

The Representation of the Cultural Memory of the Nanjing Massacre in Chinese World War II Films

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Abstract

The Nanjing Massacre has remained a focal point of World War II in China, with ongoing debates persisting to the present day. The denial of the Nanjing Massacre by Japan and the marginalization of its recognition by other nations worldwide have transformed it into an enduring war trauma for the Chinese people. This paper employs Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory to analyze the film *City of Life and Death*, a cinematic portrayal of the Nanjing Massacre. Through an examination of the cultural memory constructed in the film, this study aims to explore how cultural memory contributes to the construction of historical consciousness. Furthermore, it seeks to uncover the core reasons behind the difficulty of transitioning the Nanjing Massacre from a national trauma to a global cultural trauma.

Keywords: Nanjing Massacre, film, cultural memory

INTRODUCTION

In 1931, Japan initiated the September 18th Incident in the northeastern region of China, marking the commencement of the Sino-Japanese War. On July 7, 1937, Japan launched a comprehensive aggression against various regions in China, swiftly bringing them under Japanese military control. The Japanese forces progressively advanced towards Nanjing, the political centre of the Republic of China. The Nanjing government, led by Chiang Kai-shek, decided to relocate the capital to Chongqing. In December, the Japanese launched a full-scale assault on Nanjing. In a mere fourteen days, Japanese tanks entered the city. Starting on the 15th day, the Japanese perpetrated extensive massacres in Nanjing, culminating in the tragic event known as the Nanjing Massacre, the most heart-wrenching incident during China's involvement in World War II. Up to the present, there remains controversy regarding the number of casualties in the Nanjing Massacre, with the official Chinese response estimating that over 300,000 civilians and disarmed soldiers were slaughtered by the Japanese military (Sun, 2001; Zhu, Chengshan et al., 2013; Yoshida, 2001). Simultaneously, the Japanese forces in Nanjing engaged in the rape and murder of tens of thousands of women (The History of World War II Editorial Committee, 2021, p. 96).

With Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945, the topic of the Nanjing Massacre fell into silence for three main reasons. Firstly, following the Second World War, Cold War politics dominated the discourse in East Asia. Secondly, China was in the midst of a civil war, and the Chinese government did not prioritize the preservation of memories related to the Nanjing Massacre, as it was deemed unfavourable to the establishment of national confidence. Thirdly, due to international and Sino-Japanese political dynamics, China exercised caution in addressing topics related to the Nanjing Massacre before 1982, and it was not extensively discussed during that period.

A pivotal moment in China's collective memory of the Nanjing Massacre occurred in 1982 with the Japanese textbook incident. Japan openly distorted the portrayal of the Nanjing Massacre in its textbooks, while conservative factions within Japan denied the occurrence of the massacre and adamantly refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Tokyo Trials. For instance, Tanaka, a prominent figure among the Japanese conservatives, expressed in his work *The Illusion of 'the Nanjing Massacre'* (Nankin tokusatsu no kyok) the viewpoint that:

"The world first learned of the Nanjing incident at the Tokyo War Crimes Trial. Without a doubt, the Tokyo Trial was a tribunal at which victors uni-laterally punished a defeated Japan. Thus [the victors] concluded that the defeated nation must take all the responsibility for the war. They demonized Japan and propagandized Japan's alleged crimes through the tribunal. [The victors] fabricated the Nanjing incident, inventing atrocities committed by the Japanese military to create a counterpart to the Nazi crimes at Auschwitz.

Therefore, in my view, the key to understanding the incident depends on revising our understanding of the Tokyo Trial. Unmasking the trial and revealing its fabrications and errors would result in exposing the truth of the Nanjing incident. As long as "the Tokyo Trial's historical view" (Tōkyō saiban shikan) has not been refuted, neither the textbook accounts of Nanjing nor larger problems regarding the textbooks will be corrected. We must see things with Japanese eyes. We must analyze things the Japanese way. I believe that the time has come no longer to be held hostage by the "Tokyo Trial's historical view." It is time to search for the truth of history from a broader viewpoint" (Tanaka, Masaaki, 1984).

