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Memories of Wars and Revolutions in Wang Chong's Theatre

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Wars, Revolutions, and the Curation of Their Memories

Challenging China's official history since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 is uncommon among Chinese theatre makers in the twenty-first century. Given the stringent rules that severely limit artistic expression, such attempts are rare and, aesthetically, noticeably obscure. Director Wang Chong (b. 1982) and his collective Théâtre du Rêve Expérimental nevertheless embark on an audacious journey of deconstructing and reassembling some of China's most taboo historical moments in their productions *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0* (*Dileizhan 2.0*, 2013) and *Lu Xun* (*Da xiansheng*, 2016). Wang's critical reconfiguration of deliberately forgotten violent events from the Maoist and post-Maoist eras is articulated onstage through the intermediation of far more visible and "stage-safe" historical moments that predate Maoist China. While obscuring the direct messages of the performances, Wang's cunning technique of contesting Beijing's memory of politically sensitive events manages to unearth "hidden" violent moments of which many Chinese youth today may be completely oblivious.

The first performance analyzed in this essay, *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0*, explores the legacy of the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance (1937–45).¹ In the wake of this violent historical period, which is part of the larger Asia–Pacific War (1931–45), tensions between China and Japan have continued to simmer and often boil over due to rampant displays of nationalism among the Chinese youth, as evidenced by scattered student demonstrations against "Japanese imperialism" during the first part of the twenty-first century.² The performance was awarded the prize for "Best Emerging Program" at the Festival/Tokyo in December 2013, which proved controversial, as it brought to light politically sensitive issues related to the cruelty of war, such as rape. The jury process was also contentious, as one member opposed the decision, labeling the show "anti-Japanese" rather than antiwar.³

The Warfare of Landmine 2.0 is in fact a tragicomic, parodic adaptation of a famous, eponymous anti-Japanese educational movie (*jiaoxuepian*)⁴ produced in 1962, one which has been, depending on one's ideological allegiances, (mis)

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shaping Chinese people's memories of the Sino-Japanese conflict for decades.⁵ The August First Film Studio production depicts how a group of brave Chinese villagers during the War of Resistance strategically plant mines and outwit the much better equipped Japanese enemies (often referred to as “devils” or *guizi*), who are blown up at surreal pace. Wang explores how this heroizing and caricatural construction of war memory produced by the Maoist regime and perpetuated through television to this day has cemented a nationalist identity among Chinese people over the past seven decades, thereby (mis)informing the two countries' (mis)perceptions of each other.

Only three years later, in 2016, Wang directed *Lu Xun* (*Da xiansheng*; sometimes called *Mr. Big* in English), which premiered at the National Theatre of China in Beijing. Based on a play written by Li Jing (b. 1971) that won the Lao She Prize for Outstanding Theatre Script in 2014, Wang's production reimagines the life and afterlife of Lu Xun (1881–1936), one of China's greatest literary minds and the most influential cultural personality during the modern Republican era at the beginning of the twentieth century. Given his leftist theoretical leanings, Lu Xun had been transformed posthumously into a communist icon and national moral standard, that is, into a symbol of Mao's ideological thought.⁶ Wang uses his performance to explore precisely this Maoist symbolism associated with the intellectual figure of Lu Xun, which he believes to have been unjustly instrumentalized for Mao's political legitimacy. In the performance itself, the protagonist bears witness to China's internal wars and revolutions, from the Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists (1927–49) to Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and the Tiananmen Protests in 1989, all of which had significant implications for China and the Chinese people throughout the twentieth century.

The dramaturgy of *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0*, which was handled by Wang Chong together with Zhao Binghao, is constructed around a bricolage of texts, including Internet accounts about wars, political speeches, philosophical and psychological excerpts on which famous Western scholars have elaborated, as well as literary passages by popular Chinese writers and poets, all of which reconfigure and even parody the old war propaganda film.⁷ Conversely, *Lu Xun*'s dramaturgy has a more conventional narrative plotline, with the action fluctuating between past and present within the hazy lines generated by the stream-of-consciousness narration, while the characters (embodied by realistic actors and by puppets) have a more concrete historical identity. Based on very different dramaturgies, the two productions nevertheless share a series of common ideas and aesthetic practices. First, both engage with a certain history of violence within China's twentieth century, offering alternative visions of the historical moments with which they deal. Second, both performances juxtapose and intermix disparate events in Chinese history, thereby deconstructing official contemporary narratives of remembrance. Third, they are arguably Wang's most political creations and, consequently, both have suffered from censorship.

Multidirectional Memory and the Remembrance of Wars and Revolutions in the Context of China's Youth Nationalism

This study analyzes the aesthetic of violence within Wang's productions, which the director uses to challenge the official memory culture surrounding pivotal, taboo, or controversial moments in Chinese history, such as the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979–91), or the “forgotten” Tiananmen Protests (1989). In recollecting such violent events, Wang deconstructs memory through a

