(DIS)AGREEMENTS

WHOSE MEMORY IS IT? VISUAL CULTURE AND WAR MEMORIES IN EAST ASIA

introduction
Marcos Centeno-Martín
Alberto Porta-Pérez

discussion
Edward Vickers
Bingbing Shi
Xiaoning Lu

conclusions
Marcos Centeno-Martín
Alberto Porta-Pérez

introduction

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While a global cultural obsession with remembrance and commemoration intensified after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this phenomenon has resulted in intense "Memory Struggles" in East Asia about the mass violence suffered in the region in the 20th century. Simultaneously, new academic discussions have emerged on this traumatic past (Holcombe, 2017; Tanigaki Tonomura and Mitsui 2026), often focusing on the atrocities perpetrated under the Japanese empire during the so-called "dark valley" (1931–1945) - including the Nanjing Massacre (Fogel 2007; Yoshida 2009), Unit 731's crimes (Keiichi 2005; Dickinson 2007) and the exploitation of "comfort women" (Seo 2008; Yan 2026), followed by the Korean War (1950-53), remain unresolved and keep conditioning diplomatic relations and cultural politics in the region. This difficult past has prompted the proliferation of museums and revival of memorial practices across Japan, South Korea, and China (Frost, Schumacher and Vickers 2019). Alongside them, the circulation of wartime topics across film and non-fiction films have become central to the socialization of memory, particularly for generations with no direct experience of war. In this sense, cinema has become a key audiovisual medium for transgenerational transmission. Concepts such as "postmemory" (Hirsch, 2008) and "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg 2004) highlight how images mediate the transmission of trauma across time and space, enabling descendants and outsiders alike to experience past violence as if it were their own, reimagining them through film productions.

Related traumatic events have generated their own visual repertoires in cinema, which has become arena for representing, socialising and

calling into question long-standing categories of heroes, victims and perpetrators –proposed by Hashimoto (2015) in relation to Japanese cultural production—. These memory struggles are not confined to national borders but they unfold within global media flows, transnational productions, circuits of distribution and reception. This has also promoted new ways of looking at this violent past by focusing on historically neglected voices, such as women, diasporic communities and other marginalised groups of victims and survivors. Thus, traumatic memory in Asian films have evolved in distinctive ways that demand renew decolonised and transnational approaches.

The theoretical challenge, then, is to move beyond the notion of collective memory as a stable and nationally bounded construct. Thus, this special issue foregrounds transnational perspectives that move beyond the national, examining the complexity of memory-related films. The transnational is approached here as a methodological tool applicable from textual analysis –examining aesthetic and narrative influences— to production studies and to reception by critics and audiences. The goal is examining not only how films represent the past but also how they are negotiating identities, power relations, and international dynamics in the present. To that aim, we have conceived this (Dis)Agreements section as a forum for discussion with leading scholars in the fields of Asian Film and Memory Studies to share their perspectives: Edward Vickers, Professor of Comparative Education at Kyushu University and a specialist in memory and education in East Asia; Bingbing Shi, Departmental Lecturer in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture at the University of Oxford, whose research focuses on modern Chinese literature, literature-to-screen adaptation, and feminist writing; and Xiaoning Lu, Reader in Modern Chinese Culture and Language at SOAS University of London, specializing in modern Chinese cinema and visual culture.■

discussion

1. To what extent is contemporary visual culture generating new ways of representing and engaging in difficult pasts? How do visual artefacts related to memory influence the production of other cultural forms, foster the emergence of new voices, and contribute to the reinterpretation of past conflicts in the present?

Edward Vickers

Regarding the reinterpretation of past conflicts, I am currently working on a book that examines the changing politics of public historical narratives concerning China's frontier regions: Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Recent developments reveal significant shifts in how conflicts associated with these territories and their populations are represented. In the Chinese context, these narratives are largely, though not exclusively, shaped by state-sanctioned interpretations.

One revealing example concerns Inner Mongolia and the representation of the Mongol Empire. During a research visit in 2019, I found that museums in the region devoted considerable space to the history of the Mongols, Chinggis Khan, and the Yuan dynasty. Yet only a few years later, the exhibition on the Mongol Empire had disappeared entirely from the Inner Mongolia Museum. Around the same time, a planned collaboration between the museum and a French institution collapsed after Chinese partners reportedly requested substantial revisions to references

to Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire. The exhibition was eventually revived in cooperation with a museum in Ulaanbaatar. For reasons that remain unclear, official narratives surrounding the Mongol Empire appear to have undergone a marked transformation around 2020.

A second example concerns Taiwan and the changing status of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), long celebrated in the People's Republic of China as a national hero who expelled the Dutch from Taiwan in 1662 and reclaimed the island for the Chinese nation. Despite his prominence in textbooks, commemorations of the 400th anniversary of his birth in 2024 received relatively limited national attention. By contrast, a recent blockbuster film, *The Battle of Penghu* (Penghu Hai Zhan, Soi Cheang, 2026), focuses on Shi Lang, the Qing admiral who conquered Taiwan on behalf of the Qing dynasty. In effect, Shi Lang appears to be displacing Zheng Chenggong as the preferred national hero in narratives concerning Taiwan.

