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Interwoven Histories: A Chinese Family, a Yale Graduate and the Nanking Massacre

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Abstract

Following the fall of Nanjing, the Republic of China's capital, in December 1937 during World War II, Japanese soldiers conducted a series of atrocities against civilians in the region that lasted for months, infamously known as the Nanking Massacre. This paper takes a microhistorical approach to examining how these atrocities permanently affected civilians' lives. Relying on oral histories and primary sources at the Yale Divinity Library, it explores two interwoven histories of wartime survivors: one of the Cao family residing just outside Nanjing when the atrocities happened, and another of a Yale graduate named Miner Searle Bates who took advantage of his identity as an American to help document and represent long-lasting impacts the atrocities had on civilians like the Cao family. Through their attempts of resisting, rebuilding and reconciling, both the Cao family and Bates contributed to a truthful yet complicated narrative of war whose impact extends for generations.

“NO FOREIGNER WAS KILLED”

In the winter of 1937, towards the beginning of December, three-year old Cao Hui-ying left home in a basket, carried by her father on a shoulder pole.¹ Her pregnant mother, her 12-year old brother and 7-year-old sister were also with them. Her father had earlier fled Shanghai, where he was working, before Japanese troops occupied the city. Knowing the troops were headed next to Nanjing, he hurried to find his wife and children, who were then living in a village on the way to the capital city. In an icy rain they fled into the countryside carrying only rice and pickles to eat. The children did not even bring shoes.

They stayed on a boat for months, floating along the Yangxi river all the way to Bashi Bridge on the east side of Lake Tai. At night they hid in reed marshes. Occasionally there were corpses in the river. Around more populated areas Japanese soldiers would sometimes walk by, poking their bayonettes into the reeds: at those times her mother, afraid that baby Hui-ying might make a noise, stuffed rice into her mouth to keep her quiet. The family lived like this until spring came. When they finally went home they found the village looted and their house burned to the ground. Some old townspeople, including Hui-ying's grandmother, had stayed behind. Most were killed. It took the family months to rebuild their home and lives. In the interim they lived in the rice fields, in a

bamboo hut built with mud-plastered walls. Two years later, they were still so destitute they had to send their oldest daughter to work in a local factory. She was only nine. Even so, the Cao family would count themselves among the luckier victims of the atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers in Nanjing and its vicinity—the infamous Nanking Massacre.²

Even luckier were a small group of (mostly Caucasian) foreigners living in the region. Unlike the Cao family, they were not forced to flee from their homes and, in spite of the uncertainty as Japanese troops descended on the area, some chose to stay. The exact number of foreigners remaining in Nanjing remains unclear, but scholars agree that at least twenty-or-so “Westerners” were in the city when it fell to the Japanese.³ One of them was Miner Searle Bates, a graduate of Yale University (Ph.D. in Chinese history, 1935), who was then working for University of Nanking (now merged with Nanjing University) and has most of his Nanjing correspondences stored at the Yale Divinity Library. His children and wife Lilliath had not returned from Japan following a visit there in the summer of 1937, so Bates was in the city alone.⁴ Nanjing fell on December 13. He first got in touch with Lilliath eleven days later, on December 24: he sent a brief note on University of Nanking letterhead through a “Mr. Fukuda” – Fukuda Tokuyasu – at the Japanese Embassy: “I hope you have already heard through newspapers that no foreigner was killed or wounded here,” he wrote.⁵

Bates was not the only foreigner in Nanjing whose personal correspondences regarding the incident remain. A few other missionaries’ letters to their friends and families in Kaiyuan Zhang’s *Eyewitnesses to Massacre: American Missionaries Bear Witness to Japanese Atrocities in Nanjing*, like Ernest H. Forster’s series of letters to his wife between November 1937 and February 1938 or Lewis Smythe’s letters to his family in December 1937 and January 1938, in fact, provided even more detailed accounts of how the city was attacked and occupied.⁶ Such letters are often referred to in secondary sources to recognize the truthfulness of Nanking Massacre, as one of the large overarching academic, as well as political, debates over the past decades has been surrounding the validity and suppression of memories: controversies that arose regarding Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking* and scholarship in the essay collection, *Nanking 1937: Memories and Healing*, indicate this trend.⁷ Bates’ letters, however, can serve as tools to tackle a more complex historical question: how the events in and around Nanjing were communicated and represented on an international level, and to what extent its severity was thought to be appropriately accentuated.