The declarations and textbook manipulation events by the conservative factions in Japan prompted China to reintroduce the Nanjing Massacre into the public consciousness. Seizing the occasion of the 40th anniversary of victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan, China opened the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum. Additionally, a series of exhibitions, seminars, and the publication of historical documents were undertaken to counteract Japan's distortion of historical facts. Since the 1980s, Japan, centring its narrative on national identity, distorted the historical memory of the Nanjing Massacre, aiming to foster a historical consciousness that portrays Japan as a war victim. In the promotion of historical memory regarding the Nanjing Massacre, China finds itself in a passive position. This is attributed partly to considerations related to Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations and, on the other hand, the constraints imposed by Japan's rhetoric and actions on China's promotion and education about the Nanjing Massacre. Given Japan's distortion and denial of facts, China has consistently sought to substantiate the truth with more favourable evidence, such as historical records, figures, and other forms of documentation. Although the Nanjing Massacre has become a core element in China's national memory, whether, in terms of written accounts, architectural endeavours, or media campaigns, the focus has largely remained on establishing its historical authenticity. This mode of thinking has extended into the realm of art as well. How to write the historical trauma in the mass media such as film, so that the Nanjing Massacre can stand in the international perspective, has always been a problem for Chinese filmmakers and film researchers.

Historical Memory, Cultural Memory, Historical Consciousness, and Identity

In the early 20th century, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs introduced the concept of collective memory, bringing memory research into social sciences. Since then, "memory" has become a focal point of study in various social science disciplines. Halbwachs' collective memory theory reflects on the relationship between memory, collectivity, social relations, and memory motivation. The theory asserts that memory depends on social structures, which does not imply that collectives possess memory abilities. However,

individual memory is influenced by collective memory and constrained by social frameworks. In Halbwachs' perspective, memory is a social phenomenon closely related to others, society, and the environment. Only by placing memory within a collective mindset can one deeply understand every memory experienced by each individual during their development. In other words, memory is a construction of social culture, and the essence of collective memory lies in the reconstruction of the past based on the present context.

In Halbwachs's theoretical framework, his distinction between history and memory is predominantly centred on the discourse regarding the relationship between history and collective memory. He posits that the relationship between memory and history is one of temporal order. *"History seems to be obliged to wait until the old groups disappear, along with their thoughts and memories, before it can proceed to describe these historical scenes that only it can preserve and determine their sequence"* (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 103).

In the 1980s, German scholar Jan Assmann and his wife Aleida Assmann expanded upon Maurice Halbwachs's theoretical foundation by introducing the concept of cultural memory, which interconnects memory, society, and culture, building upon the notions of collective memory and social memory. Jan Assmann categorized collective memory into two forms: communicative memory and cultural memory. Since communicative memory can only circulate within society for three to four generations at most, the solidification of historically significant events requires reliance on cultural memory. He posits that cultural memory is the external dimension of human memory (Assmann, 1997, 15). At the core of cultural memory is the act of remembering, which can be understood both as a process – the cultural processes of transmission, preservation, and perpetuation – and as an outcome – the result of selection, revelation, rediscovery, and reconstruction. Therefore, cultural memory is, first and foremost, a recollection of facts, while simultaneously serving as an interpretation and explanation. Cultural memory can be comprehended from two dimensions: on one hand, the framework of memory theory, points to the cultural dimension of memory, whereby external objective cultural symbols are utilized to solidify and perpetuate memory. On the other hand, from a cultural theory perspective, cultural memory is seen as a crucial attribute for constructing cultural identity, playing a significant role in establishing the cultural identity of collective members.

In cultural memory theory, memory necessitates the use of symbols and symbols for its representation and expression. Therefore, memory is not static; instead, it oscillates between the past and the present. Certain aspects of memory undergo continuous repetition, some are subject to disruption and restructuring, while others succumb to oblivion and erasure. This process of symbolic construction renders memory as a text, or, in other words, memory becomes textualized.

"Texts serve as the medium through which we interpret memory, guiding

memory activities into a boundary-open memory space. At the centre of this space lies the authentic past—a realm encompassing our experiences and energies, representing the undeniably existent history often referred to as the incontrovertible and enduring past. Distancing itself from this authentic past is an array of memory texts influenced by various themes, epochs, and worldviews. These memory texts manifest diverse facets, yet collectively, they represent the traces and paths of the authentic past. They serve as reflections and attestations of one another, constituting the fundamental mechanism of collaborative memory construction” (Zhao, 2015, p. 45-46).

