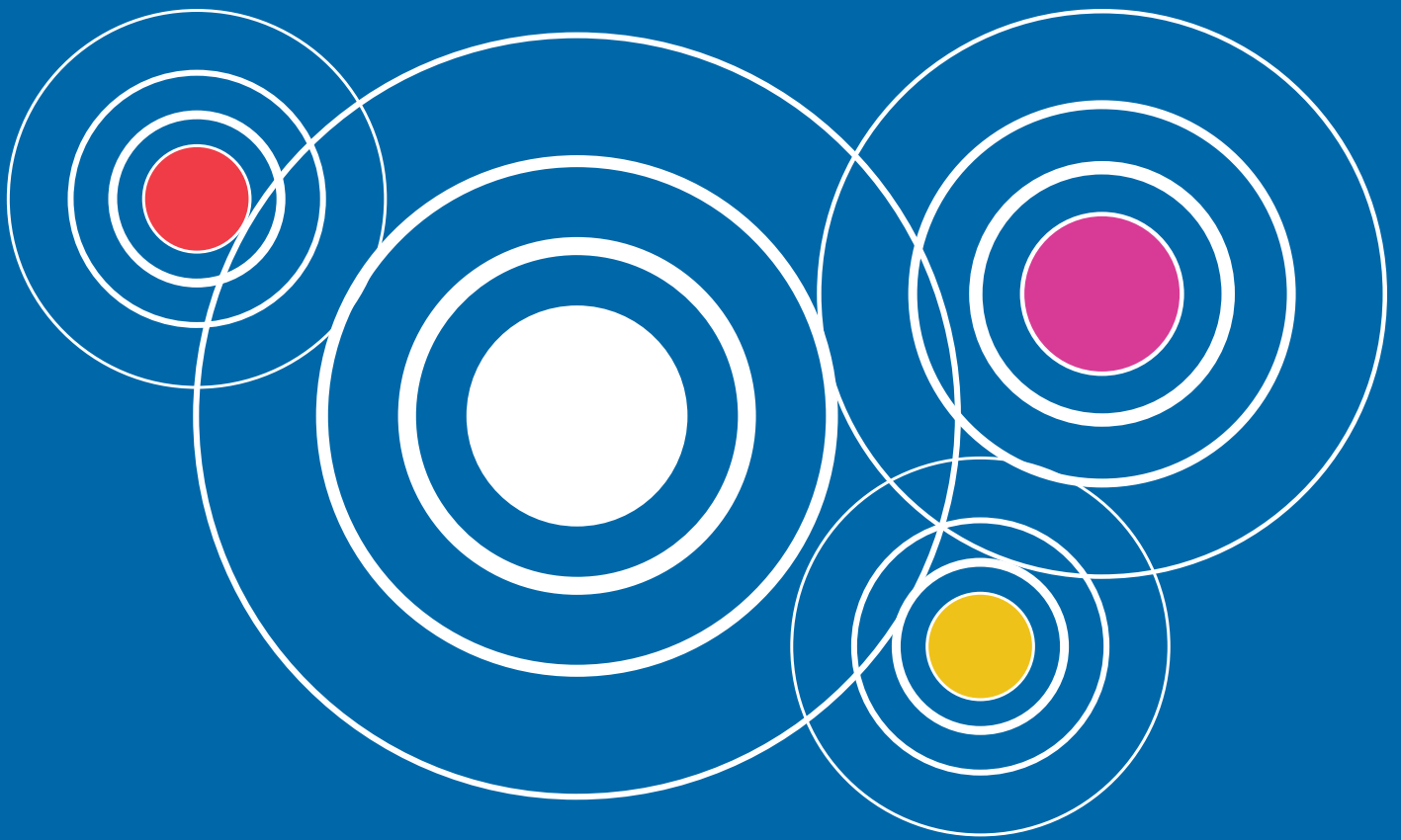




DIVE-IN

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
ON **DIVERSITY & INCLUSION**

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

DIVE-IN – An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion is a scholarly journal that takes a comparative and multidisciplinary approach to cultural, literary, linguistic, and social issues connected with diversity and inclusion.

The journal welcomes the submission of interdisciplinary contributions representative of various interests and methodologies, particularly linguistics, literature, philology, history, social sciences and economics.

DIVE-IN is a multilingual online publication with contributions in English, Italian, and the main languages of academic research. The targeted audience is specialists, as well as all those interested in the current epistemological debate on identity and environmental, cultural and linguistic challenges.



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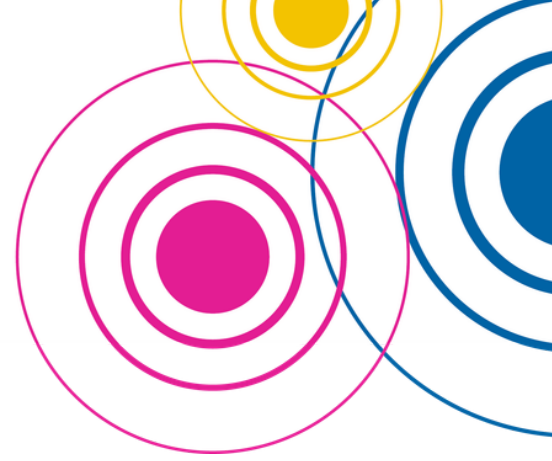
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Conflicts, bodies, memories. Globalizing Female Narratives of War and Trauma in East Asia.

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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Il suo dolore è anche il nostro. Riflessioni su corporeità, trauma e tristezza nell'opera di Wu Mali

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Abstract (English): This article examines Wu Mali's artwork *Mùzhì míng* (1997) as a critical lens to explore the interplay between corporeality, trauma, and female identity in contemporary Taiwan. Situated within the 1990s Taiwanization process and the commemoration of the 2-28 Incident, the study argues that official narratives of national healing were inherently patriarchal, elevating male victims to national heroes while marginalizing female experiences. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach merging visual studies and sociology, the paper demonstrates how Wu Mali challenges this exclusion. By employing socially engaged art, *Mùzhì míng* exposes the contradictions of official memory, acting as a counter-narrative that disrupts the patriarchal cycle of trauma. The artwork reveals that national "sadness" remains unresolved for women, highlighting the inadequacy of institutional healing processes. Ultimately, the study underscores the power of artistic expression in unveiling the gendered silences embedded within the construction of national identity.

Abstract (italiano): Il presente studio analizza l'opera *Mùzhì míng* (1997) dell'artista taiwanese Wu Mali come lente critica per esplorare l'interrelazione tra corporeità, trauma e identità femminile nel Taiwan contemporaneo. Nel contesto della Taiwanizzazione degli anni Novanta, la commemorazione dell'Incidente del 2-28 ha contribuito alla costruzione di una narrazione patriarcale della casa-nazione taiwanese, elevando le vittime maschili a eroi nazionali e relegando al silenzio le esperienze femminili. Attraverso un approccio interdisciplinare tra studi della cultura visuale e sociologia, l'articolo evidenzia come Wu Mali sfidi attivamente tale marginalizzazione, attraverso l'uso della sensibilità artistica e sociale come strumento per svelare le contraddizioni della memoria storica canonicamente proposta. *Mùzhì míng* non si limita a rappresentare la sofferenza, ma agisce come contro-narrazione che perturba il ciclo patriarcale del trauma: dimostrando che la tristezza non è risolta bensì silenziata, l'opera offre un modello estetico per la trasformazione del trauma, rivelando l'inadeguatezza dei processi di guarigione istituzionale che perpetuano l'esclusione di genere nella costruzione dell'identità nazionale.

Keywords Taiwan; trauma; memoria storica; arte socialmente impegnata; Wu Mali; Socially Engaged Art; Historical Memory.

1. Introduzione. ‘Taiwanizzazione’, ‘taiwanità’ e běntǔhuà 本土化

La storia di Taiwan si configura come un palinsesto complesso di fratture e ferite apparentemente insanabili. I processi di colonizzazione che hanno scosso questo arcipelago risalgono all’epoca delle grandi spedizioni colonialiste ispanico-olandesi (1626-1669), alle quali hanno fatto seguito, dapprima, larghi tratti di integrazione cinese sotto i Qing (1683-1895) e successivamente sotto l’Impero giapponese (1895-1945) (Roy 2003: 15). Risulta dunque evidente come questo territorio, apparentemente periferico nella cornice dell’Asia Orientale, sia stato storicamente considerato un polo nevralgico per le strategie geopolitiche globali. Sebbene formalmente l’era degli imperi nel loro senso più stretto possa considerarsi superata, la storia recente di Taiwan è stata ben lungi dall’intraprendere un lineare processo di stabilità. Al contrario, a partire dal 1945, anno in cui l’isola fu formalmente sottratta al Giappone e posta sotto l’amministrazione della Repubblica di Cina, Taiwan si è incamminata in uno dei suoi periodi storici più tesi, marcato dalla costante frizione tra le pulsioni unificatrici cinesi e le influenze esercitate dall’Occidente statunitense nell’area del Pacifico.

Al di là delle tensioni geopolitiche dello stretto, Taiwan va intesa come un arcipelago poliforme di identità. Per comprenderne le dinamiche, è imprescindibile analizzare l’impatto della cosiddetta ‘Taiwanizzazione’, emersa dopo la revoca della legge marziale nel 1987, che pose fine al regime dittatoriale instaurato dal Kuomintang a partire dal 1949, all’indomani della Guerra Civile Cinese (Jacobs 2013). L’erosione del sistema monopartitico basato sul Kuomintang aprì alla democratizzazione negli anni 1980-1990, obbligando, così, la classe politica ad abbandonare la sua storica agenda ‘sinizzante’ e favorendo un nuovo sentimento di unicità socioculturale sotto la pluralità della diversità taiwanese. A partire dagli anni Novanta, Taiwan comprese la necessità di promuovere una nuova idea di ‘taiwanità’ per garantire la sussistenza politica di fronte al suo isolamento diplomatico (Jacobs 2013). Paradossalmente, tale condizione divenne l’opportunità per forgiare una ‘comunità immaginata’ (Anderson 2006). Taiwan, in quest’ottica, non doveva che essere altro che l’immaginazione sociale degli individui che componevano il suo territorio, delimitata da caratteristiche chiare che la rendessero unica e distinta da altre comunità: il senso di sovranità, l’immaginazione collettiva del territorio e soprattutto la coesione sociale attraverso la promozione di folklori e tradizioni propriamente locali (Anderson 2006).

Politicamente, questo processo si tradusse nella standardizzazione culturale della costruzione nazionale. Lo Stato cercò legittimazione amalgamando il corpo sociale in un unico corpo politico (Vickers 2010), basato sui concetti del Táiwān yōuxiān 臺灣優先, ovvero il principio di ‘dare priorità a Taiwan’; e il dāngjiā zuòzhǔ 當家作主, letteralmente ‘essere padroni di sé stessi e prendere le proprie decisioni’ (Chang 2009: 30). Tale processo si strutturò attraverso il rifiuto passivo dei modelli continentali, proponendo al loro posto un riconoscimento attivo di una molteplicità culturale insita della ‘taiwanità’. Attraverso la riforma dell’istruzione del 1994, si promossero le tradizioni locali sostenendo che “la cultura taiwanese aveva poca influenza cinese, la letteratura taiwanese aveva i suoi meriti, Taiwan aveva una propria storia e tradizione, e il popolo taiwanese era molto diverso dai cinesi” (Chang 2009: 46). Nonostante ciò, la polarizzazione fra ‘cinese’ e ‘taiwanese’ terminò generando paradossalmente nuove esclusioni interne: pur rivendicando l’oppressione storica subita, la taiwanizzazione consolidò un quadro egemonico che ha semplicemente sostituito la vecchia struttura sinocentrica con una nuova gerarchia, altrettanto parziale ed escludente (Chen 2005). Questo pastiche identitario marginalizza ancora comunità indigene, abitanti delle isole minori e donne. Il revisionismo storico ha infatti elevato a martire un archetipo unidirezionale maschio, Hakka o Hoklo, celando una distribuzione diseguale del potere e perpetuando un sistema patriarcale dove la diversità è mera legittimazione statale (McIntyre 2013).

A partire da questa cornice, il presente articolo ha come obiettivo esplorare esattamente le fratture sociali che hanno caratterizzato Taiwan durante il suo processo di ridefinizione identitaria, utilizzando l’arte contemporanea e il suo uso pedagogico e pubblico come strumenti per l’elaborazione di narrative parallele alle prestabilite. In questo scenario, laddove la narrazione ufficiale, come vedremo, strumentalizza la memoria storica e i suoi traumi per legittimare una nuova narrazione statale essenzialmente patriarcale, l’arte contemporanea si configura come spazio privilegiato di contro-memoria e resistenza. In tal senso, il presente articolo prende come caso di studio paradigmatico l’opera *Mùzhì míng* 墓誌銘, traducibile come ‘epitaffio’, dell’artista Wu Mali. Tale creazione, presentata sotto forma di installazione artistica immersiva a metà cammino tra la monumentalità statuarica e la riproduzione audiovisiva, fu un’opera centrale della mostra *Bēiqíng Shēnghuá* 悲情昇華, spesso tradotta come *Sadness Transformed* (1997), celebrata nel Museo delle Belle Arti di Taipei (TFAM) che si analizzerà con maggiore dettaglio nel prosieguo dell’articolo. È esattamente grazie alla presenza di donne artiste taiwanesi come Wu Mali, che

è possibile dimostrare le fratture del discorso identitario taiwanese, e al contempo, riflettere sull'esclusione sistemica che le donne e i loro corpi hanno sofferto nella costruzione della narrazione della casa-nazione taiwanese. Come si vedrà nel caso di studio proposto, attraverso una prassi tra l'archivistica e l'estetica relazionale, Wu Mali esamina lucidamente il ruolo del dolore, del trauma e della corporeità femminile, portando alla luce le esperienze di quelle donne che il processo di taiwanizzazione ha relegato ai margini. Disvelando la tristezza e il lutto privato delle donne l'artista offre una testimonianza della ferita non riconosciuta, elaborando un modello estetico per la trasformazione dell'inadeguatezza della narrazione ufficiale.

Muovendo dalle premesse storiche poc'anzi delineate, il presente contributo si inserisce in un più ampio orizzonte di ricerca volto a decostruire le meccaniche della 'taiwanità' attraverso una lente metodologica dichiaratamente decoloniale e femminista. Tale approccio si impone come necessario per dare conto delle esperienze incarnate vissute dai collettivi storicamente marginalizzati dalla narrazione canonica, quali le donne, le comunità aborigene e gli abitanti degli arcipelaghi minori. A tal fine, si intende preliminarmente definire la costruzione identitaria taiwanese come un progetto intrinsecamente difettoso, fondato su una concezione di casa-nazione eterocentrica e patriarcale che, nel suo anelito alla coesione sociale, ha paradossalmente escluso dalla propria elaborazione ampi strati del tessuto sociale. L'analisi della 'genderizzazione' della narrazione ufficiale si fonda su un quadro teorico generale sostenuto da figure centrali del femminismo, quali Judith Butler¹ e Anne McClintock², dalle quali si attingono rispettivamente i concetti di 'performatività di genere' e 'famiglia nazionale'. Tale base concettuale viene integrata e arricchita dal dialogo con il contesto locale, in particolare attraverso gli studi di accademiche taiwanesi come Chen Hsiang-chun³, la cui ricerca s'incentra sull'estetizzazione e sulla genderizzazione del trauma nel contesto taiwanese; e Shen Hsiu-hua⁴, con la sua ricostruzione delle esperienze vissute dalle donne durante la legge marziale. In tal modo, lo studio mira a fornire le basi per decifrare la discorsività egemonica della Taiwan attuale.

¹ Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.

² McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. New York: Routledge.

³ Chen, Hsiang-chun. 2005. *Beyond Commemoration: The 2-28 Incident. The Aesthetics of Trauma and Sexual Difference*. Leeds, University of Leeds. (Doctoral dissertation).

⁴ Shen, Hsiu-hua. 1997. "查某人的二二八—政治寡婦的故事" [Il 2-28 delle donne: storie di vedove politiche]. Taipei: Yu-shan.

Attraverso l'analisi specifica del revisionismo storico del periodo dittatoriale, e in particolare della rilettura del celebre 'Incidente del 2-28' a fondamento traumatico della taiwanità, si procederà a interpretare tale operazione come una forma di monumento alla mascolinità eteropatriarcale performativa che legittima la casa-nazione. Contrapponendosi a questa visione ascritta dell'identità, che rielabora il trauma sociale attraverso una nostalgia ristorativa, l'obiettivo è porre l'accento su una prospettiva decoloniale e decentralizzata delle voci subalterne. L'attenzione si sposterà dunque sulle modalità critiche emerse in ambiti di carattere artistico e culturale, capaci di proporre letture alternative delle esperienze traumatiche vissute dai corpi femminili durante l'epoca autoritaria. Di fronte alla narrazione egemonica dell'uomo-martire, si propone una lettura critica che rivisita analogie di genere quali la figura della donna-vedova o della donna-dolente, riposizionando in prima linea i corpi silenziati. La loro interpretazione del trauma diviene così una nuova chiave ermeneutica, necessaria per ampliare il focus della storiografia attuale sulla gestazione della taiwanità contemporanea.

2. Genere, trauma e revisionismo storico nella costruzione culturale della Taiwan contemporanea

La sociologia politica contemporanea ha evidenziato, seppur con intensità alterne, il ruolo determinante che concetti storicamente radicati, quali la 'madrepatria', il 'patriottismo' e la 'famiglia', hanno rivestito nella genesi degli Stati moderni, agendo da fulcro per la trasposizione del corpo sociale in corpo politico della nazione. Sebbene sia ormai consolidata la correlazione intrinseca tra le gerarchie domestiche familiari e i meccanismi di potere dell'egemonia statale (Anderson 2006), alcuni teorici come Étienne Balibar vanno oltre, rafforzando l'idea di come "l'unità familiare [...] subordina la riproduzione [della forza-lavoro] alla costituzione di un'etnicità fittizia, vale a dire all'articolazione di una comunità linguistica e di una comunità di razza implicite nelle politiche demografiche" (Balibar 1990: 342). Ancora, tale trasposizione della famiglia come genere nell'ambito della rappresentazione nazionale, ha rafforzato idee genderizzate quali "madrepatria" o "patriottismo" che, come sostiene Mosse, hanno consolidato visioni della femminilità come custode statica e immutabile della tradizione e della nazione, mentre la virilità maschile viene codificata come forza attiva, dinamica e necessaria alla difesa dei confini fisici del territorio (Mosse 1985). Questa disfunzionalità sistemica conduce, inevitabilmente, a una schematizzazione dei ruoli di genere, naturalizzando la

dicotomia ‘uomo/donna’ nella società contemporanea e dando luogo a mappature sociali e performatività che si rivelano asimmetriche e difettose (Shen 1997).

In quest’ottica, analogamente a quanto accade nel modello familiare occidentale, anche nel contesto taiwanese il ruolo della donna risulta spesso circoscritto alla sfera domestica e familiare. Tale confinamento non comprende solo l’educazione della prole, ma si estende alla gestione quotidiana della casa e la cura dei familiari, trasformando simbolicamente la famiglia nel punto nevralgico dell’esistenza femminile e il locus privilegiato per la loro performatività di genere (Yang 1993). Come nel caso del cattolicesimo, anche nelle società confuciane, la tradizione agisce dunque come custode del binarismo di ruolo, rafforzando l’eteronormatività dominante e operando sottilmente una trasposizione simbolica della struttura di potere familiare al macro-contesto politico. La preminenza del genere maschile nella società relega automaticamente la donna a un ambiente micro-sociale di carattere familiare, che risulta coercitivo rispetto a una sfera macro-sociale ed economica strutturata secondo logiche eteropatriarcali. Ciò ovviamente si traduce in una sistematica esclusione delle donne dalla vita socio-politica e dalla costruzione stessa dell’idea della casa-nazione.

A tal proposito, è essenziale richiamare la prospettiva adottata da Yang Cui, la quale sottolinea come l’influenza della tradizione confuciana nel modellare il ruolo delle donne nella storia taiwanese non sia un fatto originario delle comunità autoctone dell’isola, bensì un modello alternativo divenuto egemonico a causa dei processi di colonizzazione subiti dall’isola. Tale modello, infatti, contrasta nettamente con le strutture sociali, spesso a tendenza matriarcale, proprie delle popolazioni indigene (Yang 1993), il che ci porta a comprendere come la costruzione della ‘comunità immaginata’ taiwanese moderna si fondi essenzialmente su un’esperienza coloniale ibrida, derivante tanto dal confucianesimo quanto dal capitalismo cristiano-occidentale. Ciò conduce alla conclusione che la temporalità della nazione e della comunità immaginata non sia un processo meramente secolarizzato, bensì addomesticato (McClintock 1995).

Pertanto, alla luce di tali premesse, è possibile sostenere che anche la costruzione identitaria della Taiwan contemporanea, pur basandosi su un’idea apparentemente porosa di multiculturalismo nel quadro della ‘Taiwanizzazione’, finisca per reiterare le medesime dinamiche di esclusione che hanno caratterizzato non solo il precedente sistema sinocentrico, ma la costruzione secolare delle nazioni a livello globale. Sia l’idea moderna della

casa-nazione taiwanese, sia il nazionalismo storico del Kuomintang (inteso come recupero della madrepatria attraverso lo sforzo patriottico), esemplificano ciò che Yuval-Davis (1997) definisce come strumentalizzazione dell'universo femminile in qualità di figurazione simbolica. In altri termini, la donna come categoria collettiva non viene riconosciuta quale soggetto politico attivo e membro integrante della società, bensì viene configurata come elemento passivo all'interno della gerarchia parentale della famiglia. L'impiego della donna come segno culturale volto alla legittimazione del discorso nazionale si traduce, inevitabilmente, in una oggettificazione e idealizzazione del corpo femminile al servizio dello Stato; o secondo i termini marxiani, le donne vengono prodotte e trasformate per servire gli scopi soggettivi e la causa del dominio maschile (Chen 2005). Tale mercificazione simbolica fa sì che le donne non traggano alcun reale beneficio da questa transazione con l'universo maschile: esse vengono impiegate esclusivamente come segno culturale dai sistemi di rappresentazione nazionalista per incarnare l'immaginata differenza nazionale (Yuval-Davis 1997).

3. Caso di studio. *Mùzhì míng* di Wu Mali come contro-memoria femminista

A partire da questa cornice teorica e storica, il presente articolo intende utilizzare come caso l'arte contemporanea e la sua promozione pubblica come esempio paradigmatico per scovare possibili fratture dentro all'omogeneo discorso della casa-nazione in Taiwan, specialmente per ciò che riguarda la condizione delle donne, e al contempo proporre analisi e riflessioni attive sulla costruzione della casa-nazione secondo i parametri egemonici contemporanei. In tal senso, è opportuno rammentare che le istituzioni pubbliche operano come potenti 'macchine di definizione identitaria', capaci di influenzare la percezione storica di una comunità (Duncan 1991). La loro utilità politica, infatti, risiede proprio nella capacità di plasmare il senso di appartenenza collettiva. Ciò fu particolarmente evidente nella promozione dell'arte contemporanea a Taiwan che, come si è accennato brevemente nell'introduzione, ha sempre perseguito un cammino predefinito a livello istituzionale verso quei parametri identitari proposti dalla 'Taiwanizzazione'. Nonostante ciò, benché il cammino istituzionale e museale avesse intrapreso un programma culturale fortemente politicizzato in base all'avvenire democratico taiwanese, anche nelle mostre canoniche proposte dai principali musei di Taiwan fu possibile trovare esempi di narrative parallele volte a mettere in discussione ciò che erano le narrazioni

prestabilite della casa-nazione. Con tale fine, ciò che si propone nel presente articolo è un'analisi di un caso di studio specifico, l'opera *Mùzhì míng*, realizzata dall'artista taiwanese Wu Mali, oggi figura imprescindibile nella proiezione globale dell'arte dell'isola. Divenuta famosa per via della sua selezione per lo storico debutto del Padiglione di Taiwan alla nostrana Biennale di Venezia del 1995 con l'opera *The Library*, quest'artista aveva sviluppato nella prima fase della sua carriera (1986-1996) un linguaggio installativo ibrido, sospeso tra concettualismo e neo-dadaismo. Le sue sculture, caratterizzate da forti echi post-femministi e in linea con le tendenze decostruzioniste che animavano l'accademia asiatica degli anni Novanta, contenevano una critica lucida alla costruzione sociale ed egemonica del territorio taiwanese. Rientrata a Taiwan a metà degli anni Ottanta, Wu Mali intuì l'urgenza di dare rappresentazione artistica a quella porzione di società marginalizzata dal discorso omogeneizzante della 'Taiwanizzazione'. Iniziò così a elaborare una processualità ibrida, a metà strada tra l'installazione e l'azione comunitaria; si tratterà di uno snodo cruciale nella sua carriera che, a partire dai primi anni Duemila, orienterà definitivamente verso progetti socialmente impegnati nella cornice della *socially engaged art*, valendole l'appellativo di 'madrina' di questa specifica corrente a Taiwan (Zheng 2016). In quest'ottica, Wu Mali quello stesso anno produsse un'opera velatamente critica verso la 'Taiwanizzazione' dal titolo *Xīnzhūāng nǚ rén de gù shì* 新莊女人的故事, spesso anglicizzato in *Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang*, esposta nella mostra *Pénbiān zhǔ rén zì zài zì wéi* 盆邊主人...自在自為, o meglio conosciuta in Occidente con il nome di 'Lord of the Rim: In Himself/For Herself', curata da Chang Yuan-chien presso il Centro Culturale locale di Hsin-Chuang. In questa installazione, che ripete inoltre alcune soluzioni visive di *Mùzhì míng*, Wu Mali presentò le storie intime e le voci delle donne lavoratrici delle fabbriche tessili provenienti dal sud dell'isola, indagando sulle precarie condizioni di vita e sul fragile equilibrio tra l'identità femminile e le aspettative di genere (Bo 2016). L'esperienza di Hsin-Chuang costituì un punto di partenza fondamentale per l'artista che, da allora, decise di focalizzare la propria produzione sull'analisi delle divisioni sociali non solo nella cornice della Taiwanizzazione, ma nell'intera storia dell'isola e nella sua proiezione futura.

Nello stesso anno di Hsin-Chuang, l'artista fu chiamata a partecipare alla mostra collettiva *Sadness Transformed* insieme ad altri 41 artisti, esibita al Museo delle Belle Arti di Taipei, con l'obiettivo di creare una genealogia visiva di quello che fu la traumatica esperienza del cosiddetto 'Incidente del 2-28', con il fine di istituzionalizzarlo in un momento fondante della 'casa-nazione' e della

nascente idea di 'taiwanità'. Nonostante l'evidente disfunzionalità di genere fra l'idea della donna-vedova/uomo-martire che abbiamo accennato poc'anzi e della quale si tratterà più profondamente più avanti, *Mùzhì míng* brillò come una delle poche opere capaci di analizzare in maniera trasversale il processo di ridefinizione identitaria in atto a Taiwan. L'opera, che era contemporanea all'esperienza di Hsin-Chuang, proponeva una lettura della 'genderizzazione' parzialmente simile all'opera sulle donne lavoratrici, ma si dedicava a una critica più evidente di ciò che fu il passato recente dell'isola e la sua narrazione storica, piuttosto che il suo presente. L'obiettivo, ancora una volta, era rendere visibile ciò che era stato taciuto: in questo caso, la storia delle donne taiwanesi escluse dalla narrazione della casa-nazione. La proposta avanzata da Wu Mali con questa installazione artistica fu una contro-narrativa di uno dei momenti fondanti del Taiwan attuale dalla prospettiva femminile, ovvero il brutale 'Incidente del 2-28' occorso nel 1947 a Taipei che causò la morte di un numero di civili stimato tra i 18.000 e i 28.000 per mano della polizia del Kuomintang (Schafferer 2003: 5). Questo specifico massacro, che oggi viene considerato come uno degli eventi più cupi della dittatura del Kuomintang, venne scatenato dall'aggressione ingiustificata della polizia segreta del Garrison Command ai danni di una venditrice ambulante di sigarette (donna e nativa) a Taipei, seguita dall'uccisione accidentale di un passante; episodio che scatenò l'indignazione popolare. (Chen 2005). Gli abusi delle forze dell'ordine erano sistematici: la violenza costituiva il principale meccanismo di mantenimento dell'ordine sin dal 1945, pertanto, risulta naturale che il 2-28 fu metabolizzato dai *běnsǎngrén* 本省人 (i taiwanesi residenti sull'isola prima del 1945) come il simbolo assoluto del terrore imposto dal regime autoritario del KMT per oltre quarant'anni; un periodo segnato da meccanismi repressivi volti a sopprimere l'identità locale attraverso la sorveglianza capillare e il controllo dello spazio pubblico (Kagan 1982). In tal senso, il 2-28 ha dunque rappresentato un punto di partenza fondamentale per strutturare la narrativa identitaria taiwanese come una costruzione unica e lontana dalle pressioni unificatrici di poteri esterni. Le dinamiche di memoria storica hanno consolidato una dicotomia fondata sul rifiuto tra *běnsǎngrén* e *wàishǎngrén* 外省人 (questi ultimi: i cittadini giunti dal continente dopo il 1945, dei quali il KMT era espressione politica), rafforzando il senso di estraneità nei confronti della Cina continentale.

Questo processo di rielaborazione del trauma divenne il fulcro delle politiche di 'Taiwanizzazione', attuate attraverso commemorazioni pubbliche, monumenti, festività e riforme educative (Chang 2009). Tali iniziative ponevano al centro la sofferenza del popolo *běnsǎngrén*, sintetizzandola tuttavia in un

unico corpo simbolico: quello dell'uomo-martire che combatté i soprusi della legge marziale per affermare la specificità della 'taiwanità'. Tale discorso riduzionista comportò l'esclusione di altri corpi ed esperienze dalla narrativa ufficiale della casa-nazione. Il termine *běnsǎngrén* funge infatti da categoria generica che non contempla le sofferenze intersezionali di collettivi doppiamente emarginati, quali le donne o le popolazioni indigene. In questo caso, il processo attraverso il quale costoro vengono resi invisibili non è puramente simbolico, bensì si esplica attivamente all'interno dei meccanismi di potere. Il revisionismo storico del 2-28 ha enfatizzato lo sforzo eroico degli uomini taiwanesi quali 'padri fondatori' della nazione. Parallelamente, la donna è stata inquadrata nel ruolo riduttivo di madre e segno culturale passivo che media la restaurazione del padre (deceduto ed evirato) nel figlio, futuro erede della 'nuova nazione' di Taiwan. Tali retoriche risultano evidenti anche nell'ambito delle istituzioni museali e specialmente nella rappresentazione visiva del 2-28. Ciò è particolarmente valido pure per la mostra *Sadness Transformed* (1997), di cui fa parte il caso di studio proposto. Di fatto, come possiamo osservare nelle parole scritte nella prefazione del catalogo dall'allora sindaco di Taipei, Chen Shui-bian, tale ciclo di mostre commemorative dell'Incidente del 2-28 avevano come obiettivo evidente di educare il pubblico al significato storico di questo evento:

Sadness Transformed mira a trascendere la tristezza storica e a perseguire la giustizia sociale e l'armonia attraverso gli atteggiamenti aperti e diversificati dell'arte. L'ombra dell'Incidente del 2-28 ha avvolto Taiwan per cinquant'anni. Oltre al ricordo e alla riflessione, ciò che dobbiamo fare maggiormente oggi è superare il trauma, trasformare la sofferenza, affrontare il nuovo futuro e trasformare la tristezza (Chen 2002: 6).

È indubbio che la mostra proponesse una visione dichiaratamente mitizzata dell'Incidente del 2-28, incardinata sulla narrazione dell'eroe-martire e della donna-vedova/madrepatria quali fondamenti della casa-nazione. In particolare, si osserva la predominanza di un topos legato alla morte e alla redenzione delle vittime maschili. Attraverso questo processo redentivo, "gli uomini che sotto il regime del KMT avevano subito morti infamanti, bollati pretestuosamente come criminali, spie comuniste o rivoltosi, venivano ora sacralizzati e recuperati come soggetti integri e intatti" (Chen 2005: 112). Per esempio, opere di artisti quali Hsu Wu-yang, Cheng Tsu-tsai, Hsieh Li-fa o Hsu Tsu-kuei veicolano esplicitamente quella narrativa della resurrezione dell'eroe-martire precedentemente discussa, sintetizzando l'idea che i padri defunti rinascono

come 'figli integri' attraverso la maternità delle loro mogli e la nascita dei futuri figli della casa-nazione, perpetuando così un ciclo infinito di rinascite garantito dall'istituzione della performatività mascolina (Chen 2005). Risulta dunque naturale che, inquadrata in questa precisa narrazione, la presenza dell'universo femminile era spesso relegata a posizioni subordinate, con la rappresentazione di corpi spesso spersonalizzati e marginalizzati rispetto alla figura centrale dell'uomo-martire. Si tratta di una scelta estetica che si riflette non solamente nelle opere degli artisti presenti, ma nella stessa disposizione ed esposizione della sala e del discorso curatoriale, evidentemente centrato nella riabilitazione dell'uomo-martire e concedendo solo uno spazio minimo alla rappresentazione dell'universo femminile. Un esempio è la piccola porzione di sala chiamata 'Le donne dimenticate' dedicata alle famiglie delle vittime del 2-28, nella quale la visione della donna veniva spesso e volentieri subordinata a quella performatività subordinata all'assenza dell'uomo di cui si è discusso in precedenza.

Per tali ragioni, in occasione della mostra *Sadness Transformed*, Wu Mali scelse di distanziarsi dalla retorica commemorativa canonica del 2-28, proponendo una lettura alternativa del corpo femminile durante la dittatura. Come osserva Chen Hsiang-chun (2005), l'obiettivo dell'installazione era evidenziare la parzialità delle narrazioni storiche, laddove "le vittime maschili taiwanesi sono state riabilite come eroi e martiri, [mentre] le donne rimangono ancora invisibili" (Chen 2005: 135). Invece di affrontare la questione dal punto di vista dell'uomo-martire fondatore della nazione, Wu Mali diede voce ai soggetti oppressi delle atrocità del 2-28. L'installazione si presentava come una piccola camera circolare ricavata all'interno della sala espositiva principale. All'ingresso di questa specie di camera, le seguenti parole accoglievano lo spettatore ignaro:

男人的歷史改寫了

La storia dell'uomo è stata riscritta.

暴民可以變成英雄

Il rivoltoso può diventare eroe.

女人的故事呢？

E la storia di lei?

L'artista pone lo spettatore in una posizione immediata di riflessione critica sin dall'ingresso nell'installazione. L'obiettivo, come si può osservare, non è

soltanto offrire una visione alternativa del 2-28, ma anche mettere in discussione l'intero discorso espositivo presentato nella mostra: fino a quel momento, lo spettatore ha letto una storia, quella dell'uomo, ma cosa si cela oltre? Dove risiedono i corpi messi a tacere? Al fine di dare a questi soggetti lo spazio che meritano, Wu Mali attinge liberamente da un archivio di storie orali di individui e famiglie che hanno sofferto in prima persona il trauma del 2-28, creando un intervento audiovisivo in cui le esperienze femminili sono trasformate in un'archeologia visiva per la creazione di una nuova narrazione polivocale riguardo il dolore.

Lo schermo video al centro della stanza mostra scene dell'oceano e delle sue onde, mentre il suono della marea allude agli infiniti singhiozzi della corporalità silenziata. L'instabilità della ripetizione, sia sonora sia visiva, della risacca simboleggia le innumerevoli vittime femminili che, messe a tacere dai conflitti nazionali, tuttora fluttuano dolenti nella storia, incapaci di trovare il loro luogo nella casa-nazione. Come afferma Jiang Zu-man (2004), tale metafora della risacca simboleggia la condizione instabile delle donne, private di ruolo o posizione nella cosiddetta grande storia. A lato di questa proiezione, si osserva un'installazione composta di pannelli di vetro decorati con frammenti selezionati dal libro di Ruan Mei-shu, *Yōu'àn jiaoluò de qìshēng* del 1992, celebre testo che raccoglie toccanti testimonianze orali delle famiglie delle vittime dell'Incidente.⁵

她以眼淚洗清屍體，

Lei lavò il corpo con le lacrime,

待辦完喪事，親友都回去了，

Terminato il funerale, quando parenti e amici se ne furono andati,

終於放聲大哭：父啊——我怕！父啊——我怕！

Infine scoppiò in un pianto diretto: Padre! — Ho paura! Padre! — Ho paura!

她，燒掉所有遺物，從此絕口不再提起，也不再打扮。

Lei, bruciò ogni reperto, da allora non ne fece mai più parola, né si agghindò mai più.

她，洗髮淨身，坐在家中等待，有一決生死的準備。

⁵ Ruan, Mei-shu. 1992. 幽暗角落的泣聲：尋訪二二八散落的遺族 [Il pianto dagli angoli bui: Alla ricerca delle famiglie disperse del 228]. Taipei: Avanguard Publishing House).

Lei, si lavò i capelli e purificò il corpo, sedette ad attendere, pronta alla vita o alla morte.

她，被強姦，自慚形穢，留下孩子，跑走了。

Lei, stuprata e vergognandosi della propria impurità, abbandonò i figli e fuggì via.

她，身兼數職維持生計，六個孩子，從剛出生到十歲。

Lei, svolgendo diversi lavori per sopravvivere, sei figli, dal neonato al bambino di dieci anni.

她，常常在哭，但只躲在背後哭，恐懼如影隨形。

Lei piangeva spesso, ma solo di nascosto, la paura la seguiva come un'ombra.

她，在瘖啞禁聲中，度過了一生。

Lei trascorse il resto della vita in un silenzio forzato.

她，是複數的女人。

Lei è “donne” al plurale.

她的憂傷也一直是我們的憂傷。

Il suo dolore è sempre stato il nostro dolore.

È importante notare come tali frammenti di testo siano appena incisi sul vetro dei pannelli, creando certa difficoltà nell'essere letti e richiedendo al contempo la volontà attiva da parte dello spettatore per essere decifrati. Tale effetto, voluto dall'artista, simbolizza, una volta ancora, la scarsa rappresentazione dell'universo femminile nella storia canonica taiwanese. Attraverso un'esplorazione del processo di ridefinizione identitaria, *Mùzhīmíng* dimostra una verità innegabile: le donne e i loro corpi non fanno parte della narrazione canonica della casa-nazione. Simultaneamente a ciò, questo spazio di scambio intimo-storico è concepito come un ambiente catartico di crescita, cura reciproca e uno spazio sicuro dove la voce delle donne è nobilitata per la prima volta come elemento formativo nella logica della nazione/casa. Tale corporalizzazione del dolore funge da duplice strumento: sia come monito storico che come cura per il dolore del trauma.

In *Mùzhīmíng*, lo spazio è intimo ed invitante. Ricorda l'ambiente domestico. In questa stanza semi-chiusa di forma circolare si crea una naturale atmosfera meditativa che invita la riflessione pacifica. La guarigione dal trauma non è esteticamente pulita come l'egemonia vuole, bensì sofferente, dolorosa,

corporalmente lacerante. Si presenta la memoria collettiva delle sopravvissute alle vittime del 2-28 per quello che è, senza miti o eroi. Partendo dall'esperienza di vita microscopica, si proietta una riflessione più ampia sulle strutture di potere politiche e di genere, nelle quali grazie alla comunità e alla condivisione è possibile dar voce alla frustrazione delle donne, stimolare il dialogo e lavare via il trauma nei cuori delle sopravvissute. Come suggeriscono Zhu Ji-rong e Cai Ya-chun (2004), "qui, parole, immagini, ricordi e scene diventano tutti strumenti per testimoniare e ricostruire la storia". Attraverso l'opera, le esperienze traumatiche delle vittime femminili e delle sopravvissute vengono finalmente ascoltate, vissute e comprese, come affermato dall'artista stessa:

"Le loro vite servili non erano documentate, e quindi non avevano possibilità di essere riscritte. In risposta a questo, ho creato uno spazio di meditazione cupo, con immagini in loop di onde oceaniche, e ho scritto le storie di queste donne sul vetro sabbiato appoggiato contro il muro. Il suono delle onde oceaniche, le storie in testo e le riflessioni interiori del pubblico si intrecciano in questo spazio di riflessione fatto di acqua, luce e nebbia." (Wu 2015: 190)

Tuttavia, l'epitaffio proposto da Wu Mali non si riduce a un semplice esercizio di elaborazione collettiva, ma trascende tale dimensione attraverso una monumentalità intima e discreta. Parodiando la monumentalità mascolina della 'casa-nazione' e decostruendone la mera estetica eroica, Wu Mali gioca con la concezione comune dell'epitaffio come memoriale della comunità immaginata. Lungi dall'essere una rappresentazione del canone, l'opera di Wu Mali si erge a memoriale dedicato unicamente alle donne che hanno vissuto o subito gli effetti di questo evento. È fondamentale notare, come sottolinea Sophie McIntyre (2012), che l'artista non celebra esplicitamente né il nazionalismo, né l'idea di casa-nazione o madrepatria, distaccandosi così nettamente dalla tradizione degli epitaffi classici. Neppure centra il significato dell'opera nella critica aperta all'egemonia, bensì prova a minare la sua autorità secolare, insinuando il dubbio nello spettatore che contempla il suo epitaffio. Ciò risulta quasi antitetico se pensiamo invece alla forma in cui l'egemonia taiwanese ha promosso la sua personale visione mitizzata dell' 'Incidente del 2-28'.

In tal senso, sia Jian Su-zheng (1999), in ambito letterario, sia Sylvia Li-chun Lin (2007), nel campo cinematografico, insistono sul fatto che la produzione culturale della 'Taiwanizzazione' abbia promosso una visione fortemente 'genderizzata' delle atrocità sofferte dalla società *běnnshěngrén* a seguito del 2-28. Tale processo ha strumentalizzato il lutto collettivo, ponendo

al centro la celebrazione dell'uomo-martire e identificando la sua assenza come il trauma fondante della casa-nazione. Come sostiene Sylvia Li-chun Lin, questa strumentalizzazione finisce per relegare il trauma femminile nella figura riduttiva della "donna-vedova", definita esclusivamente dalla perdita del marito (l'uomo della nazione) o dei figli (i futuri uomini della nazione). Successivamente, tale dolore viene reificato nella relazione simbolica tra corpo femminile e madrepatria: la famiglia (*jiā* 家) e la sfera privata vengono trasposte nello spazio pubblico frammentato dello Stato (*guó* 國), portando a compimento l'oggettificazione del lutto femminile ed elevando la donna al ruolo simbolico di "Madre della Nazione" (*guómǔ* 國母), a discapito del trauma reale della dissoluzione del nucleo familiare. Questo meccanismo intrappola il corpo femminile e la sua performatività in un'identità spersonalizzata, subordinata alla retorica domestica e, di fatto, esclusa da una piena partecipazione politica in qualità di cittadina (Lin 2007). Tali rappresentazioni culturali e istituzionali del trauma risultano particolarmente rilevanti, in quanto costituiscono la base su cui si è consolidata, nel discorso identitario della casa-nazione taiwanese, una sistematica 'genderizzazione' ed esclusione sociale. Ciò ha colpito in modo specifico gli strati cosiddetti subalterni, la cui voce è stata metodicamente resa invisibile, emarginata o strumentalizzata. Queste azioni di guarigione del trauma sociale, operate attraverso la strumentalizzazione dei corpi, si inquadrano perfettamente all'interno di una lettura performativa del genere in termini butleriani. In tale contesto, si osserva come "se il fondamento dell'identità di genere è la ripetizione stilizzata di atti nel tempo e non un'identità apparentemente ininterrotta, allora la metafora spaziale del fondamento verrà dislocata e svelata quale configurazione stilizzata, di più, come una corporeizzazione di genere del tempo" (Butler 1990: 179). Ciò implica che, nel suo progetto di democratizzazione volto a costruire una nuova identità egemonica, il sistema dominante ha proiettato una struttura fondamentalmente patriarcale, nella quale l'uomo, percepito come unico genere idoneo alla costruzione della casa-nazione, occupa il ruolo centrale di agente attivo, realizzando un sistema deliberatamente mascolino ed eteropatriarcale.

In altri termini, è il sistema egemonico stesso a generare i medesimi soggetti che successivamente pretende di rappresentare. Riprendendo ancora le parole di Butler, l'eterosessualità, e nel nostro specifico caso, questa performatività mascolina di Stato, deve essere intesa come un "uno sforzo costante e ripetuto di imitare le proprie idealizzazioni. [...] la performatività eterosessuale è assediata da un'ansia che non può mai superare del tutto; che il suo sforzo di divenire le proprie idealizzazioni non può mai essere definitivamente o

pienamente realizzato.” (Butler 1993: 125). Applicato al revisionismo del 2-28, questo concetto suggerisce che l’immagine della donna diviene una finzione culturale patriarcale, mentre la femminilità risulta essere il prodotto di una parodia della stessa, generata da una comunità immaginata al maschile. Questa ripetizione performativa dei corpi si configura come una strategia pubblica di controllo egemonico, dalla quale nemmeno la ‘Taiwanizzazione’ riesce a esimersi. Anzi, durante quegli anni Taiwan iniziò a sviluppare un approccio sociopolitico ibrido, sospeso tra l’etero-patriarcato di matrice occidentale e i valori sinici neo-confuciani. Se da un lato tale approccio mirava al riscatto dei segmenti oppressi della società (i *běnsǐhěngrén*), dall’altro continuava simultaneamente a opprimere le categorie che non rientravano nella centralità patriarcale. Di conseguenza, le donne, plasmate attraverso questa ripetizione sistematica della mascolinità di Stato e costrette alla reiterazione di azioni corali inquadrate in un ideale normativo di ‘essere donna’, non possono trovare spazio nella narrativa nazionale se non attraverso nozioni tradizionali: la cura della famiglia, il lutto verso l’uomo-martire e la mercificazione del corpo come metafora della madrepatria. Ciò ha condotto inevitabilmente alla formazione di una società taiwanese fratturata e incerta che, nonostante i proclami degli anni Novanta volti ad abbracciare una nozione più ampia di ‘taiwanità’, ha finito per periferizzare proprio ciò che, in linea di principio, si proponeva di ricentralizzare. In questa prospettiva, il corpo femminile, inteso come corpo materno, viene reificato all’interno della fantasia nazionale: è il mezzo attraverso cui la vita della nazione può essere sostenuta e perpetuata, e la ferita del trauma sanata e compensata. Mediando e trasformando il dolore in sentimento nazionale, e dislocandosi sul corpo materno, il senso di appartenenza può dunque svilupparsi naturalmente come una forma di parentela. È attraverso questo meccanismo che l’identità nazionale taiwanese viene forgiata, tale e come sottolinea Cheng Fei-when (2003). Da un lato, ciò legittima la costruzione dei corpi delle donne come portatrici simboliche della nazione, negando loro, al contempo, qualsiasi accesso diretto al potere egemonico (Chen 2005). Dall’altro, fa sì che gli uomini rappresentino l’agente attivo della modernità nazionale (rivolto al futuro, potente e storico), incarnando quel ‘principio progressista di discontinuità’ proprio del nazionalismo (McClintock 1995). Tale chiave di lettura si rivela cruciale per intendere più profondamente il valore e l’importanza del caso di studio proposto, già che non solamente illumina i meccanismi di revisionismo storico attraverso i quali Taiwan ha legittimato la propria unità identitaria, ma offre al contempo alternative tangibili entro la cornice della casa-nazione.

4. Conclusioni

È proprio in tale azione di disvelamento che giace il potere sovversivo dell'opera di Wu Mali: la strategia dell'artista non si limita a una semplice critica estetica, ma consiste nel sovvertire l'egemonia del centro attraverso una radicale risemantizzazione delle condizioni imposte dalla stessa performatività mascolina di Stato. Se, come si è discusso, la narrazione ufficiale della Taiwanizzazione ha cercato di legittimarsi attraverso la ripetizione stilizzata dell'eroe-martire, che si concepiscono entro una precisa cornice 'ristorativa' capace di ripristinare la sublimazione del dolore e del trauma in una sterile astrazione patriottica, Wu Mali risponde con una monumentalità orizzontale, liquida e impegnata. In quest'ottica, la fragilità e la marginalizzazione, precedentemente relegate all'invisibilità o strumentalizzate come mero strumento alla 'resurrezione' del padre evirato della nazione, si trasformano in strumenti operativi volti a generare nuove narrative alternative che pongano i corpi silenziati e le loro voci nuovamente in prima linea. L'installazione *Mùzhīmíng* rompe il patto fondante della casa-nazione, rifiutando di eseguire il ruolo passivo assegnato alla femminilità. Al suo posto, l'artista presenta corpi vivi che piangono, sanguinano e ricordano, sottraendoli alla logica della mercificazione simbolica analizzata attraverso le lenti di Yuval-Davis e McClintock. È attraverso l'etica della cura e dell'intimità — evocata dallo spazio raccolto della stanza e dal suono sanatore dello stesso territorio frammentato, che si dissolvono realmente i confini gerarchici tra la sfera pubblica (*guó*) e quella privata (*jīā*). Un obiettivo, questo, egualmente ricercato dalla retorica della 'Taiwanizzazione', ma deformato nella sua manifestazione istituzionale, la quale ha preteso di assorbire il privato nel pubblico solo per rafforzare un ordine eteropatriarcale. Wu Mali inverte questa dinamica: porta il privato nello spazio pubblico del museo, non per sacralizzarlo e mitizzarlo nella cornice della casa-nazione, ma per esigerne il riconoscimento ontologico e umano.

