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Revolutionary Trauma and Representation of the War: the Case of China in Mao's Era

The millions of Chinese people who had the misfortune of living through the War of Resistance Against Japan (hereafter “the War”) experienced nearly unbearable trauma and pain. From 1937 to 1945, during the 8 years of the War, China lost three million lives in combat, and civilian casualties were estimated to be about twenty million¹. The heinous nature of the war atrocities committed by the invading army must have left indelible marks on the consciousness of millions of war victims. Indeed, the notorious Nanking Massacre, the crimes of No. 731 Special Forces, and the forced conscription of ‘comfort women’ are but three particularly atrocious cases of trauma inflicted by the Japanese army. Such vivid and massively shared suffering and injustice, however, remained ultimately private and individual. For many years after the building of the People’s Republic of China, this suffering seldom found its way into the public sphere of expression².

Why was this the case? Indeed, few scholars have questioned the absence of public representations of this massive suffering.³ Mostly, the peculiar absence of publicly-acknowledged traumatic memories was regarded as the default ‘suppression’ stage that preceded what many assumed to be a powerful resurgence of ‘new remembrance’ in post-Mao era (Coble 2007; Cohen 2003; Mitter 2003; Waldron 1996, etc). This lacuna in interest is revealing in itself, for it points out both the elusive nature of the problem and a lack of efficacious theoretical tools to frame the question. It is more difficult to study, and even to identify, a lack of public representation than its presence. Before the question of ‘why’ no shared trauma narrative developed can be addressed, the question of ‘what’ needs to be adequately defined.

¹ There has probably never been an accurate statistic of the loss of lives and numbers of casualties caused by the War in Chinese society since 1945. The number here came from estimate from the Nationalist (or Kuomintang) government in Taiwan, as written by Chiang Kai-shek’s son in an article memorializing the ex-president who led the War.

² There is a wide consensus, especially among Western scholars on China, that the initial decades after the building of PRC were characterized by a ‘cultural amnesia’ toward the War (Chang 1997; Coble 2007; Cohen 2003; Li 2000; Mitter 2003; Waldron 1996). As I will argue here, while ‘amnesia’ may not be an accurate description, it certainly captured the ‘relegated’ status of its representation in the public sphere. In terms of the international community, however, as Western scholars have long argued, the historical truth of the atrocious war crimes committed in China by the Japanese imperial army indeed has been subjected to virtual oblivion ever since and remains “the best kept secret about World War II.”

³ With the exception of perhaps two recent papers that focus on the ‘suppressed’ collective memories of the Nanking Massacre (Alexander and Gao 2005; Xu and Spillman 2010), both addressing why “one of the worst instances of mass extermination” was largely ignored and excluded from the central official memories in the communist era of PRC.

Scholars of this era in Chinese history seek to explain the nature of ‘remembering’ as well as ‘amnesia’ within a framework of geopolitics in East-Asian area, focusing on the Sino-Japanese relationship, the political and military tension between mainland China and Taiwan, and the domestic ideological needs for legitimacy-building within the PRC. The importance of political exigencies may be a significant factor in collective memory and collective silence or forgetting, but studying the instrumental actions of social actors and the political framework alone can hardly capture the complexity of the issue. In particular, it cannot adequately explain why traumatic memories of the War, which could have potentially strengthened the solidarity of the nation, did not play a central role in the grand narrative of Mao's new republic.

A chief goal of this chapter is to delve into this curious phenomenon—namely, the lack of a collective trauma of the War despite the human suffering—and seek to explain it from a cultural sociological point of view. The theory of cultural trauma will help define the phenomenon and articulate what needs to be explained. I argue that the horrendous misery and mass destruction brought by the War was never translated into a collective trauma for the newly built PRC. In other words, a cultural trauma process never took place. Thus what I seek to explain is the ‘absence’ of the collective trauma of the War in those years.

In addition, trauma theory illuminates powerfully the question of ‘why,’ as it brings to the fore the explanatory autonomy of culture and sheds light on the relationship between various cultural structures in the process of trauma formation. The absence of the trauma of the War should not be understood merely as a consequence of political necessity, but should be contextualized and comprehended within the web of meanings woven by powerful cultural structures that predominated in the public sphere at the time. To a certain degree, particularly dominant and potent cultural structures could powerfully influence the formation of other contemporaneous cultural structures; the dominant one may enable other cultural structures when their logic complies with its own, but constrain or preempt them when their innate rationale presents a conflict. In fact, I argue in this chapter that the case of the War trauma seems to fit with the constraining scenario, as the War trauma narrative was blocked and inhibited by the universal cultural trauma of class struggle that formed in Mao’s China.

My tasks in this chapter are therefore twofold. First, I trace in Mao’s era the successful construction of a cultural trauma that sought to form a new collectivity. I argue that the intense trauma-drama of class struggle occupied the core of this era’s cultural trauma. That is, perpetrators in the old society epitomized an absolutely evil class enemy. Further, the unspeakable suffering of the proletarian victims was represented symbolically and emotionally as suffering shared by a broad group of people, united regardless of national boundaries in a new universal class collectivity.

My second task is to examine how the experience of the War fits, or, rather, ‘unfits’ with this grand narrative of ‘class trauma.’ Tracing representation of the War in the public sphere around the time, I argue that the emergence of the War as a collective trauma was effectively ‘inhibited’ by the trauma of class struggle. More specifically, I argue that as class trauma gathered momentum in the newly built republic, it became a rhetorical juggernaut that left little symbolic space for alternative trauma claims to emerge. When the fundamental conflict between the trauma narratives threatened to contradict the intrinsic logic of class trauma, the compelling force of the narrative of class

conflict dictated that the narrative of the War bend to it. The narrative of class conflict blurred the national distinctions (Japanese-Chinese, us-them, perpetrator-victim) that would be crucial to constructing a collective trauma of the War.

