

FEATURE



A Profile in Courage and Dedication

In 1988, after reading several books written by journalists and professors investigating the history of the Nanking Massacre, Tamaki Matsuoka realized that there were drastically contradictory assertions about what actually happened in Nanking.

By Don To

One of the most horrific atrocities committed in human history was the Nanking Massacre. During a six-week period beginning on December 13, 1937 in Nanking, the then capital of China, the Japanese Imperial Army slaughtered approximately 300,000 Chinese (most were civilians, including women and children) and raped approximately 20,000 women and girls (including great grandmothers and young girls less than 10 years old).

Seventy five years have elapsed since that time, yet the Japanese government still has not officially acknowledged and apologized for this atrocious atrocity, with senior government

leaders frequently making comments that the Nanking Massacre never occurred, they were fabricated by the Chinese, and what happened was just natural consequences of war. Since the early 1980s, they have revised their textbooks so that new generations of Japanese do not know the truth about this part of history. Tamaki Matsuoka, a Japanese school teacher, also wanted to find out the truth about the Nanking Massacre, and she has spent 24 years of her life to that mission. This article reports on her courage and dedication in that mission.

Tamaki Matsuoka was born in 1947 in Osaka, Japan. She studied history and became an elementary school teacher in 1982. In 1988 after

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reading several books written by journalists and professors investigating the history of the Nanking Massacre and also a large number of books and popular magazines trivializing or denying the massacre, she realized that there were drastically contradictory assertions about what actually happened in Nanking in 1937-1938. It was then that she decided that she will start her own investigation of that part of history. Little did she know that that decision has led her to a

journey of 24 years that has completely changed her life and is beginning to change the Japanese people's and the rest of the world's knowledge of that part of history.

She started her own investigation by making her first visit to Nanking in 1988 to listen in person to the recounts of the war victims. The descriptions she obtained from the surviving victims during the visit were overwhelmingly gruesome. By contrast in Japan, nothing whatsoever was heard from the nearly two hundred thousand ex-soldiers who were supposedly involved in this event. So was the government trying to evade the unspeakable guilt, and the potential backlash from the then political atmosphere would be too harsh on any ex-soldier to tell the truth about his own experience? So she visited Nanking again and again several times a year to collect additional testimonies from the war victims.

Tamaki knew that to have a convincing argument in Japan, she also needed the Japanese ex-soldiers' testimonies. Therefore, in October 1997 she set up the "Nanking Information Hotline" for three days in six Japanese cities (Tokyo, Kanazawa, Nagoya, Osaka, Hiroshima, and Kumanoto). Thanks to the coverage in



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newspapers and TV about her grass-root initiative, she received a total of 130 calls, 13 of which were from ex-soldiers. Based on the information collected, she started to track down more and more ex-soldiers. When she first visited each of them, in the beginning they all stayed silent regarding the Nanking Massacre. So she put Nanking aside and chatted about the hardships during the war. Gradually, almost half of them started to talk about Nanking. Over the years, she and her small team of volunteers interviewed

more than 250 ex-soldiers. Some of the ex-soldiers told them that they had machine-gunned several thousand Chinese who were rounded up at the bank of the Yangtze River. Others told them that they had set fire to the warehouses filled with captured residents of Nanking. Still others told them that they seized women and raped them.

With time and repeated interactions, she gained the trust of the ex-soldiers and their families. They entrusted her with their diaries as well as albums of the war history published by associations of the war comrades from that time. They also gave her war records by newspaper correspondents, copies of battle reports, medals and certificates. These numerous verifiable sources serve as crucial circumstantial evidence of the Nanking Massacre.

During this period, she and her team also interviewed more than 300 Nanking Massacre survivors, and she traveled to Nanking more than 70 times (now more than 80 times at the time of writing this article). Each of the survivors appealed to her "Please tell the facts of the Nanking Massacre to the young people of Japan."

When Tamaki and her team compared notes of the testimonies of the ex-soldiers and the

survivors, they found incredible coincidences in the times, places, and what transpired during these atrocious acts, thus confirming the validity of the testimonies. For example, in the testimonies of mass slaughter in the Xiaguan district of Nanking at the bank of the Yangtze River, the location, time and situation from both the victims' and the assailants' accounts coincide almost perfectly.

In order to have permanent records of these testimonies and make them widely available, she wrote books. For example, in 2002, she published the book *The Battle of Nanking – Searching for Forbidden Memories*. The book created a great sensation in Japan, and in 2003, she was awarded the “Japan Congress of Journalists Prize” that is given to distinguished journalists. Tributes included comments such as “She has accomplished something no one ever could.” She and her team also made 58 visual panels showing information that they had collected, and held exhibitions at more than 40 locations across Japan.

To capture the precious experiences of these aging seniors, in a race against time she and her team video-recorded all the interviews, as several ex-soldiers and victims would die with each passing year, sometimes even before her team could reach them. Since seeing a video-recording of an interview is much more persuasive than reading a written transcript of an interview, Tamaki and her team decided to produce documentary films, in spite of the fact that they had no experience in making films and no major financial supporters. For example, in 2009, they produced the documentary film “Torn Memories of Nanjing,” which on March 28, 2010 was shown for the first time outside of Japan at the Hong Kong International Film Festival.

Recently, we in New Jersey, as well as several other cities in the U.S. and Canada, had the opportunity to see this most painful and meaningful documentary at the “75th Anniversary Commemoration of the Nanking Massacre” held at Brookdale Community

College in Lincroft, New Jersey. Seeing and hearing the words spoken from so many ex-soldiers about the atrocious crimes that they and the Japanese Imperial Army committed during that period in 1937-1938 leaves no doubt about the reality of the Nanking Massacre.

Unfortunately, the historic event of Nanking Massacre had degenerated into an ideological taboo in Japan. People in Japan who were trying to revise history started to slander Tamaki with condemning labels such as “traitor,” “spy for Chinese Communist Party,” “psychopath,” or “a liar who receives bribes.” Moreover, right-wingers have barged into the elementary school where she worked and into meetings involving Tamaki. They constantly attack Tamaki on the Internet. It took great courage and sacrifice to continue her work under such circumstances. Tamaki thought that seeking and publicizing the truth was of paramount importance and was worth more than any personal sacrifices she has to endure. To prevent her attackers from finding any fault with her research, Tamaki's investigation team has been very meticulous about the verification of historic details.

Similarly, whenever an ex-soldier or victim's recollection appears in the media, deniers would use their media and political clout to start a fierce attack. They conduct numerous campaigns to slander those who speak out as “fake soldiers,” or that “they are telling lies to receive attention.” These right-wingers are supported by powerful members of the Japanese Congress and House of Representatives. To the credit of the victims and especially the ex-soldiers, such personal attacks have not silenced them from speaking the truth.

It is Tamaki's hope that when the Japanese people become aware of her research and related research by others, more people will give more thoughts to the facts of Nanking, and the Japanese people and government would handle the Nanking Massacre in the same way as the Germans and German government handle the

Holocaust – a confession, a sincere apology, and a condemnation of those war criminals.

It is a tribute to Tamaki Matsuoka to have dedicated the past 24 years of her life to finding the truth about the Nanking Massacre, and then publicizing this truth to the Japanese people, as well as the people in the rest of the world. For many years until her retirement as a school teacher, she had a full-time teaching job and did this in the evenings and weekends. She has used her own savings to finance her project. She has been able to recruit and mobilize a small group of dedicated volunteers on her mission. In the face of frequent and vicious personal attacks, she has displayed great courage, dedication, and commitment to continue on her mission that has consumed 24 years of her life.

Tamaki Matsuoka: We salute you!

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