FROM TRAUMA TO MEMORY: THE VISUAL TRANSLATION OF FEMALE BODIES IN *THE FLOWERS OF WAR**

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1. INTRODUCTION: FROM WAR IMAGES TO THE RECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL MEMORY

War is not just a military or political event; it is also a traumatic rupture that reorders social relations, gendered hierarchies and embodied life. Trauma often registers belatedly and resurfaces in mediated forms rather than being fully assimilated at the moment of violence (Caruth, 2016). At the same time, war is continuously narrativised and stabilised as shared remembrance. As a modern audiovisual medium, cinema participates in historical representation not simply by recounting events but by reorganising the past through form, style and sensory address (Rosenstone, 1995). In this context, cinema can produce "prosthetic memories" that provide non-witness audiences with a sensory and affective experience of historical traumas that "originate outside a person's lived experience and yet are taken on and worn by that person through mass cultural technologies of memory" (Landsberg, 2004: 19).

In China, the War of Resistance against Japan—particularly the Nanjing Massacre—constitutes one of the most profound national traumas of the twentieth century (Wang, 2017: 36). The Japanese capture of Nanjing in 1937 involved large-scale killing, rape, torture and looting, resulting in mass death, displacement and the collapse of everyday life throughout the city. The event has left a persistent wound whose public articulation has varied across historical periods, while also being transmitted through family memories and local narratives (Wang, 2017). Visual representations of the violence therefore do more than illustrate history: they intervene in ongoing struggles over cultural identity, moral positioning and the boundaries of national memory.

Recent scholarship on Chinese war films has examined how Nanjing narratives are shaped by representational politics, including debates over

victimhood, the visibility of sexual violence and the transnational circulation of national trauma. Comparative studies have discussed how films such as *The Flowers of War* (Jīnlíng Shísān Chāi, Zhang Yimou, 2011) and *City of Life and Death* (Nánjīng! Nánjīng!, Lu Chuan, 2009) negotiate historical suffering within a nation-centred moral discourse while also addressing international audiences and market logics (Zhu, 2013; Yang, 2014; Weiss, 2016; Lopes, 2022). Building on this line of research, this article focuses on a more specific problem: how the cinematic form organises bodily images to translate gendered suffering into a legible memory regime.

BY STAGING THE FEMALE BODY AS THE SURFACE ON WHICH HISTORICAL VIOLENCE IS INSCRIBED AND MORALLY REORGANISED, THE FILM FUSES INDIVIDUAL SUFFERING WITH A NATION-CENTRED ORDEAL. WITHIN THIS SYSTEM, WOMEN ARE DIVIDED INTO "STUDENTS" AND "PROSTITUTES" AND THEIR BODIES ARE EXPOSED TO VIEWING, INJURY, CONCEALMENT AND SACRIFICE WHILE BEING ENDOWED WITH MEANINGS THAT TRANSCEND THE INDIVIDUAL

The Flowers of War is set during the Japanese capture of Nanjing. A group of convent schoolgirls takes refuge in a Western-run church compound referred to in the film as Winchester Cathedral, where they are later joined by a group of women from a nearby brothel seeking protection. John Miller, an American mortician, becomes trapped inside the church compound as Japanese forces close in. The narrative escalates toward a climactic act of substitution in which the women from the brothel disguise themselves as schoolgirls and take their place at a Japanese military event. By staging the female body as the surface on which historical violence is inscribed and morally reorganised, the film fuses individual suffering with a nation-centred ordeal. Within this system, women are divided into "students" and "prostitutes" and their bodies are exposed to viewing, injury, concealment and sacrifice while being endowed with meanings that transcend the individual. Social representation assigns differentiated values to these bodies and, by inserting them into a broader symbolic order, helps define what counts as "human" and worthy of protection (Cubas, 2011; Xie et al., 2025). In this process, the body becomes an intersection of cultural consciousness and social power, with symbolic value emerging through repeated acts of deconstruction and reconstruction (Gao & Abas, 2024).

To avoid conceptual slippage, this article uses a minimal, consistent taxonomy of terms in relation to memory. "Cultural memory" is used as the primary umbrella term for mediated, symbolic and transgenerational remembrance (Assmann, 1995). Collective memory is referred to only in its foundational sense as the social framing of remembrance, following Halbwachs, while cultural memory remains the focus of the analysis because cinema operates with durable media forms and aesthetic conventions. The concept of prosthetic memory is used to specify how non-witness audiences come to "feel" and assimilate traumatic history in audiovisual form, and national memory denotes a politically framed articulation of cultural memory in a nation-centred discourse of morality and identity. In relation to prosthetic memory, mediated engagement with the past "is the foundation for more than individual subjectivity; it becomes the basis for mediated collective identification and the production of potentially counterhegemonic public spheres" (Landsberg, 2004: 21). Throughout this paper, "traumatic" is used as a descriptor of the past and of memory's affective charge, rather than as an independent category.