This shift is politically revealing. Zheng Chenggong was a Ming loyalist who used Taiwan as a base of resistance against the newly established Qing regime. From one perspective, he can be seen as a figure associated with opposition to the central government. Shi Lang, by contrast, represents the commander sent by the state to bring Taiwan under imperial control. It is therefore not difficult to see why his story may resonate more strongly with the current leadership in Beijing. What is equally interesting, however, is the reaction among some Chinese nationalists. For these groups, Shi Lang's service to the Manchu-led Qing dynasty raises uncomfortable questions about political and ethnic loyalty. Some argue that the Ming loyalists in Taiwan were more authentically Chinese than a military leader who chose to serve what they regard as a foreign regime. This interpretation does not reflect the official narrative, but rather a form of popular resistance to it among online nationalist communities. So those are just a couple of illustrations of sort of shifts I think that have happened recently in China. But I'm sure that Bing Bing and Xiaing have plenty more examples of that sort of thing than I can think of.

Bingbing Shi

When I think about this topic, I immediately relate it to my PhD dissertation, which I am currently revising into a book. My research is about adaptation. One of the key aspects of adaptation is repetition: stories need to be repeated, but at the same time they must be renewed. In China, a very striking phenomenon in relation to war stories, war films, and television series is that many of these stories have been adapted repeatedly. Examples include *Railway Guerrilla* (Tie dao you ji dui, Ming Zhao, 1956) and *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* (Xiao bing Zhang Ga, Wei Cui and Hongying Ouyang, 1963). These are stories that are very familiar to Chinese audiences and have been adapted many times. Railway Guerrilla, for example, was first produced in 1956 and, by 2021, had been adapted at least seven times into different films and television series. What interests me is that, through this repeated adaptation, the core narrative is continually reproduced, reinforcing mainstream and official interpretations of the war.

At the same time, developments in media and film technology require new elements to be introduced in order to attract younger generations. Sometimes, however, new media also creates possibilities for addressing the past in different ways. One example I analyse is the video game *Lurking on the Red Path* (Qianfu zhi chitu, 2013), which was developed during a period when video games —especially independent games— had not yet become a major focus of censorship in China. The game was designed by young creators, including doctoral students, and, because it is an interactive medium, it allows for multiple narrative endings. Although it is also a war story,

its different endings offer alternative perspectives that would have been difficult to imagine in traditional films or television. In one possible ending, the protagonist, who is Chinese, returns to Japan after the war and becomes a war hero there. Such a scenario would previously have been almost unthinkable in mainstream screen representations, where a Chinese protagonist aligning with Japan would have been seen as betraying the motherland.

This suggests that, at certain historical moments and through particular media forms, there may be opportunities to imagine the past differently. *Lurking on the Red Path* was created around 2013–2014, and that specific context allowed for a degree of experimentation that might not have been possible at another time. Nevertheless, I would argue that, in general, these stories continue to be repeated primarily in ways that reinforce mainstream memories and dominant ideologies.

Xiaoning Lu

It is very interesting to hear Edward talk about memories in the frontier regions because I am thinking more about national memories. In the past few years, two major wars have been repeatedly remembered and visually represented in China. One is, of course, the Second Sino-Japanese War, especially through representations of the Nanjing Massacre. The other is the Korean War, which has largely been forgotten elsewhere in the world but remains extremely important in the PRC, where it is often regarded as the founding war and a crucial event in the formation of the state's identity.

When thinking about these wars, we often frame them through the opposition between perpetrator and victim. This is particularly true of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Nanjing Massacre, which remain highly contentious subjects, not least because of ongoing debates over Japan's perceived failure to fully acknowledge or apologise for wartime atrocities.

If we look at recent cinematic representations of the Nanjing Massacre, two films are especially interesting. The first is *City of Life and Death* (Nanjing! Nanjing!, Lu Chuan, 2009). I sometimes feel that this film was released ahead of time. Visually, it is a remarkable black-and-white film, but it became highly controversial in China because it partially adopts the perspective of a Japanese soldier. Many viewers questioned why the director appeared to invite sympathy for Japanese soldiers when, in their view, Japan still owed China an apology. Yet I think the film is extremely powerful. I use it in my undergraduate course "History and Memory in East Asian Cultures", and many students find it difficult to watch. Its visual impact is deeply unsettling and traumatic. More importantly, it conveys the brutality of war and the ways in which war can erode our sense of humanity. For this reason, I think the film was not simply controversial; it was also ahead of its time. It appeared at a moment when many Chinese audiences were not yet ready to accept, or even engage with, that perspective.

