

The Narrative Dilemma of Nanjing Massacre in Chinese Screens from the Perspective of Cultural Memory

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.9010082>

Received: 30 December 2024; Accepted: 03 January 2025; Published: 02 February 2025

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, Jan Assmann formulated the notion of cultural memory, thus establishing the study of memory in its cultural context. As a selectively constructed, reorganized, and articulated phenomenon, cultural memory, through diverse reconstructive processes and expressive modalities, generates varied recollections, eliciting a range of public perspectives and emotional responses. This dissertation explores the contemporary understanding of the Nanjing Massacre narrative, reflected by its simultaneous embrace of international perspectives and adherence to national values. This understanding is according to public's interpretations of wartime history and acknowledges the dual burden between China's national identity formation and its engagement with globalization. From this perspective, this paper seeks out China's narrative dilemma of the Nanjing Massacre.

Keywords: Nanjing Massacre, Cultural Memory, Historical Narrative, Human Narrative, National Narrative

INTRODUCTION

Halbwachs pioneered the concept of collective memory, arguing that individual memories are closely associated with social contexts. Society, he claimed, offers the very mechanisms by which individuals reconstruct their memories[1]. Therefore, a "so-called" "collective memory" and a social framework for memory arise in society, allowing structures in which individuals situate and integrate their personal recollections. Collective memory, then, locates memory in group and social structures. Jan Assmann developed this concept further, integrating memory into cultural studies and drawing a key distinction between communicative and cultural memory [2]. For memory to remain vibrant in a society, it must be continually repeated and reproduced. Communicative memory, however, is vulnerable to generational change; each such shift can create a break in continuity. Jan and Aleida Assmann have often noted that the temporal limit of communicative memory is approximately 30 to 40 years[3]. To counteract the effects of these generational shifts, social communication systems must develop external structures for the encoding, storage, and retrieval of culturally significant information. This external structure constitutes the "cultural dimension of memory," otherwise known as cultural memory[2].

In essence, cultural memory involves the preservation and perpetuation of historically significant events through various external cultural symbols, such as textual, ritual, and image systems[4]. This process, however, is not static; it requires continuous adjustment and reconstruction to align with the current social environment's needs, interests, and benefits, thereby maintaining a strong emotional connection with the collective members[2]. The heart of cultural memory is the shared traditions associated with political identity in a society [5]. These traditions play a crucial role in how individuals affect their self-perception. Through the perspective of cultural memory, members of a collective gain insight into their shared characteristics and recognize what sets them apart from others[2]. Therefore, three fundamental questions arise when analyzing cultural memory: Who engages in the act of remembering? What specific elements are retained in memory? And how is the process of remembering carried out? [6].

"Who remembers" and "what is remembered" represent two sides of a coin where "who" constitutes the subject, and "what" the object. The specificity of the remembering subject defines the scope of what is remembered; whereas, the object of memory plays an instrumental role in constructing and reconstructing the identity of the remembering subject. This set of concepts pertains to the political and ideological aspects of memory and forms the critical foundation to apply the social critique function of memory. Meanwhile, "how is it remembered" or "how is memory possible" refers to the process of recollection, comprising a series of conscious actions produced from personal neural systems and psychological mechanisms. It also finds expressions in historical human activities, such as folk myths, museums, local chronicles, monuments, rituals, archives, and social customs, which are deeply connected to the social and cultural nature of memory[6].

Assmann argues that language, as a symbolic system constituted by signs, derives its symbolic power not from its formal qualities but from its acoustic dimension[7]. In essence, language, predating specific forms, constitutes a primordial form of memory, acting as a repository for shared experience. This expressive capacity of language is realized as text through formal inscription. The fundamental and prevailing understanding of "text" is that of a structured linguistic expression, one specifically molded by acts of remembering, communicating, and interpreting. Ehlich contends that the primary form of a text is not the annotated work, but the information conveyed through it, represented by its potential for re-reception. Therefore, for a text, the written form is not decisive; what is crucial are the acts of storage and transmission[8].

Therefore, in cultural texts, the scope of cultural memory plays a critical role in influencing the boundaries of memory storage and forming memory identity. In cultural memory texts, the relationship between the subject and object of memory determines the memory's scope. The memory subject's nature establishes the limits of what is remembered, while the memory object is instrumental in constructing and reconstructing the memory subject's identity. Wertsch refers to the process of organizing our understanding of the past through selection and employment as "narrative"[9]. It follows that the memory subject selects the form of "narrative" based on the function, purpose, and method of various narratives, thereby influencing the memory object. In addition, the memory object (the content of cultural memory), through its transmission and reinterpretation, forming the identity formation of the memory subject in recollections. This creates a memory chain linking the memory subject, narrative, and memory object.

