

Collective memory and ghost culture of war: comparing short films from Vietnam, Korea and Japan

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Research purpose

By studying three short films about ghosts and wars from Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan, we want to analyze the similarities and differences of collective memory towards wars and trauma among the three countries.

Background

1. Spirits and gods in Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese culture

a. Ancestor worship

The culture of East and Southeast Asia has been largely influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism. In Confucian culture, deceased ancestors are believed to be a means of connection to the supreme power of heaven. People believe that although the ancestors have entered the eternal realm, they are always by the side of their descendants, and they are able to influence the living. Filial piety is considered one of the most important virtues in Confucian philosophy, which requires people to respect their parents and ancestors, and even the deceased ancestors should be respected as if they were still alive. Therefore, there are a set of rites and practices for ancestor worship in Confucian-influenced societies, including Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan.

Vietnamese usually have an ancestor altar in their home or business. On the ancestor altar, they burn incense sticks along with hell notes, and make great platters of food as offerings during important traditional or religious celebrations, or other important events. Moreover, they celebrate the death anniversary of their ancestors, while not celebrating birthdays traditionally (Rambo, 2005). Similarly, Koreans usually hold a ceremony on the night before the death anniversary of their ancestors, which is called *Kije*. Apart from *Kije*, there are another two kinds of ancestral rites, one of which, called *charye*, is tea rites held four times a year on major holidays, and the other, *Sije*, is seasonal rites held for ancestors who are five or more generations removed (Bae, 2008). Ancestor worship in Japan has been linked to Buddhism. The basic purpose of ancestor worship has been to enable the appreciation of what the ancestors have done in shaping everything in the present. Ceremonies have been conducted to benefit the souls of the dead, to seek their benign protection and assistance, to share with them the

pleasures and sorrows of the living, or to ensure the passage of the newly dead from the world of the living to the world beyond (Parkes et al, 2015).

b. Ghost Festival

In Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan, ghost festivals are on the 15th night of the 7th lunar month. It has two origins, *Zhongyuan* Festival in Taoism, or *Yulanpen* Festival in Buddhism. In Vietnam, it is called *Tết Trung Nguyên* or *Vu Lan*, which is a time for the pardoning of condemned souls who are released from hell. People appease the homeless souls with offerings of food, and release birds and fish for the merits of the living. In South Korea, it is called *Miryang Baekjung* Festival. Apart from a festival of the dead, it also has elements of an agricultural holiday, with a shamanic ritual of supplication to the agricultural deities. In Japan, *Chūgen* or *O-Bon*, is an annual event for giving gifts to the ancestral spirits, when people give gifts to their superiors and acquaintances.

c. Traditional beliefs

Instead of an organized religious system, Vietnamese folk religion is a set of local worship traditions devoted to the *thần*, which could be translated as “spirits”, “gods” or “generative powers”. The concept of *linh* is important, which has a meaning equivalent to holy and numen, the power of a deity to affect the world of the living. Vietnamese usually believe in “the soul does not die”, and they think that those who die unlucky will bring disaster because their souls are not comforted (Kwon, 2008). In South Korea, the folk religion is Korean Shamanism, which is an animistic ethnic religion dating to prehistory, and consists of the worship of gods, ancestors, as well as nature spirits. Shamans are chosen people who hold rituals for the welfare of the individuals or society. Koreans generally believe that ghosts not only attach to mountains, rivers, trees, and rocks, but also like to attach to dilapidated houses, ancient tombs, old furniture, and utensils. If things go wrong, it is because they have failed to properly manage their relationships with the spirits who have the ability to intervene in their lives (Baker, 2008). In Japan, Shinto is the indigenous religion of most of the people. It is a nature religion, and its key concept is *Kami*, which means spirit. Shinto means the way of the *Kami*. Shintoists believe that everything in the natural world is a *Kami*. Japanese generally believe that all humans have a spirit or soul called *reikon*, which leaves the body when a person dies. If the person dies in a sudden or violent manner, or proper rites have not been performed, the *reikon* is believed to transform into a *yūrei*, analogous to the Western model of ghosts.

2. Traumatic history in Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan

Between 1910 and 1945, Korea was ruled as a part of the Empire of Japan. In colonial Korea, the Japanese government operated various forms of assimilation, including spiritual, material, as well as civic assimilation (Henry, 2016). The 35 years of Japanese colonial rule is a traumatic event for Koreans. Expansionism and militarism brought trauma to the Japanese, too. Due to the official aggressive policies, Japan was involved in several wars. Finally, Japan unconditionally surrendered to the Allied forces in 1945, followed by allied military occupation.