The second film I would mention is *Dead to Rights* (Nanjing zhaoxiangguan, Ao Shen, 2025). Photographic evidence has long played a crucial role in efforts to establish historical justice and document Japanese atrocities during the war, and this film engages with that legacy in a compelling way. It was also received very positively by Chinese audiences. The story follows a group of civilians who take shelter in a photographic studio during the Nanjing Massacre. They are ordinary people—a postman, a photo studio owner, and others—yet they risk their lives to protect photographic images of Japanese atrocities. Through their relay-like efforts to preserve and pass on this visual evidence, these characters ultimately help produce crucial evidence for the trial of war criminals.

One aspect I find quite interesting is the representation of women. In many wartime narratives, female characters are often reduced to victims, symbols of national humiliation, or fetishised figures. In this film, however, the violence inflicted upon women is represented only indirectly. The audience never explicitly witnesses rape or sexual violence; instead, these experiences are suggested through subtle visual and narrative cues. Moreover, the film creates a memorable female character: an opera singer who is forced to perform for the Japanese army. In response to that invitation, she tells her lover that what she has been singing all her life are stories of heroic women generals from China's past. In other words, through these operas, she has developed a strong sense of justice and moral clarity.

The film's nuanced portrayal of ordinary civilians is, I think, one reason for its success. It fulfils a psychological need among many viewers by showing how powerless individuals can still find solidarity and sustain a quiet but enduring spirit of resistance. Another memorable moment comes when the Chinese postman says to the Japanese military photographer, who at first appears civil and even humane but later reveals himself to be no different from the other cold=blooded aggressors, "Tomodachi janai" or "We are not friends." The line resonated strongly with Chinese audiences because of its moral clarity. It refuses the illusion of friendship or reconciliation without accountability, and it points to the unresolved question of Japan's historical responsibility and the apology that many Chinese viewers still feel is owed.

What interests me about these two films is that, although both break away from earlier official narratives of the Sino-Japanese War, they generate very different kinds of affective power. *City of Life and Death* leaves the audience contemplating the multiple costs of war. It does not offer easy answers but instead leaves many moral and emotional questions open. *Dead to Rights*, by contrast, provides a form of closure to historical and psychological wounds. The film concludes with contemporary images of Nanjing as a city of peace and prosperity, implicitly revealing the aftermath of the war and suggesting that the city's present is built upon the sacrifices of previous generations. In this way, the film links the past to the present in a deeply moving way. Together, these examples remind us of the wide range of visual strategies through which Chinese cinema continues to engage with the memory of the Sino-Japanese War.

2. In your view, has visual culture in recent decades mainly reproduced established categories and narratives, or has it contributed to the representation of new social and historical realities? More specifically, does it challenge the traditional victim–perpetrator dichotomy, or does it tend to reinforce it?

Edward Vickers

To pick up on what Xiaoying and Bingbing were saying about portrayals of the Sino-Japanese War and perhaps the Korean War as well, although I am less familiar with representations of that conflict, I was involved more than ten years ago in a project examining East Asian images of Japan. One of the chapters in the resulting volume was written by the Hong Kong-based scholar Kinnia Yau and focused on the portrayal of "good Japanese" in Chinese war films.

One of the films she discussed was *City of Life and Death*, which I think is an excellent film. It occupies something of a grey zone in terms of its representation of the Japanese, since its central character is a Japanese soldier portrayed in a relatively sympathetic manner. By contrast, the film that Bingbing mentioned, *Dead to Rights*, and especially the line "tomodachi janai", seems to move away from that grey zone towards a much more black-and-white depiction of the war. In this framework, the Chinese clearly belong in the category of "pengyou" or friends while the Japanese most definitely do not belong in the category of "tomodachi".

To me, this reflects a broader loss of nuance in representations of conflict in contemporary China. Xi Jinping's China does not seem particularly interested in ambiguity when it comes to the portrayal of past conflicts. The distinction between friends and enemies is made very clear. Perhaps this sounds somewhat pretentious, but one is reminded of the influence of Carl Schmitt on certain Chinese public intellectuals. Schmitt's insistence on the centrality of the friend-enemy distinction resonates with a political culture that emphasises the need to identify external threats and rally behind a strong state capable of defeating them. In many ways, that seems to be the overarching message communicated by much contemporary visual culture dealing with memories of conflict.

This raises another question: to what extent are China and the Chinese portrayed as victims? In *City of Life and Death*, despite the more nuanced representation of some Japanese characters, the Chinese are still very clearly depicted as victims. Yet if one visits the Nanjing Massacre Memorial today, one encounters a different emphasis. The original memorial focused primarily on Japanese atrocities and Chinese suffering. However, the large exhibition space added in 2015 is devoted almost entirely to the theme of victory.