Therefore, from a social construction perspective, reexamining historical concepts such as history and historical consciousness reveals that narratives related to history are comprehensible as processes of social construction. The process of social construction is inseparable from the construction of historical consciousness. Media, situated within specific political and economic environments, structures particular frameworks, incorporating materials for the reproduction of memory into these frameworks, thereby engaging in the construction of memory. The representation of historical memory by the media constitutes a practical activity in the production of history by mass media, representing a quest and an endeavour toward an intermediate domain of historical consciousness. At this juncture, while the memory represented in the media does not equate to history, the practice of media representation of cultural memory ultimately leads to the establishment of collective (social) historical consciousness. What merits attention is the dynamic nature of historical consciousness, which, established in the practice of media representation of historical memory, assumes a position of meta-communication in the subsequent practices of media representation of cultural memory. In this sense, each instance of media representation of historical memory will ultimately contribute to the construction or reconstruction of history. In other words, media, through the representation of memory, holds discursive authority in participating in the construction of history and engages in social practices through discursive actions.

Aleida Assmann, in her work, asserts that *“the memory of history becomes the source of collective identity formation”* (Assmann, 2016, p. 81). This implies that within the same collective, members strengthen cultural, identity, and political affiliations by sharing common historical memories and historical consciousness continually. Orwell similarly contends in the novel *1984* that *“who controls the past controls the future, who controls the present controls the past”* (Orwell, 1994, p. 38).

The Holocaust, as a crucial symbolic event in World War II, has become a historical legacy subject to narration by various discourse agents. Memory discourse surrounding it has acquired practical significance, extending beyond historical dimensions and becoming intricately intertwined with reality. The wave of cross-border cultural memory and historical memory research symbolized by the Holocaust, has transformed from a specific historical event

into a universal symbol representing trauma memory and the broader field of historical memory studies. Scholars seek to analyze other instances of genocide through its lens. It has evolved into a moral obligation for humanity, assuming responsibilities for collective identity formation and societal harmony. Official representations by various nations aim to guide national and even global historical consciousness about the Holocaust, utilizing the construction of historical memory associated with it. In doing so, they seek to strengthen the identity of their respective nations during this process.

Regarding the preservation of Holocaust memory, historical empiricism and memory studies have achieved reconciliation on this issue. This is due to the challenging circumstances surrounding the Holocaust, where evidence is exceedingly difficult to preserve, and reliance is primarily on testimonies from survivors. Nevertheless, even in the face of these challenges, research on the memory of Holocaust testimonies continues to intensify. "This is because there is an increasingly heightened awareness of the imminent passing of survivors of the Jewish Holocaust. In such circumstances, the urgent need to preserve the memories of those who endured persecution by the machinery of the Jewish Holocaust becomes particularly pronounced" (Méchoulan, 2005).

The Nanjing Massacre has evolved into a symbolic emblem of World War II on the Chinese battleground, entrenched in the hearts and minds of several generations in China. This historical event has constituted an unspeakable traumatic memory for the Chinese nation, encompassing profound mourning for the fallen compatriots. It also encapsulates sentiments of anger towards the Japanese government and right-wing factions for their refusal to acknowledge historical truths, and reluctance to apologize and admit guilt. Additionally, it involves contemplation on how to prevent the recurrence of similar tragedies. Cinematic works centred on the theme of the Nanjing Massacre construct a narrative around this historical event, thereby establishing a discourse and awareness that surpasses the established factual information associated with this historical event, imparting it with distinct meanings.

City of Life And Death: Cultural Memory in the Construction of Historical Consciousness

The film *City of Life and Death*, directed by the sixth-generation Chinese filmmaker Lu Chuan, was released in mainland China in 2009, offering a perspective on the events of World War II, specifically the Nanjing Massacre. The narrative is framed through the lens of a Japanese soldier, revealing the story of an ordinary Japanese soldier who, upon witnessing the brutal and inhumane massacre in Nanjing, experiences a mental breakdown leading to suicide. As the story unfolds, it also delves into the lives of a Chinese soldier, a Chinese teacher, German businessman John Rabe, and his Chinese secretary, whose fates undergo profound transformations in the aftermath of the Battle of Nanjing. The film portrays the lives of characters from various interest groups to depict the brutal and inhumane nature of the Nanjing Massacre and its

