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# Revisiting the Wound of a Nation: The “Good Nazi” John Rabe and the Nanking Massacre

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In 1937, John Rabe (1882–1950), the Nazi director of the Nanking branch of Siemens and chairman of the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone, saved over 200,000 Chinese during the Nanking massacre, one of the most brutal episodes of the Japanese invasion of China (1931–1945). His feat was recently revived in a film by Florian Gallenberger. The film, *John Rabe*, can be categorized as another attempt in the search for “good Germans” or, more bluntly, for “good Nazis,” a paradoxical term memorably applied to Oskar Schindler, whose story was popularized in Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film, *Schindler’s List* (e.g. Koltnow). Gallenberger’s film gained acclaim after a successful premiere at the Berlinale in February 2009, and, two months later, it again received extensive media coverage after winning four German prizes, including those for best picture and best actor. German newspapers almost unanimously stated that Rabe has been considered a “saint” and the “Oskar Schindler of China,” though his story was hardly known in Germany. Despite the 1997 publication of his Nanking and Berlin diaries by Erwin Wickert, a former diplomat to China who stayed at Rabe’s residence in 1936, and the 1997 publication of the late Iris Chang’s bestseller *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, in which Chang shares her discovery of Rabe’s diaries, Rabe remained largely unrecognized outside of China. The biopic brought Rabe’s heroism into focus, publicizing his name and story while mediating between Hollywood cinema and Nazi-retro films.

This article reiterates Rabe’s life story, compares his diaries with Gallenberger’s representation in the film, places the film within the discourses of Nazi-retro films and Asian-German geopolitics, and considers reasons for the film’s subordination of an objective account of atrocities to a version of events whose heroic and romantic elements would more likely ensure commercial success. It surveys media reports, reviews, and interviews, and in doing so examines the film’s reception in Germany, China, and Japan. Noting the past unawareness and neglect of this tragedy as a result of the Chinese Civil War and the rivalries between China and Japan, this article also situates the film within the recent decades of controversy and debate about the massacre and discusses how they shed light on politics, memory, and national identity.

Rabe's anonymity in Germany before the making of the film shows an important fissure in Europeans' awareness of atrocities in Europe and Asia. Like *Schindler's List*, John Rabe serves as "a means of enlightenment" (Niven, "The Reception of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*" 176), in this case about war crimes and genocide taking place in Asia preceding the Second World War. The story of John Rabe constitutes a unique historical episode for studying Asian-German geopolitics from the early twentieth century to the present. The film revisits the Nanking massacre, a national wound for the Chinese, in which over 300,000 Chinese were murdered by the Imperial Japanese Army. Gallenberger's film acknowledges this number in the final credits. The International Military Tribunal for the Far East concluded that more than 200,000 Chinese were massacred and approximately 20,000 cases of rape occurred in Nanking during the six weeks after the city fell (Eykholt 22; Yoshida 71). Yet those numbers are contested or even denied, especially by conservatives in Japan (Yoshida). Since Rabe is a German, the film touches on the painful past of the Germans with their obvious role in Nazism and the Holocaust. With its multinational aspect, it directs viewers' and scholars' attention to types of atrocities that are not usually compared. The Holocaust is sometimes invoked as an analytical and interpretative framework when discussing the Nanking massacre (Chang 195; Schwarcz; Uhrich; Yang; Yoshida 120). The film also has implications for Japan, where conservative forces still refuse to come to terms with the country's war atrocities in Asia and the involvement of its royal family. As evidenced by the film's reception, the discourses of perpetration and victimization are considerably different depending on the audiences and their collective memory.

Media coverage on Gallenberger's film hails Rabe as a "good Nazi" – a Nazi who has shown great humanity and a strong sense of justice. However, the term "good Nazi" remains ambiguous: Does it signal that the Nazi in question is morally good despite his party membership or that he is good because of his Nazi membership and adherence to the party's principles? These problems are central to Nazi-retro films, which Robert and Carol Reimer define as films made since the Second World War concerning the Third Reich, its antecedents, and its legacy (1). All these cinematic narratives present the heroes and heroines as moral Germans despite their affiliation with the Nazi Party, for example, *Es geschah am 20. Juli* (G. W. Pabst, 1955), *Des Teufels General* (Helmut Käutner, 1955), *Die Brücke* (Berhard Wicki, 1959), and *Das Boot* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1981). The paradox of the ethical Nazi fascinates German as well as international filmmakers, as demonstrated by the many adaptations of the stories of, among others, Colonel Graf Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, including Bryan Singer's *Valkyrie* (2008). The Nazi-retro films serve to save the idea of the positive German and build on the dichotomy of ideologically corrupt government officials and the common, decent soldier or average German. These films fit in the German discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that often looks at Germans as victims and resisters rather than as perpetrators (Niven, *Germans as Victims*; Taberner).

The body of available historical facts of John Rabe's life can be mined both to indict him as a loyal Nazi and to plead for a man who reacted humanely and morally to use his Nazi-condoned position and resources to limit, within the restricted context of his authority, acts of slaughter preceding the grand-scale genocide getting underway in his own country. Rabe first went to Peking in 1908 to work for a Hamburg firm, and in 1911 he joined the city's Siemens branch. From 1931 on, he was the director of the Siemens branch in Nanking, which was the capital of the Republic of China under the Kuomintang (KMT). In 1934, he joined the Nazi Party. According to his diary entry on 5 June 1945, one of the incentives was to get teachers and funding for a German school he wanted to establish on the property of Siemens Nanking, for which official approval from the Nazi Party was necessary. This necessity prompted him to join the party without having an accurate picture of its objectives and functions (Rabe 18–19). Thus, when in 1945 a neighbour accused him of joining the party for his personal advancement, he was furious:

Ich wies das energisch zurück und machte darauf aufmerksam, daß ich u. a. Pg. wurde, um vom Deutschen Reich eine Subvention für die Deutsche Schule in Nanking zu bekommen. Daß alle Deutschen in Übersee, mit wenigen Ausnahmen, schon um des Zusammenhaltes Willen in die Partei eintraten, scheint hier gar nicht bekannt zu sein. Persönliche Vorteile hat aber meines Wissens keiner davon gehabt. (5 Jun. 1945)

