

Review: *Kioku toshitenō Nitchū Sensō: intabyū niyoru tasharikai no kanōsei*

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Yumi Ishii. *Kioku toshitenō Nitchū Sensō: intabyū niyoru tasharikai no kanōsei*. Tokyo: Kenbun Shuppan, 2013. 278 pages. ISBN: 978-4876363537

This is a brave book. Yumi Ishii, a young Japanese scholar, set out to study how people in China remember the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). As Ishii recounts in the introduction of her book, she chose this topic because of what she had experienced when studying in Beijing in 1998–1999. A few years after the fiftieth anniversary of the war’s end, Ishii encountered many young Chinese citizens asking her, in an accusing tone, what she had thought of the war. She was bewildered, and even pained, by strong emotions that they expressed toward her, as though they had directly suffered from the war. This experience made her want to understand why postwar generations in China remembered the war with such a strong sense of identification. To this end, she conducted multiple rounds of interviews with the total of 175 villagers in Shanxi Province, which had been caught on the frontline during the war. As a fellow Japanese citizen, I cannot but admire her courage to confront Japan’s past wrongdoing head-on.

In essence, this book is about the self-other relation, as indicated by its subtitle “the possibility of understanding the other through interview” (*intabyū niyoru tasharikai no kanōsei*). Ishii’s methodology for pursuing this possibility is both rigorous and multifaceted. Ishii first looks at *People’s Daily* articles between 1946 and 2003 and illustrates how the official narrative changed over time, shifting the emphasis from China’s triumph to victimhood. She also examines three grassroots movements—“complaint” (*sùkǔ*), “four histories” (*sìshǐ*), and “miserable past, happy present” (*yì kǔ sī tián*)—that shaped war memory in China. In so doing, Ishii sheds light on a disjunction between the official triumphant narrative in *People’s Daily* and the popular victim narrative in the grassroots movements. Given this macro context of Chinese commemorations of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Ishii proceeds to a micro-level analysis of how different generations of villagers in Shanxi Province remembered the war. Ishii does this by carefully examining various media of memory—dreams, movies, doggerels (*shùnkǒuliū*), and local history collections—and situating them within economic transformations that village communities went through. One of Ishii’s most illuminating findings is that doggerels have multiple layers of meaning and operate as a main vehicle for transmitting memories of Japanese atrocities as well as memories of socioeconomic inequalities, patriarchal customs, and Confucian traditions that existed in village communities. Ishii’s book thus uncovers the vastly complex reality of war memory in rural China.

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This is an important contribution without doubt, but it is also the only notable contribution that this book makes. To put it another way, the book speaks only to scholars in Chinese studies, offering very few insights for those studying collective memory in other parts of the world. This is because Ishii is a typical Japanese area-studies scholar who pursues empirical rigor, bordering on “empiricism,” with little theoretical engagement. For example, Ishii takes the concept of “emotional memory” (*kanjō kioku*) as a point of departure for her research. Emotional memory is a concept that the Chinese scholar Sun Ge introduced in her 2000 article that examined how Chinese citizens remembered the Nanjing Massacre. Ishii considers Sun’s concept “groundbreaking” because it illustrates how the emotional mode of remembering could not be fully understood from an “objective” historiographical perspective.

But memory being emotional and distinct from historiography is no news to scholars studying collective memory. Take, for example, sociological research on “difficult pasts” that emerged in the 1990s. This term refers to a traumatic event that stirs strong emotions, generating controversy over how to remember it. Examples of difficult pasts that sociologists examined include the Vietnam War and the atomic bombings for Americans and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin for Israelis. Since psychologists also took interest in collective memory during the “memory boom” in the early 1990s, they have emphasized that memory is intrinsically tied to emotion. Similarly, historians began debating the distinction between memory and historiography in response to the memory boom. Indeed, how memory and historiography interact with each other has been one of the central problems in collective memory studies for the last three decades.

Nevertheless, Ishii leaves out these relevant studies—to her own detriment. In particular, because Ishii takes for granted the distinction between memory and historiography, she fails to address the most important question that originally motivated her study, i.e. why many people in China, especially younger generations, talk about the Second Sino-Japanese War as if they had directly experienced it. As various scholars in education, political science, and sociology have shown, the majority of Chinese citizens learn Japan’s wartime atrocities predominantly through school textbooks that are presented as historiographically “objective.” Chinese mass media also disseminate emotional representations of Japan’s wartime atrocities within the purview of the government that defines the legitimate historiography of the war. Because younger generations in China believe that what they learned from school textbooks and mass media is historiographically “objective,” they are ready to denounce the Japanese government and citizens for refusing to acknowledge “objective facts.” Here, historiography is mobilized to reinforce strong emotions associated with war memory. And yet, Ishii is unable to probe this important interaction between historiography and memory because she takes Sun Ge’s

problematic formulation as a point of departure, uninformed about relevant literatures.

Ishii also fails to build on her reflexivity and thereby unpack “the possibility of understanding the other through interview.” In the postscript of her book, Ishii recounts her fieldwork experience and describes how she went through the process of deconstructing and reconstructing her self. At the beginning of her fieldwork, Ishii felt guilty because she was unable to identify with her interviewees and feel their pain, even though she wanted to. But after she finished interviewing about 100 people, she began to feel that she somehow understood what interviewees were saying. A new mode of understanding—different from identification with the other—somehow became possible after her self had changed. This is an extraordinary story of personal transformation with the potential to offer important insights for Sino-Chinese relations, especially the possibility of reconciliation over the so-called history problem (*rekishi ninshiki mondai*). Nevertheless, Ishii does not elaborate on her fieldwork experience to articulate how it might be possible for the Japanese self to understand the Chinese other through face-to-face dialogues. Instead, Ishii uses her reflexivity simply to increase the empirical rigor of her research: since she was aware that her Japanese identity could influence how interviewees would narrate their war memories, she decided to conduct multiple sessions with each of the interviewees and triangulate these observations to increase the quality of her data. Had she engaged with the reflexive turn in anthropology, however, she could have better mobilized her reflexivity to address larger sociopolitical issues between China and Japan, such as the history problem, and profound philosophical questions about the self-other relation. Once again, a lack of theoretical engagement prevents Ishii from examining important issues and questions.

In short, although this book offers incredibly rich empirical details of war memory in rural China, its theoretical and sociopolitical implications are underdeveloped. As a result, the book remains relevant only for scholars in Chinese studies. In fact, written in Japanese, the book may not be noticed even by China specialists, if they are not proficient in the language. The book thus risks perpetuating an unfortunate tendency in the humanities and social sciences, i.e. the absence of sustained dialogues among scholars who speak different “languages” in both disciplinary and linguistic senses. By not reading each other’s work, scholars who study the same topic but publish in different disciplines and languages often miss out on opportunities for synthesizing their research to gain new insights. In this regard, I feel fortunate to be able to introduce this brave book to the larger audience beyond Japanese-speaking China specialists. Hopefully, the book, as well as my review of it, will spur interdisciplinary conversations between Japanese and non-Japanese scholars who are broadly interested in collective memory and help them advance the research

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on how younger generations think and feel about the past that they never experienced directly.

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