L'opera, in tal senso, non pretende di offrire una soluzione immediata o consolatoria alla crisi del trauma, né partecipa a quella nostalgia 'ristorativa' poc'anzi citata. Al contrario, essa mira a rendere manifesto il problema a un livello strutturale, denunciando come la costruzione dell'identità taiwanese rimanga incompleta fintanto che si fonda sull'esclusione di specifici corpi. Il 'far pensare' diviene, dunque, una strategia di monito, un atto di consapevolezza attiva che sfida l'ansia della performatività mascolina. Laddove l'ordine istituito occulta la ferita, non resta altra via che 'abitare' tali fratture, per renderle nuovamente vive e tangibili. *Mùzhīmíng* permette così alla forza dei corpi

silenzianti di reclamare ed occupare lo spazio che compete loro, trasformando la ‘tristezza’ da passività femminile a responsabilità storica collettiva. La poetica di Wu Mali si traduce, pertanto, in una dinamica di convivialità e scambio relazionale, sotto la cui superficie si cela una rigorosa riflessione critica riguardante la centralità dello Stato e i processi di marginalizzazione. In definitiva, l’epitaffio di Wu Mali ci ricorda che la vera sanazione del trauma del 2-28 per il corpo sociale taiwanese non deve avvenire attraverso la sostituzione di un patriarcato (quello sinocentrico) con un altro (quello taiwanese), ma attraverso lo smantellamento delle gerarchie stesse che hanno reso possibile il silenzio. Finché la storia dei corpi femminili resterà un’appendice alla ‘grande storia’ dell’uomo, la ferita del 2-28 non potrà mai dirsi realmente sanata.

5. Postfazione. Sull’intersezionalità di *Mùzhìmíng* e del ‘2-28’

Chi legge avrà notato che l’analisi qui condotta, a partire da *Mùzhìmíng*, tratteggia una cornice taiwanese dai contorni talvolta generici, spesso sovrapponibile alla figura astratta della donna *běnsǎngrén* sofferente, lasciando al lato altri spettri dell’identità delle comunità marginalizzate. Ai fini di una maggiore chiarezza intersezionale, è pertanto necessario segnalare che il trauma dell’“Incidente del 2-28” non ha investito in modo equivalente il complesso ventaglio di identità che compongono l’universo femminile dell’isola. Altre soggettività, pur non avendo vissuto direttamente quell’evento, hanno sperimentato traumi paralleli, diversi per epoca e intensità. Basti pensare agli abitanti dell’arcipelago di Kinmen, a soli 10 km dalla costa cinese di Xiamen, coinvolti nelle crisi militari degli anni Cinquanta; oppure agli episodi perpetrati dal Kuomintang contro altri gruppi marginalizzati, come nell’“Incidente di Kaohsiung” (1979) o nel “Massacro di Lieyu” (1987), quest’ultimo a danno di un’altra categoria marginalizzata, quella dei rifugiati. Altrettanto cruciale, sebbene spesso assente nei libri di storia, è la persecuzione delle comunità indigene durante il periodo del terrore del KMT. Una violenza simboleggiata dall’esecuzione di Uyongu Yata’uyungana (1954), ma che si è abbattuta sistematicamente anche sulle donne indigene attraverso abusi e repressioni indiscriminate. Questo lavoro si propone dunque come una voce di rilettura critica, conscio dei propri limiti storiografici e dell’impossibilità di rappresentare appieno la totalità delle esperienze sofferte nel ventesimo secolo. Si sostiene tuttavia con forza la necessità di indagare queste realtà, la cui voce, sempre più potente nell’accademia taiwanese, deve trovare spazio anche nella critica storiografica nostrana.

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After the clash of empires: Women's stories from Soviet-occupied Karafuto and Lithuania

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Abstract Building on the concepts of mediation and multidirectional memory, this paper offers a comparative analysis of two memoirs written by women who, at the end of WWII, found themselves in Soviet-occupied territories—Sakhalin in the east and Lithuania in the west. The analysis revolves around two questions: how do the authors understand and construct femininity in their texts and how does this shape their narratives of war and Soviet occupation? Even though both were writing at a time when women's experiences of the (post)war were marginalized, by aligning their narratives with the ideological demands of the Cold War, the authors could speak publicly about sexual violence and other forms of gendered trauma. By focusing on memory and femininity, this article connects the distant stories of a Japanese settler and a Lithuanian partisan, showing how historical actors recall being liberated from one empire only to be swept away by the next.

Keywords multidirectional memory; Soviet occupation; gender; Japanese repatriation; Stalinist repressions.

1. Introduction

Recent English-language scholarship on WWII has challenged many aspects of the earlier narratives about the conflict. Not only has it shown that the conventional periodization of 1939–1945 is short-sighted, Eurocentric, and ill-fitted, it has also reframed the conflict from a simplistic narrative of victory of democracy over fascism to a “clash of empires” (Overy 2021; Bass 2023). From this more recent perspective, the two “world wars” are viewed as one larger struggle, not only between states but also inside them, and the Allied powers—with the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union (USSR) at the center—are not merely the saviors and liberators, but also modern empires in their own right.

This article is an exploration of what happened after this clash of empires. More specifically, it is an analysis of how two women, who ended up in the

territories taken over by the USSR, remembered and mediated what happened to them and in their surroundings. The territories in question are German-controlled Lithuania and Japanese-controlled southern Sakhalin, both of which, despite being on the opposite ends of the Soviet empire, ended up being swallowed by it in 1945. As the land under their feet changed hands, to borrow Sherzod Muminov's phrase (2022: 7), Elena Juciūtė and Shibano Toshie found themselves alone, separated from their families and unable to leave the USSR. However, their life stories reveal a more complex picture of war and its legacies, than the one suggested by their shared identity as civilian women caught in a war and trapped under an authoritarian regime. Shibano was an agent of Japanese settler colonialism while Juciūtė was a staunch nationalist, involved in the postwar anti-Soviet guerilla resistance, complicating any straightforward connection between war, women and victimhood.

Although the life trajectories of Shibano and Juciūtė never crossed, the similarities in their biographies are striking. Both were interned in the Soviet forced labor camps, managed to leave the USSR at a time when it was not easy to do so, and both chose to immediately put their experiences down on paper. Thus, their texts predate the outpour of war and repatriation memoirs in Japan in the 1980s (Buchholz 2003: 132) and the post-Soviet "return of memory" in Lithuania (Davoliūtė 2014: 175). Soon after the Soviet invasion, both found themselves separated from their parents and siblings by the Iron Curtain and, with the exception of Shibano's short-lived marriage of convenience, both remained unmarried and childless. This differentiates their texts from similar memoirs written by Japanese women repatriates and Lithuanian women deportees, whose stories were frequently shaped by their identity as mothers (Fujiwara 1949; Armonas 1961; Rūkienė 1968; 1970; Women's Division of Sōka Gakkai 1986). Finally, the texts of both Shibano and Juciūtė are shaped by their anti-Soviet outlook and strong patriotic feelings towards Japan and Lithuania respectively. This often turns into outright hatred towards the Other; specifically, Shibano's hatred towards Koreans and Juciūtė's antisemitism (Juciūtė 1974: 9, 191-193). Their depictions of Russians, too, are not unbiased and should be read as reflections of the authors' views, not historical reality.

As an analysis of two women's autobiographical texts, this article owes a considerable intellectual debt to former similar research, especially in the field of study of camp literature (Jolluck 2002; Kurvet-Käosaar 2003; Budrytė 2017; Artwińska 2019). Previous studies in the field have shown that women's experiences of war are markedly different from men's (Kurvet-Käosaar 2003: 314) and that, in order to uncover them fully, researchers often have to straddle

several disciplines and engage imperfect sources, such as memoirs. As has been argued by Artwińska, the value of these texts “does not lie in providing tangible evidence of verifiable information on limit-experiences, but rather in combining a subjective perspective with information” (2019: 233–234). Thus, by focusing on the gendered subjectivity of Shibano and Juciūtė, this analysis adds to our understanding of how women experienced and mediated the war and its aftermath. Crucially, neither of the two memoirs offers a simple notion of femininity, painting instead a complex intersectional image, where the actions of the protagonists often challenge their own words.

Methodologically, this article draws from the field of memory studies, where interactions between individual and collective memory, history, and art have been studied most rigorously. More specifically, I build this analysis on the concepts of mediation and multidirectional memory. Mediation, in the context of memory, allows us to see memoirs critically, not as a medium that provides direct access to the past but as a social institution with its own genre conventions, produced at a particular time and in a particular societal discourse (Radstone 2005; Morris-Suzuki 2005). Multidirectional memory was developed as a tool to think through historical traumas, such as the Holocaust and the transatlantic slave trade, ‘in parallel’ rather than ‘in contrast’ with one another (Rothberg 2009). In the context of this article, it allows us to look at two memoirs written in different languages and published in different countries, as texts that nonetheless share aspects worthy of comparison. Approaching memory as multidirectional, encourages us to think beyond the nation as the default methodological standard and invites us to challenge the notion of container-cultures—the idea that the world is made up of distinct cultural units, pure, self-sufficient and perfectly isolated from one another (Erl 2011; De Cesari & Rigney 2014).

The history of ‘repatriation’ or, more aptly, end of empire migration (Bull 2023: 13–14) offers many opportunities to rethink nations, cultures and identities as homogenous and ethnically pure. In recent years, many scholars have tackled these topics in the context of the Japanese Empire more broadly (Watt 2009, Morris-Suzuki 2010, Katō 2020, Paichadze & Bull 2023) and the island of Sakhalin more specifically (Paichadze & Seaton 2015, Nakayama 2019). However, comparative perspectives are still relatively few (Araragi, Kawakita & Matsuura 2019). The comparative study at hand is an attempt to add to the existing research on end of empire migration by paying special attention to gender. But more importantly, by looking at Japanese and Lithuanian case studies side by side, I hope to offer a new perspective which

connects the history and memory of Japanese repatriation with similar stories in the Soviet periphery.

The article is divided into two sections. The first one offers a brief historical overview, with a particular focus on Karafuto/Sakhalin and Lithuania. The second section is an analysis of the memoirs, followed by a short conclusion. The comparative analysis revolves around two questions: how do Shibano and Juciūtė understand and construct femininity in their texts and how does this, in turn, shape their narratives of war and Soviet occupation. Through a close reading it becomes clear that even though Shibano and Juciūtė were writing at a time when women's experiences of the (post)war were marginalized, by aligning their narratives with the ideological demands of the Cold War, both women could speak rather openly and publicly about the matters of sexual violence and other forms of gendered trauma.

2. Historical background

After defeating the Russian Empire in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, the Japanese Empire acquired the southern half of the Sakhalin Island and established the Karafuto prefecture and established a colonial government on it in 1907. The defeat was one of many factors that sent its adversary, the Russian Empire, into a crisis, which was one of the contributing factors behind the civil war in 1917. The Bolshevik Revolution provided an opportunity for many nations under Russian imperial rule to declare their sovereignty, and one of them was Lithuania, established in 1918. Their independence, however, was short-lived as in 1939, the USSR forced the three Baltic states to sign mutual assistance treaties and, in the following year, presented them with ultimatums, demanding the stationing of an unspecified number of Soviet soldiers and premature elections of new governments in the three states. After a fraudulent election, the new pro-Soviet Lithuanian government petitioned Moscow to be accepted into the Union. Consequently, in 1940, Lithuania lost its sovereignty and became a client state: the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR) (Lane 2001; Vardys & Sedaitis 2018).

Changes in territorial control coincided with the mass movement of people. By the 1940s, on the other end of the Eurasian continent, the Japanese population of Karafuto had reached more than 380,000, vastly outnumbering all other ethnicities there (Nakayama 2015: 26). This was the result of Japanese settler colonialism, actively promoted by the Japanese state not only in Karafuto but also in other Japanese colonies at the time. Thus far, the Japanese military

advances had been mostly successful as it expanded the reaches of the Empire. One exception was the 1939 Battle of Khalkhin Gol, also known as the Nomonhan Incident, in which the Soviets defeated the Imperial Japanese Army. This was one of the factors that led to the signing of a neutrality pact between the two countries in 1941, allowing the Japanese military to focus on other fronts. Meanwhile, in the LSSR, the Soviet government engaged in the first mass deportations from the Baltic states to regions in Siberia, meant to displace all segments of the population that might harbor anti-Soviet sentiment and act on it. The operation was no sooner complete when Nazi Germany attacked the USSR and swiftly took over the Baltics, triggering some of the worst pogroms and the destruction of the local Jewish population to the extent that is considered some of the worst in Europe at this time (Eidintas 2003).

For a while, the Axis powers seemed to be on track for victory, but the tide soon turned as the leaders of the “Third Reich” and the Japanese Empire found themselves unable to sustain their offensives. As it was pushing back the Wehrmacht, the USSR took back the territories that it had previously held, including the Baltics, reestablishing the former Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs). Thousands of people tried to escape not only the frontline, but also the return of Joseph Stalin's regime. An estimated 120,000 people escaped from Lithuania to the West in 1944 (Anušauskas 1996: 404). The return of the Soviet rule launched a guerrilla anti-Soviet resistance in the Baltics which lasted until 1956. Elena Juciūtė, too, joined the resistance in 1946, while her family, unbeknownst to her, escaped to the West.

Three months after reaching Berlin, the Soviet army joined the war against Japan, breaking the neutrality pact and taking over the Japanese-controlled northeastern China, northern Korea, southern half of the Sakhalin Island and the Kuril Islands. As in Lithuania, on Sakhalin, too, civilians tried to escape the encroaching Soviet army. On August 23, about 77,000 children, women and the elderly were evacuated to Hokkaido and between August 20, 1945 and September, 1946, at least 24,000 people were smuggled out of the island (Nakayama 2015: 28–29). As the Allies scrambled to subsume the remnants of the defeated empires, the USSR expanded both eastward and westward.

In 1946, the US and the USSR reached an agreement regarding the repatriation of Japanese from Sakhalin and by the summer of 1949, nearly 300,000 Japanese soldiers and civilians were repatriated to the main Japanese islands (Bull 2018). The remaining 23,000 Koreans who had moved to the island before 1945 and 1,400 Japanese were prohibited from returning to Japan or leaving the Sakhalin Oblast until the restoration of Soviet-Japanese diplomatic

relations in 1956 (Nakayama 2015: 29). This allowed for the repatriation of 2,300 Japanese and Koreans from Sakhalin between 1957 and 1959 (Din 2015: 181). Shibano Toshie was one of them.

As Japanese settlers were repatriated out of Sakhalin, Lithuanians under the suspicion of harboring anti-Soviet sentiment were herded into the camps and special settlements of Siberia. During the postwar Stalinist period, about 118,000 were forcefully displaced to remote regions in Siberia and more than 140,000 were sent to the Gulag camps (Anušauskas 1996: 403). The Baltic states remained under Soviet rule until the late 1980s. Lithuania declared re-establishment of independence on March 11, 1990, which was met with an economic blockade and military intervention from Moscow in January, 1991. After these final throes, the Soviet empire was dissolved and replaced with more than a dozen sovereign nations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia whereas Sakhalin remains part of the Russian Federation with a majority Russian population.

2. The case studies of Shibano Toshie and Elena Juciūtė

Shibano Toshie, was born in 1929 and moved with her family to Shirutoru, Karafuto in 1933, at the age of four. She was sixteen when Karafuto became the Sakhalin Oblast and was only repatriated to Japan in 1958, much later than the majority of Japanese repatriates from the island. She managed to write and publish her nearly 250-page memoir, titled *Tsundora no onna* (Woman of the tundra) in the same year. From July to September, 1958, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, one of Japan's major newspapers, ran advertisements for the book, claiming the author received more than 11,300 letters from her readers (*Yomiuri* 1958, 2). Despite the attention, Shibano did not publish any other book, article or give any interviews, effectively disappearing from the public eye.

Shibano's identity as a woman is front and center of her memoir from the beginning. The author's view of womanhood, however, is strictly defined by virtue and marriage. On the first page of her foreword, she writes: "Born a woman, is there anyone who does not desire marriage and a happy family life?" (Shibano 1958: 3). This undertone dominates the first half of her memoir, as Shibano is overwhelmingly concerned with her chastity, fearing that losing it will diminish her chances of getting married. The obsession with chastity inversely leads to a continual thematic return to sex throughout the text. At every turn Shibano describes the voracious gaze of men, the insatiable libido of Russian women, the loud intercourse that Russians would allegedly have, and

the multiple attempts of rape that she narrowly escapes (discussed below). It also leads to a fear and disgust towards men which, combined with her homoerotic experiences later in the text, draws her declared heterosexuality into question. Thus, Shibano's identity as a woman is not only at the center of the memoir, it also defines her experiences and how she recalls the thirteen years of her life on Sakhalin.

Shibano begins the memoir in 1943 with her graduation from higher elementary school at fourteen, after which she works as a telephone operator for a year and then as a nurse in Shisuka. She depicts herself as a "young girl" (*musume*) of sixteen, who gets flustered when she has to deal with wounded soldiers, such as changing their bandages and helping them relieve themselves (12). The fact that they are men, a gendered Other, seems more important to the author than their identity as Japanese or as imperial soldiers who were meant to protect Japanese civilians like herself, which is a theme that is important in other repatriate memoirs (Fujiwara 1949).

In Shisuka, Shibano hears of the Soviet invasion and tries to escape the approaching frontline by going back to Shirutoru, where she is reunited with her family. There she joins a group of her peers who spend their days in hiding from Soviet soldiers. The refuge is organized by the adults who make sure the girls hide during the day and only come out at night, instilling a sense of uneasiness and fear in the young women.

Shibano claims they were too young and naïve to know what "a man can do to a woman" (31), and thus the three girls arrange to escape their hideout and go see the Soviet soldiers from afar. Driven by curiosity to see Russian men for the first time in their lives, they cut their hair short, dress up as boys, and paste on fake beards to their faces. This is a common theme in accounts by women repatriates, who often mention disguising their gender in order to move about safely (Women's Division of Sōka Gakkai 1986: 44, 61). When Shibano and the others come face-to-face with the Soviet soldiers, who regard them with amused curiosity, the girls freeze from fear until a Japanese elderly man tells them to run away because the Russians will take their "most prized possession" (Shibano 1958: 34), i.e., their virginity. This experience seems enough to instill fear in Shibano but once she returns to her father, the message is driven home through violence. After learning that his daughter tried to approach the soldiers of her own volition, despite her pure intentions, self-admittedly absurd precautions, and a fortunate outcome, the father beats her to the point that Shibano starts fearing for her life (35). This experience instills in Shibano a

sense that it is better to die than to be “defiled” by a man, which is expressed explicitly later in her memoir.

Soon after this incident, Shibano was once again hired as a telephone operator, due to her previous experience. For her new role, Shibano learns Russian, which proves detrimental to her repatriation to Japan since, due to her valuable skills, the authorities refuse to let her go. In an attempt to be made redundant, Shibano gets into a scuffle with a Russian co-worker, accidentally throws acid at her and is sentenced to three years of forced labor under Article 74 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). During her time in the prison camps of Sakhalin, Shibano’s father and siblings are repatriated to Hokkaido, leaving her alone on the island at eighteen years old.

Although Shibano has a clearly delineated view of what every woman must desire most in life—namely, marriage and family—during her time in a women’s prison camp she witnesses several challenges to heteronormativity and the binary view of sex. According to the author, she is imprisoned with two intersex individuals whom she describes with curiosity and pity. According to Shibano, they cannot be held in a men’s prison because they would be abused and likely raped, but they cannot fit in in a women’s camp either (65). Shibano goes on to depict their naked bodies as observed in a bathhouse (67), and how they would have loud intercourse with women prisoners (66). While in the camp, Shibano also witnesses homosexual relations between other women, which she describes without shock or judgement (70). As brief as Shibano’s time in camp was, it offered opportunities to widen her understanding of sex and sexuality. Shibano nevertheless views intersex bodies as a misfortune bestowed upon the poor souls she encounters, and furthermore that homosexual relations are born out of necessity, not something desirable under normal circumstances. The existence of same-sex relations in the Soviet camps is by no means a new discovery, discussed recently and at length by Rustam Alexander (2021, 23–50). Of note here is Shibano’s willingness and candidness in depicting them, which is not common in camp testimonies, begging the question what role nonheteronormativity plays in the text. On the one hand, it adds to her characterization of Russian women as the cultural Other, driven by sexual desire to the extent that is presented as foreign to Shibano. On the other, from a literary perspective, it foreshadows the narrator’s own shifting desires later in the text.

Shibano is released upon appeal, after spending just six months in camp, and she finds herself homeless, unemployed and with just 53 rubles to her name.

She soon meets a seemingly kind Korean man who takes her to an acquaintance, an older Korean man, telling her she can live with him for a while, until she finds a job and a home. To her surprise, the narrator wakes up in the middle of the night being fondled by the acquaintance who, as it turns out, had purchased Shibano as a wife. The author manages to escape unscathed and eventually lands with another pair of kind strangers, who arrange for her to become a barber's apprentice. The barber, again, a Korean man, tries to have sex with her but backs down when Shibano resists. When she later arrives at the Korean barber's home, Shibano finds out that instead of being sent for an apprenticeship, she was once again sold to the barber as a wife (Shibano 1958: 80–106). The importance of these two encounters is twofold. First, it highlights the effort Shibano put into preserving her chastity, often putting her own life in danger, just to escape the unwanted advances of men. This speaks directly to the anxieties of the postwar Japanese society about the “bodily contamination” and loose morals of women repatriates (Watt 2009: 111–125). Second, it challenges the image of the Soviet soldier as the main perpetrator of sexual violence against Japanese settlers. As such it functions within the “postwar literary treatments of repatriation,” where “Koreans become a source of anxiety” (156).

These two experiences add to the author's negative attitude towards Koreans, who are described as “smelling of garlic” (Shibano 1958: 82, 97), which was a common Japanese stereotype about Koreans. Korean characters in her text also speak with an accent, as the author uses small mistakes and typos to render how Koreans allegedly sound when speaking Japanese. By far the most formative experience that solidified Shibano's general attitude into a definitive hatred was her four-year marriage to a Korean man named Go. Shibano agrees to get married, despite not knowing the man, for two reasons: her friend's claim that the man is also a virgin, like Shibano, and the hope that it would make her life easier, as becoming a housewife is her view of a perfectly fulfilled woman's life (143–144). Shibano describes in detail the first sexual experience of her life, repeatedly emphasizing that it happened within the confines of marriage (147). Thus, even though she had finally given up her “most prized possession,” she remained a virtuous woman by only allowing her rightful husband to “take” it. As Go turns out to be addicted to gambling and prone to violence, Shibano comes to regret her decision to get married and, perhaps even more importantly, to give up her virginity. Go's gambling and beatings push his young and industrious wife to pursue her own income and a means of escaping the marriage. Shibano joins a group of local wives who pick

wild grapes in the mountains for making alcohol and selling it on the black market. The author claims that the domestic situation of most women in the area was the same; thus, the small outings were an opportunity for the women to vent to each other, suggesting a sense of female solidarity (157). This proves to be safe space for Shibano, not least because it is occupied entirely by women. Go eventually finds the little money Shibano manages to save, which results in a violent confrontation and an end to the unhappy marriage.

Her loss of virginity and a failed attempt at domestic bliss mark the beginning of a shift in Shibano's personality and identity as a woman. Driven by a sense of loss and disappointment, she throws herself wholeheartedly at her new job at a railroad factory, noting that in the USSR women doing such demanding labor is nothing out of the ordinary (170). One day while working, however, she witnesses a horrific accident as a group of her coworkers are crushed by an oncoming train, and Shibano barely escapes death herself. Unable to cope with the trauma or see any possibility of a brighter future, the narrator decides to commit suicide. After a failed attempt at stepping in front of a train, Shibano tries to drown herself but, hearing a group of fishermen calling to her, she gets scared and runs away from the coast. The author remarks how even though she did not fear death anymore, the idea of getting "defiled" by men felt worse than dying (186).

Having failed to kill herself, Shibano turns to a different form of self-harm—heavy drinking. One evening, she confides her troubles to a Russian female friend, who brings vodka and the two decide to drown their sorrows. Shibano writes, "That night, our bodies grew so hot that we both got naked and, while embracing each other, we fell asleep with no memory of what had happened" (187). The author claims that this sort of drinking and passing out (and perhaps the physical relationship with her friend, although it is not stated explicitly) continued for several days until the friend finds her a job with a building company. What lifts Shibano out of her lowest point is the disgust she feels towards men's bodies, which indirectly prevents her from killing herself by enabling her relationship with a Russian woman, who offers physical intimacy and tenderness as well as a stable job.

Her new position is even more physically demanding than her last one, thus, Shibano abandons femininity and tries instead to fend for herself without having to rely on others. She describes how her body changes due to her work, shifting from supposed feminine ideals to strength and functionality, aspects that Shibano considers manly (189). She also starts wearing trousers instead of a skirt, changes her speech to use more masculine pronouns *ore* (I, me) and

omae (you), continues to drink heavily, and takes up gambling as a hobby, which is dominated by men. After her disappointment with domestic life, Shibano seems to dispense with her feminine identity and thus lays bare to her reader the performativity of gender. Through small changes to her speech, clothes, fitness, mannerisms, job, and hobbies, Shibano claims to have become almost entirely like a man. Her sexuality also seems to be in flux since, after her drunken embrace with her Russian friend and her transformation towards masculinity, Shibano's view of Russian women's bodies changes, too—from offputtingly fuzzy and lumpy objects of disgust (44), as described at the beginning, to “voluptuous and soft” (213) objects of desire. She describes taking dancing lessons together with her coworkers, during which the women pair up with one another, and as she is dancing with her Russian coworkers, Shibano confides, “I thought if I were a man, I would surely be tempted” (213). The narrator has similar thoughts later, while observing the naked body of her Russian friend Marusya, as they visit the washhouse together (217). Yet, in Shibano's world of Japan and the USSR in the mid-twentieth century, lesbian relations are only seemingly permitted in the prison camp and drunken stupor, not under normal circumstances or in public life. That is despite the fact that, throughout her lifetime, lesbian relations were not criminalized in Japan or the USSR, unlike male same-sex relations which were criminalized in the USSR in 1934 (Alexander 2021, 10).

The narrator depicts the three years she spent working at a construction company, unbothered by feminine ideals, enjoying the company of her female coworkers, as the most peaceful out of her thirteen years on Sakhalin (234). However, when a call for repatriation to Japan is announced, Shibano wastes no time in applying and, thus, she once again starts worrying about her virtue and marriage opportunities. After having her application rejected once, the narrator realizes that married couples are given priority (Din 2015: 181), and thus she agrees to form a fictitious marriage with another Korean man on condition that they never engage in any acts of physical intimacy and live separately while they wait for the repatriation ship to arrive (Shibano 1958: 239). Upon boarding the ship, however, Shibano exclaims to the authorities that she does not know the man and he is forced to disembark, as the narrator openly admits that she hates all Koreans and felt no remorse for tricking and using the man for her own gain (245). According to Shibano, the Japanese ship crew and journalists on board praise her for being single and not married to a Korean (245–246). Her three years in Naibuchi notwithstanding, Shibano is once again concerned solely with her virtue and marriage prospects, not only

shunning the Korean man but also rejoicing at the fact that she is able to return to Japan before she turns thirty, while she is still supposedly of marriable age. Despite the relative happiness and freedom from restrictive gender roles that Shibano is able to achieve during the Khrushchev's Thaw and her last years in the USSR, once an opportunity to repatriate arises, she seizes it. As she puts it, she wants to live in a place with "only" Japanese people, where "only" Japanese is spoken, despite the fact that she admittedly has no memory of her homeland (*sokoku*), having settled on Sakhalin when she was four (235). The imagined ethnic homogeneity is a stronger motivator even than the desire to reunite with her family members who were repatriated earlier.

At this point, Shibano's imagined audience more obviously shapes the content of her memoir. Lori Watt (2009) has shown that repatriates to Japan were faced with all kinds of discrimination from their compatriots who had spent the war on the home islands (*naichi*). Specifically, women, who had returned from China and other territories liberated/occupied by the USSR, were viewed with suspicion in terms of their chastity. This was in part shaped by "prewar and wartime metropolitan perceptions of Japanese women abroad," who were associated with prostitution, a line of work that was legal in both the colonies and the home islands but, nonetheless, relatively stigmatized (Watt 2009: 101). In this context, Shibano's continual focus on chastity in her memoir is not only based on fear instilled in her by her father's violence, but also a response to the Japanese discourse about repatriates. Likewise, her desire to live in an ethnically homogenous Japan stems from the need to prove her loyalties. Having lived almost her whole life in the "outer territories" (*gaichi*) and, in the last thirteen years, having learnt Russian, mingled with Koreans, Russians, Jews, the Tatars, and the Roma, Shibano aims to convince her reader that, still, she wants nothing more than to live surrounded by her compatriots. In the discursive context surrounding repatriates in 1950s Japan, Shibano's memoir is less a subjective recall of an individual's experiences, and more of a response to the fears and suspicions regarding "bodily contamination" and "racial purity" of the postwar Japanese society (Watt 2009: 111–125). As she decides to become a member of it, she returns to her previous feminine self, defined by hopes of marriage and domesticity, abandoning the self-reliance and gender fluidity that defined her three years in Naibuchi. The memoir ends with Shibano disembarking in Maizuru in 1958 and reuniting with her sister.

From a certain perspective, Shibano's and Juciūtė's stories are diametrically opposed—the former was a settler who left Japan to live on the island of Sakhalin while the latter stayed in Lithuania and saw Russian settlers

come live in the LSSR. Likewise, after thirteen years on Sakhalin, Shibano became a 'repatriate,' a returnee to her supposed home country that she had no memory of, whereas Juciūtė became an 'expatriate,' she left her home, which she could barely recognize by the 1960s, to go live in the US. Essentially, both women ended up displaced by the Soviet regime that they perceived as a foreign invading force which, over the years, made their surroundings unrecognizable. Despite these significant differences, the ways that Juciūtė and Shibano remembered their time in the USSR reveal striking similarities which are worth exploring in more detail. I now turn to the memoir of Elena Juciūtė.

Juciūtė was born in 1911 in what was at the time the Kovno Governorate of the Russian Empire and was seven years old when Lithuania became a sovereign state. When the first Soviet occupation came, she was thirty, working as a teacher and, according to her own account, led a quiet life during the ensuing German occupation. Juciūtė's memoir begins in the summer of 1944 as the frontline advances through the country. At the time, Juciūtė lives separately from her mother and sister, both of whom, unbeknownst to her due to wartime disruption of communications, escape to the West. Juciūtė later finds out that her mother died in Germany, likely in a displaced persons camp. As Soviet institutions return to Lithuania, Juciūtė gets involved in distributing illicit pro-Lithuanian press and in 1946, she secretly joins the guerilla resistance for which she starts producing anti-Soviet literature. Three years later, at the age of thirty-eight, she is caught by the Soviet authorities and sentenced to ten years in forced labor camps under the infamous Article 58 of the RSFSR Criminal Code. After spending seven years in various camps in Siberia, Juciūtė is amnestied and returns to the LSSR in 1956, at the age of forty-five. Ten years later, in 1966, she is finally allowed to leave the country and go live with her sister in the US. Her memoir ends as she arrives in Boston and is reunited with her sister after twenty-two years apart.

According to the foreword, Juciūtė started writing her memoir the same year she left the USSR and completed her more than 500-page text, titled *Pėdos mirties zonoje* (Footprints in the death zone) in 1971. Since the author faced financial difficulties in having her Lithuanian-language text published in the US, only 1,500 copies of her memoir were published three years after the completion of the manuscript. During the 1980s, Juciūtė published two more Lithuanian books for the diaspora community—a study of Lithuanian farmers under Soviet occupation and a co-authored memoir of a former deportee to Siberia. In 1986, Juciūtė died at the age of seventy-five in Boston.

Based on her biography and memoir, it seems that, unlike young Shibano, Juciūtė did not show any particular interest in marriage and domesticity. She seems to have devoted her early adulthood to becoming a mathematics teacher and her later years, after the Soviet invasion, to the Lithuanian nationalist cause. More than anything, however, she remained devoted to her Catholic faith, which defined her views on morality and propriety. When trying to get a Lithuanian bureaucrat to sign her paperwork for departure to the US, Juciūtė jokingly calls herself a *davatka* (509), an old unmarried zealously religious woman; an image that is strikingly different from Shibano as she departs Sakhalin—fretting about turning thirty, lamenting her lost chastity, and pushing her second Korean husband almost literally overboard. Although Juciūtė has a strict opinion on what is appropriate for a woman—the sort of clothes one is supposed wear, work one is supposed to do, and activities one can engage in—it does not involve the duty to become a good wife and homemaker, which in turn allows her to devote herself to her faith and nationalist cause.

Perhaps the most immediate and apparent difference between Shibano's and Juciūtė's texts is the age difference between the authors. At the beginning of her memoir, Juciūtė is more than twice the age of Shibano is at the beginning of hers. Shibano was twenty-nine when she wrote and published her testimony while Juciūtė started writing at fifty-five and saw her text published when she was sixty-three years old. Completely absent in Juciūtė's memoir are any concerns about chastity or marriage that feature so prominently in Shibano's text. As an older woman, Juciūtė does not present herself as someone who was in constant danger of sexual violence while in the USSR, having to fend from the unwanted stares and touches of men. Moreover, while we witness Shibano gradually grow out of her gullibility, we never see Juciūtė getting tricked by ill-meaning men or women, testifying to her relative maturity from the beginning.

That being said, Juciūtė still attaches great value to virtue, like Shibano, but her understanding of it is based primarily on her Catholicism and sense of propriety. For instance, during a full-body search after her arrest, when she has to strip naked in front of a guard, Juciūtė expresses a sense of relief that the guard is a woman and later—when she is sent back to her cell with all buttons, clasps, laces, and rubber bands removed—an implied sense of shame that male guards witness her in such state (Juciūtė 1974: 60). Later in her memoir, Juciūtė states explicitly that she “had strict views on morality” (309).

Unlike Shibano, Juciūtė does not mention being at the constant risk and fear of sexual violence herself. Instead, anything sex-related usually happens to other women in the narrator's surroundings. For instance, when describing the

wartime chaos, Juciūtė mentions that two of her cousins were raped by Russians, resulting in unwanted pregnancies (24). She also briefly depicts the mass rapes of German women committed by Soviet soldiers as well as the establishment of special camps where locals were forced to have sex with the Red Army soldiers (23).¹

After arriving at a camp, Juciūtė describes in more detail how female prisoners would use sex as a type of currency. They would form relationships with camp guards, officers, and male prisoners with some sort of privilege, such as a job in the kitchen, warehouse, or who could receive packages from home and could give something in return for sexual favors. Depictions of these relations appear repeatedly throughout her memoir and Juciūtė's attitude towards them varies. At the beginning, she claims that these arrangements were mostly made out of necessity, with some exceptions of women who did it out of choice (127). As the memoir progresses, however, Juciūtė depicts it in increasingly ethnic and exotifying terms, stressing that it was only Russian women who tried to keep up feminine looks under abysmal camp conditions in order to seduce the guards and camp chiefs. At first, she speculates that this sort of behavior—clearly unbecoming of women from her perspective—was the outcome of poor living conditions in Russia (149) or the suppression of Orthodox Christianity. Eventually, like Shibano, Juciūtė also decides that the apparently insatiable libido of Russian women is a matter of national character (259). By subsequently stressing that her own relationships with men in the camp were limited to prayer with incarcerated priests and messages of support between Imprisoned resistance members, Juciūtė aims to show her readership that she remained a virtuous woman, devoted to her religion and her nationalist cause. Unlike Shibano, Juciūtė does not mention any lesbian relationships in the camp, either because she did not witness any or, possibly, due to a religious stigma against homosexuality.

Apart from matters pertaining to sexuality, gender also comes into focus whenever the author describes the hard labor that she and other women in the camp were forced to perform. Juciūtė describes the “equality of the sexes” bitterly, and mockingly when she writes that her cohort of female prisoners are given rough and heavy shovels, pickaxes, and sledgehammers and ordered to do hard physical work on a patch of railroad (166–167). In her eyes, the cruelty

¹ A group of Japanese women repatriates have spoken about their experience of being pressured by the leaders of the settler community to regularly have sex with the Soviet soldiers, so that the soldiers would not harass the community until repatriation (Hirai 2022). This is not entirely dissimilar from what Juciūtė is describing.

and absurdity of forcing women prisoners to perform such physically demanding labor is symptomatic of communist ideology, which she loathes. For Juciūtė, ideological differences can be easily extrapolated into matters of culture and ethnicity. She claims that Russian women specifically were better adapted to hard labor, such as felling trees and breaking rocks, while women from the Baltic states were better at needlework and other such supposedly feminine tasks (181). Here, again, Juciūtė reaffirms her femininity along ethnic lines, aiming to convince the reader that despite being put in an environment with no space for feminine hobbies or ideals, she and her compatriots held on to their feminine identity.

There is no appeal for Juciūtė, it seems, in gender equality more generally, since all it means is the loss of femininity and the obligation to perform physical labor. Unlike Shibano, who finds a certain level of freedom in rejecting gender roles, Juciūtė sees only loss, despite the fact that her own biography poses several challenges to gender norms. Juciūtė also turns a blind eye to aspects within the Soviet system that do not align with her views on gender equality. For instance, when describing camp rules, Juciūtė mentions that a discovery of a knife among prisoners' possessions would be met with ten days in solitary confinement if the owner was a man and five days if the owner was a woman (251). The author does not use this example as an opportunity to question Soviet gender equality more broadly. She later describes how in a trial case against Lithuanian resistance fighters, the men are sentenced to death while the only woman in the case is sentenced to ten years of forced labor in camps. Juciūtė speculates that the woman got a lighter sentence because she claimed to be in love with one of the men, i.e., not committed to the anti-Soviet cause. The author concludes that the Soviet justice system was more lenient towards drunkards and lovers (299), and does not entertain the possibility that the defendant's gender might have affected the outcome of the trial.

Overall, whenever discussing matters related to gender—whether it is the relative egalitarianism of the USSR or gender-based violence during the war—Juciūtė makes sure that it aligns with the religious and patriotic beliefs that she holds herself and assumes in her audience. For instance, whenever depicting sexual violence in her memoir, Juciūtė focuses on Russian perpetrators and their non-Russian victims, seamlessly reaffirming the image of Soviet Russia as the aggressor; an image that likely resonated with her main readership—the anti-Soviet and pro-American Lithuanian diaspora in the US. Likewise, instances of gender equality in the USSR are presented by Juciūtė as absurd and cruel—as potentially beneficial ideas that were taken to an extreme in the Soviet

system. This, too, allows the author to discuss her gender-specific experiences without any suggestion that, as a woman, Juciūtė might have benefited from this system outside of her Gulag experience in any way. By presenting us with the odd image of feeble women doing hard labor, Juciūtė aims to reassure us of her own ideological beliefs and align her text with the ideological and gender-based expectations of her audience.

5. Conclusion

This article has presented an examination of two memoirs written by women about the Soviet occupation of Lithuania and Karafuto/Sakhalin at the end of WWII. Through a focus on female identity, it has revealed that both texts, despite being published in environments that were relatively unreceptive to female war experience, were able to mediate it in quite some detail. In their publications, the two authors address the concerns of the societies that they were writing to, thus, making their harrowing stories acceptable. By repeatedly mentioning her efforts at preserving her chastity and warding off men, Shibano challenges the view of Japanese women repatriates as “sullied” or promiscuous. Moreover, her critical stance towards Soviet socialism and longing for an ethnically homogenous Japan are meant to reassure the audience that despite returning from the ideological enemy, the author is as ideologically pure as she is virtuous. Likewise, Juciūtė’s unwavering anti-Soviet, pro-Catholic and nationalistic opinions that permeate her text, allow the author to mediate her experience to an audience that might otherwise be unwilling to listen to a single woman’s tale.

The multidirectional approach to memory taken here also reveals significant differences between the mediated experiences of Shibano and Juciūtė. The most apparent difference is the age gap between the authors, wherein the older woman focuses less on her chastity, marriage prospects and the constant danger of sexual violence while nevertheless upholding her own feminine ideals of modesty and morality. Another important difference is religion which plays a much more significant role in Juciūtė’s text than in Shibano’s. As such, it highlights the differences between the Lithuanian context, where Catholicism played an important role in the anti-Soviet resistance and self-definitions against Orthodox Russia, and the Japanese context, where religion did not play an important role in its relations with the Russian Empire or the USSR.

Despite their ideological alignment and willingness to address the concerns of their audiences, under a close inspection, both memoirs pose certain challenges to societal norms. Shibano, a settler of the Japanese Empire, writes openly not only about sexual violence but also about her gender fluidity and attraction towards Russian women. Juciūtė, too, an unmarried and childless woman, recounts how she joined the anti-Soviet resistance, willing to fight and do anything but kill for her nation. The extraordinary postwar conditions in the margins of the Soviet empire enable both women to step out of the gender roles that they might have otherwise wholeheartedly complied with under different circumstances. However, in order to mediate these ‘unfeminine’ experiences to their audiences, Shibano and Juciūtė have to repeatedly reassure their readers that they continue to uphold appropriate (feminine) values, such as chastity, marriage, morality, patriotism and religion. Most importantly, both are vehemently anti-Soviet and anti-communist, allowing their stories to briefly enter the Cold War discourse only to be completely forgotten today.

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Inherited Wounds. Gendered Memory and Historical Trauma in Han Kang's *Human Acts* (2016) and *We Do Not Part* (2025)

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Abstract This paper investigates the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories in South Korea through a comparative analysis of Han Kang's *Human Acts* (*Sonyeoni onda* 2016) and *We Do Not Part* (*Jakbyeolhaji anneunda* 2025). Framing the Gwangju Uprising (1980) and the Jeju 4.3 Massacre (1948) as “inherited wounds,” this study uses Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” and feminist trauma theory to explore how historical pain is inscribed upon the female body and psyche. While traditional historiography often focuses on the event itself, Han Kang’s narrative architecture shifts the gaze to the “afterlife” of violence – how it is mediated, repressed, and ultimately resurfaces in the lives of survivors and their descendants. By analyzing the polyphonic witnessing in *Human Acts* and the spectral, embodied testimony in *We Do Not Part*, this paper argues that Han Kang constructs a specific form of gendered memory. In this framework, women act not merely as passive mourners, but as ethical agents who transform the open wounds of history into a political practice of “grievability,” resisting the state’s erasure of the dead.

Keywords Han Kang; Postmemory; Gendered Trauma; Gwangju Uprising; Jeju 4.3 Massacre.

1. Introduction: The Anatomy of the “Inherited Wound”

We have to make sure scabs don’t form on the wound [...] They said we have to let the blood flow, that I have to feel the pain. Otherwise the nerves below the cut will die. (Han Kang 2025: 32)

After you died I couldn’t hold a funeral, so my life became a funeral. [...] Everywhere the lights of the temple shrines are burning. In the flowers that bloom in spring, in the snowflakes. In the evenings that draw each day to a close. Sparks from the candles, burning in empty drinks bottles. (Han Kang 2016: 210)

In the opening pages of Han Kang’s *We Do Not Part*, the narrative centers on a harrowing image of somatic survival. The protagonist, Inseon, suffered an

injury in her carpentry shop that resulted in the severing of two of her fingers. The reattachment surgery is successful, but the preservation of the limb requires a ritual of agonizing vigilance. To prevent the nerves from dying and the tissue from necrotic decay, a doctor or caregiver must prick the healing wound with a needle every three minutes, forcibly keeping the blood circulating through the traumatized flesh. Pain is not a symptom of injury to be suppressed: it is the sole indicator of life.

This visceral image of pain as a necessary condition for survival and of wounds that must be kept fresh to prevent necrosis serves as a governing allegory for Han Kang's entire corpus. This paper's aim is to analyze how, for Han Kang, historical trauma operates much like Inseon's injury: it is a lesion that refuses to close. In her two major historical novels, *Human Act* and *We Do Not Part*, Han Kang navigates the pivotal yet marginalized historical traumas of the Gwangju Uprising (1980) and the Jeju 4.3 Massacre (1948) not as a closed chapters of the past but as active, bleeding inheritances.

Set during and after the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, *Human Acts* follows the lives of several characters connected to Dong-ho, a middle-school student killed during the military's violent suppression of pro-democracy protesters. Structured as a polyphonic requiem in six chapters, each narrated by a different voice (including Dong-ho's ghost, his friend's older sister, an editor, a prisoner, a factory worker, Dong-ho's mother and, finally, Han Kang herself), the novel traces the immediate and long-term aftermath of state violence. The narrative shifts between 1980 and the mid-1990s, showing how the trauma of the massacre infiltrates the bodies and psyches of survivors, manifesting in physical pain, censorship, torture, and unresolvable grief.

On the other hand, *We Do Not Part* centers on Gyeongha, a writer who travels to snow-isolated Jeju Island to find her friend Inseon's pet bird. As Gyeongha becomes trapped in a blizzard, the narrative layers three temporal levels: Gyeongha's present-day search, Inseon's account of her mother Jeongsim's survival of the 1948–1954 Jeju 4.3 Massacre, and spectral traces of the massacre victims themselves. Through dreams, documents, and embodied suffering, the novel explores how the silenced trauma of Jeju is transmitted across generations, with women bearing the burden of remembering the 'ungrievable' dead.

The historical context of these novels is essential to understand the urgency of Han Kang's intervention. The Gwangju Uprising of May 1980 was a pro-democracy movement led by students and citizens against the military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan, which had seized power following the

assassination of Park Chung-hee. The military responded with what Kim (2024) identifies as ‘democidal’ violence, deploying paratroopers who shot and violently suppressed unarmed civilians, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Similarly, the Jeju 4.3 Massacre, which began in 1948, was a brutal counter-insurgency campaign enacted by the South Korean government (under US military supervision) against islanders labeled as communist sympathizers. This campaign resulted in the deaths of an estimated thirty thousand civilians, nearly ten percent of the island’s population, and was followed by decades of enforced silence where the mere mention of the event was punishable by imprisonment under the National Security Act.¹

These events represent wounds that the South Korean state actively sought to cauterize through censorship, revisionism, and forced silence. As Kim (2024) argues, the state’s strategy was one of alienation, attempting to sever the connection between the people and their history, and between the victims and the human community. By labeling the victims of Jeju as ‘reds’ and the protesters of Gwangju as ‘rioters’, the state effectively erased their political agency and denied their families the right to public mourning. The struggle against this erasure is central to Han Kang’s work. By insisting on the visibility of the wound, she challenges the state’s attempt to impose a smooth, revised history over the jagged reality of mass violence.

The concept of inheritance here is drawn from Marianne Hirsch’s (2012) theory of “postmemory”. Although Hirsch primarily discusses this inheritance in terms of events that occurred before one’s birth, the framework is particularly relevant to Han Kang’s position in relation to these traumas. Han Kang was born in 1970—ten years prior to the Gwangju Uprising— but she experienced the event through a profound spatial and epistemic displacement: her family moved from Gwangju to Seoul just four months before the massacre occurred. Consequently, she did not witness the violence directly; instead, she encountered it indirectly and tangentially through the “hushed whispers” (Han

¹ The National Security Act (*Gukga Boanbeop*, 1948–) is a South Korean law originally enacted in the early Cold War to criminalize activities deemed supportive of North Korea or “anti-state” organizations. Especially under Syngman Rhee (1875–1965), who served as the first President of South Korea from 1948 to 1960 and later military regimes, it functioned as a broad instrument of political repression: speech, publications, and assemblies critical of the government or discussing events like the Jeju 4.3 Massacre and the Gwangju Uprising could be prosecuted as “pro-communist” or “benefiting the enemy.” The law enabled long-term imprisonment, torture, and surveillance, and its vague definitions of “anti-state” activity were used to stigmatize victims and their families as “reds,” or “rioters” thereby legitimizing state violence and obstructing public memorialization.

