

Echoes of Silence. Memories, Trauma and the Voices of Comfort Women in *Twenty Two*

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Abstract This article examines *Twenty Two* (*Ershi'er* 二十二, dir. Guo Ke 郭柯, 2015) through trauma and memory studies in Chinese cinema. Recording the lives of the last surviving Chinese “comfort women” subjected to sexual slavery during the Sino-Japanese War, the documentary foregrounds the embodied presence of aging female survivors and the afterlives of gendered violence. The analysis places the film in dialogue with mainstream feature-film representation of the war, often structured by spectacle and male-coded heroic arcs, to clarify how distinct representational regimes shape what can be seen, said, and remembered about wartime trauma in contemporary Chinese cinema. It asks how *Twenty Two* articulates female-centered memory and trauma through documentary form, arguing that it develops an alternative ethics of witnessing grounded in durational framing, silence, and testimonial intimacy. By shifting attention away from spectacular victimhood schemata toward the conditions and textures of testimony, the film complicates the relation between individual recollection and collective historical memory.

Keywords *Twenty Two*; Chinese documentary; comfort women; Sino-Japanese War; transnational trauma and memory.

1. Introduction

This paper builds on the theoretical framework of trauma and memory in Chinese cinema to examine *Twenty Two* (*Ershi'er* 二十二, dir. Guo Ke 郭柯, 2015), a documentary that records the lives of the last surviving Chinese “comfort women” (*wei'anfu* 慰安妇) subjected to sexual slavery by the Japanese military during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Released in mainland China on August 14, 2017, to coincide with the Fifth International Memorial Day for Comfort Women, the film title refers to the number of surviving Chinese “comfort women” who were still alive in 2014, when filming began.¹ Though exact numbers remain debated, an estimated 200,000 Chinese

¹ *Twenty Two* evolved from Guo’s earlier independent documentary project *Thirty-Two* (2014), centered on thirty-two surviving comfort women.

women suffered under this system (Guo, Sun & Lun 2017). *Twenty Two* adopts an observational style to capture the everyday existence, gestures, and silences of its elderly subjects. In contrast to the fictional war films that rely on spectacle, emotional dramatization, or heroic narrative arcs, the documentary offers a minimalist and deeply intimate approach that centers female experience and memory.

The relevance of this study lies in situating *Twenty Two* within the panorama of Chinese screen representations of the Sino-Japanese War. Rather than treating the documentary as an isolated case, the analysis places it in dialogue with the more extensive corpus of feature films on the topic that have shaped public imaginaries of wartime history through dominant narrative conventions and industrial production practices. Mainstream reconstructions are frequently organized around large-scale spectacle and dramatic arcs, at times centered on male-coded registers of heroism, as well as narratives of personal and national sacrifice and suffering. This tendency is especially evident in the recurrent cinematic emphasis on the Nanjing Massacre and, more broadly, in dramatized depictions of wartime atrocities in so-called “War of Resistance films” (*kangzhan dianying* 抗战电影), which are often timed to commemorate the anniversary of China’s victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1937-1945) and the end of the Second World War (framed in China as the World Anti-Fascist War).² The aim is not to evaluate documentary and fiction by the same aesthetic criteria, but to clarify how distinct representational regimes shape what can be seen, said, and remembered about wartime trauma in contemporary Chinese cinema. *Twenty Two*’s wide public reach in China – amplified by social media and reflected in strong audience reception, including an 8.7/10 rating on Douban (Zhang & Fang 2024: 6) – makes this study particularly salient.

Against this backdrop, I ask: how does *Twenty Two* articulate female-centered memory and trauma around the “comfort women” experience through documentary form? I argue that the film develops an ethics of witnessing grounded in silence, durational framing, and sustained attention to

² The lineage of so-called *War of Resistance films* (*kangzhan dianying* 抗战电影) can be traced back to the very first year of the conflict, for instance Shi Dongshan’s *Defending Our Soil* (1938) and Ying Yunwei’s *Eight Hundred Heroes* (1938). Across different periods, this production has repeatedly intersected with national commemorative calendars of wartime remembrance. In 2025, an anniversary year that renewed public attention to WWII-related memorial discourse, media commentary increasingly referred to the theatrical circulation of an “anti-Japanese trilogy” (*kangri sanbuqu* 抗日三部曲): *Dead to Rights* (2025), *731* (2025), and *Dongji Rescue* (2025).

aging female bodies and domestic spaces. By foregrounding testimonial presence long marginal to commercial war cinema, it redirects attention away from spectacular victimhood schemata toward the conditions and textures of testimony, thereby complicating the relation between individual recollection and collective historical memory. While the “comfort women” issue belongs to a wider transnational memory field across East Asia,³ the article focuses on the contemporary PRC media ecology and on the film’s formal strategies of witnessing, offering concepts that may support future comparative readings.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework: Memory and Trauma in Chinese Film Studies

Trauma and its representation, as per its entanglement with history and memory, has formed a major area of inquiry within Chinese film studies. Beginning in the early 2000s, scholars such as Yang (2002), Braester (2003, 2010, 2015), Wang Ban (2004), and Wang Der-wei David (2004) established the foundations of this field by examining how Chinese literature and cinema narrate violence, historical rupture, and the dilemmas of collective memory. Their works share a common focus: how cultural production negotiates the tension between state-led narratives of the past and alternative or marginalized modes of remembering.