dual perspective on China's past. On the one hand, he prompts the audience to reconsider how China's officially acknowledged historical traumas are commemorated intergenerationally. On the other hand, he involves his audiences, most of whom did not witness the historical moments referred to in the performances, in a process of discovering, understanding, and dealing with memories hidden from public discourse due to their potential to evoke uncomfortable feelings of guilt and historical responsibility. In order to better understand Wang's aesthetic of juxtaposing memories of wars, revolutions, and violent conflicts in these performances, Michael Rothberg's foundational work on "multidirectional memory" is employed.⁸ According to Rothberg, multidirectional memory "juxtaposes two or more disturbing memories"⁹ that subvert established narratives and "expose[s] the ideological assumptions of historicist categorization"¹⁰ intrinsic to the official dictated memories of historical events. Multidirectional memory is also relevant when perceiving the public sphere "as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others,"¹¹ creating the grounds for new meanings of past experiences in the present world. In a similar vein, in *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0*, Wang places the most dominant war memory practices in contemporary China (as victor and/or victim) in dialogue with hidden war memories, deriving new meanings from their juxtaposition that underscore the tragedy of these violent historical moments and mark China's need to confront them with reverence and responsibility. More specifically, he intermixes oversolicitous memories of "victimhood nationalism"¹² generated in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War with the obliterated memory of the Sino-Vietnamese War. The interplay of two discrepantly remembered historical moments results in a "multidirectional" and "productive"¹³ dialogue between the two memory narratives, one visible, the other one invisible. The aesthetic of war juxtaposition is a hermeneutical process that deconstructs the nationalism ingrained in China's war remembrance narratives today. Conversely, in *Lu Xun*, the representation of well-remembered violent conflicts—namely, the Chinese Civil War and, to a certain extent, the Cultural Revolution—through the memory of a "hidden" conflict—namely, the Tiananmen Protests—aims to unearth the "repressed" memories in China's internal history at the end of the twentieth century.

Indeed, the director references very specific historical moments in Chinese history, addressing issues such as nationalism (in *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0*) or, as Wang sees it, the historical amnesia (in *Lu Xun*) within the younger Chinese generation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, official Chinese narratives articulated a sense of patriotic nationalism built on the atrocities committed by the Japanese army during the Sino-Japanese War, with an emphasis on the horrific Nanjing Massacre. The emotional and graphic focus on this horrid war memory projected a "vision of national cohesion"¹⁴ that urged a younger generation to perceive China's modern history "through the lens of national humiliation."¹⁵ Consequently, nationalistic impulses reemerged in contexts where China perceived itself "insulted or threatened"¹⁶ by foreign powers. This type of patriotic nationalism continues to be instrumentalized by Beijing either to divert attention away from China's domestic social problems or to strengthen the government's own legitimacy. The nationalist euphoria stirred by the Sino-Japanese conflicts over the East China Seas' uninhabited Diaoyu Islands, which generated a series of street revolts by angry Chinese youth (*fengqing*) during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, exemplifies this. Such demonstrations underscore how China's younger generations

often reduce their traumatic war memory unilaterally to impulsive battles with Japan. It is precisely such emotional yet simplistic incitements crafted by Beijing that prompted Wang to produce a double-edged theatrical discourse: on the one hand, it explores how official narratives remember war traumas through displays of nationalism; on the other hand, it counterattacks such unilateral war remembrance practices by revealing to the audiences officially “unknown” or “inaccessible” moments in Chinese history. Wang’s aim is clear: to make Chinese youth question the way that China officially commemorates its past and processes its present. As we shall see, however, the use of overlapping war memories is not limited to the specificities of Chinese history, but rather can and does function in a broader manner as global statements against war and political violence. Crucially, Wang’s aspiration for the universal value of such outwardly oriented statements is revealed by his careful dilution of signifiers of nationhood at key moments of the performances. Consequently, such a multidirectional approach to the past dehierarchizes the memories of suffering, stressing that *all* memories of historical violence, no matter how uncomfortable to the collective or individual memory, need to be equally remembered, accepted, and dealt with responsibly.

Wang Chong and Théâtre du Rêve Expérimental

Wang Chong is a Beijing-based key representative of the “New Wave” (*xin langchao*) of contemporary Chinese avant-garde experimental theatre. Born and raised in China, he first emigrated to the United States, where he completed a degree in theatre studies from the University of Hawai’i, after which he pursued a Ph.D. at the University of California, Irvine. However, he abruptly gave up his studies, returning to China by the end of the 2000s, before establishing his own performance group in 2008 with a chic French name, Théâtre du Rêve Expérimental. Often described as “postdramatic,”¹⁷ Wang’s theatre is famous for its extensive use of cameras onstage. *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0* is part of a series of deconstructions of various classical Chinese plays, which he reinterprets in a manner he feels is more relevant for contemporary Chinese society. As scholar Tarryn Li-Min Chun has noted, “the titling of many pieces as versions ‘2.0’ speaks to his engagement with our contemporary culture of iteration and update.”¹⁸ Indeed, his productions engage with important contemporary issues, such as gender, class politics, the overwhelming effects of social media on shaping the human psyche, and the psychological aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which prompted Chun also to describe Wang’s praxis as a “theatre of immediacy.”¹⁹ Despite Wang’s international success and continued presence at international theatre venues across four continents, and despite the many injunctions he has received to leave China permanently in order to create in an unconstrained manner and in a “free” environment, Wang is extremely aware of the crucial importance of making theatre in his native China.²⁰

