

Conflicts, bodies, memories. Globalizing Female Narratives of War and Trauma in East Asia.

Editors' Introduction

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On 9 June 1945, twenty-one year old Maruyama Miyoko fled from her job at a watch company through the streets of Nagoya, while American aircraft systematically destroyed Japanese civilian life through strategic bombing. She saw women clad only in their work trousers (*monpe*), dragging along children, in a sea of fire. In the course of finding shelter, she encountered one of the empire's most feared agents—the Military Police (*Kempeitai*). The soldier, staggering forward with tears streaming down his face, blurted out to her: 'This is worse than being on the battlefield' (Mainichi shimbunsha 1971: 195). Only six years prior, on 4 August 1939, Chen Guifang, who was only a primary schoolgirl, watched Japanese aircraft kill her father and mother while raiding Chongqing, leaving her homeless and with no family support.

My father was struck in the head by shrapnel, my mother's belly was blown open, and I received injuries to my head, nose, and a chunk of flesh was torn from my arm ... I was seven years old ... it was only when I came home from the hospital that I learned my family was dead (Li 2019: 72).

Apart from the United States, most countries involved in WWII experienced the war as one in which the boundary between soldier and civilian was quite porous. Nevertheless, the experiences of women in wartime, both at the front and in the rear areas, are still poorly understood, despite a growing corpus of oral histories, visual art, cinematic representations, and diaries. This number of

DIVE-IN presents new research on women's experiences of war, violence, and trauma in East Asia. Now at the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, we examine the conflict and its subsequent legacy, devoting space to historical narratives, memories, media, and literary representations of war and violence in the latter half of twentieth century East Asia. Here we aim to add varied narratives and diverse forms, thus providing necessary reflections for the understanding of a recent past that has proved politically difficult in the region. Beyond the East Asian theatre, we also hope to contribute to the gendered history of war and its aftermath.

The collection contains a variety of expertise, sources, and approaches, varying from studies in literary criticism (Gasdia, Naranjo-Lobato, and Teodorescu) to mediatization including public discourse (Zhu), art (Alvau), cinema (Lepri), and memoirs (Dauksyte); finally, the articles by Guo and Pessot present surveys on women's collective agency in frameworks of justice. Despite such diverse approaches, the nine contributions have several elements in common. First, they all focus on women's point of view, in contrast with representations of female victimisation – a perspective historically so common that critics sometimes described these cultural depictions as 'tinged with a trace of sadism' (Hung 1989: 154; also cf. Edwards 2013). By presenting female subjects and fictional characters as historical agents rather than mere recipients of aggression, the essays here insert women's counter-narratives in contexts of conflict and post-conflict exploitative sexual relations and violence, often connecting these themes to the evolution of interpersonal relations and sexuality. In this way, the articles aim to unsettle official narratives that were shaped by various states, and to re-connect wartime violence with the peacetime patriarchy that surrounded it (Masson 1999), thus refocusing the history of post-WWII East Asia through the lens of women and their children.

Second, all articles highlight the agency of the survivors in processes of trauma elaboration, collectively or individually, as well as in the transformation of society and in the making of a new public discourse. Women-centred narratives emerge as powerful tools, capable of disrupting the patriarchal cycle of trauma and of causing disquiet in the institutionalized control mechanisms over women's bodies, ultimately, proposing alternative constructions of nation-building.

Third, while restricting themselves to the analysis of traumatic memory as expressed in the first person, most articles also analyse inherited trauma, thus expanding the critical reflection on inter-generational memory; such an approach follows the theoretical frameworks of renowned scholars such as