The apologetic tone surrounding the explanation for one's party membership was typical in postwar years. However, Rabe's activism in the Nazi Party is evidenced by his temporary function as local deputy leader, as well as by his frequent invocation of Hitler in his Nanking diary (e.g. 25, 28, 29 Nov. and 1 Dec. 1937). These elements contradict his *post hoc* self-exoneration that he became a Nazi only to build a school. As Jerome Bruner writes on "self-making narratives": "[W]e constantly construct and reconstruct a self to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future" (210). Thus it is problematic to rely entirely on a diary as validation of what "really" happened. After the Japanese denied the request for a safety zone (diary entries on 2 and 3 Dec. 1937), Rabe repeatedly drafted communications to Hitler, asking for "gütige Fürsprache bei japanischer Regierung, daß sie ihre Zustimmung erteile zur Schaffung einer neutralen Zone für Nichtkämpfer" (e.g. 25 Nov. 1937). Rabe's pronounced admiration for his "Führer" obviously contradicts his expedient latter-day self-defence. It complicates his story and explains the fact that a biopic about him was not made until 2009. Much to Gallenberger's dismay, one newspaper article even labelled everyone involved in the film project a "neo-Nazi": "Es gab eine Zeitungskritik, die uns alle, die wir an diesem Film beteiligt sind, zu Neo-Nazis erklärt hat. Da war ich fassungslos" (Kurtz). Such accusations fail to see Gallenberger's view of Rabe as a misled Nazi who entered history as a

result of his genuine outburst of humanitarianism and kindness towards those to whom he had become close. Asian-German geopolitics during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) created a spatiotemporal niche that endowed the swastika with a positive function. The film does not present itself as a revisionist treatment of German fascism. Rather, it captures a unique historical moment at the intersection of the German-Japanese alliance and Japanese war crimes in China, where a German national has to decide between his private and the public preference.

As for Rabe, he is a “good Nazi” in that he is loyal to the Hitler regime, but also arguably “good,” because he acted against the party line to protect what Nazi ideology would term one “subhuman” race – the Chinese – from the brutality of another “subhuman” race. This uneasy juxtaposition of adherence to the political beliefs of Nazism and Samaritan endeavours in helping those “in Gefahr, in großen Massen hingeschlachtet zu werden” (21 Sept. 1937) characterizes Rabe’s story. He firmly believed that he was doing his duty as a Nazi by remaining in Nanking: “Schließlich gibt’s – in meinem Unterbewußtsein – einen letzten und nicht den unwichtigsten Grund, der es mir selbstverständlich erscheinen läßt, daß ich hier durchhalte. Ich bin Parteigenosse der NSDAP, bin Amtswalter, vorübergehend sogar stellvertretender Ortsgruppenleiter gewesen” (21 Sept. 1937). It is apparent that the disparity between Nazism and humanity, with its immanent contradictions and resultant moral dilemma, was a non-issue for Rabe at the time. Being a committed Nazi and at the same time an eyewitness to horrendous crimes, Rabe may have considered it his historical obligation to alert Hitler to the truth about Japan’s war conduct. Rabe’s case resembles Schindler’s in that the *Zivilcourage* he showed in protecting the Chinese constituted “an act of resistance” in its contradiction of the official German position, in this instance the alliance with Japan. Although Rabe was arrogant towards the Chinese, as the film shows in the beginning, and did not care to learn Chinese during his stay in China from 1908 to 1938, he did not possess such dubious personal traits as Schindler, who was “an (occasionally unscrupulous) opportunist, profiteer and black-marketeer.” Nonetheless, his “act of resistance,” like that of Schindler’s, was “not triggered by any political, ideological or religious objections to Nazism” (Niven, “The Reception of Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*” 176).

What also differentiates Rabe from the other “good Nazis” is his absence during the formative years of Hitler’s regime. This is crucial for relativizing his loyalty to the Nazi Party and giving a rationale for Gallenberger’s decision to portray him in a more heroic light. His thirty-year residence in China with only three brief returns to Germany (in 1919, 1920, and again in 1930) forestalled a full picture of Hitler’s true nature and a clear, first-hand experience of what Nazism was doing to the German populace. Rabe’s knowledge about Nazi Germany was mediated, minimal, and misled, since what limited information he did receive was filtered through few newspapers that were the mouthpieces of the Reich Propaganda Ministry. Diana Zinkler conducted an interview with

Roland Stuhlmann-Laeisz, now ninety-seven, who worked as bookkeeper for Siemens in China between 1931 and April 1937. He met Rabe once a week in Shanghai when the latter brought contracts to the main office. Stuhlmann-Laeisz confirmed the reason why many Germans abroad, including himself, joined the Nazi Party, namely, the lack of accurate information; even the Röhm coup was “bagatellisiert” or “trivialized.” He adds,

Das soll keine Entschuldigung sein, aber gerade viele der Deutschen im Ausland sind der Partei damals beigetreten. Ich weiß von Rabe, dass er der Überzeugung war, das sei eine gute Sache, und dass er ein Anhänger von Adolf Hitler war. Aber in den 30er-Jahren hat die internationale Presse auch wenig Negatives über den Nazi-Staat berichtet. (Zinkler)

Nazi Party membership was not notorious at the time, but fashionable: “Die meisten sind aus Opportunität der NSDAP beigetreten. So schlimm, wie es klingt. Es gehörte damals zum guten Ton” (Zinkler).