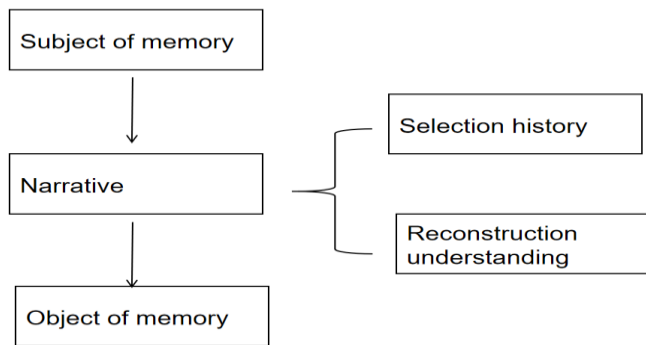


Figure 1. The memory chain between subject and object of cultural memory.

The formation of the object of cultural memory is influenced by the memory subject and the narrative. The subject represents the perspective from which memory is viewed, and varying perspectives give rise to different narrative structures, finally forming the objects of memory themselves. Narrative, therefore, is crucial in linking the subject and object of cultural memory. Visual technology, as a mass medium, has acted as a repository for historical texts since its earliest days. It not only documents history but also reflects cultural and ideological transformations. The memory conveyed through images continually shapes identity and cultural understanding in the civil society. Therefore, images have become an essential medium in the social construction of collective memory. A psychological and cognitive gap exists between images and their audience. Across this gap, the cultural memory in images is constantly reproduced and assimilated, generating shared cultural representations and national identity. Film, a medium integrating communicative, artistic, literary, and educational dimensions, offers, in this author's view, a powerful perspective for analyzing the

evolving ideologies in cultural memory by analyzing the narrative strategies and differing representations of historical events across diverse films. This analytical approach represents a roadmap for more effectively assessing the narrative interpretations of historical events in contemporary concerns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Memory and Trauma Narratives

Wang Xia highlights the profound historical responsibility of films depicting the Nanjing Massacre[10]. She asserts that such films must uphold historical authenticity while achieving aesthetic sophistication. This balance, according to Wang, should avoid the commercialization of suffering and violence, instead fostering national awareness and preserving cultural memory. Similarly, Li Feng explores how Chinese cinema addresses the Nanjing Massacre, oscillating between symbolic representation and collective emotional memory[11]. Li emphasizes the need to break away from stereotypical trauma narratives and embrace more diverse interpretations. Yang Xiwen adopts a "post-memory" framework to analyze these films, focusing on narrative structures and the representation of trauma to examine how cinematic storytelling transmits individual experiences of historical suffering. Wang also delves into the historical writing aspects of Nanjing Massacre films, advocating for the use of individual life stories to forge emotional connections with contemporary audiences and enhance the educational value of such narratives[12]. Complementarily, Chen Linxia examines cross-cultural narratives of the massacre, arguing that these not only reflect political and cultural contexts within globalization but also offer nation-states a platform to construct and project their identities through significant historical events[13]. Schultz focuses on the affective dimensions of Lu Chuan's *City of Life and Death*, emphasizing how the film employs visceral imagery[14]. He explores the role of such emotional storytelling as a form of "soft power," allowing China to share its traumatic history globally.

Reflections on Human Nature

Wang Xia analyzes the dual depiction of Japanese soldiers in Nanjing Massacre films, portraying them both as "demons" and as reflective figures representing ordinary individuals[15]. This duality provides insight into the universal dimensions of human evil, prompting viewers to reflect on historical authenticity and morality. From a media studies perspective, Li Juan investigates how national collective memory is shaped through film[16]. She observes that Chinese cinema, under the influence of Western values, is actively reconstructing its transnational and globalized identity, highlighting the need for deeper theoretical exploration of cinematic narratives.

Redemption Themes and the Brilliance of Humanity

Zhang Wei compares the "redeemer" archetype in Eastern and Western war films, noting that Western films often achieve global acclaim due to their compelling storytelling[17]. He argues that Chinese cinema should focus on emotional resonance, balancing artistic value and commercial success while addressing audience psychology and emphasizing humanitarian themes. Jia Leilei analyzes *The Flowers of War*, highlighting its dual focus on sacrifice and survival[18]. The film portrays the efforts of an American priest and courtesans in rescuing schoolgirls, revealing the complexity of human courage and compassion amidst wartime brutality. In contrast, Lu Lu critiques the film's narrative logic, arguing that its gendered elements and perspectives reflect Western critiques of contemporary China rather than historically accurate accounts[19].

