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<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02652-y>

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'We resolve our own sorrows': screening comfort women in Chinese documentary films

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This article adds a critical lens to the vicissitudinous public remembrance of the comfort women in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the oscillating representations of comfort women in Chinese documentary films. First, it probes how the violated bodies of comfort women on the screen constantly challenge and disrupt the entrenched gender norms in the interstices of the PRC's official paradigms of "national humiliation" and "national greatness." Then, it examines the distinctive film esthetics and documentary ethics of Chinese director Guo Ke's documentary films *Thirty Two* (2014) and *Twenty Two* (2017), given that the latter harvested record-breaking box office sales and incited heated online discussions of the comfort women issue in China. In particular, this article scrutinizes how Guo's esthetically appealing, politically non-confrontational, and ethically provocative approach helps constitute survivors' private, gendered memories and encourages the viewers to contemplate his minimalist narratives. In a broader sense, this article contributes to the discussions of gender, nationalism, war remembrance, and documentary filmmaking in contemporary China.

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Introduction

The term “comfort women”¹, which is the English rendition of the Japanese euphemistic term “*ianfu*,” denotes tens of thousands of women who were either recruited, deceived, or forcibly abducted to fulfill the role of sex slaves for the Japanese military during the Asia Pacific War (1931–1945). Considering the paucity of historical records, scholars have not yet reached a consensus over the total number of comfort women: Chinese historian Su Zhiliang (1999, p.275) estimates about 400,000 victims², while Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki (2000, pp.92–93) estimates between 50,000 and 200,000 victims. Previous scholarly works mainly deal with the history, memories, and cultural representations of comfort women in Japan, South Korea, and the United States and seldomly paid attention to the issue of comfort women in China (Chuh 2003; Kang 2003; Soh 2008; Yoneyama 2016). What is more, the recently published academic books and articles concerning Chinese comfort women generally look into the historical background, survivors’ oral testimonies, and relevant media reports while overlooking the growing constellation of film productions (Su 2022; Qiu et al. 2014; Song 2016).

In the history of Chinese cinema, as Shuqin Cui (2003) has noted, the female body has become “a narrative site for the projection of national trauma and collective memory” (p. xi). Since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, cinematic configurations of Chinese comfort women, which had remained in amnesia in Maoist China and re-emerged in the post-1978 reform and open-up era, have been imbricated with China’s tumultuous domestic politics and foreign diplomacy. By offering a brief summary of the historical memorialization of comfort women in China, the first section of this article provides a contextual background for the following analysis. The second section looks into how the renditions of Chinese comfort women on the screen constantly challenge and disrupt the entrenched gender norms in the interstices of the PRC’s official paradigms of “national humiliation” and “national greatness.” It points out that the violated female body serves as a communicative tool to construct a cohesive storyline centered around vehement nationalistic sentiments and becomes an effective site where alternative storytelling arises and the convoluted relations among gender, nationalism, and patriarchy are re-mediated.

Employing a narrative analysis of the interplay between the female body and nationalism and patriarchy, the third section draws from theories of documentary esthetics and ethics to examine Chinese director Guo Ke’s two documentaries, *Thirty Two* (2014) and *Twenty Two* (2017). Despite its impressive box-office performance, *Twenty Two* has generated controversial debates and discussions among film critics. Some extol how Guo filtered a weighty history through individual testimonies elicited strong emotional resonance from the viewers and triggered widespread attention to the often-suppressed memories of the Chinese comfort women survivors (Xu 2019; Wang 2017). However, Xu et al. (2015) and Wang (2020) harshly criticize the inadequate narratives and poetic film languages that simplified, homogenized, and collectivized the comfort women’s experiences. Differing from the previous scholarly works, this article contends that Guo’s poetic mode of cinematic representation raises ethical concerns about the possibility of re-traumatizing or exploiting the vulnerable filmed subjects and demands ethical responsibility from both the filmmakers and the spectators.

The research questions of this study are twofold. First, this article adds a critical lens to the vicissitudinous public remembrance of the comfort women in the PRC and the oscillating representations of comfort women in Chinese documentary films. Second, it argues that Guo’s esthetically appealing, politically non-confrontational, and ethically provocative approach helps

constitute survivors’ private and gendered memories and, in the meantime, encourages the spectators to contemplate over narrative blanks and fissures concerning the interplay between the female bodies and the ingrained gender norms in the PRC. In a broader sense, this article contributes to the discussions of gender, nationalism, war remembrance, and documentary filmmaking in contemporary China.

Historical remembrances of Chinese comfort women

In 1931, the Imperial Japanese Army invaded Manchuria, inflicted tremendous sexual violence upon Chinese women, and started systematic military sexual slavery in the occupied regions. Approximately twenty thousand Chinese women were forced to become comfort women in thousands of comfort stations across the Japanese army’s occupied regions (Qiu et al. 2014, p. 22). The history of Chinese comfort women faced a long period of national amnesia after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Having investigated the PRC’s approaches to the issue of sexual violence in the 1956 trials of the Japanese military’s war crimes, Xiaoyang Hao (2020) notes that the Chinese government failed to make rape a focal point of the prosecutions and did not pursue the comfort women issue for “their alleged complicity” with the Japanese army (p. 546).