War as a Game in *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0*

In *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0* Wang uses multimedia, documentary, and textual cut-and-paste techniques that reenact the human carnage inflicted by the landmine guerilla tactics during both the Sino–Japanese War and the more recent Sino–Vietnamese War. Six performers, four men and two women, use forty megaphones that replay vocally imitated sounds of war, such as shooting, explosions and landmine

explosions, the sounds of tanks, shurikens (throwing blades), bombers, and so on. The replayed sounds have previously been recorded by two performers live onstage at the beginning of the performance. The recorded sounds of the landmine explosions are replayed every seven seconds, prompting the performers to blow themselves up with clumsy, childlike, and overly theatrical (even caricatural) gestures, pretending to die at an extreme pace just like the Japanese soldiers in the 1962 propaganda film, which the performance parodies. The performers also recite through the megaphones excerpts from a collage of different texts copied from *The Warfare of Landmine* screenplay, Internet accounts about the Sino–Vietnamese War, selections from Carl Jung’s treatises on psychology, fragments from the works of various contemporary Chinese poets and writers,²¹ and Emperor Hirohito’s speech of surrender at the end of Second World War.²² The last part of the play, then, explores three specific war occurrences: the death of a baby, the gang rape of a woman, and the symbolic dropping of an atomic bomb. The stage floor is conceived of as a mat formed by interlocking rubber squares, which the performers move, shape, and reshape in accordance with the developments on the frontline of the war as if they were reenacting the shape of a children’s game. The jigsaw pieces also resemble a chessboard dividing enemy lines, similar to today’s situation in which propaganda divides China and Japan as the two sides engage in a chesslike game of geopolitical maneuvering. As the performance unfolds, the choreography gradually illustrates how the “gamers” arrange and rearrange the rubber squares, suggestive of a dialogue among all players involved in this warlike game. Here, Wang suggests that actual healing from the trauma of war can result only from collaboration and dialogue between the conflicting parties.

The Warfare of Landmine 2.0 and the Chinese Memory of the Sino–Japanese War

Prompted precisely by the escalating conflict between China and Japan, highlighted by a series of anti-Japanese nationalistic demonstrations that swept several Chinese cities throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century,²³ Wang himself stated in the Festival/Tokyo program that his show tackles the mutually prejudicial image that each side has of the other amid unresolved war trauma. As he wrote, “The theme is you, the Japanese people. How are you represented in the Chinese propaganda films? The theme is us, the Chinese people, how did we imagine you? The theme is them, the landmines, used to divide us from you, the dead from the living.”²⁴ In other words, “the landmines ... divid[ing] us from you” are the fabricated memories in patriotic productions such as *The Landmine Warfare*, which were disseminated for decades by the Chinese government among its own citizens and which glamorize war, thereby explicitly failing to grasp the human tragedy provoked by it.

A number of studies published outside of China argue that the memory-making policies in contemporary China vis-à-vis the Sino–Japanese War promote the narrative of China as victim, whereas during the Maoist era the focus was rather on China as the victor. Kirk Denton, for example, argues that “compared to the 1980s and 1990s, the Mao era was relatively silent about wartime atrocities,”²⁵ as the discourse of China as a heroic fighter in self-defense²⁶ prevailed. This glamorizing, victorious vision of war is also portrayed in propaganda war films produced in the early 1960s, constantly broadcast throughout the Cultural Revolution, and continues to echo into the present.²⁷ These productions initially had the purpose of

strengthening and invigorating the rhetoric of Mao's patriotic and revolutionary euphoria and explaining his discourse on anti-imperialism and class struggle.²⁸ For many sinologists and historians located in the West, the victimhood discourse articulates a more recent national ideology, one that, after Mao's death in 1976, grew stronger roots in the early 1980s, when the horrific memory of the Nanjing Massacre (1937) started to represent the central Sino-Japanese War commemoration activity.²⁹ At the same time, the glamorization of war as victory has been perpetuated by Beijing from Mao's time into the present.³⁰ Both the triumphalist and self-victimization narratives³¹ outlined above coexist and shape current war remembrance practices, arguably stoking nationalism among Chinese youth today.³²

In addition, Wang's production has taken place against the backdrop of an East Asian transnational theatre trend of exploring the memory of the Asia-Pacific War. *The Spirits Play* (2010), a project involving various theatres of memory in Nanjing, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Tokyo, is an excellent example of what Rossella Ferrari calls "mnemonic dialogism"³³ between Japan and Asia-Pacific countries. These performances militate for Japan's "accountability and ethical politics for the present and the future against the omissions of the past"³⁴ for practices of "develop[ing] new modes of historical cognition"³⁵ across postwar Asia. Using Marvin Carlson's concept of "hauntology," Jessica Nakamura also analyzes how the memory of Asia-Pacific War haunts younger generations of audiences in Japanese theatre, compelling them to "address, attend, and respond"³⁶ to the ghosts still seeking historical visibility. Wang's representation of *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0* takes place within the same artistic framework of Asia-Pacific theatre solidarity engaged to rethink its twentieth-century traumatic legacy, to convert theatre venues into new media for channeling "the malignant energies of unresolved events, and a conduit of traumatic exorcism."³⁷ As with *The Spirits Play*, Wang's aesthetic may equally be interpreted through Marvin Carlson's aesthetic of "hauntology," focusing on what Ferrari defines as "unrecognized narratives of violence."³⁸ However, as we shall see, his take focuses predominantly on China's own need to rethink the way in which *all* wars—regardless of the country's status as victim or aggressor—should be officially remembered in his country, especially when set against an emergent nationalism and the promotion of policies that further alienate China from neighboring Japan. According to various reviews, Wang explores a universal "antiwar" theme, as the jury of Festival/Tokyo acknowledged.³⁹ Nevertheless, the war metaphors constructed in this performance paradoxically coexist with another far more visibly targeted sociopolitical justification for the production. Indeed, the performance constitutes a universalist commentary on the absurdity and pointlessness of war. At the same time, Wang is specifically sending a message to China's younger generation to uncover conflicts from their own national history of which they may be unaware. Furthermore, he encourages them to embrace feelings of loss and pain in shaping their nation's memories of wars rather than perpetually turning them into battlegrounds.

