

Gereon Kopf, Luther College, and Yuki Miyamoto, DePaul University



Gereon Kopf received his PhD from Temple University and is currently associate professor of Asian and comparative religion at Luther College. As a research fellow of the Japan Foundation and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Research, he conducted research in 1993 and 1994 at Ōbirin University in Machida, Japan, and at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya, Japan, from 2002 to 2004. As a visiting associate professor, he taught at the Centre of Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong in the academic year 2008–2009. He serves as the co-Chair of the International Society of Buddhist Philosophy, as the liaison between the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, and as the review editor in the area of Japanese Buddhism for H-Buddhism. He is the author of Beyond Personal Identity

(Routledge Curzon, 2001) and the coeditor of Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism

(Lexington Books, 2009). In addition, he has published numerous articles on the religious philosophies of Dōgen Zenji and Nishida Kitarō. His current research focuses on the philosophy of the Kyoto School and the construction of postmodern Zen Buddhist ethics.



Since earning her PhD from the University of Chicago Divinity School, Yuki Miyamoto has held the position of assistant professor in the department of religious studies at DePaul University. Miyamoto's primary area of research is atomic bomb discourse. Her book manuscript, Beyond the Mushroom Cloud: Remembering, Reconciliation, and Responsibility in Atomic Bomb Discourse

, explores the ethical dimensions of religious interpretations of the bombings, particularly

Buddhist and Roman Catholic perspectives. In addition to articles on this topic, such as “Rebirth in the Pure Land or God’s Sacrificial Lambs?” and “Sacred Pariahs: Hagiographies of Alterity, Sexuality, and Salvation in Atomic Bomb Literature,” Miyamoto has written on ethics and war memory in “Fire and Femininity: Fox Imagery and the Ethical Imagination” (Imagination without Borders: Feminist Artists and Social Responsibility, University of Michigan Press, Forthcoming, 2010). Her current research focuses on the ethics of commemoration and communion with the dead, with studies of artistic expressions (the Noh play) as well as commemorative narratives in various museums and memorial halls.

I. Introduction

Last year, the AAR awarded Gereon Kopf (Luther College) and Yuki Miyamoto (DePaul University) a collaborative research grant to work on their project “Ethics of Memory and Politics of Commemoration: The Case of the Nanjing Massacre.” Each scholar visited the Massacre Memorial Hall and provided two diverse analyses on their project topic. Miyamoto applied a comparative approach discussing the ritualization of memory in the cases of the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, and the Hiroshima Peace Museum, while Kopf analyzed responses to the Nanjing massacre in order to identify four types of memory and the ideologies they reflect.

II. Yuki Miyamoto: "The Ethics of Commemoration: Politics and Religion in the Nanjing Massacre Narrative"

In December 2008, thanks to a generous grant from the American Academy of Religion, I was able to visit the “Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders,” located in Nanjing, China. My interests in this memorial site are twofold: First, one of my primary areas of research, atomic bomb commemoration, has led me to investigate commemorations of other war-time mass deaths. The Nanjing Massacre is particularly important in this connection, as it has often been invoked to diminish the destruction of the atomic bombing in Japan — the Japanese cannot justify claims to victimhood in light of their perpetration of the Nanjing Massacre as well as other war-time atrocities (To take a recent example, when Hiroshima and Nagasaki announced their joint bid to host the 2020 Olympic Games, a [Business Week](#) reader commented online, “If they want to promote peace, they should hold the games in Nanjing.”. As my research on atomic bomb discourse in Hiroshima and Nagasaki progressed, I realized that without visiting Nanjing, my study of the atomic bombing would remain incomplete.

Second, my research suggested that rites of commemoration contain fundamentally “religious” elements, even when they are hosted by secular institutions, whether municipal or national. This led me to consider the nature of commemoration in Communist China. Commemoration, I believe, enacts communication with the dead, the ultimate “Other,” and in this sense is religious in nature.