The word “*weianfu*” (comfort women in Chinese *pinyin*) first appeared in the PRC’s state-sponsored newspaper *People’s Daily* in 1962, but this report was related to the comfort women drafted by the United States Army during the Korean War. In 1992, Wan Aihua became the first Chinese comfort woman survivor to publicly speak out about her suffering as a sex slave of the Imperial Japanese Army. In 1999, a *People’s Daily* report used the term “*weianfu*” for the first time to describe the victims of the Japanese military sexual slavery in the city of Tianjin (Shi 2017, p. 26). In 1999, Su Zhiliang, the prominent figurehead of Chinese comfort women’s history, published the first full-length history book on this topic and helped set up the first Research Center for Chinese Comfort Women at Shanghai Normal University. However, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the Chinese government’s overriding concern was maintaining friendly diplomatic relations with Japan, so the survivors could barely get any state assistance, and researchers were often discouraged from investigating this sensitive issue (Vickers 2019, p. 188). For quite a long time, Chinese comfort women’s memories were mobilized only at the grassroots level, involving a small group of historians, social activists, and survivors. Qiu et al. (2014) point out that “action seeking redress for comfort station survivors began as a grassroots movement in China in the late 1980s” (p. 168). For example, Zhang Shuangbing, a retired village school teacher in Yu County, Shanxi Province, started his search for comfort women survivors in the early 1980s and successfully persuaded 127 survivors to break decades of silence, for which Zhang is lauded as “China’s first grassroots researcher investigating comfort women issue.”

The year 2014 marked a watershed moment in Chinese official discourse concerning comfort women, with the Chinese government becoming the leader in rebuilding the history of comfort women and promoting them into the collective national memory (Song 2016, p.144). In 2014, the Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations worsened because of myriad conflicts, such as the sovereign controversies over Diaoyu Island and Japan’s revisions of its constitution. Consequently, China’s media reports featuring comfort women hit a record high in 2014, becoming “not only an important diplomatic tool but also an integral part of domestic patriotic political discourse” (Song 2016, p. 145). In terms of foreign diplomacy, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs repeatedly

urged the Japanese government to treat the comfort women issue correctly and stressed that “the forced recruitment of the ‘comfort women’ is a grave crime against humanity committed by Japan and the ironclad evidence bears no denial” (Liu 2019). In the meantime, the Chinese government adopted various policies to weave comfort women’s historical memories into official discourses. The Museum of Former Site of Liji Lane Comfort Station in Nanjing claimed to be Asia’s largest and most well-preserved comfort station, opened in 2015 to millions of domestic and foreign visitors.

In the recent public remembrance of WWII, Chang (2021) states that the once-dominant trope of the PRC’s “national victimization” has been gradually replaced with “a self-assertive and aspirational narrative of ‘national victory’ and ‘national greatness’” (p. 1152). The reinvigorated interest in the comfort women issue plays into the entanglements of these two interpretative paradigms of war remembrances—national victimization and national greatness—under the rubric of the resilient, masculinist Chinese culture. On the one hand, though having been downplayed in the official rhetoric, the discourse of national victimization is still ubiquitous in the public remembrances of the comfort women, and their sufferings have been repeatedly broadcasted through China’s mass media as a constant warning for Chinese people to stay vigilant for foreign invasions. On the other hand, the discourse of national greatness and national pride helps the general Chinese public overcome their earlier biased views and inculcate the comfort women’s history in their perception of nationalism. Regarding war remembrances, Chinese history textbooks, museums, and public memorializing activities emphasize the Chinese people’s bravery, sacrifice, and heroism in resisting and successfully defeating the fascist Japanese enemy. Paradoxically, the passive comfort women’s history could hardly fit into the official discourse of national greatness and victory but struggles between the previous national humiliation rhetoric and the engrained masculinist public culture.

The official discourse is often reluctant to directly address the sex-related narratives of comfort women, which is incongruent with the PRC’s advocacy for the glorious military success and celebration of untainted revolutionary heroines. In her essay concerning the literary representations of wartime female sex spies, Edwards (2012) notes that female chastity was a long-held revered conception in ancient China and “continued to have currency as a marker of good governance and national dignity in the PRC” (p. 1076). Women who had once been forced into sex could neither fit into the traditional, patriarchal discourse of female chastity nor conform to the PRC’s re-establishment of strict gender norms regarding wartime sexual virtues of women and notions of racial purity. “[The raped Chinese women’s] victimization is often used to represent—or more precisely, to eroticize—China’s own plight,” as Lydia Liu (1994) points out, “in such a signifying practice, the female body is ultimately displaced by nationalism, whose discourse denies the specificity of female experience by giving larger symbolic meanings to the signifier of rape: namely, China itself is being violated by the Japanese rapist” (p. 161). The bodies of Chinese comfort women are not viewed merely as women in corporeal form but are regarded as constant reminders of the foreign violation of national purity based on patriarchal values. Therefore, though having emerged from historical oblivion, Chinese comfort women survivors still occupy a marginalized and staggering status in the public memorializing discourse regarding WWII.

The cinematic portrayals of Chinese comfort women

Correlated with the belated public remembrance of comfort women, Chinese cinema had paid little attention to the

configuration of comfort women throughout the 1950s to 1970s. In popular Sino-Japanese war films, the cinematic depictions of violated Chinese women serve as a powerful outcry, rallying viewers to condemn the brutality of the rapacious Japanese soldiers. Nevertheless, these violated females could hardly occupy the narrative focus under what Zhang (2016) describes as the “paradigms of nationalism, patriotism, and heroism” in the war films of the Maoist era (p. 33). In colonial Hong Kong, the Shaw Brothers produced *Bamboo House of Dolls* (1973), the first feature film to exhibit the tragic sufferings of Chinese comfort women. The main storyline revolves around a Chinese female revolutionary and several American nurses who have been captured and sexually abused in the Japanese army’s comfort station. Classified as a sexploitation film (Wong 2016), *Bamboo House of Dolls’* visual narrative of eroticism and accentuation of transnational sisterhood had a lingering effect on the blossoming Chinese cinematic representations of comfort women in the 1990s.