Existing research on war cinema and memory often either (a) discusses trauma and remembrance at the level of theme and ideology, or (b) offers close readings without a sufficiently explicit procedure for linking micro-level visual form to macro-level memory effects. This article proposes a concise, stepwise model of cinematic transduction that specifies how images of the body move from visualisation (making trauma perceivable) to symbolisation (stabilising meanings through recurring signs) and ethical communalisation (inviting shared moral positioning). This model is designed as a portable analytic tool for comparing how films translate gendered suffering into cultural and national memory. Methodologically, the model is operationalised through close analysis of framing, gaze alignment, concealment, costume coding and spatial pressure across key sequences, thereby linking the micro-level cinematic form to its memory-making effects (Cheng, 2012; Chen, 2025; Qin & Zhang, 2025).

Accordingly, taking *The Flowers of War* as a case study, this article aims to answer the following questions: How is historical trauma inscribed on female bodies in the filmic image? How do these bodies participate in the reproduction of national memory? And how do they contribute to the (re) configuration of identity under wartime conditions? Furthermore, by tracing how meaning is generated and translated through the film's visual narration of the female body, the article shows how cinematic techniques of visualisation and symbolisation turn women's bodies into affective conduits and cultural metaphors of historical memory, clarifying the internal connections between gender, memory and national narrative in war cinema.

2. VISUALISING TRAUMA: VIOLENT NARRATIVES OF THE FEMALE BODY

The term "trauma" refers to an overwhelming experience beyond immediate comprehension. Caruth (2016) highlights its belated structure: the event is often only acknowledged later through intrusive repetitions and disruptions. Audiovisual narratives are particularly suited to this logic because they can represent otherwise inexpressible pain through image, sound and recurrence. In war memory narratives, female bodies often become privileged sites through which collective vulnerability is rendered visible (Kaplan, 2005). Trauma is represented not only through scenes of suffering but also through formal disruption, where "the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection" (Whitehead, 2004: 3).

In *The Flowers of War*, the female body serves as this central visual medium, registering violence through wounds, restraint and mortal threat, while simultaneously externalising fear and shock. By repeatedly staging and framing these images of the body, the film converts individual pain into a shareable affective archive, translating private trauma into collective emotional memory.

2.1 External Violence Borne by the Female Body

War has often been narrated through a male-centred lens that sustains heroic masculinity and relegates women to the margins, securing male subjectivity while depicting female bodies as "the other" or as surfaces for projection (Weiss, 2016). *The Flowers of War* appears to depart from this convention by centring women's bodies as the principal site of visual narration, and thus their bodies become the main register of wartime trauma. The film establishes vulnerability through a recurring motif of bodily contraction and disappearance. In the opening scene showing the ruins of Nanjing, the camera follows schoolgirls running and hiding themselves in grass, pipes or collapsed structures. These movements of crouching, curling up and covering themselves are not incidental; they constitute a visual grammar of



Figure 1. Japanese soldiers assaulting female students in a church

fear. The body shrinks under external pressure, signalling entrapment in an environment saturated with violence.

As the narrative moves into the church, the film briefly frames the space as a sanctuary, only to depict its rapid violation. When Japanese soldiers enter, the girls are chased, their bodies pinned and forced against walls and into corners; close framings of limbs being grasped, clothing torn and postures constrained intensify the sense of proximity of the violence (Figure 1). The audiovisual design, through movement, impact and heightened sound, translates violence into an embodied experience for the viewer, marking the desecration of the refuge and the conversion of "safety" into a theatre of domination.

The violence is not presented as random destruction but as gendered power enacted on the female body. The soldiers' intrusion carries sexualised threats and coercion that strips the girls of agency and reasserts patriarchal control within the war zone (Brownmiller, 1993; Elshtain, 1995; Nath, 2022). In this sense, the violence of war and the intrusion of males converge: the church's protective symbolism disintegrates, while the female body becomes the central sign where military force and gender hierarchy intersect and are remembered.

To conceptualise this process, the film's presentation of female pain is understood here as an aestheticising of suffering, a representational regime that renders atrocity watchable through stylistic control and affective organisation (Sontag, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2006). In *The Flowers of War*, stylised lighting, tableau-like compositions and choreographies of vulnerability, with heads lowered and bodies huddled in confined spaces, depict trauma as an emotionally mobilising form that can be absorbed into national memorialisation. Comparative research on East Asian war cinema suggests that such codified female suffering can elicit compassion while silencing questions of structural responsibility (e.g., Coates, 2021).