The notion of the “Other” has formed one basis of ethical thought of prominent philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas and Edith Wyschogrod, but has been vigorously criticized by contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou (*Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Translated by Peter Hallward. Norton, W. W. & Company, Inc., 2002: 52.). He also complains “ethics of memory” as “unbearable” and “journalistic.” According to Badiou, the unbridgeable gap between the self and “Other” as formulated by Levinas is modeled after the relationship between the Creator and creature in the monotheistic tradition, where “God” names the insurmountable difference and distance between self and “Other.” Badiou denounces such ethical systems as betraying a “philosophy

annulled

by theology.” (

Ethics

: 23) Reading Badiou against the grain, however, suggests that efforts to communicate with the dead may remain inexplicable within the discipline of philosophy, but could be made intelligible through developing a religious account of commemoration.

This religious hypothesis regarding commemoration found support in my observations at the Nanjing Memorial Hall, as well as the Japanese national institution of Hiroshima National Peace Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims. Both memorial sites attempt to allow for “open” interpretations of the materials they present, rather than imposing the nationalistic narratives widely disseminated in popular discourse and pervasive in academic studies. They avoid the nationalistic discourse by claiming that tragedies should be a part of human, rather than merely national, memory. Hiroshima Memorial Hall contains a plaque implicating the Japanese government’s “wrong decisions” in inciting the dropping of the bombs, while the Nanjing Memorial Hall places responsibility for the massacre at the feet of Japanese fascists and their policies rather than imputing guilt to Japan as a whole. Undercutting the popular belief that this memorial is hostile to the Japanese, the Hall in Nanjing contains a section dedicated to honoring Japanese citizens who “came out” about the massacre and who convey their experiences of this event to the general population of Japan. Discovering this fact was one of the most beneficial aspects of my visit the Nanjing Memorial Hall. Having witnessed the discrepancy between the actual narrative in the Nanjing Memorial Hall and the narratives constructed outside the commemorative site enabled me to discern unlikely connections between Nanjing and Hiroshima.

With all that said, it is undeniable that the incident of the Nanjing massacre has been incorporated into China’s nationalistic discourse, seeking to enflame hostility against Japan, while also unifying the people of China. But it is equally undeniable that the narrative one finds in the Nanjing Memorial Hall attempts to move beyond the prevailing national framework. Thanks to their efforts to eschew the nationalist discourse, both the Hiroshima and Nanjing Memorial Halls open rather than foreclose interpretations of, and communications with, the

dead.

These similarities between Nanjing and Hiroshima, meanwhile, stand in remarkable contrast to the commemoration at the Yasukuni Shinto shrine in Tokyo. Unlike the Hiroshima and Nanjing Memorial Halls, the Yasukuni Shinto shrine is a religious institution that since 1868 has enshrined war dead, and in so doing has imposed upon the dead a nationalistic interpretation glorifying their “self-sacrifice.” The museum affiliated with the shrine is infused with a narrative that frames “death at war” as a glorification of the nation. This ostensibly religious institution is thus far more nationalistic in its ethos than its counterparts in Hiroshima and Nanjing, and less “religious” in how it facilitates communication with the dead.

In sum, visiting the Nanjing Memorial Hall enabled me not only to discover firsthand the actual commemorative narrative presented there, but also to deepen my understanding of the ethical stakes of commemoration in relation to religious sensibilities.

III. Gereon Kopf: "Humanistic Discourses and Nationalistic Ideology: Between Ethics of Memory and Politics of Commemoration"

When I started my year of teaching Japanese Buddhism in Hong Kong and Shanghai in the Fall of 2008, I knew going in that I would want to familiarize myself further with the history of Sino-Japanese relations. As a German who lives in the United States, as a representative of the mainstream culture in the United States who lives in an area where the names indicate but not commemorate the history of Native Americans, and as a representative of an American institution who regularly takes students to Japan, including Hiroshima, I am aware of how history and collective memory affects cross-cultural communication and learning. Thus, I find it important to visit the sites that embody the collective memory and “national shame” of the countries in which I visit and in which I live. It is for these reasons that I welcomed the opportunity to visit Nanjing.