In the 1990s, echoing the global emergence of the comfort women’s historical memories, a string of Chinese fictional films on the topic of comfort women sprang up, notably docudramas such as *How Many Levels are Hells* (*Diyu jiu jing you jiceng*, 1992), *Comfort Women 74th Branch* (*Weianfu qishisi fendui*, 1994) and China’s first television miniseries on comfort women, *Imperial Comfort Women* (*Diguo junji*, 1995). Most of these low-budget films capitalized on the sexed bodies of comfort women and used the Japanese soldiers’ extreme physical violence and sexually deviant behaviors as their selling points. Wong (2016) notes that in these sexploitation films, comfort women were “frequently consumed as sexual bodies that stimulate its viewers’ personal, and often physical, desires” (p. 170), which obscures the historical telling of their sufferings. Nevertheless, the erotic scenes are primarily associated with Japanese and Korean comfort women characters, while the sexual morals of the Chinese comfort women stand multiple tests and temptations. A common thread of transnational sisterhood runs through these fictional films: the Chinese comfort woman acts as a brave fighter for historical truth, and a protector of her docile Korean sisters, and the lascivious Japanese comfort woman is torn between justice and state ideology before eventually uniting with her pan-Asian sisters.

The fervor in cinematic depictions of comfort women dwindled in the early 2000s. While the figure of comfort women occasionally appeared in several mainstream war epics, they consistently held a marginal position in the narratives. Qiao Liang’s 2003 film *Zhenzhen* focuses on the traumatized female protagonist Zhenzhen, who, after enslavement and sexual abuse in a comfort station, escapes back to her hometown. The film piques the audience by portraying the ignorant, hostile local villagers who have discriminated against and ostracized Zhenzhen because they deem ex-comfort woman a disgrace to the village. Lu Chuan’s 2009 war epic *City of Life and Death*, a controversial historical epic concerning the Nanjing Massacre, presents graphic rapes and nude bodies of Chinese comfort women that incurred waves of debates concerning the interpretation of wartime rapes (Zhu 2014; Dai 2018; David 2021). Lu’s film also includes a failed romance between a humane Japanese army officer and a Japanese comfort woman, which further challenges provincial nationalism by insinuating the victimhood of the Japanese perpetrators.

In 2007, Ban Zhongyi, a Japanese citizen of Chinese descent, made the documentary film *Gai Shanxi and Her Sisters*, which focuses on the comfort women survivors in Shanxi Province. Ban’s film is a mixture of concise directorial commentary with montages of talking-head interviews that he recorded as visual testimonies with his handheld camera during his nine years of fieldwork. The first half of this documentary is the montage of Ban’s interviews with the local village people, especially the local comfort women survivors who speak out about their past

sufferings. In the latter half, Ban includes the interviews of Japanese veterans once stationed in Yu County and ran encounters with these comfort women. In contrast to the survivors' stark poverty and desperation, these Japanese veterans lived a comfortable life and showed no remorse for their crimes; as one of them says, "They [comfort women] were fed the same food as the Japanese." Ban's adoption of the "talking heads with evil" format creates an intimidating intimacy for the spectators who have not yet recovered from the victims' trauma-ridden visual testimonies. As Morag (2020) notices, a lacuna is revealed out of the perpetrator's indifference, denials, and lies that "threatens to erupt and break the usually fragile dialogical or 'contractual' surface between the interviewees and the director," which pushes spectators to reflect on the ethical paradox and conjure up their version of the story out of this lacuna (p. 151). After watching Ban's film at the 2005 Yunfest Documentary Film Festival, Lu (2006) praised Ban's sense of historical responsibility in approaching the sensitive historical issue of comfort women and called for more relevant history documentary films (p. 20).

The surging visibility of Chinese comfort women around 2014 fueled the production and dissemination of relevant cinematic portrayals in Chinese cinema. In 2014, Hong Kong director Bruce Lv's film *The Eye of Dawn*, a remake of the 1992 exploitation film *How Many Levels are Hells*, was released in Chinese cinema. In *Eye of Dawn*, historical footage is inserted to reinforce the tone of certifying the historical truth, and the female protagonist survives to testify against Japan's sexual slavery crimes. In the same year, Guo Ke's short documentary *Thirty Two*, featuring survivor Madam Wei Shaolan, was screened among small groups of viewers and garnered increasing attention from the Chinese public. Both *Eye of Dawn* and *Thirty Two* shun away from cinematic portrayals of sexual and physical violence and instead pivot around the ethics of the crisis of survival faced by survivors. On December 17, 2016, a Central China Television (CCTV) documentary, "To Keep a Comfort Station or Not" (*Yizuo weiansuo de quyuliu*) triggered a heated online debate. The local Shanghai government planned to tear down a dilapidated building called Hainaijia—a former Japanese Army's comfort station. What unleashed the viewers' agitation and protests were the montages of interviews of residents who wholeheartedly supported the move to tear down this "stigmatized building." In the documentary, one resident calls comfort women "prostitutes," and one local government official describes Hainaijia as a brothel. Facing a journalist's inquiry about comfort women's history, one high school student mumbles that "this part of history is not honorable, so students should shun it." The heated public dissent over the tearing-down of Hainaijia shows that the engrained belittling and discrimination against comfort women still persist in Chinese public discourses.