More broadly, while narratives of China's struggles against foreign aggressors remain a recurring theme, there has been a significant shift away from commemorating suffering and victimhood towards celebrating strength, resistance, and triumph. Rather than presenting the Chinese primarily as passive victims, contemporary representations increasingly portray them as determined victors who confront imperialist powers, defeat them, and restore national dignity. I think this shift is clearly visible in the evolution of the Nanjing Massacre Memorial itself, which has become an increasingly expansive space for narrating not only trauma, but also national victory.

Bingbing Shi

I completely agree. I do not have much to add, but Edward's comments on the ending of *Dead to Rights* made me think about a broader trend in contemporary Chinese war narratives. China is no longer portrayed simply as a victim; it is also presented as a victor. These films ultimately seek to generate a sense of national pride and cultural confidence. The message is that, although China

suffered greatly in the past, it overcame those hardships and emerged stronger. I would also add that audiences seem to embrace this kind of narrative enthusiastically. When I think about younger generations, including my own generation and those that came after it, we grew up during a period in which China became increasingly powerful and experienced remarkable economic development. As a result, I think many young people respond positively to narratives that emphasise confidence, resilience, and national strength. This may help explain why films of this kind have become so popular in China in recent years.

Xiaoning Lu

I would just add that William Callahan, a professor at LSE, discusses this dynamic in his book *China: The Pessoptimist Nation* (2008) His argument captures precisely this combination of victimhood and triumphalism: China suffered, but it also endured hardship and ultimately prevailed. In that sense, the discourse of national humiliation is not simply about remembering past suffering; it is also about affirming the need to stand up, overcome adversity, and become stronger.

Edward Vickers

I think you are right that this narrative has considerable popular appeal. In particular, the narrative of the Sino-Japanese War remains highly prominent. I am less certain about the Korean War, but the Sino-Japanese War is clearly the conflict to which the Party repeatedly returns. One reason it has retained such prominence in popular culture is that, when the authorities placed it at the centre of the Patriotic Education Campaign in the 1990s, they realised that it resonated strongly with many Chinese people. The campaign tapped into popular family memories that were still very much alive at that time.

The question, however, is whether this narrative resonates in the same way on China's periphery, which is the area I have been studying. I do not think it carries the same significance for Tibetans or Uyghurs, although it may have greater relevance for Mongols. Hong Kong provides a particularly interesting case because, until relatively recently, the war with Japan was not a major theme in the territory's public historical culture.

It appeared to some extent in cinema, and films featuring Japanese villains were certainly not uncommon. However, Hong Kong's popular culture has historically been more varied and nuanced in its treatment of conflict, memory, and the distinction between heroes and villains. Since the protests of 2019 and the introduction of the National Security Law in 2020, however, there has been a much more concerted effort to extend the mainland's Patriotic Education Campaign to Hong Kong in a relatively direct form. One manifestation of this has been the increased prominence given to the war against Japan.

For example, what was formerly known as the Museum of Coastal Defence was renamed the Hong Kong Museum of the War of Resistance and Coastal Defence. Likewise, the commemoration of Nanjing Massacre Memorial Day, which became an important event in mainland China after its official establishment in 2014, was not previously a significant feature of public life in Hong Kong. Since 2021, however, it has become much more visible. The Education Bureau has distributed teaching materials, including short documentary films intended for use in schools. In some cases, teachers—under considerable pressure to demonstrate compliance with official expectations—have shown graphic images of wartime atrocities, including scenes of beheadings and bayonet attacks, even to primary-school pupils.

There has therefore been a significant shift in the place occupied by the Sino-Japanese War within officially promoted narratives of the national past, including visual narratives. At the same time, I am not convinced that these narratives resonate with Hong Kong audiences in quite the same way that they do with audiences on the mainland.

3. Based on the visual culture and films you have been discussing, do you think these representations primarily reinforce existing international tensions and historical antagonisms, or do they also create space for reconciliation and new forms of dialogue? To what extent do these emerging narratives challenge entrenched memories of conflict?

Bingbing Shi

I can think of one example. I recently read reports about the film *731* (Zhao Linshan, 2025), which deals with Japan's use of biological warfare in China during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Although I have not seen the film myself, I understand that it portrays these events in a particularly graphic and disturbing way. What I found interesting is that there were reports suggesting that the authorities delayed or limited the film's release because of concerns that it might intensify tensions between China and Japan. If those reports are accurate, it would suggest an awareness on the part of the government that certain representations of wartime atrocities can have a direct impact on contemporary international relations.

Since I have not watched the film, I cannot comment on its specific content, but given its subject matter, I can imagine that it is a very brutal portrayal of the war. In this case, at least, there appears to have been some concern that visual representations of historical violence might generate excessive tension between the two countries.