Among missionaries in Nanjing in December 1937, Bates had one of the most comprehensive records of directly communicating with Japanese officials regarding the horrors unfolding in the city. Throughout the month of December, he sent at least a dozen letters to the Japanese Embassy complaining of the soldiers’ atrocities. In one letter, addressed

directly to Fukuda on December 21, Bates reported the cases of robbery, assault and rape he witnessed on a single day. He angrily condemned the Japanese for taking library staff from the University to be used for forced labor, stealing from the poorest people, and raping women everywhere a full week after the city had been occupied. With full sarcasm he asked, “Does this suggest that a few gendarmes are restoring order?”⁸ While the soldiers did not murder foreigners, he also noted that they looted their houses indiscriminately. In fact, according to Bates, his own home “was looted for the fourth time” while he had been meeting with Fukuda.⁹

Bates not only communicated as a victim or bystander of the incident with the Japanese, but moreover disclosed to the Western world what happened in Nanjing. For three years following the massacre, Bates stayed in the city as a member of the International Relief Committee of Nanjing, taking advantage of his identity as a foreigner to both assist local refugees and, as much as possible, call Western attention to the terrible suffering caused by the Japanese in Nanjing and other parts of China. Especially, in his documentation of the horrors of the Nanjing Massacre, he promoted the idea that the “massacre” was not a single event, nor a special case, and argued against the overuse of “atrocities narratives.” He advocated for those who died in Nanjing as well as for those in its vicinities – like the Cao family – whose stories did not fit in the traditional, graphic “atrocities narratives” but also suffered long-lastingly due to the war crimes. In order to avoid being

expelled by the Japanese he was careful to protect his anonymity while in the city; but when he felt that speaking out would do greater good for the people of Nanjing and China, he was willing to sacrifice his own work for it. Through both introducing the story of the Cao family and revealing Bates’s philosophy of international communication during this time, taken into account his identity as a white man writing about happenings in East Asia, this paper hopes to not only add on to the existing scholarship proving the truthfulness and severity of the Nanking Massacre, but also provide some sense of how these wartime stories were represented then and how that representation might inspire the way we think of the complexity of such historical events now.

“IT REMINDED ONE OF OLD ASSYRIAN RAPES”

Unlike the case for many of his fellow missionaries in Nanjing, Bates’ most graphic depictions of war crimes were not in letters to his family, but rather in his correspondences with Westerners writing about the war. On April 2, 1938, Bates wrote a letter to Rev. J.C. McKim, a New York missionary who had worked in Japan and had been “wting[sic] letters to the *Times* saying that the stories of Japanese atrocities in Nanking were false.”¹⁰ In this response to McKim’s claims, Bates dropped the reassuring tone he often took in letters to his family to provide a straightforward account of the terrible scenes of cruelty he had witnessed. “It reminded one of ancient

Assyrian rapes,” he summed up, before going on to list numbers: the Chinese Benevolent Association alone had “burned 32104 bodies,” he wrote, but at least twice as many more had died during the massacre. One cemetery caretaker he knew said he saw between 2000 and 3000 people killed and buried at one site near the cemetery.¹¹ On December 16 right outside a gate of the city, he wrote, crowds of civilians had been “mowed down by machine guns.” The son of a Chinese priest he knew had been in the crowd, but escaped to tell the story by falling to the ground and pretending to be dead until after the Japanese soldiers left.¹² Despite what some might claim, he insisted adamantly, it was never just Chinese soldiers that the troops massacred.