Methodologically, visual power is classified here in two analytic categories. First, the male



Figure 2. Prostitutes in the basement

gaze refers to how camera alignment, shot duration and framing position women as objects of visual control (Mulvey, 1975; Doane, 2002), coded through POV structures, isolating close-ups, body fragmentation and asymmetries of looking. Second, occlusion refers to how sexual violence is managed through concealment, partial visibility and spatial blockage, making the threat legible while maintaining aesthetic control. Applied across key sequences, these categories connect the micro-level of the filmic form to the macro-level of memory effects, showing how the film crystallises wartime trauma in and through the female body as a privileged site of violence and remembrance.

2.2 Internal Fear and Psychic Oppression

Most of the film unfolds inside the church, where the external threat is translated into spatial organisation and controlled visibility. The church is not merely a refuge; it is a hierarchically structured enclosure divided into an attic and a basement. The priest hides the schoolgirls above and confines the prostitutes below, in a vertical segregation that reproduces moral hierarchy and unequal protection: the schoolgirls are treated as "innocent" bodies to be safeguarded, while the prostitutes are managed as socially tainted bodies to be contained (Liu & Xiang, 2020: 67).

Cinematically, this hierarchy materialises through the lighting and framing. The prostitutes are shown in the dim cellar, often only semi-visible, partially obscured and spatially compressed (Figure 2). Instead of offering an erotic display with glamorising close-ups typical of genre cinema (Doane, 2013), *The Flowers of War* withholds full visibility: bodies are fragmented by shadows, blocked by the architecture, and restricted to the margins of the frame. This is not a neutral aesthetic choice but a visual technology of power. By distributing visibility unevenly, the film implies a deprivation of social existence: power enacted through organisation of the space,

THIS PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESSURE SHAPES HOW THE PROSTITUTES NEGOTIATE THEIR SURVIVAL. THEIR FEAR IS PROVOKED NOT ONLY BY THE IMMINENT THREAT OF VIOLENCE BUT ALSO BY THEIR LONG-STANDING SHAME AND DISPOSABILITY WITHIN THE PATRIARCHAL ORDER: SAFETY IS IMAGINED AS NEGOTIABLE THROUGH SEXUAL AVAILABILITY, A STRATEGY THAT PRESERVES THEIR LIVES WHILE FURTHER ERODING THEIR AGENCY

regulation of movements and control over who is seen and how (Foucault, 2012). Over time, external restriction becomes internalised as self-discipline: the women learn to hide, to stay silent and to make themselves small, turning the basement into a site where oppression is both imposed and embodied (Bartky, 2015).

This psychological pressure shapes how the prostitutes negotiate their survival. Their fear is provoked not only by the imminent threat of violence but also by their long-standing shame and disposability within the patriarchal order: safety is imagined as negotiable through sexual availability, a strategy that preserves their lives while further eroding their agency. When the Japanese soldiers approach, the women keep quiet and stay hidden, performing vulnerability through enforced silence. As Butler argues, "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies," and "loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies" (2004: 20). But this vulnerability is not distributed equally. Some lives are protected and their loss is mourned; others are designated as expendable. The prostitutes' bodies embody the asymmetry: they are simultaneously victims of violence and instruments used to maintain a moral order.

At the same time, the film organises women's suffering through regulated visual grammar rather than chaotic documentation. Screams, blood and silent hiding are portrayed as repeatable semiotic codes that render pain legible and emotionally addressable, encouraging ethical resonance rather than mere recognition (Sontag, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2006). Yet this aestheticising of suffering is ambivalent: while it elicits sympathy, it can also domesticate violence within an acceptable visual order and undermine the interrogation of structural responsibility as trauma enters collective memory (Coates, 2021). In this sense, the prostitutes are caught in a double regime of gendered hierarchy and national narration, giving their bodies symbolic value while eliminating the possibility of stable self-representation. Trauma thus extends beyond physical injury to the psychological violence of silence and erasure as women are unable to speak from their own embodied position.

3. REPRODUCING MEMORY: THE REDEMPTIVE SIGNIFICATION OF THE FEMALE BODY

War inflicts not only physical injury but also enduring trauma that persists beyond the conflict and is continually reworked into social memory. As Halbwachs (1992) argues, memory is not a simple record of the past but a collective process in which experience is reorganised through shared narratives and representational forms. Cinema participates in this process by translating historical violence into audiovisual images that can be circulated, stabilised and re-remembered over time. In *The Flowers of War*, the female body becomes the privileged medium of this translation, bearing the marks of destruction while simultaneously being recoded as a sign of moral redemption for the community. In this way, it shifts from individual embodiment to a visual node where trauma, cultural meaning and historical memory converge.