profound impact on the city of Nanjing and the Chinese people. This film employs a narrative approach that combines reality and fiction, utilizing a documentary style combined with cinematic techniques to recount the Nanjing Massacre, a significant episode from World War II. This narrative approach aligns with Lu Chuan's initial intent in directing the film. Lu Chuan, in an interview with Xinhua News Agency, remarked, "In the past, we were more inclined to lament the facts of the massacre. We tended to portray Japanese soldiers as demons, and both Chinese and Japanese people were symbolized. However, if we continue to describe them as monsters and only lament, how many people in the world will truly identify with such feelings of hatred?" (Xinhua News Agency, 2009-04-25). In his view, to prompt global contemplation of the Nanjing Massacre similar to the Holocaust, it is crucial to narrate the story of the Japanese people as individuals rather than conceptualizing and simplifying them into identical symbols. In another interview, when discussing the creative inspiration behind the film, Lu Chuan stated,

I wanted to authentically reflect this catastrophe in human history. Until now, there haven't been many films that truly explain this matter. Including documentaries, I feel they haven't completely revealed the truth. There are still some unknown aspects of this history based on my research. For example, why did the Chinese army fail, and how did the humanitarian disaster occur, etc? So far, all the films on this subject haven't objectively and scientifically addressed this matter. From my perspective, they have portrayed it in a somewhat simplistic manner (DW, 2007-03-04).

Presentation of Cinematic Visuals

Firstly, this film adopts a black-and-white colour palette, a common feature in photographs from the World War II era and frequently utilized in documentaries depicting this historical period. This choice of colour tone establishes a foundational tone for the entire film – authenticity. Secondly, the film commences with a documentary-style approach, employing historical photos and archival materials to set the stage for the narrative. This opening method appears to substantiate Lu Chuan's intention to tell the story from a more objective perspective. Lastly, in terms of scene composition and costume design, Lu Chuan references historical materials (photos, diaries, videos) to recreate scenes as accurately as possible. Every detail is meticulously sourced, aiming to immerse the audience in the historical context rather than adopting the perspective of a detached observer looking back. Through such visual presentation, Lu Chuan consistently conveys the notion that the Nanjing Massacre was an indisputable historical reality.

Narrative Content Selection

With a duration of 132 minutes, the challenge of selecting the narrative content becomes intricately linked to Lu Chuan's intentions in portraying specific

memories of the Nanjing Massacre during World War II. “For people familiar with the war film in China, the dominance of official history and collective memory on screen are all too obvious” (Berry et al., 2016).

In general, Chinese World War II films, particularly those addressing the Nanjing Massacre, predominantly adopt an official perspective, often referred to as the official memory. As mentioned earlier, the official stance primarily utilizes the memory of the Nanjing Massacre to evoke contemporary patriotic sentiments and emphasize the inhumane atrocities committed by Japan. Consequently, when these Chinese World War II films choose which memories to narrate, they typically focus on heroic deeds of Chinese resistance and Japanese atrocities. However, Lu Chuan's film diverges from this conventional framework. In this film, Lu Chuan reintroduces some forgotten events into the public consciousness, aligning with the original intent behind his filmmaking.

Lu Chuan chose to narrate four key events primarily. The first is the starting point of the Nanjing Massacre—the decision by the Nanjing government to relocate the capital before the war, abandoning the city of Nanjing. Since such an event does not align with the requirements of heroism and patriotism, it has been rarely mentioned in previous media narratives about the Nanjing Massacre and has even been deliberately forgotten. Lu Chuan believes that to have the Nanjing Massacre discussed on a global scale, the entire truth must be presented. Otherwise, it would be challenging to explain the absence of Chinese heroism in the Nanjing Massacre events.

The second event involves the massacre of civilians and surrendering soldiers, which constitutes the core of the Nanjing Massacre and has been extensively recounted in the media. Lu Chuan's approach to this event is characterized by a desire to shed light on the essence behind the phenomenon of massacres and to explore whether there are commonalities in human wartime behaviour. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the nature of such massacres from an anthropological perspective, transcending the mere discussion of events that transpired seventy years ago. Lu Chuan explains, *In human history of wars, you can find many similar behaviours of massacring cities, not only in Nanjing. When making this film, I wanted to clarify the formation and true motives of the entire Nanjing Massacre, of course, from a political and military perspective, but at the same time, it is crucial to analyze it from an anthropological perspective, to understand how such a human tragedy gradually formed* (DW, 2007-03-04).