Bates then moved on to individual stories of horror, underscoring how long the terror lasted. He attempted to build an empathetic connection with McKim by foregrounding the experiences of “our own people” – the Christians. His first example was of a Mr. Tung, who was struck in the head with a pipe for showing his Bible to a Japanese soldier a few weeks after the mass killings.¹³ He then recounted more serious atrocities, including those targeting entire households and women. Bates was a very effective storyteller, demonstrating each new horror by recounting just a few powerful cases. For violence done to entire families, for instance, he pointed to a house of 11 killed by the Japanese: the mother was “raped and then had a bottle rammed up her vagina”, he wrote, while two daughters, 14 and 16, were “raped several times apiece and

then killed”. Their grandparents were shot dead for trying to protect them.¹⁴ Bates did not forget to supplement the telling of one story by placing it in context, commenting that “if this awful tragedy had been an isolated event one might say that it was the work of sadists but there have been many authentic stories of such horrors.”¹⁵

Bates focused on the value of those “authentic stories,” and in this letter to McKim he made a clear effort to show that all his stories were true. Although he did not talk much about his own work assisting the refugees, he did note that he took rape victims to hospitals and heard their first-hand accounts. He recounted incidents of both random one-time rapes and forced long-term “comfort women.” He noted the case of a girl of just 15 years old, for example, who was taken as a “comfort woman” and “raped a number of times for about a month and a half when she took sick and they [the Japanese soldiers] were afraid to use her.” He also described a woman of 72 who was herself raped twice, and whose daughter, a widow, was “raped between 18 and 19 times.”¹⁶ Even April of 1938, when he was writing to McKim, Bates wrote that although things had improved, “murder and rape still continue, only on a smaller scale here in Nanking.”

Given all this, Bates insisted to McKim, it was imperative that “all friends of Japan should know the truth.”¹⁷ What makes this statement so powerful, even today, is that Bates himself could, in many ways, be called a “friend of Japan.” In 1934-5 he had been a Rockefeller Foundation

Fellow studying Japanese at Harvard, and in the summer of 1937 he visited Japan and made friends with many people there. Indeed, as noted above, even at the time of the massacre his family was still staying in Japan.¹⁸ No doubt these experiences and, his belief that people in Japan did not properly understand what their military forces were doing, were a large part of what convinced him that “it is the part of real friendship for the Japanese to let them know what is actually happening in China.” Perhaps if they understood the horrors that had been unleashed, Japan’s citizens might still act to break the power of the country’s military.¹⁹

One thing Bates did very strongly request of McKim was that, whether or not he chose to publish or publicly respond to any of the stories he had provided, his name should not be used. If the Japanese authorities learned that he has been spreading news about the massacre, he explained, they would surely force him to leave, which would mean “the relief work that we foreigners here have been carrying on for the benefit of the people of the city might be further curtailed than it has been.”²⁰ This fear was a common theme in his correspondence with members representing the Western media: it can also be seen in his exchanges with the British journalist H.J.

Timperley, discussed in the next section.

“BALANCING PROBABLE GOOD AGAINST POSSIBLE OR PROBABLE EVILS”

It is unclear whether McKim was influenced much by the letter Bates sent him, but there was another writer who took Bates’ account of the massacre and incorporated it into a book. This was H.J. Timperley. On January 29, 1938, Timperley, then a reporter for *The Manchester Guardian*, wrote to Bates about his idea of “putting together a book based on eye-witness accounts of Japanese military outrages against civilians, published and unpublished, with a view to telling the uncensored truth about the way this war is being carried on.”²¹ Since Bates had written too much to the Japanese Embassy during the peak of the atrocities in Nanjing complaining about those outrages against civilians, Timperley decided that those documents would be valuable sources for the book. Bates’ initial response to Timperley has not survived, but judging from another letter Timperley sent on February 17, Bates had written to other officials of the International Relief Committee, “encouraging [his] book.”²²