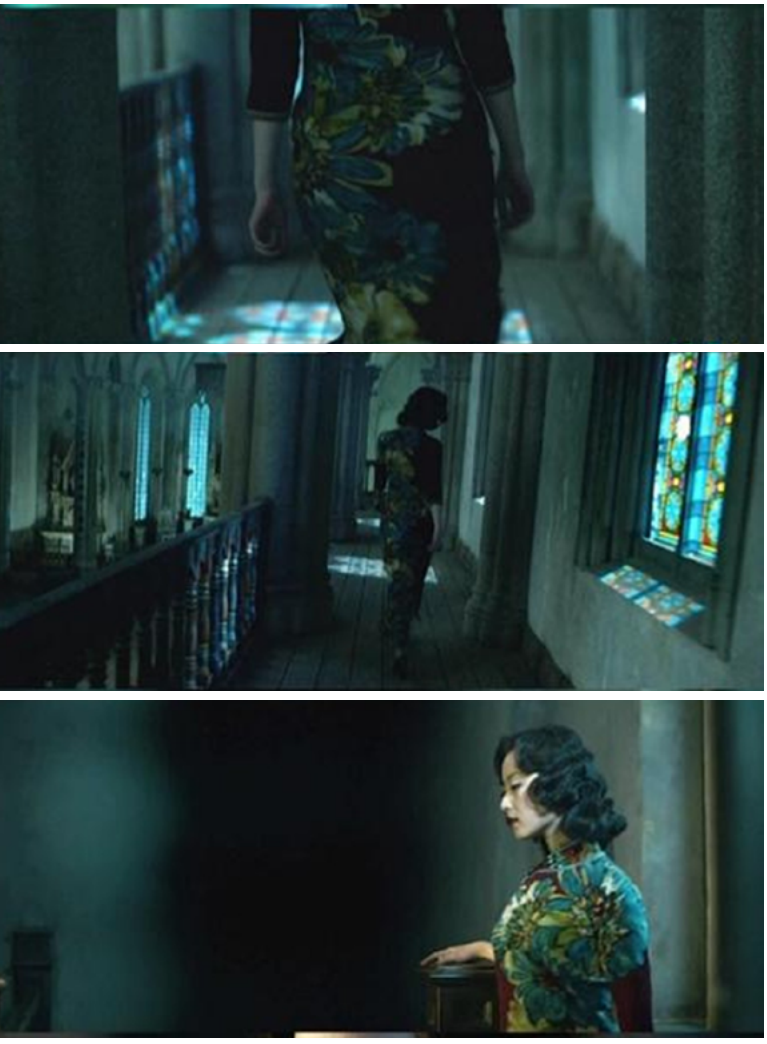


Figure 3. Yu Mo in the church corridor at night

3.1 Continuities of Memory: The Female Body as Witness to History

In mass culture, historical events are often re-encountered through mediated viewing, and repeated circulation can transform history into collectively shared memory (Burgoyne, 2003). Because "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories" and "recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs, 1992: 38), individual suffering becomes embedded in collective memory structures. Cinema translates a specific past into embodied, affective forms that audiences come to remember as their own.

IN THE FILM, THE DIM LIGHTING HAS AN AMBIVALENT EFFECT, CONCEALING AND PROTECTING YU MO'S BODY, BUT ALSO RESTRICTING WHEN AND HOW IT CAN BE SEEN. THROUGH THE FILM'S CONTROLLED USE OF LIGHT, SHADOW AND IMAGERY, YU MO'S BODY BECOMES BOTH A WITNESS TO VIOLENCE AND AN INDEX OF DESIRE, SURVIVAL AND VITALITY UNDER SIEGE

In *The Flowers of War*, female bodies serve as the primary medium of the translation. When the prostitutes enter the church, the film immediately organises their bodies within a moralised spatial hierarchy, as they are confined to the dark cellar while the schoolgirls occupy the upper level associated with faith and protection. This vertical segregation marks the prostitutes' marginal status and visualises their exclusion from dominant narratives of innocence and worth. Inside the cellar, the camera dwells on their cramped movement and micro-reactions, such as flinching, trembling and huddling together, so that the fear of each individual contributes to a shared bodily atmosphere. The resulting portrait is not of a single woman's trauma but of a communal experience that places individual pain in a collective affective register.