The Symbolic Birth of the New Nation and its Traumatic Past

As ‘communities of memories,’ modern nations, from the moment of their birth, were defined by collective memories upon which they built their collective identities and national grouping. Since memories of oppression and suffering have even more bonding potential than memories of a glorious past (Schwartz 1995: 267), it is not surprising to find that the founding myth of a nation often consists of a grand narrative built on the cornerstone of a collective trauma in which “members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness.” (Alexander et al. 2004:1)

This seemed to be exactly the case of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. In an opening speech given immediately before the building of the PRC⁴, Chairman Mao Tse-tung drafted an authoritative narrative that recounted the new nation’s origins and where it was destined to go. The founding myth was characterized by an ascending narrative that endowed the symbolic birth of the new nation with a sense of millennial salvation, which, it explicitly pointed out, must be understood as a radical rectification of what had gone horribly wrong in the past. In this speech, Mao powerfully argued that it was only after a long and “unyielding struggle” that the nation was redeemed from the fate of being subjected to over a century of “insult and humiliation.”⁵ When Mao solemnly claimed that the Chinese people must overthrow the enemies “or be oppressed and slaughtered by them, either one or the other, there is no other choice,” he further coded the birth of the nation as a battle of life and death for the Chinese people. The building of the new state, in other words, was the last chance for the nation to be saved from its horrendous fate.

The elements of “birth trauma” in Mao’s speech -- namely, the positive construction of a sacred ‘new’ that would become possible only after a transcendental leap from the profane ‘old’ -- reverberated everywhere in the public discursive field of post-revolutionary China. While both the old and new played important roles in shaping the emergent collective identity, ultimately the evil ‘old’ society assumed disproportionately greater symbolic significance. It was established clearly as the very ‘polluting’ signifier that denoted all that had gone wrong before 1949⁶.

⁴ This is the opening speech Mao gave at the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference held on Sept. 21, 1949

⁵ *Chinese* (Junior High School). 1960. Book No.5. Hangzhou: People’s Education Press. P.1-4. English translation to be found at: http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_01.htm

⁶ I drew my data extensively from sources like Chinese and history textbooks, commemorative articles and reports in newspapers, mnemonic sites such as museums, and cultural products such as films, dramas and novels.

A quick glance at contents of school textbooks of the time, for instance, could yield an inexhaustible list of how ‘old society’ was fervently painted with a profane brush: ‘the old society’, in fact, seldom, if ever, appeared as a single phrase without being prefixed by a series of virulent derogatory adjectives such as Wan E (characterized by tens of thousands of evil) and Hei An (dark and sinister). The old society was perennially portrayed as a hellish “jungle” where, as one author claimed, the only possible option left for human beings was to “exploit and subjugate each other.”⁷ The pain suffered by ordinary people under the stifling oppression was crystallized in a series of speech genres which evoked macabre visual images of agony, such as Shui Shen Huo Re (being constantly drowned in the depth of the water, and burned in heat of fire) (Alexander and Gao 2006). To further expose the horrendous nature of the evilness, it was claimed that cannibalism characterized the entire history of the ‘old society’, or “Eat people,” as the paranoid protagonist in one of the most widely-read short stories in modern China concluded⁸. In fact, the signifier "the old society" assumed such a "sacred-evil" status that it started to possess the ability to pollute by means of mere association, as editors for music textbook who adapted folksongs from "the old society" into the course had to apologetically justify their choice by summoning up the "sacredness" of the folk-culture of proletarian people⁹.

With the past being represented as a period so traumatic that it was capable of consuming human flesh and engulfing anything in its symbolic vicinity, the suffering that characterized the ‘birth trauma’ of the nation seemed to have been fully established. However, it would soon become evident that the trauma involved in the past was more than a simple ‘birth trauma’ that served merely to precede a better and brighter future. Rather, class conflict was a trauma that demanded perpetual return and identification, a drama that was constantly reproduced and re-enacted at every basic social units of Maoist China.

The Genre of ‘Remembering the Bitterness’ and the Cultural Trauma of Class Struggle

The predicament and suffering people used to have in the past would have remained abstract had there been no symbolic identification to bridge the temporal and psychological gap between the new and the old eras. Such symbolic extension and emotional identification was successfully achieved among the public in Mao’s China because the traumatic representation of the past was extensively and consistently

⁷ *Chinese* (Junior High School). 1960. Book No.5. Hangzhou: People’s Education Press. P. 9.

⁸ Refers to Lu Xun’s *A Madman’s Diary*, first published in 1918. Selected into each version of Chinese textbook for Senior High since 1949.

⁹ Indeed, the editors appeared eager to justify why folksongs that were composed “in the old era” should be known and learnt by the students at all. For instance, the editors kept saying that folksongs, because of their “profound ideas, their rich expressiveness and their authentic emotionality,” are “extremely beneficial teaching materials.” (p. 28) It was also emphasized that folksongs were created collectively by the proletarian people and therefore were the crystallization of the wisdom and talents of the mass people over time (p. 28). Zhang, Leke et al. 1957. *Pedagogical Guidance Book for Junior High School Music Teachers*. Beijing: People’s Education Press.

dramatized in various types of cultural products. In fact, a new literary genre was created for such a purpose, which was known as “Yi Ku Si Tian,” or literally, ‘appreciating the sweetness of today by remembering the bitterness of the past’ (hereafter ‘remembering the bitterness’ genre).

Serving as a transcendental mechanism that bridged the happy present with the traumatic past, the genre was designed specifically to facilitate the symbolic identification of a wider public with victims in the old bad society. Works of this genre therefore usually adopted the form of memoirs, biography or autobiography, in which the distressful life story of a specific victim was poignantly re-created; this lent much authenticity and truthfulness to the genre. A prototype of this genre can be found in the lyric of a song titled “Mum’s Story.’ Selected in music textbooks for elementary school students, the melodious song is still popular with young kids of today. The song starts with a brief portrayal of the blissful new life, then goes on with a reconstruction of the traumatic past in which mum, a landless and impoverished peasant, had suffered unspeakable misery at the hands of avaricious landlords. The song goes on:

At that time, Mum was landless and all she had was her hands and labor,
Toiling in the field of the landlord, the only food she could get was wild herbs and husks,
The blizzard of harsh winter howling like wolves, mum had barely anything on
except for her pieces of rug,
She fainted at the side of the road out of hunger and coldness, being on her way to
sew a fur robe for the landlord’s wife.