Blending Anachronic War Memories: A Critique of Nationalism and the Relativization of War

The dramaturgy of the performance subverts the formulaic structure of the Maoist postwar propaganda films from the late 1950s and early 1960s in which the enemy suffers tremendous losses at the hands of almost bare-handed villagers driven only by patriotism, communist credos, and anti-Japanese hatred.⁴⁰ As mine victims, the

performers throw themselves in the air, but then immediately stand up and play out the roles of oppressors planting bombs. After a couple of seconds, they stand up again only to be immediately blown away by bombs, turning into victims and oppressors yet again in a continuous, exhausting, and repetitive cycle. Each time their megaphones (signifiers of Chinese political propaganda) blast war sounds recorded onstage as onomatopoeia, they swap roles (as either victims or attackers). However, this uninterrupted flux of interchanging roles is not simply limited to exposing the caricatural representation of war that the original film conveyed in its portrayal of Chinese battlefield bravery. The parodic recreation of the landmine spectacle also foregrounds how easily the roles of victim and oppressor can be swapped, dislocating and replacing each other with incredible ease. Additionally, the megaphones—periodically replaying the previously recorded sounds of onstage actors imitating the war sounds from the original film—symbolize the weapons that caused so many tragedies in China during the war. They also represent the ongoing propaganda that continues to divide China and Japan today, with the performers using the megaphones as rifles to kill each other. Wang's overlapping use of symbols underscores the multidirectional nature of memory and how the Sino–Japanese war is remembered today, often through the lens of classic propagandistic films. The simplistic discourse of propaganda in shaping war memory fails to capture the true pain of the victims and trivializes war as if it were an exciting children's game.

In *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0*, as Japanese reviewer Hiroshi Seto pertinently remarked, the perpetual cycle of interchanging roles neutralizes the evil–good, oppressors–oppressed binary division that wars perpetuate, and this represents, in his terms, a “plea against the war.”⁴¹ As part of his documentary research for the performance, Wang even visited Haiyang City in Shandong Province, a place that was heavily mined during the War of Resistance against Japan. It was also where the shooting of the film took place, and he was bewildered to discover a landmine-themed park and even a Landmine Warfare Memorial (*Dileizhan Jinianguan*), where various acts of bravery represented in the film are still being reenacted and performed today.⁴² One could reasonably argue that Wang is making a broader point about the entertainment value of propaganda films such as *The Warfare of Landmine*; his view seems to be supported by the film's characterization of Chinese villagers as excited children play-acting at war rather than participating in an actual one.

The criticism of war as patriotic entertainment proposed by *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0*'s recreation of the Sino–Japanese War is then anachronistically juxtaposed against the war memories of another, more recent Asian one: the monthlong Sino–Vietnamese War. While the performers reenact the artificial bravery associated with the former, two female performers recite on their megaphones a series of commemorative lines carrying the names of Chinese martyrs who lost their lives during the latter.⁴³ Known in China as the Self-Defensive Counterstrike against Vietnam (*Dui Yue ziwei fanji zhan*), which started early in 1979 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (1904–97), this conflict is a rather controversial one in terms of China's self-perception as a victim of foreign powers or as a symbol of peace and regional stability in East Asia.⁴⁴ Wang has argued that this is a war that “we do not talk about,”⁴⁵ as it has been written out of history, and therefore people's memories, by the Chinese government.

The reason behind such apparent amnesia has been analyzed by a number of historians outside of China. Yin and Path, for instance, see the People's Liberation Army's action along the length of the Vietnam border as “an invasion that surprised

the world,” “directly triggered” by Vietnam’s toppling of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.⁴⁶ Many Chinese soldiers who fought in the war “remember the conflict as a tragic personal loss because they failed to benefit from the economic reform in the same way as their civilian peers.”⁴⁷ Li Xiaoling also considered this conflict “a war premeditated.”⁴⁸ According to him, the Chinese soldiers that took part in it have been “deliberately” and “intentionally forgotten by China’s leaders”⁴⁹ and used as “political sacrificial lambs.”⁵⁰ Chinese scholarship has typically regarded it as an example of Vietnam’s “expansionist tendencies” and “regional hegemony.”⁵¹ As Gong Li argues, this prompted China to “teach a lesson” (*jiaoxun*) to Vietnam and to its “backstage boss,”⁵² the former Soviet Union. Moreover, the memory of this war within recent Chinese media is carefully calibrated by a patriotic educational discourse,⁵³ while no mentions of it seem to exist in the history manuals up to early 2000s, a point at which the Vietnamese were still being portrayed as “ungrateful backstabbers.”⁵⁴ These views suggest a stark discrepancy regarding the Sino–Vietnamese War within and outside of China.

The Warfare of Landmine 2.0 inserts references to the Sino–Vietnamese War within the parodic deconstruction of the Sino–Japanese one. This technique implies a process of dislocation: the much-hyped memory of the Sino–Japanese War is disjointed by the questionably forgotten memory of the Sino–Vietnamese one. This technique has quite a multidirectional effect on recalibrating war memory: not only does it reanimate the memory of the forgotten war, but it makes one wonder why certain wars are forgotten in the first place. It also exposes how Chinese cultural and political media craft and select only the memories that *should* be preserved and nourished by the people, based solely on notions of victimhood or patriotism. The victim at one point in history can equally become an aggressor at another, as Wang’s anachronistic juxtapositions of two different war memories seem to suggest. For him, minimizing the memory of one war, whether justified as a war of self-defense or a war of aggression, means minimizing the memory of the victims.