Against this background, the film gradually foregrounds the prostitute Yu Mo as a focal point for the intersection between trauma and the narration of the female experience. Her appearances in low lighting emphasise her *qipao* (or *cheongsam*) as a legible sign of gendered visibility and social coding, while close framing of her figure produces a tension between erotic readability and wartime vulnerability. Worn widely by women in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, the *qipao* is



Figure 4. Female students on top of the church

a fitted dress with a stand-up collar, frog-button fastening and side slits. Its tailored silhouette accentuates the female form while constraining the body (Pan, 2020). In modern China, the *qipao* became an emblem of femininity, desire and urban modernity (Zhang, 2026: 113). In the film, the dim lighting has an ambivalent effect, concealing and protecting Yu Mo's body, but also restricting when and how it can be seen. Through the film's controlled use of light, shadow and imagery, Yu Mo's body becomes both a witness to violence and an index of desire, survival and vitality under siege (Figure 3).

THE FLOWERS OF WAR CONNECTS THE BODILY EXPERIENCE OF YU MO AND THE OTHER PROSTITUTES TO THE NANJING MASSACRE BY MAKING THE FEMALE BODY A CONCRETE VESSEL THROUGH WHICH HISTORICAL TRAUMA IS FELT, ORGANISED AND RE-REMEMBERED. BY DEPICTING FEAR, CONFINEMENT AND VISIBILITY AS SHARED CONDITIONS, THE FILM VISUALISES A SHIFT FROM INDIVIDUAL SUFFERING TO COLLECTIVE REMEMBRANCE, TURNING WOMEN'S BODIES INTO ENDURING BEARERS OF NATIONAL TRAUMA IN CINEMATIC FORM

Overall, *The Flowers of War* connects the bodily experience of Yu Mo and the other prostitutes to the Nanjing Massacre by making the female body a concrete vessel through which historical trauma is felt, organised and re-remembered. By depicting fear, confinement and visibility as shared conditions, the film visualises a shift from individual suffering to collective remembrance, turning women's bodies into enduring bearers of national trauma in cinematic form.

3.2 Remaking Meaning: The Female Body as Cultural Vehicle

Cinema operates as social memory: it does not merely refer to the past but reworks it for the present by shaping shared emotions and identities. In *The Flowers of War*, the depiction of female bodies allows subsequent generations who did not witness the Nanjing Massacre to inherit the trauma as an affective experience. As a technology of cultural memory, film images construct a shared sensory archive rather than merely recording history (Assmann, 2011). The female body becomes the privileged bearer of this archive, inviting audiences to re-encounter history through embodied perception. Throughout the film, women's bodies are assigned meanings that transcend the individual, shifting from physiological presence to cultural sign, which can be seen as a condensed "mode of signification" for the narration of national trauma and redemption (Barthes, 1999). In this register, the body serves as a bridge between personal suffering and state-centred memory, translating violence into legible moral meaning.

This logic crystallises in the church sequence later in the film, when Japanese troops plan to remove the schoolgirls under the pretext of a "celebration". Trapped within the church's closed architecture, the girls confront a dilemma between wartime violence and the moral demands of national discourse. Faced with abduction, they consider collective suicide by climbing to the highest point of the church, imagining death as the only way of preventing their violation (Figure 4).

This is not just an extreme assertion of bodily autonomy but also a culturally coded act. By choosing self-sacrifice, the girls seek to protect their "chastity" and "purity", values embedded in moral tradition, thereby fusing personal dignity with national dignity (Yu, 2023: 273). Through the willingness to cross the boundary of self-destruction, they reclaim agency: the body ceases to be merely an object of others' violence and becomes a sign of national integrity. In Douglas's terms, bodily boundaries become metaphors for the social order (Douglas, 2003). By defending those boundaries, the girls in the film enact a specifically gendered form of resistance in which bodily harm becomes a shared moral resource. In this sense, altering or sacrificing the body intensifies memory. The girls' readiness to injure themselves



Figure 5. Prostitutes in qipaos



Figure 6. Prostitutes in school uniforms

stages a passage from the personal to the national, from the physiological to the cultural. As a core medium of cultural memory, the body converts individual experience into a communal emotional resource (Assmann, 2011). Such a sacrifice not only re-enacts wartime trauma but recasts women as producers of cultural memory: through their bodies, national suffering is re-narrated as a circulating symbol that endures violence while signifying resilience and redemption.

Gendered bodily transformation is a technique of national memory. *The Flowers of War* stabilises traumatic history as national memory by reorganising women's bodies in a three-step sequence that converts social differences into moral value. First, *desexualisation* displaces prostitution as social memory: the *qipao*-coded body is progressively stripped of erotic-professional legibility through concealment, uniforming and spatial confinement, allowing the women to be recoded as subjects of collective mourning rather than inhabitants of the social periphery. Second, the film sustains a deferred *resexualisation*: overt display is reduced, yet the threat of sexual violence persists as an implicit horizon that structures fear and suspense, keeping the trauma visible without explicitly depicting it and extending vulnerability across female bodies. Third, *rematernalisation* culminates in substitution and sacrifice. Through bandaging, hair cutting and protective postures, the prostitutes' bodies are rewritten as maternal shields for "innocence", transforming individual suffering into a communally endorsed ethical act. Taken together, this sequence makes the female body the key medium through which gendered trauma is moralised and articulated as national memory.