On December 11, 2017, the five-episode television documentary *Revealing the Atrocities of the Japanese Military's "Comfort Women" System* (*Jiemi rijun "weianfu" zhidu baoxing*) was broadcasted on CCTV-4 channel's "The Memory of a Nation" program. The broadcasting of this television documentary series dovetailed with China's third "National Memorial Day for Nanjing Massacre Victims" and carries an official tone with its screenings on multiple state-run television channels. On its debut, the production team emphasized the new perspective that "it is the first Chinese documentary to deeply expose and analyze the evil of Japanese sexual slavery from the perspective of the origin, establishment, and implementation of the comfort women system" (Dong 2017). *Revealing the Atrocities* foregrounds the word "system" (*zhidu*) to build up a grand narrative of the history of comfort women and present the historical evidence to certify the Japanese military crimes in Asia Pacific regions (Wu 2019, p.17). Accompanied by the voice-of-

God narration, *Revealing the Atrocities* intercuts survivors' testimonies with footage, historical documents, and interviews with historians from multinational backgrounds, bolstering the film's authority in representing history.

Another interesting aspect to note is the international angle adopted in its storytelling, as the production team once stated that the interviewees had spent more than three years traveling around the world to collect evidence, testimonies, and interviews of comfort women survivors from different countries (Dong 2017). For example, the fourth episode, "Nanyang's Weeping Blood" focuses on the harrowing experiences suffered by comfort women in Southeast Asia. In *Revealing the Atrocities*, the former pan-Asia victimhood develops into a humanistic, globalized perspective of remembrances. The interviewed experts all point out that the atrocities against comfort women are different from other war crimes and bear a gendered aspect akin to women's wartime experience. The growing tendency of the internationalization of China's public war remembrance echoes the Chinese government's paradigm to "promote an image of the PRC as a peace-loving and responsible power" (Chang 2021, p. 1169). Therefore, *Revealing the Atrocities*, which conveys an official tone in projecting an international perspective for globalizing comfort women's history, gestures toward the transnational redress movements and international feminism and fits into the PRC's privileged narratives of global anti-fascist war and global peace.

Thirty Two (2014) and Twenty Two (2017)

Guo Ke's two documentaries marked a watershed in the cinematic projections of Chinese comfort women, as *Thirty Two* is the first Chinese documentary film on this topic, and *Twenty Two* is the first and only comfort women documentary film to receive a nationwide release in the PRC. In Guo's documentaries, the politicized and sexualized bodies of comfort women that dominated previous fictional films are replaced with aged, feeble and impoverished survivors. Guo's documentaries shift the narrative focus from an obsession with providing historical evidence to representing personal memories and testimonies, from centering on the painful past to emphasizing the contemporary memorializing context, and from piecing together univocal, collective testimonies of war atrocities to presenting fragmented oral stories of survivors' mundane, everyday lives.

The ethical dilemma: representing or retraumatizing. Marked with a highly poetic style, Guo's documentaries differ from the mainstream history *zhuanti pian* ("special topic documentary film" in a literal translation), which is produced inside the official system, applies pre-scripted narration and method of directly approaching the viewers from a top-down perspective. The WWII *zhuanti pian* is generally characterized by a narrative axis of linear temporality, dominated by assemblages of black-and-white archival footage and historical photographs of war atrocities with interviewed testimonies and accompanied by objective, male voice-of-God commentary. Usually shot inside film studios, the interviewed survivors in the *zhuanti pian* recount their nightmarish experiences at the hands of the Japanese army to condemn Japanese war crimes and serve to create a univocal official discourse of war remembrances. However, in these *zhuanti pian*s, the survivors are rendered more as a culturally sanctioned homogeneous group occupying a purely functional, categorical role in weaving meta-historical narratives of military battles and incidents of bloodshed.

The renowned documentary maker John Grierson (1946) defines documentary as "the branch of film production which goes to the actual, and photographs it and edits it and shapes it"

(p.159). Believing that the documentary “attempts to give form and pattern to the complex of direct observation,” Grierson notes that intimacy with the fact of the matter is, therefore, the distinguishing mark of the documentary (1946, p. 159). In an interview, Guo once said that he preferred capturing these old survivors’ mundane lives instead of asking about their painful sufferings (Zhang 2017). Guo’s documentary esthetics and his interest in filming the everyday lives of the underclass bear influence from China’s independent documentaries, which have functioned as “alternative archives” for mediating gender, nationalism, and private memories (Berry and Rofel 2010a, 2010b, p. 135). Chinese independent documentary films first emerged in the late 1980s when a group of independent documentarians “self-consciously fashion themselves as committed to a social practice that they hope will open up new public spaces for discussion of social problems and dilemmas in the post-socialist era” (Lu 2010, p. 10). Berry and Rofel (2010a, 2010b) contends that the “on-the-spot realism” that stresses “immediacy, spontaneity, and contact with lived experience” is the unique feature of Chinese independent documentaries (p. 2). In his filming of *Twenty Two*, Guo embraced this unscripted spontaneity, as he did not have any pre-script and threw away all prepared interview questions. Besides, Guo’s two films forsake traditional voice-of-God narration and contain no commentary and historical footage but emphasize the constructive function of images to convey an objective value, thus leaving the interpretation of what is shown in his documentaries very open to the viewers.

Considering the paradoxical social status of comfort women in Chinese public discourse, speaking the unspeakable contradicts China’s long-held womanly virtues of chastity and racial purity, thereby documentary representation of comfort women becomes an ethically fraught terrain. Given the imbalance of power between filmmakers and their subjects, “Do no harm” and “Protect the vulnerable” are common values (Aufderheide 2012, p. 36). Guo faces such an ethical dilemma—representing these vulnerable bodies runs the risk of re-traumatizing, objectifying, or exploiting his filmed subjects. Before shooting *Twenty Two*, Guo established personal ties with his filmed subjects by living with them in villages, chatting and playing cards with them and calling them his grandmas. Guo’s embedded relationship with his subjects and their environments renders him not a distanced observer but an intimate listener eager to share these grandmas’ private and gendered memories that eventually unsettle the official historical knowledge.