Wang’s technique goes beyond merely pointing fingers at an emergent wave of Chinese nationalism, which uses collective memories of war trauma as a platform for promoting a shared sense of political superiority over Japan. His aesthetic of conjoining war memories transcends accusatory ideologies against his country’s official (mis)handling of war narratives. All six performers are dressed in athletic outfits, each of a different color, intentionally avoiding any symbolic markers of nationhood or ethnicity. They each represent the many nations involved in the carnage during the Asia–Pacific War. Apart from participating in a war resembling a game, they are united by the fact that they are all victims of the propaganda machine, symbolized here by the megaphones that dictate their movements and caricature a stereotyped form of heroism. Toward the end of the performance, after the actors finally finish manipulating dozens of small megaphones as part of the game, a gigantic megaphone descends from the ceiling, “killing” all six performers, who collapse motionless to the ground, victims of an omnipresent propaganda machine.

The juxtapositions of memories in this production also question the hierarchy of suffering within respective nations’ war commemoration practices. As Michael Rothberg has argued, “creat[ing] a hierarchy of suffering” is “morally offensive” and “removes that suffering from the field of historical agency.”⁵⁵ With the aforementioned wars as his starting points, Wang instead addresses the more universal human feelings of pain and loss in the aftermath of war. Yet his double gaze at China’s past through the intermingling of two very different wars—one framed by the

“nationalization of suffering”⁵⁶ and the other by deliberately erased memories wherein China may be perceived as the aggressor—highlights how multidirectional memory can lead audiences to uncover unknown aspects of their own past. It also prompts viewers to examine critically historical revelations deliberately concealed by official narratives. The overlapping of the Sino–Japanese and Sino–Vietnamese Wars also generates universalist war metaphors that underscore the necessity of remembering war victims with equal parts pain and reverence in a manner that transcends the parochial concerns of nationalism.

In fact, Wang’s universalist message could well be one of the reasons why Chinese censors did not grasp the antinationalist implications of *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0*. In a conversation with him, he indicated that the censors expressed certain fears that references to the Vietnam War might cause Chinese veterans to protest at an inopportune time—namely, when China was celebrating twenty years of reestablishing postwar diplomatic relations with Vietnam. The performance generally ran rather smoothly and uncensored; however, for its run at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre in 2014, the production encountered problems. What triggered the censors’ concern was the rape scene at the end of the performance, a taboo subject even today on the Chinese stage. In what follows, I analyze this “trouble-making scene” staged by a “trouble-making director,”⁵⁷ with a focus on its power to subvert precisely the hypersexual imagery with which rape is often associated.

War Rape as a Metaphor of Patriarchal Nationalism

The rape scene is the most powerful and emotionally charged one of the entire performance, referencing as it does the tragedy to which women across the Asia–Pacific had been subjected during wartime: the brutality of being used as sex slaves by Japanese soldiers. In *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0*, the rape scene is enacted by three male performers who slowly take off their shirts and one by one rape a woman, who remains motionless on the stage floor. Her body is veiled behind white cloth, with only her head visible, and so the performers’ sexual movements cannot be fully perceived by the audience. Their moves are awkwardly slow, and the rape victim, contrary to what one would expect, does not respond in any way to what is happening to her. The entire scene unfolds in virtual silence, aside from a sad song (barely audible) being hummed by another female performer. Rape is performed and made obvious, but in a veiled and coded manner because the memory of “comfort women” across Asia–Pacific is also “veiled” in official Japanese history to this very day. Rape remains veiled due to the social stigma that has obscured remembrance of the brutalities inflicted upon these women within their own national communities.⁵⁸ Symbolically, the rape scene represents the “ghosting” of war victims, hidden by history only to resurface “in new circumstances and contexts”⁵⁹ that “prompt audience members to ask about and interpret them.”⁶⁰ Viewed through the lens of multidirectional memory, this scene reveals how Wang juxtaposes the obscurity of this episode within Japan’s war remembrance practices with the tragic obscurity of the victims within their own national history.

Wang’s aesthetic of war rape is also similar to what Joanna Townsend-Robinson termed “hysterical performance,” meant to “leave its the audience unsettled, suspended between different, contested meanings.”⁶¹ His representation of war rape is also in line with Lisa Fitzpatrick’s argument that the act of rape itself “demonstrates the failure ... to see oneself in the other.”⁶² In *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0* rape is

represented as a static, reactionless act. The audience is forced to watch in horror and ask themselves why the victim has no reaction to what is happening to her. Is it because her rape continues to remain hidden from history and may never be acknowledged? Why is her ghostly return so submissive, instead of vengeful? The very obscurity of her rape and the passivity of her reaction mirror the obscurity and passivity with which the memory of this historic episode is handled in the present. Wang's double gaze in the representation of war rape forces the audience to confront its meaning and to question what creates rapists in the first place.

Focusing the interpretation of this scene within the specific context of China's political instrumentalization of war memories, it becomes apparent that Wang moves away from the narrative of China as victor, instead deconstructing the more recent "victimhood patriotism" discourse. Slogans such as "Never forget national humiliation: Chinese women raped by the Japanese devils" have been pervasive within the Chinese media during the past forty years, serving to manipulate public sentiment in the post-Mao era.⁶³ In the early 1980s, revisionist memory-making policies were implemented for politically "pragmatic"⁶⁴ concerns, with Beijing reinvigorating the memory of "a century of national humiliation,"⁶⁵ thereby diverting attention "from domestic concern to foreign enemies" and thus consolidating "a new patriotic nationalistic identity."⁶⁶ As is by now well known, there is a long history of linking nationhood with the female body. When constructing nation-building discourses, the female body "tends to become a metaphor for the nation, and as such often functions as a symbolic indicator of nationality within discourses of nationalism."⁶⁷ China is no exception, when it comes to representations of brutalized female bodies in both modern and contemporary art.⁶⁸ As scholars Zoë Brigley Thomson and Sorcha Gunne have observed, "The imaginative construction of the nation" turns rape into an "ideological weapon,"⁶⁹ setting the grounds for "patriarchal nationalism,"⁷⁰ a theme poignantly explored in *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0* as well.