When I went to Nanjing for the first time in February of 2009, I visited the Massacre Memorial Hall, the John Rabe House, and one of the sites where the massacre occurred. I also had the fortune to be introduced to Li Xue, who showed me the city, and to Zhang Liwei from Nanjing University, who suggested that I return on March 30, 2009, to meet with a representative of the Nanjing Massacre Research Institute. I was haunted by the sites, images, and reports of the massacre and, at the same time, inspired by the conversations I had with my hosts in Nanjing, and also with my students and colleagues in Hong Kong and Shanghai. I began to examine books and audiovisual materials about the massacre, high school textbooks and graphic novels

about the Sino-Japanese war in both Chinese and Japanese, theoretical discussions of the significance of the Nanjing massacre and its memory, and eyewitness reports of the outrageous and unspeakable atrocities that occurred in the winter of 1937–1938. I was shocked but not necessarily surprised to see how this human tragedy has been appropriated for ideological purposes and I struggled to find a heuristic device to reveal, understand, and do justice to the standpoint, agenda, and experience of the various authors I was reading. I am grateful to my colleagues and friends who shared their valuable insight and reflections about the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and those who were victimized as “comfort women” during WWII to help me gain a wider perspective.

When I visited the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, I was struck by a poster that identified the purpose of the Memorial Hall as simultaneously fostering “patriotic education” (愛國教育) and promoting “world peace” (世界和平). A more thorough investigation of the literature and audiovisual material remembering the Nanjing massacre revealed four basic types of narratives: nationalistic narratives that construe the massacre to be a “crime against one nation;” moralistic narratives that interpret the massacre to constitute a “crime against the moral law or, at least, a sense of morality;” individualized narratives that focus on the experience of one person in the form of a “human interest story;” and humanistic discourses that realize that “crimes against humanity” are always crimes against individuals, communities, and against human morality. This typology, then, renders four modalities of remembering the Nanjing massacre or any injustice experienced by a community and evoked by a collective memory. First there is the politics of commemoration, by means of which a community, be it a nation, an ethnic community, or a religious group, ritualizes its collective memory and celebrates a communal identity in order to engender a sense of belonging. A moralistic universalism, on the other hand, utilizes memorial sites as an educational moment and its history as a lesson to learn about the universality of the human condition and the inalienable nature of human rights. A personalistic approach focuses on witness accounts that empower the individual and give voice to those silenced by history. Finally, humanism emphasizes exactly this complexity and advocates an ethics of understanding insofar as it proposes that it is exactly such an ethics of memory that leads to personal transformation and to the implementation of social justice.

In my writing, I utilize the terminology developed by the Japanese philosopher Mutai Risaku to delineate such as an ethics of memory as it has been suggested and developed, albeit in different ways, by Avishai Margalit, Sueki Fumihiko, and Pamela Sue Anderson from the politics of commemoration, but also from moralism and personalism. Such an ethics proposes that memory in its personal, collective, and universal forms is pivotal to engender transformation, personal and social, and to understand the conditions of tragedies. The goal of this memory is to avoid the repetition of such tragedies in the future since, as the anonymous figure in Max Frisch’s *Nun Singen sie Wieder* (*They are Singing Again*) observes, “if no one remembers what war is like, the next war will commence.”

I presented the preliminary results as “Humanistic Discourses and Nationalistic Ideology: Distinguishing between Ethics of Memory and Politics of Commemoration” at the Saturday afternoon session of the Religion, Memory, and History Consultation at last year’s annual meeting of the AAR in Montréal. The final product will constitute a chapter in a volume that I am currently working on in which certain concepts that were framed within the Zen Buddhist tradition can help us refine our approach to ethics.

I am deeply grateful to the AAR as well as for my hosts in Nanjing and Yuki Miyamoto for making this research possible. It has been invaluable for my current work on Mutai’s humanism, of which my paper on the ethics of memory will be an integral part of, and also for my understanding of Sino-Japanese relations, which was of the utmost importance for me while I was teaching Japanese Buddhism in Hong Kong last year.