Political Context and International Communication

Xiang Zhiqiang discusses the challenges of cross-cultural communication in Chinese cinema, proposing that effective global engagement requires the integration of local cultural strengths with international cinematic strategies[20]. Ning An argues that these films employ gendered narratives to construct Chinese nationalism and fostering a collective anti-Japanese identity[21]. Kinney explores these films dramatize the historical events of the Nanjing Massacre, often aligning with the "national humiliation" narrative promoted by the Chinese Communist Party. Weiss explores the representation of the Nanjing Massacre in Chinese and Japanese cinema, focusing on the depiction of wartime sexual violence[22]. The review highlights the divergence in

national perspectives and narrative strategies between the two countries. It contextualizes the discourse within broader debates about nationalism, gender, and historical memory.

It is evident that research on films about the Nanjing Massacre, while encompassing various fields, remains predominantly discipline-specific, with a notable lack of genuine interdisciplinary collaboration. This study integrates perspectives from multiple disciplines, including memory studies, narrative theory, and political analysis, to examine the portrayal of the Nanjing Massacre in cinema. By situating these films within their broader social contexts, the study further explores the narrative dilemma.

METHODS

This paper, drawing on Jan Assmann's framework of cultural memory[23]-[25], analyzes how narratives of memory are formed from the perspective of the "subject and object" of cultural memory. Through close readings of Chinese Nanjing Massacre films, this study explores how these narrative strategies affect the differences in memory. From this point of view, this paper observes the narrative characteristics and narrative dilemma of the Nanjing Massacre in Chinese screen.

Thr Memory of Narrative Differences

In the aftermath of World War II, the Nanjing Massacre has been subject to continuous reinterpretation and redefinition in the national consciousness of both countries involved, as well as in the international arena. Over recent decades, it has increasingly come to symbolize Japan's aggression against China during World War II. The Nanjing Massacre plays a critical role in redefining China's national identity and image. Its significance has been imbued with various meanings, influenced by national needs, political contexts, and diplomatic relations.

National Perspective: National Narrative

When a nation/ethnic group is treated as the frame of reference for cultural memories, the particular motive for constructing such memories can be to forge loyalty to a particular nation or ethnic group and simultaneously promote national unity and state-sponsored ideologies. To achieve this objective, usually the nation puts itself at the center of the memories and nearly invariably opts for a national framework in storytelling. Such controls over the collective memory of citizens and their feelings of patriotism are exercised for the purpose of strengthening the relations of the nation. National narratives generally serve political purposes, aiming to shape citizens' national consciousness by selecting events and figures that contribute to the construction of national identity and the promotion of state ideology. These narratives are frequently presented in a coherent and readily comprehensible story structure, avoiding complexity and diversity. This facilitates the formation of a memory object that emphasizes national unity and legitimacy, ensuring that the ideology in the narrative remains consistent throughout repeated transmission and reception.

The narrative constructs a stark dichotomy between Japanese soldiers and Chinese civilians, fixating on the wanton slaughter of the latter and the sexual violence perpetrated against Chinese women by the Japanese military. This binary depiction casts the Japanese soldiers as agents of cruelty, barbarity, and unwarranted aggression, while the portrayal of Chinese civilians highlights their victimhood and righteousness. In early Chinese Nanjing Massacre films, such as *Massacre in Nanjing* (1987) and *Men Behind the Sun* (1988), this narrative was dominant. By nationalizing the memory of the Nanjing Massacre, the state assumes the agent role of remembrance. Employing a state-sanctioned narrative, this film highlights the most savage elements of the massacre to ensure its continued commemoration. The objective is to verify the historical record and cultivate patriotism, thereby strengthening public understanding of this event. The resulting cultural memory incorporates the rebuilding of collective remembrance, the stimulation of patriotism and nationalism, the accentuation of historical justice and moral obligation, and the development of cross-cultural historical connections.

Personal Perspective: Human Narrative

A humanistic narrative seeks to study the fundamental traits, motivations, and behavioral patterns intrinsic to human beings, clarifying both our shared humanity and individual differences. Memories, in this narrative

structure, form various dimensions such as emotions, morality, desires, fears, and conflicts, thus illustrating the complex nature of human behavior and psychological processes. In cinematic storytelling, humanistic narratives often employ individual perspectives, concentrating on several key elements: 1) By depicting complex characters and subtle emotions, these narratives cultivate audience connection. 2) They embed personal stories in particular social environments, thereby analyzing broader sociocultural concerns. 3) They probe human morality and values by showcasing the ethical quandaries characters confront. 4) Through characters' journeys of self-discovery and development, they clarify the core of human nature. 5) Utilizing detailed plots and psychological storytelling, they unveil the significant effect of trauma on the human spirit, alongside the potential for healing and restoration.