Edward Vickers

Very briefly, I am afraid that, in East Asia at least, I do not see visual culture playing a particularly significant role in promoting reconciliation. This is not only true in the case of China but also in Japan, where censorship and political pressure directed at those seeking to portray conflict in more nuanced ways can be considerable. Of course, everyone is aware of the extent of censorship in China, and the situation has become markedly more restrictive since *City of Life and Death*was released. There are several examples of interesting Chinese films about the Sino-Japanese War that would simply not be made today. My favourite is *Devils on the Doorstep* (Guizi lai le, Jiang Wen, 2000). It is a fascinating dark, often humorous, and deeply unsettling film. Films of that kind, which humanise their protagonists and avoid overly simplistic moral binaries, potentially have a cross-border appeal. Precisely because they do not take themselves too seriously, they create space for more complex engagements with the past.

Yet similar pressures exist in Japan. There is considerable pressure surrounding public history and cinematic representations of contentious historical issues. One example is *Shusenjo: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue* (Shusenjō, Miki Dezaki, 2018), a documentary by the Japanese American filmmaker. Following its release, Dezaki was sued by several right-wing nationalists. Although he ultimately won the case, the legal proceedings significantly restricted the film's circulation in Japan for several years. In effect, this amounted to a form of censorship. More generally, when controversial films are screened at festivals in Japan, cinemas can become targets of intimidation. Demonstrations are sometimes organised outside venues, and pressure groups associated with the nationalist right may attempt to disrupt screenings. Thus, while Japan is formally committed to the rule of law, civil liberties, and freedom of expression, there remain strong social and political pressures to suppress representations of past conflicts that challenge or offend nationalist sensibilities.

Bingbing Shi
I also think education plays an important role here. From conversations with some of my Japanese colleagues, I have the impression that they learned relatively little about the Second World War in school. If that is the case, it may help explain some of the sensitivities surrounding these issues, including the pressures and forms of censorship that Edward has just described.

Edward Vickers
This is not a new observation, but I think a large part of the problem relates to the question of how perpetrators and victims are represented. Across East Asia, there is a strong tendency for different societies to insist on their own victimhood. In China, for example, there is often an emphasis on the uniqueness of Chinese suffering during wartime: the implicit message is that no one has suffered as much as China, and therefore other experiences of suffering, such as the atomic bombings of Japan can appear secondary or less deserving of attention. Yet similar dynamics can be found elsewhere. In Japan, some argue that the country's experience as the only nation to have suffered atomic bombings gives it a unique understanding of the horrors of war. In Korea, memories of invasion, colonisation, and the devastation of the Korean War can likewise foster a strong sense of historical victimhood, whether in relation to China, Japan, or the United States.

My point is not that these experiences are comparable in any simple way, but rather that an intense focus on one's own national suffering can make people less receptive to the suffering of others. When public culture and commemorative practices are organised primarily around narratives of national victimhood, they can encourage competition rather than empathy. In many cases, the broader apparatus of public memory, education, and cultural production is geared towards sustaining that focus on national suffering rather than fostering a more shared understanding of the past.

Xiaoning Lu
Edward, why do you think these narratives are never enough? Despite the large number of films that continue to be produced, societies seem to return repeatedly to the same stories of suffering and victimhood. Why is there a persistent need for new films about events such as the Nanjing Massacre? Why do these narratives require constant repetition, whether in China or, in different ways, in Japan?

Edward Vickers
In the case of China, if we look at the last century alone, there is potentially a wide range of conflicts and traumas that could become subjects of public memory and cinematic representation: the Great Leap Forward and the ensuing famine, the Chinese Civil War, or the Cultural Revolution, among others. *In the Heat of the Sun* (Yangguang canlan de rizi, Jiang Wen, 1994) is a very interesting example of a film that engages with the Cultural Revolution. It is also the kind of film that, in my view, could not be made in China today. One reason films about the Nanjing Massacre continue to be produced is that this remains one of the few major historical traumas that can be discussed relatively openly. Many of the other conflicts and upheavals that still fall within living memory are far more politically sensitive because they involve episodes in which the Communist Party itself played a central role. As a result, they are much more difficult to address through mainstream cultural production.

In that sense, the repeated return to the Nanjing Massacre is not simply a reflection of public interest in that event; it is also related to the limited range of historical traumas that can be publicly represented and debated.

4. Several of the points you have raised have already touched upon the next issue we wanted to discuss, namely the transnational dimension of memory. What role do transnational perspectives play in the construction and circulation of memory? Do national frameworks still dominate the way historical conflicts are remembered and represented, or is there increasing room for more transnational approaches to memory? More broadly, do you think a transnational perspective is meaningful or productive when examining these visual narratives of the past?

Xiaoning Lu

The memory of the Korean War is undoubtedly transnational, and this makes it an interesting case. Although China participated in the conflict by sending the People's Volunteer Army to the Korean Peninsula, the war was not fought on Chinese territory, unlike the Sino-Japanese War. As a result, most Chinese citizens did not directly experience it. This raises an important question from the perspective of memory studies. We often think of postmemory as something transmitted between generations, but in the case of the Korean War, how is the experience of war transmitted to a population that largely has no direct personal connection to it?