Cathy Caruth (1996), Dominick La Capra (2016), and Marianne Hirsch (2012). Ever since the inception of trauma studies in the 1990s, the field has developed as a vibrant space attracting cross-disciplinary collaboration – mostly integrating psychology and literary studies in its inception. According to scholars in this field, representation of traumatic events is dauntingly complex because trauma itself challenges space and time frameworks and prior schemes of knowledge (Caruth 1996). The argument lies at the basis of various literary and cinematic experiments regarding trauma and memory, and thus fascinates the scholars who attend to the topic; as a consequence, perhaps, trauma has recently become a defining paradigm of our age (Kurtz 2018). For this reason, it is now all the more important to extend the geographic and cultural reach of trauma studies globally. As acknowledged by recent studies, non-Western cultures thus far have unfortunately been almost totally absent from the study of historical trauma (de Rogatis & Wehling-Giorgi 2022). By integrating an East Asian focus into trauma studies, this collection aims to fill an important gap and to provide new perspectives that will illuminate our understanding of an increasingly connected world.

Due to our focus on East Asia, the spectre of the Japanese Empire haunts all of the pieces in this collection. It does so both as a proximal cause of the proliferation of gender-based military violence in the Asia-Pacific region, but also as a centre of gravity for the various historical memory debates across modern media culture, which have all impacted international relations up to the present day (Rose 2004; Kirsch 2015). Japan's leaders oversaw the annexation of Taiwan (1895) and Korea (1910) and later on expanded their military and economic presence in China by establishing collaborationist 'puppet' governments. Eventually, the unresolved total war between the Empire of Japan and a united front of Chinese forces from 1937 was a direct cause of the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. This resulted in the rapid and destructive expansion of Japanese forces across Southeast Asia, which in turn destroyed the empire itself and ushered in an era of American hegemony in the region. Ironically for a polity that construed empire-building as a form of Asian 'liberation', Japanese forces often treated their 'Asian brothers' more harshly than the white colonialists they encountered, including women.

The costs of empire and total war will never be fully counted, but the widespread violence against women was always a part of this consideration. Despite claims that violence against women was neglected or forgotten, Chinese propagandists extensively covered the 'barbarity' of Japanese men during and after the war, in various media forms, across all parties and ideological divides;

after 1945, Japanese veterans published memoirs and diary accounts testifying to widespread violence, including against women (Ono et al. 1996; Laughlin 2002; Rosenfeld 2002; Cipris 2003; Yoshida 2006; MacKinnon 2008; Moore 2013; Yoshimi 2015; Coble 2015). The war crimes trials conducted by Allied forces after the war—in Tokyo, Nanjing, and Khabarovsk—consolidated the public awareness of violence against women, which was broadly disseminated in the media in China, Japan, Korea, and the West (Totani 2009; Kushner 2015). While useful for victorious powers in exposing the immorality of the enemy empire, crimes of sexual violence (including rape, the ‘comfort women’ system, and other forms of ‘sexual slavery’) were usually punished in trials of commanding officers alongside other offences done by their subordinates, which meant that very little justice was offered for Asian women against the men who had directly harmed them (Kushner 2015: 147–164; Wilson et al. 2017: 58–63, 68–72). The trial of the empire, so to speak, also meant that crimes committed by Japanese men against Koreans—or by Korean servicemen in Japanese imperial forces against Korean women, for example—were not considered. Thus, recognising military violence against women as a war crime was a step forward, as the post-war trials revealed it to be a ‘weapon’ against the enemy civilian population, but it occluded considerations of such aggression as a patriarchal tool of intimidation more broadly—even if the crime occurred within one’s own society (Roucaýrol 2020). Finally, women’s voices and perspectives were rarely heard.

Post-war governments in China, Taiwan, and Korea (as well as across Southeast Asia) consolidated power and moved away from the rhetoric of justice to reconstruction, economic cooperation, and reconciliation with post-war, democratic Japan, which was in an alliance with the United States. Nevertheless, Japanese scholars and activists archived important documents and voices concerning imperial war crimes throughout the post-war. Later, in China, following the ‘Reform and Opening’ era led by Deng Xiaoping from 1978, the emergence of ‘history activism’ during the 1980s made space for war crimes, trauma, and gender-based violence to all become salient again (Reilly 2006). In South Korea, it was the democratization process of the late 1980s that unleashed an open debate in civil society (Lee 2025). The silence of non-Japanese female victims of the empire was broken in 1991 by Kim Hak-soon – a former comfort woman, who decided to testify after a session of the Japanese Diet denied once again the involvement of the wartime government in the system of ‘sexual slavery’ (Nozaki 2005). Her story was broadcast on Japanese television and stimulated historians and activists to look for evidence and

elaborate new interpretations. The emergence of victims' testimonies and activism in China and Korea was significantly bolstered by long-standing Japanese academic criticism of war atrocities, memorial practices including reportage, and political activism within the 'peace movement' (Honda 1987; Yoshimi 2000, 2016; Gries, 2005; Seraphim, 2006).