Nichols (2010) points out that because documentary film-making deals with social actors and real historical events, the exercise of the camera and its gaze often has ethical implications (p. 80). In interviews, Guo repeatedly emphasizes his ethical principle of “stopping shooting instantly when the interviewee felt uncomfortable” and “making sure the public screening of his film would not cause uneasiness to these grandmas” (Sun 2017, p.12). To avoid exploiting or objectifying his filmed subjects, Guo would stop shooting and cut his camera to scenery shots whenever the interviewee expressed uneasiness. Guo carefully combines esthetic devices such as long takes, scenery shots, and frame-within-a-frame with a minimalist narrative style to strengthen the emotional interaction between the spectators and the filmed subjects, thus reconfiguring the documentary relationship among the filmmaker, the filmed subjects, and the spectators. The following analysis probes the ethical implications of Guo’s modes of representation and the intricate relationship between his cinematic ethics and esthetic forms that call for attention to the interplay between the violated female bodies and the entrenched womanly virtues and gender norms endorsed by the PRC.

***Thirty Two* (2014): filming the everyday.** Guo’s documentary film *Thirty Two*, which runs 43 min, focuses on the life story of Wei Shaolan (1920–2019), who had been kidnaped and forced to be a sex slave at a Japanese military comfort station for three months in 1944 and later gave birth to her half-Japanese son. *Thirty Two* won several domestic and international documentary film awards, creating a ripple effect on social networks. Before *Thirty Two*, Guo mainly directed low-budget suspense films, and none of his crew had ever shot a documentary film. Resembling Chinese independent documentaries, *Thirty Two* is a decentralized, politically nonconfrontational mode of the documentary “that values the *grassroots* as its primary locus and the *everyday* as its foundational temporality” (Pickowicz and Zhang 2017, p. 4). *Thirty Two*’s frequent usages of the extremely long take, scenic shots of beautiful landscapes dissolves, and the slow and simple camera work of tilting and panning add a lyrical esthetic rarely seen in WWII *zhuantipian*.

Thirty Two begins with a long take showing snow-falling for 32 s, and then the camera dissolves into the sparkling lake water and slowly tilts up to unfold the idyllic landscape of Guilin, whose beauty seems untainted by the modern world. Accompanied by soothing piano chords and slow-paced scenery shots of Guilin’s breath-taking mountains and rivers, a woman’s voice-over is reciting Wei’s favorite folksong:

Only worry that life is too short, not about poverty.

Rain falls from the sky, so the roads are slippery.

We climb up from our falls.

We resolve our own sorrows.

We wipe our own tears.

With captions reading, “They have long faded away,” the camera tilts down from the Guilin mountains to reveal the front of a shabby country house where Wei sits alone. The camera follows Wei walking across the peaceful, pastoral countryside, the hustling market in the county, and entering the local government buildings to get a monthly pension of 30 yuan (the average monthly income in Xiping county is about 3600 yuan). *Thirty Two* shows Wei’s testimonies of her wartime ordeal and tries to unfold the hardships and discrimination she has suffered after the war. Her husband scolds and beats her for “learning bad from the Japanese” and suggests abortion when she finds herself pregnant. Wei decides to keep the baby and gives birth to her half-Japanese son, Luo Shanxue. The latter half of *Thirty Two* juxtaposes the interviews of Wei and her son Luo, who is severely depressed and harbors hatred against his Japanese descent. Contrary to Wei’s optimistic views of life, Luo remembers the misery of being bullied by the local villagers because of his Japanese blood and repeatedly expresses disappointment with his life. *Thirty Two* ends with Wei’s optimistic resolution of solving her sorrows and hope for a better future, as she says, “The world is so great. Sustain your life to witness it, even if that means only eating wild vegetables”. This ending conveys a poetic confirmation of human physical strength and emotional resilience against a harsh, impoverished backdrop for the underprivileged survivor.

Xu et al. (2015) contends that *Thirty Two* manages to “delve deep into quotidian details and furnish a moving narrative, thus remaining relatively grounded in the lived, emotional experience” of Wei and her son (p. 227). Long takes of framing survivors in their mundane everyday lives are ubiquitous in Guo’s documentaries, allowing us to establish a correlation between these bodies-in-frame and the environment they occupy. “The long take constructs and enables meaning through duration by creating an

open space within which meaning(s) can emerge,” Kissel (2008) writes, noting that long takes carry an affective aura that “enables the consideration of ordinariness in detail” (p. 357). The bright and beautiful rural landscape starkly contrasts with the dark, dilapidated domestic space inside Wei’s house, where she cooks a cabbage dinner—the cheapest food she could afford with her meager savings. A montage of close shots of household objects precedes Wei’s recounts of her fear and suffering at the comfort station and her final escape from hell. Whenever Wei comes to the part where she is too sad to speak, the camera cuts to the scenes of her daily chores, such as making the bed, cleaning clothes by the river, and buying pots at the market. The mundane, everyday lived experiences of women in documentary films constitute an alternative site for rewriting female subjectivities “through the consideration of personal experience in understanding sociological phenomenon of class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation” (Kishore 2019, p. 3). By showcasing Wei in her private everyday life, *Thirty Two* peels off the fixed label attached to Wei and incites intimate compassion from the audience to view Wei as an ordinary, strong-willed grandmother. *Thirty Two* is less concerned with the comfort women’s ordeals than with Wei’s gendered experiences and memories, as the spectators are offered a personal, detailed account of Wei through its rendition of intimate family scenes and dialogs.