For a long time, memory of the Korean War in China was largely preserved by relatively specialised groups, including historians, former military officiers, and veterans. Much of the early memory work took the form of memoirs, oral histories, and military accounts. Visual representations were also important, but initially they were not primarily cinematic. During the war itself, propaganda posters played a central role. Produced between 1950 and 1953, they were designed to mobilise support for the war effort by encouraging economic production and public contributions to the supply of troops on the Korean front Cinema also played a role. Several well-known films about the war were produced in the 1950s and 1960s, including *Battle on Shangganling Mountain* (Shangganling, Sha Meng and Lin Shan, 1956). However, cinematic engagement with the Korean War largely disappeared during the 1990s before experiencing a revival after the 2010s.

The Korean War is inherently transnational because it involved not only China and Korea but also the United States and the wider United Nations coalition. Yet in Chinese cinema, this transnational complexity is often reframed through a nationalist lens. The dominant narrative emphasises resistance to American imperialism, primarily through the heroic battles of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army against UN troops led by the United States. Relatively little attention is paid to China's coordination with the Korean People's Army or to its engagement with the wider socialist camp.

This contrasts with many South Korean representations of the war. Films such as *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* (Taegukgi Hwinalrimyeo, Kang Je-gyu, 2004) and *The Front Line* (Gojijeon, Jang Hun, 2011) tend to place greater emphasis on the human cost of the conflict. Themes such as family separation, brotherhood, and the tragedy of civil war are central to these narratives. American films, meanwhile, have often approached the Korean War from different angles, sometimes using it as a backdrop for broader anxieties about ideology, psychology, or Cold War politics, as in *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962).

In China, however, the memory of the Korean War has become increasingly significant in recent years, especially since the deterioration of Sino-American relations and the onset of the trade war with the United States. The conflict is now often invoked as a historical example of China's ability to confront a more powerful adversary and demonstrate its national strength. What is particularly interesting is that this memory now

circulates through a wide range of cultural forms. For example, during the Sino-American trade war, an enamel mug was sold on Chinese e-commerce platforms as a "commemorative cup for participation in the China-US trade war". The object was clearly modelled on the "Resist America, Aid Korea" commemorative enamel cups, which were tokens of appreciation given to participants in the Korean War. In other words, the mug playfully borrowed the material form, visual language, and commemorative rhetoric of Korean War memory, but redirected them toward a contemporary economic conflict.

It is clear that different countries engage with conflict through their own political concerns, cultural forms and memory practices. The Chinese case also reminds us that the present often shapes how the past is remembered. The circumstances in which we remember a conflict may ultimately matter as much as the conflict itself.

5. One of the questions underlying this discussion is whether memory can still be understood primarily within national frameworks. To what extent do transnational actors, diasporic communities, and cross-border circulations of images and narratives reshape collective memory today? Are we witnessing the emergence of genuinely transnational memory cultures, or does the nation-state remain the dominant framework through which historical conflicts are remembered and represented?

Bingbing Shi

When I think about the transnational dimension of memory, one example that comes to mind is *The Message* (Feng sheng, Chen Kuo-fu and Gao Qunshu, 2009). It is a commercial war film that was originally based on a novel and later adapted into a highly successful film. What I find particularly interesting is that it was subsequently remade in South Korea. However, in the Korean adaptation, most of the specific historical elements were either removed or made much more ambiguous. The focus shifted away from the historical context and towards genre conventions, particularly suspense and espionage. In other words, the adaptation became much more about genre than about history.

This suggests that when Chinese war films, or the memories associated with them, travel across national borders, commercial considerations may become especially important. In this case, Korean film producers clearly recognised the box-office success of the original film in China and sought to adapt the story for a Korean audience. As a result, what circulated transnationally was not necessarily the historical memory itself, but rather a commercially successful narrative framework.

Edward Vickers

Very briefly, on the question of transnational memory, I would point to the issue of the comfort women, a topic on which I conducted some research several years ago. The exploitation and trafficking of women in wartime is, in many respects, a transnational issue. The specific case of the comfort women system was also inherently transnational, involving multiple countries and populations across East Asia. For that reason, it presents a clear opportunity for developing forms of remembrance that transcend national boundaries. At a fundamental level, the issue relates to broader attitudes towards women and gender relations in East Asian societies during the early and mid-twentieth century, attitudes that were by no means unique to any single country. It also connects to wider questions of exploitation and trafficking that persisted long after the end of the

Second World War and, in some respects, continue into the present.

Some activists involved in movements for commemoration and reparations have sought to frame the comfort women issue as a transnational feminist cause. However, those efforts have had only limited success. Time and again, the issue has been drawn back into national frameworks, whether by Korean, Chinese, or Japanese actors, and mobilised in support of national narratives and historical grievances. As an issue of gender, women's history, and women's experiences of war, the comfort women system has the potential to move beyond nationalist patterns of memory. Yet, in practice, that potential has rarely been fully realised.