In the 1990s, there was an ideological backlash in China. Don't Cry, Nanking (1995) situates Sino-Japanese civilians in the social context of the Nanjing Massacre, powerfully demonstrating history's profound effect on individual lives. The memory of the Nanjing Massacre, constructed through a humanistic narrative perspectives, transcends mere documentation of the event. It explores the complexities and diversity of human experience through deep explorations of individual feelings, ethical conflicts, societal pressures, self-realization, and the effects of trauma. In the film's cultural memory, the subjects of remembrance are Chinese and Japanese civilians, and the chosen recollections indicate the factual challenges faced by civilians during this calamity. Therefore, the memory of the Nanjing Massacre in the humanistic narrative framework not only elicits public emotional resonance, encouraging deeper contemplation on humanity, history, and society, but also enriches the collective memory of the event. This enrichment facilitates a more deeper interpretation of the massacre.

International Perspective: Historical Narrative

The historical narrative seeks to document and interpret past events with the utmost objectivity and comprehensiveness possible. This narrative framework prioritizes multiple perspectives and complexity, evaluating various interpretations and impacts of historical events. Historical narratives tend to gravitate towards empirical research, focusing on the examination of diverse historical evidence, such as documents, archaeological findings, and oral histories. This approach embraces a wide array of voices and perspectives, avoiding oversimplification and one-dimensional accounts. It not only concentrates on the occurrence and progression of events but also incorporates an in-depth analysis of the background, causes, and effects. By acknowledging the complexity and multilayered nature of history, striving to record and interpret historical events in an objective and comprehensive manner.

In a historical narrative, cultural memory is constructed by various actors, and their corresponding ideologies also become varied. The resulting mnemonic artifacts are inevitably affected by power and ideological influences, as well as the narrators' subjective interpretations. Nevertheless, through rigorous research and multi-angle analysis, a degree of objectivity and impartiality can be achieved. Applied to film, this narrative structure allows for diverse recollections of a single historical event, presented from multiple viewpoints that corroborate and enrich one another. Accordingly, this facilitates a more objective and thorough understanding of unfamiliar historical events for international audiences. Due to the diversification and complexity of historical narratives, such an approach is suitable for an international perspective and conducive to a deeper understanding of the Nanjing Massacre. Therefore, memories curated in this framework tend to be more comprehensive and complete.

In *City of Life and Death* (2009) and *John Rabe* (2009)[26], these films have attempted to use historical narratives to bring the Nanjing Massacre to the international marketplace. The subject of these films centers on the memory of history. While influenced by certain ideologies, in the framework of the historical narrative, the constructed memory object not only embraces those memories that are intentionally overlooked but also admits other memories and meanings supported by the truth of history. This approach comprehensively and objectively discloses the memory of the Nanjing Massacre to the international audience, which, beyond the residents of China and Japan, offers a means of understanding the Nanjing Massacre while also offering a channel for deeper interpretation of the event.

The Practice of Cultural Memory Narrative and the Cognitive Patterns of World War II History

The narrative methods employed in cultural memory play a critical role in forming our understanding of World War II history. The progression from war resistance to anti-fascism and the broader anti-war sentiment forms a coherent sequence that aligns with the cognitive patterns associated with World War II history. This structure resonates with the internal reasoning processes of the general audience [27].

Resistance — National Narrative

Chinese national narratives frame the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression as a conflict between righteousness and iniquity. These narratives, centered on themes of heroism, shared sacrifice, and national cohesion, emphasize the nation's critical role in the war effort. These films under the national narrative cast the nation as both a sufferer and a vindicator, a narrative strategy that resonates deeply with Chinese audiences while also establishing the nation's historical authority[28]. These films cast the nation as both a sufferer and a vindicator, a narrative strategy that resonates deeply with Chinese audiences while also establishing the nation's historical authority[1]. Moreover, through a selective presentation of historical events, these films forge a shared national memory, foregoing a study of historical complexity and diversity, thus tightly connecting the nation's destiny to its wartime triumph[29]. The focus on this victory further strengthens the image of the nation as a factor for justice.