Therefore, in narrating the massacre, Lu Chuan chooses to approach it from the perspective of a Japanese soldier, emphasizing the dehumanization perpetrated by Japanese militarism through scenes of various Japanese rituals. When ordered to massacre children and the elderly, the soldier, tormented by questions about his humanity, chooses suicide, thereby releasing Chinese children and the elderly. This indirect portrayal signifies a triumph of humanity and illustrates the profound persecution inflicted by fascism on both Chinese and Japanese military and civilians.

The third event involves the Comfort Women issue, which, like the second event, is a significant symbolic element of the Nanjing Massacre. In previous narratives about Comfort Women, the portrayal of the women who were raped and killed often depicted them as passive and voiceless victims, symbolizing both the silenced victims in China and the absence of resistance. In this film, Lu Chuan imbues these women with greater significance—depicting them as symbols of sacrifice and heroism. In many war films, the hero figure is typically male; however, in this film, a group of women voluntarily raises their hands to go to the Comfort Women station, fully aware of their inevitable fate (rape, murder, and ultimately being thrown out wrapped in a straw mat). They do so to provide more opportunities for survival for children and other women (in exchange for food, clothing, and coal for winter heating). Lu Chuan uses this narrative to convey that being a Comfort Woman does not equate to shame; these women are also heroes of China. China did not remain entirely voiceless in this massacre; resistance still existed.

The fourth event involves the story of the German businessman John Rabe. This event is based on real historical occurrences. John Rabe, a German, *provided refuge for hundreds of refugees in his garden in Nanjing and made every effort to save people in the weeks following the city's fall. Upon returning to Germany, he attempted to publicize the situation in China. In May 1938, he delivered five lectures on the suffering of the people of Nanjing and screened films documenting Japanese atrocities, shot by John Magee, chairman of the International Red Cross Nanjing branch* (Yoshida, T., 2001, 32). This event has also been adapted into separate films, namely *City of War: The Story of John Rabe* and *The Flowers of War*.

The film incorporates four major events based on real occurrences, presenting the Nanjing Massacre from three different perspectives (Chinese, Japanese, and German) using a narrative approach that combines both fiction and reality. These events comprehensively depict the unfolding of the Nanjing Massacre. Simultaneously, these four events serve as symbols within the discourse surrounding the Nanjing Massacre, reclaiming historical memories that have been forgotten or manipulated and infusing them with new meaning in the contemporary context. This approach by Lu Chuan stands out from official narratives, aiming to showcase the Nanjing Massacre from a humanistic perspective rather than a nationalist one. The intention is to garner genuine international attention to the event, transcending its role as mere material for patriotic education.

Character Design

The film features five main characters, including Japanese soldier Kadokawa Masao (played by Eiji Okuda), Chinese soldier Lu Jianxiong (played by Leon Lai), John Rabe's secretary Tang Tianxiang (played by Wei Fan). These characters are fictional, embodying a clear spirit of resistance. Kadokawa resists his fate, avoiding the influence of Japan's militaristic ideology. Lu

Jianxiong represents a small group of soldiers in Nanjing who continue to fight in the alleys, resisting invasion even after the city's fall. Tang Tianxiang, initially favoured due to his connection with the Germans, witnesses the persecution of his family and, upon having the opportunity to leave Nanjing, chooses to let his pregnant wife depart while he stays behind, sacrificing himself to protect a Chinese soldier. Like the women who risk their lives to protect young girls, he represents a sacrifice in the resistance against militarism—protecting the forces of resistance (Chinese officers) and hope (young lives and future generations). Jiang Shuyun (played by Gao Yuanyuan) is based on the real historical figure Zhang Chunru. John Rabe (played by John Paisley) is a real historical figure. Female characters, such as Jiang Shuyun, embody the spirit of resistance during the war, facing the harsh environment with their strength. Jiang Shuyun also symbolizes Zhang Chunru's resilience in collecting evidence of the Japanese atrocities despite Japan's denial of the Nanjing Massacre. John Rabe, despite being part of the same alliance as Japan, resists fascism both during and after the war, advocating for the truth of the Nanjing Massacre. The film's character design continues to employ a narrative approach that combines fiction and reality, offering a comprehensive and objective portrayal of the Nanjing Massacre from different perspectives.