It is not hard to notice that the painful experience suffered in the old society was successfully personalized here because the victim took the image of one’s most intimate family member. This undoubtedly made a psychological identification much easier. But more than anything else, what we cannot miss in this lyric is that the major conflict was explicitly developed along a class line where the victim, the mum, represented the impoverished proletarian class, and the perpetrator, the landlord, obviously served as a metonymy for all exploitative classes. This highlighted the fact that the profanity of the ‘old society’ was principally constructed via the dramatic struggle between class antagonists and was thereby inseparably coupled with the trauma of class struggle. In fact, the following discussion would testify that the ‘bitterness’ genre played a crucial role in building the trauma drama of class struggle, which in turn became the core component in the overall traumatic representation of the past.

With two of the essential elements in trauma claim thus explicitly defined, the victims being the proletarian people and the perpetrators exploitative classes¹⁰, the unspeakable torment and grief that had been the ubiquitous motif in public discourse was

¹⁰ It was evident in the public discourse of Maoist era that while class enemies include imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic-capitalism, it was always their “general representative,” as Mao defined in his opening speech, the Kuomintang reactionary that served as the scapegoat for all in the construction of class enemy. Such ‘epitomized’ embodiment status bore fatal consequences on the construction of the regime in the representation of the War; its absolute evil status determined that it were to outrank the Japanese troops as the ‘true’ enemy even in a war they fought on the ‘just’ side.

thus shed in a different light. The trauma of the old society was no longer simply a ‘birth trauma’ that can be and had been once and forever transcended, thoroughly resolved or happily dismissed, but a perpetual pain that must be re-created and re-experienced in current time. Indeed, it seemed that only through a constant cycle of reconstruction and remembering of the darkness of the old evils could the new collectivity come into being. As the protagonist in another illuminating example, after recounting his miserable suffering in the past to his daughter, exclaimed at the end: “What a society that was! What a miserable life! We must inscribe them line by line upon our heart! Even when we are one-hundred years old, when we are enjoying a happiness that is equivalent to paradise, we must not let these marks erode!”¹¹

The perpetual return to a traumatic past takes on a universal dimension when one takes into account the wider community of suffering that went beyond national borders, as identified and facilitated by the genre of ‘remembering the bitterness.’ In fact, one major group of articles in this genre, as demonstrated by articles selected into Chinese textbooks for junior high school in the 1950s, were dedicated to depicting wretched life suffered by proletarian people in other countries at the hands of their similarly ruthless exploitative class. The public was constantly reminded that “2/3” of the world proletarian people were still ‘living the bitterness’ day by day. This extended and reinforced the trauma claim to a universal community. Through such an emphasis on ubiquity, the shared bitterness became the expanded boundary of solidarity, building a broad class identity that was deeply entrenched in internationalism; as proletarian people of different nations united by a sacred universal victimhood, the world and its conflict was simplified into an unbridgeable demarcation along the horizontal line of class chasm, where any other social differentiation or conflict—including conflict of nation against nation as in the War—ought to be and could be overlooked and transcended.

Four Genealogies, the Deepening of the Nature of Suffering, and the Building of the ‘Sacred’ Evil of Class Enemy

By the beginning of 1960s, the genre of ‘remembering the bitterness’ had surged with such momentum that from 1960 on, in the General Catalogue of Publication compiled by the central government, there appeared a new column named ‘Four Genealogies,’ namely, genealogies of factories, of the People’s Liberation Army, of people’s communes, and of villages, which were exclusively composed of ‘bitterness’ works published nationwide. The choice of the new term, genealogy, conveyed a significant message; while having a genealogy used to be “the privilege of reactionary ruling class,” as an editor explained in the prologue of one representative book series, “under the leadership of CCP, we, the revolutionary people are endowed with the privilege” “to write genealogy of proletarians.”¹² The new terminology was thus chosen purposefully to reinforce the class boundary of bitterness works, and thereby to further intensify the focus on class struggle.

¹¹ *Chinese* (Junior High School). 1964. Book No.4. Beijing: People’s Education Press. P. 83.

¹² Xinhua Daily Press. 1964. *Red Genealogy Vo. 1*. Nanjing: People’s Press of Jiangsu, p.1. *Ibid. Vo. 2*, p.2.

Reading through stories with the label of ‘genealogy,’ it is not hard to notice that while they shared with other ‘bitterness’ works the endeavor to reach out for breadth of audience and for creating a symbolic collectivity, they distinguished themselves by an acutely heightened fixation on efforts to deepen the evilness of the perpetrators, to make the wound upon the collectivity more painful and the scar on the memory more indelible. Indeed, in comparison with other bitterness works, genealogies seemed much more articulate and intense upon constructing a drastically tragic trauma-drama for the proletarian collectivity, a process which entailed two building blocks.

The first one was to showcase the incredibly broad extent and the tremendous volume of the sufferings of the people. This was successfully achieved with the large-scale and prominent publication of stories and memoirs under the column of genealogy in the 1960s¹³. All of these stories seemed to adopt the same framework of plot and narrative development and their protagonists represented people from all walks of life. In the prologues, epilogues or editor’s words of genealogy publications, all editors seemed to be focused upon building the universality of the anguish and afflictions experienced by proletarian class in its entirety. They would not only justify the production of their own collections by emphasizing how “class grievances are just endless to speak,”¹⁴ but also apologize for being able to present only such a tiny part of all ‘emblematic cases.’ Indeed, the most frequently quoted Chinese idioms in these texts was perhaps the term, “Qing Zhu Nan Shu,” literally meaning that “(the horrendous agonies inflicted on us) were so tremendous and so profound, that even if all the bamboos (an ancient Chinese substitute for paper) in the world were exhausted, we still could not finish writing them.” The overwhelming amount of publicity given to the tragic experiences of poor people in the old society not only magnified the sufferings of individuals and increased the enormity of the evil doings of the perpetrators, but elevated traumas that would have remained in the privacy of personal memories onto a public sphere, so that the pain and agony of a worker or a peasant became the sufferings of an entire collectivity.