6. Our final topic concerns the intersection of gender and memory. How do contemporary films, visual media, and other cultural forms engage with women's experiences of war, violence, and historical trauma? Have gender perspectives opened up new ways of remembering the past, or do national and official narratives continue to shape the representation of these experiences?

Bingbing Shi

One question that interests me is why war films so often rely on the figure of the female spy. She is typically portrayed as a *femme fatale*: attractive yet dangerous, highly capable yet ultimately defined by her romantic relationships. From a critical perspective, I would argue that this recurring trope reveals the extent to which female characters continue to be objectified within wartime visual culture. Such figures are often used to make war narratives more appealing and commercially successful, rather than to explore women's experiences.

More broadly, in representations of war and national trauma, women frequently function as symbolic embodiments of national suffering. Their bodies and experiences are used to signify the nation's victimhood and its historical wounds. Yet women's agencies, subjectivity, and lived experiences are often only partially represented. As a result, women become vehicles through which national trauma is narrated, rather than fully developed historical actors.

Edward Vickers

When you talk about portrayals of female spies, are you thinking of films such as *Lust, Caution* (*Sè, Jiè*, Ang Lee, 2007)?

Bingbing Shi

Yes, and *The Message*. More generally, female spies appear very frequently in Chinese war films and television dramas. In fact, they have become a recurring character type across the genre.

Xiaoning Lu

I would add that this trope is especially common in narratives about the Chinese Civil War and the conflict between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In films about the Sino-Japanese War, by contrast, the more interesting recurring figure is often the male collaborator or traitor rather than the female spy.

7. That is interesting because it also suggests the issue of the comfort women. Discussions of this subject usually focus on the women who were recruited from Japan's colonies and occupied territories, but the experiences of Japanese comfort women themselves often remain outside the conversation. In a way, this also raises questions about visibility, representation, and the selective nature of memory.

Edward Vickers
There were, of course, Japanese comfort women as well, but they are rarely discussed. Or at least they are rarely discussed as victims. The common assumption is often that Japanese comfort women were simply prostitutes and therefore somehow less deserving of sympathy or recognition.

Xiaoning Lu
The discussion of comfort women also reminds me of the transnational dimension of memory. We have Korean films dealing with the comfort women issue, as well as several Chinese-language documentaries about Chinese comfort women. In Taiwan, for example, there is *Song of the Reeds* (Lúwěi zhī Gē, Wu Hsiu-ching, 2015), which focuses on the experiences of Taiwanese comfort women. In that sense, this is a genuinely transnational memory issue. I believe there are also films from Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia that address similar experiences.

Returning to the earlier question about the complexity of representation, I think there are examples of more nuanced portrayals of women. One can be found in *City of Life and Death*. The film includes a prostitute who initially appears as an outsider among the other women. Even while taking shelter, she continues to apply wear makeup and is presented as somewhat out of place, especially in contrast to the terrified and the more conventionally respectable female characters around her. Yet she is ultimately the one who volunteers to accompany the Japanese soldiers.

Edward Vickers
In order to prevent them from taking the younger girls.

Xiaoning Lu
Exactly. That creates a very interesting reversal. The film complicates the conventional opposition between innocent women and sexualised women. Characters who might initially appear marginal or morally suspect are shown to possess agency and moral courage. In that sense, I do think there are examples of more subtle and complex representations of women.

Edward Vickers
That's true. But then we return to the fact that *City of Life and Death* were heavily criticised almost as soon as it was released.

Xiaoning Lu
In that respect, I think *City of Life and Death* offers a much more interesting representation of women than *The Flowers of War*. In *The Flowers of War*, the narrative still relies on a conventional opposition between innocent schoolgirls and courtesans. At the end of the film, the courtesans dress as schoolgirls and go in their place to the party arranged by the Japanese soldiers, so it is through their sacrifice that the actual schoolgirls' innocence is preserved. In that sense, the film reinforces a familiar gendered logic: some women are seen as pure and worth protecting, while others are sexualised and made available for sacrifice. Their bodies become the means through which the nation is symbolically saved.

Edward Vickers
When it comes to the comfort women issue, one example of a relatively nuanced approach, and one that, to some extent, recognised the transnational nature of victimhood, comes to mind. In Tokyo,

there is the Women's Active Museum on War and Peace, which does very interesting work, although it faces considerable difficulties and its exhibitions can hardly be described as part of mainstream public culture. There was also a museum in Taipei, the Ama Museum, dedicated to the memory of comfort women. What I found interesting about its approach was that, partly because of Taiwan's relatively pro-Japanese climate in recent years, it did not frame the issue in strongly anti-Japanese terms. This was no doubt related to the broader political context, but I think it also reflected the outlook of many of the activists involved, who tended to view the issue primarily as a feminist concern rather than a nationalist one.