Wang's representation of rape subverts the Chinese nationalist discourse in the post-Mao era, which often amplified anti-Japanese sentiments by drawing on the shocking episode of the Nanjing Massacre. In the late 1980s, for example, gruesome images of raped and brutalized Chinese women were displayed across various media for public consumption.⁷¹ In China's case, the memory of war rape as symbolized by the Nanjing Massacre is ubiquitous within China's media. As Lydia Liu has noted, "as a sign of symbolic exchange, the raped woman often serves as a powerful trope in anti-Japanese propaganda. Her victimization is used to represent—or more precisely, to eroticize—China's own plight. In such a signifying practice, the female body is ultimately displaced by nationalism."⁷² Relying on Liu's analysis, William Callahan similarly concludes that "the symbol of raped women also helped build Chinese identity according to a patriarchal nationalism."⁷³ Significantly, the Nanjing Massacre is also commonly referred to as the Rape of Nanjing, gendering the place where the horrific acts of violence occurred in 1937.⁷⁴ By muting the sexual violence of rape, Wang in a sense deemphasizes the national identities of perpetrators and victim, drawing his audience to focus on the physical act and its dehumanizing brutality in a way that transcends the historical specificity at the heart of this scene. Moreover, Wang's veiled representation is antithetical to Beijing's politically expedient and demonstrably public instrumentalization of this shared history. The effect is to interrogate the practice of using rape for what Callahan calls "nationalist mobilization" and for "reproducing patriarchal nationalism and Sino-Japanese conflict."⁷⁵

The Memory of Forgotten Internal Conflicts in *Lu Xun*

When considered through the lens of multidirectional memory, the performance of war memories in Wang's 2016 production *Lu Xun* adds an additional layer of complexity, and indeed critique, to his theatre practice. In this particular performance, Wang deconstructs the image of Lu Xun as a Maoist model hero, as he is officially remembered today, reconstructing him into its opposite—a Maoist anti-hero, which is one of the reasons why the performance was canceled abruptly in Shanghai.⁷⁶ The opening scene shows the protagonist on his deathbed in 1936, when the male “Fatty” and female “Skinny,” two “angels” in the shape of fictitious puppets with grotesque features, show up and claim to have descended from Heaven in order to complete the separation of the dying man's body from his spirit. The two symbolic characters first take the Chinese writer back in time, amid major individual and political events he had witnessed during his life, then forward into his “afterlife” during the Maoist era, and finally to contemporary China. The wandering back and forth through China's history reimagines a modern Lu Xun, now dressed in a pair of jeans and a shirt, who tries to make sense of how his ideological thought has impacted his country after his death. The dramaturgy's stream of consciousness connects China's past with its present in a mirrorlike image, turning the past into a commentary on the present.

While traveling through the era following his actual death, Lu Xun first becomes naively enthusiastic about the revolutionary craze that his intellectual legacy (shaped by the May Fourth Movement and by the Civil War) aroused within Maoist and post-Maoist Chinese youth,⁷⁷ before gradually becoming disappointed by the hypocrisy and emptiness that he witnesses. As he joins a contemporary march, which carries the generic, fictitious name The Great Alliance for Freedom and is attended by the lower strata of Chinese society, he is gratified to notice a very young man delivering a speech on the importance of “the freedom of the masses.” “I'd rather die than live without freedom,” declares the young man emphatically. Fatty and Skinny, who assume different roles throughout the performance, here disapprove of the young man's “freedom of the masses” ideals and, unexpectedly, counterattack him: “The masses don't need freedom. They need bread,” Fatty replies to the young man, while Skinny's alienlike eyes display documentary black and white images from the Chinese Civil War. The protean Fatty again takes on a new role, that of an executioner; he pulls out his pistol and points it at the young man. The monologue accompanying the boy's slow death at Fatty's hands is painfully sadistic.

Fatty as Executioner says:

On your knees! I said on your knees! The first bullet to your left leg, to make you kneel and shake. The second bullet, to your right leg, to make you fall on both knees and cough. The third bullet, to your crotch, so you may never have a wife. The fourth bullet, to your belly, to turn your guts inside-out! The fifth bullet, to your chest, so that your heart may never beat again. The sixth bullet, to your throat, to make you hold up your own brain. The seventh bullet, to your left eye, to make you die staring at me. The eighth bullet to your right eye, to make me the last man you remember. The ninth bullet, into your mouth, to send you straight to hell for your ranting. The tenth bullet, straight to your forehead, to mark your meaningless existence.⁷⁸

The young man, who is performed by a child no older than eleven, eventually dies, much to Lu Xun's despair, as he is helpless to prevent his gruesome death. As the spectacle of the boy's slow death continues, Skinny encircles Lu Xun with her snake-shaped body and forces him to continue watching. The entire scene occurs in front of a huge screen in the shape of Mao's famous bust, with live elements of the performance shot, selected, and projected on the statue's chest by a cameraman filming live. As Fatty points his gun at the boy and shoots him, one shot at a time, Lu Xun does not make a single move, nor do the gunshots make a noise, nor is there any blood at all. With every shot, the boy touches the wounded part of his body; his dying gestures are minimalistic and artificial, as eventually he falls to the ground and lies still.