Yang’s early analyses foreground how cinematic and literary representations of violence construct non-mainstream narrations of national history, particularly in the ways avant-garde fiction by Chinese intellectuals and artists mobilizes memory to recall social experiences otherwise marginalized in official accounts. David Der-wei Wang, meanwhile, situates Chinese cultural production within a long genealogy of narration of multiple campaigns of violence that have marked Chinese history since antiquity. More specifically, Wang argues that the brutality of historical experience, sometimes elided or domesticated in official narratives, demands a mode of reading attentive to what he terms “the monster that is history.” Together, these works suggest that trauma is not only a recurring theme in filmic and literary texts but also a structuring force shaping how history is imagined, narrated, and contested.

³ For other documentary treatments of the “comfort women” issue produced beyond mainland China, see, for example, *A Secret Buried for 50 Years: The Story of Taiwanese* (1998) (Taiwan); *Shusenjo: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue* (2018) (Japan); *Kokosuni* (2022) (South Korea); and the Canadian documentary *The Apology* (2016).

Among the most influential contributions is Yomi Braester's (2003, 2010, 2015) theorization of cultural memory in post-Mao China. In *Witness Against History* (2003), Braester proposes to reframe some of the works labeled as Chinese classics of modern culture (e.g. Lu Xun) and to shed light on the counter narrative and deeper critique to society that has been neglected. More specifically, in his later work (2015) Braester identifies three broad tendencies in the ways memory is negotiated in post-Mao cultural production. First, state-sponsored media may selectively reclaim and reframe remembrance, integrating historical events into officially sanctioned narratives. Second, dissident writers and artists often resist the recurrent erasures of public memory, generating counter-discourses that illuminate gaps, silences, and ideological distortions. Third, a more cynical or playful attitude toward forgetting can also emerge, treating memory as provisional, ironic, or detached from political accountability. As Braester suggests, literature and film frequently move among these positions, offering implicit critiques of triumphalist historiography by emphasizing rupture, contingency, and the limits of official narratives.

Wang Ban's (2004) reflection on history and memory further expands this discussion by drawing on Pierre Nora's seminal distinction between '*milieux de mémoire*' and '*lieux de mémoire*.' For Nora, '*milieux*' represent living environments in which memory is organically embedded, whereas '*lieux*' are constructed sites – monuments, museums, archives, dictionaries – where memory is preserved once it has lost its lived immediacy. Building on this framework, Wang (2004: 17-92) proposes the application of the notion of "critical historical consciousness", an interpretive stance that interrogates *how* historical discourse is produced, maintained, or contested in Chinese culture. This approach is particularly relevant to the study of war trauma in Chinese cinema, where the interplay between lived memory, historical representation, and ideological reconstruction is especially pronounced.

Within this evolving scholarly landscape, a significant turning point came with *A History of Pain* (Berry 2008), which offers a wide-ranging synthesis of trauma studies in both Chinese literature and film, and stands as the methodological base of the present work. Berry argues that the study of history should be expanded beyond traditional historiography to include an examination of how history is "presented, re-presented, and projected" in contemporary Chinese cultural texts (Berry 2008: 2). To conceptualize trauma within this framework, he draws on Joshua Hirsch's influential account of trauma as a crisis of representation rather than a discrete, fully transmissible event (Hirsch 2004: 15–16). In Hirsch's terms, extreme experiences may be felt

as exceeding inherited interpretive frameworks, leaving impressions that are only partially narrativized and that can persist through discontinuous recall, intrusion, or fragmentation, without being either straightforwardly integrated into memory or simply forgotten (Hirsch 2004: 15–16).

From this perspective, trauma emerges from the inability to integrate an event into shared frameworks of representation and, by extension, into collective memory. It marks a rupture in meaning – a destabilization of the cognitive and emotional structures through which individuals and communities make sense of the world.

Berry uses this lens to conduct a transversal reading of Chinese cultural production, from the writings of Lu Xun – where he locates the origins of China’s modern sensibility toward trauma – to cinematic and literary depictions of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre and the 1989 Tian’anmen crackdown. Drawing on Bakhtinian concepts of discourse and dialogism, he identifies trauma as generating both ‘centripetal forces’, which pull narratives toward official coherence, and ‘centrifugal forces,’ which push them toward fragmentation, heteroglossia, and transnational resonance.

What makes Berry’s intervention particularly important for the present study is his insistence that the central question is not simply *what* trauma represents, but how narratives are constructed around traumatic events, and at which points these constructions intersect with individual and collective memory. This emphasis positions film as a privileged medium for examining the tensions between the unspeakable and the visible, between personal testimony and national historiography.