Unfortunately, the museum ceased operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. What is interesting, however, is that the issue also became the subject of political contestation in Taiwan. At one point, the Kuomintang attempted to promote a much more nationalist interpretation of the comfort women issue, using it as a way of criticising the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) for being insufficiently willing to defend Taiwan's interests in relation to Japan. That effort had very limited political impact, but it nevertheless illustrates how the issue could be mobilised for nationalist purposes. In the end, the attempt largely fell flat, which highlights an important contrast between Taiwan and places such as South Korea or mainland China, where the politicisation of the comfort women issue has generally been much more pronounced.

8. One issue that interests us is the extent to which memory is negotiated through genres that are not conventionally associated with historical trauma or war. We often think of memory in relation to war films, historical dramas, or documentaries, yet memories of conflict can also emerge in more unexpected forms, such as musicals, romances, family dramas, comedies, or even erotic cinema. In your respective fields, have you observed similar tendencies? Are there examples in which questions of memory, trauma, or historical violence are being explored through genres that might not ordinarily be associated with these themes?

Bingbing Shi
I would also mention online fiction. There is a hugely popular genre of web novels devoted to war and military themes, many of which attract very large readerships. These are often long-form narratives published online.

Xiaoning Lu
Are these stories set against historical backgrounds, or are they completely fictionalised versions of war?

Bingbing Shi
In many cases, they are set within real historical contexts, but they are also highly imaginative. For example, one novel I read involves a protagonist who travels back in time to the period of the Second Sino-Japanese War. He finds himself inhabiting the body of the son-in-law of a powerful Japanese military officer. Equipped with modern knowledge and sensibilities, he navigates wartime society while secretly working as a spy for the CCP, gathering intelligence from within the family. Stories like this are highly imaginative, but they are still anchored in the historical setting of the Second Sino-Japanese War. What is interesting is the way they combine multiple genres, including time travel, romance, family drama, espionage, and war. ■

conclusions

MARCOS CENTENO-MARTÍN
ALBERTO PORTA-PÉREZ

This dialogue suggests that memory is never stable and that, more specifically, memories in East Asia remain deeply contested and unresolved. As our discussion has shown, narratives surrounding conflicts such as the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Korean War are continually reconfigured in response to present-day political concerns. These narratives also contribute to shaping interpretations of the past and of national identity, while remaining subject to contestation, reinterpretation, and resignification.

Rather than providing definitive answers, this dialogue raises new questions about the potential and the limitations of transnational approaches in the face of the enduring influence of national narratives. The conversation also highlights that visual culture does not merely reflect memory but actively constructs it. The examples discussed demonstrate that this process extends well beyond cinema to include photography, video games, museums, and museum exhibitions. Each of these media contributes to the construction and interpretation of memories of the past. ■

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WHOSE MEMORY IS IT? VISUAL CULTURE AND WAR MEMORIES IN EAST ASIA

Abstract

This interview brings together three leading scholars whose research focuses on transnational memory from different disciplinary perspectives. Edward Vickers, Bingbing Shi, and Xiaoning Lu reflect on the relationship between memory and historical conflict in East Asia, using visual culture as the central axis of the discussion. Through the analysis of film and other forms of representation, they examine how visual culture both reinforces and challenges national narratives of war. The conversation also addresses specific historical events, including the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Korean War, the Nanjing Massacre, and the unresolved legacy of the comfort women system. Furthermore, it interrogates the categories of victim and perpetrator, as well as the tensions between national and transnational memory. Taken together, the interview highlights how visual culture constitutes a privileged site for negotiating memories of the past and for understanding the contemporary challenges of memory in East Asia.

Key words

Visual Culture; Transnational Memory; East Asian Cinema; Historical Memory; War Memory; Comfort Women.

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¿DE QUIÉN ES LA MEMORIA? CULTURA VISUAL Y MEMORIAS DE GUERRA EN ASIA ORIENTAL

Resumen

Esta entrevista reúne a tres destacados especialistas cuyas investigaciones abordan la memoria transnacional desde diferentes perspectivas disciplinares. Edward Vickers, Bingbing Shi y Xiaoning Lu reflexionan sobre la relación entre la memoria y los conflictos históricos en Asia Oriental, tomando la cultura visual como eje central de la discusión. A través del análisis del cine y de otras formas de representación, examinan cómo la cultura visual contribuye tanto a reforzar como a cuestionar las narrativas nacionales sobre la guerra. La conversación aborda, asimismo, acontecimientos históricos concretos, entre ellos la segunda guerra sino-japonesa, la guerra de Corea, la masacre de Nankín y el legado aún no resuelto del sistema de las «mujeres del consuelo». Asimismo, analiza críticamente las categorías de víctima y perpetrador, así como las tensiones entre la memoria nacional y la memoria transnacional. En conjunto, la entrevista pone de relieve que la cultura visual constituye un espacio privilegiado para la negociación de las memorias del pasado y para comprender los desafíos contemporáneos de la memoria en Asia Oriental.

Palabras clave

Cultura visual; Memoria transnacional; Cine de Asia Oriental; Memoria histórica; memoria de guerra; «Mujeres del consuelo».

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