***Twenty Two* (2017): esthetics, ethics, and minimalist narrative.**

After the initial critical success of *Thirty Two*, Guo decided to launch an ambitious project to film more comfort women survivors. Released on August 14, the World Memorial Day for Comfort Women, *Twenty Two* initially received less than 1.5% screen shares despite high cinema attendance and ratings from the spectators. The news of *Twenty Two*’s low screen shares soon went viral on social networks, as numerous Chinese netizens and influential media accounts enthusiastically tweeted recommendations and strongly advocated for more screen shares.³ On social network websites like Weibo (a Chinese version of Twitter), many netizens posted photos of their movie tickets to show their support for this film, and some even gave free tickets to potential moviegoers. *Twenty Two*’s screen shares soon increased to 9%, and the final box office revenue reached the record-breaking figure of 170 million yuan with a total attendance of 5.6 million spectators. *Douban*, generally considered one of the most reliable media review platforms in the Chinese Mainland among young people, gave a high rating of 8.9 (on a 10-point rating scale), making *Twenty Two* the highest-rated Chinese film in 2017.

Twenty Two begins with an establishing shot, offering a view of the snowy Shanxi countryside where the funeral of the former comfort woman Chen Lintao is being held. The camera slowly tilts down and pans to the right to film the hustling people in mourning clothes and captures the renowned social activist Zhang Shuangbing giving a speech about Madam Chen’s brief life stories. In the opening scene, the film exhibits montages of these silent, old survivors’ household scenes with their names, birth year, and death year. To imply the passing of time, the director offers close shots of pill bottles and portraits of the deceased, and one close shot ingeniously displays an old ticking clock whose glass reflects the stooping body of an old lady. Like *Thirty Two*, *Twenty Two* does not employ voice-of-god narration, historical footage, commentary, or interview of experts, and the background music adapted from Madam Wei’s folksong only sounds in the closing credits. *Twenty Two* continues *Thirty Two*’s poetic film language, such as extremely long takes of scenery shots, dissolves, slow camera work, and montages of survivors’ daily chores in their impoverished, domestic living space. As there is no narration or mood music, the storyline is bleak. To connect the

life stories of each interviewed survivor, Guo includes interviews of another group of people—the grassroots social activists, including the retired village teacher, a South Korean photographer, and a Japanese female volunteer—that precede the interviews of each comfort woman and offer basic background information.

These volunteers who are familiar with the survivors help ease the tensions interviewees feel in front of the camera eye and unveil more subtle, mundane details that could elicit emotional empathy from the audience. For instance, the camera follows the Japanese volunteer Mai Maita, who has cared for the recently deceased Madam Wang Yukai for many years. In a long, static shot, with her back turned to the camera, Mai is chatting with Wang’s relative over the details of Wang’s death when she begins to sob uncontrollably while holding the new bedsheets she had bought for Wang. According to Hsiu-Chang Deppman (2021), the back image directs the audience’s attention away from the face to the back and “draws an investigative interest in the interactions between character and surroundings...[and] creates a retrospection that gives the viewer a fill-in-the-blank power to suture the narrative gaps” (p. 101). The back image of Mai tentatively draws the audience’s attention to the dark and dilapidated domestic space that Wang once inhabited alone. Framed in the center of this back shot, the sobbing Mai is configured like a lonely fighter who, among a small number of social activists, engages in a lonely battle against fleeting time and forgetful history. Though the spectators know little about Wang except for Mai’s brief mention of Wang’s loneliness, they can instantly share Mai’s sorrow and understand that these obscured old ladies’ deaths carried an individualized, special meaning to volunteers like Mai.

In *Twenty Two*, the scenery shots occupy a strikingly 14.3% of the film length. Compared with the scenes of the idyllic, primordial, and exotic Guilin mountains in *Thirty Two*, the scenery shots of *Twenty Two* are more varied, ranging from the snow-capped hills in northern China to the coconut trees and palms in the tropical island of Hainan. The heavy snow, rainstorm, lonely bird flying in the sky, and other natural scenes presented in *Twenty Two* are no longer bright and soothing but convey a darker tone and invoke a myriad of feelings from the spectators—loneliness, isolation, aging, and death. Guo frequently uses the frame-within-a-frame composition technique, with the survivors usually appearing on the side of the frame of windows, doorways, or living rooms, reinforcing their physical feebleness and emotional loneliness and enabling the audience to be aware of the time-worn, dilapidated dwellings of these survivors. In most static, long takes where time seems to be fossilized, the aged survivors spend most of their time lying in bed in a trance or just sitting alone in front of their shabby houses, napping, taking pills, or doing basic household chores. Accompanied by the extremely slow pace of *Twenty Two*’s camera movements and plot development, the audience faces a primordial, timeless, rural China where the aged survivors struggled to make a living in their last years, which is in stark contrast with the prevalent media images of modern China’s affluent, bustling metropolitans and Chinese young people’s energetic, westernized lifestyles. Guo’s expressive frame and sensorial mise-en-scène accentuate the harsh, solitary, and painful realities endured by these old ladies and alert us that these survivors, together with their embodied traumatic memories, will soon be gone.