At the same time, shifts in cinematic practice during the reform era opened new expressive possibilities for engaging with trauma and memory. The 1990s witnessed the emergence of an underground visual culture that approached contemporary life through observational and often critical perspectives. A pivotal example is Wu Wenguang’s 吴文光 *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (*Liulang Beijing* 流浪北京, 1990), widely regarded as the foundational work of China’s independent documentary movement (Pernin 2015). Filmed in the aftermath of the Tian’anmen protests, it follows a group of young creatives – artists, writers, and performers – living on the margins of Beijing society, capturing their internal conflicts, personal struggles, and disillusionments amid the tension between individual expression and social constraint. Moving beyond the conventions of the state-sanctioned ‘special topic film’ (*zhuantipian* 专题片), Wu incorporates unscripted interview segments and employs largely spontaneous, improvisational practices (Berry

2006: 134). Through its handheld camera and raw synchronous sound, *Bumming in Beijing* inaugurated a new mode of personal documentary that privileged authenticity, immediacy, and subjective experience over traditional didactic narrative structures.

Within this same turn toward the personal and the quotidian in the underground documentary cinema, Zhang Yuan's 张元 *Mama* (*Mama 妈妈*, 1991) offers an early, influential articulation of female experience in relation to trauma, and thus provides a useful point of reference for the present study. If Wu's film foregrounds the precarious lives of a post-1989 artistic milieu, *Mama* shifts the documentary impulse toward domestic space and a maternal voice. As Zhang suggests, the film draws on video interview material with Qin Yan, the screenwriter, who also appears onscreen as a distressed mother negotiating social prejudice while caring for her autistic son (Zhang 2012: 64). With minimal means, *Mama* registers care, exhaustion, and the emotional labor of endurance, advancing a mode of testimony grounded less in exemplary narratives than in embodied routine and the uneven temporality of suffering. Its attention to the home as a site of vulnerability and persistence, and to a woman's voice as a structuring perspective, also broadens the independent documentary field beyond predominantly male-centered marginal subjectivities toward gendered forms of lived experience. In this sense, *Mama* helps open a path for considering how female-centered accounts of pain, care, and survival can be articulated through observational strategies – an aesthetic and ethical orientation that becomes central, albeit in a different historical register, to Guo Ke's *Twenty Two*.

The turn toward independent filmmaking and more personal modes of narration also reshaped how memory could be articulated on screen. As Wang (2014: 26) observes in her survey of existing scholarship on the trope of memory, it is largely through independent cinema that memory itself assumes forms that may be read as “counterparts of the national and the official,” foregrounding “the personal, private, grassroots, experiential, oral, and bodily aspects of remembrance.” Such practices bring to the fore fragmented experiences and, at times, underground or alternative narratives that offer different perspectives on national historiography. This development is significant given that, in a socialist context, historical discourse is typically aligned with an official master narrative in which historiography has been closely tied to accounts of socialist revolution and national development. These narratives have tended to emphasize mass participation and collective progress, often subsuming individual or localized experiences under the broader rubric

of Party-guided national movements. In this sense, Wang continues, history in modern – and especially socialist – China has frequently operated as a hegemonic framework, organizing records of the past according to official priorities and ideological imperatives. Independent documentary, by contrast, has provided a space where more plural, intimate, and embodied forms of memory can emerge and complicate dominant understandings of the past.

Taken together, these developments not only transformed the aesthetic landscape of Chinese documentary filmmaking (Wang 2014, Berry 2025) but also created the conditions for works such as *Twenty Two*, in which trauma is approached through observational intimacy and the lived textures of memory. These theoretical and methodological perspectives frame the present study's reading of *Twenty Two* as a form of documentary "alternative memory" that reconfigures gendered wartime trauma in contemporary Chinese visual culture. At the same time, the film's intervention becomes clearer when set against the dominant templates of mainstream war cinema: the prominence of Nanjing narratives has produced a powerful repertoire of spectacularized atrocity, heroic resolution, and redemptive arcs, yet it also leaves a representational gap for the "comfort women" system – a structural regime of sexual slavery whose afterlives are marked by stigma, silence, and the long temporality of bodily harm. Recognizing the centrality of historical cinema in the articulation of modern understandings of the past (Rosenstone 2024), this shift in form and narrative is consequential: it reframes remembrance as a situated cultural practice that can function as a site of mourning (Winter 1995, 2010), while drawing attention to the "structural roots" of silence – "Something is always left out while something else is recorded" (Trouillot 1995: 49). Thus, *Twenty Two* makes visible not only what is remembered within a national horizon, but how memory is mediated, narrated, and ethically staged on screen at the limits of traumatic recall.

3. The Sino-Japanese War in Chinese Feature-Films: Narrating the Nanjing Massacre

Known also as the "Rape of Nanjing," the Nanjing Massacre refers to the six-week period of mass killing and sexual violence that followed the Japanese army's occupation of the city in December 1937. According to estimates cited in both Chinese and international scholarship (Chang 1997; Yamamoto 2000; Yoshida 2006), hundreds of thousands of civilians and disarmed soldiers were killed, while tens of thousands of women were subjected to rape and sexual

slavery. As one of the most traumatic episodes in modern Chinese history, the massacre has become a central site of remembrance and a recurring subject in Chinese cinema. For the purposes of this article, Nanjing films matter less as an exhaustive corpus than as a dominant representational template through which wartime trauma – and, frequently, gendered national suffering – has been made legible within mainstream production.