As soon as debates around war responsibility, including 'comfort women', erupted within the Anglosphere in the 1990s, they brought attention back to the unresolved issues of trauma and justice, abetted by the critical gaze of foreigners. The renewed debate coincided with many victims communicating their traumas to their adult children and grandchildren, as explored in this issue of *DIVE-IN*. Revisionist scholars in Japan (and in Japanese studies internationally) attempted to exploit public ignorance of the long historical record on these issues, including ignoring Japanese academic work on war atrocities, which prompted responses from scholars, lawyers, and activists in Japan and elsewhere (see special 'Response' in Japan Focus, 2023).

In the (re-)construction of post-war East Asia, other themes conflate with the Japanese imperial expansion and with the consequences of the various acts of violence perpetrated on civilians in war theatres. East Asia was greatly impacted by the ideological setting of the Cold War, which created additional fracture and trauma. The articles in this collection confront especially with the cultural change generated by the US Occupation of Japan, the forcible relocation of China's Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) to Taiwan, as well as with the neglected tragedy of the Korean War and the belated democratization process in the South (Republic of Korea, ROK).

The editors of this collection particularly advocate the need to adopt a focus on inter-generational memory because women's stories and traumas tend to be forgotten in the post-war East Asian context for several reasons. Historically, armed conflict has been perceived as an activity typically carried out by men, and this is no different in the context of East Asian historiography. While the male-centric point of view is not necessarily supported by science (Ferguson 2021), human societies have long interpreted war in terms of hegemonic masculinity, connecting military engagement with idealized male roles of protector, aggressor, and warrior. While male narratives have traditionally been integrated into mainstream historical narratives and nation-building processes, women in conflicts have been associated with negative images. Not only have women been equated with a (sexually) violated national sovereignty, but they were also physically punished as collaborators who 'lay with the enemy', in East Asia and across Europe (Virgili 2000; Branche and

Virgili, 2011). In Japan, China, and Korea, a pre-eminent patriarchal order in the family and society explains why women's experiences are generally absent from war accounts or perceived as marginal, irrelevant, or even embarrassing, as it is the case of the 'comfort women'. In this broader cultural context, archiving women's accounts has been particularly challenging and has proven even harder in countries with lower literacy rates like China, with notable exceptions (Li 2009; Yu 2011).

Women are also largely missing from the Cold War history of East Asia, which has exacerbated their relative erasure from the history of WWII trauma. In spite of deep cultural changes aided by gendered perspectives in history and cultural studies, historical accounts of this period nevertheless have still privileged male-centric approaches, albeit with notable exceptions (Zheng, Hong and Szony 2010; Muehlenbeck 2017). The main reason for women's absence is that, once military conflict(s) ended, East Asian countries steered their gaze away from war tragedies to focus on achieving development and economic prosperity through a system characterised by male dominance. Pioneered by Japan and the 'Four Asian Tigers' (Taiwan, ROK, Hong Kong, and Singapore), the developmental state increased national wealth and greatly improved citizens' living conditions (Johnson 1982). Successful economic growth under such a system, regulated by conservative coalitions or authoritarian regimes, upheld traditional social structures and prioritized hierarchical roles in the family. Women's perspectives were thus neglected in favour of national progress. As Tilly and Scott argued in their seminal work, this should temper the view that industrialisation immediately emancipated women (Tilly & Scott 1978). From the 1950s, Japanese women were increasingly pushed from the industrial work force and labour unions in favour of higher pay for men; ironically, some of those women would become the teachers and activists who made archiving Japan's war crimes possible in its 'peace museums' (*heiwa shiryōkan*), well before such movements took off in China and Korea. In South Korea, within the framework of an already deeply misogynist society, the head-of-family system (in Korean, *hoju*, in Japanese, *koseki*), a custom which prescribed norms coherent with one (male) householder to whom all family members were subordinate, remained in place until 2005. Thus, the division of roles in the family was reproduced in the work environment, complementing and strengthening the national image (Nam 2010). As for China, there continues to be a lively debate about the role of the socialist state after 1949 in uplifting women's traditionally lower place in society. Mao's China transformed the values traditionally attached to the