Kang 2016: 213) of her parents and by accidentally viewing a photo book documenting the atrocities. For Han Kang, the trauma of Gwangju (like the Jeju 4.3 Massacre, which historically preceded her) operates not as a direct memory but as a “structure of transmission” characterized by “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (Hirsch 2012: 5). However, Han Kang complicates this transmission by rooting it specifically in the female experience and the politics of resistance. While male bodies are often the spectacular victims of state violence in these texts – the piles of corpses in the Gwangju gymnasium, the executed prisoners of Jeju – it is the female characters who bear the burden of remembering.

This paper shows how the trauma in Han Kang’s novels is not merely personal but a symptom of alienating forces in a society still grappling with the legacies of imperialism and dictatorship. By refusing to let the wound heal into the scar tissue of forgetting, her protagonists perform a radical act of “not parting,” ensuring that the spirits of Gwangju and Jeju remain present, articulate, and undeniably real. This refusal to part is an ethical stance, a demand that the reader acknowledges the ongoing pain of the past as a condition for any meaningful future.

2. State of the Art and Scholarly Intervention

Scholarship on Han Kang’s historical fiction has evolved significantly over the past decade, particularly following the international recognition of *Human Acts*. Early critical responses centered on the novel’s testimonial function and its challenge to official narratives of the Gwangju Uprising, positioning it within the broader tradition of Korean “democratization literature” (*minjung munhak*). Subsequent work has expanded this focus to interrogate the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of trauma representation. Pak (2020), for instance, examines the ‘impossible translation’ of *Human Acts*, arguing that the novel’s use of the Gwangju dialect constitutes a form of linguistic resistance that risks being flattened in global circulation. Similarly, scholars employing trauma theory have emphasized the novels’ refusal of narrative closure and their insistence on the “irrepresentability” of mass violence (Choi 1999; Na 2022). More recently, Kim Youngchan (2024) has introduced the concept of “mimesis of pain” (*gotong-ui mimesis*) as a defining feature of *We Do Not Part*, suggesting that the narrator undergoes a “symbolic death” to access the perspective of the deceased—a move that transforms the text into what he calls an “impossible

place” (*pulganunghan jangso*) where the boundary between the living and the dead dissolves.

At the same time, Han Kang's female protagonists are not passive victims but active custodians of counter-memory, engaging in what Butler (2004) terms the politics of “grievability”²—insisting on the public recognition of lives the state has deemed unworthy of mourning.

However, while these interventions have enriched our thematic understanding of Han Kang's prose, they tend to treat *Human Acts* and *We Do Not Part* in isolation, analyzing them as a response to distinct historical events rather than as part of an evolving aesthetic project.

What remains underexplored in the current scholarship is a comparative structural analysis that examines how Han Kang's narrative strategies shift between the two novels in response to the different temporalities of trauma. Specifically, existing studies (Chung 2023; Dahal 2025; Pokharel & Banu 2025) have not adequately addressed how the transition from the “fresh wound” of Gwangju (a massacre within living memory) to the “chronic wound” of Jeju (a trauma buried under decades of amnesia) demands fundamentally different modes of narration. Moreover, while feminist readings (Lee 2022; Glynne & Latha 2025) have rightly emphasized the centrality of women's voices, they have not systematically theorized how the architecture of female witnessing changes across the two texts—from the polyphonic ‘chorus’ of caregivers and mourners in *Human Acts* to the intimate, dyadic “intercorporeality” of Gyeongha and Inseon in *We Do Not Part*.

This article addresses these gaps by offering a comparative formal analysis that foregrounds the relationship between trauma's temporality and narrative structure. It argues that Han Kang does not simply repeat a single aesthetic strategy; rather, she develops distinct modes of representation suited to the specific ‘afterlife’ of each massacre, while demonstrating that Han Kang's prose on gendered memory is not merely a thematic concern, but a formal practice that adapts to the conditions under which historical violence is transmitted. Also, by situating both novels within Marianne Hirsch's framework of “postmemory” and the Korean critical concept of ‘mimesis of pain,’ this study

² Judith Butler introduces the concept of “grievability” in *Precarious Life* (2004) to describe the political and social distribution of value. A life is considered “grievable” if its loss would be publicly marked and mourned, signifying that it counted as a qualified, recognizable life within the community. Conversely, lives deemed “ungrievable” (such as those of the “reds” or “rioters”) are excluded from the sphere of public mourning, effectively rendering them ontologically null even before death. Han Kang's characters resist this erasure by insisting on the “grievability” of the state's victims.

shows how Han Kang constructs the female body as a persistent “embodied archive”—a site where the past is not passively remembered but actively, painfully re-experienced in the present. In doing so, this article clarifies what is central in Han Kang’s shifting aesthetics of remembrance: the insistence that the “inherited wound” must remain open, unhealed, and politically contestable.

3. Theoretical Framework: The Architecture of Remembrance

To fully understand the complex narrative mechanism Han Kang employs to excavate the ‘inherited wound’ it is necessary to present a precise theoretical framework. This study employs three distinct but complementary fields: Maurice Halbwachs’ (1992) foundational sociology of collective memory, Marianne Hirsch’s (2012) psychoanalytic theory of “postmemory”, and the specific, localized aesthetics of the ‘mimesis of pain’ and the ‘impossible place’ derived from recent Korean literary scholarship. Together, these lenses examine how historical trauma is not merely represented, but structurally reenacted within the text, transforming the novel into a site of ethical witnessing against the obliterating forces of state power.

3.1 From Individual to Collective Memory: Reconstructing the Shattered Frameworks

Maurice Halbwachs, in his seminal work *On Collective Memory* (1992), fundamentally challenges the Cartesian notion of memory as a purely individual, biological faculty. Instead, he states that memory is a social function, inextricably bound to the groups to which an individual belongs. He argues that individual recollection is always supported, structured, and indeed made possible by “social frameworks” – such as the family, the religious community, the social class, and the nation. As Halbwachs states:

It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories. (Halbwachs 1992: 38)

Halbwachs draws a crucial distinction between collective memory, which is living, continuous, and carried by a group, and history, which he views as a dead reconstruction of the past that begins only when the living memory of the group has faded. For Halbwachs, history is a unitary, abstract narrative imposed from

the outside, while collective memory is plural, diverse, and rooted in the specific experiences of group members.

In the context of Han Kang's novels, this distinction is crucial and goes against the official history that required the systematic destruction of the "collective memory" of the victims. By banning funeral rites, bulldozing massacre sites, and criminalizing speech, the state sought to shatter the social frameworks – kinship networks and village communities – that sustained the counter-memory of the events. When the group is destroyed, Halbwachs warns, its memory is threatened with extinction.

3.2 The Generation of "Postmemory"

While Halbwachs explains the dynamics of memory within a living group, Marianne Hirsch's theory of "postmemory" is essential for analyzing Han Kang, born in 1970, who writes about the events of 1948 and 1980 not as a witness, but as an inheritor. Hirsch defines "postmemory" as the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – they experience only through the memory of others, through the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.

Crucially, Hirsch distinguishes this from simple recollection or historical knowledge. As she argues in *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012):

Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories [...] is to be shaped [...] by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction. (Hirsch 2012: 5)

In Han Kang's work, this "imaginative investment" is an intense ethical labor. The writer herself belongs to the generation that inherited the silence of Gwangju – the "hushed whispers" of adults that she mentions in the epilogue to *Human Acts*. This inheritance is mediated through what Hirsch calls "testimonial objects" – material objects that carry memory traces and embody the process of transmission. These objects do not merely signify the past; they carry the affective weight of its transmission into the present. In *We Do Not Part*, objects like the black logs (representing unburied bones) and the needle used to prick Inseon's finger function as these testimonial objects.

However, Han Kang expands Hirsch's theory by positioning the female body itself as the ultimate testimonial object. While Hirsch often focuses on the

visual medium of photography as the carrier of “postmemory” (the “family album”), the writer shifts the locus of memory to the somatic dimension: it is the scar, the migraine, the phantom limb, and the stomach cramp that serve as the indexical signs of the past. This somatic “postmemory” suggests that trauma is not just psychologically inherited but physically transcribed onto the next generation. Because the state successfully erased the archival evidence of the massacres, the memory of the event was forced to bypass the textual record and settle into the biological life of the survivors. In this context, the descendant’s physical pain—such as Gyeongha’s sympathetic stomach cramps or Inseon’s phantom pain—functions as a form of “intercorporeal witnessing.” The body becomes an “embodied archive” (Kim 2024), where the unarticulated suffering of the ancestor is reenacted by the descendant, allowing the past to be felt before it can be known.

Furthermore, Hirsch’s concept of “connective histories” is also crucial. This approach allows divergent histories to be thought of alongside one another, resisting the competitive logic of victimhood. Han Kang uses it to link the diverse traumas of Gwangju (1980) and Jeju (1948) into a single, connective genealogy of state violence. By doing so, she creates an affiliative “postmemory” that moves beyond the biological family to include the reader in a wider, trans-generational community of witnessing. The reader is invited not just to learn about the past, but to feel its weight, becoming a “co-witness” through the affective transmission of the text.

3.3 The “Mimesis of Pain” and the Symbolic Death

To fully recognize how Han Kang bridges the gap between the living and the dead without relying on Western concepts of closure or catharsis, turning to the concept of the “mimesis of pain” (*gotong-ui mimesis*) is needed. As elaborated by Kim Youngchan (2024), this concept suggests that the narrator does not merely observe the trauma from a safe distance, but voluntarily steps into the center of it.

Kim argues that the narrator undergoes a ‘symbolic death’ to become a vessel for the pain of others. This is not merely a metaphorical device but a structural enactment of radical empathy:

‘This symbolic death opens “I” to the pain of the others who died, overlapping one’s body and mind with theirs. This mimesis of pain repeats

throughout the novel, demonstrating the premise and method of writing about Jeju 4.3's suffering.' (Kim 2024: 80)

This mimetic practice transforms the narrative space into an “impossible place” (*pulganunghan jangso*) where the spirits of the dead arrive, and their voices become manifest. In this space, the ontological boundary between the self and the other, the living and the dead, is dissolved. Unlike Halbwachs's collective memory, which relies on the stability of the group, or Hirsch's “postmemory”, which relies on mediation, the mimesis of pain relies on a radical, somatic identification. By physically suffering the pain of the past – through exhaustion, cold, or sympathetic agony – Han Kang's characters transform historical records into lived experience.

The mimesis of pain ensures that the specific, local agony of Jeju or Gwangju is not dissolved into a generalized national narrative, but remains sharp, distinct, and physically felt. Writing thus becomes an ethical performance, where the writer stages her own difficulty in accessing the past not as a failure, but as a necessary condition for respecting the magnitude of the trauma she seeks to represent.

3.4 The Narrative Space as an “Impossible Place”

Linked to the mimesis of pain is the concept of the narrative space as an “impossible place.” Kim (2024) posits that Han constructs her novels as liminal zones where the laws of physics and linear time are suspended to allow the dead to arrive. In *We Do Not Part*, the snow-covered isolated Jeju creates an “heterotopia”³ where the deceased of 1948 can manifest alongside the living.

‘The space of “writing” that Han depicts is an impossible place where the spirits/ghosts of the dead arrive and their voices become manifest. Han transforms this space into one where the voices of “I”, Inseon, and the dead are superimposed.’ (Kim 2024: 79)

This theoretical insight provides a framework for understanding the spectral elements of Han Kang's work not as magical realism, but as an ethical necessity.

³ The concept of “heterotopia” was introduced by Michel Foucault (in *Of Other Spaces*, 1967) to describe physical sites that function as “counter-sites” to ordinary society, where real spaces are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. In this paper, the term is applied to the snowbound house in *We Do Not Part* and the gymnasium in *Human Acts*—liminal spaces where the boundary between the living and the dead is suspended, allowing the suppressed “counter-memory” of state violence to emerge in opposition to the space of the official nation.

Because the state has erased the physical traces of the massacres, the memory of the dead has nowhere to go but into this “impossible place” of literature. Here, the polyphonic voices of the dead in *Human Acts* and the silent trees in *We Do Not Part* find their own space where they can be heard, which is ‘impossible’ because it defies the state’s logic of erasure and the biological logic of death, asserting instead a continuity of existence through shared pain.

4. Historical Context: The Genealogy of Violence

The Gwangju Uprising and the Jeju 4.3 Massacre are not isolated incidents but connected tangles in a genealogy of state violence that shaped modern South Korea. Both events share a common trajectory: a popular uprising or resistance, a brutal military suppression labeled as “anti-communist” purification, and a subsequent era of enforced silence where the victims were criminalized and their families silenced. This shared history of repression created what scholar Heonik Kwon (2009) terms a “politics of the dead,” where the rights of the living were contingent upon the erasure of the “political ghosts” (Kwon 2009: 12) of the past.

4.1 The Jeju Massacre (1948–1954): The Silenced “Red Island”

The Jeju 4.3 Massacre (*Cheju sasam sakon*) remains one of the most traumatic events in Korean history. Following Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel, with the Soviet Union occupying the North and the United States administering the South. The division, intended to be temporary, became increasingly entrenched as Cold War tensions escalated. On Jeju Island, a unique confluence of factors created a volatile situation: the island had suffered particularly brutal treatment under Japanese colonization (1910–1945), including forced labor and militarization; after liberation, many Jeju residents who had fled to Japan or worked in collaboration networks faced intense social stigma; and the U.S. military government’s policies, including the appointment of former colonial collaborators to positions of power, generated widespread resentment.

The violence on Jeju did not occur in isolation; it was a direct response to the changing political landscape in the post-liberation era (Cumings 1981; Armstrong 2003). After the plan proposed in 1945 at the Moscow Conference failed and the U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission deadlocked on establishing a

unified provisional government, the prospect of a unified Korea started to fade. By 1947, as Cold War tensions escalated, the U.S. military government moved to hold separate elections in the south to contain Soviet influence. Korean nationalists and leftists alike—particularly on Jeju Island—perceived this decision not merely as a procedural step but as the permanent crystallization of national division. Thus, the April 3 uprising was fueled by a desperate—albeit violent—rejection of this separate state-building project. This frames the subsequent massacre not just as an anti-communist purge but also as the crushing of a final attempt to preserve a unified nation.

The response was catastrophic. The South Korean government, operating under U.S. military supervision and supported by paramilitary Northwest Youth League members (refugees from North Korea known for their anti-communist fanaticism), launched a scorched-earth counterinsurgency campaign. President Syngman Rhee (1875 – 1965) declared martial law and authorized the designation of most of the island's interior as a “cleared area”—any person found in these zones could be killed on sight. Between 1948 and 1954, government forces and paramilitary groups systematically destroyed entire villages, burned homes, executed civilians, and buried bodies in unmarked graves. The brutality was indiscriminate: elders, women, and children were killed alongside suspected insurgents. By conservative estimates, approximately 30,000 civilians—nearly 10 percent of Jeju's population—died. Some scholars place the death toll even higher.

The massacre was systematically erased from public discourse for decades. Survivors and their descendants lived under the stigma of being associated with “reds,” facing discrimination in employment, education, and social life. The phrase *saram simyeon sarajinda* (tr.: “if you endure life, you can survive”) became a survival mantra, encoding the enforced silence that allowed survivors to persist (Kim, 1989).

Crucially, the trauma of Jeju was profoundly gendered. Kim & Hwang (2023) argue that the extermination of approximately 80% of the male population in many villages resulted in a “total deprivation of social support” for surviving women, who faced acute forms of trauma, including proxy killings (*taesal*) where family members were executed in place of missing male relatives. In response, women adopted a survival strategy of enforced silence, maintaining secret ancestral rites to preserve the memory of the dead despite the state's ban.

The historical legacy of Jeju 4.3 cannot be fully resolved through legal rehabilitation alone; it requires a narrative intervention that addresses the “impossibility” of its representation. The memory of the massacre itself is not a static object to be retrieved but a dynamic, painful process of “suffering together” (*hamkke gyeokgi*). By overlapping the voices of the narrator (“I”), the survivor (Inseon), and the dead (Inseon’s mother), Han Kang enacts the true history of Jeju, asserting that the only ethical way to remember 4.3 is to voluntarily inhabit its suffering

4.2 The Gwangju Uprising (May 1980): The Explosive Resurgence

If Jeju represents the suppressed origin, Gwangju represents the explosive resurgence of state violence. In December 1979, following the assassination of dictator Park Chung-hee, General Chun Doo-hwan seized power in a military coup. Pro-democracy protests spread across the country in the spring of 1980 (the “Seoul Spring”). In response, Chun declared martial law on May 17.

In the city of Gwangju, students protesting the closure of Chonnam National University were met with extreme brutality by paratroopers, who used bayonets and clubs indiscriminately. Enraged by the violence, the citizens of Gwangju armed themselves, driving the military out of the city on May 21 and establishing a self-governing community for ten days. This ‘liberated Gwangju’ is described by political scientist Choi Jungwoon as an “Absolute Community”:

In the absolute community, individual possessions that marked social status had no meaning [...] There was no class since every individual’s supreme dignity was recognized. [...] It was a permanent space in which finitude was overcome and time had no meaning. (Choi 1999: 125)

In Han Kang’s *Human Acts*, the brief, utopian counterpoint to the state’s violence is clearly represented. However, on May 27, the military retook the city in a bloody crackdown. The official death toll remains contested, but estimates range from several hundred to two thousand. Like Jeju, Gwangju was framed by the state as a “communist insurrection” incited by North Korean spies. The victims were buried in makeshift graves or dumped in trucks, denied proper rites.

The trauma of Gwangju is characterized by its visibility – the corpses in the streets, the open coffins – and its function as the crucible of South Korea’s contemporary democratic consciousness. Unlike the hidden trauma of Jeju,

Gwangju was a rupture that occurred in the full light of day, demanding an immediate, visceral response.

5. *Human Acts*: The Polyphony of the Fresh Wound

In *Human Acts*, the “inherited wound” is presented to the reader not as a scar of the past, but as an ongoing wound in the present. The novel’s narrative architecture, structured as a requiem in six movements, circles the central void of the Gwangju Uprising – the death of the middle school boy Dong-ho – without ever allowing the wound to fully scab over. This structural choice is not merely aesthetic but deeply political; by refusing a linear, singular historiography, Han Kang democratizes the trauma, distributing the burden of witnessing across different voices that collectively resist the state’s attempt to sanitize the massacre.

From a gendered perspective of memory, while the central victim – Dong-ho – is male, the burden of witnessing and the labor of carrying the ‘inherited wound’ fall disproportionately upon the female characters. Han Kang builds a gendered memory where the female body becomes an active, resistant archive. Unlike the male bodies in the novel, which are often destroyed, silenced, or reduced to meat, the female bodies – specifically the editor Kim Eun-sook and Dong-ho’s mother – survive. However, their survival is not a triumph; it is a painful, ongoing battlefield where the struggle against the erasure of history is waged daily.

5.1 Kim Eun-sook: The Body as a Battlefield of Censorship

The third chapter, centered on the editor Kim Eun-sook, shifts the narrative from the spectacular violence of the 1980 uprising to the suffocating atmosphere of 1985. While historians often mark this year as the beginning of the regime’s political decline following the February legislative elections—which saw the resurgence of the opposition—for ordinary citizens like Eun-sook, the dictatorship had paradoxically consolidated its grip through the “bureaucratization of violence.” (Lee, 2007)

By this time, the regime’s control had migrated from the open street to the closed interrogation room, enforcing silence through a sophisticated mechanism of censorship and surveillance that targeted the private lives of survivors.

Eun-sook represents a new voice emerging from the wreckage, one that must contend with the crushing and oppressive silence imposed by the regime.

This silence is enforced not through bullets, but through the bureaucratization of violence. The pivotal moment of this chapter occurs in the interrogation room, where Eun-sook is slapped by an officer. This slap is not merely a physical assault; it is an ontological rupture described with forensic precision: “At this point, the force of the slap had already burst the capillaries in her cheek and the man’s fingernails had broken her skin” (Han 2016: 76). And as the narration flows, the reader becomes the witness of a multitude of both real and metaphoric slaps that mark her entire life, transcending from the past directly into the present in which she is depicted. In an instant, Eun-sook’s body becomes a living archive where the past and present collide. The redness of her cheek is the surfacing of the blood spilled five years prior. By focusing on this specific, gendered humiliation – the officer’s casual assertion of dominance over a young woman – Han illustrates how the macro-violence of the state is sustained by the micro-violence of patriarchy. Eun-sook’s flinching reflex is not cowardice; it is the somatic registration of a history that refuses to pass.

However, Eun-sook is not merely a passive victim. Her act of remembrance, which is both physical and mental, constitutes a profound resistance against a modernizing world that seems bent on erasing the memory of Gwangju. Amid the rapid, dizzying changes that Seoul, the capital city, has undergone in the modern era, Eun-sook remains an unmoving, scarred anchor. Her existence embodies a refusal to move forward, recalling the wounds of a past that continue to burn beneath the surface of the nation’s progress:

It was time for her to get up and leave the office, but instead she remained where she was, unmoving. The flakes of snow silently sifting down looked as soft and white as freshly ground rice flour. Nevertheless, she could not think of them as beautiful. Today was supposed to be the day for her to forget the sixth slap, but her cheek had already healed. It barely even hurts anymore. When the next day dawned, then, there would be no need to forget the seventh slap. There would never be a day when she would forget the seventh slap. (Han 2014: 80)

5.2 The Mother: The Dialect of Grief and the Refusal to Part

If Eun-sook represents the struggle of the witness in the public sphere, the sixth chapter, narrated by Dong-ho’s mother, retreats into the radical interiority of maternal grief. This section serves as the emotional and ethical anchor of the novel, grounding political history in the irrefutable, biological reality of loss.

In the original Korean text, the mother's narrative is distinguished by its linguistic specificity. Written in a thick Gwangju dialect (*Jeolla bang-eon*), her voice resists the 'standardization' of national history. This dialect is not merely a regional accent but a political marker of the working-class south, which was historically marginalized by the Seoul-based military regime. In the translated work, this distinct regionality is inevitably replaced with a specific Anglophone dialect, creating an incongruous cultural displacement. Consequently, the foreign reader encounters a voice that is semantically clear but phonetically "widowed"—stripped of the rough, local texture that originally marked her defiance against the standard language of the state. This loss in translation⁴ paradoxically reinforces her status as a "remnant": the mother's grief is so deeply rooted in the specific soil of Gwangju that it resists full assimilation into a global literary language. (Na 2022).

The mother's memory can be defined as gendered through her refusal to accept the linear progression of time. The state demands reconciliation and closure, a moving on, but she refuses, rejecting the changing seasons, the blooming flowers, and the very passage of time because they signify a world continuing without her son.

I cut out the photo from your school ID and put it in my purse. Day or night, the house is always empty, but still I like to wait until the early hours of the morning, when there'd be no earthly reason for anyone to drop by, before I unwrap it from the folds of plain writing paper and smooth out the creases lining your face. There's no one around to overhear, but still I only let myself whisper it... Dong-ho. (Han 2014: 210)

By clinging to the pain, she asserts the "grievability" of a life the state deemed disposable, and her grief is an active, stubborn persistence. She wanders the streets of Gwangju, a spectral figure who haunts the city's modernity with the unresolved past. In her, the wound is shown to be terminal, with no possibility of healing; only fierce, protective custody of the memory.

Through these two women, Han Kang delineates a specific taxonomy of female resistance. While Eun-sook resists through the intellectual and somatic struggle against censorship, using her bruised body as a testament to the truth, Dong-ho's mother resists through the absolute fidelity of affect, using her

⁴ This loss is partially mitigated by the translator's, Deborah Smith (2016), who clarifies such aspect in the introduction, informing the reader, through a paratextual intervention, that the political marker of the dialect is inevitably 'flattened' in English, asking to 'hear' the silence of the missing dialect.

refusal to heal as a weapon against the state's enforced amnesia. Together, they show that in the face of violence, the most powerful "human act" is the refusal to let the dead disappear.

6. *We Do Not Part*: The Chronic Wound and the Embodied Archive

If *Human Acts* is a confrontation with the chaotic violence of an immediate, persistent scar, *We Do Not Part* is a meditation on the chronic wound that has festered in silence for seventy years. Shifting the focus to the Jeju 4.3 Massacre, Han Kang moves from the visceral shock of Gwangju to an aesthetic of atmospheric haunting, reflecting the latency of a trauma buried under decades of anti-communist suppression. The violence here is not fresh in the temporal sense, yet it is no less active; it has simply migrated from the surface of the skin to the nervous system of the survivor.

6.1 Inseon's Finger as Historiographical Allegory

The central allegory of the novel is Inseon's severed finger. As mentioned in the introduction section, the medical necessity of pricking the wound every three minutes to prevent the nerves from dying creates a harrowing somatic parallel to the labor of "postmemory". Just as the finger will rot if the pain is allowed to subside, the historical truth of Jeju will coagulate into oblivion if it is not constantly, painfully reactivated by the witness.

This "phantom pain" (Han 2021: 32) is not merely metaphorical but deeply material. Inseon's body becomes an 'embodied archive' where the data of history – U.S. military records (Han 2021: 105), massacre lists, oral testimonies (Han 2021: 203) – blends with sensory agony. As Inseon tells Gyeongha:

It was like I had thousands of transparent needles placed all over my body and they were transfusing me with life. [...] In that profound, uncanny euphoria, feeling my heart might rip open, I knew. That now I really could start on our project. (Han 2021: 205)

Inseon does not just know the history of 4.3; she suffers it, her body becoming the medium through which the unclaimed experience of the past erupts into the present. The novel suggests that for the generation of "postmemory", historical knowledge is not an intellectual acquisition but a physical burden.

Gyeongha, the writer-protagonist, experiences this burden as a crushing weight that manifests in her dreams and her physical exhaustion. The narrative enacts a “mimesis of pain” (Kim 2024), forcing the reader to participate in the somatic experience of the characters. We feel the cold, the exhaustion, and the sharp prick of the needle, just as we feel the weight of the unspoken history. This strategy collapses the distance between the event (1948) and the reading experience (2021), insisting that the pain of the massacre is trans-historical.

6.2 The “Impossible Place”: Writing as Katabasis and Heterotopia

The theoretical “impossible place” finds its concrete realization in the novel's setting. The blizzard that isolates Inseon's house functions as the physical threshold of the aforementioned “heterotopia,” suspending the laws of physics and time to allow the ghosts of 1948 to manifest. Gyeongha's journey through this white abyss is thus not merely a travel narrative but a form of *katabasis*—a mythological descent into the underworld to retrieve a lost soul (represented here by the bird Ama, a proxy for the witness's own spirit).

In this space, the distinction between the living and the dead blurs. The “black tree trunks” in Gyeongha's dream are simultaneously trees and the bodies of the executed. This spectrality is not a supernatural horror but an ontological reality for survivors. For Jeongsim, the dead brother is more real than the living daughter. The novel argues that for the “negative community” of Jeju survivors, the present is permanently colonized by the past.

I wipe the snow from my numbed nose and eyelid. Who's to say the snow
dusting my hands now isn't the same snow that had gathered on their faces
(Han 2021: 88)

The “impossible place” of the novel allows these “isolated monads” of memory to finally touch, if only in the shared space of the text. The writer's task is to enter this impossible place, to undergo a symbolic death and to become the medium for the voices that have been silenced. This narrative strategy challenges the rationalist historiography of the state, which demands empirical proof and linear timelines. Han Kang suggests that the truth of trauma can only be accessed in the “impossible place” of art, where the dead are permitted to speak.

6.3 Decentralized Representations: The Agency of Objects and Location

A key aspect of *We Do Not Part* is its “decentralized representation” (Kim 2024). The novel moves the center of gravity from Seoul (the center of power and official history) to Jeju (the periphery). The tension between Gyeongha (the outsider from Seoul) and Inseon (the local) highlights the difficulty of cross-cultural witnessing. Gyeongha struggles to understand the Jeju dialect and the specific texture of the island’s grief.

This linguistic estrangement is crucial. It prevents the “harmonization” of the narrative. The trauma of Jeju cannot be seamlessly translated into the standard language of the mainland. By preserving this friction, Han respects the “singularity” of the Jeju experience. The novel refuses to universalize the trauma; it insists on the specific, local, and untranslatable nature of the violence. This aligns with the critical insight that “an individual’s particularity cannot be fully exemplified by similarity with others.” (Kim 2022)

Furthermore, Han imbues objects with a profound agency. Ama, Inseon’s bird, serves as a witness to the isolation of the survivor. The needles used to prick Inseon’s finger become instruments of memory. The snow itself acts as a preserving medium, freezing the bodies of the past in a state of suspended animation (The Atlantic 2025). These objects are “testimonial objects” (Hirsch) that carry the affective charge of the trauma when words fail. The black logs that Inseon collects are not just wood; they are the ‘bones’ of the history she is trying to reconstruct. By granting agency to the non-human world, Han expands the scope of witnessing beyond the human subject, suggesting that the land itself remembers what the state has tried to forget.

6.4 Maternal Resistance and the Embodied Archive

Ultimately, the figure of Jeongsim represents the “embodied archive.” Her memory is not stored in books but in her body – in her dementia, in her wandering legs. Her search for the bones is a form of “clandestine commemoration” that defies the state’s ban. For decades, Jeongsim searched the snowy landscapes of Jeju, looking for the remains of her family members who were executed and dumped in mass graves. This act of searching is portrayed not as a futile gesture but as a supreme act of resistance.

Jeongsim acts as a “liminal witness”: her dementia paradoxically allows her to access the past more directly than the sane. As Inseon recounts in the novel,

her mother's survival was driven by a somatic refusal to succumb to the cold of history:

She told me the desire to know the reason she had been the only one spared was like a roaring flame inside her, and this was what kept her from freezing to death (Han 2025: 38).

This internal fire represents an ethical fidelity: while the rational world has moved on, Jeongsim refuses to part. Her body becomes a testimonial object itself, carrying the traces of the massacre into the 21st century.

The novel suggests that true historical memory resides in these embodied practices of persistence, rather than in the official monuments of the state. Jeongsim's refusal to stop searching is a refusal to accept the "ungrievability" of her brother, in the attempt to assert that his life mattered, and that his remains deserve the dignity of recognition.

7. Comparative Analysis: "Inherited Wounds" Across Time and Form

While both *Human Acts* and *We Do Not Part* are united by their preoccupation with state violence and the inherited wound, a comparative reading reveals a distinct evolution in Han Kang's aesthetic strategy. This comparative analysis is guided by three primary criteria: (1) the temporality of trauma (immediacy vs. latency, fresh vs. chronic wounds), (2) the structure of narrative voice (polyphonic chorus vs. intimate dyad), and (3) the forms of gendered witnessing (public commemoration vs. private endurance). This shift—from the visceral shock of the former to the atmospheric haunting of the latter—reflects not only the different historical textures of the Gwangju Uprising and the Jeju 4.3 Massacre, but also a deepening of the author's engagement with the ethics of representation. These criteria are grounded in the methodological dialogue between structuralist and postcolonial trauma theory. Following Cathy Caruth's (1996) notion of "latency," the analysis distinguishes between the immediate rupture of the event and its belated return. Furthermore, drawing on Stef Craps' (2013) call to pluralize trauma aesthetics, it examines how Han Kang shifts from a polyphonic "acting out" (LaCapra 2001) of the collective Gwangju trauma to a dyadic, intimate witnessing of the silenced Jeju massacre, demonstrating that narrative form is contingent upon the specific historical ontology of the violence.

7.1 Between Immediacy and Latency: Confronting Narrations

Human Acts operates through a poetics of confrontation. The novel's primary mode is exposure; it seeks to rip the bandage off a wound that is still, in a historical sense, wet and hemorrhaging. The narrative is saturated with the abject materiality of the body. This visceral immediacy serves a specific political function: it counters the sanitized, abstract language of the military dictatorship. By forcing the reader to look directly at the open wounds, Han Kang creates a "counter-sovereign sacredness" (*banjugwonjeok seongseureoum*) rooted in the undeniable reality of the corpse (Na 2022). The fresh wound here functions as irrefutable evidence: it screams, demanding an immediate, shock-induced ethical response. The aesthetic is one of heat, smell, and noise – the sensory overload of a battlefield.

In contrast, *We Do Not Part* operates through poetics of mediation. Dealing with a massacre that occurred seventy years prior and was silenced by decades of effective censorship, the novel cannot rely on the immediacy of the fresh corpse. Instead, it evokes the chronic wound through atmospheric pressure. The violence of Jeju is filtered through layers of dreamscapes, documents, and the numbing cold of the blizzard. The "black tree trunks" that look like "haggard children" (Han 2021: 11) in Gyeongha's dream are not the literal bodies of 1948 but their postmemorial avatars. As Kim Youngchan (2024) observes, these spectral images function as the entry point into the 'impossible place' of the massacre, bridging the gap between the dreamer's present and the historical trauma.

7.2 The Evolution of the Female Voice: From Chorus to Dyad⁵

Despite these stylistic divergences, the two novels converge powerfully on the gendered dynamics of witnessing. In both texts, the 'inherited wound' is ultimately sustained and articulated by the female voice. However, the structure of this female witnessing evolves significantly.

⁵ The term "dyad" draws on Georg Simmel's (1950) sociological concept of a two-person group characterized by unique interdependence and fragility. Here, it analyzes the structural coupling of Gyeongha and Inseon in *We Do Not Part*, contrasting it with the polyphony of *Human Acts*. As Kim Youngchan (2024) observes, these two subjects are "superimposed" in a shared "intercorporeity," blurring individual boundaries to form a single, intimate site of witnessing where the existence of the testimony depends entirely on the maintenance of their bond.

Human Acts presents a chorus of female caregivers. Their witnessing is communal and public, performed in the gymnasium or in the interrogation room. The novel creates a textual communality where multiple female voices overlap to form a collective resistance. The politics of the spirit in *Human Acts* is democratic and polyphonic; it suggests that the memory of Gwangju belongs to the collective body of the people.

We Do Not Part transforms this chorus into the intimate dyad of Inseon and Gyeongha. Here, the witnessing is more private, taking place in a remote house during a snowstorm. The “intercorporeity” of pain binds these two women together in a relationship that is almost symbiotic (Kim 2024). This shift from the public chorus to the private dyad reflects the specific nature of the Jeju trauma, which destroyed the community so thoroughly that only fragmented, individual connections remain.

In both cases, Han Kang posits the female body as the embodied archive that resists the patriarchal state’s attempt to part the living from the dead. Whether through the mimesis of pain in Inseon’s finger or the flinching reflex of Eun-sook’s cheek, Han Kang shows that the obligation to witness is absolute. The evolution from shock to hunting does not diminish the urgency of the testimony; rather, it suggests that as the event recedes in time, the wound must be tended to with even greater vigilance, preventing the risk of forgetting.

7.3 Meta-fictional Ethics: The Writer as Witness

Furthermore, both novels employ a meta-fictional device that implicates the writer herself in the act of witnessing. In *Human Acts*, the epilogue features the writer explicitly discussing her research and her personal connection to Gwangju. In *We Do Not Part*, the protagonist Gyeongha is a thinly veiled extension of Han Kang herself, struggling with the burden of writing about mass violence. This self-reflexivity highlights the ethical difficulty of representing trauma.

Han Kang acknowledges that writing is always a form of failure – a failure to fully capture the horror of the event, a failure to bring the dead back to life. Yet, she insists on the necessity of this failure. As Gyeongha reflects:

Having decided to write about mass killings and torture, how could I have so naively – brazenly – hoped to soon shirk off the agony of it, to so easily be bereft of its traces? (Han 2021: 19)

By foregrounding the struggle of the writer, Han Kang invites the reader to share in the burden of representation. We are not passive consumers of historical tragedy; we are active participants in the struggle to find a language for the unspeakable. This aligns with the concept of the “drama of writing” (Kim 2024), where the text stages its own difficulty as a way of respecting the magnitude of the trauma.

8. Conclusion

Han Kang’s literary project in *Human Acts* and *We Do Not Part* constitutes a profound intervention in the global literature of trauma. By intersecting the concept of “postmemory” with a feminist ethics of care, she transforms the novel into a space of communal mourning that defies the boundaries of time and the edicts of the state. Her prose shows that the ‘inherited wound’ is not merely a pathological condition to be cured but a historical truth to be witnessed, a scar that opens a channel between the living and the dead.

Through the gendered bodies of her protagonists, Han Kang refuses the revisionist history and alienating forces that sought to justify the massacres of Gwangju and Jeju. She shows her public that the erasure of history is never complete so long as there are bodies that remember – bodies that flinch, ache, and bleed in sympathy with the past. As this analysis has shown, her prose reactivates sites of collective and intergenerational suffering, transmitting the affective ties that bind the generation of the “postmemory” to the ancestors they never knew.

The title *We Do Not Part* thus serves as the ultimate manifesto for her aesthetic intervention. It is a refusal of the closure that conventional narratives often promise. To ‘part’ would be to accept the state’s verdict that the dead are gone, that the wound is healed, and that the past is past. By choosing not to part, Han Kang and her characters engage in a form of radical, painful love – a love that keeps the wound fresh so that the connection to the lost remains alive. In a world intent on forgetting, this refusal is the most potent human act of all.

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“Or We Will Have to Break the Law”: Sex Workers’ Bodies, Gender and Sexual Experiences in Japan’s “Self-Orientalist” Anti-Prostitution Law (1945–1967)

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Abstract At the end of the Second World War, Japan enacted the Anti-Prostitution Law (*Baishun Bōshi Hō* 売春防止法), declaring the complete abolition of the “public prostitution system” in 1956 as part of a broader national project to modernize the state, protect sex workers’ rights, and reshape sexual morality. Yet the rhetoric of liberation, civilization and rehabilitation concealed a deeper reconfiguration of risk: sexual labor that had once been licensed and taxed became criminalized, pushing sex work underground and transforming women’s embodied experiences from social and geopolitical tensions into moral failures. Existing scholarship has underscored the role of the U.S. occupation in shaping the law and highlighted the tension between its proclaimed objective of protecting sex workers and the new forms of marginalization it produced. Building on but moving beyond existing scholarship, this research revisits the sex workers’ experiences from the overlooked lens of Japanese self-orientalism, which underpinned a linear narrative of civilizing and modernizing the nation through the anti-prostitution discourse. This study reconstructs a layered picture of how law, transnational power, and ideology intersected with women’s lived realities in postwar Japan, thus moving beyond the nation-state paradigm and the hegemonic Western-centric interpretations of Japan’s postwar gender governance.

Keywords Anti-Prostitution Law; self-orientalism; public prostitution; U.S. occupation; postwar Japan.

1. Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, Japan enacted the Anti-Prostitution Law (*Baishun Bōshi Hō* 売春防止法), declaring the complete abolition of the “public prostitution system” in 1956. This measure was framed as part of a broader national project to modernize the state, protect sex workers’ rights, and reshape sexual morality. Existing scholarship on the law has primarily revolved around two analytical frameworks: women’s rights activism and state regulation of sexuality. Feminist scholars highlight the role of women’s organizations in

advocating the abolition of the public prostitution system and often treat Western, especially American, gender norms as a positive democratizing force (Onozawa 1999; Hirai 2014), while legal studies focus on institutional debates and the practical failures of regulation (Akagawa 1995; Honda 2015; Kawashima 2018). These studies have illuminated the impact of the U.S. occupation on Japan and offered crucial insights into the paradox of the law that ostensibly liberated sex workers' experiences. However, existing scholarship reproduces a potential linear narrative of civilizing and modernizing the Japanese nation-state through analyses of anti-prostitution discourse, leaving unaddressed the contradictions and historical experiences embedded in sex workers' lived realities.

Focusing on the process of formulating and enacting the Anti-Prostitution Law (1945–1967), this paper applies transnational and gendered perspectives to examine how bilateral Japan–U.S. relations and broader Cold War–era legal reforms interacted with Japanese legislators and authorities, and how sex workers responded to these transnational dynamics, the resulting legal regime, and the changes these processes brought to their everyday lives. This paper argues that sex workers actively negotiated and resisted the Anti-Prostitution Law, which, although framed as a step toward “modern civilization,” in fact produced a self-orientalist form of modernization that deepened the exploitation of women within the sexual industry. This analysis traces three phases of the law: the pre-legislative years (1945–1956), the legislative debates (1948–1956), and the outcomes of implementation (1957–1967). Across these phases, sex workers' organized resistance, though articulate and politically engaged, was ultimately subsumed within the state's “modernization” project. American “neo-regulationism” and Japan's embrace of Western moral discourse redefined sexuality in ways that served geopolitical rather than humanitarian ends. This study reconstructs a layered picture of how law, transnational power, and ideology intersected with women's lived realities in postwar Japan, thus moving beyond the nation-state paradigm and the hegemonic Euro-centric narratives.

2. Literature Review

Previous scholarship on the Anti-Prostitution Law has primarily revolved around two analytical frameworks: women's rights activism and state regulation of sexuality. Feminist scholars highlight the role of women's organizations in advocating for the abolition of the public prostitution system and often regard

Western, especially American, gender norms as a democratizing force (Hirai 2014; Lu 2016). Onozawa (1999)'s comprehensive studies of the JCWTU (Japan Christian Women's Temperance Union, *Kyōfūkai* 教婦会) demonstrate how these organizations drew on American models to reform sexual morality, particularly through the influence of leaders such as Kubushiro Ochimi, who studied at American social hygiene institutions. However, these feminist scholars have not critically examined the power asymmetries and cultural imperialism embedded within these reform movements. The tendency to view Western feminist models as inherently progressive risks obscuring the ways in which the abolition of the public prostitution system was inappropriate for Japanese social conditions and may have adverse consequences for women it purported to protect.

More recent scholarship has further revised such Western feminist models. Honda (2015)'s analysis of modern Japan's anti-prostitution discourse emphasizes the tension between the "prostitution preservation theory" and the "prostitution abolition theory," noting how legal recognition through the public prostitution system provided certain protections that were later eliminated. Kawashima (2018) argues that while the Anti-Prostitution Law seemingly presented itself as a women's liberation movement, it reflected male-centric perspectives on female sexuality and failed to consider women's economic agency and survival strategies. Yō (2018)'s work goes even further, demonstrating how the implementation of the law deteriorated conditions for sex workers by pushing them into unregulated markets where they faced increased violence and exploitation. These studies provide crucial insights into the practical failures of the law but do not fully theorize the transnational mechanisms that led to these outcomes or connect them to broader patterns of legal imperialism in Cold War East Asia.

Legal studies from a comparative and global perspective have clarified Japan's approach to abolishing the public prostitution system. Fujime (1997) situates Japan within a global landscape of prostitution regulation and shows that its turn to criminalization was an exception rather than an embodiment of international best practices. In the postwar period, most countries prioritized preventing exploitation over criminalizing prostitution itself, making Japan's adoption of American-style "neo-regulationism" particularly problematic. This comparative perspective reveals that Japanese policymakers' understanding of "international standards" was filtered largely through American military viewpoints rather than a genuine global consensus. The law has also been analyzed as a site of cultural negotiation and power struggle. Pratt (2007)

introduces the concept of “contact zones,” a useful framework for understanding how legal reform emerged from unequal interactions between American and Japanese institutions. From this perspective, the Anti-Prostitution Law can be seen as the product of such contact zones, in which American military authorities, Japanese officials, women's organizations, and sex workers negotiated competing visions of social order.

However, existing Japanese and English scholarship has largely relied on top-down official sources, producing a linear narrative of civilizing reform that obscures sex workers' lived experiences and everyday negotiations with state power. This paper therefore adopts a gendered and transnational perspective in examining Japan's Anti-Prostitution Law. It foregrounds sex workers' agency through the use of sources related to sex workers' own experiences, including oral testimonies and written records. It further situates sex workers' experiences within transnational forces in order to move beyond the nation-state paradigm and Euro-centric assumptions.

3. Pre-Legislative Years (1945–1956): Competing Interpretations of “Civilizing” Selling Sex

Before examining the law itself, this section analyzes the contested terrain in which Japanese authorities, U.S. occupation forces, and women engaged in sex work negotiated the meaning of regulation of selling sex in postwar Japan. From 1945 to 1956, economic desperation and state policy intersected with U.S. military presence to produce not a unified regulatory logic, but a field of competing interpretations: Japanese policymakers framed prostitution as a civilizational problem, U.S. authorities projected selective moral standards as universal norms, while women responded pragmatically to shifting legal and economic constraints. As analyzed below, these interactions reveal that the governance of prostitution emerged through conflict and negotiation rather than linear policy-making.

Exacerbated by war and occupation, selling sex became both a means of resisting long-term poverty and a survival strategy for many women. Pre-war rural poverty, especially in regions such as Tōhoku, combined with the collapse of the agricultural economy in the 1930s normalized the sale of daughters, transforming women into exchangeable household assets under conditions of indebtedness rather than individual choice (Dower 1999; Harada & Annaka 2015). The women's livelihoods were later devastated by Japan's defeat in 1945, as the demobilization of soldiers, the repatriation of millions from former

colonies, urban destruction, and rampant inflation left many women with few employment pathways for survival (Masuda 2023). In this context, sex for survival rapidly became an unavoidable reality for war widows, single mothers, and displaced migrants (Shiga-Fujime & Findlay-Kaneko 1993). For many of these women, prostitution was not an act of moral decline, but a pragmatic calculus of survival in the aftermath of the war. As recorded in *Women's New Wind* (*Fujin Shinpō* 婦人新報), an account during the immediate postwar period presents a woman who had “never imagined” she would be forced into prostitution until she owed 1,000 yen (Takenaka & Sumiya 1949: 155). This account reveals that women were compelled to sell sex as a result of accumulated debt. Another account presents a mother who turned to street prostitution amid economic hardship as both the de facto head of household and sole provider caused by the uncertain survival of her husband as a soldier in the war (Kawanishi 2014: 40). These accounts suggest that, amid economic collapse, sex work was often experienced by women as a coerced means of survival rather than a matter of autonomous individual choice. The commodification of women's bodies, gender, and sexuality thus operated within broader structures of poverty and social dislocation that rendered conventional forms of economic activity impossible for many households.

However, the Japanese government sought to frame sexual labor as a form of sacrifice for the nation rather than a disgrace. In the immediate aftermath of surrender, the Japanese state sought to manage the presence of U.S. occupation forces by instrumentalizing women's bodies through the Recreation and Amusement Association (RAA) system. The establishment of the RAA represented a deliberate government strategy to “sacrifice” certain women to protect others from sexual violence by occupying forces. This policy was explicitly framed in terms of national sacrifice, with government officials arguing that the RAA system would serve as a “breakwater” to protect “respectable” Japanese women from American soldiers (Dower 1999; Hirai 2014). Evidently, this was not a humanitarian intervention but a calculated strategy to sacrifice a subset of women in order to preserve social order and national dignity. In this manner, government propaganda portrayed sex workers not as victims of economic circumstance but as patriotic contributors to national recovery. For example, Police Chief Yamamoto Kunishi described sex workers as “national agents” serving their country (Hirai 2014). Echoing this framing, one sex worker in Aomori Prefecture even regarded herself as a member of “special attack troops” in the occupied era (Awaya 1980:325). It presents how state propaganda temporarily reconfigured social outcasts into

national heroes, elevating sex workers' status as they can serve broader political objectives.

Nevertheless, official discursive shift did not empower women within the sexual industry. Instead, it illustrated the instrumental redeployment of women's bodies to stabilize Japan's international standing under the U.S. occupation, as this elevation was both conditional and temporary. When the RAA system was closed due to American pressure based on ethical and health issues, the same government that had praised sex workers as national heroes quickly abandoned them. Many RAA workers found themselves without employment or support and were forced to continue sex work in unregulated markets where they faced greater risks of violence and exploitation. A letter from a sex worker to missionary U.G. Murphy highlights that even severe illness did not allow sex workers to exit exploitative arrangements, underscoring the gap between official claims of protection and the reality of state abandonment (Hayashi 2020: 129). The woman's insistence that she "cannot leave" her post despite suffering from syphilis points to the material pressure that rendered departure impossible. With no mention of legal protection, medical care, or state assistance, and only an appeal to divine help, the letter exposes how postwar sexual governance offered neither protection nor liberation but instead normalized bodily sacrifice among marginalized women.