GENDERED BODILY TRANSFORMATION IS A TECHNIQUE OF NATIONAL MEMORY. *THE FLOWERS OF WAR* STABILISES TRAUMATIC HISTORY AS NATIONAL MEMORY BY REORGANISING WOMEN'S BODIES IN A THREE-STEP SEQUENCE THAT CONVERTS SOCIAL DIFFERENCES INTO MORAL VALUE

4. FROM SEPARATION TO FUSION: TRAJECTORIES OF FEMALE IDENTITY

In war cinema, the body often serves as a nexus between personal experience and collective remembrance, becoming a symbolic site where his-

torical meaning is produced and contested (Nora, 1996). In *The Flowers of War*, female identity is continuously reconfigured through the circulation of bodies across spaces, costumes and gestures, so that the body becomes the medium for negotiating and redrawing social boundaries. As the narrative unfolds, the interaction between prostitutes and schoolgirls intensifies, and the spatial hierarchy begins to shift. When the prostitutes rush to the church's highest point to prevent the schoolgirls' collective suicide, they enter the attic previously coded as the space of "purity". Later, when the girls learn that the prostitutes plan to take their place at the Japanese "celebration", they descend into the cellar, a space associated with concealment and stigma. This exchange is not merely a change of setting; it signals a displacement of social identity and a redistribution of bodily value.

This reconfiguration is initially structured as a moral binary. Prostitutes are framed as bodies already marked by violation, while schoolgirls are framed as innocent bodies to be safeguarded. The film expresses this divide through clothing. The *qipao*, with its fitted cut and saturated palette (Figure 5), contrasts with the school uniform's loose silhouette and subdued tones, marking different social positions and moral expectations (Chen, 2012). Importantly, the *qipao* is not significant in isolation, but acquires meaning through a dichotomous visual connection with the school uniform that produces paired oppositions around which the film's gender politics are organised: the object of the gaze versus the object of protection, commodified femininity versus sanctified innocence, and social periphery versus moral centre. As the plot progresses, these oppositions are repeatedly disrupted through spatial exchange, concealment, uniforming and ultimately substitution, so that the clothed body becomes a site where power, morality, and memory are renegotiated rather than merely displayed (Shi, 2012). Crucially, the film gradually reframes these social roles as historically contingent and ethically chosen: what the women "are" is not ultimately determined by their background or prior social status, but by the decisions they make under wartime conditions.

IN THE FINAL SEQUENCE, THE PROSTITUTES, WHO ARE UNIFORMED, STYLED, AND VISUALLY HOMOGENISED AS SCHOOLGIRLS, WALK OUT OF THE CHURCH UNDER JAPANESE GUARD. THEIR INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES ARE ERASED, COMPLETING THE RECODING OF BODILY MEANING INTO A COLLECTIVE FIGURE. THEIR FATE IS NOT SHOWN BUT INSISTENTLY IMPLIED: THE LAST VISIBLE IMAGE IS OF THEM BOARDING THE TRUCKS. THIS OMISSION PRODUCES THE TRAUMATIC STRUCTURE CARUTH (2016) DESCRIBES AS AN "ABSENT PRESENCE", IN WHICH THE VIOLENCE OF THE EVENT IS FELT THROUGH ITS NARRATIVE AND VISUAL ELISION

To stand in for the schoolgirls, the prostitutes undertake a deliberate remaking of the body: cutting their hair, binding their breasts, and replacing their qipaos with school uniforms (Figure 6). This transformation does not confer "purity" in any essential sense; rather, it attempts to erase the social memory of prostitution and to enter a symbolic order in which "student" signifies innocence. In this way, the binary opposition between prostitute and schoolgirl becomes unstable. The prostitutes' bodies shift from stigmatised visibility to moral legibility, and their commitment to shielding the girls dissolves earlier conflicts of status and image. The body is no longer a fixed social sign but a contingent surface that can be reinscribed by changing contexts and wartime demands, an ethics of action that overrides any identity of origin. The film reinforces this instability through temporal layering. When the prostitutes, now dressed as

students, sing in the cellar, the schoolgirls recall their first encounter with them in their qipaos and heavy makeup. Cross-cutting between present and past mobilises bodily meaning: the prostitutes' former social readability overlaps with their present sacrifice, allowing the two groups' identities to become mutually permeable.