However, Guo received much criticism for his interview methods and frequent use of B-roll scenery shots and pillar shots instead of producing a cogent narrative, as Wang (2020) criticizes that *Twenty Two*’s abstractive representation of Chinese comfort women has not fully utilized and excavated “the private narrative that oral interviews are good at” (p. 126). Calling *Twenty Two* “a

fast-moving consumer-goods documentary,” Xu et al. (2015) points out that the film “fails to show not only depth in reflection but also the density of life” without a comprehensive representation of the female perspective (p. 228). Differing from previous scholarly works, the following discussion directs its critical attention to Guo’s documentary ethics, aesthetics, and minimalist narrative styles concerning the configuration of comfort women under the rubric of the masculinist Chinese public culture.

“Gender-based violence presents challenges in the production and representation of documentaries.” McIntosh (2015) suggests that relevant documentary productions should prevent causing further harm or distress to the survivors who experienced the initial violence or were affected during the subsequent production (p. 2). In the filmmaking stage, whenever the interviewed survivor felt uneasy, Guo would stop filming and change to another topic; hence, the audience could barely find a complete and detailed testimony given by survivors but instead fragmented memories of their childhood stories and hardships after the war. Guo’s camera cuts away when Madam Lin bursts out, “Don’t mention this anymore.” It again cuts to a scenery shot when Madam Li suddenly cries out, “I don’t want to talk!” In a long take of a rural house where Madam Liu lives, the subtitle shows that she eventually chose not to appear in this film because she was afraid of future troubles.

Guo explained that he did not include the interview footage of those reluctant survivors as “it is the most basic documentary film ethic” (Sun 2017, p. 12). “If she was my grandmother, how could I ask her about the rape details directly?” Guo argues that “they have their ways of reconciling with history, and it is us onlookers that consistently harm their feelings” (p.12). Renov (2004) notes that the value of documentary works exists “both as a challenge and affirmation: provocative in its refusal of individualist truth, profoundly moral in its call for, and reliance on, individual moral responsibility” (p. 147). Renov considers documentary filmmaking as an ethical encounter with the other—an encounter that privileges the concerns of moral responsibility and being-for-the-other. Worried that documentary films run risks of exploiting the already traumatized subjects to satisfy the audience’s voyeurism, Guo tried to avoid this ethics quagmire by forsaking the systematic talking heads interviews and directing the audience’s attention to the fissures, aporia, and silences in these fragmented narratives.

Hesford (2015) notes that in the context of human rights documentaries, “victims’ testimonies bear witness to incommensurable events and also function rhetorically as empathetic markers in an effort to create the viewer as witness” (p.105). Rather than treat the filmed subjects as mere objects of national humiliation, Guo’s filmmaking “foregrounds the camera as an agent of provocation as much as a medium of observation” (Chiu and Zhang 2014, p. 84); thus, he not only took on the filmmaker’s moral responsibilities but tentatively enabled the audience to be there for these survivors. In front of the camera, the Korean-born Madam Mao Yinmei recounts a heartrending story of how her poor mother abandoned her and later was duped by a Korean man who promised her a job at a factory but instead sold her into a comfort station in Wuhan. When Mao comes to the part of her four years of suffering as a sex slave, she suddenly becomes agitated and mumbles incoherently that “they [the Japanese] didn’t do anything to me.” She stops and puts her hands over her face, murmuring, “Something I remember and something I don’t. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I don’t feel comfortable talking about it.” Then, the interview stops here, and the camera cuts to a long scenery shot of Mao’s humble living space. Later in her interview, Mao never resumes her story but sings the Korean folksongs *Arirang* and *Doraji* that she used to hymn in her childhood. Accompanied by Mao’s singing, the camera gives a montage of close shots of the Korean cultural objects in her room

—the girl doll dressed in traditional Korean clothes and the map of Korea, where Mao came from but would never return. Instead of knowing more stories about Mao’s plight as a comfort woman, the audience tends to identify with Mao’s unspeakable sorrows and melancholic yearning for her faraway hometown.

Twenty Two’s minimalist narrative style leaves substantial blank spaces for the audience to excavate the hidden story and pleads for an ethical spectatorship in which the viewers are ethically responsible for forming their own opinion regarding the comfort women’s history. At the film’s end, the ethical dilemma is posed to the viewers when the social activist Zhang Shuangbin expresses his regret to have publicized these survivors’ humiliated past: “Every Chinese knows about their humiliations. It is not a good thing for them. I am very regretful about it. If I had known it would turn out like this, I would have never disturbed them”. Through Zhang’s poignant self-condemnation, Guo reveals the ethically problematic position he is forced to occupy—by making this film, he, too, runs the risk of re-traumatizing these survivors in vain. In addition, Zhang’s comments pique the viewers’ painful realization that the prevalent stigmatization and discrimination faced by comfort women survivors would persist in the public discourse. The film ends on an interpersonal and reflective note: the last moments guide the viewers through the boisterous, rural funeral of Madam Chen and ends with a static, high-angle scenery shot of the desolate, snow-capped funeral ground. The names of the interviewed twenty-two survivors (the four deceased are indicated with a typographical mark) appear on this static frame. The jarring moments of a lively rural funeral and the marked name list of passed-away victims urge the viewers to participate in the ethical interpretation of the film’s reflective, poetic representation of the vulnerable documentary subjects.