American occupation power further normalized sexual violence through racializing sexual discourse and enforcing the silence of sex workers. American military personnel viewed Japanese sex workers through orientalist lenses that combined racial othering with sexual objectification. U.S. soldiers frequently referred to Japanese women employing the dehumanizing term "yellow toilet," reflecting a racialized construction of sexual availability that reduced Japanese women to objects for American consumption (*Shinsō* 1954: 34). This language was not merely an expression of individual prejudice but revealed broader patterns of racialized sexuality that characterized American military occupation across multiple Asian contexts. Furthermore, the testimony from a Japanese woman who was sexually assaulted by American soldiers exposes that the occupying power operated not only through physical violence but also through enforced silence (Mizuno 1953: 223). Mizuno's claim that she was "not even allowed to speak" of the wounds inflicted by the "apostles of freedom" lays bare the contradiction between the democratic rhetoric promoted by occupation forces and the lived reality of sexual violence. This silence was politically imposed, which transformed bodily harm into an unspeakable

private trauma rather than a public injustice. This testimony further highlights the enduring nature of personal suffering: the wounds persist long after the formal end of the war, becoming internalized and carried for life. This account thus demonstrates how sexual governance under occupation functioned by erasing women's voices, and preserving the moral authority of the occupying power at the expense of local women's recognition and justice.

These dynamics shaped a regulatory environment in which women's bodies were already treated as instruments of politics rather than as subjects to be protected. Public health policy, particularly the management of venereal disease in postwar Japan, provided the mechanism through which these informal logics were translated into routine regulation. By 1946, infection rates of sexually transmitted diseases among U.S. troops had reached nearly twenty-five percent, causing American pressure, which prompted the Japanese government to impose strict regulations on sex workers, including compulsory treatment and even imprisonment (Tanaka 2002). Responding to this issue, the Japanese government anticipated Western approval by presenting sexual regulation as proof of "civilized" governance (Fujime 2006). Not only were American soldiers exempted from such penalties (Tanaka 2002; Hirai 2014), but also by 1952, Japanese police had catalogued 29,476 sex workers serving American military personnel, subjecting them to mandatory STD testing while still exempting their American clients from similar scrutiny (Kovner 2009). Japan's response regulations therefore revealed how transnational power asymmetries shaped domestic approaches to regulating sexuality, with Japanese women bearing disproportionate responsibility for managing the health and moral concerns of the occupying force.

This unequal enforcement established a precedent that was institutionalized a decade later in the Anti-Prostitution Law's principle of "single punishment," which criminalized sex workers while exempting their clients. The pattern demonstrated how Japanese sovereignty was subordinated to American military priorities and how women's bodies became sites for managing the contradictions of democratic occupation, public order, and geopolitical necessity. Therefore, postwar venereal disease governance functioned as a self-orientalist rehearsal of future legal reform, by displacing regulatory responsibility onto Japanese women while exempting American servicemen in the name of civilized governance.

4. The Legislative Debates (1948–1956): Gendered Regulation and Sex Workers' Failed Resistance

Following competing interpretations of selling sex, competing demands emerged among American occupation authorities, Japanese ministries, women's organizations, and sex worker associations during the drafting of the Anti-Prostitution Law between 1948 and 1956. Rather than constituting an internally coherent legal reform, the process unfolded through resistance and negotiation among these parties. As analyzed below, sex workers did influence the drafting of the law, while geopolitical tensions ultimately shaped its content.

American influence, especially the projection of selective moral standards as universal norms, set the ideological boundaries of the debate. The initial impetus originated with General Headquarters (GHQ), which ordered the abolition of licensed prostitution in 1946 amid U.S. media criticism and public pressure (Hirai 2014). Beyond such directives, American social-purity discourse shaped the ideological framework within which Japanese women's groups operated. Organizations such as the JCWTU, whose roots lay in Protestant missionary networks, appropriated American models of social hygiene and abolitionist morality (Onozawa 1999; Lu 2016). This was a process of ideological translation in which U.S. understandings of "purity," "rehabilitation," and "modern womanhood" were reframed as universal. This ideological configuration differed sharply from international mainstream debates on prostitution. Whereas the International Abolition of Slavery Alliance emphasized the protection of workers from exploitation and focused on forced prostitution and trafficking, American reformers advanced what contemporaries described as "neo-regulationism", a prohibitionist program advocating the criminalization of both the sale and purchase of sex (Kovner 2009). Japanese reformers, lacking direct access to European debates and relying heavily on American interlocutors, mistakenly interpreted U.S. policies as the global standard (Kataigi 1996). As a result, American policy was naturalized as the normative horizon of "modern" governance of gender and sexuality.

Japanese political actors framed prostitution as a civilizational problem; however, they were not unified in their responses to these frameworks. The JCWTU, and several female Diet members framed prostitution as an inherently immoral practice requiring the criminalization of both sex workers and clients regardless of economic circumstances or social context (Fujime 1997). Their claims rested on a moral rehabilitation logic that privileged social purification

over labor rights. Other bureaucratic actors, particularly within the welfare ministries, advocated prevention-focused regulation that targeted solicitation and brothel operators while offering correctional and vocational programs to women. The eventual compromise around *kōsei* (rehabilitation) tethered the law to a welfare-cum-correctional model that treated sex workers not as workers or citizens but as deviants requiring re-education (Kataigi 1996; Kawanishi 2014).

The incorporation of these discourses into law further reflected a process of self-orientalism, in which Japanese elites cast licensed prostitution as a barbaric remnant incompatible with modern civilization. This framing was codified in Article 1 of the Anti-Prostitution Law, which declared that prostitution violated human dignity, offended sexual morality, and disrupted social customs (Anti-Prostitution Law 1956). These normative claims, in turn, provided the legal justification for pushing those who promoted prostitution while subjecting sex workers themselves to corrective and protective measures. In the context of Cold War competition and U.S.–Japan asymmetry, adopting American social models became synonymous with demonstrating national modernity and international respectability. This symbolic performance of gendered modernization reconfigured the stakes of reform since the law came to signify Japan's reintegration into a U.S.-centered liberal order more than it addressed the material conditions of sex work.

However, sex workers themselves resisted these framings, demonstrating forms of agency and political awareness that contradicted stereotypes of passive victimhood. The National Service Employees Union, representing licensed-district workers, submitted petitions, testified in Diet hearings, and organized demonstrations, successfully lobbying to transform the law from a punitive “prohibition” measure to a supposedly protective “prevention” statute (Shiga-Fujime & Findlay-Kaneko 1993). Their claims rested on economic and political arguments: since the state had licensed and taxed prostitution for decades, it bore responsibility for compensating workers upon abolition. They demanded financial restitution, reduced medical fees, retraining programs, and protection from displacement into unregulated sectors (*Fujin Shinpō* 1955a, 1955b). Workers further warned that criminalization would push women into more precarious “blue-light” and “white-light” districts, worsening rather than ameliorating exploitation (*Fujin Shinpō* 1955c, 1955d). Their arguments thus invoked a citizenship-based logic in which sex workers sought recognition as legal subjects and workers, a logic ultimately incompatible with the moral-hygienic framework embraced by reformers.

Despite substantial mobilization, geopolitical imperatives ultimately prevailed. While sex worker advocacy managed to mitigate some of the punitive elements of the law, American military interests guaranteed that American clients would not be prosecuted. Even after the 1953 revision of the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty granted Japan partial jurisdiction over American personnel, the Justice Ministry reached a secret agreement excluding prostitution from prosecution. As a result, American servicemen continued to access Japanese sex markets without legal consequences (Dower 1999; Kawanishi 2014). The exclusion of American soldiers from legal liability was not merely a technical diplomatic arrangement but reflected deeper assumptions about racial hierarchy and national responsibility. American negotiators insisted that Japanese women bore primary responsibility for sexual transactions, while American soldiers were framed as responding to temptation rather than actively participating in exploitation (Hirai 2014). This arrangement also reflected the paradox of the reform: the Anti-Prostitution Law functioned less as a domestic social policy than as a diplomatic performance of moral modernization. Even as Japan regained formal independence in 1952, American military interests continued to shape domestic legislation in ways that prioritized American concerns over Japanese social welfare. The secret nature of these agreements also demonstrates how transnational power relations operated through informal channels that were shielded from public scrutiny and democratic accountability. While signaling Japan's conformity to U.S. normative expectations, the law left intact the hierarchies and inequalities produced by the occupation system.

5. Post-implementation Outcomes (1957–1967): Uneven Modernization and Renewed Marginalization

The implementation of the Anti-Prostitution Law in April 1957, followed by the enforcement of its penal provisions in April 1958, provides a crucial test of whether transnationally inspired legal reform achieved its stated objectives of protecting sex workers and modernizing Japanese society. On both counts, the evidence suggests that the law failed while simultaneously advancing the geopolitical interests that motivated its creation. A key assumption guiding the law's implementation in 1957 was that it would displace rather than eradicate prostitution. Japanese government surveys conducted in advance forecast its limited efficacy. Of the approximately 180,000 women directly affected, only about a quarter were expected to transition into regular employment or return

to families under the “correction” programs overseen by women’s organizations, while a mere 15 percent might enter related entertainment work such as geisha houses or bars; the majority, between half and seventy percent, were predicted to continue in underground prostitution (Shiga-Fujime & Findlay-Kaneko 1993). These forecasts were not pessimistic outliers; rather, they were compiled by the very state agencies promoting the law. The fact that official data anticipated such widespread evasion of the law demonstrates that officials acknowledged that very few would receive welfare assistance. From the outset, therefore, policymakers anticipated displacement rather than eradication of prostitution.

As a consequence, the Anti-Prostitution Law transformed sex workers from state-licensed laborers into criminalized subjects, resulting in worsening their social and economic vulnerability and shifting risk of selling sex onto them. Women’s testimonies confirmed these outcomes. Testimonies collected in *Women’s New Wind* and other contemporary publications reveal the everyday hardships produced by this legislative approach. For many, sex work remained the last viable survival strategy in a society where wages were inadequate, welfare provision meager, and gendered labor opportunities limited (Kobayashi 2022). One woman, widowed and left without stable housing or employment, explained:

“Now, the last desperate attempt I made to survive is about to be taken away... No matter how desperate a person is, deep down, she still longs for a normal life. From April 1 onwards, we will be cast into the turbulent sea of society, with no guarantee of a stable life. This is no different from death itself. Or we will have to break the law and turn to the blue light and white light districts so we can continue to live.” (*Fujin Shinpō* 1955a: 32)

Such statements underscore that the law did not provide viable alternatives for displaced sex workers. Instead, it criminalized their primary means of subsistence, transforming legally recognized workers into offenders overnight. The conceptual underpinnings of this transformation are visible in the law’s emphasis on *kōsei* (“rehabilitation”), a term typically reserved for individuals convicted of serious crimes. When applied to women whose “offense” was selling sexual services under economic duress, the discourse of *kōsei* recast these women as criminalized subjects in need of correction, compounding stigma and vulnerability. What had previously been state-licensed and taxed labor now became an illicit activity, exposing women to harassment, arrest, and contempt (Yokoyama 1993; Kawashima 2018). With licensed districts shuttered, sex work migrated underground into venues increasingly controlled

by organized crime. Women faced heightened exposure to violence, coercive debt arrangements, and limited access to legal recourse. Rather than ending the sex trade, the law redistributed risk downward—away from the respectable public and onto already-precarious women.

Unequal jurisdiction under the post-occupation security regime continued to shape the regulatory environment. Crimes committed by American servicemen disproportionately affected sex workers, yet courts frequently reframed assaults as contractual disputes over prostitution rather than violations of bodily autonomy, thereby undermining women's legal standing as victims (Hirai 2014). The law's "single punishment" system further entrenched this asymmetry: sellers bore criminal liability, while buyers, including foreign servicemen, remained exempt. Under the U.S.–Japan security apparatus, the Anti-Prostitution Law thus functioned less as an instrument of women's protection than as a form of regulatory imperialism that shielded foreign military interests at the expense of local women. Far from securing emancipation, the new legal order reinforced existing hierarchies of race, gender, and sovereignty.

In this way, the Anti-Prostitution Law drove the trade underground and intensified the structural precarity that sustained it. Women expelled from the licensed system faced ostracism in their home communities, difficulty securing formal employment, and the constant threat of criminal prosecution. Many, unable to overcome these barriers, returned to sex work under more precarious and dangerous conditions. As former red-light districts lost their legal status, the trade was absorbed into underground markets increasingly controlled by organized crime syndicates, where gang-affiliated pimps replaced licensed brothel operators and violence intensified (Kawanishi 2014). Without even the minimal labor protections afforded under the pre-1957 system, sex workers lost legal recourse against abusive clients or employers, and physical assaults often went unreported due to fear of arrest. Between 1957 and the early 1970s, more than 120,000 women were arrested under Article 5, which criminalized the public solicitation, tailing, or advertising for the purpose of prostitution alone (Tanaka 2002). Official surveys acknowledged the overwhelmingly economic motivations behind these arrests: in 1957, the National Service Employees' Union reported that eighty-six percent of women entered prostitution for financial reasons and seventy-seven percent were fully aware of the illegality of their work but had no viable alternatives (*Fujin Shinpō* 1955b). The structural conditions that drove women into prostitution in the 1950s, low wages, gendered labor segmentation, and inadequate welfare provision, persisted well

into the late twentieth century, undermining any claim that the law represented a step toward social modernization. In this sense, the Anti-Prostitution Law not only failed to dismantle the economic drivers of sex work but actively reinforced cycles of marginalization. The moral rhetoric of “civilization” and “protection” thus masked a reality in which legal reform deepened the vulnerabilities it claimed to address.

6. Discussion and Conclusion: Self-Orientalism and the Limits of Transnational Legal Reform

As a result, the failure of the Anti-Prostitution Law to realize its stated humanitarian objectives should be understood within the broader logic of self-orientalist reform. In their eagerness to demonstrate “modernity” to international observers, Japanese policymakers adopted regulatory frameworks that were ill-suited to local labor markets and fundamentally misaligned with sex workers’ material needs. This self-orientalist orientation manifested itself in three interrelated tendencies. First, Japanese reform advocates routinely characterized indigenous public prostitution as “backward” or “uncivilized” while treating Western alternatives as inherently progressive, regardless of their actual consequences (Kataigi 1996; Tanaka 2002). Second, policy debates privileged Western, especially American moral principles over the pragmatic concerns of sex workers, subordinating welfare to symbolism (Yokoyama 1993; Kawanishi 2014). Third, the reform process marginalized those most directly affected while elevating the perspectives of elite women who had achieved social mobility through the adoption of Western cultural models (Kataigi 1996; Kovner 2013). These three points further reveal the disconnect between symbolic performance and substantive outcomes. By internalizing Western critiques of indigenous practices, Japanese reformers became committed to legal transformation irrespective of its practical consequences. The Anti-Prostitution Law thus succeeded in signaling Japan’s alignment with American moral standards but failed to improve conditions for the women it claimed to protect, highlighting the tension between its proclaimed objective of protecting sex workers and the new forms of marginalization it produced. Modernization was thus performed rather than achieved.

In conclusion, Japan’s Anti-Prostitution Law of 1956 was more than a failed attempt at moral reform. It exemplifies how transnational power relations in a postcolonial setting shaped domestic law in ways that privileged geopolitical interests over humanitarian concerns. American occupation

created the pressures and conditions for abolition, while Japanese elites' self-orientalist embrace of Western models foreclosed critical evaluation of the law's consequences. Tracing the law's development across three phases, from the commodification of women's bodies in the immediate postwar years, through debates dominated by transnational influence, to post-implementation re-marginalization, reveals how projects of legal modernization can entrench inequality when symbolic alignment with international norms takes precedence over substantive improvement in social conditions.

This case resonates with broader Cold War patterns of legal reform across East Asia, where Western models were privileged, affected populations excluded, and moral discourse substituted for structural analysis. For contemporary scholarship, the lesson is clear: analyzing the content of reform is insufficient without also interrogating the power relations that shape its making and implementation. Ultimately, the Anti-Prostitution Law illustrates the limits of externally driven modernization. Legal transplantation, even when cloaked in humanitarian ideals, risks reinforcing hierarchies if it excludes the voices of those most directly affected. Japan's experience thus stands as a cautionary tale: beneath the performance of civilization, self-orientalist impulses persisted, and the lived realities of women in the sex industry were rendered invisible in service of geopolitical and ideological ends.

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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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Echoes of War. Postmemory and the Haunting of the Past in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997)

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Abstract Linda Hutcheon's critical response offers contemporary authors an opportunity to reimagine history through the postmodern concept of historiographic metafiction, which explores the past as not one original truth but as "plural truths" (Hutcheon 1998: 109) that can be reinterpreted. Consequently, this approach enables marginalised voices, those often omitted from official record, to reclaim their narrative authority in order to represent their lived experiences. Building on this foundation, scholars use Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory so as to counteract official and exclusionary versions of the past by examining how one generation transmits history and memory to the next, as it reflects on how memory functions as a mechanism for the survival of cultural material. These ideas converge in Nora Okja Keller's novel *Comfort Woman* (1997), which centres on the story of a former Korean woman, Akiko, forced into sexual slavery through the Japanese Occupation in Korea, her country's intervention in the Pacific War. Through an intergenerational dialogue, Keller does not only offer the fragmented history of Akiko, but also the perspective of her daughter, Beccah, who inherits her mother's cryptic and disorienting memories that shape her personality, her life, and her own trauma. The main objective of this article, hence, will focus on the historical representation of a war-time period from a memory that is damaged and abused, while also emphasizing the role of the mother-daughter relationship. Moreover, this research will also accentuate the importance of absenteeism, silence, and cryptic phantoms as a metaphoric representation for repression and resistance.

Keywords Trauma; Postmemory; Comfort Women; Historical Fiction; Haunting.

The past has always been a powerful tool through which authors have aimed to explore the unexplored. By doing so, contemporary authors have challenged the limitations of history, as well as the legal silences and gaps produced by representation as ideologically shaped by historiography. The manipulation of history is something that Pierre Nora defends in his work, "Between Memory and History", stating that history is "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (1989: 8). In contrast to this depiction of history, Nora underlines how memory is "multiple and yet specific; collective,

plural and yet individual” (1989: 9), providing with a plurality that history lacks. Nevertheless, the friction between history and memory opens a field for authors such as Dominick LaCapra, Paul Ricoeur or Linda Hutcheon, who advocate for the reinterpretation of history in an attempt to reach historical justice, by engaging with silenced voices from minorities regarding gender, origin, religion, or class. Within this broader field, Nora Okja Keller’s novel *Comfort Woman* (1997) occupies a distinctive position as a work of historical fiction that reimagines the lived experience and aftermath of sexual enslavement through an intergenerational narrative.

The novel under study is inspired by real events that happened during the Pacific War, following Japan’s occupation of Korea, as the military established comfort stations in which women were subjected to psychological, physical and sexual abuse, as they became trapped “in a system that was likely to kill them, destroy their ability to have children, and stigmatize them to an extent they could no longer participate in Korean society as wives and mothers” (Norma 2017: 132). As it will be explored through Keller’s narrative, many of the women under these circumstances often perished, either by suicide, illness, or they succumbed to the Japanese military’s violent abuse, while those who survived were abandoned to their own luck, stained with the stigma of the trauma, and “forever altered by the experience” (Robinson 2011: 98). The author’s position as a Korean-American writer also shapes the novel’s engagement towards the involvement of the United States in the Korean War and the comfort women issue. As a diaspora writer, she approaches the history of Japanese colonial violence from a mediated distance that invites comparisons with other Asian-American writers who have addressed wartime atrocities from a diasporic framework, such as Iris Chang’s work on the Nanjing Massacre, titled *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (1997). In Keller’s case specifically, fiction becomes a space to wonder how historical violence has been portrayed in historical fiction, and simultaneously allows the reader to question themselves about issues of migration, generational rupture, and the ethics of representation. This novel, then, displays an exploration of gendered trauma and national displacement through the protagonist’s experience in the Japanese system of sexual abuse. Consequently, the diasporic framework in which the novel is written can be studied from the perspective of Abraham and Torok (Rand 1994: 169, Gordon 1997: 8), and how the haunting of the past is not only exemplified through generations but also follows the victims in space, as Rose observes: “haunting works not just down through the generations, but across them” (Rose 1996: 31). By situating *Comfort Woman* (1997) within the scholarly discourse and foregrounding the interplay between fiction, memory, and diasporic authorship, this article argues how Keller’s narrative does not simply recount historical suffering through a fictional narrative, but also demonstrates

how the past can be transmitted to the next generation in the shape of a trauma that does not belong to them, but that still shapes their lives, and that can be seen and experienced in every aspect of their existence.

1. Memory, Postmemory, and the Haunting of the Past

Defining memory has been a challenge for critics and philosophers who work in the field of Memory Studies, as the first pursuit to define it regarded Henry Bergson's phenomenological disciplines through which he created a dichotomy between pure perception and pure memory, terms that refer to the visual figure that triggers an individual to remember, while the second explains the process through which memory is retained (Ansell-Pearson 2010: 64). Nevertheless, it was not until the First and the Second World War that studies on memory started to expand as a consequence of post-structuralism, and philosophers such as Theodor Adorno and Giles Deleuze reinterpreted the danger of forgetting the past and the human desire for truth, both of which defended the conservation of memory as the only way of preserving human identity, as the "loss of individuality and the danger of forgetting human suffering" (O'Connor 2010: 136) would evolve into the repetition of patterns of destruction and cruelty. However, memory has not only served to preserve history in a truthful manner. It has also helped to shape the ways in which history has been rewritten, particularly through contemporary fiction narrative such as Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997).

Theorizing the importance of non-forgetting, Marianne Hirsch articulates a model through which the transmission of the past unfolds towards the present through generational structures that forge a dynamic between past and present. Said structure produces a "generational remove" (Hirsch 2008: 106) and creates a temporal yet affective distance that prevents historical and familial memories from receding into oblivion, since it will be inherited through the generations¹. In "The Generation of Postmemory" (2008), Hirsch delineates for

¹ While this article mainly focuses on Marianne Hirsch's Postmemory, other critics contributed to the idea of inheriting the past, such as James E. Young, who proposed the term "received history" in order to explain the problematic character of postmodern history and to question how truthful history is. Celia Lury, on the other hand, used the term "inherited memory" to emphasize the importance of actively passing on memories, not only through the familial circle but also to the social sphere. Eva Hoffman, closer to Hirsch's concept of generational remove, used the term "hinge generation" in order to defend the existence of a generation who did not experience trauma or violence, but that nevertheless

the first time the base for the postmemorial structure, which has two generational positions: the first one comprising the individuals who directly undergo a traumatic or violent experience, as it can be the experience of war, while the second generations, by contrast, are those whose lives are shaped by “experiences that preceded their births [...] [that] were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (2008: 103). It is through this framework that Hirsch demonstrates how memory can be inherited, mediated, and reimagined across time, challenging the conventional boundaries between personal recollection and subsequently, contributing towards a real collective historical consciousness.

The mother-daughter dynamic that Hirsch’s model attempts to decipher can be observed in Keller’s novel. The daughter’s character will inherit the mother’s trauma and this will shape her life. This narrative structure also intertwines with the daughter’s retrospective account of events. The mother’s voice illustrates how trauma, even when it is unspeakable and has been silenced, can become equally significant. For this reason, trauma can influence how the past is understood and reimagined. Another common feature of postmemory is its fragmented nature, which Hirsch describes as composed by “flashes of imagery” and “broken refrains” that are transmitted through “the language of the body” (2008: 109). In other words, the consequences of inheriting Akiko’s traumatic memories exceed the realm of symbolic or aesthetic representation. An additional element shared both by Hirsch and Keller is the somatic expression of trauma. Rather than materializing in a coherent story, postmemorial work usually emerges through psychological registers that trigger depression, anxiety, silences, unarticulated gaps and crypts. Categorised as traumatic residues, they signal that the second generation bear with the weight of what remains unspoken, and by not being properly articulated, it becomes unassimilated.

Because of the perspective on gender that both the present article and the novel under study contain, it is necessary to emphasize that gender is crucial in the construction of history and memory, as it determines how the experience of trauma is narrated. Both Marianne Hirsch and Eva Hoffman coincide and provide examples of how female voices —or the lack of them— shape the literature written on the Holocaust and reflect on how these gaps in history have affected their inheritance of the past as well as their comprehension of their own history. One of the examples that Hirsch provides in *The Generation of*

acquired these experiences, and in order to make sense of them, had to use fiction to imagine a past that they never lived, though comprehended.

Postmemory (2012) is her experience after watching the documentary film *Shoah* (1985). Hirsch wonders why were women's voices not represented:

“Why were women relegated to the role of translators and mediators? Why were they allowed to sing in the film and not to talk about their experiences as the men were invited to do? And how did the absence of women shape the story told in this remarkable document?” (2012: 8–9).

Hoffman's approach further elaborates on the fact that the way in which history was told affects how memory is being received by the following generation, and she reflects on this by sharing her own experience. Hoffman shares her position with Beccah, as both of them are second generation daughters. Hence, they belong to the generation “in which received, transferred knowledge of events is transmuted into history, or into myth”, This creates a sense of living connection between generations that can be seen through the perspective of a past filtered through gendered hierarchies, as the trauma of the mother haunting the next generation can be interpreted both as belonging to the cultural context and as part of familial stories. Haunting also occurs in gendered spaces –such as the house, the kitchen, or as it will be seen in the analysis, in the river or the comfort camps–, usually in a non-linear form, fragmented, or in the necessity of being understood by the daughter. The need for connection between the mother's memory and the daughter provokes a sensation similar to re-living a situation originated from a wound. This, LaCapra asserts, is a way of “acting out the past” that would evolve in a way of “self-rendering identification with the victim” (1998: 113), creating a pattern of re-enactment by which the second generation does not only acquire the first generation's memory –as postmemory defends– but creating a repetitive pattern of action.

Those types of sequence can be clearly observed in the narrative of Toni Morrison and in her usage of rememory, a term that she created to meditate upon international haunting and the spectral return. In her novel *Beloved* (1987), Morrison used this pattern to reflect on how a daughter's life must be conditioned by the unresolved trauma of the mother, which reappears not only psychologically but materially as a ghostly presence that collapses the distinction between past and present, as well as the real and unreal. In this dynamic, the trauma persists beyond individual consciousness and inhabits both body and space. On the other hand, Marianne Hirsch observes how rememory involves the use of the unconscious, as it embodies the transmission of maternal wounds to the daughter, who needs to feel mutual identification towards her parent (2012: 87). This observation resonates with Akiko and

Beccah's dynamic in Keller's novel. Following Hirsch's approach, Marilyn Sanders Mobley describes Morrison's rememory as the creation of "fictional texts that tap into history, lived life, and the imagination to create new representations" (2024: 10). Yet Morrison's narrative does more than re-stage the past, as it establishes a dialogic space where readers, regardless of their origin, can "interrogate the meaning of a moment in history about which many have been miseducated, uneducated, or undereducated" (Mobley 2024: 11). Finally, even if *Comfort Woman* (1997) has not typically been categorised as a rememory novel, it shares comparable similarities to the dynamic of revisiting silenced or forgotten stories. As a Korean American writer, Nora Okja Keller does not pursue the discovery of the original history of comfort women. She provides a fictional narrative that she herself constructed upon an alternative voice from a different perspective. By doing so, her novel functions as a literary intervention that opens a space through which readers can reconsider the problematics of history and the lingering presence of traumatic pasts.

Gabriele Schwab conceptualizes traumatic inheritance as a "haunting legacy", defining it as the "result of a violence that holds an unrelenting grip on memory" while being "deemed unspeakable" (2010: 1). Traumatic experience, in this sense, becomes a form of knowledge that resists assimilation, remaining unincorporated within the traumatised individual. These histories are not only confined to direct witnesses and do "not only haunt the actual victims. They have also been passed on through the generations" (2010: 1). Schwab further emphasizes that "children become the recipients not only of their parents' lived memories but also of their somatic memories" (2010: 14), inheriting not simply the narratives but the embodied affective residues that continue to influence their heirs long after the original event has passed. The socio-historical dimensions of trauma also inflict a deep and lasting damage on cultural practices, policies, and forms of collective understanding that crystallize into structures of silence, which are never neutral, but part of an ethical representation of trauma. Schwab distinguishes three different types of silence depending on the origin of muteness. The first one designates an attack on memory, a mode of forgetting through which the individual deliberately buries certain experiences within their psyche in order to protect themselves (2010: 51). The second one, silencing history, refers to the intentional suppression of historical knowledge enacted either by the perpetrators of violence who seek erasure of the past or by victims who were muted against their will (Schwab 2010: 53). Finally, the third one is the crypt – a concept that describes rupture, as the "dysfunctions in expressiveness may then be read as symptoms and

symptomatic silences or traces pointing to a secret that is paradoxically both kept and revealed in language” (Schwab 2010: 53). In other words, the type of silence that is acknowledged through the crypt withholds an information that is made obvious, even when it is not directly revealed. At the beginning of the novel, Akiko’s silence might be interpreted as an attack on memory. Yet, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that her silences are part of a crypt. Rather than simply silencing her traumatic memory, Akiko’s muteness becomes apparent through fissures, interruptions or indirect speech. Therefore, the trauma cannot be spoken but it is seen through the traces that expose what remains unassimilated.

These silences and the way in which they shape the transmission of memory resonate profoundly with Jacques Derrida’s notion of hauntology, which reframes the past not as something concluded but as a spectral presence that continues to infiltrate the present. Hence, these gaps do not only haunt next generation’s minds, nor do they simply disappear or remain unspeakable. In fact, they return as a spectral residue. According to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, the spectral element in narratives plays a significant role in the generational transmission of the past, as well as in the transmission of silence. Abraham considers the phantom as “a metapsychological fact” since “what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (1994: 1), which turn into the inability of an individual to process a loss, to mourn, and to work through their trauma in order to survive. Spectral features, then, become a critical lens for understanding how trauma operates across generations as a suppressed or disfigured form of memory. This consideration is especially valid when referring to Derrida’s conception of the spectre as a phantasmagorical figure that surfaces when articulation in language fails, “a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate. It does not belong to the order of knowledge” (Davis 2005: 376).

2. Historical Re-interpretation through Contemporary Trauma Narratives

Because the historical record regarding the comfort women system had remained fragmented and hidden from global knowledge until survivors began speaking publicly in the early 1990s, literary works such as Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* (1997) uphold a tremendous interpretative weight, both in the transmission of knowledge towards the contemporary public and in the

representation of an experience through which survivors may see themselves, as she offered a different voice through which a silenced history can be reconstructed, contextualized and reimagined. In fact, the existence of documents from the 1930s regarding comfort stations in China as well as in other parts of Europe was well known before the 1990s (Yoshiaki 2018: 44–46). Artistic items such as books and films were produced about the matter in Japan. Among these: *Gate of Flesh* (1964) or *Story of a Prostitute* (1965), directed by Seijun Suzuki and based on previous novels by Taijiro Tamura; the trilogy *The Human Condition* (1959), directed by Masaki Kobayashi based on the written work of Junpei Gomikawa; *Sandakan No. 8* (1974), based on the novel written by Yamazaki Tomoko. Nevertheless, what these films have in common is that they focus on Japanese sexual slaves rather than on Korean victims, a notable exception being Yoshida Seiji's written testimony. Published in 1983 under the title *My War Crimes: The Forced Draft of Koreans*, in this work "Yoshida describes how he himself led 'slave-raid' expeditions which recruited thousands of male labourers and about 1000 women for comfort duties" (Hicks 1995: 55). These artistic expressions of life in the comfort stations may as well be regarded as not completely accurate if we take into consideration other sources, such as the research carried out by Korean academic Yoon Jeong-ok in the 1980s. During this time, Yoon had embarked in the process of acknowledging the truth of many Korean women who, unlike women in other parts of the world, were still silenced by the political situation of their country. It was not until 1988 that she published the results of her work, which became a precursor for many studies as well as for research committees that came afterwards (Kyeol 2019).

In her narrative endeavour, Keller attempts to provide a new perspective on the comfort women issue. Emphasizing that the novel is a work of fiction, her work is based on previous research started by Professor Yoon, as well as on the political activism that rose in the 1990s in South Korea after the testimony of Grandmother Kim Hak-sun. Kim's statements inspired many other women to come forward and share their experience in different parts of the world, such as China, the Philippines or the Netherlands. It is for this reason that Akiko, Keller's protagonist, exposes not only the experience of living as a comfort woman, but also portrays a socio-political and historical situation. This can be seen, for example, when Beccah states how her mother's generation "was the first in Korea to learn a new alphabet, and new words for everyday things. She had to learn to answer to a new name, to think of herself and her world in a new way" (Keller 1997: 153). This description emphasizes the change of everyday

life in Korea during the Japanese occupation by specifically referring to the enactment of assimilation politics, which forced Korean citizens to absorb Japanese language and culture and even change their birth names into Japanese.

The background of the novel covers the outcome of World War II and the role of the United States in the political, military, and religious domains during the Korean War and its aftermath. Such contextualization could be inspired by the author's own experience as a Korean-American. It is through Akiko's memories that the readers, as well as the daughter, are inserted into the exposition of colonial violence through silences, crypts, and erasure. The novel opens with Akiko's testimonial confession towards her daughter, Beccah, with whom Keller creates a multigenerational and polytemporal narrative space, and who will be portraying the haunting forces of Akiko's memory. Through the historical narrative of both characters, the text reveals references to structures of oppression, especially when Akiko hints at her childhood and at how women's bodies and voices were situated at the centre of colonial oppression, underscoring how Confucian social structures functioned as well as how the absence of male family members who were sent to war exposed young girls to abduction and sexual enslavement.

When further presenting historical information and enhancing the diasporic sentiment, Keller emphasizes the identity dislocation that happened in the comfort stations, as the girls' identities were systematically erased through both physical and psychological violence. Akiko recounts how the Japanese soldiers forced them to learn basic commands in their language, limiting them to simple words such as "sit, eat [or] sleep", as well as "'close mouth' and 'open legs'" (1997: 16). Such imposed vocabulary became a symbol of the enforced muteness which the girls were obliged to, and conveys the objectification of their minds and bodies, since the system attempted to also erase their linguistic abilities. Despite the repeated attempts at silencing them, the community of imprisoned women created a clandestine linguistic structure, developing non-verbal cues, glances, gestures and sounds, which allowed them to keep the communication flowing. In Akiko's words: "We taught ourselves to communicate through eye movements, body posture, tilts of the head, or—when we could not see each other—through rhythmic rustlings between our stalls; in this way we could speak, in this way we kept our sanity" (Keller 1997: 16), but also, as an act of resistance against the dominant force, and as a preservation of selfhood against the machinery of oppression. Keller also reflects on how the brutality of the system and the exploitation of Korean girls throughout the colonization process functioned as a racist attempt to erase Korean identity.

She illustrates the structure of dehumanization imposed on women through the imposition of Japanese names accompanied by numbers which marked the girls who had owned that name before, and who had died, thus emphasizing the disposability of the bodies as, once again, objectified matter. The protagonist, Akiko 41, receives that number after Induk –former Akiko 40– is brutally murdered by the soldiers after reclaiming her own identity.

The character of Induk does not only serve as the example for historical cruelty, but becomes a constant in Akiko's life, as her spirit comes to be a pivotal figure illustrated in the gendered and political critique of the novel. As her final act she perishes in the hands of the Japanese army after reclaiming her own voice and identity, stating that:

I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive. I am seventeen, I had a family just like you do, I am a daughter, I am a sister. [...] All through the night she talked, reclaiming her Korean name, reciting her family genealogy, even chanting the recipes her mother had passed on to her (Keller 1997: 21).

Her violation and her death has a double meaning in Keller's metaphorical framework, and rather than being simply a narrative of a violent event, the violated female body mirrors how war was violating their nation, how it was being invaded, mutilated and deprived of their own autonomy, while also becoming a martyr and a symbol of national and feminist resistance, something emphasized by the use of the body and the effect of the Emperor's orders, as Akiko claims that under his rule, "we were beaten and starved", "the holes of our bodies were used to bury their excrement" or "we were bled again and again" (Keller 1997: 193). On the same matter, and continuing the metaphor of the body as the country comes the idea of war and colonization as a never-ending process in which waiting is not an option: once Induk has died, the soldiers will need a new Akiko, and that becomes the novel's protagonist:

I was given her clothes, which were too big and made the soldiers laugh. [...] Even though I had not yet had my first bleeding, I was auctioned off to the highest bidder. After that it was a free-for-all, and I thought I would never stop bleeding. [...] That is how I know Induk didn't go crazy. She was going sane. She was planning her escape. The corpse the soldiers brought back from the woods wasn't Induk, It was Akiko 41, it was me. (1997: 21)

While this is the most powerful moment in which the dichotomy between the female body and the country is explored, in the course of the novel Keller

distributes details referring to the country as a body cut into two, so as to make readers retain this metaphor firmly on their mind (Keller 1997: 105). In another part of the novel, when the missionaries baptize Akiko, she consciously takes the land into herself by licking a pinch of mud from the river, as she claims that she wanted to make sure that the country would always stay within herself, inside her body (1997: 104). These actions could also be read as a metaphor for the inability of the new colonisers –the American missionaries– to change her identity, that had remained intact despite the Japanese had attempted to erase it. On this matter, Stella Oh contemplates that female bodies could be silenced by society as “discursive and disciplinary practices manipulated the bodies and stifle the voices of women in an effort to dissolve the national shame associated with colonisation” (2024: 182). Likewise, Oh reinforces the conceptual connection between the female body and the land by suggesting how sexual violence is represented in art and literature, as she argues that such portrayals should avoid graphic and sensationalist depictions. Instead, they should adopt a more symbolic mode of expression, through which artistic performativity enables a more mediated engagement with trauma (2024: 186–187).

3. The Haunting Burden of Memory

Despite her relocation to the United States after she marries an American missionary, Akiko is unable, throughout the novel, to save herself from the violence imprinted on the body and mind through the years of constant cruelty at the comfort stations. As discussed in relation to the somatic persistence in LaCapra’s re-enactment or Morrison’s rememory, Akiko’s everyday life is burdened by the presence of involuntary flashbacks and dissociative trance states in which the past becomes vividly present again. These episodes will be described by Beccah as possessions by spirits that come to talk to her mother, as Akiko is believed to be a shaman during her adult life. In earlier stages of her life, when she had not yet left Korea, the manifestation of previous experiences became a perpetual re-living of a past that has never existed: an embodied force that refuses to be assimilated and continually disrupts her relationship to her present reality and to other people. The missionary house, the place where Akiko met her husband is acknowledged and described by Keller as a space of salvation, to explore the phenomenon of traumatic re-enactment as well as the ways in which trauma persists in the nervous system, resurfacing without previous warning or boundaries. As stated by the protagonist during her work

sessions, she experiments a series of re-enactments and memories of the stations originating in the safety of the missionary house:

Whenever I stopped cleaning or gluing to stretch cramping fingers or crack my stiff neck, I heard the sounds of a woman being kicked because she had used an old shirt as a sanitary pad. Or I heard a man sigh loudly as he urinated on the body where he had just pumped his seed. And always, a low rumbling underlying every step I took at the mission house, I heard the grinding of trucks delivering more men and more military supplies (Keller 1997: 65)

Although the space is framed within the ideas of Christian benevolence, Akiko is haunted by the echo of war, and consequently by the comfort stations, firstly because the missionaries, similarly to the Japanese soldiers, expect her and other rescued Korean girls to know, or at least learn, their language, which in this case would be English. Likewise, Akiko is expected to perform roles assigned to her without resistance, whether it is sweeping floors, washing dishes, or gluing labels to boxes (Keller 1997: 64). By completing these tasks, she will continuously repeat patterns of labour and obedience that mirror the compulsory submission enforced in the stations. This prevents her from healing her original wound. Quite on the contrary, it keeps it open due to the constant re-enactment of the unresolved trauma. Sounds, including footsteps, breathing, or the sound of men laughing become part of the haunting scheme through Keller's narrative, since it triggers fear responses from Akiko by reminding her of the acoustic landscape of the stations, where she believes she will be sent back if she does not perform her allocated duties in the house:

I remember thinking that I could not stop cleaning, washing, cooking, gluing, because if I did, the camp noises would envelop me and I would be back there, trying to silence the noises I made eating, crying, relieving myself, breathing, living. As long as I was quiet, there was the hope that I would be overlooked and allowed to die in the darkness. (Keller 1997: 65)

These sensory flashbacks can be interpreted with the Derridean theory of hauntology, given that they blend the boundaries between present and past. Moreover, the narrative becomes somehow polytemporal, as the ghost of the past inhabits the present and materialises, refusing to leave her. Toward the missionaries, Akiko performs a double act of silence, partly imposed by the language barrier, but also stemming from the impossibility of bearing witness to those unwilling to listen to her. Consequently, her muteness resembles

LaCapra's concept of acting out. Trauma, rather than being worked upon and overcome, is constantly embedded into the narrative, because her environment replicates the structures of domination that she had endured throughout her childhood and teenage years.

Grace M. Cho discusses how these readings act as "unacknowledged traumas carried into the diaspora" and how they become assembled into the victims daily life (2008: 166). Referencing John Johnston's idea of "machinic vision", the original trauma becomes diasporic as "what is perceived is not located at any single place and moment in time, and the act by which this perception occurs is not the result of a single or isolated agency but of several working in concert or parallel" (1999: 44). To this, Cho adds that trauma and diaspora are intertwined and they identify metaphorically with the figure of the ghost, which resonates with Keller's proposal of a ghost that haunts Akiko's life even when she moves from her home country, by delineating how "the ghost is distributed across the time-space of the diaspora in order to create another type of body, an assemblaged body whose purpose is to see and speak the traumas that could not be seen and spoken by those who directly lived them" (2008: 166). In this specific case, the ghost of Induk talking to Akiko would be seen as a diasporic assemblage that seeks self expression through a new body, while the traumatic inheritance towards Beccah would add a second layer of trauma narratives in diasporic contexts. Nevertheless, this structure also serves Keller to expose the second biggest dichotomy of the novel, which is the comparison and juxtaposition of Japanese and American occupations. In so doing, Keller discloses the continuity of both as imperial systems that claimed to liberate and help Korea but instead, imposed cultural, religious and economic authority, an idea that is supported by Chow Sheat Fun, who argues that the Western imposition of "gospel, culture, [and] philosophy" mirrors, on a geopolitical scale, the intimate violations of the comfort stations (2020: 2999).

Continuing with the use of religion as a dominant force towards the victim, Christianity and the pastor are used by the author so as to suggest a metaphorical reflection of an imposed second culture. The pastor advocates for the idea that Akiko should marry him since he perceives her as a challenge. He needs to "guide her into the flock by yoking her to its shepherd" (Keller 1997: 101). While adoption might have been seen as a more appropriate option due to the age gap between these two characters, the pastor reiterates the idea of getting married as a better choice. This leads Akiko to live the moments that later on she would categorize as the "two greatest events in a Christian woman's life" (Keller 1997: 102), which are her baptism and her wedding. It is in this

relationship that violent dominance is once again enacted and underlined in the novel. As the pastor finally becomes Akiko's husband against her will, once again under the excuse of helping the poor girl from her appalling future, he would likewise objectify her by violating her and forcing her to bear children. To contextualise the extent of Akiko's haunted mind and her rejection of men, the narrative demonstrates how the pastor's performative sermons provoke her a traumatic re-enactment, as she claims that "each time I saw him slap the pulpit for emphasis, I heard the sounds of women's naked buttocks being slapped as they were paraded in front of a new arrival of troops" (Keller 1997: 71). The pastor becomes yet another iteration of patriarchal power, and the trauma of sexual and colonial domination persist even when she is taken outside Korea, and displaced to the United States.

4. Spectrality and Postmemory

The novel's postmemorial attitude can be seen through its dual narrative, divided between Akiko's fragmented testimony and Beccah's belated attempt to decipher it. This provides Keller with a structural foundation through which Hirsch's theory can be understood, as the role of the daughter becomes one of interpreting her mother's unresolved trauma through the unresolved gaps of history and absenteeism. Akiko's unavailability in her role as a mother is blamed on the trances that take her to the spiritual world, where she meets two main spirits to which she devotes her spiritual life, who are Saja the Death Messenger and Induk, the Birth Grandmother. For Beccah, these figures initially take the shape of delusions or hallucinations of a mother who drifts between silence and madness, yet the spirits operate according to a Derridean logic of the spectre, functioning as a mechanism useful to understand a truth that Akiko cannot articulate by herself. Thanks to moments of disappearance, the crypt becomes obvious and Keller makes it readable. Meanwhile, for Beccah, the ghosts take on a transgenerational dimension, marking an inherited gap that has been silently transmitted and that somehow shapes her life and her identity, to an extent that she starts connecting the mother's explanation to her own imaginative process by interpreting Akiko's descriptions of the past and transforming them into what she considers best for each situation.

For instance, she considers that Saja the Death Messenger must either be the devil that her father preached about or her father himself. This happens especially during Akiko's trances, when she asks the spirits to take her with them. Beccah witnesses the situation and describes it as a desperate request for help: "when she cried out for my father, for Saja the Death Soldier, for the

spirits that teased her with their cacklings, for anyone who cared, to kill her” (Keller 1997: 127). When Beccah enters her teenage years, she starts conceiving her mother as a mad woman who cannot be trusted, for example, when Akiko swamps her with the idea that she has got “evil-energy arrows” (Keller 1997: 73) that attack her by changing her body, and the only solution to escape an horrific fate is to burn everything red, as stated by Beccah:

My mother held her hands in front of her, and like divining rods, they swung toward the color of blood. She ripped red-bordered good luck talismans from our walls and furniture, where they fluttered like price tags. She knocked over our altars, sending the towers of fruit and sticky rice crashing to the floor, and rummaged for the apples and plums. Clawing through the bedroom closets and drawers, she collected everything red, from T-shirts and running shorts to a library copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* to the bag of Red Hots I bought with my own money and stashed in my sock drawer. When she was through piling the red things into a mountain in our living room, my mother said, “We need to burn the red from your life. Everything.” (Keller, 1997: 74)

While burning was considered a purifying tool, what Akiko calls the red disaster has a deeper meaning that, against her will, cannot be burnt. Based upon her daughter’s age and the symptoms that she is starting to see in her body. This phenomenon, described by Beccah as “Knees and elbows erupted into sharp and dangerous angles. Zits bubbled onto my forehead and chin. Hair sprouted in damp, unexplored crevices.” (Keller 1997: 82). What Akiko fears so much, then, is the fact that her daughter is about to have her first menstruation. Her discomfort toward Beccah’s sudden physical and psychological maturation can be read through two interrelated yet different frameworks. First, by reading it through Marianne Hirsch’s postmemory, Akiko feels how the emergent womanhood threatens to provide her daughter with her same wound, that she is so eager to protect Beccah from. This reading would mean that Akiko’s rejection of her daughter is not a repudiation but instead, an instinctive and protective manoeuvre that is grounded in transgenerational trauma. Being aware of the burden that her daughter is about to inherit, Akiko is attempting to stop her history of trauma to continue on her daughter’s life by preventing her from entering womanhood. A second reading can complicate this protective behaviour. By referring to LaCapra’s theory of acting out, Akiko, at the age of twelve, had already been forced into the comfort stations. Hence, her transition to womanhood coincided not with normalised cultural rites of passage but with institutionalized sexual violence. Consequently, Beccah’s bodily transformation does not simply make Akiko recall the past, but make her re-live those experiences. To that end, her refusal to acknowledge that her daughter is

growing up emerges from the haunting of the past and traumatic compulsion of repetitive patterns in which this maturation of the body is equal to rape. Yet, at that point, Akiko is not only passing on her spiritual knowledge and fear. She is also visualizing how her own perception of biological transitions has been understood and shaped by her own history of possession, exploitation, and forced labour in the stations, thus reframing Beccah's entrance to puberty not as a natural progression of life, but as an initiation into a realm of threat and vulnerability.

Building on the spectral transmission and the haunting structures of inherited trauma, it emerges that Beccah is not conscious of her mother's fragmented and bruised memory until she gets old enough to listen to her story and complete the existing gaps. It is for that reason that the distortion seen in the mother is projected onto the daughter's personality and her actions, as Beccah grows cautious of her mother's testimonies that appear to be inconsistent, fantastical, or deliberately fabricated. Eventually, Beccah's realization would cause her to reject them. Patterns re-emerge as Akiko attempts to not replicate the past but to conceal the truth in order to deceive her daughter and distract her from what really happened. Akiko also resorts to block her own memory as part of a forced displacement of that what cannot be consciously remembered or spoken, yet in that displacement, truth surfaces within metaphors. It is precisely in the dynamic between mother and daughter that Hirsch's theory becomes indispensable, as Beccah, who was raised in the nature of her mother's trances, spectral visitations, fragmented stories and half-truths, inherited not only the memory of the event but the affective charge that surrounds its suppressions. This is apparent also in how she unconsciously inherited the mannerism of her mother's imaginative reconstructions as well as her narrative strategies:

I grew cautious of my mother's stories, never knowing what to count on or what to discount. They sounded good—most of the stories she told me included the phrase: "It was a hard time but a happy time." In fact, I repeated several of her stories, telling teachers and other students versions of them that I supplemented with my own favorite movies: *West Side Story*, where Maria, my mother, was left pregnant with her love child, who was, of course, myself; *The Little Princess* and *The Poor Little Rich Girl*, where I, the brave and suffering orphan, am reclaimed in the end by a rich and loving father, who was alive. (1997: 32)

The embellishment of an unfinished narrative constitutes a trauma response that Beccah learns by participating in her mother's system of deception, as she attempts to fill the gaps of Akiko's stories with her culturally acquired scripts.