The expressionistic aesthetic of this tableau of death yet again diverts attention away from the voyeurism of death and violence, focusing instead on Lu Xun's own feelings of helplessness, as he is forced to witness how his own ideal of freedom is being obliterated by the very people meant to fight for and uphold it. The dying preteen is in fact his own alter ego, a young Lu Xun projected into present-day China, as Wang explained to me during a personal interview. Ironically, Lu Xun's immaterial soul wandering through China's history is represented by real human beings, while all other historical characters (e.g., Lu Xun's wife, mistress, brother, intellectual leaders of the era) are embodied by puppets, conceived as "imitations" of "real life." Symbolically, Wang's puppets epitomize the opposite of Lu Xun's "free soul," "unchained" from the "shackles"⁷⁹ attached to him by official history. As if to dispel any doubt, Wang has described his intention in various interviews—namely, to create a "human" and "real" version of Lu Xun⁸⁰ while ridding him of the stiff clothes of national icon, which deprived him of a genuine soul. The dramaturgy does not make explicit which particular contemporary Chinese revolution this scene references, allowing the audience room for speculation, but Wang has offered a conclusive clue: "The boy wears jeans and a shirt, just like the youngsters killed during the 1989 Tiananmen Protests."⁸¹ At one point in the performance, the stage's screen displays live views of the audience itself, portraying their unfiltered reactions voyeuristically and in an unmediated way, unlike the carefully scripted and controlled official narrative of what happened in 1989. Turning the cameras from Lu Xun's vulnerable face onto the audience, who see themselves projected onto Mao's bust, serves as a reminder that they are all contemporary versions of Lu Xun. They are caught in a present where they are unable to act, forced to watch with a fatalistic gaze their own incapacity to intervene in the violence they helplessly witness. Even fifty years later, they are still trapped within Mao's political legacy.

In contemporary China, the memory of the Civil War is far more popularized in the Chinese media than the "repressed political memory"⁸² of Tiananmen Protests in 1989. *Lu Xun's* mise-en-scène connects both overly explored and repressed memories of violent events in Chinese history, a strategy that recreates the memory of a forgotten historical event via the memory of another well-remembered one. Approached through multidirectional memory, *Lu Xun* unearths, for the young generation often accused of amnesia, the extreme violence of "a blank spot"⁸³ in Chinese history (e.g., Tiananmen). One of the most emotional scenes illustrating this idea follows the boy's death, when his mother, performed by a blind old puppet handled by two actors, comes onstage to claim his body. While the images displayed on the screen focus on her facial expression, two hands come out of her gigantic sightless eyes, providing a grotesquely emotional image of a mother devastated by grief. Her sight has been taken away by the violence of history, but the arms replacing

it and coming out of her eyes are still searching aimlessly for her son. Wang's reference is clear here: the "Tiananmen Mothers" in search of "truth" and "accountability" for the death of their children in the aftermath of the events of that epoch-defining day.⁸⁴

Similar references become apparent in a later scene, when Lu Xun carries on his shoulders a garland of heads made of white paper, as he decries the poor souls of those who have died in violent conflicts, aimless and without peace:

They don't even have graves. Late at night at the wasteland, the butchers sent workers to dig a shallow hole. After they dug it, they threw you all inside, one on top of the other.... There were so many corpses, they couldn't even have everyone fit in the hole, and there was not enough earth to cover you. Not enough earth to cover your young swollen faces, your bruised bodies, your legs and wrists rubbed by iron manacles.

During Lu Xun's emotional speech, the gigantic screen displays the sea of white heads marked with spots of red paint, suggestive of their violent deaths. The garlands of heads symbolize the many youngsters who died violent deaths during the Tiananmen protests. Their facial features are indistinct, as their memory has carefully been hidden from public remembrance by Beijing. Volatile and soft, just like the paper of which they are made, they represent the many ghosts returning to oppose their deliberate erasure from history. Despite his intellectualized aesthetic, Wang's aim is clear: haunting present China, these ghosts force the audiences into a dialogue with a violent past purposefully obscured. Moreover, by portraying the violence of the Civil War (as the documentary images displayed on Skinny's eyes suggest), the scene echoes the sounds and discourses of the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen protests. The *mélange* of historical events may seem ambiguous indeed. Yet, as Wang explains when referring to how the audience perceived his performance, "my intention may not be clearly pointed out, but the audience does sense they're in for something very political."⁸⁵

In one of the last and most climactic scenes of the performance, Lu Xun makes it clear that his struggle to redeem his name is based on memory's multidirectional role in shaping the future of any nation. Looking directly at the audience, he addresses "the children of the future," saying that "Memory and resistance are the weapons of the helpless." The protagonist then climbs up an iron ladder built across Mao's gigantic chest and reaches the statue's head. The screen projecting images throughout the performance is now turned off, while the stage lights focus on the statue's head, which unexpectedly has no facial features. His head is designed in the shape of an almost empty cube, occupied only by a big chair. Lu Xun snatches the chair, a symbol of Mao's megalomaniac power, while the sound of gunshots amid dramatic music punctuates the highly tense atmosphere. "You cannot sacrifice your freedom for the others ... but you can throw away the vilest chair! Children, remember this," he declares, and then throws the chair to the ground. The stage lights darken all of the characters onstage, except Lu Xun and the bloody white heads lying on the ground. This contrast creates a cynical symmetry between the hollowness of the statue's head (a symbol of Mao's empty revolutionary ideals) and the sea of death lying right beneath it, representing the very victims of the Chairman's shallow political credos.

Articulating memory's multidirectional function, the ghosts of the victims of the Civil War morph into the ghosts of Mao's Cultural Revolution and, later, into the forgotten ones who lost their lives during the Tiananmen protests. Wang's mix of historical references illustrates that erasing the memory of past violence and denying survivors the right to remember the lost can only perpetuate history's repetition, continually generating victims whose ghosts return to haunt the present and challenge its lack of responsibility.