In this film, Lu Chuan strengthens many historical facts, using them as a focal point to solidify the historical memory of the Nanjing Massacre. The selected memories are rearranged and retold, reconstructing the collective memory of the Nanjing Massacre and extending it to convey additional meanings. The cultural memory conveyed in the film continually declares to future generations: on the one hand, during the Nanjing Massacre, though the Chinese experienced failures, they persistently engaged in resistance and struggle. On the other hand, not all Japanese soldiers were devoid of humanity; they, too, were victims of militarism and fascism.

Film Critique and the Cognitive Process of World War II Understanding

This study conducts a comparative analysis of the divergent responses to the film *City of Life and Death* in both domestic and international contexts. Utilizing film reviews from Chinese and American film critique platforms, the research examines the rating differentials and explores potential factors influencing audience perceptions. The findings reveal significant variations, with Rotten Tomatoes in the United States giving the film a rating of 8.4/10 with a 92% approval rate, while China's Douban rates it at 7.6/10 with a 22% approval rate and a moderate to high rating of 66.3%.

Manohla (2011), in her review for The New York Times, has given *City of Life and Death* an R rating and expressed the following opinion: *City of Life and Death isn't cathartic: it offers no uplifting moments, just the immodest balm of art.* Maggie Lee (2009-06-02) of The Hollywood Reporter characterizes the film as *Potently cinematic and full of personal stylistic bravura.* Karina Longworth (2009-09-17), in her evaluation for IndieWire, observes that the

film manages to convey the total horror of the Japanese atrocities from the perspective of both perpetrators and victims, all with exceptional nuance, sensitivity, and sadness. She further states that the film *has the feel of a lost post-war foreign classic, a masterwork implicating the viewer in the horrors of bearing witness*. Michael O'Sullivan (2011), providing a critique for The Washington Post, awards the film a three out of four-star rating, describing it as *...a muscular, physical movie, pieced together from arresting imagery and revelatory gestures, large and small*.

Undeniably, Luchuan's film has achieved commendable international success and recognition. However, domestically, the film has faced strong resistance, with Luchuan himself even being denounced as a traitor. Professor Cui Weiping (2009-05-13) from the Beijing Film Academy believes that the *City of Life and Death* is nothing more than a splendid turn for the guilty, providing a cloak of humanity for those deserving contempt. Therefore, the film's space for ideological liberation is tailored for these individuals and serves a specific audience.

Phoenix Weekly's chief editor, Huang Zhangjin (2011), launched a vehement criticism against this film and its director, stating, *Even if he (Lu Chuan) selectively forgets the history education he received, from Wu Ziniu to Lu Chuan himself, the various twists and turns encountered in the process of making films on the Nanjing Massacre are remembered clearly and repeatedly emphasized. However, has he ever thought about the fact that a film reflecting the history of the suffering of the Chinese people has to undergo so much scrutiny and restriction in China? Whose memory and historical perspective need saving? If the film successfully lands in Japan, doesn't it precisely prove that the ones who need education are the Chinese, especially himself?*

This paper excerpts evaluations from ordinary audiences on Douban, a relatively authoritative film and television review website in China. In the hot comments section of the website, viewers question the film, stating, *the depth is not enough, and it only portrays the Japanese side, portraying the Chinese as pathetic!* and *Lu Chuan should not attempt to handle subject matter beyond his capabilities*.

In the latest reviews from 2023, audience contradictions are directly aimed at Lu Chuan himself. For example, comments such as *Lu Chuan, with your subjective consciousness, you shouldn't be making films on this subject* and questioning the director's stance reflect implicit criticism of Lu Chuan's perceived political incorrectness. Additionally, these reviews express the opinion that there is no need to portray the humane side of the Japanese, as seen in the comment *There is no need to portray the conscientious aggressors, preserving the humanity of the beasts within*.

Certainly, some audiences understand Lu Chuan's approach, responding with comments like. *The film enhances authenticity and persuasiveness by documenting Japanese atrocities through a conscientious Japanese character. Saying that Lu Chuan is a Japanese director is probably because they have*

watched too many Japanese dramas since childhood.

The public's cognitive process of the Second World War can be delineated into three stages: Resistance War - Anti-Fascism - Anti-War. This orderly progression not only conforms to people's understanding patterns of World War II history but also aligns with the inherent logic of general audience thought processes. However, for a long time, Chinese WWII films have remained within the confines of the first stage. Lu Chuan's film represents a breakthrough in the creation of Chinese WWII cinema. He endeavours to explore the fundamental reasons behind the Nanjing Massacre by examining the spiritual struggle in the transformation from having humanity - being forced into inhumanity as experienced by the character Juro Karuki, thus delving into the obliteration of humanity by Japanese militarism.