After World War II, there was the Vietnam War and Korean War under the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Vietnam War was a protracted and costly conflict that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States, which killed more than 3 million people (Anderson, 2002). The Korean War was fought between North Korea and South Korea. Throughout the Korean War, “comfort stations” were operated by South Korean officials for UN soldiers, and many women suffered (Hohn & Moon, 2010).

Introduction of three short films

We have selected three ghost-themed films from three Asian countries to reflect and compare the war trauma of different countries and the ways they are shaping the collective memory related to war.

1. Vietnam Film: Wandering Souls

a. Synopsis

During the Vietnam War, American soldiers exploited the religious beliefs of the Vietnamese people by playing tapes that imitated the cries of ghosts to convince Viet Cong soldiers that the wandering spirits of soldiers were calling. When the VC soldiers stationed in the dark and claustrophobic tunnels heard these ghosts, they felt panic and eventually fled their positions.

b. Relation to Topics

The Symbolic Meaning of Ghosts: In Vietnamese religious beliefs, if a person was not properly buried, his or her soul would continue to wander aimlessly in pain, becoming a lonely ghost. Out of fear of becoming a lonely ghost in war, the Vietnamese soldiers eventually succeeded in falling prey to the American ghost recordings.

The Invaded Part of the War: Vietnam in the last century was in the midst of a long process of colonization, invasion and internal struggle, which triggered a large number of casualties and family break-ups, thus triggering emotions of war trauma among the Vietnamese people. There were three types of voices of ghosts played by the US military: girls' voices, men's voices and friends' voices. For example, the girl's voice often consisted of "Daddy, Daddy, come home with me". And these voices reflect the nostalgia for family life in times of peace and the resistance to war in the midst of war.

2. Korean Film: The Pregnant Tree and the Goblin

a. Synopsis

In-soon was orphaned during the Korean War and later sold to American soldiers as a prostitute, suffering the tragic experience of being a comfort woman. One day, the messenger of death found In-Soon and hoped to bring her to the afterlife by making up stories. However, In Soon refused to give in to the messenger of death and was determined to defend her memory.

b. Relation to Topics

The Continuous Trauma of War: The massive casualties and destruction caused by the Second World War and the Korean War have left the Korean people with extensive psychological scars from the war. In the US military 'base villages', some women were forced into the war as comfort women and suffered ongoing psychological trauma from the sexual violence of the war.

Collective Memory and Individual Memory After the War: Comfort women choose to remember the trauma of war, but the state and society tend to tamper with the historical memory related to comfort women, thus forgetting this traumatic memory.: According to Korean folk belief, the death of a person in a family is followed by the visit of three messengers of death, who take the spirit of the dead to the underworld. In the movie, the messenger of death symbolizes the party who tries to tamper with the collective memory and make the collective forget the history of comfort women.

3. Japan Film: Dreams - The Tunnel

a. Synopsis

A retired Japanese company commander passed a large concrete pedestrian tunnel on his way home from the war in World War II. Here, he met the ghost of Private Noguchi who had died in war. Noguchi pointed to his parents' home. He was sad and knew that he would never see them again. Subsequently, the commander's entire third platoon walked out of the tunnel and failed to accept their death. The commander struggled to tell them the truth and said that he himself should be blamed for sending them to a futile battle.

b. Relation to Topics

The Symbolic Meaning of Ghosts: According to the traditional Japanese belief, people believe that when people die, their souls will go to the Shinto afterlife (yominokuni) or the Buddhist pure land (anoyo). But any obstacle to achieving this goal will turn the soul into yurei (ghost), a Japanese ghost trapped between the dead and the living, just like the dead soldier in the movie.

The Way the Aggressor Shapes Traumatic Memory: As an aggressor in Japan's war, it is different in shaping the collective memory of the war. On the one hand, Japan chose to reflect on the evil and cruelty of war, and hoped to prevent the war from happening again. On the other hand, Japan focuses on the war trauma of casualties and broken families, and depicts a sad plot of war trauma.

Similarities

After introducing three short films, there are some similarities in the contexts, including the common religion and belief in Southeast Asia as well as how people perceive the concept of ghost culture.