Yet, Beccah's postmemorial experience is bound to be only understood after her mother's death, when Akiko overcomes the unspeakability of her trauma and decides to leave her real testimony behind for her daughter to listen to. Meanwhile, Beccah's inheritance consists of the complete haunting of the mind, as she will devote her life towards the understanding of her mother, and the acceptance that no matter what, she cannot escape her origin.

5. Conclusion

In the final scenes of *Comfort Woman* (1997), the intricate architecture of trauma, memory, and spectral inheritance converges into a moment of profound recognition as Beccah comes to understand that her mother lives within herself physically, psychologically, and spiritually. This is a crucial moment for this article's central argument as it illustrates how the novel constructs trauma, not as a contained and rehearsed past event, but as the embodiment of a transgenerational force that persists across time and space. Psychologically, Beccah opens a window towards her mother's past, and she begins to comprehend the fragmented, encrypted and unintelligible stories that her mother told her, only once she is able to access Akiko's life through a cassette recording that she records for her daughter to have. The belated comprehension resonates with Marianne Hirsch's concept of the "generation after", as she becomes the vessel that bears the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before her. Finally, Beccah's spiritual inheritance becomes real when she accepts the shamanic gifts that Akiko has blessed her with, but that she dismissed for years. Such gifts now emerge in Beccah as an undeniable force and can be understood thanks to Cho's explanation of the ghostly figure that needs of a new body to be seen (2008: 166). By accepting her memory, Beccah embraces her shamanic destiny, and the appearance of Induk's spirit as a guide binds her to her ancestors in a crucial narrative transformation, proving how diaspora moves across time and space. Akiko's existence is proven to have shaped her daughter, preparing them from her moment of departure, as Beccah's own memories resurface with the rituals that she had so intentionally tried to forget in order to ensure that her mother's spirit would go back to her homeland in peace. By performing these rituals, she does not merely imitate her mother, but starts to participate in the same spiritual lineage that the women before her had sustained. As a final act of love and respect, Beccah scatters her mother's ashes in the river, she drinks from it, evoking Akiko's scene in the river where she licked a bit of mud to maintain her homeland within her body. By doing so, Beccah chooses to honour her mother's history, her pain, her resilience, and embraces her haunting presence. It is also by performing this

ritual that Beccah allows the spirit of her mother to find “its way home. To Korea. To Sulsulham. And across the river of heaven to the Seven Sisters” (Keller 1997: 212). An imagery that evokes not only the literal return to the homeland that was denied to Akiko throughout her life, but also, a metaphysical reunion with the matrilineal ancestors represented by the seven sisters, those who were lost, silenced, or unremembered. Rather than a simple ritual of mourning, Beccah’s actions constitute an act of narrative and historical reclamation, through which suppressed histories are re-written and find representation into both personal and collective memory.

Within this framework, traumatic retelling emerges as an ongoing and cyclical process, as trauma critics have argued, because it recurs, reconfigures, and reinterprets itself through repetition. Nora Okja Keller demonstrates throughout the novel that the dynamic of an ongoing conversation between present and past mirrors the intrusive return of traumatic memory. The very act of retelling, then, does not only become a mode of survival of history and memory, but also a way through which new generations reconnect and engage with an inherited past that was previously inaccessible. In this sense, the novel responds directly to the central concern of the article, which is how historical trauma can be rearticulated through historical fiction in ways that challenge official historiography and mediate through the fragmentation of memory and postmemory. Additionally, the historical perspective of the novel becomes inseparable from the gendered approach that it aims to embrace, as Keller situates her characters within a complex historical terrain shaped by colonial domination, militarized sexual slavery, and patriarchal structures embedded in their cultural contexts. The novel portrays women as victims of the position they occupied. Yet, it also presents them as survivors, collaborators, spiritual mediators and most importantly, as vessels of history and as responsible for cultural transmission. Women, in Keller’s novel, are those who possess a voice, who testify, witness, and who reveal the multiplicity of female experience through war, exposing perspectives that are erased from official historiography. A gendered framework is essential for understanding Akiko and Beccah, whose identities develop under oppressive structures, colonial subjugation and violence in the mother’s case, and by displacement and unspeakable suffering in the daughter’s. For instance, Marianne Hirsch reflects on the importance of gendered narratives in historical fiction by stating that “it can offer a position through which memory can be transmitted within the family and behind it, distinguishing mother-daughter transmission from that of fathers and daughters or fathers and sons”, and simultaneously, gender also “seems to be erased or invisible”, reason why “feminist and queer readings can [...] illuminate not just what stories are told or forgotten, or what images are seen or suppressed, but how those stories are told” (2012: 18).

Finally, the present article traces back to the idea of the relationship between history and literary fiction as an interactive and relevant conversation that needs to happen in contemporary narratives contexts, something that Keller achieves perfectly throughout the novel, as it interweaves historical documentation with the fictional testimonies of Akiko and Beccah. Further enhancing the idea that the present and the past are in constant conversation with each other, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the existence of an “insurmountable gap between history (the real past) and fiction” (Arias & Petterson 2022: 4). In a similar manner, Dominick LaCapra underscores the methodological affinities between writing history and writing fiction. From a postmodern perspective, this dialogue has been defined by Linda Hutcheon’s idea of Historiographical Metafiction as fiction that is not only used to write about the past, but that creates an interplay that provokes the rethinking of the past under a paradoxical and self-reflexive world, where the reader is invited to reinterpret the past (Hutcheon 1998: 18). This narrative process, rather than diminishing historical truthfulness, reveals the necessity of literary testimony in order to capture forms of suffering and oppression that still may remain unrecorded in historical documents. This effect is especially relevant because Korean diaspora and other existing diasporas – differently from other diasporas – has not been globally acknowledged so far. In the words of Grace M. Cho, “the ongoing conflict of the Korean War is not apparent to most Americans, nor are its state-sanctioned practices of mass killing”. There is a “failure to recognize the brutality of the Korean War” that has been “elaborated to such extent that what we remember about it first and foremost is that it is ‘forgotten’” (2008: 30–31). Hence, diaspora becomes a crucial tool for transmission, proving how trauma is not only displaced geographically but also rendered as an invisible string within historical narratives. Literature, then, becomes a safe space in which the erased, the spectral, and the unspeakable can be reimagined, and the silenced may be given a voice. Through Akiko’s voice, *Comfort Woman* performs an act of historiographic recovery by engaging history, not as a static record of pure data but as a fluid narrative, while its postmemorial relevance demonstrates how second generations can become witnesses of a history they never lived but nonetheless inherited. Trauma does not end. In fact, it is carried on throughout the generations. Memory, likewise, is not resolved or forgotten but transmitted. The dead appear to not be silenced but accompany the living in their spiritual corpus. Eventually, Beccah’s acceptance of her mother’s trauma marks Keller’s indication of a future in which voices that were once oppressed by colonial violence will resonate through new embodiments. The river that receives Akiko’s ashes becomes a new metaphor, again, of the ongoing flow of memory and inheritance, of a movement across generations. By connecting geographies, the river challenges the boundaries between the realm of the living and the

dead. Finally, Beccah chooses to honour her mother's history, her pain, her resilience, and she accepts the haunting, ensuring that the history that was once silenced will neither be forgotten nor lost. It will remain present and alive.

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Embodied Memories of War: A Cognitive Feminist Reading of Yan Geling's *The Flowers of War*

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Abstract This paper examines Yan Geling's *The Flowers of War* through a cognitive-feminist framework to explore how the Nanjing Massacre is represented as an embodied female experience, not only as a military event. The novel places trauma within an American Catholic church where schoolgirls and prostitutes seek refuge, foregrounding the female body as both target of violence and medium of resistance. The prostitutes' self-sacrifice reframes heroism through gendered vulnerability, shifting memory of war from national narrative to intimate corporeality. Drawing on cognitive narratology (Herman 2013), grounded cognition (Barsalou 2008), and reader-response theory (Iser 1978), the analysis shows how sensory details, bodily imagery, the church as anticipatory anchor, and fragmented temporality shape the representation of trauma. As a result, memory takes on vivid, affective, and visceral dimensions. By integrating trauma research that foregrounds the sensory registration of experience (van der Kolk 2014) with feminist trauma studies (Osborne-Crowley 2021; Caruth 1996), this article argues that the novel's depiction of embodied knowledge and gendered vulnerability displaces conventional war narratives, reframing trauma as a situated, corporeal mode of agency. Ultimately, the novel's transnational circulation enables a cross-cultural engagement with WWII, mediated through the reader's embodied apprehension of women's experience of violence.

Keywords grounded cognition; cognitive narratology; reader-response; female embodiment; Nanjing Massacre.

1. Introduction

Yan Geling 严歌苓 (b. 1958) is a leading Chinese writer whose works interrogate the intersections of female subjectivity, embodied history, memory, and violence. Across her fiction, from *Lost Daughter of Happiness* and *The Secret Talker* to *The Flowers of War*, Yan Geling uses an omniscient yet tightly focalised narrative voice, one that renders experience at a microscopic, bodily level. Small gestures and reactions, moments when a character has just “flinched a little” (Yan 2021: 2), repeatedly foreground the fact that every bit of emotion is registered in bodily sensations. Her novel *The Flowers of War* (*Jinling shisan*

chai 金陵十三钗), set during the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, reframes wartime trauma not only through scenes of military brutality but through the embodied experiences of women, whose bodies become both sites of vulnerability and means of resistance and protection. The novel follows a group of schoolgirls and several prostitutes who seek refuge in an American Catholic church, where the adult women ultimately choose an extreme act of self-sacrifice to safeguard the girls, none older than fourteen. As in her other works, Yan Geling employs a direct, image-driven prose style, and enters in *medias res*, describing a scene internally focalised through a young girl's body rather than through macro-historical reference. Thus, the novel begins with intimacy and vulnerability, while historical trauma emerges obliquely, primarily through embodied perception and less through direct exposition. History is filtered through sensory perception and enclosed space: "Buildings all over Nanking were burning and light from the flames filtered through the blackout curtains that covered the small oval attic windows. Orange patterns rippled across the room" (Yan 2012: 1–2).

The novel briefly invokes Minnie Vautrin (1886–1941), the American missionary whose diary documented her efforts to shelter thousands of women and children at Ginling College during the massacre. Although not developed as a full character, her presence provides a moral anchor and a documentary frame, linking Yan's fictional reconstruction to the embodied experiences of women who survived the atrocities.

The Nanjing Massacre (*Nanjing Datusha* 南京大屠杀) remains one of the most painful collective traumas in China's cultural memory, continually reactivated in public discourse, education, and state-sponsored memory practices. As journalist Wang Fan observes in a recent BBC report (2025), the memory of the massacre persists through commemorations, documentaries, and a prolific visual-literary culture.

The Nanjing Massacre has been extensively studied by historians, journalists, and cultural critics, whose works have shaped a broad international discourse on violence, history, political interests, memory, and trauma (Fogel 2000; Berry 2008; Yoshida 2009; Denton 2014). As Berry argues in *A History of Pain*, alongside the persistent demand for proof driven by political and ideological interests, the massacre has generated numerous films and literary works that play a crucial role in mediating collective memory and shaping how the history of the massacre is publicly understood. In the Anglophone world, the revival of public memory surrounding the massacre is often associated with Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*

(first published in 1997; cited here from the 1998 edition), whose foreword by William C. Kirby underscores the book's corrective function against Western historiography. Yan Geling's novel expands this cultural memory beyond nationalist or documentary frameworks, mainly by reframing the violence through gendered embodiment and situated cognition.

Existing scholarship has approached *The Flowers of War* through several recurring frameworks. However, the body of research remains relatively recent, fragmented, and marked by very diverse methodologies. One influential article analyses the novel within historiographic and metacritical debates, examining the relationship between history, narrative form, and postmodern historiography (Matthews 2016). Other studies focus on memory, trauma, and postmemory, treating the Nanjing Massacre as a mediated historical trauma negotiated between personal memory and grand historical narratives, sometimes within a comparative literature lens (Wu 2023). A substantial part of the scholarship adopts gender perspectives and feminist theories, focusing on prostitutes and schoolgirls who become figures of sacrifice, marginalization, redemption, and national identity (Yang 2015; Li 2022; Sun & Yu 2023; Liao 2025). Some studies use psychoanalytic, archetypal, or ethical approaches (Wu 2024), while others emphasize religious symbolism and the meanings of violence, reading the novel through Christian ethics, scapegoat imagery, or Girardian theories of violence and witnessing (Zhang 2017; Hwang 2018). Finally, several studies focus on adaptation, comparison, translation, and global circulation (Agurruza 2016; Jiang 2024; Zhang 2024), showing how cinematic adaptation and English translation reshape the novel for international audiences.

Due to the limited accessibility of Chinese-language scholarship, following Yan Geling's erasure from the Chinese Internet, this overview focuses primarily on studies available in international academic databases.

While the approaches mentioned above have shed light on the novel's historical, ideological, and symbolic dimensions, they tend to remain mostly focused on the text itself (its representations and dominant themes) or the author and her transnational identity. Far less attention has been paid to the role of the reader and to the cognitive and affective processes through which traumatic experience is produced, lived, and negotiated in the act of reading. Moving away from these frameworks, the present article foregrounds the reader and the reception of narrative trauma. Drawing on grounded cognition, cognitive narratology, feminist trauma theory, and reader-response perspectives on the implied reader, this article examines how *The Flowers of War* represents

trauma as a gendered, embodied experience, activated through narrative techniques that engage the reader in sensory and emotional simulation. I argue that this approach enables readers to experience trauma from within female experience, foregrounding forms of female agency even under conditions of extreme violence and limited choice.

The analysis is based on Nicky Harman's English translation of *The Flowers of War* (Other Press, 2012), as the article is concerned with how trauma is produced through narrative cues, sensory details, and readerly participation in the version through which anglophone readers encounter the novel. Nicky Harman is a well-established and award-winning translator of contemporary Chinese literature and has also contributed significantly to its promotion in English through her work with Paper Republic. She has translated works by several major women writers, including Yan Geling.

2. Readerly Construction of Trauma

2.1 Narrative Perspective and Storyworld Construction

The novel's portrayal of trauma depends on sensory perception, spatial affordances, and shifts in narrative perspective that invite readers to actively construct the experience of fear, anticipation, and vulnerability. The novel depicts a traumatic event anchored in collective memory, and its very structure reflects this collective dimension. However, several characters stand out through their individuality. The narrative thus also performs a recovery of the individual, even if in fragmentary and economical ways. By following the trajectories of characters such as Shujuan, Zhao Yumo, Cardamom, and Fabio both forward and backward in time, Yan Geling shifts the scope of war from the collective sphere into the personal and explicitly feminine, embodied one.

For Wolfgang Iser, the meaning of a literary text is not hidden content but an effect that emerges through the interaction between text and reader. The text functions as a "potential effect" realized through the reader's cognitive and imaginative activity, making reading a process of anticipation, frustration, and continual adjustment of understanding (1978: ix–xi, 4–5). This is particularly relevant to *The Flowers of War*, where violence is rarely presented frontally and traumatic meaning emerges through delay, suspense, and sensory detail, requiring the reader's active participation in its construction. In this way, Yan Geling moves away from nationalist or melodramatic representations of war

and foregrounds narrative strategies that draw attention to its embodied, affective, and gendered dimensions.

According to David Herman (2013), readers do not simply decode narratives but build *storyworlds* or mental worlds populated with characters, places, and events, using cognitive structures such as *scripts*, which encode expectations about typical event sequences, and *frames*, which organize spatial and situational understanding even when texts give little information.

Deictic shift theory further shows that reading involves continual changes of mental “vantage point,” as readers move from their own perspective into that suggested by the text, whether that of the narrator, a character, or other viewpoints. The storyworld is therefore not fixed but constantly reorganized according to the cognitive position adopted. A related mechanism is Emmott’s (1997, qtd. in Herman 2013) concept of *contextual frames*, which suggests that readers maintain an active spatiotemporal representation of the scene even when the text does not restate it explicitly. These frames function as anchors for the action, allowing readers to track events and recognize contextual shifts.

In his overview of cognitive narratology, Herman draws on earlier work by scholars such as Dorrit Cohn (1978, qtd. in Herman 2013), who argues that the representation of consciousness in narrative is not conveyed solely through the verbal reproduction of inner thoughts. Building on this line of thought, Alan Palmer (2004, qtd. in Herman 2013) shows that readers infer characters’ minds through a wide range of cues, including perceptions, dispositions, intentions, and gestures. During reading, they do not simply follow inner speech but reconstruct how characters perceive and orient themselves in their environment, as well as how they respond to other minds.

While Herman describes how readers organize fictional worlds through scripts, frames, and contextual cues, Lisa Zunshine shows that such cognitive mechanisms are also involved in acts of mind reading. Drawing on Theory of Mind (ToM), originally defined by Premack and Woodruff (1978) as the cognitive capacity to attribute invisible mental states to oneself and others, understood as a system of inferences enabling the prediction of behaviour (515), Zunshine argues that readers automatically infer characters’ “thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires” even when textual cues are minimal (30). In fiction, this means that even when explicit thoughts are absent, readers complete mental states from behavioural, discursive, or affective cues.

Drawing on Stearns’s (1995) concept of emotionology, defined as the set of culturally sanctioned norms that determine which feelings are valued or suppressed within a community, Herman (2013) shows how different genres

operate through recognizable emotional scenarios that help structure readers' affective interpretation of events. Narratives rely on emotional norms but can also challenge them, offering alternative ways of understanding emotional experience.

Beyond interpreting characters' minds, actions, and emotions, we also need to consider how these interpretations are made possible through the text, and how the text itself guides the reader toward them. In Iser's terms, the text does not present a fully accessible world but only a "limited availability" of information, since readers can never hold the whole narrative in view at once (1978: 16–17). Meaning thus emerges through the reader's activity, guided by what Iser calls the *implied reader*, a reading role prestructured by the text itself. The implied reader is a textual construct embodying the predispositions necessary for the text to produce its effects (34–35). The fictional world appears only in partial form and must be assembled through what Iser calls textual *blanks* and *negations*. The blanks leave the connections between perspectives open, making the reader coordinate them, while negations invoke familiar elements only to cancel them out, thereby modifying the reader's expectations and attitude toward the text (169–170).

In *The Flowers of War*, the fragmentary narrative, the lack of a totalizing perspective on Nanjing, and the focus on young and vulnerable characters such as Shujuan create precisely this sense of "limited availability" for the reader. Violence is seldom presented directly; yet it accumulates through absence and fragmentation: silences, ellipses, tense anticipation, repeated preparations for imminent danger, fleeting images of corpses, wounds, burning buildings, second-hand testimonies from soldiers, atrocious photographs, and survivors' accounts. Without a continuous narrative representation of the massacre, these narrative gaps activate the frames and scripts described by Herman, as well as Iser's open connections, making the reader fill textual silences with cognitive and affective inferences. The result is an intensified perception of trauma within the narrative, produced not through explicit depiction but through the reader's active participation in meaning construction.

One of the most persistent contextual frames in the novel is the church itself, which works at the macro level of the novel as a cognitive and embodied anchor. In a city where everything has collapsed, it becomes a fixed point that helps both characters and the reader orient themselves. The church activates a basic, yet powerful opposition: inside versus outside, shelter versus exposure, prayer versus violence. This spatial contrast stabilizes the storyworld in the middle of the chaos. The church organizes expectations: every sound,

movement, or interruption is interpreted in relation to the possibility of invasion. Although stable, this frame intensifies anticipation, because the reader must continuously evaluate how close danger is to getting inside.

The novel also constructs time in a fragmented manner. The story does not move in a straight line. Most of it remains in a tense present inside the church, but when a new character appears, the narrative briefly slips into the past to show who that person was and what kind of life they once imagined. Towards the end, the novel concludes with a short glimpse into the future, after the massacre. From a cognitive narratology perspective, this reflects how readers actually build a storyworld: not chronologically, but piece by piece, as new information becomes relevant.

The narrative also relies on readers' ToM capacities. Characters' inner states are often inferred from gestures and reactions, not merely through explicit introspection. Small bodily cues, such as Zhao Yumo's glances, Father Engelmann's hesitations, Father Fabio's flinches, or sudden silence invite the reader to reconstruct fear, shame, moral conflict, and determination. This activates the reader's capacity to attribute thoughts and emotions to the characters, intensifying the sense of embodied vulnerability.

One such moment occurs when Father Fabio finds himself increasingly destabilised by Zhao Yumo's presence, at once bodily, emotionally, with broader implications for his moral authority as well (Yan 2012: 39, 42–43). Yumo's body, especially her expressive eyes, triggers thoughts and sensations he had not anticipated, unsettling his sense of control. Her ability to read his reactions allows her to recognise the influence she has over him and the subtle power it gives her. This perceptiveness enables her and the other "sisters" to see him as a potential ally. Her beauty, combined with her dignified and composed demeanour, intensifies this dynamic. Nonetheless, when the Japanese soldiers return to seize the girls, Father Fabio declares that as long as he is alive, he will fight to protect them and stop the Japanese from taking them (233). Moments like these draw the reader into an embodied mode of perception that becomes central to the novel's representation of trauma.

2.2 Embodied Simulation and Narrative Perception

Embodied and grounded cognition argue that thinking does not rely on abstract, amodal symbols, but on the simulation of previously lived sensory, motor, and affective experiences (Barsalou 2008: 618). In his Perceptual Symbol System theory (PSS), Barsalou explains that cognition is implemented

through simulators, conceptual structures that “capture multimodal states and simulate them later” (622), allowing past experience to be reactivated when “knowledge is needed” (618).

In chapter seventeen, the moment when the girls and the prostitutes learn that the Japanese demand the schoolgirls for the Christmas “party” is first registered at the level of the body, before it becomes fully understood. The girls understand that something dangerous is about to happen, yet their reactions reveal confusion, denial, emotional overflow, and a form of uncertainty which amplifies the fear. Their responses erupt into insults, panic, and physical aggression, a chaotic outburst without a clear target. One of the girls, described as coming “from the countryside near Anqing” (Yan 2012: 226), clings to fragile hopes of finding flowers and food at the Japanese quarters, or even returning home after the party. Her attempt at reassurance is dismissed by the other girls, and the narrative briefly marks her as a “fool” (225), turning her into a scapegoat for the others’ rising terror. Denial becomes a desperate coping mechanism, and the violence remains pre-conceptual, experienced through bodily tension and contact with others in the confined space.

In contrast, the prostitutes respond with striking calm. Their blunt, pragmatic language reveals a different relationship to violence, shaped by prior experience. Instead of panic, they impose order, silencing the girls’ insults and restoring a fragile sense of normality. Zhao Yumo’s scolding voice resembles that of a tired mother or a strict class monitor, grounding the scene in everyday gestures rather than hysteria (227–228). The contrast reveals how danger is embodied differently depending on lived experience. Trauma thus appears first as a bodily and affective response, structured by experience, before it becomes a conscious understanding of what is at stake.

In grounded cognition, perception is an active, reconstructive process. As the experiments cited by Barsalou show, the brain combines present stimuli with traces of past experience, completing patterns, anticipating possible actions and responses, or even distorting what is perceived (2008: 624). In the novel, spatial perception follows a similar logic: danger is largely anticipated as coming from the front, refuge is imagined behind the protective walls, while lateral space remains an uncertain, unreadable territory. In this sense, the body shapes not only emotion and strategy but also organizes space according to possible actions, showing that perception under threat becomes a sensorimotor predictor, not a form of abstract reasoning. Characters’ bodily memories reactivate entire war scenarios from a single cue. One telling example is the scene in which the warning that Japanese soldiers are approaching on

horseback, soon followed by the actual sound of cavalry outside the church, immediately produces defensive reflexes, fear, and heightened alertness among those inside (77–79). A sound, a gesture or a glimpse is enough to reactivate internalized patterns of violence and masculine power, setting off responses such as self-protection, negotiation, manipulation, and solidarity.

The same logic applies not only to the characters' perception, but also to the reader's experience of narrative. Simulations can occur automatically during reading. When a text describes an action, the brain activates motor and affective systems as if the reader's own body were preparing for action (Barsalou 2008: 628–629). In narrative contexts, this can enable readers to "see" a scene from a specific point in the narrative space, sometimes even from the focal character's position.

The novel opens with a scene that introduces one of its major themes and offers a clear example of embodied simulation for the reader: the female body as a site of transition, vulnerability and knowledge: "Then she noticed a warm stain on her cotton nightgown. She stood barefoot and dazed. Blood. The wetness quickly turned icy cold. So, it had finally happened to her, as it does to every woman" (Yan 2012: 1). Menstruation becomes a boundary between girls and women; it marks a shift in perspective: between the girls in the attic and the women who will later occupy the cellar lies a spatial, moral, and cognitive divide. The moment of blood signals her transition out of protected childhood into embodied womanhood, where vulnerability and perception become inseparable. From an embodied cognition perspective, the body itself becomes a source of information, altering how Shujuan perceives danger and her own position in the world. At the same time, this echoes Osborne-Crowley's account of the body moving from something incidental to something seen, judged, and sexualized by others, a source of shame and unease (2021: 23–24). In the scene, she senses her body transformed into "fertile soil... where any demon could implant a seed" (Yan 2012: 5), revealing an immediate association between menstruation, sexual vulnerability, and real danger. Her body is the first to inform her, signalling that she now belongs to a newly exposed category during wartime, even before the Japanese soldiers arrive.

Perspectives on menstruation have varied across cultures, but a shared idea is the tension surrounding the visibility of the female body. Chris Bobel notes that menstruation often produces anxieties about bodily exposure (2010: 31). In the Chinese context, menstruation must be concealed in order to comply with long-established moral expectations that have encouraged women to adopt restraint and control over their own bodies. Shujuan's reaction in the novel

follows this same logic. Her immediate concern is to hide the stain and manage her body discreetly, especially since she was instructed not to leave the attic, to remain unseen and unheard (Yan 2012: 2). Menstruation thus places her in a doubly vulnerable position: it marks her entrance into womanhood and, at the same time, threatens to make her visible at a moment when visibility means danger.

At the same time, Shujuan begins to stand apart from the other girls' naiveté: she repeatedly breaks the attic rules, observes the women in secret (32–37), and forms her own judgements. Her relation to Xiaoyu is also more ambivalent, shaped by attachment, pride, rivalry, and the uneasy possibility of dependence. This growing distance from Xiaoyu (80, 160–161) culminates in her refusal to beg for rescue when Xiaoyu is given the power to choose who will leave with her father. Even though she feels humiliated and inwardly desperate, she refuses to submit herself to Xiaoyu's superior position (172–173). These small transgressions suggest an early autonomy, still fragile and mixed with insecurity, as well as the formation of an embodied moral awareness.

The spatial arrangement of the prostitutes and the schoolgirls in the same building, but in two distinct spaces, creates two separate modes of perceiving and interpreting the war. The schoolgirls, protected and suspended above the scenes of violence, experience the war indirectly, through rumours, prohibitions, and filtered impressions of the burning city outside. Their agency remains minimal, and fear becomes their primary mode of orientation, reinforced by their naive social games and limited knowledge. Therefore, the novel marks a powerful contrast between two forms of embodiment and two epistemologies of war: one innocent and sheltered, the other shaped by lived experience. The physical separation between attic and cellar becomes a cognitive separation: the girls cannot know because they have not seen, while the women know how to read the environment because their bodies have been trained through repeated exposure to violence. Cardamom's reaction after the beating illustrates this point. Instead of collapsing in fear, she declares that she has endured beatings since childhood, and that the girls' blows are insignificant by comparison (61). Violence is already part of her lived bodily experience, shaping her ability to endure pain and read hostile situations. By contrast, her tender care for the dying soldier, and her decision to repair her *pipa* to offer him one final beautiful song (169), reveal another form of embodied knowledge: compassion learned through hardship.

This constant contrast also has consequences at the level of reading. It resonates with Lisa Zunshine's perspective on source-monitoring, a key socio-

cognitive mechanism through which readers track information in a narrative (2006: 30–31). In *The Flowers of War*, scenes of violence, fear, and protection are filtered through multiple voices (schoolgirls, prostitutes, soldiers, priests, servants) and through brief temporal shifts that reveal the characters' pasts. As a result, source-monitoring becomes essential for evaluating the status of each claim, tracking who knows what and when, assessing how reliable each piece of information is, and following the suspense and gradual construction of impending trauma.

At the same time, for readers, knowledge emerges not only through source-monitoring, but also through situated interaction between body, environment, and other people (Barsalou 2008: 619). Through repeated interaction with the environment, perceptual, motor, and cognitive systems form stable patterns of response for recurrent situations (attractors), which the system reactivates to meet situational demands and action goals (621–622). Grounded cognition also emphasizes the role of *affordances*, the action possibilities that the environment offers to an embodied agent (Gibson 1979: 127). Anthony Chemero (2009) reframes affordances not as fixed properties of objects but as dynamic relations between an agent's abilities and situational contexts.

In the novel, the prostitutes operate through cognitive and behavioural patterns that, in Barsalou's terms, resemble attractors, which are entrenched action tendencies shaped by experience and activated automatically in high-pressure situations. Their lives have generated efficient responses based on social intelligence, emotional acuity, and rapid context assessment, adapting continuously to an unpredictable environment. They first attempt to enter the American church and obtain shelter (6–11), then negotiate the conditions of their continued stay (38), and finally, after reading Father Engelmann's inability to ask directly for their sacrifice (228–229), decide to replace the schoolgirls (230–234). By the end, they manage to exert affective control within the church: they calm the girls, manage escalating tension, and provide directions when the priests falter (225–234). Even when switching places with the girls to leave with the Japanese soldiers, they must activate internalized action patterns to imitate the girls' posture, gestures, and outward appearance, thus reshaping their own bodies and appearances (233–236).

The prostitutes perceive the affordances of the setting not as fixed properties but as dynamic relations between their abilities and the immediate situation, in Chemero's sense of affordance (2009). They exploit these affordances with skill: identifying vulnerabilities in others, sensing hesitation, reading micro-expressions, and rapidly interpreting surrounding tensions. They

know when to reveal themselves and when to recede, when to provoke, flatter, negotiate, or remain silent. Their responses draw on embodied patterns shaped by experience, which they can rapidly reactivate within extreme constraints. Through this, Yan Geling transforms the figure of the prostitute from a morally marginal presence into a cognitive and ethical agent, showing that survival and protection of others draw upon forms of embodied knowledge that are often overlooked.

This portrayal is not an attempt to idealize the characters; rather, it shows that their cognitive resources are shaped by their bodily and social histories. The novel thus suggests a subtle form of agency grounded in perceptual and relational competencies, reconfiguring the role of female characters within a narrative space otherwise dominated by military force and trauma. In contrast to many war narratives in which women are rendered passive or purely vulnerable, Yan Geling attributes to the prostitutes a form of situated intelligence that turns them into active participants in a world where every option involves violence and where their strategies offer the only meaningful chance of survival.

3. Female Agency, Moral Reversal, and Cultural Trauma

3.1 Embodied Trauma and the Work of Shame

If the mechanisms discussed above explain how readers generally construct meaning, perspective, and emotion during reading, traumatic narratives create a powerful disturbance in these processes.

In trauma studies, Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) remains foundational, even though its psychoanalytic model is no longer empirically adequate. Its relevance for literary analysis lies in the insight that trauma manifests through recognizable narrative effects. Drawing on Freud's notion of "repetition compulsion" and illustrated through her rereading of Torquato Tasso's tale of Tancred and Clorinda, Caruth defines trauma as an event not fully registered at the moment of violence, which reappears belatedly in intrusive images, scenes, or dreams. Formally, Caruth identifies trauma in narrative through ruptures, repetitions, fractures, compulsive returns, overlapping voices, and ghostly images, in other words traces of tension between what can be known and what remains inaccessible. Literature becomes a site where trauma is perceived not through

direct representations but through the fragmentary effects of language that reveal a delayed truth (1996: 1–9).

In a Caruthian sense, collective trauma in *The Flowers of War* becomes visible in the narrative itself, through rhythmic breaks and constant returns to memories from the characters' former lives. Through these shifts between the present and fragments of the past, Yan Geling constructs a temporal oscillation that simulates key features of traumatic memory. Although the plot is never chaotic, this oscillation creates the impression of a fragmented collective consciousness that operates through reappearances, partial details, and affective snapshots. Memories such as Yumo receiving the scissors after being falsely accused and beaten for stealing them (Yan 2012: 198–199), her sale to the brothel as a child (132), Cardamom's childhood beatings (61), or Fabio's recollection of his parents' death (62) function like the situated perceptual cues discussed by Barsalou. Each recollection is anchored in a sensation, an object, or a bodily gesture; these are not merely biographical episodes but somatically lived traces that shape the way characters perceive and respond to imminent violence. At the same time, the novel maintains continuous suspense: the women's sexual trauma is not shown directly from the beginning but gradually prepared through signs of danger and through what remains afterward: mutilated bodies, horrific photographs, or a single survivor who testifies at the Japanese War Crimes Tribunal in 1946 (245–247). Taken together, this rhythmic and repetitive construction, marked by fractured identities, evokes a form of collective trauma that continues to activate past episodes through embodied pattern completion whenever the present triggers similar perceptual cues.

This narrative dimension of trauma remains important even within a cognitive framework, as it allows us to articulate how disrupted cognitive processes (attention, memory, somatic reactivity) are reflected in the text and shape narrative engagement. However, the underlying mechanism of trauma itself can be approached from a contemporary neuropsychological perspective. Instead of a spectral return of an experience that cannot be known, trauma can be understood as a combination of disrupted modal processes, somatic reactions, and dysfunctions in emotional regulation systems, a model compatible with Barsalou's theories of embodied and perceptual cognition. From this perspective, traumatic traces are stored multimodally, and their reactivation involves both cognitive and bodily responses.

In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel van der Kolk shows, drawing on contemporary neuroimaging

research, that while the mind may suppress a traumatic event, the body retains it through sensations, pain, and a range of physiological reactions. Emotions do not reside solely in the mind but are distributed throughout the body, and traumatic memory often returns in bodily, sensory, and nonverbal forms that escape rational control (van der Kolk 2014: 53–59). Van der Kolk notes that trauma patients often display physical and emotional difficulties, such as clumsiness, bodily rigidity, awkward gestures, constrained facial expressions, and a general lack of coordinated engagement with their surroundings (38). Beyond painful memories, outbursts of violence, and altered neurochemistry, trauma can reshape identity and trap individuals in a time that no longer moves forward (18–24). Because trauma persists through automatic physical and hormonal responses, healing requires teaching the body that the danger has passed and allowing it to return to the present (32–33).

Osborne-Crowley's *My Body Keeps You Secrets* extends this view by introducing the concept of structural oppression, the ways in which social rules, cultural norms, and institutions produce and sustain injustice that is ultimately inscribed on individual bodies. Shame and silence operate as an invisible force of suffering, often more enduring than the initial traumatic event (2021: 13). Drawing on Lisa Feldman Barrett, Osborne-Crowley argues that emotions are socially constructed: the brain does not “feel” spontaneously but builds emotions from past experiences and cultural norms (13–14). As Osborne-Crowley suggests, emotions are both structural and individual, each new experience carrying traces of the previous ones. She also describes a form of collective, structural shame that enters the body from the outside (through violence, discrimination, social expectations, or institutional authority) and teaches individuals that their bodies or lives are worth less. In response, people develop protective mechanisms to hide what they have been made to perceive as defectiveness or unworthiness (14).

In the novel, this structural shame and bodily devaluation become visible in the way women's bodies are treated as already available to violence under Japanese occupation. As Susan Brownmiller (1975) argues, wartime sexual violence is often validated on the assumption of female bodily availability, a logic causing both fear and power asymmetries. Within this framework, the prostitutes' moments of agency and Zhao Yumo's later testimony at the 1946 War Crimes Tribunal (Yan 2012: 242, 245) acquire greater force. They disrupt the expectation of the passive, violable female body and reframe female embodiment as a site of moral and political authority. This can be seen in the scene where Zhao Yumo comes under the male gaze when the other women ask

her to dance for the wounded Chinese soldiers. Yet as she begins to move, the performance slips away from the audience: she dances less for them and increasingly for herself, transported into her own past and into the memory of her love affair with Zhang Shitiao (124–125, 129–136). The scene points to the tension between objectification and agency: even within a performance demanded by others, her body becomes a site of self-retrieval, the embodied memory briefly overrides her vulnerability.

At the end of the book, Yumo refuses to recognize herself as Zhao Yumo, despite the bodily signs that reveal her identity, suggesting an inability to integrate a traumatized self (243–244). As a survivor of sexual violence, she cannot claim a continuous self. This refusal functions as a protective mechanism consistent with trauma theory: the body reveals what the mind cannot yet fully acknowledge. Yet she still testifies at the 1946 tribunal, embodying a paradoxical position: she cannot reclaim her former self, but she can still transmit the memory of what happened.

As this section has shown, trauma takes shape in the body through neural, somatic, and sensory mechanisms, but the way it is lived in the body is also shaped by social norms and cultural expectations. In Yan Geling's novel, while trauma affects all characters, women bear it doubly: somatically and culturally. It therefore becomes necessary to examine the cultural and moral frameworks that determine how female characters are judged, valued, and constrained in *The Flowers of War*.

3.2 The Female Body as Cultural and Moral Site

Bodily reactions to trauma are never purely individual but shaped by cultural norms that determine what kind of body is considered valuable, shameful, or expendable. These expectations were still strongly shaped by Confucian moral frameworks in early twentieth-century China, where the female body functioned as an emblem of chastity, family honour, and social order. Terms such as *funü* 妇女 (“woman”) and *xian qi liang mu* 贤妻良母 (“virtuous wife and good mother”) preceded the modern notion of *nüxing* 女性 (“female identity” or “womanhood”) which only gained wider cultural circulation in the 1920s. Until then, the female body was understood less as an individual, autonomous entity and more as a symbolic site shaped by collective norms. As a result, female identity was frequently negotiated, contested, or fragmented.

This framework remained influential in Republican China of the 1930s, despite debates over modernity and women's emancipation. Confucian norms

concerning the body, filial piety, and female chastity continued to shape everyday expectations and produce collective, structural shame. These continuities matter for understanding how women in *The Flowers of War* are judged and valued. In the Confucian tradition, the body was not regarded as a private possession, but as something received from one's parents and ancestors, and therefore subject to moral as well as social regulation. More broadly, classical Confucian thought places strong emphasis on bodily conduct and emotion, since uncontrolled impulses were seen as disruptive to both personal virtue and social order. Within this framework, sexualised female bodies, such as the prostitutes in *The Flowers of War*, become markers of disorder and moral failure rather than autonomous subjects.

In the context of trauma, shame, or social pressure, the female body is not merely observed; it is pointed at, judged, and condemned. Yet it can also become a site of resistance. This dynamic appears in Ding Ling's 1941 story *When I Was in Xia Village* (Wo zai Xia cun de shihou 我在霞村的时候), through the character Zhenzhen, a young woman kidnapped and forced to "comfort" Japanese soldiers for five years. Upon returning home, she becomes the target of blame and communal shame. Rumours circulate about how many men she "comforted," whether she contracted disease, and whether she is "unclean," while she herself insists she has not changed much, only that her heart grew "harder" (1995: 151). In the end, she leaves home to pursue an education. Although Ding Ling's story is embedded in nationalist-communist ideology and Zhenzhen becomes a prototype of the "new woman" *xin nüxing* 新女性, the broader moral landscape at the time remains shaped by long-standing cultural norms.

Moral judgement in the novel is constructed primarily through the eyes of the St Mary Magdalene schoolgirls and the two Catholic priests, who embody Christian moral authority. Both Confucian and Catholic moral frameworks operate as forms of "emotionology" (Herman 2013), shaping which feelings, bodies, and behaviours are sanctioned or condemned. These learned moral expectations form the basis for schoolgirls' and priests' reactions to the prostitutes, before any direct interaction takes place. The prostitutes' sudden appearance with "bright satin dressing gown," a "tight cheongsam" (Yan 2012: 7), "baskets, bundles and satin bed quilts from which tumbled hair ribbons, silk stockings and other intimate articles" (11), "silk quilts in impossible pinks and greens" (33) is visually disruptive, vulgar, and chaotic; it also destabilises the symbolic hierarchy that structures the church space as morally pure and culturally superior. Their language ("fucker!" (8), "there's nothing wrong with

my arse, Jade!” “I bet he’d like a bit of it too!” (15)) further disturbs the sanctity of the church, exhausts its already scarce resources, and destabilizes the refined, disciplined world that shelters the girls.

Shujuan’s reaction is particularly revealing of the moral positioning imposed on these women: “She even began to hate herself, now it turned out she had the same body and organs as those women downstairs, and the same cramping pains expelling the same unclean blood from her body” (23). She experiences her shared female corporeality as contamination, feeling ashamed of being like them, as if she committed some sort of sin. Moreover, after seeing these women, she begins to suspect her family loves her less: “How could her parents have left her to witness such a vile scene? It could only be because they were selfish and loved her less than her sister” (11).

Neither priest welcomes the women wholeheartedly. In fact, Father Fabio calls them “animals” (12) and invites George, the cook, to beat them (10). Although they eventually allow them into the compound, their presence remains a source of unease. In fact, they try as much as possible to shield the girls even from seeing them, as if the perception of these women were dangerous. Then spatial separation reinforces this moral boundary: the girls remain in the attic, sheltered from the chaos unfolding in Nanjing, while the women are relegated to the cellar below. This spatial and moral segregation aligns with Mary Douglas’s argument that “dirt offends against order” (2001: 2), meaning that it represents an anomaly that threatens the established structure, disturbs cultural categories, and produces a form of moral shock. After Hongling is struck by mahjong tiles thrown by the schoolgirls, Yumo remarks that “we’ve got no face to lose” and that “we can be beaten and humiliated by anyone at will” (29). In doing so, she makes clear that the prostitutes fully understand the position they occupy in the eyes of others. Their bodies are not only sexualised, but also treated as bodies with less value, less protection, and less right to dignity.

In chapter six, the schoolgirls even physically attack Cardamom, beating her severely (60–61). Shujuan considers throwing hot coals at the women’s faces (122–123), blaming the prostitutes for Ah Gu’s death, since he had gone out to fetch water. After the altercation, the girls appear more disturbed than Cardamom herself, who is covered in blood (61). Their distress is not rooted in physical harm but in a sense of moral violation. Confronting Cardamom’s sexuality and vulgarity inside a space associated with purity, religious discipline, and cultural refinement feels like an intrusion and a form of symbolic pollution in Mary Douglas’s sense of a disruption of cultural boundaries (2001: 3).

The girls also contemplate with a mixture of fear and fascination “the business they did with that secret place between their legs” (Yan 2012: 32), which they associate with sin and wrongdoing. They experience a double consciousness: they judge the prostitutes according to the moral codes they have internalized, yet the resemblances between them destabilize their sense of purity.

Through Shujuan’s and her friend Xiaoyu’s furtive glances, the reader gains access to the cellar world arranged by the prostitutes: their vivid belongings (“their fur, scarves, wraps and brassieres” (34)), their mahjong games, their wine drinking, and their sexually suggestive jokes. The girls assess the women’s beauty through these hidden observations: first Cardamom with her pipa, and then Zhao Yumo, the leader of the group (33–37). Even under wartime conditions, the prostitutes are not reduced to pure vulnerability. Their conduct shows an ability to preserve forms of affective and social life even within violence.

This mixture of fascination, admiration, and moral unease becomes more intense in the case of Zhao Yumo. She is perceived through a complex mixture of allure and moral judgement: she appears distinguished, sharp, intelligent, even arrogant. Most importantly, in the girls’ perception, her greatest quality is that she does not behave like a “shameless slut.” Even her changed clothing, different from what she wore upon arrival, makes her appear “neat and tidy” (36–37), a sign that moral value is inferred from visual cues and bodily behaviour.

Other actors in the novel perceive the prostitutes through very different moral lenses. The Chinese soldiers and even the cook George, who has a brief relationship with Hongling, interact with them without the same anxiety about purity, suggesting a more pragmatic or affective attitude toward their bodies. By contrast, the Japanese soldiers represent the extreme opposite: for them, the female body is stripped of all moral value and reduced to an object of conquest. In this sense, it is the schoolgirls’ and priests’ reactions that most clearly expose how moral shame is culturally constructed and projected onto the female body.

These moral frameworks, which determine how the female body is seen, judged, and valued in *The Flowers of War*, also shape the affective and cognitive logic behind the women’s responses to violence, vulnerability, and sacrifice. The next section examines how embodied trauma comes to function as collective meaning and cultural memory.

3.3 From Embodied Trauma to Cultural Memory

Trauma, van der Kolk argues, leaves traces not only in the psyche of the affected individual but also across families, communities, and sometimes entire generations (2014: 13). In Yan Geling's novel, trauma likewise exceeds the individual suffering: it is constructed gradually, through narrative fragments, sensory cues, and an atmosphere of anticipation, first in the tense moments leading up to violence, and later in its aftermath.

As historian Joshua Fogel (2000) notes, the Nanjing Massacre became central to Chinese identity only in recent decades, not immediately after 1937–1938. Postwar reluctance in China to adopt a victim position, combined with rising nationalism and persistent denial on the part of some Japanese, transformed the event into a key site of collective traumatic memory, especially for the Chinese diaspora seeking a shared identity (2000: 1–3). In this sense, the Nanjing Massacre exemplifies what Jeffrey Alexander (2012) defines as cultural trauma: not an event that is inherently traumatic, but one that is publicly reinterpreted and socially attributed as such, until it becomes a defining moral reference point and a core component of a group's collective identity (13–14).

Yan Geling's novel participates directly in this narrative reconstruction of collective trauma. The massacre is not portrayed simply as a historical event but as a pervasive atmosphere of violence, in which each character carries part of the collective wound in their body. Narrative fragmentation, interwoven memories, and the continuous return to somatic, especially visual, detail transform individual experiences into shared suffering, precisely the process through which cultural trauma is constituted.

This process becomes more visible in the moral reversal that occurs after the prostitutes choose to sacrifice themselves. Initially portrayed as immoral, diseased, or sinful, their final act forces every character who had previously condemned them to reassess this judgement. Their decision to go in place of the schoolgirls becomes an act of radical moral agency. The shift is especially evident in Father Fabio, who had earlier dismissed the women as "animals." Once he learns of their intentions to sacrifice themselves, he firmly opposes the plan and even confronts his superior, Father Engelmann (232–233). His reaction reveals how the prostitutes' decision destabilizes the moral hierarchy that had only days before placed them at the bottom. The experience marks him permanently: after the war, he leaves the church, becomes a teacher, and continues to search for the women who sacrificed themselves (242), unable to forget their moral example.

In analysing how *The Flowers of War* articulates women's embodied trauma in times of military violence, Lucy Britt and Wilson Hammett's theory of trauma as cultural capital offers a useful perspective. They argue that in contemporary public discourse, trauma can be strategically instrumentalized by privileged subjects, reinforcing existing hierarchies and diminishing the trauma of the less powerful (2024: 921–922, 929). Read through this lens, Yan Geling's novel appears to resist the familiar cultural processes that convert trauma into symbolic or political capital. The novel keeps women's suffering anchored in the embodied, rather than abstracting it into national allegory or moral prestige. In this sense, the text foregrounds trauma as testimony rather than cultural currency, preserving its force within a register shaped by female vulnerability, solidarity, and embodied memory.

4. Conclusions

This article has shown that *The Flowers of War* constructs trauma through a narrative mode that draws the reader into its gradual production. One of the central insights of cognitive narratology is that readers do not need full access to a character's inner life in order to understand emotions, fears, and intentions. They infer mental states naturally, from partial cues, gestures, silences, and shifting contexts, and literature offers a particularly powerful space for this kind of participation. Yan Geling's novel makes full use of this capacity. It does not offer a complete or totalizing image of the Nanjing Massacre. Instead, it relies on fragments, small actions, pauses, limited focalization, noises, memories, and shifting perspectives, rather than on direct violence, and in doing so sustains a tense atmosphere of anticipation in which trauma emerges through the act of reading itself.