The second building block involved the heightened weighting of all symbolic codes and the deepening of the emotional involvements of the audience. Browsing over the titles of genealogy works from 1960 to 1965, one would be struck by how dramatically gory and sentimental language had been used to present a general image that was tinted with violence and blood. Take the collection titled ‘*the Red Genealogy*’ as a revealing example. The titles, or subtitles, of the memoirs in this collection, echoing the general trend, were full of words and expressions that were capable of re-enacting grisly visual images that would heighten the level of people’s alertness and emotional response.

¹³ While no official statistics seems to exist regarding the number of publication on Four Genealogies, an article written on the development of oral history in contemporary China points out that the collection of genealogy was part of the nation-wide campaign directly advocated by Chairman Mao and therefore “huge amount of oral history documents and materials were collected and preserved.” Song, Xueqin. 2006. A Study of Contemporary Chinese History and Oral History. *Collected Papers of History Studies* 5. To certain extent, the very fact that Four Genealogy was singled out as a major column in the General Catalogue of Publication in the 1960s was in itself a testimony to the significance and scale of the publication.

¹⁴ Xinhua Daily Press. 1965. *The Battle Song at the Cotton Mill: A Collection on Genealogy of Villages*. Nanjing: People’s Press of Jiangsu, p.40.

In one article titled “*the Surge of Indignation Avenged the Feud of the Fishers’ Family,*” for instance, the first section was subtitled “*the Yangtse River was a River of Blood and Tears;*” in another article titled “*the Killing Ground of the Imperialists,*”¹⁵ the title of a section read “*Before the Liberation, A Drop of Milk Was Produced with a Drop of Blood of the Workers.*” The extensive use of words like “feud,” “hatred,” “blood,” “tears,” “killing,” etc. alerted the readers that what awaited them in these stories were not simply some ordinary offense or usual incidents of oppression, but tragedies of bigger enormity, situations where people’s blood was spilled.

In fact, just as these titles indicate, all genealogy stories aimed to show “a debt of blood that went as deep as the ocean,” a collective trauma of the proletarian people whom, according to these stories, had not only been oppressed, starved, tortured, persecuted, humiliated, trampled upon, and relentlessly exploited, but also murdered, massacred, and carnally destroyed. It seems to be the rule that in every genealogy story there must be at least one victim whose life was deprived by various evil perpetrators. One very representative piece came from the memoir of a nurse, titled “*From a Slave to a Fighter in White Dress.*”¹⁶ In the memoir, she recalled the tragic fate to which many of her young female colleagues fell before 1949: one was raped by a high-rank government official; one was forced to marry a rich businessman as his concubine; and another committed suicide soon after being sold to a brothel by her rogue husband. In case this was not adequate to make things traumatic, she continued to expose more horrendous details she witnessed in medical practice. According to her story, hospitals in the old society would deliberately admit in poor patients who could not afford the expenses for the secret purpose of medical experiments, and many of these poor people were killed during the process of being treated¹⁷.

Obviously, “death” and “blood” functioned as the transcendental mechanism through which common sad stories about how good people suffer were elevated to a more dramatic level where innocent and sacred people were being slaughtered. Through this transcendental mechanism, the nature of the trauma was endowed with a grave symbolic weight, and such deepened weighting of perpetration was perfectly matched by the portrayal of perpetrators who took proportionally dreadful forms in various contexts. Many times the perpetrators were compared to marauding and cannibal predators. To expose the equally savage nature of all oppressors, for example, it was rhetorically asked in one article “can you find a tiger in the world that does not eat people?”¹⁸ In another memoir, the author compared the Kuomintang reactionaries to “beasts that eat human flesh without even spitting out the bones.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Xinhua Daily Press. 1965. *The Indignant Surge at the River: A Collection on Genealogy of Mines and Factories*. Nanjing: People’s Press of Jiangsu, p. 21.

¹⁶ Xinhua Daily Press. 1964. *Red Genealogy Vo. 2*. Nanjing: People’s Press of Jiangsu.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 93

¹⁸ Xinhua Daily Press. 1964. *Red Genealogy Vo. 1*. Nanjing: People’s Press of Jiangsu, p.67.

¹⁹ Ibid *Vo. 2.*, p.24.

Yet, it seemed that even the most predatory beasts could not hold up to comparison with the evilness of the exploitative classes. Therefore, more widely adopted than the figuration of animals was the comparison of class enemies to the ultimate embodiment of cruelty in traditional Chinese culture. One most frequently employed symbol was “Yao Mo,” the Chinese word for devils and fiends, as shown by a subtitle in one article, “the reactionary forces are a group of devils and fiends who stank with the odor of blood.”²⁰ Another group of popular symbols could be found in the nicknames that local peasants attributed to rapacious landlords. One particularly devilish landlord in a village was called “Yan Luo in human world,”²¹ meaning the god of Yama, or the god in Chinese folklore who was in charge of hell and was famous for taking pleasure in inflicting pain upon people. “Ba Pi,” which literally means the “person who strips people’s skin,” is another most frequently employed metonymy typically reserved for bad landlords who are notoriously rapacious and exploitative.

Speaking the Bitterness and the Trauma-Drama of Class Struggle

‘Remembering the bitterness’ genre, with the surge of Genealogy stories as its climax, offered a very efficient narrative mechanism through which the cultural trauma of class struggle was successfully built in Mao’s China. By huge scale distribution, witness-perspective story-telling, and dramatically heightened weighting of the symbolic codes attributed to the nature of sufferings and the perpetrators, such narrative construction successfully re-created a universally shared experience of class victimhood. What complemented such narrative construction and consummated the success of the trauma-drama was the ubiquitous performative mechanism where the drama was not only written and read, but also performed and recited by real people on a daily basis.

Since early 1950s, various nation-wide campaigns were carried out consecutively, that not only necessitated but also facilitated struggle meetings and other types of rituals to be enacted at all levels up from the local communities²². Among these rituals, ‘speaking the bitterness’ was perhaps the most universally adopted and exerted the most profound impact on people, as it offered an efficient mechanism where the ‘drama’ could be literally put on show and the ‘bitterness’ reenacted on a ‘stage.’ In other words, ‘speaking the bitterness’ was to certain extent the performative embodiment of ‘remembering the bitterness;’ only that it was much more compelling as it rose beyond cognitive argument and demanded the acute physical presence, emotional involvement and performative action of the audience.