division of labour, allowing women to have the same jobs as men in factories as well as in the countryside. While some scholars argue that Socialism helped improve gender and class equality in a male-dominated society (Hershatter 2012; Barlow 2004; 2020; Wang 2016; Kim 2020), others point to a profound misalignment between socialism and women's emancipation, which limited the use of 'gender' as a category of analysis well into post-Mao times (Evans 2008). Others even claim that the Socialist state exploited gender to achieve political aims, eventually erasing femininity (Yang & Yan 2017). In any case, while prewar patriarchal structures were irrevocably changed after 1945, patterns of male dominance continued to suppress women's voices while survivors were passing away year after year. This has created silences and distortions in the historical record that may prove to be impossible to properly amend.

Nevertheless, by adopting gender and, particularly, women's perspectives as a lens, it is possible to shed light on several asymmetries connected to a reactionary bipolar paradigm, which descended on East Asia during the Cold War. As recently highlighted by Endo Masako, the impact of the American occupation deeply influenced the making and remaking of womanhood in post-war Japan, eventually favouring the resurgence of nationalism (Endo 2025). In addition to this, the post-war resilience of authoritarian states in Taiwan and in South Korea until the late 1980s, despite the progress that was achieved by all the countries that received US support, obfuscated the experience of women during Japanese occupation. The ROK regime maintained not only a repressive and authoritarian posture, but also a staunch conservative attitude towards gender. It was, in fact, North Korea in 1995 that was the first to abolish the head-of-family system, whereas South Korea did it only in 2005, following a long-awaited democratization process (Nam 2010).

Arguably, the most unsettling consequence for the victims of gender-based wartime violence was the broader social reaction. Feminist approaches to the 'comfort women' in Japan, such as Yamazaki Akiko's 1972 book *Sandakan Brothel No. 8* (*Sandakan hachiban shōkan*, also a 1974 film), highlighted the abuse and embarrassment that adult women who had been trafficked as minors suffered well into the country's 'economic miracle'. In South Korea, because traditional feminine values praised chastity and virtue, many former 'comfort women' feared being humiliated once they shared their testimonies (Ahn 2019). While shame made them feel hesitant, women would also feel guilty for the embarrassment caused to their families, and possibly also to their nation. Rather than address the injuries of the past, in 2015 the governments of ROK and Japan agreed to not raise the issue ever again for the sake of good diplomatic and trade relations.

The victims were, thus, forgotten and cast aside (Lee 2025). The solution was then discarded by national governments, leaving ‘something that is a clear rights violation and a war crime’ to continue to be addressed as a political issue by NGOs and political activists (Akibayashi 2020).

Perhaps because of a general failure in political leadership, it has been left to social organisations and academics to pick up the slack. Since their inception in the 1990s, trauma studies have matured predominantly in Western academic spaces, contributing greatly to the elaboration of the post-war past and rapid changes in economic development, climate change, and technology. Inter-generational memory, in particular, has accompanied the elaboration of wartime horrors such as the Holocaust, as well as people’s displacement, migration, and political struggle in a divided Europe. In this respect, the concept of ‘post-memory’ as developed by Marianne Hirsch has provided a powerful tool to deal with collective pain, thus bridging the reflection from individual stories to communities and helping to create more knowledgeable and responsible European citizens. By refocusing on women-centred memory of trauma in an East Asian context, the present collection aims not only to address a neglected perspective, but also to expose the difficulties that come with these recollections. The (re-)remembering of the ‘comfort women’ issue—by the broader public at the end of the twentieth century, in any case—was undoubtedly a mixed blessing for victims and their loved ones.