At the same time, this process is deeply embodied. The novel repeatedly offers small perceptual cues that lead both characters and readers to activate broader scenes of possible danger, fear, or action, especially in relation to female experience. The opening scene centred on menstruation is especially important in this respect: by beginning with a female body in transition, vulnerable yet powerful, the novel establishes from the outset a sensory and intimate mode of perception. The contrast between the schoolgirls in the attic and the prostitutes in the cellar further develops two different forms of embodiment and two different ways of knowing the world. Fear, anticipation, and survival are all registered through the body. Read in this light, the prostitutes become far more than morally stigmatized figures. Their practical,

bodily, and experiential knowledge allows them to read situations quickly, adapt to danger, and judge what remains possible within a violent and tragic environment. Even their final decision is shaped by this kind of situated judgement: they do not simply sacrifice themselves, but assess what is most likely to happen, what can still be done, and what kind of action still carries meaning. This analysis makes especially visible their transformation into agents of practical judgement and moral action. The novel therefore challenges inherited moral codes while also showing how trauma can reshape the body into both a target of violence and a source of action.

This embodied mode of reading clarifies the novel's treatment of trauma. Yan Geling's novel is better understood through approaches that emphasize the body and the social shaping of suffering. Trauma is carried in bodily reactions, shame, silence, and dissociation, while the female body remains burdened by violence as well as by moral judgement. Yet the same body becomes a site of protection, sacrifice, endurance, and testimony. Finally, although the novel gestures toward cultural memory, it does not dissolve women's suffering into abstract symbolism or nationalist rhetoric. Bringing together cognitive narratology, grounded cognition, and feminist trauma theory, this article has proposed a reading of *The Flowers of War* that shifts attention from trauma as representation to trauma as lived and simulated experience. More specifically, it shows how Yan Geling's narrative allows readers to simulate, at both cognitive and affective levels, the embodied reality of women's fear, endurance, and agency in wartime, making gendered suffering, moral complexity, and forms of survival more visible in the process.

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Testimonianze, contromemoria e attivismo femminista: La rielaborazione del trauma nei contesti postbellici asiatici e balcanici (1991–2015)

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Abstract (English) This paper investigates how the emergence of survivor testimonies from sexual violence during the Yugoslav wars and the Japanese comfort stations system in World War II catalyzed the formation of a vibrant transnational feminist and women's activism network starting in the 1990s. These grassroots movements fostered a collective reworking of trauma and constructed alternative narratives that challenged dominant, often denialist, historical accounts. Individual testimonies became a form of public counter-memory, questioning the limitations of traditional judicial institutions. Crucially, this activism has redefined the survivor's role: from a marginalized victim to a politically engaged agent of collective memory, thereby advancing new frameworks of justice and deepening our understanding of sexual violence as a strategic tool of war.

Abstract (italiano) Il contributo analizza come, a partire dagli anni Novanta, le prime testimonianze delle donne sopravvissute agli stupri di guerra durante il conflitto nell'ex Jugoslavia e di quelle costrette alla schiavitù sessuale nelle comfort stations giapponesi durante la Seconda guerra mondiale abbiano dato origine a una rete transnazionale di movimenti femministi e femminili. Questa rete ha favorito una rielaborazione collettiva del trauma e la costruzione di una narrazione alternativa, radicata ai margini e capace di sfidare le forme di negazionismo. Le testimonianze individuali sono così diventate una contro-memoria, interrogando i limiti delle istituzioni giudiziarie tradizionali. Il processo ha determinato una profonda riconfigurazione della figura della sopravvissuta, non più vittima, ma protagonista politica e agente di memoria collettiva, promotrice di un discorso di giustizia alternativa e di una nuova comprensione dello stupro come arma di guerra.

Keywords survivor testimonies; comfort women; transnational feminism; war rape; women's tribunal.

1. Introduzione

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice (hooks 1989: 9).

Uscire dal silenzio è, per bell hooks,¹ un atto di resistenza. Prendere parola significa riappropriarsi della propria soggettività di fronte a un sistema di dominio che oggettifica e riduce al mutismo chi sta ai margini. Parlare diventa così un gesto politico: la rottura del silenzio imposto dal potere mette in discussione la violenza simbolica e materiale che lo sostiene e apre uno spazio di ricostruzione del sé negato.

Questa riflessione offre una chiave di lettura feconda attraverso la quale guardare alle testimonianze delle donne che, a partire dagli anni Novanta, dalla Corea alla Bosnia, hanno scelto di raccontare pubblicamente le violenze sessuali subite in contesti bellici. Di fronte a narrazioni ufficiali che avevano a lungo taciuto, minimizzato, o addirittura negato tali violenze, la presa di parola – spesso sostenuta da reti di associazionismo femminile e da pratiche di attivismo femminista – si configura come un processo di soggettivazione collettiva.

In queste pagine si indagherà il ruolo svolto dalle mobilitazioni femminili e femministe transnazionali nei processi di elaborazione collettiva del trauma degli stupri di guerra in due casi studio: le violenze sessuali sistematiche perpetrate dall'esercito serbo durante il conflitto nell'ex Jugoslavia, e quelle inflitte dall'esercito giapponese alle cosiddette ‘*comfort women*’² durante la Seconda guerra mondiale.

¹ La grafia in minuscolo segue la volontà dell'autrice, Gloria Jean Watkins (1952-2021), che ha adottato questo pseudonimo come scelta militante negli anni Settanta.

Si rimanda all'introduzione di Nadotti, Maria & bell hooks. 2020. *Elogio del Margine. Scrivere al buio*. Napoli: Tamu Edizioni.

² Nel presente lavoro l'espressione ‘*comfort women*’ viene utilizzata tra virgolette per segnalare il carattere storicamente situato, eufemistico e controverso della denominazione, impiegata per riferirsi alle donne sottoposte a un sistema di sfruttamento sessuale organizzato dall'esercito giapponese. L'uso delle virgolette intende marcare una distanza critica dal termine, ampiamente discusso in ambito storiografico, giuridico e politico. Si tratta di una categoria non neutra, prodotta all'interno di specifici rapporti di potere e tuttora oggetto di critiche e riconsiderazioni, dentro e fuori l'accademia.

Se la storiografia si è dedicata a studi comparati sul ricorso allo stupro come arma di guerra nei due conflitti (Son 2023), minore attenzione è stata rivolta alle forme di solidarietà transnazionale e ai processi collettivi di rielaborazione del trauma nati dall'attivismo delle sopravvissute.

L'obiettivo non è proporre una comparazione meccanica delle due esperienze, né tracciare analogie forzate tra contesti storici, politici e culturali eterogenei. Piuttosto, si intende far emergere le risonanze tra le strategie adottate da soggettività femminili che, di fronte al fallimento di percorsi istituzionali di giustizia o di riconoscimento, hanno trasformato la testimonianza in un gesto politico capace di incrinare il silenzio pubblico. Al centro dell'analisi vi sono le parole delle sopravvissute: testimonianze che hanno aperto faglie nelle memorie nazionali, interpellando criticamente le narrazioni che per decenni hanno legittimato o occultato la violenza. Attraverso queste voci si delinea un sapere situato, che mette in questione le strutture di potere che hanno reso possibile sia il trauma che il suo successivo silenziamento.

Dal punto di vista metodologico, l'analisi si basa principalmente su fonti primarie costituite dalle testimonianze scritte delle sopravvissute (incluse autobiografie, interviste e dichiarazioni pubbliche) e dalla documentazione prodotta dai movimenti femministi e femminili coinvolti, come report, resoconti e comunicati politici. A queste fonti si affianca un confronto critico con la letteratura storiografica e teorica relativa ai due contesti sui temi della violenza sessuale in guerra, della memoria e della giustizia. La testimonianza è qui intesa non solo come fonte storica, ma come pratica politica e dispositivo di produzione di contromemoria.

2. Tra testimonianze e attivismo: l'importanza di una rete transnazionale

2.1. L'intenzionalità della violenza

Senza ricadere in facili analogie, ci sono elementi che accomunano le strategie militari dell'esercito serbo con quelle dell'esercito giapponese in relazione all'uso dello stupro come arma di guerra.

Il primo aspetto è l'organizzazione sistemica degli stupri. In entrambi i casi sono stati istituiti dei campi di stupro specificatamente pensati per tali violenze. Lo stupro, quindi, deve essere inteso come strategia militare intenzionale, non come conseguenza del conflitto, ma funzionale a obiettivi militari e politici.

Se si guarda ai numeri, secondo alcune stime (Džidić 2015), tra il 1991 e il 1995 furono circa ventimila le donne stuprate in Bosnia Erzegovina; la cifra sale invece a cinquanta-sessantamila se si considera l'intera area balcanica, dalla Bosnia alla Croazia (Richter 2003: 99). Molte di queste donne furono sequestrate e condotte in scuole, alberghi, caserme o in veri e propri campi di prigionia – come Omarska, Keraterm e Manjača – gestiti da milizie e formazioni paramilitari serbe.

Per quanto riguarda invece il caso asiatico, i numeri variano dalle ventimila e le duecentomila donne rinchiusi in campi di prostituzione obbligata.³ Il termine '*comfort women*', traduzione dell'espressione giapponese *ianfu* (慰安婦),⁴ fa eufemisticamente riferimento ai campi di prigionia chiamati '*comfort stations*' (*ianjo* - 慰安所), intesi come luoghi di conforto e di consolazione per i soldati giapponesi. Un sistema che si colloca pienamente nella politica militare e che risponde a obiettivi strategici ben definiti: tra questi, il mantenimento del morale – e quindi dell'efficienza operativa – delle truppe, oltre alla volontà di prevenire episodi di violenza incontrollata come il massacro di Nanchino,⁵ che aveva incrinato l'immagine del Giappone imperiale (Peipei Qiu, et al.: 2014). Le donne rinchiusi avevano provenienze molto varie come Cina, Taiwan, Filippine, Thailandia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Birmania, India, Isole del Pacifico, Olanda e lo stesso Giappone. La maggior parte – secondo alcune stime addirittura l'80% (Goff 1995: 265) – era di origine coreana, un dato che mette in relazione la dimensione di genere con quella coloniale. La Corea è stata una colonia giapponese dal 1910 fino alla fine del conflitto nel 1945. Come ha ben approfondito Ueno Chizuko in *Nationalism and Gender*, questo porta a un intreccio di diverse forme di violenza, che hanno esposto le coreane a un'elevata vulnerabilità, legata alla posizione subordinata che occupavano nella società (2004: xiii). Il sistema di prostituzione forzata si inserisce quindi in un progetto di annullamento etnico della popolazione coreana e di assimilazione dei territori occupati (Yoshimi 2002: 126; Odetti 2006: 36).

³ International Commission of Jurists. 1994. *Comfort women: an unfinished ordeal. Report of a Mission*. Ginevra: ICJ.

⁴ Il termine significa letteralmente 'donne di compagnia' e ha origine da *shōfu* (娼婦), che significa 'prostitute'.

⁵ All'inizio della seconda guerra sino-giapponese, tra il 1937 e il 1938, le truppe imperiali giapponesi occuparono Nanchino, all'epoca capitale della Repubblica di Cina. Più di trecento mila persone furono uccise e decine di migliaia di donne subirono stupri ed altre atrocità. Tussi, Tiziano. 2020. *Nanchino 1937-1938. La strage dissotterrata*. Milano: Meltemi Editore.

Anche gli stupri delle donne bosniache rientrano nel caso della pulizia etnica, come dichiarato dal Tribunale penale internazionale per l'ex Jugoslavia.⁶ Lo stupro delle donne mussulmane bosniache era una forma di disprezzo nei confronti della cultura del nemico. Secondo la concezione patriarcale dell'appartenenza di un bambino al gruppo etnico del padre, lo scopo era mettere al mondo bambini di un'altra etnia e religione per punire e umiliare l'avversario. La donna viene ridotta a corpo, a quello che Rada Iveković ha definito 'strumento di comunicazione' tra gli uomini aggressori e i loro nemici (1999: 32). L'importanza attribuita alla castità femminile nella cultura musulmana bosniaca ha prodotto conseguenze psicologiche e sociali profonde per le sopravvissute. Al senso di colpa interiorizzato si sono spesso aggiunti il rifiuto da parte della famiglia e della comunità, o il timore costante di isolamento sociale in caso di rivelazione della violenza subita (Kohn 1994: 203). Un meccanismo analogo è riscontrabile anche nel caso delle *'comfort women'*. Per molte rientrare nel paese d'origine ha significato essere accolte come *hwang-hyang nyeo* ('donne che ritornano' nel senso di 'svergognate') una definizione che si colloca in contrasto con l'ideale confuciano della *yeong-gyeol* e *sung-gyeol*, fedeltà e castità (Odetti 2006: 35). In numerosi casi, questo ha determinato ostracismo, vergogna interiorizzata ed emarginazione sociale. Un'atmosfera di vergogna e stigma che ha sostenuto per decenni il loro silenzio.

2.2 "Rain or shine, snow or sleet, we have come out"

Nell'agosto del 1991, la sessantasettenne sudcoreana Kim Hak-sun (1924–1997) decide di rompere un silenzio durato circa cinquant'anni e denunciare pubblicamente il governo giapponese. La sua testimonianza rappresenta il primo atto pubblico di accusa da parte delle ex *'comfort women'*. Il suo discorso, tenuto in conferenza stampa a Seul, ha una risonanza mediatica immediata. Viene registrato, tradotto e la notizia è riportata dai telegiornali serali del giorno stesso. Pur senza la stessa attenzione, le sue parole raggiungono anche il Giappone, grazie a un articolo del giornalista Asahi Shimbun, pubblicato per una rivista giapponese MILE.

Kim non esce allo scoperto da sola, ma ha alle spalle una rete di attiviste che la sostengono. Un anno prima, trentasette organizzazioni femminili si uniscono per formare il *Han'guk Chongsindae munje taech'aek hyobuihoe* (*the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan*) con

⁶ "Landmark Cases." *United Nations International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals*, (<https://www.icty.org/mk/node/9226>) [last accessed 05 Nov 2025].

l'obiettivo di fare pressione sul governo giapponese. Tra le figure più attive vi è la professoressa Yun Chung-ok dell'Ewha Womans University, che nello stesso anno pubblica diversi report sul tema e inizia a raccogliere interviste a ex '*comfort women*'. È in questo contesto che Kim rilascia le prime interviste ed è a Yun che poi esprime il desiderio di fare di più, esporsi in prima persona per denunciare direttamente il governo giapponese. La sua prima uscita pubblica causa un effetto valanga, tanto da portare più di duecento donne a rilasciare altre testimonianze (Nozaki 2005: 3).

Il suo atto di coraggio è stato fondamentale per molte donne. Anche Lee Yong-soo (1928– ancora in vita), una delle attiviste simbolo del movimento, costretta a diventare '*comfort woman*' a quattordici anni, racconta di essersi sempre sentita sola e di non aver mai pensato di poter parlare del suo passato: "Until the women came out, I did not exist" (Howard 1995: 40). La storia di Lee mostra bene come, per molte sopravvissute, il fatto stesso di rilasciare una testimonianza abbia rappresentato il primo passo per avvicinarsi all'attivismo. Come sostiene la storica e sociologa Yoshiko Nozaki, è grazie al movimento femminista democratico sudcoreano se queste donne hanno cominciato a parlare, portando la questione sulla scena internazionale (Nozaki 2005: 4). L'eco delle testimonianze delle sudcoreane si fa sentire e anche donne da altri paesi decidono di raccontare le loro storie. Il tema assume una risonanza internazionale, ricevendo attenzione dentro e fuori l'accademia, dall'Europa agli Stati Uniti. Le ragioni sono molteplici e spaziano dalla dimensione transnazionale del movimento femminista alla mobilitazione di singole sopravvissute, non necessariamente legate a un'organizzazione o a un attivismo strutturato.

Uno dei casi più rilevanti è quello dell'olandese Jan Ruff O'Herne (1923–2019), la cui vicenda permette di comprendere quanto il clima internazionale e la diffusione globale del femminismo abbiano contribuito a far emergere pubblicamente questo tema. Cresciuta a Bandung, nelle Indie Orientali Olandesi, durante l'occupazione giapponese viene costretta ai lavori forzati in un campo di prigionia per poi essere obbligata a schiavitù sessuale. Finita la guerra, decide di emigrare in Australia, dove si ricostruisce una vita senza mai nominare il suo passato. Con l'arrivo degli anni Novanta, tuttavia, una serie di eventi la colpiscono così profondamente da spingerla a scrivere un'autobiografia e a rivelare la sua storia. Come lei stessa racconta, sono tre le ragioni che la inducono a parlare. La prima è l'aver ascoltato in televisione la testimonianza di Kim, a conferma di quanto la dichiarazione di quest'ultima abbia avuto una forza dirompente al di là dei confini coreani. La seconda risale

invece ai primi anni Ottanta, quando, durante l'*Anzac Day*,⁷ un gruppo di militanti femministe interrompe la parata commemorativa per denunciare gli stupri di guerra. La capacità inedita dei movimenti femministi di far entrare le proprie istanze all'interno del dibattito pubblico e politico ha creato un terreno fertile che ha influenzato la scelta e la possibilità di alcune sopravvissute di uscire dal silenzio. Il momento catartico per O'Herne arriva con la guerra nell'ex Jugoslavia e le notizie degli stupri delle donne bosniache: "I had this strong feeling inside me. I've got to be with those women. I've got to back them up" (2008: 152). Gli stupri di massa avvenuti in Bosnia cambiano radicalmente la percezione mondiale delle violenze sessuali in tempo di guerra (Kohn 1994: 205).

For women and for feminists around the world, the effects of the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the discourses that surrounded them, had undeniable transnational importance. For the first time, rape in war found its place on the international agenda and in legal and human rights discourses; it was a crucial moment for feminists to try to make critical interventions into these discourses and to struggle for a feminist reconceptualization of violence against women (Enloe 1994: 220).

Grazie alla mobilitazione pressoché immediata di movimenti femministi e ONG, assieme alla conseguente copertura mediatica, il tema assume una portata globale, influenzando anche le rivendicazioni di giustizia, riparazione e riconoscimento sociale delle sopravvissute di altri contesti, come le *'comfort women'*.

O'Herne è pienamente consapevole della posizione dalla quale parla, e sa quanto le sue parole, pronunciate da una donna occidentale, possano avere un impatto mediatico diverso sul pubblico internazionale:

I could see that the Asian 'comfort women' needed the support of European women. Perhaps when a European woman came forward, Japan would take notice. The war in Bosnia was showing me that the world had not changed. Women were again being raped as if it were a natural consequence of war, as if war could make it right [...] I could see that this was not something that only happened fifty years ago. I had to tell my story so that in some way it might help to stop these atrocities from continuing. Rape in war must be recognised as a war crime (O'Herne 2008: 154).

⁷ Commemorazione che si tiene ogni anno il 25 aprile in Australia e Nuova Zelanda per ricordare i caduti delle forze armate australiane e neozelandesi in tutte le guerre.

I racconti in prima persona sono stati decisivi per sensibilizzare la comunità internazionale sulle violenze perpetrate dall'esercito giapponese. Il fatto che la biografia di O'Herne fosse scritta in lingua inglese ne ha sicuramente facilitato la circolazione globale, ma il suo caso costituisce un'eccezione.

La maggior parte delle testimonianze diventa accessibile in Occidente solo grazie a un complesso lavoro di mediazione linguistica, reso possibile da una fitta rete transnazionale di attiviste, scrittrici, registe e studiose. Quando, con gli anni Novanta, il tema comincia a riscontrare una certa attenzione mediatica, rendere pubbliche e traducibili le voci delle ex '*comfort women*' diventa uno degli obiettivi centrali delle organizzazioni femminili e femministe impegnate sulla questione.

Dopo la testimonianza di Kim, il *Korean Council* apre una linea telefonica per incoraggiare il maggior numero possibile di donne a condividere la propria esperienza. Nel 1993 il *Chongshindae yon'guhoe* (*Research Association on the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan*) pubblica novantasei interviste, poi tradotte in inglese nel volume *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (1995). È a partire da queste prime traduzioni che emerge con chiarezza la dimensione globale della mobilitazione, sostenuta in particolare dal forte radicamento del movimento all'interno della diaspora asiatica negli Stati Uniti.

Questo aspetto risulta ancora più evidente nel volume *Silence Broken* (1999), curato dalla regista e scrittrice coreano-americana Dai Sil Kim-Gibson (1938–2023). Ripercorrere la storia di questa pubblicazione permette di cogliere la portata della rete transnazionale: il costante dialogo tra diaspora e movimento coreano, le manifestazioni organizzate negli Stati Uniti e i viaggi delle sopravvissute per testimoniare in prima persona.

La prima testimonianza raccolta nel volume è quella di Hwang Keum Ju, invitata dalle attiviste della diaspora coreana di Washington. Il *Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issue*, gruppo particolarmente attivo, organizzava manifestazioni davanti alla Casa Bianca per sollecitare una presa di posizione ufficiale del governo statunitense contro il Giappone. Hwang viene invitata una prima volta nel 1992, in occasione delle proteste contro la visita dell'imperatore Akihito:⁸ una folla di circa seicento donne accoglie la delegazione giapponese con slogan come "Japan apologize" e "Japan must confess; no more hiding" (Kim-Gibson 1999: 12). Due anni dopo, durante la sua seconda visita, è proprio a Kim-Gibson che viene chiesto di tradurre in inglese la sua testimonianza,

⁸ Akihito (1933 – ancora in vita) è stato imperatore del Giappone dal 1989 al 2019.

contribuendo così a consolidare ulteriormente la propagazione delle voci delle sopravvissute.

La dimensione transnazionale del movimento è stata una delle condizioni della sua efficacia e la circolazione delle testimonianze emerge come un indicatore della potenza politica di queste alleanze. Non, quindi, un mero passaggio editoriale, ma un dispositivo politico essenziale: è attraverso la loro diffusione internazionale che la questione delle *'comfort women'* è uscita dal contesto asiatico, ampliando la risonanza politica del movimento e, di conseguenza, uno strumento essenziale per la de/costruzione di una memoria pubblica globale.

2.3 Attivismo in ex Jugoslavia e solidarietà internazionale

La studiosa Maki Kimura sostiene che “the development and maturing of feminism has enabled transnational and global collaboration among feminists, which raised awareness of women’s human rights” (2016: 182). Vale la pena notare che, nonostante la questione delle *'comfort women'* fosse da tempo nota in Asia grazie a memorie di soldati⁹ o a studi accademici sul tema, è solo con gli anni Novanta che comincia ad essere intesa come una grave violazione dei diritti umani. Il dibattito si sviluppa all’interno di un’ondata globale di ridefinizione dei diritti delle donne come diritti umani. Sempre Kimura ricorda che “this feminist movement was also successful in addressing sexual violence during conflicts as a war crime at the international level, challenging a long-held view that rape during war is simply an accidental and unfortunate incident” (2016: 201). L’unione transnazionale nella lotta contro la violenza sessuale sulle donne e contro gli stupri di guerra crea una grande mobilitazione che si condensa nel caso jugoslavo. “There have been few events in history that have caused such a global feminist response”, scrive Dubravka Zarkov (2003: 60).

Come si è accennato, l’immediata emersione e denuncia degli stupri di guerra in Bosnia-Erzegovina segna un punto di svolta nella storia della percezione dello stupro come arma di guerra. Jelena Batinic evidenzia come la risposta femminista agli eventi in Jugoslavia rappresenti il primo esempio che rivela gli effetti di un clima internazionale in trasformazione, più sensibile e attento al tema (2001: 12).

⁹ Lo studioso Ryuji Takasaki ne ha individuate e raccolte circa un centinaio.

Takasaki, Ryuji. 1994. *The “comfort facility” and men’s confessions told in one hundred books: There were “comfort facilities” all over Asia*. Tokyo: Nashinokisha.

Anche qui, come nel caso delle ‘*comfort women*’, la diffusione delle prime informazioni e testimonianze dirette si deve all’attivismo di movimenti di donne locali. L’impegno è tempestivo: già nei primi due anni del conflitto (1991–1992) alcune realtà hanno messo in campo un lavoro sistematico di raccolta e denuncia.

Uno dei primi esempi è il Report diffuso dal *Ženska grupa Trešnjevka* (Gruppo delle donne di Trešnjevka), collettivo femminista nato nel 1986 da alcune militanti di *Žena i društvo* (Donna e società), tra i primi gruppi femministi sorti in Jugoslavia. Le attiviste decidono di creare un nuovo spazio dedicato specificamente alla lotta contro la violenza sulle donne. Con lo scoppio della guerra nel 1991,¹⁰ il loro lavoro si concentra sulla raccolta di testimonianze e informazioni sui crimini commessi contro le donne. Riescono a identificare diciassette campi di prigionia nei quali le detenute vengono costrette alla prostituzione dall’esercito serbo. La ricostruzione si basa anche in questo caso su testimonianze dirette, come quella della sessantaseienne detenuta del campo di prigionia Ciglane, a Prijedor, in Bosnia. Il loro lavoro di documentazione si rivela fondamentale anche come fonte per la stesura del *Bosnia and Herzegovina Report* (1994) da parte del *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW).

Il Report di *Ženska grupa Trešnjevka* viene pubblicato anche sulla rivista femminista inglese *Spare Rib*.¹¹ Sebbene la rivista avesse ormai perso la centralità politica e mediatica che aveva caratterizzato i due decenni precedenti, la scelta di inserirlo in una delle sue ultime uscite – nel 1992, a un anno dalla chiusura – testimonia la rapidità con la quale il tema ha attirato l’attenzione dei femminismi internazionali e la volontà dei collettivi di altri paesi di mobilitarsi affinché le donne bosniache non restassero isolate. Anche la rivista statunitense *Ms.*¹² lo pubblica nel 1993 devolvendo il ricavato della vendita ad associazioni umanitarie bosniache (Batinic 2001: 19). Questo tipo di intervento non è isolato: molti articoli, infatti, contenevano appelli a un sostegno finanziario e umanitario.

Le reti transnazionali si muovono a partire proprio da questo bisogno di supporto materiale. Per quanto riguarda il contesto statunitense, diverse

¹⁰ Il 25 giugno 1991 Slovenia e Croazia dichiararono l’indipendenza dalla Repubblica Socialista Federale di Jugoslavia, evento che diede avvio alle guerre jugoslave e alla dissoluzione della federazione entro la metà degli anni Novanta.

¹¹ *Spare Rib* è stata una delle riviste femministe più diffuse nel Regno Unito. Fondata a Londra nel 1972, è stata attiva fino al 1993.

¹² *Ms.* nasce a New York nel 1971 ed è la prima rivista femminista americana a diffusione nazionale. È tuttora attiva e consultabile al sito <http://msmagazine.com/>.

associazioni di donne, tra le quali *Women's Health Action and Mobilization* e il *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, si sono unite per fondare il *Global Action to Help End Rape (GATHER)* con lo scopo di raccogliere fondi per il *Centar za žena žrtve rata* (Centro per donne vittime di guerra). Quest'ultima è un'organizzazione antimilitarista, femminista e antinazionalista nata a Zagabria nel 1992.

In alcuni casi, la raccolta di fondi da parte di gruppi femministi di altri paesi è stata determinante per la nascita stessa di strutture di supporto per le sopravvissute. Un esempio significativo è quello dell'*Autonomni Ženski Centar* (Centro autonomo delle donne) di Belgrado, fondato nel 1993 grazie all'alleanza tra le attiviste della *SOS Telefon žene in žrtve nasilja* (Linea telefonica per donne e bambini che hanno subito violenza) e il collettivo svizzero *Pride for Women and Children* di Berna. La collaborazione prende avvio dopo una prima visita delle attiviste svizzere a Belgrado, nel dicembre 1992, seguita da una campagna di raccolta fondi organizzata in Svizzera. Il sostegno economico permette ad alcune donne che avevano inizialmente usufruito della *SOS Telefon* – e che nel frattempo erano diventate attiviste – di aprire un centro autonomo dedicato all'ascolto e al supporto delle sopravvissute. Fin dall'inizio, il Centro pone tra i suoi obiettivi quello di mantenere una comunicazione continua con le donne di Bosnia-Erzegovina, Croazia, Slovenia e Macedonia, con particolare attenzione a quelle sotto assedio a Sarajevo. Per sostenerle, attivano uno scambio di lettere e lanciano il progetto *Parcels for Women in Sarajevo* (1993–1995), volto a far arrivare aiuti umanitari nelle aree più colpite dal conflitto. Il rapporto con le attiviste svizzere non è importante solo sul piano finanziario, ma anche su quello formativo. Nella primavera del 1993, alcune attiviste serbe si recano a Berna per conoscere pratiche e modelli di intervento.¹³ Visitano centri di ginecologia autogestiti e case rifugio, portando poi quanto appreso del difficile contesto di guerra. Il loro aiuto oltrepassa le rigide linee di confine esaltate dai nazionalismi, favorendo legami e forme di supporto sia tra donne dei paesi balcanici coinvolti nel conflitto, sia tra queste e le femministe di altre parti del mondo. La linea telefonica di aiuto, per esempio, è in continuo contatto con le terapisti del *Medica Zenica* in Bosnia-Erzegovina, centro dove donne stuprate e rilasciate dai

¹³ Mladjenovic, Lepa. "Autonomous women's center against sexual violence Belgrade. A personal story." Autonomous women's center Belgrade, (<https://www.womenngo.org.rs/en/about-us/annual-reports/441-10-years-history-report>) [last accessed 5 Nov 2025].

campi di detenzione trovano accoglienza, cure mediche e psicologiche (Brunori 2003: 50).

L'attraversamento dei confini è stato facilitato dall'introduzione delle prime reti di comunicazione elettronica. Lepa Mladjenovic, una delle attiviste più attive a Belgrado, racconta l'arrivo della posta elettronica come un importante momento di svolta:

In November 1994, we got the e-mail!! That was a celebration of mystery [...] We could then communicate with Zagreb, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zenica, Split! [...] All women who came to us could use the e-mail. For them we usually wrote short messages like 'we are alive and well', 'tell us if you are alive and well'.¹⁴

Anche l'attivazione di queste nuove infrastrutture di comunicazione è stata possibile grazie alla rete di alleanze femministe. Un'attivista per la pace tedesca installa il sistema *ZaMir*¹⁵ nel centro, mentre il gruppo *Electronic Witches* di Zagabria ne ha insegnato l'utilizzo. L'uso della posta elettronica, quindi, è un altro elemento da tenere in considerazione nel ragionare sulla dimensione transnazionale dei movimenti femministi: ha sicuramente agevolato la loro capacità d'azione, la costruzione di alleanze, così come la circolazione immediata delle informazioni e la connessione tra reti attive in contesti diversi.

Durante il conflitto, nonostante l'impegno di diverse realtà femministe – come la già citata *Medica Zenica* – nel portare alla luce le violenze subite dalle donne, il tema è rimasto ai margini del discorso pubblico bosniaco. Politici e autorità lo hanno nominato spesso in chiave strumentale, utilizzandolo soprattutto per sollecitare l'intervento internazionale contro gli attacchi serbi, più che per affrontare concretamente le esigenze delle sopravvissute (Helms 2013: 82). Anche sul piano internazionale si presentano delle criticità. Giornalisti, istituzioni, ONG e organizzazioni per i diritti umani, nelle loro inchieste e nei loro report sugli stupri di guerra, ricorrono di rado alle testimonianze dirette delle donne bosniache (Cole 2017: 61). Hanno preferito,

¹⁴ Mladjenovic, Lepa. "Autonomous women's center against sexual violence Belgrade. A personal story." Autonomous women's center Belgrade, cit.

¹⁵ *ZaMir* Transnational Net è un sistema telematico BBS creato nel 1992 a Zagabria dalla Anti-War Campaign con l'obiettivo di permettere alle persone dei territori della ex-Jugoslavia e ad attiviste e attivisti di entrare in contatto. Il nome *ZaMir* in serbo-croato significa 'per la pace'.

invece, affidarsi a voci croate o serbe per raccontare – e spesso per parlare al posto – delle bosniache.

Se nel caso delle ‘*comfort women*’ il dibattito internazionale si accende grazie all’iniziativa delle stesse sopravvissute, che rivendicano pubblicamente la propria voce, nel contesto bosniaco queste vengono invece ridotte a figure da rappresentare, testimonianze mute.

Tale paradigma viene rotto nel 1999 con il volume *I Begged Them to Kill Me: The Crime against the Women of Bosnia-Herzegovina*, una raccolta di quasi cinquanta racconti di donne che hanno subito stupri di guerra e che si erano affidate al *Savez Udruženja Logoraša Kantona Sarajevo* (Associazione dei sopravvissuti alle torture dei campi di prigionia del cantone di Sarajevo). Il testo, pubblicato grazie al *Center for War Crimes Research*, contribuisce a dare nuova visibilità al tema nella sfera pubblica bosniaca (Helms 2013: 83). Soprattutto, rifiuta l’immagine delle donne violentate come vittime passive, restituendo loro invece la posizione di “subjects who speak and accuse” (Ajanović 1999: 14).

3. Tra memoria e storia: il ruolo delle testimonianze nella trasformazione della ricerca storica e della memoria collettiva

Judith Lewis Herman nel volume *Trauma and Recovery* sostiene che il trauma distrugge il linguaggio e che la prima forma di cura e di superamento sia proprio quella di ritrovare le parole (1992: 41). Tuttavia, il semplice atto di parlare non è sufficiente. Per far sì che possa avere un’efficacia trasformativa, è necessario che venga accolto, riconosciuto e sostenuto all’interno di una relazione. “The victim asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement and remembering”, scrive Hermann (1992: 63). La testimonianza, quindi, richiede un contesto relazionale capace di restituire potere alle parole.

In entrambi i casi in esame, questo ruolo è stato svolto dalle associazioni femminili e femministe, che hanno fatto da garanti dell’ascolto, da argine contro le distorsioni prodotte dall’appropriazione politica delle storie di violenza. Le testimonianze delle sopravvissute, infatti, sono state spesso strumentalizzate: sottratte al loro significato situato, ricollocate in narrazioni nazionaliste e svuotate della loro potenzialità critica. In Corea, per esempio, le testimonianze sono state usate per alimentare la narrazione del paese come un corpo violato dal Giappone (Odetti 2006: 21). Come mostrato dagli studi di genere, queste costruzioni narrative non sono nuove, ma parte di un repertorio retorico che

attraversa la modernità e che attribuisce alla nazione un corpo femminile da proteggere, fragile e passivo, funzionale alla produzione di consenso e di identità collettiva (Sugamele 2020: 171). Dalla propaganda europea della Prima guerra mondiale alle retoriche contemporanee, la femminilizzazione della nazione costituisce un dispositivo discorsivo ricorrente (Blom et al. 2000). Analoghi meccanismi sono rintracciabili nel caso bosniaco. Durante il Consiglio di Sicurezza delle Nazioni Unite dell'agosto 1993, Muhamed Sacirbey, primo ambasciatore bosniaco presso le Nazioni Unite, ha dichiarato che “Bosnia-Herzegovina is being gang-raped” (MacKinnon 1994: 195). Paradossalmente, un altro caso tra i più problematici riguarda proprio il già citato volume *I Begged Them to Kill Me*. Come ricostruisce Helms, la promozione stessa del libro è stata assorbita da un discorso nazionalista centrato sulla protezione maschile delle donne, in quanto custodi dell'onore collettivo (2013: 229). Uno schema ripreso anche da settori della propaganda politica, specialmente dal partito *Stranka Demokratske Akcije* (Partito d'azione democratica).

La sociologa Sara Ahmed sottolinea come la sofferenza non sia un fatto meramente individuale, ma un fenomeno relazionale e sociale (2014: 21). In questa prospettiva, la sofferenza può assumere un uso politico ambivalente: può essere strumentalizzata, come negli esempi sopra citati, oppure trasformata in leva di elaborazione collettiva, quando diventa linguaggio condiviso e strumento di critica radicale. In 4.1 saranno esplorate esperienze in cui la sofferenza è stata politicizzata in senso trasformativo, in particolare attraverso pratiche femministe capaci di produrre un'elaborazione collettiva del trauma.

In entrambi i contesti analizzati, tuttavia, occorre registrare anche un controflusso problematico. Nel caso coreano, la crescente visibilità pubblica delle testimonianze ha contribuito a consolidare un'immagine stereotipata della sopravvissuta: triste, passiva, in lacrime, incapace di agire (Choi & Yang 2023: xx) – una rappresentazione che ricalca quella riscontrabile nello scenario bosniaco. I movimenti femministi hanno svolto un ruolo cruciale nello smontare tali narrazioni, spesso adottando posizioni di cautela. Le attiviste di *Medica Zenica*, ad esempio, hanno rifiutato la richiesta – avanzata anche da attori internazionali – di pubblicare raccolte di testimonianze. Temevano che questi materiali potessero essere facilmente strumentalizzati a fini politici o nazionalisti, sulla scia di quanto accaduto a *I Begged Them to Kill Me* (Helms 2013: 215). Del resto, come ricorda Susan Brownmiller, “Defense of women has long been a hallmark of masculine success” (1993: 42).

La memoria collettiva è strettamente intrecciata ai processi di costruzione dell'identità nazionale e fornisce il repertorio emotivo attraverso cui una

comunità definisce sé stessa e il proprio passato. Allo stesso tempo, è il prodotto di continui processi interpretativi che selezionano, rimodellano o rimuovono eventi in funzione delle esigenze del presente (Thomson 2007: 13). La memoria, in questo senso, non è un deposito neutrale, ma un terreno di conflitto nel quale si stabiliscono gerarchie di significato, si legittimano narrazioni e si consolidano forme di appartenenza.

La ricerca storica contribuisce alla formazione della memoria collettiva tanto quanto ne dipende, e non è immune da usi strumentali. Le narrazioni veicolate dai manuali scolastici, dalle istituzioni o dai media non sono mai neutrali: rispondono a un progetto pedagogico e politico che mira a consolidare una determinata immagine nazionale.

È proprio in questa ambivalenza che si collocano i casi di negazionismo e revisionismo che persistono ancora oggi. La storia può essere manipolata per confermare cronologie selettive, nascondere responsabilità o legittimare versioni edulcorate del passato. Nonostante decenni di pubblicazioni che hanno adottato uno sguardo femminista volto a legittimare le testimonianze delle sopravvissute, sono tuttora attivi dei tentativi di minimizzazione degli stupri e delle violenze di guerra.

Nel 2021, ad esempio, J. Mark Ramseyer, professore alla Harvard University, ha proposto una rilettura delle *'comfort women'* come *'prostitutes'* contrattualizzate e non come vittime di schiavitù sessuale (Ramseyer 2021: 8). Una posizione che si inserisce nella più ampia tradizione negazionista giapponese, funzionale a preservare un'immagine nazionale duplice: da un lato quella di un Giappone vittima della guerra – costruita soprattutto attorno al trauma delle bombe atomiche (Tsukamoto 2022: 3) – dall'altro quella di un presunto liberatore dell'Asia dal colonialismo occidentale, una lettura patriottica che rilegge la dominazione nipponica come un progetto animato da buone intenzioni (Caroli 2009: 137).

Analogamente, in Serbia, la storia è stata modificata attraverso un processo di selezione e omissione degli eventi traumatici volto a costruire un'identità nazionale più 'pulita'. Il terreno di conflitto in questo caso, non si è svolto solo in ambito accademico e tra le pagine dei testi scolastici, ma anche su quello della Public History.

La rimozione della memoria passa per la cancellazione dei luoghi che la custodiscono. Il caso bosniaco lo restituisce chiaramente. Tra il 1992 e il 1995, il Vilina Vlas Hotel di Višegrad è stato adibito a campo di stupro dal

paramilitare serbo Milan Lukić.¹⁶ Si stima che vi siano state detenute e violentate oltre duecento donne.¹⁷ Lo stesso luogo nel 2020 è diventato una struttura ricettiva e sponsorizzata con voucher per riavviare il turismo dopo la pandemia Covid-19. Queste azioni pericolose mirano a “sradicare le atrocità dalla memoria pubblica”.¹⁸ Spogliare un luogo della sua storia significa volerne eliminare le tracce. Non c’è nemmeno una targa commemorativa, un monumento a testimoniare che, come ricorda Bakira Hasečić, quel posto era “letteralmente intriso di sangue”.¹⁹

Questi episodi mostrano come la memoria collettiva non sia soltanto un luogo in cui si conserva il passato, ma un campo nel quale si combattono battaglie politiche. E ricordano quanto sia necessario interrogare criticamente le narrazioni dominanti e il modo in cui esse continuano a modellare il rapporto tra storia, memoria e responsabilità collettiva. In tale quadro, le testimonianze hanno assunto un ruolo cruciale: hanno introdotto voci capaci di incrinare o ridefinire le versioni ufficiali del passato, ma non solo, anche il modo stesso di fare ricerca storiografica.

Prima dell’ondata di testimonianze emersa negli anni Novanta, le poche ricerche storiche sulle ‘*comfort women*’ si fondavano su una documentazione estremamente limitata: pochi materiali d’archivio e alcuni diari redatti da uomini. Inoltre, alla fine della guerra, il governo giapponese aveva distrutto gran parte dei documenti ufficiali, e ancora oggi non ha reso accessibili i pochi rimasti (Tsukamoto 2022: 12). In questo contesto, le memorie delle sopravvissute non hanno un ruolo secondario, non servono a confermare i documenti ufficiali, bensì rappresentano, esse stesse, fonti primarie essenziali. Non è un caso, infatti, se il recente volume *Voices of the Korean Comfort Women*

¹⁶ Milan Lukić (1967), comandante della formazione paramilitare serba Beli orlovi (Aquila bianca), è stato condannato all’ergastolo per crimini di guerra e contro l’umanità dal Tribunale penale internazionale per l’ex Jugoslavia (TPIJ). Nonostante le diverse testimonianze di donne che hanno dichiarato di essere state stuprate da lui proprio all’interno del Vilina Vlas Hotel, lo stupro non rientra tra i capi d’accusa.

Atto del Tribunale penale internazionale per l’ex-Jugoslavia ICTY IT-98-32/1-T: Lukić at al (Judgement), 20 luglio 2009 (Prosecutor v Milan Lukić and Sredoje Lukić).

¹⁷ Harrison, Emma. 2018. "Back on the tourist trail: the hotel where women were raped and tortured." The Guardian, 28 gennaio 2018, (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/28/bosnia-hotel-rape-murder-war-crimes>) [last accessed 5 Nov 2025].

¹⁸ Maarad, Brahim. 2020. “In Bosnia la regione serba offre sconti per l’albergo degli stupri di guerra, vittime indignate.” AGI, 20 ottobre 2020, (<https://www.agi.it/estero/news/2020-10-28/bosnia-scontri-hotel-stupri-guerra-10097349/>) [last accessed 5 Nov 2025].

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

(2023) abbia come sottotitolo ‘history rewritten from memories’. Nello spiegare la scelta metodologica, le due curatrici, Chungmoo Choi e Hyunah Yang, descrivono le testimonianze come “invaluable sources of history writing”, grazie alle quali è possibile “[to] restore, produce and expand knowledge of history through the voices of the subaltern old-aged women survivors of sexual violence who might otherwise have remained at the very margins of history writing” (Choi & Yang 2023: xxxv).

Per Tsukamoto la prima testimonianza di Kim ha implicato un vero e proprio cambiamento metodologico: da documenti ufficiali scritti da uomini a testimonianze dirette di donne (Choi & Yang 2023: 13). Il tipo di fonti che si analizzano cambia la narrazione, privilegiando un determinato punto di vista rispetto ad un altro. Ciò significa spostare lo sguardo e muoversi su un altro piano, verso i margini. Basandosi su quanto teorizzato da Abrams in *Oral History Theory* (2010), Tsukamoto descrive così la storia orale:

Oral history is defined as ‘recovery history’ since it can restore the past based on evidence provided by oral testimonies, which otherwise could not be recovered from archival documentation. Therefore, ‘oral history is one of the few ways by which those who have traditionally been silenced in History may be heard’ (ibidem).

Il percorso per la legittimazione della storia orale in ambito accademico è stato lungo e carsico. È interessante notare come lo storico Alistair Thomson, nel ricostruire i paradigmi che ne hanno favorito lo sviluppo, sottolinei la crescente rilevanza delle testimonianze personali nelle pratiche politiche e legali. Un fenomeno che diventa particolarmente evidente dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale, quando la memoria torna a essere una fonte centrale per la People’s History (Thomson 2007: 50). Questo legame tra memoria, storia e politica, nel caso specifico della storia delle donne e dei Gender Studies, emerge ancora con più forza. A riguardo, Thomson scrive:

[...] oral history as used within the community and women’s history movements could be a significant resource for making more democratic and transformative histories, and might in turn enable people to tell stories that had been silenced because they did not match the dominant culture (Thomson 2007: 56).

Una consapevolezza, quest’ultima, ben chiara alle attiviste del *Documenta – Centar za suočavanje s prošlošću* (Centro per affrontare il passato) nato nel 2004

grazie a una rete di diverse associazioni guidate da Vesna Teršelić,²⁰ con l'obiettivo di documentare violenze e crimini di guerra in ex Jugoslavia. Con l'aiuto di altre associazioni e movimenti, come quella delle Donne in Nero di Belgrado,²¹ *Documenta* ha contribuito alla raccolta e alla conservazione di testimonianze orali. Un lavoro anche storico-archivistico, quindi, che testimonia la consapevolezza della necessità e dell'importanza delle fonti orali.

La loro azione è volta da un lato a reinserire narrative marginalizzate nella memoria collettiva, dall'altro a demolire lo stereotipo della donna come vittima passiva di stupro e, nel caso delle donne di Bosnia, come vittime musulmane facili della società rurale patriarcale. Con il loro lavoro, tali gruppi sottolineano invece come le donne abbiano vissuto esperienze che vanno oltre il loro essere corpi in guerra [e di] come alla violenza abbiano saputo reagire (Di Palma 2014: 23–24).

Le testimonianze si collocano in una posizione di costante tensione rispetto alle narrazioni egemoniche. In questo spazio conflittuale, le parole delle sopravvissute non si limitano a contestare versioni ufficiali del passato, ma danno forma a una contromemoria trasformativa, all'interno della quale diventano soggette attive nella definizione della violenza subita. Come osserva Tsukamoto, il problema non consiste nel far prevalere una memoria sull'altra, poiché le memorie collettive non sono mai un blocco unitario: coesistono, si sovrappongono, si contraddicono e vengono continuamente rinegoziate (2023: 15). Per questo è significativo richiamare esempi recenti di negazionismo come quelli sopracitati. Essi mostrano come il processo di riconoscimento della violenza sia fragile e continuamente minacciato da strategie politiche volte a neutralizzare il potenziale critico delle testimonianze.

In risposta a questa vulnerabilità, i movimenti femminili e femministi si sono attivati, aprendo spazi di rielaborazione del trauma. Non si tratta soltanto di sostenere le sopravvissute, ma di creare una memoria collettiva che trae forza proprio dalle loro parole e che permette di ricomporre il trauma in una dimensione comunitaria. La memoria, così intesa, non è solo un racconto, ma

²⁰ Vesna Teršelić (1962) è stata una delle figure più attive all'interno del movimento pacifista croato.

²¹ Il gruppo femminista pacifista delle Donne in Nero di Belgrado nasce nel 1991 in opposizione alle politiche nazionaliste e xenofobe del regime di Slobodan Milošević. Il movimento fa parte di una rete internazionale nata dalle donne israeliane del 1988 contro l'occupazione israeliana dei territori palestinesi durante la prima Intifada. A riguardo si rimanda a Pisarri, Milovan. 2011. "Intervista a Staša Zajović, Donne in Nero di Belgrado." *DEP Deportate, esuli, profughe* 15, 253–260.

un processo politico e relazionale attraverso il quale le donne ridefiniscono il proprio vissuto, sottraendolo all'isolamento. È in questo intreccio di voci, ascolto e riconoscimento reciproco che molte sopravvissute hanno potuto attraversare il trauma, ri-narrarlo e re-inscriverlo in un orizzonte di senso condiviso.

4. “Finora siamo state invisibili, adesso le testimoni non possono essere ignorate”: i Tribunali delle donne

L'ascolto e la vicinanza dei movimenti sono stati decisivi nel sostenere le sopravvissute di fronte allo sconforto e alla disillusione verso istituzioni che non hanno garantito loro un adeguato riconoscimento di giustizia. “Le donne vittime di stupro in guerra sono vittime anche in tempo di pace; lo stato non se ne occupa”²² scrive Staša Zajović.

Per il governo giapponese, le ex ‘*comfort women*’ erano una minaccia e non sono stati rari i tentativi di screditarle e silenziarle. Kim, nella sua ultima intervista rilasciata a cinque mesi dalla morte nel 1997, restituisce questo senso di frustrazione: “I am furious! Wake up, Korean women. It’s so frustrating and suffocating. Look at Japan!”.²³ La lentezza del Giappone nel riconoscere la propria responsabilità dei crimini commessi è stata sicuramente agevolata dalla totale mancanza di condanne per crimini contro l’umanità sia al Tribunale Militare Internazionale per l’Estremo Oriente (IMTFE), che in altri tribunali asiatici (Yoshimi 2002: 162).