Going by such facts and assumptions, Gallenberger undertook this film project believing that Rabe was not a Nazi in the truest sense of the word: “Vielleicht war er selbst überzeugt, einer zu sein. Aber er, der im Ausland lebte, wusste im Grunde gar nicht, was es bedeutete, Nazi zu sein” (Fromm). Such a premise is typical of Nazi-retro films that attempt to create a past that de-Nazifies ordinary Germans; otherwise it would be problematic to present sympathetic Nazis with whom the audience is asked to identify. As the Reimers write,

Rather than risk loosening the bonds of identification between viewers and characters, most directors choose to protect their creations from the Nazi label. Characters in Nazi-retro films either are completely separate from the Nazi regime or have an excuse for having supported Nazi policies; but even when shown in support of the Third Reich, they are shown *to have opposed the atrocities of this criminal regime*. (4; emphasis added)

In his Berlin diary, looking back after the war, Rabe claims that he would also have opposed Nazism had he known more about it:

Wenn ich in China von irgendwelchen Greueln der Nazis gehört hätte, wäre ich doch nicht Pg. geworden, und wenn meine Einstellung als Deutscher mit den Ansichten der Ausländer in Nanking kollidiert hätte, würden die Engländer, Amerikaner, Dänen etc. in Nanking mich doch nicht zum *Chairman* des Internationalen Komitees der Nanking Sicherheitszone gewählt haben! (18 Apr. 1946)

Rabe's retrospective comments that his election as chair of the International Committee attests to his good reputation among the Westerners in Nanking are corroborated by his contemporaries. Though repulsed by Nazism, Robert Wilson, an American doctor, wrote about Rabe in favourable terms and pointed

out the incommensurability between Rabe and a “typical” Nazi: “[Mr. Rabe] is well up in Nazi circles and after coming into such close contact with him as we have for the past few weeks and discovering what a splendid man he is and what a tremendous heart he has, it is hard to reconcile his personality with his adulation of Der Führer” (Zhang 399). George Fitch, the head of the YMCA in Nanking, wrote to his friends that he would “almost wear a Nazi badge to keep fellowship with Rabe and the other Germans in Nanking” (Chang 121).

Under the aegis of German-Japanese alliance, Rabe’s national and political affiliation proved to be life-saving in 1937. Rabe was aware that Germany, in its long history of involvement in the Far East, sent military advisors to assist Chiang Kai-shek in modernizing his military (3 Oct. 1937). However, Hitler was changing his loyalty to Japan by 1937, which left the Germans in Nanking feeling torn (Chen). Bound by their shared fascist ideology of expansion, conquest, and the dream of domination of, respectively, Europe and Asia, Nazi Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact against the Soviets in 1936. Against this historical background of shifting national alliances, Rabe, as Gallenberger sees him, is portrayed as an essentially good man, misled by the Nazis, yet rising to the occasion when he has some “clout” against the Japanese. In the imminent fall of Nanking, Rabe presciently recognized his value by staying: “Ihrer [the Chinese] aller Hoffnung ist, daß ich ‘fremder Teufel’ die bösen Geister vertreibe” (16 Dec. 1937).

For Gallenberger, it is Rabe’s distance from Nazi Germany, his false conception of Nazism, his later arrest by the Gestapo, and his eventual insight into the true nature of Nazism that make a film about him justifiable:

Rabe war bei der NSDAP und hatte eine völlig falsche Vorstellung vom Nationalsozialismus. Nur sein Umdenkungsprozess, den er durchläuft, als er von der GESTAPO verhaftet wird, hat diese Geschichte überhaupt für mich gerechtfertigt. Wenn er nicht stattgefunden hätte, wäre ein Film über ihn nicht angebracht gewesen. (Schumann)

After Rabe returned to Germany in early 1938, he went on lecture tours, reporting as an eyewitness about the Nanking massacre and showing documentary footage filmed by John Magee, an American missionary. He wrote a letter to Hitler in which he again pleaded for the Führer to intervene in Japanese war atrocities in China. His sympathy for the Chinese and outrage at Japanese bestiality brought the Gestapo to his doorstep. They forbade him to give any further lectures about the Nanking massacre and temporarily confiscated his books and diaries. As the Nazis prepared for war, Rabe’s lectures and screenings in memorializing genocide ran counter to the official agenda. His detention in the Gestapo headquarters differentiates him from “bad Nazis.”

Although Rabe and his wife Dora survived the Second World War in Berlin, they were on the brink of starvation. Much to his humiliation, his initial petition to be de-Nazified was turned down by the Russians. He lamented: “In

Nanking der 'Lebende Buddha für Hunderttausende' und hier ein 'Pariah' ein *Outcast!* Da kann man schon vom Heimweh kuriert werden!" (18 Apr. 1946). With this, Rabe is referring to the occurrence described in his diary entry of 31 January 1938, in which the Chinese refugees presented him with a silk banner with the inscription "You are the Living Buddha for a hundred thousand people." After the Chinese government learned about Rabe's destitution in the early postwar years, it collected generous donations from the people of Nanking. The mayor of Nanking travelled to Switzerland, where he bought basic food items to be delivered to Rabe in four huge packages. From June 1948 to the end of nationalist rule, the people of Nanking also mailed Rabe a bundle of food each month to express their gratitude (Chang 193). Rabe's petition for de-Nazification was finally approved "aufgrund Ihrer erfolgreichen humanitären Arbeit in China" (7 June 1946).

For Rabe, what he did was obvious and had nothing to do with heroics: "Das sind alles Selbstverständlichkeiten, die mit irgendwelchen heldenhaften Charakter-Eigenschaften nichts zu tun haben" (17 Feb. 1938). Gallenberger undoubtedly considers it an imperative to portray Rabe more in a heroic than in a revisionist, critical, and iconoclastic light.

Absolutely, he was a hero, a real hero. He had no weapon in his hand. He did it without contemplating personal gains. His subsequent life was very tragic: He lost his belongings; no one accepted him; no one respected him. In my heart, however, although he was bare-handed, he did not command armies in wars, he was a hero. (Li; all translations from the Chinese sources by the author)

While most foreigners in Nanking left the city at the order of their embassies, the remaining Westerners all made a choice to stay.