1. “Good death” and “Bad death”: Buddhism

To begin with, people in these three places believe in “Good death” and “Bad death” as Buddhism affected them the most. According to Buddhism, all life is in a cycle of death and rebirth called samsara which is also the definition of reincarnation. People believe death is not the end, there will be life after death and “God” will define their souls based on their achievements in life. To achieve a “Good death”, according to the genealogical and spatial order, is non-violent and a concept of “death at home” (Kwon, 2008). Therefore, good souls will become ancestors and develop into ancestor worship and tradition, in order to maintain the law of the entire family and society. While “Bad death” means the painful and violent death away from home, having to wander in another world and staying in the margins of this world (Kwon, 2008). In this case, the Vietnamese and Japanese films illustrate the concept of “Bad death”. In the former film, the comrade died during the war and the main character buried him. Although the US army played a trick to frighten him, we can still know how Vietnamese scared spirits which died away from home. In the film "The Tunnel", the entire ghost platoon stopped the commander in order to know the truth of their death and also revealed how locals believe that “Bad death” can not let people rest in peace.

2. Traumas and intimacy with displaced souls

Local people in these three places hold an “extreme contrast” attitude towards ghosts (Wolf, 1974). It is because the social identity of the dead changes as the position of the observer changes. For example, one’s ancestor may be another person’s ghost, and vice versa. The “extreme contrast” attitude can also be shown as the different emotions perceived from the displaced souls. Although they are all ghosts, people worship ancestors with respect, offering incense, food, and votive money to them. However, to other wandering spirits, they hand over gifts to other souls like to bandits in the hope of avoiding their menace. The “extreme contrast” attitude is also presented in these three films. In the Vietnamese film, the main character felt close to his dead comrade but was scared of his soul. While in the Korean film, the girl was afraid of dead souls but respected the Death Messengers. In the Japanese film, the commander was scared of the displaced souls but felt calm when he knew they were his dead subordinates. Therefore, from the above examples, people can have both traumatic and intimate feelings towards one displaced spirit.

3. Symbolic meaning of ghost culture

Death of souls has its symbolic meaning and the identity of ghosts is a variable. Speaking of different meanings of ghost, the natural meaning of it is a wandering spirit that can appear to the living. While the traditional meaning of ghosts in Vietnam represents public figures, and have their own stories and historical background (Kwon, 2008). For instance, every Vietnamese knows who is Đạo Mẫu, the worship of mother goddesses. It becomes their collective memory as well as their tradition. In cultural meaning, ghosts can be a traumatic thought that always follows an identity. Derrida mentioned a concept of “Hauntology” in his book *Spectres of Marx* in 1993, it is a concept of referring to the return or persistence of elements from the past, as in the manner of a ghost. Take war as an example, we all think that

the world is peaceful now, but the idea of invasion follows us like a ghost spirit. It may be the reason that led to the Russo-Ukrainian War as Putin regards Ukraine as an extra resource for Russia. Speaking of the film's context, in the Korean film, although there are no more comfort women now, the psychological trauma of suffering still follows some people as an individual memory or collective memory. Therefore, ghost culture has different symbolic meanings and the idea of "Hauntology" explains how the past becomes a ghosted thinking that follows us as a psychological traumas.

Differences

In this section, we will discuss the differences among three texts, such as characters and their different roles in the historical context. Although reviewing and reflecting on mainstream historical discourse is certainly a way of analyzing history from the perspective of cultural studies, individual memory can help us get closer to the diverse "truth". Memories are something everyone can do. It allows individuals to record historical scenes as well as feel subjectivity. Therefore, we will compare the collective memory with the individual memory in these films, in an attempt to understand the complexity of history. In addition, through the analysis of individual experiences and individual memories in these films, we can have a more embodied understanding of what wars meant to them.

1. Vietnam

In Vietnam's collective discourse, the Vietnam War was a "hot war" during the Cold War—A war between the Republic of Vietnam and the United States against Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Viet Cong. North Vietnam played an invaded role in the War, as presented in the film "Wandering souls". Conversely, the U.S. military in it appeared as an invisible and faceless symbol of "aggressor". The director focused on the presentation of the "invaded", such as shooting scenes of Vietnamese soldiers hiding in burrows who were on the passive and vulnerable side. They tried to escape the fate of being hunted and killed by American soldiers. Although they did not see the invaders, they were shocked by the roar of "wandering souls", as if their fear of ghosts was far greater than their fear of being defeated or being killed.