However, the memory objectives of such narratives diverge from official memory objectives. Official memories of the Nanjing Massacre are influenced by the current domestic and international political environment and societal demands. On the one hand, it aims to prove the authenticity and inhumanity of the Nanjing Massacre; on the other hand, it seeks to strengthen patriotic education. Therefore, official memories of the Nanjing Massacre remain focused on affirmation and confrontation. As Habuwa noted, individual memories are also influenced by collective memories. Hence, the current cognition of the majority of domestic audiences regarding World War II and the Nanjing Massacre maintains an attitude consistent with the official narrative, specifically emphasizing the Resistance War aspect. Due to Lu Chuan's cognitive disparity with the prevailing audience mindset, this film and Lu Chuan himself face considerable scrutiny. Therefore, it is evident that, for the psychological acceptance of Chinese audiences, the Anti-Fascism aspect is particularly crucial.

Certainly, it can also be observed that Lu Chuan's film falls far short of reaching the anti-war level, failing to touch upon the fundamental core of war, massacre, fascism, and militarism. This is why Chinese World War II films have not stepped onto the world stage, and the Nanjing Massacre has not garnered the global attention that the Jewish Holocaust has received.

CONCLUSION

Cultural memory involves recalling the past for current social needs and plans. *"The core elements of memory research primarily include three questions: "Who remembers," "What is remembered," and "How is memory possible" ... "Who remembers" and "What is remembered" are a pair of causally related questions. The subject and object, the specificity of the memory subject, determine the boundaries of the remembered object, while the remembered object plays a crucial role in constructing and reconstructing the identity of the memory subject. This set of concepts involves the politics and ideology of memory and is a crucial foundation for the effective implementation of*

memory's social critical function" (Zhao, 2013).

The Nanjing Massacre, as a core event and emblematic symbol of China during World War II, has undergone various narrative phases. Whether forgotten or revisited, the reasons behind these phases are linked to the national and societal demands of each period. In China, since 1982, the narrative surrounding the Nanjing Massacre has consistently maintained an official stance aligned with the confirmation phase. Within the Chinese narrative framework, the international anti-fascist war has been simplified into two national wars. Collective memory is constrained by societal structures, while individual memory is reconstructed by collective memory. Therefore, whether at the individual or collective level, the comprehension and memory of the Nanjing Massacre struggle to break free from the current framework.

Such portrayals are prominently evident in Chinese World War II films. Historically, Chinese World War II films have predominantly focused on heroic legendary resistance films, and the audience's understanding of this war has often remained within the confines of the resistance phase of visual narrative. These films typically employ a binary opposition narrative structure and invariably conclude with the victory of the Chinese people and the defeat of Japan. In such films, the perception of fascism is overshadowed by the entertainment-oriented nature of legendary hero stories. Films that disdain the enemy and glorify national heroes continuously stimulate patriotic fervour and nationalist tendencies among the audience. Under the dominance of this ideology, films that critically reflect on World War II by establishing a dimension contrary to the resistance sentiment and aligned with an anti-war perspective face general audience disapproval and rejection.

From this perspective, two glaring issues are evident in *City of Life and Death*. Firstly, the level of understanding among Chinese filmmakers regarding World War II remains to be surpassed. Secondly, the majority of the audience's overall comprehension of this war and the corresponding war concepts are influenced by the narrative of the resistance phase. Moreover, in contrast to the narrative of the Holocaust, it is apparent that one significant reason for the marginalization of the Nanjing Massacre lies in the fact that its narrative has been predominantly confined to the framework of a war between two nations, rather than within the context of the global anti-fascist war.

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Appendix

A.1. Zhang Chunru, a distinguished historian and scholar, is renowned for her significant contributions to documenting and researching the Nanjing Massacre. Her work holds paramount importance not only for the preservation of historical memory but also for shedding light on wartime atrocities and advancing justice. She dedicated herself to gathering and organizing various primary sources, including documents, photographs, and oral histories from the massacre period, providing invaluable historical documents for subsequent studies. Her efforts contribute to the reconstruction of the true picture of that dark period and provide crucial support for corroborating historical truths.