Gallenberger proceeds from this more sympathetic and positive reading of Rabe as a good man, naive and ill-informed regarding the Nazi Party he joined, but using his Nazi-German status to save innocent lives. Based upon this view, he produces a version of the events that would appeal to a wider audience and thus ensure greater popular and commercial success. In other words, he accepts a view of Rabe as being more heroic than duplicitous, and he proceeds to embellish that view with heroic and sympathy-gaining features to appeal to an imagined audience's desire for romance and heroism. He invents an antagonist, a typical, scar-faced, dogmatic Nazi, Werner Fließ. Rabe's diaries have never mentioned Fließ or a successor to his position, yet Gallenberger's creation of a typical Nazi contrasts with Rabe and the other "good Germans" in China. The director establishes an evolving friendship between Rabe and Robert Wilson, the anti-Nazi American surgeon, so as to foreground Rabe's charisma and morality. He romanticizes the plot by framing it in a love story between Rabe and his wife and by inserting additional invented romantic subplots. The film rationalizes the massacre by focussing on the killings of Chinese soldiers. It even conceives a "good Japanese" character in Major Ose and thus attempts a more balanced portrayal of the Japanese.



Despite the claim that Gallenberger, rather than rehabilitating Rabe, wants to show who he really was (Fromm), the film “de-Nazifies” him from the outset. At the beginning of the film, Rabe puts on a record that plays “Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit” instead of the preferred anthem of the Nazi Party, the “Horst-Wessel-Lied,” through the firm compound’s loudspeaker (Uehling), while a Nazi flag is being hoisted onto a Siemens building. Yet the huge swastika flag, a present from Berlin, is shown lying around in the casino. In addition, the portrait of Hitler is covered by that of the British king in the casino, which is frequented by the English. Germans’ lax dealings with the sanctified objects of the Third Reich enrage the newly arrived Nazi Fließ, who then reprimands the Germans in Nanking.

Fließ is an invented character, a fictionalization adhering to the cinematic convention of pairing a hero with a villain. This certainly increases the dramatic effect and distances Rabe from the Nazis, which Rabe failed to do in his diaries. While Fließ orders the gate of the Siemens compound to be closed to refugees on the eve of the fall of Nanking, Rabe overrules him and hurries refugees under the huge swastika flag that he arranges to be spread out, hoping that it could ward off bombing. To their relief, the Japanese fighter planes seem to recognize the area as German property and fly away. Rabe’s Nanking diary includes a photo with him posing by a six-by-three metre swastika flag, originally a piece of canvas, onto which a huge swastika was painted (22 Sept. 1937). Rabe’s diary makes clear that the original intent for the “homemade” flag is to mark out the territory as German, so as to stave off Japanese bombers. It is the survival instinct of “einige ganz Schlaue” who had identified the large Nazi flag as the ideal shelter:

Frauen und Kinder bitten flehentlich um Einlaß. ... Da ich das Jammern nicht mehr mit anhören kann, öffne ich beide Tore und lasse alles hinein, was hinein will. ... *Einige ganz Schlaue* breiten ihre Betten unter der horizontalen großen deutschen Fahne aus, die wegen der Fliegergefahr angebracht wurde. Dieser Platz galt als besonders “bombensicher”! (12 Dec. 1937; emphasis added)

The powerful moment of Chinese running beneath the huge swastika becomes the signature scene of the film, and it succinctly expresses the overall thematic thrust: its effort to reveal, beneath the persona of a Nazi businessman, a will to protect the weak from inhuman barbarism that his government condones. This emblematic *mise-en-scène* distills the historical irony that transforms the symbol of evil into a rescue device. The huge swastika flag is used for a different purpose than what the Nazi Party in Berlin intended. In retrospect, Rabe’s deployment of the swastika is ironic, because he used the insignia of genocide to stop genocide. However, like the term “Nazi,” the swastika did not yet designate evil for Rabe. Whereas it was abhorred in the rest of the world, the Nazi swastika possessed a life-saving force in Nanking. Rabe used his country’s alliance with Japan to further his personal alliance

with the Chinese. He carried out his responsibilities as chair to the best of his abilities under exceedingly difficult conditions. He often rushed to save women from being raped or properties from being ransacked by waving his swastika armband under the nose of Japanese soldiers (22 Dec. 1937). The Nazi flag and armband had deterrent power over Japanese soldiers. Rabe wrote, "Wenn ich ihnen mein Parteizeichen zeige, kehren sie auf demselben Wege zurück, den sie gekommen" (17 Dec. 1937) or "Mit einem Deutschen mögen sie ungern zu tun haben. Ich brauche eigentlich meistens nur 'Deutsch' und 'Hitler' zu rufen, dann werden sie manierlich, während die Amerikaner recht große Schwierigkeiten haben, sich durchzusetzen" (17 Dec. 1937). Rabe was aware that his mere presence could save the Chinese: "Solange ich persönlich im Hause bin, geht alles gut. Vor einem Europäer haben die Kerle bis jetzt noch etwas Respekt, vor einem Chinesen nicht" (18 Dec. 1937). Iris Chang notes, "The Japanese soldiers appeared to respect – at times even fear – the Nazis of Nanking" (120).

Although Rabe's appointment to the chairmanship in fact took place after he had already decided to stay (19 Nov. 1937), the film shows the nomination causing him to stay, making him an involuntary hero. He abstained in the election. His initial reluctance in the cinematic version echoes reality: "Man wählt mich zum *Chairman*. Mein Sträuben nützt nichts. Um der guten Sache willen gebe ich nach. Hoffentlich kann ich den Posten, der groß werden kann, ausfüllen" (22 Nov. 1937). Yet the film goes a step further – with a resulting enhancement of its title-figure's heroic stature. It has him waste his steamship ticket, while his wife, Dora, leaves Nanking on the US gunboat *Panay* – to her dismay but to the relief and joy of the other committee members. Choosing to stay on alone in order to guide events as chairman, placing his personal safety and his family below a sense of obligation to the situation in Nanking, Gallenberger's Rabe takes on an enhanced and more distinct aura of tragic grandeur. The film then ratchets this up to the level of melodrama by showing a Japanese bomb hitting the *Panay*, which then burns and sinks before Rabe's eyes, leaving him grieving over his presumably dead wife. Only at the end of the film does his wife reveal that she is alive when she sends him a Gugelhupf cake. The "death" of his wife valorizes Rabe in a more explicitly public manner: he must suppress personal sorrows and throw himself wholeheartedly into saving Chinese civilians. The tearful family drama with a touching reunion at the end is as fictive as it is melodramatic. In reality, the suspense over Dora's fate was nonexistent. The Japanese did bomb the *Panay* (Chang 144–49), yet Rabe's wife was not a passenger on that boat, and Rabe knew that his wife was safe (Rabe 9 and 32). His wife's absence and presumed demise, however, create a filmic opportunity for romantic subplots. The undeveloped erotic feeling Valérie Dupres, the French director of the Ginling girls' college, feels for the supposed widower Rabe adds an element of kitsch. Mme. Dupres is a fictive character modelled on Minnie Vautrin, the actual American director of the college. The switch from an American to a French director is apparently