THE SUBSTITUTION OF THE PROSTITUTES FOR THE SCHOOLGIRLS FUNCTIONS AS BOTH A PLOT-LEVEL REDEMPTION AND A RECONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL MEMORY. BY OFFERING THEIR BODIES IN PLACE OF THE GIRLS', THE PROSTITUTES ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR PROTECTION AND, ON A SYMBOLIC LEVEL, TAKE ON A MATERNAL ROLE

In the final sequence, the prostitutes, who are uniformed, styled, and visually homogenised as schoolgirls, walk out of the church under Japanese guard. Their individual differences are erased, completing the recoding of bodily meaning into a collective figure. Their fate is not shown but insistently implied: the last visible image is of them boarding the trucks. This omission produces the traumatic structure Caruth (2016) describes as an "absent presence", in which the violence of the event is felt through its narrative and visual elision.

The substitution of the prostitutes for the schoolgirls functions as both a plot-level redemption and a reconstruction of cultural memory. By offering their bodies in place of the girls', the prostitutes assume responsibility for their protection and, on a symbolic level, take on a maternal role. This rematernalisation is reinforced by micro-level staging choices: protective gestures (shielding, guiding and encompassing the schoolgirls), spatial re-organisation that positions transformed bodies as buffers in thresholds, and repeated visual signs of care (touch, covering, calming). In the interests of methodological transparency, it is important to understand this rematernalisation as a symbolic inference from the film's visual rhetoric rather than a claim about the characters' intentions within the diegesis. The prostitutes become both courageous fighters and maternal figures in the national narrative. Their bodies are depicted as emblematic bearers of collective commitment and historical memory.

Yet the shelter offered by the church is temporary, and the film's ethical resolution remains ambivalent. The women's sacrifice completes an identity shift, from stigmatised bodies to redemptive figures, while also revealing how patriarchal war narratives often imagine female "liberation" only through self-destruction. In this sense, the fusion comes at a cost: bodies acquire national significance precisely because they are made available for sacrifice.

5. CONCLUSION: THE REGENERATION OF MEMORY THROUGH THE FEMALE BODY

Historical narrative provides the frame within which memory is organised; however, memory is not a simple reproduction of facts, but a mediated reconstruction of the past. As a site of memory production, cinema reshapes historical experience in audiovisual form and invites audiences to participate in a shared re-encounter with history. In this process, the body serves as a key medium for the inscription and circulation of affect, and it is therefore essential to making memory perceptible. By examining the representations of the female body in *The Flowers of War*, this article has shown how women's bodily trauma is translated from individual experience into national memory.

The analysis first examined how the violence of war is inscribed on women's bodies through both physical injury and psychological oppression, revealing the precarious position of female life in wartime. As the narrative progresses, the meaning of the body is continually reorganised, as it shifts from witnessing trauma to producing

memory. Through being looked at, threatened, wounded and ultimately sacrificed, women's bodies are recoded from sites of harm into bearers of national value, linking historical atrocities to a redemptive moral narrative. In this sense, the film constructs a feminised model of national memory that renders trauma legible through embodied suffering and ethical substitution, foregrounding the performance of political remembrance through gendered bodies.

At the same time, this centring of women does not fully escape patriarchal mediation. Redemption is achieved largely through acts involving suffering and self-sacrifice: the prostitutes' martyrdom is elevated to the level of a national allegory, yet it also serves to complete a broader heroic arc, and female pain risks being aestheticised into a watchable spectacle. The film thus renders the female body both meaningful and constrained, visible as a medium of memory yet shaped by regimes of the gaze and moral coding. Crucially, however, the film does not depict social roles as determined by background alone. Instead, it reframes identity as contingent on wartime choice: women's status and moral significance emerge through their decisions, actions and sacrifice, emphasising agency and moral responsibility in the context of a historical catastrophe. The "regeneration" of memory through the female body is therefore double-edged, simultaneously recovering silenced suffering and reinscribing it in a narrative form that expresses bodily discipline.