The broader field of East Asian war film studies has been advanced by works such as *Chinese and Japanese Films on the Second World War* (Tam, Tsu & Wilson 2015), which outline how cinematic narratives participate in national memory-making. Within this context, a significant strand of scholarship has focused specifically on representations of the Nanjing Massacre. Building on influential early analysis such as Berry (2001), scholars including Trausch (2012), and Van den Troost (2015) have explored how films depicting this event construct trauma onscreen, noting that the latter suggests – albeit cautiously – that Nanjing Massacre films may be understood as a genre in their own right, and can be productively analyzed through the lens of trauma cinema. Nonetheless, Berry’s (2001) comparative study of three key works – *Massacre in Nanjing* (Tucheng xuezheng 屠城血证, dir. Luo Guanqun 罗冠群, 1987), the Hong Kong production *Black Sun: The Nanjing Massacre* (*Hei taiyang: Nanjing datusha* 黑太阳：南京大屠杀, dir. Mou Dunfei 牟敦芾, 1995), and Wu Ziniu’s *Don’t Cry, Nanking* (1995) – remains a nodal reference while the first two foreground graphic violence and shock aesthetics, *Don’t Cry, Nanking* adopts a more expansive narrative frame that enables greater character development, even as it remains constrained by melodramatic conventions and the difficulty of producing coherence around catastrophe. Despite their differences, these films also consolidate a repertoire of recurring motifs – such as the International Safety Zone, the weeping child, the endangered pregnant woman, and closing captions invoking the “300,000” death toll – that function as cinematic memorial devices and help stabilize an authoritative narrative of national trauma.

A major turning point came with Lu Chuan’s *City of Life and Death* (2009), produced by Han Sanping 韩三平, whose black-and-white cinematography and unsettling inclusion of a Japanese soldier’s perspective generated intense debate. Kraicer (2010) characterizes the film as “post-main melody cinema”, insofar as it departs from state-centered heroic frameworks and foregrounds the ambiguity and chaos of wartime experience. This trajectory culminates, in a different register, in Zhang Yimou’s commercially oriented *The Flowers of War* (2011), widely discussed for its synthesis of trauma, gender, and nationalist

sentiment (Meilicke 2012; Yang 2014; An, Chen & Hong 2015; Li 2022; Jiang 2024). Particularly incisive is Meilicke's argument that *The Flowers of War* extends a recurring pattern in Chinese trauma cinema, in which female bodies become symbolic sites through which national history and suffering are negotiated. Set in a church compound in occupied Nanjing, the film juxtaposes convent schoolgirls with a group of prostitutes, developing a narrative of self-sacrifice: the prostitutes volunteer to "sing at a dinner" for Japanese officers in the girls' stead – a euphemism for mass rape (Meilicke 2012: 60). Critics have argued that the plot hinges on a problematic hierarchy of purity, implying that safeguarding the girls' "innocence" becomes a metonym for safeguarding the nation, and raising the question of whether the film's heightened visual aesthetic risks aestheticizing atrocity and reinscribing a moral economy of purity and sacrifice.

Despite their formal differences, these Nanjing-centered works converge in establishing a dominant grammar for making wartime trauma legible within mainstream cinema: one that privileges narrative climax, visual power, and morally charged scenarios of sacrifice, while repeatedly mobilizing women's bodies as condensed emblems of national violation and redemption. This grammar has been historically effective in consolidating a shared repertoire of remembrance, yet it also has clear limits. The "comfort women" system cannot be easily contained within a cathartic arc of revelation and closure. It marks a structural regime of sexual slavery whose aftermath unfolds through stigma, silence, and the long temporality of bodily harm – forms that sometimes remain peripheral, or are rendered only obliquely, within spectacle-driven conventions. It is against this representational horizon that Guo Ke's *Twenty Two* becomes especially illuminating, not as an exception to wartime memory on screen, but as a formal and ethical opening toward the conditions under which testimony can be offered, sustained, or refused, and toward the ways silence itself can be made visible as a historical trace.

4. Case study: *Twenty Two*

Twenty Two emerges from a complex process that begins in independent documentary practice, supported by a crowdfunding activity, and later intersects with state-sanctioned forms of remembrance. The project originated as Guo Ke's independently produced *Thirty Two* (2014), which documented the testimonies of thirty-two surviving "comfort women" (Song & Liu 2018). While *Thirty Two* initially screened through festival circuits – winning the 2013 China Documentary Academy Award for Best Photography (Cai Tao) and

receiving nominations at the 2014 American Documentary Film Festival – *Twenty Two*, whose title reflects the number of women still alive when the filming began, opened to modest box office returns but gradually gained visibility through word-of-mouth on social media (Zhang & Fang 2024). It eventually attracted broader public attention, including national media coverage and English-language publicity on China Global Television Network (CGTN) (Li B. 2017, Li J. 2017, Han 2017). In 2017, the film received the Special Award of the “Five-One Project” from the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CCP and the Propaganda Department of the Sichuan Provincial Party Committee for the Construction of Spiritual Civilization. This award is generally described as supporting mainstream cultural development, encouraging educational or value-oriented content, and recognizing works that align with themes emphasized by official cultural policy. It was also promoted by institutions such as the Memorial Hall of the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre by the Japanese Invaders (*Qinhua rijun Nanjing datusha yunan tongbao jinianguan* 侵华日军南京大屠杀遇难同胞纪念馆) in Nanjing (Xia 2017).