It must be emphasized that for North Vietnamese soldiers, in their fear of displacement and death, comfort can only be found in traditional religions. That is why the North Vietnamese soldiers were very religious about their beliefs. To understand their metaphorical fear of "ghosts", we must place it in the context of local folk beliefs: Wandering ghosts/souls are widely associated with "death without a burial place" in Vietnamese culture. The fear of becoming a ghost and being forgotten is rooted in the North Vietnamese soldier's fear of death. Therefore, the aggressor who played "the cry of ghosts" reminded Vietnamese soldiers of the tragic fate of being "encroached, destroyed, and forgotten". "Wandering souls" used a number of technical means—tense music or dark and eerie sets—to render the almost neurotic mental state of the Vietnamese soldiers. We can say that the deep fear of "being forgotten" also reflects the concerns of North Vietnamese soldiers with local characteristics in the context of the Vietnam War.

2. Korea

Park Inshun in the documentary “The Pregnant Tree and the Goblin” was a comfort woman from a base village. The history of the base village sex industry can be traced back to September 1945. At that time, the U.S. occupied South Korea and took over a comfort station once used by the Japanese. Although comfort women were designated as illegal by the US in 1946, the number of Korean comfort women serving the US military stationed in Korea continued to rise during the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1960s, there were as many as 13,000 women in the sex trade targeting U.S. troops stationed in South Korea. The devaluation of comfort women in mainstream social discourse has kept Park Inshun on the lower rungs for a long time. Her traumatic experience comes from her vulnerability, which in turn comes from her profession, her femininity and her nationality. In the film, Park Inshun saw some ghosts who were trying to tamper with her memory in her trauma-induced delusions. "Ghosts" here can be seen as a metaphor for the U.S. military. The stories recorded in the documentary reflect the kinship between traumatic memory and ghost legends in a general sense, and also show the tragedy and trauma of Koreans (especially Korean women) in colonial history in a metaphorical way.

Nevertheless, unlike the other two films, the character in this film was not satisfied with just staying in pain, but took the initiative to confront national colonization and gender colonization, and gain her own subjectivity from actions and choices. Park Inshun painted "Ghosts and Pregnant Trees" to reflect her own situation, while also using artistic creation as a means of resistance. The women in the base village who were sexually assaulted used art to resist the erasure of their memory by the American invaders.

In addition, as one of the few war films with female protagonists, we can see the impact of war on different gender roles from its comparison with other movies. Male soldiers in history have faced different kinds of traumas: Firstly, perhaps their country has been subverted and invaded, so they may have experienced traumas under patriotism; Secondly, traumas may have come from their religious belief and fear of becoming “wandering souls”. Thirdly, they may also need to suffer the fate of being the only survivors which means unable to integrate into the current society, and difficult to get rid of the guilt for the deceased. But comfort women’s traumas have broader origins. In addition to these above, there is a double dilemma for comfort women such as Park Inshun: Her traumas represented by ghosts contain the isomorphism of national colonization and gender colonization. Comfort women may experience the traumas soldiers faced in colonial countries, while being sexually oppressed. The film does not over-exaggerate Park Inshun’s traumas. Through the characters’ semi-fictional statements about their own experiences, it shows women’s injuries and tenacity.

3. Japan

As mentioned above, Japan has played the roles of both “aggressor” and “invader” in history. Nevertheless, in this film, the boundary between the aggressor and the invaded is blurred, but it opposes the cruelty of war from a broad perspective, and deals with the relationship between the survivors and the dead. For example, the surviving officer in this film apologized to the dead soldier and expressed his pain. He felt guilty about the dead, while he was not accepted

by the “living” world. In public history, after the defeat at the end of World War II, Japan's domestic militarism had loosened a lot. Soldiers’ behaviors were not accepted by citizens, they were treated as “devils”.

This film with the theme of “Dreams” does not introduce too much of its historical background. In order to create a dreamlike atmosphere, the setting of the film is somewhat surreal. The plot of the story is also like a dream, without too much elaboration. We don't know where the soldiers in the film came from, but only see their neat formations and steps, and their green faces indicate their deaths. The story is fictional. However, in the historical context, Japanese soldiers’ sins were real, and so were their traumas. In a decontextualized way, the film weakens the former and highlights the latter. As a result, the surviving officer’s apology has nothing to do with the “justice” of war, but only reflects the alienation of human nature by war, and the sad paradox brought about by this alienation: under the nature of survival, people feel guilty about "surviving", as for rather die with comrades.

Although “Dreams” also used the image of “ghosts” to express the trauma of war. Nevertheless, in the other two films, the fear comes from “being disappeared” (Whether it is the disappearance of memory or the disappearance of life); but in this film, the fear comes from “being forced to exist”, from the idea of carrying the death of others. Trauma manifests itself in very different ways in different war-themed films. Both the fear of “live a long life” and the fear of “premature death” are just two sides of the same war trauma.

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