

## The Cost of Remembering: Reflections on *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post-Cold War in Asia* (Book Review)

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Forgetting, Nietzsche said, is no mere result of inertia: “it is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression.” We human beings need to be forgetful; forgetfulness is “like a doorkeeper, a preserver of psychic order, repose and etiquette ...there could be no present without forgetfulness.” Happiness, cheerfulness, hope—they all have as their talisman, a salutary forgetting. The opposite faculty is, of course, memory. The preservation of memory is a struggle precisely with inertia: ‘an active *desire* not to rid oneself’ of memories, however unpleasant; a will to memory; a conviction never to forget. Violence is the sternest teacher of memory, in a human “mnemotechics:’ the oldest psychology on earth is that which must be “burned” in: “only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory.”

--Bruce Cummings, “What are We remembering to Forget?”

If, according to Nietzsche, forgetting preserves psychic order, then remembering ruptures it. The old wounds from Asia’s harrowing, though often repressed wars, pose a major stumbling block to a regionally integrated Asia. The book, *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory and the Post-Cold War in Asia* posits that to truly understand the region one has to take a long look at the wars that have shaped it –“the Opium Wars, the Sino-Japanese Wars, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and the Chinese civil war” (Cummings, 328). In the advent of a seismic geopolitical shift marked by the post Cold War and Post 9-11 era, war memories are not just being merely commemorated but re-remembered (Cummings 47). The past, sometimes unknown, sometimes

forgotten, is constantly being written, re-written and erased often by those in power. Despite this, counter-memory seeps from the margins through a tireless and growing civil society of ‘memory activists’ troubling the dominant accounts of imperial history. As a result, memoryscape is a complex and vastly changing terrain; while other events are being tied up in a neat package and buried for a few decades under the epitaph, “A forgotten war,” others are being brought out into the open for public scrutiny (Cummings 14).<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, as each country tells the war from its own point of view, “seeing victory, defeat, liberation, or division as an almost entirely national experience,” *Ruptured Histories* unravels how “there is no such thing as a singular memory.” As each nation’s subjects were “twiced mobilized, first for national sacrifice and then for national memory, in which all war stories were melded monolithically into a single national narrative” what happened resulted in “a story of a world war with the world left out” (Gluck 48). As the world became more globalized and barriers eroded, the nation state, however, ceased to be the sole custodian of war memory even as “memory struggles continue to be dominated by national politics. “ (9). Memory change also happened along two vectors: one from below and one from the outside. Counter-forces emerged in the guise of international pressures, shattering the walls of those who wished to stay within the easy rooms of their national narratives of war heroism or victimization. (59)<sup>2</sup> The question then arises –How do we come up with a truly communicative history that takes into consideration all the stories of those who suffered through the war? If the memory causes ruptures and wounds—is there a chance this rupture will ever heal?

#### *A Transnational Memory?*

To delve into this, *Ruptured Histories* also inquires: “How did public memory actually work in late 20<sup>th</sup> Century mass society? What factors accounted for the contention and for the changes in the way war stories were told? Where, discursively, was public memory located and whose memory was it? Why did war memory follow different patterns in different countries?” (Gluck, 47) And finally, how do the shifting power dynamics in Asia in the post cold war, post 9-11 era change how the various Asian wars are remembered?

Through looking at the different groups involved in memory activism and historical archaeology, official statements, attempts at reparations, the treatment of textbooks, museums and various other media, *Ruptured Histories* explains how, due to the shifting position of the US and various Asian powerhouses—South Korea and China’s rise to power, for instance—the restructuring of their relationships is also forcing us to reexamine history through different lenses. Moreover, it draws attention to the growing call to acknowledge war memory and war responsibility in a genuine public discourse. (Miyoshi and Miter, 4). The emergence of a “transnational memory” during this period also made sure that war memory did not stay simplistically black and white nor did it stay the possession of one countries’ narrative, villainizing one set of people while exclaiming the heroism of another.<sup>3</sup> With a widening sense of collective consciousness, impunity became harder to overlook. Along with this new sensibility

<sup>1</sup> An example of this is the Korean war which was buried due to the context of the cold war. It was important for the US to participate in this war, since they believed it was crucial to stopping the red plague from spreading in Asia. See Cummings discussion in “What do we Remember, What do We Forget,” specifically page 288.

<sup>2</sup> Like Official discourses of countries who only valorize or victimize their side of the story. Like the US’ simplistic speech—“the atomic bombings saved many American lives” or Japan’s tried and true version of “that war” when PM Koizumi intoned “by facing our past and reflecting on it, postwar Japan too was able to prosper as a peaceful nation.” End of Story (Gluck 52).

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed elaboration of this thought, see Gluck 49.

also came the awareness that “Holocaust, Auschwitz did not just belong to those who suffered them but all who lived in their historical and moral aftermath” (Gluck 52).