La rabbia e la consapevolezza di non essere ascoltate, tutelate e riconosciute porta molte a perdere fiducia nei confronti delle istituzioni e della politica.

Anche il caso serbo è simile. “In Serbia non c’è un vero desiderio politico di giudicare i crimini di guerra, se si dovesse giudicare dalle disponibilità della maggioranza di questo Paese, la fiducia andrebbe a quel tribunale che mette in libertà gli accusatori” scrive Nataša Kandić, storica e direttrice del centro *Humanitarian Law Center* (Richter 2002: 31). Il movimento delle Donne in

²² Donne in Nero di Udine. 2015. “Tribunale delle Donne per la ex-Yugoslavia, un approccio femminista alla Giustizia.” (<https://www.zenskisud.org/en/pdf/2015/Tribunale%20delle%20Donne%20per%20la%20ex%20Yugoslavia.pdf>) [last accessed 5 Nov 2025].

²³ “TS-2. Hak-Sun Kim, a Korean survivor who first broke silence publicly.” Comfort women resource center, (https://international.ucla.edu/cks/care/comfortwomen_speakup/267562) [last accessed 5 Nov 2025].

Nero di Belgrado crede che il sistema giuridico nazionale e internazionale non abbia risposto alla necessità di giustizia:

Le donne che hanno subito violazioni dei diritti umani e sono state esposte alla violenza strutturale, sono consapevoli che il sistema legale non è al servizio della giustizia e provano un senso di sfiducia nei confronti delle istituzioni giuridiche, sia nazionali che internazionali.²⁴

L'elaborazione di una contromemoria fondata sulle voci delle sopravvissute ha una portata profondamente trasformativa. Consente di immaginare nuovi paradigmi di giustizia e di restituire dignità a tutte coloro che, nei tribunali nazionali e internazionali, non hanno trovato ascolto. Mosse da questo obiettivo, associazioni femminili e femministe si sono unite per creare spazi altri rispetto a quelli ufficiali nei quali permettere alle donne di parlare ed essere credute. Nascono così delle corti simboliche create dai movimenti. Nel dicembre 2000, Asian Women's Human Rights Council (AWHRC) istituisce a Tōkyō il Tribunale internazionale delle donne per i crimini di guerra relativi alla schiavitù sessuale perpetrata dai militari giapponesi: uno dei primi Tribunali delle donne. Questa esperienza si inserisce in una genealogia che comprende altri precedenti, a partire dal Bertrand Russell Tribunal, istituito nel 1966 per indagare la condotta degli Stati Uniti in Vietnam. Tali organismi non intendono sostituirsi alle corti ufficiali, ma colmare un vuoto, offrendo visibilità, rispetto e riconoscimento alle persone che scelgono di testimoniare. Pur richiamando nella denominazione l'idea di tribunale, queste corti non si fondano su trattati internazionali o risoluzioni delle Nazioni Unite e non prevedono condanne, pene o risarcimenti. Non si pongono dunque come alternative alla giustizia ufficiale, ma come un suo supplemento e completamento (De Vido 2016: 49). La loro forza risiede nella dimensione simbolica, nel cercare di pensare ad altre forme di giustizia e memoria. Quelli delle donne aggiungono "la dimensione di genere nella teoria e nella pratica della giustizia"²⁵ ed è proprio qui che risiede la loro portata innovativa. Propongono un approccio femminista alla giustizia, "un atto di responsabilità femminile" – scrive Stanislava Staša Zajović, pacifista tra le fondatrici delle Donne in Nero di Belgrado – "motivato dalla percezione della invisibilità del

²⁴ Donne in Nero di Udine. 2015. "Tribunale delle donne per l'ex-Yugoslavia, un approccio femminista alla giustizia." cit.

²⁵ Zajović, Staša. 2015. "La Corte delle Donne, un approccio femminista alla giustizia: analisi del processo di organizzazione della Corte delle Donne". *Zenskisud* (https://www.zenskisud.org/en/pdf/2015/9_sintesi_libro.pdf) [last accessed 5 Nov 2025].

contributo delle donne al processo di giustizia transizionale, nel quale sono marginalizzate e ridotte ad oggetto di violenza”.²⁶

L’esperienza di Tōkyō si è poi diramata nel Sud Globale attraverso la collaborazione del AWHRC con altri gruppi per i diritti delle donne in Asia e ha raggiunto India, Africa e America Latina grazie anche all’istituzione di un’organizzazione gemella in Tunisia, la El Taller International. Corinne Kumar,²⁷ una delle fondatrici e coordinatrici del movimento globale dei Tribunali delle donne, li descrive così:

The Courts of Women are an unfolding of a space, an imaginary: a horizon that invites us to think, to feel, to challenge, to connect [...] It is a gathering of voices and visions of the global south, locating itself in a discourse of dissent: in itself it is a dislocating practice, challenging the new world order of globalisation, crossing lines, breaking new ground: listening to the voices and movements in the margins.²⁸

Quindici anni dopo Tōkyō, si svolge a Sarajevo la prima esperienza europea con il Ženski Sud, promosso dall’antropologa e attivista serba Žarana Papić²⁹ e dal movimento delle donne per la pace in ex Jugoslavia, insieme alla stessa Kumar.

Entrambi i tribunali parlano di una “new generation of women’s rights”,³⁰ nonostante siano state delle esperienze molto diverse.

Il Tribunale di Tōkyō ha una struttura simile ai tribunali penali internazionali con un team di procuratori e un corpo giuridico di fama internazionale. Alle udienze partecipano figure di spicco del mondo giuridico e delegate e delegati delle Nazioni Unite, insieme a circa un migliaio di persone provenienti da diversi paesi e a trecento giornaliste e giornalisti, che assistono all’ascolto delle testimonianze di sessantaquattro sopravvissute (Caroli 2009:

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Corinne Kumar è filosofa, poeta e attivista indiana che ha dedicato la sua vita ai diritti umani. Per un approfondimento della sua biografia: Wentzel Wolfe, Regina & Patricia Werhane. 2017. *Global Women Leaders. Breaking Boundaries*. Northampton: Elgar, 35-42.

²⁸ Kumar, Corinne. “World Courts of Women.” *Vimochana forum for women’s right*, (<https://vimochana.co.in/courts-of-women/>) [last accessed 5 Nov 2025].

²⁹ Žarana Papić (1949–2002) è stata una delle principali teoriche del femminismo jugoslavo. Le si deve l’organizzazione del primo convegno internazionale femminista nell’Europa dell’Est, Drug/ca žensko pitanje, novi pristup? (‘Compagna la questione femminile, un nuovo approccio?’), tenutosi a Belgrado nel 1978.

³⁰ Kumar, Corrine. 2022. “Day fourteen: The Courts of Women – AWHRC, El Taller International and Vimochana.” *Demodernise*, 8 dicembre 2022, (<https://16daysblogathon.blog/2022/12/08/day-fourteen-the-courts-of-women-awhrc-el-taller-international-and-vimochana/>) [last accessed 5 Nov 2025].

139). Con le duecentocinquanta pagine del verdetto finale, il Tribunale raggiunge l'obiettivo di comprovare definitivamente che la schiavitù sessuale cui furono costrette le ex '*comfort women*' costituisce un crimine di guerra contro le donne e contro l'umanità e, di conseguenza, di individuarne i colpevoli. Non solo vengono condannati nove ufficiali di alto rango, ma anche lo stesso Stato giapponese, per non aver rispettato diritto consuetudinario e trattati internazionali. La scelta che ha influenzato di più l'opinione pubblica è stata proprio quella di condannare anche lo stesso imperatore Hirohito, che era stato invece assolto dal Tribunale militare internazionale per l'Asia Orientale (1946–1948).³¹

Diversi, invece, sono stati gli obiettivi del Ženski Sud, che non ha proclamato verdetti ma raccomandazioni – questo il termine utilizzato nei documenti ufficiali³² – rivolte principalmente alla rete femminista, a quello che le promotrici definiscono “il potere di solidarietà internazionalista delle donne”,³³ più che alle istituzioni. Tra gli obiettivi, infatti, si ritrova proprio la volontà di rafforzare alleanze e coalizioni femministe-pacifiste globali.

Per la scelta della città, racconta Zajović, la proposta iniziale, seguendo il modello del Tribunale di Tōkyō, è Belgrado.³⁴ L'obiettivo è fare pressione sullo Stato e sulla società serba affinché riconoscano i crimini commessi, valorizzando al contempo il lavoro instancabile delle Donne in Nero di Belgrado. Tuttavia, una serie di attacchi intimidatori contro il movimento e il clima politico sempre più ostile rendono questa opzione impraticabile. Per evitare rischi alle trentasei testimoni e garantire un contesto più sicuro, decidono quindi di spostare l'iniziativa a Sarajevo, scelta per “il valore simbolico della sua sofferenza, ma anche come ‘la città più jugoslava’ per il suo carattere multi-etnico”.³⁵

La struttura, diversa dall'impostazione di Tōkyō, è articolata in tre organi: una giuria internazionale, un comitato consultivo e un gruppo di testimoni esperte, tutti composti da sociologhe, storiche, esperte di diritto, ginecologhe e attiviste internazionali.

³¹ The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Trial of Japan's Military Sexual Slavery. 2002. Judgement on the Common Indictment and the Application for Resolution and Reparation, 4 dicembre 2001, (<https://archives.wam-peace.org/wt/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Judgement.pdf>) [last accessed 5 Nov 2025].

³² Donne in Nero di Udine. 2015. “Tribunale delle donne per l'ex-Yugoslavia, un approccio femminista alla giustizia.” cit.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

Più che mirare a una condanna dei colpevoli, l'obiettivo di questi tribunali è stato quello di cambiare la narrazione, proporre una "journey of the margins"³⁶ per invitarci a scrivere una nuova storia. In questa prospettiva, il report del Ženski Sud interpreta il lavoro del tribunale come un intervento "storico", volto a produrre una "storia alternativa".³⁷

Ragionando sul Tribunale di Tōkyō, Caroli sottolinea come la mole di documentazione raccolta abbia reso questa esperienza "uno strumento per tutelare la memoria" (2009: 141). Una memoria che si muove dalle parole delle testimoni, non più intese come confessione ma come accusa nei confronti dei perpetratori: una pratica collettiva di rielaborazione del trauma e in questo senso riparativa.

5. Conclusioni

Nel corso di questo contributo è emerso il ruolo centrale svolto dai movimenti femministi e femminili nel processo di ridefinizione collettiva degli stupri di guerra e della percezione del trauma femminile, nonché nella riconfigurazione della figura stessa delle donne sopravvissute. Il confronto tra i due casi analizzati ha permesso di mettere in dialogo strategie politiche e pratiche differenti, accomunate dall'obiettivo di sostenere la presa di parola pubblica delle testimoni e di sottrarle all'isolamento individuale. Tale processo si è articolato entro reti transnazionali di solidarietà che hanno favorito la legittimazione pubblica delle testimonianze e la circolazione di pratiche femministe di giustizia. La loro affermazione negli anni Novanta si colloca in uno spazio di risonanza transnazionale, in cui esperienze e pratiche si sono richiamate e rafforzate a vicenda.

Le trasformazioni prodotte hanno investito non solo le narrazioni e le rappresentazioni del trauma femminile, ma anche i modi di fare storia. La centralità attribuita alle voci delle donne ha contribuito a interrogare i confini della ricerca storica tradizionale, valorizzando strumenti come la storia orale e pratiche riconducibili alla Public History.

In questo quadro, la testimonianza si configura come pratica collettiva di presa di parola, resa possibile da relazioni di ascolto e riconoscimento. È in questo *'talking back'* che i movimenti femministi hanno contribuito alla

³⁶ Kumar, Corinne. "World Courts of Women." cit.

³⁷ Donne in Nero di Udine. 2015. "Tribunale delle donne per l'ex-Yugoslavia, un approccio femminista alla giustizia." cit.

costruzione di una memoria altra, restituendo alle sopravvissute un ruolo attivo nei processi di elaborazione del passato e di rivendicazione di giustizia.

Se, come ha osservato Annette Wieviorka a proposito della Shoah, il secondo dopoguerra può essere definito ‘l’era dei testimoni’ (1998), le mobilitazioni femministe analizzate hanno contribuito a inaugurare un tempo delle testimoni, in cui la parola delle donne si è fatta strumento di elaborazione collettiva e “ha permesso di trasformare il dolore che hanno vissuto in un’altra forma di resistenza”.³⁸

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³⁸ *Ibidem*.

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Reordering the Family, Society, and Nation. The Problem of the “Resistance-War Wife” in Postwar China

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Abstract This paper examines the post-WWII Chinese debate over the problem of the “resistance-war wife,” a term referring to intimate relationships formed during wartime displacement. Drawing on mass media sources, it argues that discussion of this issue created a key discursive arena in which the relations among family, nation, and society were contested in the aftermath of the War of Resistance against Japan. Melodramatic narratives cast the phenomenon as a moral crisis rooted in wartime upheaval, and expressed a popular longing for the restoration of familial order. In contrast, feminist voices redirected attention to structural gender inequalities in Chinese society and called for broader social reform. The “resistance-war wife” problem thus revealed competing visions of postwar reconstruction and illuminated how personal trauma, gendered expectations, and nationalist ideologies intersected in shaping public understandings of family and society during a moment of profound transition.

Keywords “Resistance-war wife”; family reconstruction; gender inequality; social reform; nationalism.

1. Introduction

Aside from brutal combat and drastic political transformations, the Second World War in China, also known as the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), generated massive population displacement and prolonged separation of families, giving rise to notable wartime extramarital relationships and concerns about the restoration of the family in postwar China. In China’s postwar mass media, the term “resistance-war wife” (*kangzhan furen*) emerged as a popular term to describe women who had formed wartime intimate or marital relationships with men displaced to China’s vast rear areas, despite those men’s preexisting marriages. The term frequently appeared alongside “left-behind wife” (*liushou furen*) or “occupied-region wife” (*lunxian furen*), referring to the

original spouses who had remained in Japanese-occupied regions during the war. These media-driven designations of wartime intimate relationships captured the conflicts arising when wartime unions confronted prewar marital ties after 1945. When separated husbands returned home, encounters between “resistance-war wives” and “left-behind wives” sparked public debates over morality, legality, and the future of the family and of Chinese society at large. The postwar “resistance-war wife” problem thus became a highly visible manifestation of the social dislocations that persisted after China’s military victory over Japan.

While newspapers, journals, and cinema at that time, as shown in later sections, were loaded with indignant critiques of the “resistance-war wife” phenomenon, and propositions for restoring and defending the moral and legal principles of family life, I argue that the problem of the “resistance-war wife” also offered people at that time a channel for envisioning and elaborating alternative family models and gender relations to those proffered by the moral, legal, and political establishments. In other words, in addition to the “resistance-war wife” phenomenon as a social problem infringing on monogamy and causing traumatic experiences to those betrayed by their spouses, I also explore how the “resistance-war wife” discourse effectively magnified and navigated the internal tensions within the prevailing ideologies of gender, family, and the nation. Nationalist ideologies, conventional patriarchal moralities, traditional Chinese melodramatic literature, as well as feminist thinking, were all mobilized to address the postwar problem of the “resistance-war wife.” Instead of simply calling for a return to prewar social and familial orders disrupted by the war, postwar debates questioned the legitimacy of the prevailing wartime nationalist visions, and their domination over individual and family life. Participants in this debate proposed new or conventional moral and political frameworks for establishing anew the everydayness in the postwar era. In particular, feminist voices demanded a thorough reform of Chinese society to eliminate the deeply rooted gender inequality, instead of merely addressing the consequences of the war.

To appreciate the stakes of this intervention, it is necessary to situate the controversies over the “resistance-war wife” within the longer history of modern Chinese debates on the problem of the “family”. With the onset of China’s modernization in the mid-nineteenth century, triggered by the national crises such as foreign invasion, unequal treaties, and imposition of Western economic and intellectual forces upon Chinese society, late Qing and early Republican intellectuals condemned China’s traditional *jia* system, the

patriarchal clan (*jiazu*, *zongzu*, or *zongfa*) rather than a western-styled “family,” as a Confucian hierarchy that suppressed women, youth, and individual autonomy, and hindered the formation of modern citizenship. They therefore argued that the patriarchal clan must be dismantled to build China into a modern nation (Zhao 2020: 21–35; Hung 2003; Lv 2019). May Fourth reformers promoted the small family (*xiao jiating*) as a modern alternative to the patriarchal clan, framing it as a union of free individuals (Zhao 2020) yet also a socioeconomic unit serving national goals. As Susan Glosser shows, this ostensibly liberating model often reproduced existing gender hierarchies, redirected loyalty from kin to nation-state, and preserved the family as a site of moral regulation and political utility (Glosser 2013: 6–26). Early Communist activists also utilized calls for marriage and family reform to recruit youth while simultaneously reproducing patriarchal structures within revolutionary organizations (Gilmartin 1995: 16). Moving beyond institutional transformation of marriage and family, Lee Haiyan further argues that China’s modern subject emerged as a sentimental autonomous individual, while the modern nation was imagined as a community of sympathy. Lee maintains that discourses of romantic intimacy thus helped redirect individual loyalty from patriarchal clan to the nation by promoting ideals of free love, individual equality, and universal citizenship (Lee 2007: 7). In this sense, critiques of “feudal” clan¹ and call for romantic companionate marriage cannot be framed as purely personal emancipation; rather, the new familial ideals were embedded within broader projects of nation building and/or revolution where individuals had been freed from patriarchal clan yet were further regulated by and in a superior political community.

¹ There were also conservative thinkers like Dai Jitao who valorized conventional Chinese *jia* system. They viewed China’s traditional patriarchal moral order as a source of social stability and national unity, which could counter the defects of Western capitalism such as individualism, exploitation, and class conflict. By preserving the Confucian *jia* as a cultural core, conservatives envisioned a mode of national development distinct from Western liberal individualism or Soviet-style collectivism. 施純純 (Chun-Chun Shih). “Tai Chi-t’ao’s Theory on Social Revolution, 1919–1920 (戴季陶的社會革命觀),” *The Journal of History, NCCU*, Vol.39, No.5 (2013): 145–182. For more on Nationalist conservative thinking, see in: Dirlik, Arif. “The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (1975): 945–80. Liu, Wennan. “Redefining the Moral and Legal Roles of the State in Everyday Life: The New Life Movement in China in the Mid-1930s.” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 2, no. 2 (2013): 335–365. Yen, Hsiao-peí. “Body Politics, Modernity and National Salvation: The Modern Girl and the New Life Movement.” *Asian Studies Review* 29, no.2 (2005): 165–86. Brian Tsui. *China’s Conservative Revolution: The Quest for a New Order, 1927–1949*. (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

As elaborated in the next section, this structural linkage between family and nation in modern China would be further intensified during the national crisis (*guonan*) of Japanese invasion during 1931–1945. Wartime cultural works also incorporated and represented female bodies and experiences within the framework of national struggles against Japan. Whether cast as heroic warriors or victims of alien sexual violence (Hung 1989; Edwards 2013), women's wartime trajectories were aligned with the moral and political demands of the nation.

It was against this backdrop that the post-1945 debates over the “resistance-war wife” unfolded. The wartime displacement and separation, and traumatic postwar reunions exposed the moral and emotional costs of subordinating intimate life to national causes. Participants in the postwar debates on the “resistance-war wife” issue thus questioned whether the nationalist framework itself had distorted justice within the family institution and entrenched gender inequality in the name of national survival. Unsettling the long-standing superiority of nationalist imperatives to intimate family life, the postwar debates over the “resistance-war wife” refocused the politics of the family from the nation to the lived experiences and desired reordering of domestic life.

Methodologically, I examine the stories and comments about the “resistance-war wife” in public discourse as “meaningful fabrication” – to use Robert Darnton's term. That is, I do not check them as the “mirror-image of what actually happened” for their truthfulness and credibility, but rather as specific “versions of a happening” that give meaning to the “raw stuff of experience” (Darnton 1984: 78). What is investigated in this article is not the social realities of wartime and postwar intimacy patterns, but rather their postwar representation. This approach allows us to better position the problem of the “resistance-war wife” in the postwar ideologies of family, gender, and nationalism, and to grasp the vision of family life desired by Chinese people at that time. By analyzing how experts, editors, and columnists narrated the conflicts between men who escaped Japanese occupation, and the original wives and new lovers they abandoned during and after the war, this article thus highlights the discursive strategies that rendered war-related intimate injury publicly legible, and foregrounds the representational work that transformed individual grievances into symbolic commentary on moral corruption, social inequality, and the legitimacy of national recovery.

2. Intimate Relationships under National Crisis

Terms like “resistance-war wife” and “occupied-region wife” do not simply suggest the temporal and spatial features of the intimate relationships formed during and/or after the War of Resistance. As concepts widely circulated in postwar Chinese mass media and retrospectively used to address the problems of wartime intimacy and its postwar consequences, the “resistance-war wife” and relevant vocabularies suggested the redirection of postwar public attention onto the re-articulation of the relationship between individual life trajectories and the nationalist politics that had prevailed during and before the War of Resistance. The gender dynamics of wartime nationalist politics and the postwar deliberation on it, to be discussed in this and following sections, were also symbolically and effectively conveyed to the public through these terms’ discursive focus on women’s position during and after the war in the private domain. To fully understand the postwar visions of family, intimacy, and individual everyday life embedded in the “resistance-war wife” discourse, we should first examine the association of private intimate relationship with the “nation”, which had been established before and strengthened during the War of Resistance.

Despite the presence of other imperialist forces in China, Japan’s continuous military advance starting from the early 1930s and Manchuria constituted the core of China’s national crisis (*guonan*) until 1945. Reactions to the national crisis included not only political, military, and diplomatic maneuvers, but also a realignment of individual life with the national causes. The New Life Movement initiated by the Nationalist regime in 1934 was aimed to morally remold personal life and unite individual bodies into a national body governed by conservative values (Dirlik 1975; Liu 2013; Tsui 2018). The New Life Movement prepared the Republican state and society for the War of Resistance against Japan, and its organizations facilitated the Nationalists’ substantial wartime mobilization (Ferlanti 2010; 2012). People at that time who did not necessarily subscribe to the Nationalist ideologies or policies also highlighted intimate relationship as an essential part of this realignment between individual life and the nation-saving struggles in the context of national crisis.² For instance, in 1932, *World Daily* in Beiping [Peking] published a

² Here the emphasis of intimate relationship is placed on private, emotional, and sexual connections between spouses, not the ritual and legal constructs of marriage. The Nationalist regime did promote group wedding as part of its New Life Movement in order to reduce waste from commercial weddings, surveil the liberal civil conjugal relations as well as the

debate (QiuHong 1932; Keluobo 1932) on marriage during the national crisis, featuring two contrasting perspectives. One argued that romantic relationships, driven by selfish love, were incompatible with the spirit of national self-sacrifice and called for individuals to postpone marriage in service of the nation - not the Nationalist regime, but the suffering people. The other viewed love as potentially selfless and transformative, capable of inspiring personal growth and contributing to national salvation. Despite their differences, both believed that individual choices of intimate relationship, which was fundamentally private and rooted in emotional attachment, should prioritize national salvation during *guonan*, rather than centering on individual pleasure.

Political parties and intellectuals also debated women's positions in the family, the society, and the nation-saving endeavors under national crisis. Conservatives, including the Nationalists, asked women to leave their social occupations and political engagements, and to "return to the family." For them, women serve the nation best in their role as wife/mothers, both the devoted and chaste "good wives and wise mothers (*xianqi liangmu*)" in the family and "the selfless nurturer and educators of the nation" (Edwards 2008: 185–188). On the other hand, leftists fiercely criticized the "good wives and wise mothers" model that confined women to their domestic roles and proactively called upon women to step out of the family and contribute direct service to the nation in their professional occupations and/or the resistance struggles. However, in practice, this vision of women's role under national crisis led to women's double burden as both housewives and the nation's mother (Wang & Wang 2021).

Unlike the *World Daily* pieces' visions of intimate relationship under national crisis, in both the conservative and leftist views above, family and marriage were not articulated as intimate associations between equal and heterosexual individuals, nor were individual nationals directly bound to the national community. Individuals, especially women, were expected by both the conservatives and leftists to serve the nation through fulfilling their gendered domestic roles in the family or undertaking their responsibilities for the nation

reproduction of new citizens, and restructure the relationship between the state and individuals. For more on group wedding during New Life Movement, see in: Charlotte Cowden, "Wedding Culture in 1930s Shanghai: Consumerism, Ritual, and the Municipality," *Frontiers of History in China* 7, no. 1 (2012): 61–89; Susan Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 129–32; Altehenger, Jennifer E. 2014. "Between State and Service Industry: Group and Collective Weddings in Communist Shanghai, 1949–1956." *Twentieth-Century China* 40 (1): 48–68.

in accordance with their domestic positions.³ Individual physical and emotional experiences in the private space of the family, marriage or other forms of intimate relationships, either sufferings or pleasure, became secondary to the service for the nation under a national crisis. Despite all the differences between the visions above, the subjugation of individual life to the national causes of salvation was central to all the threads of articulation throughout the *guonan* period until 1945.

However, when the war was over and urban residents, press commentators, intellectuals, and women’s activists, among many others, started to reflect upon the wartime practices of intimate relationships. To restore the order of everyday family life disturbed by the war, they went far beyond a simple return to or restoration of the disrupted family-nation order under national crisis. China’s supposed completion of its nation-building upon victory in 1945 was not a natural solution to the various familial and marital issues caused by and during the war. In fact, the victory in the War of Resistance immediately left the Chinese nation-state broken and in chaos, with a civil war imminent and worsening hyperinflation. The Chinese family would further be troubled by more severe problems such as internal ideological confrontation under the Communist regime and prolonged separation across the Taiwan Strait after 1949. Despite the continuous war and social turbulence, the haphazard postwar voices from 1945 to 1949 on China’s problem of the family, especially those focused on the problem of the “resistance-war wife”, proved to be productive and transformative in articulating alternative visions of family, its internal dynamics and its relationship with the Chinese nation.

3. The Sour Reunion: Return of the “Resistance-War Wife” after the War

In the postwar era, as the sour reunions unfolded between family members who had been separated during the war, the terms of “resistance-war wife” and others gained wide circulation in mass media, becoming a focal point of public storytelling, commentary, and debate. In the stories narrated from the perspective of the “left-behind/occupied-region wives”, after eight years of suffering from material hardship and hard work of raising the children and caring for the husbands’ parents, the “left-behind wives” were usually greeted

³ Women taking logistical and supportive occupations during the war, like healthcare workers, also challenged male domination of China’s wartime regime. See in Nicole Elizabeth Barnes. *Intimate Communities: Wartime Healthcare and the Birth of Modern China, 1937–1945* (University of California Press, 2018).

by the unexpected appearance of the “resistance-war wives”, which would shatter their dreams of family reunification upon victory. Having lost their youth, beauty, economic sources, and spirits, the “occupied-region wives” were replaced by younger, more beautiful, and sometimes more cultured “resistance-war wives”, and were abandoned yet again by their husbands who had climbed the social ladder in the rear areas during the war.⁴ The “resistance-war wives” were not always the beneficiaries of such marriage, though. Men were perfectly aware of their own marital status, but still married “resistance-war wives” nevertheless, taking advantage of their economic, social, and sexual resources, and sometimes abandoning their wartime spouses when or after they returned to the previously occupied coastal areas.⁵ Figure 1 is a satirical illustration of the varied wartime and postwar intimate relationships relevant to the problem of the “resistance-war wife”.



Figure 1: Satirical Comic: Abandon the old yellow-faced wife and search for “resistance-war wife.” After the victory and plundering takeover, find a new lover and build a new golden nest. Gongli, “Comic,” *147 Pictorial*, no.3 (1946): 1.

⁴ Wenying, “Reader’s Letter: On Resistance-War Wife,” *Women*(妇女), no.3 (1946): 20. “Oftentimes, There is an Extra Resistance-War Wife,” *Essence*(精华), vol.2, no.1 (1946): 8. “New Qin Xianglian: A Self-Told Story from a ‘Left-behind Wife,’” *147 Pictorial*(一四七画报), vol.8, no.9 (1946): 9–10. Fei Lan. “Occupied-Region Wife”, *The Yangtze River Monthly*(长江月刊), No.4 (1947): 33–36. “Reader’s Letter: On Resistance-War Wife,” *Xidian*(西点), no.5 (1946): 88–89.

⁵ “The Young Lady Who Committed Suicide in Town Turned out to Be a Resistance-War Wife,” *Xibao*(锡报), Jan 26, 1947. “The Tragedy of a Resistance-War Wife”, *World Morning Newspaper*(世界晨报), Oct 13, 1946. “Resistance-War Wife Committing Suicide in front of Zhang Zhizhong Mansion”, *Robinhood*(罗宾汉), Nov 9, 1947.

Yet the abandonment of wives was not unprecedented in modern China. In the 1910s and 1920s, some male intellectuals had repudiated arranged wives in the name of free love and historical progress, framing such acts as a break with the “old” patriarchal order (Yu 2009: 219–251). In contrast, post-1945 abandonment did not present itself as a forward-looking cultural revolution; it emerged from wartime dislocation and fractured reunions, exposing intimate consequences of the nation-saving struggles.

The postwar bitter reunions and the sufferings of the abandoned or disillusioned women were deeply personal traumas.⁶ As social consequences, they were not unique to the War of Resistance against Japan. In other words, the narrative patterns and temporal frameworks used to express and make sense of these experiences were not exclusively associated with the War of Resistance as a nation-saving struggle and its aftermath. In fact, the sour reunion between separated spouses after the war was constantly represented as the contemporary embodiment of a classic Chinese tragic melodrama, the story of Qin Xianglian and Chen Shimei, which had appeared in Chinese crime-case (*gong'an*) fictions and operas since the Ming Dynasty.⁷ Details of the plot vary in different versions, but the main body of the story remains mostly the same: A *xiucai* (junior scholar who has passed county-level civil exams) named Chen Shimei studies for the higher-level civil exams while his wife, Qin Xianglian takes care of the family and funds him; Chen Shimei leaves home to take the exam in the capital, ranks first in the royal-court exam, and marries the emperor's sister. Meanwhile, Qin Xianglian raises their children and serves her in-laws alone; she goes to the capital to find Chen Shimei, only to be denied and banished by Chen; Qin Xianglian turns for redress to an incorruptible official for justice, and despite the princess and the emperor's order for mercy, the official decapitates Chen Shimei after he refuses to take Qin Xianglian back.

⁶ While socioeconomic differences and mobilities formed part of the background to the “resistance-war wife” stories, their narrative focus lay less on class contrasts and conflicts than on the moral and emotional sufferings of women whose marriages had been unsettled by war and displacement.

⁷ “秦氏还魂配世美” in *Baogong An (Cases by Master Bao Zheng)*, from Chinese text project, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=98109&remap=gb>, last access on August 25, 2025. 冯文龙. “《铡美案》故事的渊源流变与演进规律.” *戏剧丛刊*, no. 6 (2013): 18–19. Shaanxi Opera Research Institute. “铡美案,” online source: <http://www.sxqq.net/Information/news/5558>, last access on August 25, 2025. 秦剧学社. “略谈《铡美案》的改编,” online source: https://www.sohu.com/a/376984533_528934, last access on August 25, 2025.

In the story of Qin Xianglian and Chen Shimei, the core conflict resides in a man's moral decline as he climbs up the social ladder. Though the story also involves prolonged spatial separation between spouses, war or social chaos is not part of the setting. Therefore, applying the narrative framework of Qin Xianglian's story to the "resistance-war wife" stories would further downplay the political implications and social consequences of the War of Resistance, and represent the problem of the "resistance-war wife" as an emotionally loaded contemporary melodrama so that it could appeal to the individual audiences in the postwar era. In 1946, the journal *147 Pictorial* published a reader's letter, titled "New Qin Xianglian: A Self-Told Story from a 'Left-behind Wife'" (*147 Pictorial* 1946: 9–10). To briefly summarize the letter, the narrator said that she and her husband were cousins, and they got married when they were twenty years old. Although her husband went to college in Shanghai and she stayed with his big traditional family, they maintained a sweet relationship through correspondence, and had two kids. Shortly after he graduated, the all-out war against Japan broke out. Despite her in-laws' objection, she supported her husband's decision to join the resistance and assured him that she would take care of the family while he was "sacrificing for the nation and accomplishing great achievements." She lost contact with her husband during the eight years, and she lived harmoniously with her in-laws, endeavoring to manage family affairs, educate the kids, take care of the sick in-laws, and obey the traditional womanly morality by rarely going out. Upon victory, she looked forward to her husband's return, while mourning for the loss of her youth, death of her in-laws and the worsening economic scarcity. Her husband returned but lived in a fancy hotel. She went to see him with joy, only to be greeted by a mean-looking modern woman standing beside him. He said that he had become a high-ranking official in Nanjing, capital of Republican China, and her poor social skills would obstruct his career. Only wanting her husband back, she refused the thirty-million-*yuan* cheque and was on the edge of mental breakdown due to the loss of her husband. The eight years of dream of family reunion was shattered, and she did not know what to do except to write this letter to *147 Pictorial*.

The title "New Qin Xianglian" was formulated by the pictorial's editor and Qin Xianglian is not mentioned in the main text. The editor also added some rhyming and/or antithetical lines that could catch readers' eyes and summarize the content of the piece for readers before they read the lengthy letter. Right beside the subheading, the editor added a line rhyming in Chinese "Victory and reunion are both illusion, (I) regret letting (my) husband seek for

honor and office,” next to which is another antithetical line “(I was) willing to stay chaste, bury father-in-law, and raise the kid, only to learn that the wicked husband breaks up with me.” There are more editorial comments like these to be found inserted into the letter text, reminding readers of the resemblance of the “resistance-war wife” story with that of Qin Xianglian. In this narrative framework, instead of a moment of national struggle and reconstruction, the wartime service and postwar homecoming became an opportunity for men to ascend to higher social, political, and economic status. They took or abandoned their spouses, including the “resistance-war wife,” the “left-behind wife,” and in some cases also the “victory wife,” exclusively based on their career needs during and after the War of Resistance, without regard to marital morality, emotional bonds or women’s sufferings. The abandoned wives in such stories, having endured all the emotional and material hardship and maintained their loyalty to both their husbands/in-laws and the nation, experienced further disillusionment of both their intimate relationships and the national victory (and in the original Qin Xianglian case, disillusionment about her husband’s intellectual success in the palace exams).

In the previously occupied region, the Qin Xianglian style of the “resistance-war wife” stories could certainly appeal to the public sentiment, and therefore attract more audience for the mass media products centered on this issue. This can be exemplified by the commercial success of the film *A Spring Water Flows East*, “a family drama that adapted the traditional story of ‘Execution of Chen Shimei (*zhameian* 铡美案)’ to the setting of the War of Resistance” (Chen 2014:242). Compared with the story published in *147 Pictorial*, *Spring Water*’s storyline includes an extra “victory wife” which the male protagonist, a former teacher name Zhang Zhongliang, tried to take after the war in addition to his “resistance-war wife”. The abandoned “left-behind wife,” Sufen, Zhang Zhongliang’s official wife wedded before the war, instead of writing to the press, surrendered her life to Shanghai’s Huangpu River. Over five hundred thousand people viewed this film during the first seven weeks of its premiere, and the film was also a box-office hit in Southeast Asia.⁸

The melodramatic representation of the “resistance-war wife” stories positioned the men living and working under the resistance regime as predators for social status, economic profit and sexual resources, and highlighted the unresolvable predicaments of the virtuous women. But the commercial success of such films on the “resistance-war wife”, as Pickowicz explains (Pickowicz

⁸ “Record of Shanghai Viewers of *A Spring Water Flows East*,” *Dongfang Daily*, 1947.12.4.
 “*A Spring Water Flows East*, A Box Office Smash in Southeast Asia,” *Peace Daily*, 1948.3.3.

2000: 390–396), cannot be explained by the leftist stances of their producers and the seemingly progressive storytelling. These films might be intended to be critical of postwar realities, but they were far from radical, progressive or revolutionary. The disillusionment in the national causes in these Qin-Xianglian-styled narratives of the “resistance-war wife” were used to express neither the patriots’ disappointment at the unfilled nation-building project after victory nor the feminist criticism of the nationalist politics, but rather to spotlight a broader moral and social crisis in Chinese society where the conventional values governing individual life, and the family institution were profoundly interrupted. This made the audience of *Spring Water* find the narrative “to be both moving and realistic as far as their own experience was concerned” (McGrath 2022: 121). Perhaps from the perspective of the leftist producers, even without an explicit articulation of a revolutionary future at the end of the story, the melodramatic accounts of the “resistance-war wife” could still be directed toward fostering a broad awareness of social revolution. But the audience and readers watched men betraying conventional family values, and were moved by the female figures staying faithful to the traditional family values and loyal to the patriarchal seniors (Pickowicz 2000: 392–393). Therefore, the “resistance-war wife” stories represented in the Qin Xianglian narrative style deviated from both the nationalist and revolutionary visions of China’s postwar future, and were directed toward a return to and restoration of the patriarchal family traditions as the moral foundation of the postwar everyday.

The postwar problem of the “resistance-war wife” thus signified a major disruption to China’s preexisting social order centered on the institution of the family. The national causes indicated by the problem’s nominal connection with the War of Resistance were downplayed while individual, especially women’s, experiences of displacement from the conventional familial order were placed at the center of public sentiment and anxiety. In the “resistance-war wife” stories analyzed above, a restoration of such an order, instead of the association between individual life and the national cause, was presented by editors and filmmakers to the public as a desired future.

4. Engendering the Nation, Carving Women’s Way out

In stark contrast to the melodramatic representation of the “resistance-war wife” phenomena, a feminist stance emerged in China’s postwar media with gender inequality at its center, and redirected the emphasis of this issue onto a general reform of the Chinese society, instead of a restoration of or return to the

conservative values and conventional practices of family which was considered to have been disrupted by the war.

In 1945, a conference record of “The Roundtable on the Problem of the Resistance-War Wife” was published in *Women’s Voices* (*Nüsheng*) in Shanghai (*Nüsheng*, 1945). Voices from both sexes and varied professions converged in this panel record regarding the “resistance-war wife” phenomena. *Nüsheng*’s editor introduced the phenomena of the “resistance-war wife” not as a reciprocal relationship premised upon the wartime complicity between displaced men and women, but rather as a highly gendered problem. She noted:

Eight years of Resistance War is not a short period, and the uncertainty in the world has greatly impacted every person and family. We have long been hearing that in the vast rear area, many people abandoned their wives who had been left behind in the occupied regions, and married the so-called ‘wartime wife’ or ‘resistance-war wife’, establishing the so-called ‘pseudo-organization’ in the family. This phenomenon must have caused broad dispute, so [we organized this roundtable] (*Nüsheng* 1945: 8).

First, the editor narrowed the abnormal wartime marital practices down to the men abandoning their spouses left behind in the occupied region and marrying wartime wives. Women – both the wives left behind and the wartime wives taken in the vast rear areas – in such relationships were simply passive victims. Second, the editor’s opening shifted the focus of the problem of wartime marital issues from restoring certain moral principles that were crucial to the nation, to the human cost of the war, especially women’s sufferings due to the wartime extramarital relationships and the awkward postwar reunion. Third, a gendered dichotomy, not hierarchy, between the wartime resistance regime and occupied China was established through the depiction of men as moving inland and women as left behind and silenced. As a liberal feminist journal affiliated with neither the CPC nor the GMD and aimed at a female audience, *Nüsheng* reframed the discussion away from partisan politics centered on the nation and revolution, and toward the gendered consequences of the war, foregrounding the issue of women’s wartime experiences and postwar survival,⁹ as would be shown by their following discussion.

⁹ The panelists included the lawyer Mr. Ge, Ms. Ouyang Meirong, Ms. Huang Xinming, Mr. Bao Zhongting, and *Nüsheng*’s editor Ms. Wang, most likely Wang Yiwei, the magazine’s chief editor. Identities of the participants cannot be determined. The editor’s voice was rather prominent in this roundtable. Wang Yiwei, chief editor of *Nüsheng*, was a leftist feminist journalist affiliated with neither the CPC nor the GMD. In the postwar years, *Nüsheng* published many articles by women and/or on patriotic women in the War of Resistance,

With women's experiences at the center of the "resistance-war wife" issue, the nation, once considered as the supreme principle of individual behavior, was presented as the flimsy excuse for men's wartime extramarital relationships. Mr. Bao said that men were burdened with onerous work in the vast rear areas, and that they were depressed both emotionally and physically without their families' company. The editor maintained that all citizens were doing their parts during the war, and that unfulfilled sexual desire was nothing compared with the soldiers' sacrifice of their life in the battlefield. Those who could not stand the loneliness during the war, the editor said, were not qualified to be citizens. Another excuse for men taking wartime wives was to boost population growth to make up for China's enormous population loss during the war. To this, *Nüsheng's* editor said that the nation needs population increase in both quality and quantity, and that those who only cared about their sexual pleasure without considering others' happiness could not raise children with a sound life philosophy (*Nüsheng* 1945: 8). This eugenicist view, rather than reducing women to the role of the nation's biological reproducers who were passively subjected to male exploitation of their sexuality and reproductive force, emphasized women's autonomy and right to choose qualified sexual partners (Barlow 2004: 129-154). Thus, taking wartime wives was no longer justifiable by the national causes.

A general social reform, instead of simple completion of the nation-building process, became the central focus of the debate over the "resistance-war wife" problem. The *Nüsheng* panelists put the emphasis of their discussion on saving women from their miserable relationships, and highlighted women's general socioeconomic disadvantages in China's postwar society. Panelists maintained that both insufficient economic opportunities and the moral stigmatization of divorced women would prevent women from considering the legal approach to the "resistance-war wife" problem, and that the "semi-feudal" nature of the Chinese society, namely the patriarchal order and moralities, was still suppressing women's independence, subjectivity, and free choice of marriage. Therefore, divorce was a courageous but tough choice for women

regardless of their political background. Wang Yiwei said that *Nüsheng* often "printed exposés of men who abandoned their wives and married young beautiful women, of intellectual women who broke up other families in order to live a luxurious life, and of rascally literary men who philandered with women in the name of courtship." Therefore, the journal was criticized for "narrow womanism," and disliked and/or ignored by both the CPC and the GMD. She was one of the interviewees of Wang Zheng's oral history project. See in: Wang Zheng. "Wang Yiwei (1905–1993): Editor in Chief." In *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (University of California Press, 1999), 221–258.

involved in the “resistance-war wife” cases. Solutions to the “resistance-war wife” problem, the roundtable thus decided, included women’s economic independence, legal support for women, and help from women’s organization. More fundamentally, a thorough social reform was needed and women should play a key role in it (*Nüsheng* 1945: 9). *Nüsheng*’s editor concluded:

... The moral degeneration of wartime society is the biggest reason [for ‘resistance-war wife’]. Now we only ask for reasonable political progress as fast as possible, to rebuild a normal social life and restore social moralities. Women should voluntarily participate in such a social reform. (*Nüsheng* 1945: 9).

Here, the concept of nation which had been prevalent under national crisis was replaced by the concept of society that did not necessarily bear innate political significance over individual life. In fact, the wartime representation of the Chinese nation – the vast rear area under the Chongqing Nationalist Government – was implicitly accused of immorality that led to the postwar social chaos. Therefore, the desired political and moral order of the postwar society, though not clearly articulated here, would require some serious reflection on unchecked nationalism as well as the cessation of the “feudal” moralities that positioned men and women unequally in social, political, and economic life.

Nüsheng’s roundtable redirected the focus of the anxiety about the “resistance-war wife” from the morality and legality of private intimate relationships and their alignment with the nation, to the unequal gender relationships embedded in both Chinese society and China’s nationalist ideologies. Like *Nüsheng*’s editor, the editor of *Women (Funü)*, a journal affiliated with the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in China, responded to Wenying, a reader who faced the “resistance-war wife” problem and wrote a letter for help:

... In our current society centered on men’s power, it is tacitly tolerated, facilitated and indulged for men to engage in a dissolute life with three wives and four concubines (*sanqi siqie*),¹⁰ while women are not allowed to

¹⁰ Here concubine is mentioned as part of an idiom 三妻四妾, which spotlights men’s infidelity in marriage, not literally the action of taking many concubines. Although the 1930 Republican Civil Code formally prohibited bigamy, it did not explicitly ban the taking of concubines. Concubines taken before 1930 did not constitute legal grounds for divorce, and a wife’s petition for divorce could be denied if she failed to file within six months of discovering the concubinage. Judicial records further indicate that cases involving concubinage often resulted

remarry under the rule of lifelong loyalty to one husband... During the chaos of wartime, men can openly take extra partners with the excuse of separation from their wives... It is inevitable for women to experience such misfortune in a society where women must rely on men for survival due to inequalities in educational and career opportunities. We can only struggle for the earlier realization of a gender-equal society to save ourselves and countless sisters from the miserable situation...(Funü 1946: 20)

Despite women's broad participation in and great contribution to the struggle of resistance against Japan, the War of Resistance magnified the profound gender inequality of Chinese society and family institutions. *Women's* editor also identified women's lack of opportunities and their dependence on men as the root cause for the problem of the "resistance-war wife," but they further called not simply for general social reform and political progress, but also for the collective activism and identities among women as "sisters" in the struggle to eliminate the social inequality premised upon the dichotomy between men and women. In other words, they not only highlighted gender inequality as a fundamental feature of Chinese society, but also adopted gender, or *nannü* (man/woman), as a critical category of analyzing and reshaping social grouping. The editor of *Women* recommended that Wenying register at the unemployment department of YWCA in Shanghai, or join its department of handicraft to learn some skills if she needed to feed her family. For Wenying, the editor wrote, the Association would not only benefit her economically, but also would be a place where she could meet new friends and have her sorrow eased through "mutual help and mutual aid" with other women (Funü 1946: 20).

Different threads of postwar feminism shared their advocacy for promotion of women's economic, educational, and political rights, but this piece on the "resistance-war wife" in YWCA's *Women/Funü* journal demonstrates some nuances between its own call and the positions of other more prominent feminists during the postwar years. On the Nationalist side, the broad participation of both sexes in the patriotic struggle against Japan strengthened women's roles as female patriots, encouraged women from a wide social spectrum to join the feminist movements, and "provided fertile ground for feminist activists to press their case for... a minimum quota of seats for

in separation rather than formal divorce. In litigation, husbands frequently invoked the wife's "consent" as a means of legitimizing the arrangement. See in Margaret Kuo. *Intolerable Cruelty: Marriage, Law, and Society in Early Twentieth-Century China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

women in the national legislative bodies” (Edwards 2008: 204–407). On the Communist side, the Party on the one hand painstakingly mobilized women out of the domestic sphere into political activities where both sexes were involved, despite the peasants’ suspicion of the sexual morality of women who showed up in public occasions. On the other hand, the long-standing contradiction between the class oppression and sexual oppression led the party to subjugate women’s demand for political rights into the class struggle for socialism and to prioritize women’s rights to work over their political participation, even though women had always been working within the bounds set by China’s patriarchal system (Edwards 2008: 225–229). For both the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, gender as a political category was secondary to a more fundamental one, nation and/or class. For the YWCA, at least in the piece discussed here, the unequal gender relationship was defined as a core feature of Chinese society and the root cause for women’s sufferings, and the War of Resistance was considered a time when such structure was reinforced. The problem of the “resistance-war wife” thus constituted a discursive space for the editor to radically advocate for the concept of gender as the most basic category of social grouping and association, and to envision a women’s community outside the family institution where not only women’s well-being but also their collective identity could be advanced to free them from their traumatizing intimate relationships in the postwar years.

5. Conclusion

The problem of the “resistance-war wife” was long treated as a minor issue of personal morality, and retrospectively deployed to illustrate the moral corruption of the Nationalist regime (Chen 1982: 1–2). As a result, the gendered consequences of the War of Resistance were relegated to the margins of a teleological narrative that positioned the founding of the People’s Republic of China as the inevitable culmination of China’s twentieth-century history.¹¹ This

¹¹ This approach of postwar Chinese political and social history can be found in: Odd Arne Westad. *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946–1950*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Suzanne Pepper. *Civil War in China: The Political Struggle, 1945–1949* (University of California Press, 1980). Lloyd E. Eastman. *Seeds of destruction: Nationalist China in war and revolution, 1937–1949* (Stanford University Press, 1984). Edmund S. K Fung. *In Search of Chinese Democracy: Civil Opposition in Nationalist China, 1929–1949* ((Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Chapter 8 and 9.

