

Media Mirroring, International Perception, and the Struggle for Historical Memory: How Media Coverage of the Nanjing Massacre Deeply Shaped International Relations

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Abstract

The media dissemination of the Nanjing Massacre constitutes a seminal case in the study of international relations. Third-party media, through images and text, broke through information blockades, laying the foundation for global recognition of the atrocities; by contrast, perpetrator-state media employed narrative manipulation to delay historical reckoning and deepen cognitive rifts between nations. Drawing on original archives and empirical materials from the Memorial Hall of the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre, this paper examines—through the three dimensions of fact construction, public opinion mobilization, and rule evolution—the “evidence chain–narrative framing–rule transformation” mechanism. It reveals how the media reshape national images, consolidate international consensus, reconstruct postwar order, and act as structural variables influencing Sino-Japanese relations and East Asian security cooperation. The study finds that the power of media in international relations hinges on balancing evidentiary authenticity and narrative ethics: when images and texts form a rigid mutual corroboration, they can drive the evolution of international humanitarian norms; conversely, they exacerbate cognitive fragmentation. Establishing a transnational mechanism for verifying historical authenticity is a critical pathway for addressing the challenges of “memory politics” and safeguarding stability in international relations in the digital era.

Keywords

International Relations; Media Mirroring; media dissemination

1. Cognitive Construction: Media as the Factual Framework of International Relations

1.1. Transnational Evidence Chain Dissemination Through Third-Party Witnesses: The Truth-Carrying Medium Breaking Through Information Barriers

The core exhibits at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall reveal the critical role of media as an intermediary in historical cognition. The only existing dynamic visual evidence—the 16mm silent film by Reverend John Magee (museum collection version: 37-minute “inch-disk” film, catalog number JM2024-001)—documents over 40 instances of Japanese military atrocities, including mass executions, the suffering of women, and hospital trauma scenes. These images were smuggled into Shanghai in 1938 by George Fitch, a member of the International Safety Zone Committee, sewn into the lining of his coat (Museum archive document 1). After being duplicated by Kodak, ten frames of the footage were published in *Life* magazine (May 16, 1938) under the title “A Week in Hell in Nanjing,” marking the first time the atrocities were visually presented to the Western public. These images complemented the eyewitness reports by New York Times journalist Frank Ddin (New York Times microfilm archive, December 18, 1937 edition) and the original manuscript of the Rabe Diary (original document number: LB2024-002), which documented scenes such as “every 100-200 meters encountering corpses” and “Japanese troops looting boxes of goods “ from the ” Rabe Diary” (original number: LB2024-002), these sources form a robust chain of evidence that transcends a single source.

Such dissemination directly influenced the decision-making of neutral countries. German diplomat George Rosen in China emphasized the “irrefutable nature” of the Magie footage in his “February 10, 1938, report to the Foreign Ministry (No. 2722/1113/38, Berlin-Potsdam Archives Collection, Memorial Archives Document 2),” recommending the replication of the film as diplomatic reference material, which prompted Germany to suspend arms sales negotiations with China. Although strategic constraints prevented public condemnation, the implicit constraints of media evidence on state behavior were evident—fact construction became the cognitive starting point for power struggles in international relations.

1.2. Narrative Obfuscation and Cognitive Confusion by the Perpetrators: Political Manipulation of Media Framing

Japan's mainstream media employs narrative strategies such as semantic substitution and victim grafting to reconstruct facts and disrupt international perception. Documents from the “Historical Revisionism” special exhibition at the memorial (such as clippings from *The Sankei Shimbun* and *The Yomiuri Shimbun*) reveal: *The Sankei Shimbun* (2015) cited the so-called “testimony of former airman Harada Yo” claiming “peace in Nanjing,” yet avoided physical evidence such as the Ma Ji footage and the Rabe diary; *The Yomiuri Shimbun* (2014) characterized the “300,000 casualty figure” as “China's unilateral claim” and frequently linked it to the “Hiroshima atomic bombing” to construct a narrative of “Japanese victims.” A comparative study of memorial archives (Liu Jiawen, 2024) confirmed that over a decade, the *Sankei Shimbun* and others used “Nanjing Incident” instead of “Nanjing Massacre” 256 times, always adding the label “controversial”

when mentioning the number[1]. This framing shift blurs the nature of the atrocities, weakens international moral condemnation, and delays the process of international intervention.