To observe how the ritual works and to understand its powerful impact on participants, we now turn to works that actually record the proceedings of such a ritual, a

²⁰ Ibid. p. 38.

²¹ Xinhua Daily Press. 1964. *Red Genealogy Vo. 1*. Nanjing: People’s Press of Jiangsu, p.67.

²² Other daily rituals include “asking for instructions in the morning and reporting back in the evening,” quoting Chairman Mao’s words at the beginning and the end of each speech, conversation and text, reciting Chairman Mao’s Three Old Pieces every day, and the ritual of criticizing and self-criticizing, etc.

text titled “*Struggling Han Lao Liu*,” found in Chinese textbook for junior high students in the 1960s²³.

What became salient from the very beginning was the absolute coding and weighting of the chief antagonist, the target of the struggle, landlord Han. It was described that even before the ritual began, women and kids had started to sing a folk Yang Ge song that they improvised on the spot. The lyric goes like: “Thousands of years of hatred, and tens of thousands of years of scores, can only be cleared when the Communist Party comes! Han Laoliu, Han Laoliu, people today will cut you to pieces!” The rancorous sense of animosity illustrated here made it lucid that the evilness of the landlord had been weighted to such a level that he deserved to be killed in a most relentless way.

When the meeting began, the landlord was brought to the center of the courtyard where a certain kind of stage was set for the ‘struggle,’ and one by one, people who felt that they had been wronged, oppressed or persecuted by the landlord came up to the stage to give a public testimony to the unforgivable sins of the evildoer. The ritual started as the first figure, a young man named Yang San, stepped onto the central stage. He testified that Han had once attempted to force him working as a slave labor for the Japanese colonizers and when he refused and ran away, Han retaliated by sending his mum into prison, who eventually died there. “‘I want to take revenge for my mum today!’ as Yang San bellowed with anger,” “people around all cried out, ‘Let’s beat him to death!’ and started to push forwards with sticks to the center of the courtyard.” “‘Their chorus,’ it went on, was like “the thunder of spring roaring in the sky.”²⁴

The text shows that the ritual of speaking bitterness was also a production of trauma-drama, where the tragedy that victims had to suffer individually and privately was dramatized on the stage and publicized to an audience who shared with victims their pain and their hatred towards the common foe. If the bitter story told by each victim comprised one independent act of the drama, the momentum of each act would accumulate and eventually reach a climax when a collective effervescence was achieved and a stronger solidarity created among the community. Such a dramatic process could be found in the final act of the struggle described in the chapter.

When the last bitterness speaker finished her story by yelling “Give me back my son!” it was described that “men and women all pushed forwards, crying that they want their sons, husbands, fathers, brothers back. And the sounds of weeping, crying, beating and cursing all mixed together.” Indeed, the scene was so intense and moving that Xiao Wang, a young member of the land reform team who came from outside the village, “kept wiping his tears with the back of his hand.”²⁵

It is interesting to note that at this moment, when Xiao Wang emotionally identified with the victims of the village, readers of the chapter would also have re-lived

²³ The chapter was originally selected from a novel titled ‘Storms of Revolution’ (Bao Feng Zhou Yu) written by Zhou Libo.

²⁴ *Chinese* (Junior High School). 1964. Book No.3. Beijing: People’s Education Press, p. 61.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 63.

the trauma-drama that occurred in the all-evil old society that they may or may not have experienced personally. So what we observed here was a dual process that paralleled two mechanisms working at two distinct levels: one on the micro level of the local communities, where rituals, physical presence and intensified emotions produced a concrete and tangible collective effervescence that bonded individuals together into a collectivity; and the other on the macro level of the wider “imagined community,” where the powerful textual re-creation of a common trauma produced widely spread symbolic identification and emotional extension among readers who were tightly united by both the past anguish that they believed they had shared, and the new proletarian class identity that emerged from the collective trauma.

What has been demonstrated up to this point is that the national collectivity of new China was determinedly shaped by a powerfully established cultural trauma of class struggle. Via cultural structures as ‘remembering the bitterness’ genre, and particularly the broad distribution and popularity of ‘genealogy stories,’ the trauma was personalized and dramatized extensively and consistently in various cultural products. The textual re-creation of a shared trauma was also ‘performed’ and ‘embodied’ by rituals as struggle meetings that exponentially add to the force of impact. Through a constant reproduction of the trauma drama in texts and in rituals, the class enemies were firmly crucified as an absolute evil, whose only befitting fate was to be perpetually struggled and condemned; and the bitterness that characterizes the sufferings of poor people in the traumatic past was being consciously revisited and re-lived by a broad public, which, continually ‘traumatized’ in class struggle, was all but too willing to identify with the victimized proletarian brothers and forge a class solidarity that also serves as the very foundation of the new national collectivity.

The question now turns to the relationship between such a powerfully built cultural trauma and representation of the War around the time. Indeed, how had the War been narrated and memorized within a cultural context where class trauma predominates with such compelling force? It is my argument in the following sections that the trauma of class struggle contributed to the ‘absence’ of the collective trauma of the War through a process of ‘inhibition’ that involves two cultural and symbolic dimensions. First, as I demonstrate in previous sections, the successful construction of class trauma has been achieved with such sweeping scale and engrossing depth that to the extent that the trauma grew to be the very symbolic anchor around which social meanings of the new Chinese nation were organized, the likelihood of the emergence of other trauma claims is largely determined by their relation to the central structure of class conflict and trauma, for other trauma constructions would inevitably compete for symbolic resources and media venues. Those trauma claims that are not symbolically aligned with class trauma, like the case of the War which entails a different and conflicting central binary of victim and perpetrator and nature of suffering, would be left with little symbolic space and their narratives would be significantly ‘colonized.’

Second, because the logic of class trauma dictates that the world be structured along a horizontal boundary of class and collective identity that transcends other borders posed by race, ethnicity, and nation, neither the perpetrator nor the victim group of the War are allowed to be identified as ‘legitimate’ collectives or categories, as both are ‘polluted’ by an awkward and dangerous ‘hybrid’ between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane.’