From an academic point of view, dealing with historical and inter-generational traumas such as wartime sexual violence poses an important problem in terms of sources and methodologies. While attempting to rewrite a history of trauma from a gendered perspective is essential, it is also crucial to find diverse methodologies to engage with women’s stories. Hence, one of the central concerns of this special edition is how traumatic experiences have been described, shared, and remembered, which is inextricably linked with methodological concerns around media, genre, and historical memory. As the reader of the articles will be aware, many authors address historical trauma as represented in visual media such as film, art installations, and comics (Kr. manhwa, Jp. manga, Ch. manhua). Since Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* (1964), scholars have paid more attention to how media forms give shape and meaning to human experience, from the typewriter to digitization. Considering the interventions of scholars like Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), the degree to which history debates and ‘dark tourism’ have made trauma a form of mass entertainment is a difficult problem that future authors may wish to confront. Readers should therefore take note

how differently the depiction of sexual violence appears across the contributions here, when the medium is a documentary film versus a fictionalised novel, calling into question the extent to which the ‘memory’ of the past is a form of media representation.

At the same time, as Lewis Mumford once observed, even if a play is technically flawless, from the raising of curtains to the spectacle of practical effects, with no people on stage, it is meaningless (Mumford 1964); media representation is not simply a history of technological determinism, but the continual use of new technologies to co-constitute a shared culture of experience and memory. Consequently, similar themes emerge in the different articles in this special edition, despite the technological transformations of the last seventy-five years. If a novel, play, film, and comic all point to the importance of inter-generational memory, or the poverty of language to capture trauma, then this begs the question of how genres can synchronise and help generate self-expression across nations, generations, and history—a methodological question taken up by scholars such as John Frow in *Genre* (2006). However similar women’s experiences were, they must be articulated in order to be shared, and each culture will have its own scripts for doing so, some of which will inevitably fall into generic categories. For example, literary examples of women struggling with embodied trauma, and passing these experiences to other women in ways that challenge language and expression, have a long history in the West and in East Asia. Frequently, the authors who describe the hard lives women have led, have in fact been women themselves, from Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* (1918) to Higuchi Ichiyo’s *Takekurabe* (1894–5), Kang Kyŏng-ae’s *The Underground Village* (1936) to May Sinclair’s *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919). Even in works where sexual violence is not a main theme, like Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), or the route of transmission of trauma is not from mother to daughter, as in Ba Jin’s *Family* (1931), these influential works established a set of expectations and useful linguistic tools for how women would later express themselves about painful experiences in the past. It does not matter, ultimately, if individual authors have or have not read a specific work, because the cultural scripts they will ultimately utilise to represent the past are shaped by the mavens of literature, art, and cinema.

As argued in this critical introduction, women’s experiences of war and/or trauma are largely forgotten in the East Asian context. This circumstance makes it all the more important for the authors here to integrate direct recollections and inter-generational memory in order to recover narratives of the recent past. Lepri explores the most comprehensive experiment of memory collection that