Anti-Fascism — Historical Narrative

World War II historiography extends beyond national boundaries, situating the conflict in a global historical perspective. This approach analyzes the war itself while also, through the reconstruction of historical evidence, exposing the brutality and inhumanity of fascism and emphasizing the international importance of collective anti-fascist resistance[9]. These films under the national narrative meticulously portray the ravages of war and the differing experiences of soldiers and civilians from both sides, clarifying the devastating consequences of armed conflict[30]. These films' historical narrative not only details China's resistance but also stresses the global repercussions of this event in the larger anti-fascist movement, thus placing the Nanjing Massacre in a more extensive historical context[31]. The persistent duress placed upon Japanese soldiers to commit atrocities against civilians illustrates how Japanese militarism and fascism eroded human morality. This devastation affected not only the victims of invasion but also caused extensive damage to all involved and those who bore witness. Moreover, cultural memory in this historical narrative explores the reasons for the recurrence of massacres across time and geography. Its ultimate objective is to encourage audiences to contemplate contemporary global issues and to resist the resurgence of fascist atrocities and massacres[28].

Anti-War — Humanistic Narrative

Humanistic narratives, in contrast to their counterparts discussed previously, center on individual wartime experiences. By portraying human emotions and moral conflicts, they expose senselessness and brutality of the war. These narratives emphasize war's devastating effects on individuals and families, evoking the audience's desire for peace and prompting reflection on human nature[27]. *Don't Cry, Nanking* (1995) exemplifies this humanistic approach. Through detailed depictions, the film concretizes the horrors of war, enabling viewers to viscerally experience its cruelty and ruthlessness[32]. The resulting emotional impact seeks to ignite a profound desire for the cessation of hostilities and the establishment of peace, thus fulfilling its anti-war purpose. In addition, humanistic narratives represent a crucial moral function. By showcasing the ethical quandaries individuals confront in wartime, the film prompts viewers to evaluate the justification and validity of war itself. This narrative strategy questions conventional notions of heroism and, by indicating inhumanity of the war, advocates for the restoration of peace and humanitarian principles[33].

CONCLUSION

The Nanjing Massacre has long been entangled in a Sino-Japanese struggle for the "right of discourse", hindering its recognition on the world stage. This has thus limited cinematic portrayals of the event, presenting filmmakers with two central predicaments. On the one hand, narratives are trapped between the demands of

political agendas and the need for global resonance. The recounting of the Nanjing Massacre is unavoidably shaped by political forces. China and Japan hold vastly different interpretations of this historical tragedy, leading to a diversification and complication of the narrative. In China, the Nanjing Massacre is frequently utilized to evoke nationalistic feeling and acts as a vital instrument for solidifying national identity.

However, this politically charged narrative risks simplifying or ignoring the complexity of the event, cultivating a singular and unbalanced remembrance [9]. For the Nanjing Massacre to achieve international acknowledgment, it must be situated in a broader global historical framework. Accordingly, this presents the new challenge of preserving the narrative's credibility and consistency in a diverse cultural milieu. Considering the widely varying understandings and interpretations of the Nanjing Massacre across cultures, constructing a cohesive global narrative poses a formidable challenge[29].

On the other hand, the conflict between the audience's historical understanding of World War II and the evolving direction of films contributes to narrative ambiguity. Chinese audiences' understanding remains anchored in the resistance era, with some even opposing global anti-war sentiments. For instance, *City of Life and Death* sparked widespread criticism and negative feedback online following its release. As evidenced by online responses, Chinese audiences' understanding and conceptualization of World War II are significantly affected by legendary narratives, cultivating China's unique nationalistic sentiments and ideological perspectives regarding the conflict. These "stories" have crystallized into perceived facts in the audiences' consciousness, rendering alternative ideologies unacceptable[27]. Therefore, the production of Nanjing Massacre films suffers with the challenge of either catering to prevailing cognitive levels or guiding audiences towards a more progressive anti-war ideology.

Remembering the Nanjing Massacre requires considering how national identity is constructed and how discourse power is negotiated in a globalized world. Therefore, a single narrative cannot adequately satisfy both global perspectives and contemporary Chinese mainstream thought. Since Chinese public understanding of the event must move from a focus on resistance to one on anti-fascism, films regarding the Nanjing Massacre should synthesize national, historical, and humanistic narratives. These films should expose the massacre's fundamental nature and touch upon the war's central issues, rather than framing the event as a typical ethnic conflict. By incorporating multiple narratives, the cultural memory of the Nanjing Massacre can transcend ethnocentrism and cultivate a shared international historical understanding, clarifying its significance irrespective of race, nationality, religion, or gender, and consistently prioritizing the value of human life[34].

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