Guo’s minimalist narrative strategy not only reflects his politically non-confrontational approach but, more importantly, functions to invite the audience to actively participate in filling in these narrative blanks. Madam Lin Ailan from Hainan Province differs from other passive victims. She proudly begins with her past experiences of following the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) and explains meticulously how she has killed two Japanese enemies with machine guns. According to the interview with a local volunteer, Lin worked as a sex spy to steal bullets and powder out of the Japanese barracks and later joined the Red Army to be a woman soldier. However, *Twenty Two* only briefly mentions Lin’s past identity as a sex spy for the Party, and Lin herself skips this part and says confoundingly, “the government knows my past doings.” Despite Lin’s brave deeds, the volunteer mentions that the local villagers all stayed away from Lin and avoided any contact with her, suggesting that Lin had suffered greatly because of her sex spy identity. “Once the fighting has ceased, the woman sex spy’s utility also ceases and discussion about her work for ‘us’ becomes problematic,” Edwards (2012, p. 1060) insightfully observes, noting that the re-absorption of women sex spies into the official discourse of victory and high moral values usually means the downplaying or erasure of the CPC’s deployment of women as sex spies. Before the camera, Lin exhibits her most treasured object—a souvenir medal conferred by the Chinese government to commemorate her dedication during the war—an emblem to certify her heroic deeds against a humiliated past. By briefly hinting at Lin’s past sex spy identity and agonies, Guo employs a strategic ambiguity necessary to pass censorship and enter mainstream distribution while maintaining a degree of distance from broadcast television documentary style and content. The story of Lin is an example of *Twenty Two’s* narrative strategy to reconcile with China’s official gender norms and leaves substantial blankness and untold stories for the audience themselves to contemplate over the paradoxical situations faced by comfort women survivors.

Within the limit of freedom and political boundaries set by the State, social media platforms such as Weibo exert significant political, economic, and social influences on modern Chinese society (Han 2018; Zhang 2020). Emotions of sympathy for victims of social injustice are particularly important in the processes of online mobilization of Chinese netizens who are often politically opinionated (Yang 2017, p. 1946). In particular, remembrances of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–1945) could easily incite vehement online nationalistic sentiments that are congealed in netizens' anti-Japanese attitudes and rallying outcries for apologies from the Japanese government (Hyun et al. 2014; Ng and Han 2018). *Twenty Two's* toiling journey from an underfunded film project to a box office miracle was partially attributed to Guo's ingenious strategies of mobilizing millions of Chinese netizens. To cover the distribution budget, Guo turned to the social network "ifundraising platform" and spread the news on Weibo to raise over one million yuan donated by 32,099 Chinese netizens. The high-profile fundraising activities on the social network and Guo's commitment to donate the film's profit significantly built up *Twenty Two's* reputation and foreshadowed its remarkable commercial success. Guo's maneuver to showcase the names of 32,099 netizens in *Twenty Two's* closing credits hinted to the viewers that *Twenty Two* could not be shown in theater without their enthusiastic support. Guo's subsequent donation of ten million yuan to the Chinese Comfort Women Research Center indicates that documentary films could impact contemporary China's public culture and social life. *Twenty Two* points out a new outlet for Chinese documentary filmmakers to engage with private memories, reach a much wider audience and figure out new ways of rewriting historical traumas.

Conclusion

The public remembrance of Chinese comfort women went through decades of historical oblivion, re-emerged in the late 1990s, and flourished since the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations in 2014, closely related to the Chinese political, socioeconomic, and cultural transformations. Song (2022) notes that in contemporary Chinese official discourses, women and feminine virtue embody the motherland under the protection of the masculine nation, and "gender normativity legitimizes nationalism and the social order associated with it" (p. 2). The historical memories of Chinese comfort women are enmeshed deeply in the entanglements of the discourse of national victimization and the discourse of national greatness, which is further complicated by the entrenched gender norms of female chastity and racial purity in the PRC.

It is important to note that documentary filmmaking has acted as an alternative site for giving voice to these marginalized women and successfully mobilized the general Chinese public to rectify the obscured history of Chinese comfort women into a unified nationalist narrative of rejuvenation and pride. Characterized by zero commentary, fragmented narratives, long takes and scenery shots, Guo Ke's two comfort women documentary films are esthetically different from the mainstream WWII *zhuantipian*. By delving into the mundane daily activities of these survivors, Guo tentatively invites the viewers to fill into the lacuna, fissures and silences of his minimalist narrative style and his poetic film language. Indeed, in a retrospective light, the box office miracle of Guo Ke's *Twenty Two* seemed to be a flash in the pan, as the subsequent Chinese films portraying comfort women all suffered substantial box office failures and never trended on social networks. Unlike Guo's focus on the private memories of survivors, the state-produced television documentary series *Revealing the Atrocities* firmly anchors an authoritative tone and corresponds to the internationalization of the comfort women issue in today's globalized world. Overall, this article reflects critically upon how

Chinese comfort women's gendered bodies have functioned as an important trope settling and unsettling a gendered nationalist discourse of WWII memories in Mainland China.

Received: 6 November 2023; Accepted: 9 January 2024;

Published online: 20 January 2024

Notes

- 1 The term "comfort women" is a loaded, controversial term that many scholars believe has obscured the brutalities of sexual violence. Throughout this essay, I use the term comfort women to make the whole article more readable.
- 2 Su Zhiliang's estimations include the women who had once been placed inside the comfort centers and women who had been sexually violated in random cases outside the comfort centers during the Sino-Japanese warfare.
- 3 On the day before the release of this documentary, the celebrated Chinese director Feng Xiaogang promoted *Twenty Two* on his Weibo account and received more than 141,000 likes and 68,000 retweets in less than 20 h. Feng's promotional message soon created a rippling effect on China's major social media platforms such as Weibo and Douban, as numerous celebrities and Weibo influencers retweeted Feng's message. Chinese social media platforms were replete with sensational headlines like "Every spectator of *Twenty Two* is a Hero" and "Every Chinese Should Watch this Film."

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Acknowledgements

Funding was provided by Zhejiang Gongshang University (Grant No. 1070XJ2322054).

Author contributions

The first three sections and the conclusion were written by PZ. The third section was written by PZ and CF. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Additional information

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