occasioned by the fact that the film is a German-Chinese-French coproduction, and the film further alters the facts surrounding that figure in a way that obliterates Minnie Vautrin, who was in fact a heroic and tragic participant in the real events. She too acted to protect Chinese victims and eventually committed suicide after returning to the United States. Again, the realities of the ambiguous but in many ways arguably positive and heroic aspects of the entire Rabe story are altered with what appears to be a conventionally calculating, “Hollywood”-mentality eye to audience appeal and thus commercial success, with the result that conventions of romance, glamour, and simplistic notions of heroic grandeur are served at the expense of the realistic narrative of genocide and its impact on real lives. Vautrin, “the living Goddess of Nanking” (Chang; Hu), who courageously protected thousands of Chinese women from being raped by the Japanese soldiers, deserves a place in public memory, for she too, along with the real and complex details of Rabe’s life throughout and after the Nazi years, is living proof of the lingering horrors of trauma.

The romantic episode between the German-Jewish diplomat Georg Rosen, played by Daniel Brühl, and Langshu, one of the college girls played by Zhang Jingchu, seems out of place (“Naiver Nazi”), again tending to shift the facts in a sentimentalizing and idealizing fashion. On the one hand, this subplot does invite reflection on how Rabe and the Nanking situation relate to the context of Jewish persecution in Europe; on the other hand, it does so in a way that disturbingly shifts the focus away from the real and complex facts of the massacre and toward the romantic. The appearance of a beautiful Chinese actress imparts an element of aesthetic pleasure to a historical situation in which, in fact, beauty was a curse rather than a blessing. In actuality, attempts were made to suppress beauty or even conceal femininity, as when girls’ hair was cut short to make them look like boys. Eroticism was even more out of place in Nanking in 1937, where rape became the rule of the day and female sexuality was defiled. Thus the cliché-rife love subplot is pleasing to the eye, but raises ethical questions by eliding the horror of violence. This subplot’s linking of the Nanking massacre to the context of Nazi anti-Semitism reasserts ambiguities about Rabe as a “good German.” His stay in China preceded *Kristallnacht*, after which the number of Jewish refugees to Shanghai, which then required no entry visa, skyrocketed to 20,000 (Grossman; Mann; Ristaino). With his connections, Rabe could not but have been aware of the Jewish exiles to Shanghai (Rabe 18). Yet the Nazis’ anti-Semitic policies did not change Rabe’s loyalty to Hitler, although his apparent nonchalance regarding the Jews’ plight does not necessarily make him an anti-Semite. In fact, when Dr. Rosen was forced to stay in China instead of being allowed back to Germany, Rabe asked the wife of the German ambassador to intercede on Rosen’s behalf, of course to no avail (20. Nov. 1937). He could not then have known that Rosen, as a Jew, would be better off in China than in Germany. This shows that Rabe was naïve about Germany’s racial laws, while his intercession for Rosen supports the film’s emphatically positive image of him.

The portrayal of Werner Fließ is not the film's sole ploy in distinguishing Rabe from typical Nazis. Robert Wilson, the cynical American surgeon who despises Hitler, is used as a foil to show that Rabe is indeed not the kind of Nazi that Wilson loathes. In the film, Wilson is initially very critical of Rabe's Nazi membership. Rabe then mitigates Wilson's negative attitude by nominating him as vice president for the safety zone committee, thus showing his magnanimity and diplomatic aptitude. However, Rabe's diaries never mention any dramatic confrontation with Wilson, and in fact Wilson was not even on the committee. The film emphasizes a transformation in the relationship between the two men so as to enhance the positive impression of Rabe's true character. A drinking scene signals a turning point in this transformation. Wilson sings "Hitler, he only had one ball" – the vulgarly satirical words to the "Colonel Bogey March" – to Rabe's piano accompaniment. He then calls Rabe "a real phony bastard, a Nazi swine," to which Rabe counters: "You are an ugly pighead know-it-all and a crybaby." This bittersweet crossfire indicates that Rabe has won Wilson over as a friend, the sequence thus tending to shift focus away from the brutality of the war, in order to emphasize the interpersonal dynamic among foreigners in Nanking at that time:

In "John Rabe" geht es weniger um den japanisch-chinesischen Krieg als um die Konflikte der in Nanking lebenden Ausländer untereinander. Besonders die zwischen dem NSDAP-Mitglied John Rabe und einem amerikanischen Chirurgen. Für mich war die Balance wichtig zwischen den Kriegsgräueln und der Figurenentwicklung. Die Saufszene mit John Rabe (gespielt von Ulrich Tukur) und dem Arzt Robert Wilson (Steve Buscemi) war die erste, die wir geprobt haben. (Umar)

