

Was Japan wrong for raping and killing millions of Chinese civilians in the 1930s?

By Alan Trefzger, Renmin University, 人民大学, Week of May 13-17, 2015.

"Was Japan wrong for raping and killing millions of Chinese civilians in the 1930's?" I asked. Not one of my Chinese students would say "Yes!!!! Japan was wrong!!!!" The topic for debate in my American Culture class at Renmin University was, "Are some cultures superior to others?" and "Can one culture judge another culture as good or bad?" One student after another had said that no culture was better than any other and that it was wrong to judge another culture. That's when I asked the question.

I explained that the 1930's Japanese culture taught that the Japanese were at the pinnacle of evolution (the Nazis taught the same thing regarding themselves). Killing lesser humans, they thought, was actually helping the progress of evolution. Thankfully no one in power believes that today, but in the 1930's, it was a prevalent belief among many peoples, of course, each one putting itself at the top. When you view other people as less than human, then it becomes easy to murder. This attitude made it easy for Japanese soldiers to have contests on how many Chinese civilians they could kill with a sword. Everyone in my class felt deeply within themselves that the 'Rape of Nanjing' was wrong, but they couldn't say it. Then I said, "I am judging Japan's culture in the 1930's to be wrong. It was evil to murder and rape so many innocent civilians." Then I asked, "Am I the only one here who will defend China's honor?"

I had fun with the next example. After a male student said, "You can't judge another culture," I explained the Hindu Indian practice of Sati, where the widow would throw herself, voluntarily or forcibly, onto her deceased husband's funeral pyre. I asked the male student if this was wrong. He said he couldn't judge. Then I called out the name of one of the female students and said, "Summer, I just got a call from your parents!" She looked shocked. I then said, "A rich, old Hindu man from India has offered to give your parents 100,000,000RMB for you to marry him, and your parents said 'Yes'!!!! He is going to die next month and they are going to throw you on the funeral pyre and burn you up!!!! And your classmate here doesn't care!!!!" The whole class is laughing now. Then I said, "Girls, don't date or marry him," pointing to the guy who just said you can't judge.

Then one student said, "The problem in the 1930's was that they believed they were superior and the belief of superiority caused the problem." I said that that statement was self-contradictory. You are judging the 'culture of superiority' as bad, and therefore inferior. You are saying that your culture, your belief, is superior. Another said, "If you believe your culture is superior, won't you impose it on others?" I pointed out that after WWII; the Allies imposed their belief, their culture, on Japan, which resulted in the peaceful, far superior culture of today rather than the Japanese culture of the 1930's.

Another asked, "When should you impose your values and when should you not? And how can you tell what are the superior values?"

"Now," I said, "we are getting to the real questions, which are for another time and another class."

But to say, "You can't judge other cultures," is intellectually shallow and self-contradictory. It is also against our human experience and against what we feel deep inside. Everyone says, "You can't judge other cultures," but nobody believes it, like so many of the other beliefs and statements of the American left.

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

After reading through the article, create your best answer to the following questions. You can also use this article to practice English in a group discussion. Ask each member of your group to read the article and then discuss these questions together.

1. According to Mr. Trefzger, what kinds of circumstances make it alright to judge other cultures?
2. Why did Mr. Trefzger humorously say of one of his students, "Girls, don't date or marry him."
3. What is your answer to the question, "How can you tell which values are superior?"