The potential Japanese perpetrators are inconveniently composed of poor proletarian brothers and the potential Chinese victim category unfortunately includes members of the exploitative class. In other words, as the fundamental conflict of the War, basically defined along a vertical boundary of national difference, runs counter to the innate logic of class trauma, it poses thereby an inconvenient symbolic problem. The overwhelming force of class conflict dictates that both the collective significance of the War suffering is decreased and that the identification of its perpetrators and victims be put in a symbolically ambiguous light so as not to jar with class line.

Remembrance of the War: Absent-minded Commemoration in Public Sphere

To substantiate my argument that the trauma of the War "unfits" with the trauma of class conflict thereby blocking a collective trauma of the War from emerging, we should observe what happened in 1965, the 20th anniversary of victory in the War. Fully two decades after the end of the War, with the benefit of hindsight, one might imagine that sufficient time had passed to reflect on what happened and transform the profound sense of trauma that still seared on the minds and bodies of millions of individuals into a collective trauma. Yet, this did not come to pass. A general survey of publications in 1965 indicates that none of the necessary elements that might contribute to the emergence of a collective trauma based upon the War ever appeared in the public sphere; what is more, the institutional commemoration activities convened by the central government appeared to be rather limited in quantity and absent-minded in intention.

Browsing briefly through the General Catalogue of Publication of 1965, one would be surprised to find that besides two monographs that were listed respectively in the *Politics and Social Life* and *Military* columns, and a collection that comprises four books listed in the *News Features and Profile Stories* Section in Literature, there was hardly any special works published explicitly dedicated to the commemoration of the War. The lack of commemorative attention was even more pronounced when we consider the section following the commemorative collection. In sharp contrast, the column of *Four Genealogies* includes a lengthy 109 books whose titles cover six and half pages²⁶.

Another telling piece of evidence can be found in *'Editorials of the People's Daily 1965,'* compiled and published by the People's Daily Press²⁷. Among all six volumes, there was not a single piece dedicated to the commemoration of the War, powerfully revealing what little historical significance the War had in the public sphere at the time. The very fact that *People's Daily* is the mouthpiece of CCP and editorials from it are meant to serve as a policy guide for the provincial governments and local people makes such an absence more pronounced and the meaning more illuminating.

While the absence is striking, the contents of what had been published on the War prove more rewarding to explore. In what follows, I demonstrate the ubiquity of three semiotic and narrative features that are salient in most of the texts that represent the War in Mao's era: first, the semiotic hierarchy that is shown in the identification of the enemy camp between the 'conspicuous' and the 'true;' second, the symbolic ambiguity that is

²⁶ *General Catalog of Publication 1965*. Book Bureau of China. Pp. 127-33.

²⁷ *Selected Editorials of the People's Daily 1965 Vo. 1- Vo. 6*. 1966. People's Daily Press.

embodied in the ‘sacredization’ of the conspicuous enemy; and the third, the rosy romantic narrative in which the War was being represented. I show that these features not only testify to the absence of a traumatic representation of the War, but also illuminate the concrete mechanisms through which significance of the War was overshadowed by the dominant trauma of class struggle and the construction of the War past was subsumed and filtered through the framework of a revolutionary struggle between the oppressed proletariat and the sacred evil of their class enemy.

Semiotic Hierarchy: Conspicuous Enemies vs. True Enemies

One way that the narrative of the War was ‘colonized’ by the central trauma of class struggle is that the role of the ‘conspicuous enemy,’ i.e. the Japanese imperial army, was greatly downplayed so that they are meaningful only as a blurred backdrop image, whereas the ‘true evil’ of all time, class enemies as often epitomized by Kuomintang, were exposed and brought back into the dazzling light on the central stage. Indeed, it seems the rule that the Japanese were seldom constructed as the sole offender without the accompanying demonization of Kuomintang forces; often, Kuomintang reactionaries were not only singled out as the main devil, but the profane code assigned to them carried much heavier symbolic weight.

A very representative case can be found in Vice-Chairman Lin Piao’s commemoration article²⁸. Browsing through the entire sixty-eight pages of the monograph, one would be curious to find that not a single war crime or brutality committed by the Japanese forces was mentioned, and except for the word ‘barbarous’ (8), used once when the nature of the war was being discussed, no characterization stronger than this was attributed to the conspicuous enemies of the War. In contrast, the profanity of the leading antagonists in this narrative, Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang reactionaries, seems hard to redeem. It was, as claimed in the monograph, the Kuomintang reactionaries who “had betrayed the revolution, massacred large numbers of Communists and destroyed all the revolutionary mass organizations” (26) after the First Revolutionary Civil War; it was the Kuomintang who, when the CCP called for a national united front, were engaged in “passive resistance to Japan and active opposition to the Communist Party” (15); and it was Chiang Kai-shek again, “our teacher by negative example,” who launched a “surprise attack” on part of CCP-led forces in 1941 and “slaughtered” many of “our heroic revolutionary fighters.” (17) Portrayed explicitly as “treacherous,” “brutal,” “ruthless,” the “massacre” and “slaughter” committed by Kuomintang was obviously coded as more unforgivable than the “barbarous” attacks by the Japanese troops.

Another telling piece can be found in *The East is Red*, a song and dance epic of the Chinese revolution²⁹. Preceded by a vehement condemnation of the murderous

²⁸ Lin, Piao. 1965. *Long Live the Victory of People’s War! In Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of Victory in the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japan*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, first published on *People’s Daily*, Sept. 3rd, 1965.

²⁹ The performance debuted in Beijing in October 1964. In celebration of the 15th anniversary of the founding of the new republic, the epic performance presents a vivid depiction of Chinese revolution in forms of songs, dance, opera and ballet and thus offers an ideal text for interpreting how the nation

besiege on “our base areas” launched by Kuomintang reactionaries, the artistic re-creation of the ‘conspicuous’ enemy in the fourth episode of the performance, which was dedicated to the depiction of the War, is completely absent. During the only dance piece that was meant to represent CCP’s battle with Japanese troops, the enemy figures never materialized on the stage, and the theme forcefully focused on the demonstration of the superior tactics of Chinese guerilla soldiers and the merit of the People’s War. This virtual shunning of the representation of Japanese enemy figures clearly consummated the effort to build a hierarchy in the identification and coding of the profane camp. The message seems clear: no matter who else might be put into the ‘conspicuous’ enemy camp under different historical circumstances, the dark title of ‘true’ enemy was perpetually reserved for class antagonists.