This evolution demonstrates how individual acts of testimony can be absorbed into nationally curated modes of commemoration – a dynamic consistent with Braester’s theorization of post-Mao memory politics, in which historical events are acknowledged yet reframed within ideologically acceptable narrative forms. *Twenty Two* therefore occupies a liminal position, being situated between grassroots documentation and, later, national memorialization.

For the purposes of this study, however, the film’s institutional repositioning constitutes context rather than the analytical core. What is central here is how the film itself develops a different ethics of witnessing to mainstream media. Through silence, extended observational sequences, and sustained attention to aging female bodies, *Twenty Two* foregrounds personal testimonial presences long marginalized in mainstream feature films. In doing so, it reconfigures the relationship between individual recollection and collective remembrance.

4.1 Analysis: Voice, Silence, and the Cinematic Construction of Memory

This section examines how *Twenty Two* constructs a female-centered memory of wartime trauma through its documentary form, paying particular attention to the articulation of voice and silence. Drawing on the methodological framework of film analysis and on trauma studies, it interrogates the central

question of how Guo Ke's documentary gives shape to experiences that have long remained marginalized within mainstream cinematic representations of the Sino-Japanese War.

Twenty Two unfolds over ninety-nine minutes and develops an aesthetic of observational intimacy that emerges from Guo Ke's multi-year effort to record the lives and voices of survivors across various regions of China, including Shanxi, Heilongjiang, and Hainan. The film's opening sequence already signals the stylistic and ethical orientation that will guide the narrative. After the 'longbiao 龙标' (dragon seal) certifying State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) official approval appears on screen, there is a fixed-camera image of the snowy landscape of Yu County in Shanxi. Filmed from above, the scene is marked by absolute stillness: the pale sky, the whiteness of the snow, and the quiet desolation of the terrain suggest a suspension of time. Traditional Chinese music accompanies this tableau. Although it first evokes a ceremonial atmosphere, it is soon revealed to be the music of a funeral procession – the funeral of Chen Lintao 陈林桃 (1921-2014), a former comfort woman whose death is announced through a loudspeaker by Zhao Wenjie 赵文杰 of the China "Comfort Women" Issue Research Center (*Shanghai Shifan Daxue Zhongguo Weianfu Wenti Yanjiu Zhongxin* 上海师范大学中国慰安妇问题研究中心). With this gesture, the film situates the spectator not only at the threshold of a narrative but within a space of mourning.

The landscape in this opening shot functions as a silent witness, indifferent yet inexorably linked to the violence that unfolded decades earlier. Its return in the final sequence suggests that trauma persists beyond the lifetimes of individuals, embedded in the very materiality of history. Although the film begins with this wide, contemplative framing, the montage of *Twenty Two* soon shifts to a markedly more intimate visual grammar. The documentary relies heavily on close shots and details – faces, hands, eyes, medicines, cigarettes, house paper decorations, dolls, cooking pans – as well as on side and tracking shots that situate the women within their everyday environments. These choices keep the viewer in close proximity to both the survivors and the small gestures through which they inhabit memory. Their homes – at times visibly deteriorated or left largely unrepaired, with brick *kang* beds and paper-covered windows – become extensions of their bodies; Guo uses them to represent material traces of decades of poverty, marginalization, and social neglect. They are survivors (*xingcunzhe* 幸存者). Table 1 lists the names of all those featured in the documentary, including available dates of birth and death. According to

publicly available information (as indicated, for example, in the interview to the director published in Li J. 2017), fourteen of these women have since passed away. Notably, the documentary's closing credits include additional names beyond those who appear onscreen, bringing the total number remembered to twenty-six and underscoring the film's broader commemorative intention.

Surname and Name	Date of Birth and Death
Zhang Xiantu 张先兔	1926-2015
Li Xiumei 李秀梅	1928-2014
Liu Mianhuan 刘面换	1927-2012
Zhang Gaixiang 张改香	1924-2014
Chen Lintao 陈林桃	1921-2014
Pian Huanying 骈焕英	1928
Hao Juxiang 郝菊香	1922-2016
Ren Lan'e 任兰娥	1931-2016
Zhao Lanying 赵兰英	1923-2016
Liu Gailian 刘改连	1925
Liu Fenghai 刘风孩	1924-2017
Cao Heimao 曹黑毛	1922-
Li Fengyun 李风云	1921-2016
Mao Yinmei 毛银梅	1922-2017
Chen Yabian 陈亚扁	1927-2017
Huang Youliang 黄有良	1927
Chen Liancun 陈连村	1926
Fu Meiju 符美菊	1928-2017
Wang Zhifeng	1928

王志凤	
Fu Guiying 符桂英	1919-2015
Wang Yukai 王玉开	1920-2014
Lin Ailan 林爱兰	1925-2015
Li Meijin 李美金	1926
Li Ailian 李爱连	1928
Wei Shaolan 韦绍兰	1920
He Yuzhen 何玉珍	1921-2004