In the same vein, Gallenberger keeps horrific images in check so as to make the picture more appealing to a Western audience. Despite this gesture to Hollywood marketability, the film uses historical footage that depicts various atrocities. Black-and-white film slowly transfers to coloured images, which finally turn into scenes with the actors, history thus merging into fiction. The graphic images of atrocities such as shootings and decapitations constitute only brief moments in the film. For Chinese viewers, the film suppresses the visual horror of the genocide and thus unintentionally downsizes the scope of the massacre. German audiences, however, found the images of the massacre sufficiently traumatic (Li). Rape is mentioned only indirectly in the film, which depicts one failed attempt. Langshu, one of the college girls, repeatedly sneaks out of the college to bring food to her brother, despite Mme. Dupres' warning. One night, she is followed by two Japanese soldiers, who shoot her father and are about to rape her. However, her brother takes the Japanese soldier's gun and kills the would-be rapists. Wearing the Japanese military uniform, she makes her way back to her dorm room, tailed by a group of Japanese soldiers. In the German release, the Japanese officer orders all girls to strip naked for him to check that they are indeed girls, not disguised soldiers hiding in the

college. The version shown in China has abbreviated the scene by cutting out the frontal nudity. While Langshu's nightly excursions nearly result in disaster, the Japanese cannot find any soldiers and must leave in disappointment. Even Langshu's brother is safely hiding somewhere. Thus the film turns the only rape attempt into an uplifting but anomalous story of resistance, an optimistic reworking that appears to cater to commercial demands in the Hollywood tradition. Gallenberger notes, however, that Chinese officials wanted him to include a strong Chinese resistance figure, which he declined to do, claiming that the fictive character Langshu is brave enough in using a camera that documents the horrendous crimes of the Japanese soldiery ("Director of *John Rabe* Defuses Doubts"). Usually, narratives about the massacre present the Chinese as so weak and helpless as not to fit into any concept of heroic literature, the preferred genre since the Maoist era in China (Eykholt 25). It is difficult, as well as morally questionable, to turn the Nanking massacre, which symbolizes the utter and complete victimization of the Chinese, into an account of heroic resistance. However, the topic of the Nanking massacre has always been affected by Chinese, Japanese, and international politics, both past and present.

In the Cold War era, the former Allies supported West Germany and alienated themselves from the Soviet Union. In an analogous manner, Chiang Kai-shek, who had fought the Japanese during the second Sino-Japanese War, utilized some remaining Japanese units after the war to assist in his struggles against Mao. Chiang punished the Chinese who allegedly collaborated with the Japanese during the war more severely than he did the defeated Japanese (Wakabayashi 3). After 1949, instead of pursuing apologies and reparations from the Japanese (Eykholt 12, 40, 50; Fogel 2), the communist government sacrificed the Nanking victims on behalf of its anti-KMT, anti-US policies and blamed the massacre on the failure of the then-governing nationalists and, more absurdly, on the foreigners who had established a refugee zone that supposedly protected foreign property and made its residents vulnerable targets (Eykholt 24–25; Wakabayashi 4). This worked to the favour of Japanese conservatives bent on denying the massacre and helped to sow the seeds of historical controversies about the incident. Since its economic reform, the Chinese government has been walking a tightrope on the issue: To some degree, it satisfies the anti-Japanese sentiment concerning Japan's prevarication about the massacre in textbooks and Japanese officials' visits to the Yasukuni Shrine that houses 14 Class-A war criminals. At the same time, the Chinese government moderates its encouragement of anger over national trauma so as not to jeopardize the vital trade between Japan and China (Eykholt 24–45; Yoshida).

The Chinese government's treatment of the massacre explains the difficulty Gallenberger encountered when obtaining approval for his project. The government initially approved a film titled *Diaries*, which was to be directed by Hong Kong director Stanley Tong and would be partly based on Rabe's accounts. However, Gallenberger and his producer owned the copyright to

filming Rabe's diaries, and this earned their film proposal greater attention and ultimately made it possible through the support of Qiao Ling, the daughter of Qiao Shi, the third most important man under Jiang Zemin, the former president of China (Umard). Gallenberger was fully aware of the politics surrounding the Nanking massacre and explains the Chinese state's reservations:

Es gibt zwei Gründe dafür: China will sich heute als starkes Land sehen, als mächtige, große Nation. In der Geschichte von John Rabe sind die Chinesen aber die Opfer. Es sind Ausländer, die ihnen helfen, sie schützen und letztendlich retten. Der andere Grund ist, dass Japan heute ein wirtschaftlicher Partner Chinas ist und wir aufpassen mussten, Japan nicht zu negativ darzustellen. (Schumann)

In order not to portray the occupiers too negatively, the film sugarcoats the image of the Japanese so as to accommodate both commercial and political contingencies. The film rationalizes the atrocities as mainly targeting ex-soldiers. The only shooting that takes place in Wilson's hospital occurs when a wounded soldier, who happens to be the son of one of the doctors, is carried in. A Japanese squad searches for him and shoots him along with the attending hospital staff. The film deviates from history and suggests civilian casualties were only collateral damage. When Rabe's chauffeur is decapitated, the Japanese want to appease Rabe by giving him the lives of twenty soldiers. This scene focusses again on the disarmed soldiers, who face execution. The reason that Prince Asaka, "one of the highest-ranking Japanese commanders in Nanjing" (Yang 141), wants to remove the safety zone is because he has extorted confessions from some college girls that ex-soldiers are hiding in the zone. In this way, the film provides a rationale for Japanese actions, and to some extent, qualifies the massacre.

To give a balanced picture of the Japanese, Gallenberger invents a "good Japanese," the sympathetic Major Ose. Against his conscience, he must obey Asaka and order the execution of prisoners of war, knowing that it is against international laws. He finally finds a form of resistance by informing Rosen about the arrival of the foreign press. The information helps Rabe to have the sirens sound as though foreign journalists were already arriving, which stops Asaka from destroying the safety zone and killing its civilian inhabitants. Gallenberger told reporters that he made up this character to incorporate Japanese veterans' explanation that they simply obeyed orders ("*John Rabe* Team Answers Questions from the Audience"). The insertion of a "good Japanese" caters to a potential Japanese cinema audience.