The semiotic hierarchy testifies to the ‘constraining’ effect of the trauma of class struggle on War narratives. The absolute evil of class enemies and the enormity of their crimes, as established in class trauma, thoroughly deprived the Kuomintang regime of likelihood for symbolic ‘redemption’ and left them transfixed on the pillar of shame in a ‘just’ war which they not only fought as the incumbent government but to which they contributed enormously in winning. Via such a hierarchy, the structure of War narration was tailored to match with that of class struggle, and the role of the conspicuous Japanese enemy was reduced to a piece of stage setting and their atrocity factually covered up and largely dismissed as unworthy in comparison.

Symbolic Ambiguity: Victimization of Japanese Proletarian Soldiers and Their Symbolic Redemption

The semiotic hierarchy that constructed the Japanese enemy as the lesser evil was strengthened by a symbolic ambiguity that made the distinction between the ‘conspicuous’ enemy and the ‘true’ enemy a qualitative leap instead of just quantitative difference. Unlike the true enemy, forever condemned and denied a redemptive opportunity, the conspicuous enemy was always endowed with a potential for symbolic transcendence. In fact, more than just being portrayed as redeemed ‘ex-enemies,’ many Japanese figures in literary works were identified as ‘retrieved brothers’ who were ‘rescued’ back from fascist poisoning imposed by imperial class enemy. One such figure can be found in a popular novel of the 1950s that uniquely took Japanese POWs as its protagonists³⁰. Portrayed as being a miner before being forced into the army, the figure of Matsuyama was intentionally created to represent Japanese soldiers who were members of “Japanese proletariat that had suffered miserably.”³¹

The wretched life Matsuyama and his family led in Japan was given a lengthy and detailed depiction, as he himself recounted during his interrogation. Reading his story, it would be hard not to recognize immediately the salient pattern of ‘remembering the

represents its own past and defines its collective identity to the public, including the construction of the War in public arena.

³⁰ Ha, Hua, 1951, *Asano Sanbuloo*, (Qian Ye San Lang), Shanghai: New Literary and Artistic Press.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 18.

bitterness' genre. Indeed, there is the debt of blood (death of his mum, and physical injury of his dad); the inhuman treatment and merciless exploitation of proletarian people (starvation, meager salary, long working hours, and poor child labor); and ruthless political persecution (being sent to prison for potential political involvement), all of which were attributed to the evil exploitative class and its representative agency, the imperial regime.

The presence of the 'bitterness' genre demonstrates that the figure of Matsuyama was emphatically constructed as a typical victim of class oppression instead of a perpetrator of war crimes. And befitting such a class identity, his bitter grievance was bound to cleanse him of whatever sin he might have committed by joining the imperial army, mightily bond him with brothers and sisters of Chinese proletarians, and quickly confer on him the 'certificate' for re-entry into the sacred camp of camaraderie. In fact, it was portrayed in the novel that even before the interrogation was brought to an end, Wang Ming, the eighth route army cadre, "deeply touched by the adversity suffered by this Japanese class brother," (22) had already generously granted Matsuyama his symbolic redemption, to which the latter responded with enthusiasm. Both held hands "like old friends for many years." (24)

The case of Matsuyama and other 'enemy-turned-comrades' Japanese figures especially illuminate how representation of the War was powerfully engulfed by the symbolic juggernaut of class trauma. As implied by the logic of the latter that solidarity must be extended to Japanese proletarians, the majority of Japanese soldiers, instead of being constructed as merciless perpetrators of war crimes, were to be more often than not identified as innocent victims subjected to the poisoning and exploitation of the Jingoist ruling class. Their 'victimized' status as proletarians significantly eclipsed their identity as perpetrators in the War and thereby further confounded identification of the central binary that had already been skewed by the aforementioned semiotic hierarchy. With class perpetrators constructed as the 'true' enemy, with conspicuous enemy of the War depicted as sacred War victims, and with Chinese War victims, as I will show in the following section, being fiercely constructed as dauntless resistant heroes, all the essential components of a potential War trauma claim were dislocated and thereby dismissed. The nature of the struggle was effectively shifted back into the framework of class trauma.

Romanticization of the War: Denial of Victimhood and Sufferings

As conspicuous enemies were overshadowed by the dazzling darkness of class enemies and further established as class victims, a traumatic narrative of war atrocities and victims was largely preempted; in its place, the War was narrated in a rosily romanticized and fiercely heroic pattern, which is characterized by an exaggeratedly empowering construction of heroes and caricaturization of enemy figures.

One very convincing case comes from the lyrics of *the Song of Guerillas*, which accompanied the aforementioned dance in *The East is Red*. In the song, the guerilla soldiers are portrayed as being capable of conquering any possible adversities and finding ways to triumph regardless the dangers and difficulties they face, as one paragraph claims:

We are sharpshooters, wipe out one enemy by only one bullet; we are pilots, no matter how high the mountain and how deep the water is; in the tight forest, comrade's camp is all over; on the high mountains, there's unlimited numbers of our brothers. If we haven't food and clothes, enemy will give us; if we haven't weapon, enemy will supply us...³²

No one would have missed the thoroughly cheerful construction of heroic protagonists here; not only were they empowered with a superman-like capability, they seemed to be injected with a symbolic immunization against feelings of pain, loss or distress. Such a romantic portrayal, with the heroes covered with an impregnable 'armor' of undaunted spirit, would intrinsically inhibit the enactment of victimhood in the role of Chinese guerilla/civilians. In other words, the only central binary that could emerge in the narrative of the War is that of the 'David vs. Goliath' genre, and absolutely not the 'helpless victim' vs. 'ruthless perpetrator' set.

