference is above all to Japan – responsible for renewed tensions, with their territorial claims, their "unilateral provocations" and their policies of rearmament: these countries obstruct trends towards peace, raising an unfounded alarm against "China's threat". China's, instead, is exclusively a determination to defend her "lawful rights and interests" and work towards peace and stability in the spirit of regional cooperation, according to that "new security concept" which even non-Asian countries should adhere to and which combines "strategic mutual trust" and "comprehensive", "common" and "cooperative" security while respecting Asiatic diversity. If the objective is to turn Asia into a "big stage" rather than a "boxing ring", then a strong, prosperous and stable China means a strong, prosperous and stable Asia, because:

China is a member of the big Asian family. We stand ready to work with our neighbours to achieve a new Asia of peace, development, cooperation and win-win.

Many other official statements have insisted on this point over the past few years. Among the most explicit were the words spoken in Berlin in March 2014, a little after Ambassador's Liu London lecture, by President Xi Jinping, resorting to a choice of Confucian quotations praising harmony, peace and goodwill as regulative principles of coexistence among peoples throughout the glorious imperial past:

the Chinese nation is a peace-loving nation [...] The Chinese civilization, with a history of over 5,000 years, has always cherished peace. The pursuit of peace, amity and harmony is an integral part of the Chinese character which runs deep in the blood of the Chinese people [...].<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, "Pride, Pressure and Politics: The Roots of China's Worldview", in Yong Deng, *In the Eyes of the Dragon: China Views the World* (New-York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 239-256, see 243.

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk/eng/ambassador/t1125905.htm>.

<sup>60</sup> "Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at the Körber Foundation",



These official pronouncements have raised the question of to what extent they imply a hidden reassertion of the hegemonic centrality of imperial China in the Asian continent. The idea that the Middle Kingdom considered itself placed hierarchically at the centre of a Confucian cosmic order comprising the entire “land under heaven”, governing a Sino-centric “tributary system”, was codified by John Fairbank particularly in the 1960s.<sup>61</sup> It has been specified that it was mostly an ideal representation, not necessarily corresponding to the actual reality of relations with the neighbouring nations: think of the ambiguity of the idea of “pacification of the borders” at the Western outskirts of the empire.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the scientific foundation of the thesis of an imperial China at the heart of a hierarchical order, guarantor of peace and harmony, has been questioned especially by Western historiography. Historians such as Peter C. Perdue deny and others such as Odd Arne Westad significantly play down the idea of the tributary system as the main, unique, institutionalised expression of a harmonious hierarchical order as it is in fact founded on unequal inter-Asian relationships, military expansionism and colonialism, violent repression of those ethnic minorities, whose integration in a truly multi-ethnic nation is today one of the key tenets of the Chinese state’s official self-descriptions.<sup>63</sup>

Irrespective of what contemporary Western historiography has to say, this vision, outwardly cleansed of its hierarchical, cosmological and inter-Asian imperialistic aspects, seems to be visible in the background, almost between the lines, of the representation of the international role that the Chinese leadership – not at all relinquishing the idea of ‘national sovereignty’ – would like to give to China in the modern world: her rise in terms of wealth and power would therefore offer the preconditions to restore an Asian order based on justice and peace, through a full recovery of historic imperial memories, set aside during the Maoist era, and completing what has been called an “imperial cycle”, a course of events that saw the nineteenth century decline of the empire followed by its resurgence in the twenty-first century.<sup>64</sup> The century of the invasion of Western powers and Japan would therefore be a mere interlude in the several centuries of history where China, first imperial, now post-socialist, played the role of a peaceful and benevolent regulator of the future of East Asia, which the current economic and political rise would enable her to recover, through proposing peaceful perspectives to Asian neighbours, without any threat from the Chinese. This does not detract from the existence and importance, in Chinese official public

Berlin, 28 March 2014, entire text available on the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC: [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1148640.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1148640.shtml).

<sup>61</sup> John K. Fairbank, “A preliminary framework”, *The Chinese World Order*, ed. by John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968). See also the earlier contribution by John K. Fairbank and S. Y. Têng, “On the Ch’ing Tributary System”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 6, (June, 1941): 135-246.

<sup>62</sup> Lien-sheng Yang, “Historical notes on the Chinese world order”, *The Chinese World Order*, ed. by John K. Fairbank, 20-33, in particular the section “The Sinocentric World Order: Myth and Reality”.

<sup>63</sup> Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005) and Id., “The Tenacious Tributary System”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24, 96 (2015): 1002-1014; Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

<sup>64</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “Rethinking the Chinese World Order: the imperial cycle and the rise of China”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24, 96 (2015): 961-982.

discourse, of a representation centred on the myth of a China that has been peaceful for centuries and that is at the centre of a system of Asian coexistence, according to the Confucian ideal of a benevolent and harmonious government guaranteed by a central power, bearer of civilization and with an inclusive attitude. Proof of this is the intense reflection, even in international political theory, on a traditional term that has regained great popularity, “Tianxia” (literally: “all under heaven”), with the ideals of perpetual harmony and peace to which it refers. As has been noted, “many public intellectuals in Greater China have been promoting the ancient concept of ‘Tianxia’ to understand Chinese visions of world order”, even if “Tianxia” is an ambiguous concept, oscillating between ‘world’, ‘empire’ and its literal translation of ‘all under heaven’, and between descriptive and normative meanings.<sup>65</sup>