directly involved the victims of the ‘comfort women’ system. By examining the documentary *Twenty Two* (Ershi’er 二十二, dir. Guo Ke 2015), she convincingly illustrates filmic approaches to a female-centred way of remembering. By looking at the cinematic construction of memory carried out in *Twenty Two*, the article presents an alternative to male-centred narratives that dominate the more heroic films shot in China about WWII. In particular, the elements of Guo’s alternative vision include durational framing, intimacy and, most notably, silence. The latter is not intended ‘as an absence but as a form of testimony’ because, for some women, ‘the act of remembering becomes so overwhelming that speech simply collapses.’ The contribution by Dauksyte also focuses on direct recollections but, in this case, the primary sources are the memoirs published by two survivors, namely: two women who, at the end of WWII, found themselves in Soviet-occupied territories— a Japanese woman in Sakhalin and a deported Lithuanian woman. Though profoundly different in terms of cultural background and life experience, both women share a solitary and marginalised existence after the conflict ends and publish their memoirs in the final phase of the Cold War. They both find a way to elaborate and, at least partially, heal, their trauma through writing. By drawing on the concepts of mediation and multidirectional memory, the article carries out a critical reading of the memoirs, highlighting complex intersectional images that defy feminine models normally accepted by society. Dauksyte convincingly argues that the two memoirs succeed in mediating ‘unfeminine’ experiences to their audiences because the two authors uphold appropriate (feminine) values and adhere to anti-Soviet and anti-communism. The contribution by Teodorescu presents an analysis of Yan Geling’s novel *The Flowers of War*, set during the 1937 Nanjing Massacre. Through her use of a cognitive-feminist framework, she explores how the massacre is represented as a female experience, highlighting the depiction of the main characters of the book, whose bodies become both sites of vulnerability and means of resistance and protection. Haunting memories from the War populate the article by Naranjo-Lobato, who proposes a novel analysis of the book *the Comfort Woman* by Korean-American author Nora Orja Keller. The fictional experience of a real system of sexual violence is mediated through the conflicting gazes of mother and daughter, and further problematised by the hyphenated identity of the daughter and of the author herself.

The theme of imperialist military expansionism and acts of violence in war theatres is less central in other articles, which specifically address Cold War-related asymmetries in three of the United States’ most important allies. By carrying out an in-depth study of the installation ‘Muzhiming’ by local artist

Wu Mali, Alvau delves into the memory of the KMT's forceful occupation of Taiwan, and of a subsequent nation-building process that was deeply imbued with patriarchal characteristics. The article argues that the wounds of the past would only be healed by dismantling those hierarchies that reduced women to silence, thus transforming female sadness and their passive roles into collective historical responsibility for the entire society. The article by Gasdia examines the painful consequences of a long-delayed democratisation process in the Republic of Korea. By focusing on Han Kang's novels *Human Acts* and *We Do Not Part*, the article studies the manifestations of the trauma of a massacre on the bodies and psyches of survivors. Han Kang's works incorporate spectral elements associated with physical pain, censorship, torture, and unresolvable grief, framing them not as magical realism but as an ethical imperative. Since the state has eliminated the physical evidence of the massacres, the memory of the deceased is confined to the 'impossible place' of literature. The tense atmosphere of the Cold War plays a more powerful role in Guo's article. This piece takes a close look at the reform of the Japanese prostitution law, revealing how the US-led occupation redefined local cultural tenets around sex work from the wartime era. While the Allied authorities established the pressures and conditions necessary for sex work's legal abolition, the adoption of Western models by Japanese elites prevented a critical assessment of the law's consequences. The article by Zhu explores how the consequences of the War of Resistance spilled out into public discourse during the profound social transformations from 1945. Massive population displacement and prolonged separation of families gave rise to extramarital relationships, in which women were known as 'resistance-war wives'. The phenomenon caused concerns about the restoration of the family and informed discussions on ideologies of gender, family, and the nation. Finally, the article by Pessot addresses the role played by transnational women's and feminist mobilizations in the processes of collective elaboration of wartime rape trauma. By comparing two case studies, the article spans from Europe to East Asia, including the systematic sexual violence perpetrated by the Serbian army during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the 'comfort women system' organized by the Japanese army during WWII.

The contributions collected in this special edition thus include not only the perspectives of women who experienced gender-based violence in the wartime past, but also new scholarly reflections on conceptual frameworks. The authors here aim at enriching, and potentially re-dressing, the study of contemporary entanglements between the West and East Asia during periods

of conflict and remembrance. By reinforcing the importance of gender within the thematic exploration of WWII, violence and trauma, and by highlighting transnational connections with European and American culture, we hope this publication will stimulate a re-consideration of intercultural perceptions of female trauma in history, memory, and scholarly work.

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