The significance of this dynamic extends beyond the film itself. In East Asia, wartime atrocities remain a key issue of public contention, and "memory battles" have intensified since the late 20th century, shaping cultural politics and regional diplomacy (Holcombe, 2017). Controversies such as the human experimentation conducted at Unit 731 entered broader public discussion only in the 1980s (Dickinson, 2007), while the international community only began giving sustained attention to the Nanjing Massacre and "comfort women" debates in the 1990s thanks to the circulation of documentation and testimonies (Fogel, 2007; Seo, 2008; Yoshida, 2009). In addressing these controversies, what Asian cinema offers is not a passive reflection of history but an active arena where atrocities are visualised, moralised and reinterpreted (Jager & Mitter, 2007; Schneider, 2008). It also contributes to "postmemory", shaping how non-witness generations inherit traumatic pasts through images (Hirsch, 2008). From this perspective, *The Flowers of War* functions as an agent of cultural memory, mobilising the female body as both a site and medium through which the past is remembered, contested, and reimagined. ■

NOTES

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1. The Nanjing Massacre is a collective term for the atrocities committed by the invading Japanese army after occupying Nanjing, the capital of the Republic of China. These atrocities included massacre, rape, arson and looting, and mainly occurred over a period of six weeks from 13 December 1937 to January 1938.
2. *The Flowers of War* (Jīnlíng Shísān Chāi, 2011) is a historical war drama directed by Zhang Yimou and adapted from Geling Yan's novella *13 Flowers of Nanjing*.

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FROM TRAUMA TO MEMORY: THE VISUAL TRANSLATION OF FEMALE BODIES IN *THE FLOWERS OF WAR*

Abstract

Taking Zhang Yimou's *The Flowers of War* (2011) as a case study, this article examines how war films translate historical trauma into collective remembrance through the visual construction of the female body. Anchored in the theories of collective and cultural memory as articulated by Assmann (2011), alongside the concept of prosthetic memory established by Landsberg (2004), this analysis employs semiotics of the body and gender studies to conduct a close reading of two distinct positions of female subjects in the film: schoolgirls and prostitutes. The study identifies a three-step "cinematic transduction" of trauma: (1) visualisation, whereby exposure/occlusion, extreme close-ups and disjunctive editing present violence as embodied experience; (2) symbolisation, as female bodies shift from victimhood to an ethical-aesthetic "sublime body", bearing structures of sacrifice, mutual aid and communal mourning; and (3) ethical communalisation, whereby previously segmented social identities converge in the context of a civilian catastrophe, transforming the female body into a conduit between individual affect and national narrative. In this trajectory, the body serves not merely as a physical entity but as a cultural sign where power, gender and memory intersect. This article thus argues that gendered embodiment operates as a pivotal nexus in the production of national memory, as the film's visual grammar, especially the interplay of concealment and exposure, re-codes women's bodies as affective archives and cultural metaphors, enabling traumatic history to become sensorially shareable and narratively durable. The findings thus offer an operational framework for analysing the memory politics and bodily aesthetics of Chinese war films.

Key words

Female body; Collective memory; Trauma narration; Cinematic transduction.

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DEL TRAUMA A LA MEMORIA: LA TRADUCCIÓN VISUAL DE LOS CUERPOS FEMENINOS EN *LAS FLORES DE LA GUERRA*

Resumen

Tomando como caso de estudio la película *Las flores de la guerra* (Zhang Yimou, 2011), este artículo analiza cómo el cine bélico traduce el trauma histórico en memoria colectiva mediante la construcción visual del cuerpo femenino. A partir de las teorías de la memoria colectiva y cultural de Assmann (2011) y del concepto de memoria protésica de Landsberg (2004), se recurre a la semiótica corporal y a los estudios de género para realizar una lectura minuciosa de dos posiciones femeninas diferenciadas en el filme: colegialas y cortesanas. El análisis identifica una "transducción cinematográfica" del trauma en tres momentos: (1) la visualización, mediante la cual la mirada/oclusión, los primeros planos y el montaje disyuntivo convierten la violencia en experiencia corpórea; (2) la simbolización, en la que los cuerpos femeninos dejan de ocupar exclusivamente el lugar de víctimas para devenir un "cuerpo sublime" ético-estético atravesado por el sacrificio, la ayuda mutua y el duelo comunitario; y (3) la comunalización ética, donde identidades sociales previamente segmentadas convergen bajo la catástrofe cívica, transformando el cuerpo femenino en un conducto entre el afecto individual y la narrativa nacional. En este recorrido, el cuerpo no se presenta solo como entidad física, sino como signo cultural en el que se entrecruzan el poder, el género y la memoria. El artículo sostiene, en consecuencia, que la corporeización generizada funciona como un mecanismo clave en la producción de la memoria nacional: la gramática visual del film, en particular la tensión entre ocultamiento y exposición, recodifica los cuerpos femeninos como archivos afectivos y metáforas culturales, haciendo que la historia traumática se vuelva sensorialmente compartida y narrativamente perdurable. En conjunto, los hallazgos ofrecen un marco operativo para examinar las políticas de la memoria y la estética corporal en el cine de guerra chino.

Palabras clave

Cuerpo femenino; memoria colectiva; narración del trauma; transducción cinematográfica; identidad nacional.

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