Table 1: Names and life dates of the women portrayed in *Twenty Two*

Within this intimate frame, silence emerges as one of the film's most expressive narrative tools. Throughout the documentary, silence not only fills the environmental shots and detail-oriented frames – branches swaying in the wind, pots simmering on the fire, cats moving between houses – but, more importantly, functions not as an absence but as a form of testimony. For some women, the act of remembering becomes so overwhelming that speech simply collapses: for example, Mao Yinmei – a Korean survivor who renamed herself with a Chinese name in honor of Mao Zedong as an expression of hope for a different future – after recounting fragments of her past, brings the conversation to an abrupt close: “I’m done talking. I don’t want to talk about it anymore” (*Wo shuowan le, wo bu shuo le, bu shuo le* 我说完了, 我不说了, 不说了). Others fall into tears after a few words recounting their past, such as Li Ailian. Others, like Liu Fenghai, refuse to appear before the camera, and their withdrawal is a reminder that trauma often elides narrativization. Still others hesitate out of concern for how their children and relatives might interpret the shame attached to their histories. In Mao Yinmei’s case, her daughter learned not only that she had been adopted but also of her mother’s past as a comfort woman through a televised report. In all these instances, silence acquires a representational density that spoken testimony alone cannot convey. It becomes a mode of presence, showing the limits of what can be articulated and what has been silenced.

Memory in *Twenty Two* is not constructed by the survivors alone. Relatives, researchers, journalists, local public officials, and volunteers from

different areas of Asia (China, Japan, Korea) occupy important positions within the film's narrative texture. Family members frequently appear alongside the women, offering physical support, clarifying details, or simply sharing moments of silence and tears – gestures that reveal the intergenerational tensions inherent in recounting traumatic histories. Figures such as Zhao Wenjie, the Korean photographer Ahn Sehong (whose work links the Chinese and Korean experiences of comfort women, namely JUJU Project),⁴ and the Japanese volunteer Komeda Mai in Hainan contribute to a polyphonic reconstruction of the past. Their presence not only situates the women's stories within broader transnational networks of remembrance but also underscores the collaborative and, at times, contested nature of historical recovery. Moreover, their interactions with the survivors extend beyond documentation: in several instances they actively assist the women in their daily lives, including helping with the repair or renewal of their homes, as in the case of Li Fengyun. Through these multilayered engagements, the film highlights how remembering the past becomes an ongoing, relational practice shaped by care, solidarity, and cross-cultural engagement.

The film reinforces its commemorative function through the intermittent use of intertitles – white text on a black background – providing historical context and statistical data. For example, here is reported the first intertitle (see Table 2).

在日本侵华战争（1937-1945）的八年间，先后有 20 万中国女性被迫为日军“慰安妇”。大部分女性在当时被残害至死或承受不了屈辱而自杀，只有一小部分幸存下来。	During Japan's eight-year occupation of China (1937-1945), around 200,000 Chinese women were forced into sexual slavery and designated as "comfort women" by the Japanese military. Most were tortured to death or committed suicide due to the unbearable humiliation. Only a very small number survived.
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Table 2: First intertitle in *Twenty Two*.

These textual interruptions punctuate the observational rhythm of the documentary, anchoring individual stories within the broader historical violence of the comfort women system. They operate as a pedagogical tool, but also as a memorial gesture, reminding the viewer that personal testimony is

⁴ The JUJU Project is an online portal that gathers testimonies from survivors of the system of sexual slavery enforced by the Japanese military across Asia, moving beyond the label of 'comfort women' and placing their personal narratives at the center. See JUJU (2020).

inseparable from structural history, thus the link between micro-history and macro-history.

The narrative that gradually unfolds in *Twenty Two* encompasses an extensive constellation of traumatic experiences, each rooted in the specific historical conditions of the Japanese occupation yet reverberating far beyond the wartime period. Many of the women recount being violently abducted from their homes – taken not only from villages across northern and southern China but also from Korea – and transported to unfamiliar locations where they were cut off from kinship networks and deprived of any possibility of return. Once captured, they were confined within the spatial regimes of the “comfort station” (*wei’ansuo* 慰安所): sometimes in urban centers such as Wuhan, where brothels operated under military administration – or connected to brothels in Hiroshima, Kobe, and Osaka – and at other times in remote rural encampments where surveillance and isolation compounded the violence. The women’s testimonies describe repeated sexual assault as a routine and enforced structure of daily life. To this were added the burdens of forced labor, tasks such as washing uniforms, sewing shoe soles, singing on command, or climbing trees to pick fruit. Survivors recount that any refusal was met with immediate threats of physical violence, including confinement, beatings, being stabbed with bayonets, or even seeing one’s house burned to ashes. This was a stark reminder that forced labor and sexual slavery operated within a continuum of abuse that included coercion and terror. The physical consequences of these abuses were often irreversible. Several women speak of injuries that resulted in lifelong infertility, a condition that not only marked their bodies but also affected their social status in the postwar decades, leading some to adopt children from other families in an effort to rebuild forms of kinship. Many women, such as Li Meijin, also report persistent physical pain into old age – especially chronic leg pain – which they associate with the years spent fleeing into mountainous areas.