Rabe recounts no direct confrontation with Asaka. The Japanese did, however, threaten to clear out the zone on 4 February 1938. Rabe wrote,

Wir erhalten die Nachricht, daß die Japaner alle Flüchtlingslager am 4. Februar zwangsweise auflösen wollen. Die Flüchtlinge sollen in die zerstörte Stadt zurückkehren, ganz egal, wo sie in den Ruinen unterkommen! Das kann übel

werden; aber wir wissen nicht, wie wir das Unheil abwenden sollen. Das Militär hat halt die Macht. (28 Jan. 1938)

On 4 February, the day of the supposed clearance, Rabe wrote, “Viel ausrichten werde ich nicht können, wenn die Japaner gewaltsam eindringen, aber ich kann wenigstens dabei sein und mir die Sache ansehen, damit die Welt orientiert werden kann” (4 Feb. 1938). He noted later that day: “Der gefürchtete 4. Februar liegt hinter uns. Es ist alles ruhig geblieben. Soweit die Japaner in Betracht kommen, sind wir nicht belästigt worden.” However, in the film, Gallenberger invents an episode that brings the film to its climax and enhances Rabe’s heroic stature. When the zone residents are about to be massacred, Rabe walks to the front of them and challenges Asaka to kill him and the Westerners alongside the Chinese: “Aber wenn Sie [Asaka] vorziehen, ein weiteres Massaker anzurichten, müssen Sie uns diesmal mit erschießen.” He risks his life to prevent another imminent bloodbath. In this moment, the siren goes off as Rabe has previously arranged. Believing that the ship carrying foreign diplomats and journalists has arrived, Asaka retreats. The fictive episode unfolded between Rabe and Asaka highlights Rabe’s dedication to saving the Chinese and overshadows his affiliation with the Nazi Party, which is rendered tenuous and insignificant to the understanding of Rabe as a person.

The film ends with Rabe’s reunion with his wife at the harbour of Nanking in 1938. It omits his traumatic experiences with the Gestapo, the Second World War, poverty, and de-Nazification, mentioning that sequence only briefly in the final credits. In an interview, Ulrich Tukur, who plays Rabe, suggested an alternative beginning for the film: An old, impoverished couple sit in a Berlin apartment, helpless against the cold and hunger, and the mailman brings in a food package from China (“Ulrich Tukur kommt an diesem Donnerstag mit *John Rabe* ins Kino – Ein Gespräch”). Such a beginning would incorporate Rabe’s post-Nanking experience and frame the story in a flashback. Gallenberger explains why he stops the film at the reunion: “The film *John Rabe* is not a documentary about him. It is rather a story about how an average person acts heroically in critical times. It is a film about love and hope” (“Interview with Florian Gallenberger”). It is possible that Rabe’s difficult later moments in his life are ignored because they do not fit in with the simple story line and sense of closure deemed necessary in the commercial film industry to ensure success.

Although Rabe’s diaries have been translated into Japanese (Yang 174), the film *John Rabe* has yet to find a Japanese distributor. One distributor indicated willingness on the condition that all scenes about Prince Asaka be cut out, which Gallenberger refused to do (“*John Rabe* Team Answers Questions from the Audience”). He explains that Japanese cinemas fear attack from right-extremists, who might resort to violence if the royal family is criticized. In recruiting Japanese actors for this film, Gallenberger approached actors who declined involvement out of fear: “Schon beim Casting haben Leute zu mir gesagt, dass sie nicht mitspielen wollen, aus Angst, dass ihnen hinterher das

Haus angezündet wird oder ihre Frau verschwindet" (Schumann). Even those Japanese who agreed to be part of the film were largely unfamiliar with the history of the Nanking massacre: "Außerdem ist es schockierend, wie wenig die Japaner über ihre eigene Geschichte wissen. Viele unserer Darsteller mussten sich erst in die Thematik einlesen" (Schumann). Teruyuki Kagawa, who plays Asaka, is a prominent actor in Japan. As quoted by Gallenberger in an interview, Kagawa explains his decision:

[...] exactly because it is a taboo topic and exactly because people do not discuss it, I want to participate in the film to help the Japanese change their attitude towards their past. It is time to take responsibility. It is time to face all that has happened. When we have made a mistake, we should acknowledge it, discuss it, and analyze it, so as to establish a new relationship with history. ("Interview with Florian Gallenberger")

Gallenberger admires Kagawa for his uprightness and trusts that the actor's status will help ensure that the film becomes known in Japan. The director seems keenly aware of the discrepancy between the ignorance of the Japanese of their country's war crimes in Asia and Germany's familiarity with Auschwitz and wants Japan to emulate Germany in the effort to come to terms with its past.

Chinese interviewers frequently ask Gallenberger for his opinion about *City of Life and Death*, also known as *Nanjing! Nanjing!* (2009), a parallel film by Lu Chuan shown in Chinese theatres. The *Nanjing! Nanjing!* team used an aggressive public-relations strategy to eclipse Gallenberger's film. However, *Nanjing! Nanjing!* received much criticism for downplaying the significant role of Rabe and other foreigners and for untruthfully representing Rabe ("*John Rabe: The Chinese Version of Schindler's List*"). In *Nanjing! Nanjing!*, Rabe appears as a lachrymose, elderly man in his seventies, whereas in fact, upon returning to Germany in March 1938, he was only fifty-six years old. Inappropriately and unrealistically, Lu has Rabe kneel before the zone residents when he is called back to Berlin, asking to be forgiven for his failures in saving them – a sequence reminiscent of the final scene in *Schindler's List*, where Schindler breaks down in tears and asks to be forgiven. In actuality, according to Rabe's diary, it was Chinese women who knelt before him and begged him not to leave:

Die Flüchtlinge in der Universität – heute nur noch 3000 Mädchen und Frauen – belagerten die Tür und verlangten von mir das Versprechen, sie nicht im Stich zu lassen, das heißt, Nanking nicht zu verlassen. Alle lagen auf den Knien, weinten und schrien und hingen, als ich gehen wollte, buchstäblich an meinen Rockschößen. Ich mußte mein Auto zurücklassen und, nachdem ich mir mühsam den Weg bis zum Tor erkämpft hatte, das sofort hinter mir geschlossen wurde, zu Fuß nach Hause gehen. Das klingt alles sehr wehleidig und übertrieben. Aber wer das Elend hier mitangesehen hat, versteht, was der Schutz, den wir diesen armen Leuten gewähren konnten, bedeutet. (17 Feb. 1938)