The two men soon started a collaboration that lasted for two months, and their correspondence lasted until the end of March, when Timperley finished a full draft and showed it to Bates for his suggestions. This collaboration was made possible by the two men’s common goals: Timperley stated in his very first letter that his purpose in writing the book was to “strip war of its false glamour,” a sentiment that very much

resonated with Bates' idea that accurate reporting of the horrors that had been carried out would awaken the Japanese people from their illusion of glorious war.²³ The two also agreed that the book's tone should be "unsensational but telling, combining dignity with punch."²⁴

While Bates and Timperley shared these overriding goals, their opinions still occasionally differed on the details. One of the main suggestions Bates repeatedly made to Timperley was that he should avoid discussing Nanjing as a peculiar or extraordinarily awful case. This might seem a little counter-intuitive, as the Nanjing Massacre was indeed extraordinarily awful: perhaps the single most horrific atrocity committed by Japan in China. But presenting Nanjing as an exceptional case, Bates argued, would weaken the wider sense of horror the materials would evoke in readers. In a letter sent on March 3 he wrote, "for purpose of impressing a distant public with the brutality of warfare... it seems much more effective to have a base wider than that of one city."²⁵ Too much attention to one place might lead a foreign audience to mistakenly conclude that the violence was unleashed there only because of Nanjing's status as capital and its historical significance.

"Both the specific horrors of old women raped and young children shot and the profound disruption to normal life that was experienced by millions, needed to be conveyed in order for people to properly understand the devastation caused by war."

Bates also argued that focusing on Nanjing alone would draw attention away from the wide scope of atrocities carried out in the rest of China and their impact on other cities, as well as rural areas through which the Japanese passed. He pointed to cities like Suzhou and Wuxi (where the Cao family was from), where people had been subjected to the same kind of horrors, even if the number of victims were not as great as in Nanjing. In all cases, Bates realized that survivors' daily lives were still profoundly disrupted, and the impact of what had happened to them was long-lasting. In a letter to Timperley on March 14, he stated his concern about "a tendency to 'atrocious stories,' at least in the impression given to many readers,"

for it "closes some minds at once."²⁶ The ultimate purpose of Timperley's writing, Bates argued, should be "a demonstration of the cruelty and injury of such warfare to normal life". He emphasized that "economic dislocation, lasting damage to property and means of production, dislocation of social life and connections of millions of people... [were] in some senses more basic than shootings and rape."²⁷ In other words, stories like that of the Cao family needed to be told, too. In this way, Bates was striving to reach a balance in the experiences that

was able to represent: he wanted to show both the extremes *and* the full range of the atrocities that had been unleashed. Both the specific horrors of old women raped and young children shot *and* the profound disruption to normal life that was experienced by millions, needed to be conveyed in order for people to properly understand the devastation caused by war.

This was not the only form of balance Bates was reaching for. He was also, through multiple requests similar to the one he made to McKim regarding his anonymity, trying to protect his identity as a witness to the war crimes while giving out as much information as possible, in order to still stay in the city to conduct relief work. There was a constant anxiety in his correspondence about possible retaliation against him, the University and the Relief Committee, and an increasing fear that the Japanese would bar all individuals from doing work in Nanjing in order to control the dissemination of information. The last letter he wrote to Timperley in this set was on March 21, after he had read and revised the latter's draft of the book: despite giving multiple suggestions (which, according to Timperley's response, almost all of which were accepted), he expressed his surprise at how fast the manuscript was written, and at the degree in which his own papers were used. Again, he was worried about what it would mean for his ability to work in Nanjing: "[The book] may heighten attention in the west, both to this particular situation and to the savagery of the whole military game," he wrote, "but this may be the end of

deeply set life-work for [George] Fitch, for me, perhaps for [Lewis] Smythe and others... and... [is likely to lead to] serious exclusions or restrictions upon Christian work in whole areas."²⁸