### *The Comfortless Comfort Women*

A case in point is the issue of the ‘comfort women’ or military sexual slaves found in the Philippines, Korea, China and other parts of Southeast Asia. The Comfort women issue was akin to the battle of David and Goliath --the word of these aging, poverty stricken grandmothers with their fragile bones but strong voices, against that of Japan’s –modern, sleek, forward-looking, and the second richest economy in the world. Although full accountability is yet to be imposed, at one point, these frail “lolas” brought Japan to its knees, through the way their voices ruptured the politics of reparation in the International World, teaching the world a thing or two about the brutal, unforgiving politics of remembering and looking back. Given that these women had to fight decades of reasoning that justified male-aggression during wars, they had accomplished a near impossible feat. Although it took nearly 50 years, it showed the world how vernacular memories from grassroots women from the outside *can* trouble the official male state discourse, changing the shame of these women to the crime of men. The image of the comfort women also proliferated debates on democracy, citizenship and the relationship not only of individuals to society but of women subjects to the state (Hein 42).

The comfort women issue is a testament, moreover “to the exemplary effectiveness of transnational activism in making their claims for memory and justice.” (Gluck 75). With a variety of memory activists rallying in concert for the comfort woman cause, the issue also taught the important lesson of seeking common ground while maintaining a sensitivity to different national, social and historical contexts (Gluck 72, 76).

*Ruptured Histories* also looked at how groups use media to shape memory and consciousness. By 1999, for example, 78% the Japanese populace believed in compensating the women, after being under fire in the international press for the “stonewalling of the comfort woman issue,” and hearing, through the media, the behavior asked of them by the international community. The chapter, “Operations on Memory” also delves into the crucial role that media played not only in disseminating, but also in urging the grandmothers to tell their story, shown by the fact that Lola Rosa Henson, the first Filipina comfort woman to come out, only did so after hearing other Korean comfort women tell their story on the radio (41).

### *Why do we Remember? Why do we Forget?*

The book also posits that as some memories are being fore-grounded, others are being relegated into the background. If countries like Japan, for instance, are made to forget for “the preservation of the psychic order,” which then ultimately serves the US hegemony,<sup>4</sup> countries like South Korea are *not* made to forget for the same reason.

In, “The Korean War: What is it that we are Remembering to Forget?” Bruce Cummings explains how: “The South Koreans were thus not allowed to forget the brutality of their wartime experience in order to prevent the wounds of the war from healing which in turn promoted the legitimacy of the South Korean nation-security state aligned with the United States “ (Cummings 6). The role of the US in the North-South division of Korea, as well as their complicity in the

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<sup>4</sup> Encouraged by the cold war campaign, Japan’s “national amnesia about their wartime past,” was so successful that, at the time of Hirohito’s death, Japan’s right wing was disseminating their narrative of self-victimization, while ironically also looking at the war in positive terms. (Cummings 6).

political massacres and succession of dictatorships in South Korea, are all reflected in the classified reports of the US State Department (Cummings, 283). However, after the long haul of dictatorship rule, Korea today has been experiencing “a cathartic politics, where many suppressed and unpalatable truths have come forth with enormous political force.” (Cummings 386) This remembering, emerging from the bottom up and done “in the teeth of astonishing repression and with very little support from agencies of the government in the US” (Cummings 289) shows us the fruits of the struggle for democracy in Korea. This overwhelming rush of memory would never have been possible during authoritarian regimes (Cummings 289). Here we can see how the nature of one’s government can be defined through its attitude towards memory, where a democratic government allows for the most diverse ways of remembering but an authoritarian one nearly crushes all but the official version of remembering, at least in the way that true democracy is envisioned.

### *Museums and Historical Sites as a Metaphor for How we Remember*

A similar upsurge of memory is happening in China at present as well, where Chinese historians are using historical documents left by British, French, Germans, Dutch, Russians and Americans to weave a counter-narrative of how their country was shamed and invaded by imperial forces, thus building up to a story of liberation as China rises from its “national shame.” At the center of this rhetoric is the Opium wars, a starting point for China’s modern history for Chinese and foreign historians alike, which stands at the center of the narrative about imperialism (Miter and Miyoshi 12). The opium wars exemplified imperialism, the highest form of capitalism, and they signified the threat that imperialism posed to China’s sovereignty and to its proletarian population. The Rhetoric for them was easy to justify.

Although British and north American scholars have been critical of the counter-narratives that Chinese posed about their accounts of the latter’s imperialist invasion in China, accusing Chinese historians of shoe-horning history into ideological or mythological structures, the case generated by Chinese historians remain difficult to ignore --they were supported by documentary record.