Systematic concealment in textbook compilation and public communication is even more destructive. The “Comparison Chart of Japanese Textbook Alterations in Memorial Archives (2005-2017 Editions)” shows that terms like “massacre of civilians” is changed to “the event is controversial,” and terms like “invasion” are replaced with “entry,” directly challenging the Far East International Military Tribunal (Tokyo Trial) ruling that “over 200,000 civilians were massacred within six weeks” (copy of the Tokyo Trial judgment, museum archive materials 2). When the Asahi Shimbun (2020) stated that “the Japanese side estimates the upper limit at 200,000,” it deliberately detached itself from international consensus, creating a cognitive trap and exacerbating historical tensions between China and Japan.

2. Public Opinion Mobilization: Media as a Pressure Transmission Mechanism in International Relations

2.1. The Formation of a Transnational Public Opinion Arena and Diplomatic Decision-Making Responses

The “viral spread” of the *Magi* film and safety zone documents spurred international collective action. After Fitch toured churches in the United States with the film in 1938, a mass protest rally erupted in Chicago, prompting the U.S. Congress to launch an “inquiry into Japanese atrocities” (as recorded in the oral history archives of the memorial). British journalist T. H. White's book **Japanese Atrocities in China** (published in New York in 1938), based on *Magi*'s footage and safety zone archives, was translated into over 20 languages and became a basis for parliamentary debates in multiple countries. Indian scholar Krishan Karthik noted in the foreword to the Hindi edition of **The History of the Nanjing Massacre**: “Silence in the face of atrocities is complicity” (Memorial Archives Document 2), illustrating how media can transcend cultural boundaries to forge moral consensus.

This public pressure was channeled through diplomatic channels into policy responses. In March 1938, a U.S. State Department memorandum cited media reports, instructing the U.S. Embassy in China to “investigate the humanitarian situation in Nanjing”; the British **Manchester Guardian** continued to expose the atrocities, driving the League of Nations to discuss a resolution for sanctions against Japan[2]. Although no substantive sanctions were imposed during the war, the atrocities escalated from a regional issue to an “international humanitarian problem,” laying the groundwork for the legitimacy of public opinion for the 1946 Tokyo Trials and post-war legislation on crimes against humanity (such as the 1949 addition of provisions prohibiting the massacre of civilians in the Geneva Conventions).

2.2. Cognitive Divide in Bilateral Relations and Media Backlash

The politicization of Japanese media reporting has exacerbated cognitive divisions and hindered bilateral exchanges. A Comparative Study of Media Coverage of Memorial Sites (Liu Jiawen, 2024) “shows: The Yomiuri Shimbun characterized China's National Memorial Ceremony as” historical pressure, “ while the Sankei Shimbun used terms like” anti-Japanese propaganda “ 45 times in its coverage of the ceremony. This led to only 19% of Japanese respondents in a 2022 China-Japan public opinion survey acknowledging that ” the massacre was an organized atrocity” (compared to 67% of respondents from Europe and the United States)[3] . This cognitive echo chamber directly impacts diplomatic practice—in 2017, the Sankei Shimbun was excluded from the memorial ceremony’s media list for persistently denying historical facts, prompting it to publish seven articles accusing the exclusion of “suppressing freedom of speech,” leading to an eight-month suspension of media exchanges between China and Japan (as documented in the memorial hall's diplomatic archives), thereby illustrating the corrosive effect of biased narratives on bilateral relations.

3. Evolution of Rules: Media as a Legitimizing Force in International Relations

3.1. The Postwar Trials and the Effectiveness of Media Evidence in the Construction of International Law

The Magi film became a key piece of evidence in the judicial process, promoting the establishment of international humanitarian rules. In the Tokyo Trials (1946-1948), the film “Piles of Corpses Outside the Zhonghua Gate” Jinling University Hospital Trauma” and the body burial records in the Rabe Diary (original document number LB2024-002) and the Weitlin Diary (English original manuscript archive WTL2024-003) formed a chain of evidence, leading the court to determine that the total number of victims exceeded 300,000. The judgment specifically emphasized that Magee's footage was “a milestone in establishing the standards for applying crimes against humanity” and became the legal basis for the post-war Geneva Convention's prohibition of the massacre of civilians (Chen Xiao, 2025)[4].

Media evidence also continued to play a role in civil justice. The scars of survivor Xia Shuqin (who survived 37 stab wounds at the age of 7) were documented by Ma Ji (video clip: JM2024-001, Film No. 4, Segment 1) and used by Japanese journalist Kado Hideaki in the documentary “Verifying the Nanjing Massacre” (broadcast by NHK) in 1991, sparking a wave of apologies from over 10,000 Japanese citizens (oral history materials from the memorial hall). The truthful imagery transcends national borders, serving as a bridge between individual justice and collective memory[5].