Even so, Bates and the other leaders of the Relief Committee "decided to approve going ahead" with Timperley's work: Bates hoped that "this work in a hurry may result in greater control during later phases of this struggle." And so, he agreed to risk having his work in Nanjing end, "balancing probable good against possible or probable evils."²⁹ Timperley returned to London in April and published the book, *What War Means*, in July, fully incorporating Bates' suggestions. Its subtitle, *the Japanese Terror in China*, was suggested in the last letter by Bates. The book immediately caused a sensation in the West, although even today Japanese still try to undermine its credibility by to emphasizing Timperley's connections with the Chinese Nationalist Party and portraying it as propaganda.³⁰

Despite his fears, Bates' career in Nanjing did not end with the publication of the book. He remained on the Nanking International Relief Committee, and served as its chairman for two years. He was also appointed as Vice President of the University of Nanking.³¹ Before he left the city in 1941 to reunite with his family, his colleagues at the Committee wrote him a collective letter, thanking him for his service, and expressing their hope that they would see him again with his family in the city soon: "The people of this city during these

last four years have had no truer friend, nor one who has served them more faithfully or loyally.”³²

“HOW TO RECONCILE”

In 1941, the year that Bates returned to the US, the Cao family was slowly reconstructing some semblance of normal life. Hui-ying’s mother had given birth to another baby. Her grandmother, they discovered, had not been killed in the looting after all. She had dug a small bomb shelter and somehow managed to survive when the house was burned down. Hui-ying father started working for an industrialist named, Gao Jing-yue, serving as manager of a silk factory in the city of Wuxi. Even so, Hui-ying was not able to go to school. Gao’s third son, who was then a tuberculosis specialist in the United States, offered to take her abroad and sponsor her education, but her mother turned down the offer since her labor was needed to help take care of the growing family.

Eventually, though, after the war with Japan finally ended, Hui-ying went to elementary school—at age 12. She finished her education, settled down in the city of Wuxi, and became a math teacher. She got married and had three daughters, one of whom went to Nanjing for college and built her family there. She gave birth to a child who eventually left Nanjing and went to study at Bates’ alma mater, Yale. It is that child who is now writing this paper, trying to catch a glimpse of what he saw and experienced all those decades ago in her home city.

Yes, Cao Hui-ying is my grandmother, and her story of survival was recorded through an oral history interview I conducted with her a couple years ago. The recording sat untouched in my files until a pandemic swept across the world and prevented me from accessing any library sources except for the ones online. I then happened to accidentally come across the digitized letters of Bates and realized the connection to my own family history. My grandmother and members of her family were among the “millions of people” Bates referred to in his letter to Timperley, whose normal lives were disrupted, whose economic and social situations were profoundly impacted, despite having been neither shot nor raped. My grandmother is now 85 and still hates the Japanese, saying she would never forgive them. She has never imposed this emotion on any of her descendants. But as someone who studies the “prettier” aspects of Japan – its poetry, art and, in many ways, remarkable history – I often struggle to reconcile the side of Japan I have learned about and the side lurking in the deep memories of my family.

I found something in Bates’ writings that parallels my own struggle. He, too, was a “friend of Japan,” who studied its culture and interacted with its people. At the end of the letter to McKim, he wrote, “I have visited Japan a number of times... it is a beautiful country and I thought the people charming. How to reconcile the Japan that I have seen and the savagery that I have seen here is a problem that I have not solved yet.”³³ We don’t know if Bates ever found a solution to this problem; for

me personally, and perhaps for many younger Japanese people, too, it remains elusive.