Linguistic memory constitutes another layer of trauma. Several women recall being compelled to speak Japanese to satisfy their captors, a practice that functioned simultaneously as symbolic subjugation and as a material discipline of the body. For some, language domination remained accessible decades later. Mao Yinmei, for instance, acknowledges that her memories are uneven – “Some things I remember, some I don’t” (*you jide yidian, you bu jide yi dian* 又记得一点, 又不记得一点) or “I just can’t remember” (*jubuzhu* 记不住) – yet she can still recite in Japanese the phrases she was forced to utter as “Miss Shiro” (*Shiro chan* しろちゃん). With unsettling immediacy, she slips back into the deferential posture of a “comfort woman,” performing deep bows and

reenacting the scripted invitation for her abusers to “make themselves comfortable.” The scene makes visible how linguistic and bodily impositions have persisted as embodied memory, resurfacing involuntarily long after the historical violence itself (see Table 3).

しろちゃん！	Miss Shiro!
しろちゃん、はい！	Miss Shiro, yes!
[...]	[...]
いらっしゃいませ、どうぞ。	Welcome, please sit down.
いらっしゃいませ、どうぞ。	Welcome, please sit down.
[...]	[...]
お入りください。	Please come in.
[...]	[...]
いらっしゃいませ。	Welcome.
どうぞ。	Please sit down.

Table 3: Japanese-language phrases recalled by Mao Yinmei from her enforced role as “Miss Shiro.”

Guo uses such moments to argue how linguistic violence endures as a deeply embodied form of memory: not merely a recollection, but a rehearsed habitus engraved into voice, gesture, and identity. The loss or transformation of identity extended even further. For example, cut off from their families for years, some women were presumed dead or even disowned, while others fashioned new names and affiliations to anchor themselves within reconfigured social worlds. In showing these experiences, Guo represents how the persistence of forced language and fractured identity testifies to the lasting imprint of trauma. The film thus constructs trauma as a force that resists erasure, resurfacing in the mechanical memory of the body and in the fragile continuities of selfhood.

Trauma did not end, however, with Japan’s defeat in 1945. In the decades that followed, many of these women faced profound social stigmatization within their own communities. During the Cultural Revolution, some were even accused of having collaborated with the Japanese (or “Japanese devils”, *Riben guizi* 日本鬼子), and their histories of coercion were overwritten by the political logics of the era. Others, such as Cao Heima, who nearly lost her ability to speak, and Lin Ailan, received “good citizen certificates” (*liangminzheng* 良民证) and commemorative medals from Chinese public institutions. In the film, they display these documents with evident pride, often recalling the Chinese Communist Party’s role in liberating their regions from Japanese occupation or

noting that the government has formally acknowledged the weight of their suffering.⁵ Guo includes these later experiences of shame, misrecognition, shifting political narratives, and selective rehabilitation to reveal how wartime violence continued to shape their lives long after the war's end, producing new layers of trauma that accumulated across the twentieth century.

At the same time, *Twenty Two* captures moments in which survivors articulate subtle forms of agency. Some women recall acts of defiance – killing Japanese soldiers, stealing weapons, or surviving gunshot wounds, as for the case of Lin Ailan – while others recount memories tinged with irony, such as mocking an aging perpetrator who had once abused them. These recollections do not undo the violence they endured, but they complicate a purely passive framing of victimhood. By foregrounding these gestures, the film reveals how resilience, however fragile, coexists with trauma, allowing the survivors to assert presence and personhood within narratives long dominated by silence.

The film concludes by returning to the funeral announced in the opening sequence. The camera follows the coffin, carried by men through the village, with family members, neighbors, and the film crew forming a collective procession. The final aerial shot mirrors the opening one, but the season has changed, as winter gives way to spring. The transformation suggests both continuity and renewal, inviting the viewer to contemplate the temporal rhythm of memory, where the past does not disappear but is transformed through acts of communal acknowledgment. The closing intertitles present short statements from the women, coming from different parts of China – reflections on life, endurance, and the desire for peace. Their words function as epitaphs, but also as affirmations of agency. Guo uses them to remind the viewer that, despite the devastating violence they endured, these women insist on the value of life, on the importance of remembering, and on the hope for a world without war (see Tables 4-5).

Quotation	Translation
日头出来点点红 照进妹房海空 来还越空越好要 只愁命短不愁穷	The sun comes up with its red rays Shining onto the empty rice jar in my room The more empty the jar, the more pretty Only worry that life is too short, not about poverty

Table 4: Closing intertitle – poem.

⁵ Propaganda posters with the effigy of Mao Zedong appear in the documentary hung to the walls, as in the house of Li Ailian.

Quotation	Translation
这世界真好，吃野东西都要留着这条命来看。 韦绍兰（广西幸存老人）	The world is so good, sustain your life to be witness to it, even if that means eating only wild vegetables. Wei Shaolan (Survivor, Guangxi Province)
谢谢你们。 毛银梅（湖北幸存老人）	Thank you. Mao Yinmei (Survivor, Hubei Province)
你们来看阿婆，阿婆就开心啊。 李美金（海南幸存老人）	I'm happy that you came to visit me. Li Meijin (Survivor, Hainan Province)
希望中国和日本要一直友好，不要在打仗，因为一旦打仗，会有许多人死去的。 陈林桃（山西幸存老人）	I hope China and Japan can make peace with each other. No more wars. Once a war begins, a lot of people may die. Chen Lintao (Survivor, Shanxi Province)

Table 5: Closing intertitle – quotations.