In “Remembering the Century of Humiliation,” James Hevia discusses how places like Dagu forts and the Yuan Ming Gardens are being commemorated and subverted for nationalist purposes, in order for China to tell the story of their “shame” in their own terms. By doing so, China is following through on its promise that “it would no longer be subjected to humiliation.” To retell their story of liberation, the Chinese government since the People’s Revolution has been reclaiming historical sites as physical, tangible proofs of Western imperial aggression (199).

Today, for instance, Yuanming Gardens is a museum which boasts of a diorama that features British soldiers looting the museum in 1860, demonstrating the savagery and unprincipled nature of the aggression against China. The museum also provides plenty of texts which contextualize the importance of the site including the “Never Forget National Humiliation Wall.”

If museums, like textbooks, are any indication of war memory and how it is handled in various countries, the way China displays its museums is a sharp departure from how Japan portrays theirs. The Showakan museum, for instance, is built and maintained by taxpayers money although there is no actual indication that this is so (Seraphim 37). In fact, what is notable about the museum, with its emphasis on material culture and “a media center that invites visitors to explore documents on their own,” is the absence of explanations and interpretations (Seraphim

37). It contains objects which pertain to the everyday life of Japanese within a trans-war framework, though the displays are hardly given any historical and political context, which is perhaps symptomatic and reflective of a prevalent Japanese consciousness which focuses on, in Harootunian's words, "a pastless present, an endless everyday." According to him:

what appears significant in this observation is the recognition that the body, is no longer the reservoir of self as such, no longer the sanctuary of the irreducible subject who produces meaning, but simply a site –a "habitat" colonized by commodities and driven by continuous consumption that allows one to get through an "everyday that never ends." (Harootunian 171).

This observation apparently also applies to the museum-going experience where meaning and contexts are no longer given, and free-floating objects are merely displayed. Harootunian's assertion that Japanese subjects can only navigate through the "endless everyday" aided by consumption can also be seen in how meeting rooms in the Showakan museum are rented out for group use. Moreover, "nothing in the Showakan Museum suggests that this is in fact a national museum, or that it is even managed by Nihon Izokai, except the long list of local Izokai chapters as sponsors of displays" (Seraphim 37). Thus, even museum going becomes a consumptive experience, with matching sponsors to boot.

China, too, had to buy back its "pride" when, in an event that infuriated Beijing, Sotheby's and Christie's Hong Kong decided to auction two bronze animal heads which were part of the loot pillaged from the Yuanming palace. In an unprecedented event, however, mainland Chinese company bought the artifacts for 6 Million, three times the actual selling price (203). Today, one of the bronze heads is on display in the museum, its "rightful" place.

### *Memory has a Price*

The case of the Japanese museums sponsors and Chinese businesses buying out symbolic remnants of Chinese humiliation indicates that memory, and the voicing out of memory, has an economic equivalent. It also shows us 'the sins of memory' --how people's remembering can often be tilted to serve a particular cause or ideology. If, according to the book, Vietnam has yet to write its own historiography and open itself up to remembering, (Cummings, 326) it is perhaps because, for developing countries, memory is considered as a luxury. Every year, for instance, the Philippine government remains silent on the comfort woman issue, in exchange for the financial aid and investments it gets from Japan. This perhaps also explains why the Philippine comfort women could only come out after the lead of a powerful and economically advanced South Korea. The increase of the voice of South Korea and China in International discourses on memory is directly proportional to the increase of their GDP. Perhaps it is no coincidence that marginalized activists of counter-memory are so under-funded in contrast to the colonial victors who get to write and re-write history the way they see fit.

One essential truth that has not changed throughout history, however, is that as long as there are stories pushed out into the margins, there will always be conflicts and ruptures to bring them out into the center, if only briefly. For is it not the basic lesson of the unconscious that anything that is repressed only becomes more powerful and that "anything that we deny, denigrate or despise only serves to defeat us in the end?"<sup>5</sup> For whatever we suppress does not simply cease to exist, it falls into the realm of the unconscious, the recesses that drives us and compels our actions –with or without us knowing it. For instance, Japan's refusal to completely

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<sup>5</sup> This quote is from Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Guatemalan social reformer, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate and can be found at <http://www.ifor.org/WPP/quotes.htm>.

acknowledge “that war,” with its rightist groups exclaiming that ‘what’s done is done and it is best to only remember the positive’ only brought the nation more infamy as a country with no memory about its imperial past. Its resistance in confronting the full extent of its actions only increased the clamor for it to have a more comprehensive memory which takes into consideration not just voices from below but from the outside.

With China still smarting from the humiliation and shame of having been subjected to imperial invasion --ambiguous at best, vengeful at worst—against its powerful and often forgetful neighbor, Japan –who, too, feels victimized and thinks that by re-militarizing, it is only being on the defensive, the prospect of full regional integration seems bleak. Much more frightening is the foreboding warning of this common wisdom: when we don’t remember, much less, learn from our past, we repeat it.

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