It is also important, especially in the modern context, to address Bates's racial identity and how it adds another layer of complexity onto his story. Having a white person be the narrator of atrocities conducted against the Chinese inevitably add colonial implications to the storytelling, and limitations posed by international power dynamics at the time make sources on Bates much more available than sources on local victims like the Cao family. I personally had been lucky to have surviving witnesses of such war crimes in my own family, but most modern readers' only primary sources on the Nanking Massacre come from foreigners in China like Bates. But on the other hand, Bates himself had been aware of his identity and its implications: he was aware that by being an American, he had the privilege to circumvent the strict censorship on outgoing information Japan imposed upon China and, as part of the international community, document what he had seen as much as his identity allowed. While "colonial implications" undeniably exist, it is also doubtless that Bates' American identity has allowed modern readers to access, study and reflect upon the memories of an incident otherwise buried in history.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ All Chinese and Japanese names in this paper are spelled using the way they are spoken in the original languages (family name followed by given name). All materials regarding the Cao family are taken from an oral history recording of the Cao sisters, currently living in Wuxi, China, interviewed by Isabella Yang on August 7, 2018.
- ² Askew, David. "The international committee for the Nanking safety zone: An introduction." *Sino-Japanese Studies* 14, no. 4 (2002), 4.
- ³ "Miner Searle Bates." Miner Searle Bates | Yale University Library. Accessed May 6, 2020. <https://web.library.yale.edu/divinity/nanking/bates>.
- ⁴ Miner Bates to Lilliath Bates, December 24, 1937, RG 10: Box 1 Folder 7: "Bates/wife and sons 1937 Nov-Dec," Yale Divinity Library.
- ⁵ Zhang, Kaiyuan, ed. *Eyewitnesses to Massacre: American Missionaries Bear Witness to Japanese Atrocities in Nanjing* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 110-154; 252-298.
- ⁶ Chang, Iris. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). Sabella, Robert, Li, Feifei, and Liu, David. *Nanking 1937: Memory and Healing* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002). Accessed July 24, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- ⁷ Miner Bates to Fukuda Tokuyasu, December 21, 1937, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 59: "Japanese Embassy, Nanking 1937-1939, Japanese Embassy, Shanghai 1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Miner Bates to J.C. McKim, April 2, 1938, pg. 1, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 62: "M," Yale Divinity Library.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Miner Bates to J.C. McKim, April 2, 1938, pg. 2, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 62: "M," Yale Divinity Library.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ "Miner Searle Bates." Miner Searle Bates | Yale University Library. Accessed May 6, 2020. <https://web.library.yale.edu/divinity/nanking/bates>.
- ¹⁹ Miner Bates to J.C. McKim, April 2, 1938, pg. 3, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 62: "M," Yale Divinity Library.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ H.J. Timperley to Miner Bates, January 29, 1938, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 65: "Timperley, H. J. 1936-1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ²² H.J. Timperley to Miner Bates, February 17, 1938, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 65: "Timperley, H. J. 1936-1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ²³ H.J. Timperley to Miner Bates, January 29, 1938, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 65: "Timperley, H. J. 1936-1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ²⁴ H.J. Timperley to Miner Bates, February 4, 1938, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 65: "Timperley, H. J. 1936-1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ²⁵ Miner Bates to H.J. Timperley, March 3, 1938, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 65: "Timperley, H. J. 1936-1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ²⁶ Miner Bates to H.J. Timperley, March 14, 1938, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 65: "Timperley, H. J. 1936-1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Miner Bates to H.J. Timperley, March 21, 1938, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 65: "Timperley, H. J. 1936-1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ²⁹ Miner Bates to H.J. Timperley, March 21, 1938, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 65: "Timperley, H. J. 1936-1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ³⁰ Kitamura, Minoru. *The Politics of Nanjing: An Impartial Investigation* (University Press of America, 2007), 20.
- ³¹ C.A. Evans to Miner Bates, April 2, 1938, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 63: "Nanking International Relief Committee 1941; Nanking, University of; Board of Founders 1937-1938"; National Christian Council, Shanghai 1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ³² Forster, Kearney and Mills to Miner Bates, May 1, 1941, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 63: "Nanking International Relief Committee 1941; Nanking, University of; Board of Founders 1937-1938"; National Christian Council, Shanghai 1938," Yale Divinity Library.
- ³³ Miner Bates to J.C. McKim, April 2, 1938, pg. 3, RG 10: Box 4 Folder 62: "M," Yale Divinity Library.