The closing intertitles gather brief reflections from the survivors – statements that function both as quiet epitaphs and as assertions of enduring agency. Lines such as “The sun comes up with its red rays... only worry that life is too short, not about poverty” transform deprivation into a meditation on survival, reframing suffering through a poetics of endurance and circular perspectives on life. Wei Shaolan’s remark extends this ethos, positioning survival as an ethical commitment rather than a passive state. Other utterances, such as “Thank you” or “I’m happy that you came to visit me,” invert the expected hierarchy between filmmaker, the subject, and the viewer – an inversion echoed in the closing acknowledgement, “thank you to every friend who has seen this film” (*ganxie guankan ben pian de mei yi wei pengyou* 感谢观看本片的每一位朋友). Rather than reinforcing a discourse of victimhood, these expressions assert hospitality, presence, and relational agency, foregrounding the act of sharing memory as a dialogic encounter. Finally, Chen Lintao’s hope that China and Japan “make peace” shifts the horizon of memory toward reconciliation, transcending national narratives of injury. Together, these closing quotations embody the film’s central gesture, namely: giving voice to the silenced, reclaiming testimony not through spectacle but through the everyday language of women who persist beyond trauma. This gesture is further reinforced visually by the film’s closing credits, which are graphically styled to resemble gravestones, which is a design

that underscores the imperative of remembrance and the ethical demand not to forget.

In its interplay of voice and silence, proximity and distance, *Twenty Two* constructs a documentary ethics grounded in attention, patience, and respect for the limits of representation. Rather than imposing narrative coherence on experiences that resist closure, the film allows memory to emerge through gestures, hesitations, silences, and the textures of daily life. In doing so, it offers an intimate and ethically attuned cinematic engagement with the history of the comfort women system in contemporary Chinese visual culture.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined how *Twenty Two* articulates female-centered memory and trauma through documentary form, showing that Guo Ke's approach, grounded in fragmented voices, silence, and embodied presence, advances an alternative ethics of witnessing within contemporary Chinese visual culture. In contrast to mainstream and often male-centered fictional narratives of the Sino-Japanese War, the film recenters elderly women whose lives have long remained at the margins of both historiography and cinema. Rather than reasserting a narrative of passive victimhood, *Twenty Two* foregrounds their agency and reveals how memory persists not only in spoken testimony but also in gestures, hesitations, and the everyday rhythms shaped by aging bodies.

Silence plays a central role in this process. Moments in which speech falters, tears interrupt recollection, or the women refuse to appear before the camera demonstrate the limits of narrativization and the ongoing work of survival. At the same time, the film insists on the corporeal traces of violence: bodies rendered infertile, legs that still ache from hiding in the mountains, or voices that involuntarily reproduce the Japanese phrases once imposed on them after years. Guo uses domestic spaces in visible disrepair to further extend embodied memory into the material environment, suggesting that trauma is preserved not only in psychological or linguistic form but also in the textures of everyday life. The analysis therefore shows that *Twenty Two* constructs trauma as a layered and somatic condition, carried in muscles, scar tissue, and habitual gestures as much as in verbal recollection.

The film also occupies a transitional position between an independently initiated project and its later incorporation also into state-approved memorial frameworks. This trajectory highlights the complex interplay between grassroots testimony and institutionalized remembrance. Although *Twenty*

Two eventually circulated through official commemorative channels, it also resists monumentalization through its insistence on the ordinariness of survival, visible in scenes of cooking, smoking, joking, or receiving visitors. In doing so, the film expands the possibilities of documentary aesthetics and invites viewers to consider how trauma can be represented ethically when the survivors' voices and silences are themselves fragile historical traces.

Finally, the film demonstrates that memory in this context is never purely individual. It emerges through intergenerational and transnational networks involving family members, researchers, students, journalists, and volunteers from China, Korea, and Japan. These interactions reveal *Twenty Two* as part of a wider constellation of remembrance in which personal experience intersects with collective and cross-border efforts to confront a painful and contested history.

Several avenues for further enquiry emerge from this study. First, *Twenty Two* invites comparative analysis with other East Asian documentaries on "comfort women," including works from Korea, Japan, and the Philippines; such a standpoint, central to the aims of this Dive-IN volume on the narratives on war and trauma in a female-focused perspective, would clarify how distinct national contexts shape practices of testimony, visual remembrance, and public engagement with this shared history. Second, a more sustained examination of silence as a transnational documentary strategy in trauma cinema could deepen our understanding of how the unsaid and the unsayable operate as forms of historical knowledge. Finally, *Twenty Two* opens a space for thinking about aging and gender in documentary practice: how older female bodies function as sites of memory, and what ethical considerations arise when filming individuals at the end of their lives.

Taken together, these lines of enquiry demonstrate the broader significance of *Twenty Two* beyond its immediate historical context. The film stands as a crucial intervention in the cinematic politics of memory, showing that even the softest voices and, at times, the silence between them, can speak with enduring force.

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