The picture of the War as depicted through chapters selected from literary works proves to be equally incurably rosy³³. In fact, it almost seems a rule that any conflict between the CCP-led forces and the Japanese invading armies must end with a thorough triumph of the former, with 'our' victory usually coming at little or no cost of lives or blood³⁴. More often than not, the right thing happens at the right time in the right place so that all conducive elements coincide to contribute to the eventual triumph of the people. In a text titled '*Troops on the Yanling Ridge*',³⁵ for instance, that tells how a small guerilla dispatch team thwarted a round of attacks made by a Japanese water force, the defeat of the enemy was portrayed as simple; as soon as the enemy characters appeared in the scene, they fell into the trap prepared by the guerilla soldiers and their fate was inexorably doomed. Predictably, the battle scene barely started when all the dozens of Japanese soldiers were erased with a light brush, and their much more advanced weapons and the impressive modern steamboat became the booty of a boisterous crowd of guerilla soldiers.

The incredible prowess and good fortune of Chinese people as depicted in these chapters is juxtaposed sharply with the portrait of their Japanese antagonists, always constructed as being ridiculously weak, absurdly stupid and incredibly unfortunate.

32 The English translation was revised by the author, based on a version that comes from the following website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guerillas'_Song.

33 These refer to excerpts and chapters of novels or other literary works on the War that had been selected into Chinese textbooks for senior elementary and junior high schools in the 1950s and 1960s. Altogether, there were eight such texts, all written by writers under the leadership of CCP and published during the 1940s to late 1950s.

34 Only in samples of Chinese textbooks was this the case. It cannot be denied that in the majority of novels that write about the War there were usually loss of innocent lives and some brutalities, but as I have shown to certain extent, the immaculately heroic image of the martyrs who were killed and the excessively caricatured image of the Japanese enemies served as the main mechanism to inhibit a sense of trauma. Instead, there emerged a strong collective sense of righteousness and efficacy and the highlight was always focused onto the eventual outcome of triumph.

35 *Chinese* (Junior High School). 1954. Book No.4. Shenyang: People's Education Press, p. 16-22.

Indeed, though they were most frequently referred to as ‘Guizi,’ Chinese words for ‘the devils,’ their images as portrayed in these chapters were usually so deprived of evil characters that the signifier instead took on a certain comic connotation³⁶. To demonstrate this point, it is worthwhile to turn to the text titled ‘*At the Baiyang Lake*,’³⁷ where ‘Guizi’ were more vividly portrayed than in the other pieces.

At the beginning, several ‘Guizi’ soldiers, who came to attack Baiyang village, were depicted as being obsessively engaged with their petty pursuit of catching a rooster in order to give themselves a treat; as their very awkward and frantic chase was successfully thwarted by the rooster, which was personified as brave and tactful as its Chinese guerilla master, they came across three young Chinese women who hid themselves in huge piles of grass. As ‘Guizi’ happily cried to each other that they found some “young pretty women”, they quickly met with their premature death by a grenade thrown by one of the Chinese girls. It was quite manifest that ‘Guizi’ as portrayed in this text are not capable of doing any serious harm; not only were they not able to pose any formidable threat to young civilian girls, who on the contrary were portrayed as merciless soldiers miraculously equipped with heavy arsenal at the critical moment, but the way ‘Guizi’ soldiers fell to their tragic demise was so convenient that one could even pity these pathetic figures. After all, their cardinal sin in this work -- the desire for food and women -- makes them somewhat sympathetic as human beings.

The romanticized representation of the War, with unfailing triumphs that always come with little cost, and the rosy binary construction that reminds us of childhood tales in which bad rascals are always defeated by good people, maximally covered up the traumatic sufferings inflicted by the War and powerfully relativized its enormity. By virtually shunning the re-creation of war atrocities, it mitigated the symbolic weighting of the nature of suffering and further marginalized the significance of the War. In this rosy picture, unlike the oppressed, trampled and massacred proletariat as constructed in the trauma of class struggle, which by principle also include the majority of Japanese soldiers, the identification of war victims was curiously yet thoroughly evaded, turned into a non-identity or non-existence; in its place, as the aforementioned cases so vividly illustrate, any potential war victims would have been constructed as heroic warriors of resistance, intrinsically rejecting enactment of victimhood.

Combined with the absent-minded and scanty commemoration of the War in the public sphere, these features characterizing representation of the War help to highlight the salient absence of a collective trauma-making process; such an absence, as argued in the chapter, was the result of an ‘inhibition’ process where representation of the War was overshadowed, subsumed and shaped by the ubiquitous and compelling force of the hugely successful trauma of class struggle.

36 This does not mean, of course, that they were not unequivocally coded as ‘evil’ or ‘bad’. But as I have demonstrated in the chapter, the deepening of such an evil seldom occurred. And this, in a self-reinforcing way, further strengthened the semiotic hierarchy that ranked class enemies over Guizi soldiers.

37 The article was selected into two major editions of Chinese textbooks for Junior high school in the 1950s and 1960s, book 4 published in 1952, and book 1 published in 1963.

The 'conspicuous' perpetrators of the War, comprised of an awkward heterogeneity that does not necessarily fit within one class, were always portrayed in an ambiguous light where their perpetration appeared as not worthy of consideration in comparison with the ultimate vileness of the Kuomintang regime and their symbolic significance was largely dwarfed by the dark 'sacred' evilness of 'true' class enemies. The horrible War atrocities, factually yet 'inconveniently' committed by Japanese soldiers of all class origins, were effectively shunned and replaced with the romantic narration of proletarian triumph. Millions of Chinese war victims were virtually left out of the picture as the class victimization of Japanese proletarian soldiers commanded more symbolic significance, and the unabashedly empowering construction of resistant Chinese heroes cleansed the victory of blood and suffering. It is thus that some of the most important elements for a potential trauma claim on the War were 'preempted' from emerging, and in their place, representation of the War was adeptly tailored to become just another episode seamlessly fitting with the sweeping trauma of class struggle. After all, in comparison with a landlord who would not hesitate to strip your skin and who therefore must be eliminated without mercy, a Japanese soldier, not capable of doing any serious harm and usually also a victim of class oppression himself, is a much more amicable figure and embodies greatly more potential for redemption.

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