The conceptual formulation of the “Tianxia system”<sup>66</sup> is very complex in its ambition to theorize a “world institution”, a system that presents itself as a Chinese model of world order for the twenty-first century, an alternative to the chaotic post-Westphalia Western version of the nation-states.<sup>67</sup> It is also ambiguous and problematic in its re-proposal of a discourse that has been called not post-, but rather neo-hegemonic – a sort of adaptation to the contemporary conditions of the hierarchical idea of imperial Chinese *governance* – and in the ambiguous way with which, between inclusion, ‘transformation’, ‘conversion’ and conquest, it deals with the theme of the difference.<sup>68</sup>

The combination of a historical idea of continuity in the name of a continental hegemony with theories of ‘real ethics’ – an idea of government founded on universal morality, persuasion, consensus, harmony between human beings, justice and the development of humanity and on peace, as opposed to tyranny and hegemony – is in China today at the basis of a Chinese exceptionalism, which some Western commentators have critically analysed and deconstructed.<sup>69</sup> Some elements of this theory might be seen as also looming within the Memorial Hall in Nanjing. This semiotic-

<sup>65</sup> Ban Wang, *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Wang Gungwu, *Renewal: The Chinese State and the New Global History* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2013); William A. Callahan, “Tianxia, Empire and the World: Chinese Visions of World Order for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, in *China Orders the World? Soft Power, Norms and Foreign Policy*, ed. by William A. Callahan and Elena Barabantseva (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 91-117; Rosita Dellios and R. James Ferguson, *China’s Quest for Global Order: From Peaceful Rise to Harmonious World* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012); Wang Mingming, “All under heaven (tianxia). Cosmological perspectives and political ontologies in pre-modern China”, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 2, 1 (2012): 337-383; Zhang Feng, “The Tianxia System: World Order in a Chinese Utopia”, *China Heritage Quarterly*, 21 (March 2010), available at: [http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/tien-hsia.php?searchterm=021\\_utopia.inc&issue=021](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/tien-hsia.php?searchterm=021_utopia.inc&issue=021) (last accessed 7th June 2017); and last but not least, the influential book (in Chinese) by 赵汀阳 [Zhao Tingyang], *天下体制：世界制度哲学导论 [The All-Under-Heaven System: A Philosophy for the World System]* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2005), that, with its peculiar interpretation, “romantic” and normative, of the “Tianxia system”, has contributed greatly to the theorisation of the “Chinese-style IR” and of the Chinese “soft power” as the foundation of a “universally valid model of world politics” (William A. Callahan, “Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?”, *International Studies Review*, 10 (2008): 749-61, v. 751, 759).

<sup>66</sup> Callahan, “Chinese Visions of World Order”, 751 ff.

<sup>67</sup> Zhao Tingyang, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven’ (Tian-xia)”, *Social Identities*, 12, 1 (2006): 29-41.

<sup>68</sup> Callahan, “Chinese Visions of World Order”, 749, 752.

<sup>69</sup> William A. Callahan, “Sino-speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 71, 1 (February 2012): 33-55.

ly composite cultural monumental artefact, with its discourse of redemption through memorialisation and final overcoming of the humiliations suffered over a century, might be seen as in some way evoking ideas of centrality and prestige typical of the imperial ages.<sup>70</sup> Its complex symbolism and monumental semantics refer not only to ethical values of humanitarianism and universal morality, but also to concepts regarding Chinese history and historical relations to the world.<sup>71</sup> Its meaning is not entirely comprehensible today without taking into account what has been defined “the great problem of China’s place in the world”<sup>72</sup> and in particular the problem of China’s self-representation of her role in Asian and global politics in the era of “China rising” – or “peaceful development”, in the wording used for toning down the anxiety-inducing and alarmist implications of the rise of China as a great global power.<sup>73</sup> The Memorial Hall, as a monumental consecration of the idea of the “peace-loving nation”,<sup>74</sup> appears to contribute to the articulation of a discourse aimed at dispelling the apprehensions in international political and historiographical discussions related to the theory of the “Chinese threat” and concern about a presumed Chinese expansionism and desire to restore an Asian supremacy of imperial ancestry.

<sup>70</sup> Zhou Fangyin, “The Role of Ideational and Material Factors in the Qing Dynasty Diplomatic Transformation”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 1, 3 (2007): 447-474; Xiaomin, Zhang, and Xu Chunfeng, “The Late Qing Dynasty Diplomatic Transformation: Analysis from an Ideational Perspective”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 1, 3 (2007): 405-445; Suisheng Zhao, “Reconstruction of Chinese History for a Peaceful Rise”.

<sup>71</sup> Allen Carlson, “Moving Beyond Sovereignty? A Brief Consideration of Recent Changes in China’s Approach to International Order and the Emergence of the Tianxia Concept”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 20 (2011): 89-102.

<sup>72</sup> Charles A. Fisher, “Containing China? I. The Antecedents of Containment”, *The Geographical Journal*, 136, 4 (1970): 534-556.

<sup>73</sup> Christensen, “Pride, Pressure and Politics: The Roots of China’s Worldview”, 240.

<sup>74</sup> It should be underlined that the Massacre Memorial Hall has been acting itself since the last few years as a promoter of ‘peace studies’ in collaboration with Nanjing University. These two institutions established in 2015 the “Institute for Nanjing Massacre History and International Peace”, with the precise aim of associating peace studies and the research on the history of the Nanjing Massacre. 6 centers have been set up in the Institute, such as the “Center of Nanjing massacre research”, “Center of the war of resistance against Japan”, “Center of comfort women research”, “Center of contemporary Japanese political research”, “Center of Peace Studies” and the international peace school. In 2017, the Institute of Peace Studies in Nanjing University, in collaboration with the above mentioned “Institute for Nanjing Massacre History and International Peace”, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Liu Cheng, obtained Nanjing’s membership among the “International Cities of Peace. A Vision for Global Community”, a worldwide non-profit association based in the United States (<http://www.internationalcitiesofpeace.org/>).