The ending of *Nanjing! Nanjing!* leaves the audience wondering whether the over 200,000 refugees in the safety zone would survive. In order to emphasize Chinese self-reliance, Lu tendentiously weakens the role that foreigners played. He singles out moments when Europeans were also mistreated by the Japanese. Rabe's Nanking diary indeed mentions violent abuse that even foreigners suffered at Japanese hands, in addition to damages to foreign properties and personal items (e.g. 19, 22 Dec. 1937). A letter from the zone committee to the Japanese embassy on 25 Dec. 1937 complained that an American, Mr. Riggs, was attacked (Rabe 145). Iris Chang also notes, "a Japanese soldier slapped [Minnie Vautrin] in the face" (133). According to Suping Lu, "The most blatant incident happened to John M. Allison, the top American diplomat in town, who was slapped by a Japanese sentry when he was investigating a rape case that occurred on American premises" (7). The director of *Nanjing! Nanjing!* does not want Rabe to enter public memory as someone who saved hundreds of thousands of Nanking's citizens: "I just do not believe that Rabe could save 250,000 people. If he did, he could also have saved the other 300,000. I believe that the Japanese soldiers were tired of killing" (Lei). Gallenberger rightly points out that Lu's film does not respect Rabe and that Lu's ludicrous portrayal of foreigners would not be accepted by the international community ("Director of *John Rabe* Comments on *Nanjing! Nanjing!*").

While Gallenberger focusses only on Westerners' actions during Rabe's last months in Nanking, Lu deemphasizes foreign contributions. While both films subordinate fact to narrative, Gallenberger opts for a typical Western representation of the history that centres on interactions between foreigners and indirectly marginalizes China and Japan. Lu does the exact opposite by striking a nationalistic tone. Both films use a narrator who wrote a wartime diary. In *Nanjing! Nanjing!* the narrator is a Japanese soldier named Masao Kadokawa, who alienates himself from the violence surrounding him and commits suicide to alleviate his guilt. The use of a narrator who is a witness to the massacre increases the authenticity of the story, despite its partly fictional storyline typical of cinematic narrative.

Gallenberger's film with its "Hollywood" elements has generated both critics and defenders in Germany and China. Criticism focusses on the commercialism of the film, emphasizing that its representation of Rabe and the Nanking massacre caters to Western audiences. However, the film did not do well in box offices in Germany, and Gallenberger appealed to the ZDF viewers at the Film Awards ceremony: "Gehen Sie ins Kino, der Film läuft noch, er hat es nötig" ("Zuschuss und Schampus"). Commercial consideration is, of course, legitimate for a film with a budget of seventeen-million euro (Li). In fact, all Nazi-retro films have had dual obligations both to history and to film, which itself is both an aesthetic artifact and a commercial product. The Reimers' general observations about Nazi-retro films fit the description of Gallenberger's *John Rabe*:

Narrative films set in a real historical past face a dilemma: as documents of the past, they are responsible for showing historical truth; yet as fictional constructs created to entertain as well as enlighten, they are constrained by the requirements of the medium. Nazi-retro films in particular tend to distort the past to create dramatic conflict where none may have existed, to romanticize the subject matter and emphasize individual, heroic actions, and to emphasize conventional values: valor, commitment to family, concern for one's neighbor, and love for one's country. Many of these films examine the period 1933–45 through a filter that subjectivizes, thus distorting the object of interest. Whatever the films focus on is transformed beyond its historical reference into something that will appeal to viewers, something more suited to cinematic narrative [...]. (Reimer 9)

For a film concerning the Nanking massacre, commercial consideration is not only a necessary compromise, but has positive ramifications. The Nanking massacre is, in Chang's words, "the forgotten holocaust of World War II." It remains a taboo topic in Japan, and the world, especially the Japanese, should be encouraged to watch the film. Europeans, too, know little about the war in Asia. Thus the defence of *John Rabe*'s Hollywood style stems more from sociohistorical, geopolitical, and moral imperatives than from aesthetic considerations. The Japanese revisionists who deny the existence of the massacre or diminish its magnitude could attempt to discredit accounts of Chinese survivors. It is considerably more difficult to doubt the veracity of neutral eyewitnesses such as Rabe, given his diaries and now a German film produced about his experience. Historians have recognized the importance of the discovery of the diaries (Chen). Rabe and other Westerners enjoyed certain immunity and privilege that the Chinese did not. Their third-party status imparts credibility to their textual and visual accounts in the form of letters, diaries, photos, or film. In turn, their witness corroborates the testimonials of Chinese survivors.

Although some German newspapers reported mixed sentiments in China towards the film ("*John Rabe* findet in China geteiltes Echo" and "Geteiltes Echo auf *John Rabe* in China"), the overall Chinese reception was enthusiastic and grateful ("*John Rabe*: The Chinese Version of *Schindler's List*"). A film about the Nanking people's "Living Buddha" during the 1937 massacre is a worthy and significant project. The celebratory Chinese premiere of *John Rabe* took place in Beijing on 28 April 2009. The next day, the film was shown nationwide with an initial distribution of 750 copies, which broke the record for a German film abroad.

Between when Rabe's granddaughter Ursula Reinhardt first presented Rabe's diaries to the world in New York in 1996 to the premiere of Gallenberger's film in 2009, it has taken over a decade for the world to come to know the story and heroics of Rabe. It was not until 2003 that his humanitarian work in Nanking was officially recognized by the then German President Johannes Rau with a visit to Rabe's memorial in Nanking. In 2005, Rabe's grandson, Thomas

Rabe, established a John Rabe Communication Centre in Heidelberg in the memory of his grandfather. In the wake of Gallenberger's film, internet hits on John Rabe in English and German have grown from a scant few to several thousand. However, honest and truthful discussion about the Nanking massacre is especially wanting in Japan. In this light, aesthetic conservatism is a worthy sacrifice the film pays considering its educational mission and moral obligation in providing an incentive to reshape the discourse on the Nanking massacre in China and beyond.

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