3.2. Media Ethics Controversies and Rule Challenges in Memory Politics

Japan's historical revisionist practices in the media continue to undermine interna-

tional consensus and challenge the rules of memory governance. Documents from the memorial hall's special exhibition reveal that the textbook's downplaying of the “Nanjing Massacre” and distortion of the number of victims were criticized by UNESCO as “violating the principle of historical accuracy” (Memorial Hall Archive Materials 2); The government has rejected international oversight of historical education on the grounds of “interference in internal affairs,” continuing the wartime Ministry of Foreign Affairs' narrative strategy of “convincing the U.S. media that atrocities were part of suppressing rebellion” (1938 Ministry of Foreign Affairs telegram archives)[6]. This systematic obfuscation not only constitutes a secondary harm to the victims but also undermines the spirit of historical justice advocated by the United Nations Charter, becoming a cognitive barrier to security cooperation in Northeast Asia. In contrast, Germany's “Stumbling Stones” memorial bricks (engraved with the names of Nazi victims) and textbooks dedicating one-third of their content to detailing the massacre exemplify reflective practices (Memorial Museum comparison case), highlighting the central role of media ethics in the recognition of international norms[7].

4. Mediatized Truth and the Reconstruction of International Relations: Insights from the Digital Age

The media practice of the Nanjing Massacre reveals its duality in international relations:

Constructive dimension: When third-party evidence (such as Maji film and Rabe's diary) is rigidly disseminated through cross-border media, it can break through information hegemony, build international humanitarian consensus, and promote the evolution of war crime trials and rules.

Destructive dimension: The perpetrators' narrative manipulation (frame shifting, memory cleansing) creates cognitive opposition, delays historical reckoning, and exacerbates security dilemmas.

The core logic lies in the fact that media influence depends on the balance between the authenticity of evidence and the ethics of narrative—authentic evidence (mutually corroborating images and text) forms the foundation of cognitive legitimacy, while ethical narrative (avoiding political distortion) maintains the bonds of trust in international relations[8]. In the digital age, fragmented dissemination and algorithmic echo chambers exacerbate the complexity of memory politics, necessitating the establishment of transnational collaborative mechanisms:

1. Historical Authenticity Verification Platform: Integrate multilingual archives from memorials (such as the VR reconstruction of the Maji Film and the multilingual database of The Rabe Diary) to build an open academic resource repository to counter false information (the Spanish “World Memory and Peace Vision” exhibition and the Hungarian touring exhibition, which generated over 600 international reports, serve as practical examples, along with memorials' international communication

archives);

2. Media Ethics Convention: Promote international organizations (such as UNESCO and the International Federation of Journalists) to establish guidelines for reporting on wartime/conflict memories, prohibiting the glorification of atrocities and the tampering of evidence;

3. Cross-cultural memory education: Through joint exhibitions (such as the China-France documentary collaboration “Nanjing: Memory and Forgetting”) and textbook mutual review mechanisms, incorporate the Nanjing Massacre into the global narrative of World War II memory to prevent the Balkanization of historical understanding.

As the inscription at the memorial states: “Truth is the best monument” —when the world confronts the scars of Nanjing through the lens of the media, the dissemination of truth is not only a consolation for the 300,000 souls who perished but also a defense of the common values that underpin humanity[9-10]. In the age of media-driven existence, only by anchoring ourselves in evidence and guiding ourselves by ethics can the media become a messenger of peace across borders, rather than a tool of power that divides perceptions.

Conclusion: A New Landscape of International Relations Under the Media Prism

The historical memory struggle surrounding the Nanjing Massacre profoundly demonstrates that the media has become deeply embedded in the core of international relations, serving as a sculpting tool for national image, a catalyst for international consensus, and a shaper of rules and order. Transnational dissemination of third-party testimonies (such as the Magee footage) reveals that when evidence of atrocities breaks through geographical and political barriers, the truth can resonate morally across the international community, driving diplomatic decisions and humanitarian interventions. Meanwhile, the systematic narrative manipulation by perpetrators serves as a warning: if media becomes a political tool, it will erode the foundation of trust through cognitive pollution and hinder the reconciliation process.

The ultimate lesson of this case lies in the fact that in today's deeply interconnected globalized world, any nation attempting to conceal historical atrocities with lies will ultimately collapse before the web of truth woven by the media—John Magee's trembling camera, John Rabe's angry, hastily written notes, and Xia Shuqin's silent accusations through her scars, these artifacts spanning time and space form a collective defense of human conscience. Only by learning from history and establishing a transnational media governance framework rooted in authenticity and ethics can we avoid the recurrence of tragedy in the age of media, ensuring that international relations truly serve the coexistence and evolution of peace and civilization.

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