In 1991, Andrew Nathan had already identified a critical shift in English-language scholarship on Republican China. He observed that newly emerging works, shaped in light of China’s

interpretive framework has obscured the lived wartime and postwar experiences of ordinary people, as well as the alternative visions of nation, society, and gender relations that emerged during the postwar years. As Toby Lincoln states in his piece on postwar urban reconstruction in China, “clean water, electricity, a roof that kept the rain out, food to eat, and a job,” in a word, a life to be reconstructed after eight years of War of Resistance, deserves scholarly attention, and the legacy of Cold War has prevented scholars from exploring how people tried to rebuild such a life in the postwar years (Lincoln 2025).

Restoration and renewal of the family order lie at the center of this postwar reconstruction endeavor. This article demonstrates that the postwar problem of the “resistance-war wife” formed a dynamic discursive space not just for ordinary Chinese people to grieve for their own wartime and postwar traumas in the domestic domain, but also for diverse visions of China’s postwar social and familial reconstruction to converge. Its prevalence in postwar Chinese mass media on the one hand indicated the broad apprehension about the dissolution of conventional Chinese family ethics, while on the other hand motivated feminists to refocus the problem in the domestic domain onto the basic gender inequality in Chinese society and patriarchy, and to envision new forms of women’s association with their domestic partners as well as the broader society. At the critical historical moment of postwar years, overshadowed by the peak of nationalism upon victory over Japan and the fierce Civil War between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, the mass media representation of the “resistance-war wife” issue placed gender inequality and human experiences at the center of the discussion. It thus not only destabilized the firm association of family life

retreat from Maoist orthodoxy, challenged the older view that CPC victory was inevitable and rooted in broad popular support, a teleological narrative that dominated earlier historiography. For Nathan, this newly developed scholarship signaled the maturation of the field, foregrounding the role of coercion in Communist base-building, highlighting the limits of worker mobilization, and, crucially, refocusing attention on the strategic and political failures of the GMD, thus suggesting that military dynamics and Nationalist weakness were decisive in shaping the war’s outcome. Andrew J. Nathan. “Some Trends in the Historiography of Republican China.” *Republican China* 17, no. 1 (1991): 117–131.

However, until today, much of the scholarship on postwar China continues to reproduce a teleological framing: while it has shifted from celebrating the CPC’s victory to emphasizing the GMD’s weaknesses and missed opportunities, it still directs historical interpretation toward the same predetermined endpoint, the Communist triumph in 1949.

with the national causes under the national crisis, but also challenged the gender biases embedded in social conventions and nationalist ideologies.

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Omri Asscher, *Machine Translation and Translation Theory*, Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2025, 178 pp., ISBN 9781041000662.

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The past decade has witnessed a rapid progress of machine translation, driven largely by the advent of neural machine translation systems like DeepL and, more recently, multitask generative artificial intelligence models such as OpenAI's GPT series. These technologies, capable of simulating human language, have not only improved the fluency and apparent accuracy of machine outputs but have also impacted the conditions under which translation is conceived, produced, and received (Chang et al. 2024; Lyu et al. 2023). In *Machine translation and Translation Theory*, Omri Asscher undertakes the ambitious task of conceptualizing these technological developments within the established frameworks of translation theory.

Asscher's volume is neither a technical evaluation nor a practical guide. Rather, it positions itself as a theoretical intervention that interrogates how leading paradigms of machine translation intersect with, challenge, or diverge from key human-centered translation theories. In doing so, the author directly engages with a timely concern as the field confronts the implications of what he refers to as the "Machine Translation Era" (p. 4).

The book is structured around an introduction, five thematic chapters (definitions, equivalence, aesthetics, ethics, cross-cultural communication) and a conclusion. Each chapter is enriched with a set of thought-provoking questions and suggestions for future research, encouraging reflection beyond the text itself. The overall structure is logical, guiding readers from questions of

what translation *is* (Chapters One and Two) to considerations of what translation *does* (Chapters Three to Five).

The opening chapter situates machine translation firmly within translation studies. Asscher reconstructs the two overarching categories of definitions that have long divided scholars: prescriptive linguistically-oriented definitions and descriptive approaches. He argues that descriptive approaches are particularly well-suited to account for machine translation, thereby establishing the conceptual groundwork for conceiving the latter as a “full-fledged translational object of inquiry, fully at home in translation studies” (p. 37).

This theoretical alignment underpins the analysis in Chapter Two, dedicated to the long-debated notion of equivalence. Asscher identifies a strong conceptual compatibility between machine translation and Gideon Toury’s Descriptive Translation Studies, arguing that this convergence should serve as a “point of departure” (p. 63) for further theorization.

From ontological reflections, the discussion then turns to the aesthetics of translation. Here, the divergences between human and machine practices become particularly evident: whereas traditional human approaches often valued structural fidelity, machine translation systems prioritize idiomaticity and fluency in the target language (Müller, Rios & Sennrich 2020; Hendy et al. 2023). Automatic evaluation methods reinforce this orientation by largely disregarding the original form. Asscher transforms this apparent theoretical misalignment into a productive opportunity for a functionalist reconceptualization of aesthetics that shifts focus from source text fidelity to the communicative purpose of the translated text.

The volume’s most conceptually ambitious contribution is Chapter Four, where the author delves into the ethical dimension of translation. Asscher moves beyond the already discussed environmental or social impacts of machine translation (e.g. Moniz & Parra Escartín 2023; Moorkens 2022; Moorkens et al. 2025) to shape the latter as a decision-making and explicit ethical agent, with a potential for autonomy and unpredictability. Consequently, he suggests the need to introduce competing ethical considerations that engage with situation-specificities of translation.

Finally, Chapter Five tackles the communicative function of translation. Drawing on previous research, the author emphasizes awareness of machine-mediated communication impacts users’ perceptions of reliability and their willingness to trust translated content. Asscher then elaborates on machine translation’s potential to affect symbolic boundaries between communities.

This progression from translation definition and equivalence to aesthetic, ethical dimensions and cross-cultural communication culminates in a firm concluding statement: machine translation should “be conceived and pursued as a full-fledged historical agent” (p. 161), participating in socio-historical processes in ways that, while distinctive, have telling precedents in the long history of human translation.

The volume’s principal contribution lies in its robust theoretical methodology. Asscher systematically positions automated translation within established paradigms of human-centered translation studies, deliberately avoiding the simplistic “human *versus* machine translation” dichotomy that pervades many contemporary studies. His alternative “human *and* machine translation” framework successfully acknowledges both the convergences and divergences between these agents and offers a more nuanced understanding of their relationship.

Crucially, this work is grounded on an in-depth knowledge of neural machine translation and generative artificial intelligence. This allows Asscher to evaluate the theoretical compatibility of automated systems with human-based theories or, in turn, effectively bridge conceptual gaps, as demonstrated by the functionalist reframing of aesthetics in Chapter Three. Throughout the volume, Asscher avoids definitive conclusions. He acknowledges that his work is intended as a “preliminary discussion” (p. 117), a “thought experiment” (p. 114, 119), and a set of “tentative hypotheses” (p. 135), positioning it as a genuine contribution to ongoing academic research.

Despite the volume’s evident strengths, certain limitations must be noted. Most notably, the absence of empirical analyses of machine-generated outputs necessarily renders some arguments abstract. While this omission aligns with Asscher’s explicitly stated focus on theory, empirical validation might have strengthened key claims without compromising the work’s theoretical orientation. Additionally, the considerable conceptual density, while entirely appropriate for the work’s scholarly objectives, may prove challenging for readers who are less familiar with the field and limit its accessibility.

Overall, *Machine Translation and Translation Theory* stands out as a significant contribution to translation theory. Through clear and precise writing, supported by well-grounded reasoning, Asscher convincingly positions machine translation as a full-fledged translational, ethical and historical agent while still maintaining the human element as the primary frame of reference. This volume deserves recognition as an essential reading for scholars interested in rethinking the theoretical implications of our technological present.

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Stephanie Barczewski, *How the Country House Became English*, London: Reaktion Books, 2023, 392 pp., ISBN 9781789147605.

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Country houses are widely regarded as quintessentially English. These buildings form a key part of England's heritage, having become especially popular tourist sites since the mid-twentieth century. In this period, they also became subjects of academic interest, with Mark Girouard's *Life in the English Country House* (1978) paving the way for understanding the country house as a cultural and national symbol. Moreover, in their connection with the English landscape, they have long been portrayed in poetry, music, painting, and literature. In his seminal *Happy Rural Seat* (1972), Richard Gill presents English country houses not merely as elite residences, but as emblems of stability, tradition, and a pastoral ideal.

These buildings continue to attract significant academic interest, particularly for their role in shaping and reflecting notions of Englishness, which is central to Stephanie Barczewski's *How the Country House Became English* (2023). Prior to this, Barczewski—Professor of Modern British History at Clemson University, South Carolina—had examined the imperial dimensions of British country houses in her 2014 volume, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930*, which she considers complementary to her more recent work. In her latest volume, the author shifts focus to national identity—an element she contends must be studied alongside empire as two inseparable and mutually constitutive categories of historical enquiry.

As Barczewski states in her precise and solid introduction, “this book was [...] originally a result of a ‘Brexit moment’”.¹ From 2016 onward, scholars have been compelled to reconsider both the trajectory of British history in relation to the wider world and the nature of British identity—or, as the author astutely suggests, *identities*. In this respect, the book is about English identity as much as the country house. It is also about English history, particularly from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, and its paradox of celebrating order and stability while being punctuated by disruption and violence. By revealing how country houses encapsulate these contradictions, the author shows how they came to be perceived as symbols of Englishness.

In the opening section of her work, the author argues that the English country houses have often been marked by episodes of violent disruption by deconstructing the notion—particularly widespread in literature and, more generally, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries—that they functioned as enduring symbols of historical continuity. In the first three chapters, she examines the Reformation, the Civil Wars, and the Age of Revolution as key periods of violence and upheaval reflected in English country houses. The Reformation and subsequent Dissolution of the Monasteries of the 1530s are analysed in the first chapter, the former being an extremely violent event and the latter causing the largest land transfer in England since the Norman Conquest. Emphasis is placed on country houses serving as refuges for Catholic priests, the seizure of land, and the adaptation of monastic buildings after their dissolution. A century later, many country houses were destroyed in the English Civil War, the most violent event in English domestic history. In the second chapter, Barczewski focuses particularly on the massive damage to private property that accompanied this bloodshed, mainly because she believes that this aspect has been largely overlooked in historical memory studies. Notably, she draws a connection between the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Civil War, showing how the former resulted in the building of numerous country houses—often converted from former monastic sites—while the latter led to their destruction. Through detailed case studies, she enables the reader to trace the transformations of places such as Abbotsbury (explored in depth), Godstow House in Oxfordshire, Leicester Abbey in Leicestershire, and others. The third chapter explores the eighteenth century as a period when architectural choices became increasingly entangled with political ideology, beginning with the aftermath of the 1715 Jacobite rebellion, when country houses were used to assert Whig values and celebrate the Glorious Revolution. A pivotal point is the French Revolution, after which country houses revived and imitated medieval

¹ Barczewski, Stephanie. 2023 “Introduction: Englishness and the Country House.” *How the Country House Became English*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd, p. 8.

architecture. By adopting Gothic styles, these buildings became physical embodiments of national superiority conferred by continuity and markers of difference from France.

At the same time, English identity was shaped in part by interactions with external entities. The second half of the book, also comprising three chapters, examines England's contact with the other nations of the United Kingdom, the British Empire, and continental Europe. The absence of a British style of country house is brought to the fore in the fourth chapter, which presents the defensive nature of the border zones between England and Wales and between England and Scotland into the early modern era as the main reason that prevented the development of hybrid architectural styles. The fifth chapter explores the complex relationship between country houses and the British Empire, from the Tudor and early Stuart periods to the twentieth century, a period in which country houses evolved from sites of imperial curiosity to symbols of English superiority. While early displays reflected fascination with the exotic, by the nineteenth century, architecture emphasized racial and cultural hierarchy. These shifts mirrored changing notions of English identity, transforming the country house into a space that affirmed imperial dominance. The sixth chapter turns to connections with continental Europe, posing the question: "what makes a building 'English': its resistance to continental influences or its transformation of them into something unique to the national context?" (p. 255). Barczewski discusses how, by the twentieth century, the country house had become a symbol of Englishness, celebrated for its rural charm and historical continuity. Yet this idealized image increasingly isolated the English country house from both its imperial and European contexts, reinforcing a nostalgic, pastoral vision of English identity.

The narrative as a whole is compelling and richly developed, and the author demonstrates in detail how architecture intersects with politics, empire, and culture. Barczewski also offers a rich collection of stories about specific English country houses and their owners. However, even if engaging and consistent with the purpose of the book, these case studies require special attention from the reader, both to follow the argument and not perceive them as digressions.

How the Country House Became English concludes at Castle Drogo in Devon, a site that encapsulates the tensions—between continuity and disruption, native and foreign influences—that Barczewski traces over centuries of English country-house architecture. However, this conclusion seems rather ambiguous and does not fully summarise the book's main argument: the question posed by the title of the book is addressed more explicitly in the final part of the last chapter, where the author states that the concept of the

“English” country house was a nineteenth-century construction, shaped by a desire for political stability and cultural continuity in the wake of the French Revolution. Ultimately, the open-endedness of the conclusion, which echoes the question posed in the title *How the Country House Became English*, may be intentional and reflects the complexity of defining what identity really is—a central claim of Barczewski’s book.

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Ilya Kliger, *Sovereign Fictions: Poetics and Politics in the Age of Russian Realism*, University of Chicago Press, 2024, 287 pp., ISBN 9780226831879.

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Kliger's monograph *Sovereign Fictions: Poetics and Politics in the Age of Russian Realism* is devoted to the nineteenth-century Russian novel. A substantial body of scholarship exists on particular authors and themes, from Tolstoy's treatment of war and history to Dostoevsky's explorations of psychology and morality, Turgenev's depictions of the intelligentsia, and Gogol's representations of bureaucracy (Jones & Miller 1998). Much of this research focuses on individual writers, specific works, or narrowly defined problems. Kliger, by contrast, offers a synthetic and theoretically ambitious account of Russian realism as a whole. He examines literature not simply as a reflection of individual experience, but as a way of understanding the role of the state in society's life. In his view, state power becomes one of the central subjects of interest for Russian novelists.

Kliger makes an important point by comparing Russian novels with Western ones. He shows that Western literature usually represents what he calls "sociotopes" of literary craftsmanship and creative techniques. These include economic and legal systems as well as shared interests. These systems help bring individual people together into working groups. Western novels often show how traditional father-figure authority becomes less important over time. Kliger demonstrates that Western literature typically keeps personal life separate from public life. In Russian literature, on the contrary, the state penetrates all spheres of life and becomes an important element of the narrative. It can be perceived as a force uniting the personal and the public, but at the same time as a source of violence and fear. The Russian novel, according to Kliger, gravitates toward

tragedy, where power plays a key role. He argues that while the Western novel centers on autonomous private life, in the Russian novel this private life is vulnerable to state intrusions.

The book explores how realist literature is connected to the idea of the state and how it reflects what the author calls the “social imaginary,” a category borrowed from the works of Cornelius Castoriadis (1987). This is a conception of who belongs to society, what roles, duties, and expectations exist, and what it means to be an individual. Kliger traces how the peculiarities of social structure influenced characters, situations, and conflicts in literature. The focus is on the ways Russian writers depicted the state—as a harmonious community or as a threatening source of power. Thus, in A. S. Pushkin’s poem *The Bronze Horseman*, the hero encounters the frightening symbolism of power in the form of the monument to Peter I.

In N. V. Gogol’s *The Inspector General*, officials find themselves in panic from unexpected state intervention. In I. A. Goncharov’s *Oblomov*, the main character’s inability to integrate into a society organized by the state and demanding activity and participation in state service is shown; against this background, the active Stolz emerges victorious. In Kliger’s opinion, this ambivalent perception of power is a characteristic feature of Russian literature. He describes this phenomenon as “social realism under autocracy.” Under such conditions, literature attempted to comprehend the role of the individual not within the framework of civil society, but in the context of the state as the main force of belonging and identity.

Kliger uses a method he calls “medial reading.” This is an intermediate approach between close and distant reading. He does not concentrate on one work but analyzes a wide spectrum of texts to capture persistent forms expressing the social imaginary. He strives to reconstruct the “language of the epoch”—a system of images, figures, and meanings through which Russian authors spoke about their time. A key concept in the analysis becomes “deformation,” a term borrowed from Russian formalists. Kliger shows how Western literary forms were reconceptualized depending on their interaction with the theme of the state. He investigates not only internal changes in texts but also their connection with the political and social situation, including censorship and the system of power.

Of particular interest is Kliger’s choice of theorists and the specific interpretations of works he proposes. While philosophers such as Hegel, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Antonio Gramsci are widely discussed in various fields of literary studies, Kliger’s analysis demonstrates their unique productivity when applied to the distinct conditions of Russian realism, particularly in highlighting the state’s pervasive

role. For instance, in the first chapter, Kliger examines how Vissarion Belinsky, a prominent critic of the first half of the nineteenth century, adapted G. W. F. Hegel's ideas, notably by focusing attention not on civil society but on the state, which in turn influenced narrative frameworks for individuals in their social settings. This allows for a new reading of *Eugene Onegin*—not as a novel about private life, but as a work about how individual fate is formed under the influence of state structures. Tatyana turns out to be not simply the heroine of a love story, but a figure embodying the possibility of social integration through marriage to a general.

Kliger's examination of Russian literature through Carl Schmitt's idea of sovereignty provides a clear way to understand how power works and affects people's lives in stories. Schmitt's concept of the "state of exception," where normal laws are set aside for sovereign control, is especially relevant in his analysis of Alexander Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*. In this poem, the main character, Eugene, faces the overwhelming force of state power shown through a flood—a symbol that goes beyond just a natural disaster to represent the unpredictable nature of sovereign authority. This power can erase personal lives at any moment, showing how individuals are at the mercy of those in control.

Kliger further enriches this analysis by incorporating Walter Benjamin's reflections on melancholy, which serve to deepen our understanding of characters weighed down by power. In Nikolai Gogol's *Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich*, Kliger highlights Belinsky's distinction between the "poetry of actuality" in *Taras Bulba* and the deeply sad nature of Gogol's story, where life in the ghostly world lacks real vitality. This connects with Benjamin's idea of the "dramatic collapse of the body politic onto the body natural," showing an image of a bleak life cut off from political effort. Building on these ideas, Kliger uses Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben to look at how power has changed from sovereign rule to biopolitical control. In Ivan Turgenev's *First Love*, Kliger shows how the government's influence goes beyond public life into personal relationships and moral choices. The father's death starts a melancholy contagion that leads to "universal creaturely solidarity in death," highlighting a world where power is used harshly, making the social/private realm feel unreal and focusing all life in the political story of autocratic fathers and queens.

Moreover, Kliger uses Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony to examine generational conflicts in Alexey Pisemsky's *One Thousand Souls*. Kliger discusses Pavel Annenkov's review of this novel, where Annenkov points out the gelatinous quality of civil society in Russia and how its members struggle to be self-governing, disciplined participants in a hegemonic normative culture. The novel reflects this issue, where only the ruler acts for the common good,

and these actions take on an “ambiguous, sinister form.” This shows Gramsci’s view that the state remains obvious in Russian literature due to the lack of strong bourgeois power. However, the eventual defeat of reformist aspirations demonstrates how resilient established beliefs and values remain in the face of revolutionary ideas.

Kliger works with a wide range of sources. His corpus includes literary as well as critical, philosophical, legal, and publicistic texts. The foundation consists of novels—this distinguishes his approach from many Western studies. He chooses not only canonical works by Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Goncharov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, but also lesser-known texts by Sleptsov, Druzhinin, Kostomarov, and Herzen. He also analyzes texts by Belinsky, Annenkov, Chicherin, Aksakov, and others.

The unusualness of Kliger’s approach lies not only in method but also in the reevaluation of familiar categories. Instead of emphasizing individualism or civil society, he shows how Russian novels are built around the theme of power and its influence. This provides a new understanding of realism as literature closely connected with the state. He includes early texts in his analysis that are traditionally not classified as realism in order to trace how the special state optics of Russian prose was formed. Thus, he proposes reading realism as part of a broader historical process where literature becomes a space for reflection on power and belonging.

Thus, Kliger’s book fits into the line of research devoted to connections between poetics and politics. The monograph allows us to see those aspects of the literary process that usually remain outside the field of vision. The author concludes that Russian literature is not secondary to Western literature, despite borrowing genres and forms, but expresses a specific experience significant for the contemporary subject.

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John Hajek, Catrin Norrby, Heinz L. Kretzenbacher, Doris Schüpbach (eds.), *Multilingualism and pluricentricity. A tale of many cities*, Boston e Berlino: De Gruyter Mouton, 2024, 342 pp., ISBN 978-1-5015-1751-8.

Recensito da Lorenzo Petrucci

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Il volume *Multilingualism and pluricentricity. A tale of many cities*, pubblicato da De Gruyter Mouton nel 2024 e curato da John Hajek, Catrin Norrby, Heinz L. Kretzenbacher e Doris Schüpbach per la serie *Language and Social Life*, affronta il tema del multilinguismo e della diversità linguistica in tutta la sua complessità e stratificazione, con particolare riferimento a contesti urbani e suburbani finora poco esplorati dalla ricerca linguistica.

Composto da 12 capitoli, suddivisi in tre sezioni – la prima, “Multilingual policies in practice”, focalizzata sulle concrete pratiche linguistiche in contesti multiculturali; la seconda, “Attitudes and identities”, più incentrata sulle identità dei parlanti e le loro attitudini e percezioni verso le lingue e gli spazi multilingui; infine, la terza, “Language across time and space”, concentrata sulle variazioni diatopica e diacronica della lingua in contesti plurilingui –, il libro vanta un’ampia gamma di approcci teorici e metodologie che spaziano da approcci quantitativi a quelli più qualitativi, da quelli meramente sociolinguistici a quelli di natura più discorsiva ed etnografica. È altresì abile nell’incorporare approcci tradizionali, quale quello dei *social domains* di Joshua Fishman, utilizzato nell’ambito della sociologia del linguaggio, con approcci più recenti e innovativi, come per esempio il *linguistic landscape* o il pluricentrismo.

I nodi centrali che accumulano tutti gli articoli sono fondamentalmente quattro: la diversità dei repertori linguistici in prospettiva diacronica; la

diversità degli spazi urbani e la visibilità delle lingue; la diversità delle rivendicazioni identitarie e le loro rappresentazioni discorsive; infine, i rapporti di potere e le politiche linguistiche, implicite o esplicite, che incidono sulle pratiche comunicative in contesto urbano.

Il capitolo 1 comincia questa esplorazione della diversità linguistica con uno studio delle rappresentazioni discorsive che due città svizzere di frontiera, Fribourg/Freiburg e Biel/Bienne, tradizionalmente considerate come bilingui perché abitate rispettivamente da una maggioranza francofona nel primo caso e una germanofona nel secondo, costruiscono di se stesse sul principale sito web del comune, mettendo in luce una diversità di strategie discorsive e pratiche identitarie. Il capitolo 2, scritto a due mani da Marie Nelson e Sofie Henricson, è il primo studio sul *linguistic landscape* in ottica comparativa tra due città finlandesi, Mariehamn e Kokta, la prima situata nell'arcipelago Åland tra la Svezia e la Finlandia, la seconda al sud del paese: lo studio mette in luce la diversità delle pratiche linguistiche *bottom-up* e *top-down* in contesti storicamente toccati da migrazioni, insediamenti e oggi caratterizzati da imponenti processi di turistificazione. Con il capitolo 3, Zane Goebel torna sul tema delle rappresentazioni discorsive indagando come l'esposizione e la visibilità mediatica di lingue minoritarie e con poco privilegio abbia cambiato, a livello simbolico, la rappresentazione della diversità a Giacarta e, in senso lato, in Indonesia. Come per il capitolo 2, anche il capitolo 4 è uno studio sul paesaggio linguistico, questa volta, della città di Padova: in questa ricerca, Francesco Goglia utilizza l'approccio e la metodologia offertogli dal *linguistic landscape* per ricostruire le funzioni e gli usi tanto della lingua italiana come delle lingue immigrate nel capoluogo veneto, ristrutturati a seguito delle recenti ondate migratorie che hanno caratterizzato l'Italia negli ultimi 20 anni.

La seconda sezione del volume esordisce con il capitolo 5 di John Hajek, Ambrin Hasnain e Carlie Hanson che, grazie ad uno studio di stampo etnografico, rivela come l'italianità sia oramai solamente una rivendicazione identitaria per la città di Melbourne, ma non più la diretta rappresentazione di pratiche linguistiche legate alla lingua italiana. Daniel Kaufman, nel capitolo 6, esplora il tema della discriminazione linguistica e culturale che le persone di lingua mixteca vivono quotidianamente sulla loro pelle nella città di New York e di come questa abbia serie conseguenze sia nelle pratiche linguistiche – le sue indagini mostrano, infatti, come i parlanti di lingua mixteca scelgano sempre più la lingua spagnola, lingua ritenuta come più prestigiosa, in molti dei contesti analizzati – sia nelle loro identità in contesti migratori. Con il capitolo 7, Chloé Diskin-Holdaway esplora le identità dei parlanti L2 di lingua inglese in Irlanda

arrivando a dimostrare come i nuovi arrivati abbiano identità profondamente differenti dai parlanti di L1 per via del diverso *background* linguistico e culturale che, inevitabilmente, modifica le percezioni e le attitudini verso la lingua, lo spazio e, infine, anche verso il sé. Questa seconda sezione si conclude con lo studio di Claudia Maria Riehl e Sara Ingrosso sull'evoluzione diacronica dei repertori linguistici di immigrati italiani a Monaco lungo tre generazioni, dalla prima degli anni 1955–1973, denominata dei *guestworkers*, passando per la seconda e la terza, dagli anni 1974 al 2010, fino ad arrivare ai *newcomers* dell'ultimo decennio.

Sulla falsariga del capitolo 8, Peter Trudgill e Jane Warren inaugurano la terza e ultima parte del volume con un capitolo incentrato sulla ricostruzione diacronica del repertorio urbano della città di Norwich dal Medioevo ai giorni nostri. Con il capitolo 10, Bolormaa Shinjee e Sender Dovchin passano poi all'analisi del paesaggio linguistico della capitale della Mongolia, Ulan Bator, prima e dopo il periodo sovietico, documentando così un cambiamento dalle politiche linguistiche statali incentrate sul mero uso della lingua mongola e del russo all'apertura verso pratiche *bottom-up* multilingui. Per concludere, Anu Bissoonauth e Jane Warren, nel capitolo 11, dimostrano come il multilinguismo urbano del porto di Port-Louis sia inevitabilmente legato al colonialismo francese prima e inglese dopo, che hanno influenzato profondamente i repertori linguistici degli abitanti delle Mauritius. Infine, María Irene Moyna nel capitolo 12 esplora il tema del pluricentrismo comparando alcuni tratti morfosintattici di due varietà di spagnolo latinoamericano, quella argentina e quella uruguaiana, per dimostrare come la varietà argentina stia diventando sempre un centro endonormativo ed eserciti pertanto un potere maggiore in termini di attrattività e prestigio sulla varietà uruguaiana che, invece, è relegata a varietà periferica e esonormativa.

Il volume è, dunque, ricco di casi di studio, che spaziano da città europee, come Monaco, Norwich e Padova, a realtà extraeuropee quali New York, Giacarta o Ulan Bator. Questi contributi mettono bene in luce come il multilinguismo urbano sia sempre stato un fenomeno complesso e stratificato, legato tanto a processi storici (colonizzazioni, migrazioni, invasioni) quanto a dinamiche contemporanee di mobilità transnazionale. Particolarmente significativa è la sezione dedicata al paesaggio linguistico, un valido strumento affermatosi negli ultimi decenni per comprendere maggiormente a) la relazione tra spazio e visibilità delle lingue, alla base di ogni costruzione simbolica dello spazio pubblico, b) il rapporto (in qualche caso l'allineamento, talvolta i disallineamenti, in altri casi le tensioni) tra politiche *top-down* e pratiche *bottom-*

up, infine c) le proiezioni identitarie che, una volta riflesse nello spazio pubblico, diventano anch'esse fondamentali al simbolismo della città.

Il tema delle rappresentazioni identitarie è affrontato in prospettiva comparativa: dai discorsi municipali sul bilinguismo in Svizzera, alla costruzione simbolica di italianità a Melbourne, fino alla risignificazione delle identità linguistiche in contesti migratori irlandesi. In tutti questi casi emerge la natura fluida e dinamica dell'identità, costantemente ricostruita e negoziata attraverso la lingua.

Di notevole interesse è anche l'attenzione al pluricentrismo linguistico, raramente considerato negli studi sul multilinguismo urbano. L'approccio alle lingue pluricentriche apre difatti nuovi e interessanti percorsi di ricerca che mirino ad analizzare il multilinguismo in relazione a concetti quali quelli di centro e periferia, fondamentali per comprendere, da un lato, le relazioni di potere tra varietà linguistiche detentrici di una norma e, di conseguenza, di un maggiore potere e prestigio, e varietà esonormative meno prestigiose che invece subiscono l'influenza del centro, e dall'altro come queste ineguali relazioni di potere influenzino le pratiche linguistiche dei parlanti così come le loro tendenze centrifughe o centripete verso l'una o l'altra varietà, come dimostra il caso del rapporto tra varietà argentina e uruguaiana dello spagnolo.

Nel complesso, il volume bene si inserisce nella lunga tradizione di studi sull'*urban multilingualism*, inaugurata negli anni Sessanta da linguisti come Labov, Milroy e Trudgill, ma ne rinnova le prospettive grazie al ricco impianto di approcci e metodologie che permettono non solo di gettare nuova luce sul fenomeno della diversità linguistica, sul multilinguismo e sui processi sociali a loro connessi, ma anche di rimettere in discussione in modo critico un concetto, oramai divenuto *port-manteau*, quale quello di "superdiversità", proposto da Vertovec (2007), evidenziandone i limiti ideologici, mettendo in rilievo talvolta la sua eccessiva astrazione e astoricità – che non permettono, per l'appunto, di osservare come la diversità linguistico-culturale popoli da sempre le città, seppur in diverso grado –, sottolineando, in terzo luogo, come una certa percezione dell'eccezionalità di questa *superdiversità* contemporanea possa far pensare che le persone non si siano sempre spostate e non abbiano sempre migrato quando invece la storia della diversità è inevitabilmente e intrinsecamente una storia di migrazioni, di contatti, ma anche di conflitti, di colonialismo e di ineguali relazioni di potere.

Dal punto di vista stilistico, i contributi risultano accessibili pur mantenendo rigore accademico, caratteristica che rende il volume adatto sia a giovani studiosi sia a ricercatori esperti. L'opera, complessivamente, si distingue

per la coerenza interna e la capacità di fondere tradizione e innovazione, offrendo strumenti critici utili per interpretare la complessità del multilinguismo contemporaneo.

Un testo di grande valore scientifico, che contribuisce in modo significativo al dibattito sul multilinguismo urbano e sulle lingue pluricentriche.

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Bradley J. Irish, *Literary Neurodiversity Studies. Current and Future Directions*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, 106 pp., ISBN 9783031806025.

Reviewed by Valentina Tafuni

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Originating in the established lineage of literary studies on the history of emotions and affect—such as love, lust, desire, envy, and rivalry—in the English Renaissance, and on how deeply these forces governed, perturbed, and shaped human individuality and interaction (Irish 2018; Irish 2025b; Irish 2025c), Bradley J. Irish’s latest manuscript compellingly affirms the expansion of his critical framework to encompass neurodiversity within early modern literature and culture. Beyond this, it interrogates both the current state and the future trajectories of the emerging field of Literary Neurodiversity Studies, which applies the principles of neurodiversity theory to literary criticism. Irish has the merit of delivering an intuitive field map, deliberately positioned at the threshold of a still largely uncharted terrain, and offering a generous invitation to break new ground. This contribution is the first to meaningfully synthesize the field’s foundational efforts into a compact and programmatic overview.

Published in Palgrave’s Literary Disability Studies series, the essay unfolds over five chapters. Serving as a preface, the opening chapter highlights the intensely personal dimension of Irish’s academic endeavor. An associate professor of English literature at Arizona State University, Irish publicly identifies as both autistic and ADHD, having received both diagnoses in adulthood. After explaining how this lived experience informs his critical engagement with neurodivergence, he proceeds to a conceptual and theoretical

mapping of the field, beginning with an essential analysis of the various—and frequently contested—approaches to this intricate and multidimensional topic. As already indicated, Irish reflects his longstanding research interest in emotional experience by proposing a theoretical framework centered on the triad of cognition, emotion, and sensation, as evidenced in his previous publications.

Overcoming the notion of neurotypicality, Irish offers a diachronic account of neurodiversity based on a biocultural perspective (Walker 2021; Seymour 2025). Despite acknowledging that “not all forms of neurodivergence are inherently disabling,” (Irish 2025a: 10) he emphasizes that the idea remains deeply rooted in the history of disability studies, although the definition of neurodiversity is inherently open and flexible due to its inclusive character. The author also points out that regional differences exist in academic approaches to neurodiversity: European scholarship tends to emphasize philosophical and sociological viewpoints, whereas American research usually adopts alternative methodological and disciplinary orientations. Irish outlines at this point his two-fold aim, worthy of consideration: first, to stabilize the field’s foundations for teaching and research; second, to catalyze methodological innovation by tying it more tightly to empirical-adjacent work on reading, emotion, and sensory experience. As a field primer, the book is deliberately accessible. At the same time, it offers a programmatic agenda by specifying where Irish identifies the most promising cross-disciplinary exchange—particularly with cognitive literary studies, affect theory, and the often-underexplored sensory dimensions of literary engagement. The author also advances a “polemical purpose” (Irish 2025a: 16) of the book: to make room for understanding the neuro-reading of a literary text no less basic than one that is grounded in other elements such as sex, gender, race, etc.

In the second chapter, Irish’s effort could be described as the compilation of an extensive bibliography intended to serve as a practical resource, citing some of the most comprehensive and tentative works to delineate features of a literary text read under the lens of Literary Neurodiversity Studies (e.g. Philippian 2025; Stenning 2024; Rodas 2018; Yergeau 2018). While the issue of representation is quoted as relevant, Irish also addresses broader global perspectives, specific case studies, and recurring tropes. His synthesis highlights how the field draws on and reworks adjacent frameworks—neuroqueer studies, crip theory, rhetoric, and autistic poetics—while firmly insisting on literary method (close reading, analysis of genre and form, readerly phenomenology) as the field’s core. The emphasis on Literary Neurodiversity Studies as literary

criticism—rather than as clinical commentary on literature—proves both clarifying and pedagogically useful. Moreover, Irish’s overview also names a canon of anchors and trends that can quickly be mobilized in a literature review.

The third chapter is set in the future –or, better, in “*one* possible future”– (Irish 2025a: 47) of the field and represents the book’s intellectual fulcrum. Irish proposes a “radical reimagination” (Irish 2025a: 47), a tighter braid between Literary Neurodiversity Studies and research on literary cognition, literary emotion and affect, and literary sensation. He affirms that, because neurodiversity encompasses the full spectrum of cognitive, emotional, and sensory functioning, *all* literary analyses of these domains may be understood as part of the field of study, within a neurological approach. All the abovementioned critical traditions share a concern with “mind-contingent” phenomena, so bringing this triad under the umbrella of literary neurodiversity would increase their scholarly visibility, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and foreground their interdependence. This broadened vision, however, raises ethical concerns, particularly the risk of marginalizing neurodivergent voices. Irish rightly insists that neurodivergence must remain pivotal to the field’s core, emphasizing that any expansion of the field must strengthen, not dilute, its liberationist aims. Irish ultimately supports a two-pronged strategy: maintaining the emphasis on neurodivergent modes of being while adopting a more thorough conceptualization of neurodiversity that incorporates literary analysis that is cognitive, emotional, and sensory. He contends that doing so will depathologize neurological differences and increase the legitimacy of the field. Irish’s proposal sits productively amid current developments about moving beyond high-level theoretical claims, like for example “double empathy” (Milton 2012) that reframes social-cognitive differences as reciprocal misattunements; in Literary Neurodiversity Studies, neurological ways are treated as methods rather than biases. Indeed, in neurodivergent temporalities an emergent work is already expanding the toolkit for linking form (rhythm, pacing, iteration) with autistic and other non-normative experiences of time (e.g. Yeager’s concept of “*kakokairos*”, cf. Yeager 2025). Irish’s call to integrate cognition/emotion/sensation provides a frame into which these developments snap.

In the fourth chapter, the author models “neurological reading” through Othello. Irish’s choice of a canonical, much-taught Shakespeare play is strategic: it shows how Literary Neurodiversity Studies can operate in familiar curricular terrain and how neurodiversity reframes long-debated questions such as jealousy, manipulation, and perception through a different lens. The analysis

is designed less to declare definitive diagnoses and more to demonstrate practice: what it means to attend to cognitive/affective/sensory dynamics, to resist pathologizing shortcuts, and to keep literary form and historical context in view. As a teaching model, this represents a strong, reproducible template for seminar discussion and writing of neurological readings without medicalizing characters or authors.

Trying to define its contribution and significance, Irish's analysis matters for at least three reasons: (1) it crystallizes objects, questions, and methods in a systematic pathway, starting from definitions to demonstrations, passing by the present state and setting of an agenda; (2) a research-forward agenda that remains strongly rooted in literary analysis; (3) its pedagogical usefulness, enclosed above all in the case study centered on Shakespeare's Othello.

Nevertheless, several challenges remain. First, the broader Critical Literary Neurodiversity Studies landscape remains anchored to autism, while the rest of the spectrum of neurodivergence will need equal theoretical depth about their peculiar and distinctive literary-aesthetic signatures. Second, the case study effectively models the method but also keeps the attention in the Anglophone canonical zone in the early modern period. Third, Irish's call to bridge the field with the branch on cognition, emotion and sensation needs to be operationalized, and this would mean an effort on measurement, replicability, and methodology, considering the shown deficits of framings and constructs like Theory of Mind (ToM), as Yergeau (2018) and others have argued (see Milton 2012).

Overall, the bibliography in the appendix is of considerable value, and the study constitutes a timely and field-defining work, because it offers a persuasive sketch of where Literary Neurodiversity Studies are and could productively lead. The book provides tools to apply the neurodiversity lens to literature, but above all launch an important call to action for scholars: to continue compiling a collective comparative case studies history, a living bibliography beyond the Anglophone canon; engaging in design the participatory, neuro-affirming research protocols; and expanding theory-building beyond autism to encompass a fuller spectrum of neurodiversity.

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Pedro Salinas, *Poesie* (a cura di Matteo Lefèvre), Milano: Garzanti, 2024, 579 pp., ISBN 9788811006688.

Recensito da Pedro Argüello Mur

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Un lavoro come quello condotto da Matteo Lefèvre nella sua antologia della poesia di Pedro Salinas per la casa editrice Garzanti presenta una triplice difficoltà: in un solo volume, l'editore si assume il compito di spiegare in poche pagine tutta una traiettoria poetica, di selezionarne le poesie più rappresentative e di trasporle in lingua italiana senza che perdano le loro qualità originarie. Di seguito commenteremo brevemente il modo in cui il curatore ha risolto queste tre sfide.

Già dalle prime pagine dello studio preliminare Lefèvre conferma la volontà di favorire una “riscoperta piena” (p. 6) del poeta che vada al di là della sua più conosciuta poesia amorosa. Le tre fasi in cui divide la sua opera, da *Presagi* (1923) a *Favola e segno* (1931), da *La voce a te dovuta* (1933) a *Lungo lamento* (1938-1939), e da *Il Contemplato* (1946) a *Fiducia* (1955), servono da cornice a un percorso critico caratterizzato dal suo equilibrio di elementi filologici e divulgativi. Infatti, sia i neofiti che i lettori già familiarizzati con la poesia di Salinas potranno trovare in queste pagine spunti e interessanti informazioni biografiche che soddisfino i loro interessi. Per quanto riguarda i primi, è da notare lo sforzo di fornirgli un minimo quadro di riferimento nella cultura di arrivo (Montale, Pascoli, Petrarca...) ai fini di facilitare il loro inserimento nelle coordinate poetiche di Salinas. Lungo le pagine dello studio viene ricostruito anche il contesto vitale e sociale del poeta madrileno: i suoi anni a Parigi e a Siviglia, i rapporti con gli altri poeti della Generazione del '27, il ritorno a Madrid e il suo lavoro al Centro di Studi Storici nel periodo della Repubblica, la sua relazione con Katherine Whitmore, l'esilio... Il profilo

biografico è esaustivo e sfilano già alcune figure di riferimento per il suo pensiero e la sua poesia: Juan Ramón, Machado, San Juan de la Cruz... Sebbene possano mancare alcuni nomi fondamentali (ad esempio quello di Unamuno), la lista è più che sufficiente per lo scopo divulgativo del volume.

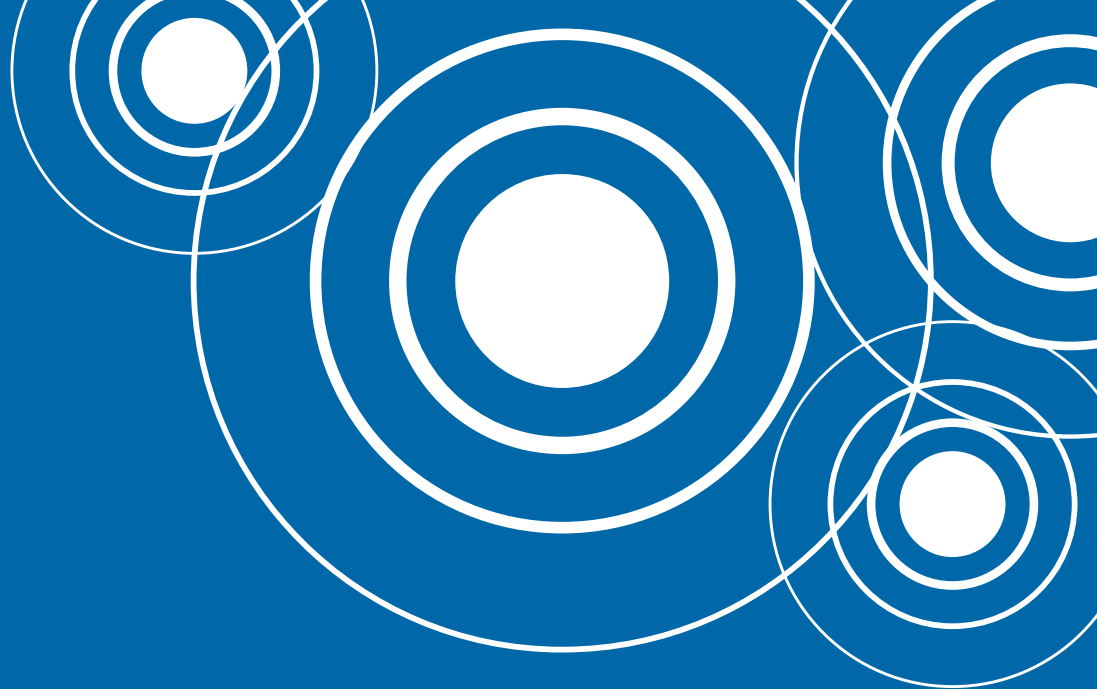
Le poesie incluse nell'antologia riescono effettivamente a mostrare la complessità e l'ampiezza di tematiche della poesia di Salinas. Nei primi libri, il lettore potrà trovare il giovane sguardo del poeta affascinato dal mondo tecnico, con poesie rivolte alle macchine da scrivere ("Underwood girls"), a una lampada ("35 candele"), alla sua automobile ("Navacerrada, aprile"), nelle quali è già in voga il dialogo tra un "tu" e un "io" che poi la trilogia amorosa porterà al suo culmine. La scelta delle poesie del principale libro di Salinas, *La voce a te dovuta*, è molto accurata e permette di intravedere l'attenta struttura della raccolta, dove le ombre, i corpi e il desiderio di conoscenza del poeta mantengono importanti relazioni dialettiche tra di loro senza però una sintesi finale ("Le senti come chiedono realtà").

Le poesie dell'ultima fase di Salinas incluse in questa antologia mostrano il desiderio di far conoscere altri volti del poeta, forse meno noti al pubblico italiano. In questo senso, la decisione d'includere la poesia "Zero" nella sua interezza (per quanto impedisca di includere altre poesie di *Tutto più chiaro*) è ottima, nel rivelare un poeta attento agli eventi della storia così come il suo profondo umanesimo di denuncia. La scelta di queste poesie serve anche a mostrare il disincanto di Salinas verso il mondo della tecnica ("Notturmo delle pubblicità") che un tempo lo aveva affascinato, illustrando fino a che punto la sua opera sia un percorso, una ricerca dinamica invece di una poesia immutabile e statica.

Questo gioco di echi e di evoluzione delle tematiche attraversa tutta la poesia di Salinas, ed è notevole lo sforzo del curatore per rivelarlo nei limiti del possibile: così, ad esempio, include entrambe le poesie di Salinas rivolte alla sua vocazione (la "Vocazione" di *Sicuro azzardo* e "La vocazione" di *Tutto più chiaro*), le quali servono da cornice alla sua intera produzione e permettono di capire le evoluzioni subite lungo la sua avventura poetica. Forse alcune tematiche non sono sviluppate quanto potrebbero esserlo, come nel caso della *salvación*: la mancanza di "Salvación por la luz" (la poesia che chiude *Il Contemplato*) e di "Pasajero en museo" (*Tutto più chiaro*) tolgono peso a questo tema capitale in Salinas, ma ancora una volta non si deve perdere di vista che quella che ci offre Lefèvre è un'antologia. Infatti, il curatore include precisamente la poesia "Salvezza" di *Favola e segno* e controbilancia così l'assenza delle poesie precedenti.

Per quanto riguarda la traduzione, a prima vista potrebbe sembrare che lo stile libero e “conversazionale” delle poesie di Salinas —definite addirittura da Lorca come “*prosías*”— non presenti particolari difficoltà, ma il loro ritmo, il loro gioco di attese e di rinvii tra parole dimostrano subito il contrario. Il curatore a volte trova soluzioni molto originali ad alcuni versi problematici, come per esempio la traduzione di “cien mil” per “millanta” (p. 163) che poi gli permette di conservare la metrica dei versi settenari ed endecasillabi. In alcune occasioni la traduzione di certi versi li rende inevitabilmente più chiari; ad esempio, “Tu azul por azul se explica: / color azul, paraíso; / y mirarte a ti, mirarlo” (p. 454) diviene “Il tuo azzurro è in sé l’azzurro: / come azzurro è il paradiso; / e guardare te, è guardarlo” (p. 455), ma è il curatore a spiegarne i motivi: “Raramente, e per estrema necessità, la sintagmatica convulsa, avvolgente è stata sbrogliata per rendere il discorso più chiaro” (p. 84), dimostrando così la coerenza tra il suo discorso sulla traduzione e la sua pratica effettiva. Ma la coerenza non è un valore in sé se non viene accompagnata dell’esito della traduzione, ed è ciò che si trova in molti dei suoi versi, che risolvono con intelligenza diversi problemi metrici e semantici: “de será o no será” diviene “tra l’essenza e l’inessenza” (p. 136), “cercare ciò che è chiaro” (p. 479) rende attraverso una acuta trasposizione l’originale “claridades buscar”... Ci sono ottonari splendidamente tradotti che si leggono con assoluta naturalezza (“Ogni dolore sofferto / mi ti rendeva più sacra”, p. 439). E, finalmente, c’è la sensibilità di tradurre alcuni versi allontanandosi dalla loro struttura originale quando altri motivi lo richiedono: ad esempio, “Menos morir, morir así: transbordo” diviene “È morte senza morte questa: transito” (p. 547), dove il sintagma “morte senza morte” riesce a mantenere tutto il carico semantico latente sotto la sintassi estremamente sintetica del verso originale.

In conclusione, quest’antologia di Matteo Lefèvre soddisfa gli obiettivi che si era prefissata: dare a conoscere la voce di Salinas in tutte le sue varianti al pubblico generale italiano. L’assenza di note esplicative lungo il percorso dei testi favorisce la lettura diretta delle poesie, permettendo al lettore di cogliere le loro diverse sfumature e l’evoluzione dei loro temi grazie anche all’accurata selezione delle poesie. Inoltre, la traduzione attenta alla semantica profonda del testo riesce a mostrare tutto il ventaglio di significati dei versi, rendendo, insomma, “la voce dovuta” a Pedro Salinas in lingua italiana.



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