Conclusion

The Warfare of Landmine 2.0 challenges war remembrance practices through multidirectional memory and its ability to demystify the rigid ideologies that define the current nationalistic discourses in China. Wang questions the vindictive impulses and practices generated by the selective propaganda memories of war, replacing them with the genuine need to heal from past traumas through sympathy and respect for the victims. However, Japanese and Chinese audiences,⁸⁶ critics, and censors broadly have failed to grasp the antinationalist stance of the production. One Chinese audience reviewer remarked that the performance "deconstructs propaganda with propaganda tools."⁸⁷ The collage of literary and academic texts and references, to say nothing of the critics' own inherent ideological blinders, have rather alienated them from acknowledging Wang's political allusions. Wang's aesthetic of violence is double layered in its quest to explore war memory by mixing the historical specificities of twentieth-century China in order to make a broader, more universalist antiwar point. Embedded within his critique of his own country is a deeply felt awareness that, as Rothberg argues, cultures of memory should not be reduced to "a zero-sum game" in which one culture's memories supersede those beyond its borders; rather, Rothberg suggests quite emphatically, memories are "dialogical."⁸⁸ Equally, Wang proves that traumatic memories of past violent events should not be viewed as "competitive," crafted by the immediate interests of political games; instead, war memories should be "productive"⁸⁹ and engaged with healing the trauma they generated transgenerationally.

Regarding *Lu Xun*, we realize that Wang is drawing our attention to what he sees as the cyclicity of historical violence and the cultures of memory that emerge in its wake. Humanizing and demystifying the iconic and politically manipulated figure of Lu Xun is in fact a process of humanizing and demystifying China's memory of wars, revolutions, and conflicts, which opens up a more lucid and empathetic outlook on history in Wang's view. Moreover, the fluid, poetic and emotional articulation of the script, its narrative flow crafted by playwright Li Jing, deeply moved the audiences, who often gave impassioned accounts of their experience of the play.⁹⁰ Wang suggests that the chaos of the Civil War and of the Cultural Revolution, two violent events well documented and well (mis)remembered in China, are not worth remembering more than the devastation caused during the events of 1989. Memory's ability to function multidirectionally sets all these episodes in China's history in a dialogue with each other and with the present generation, exposing young audiences to both known and unknown histories to encourage reflection. For example, when Lu Xun throws the chair of power from Mao's head, leaving it empty, his ideological statement becomes quite clear: the chaos and violence in post-Mao China (as suggested also by the characters 胡乱 [*huluan*, meaning "chaos"] turned upside-down on the stage) are the

legacy of the Chairman's equally void ideas of revolution marked by violence and senseless death.

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As Elizabeth Son argues when considering wartime violence in Korea, "to perform pain is to desire healing."⁹¹ Wang's theatre praxis is particularly necessary in that it explores war memories in a manner much more concerned with China's own genuine need to face its traumas and heal in order to avoid repeating such episodic violence in the future. In both performances one comes to understand how multidirectional memory reveals China's "forgotten" or hidden internal and external conflicts. Unearthing the forgotten past also opposes "the homogenization and moralization of memory"⁹² crafted by official structures of power for their own political benefit. Wang's aesthetic of heterogenization vis-à-vis violent memories suggests that deliberate historical amnesia may in fact lead to future tragedies. As Rothberg argues, memory understood as "competitive" is reductionistic. He is "in favor of a more open-ended sense of the possibilities of memory and countermemory that might allow the 'revisiting' and rewriting of hegemonic sites of memory."⁹³ Equally, Wang revisits hidden memories of violent historical events through the mediation of omnipresent memories and highlights their equal significance in the collective memory of a nation. By making visible the invisible legacy left by China's violent history, Wang attempts to construct a healing dialogue with his country's past, which is crucial for fostering a responsible present.

Finally, the performances analyzed in this essay are two of Wang's most political and controversial ones. Chinese theatre makers are often expected by their Western supporters (institutional or otherwise) to produce theatre that is almost entirely political, insofar as it conforms to Western narratives about what the Chinese government and Chinese society should be (i.e., more like the ideals of Western democracies, even if those democratic governments don't live up to those ideals themselves). In other words, the extent to which a Chinese artist is demonstrably outspoken against Beijing tends to determine the extent to which Western cultural and political institutions will advocate on behalf of that artist, as such outspokenness aligns with certain geopolitical strategic aims. Unfortunately, this expectation greatly complicates and influences the social and political sensitivities of Chinese directors like Wang, who necessarily must strike an appropriate balance between realizing his artistic vision while being cognizant of the ideological influences of his Western-based theatre practice and productions.

Remaining true to his own artistic impulses, without succumbing to the pressure of creating art in a Western box, is indeed a difficult mission for Wang. *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0* and *Lu Xun* have been conceived first and foremost with Chinese audiences in mind, in spite of their universal antiviolence messages. Perhaps more important, the very fact that the director manages to use the specificities of his historical references and turn them into global antiviolence metaphors in both productions is yet another sign of his ideational freedom. "Not only [do] I promote my political works; I do treasure, value my apolitical works as well,"⁹⁴ he stated during a webinar addressing this particular issue, defending his creative right to engage artistically with precisely the social and political aspects that genuinely stir his creative sensitivities.

Notes

- 1 Seeking to extend its colonial powers in Asia, Japan occupied China's largest east-coast cities, which resulted, among others, in the infamous Nanjing Massacre (1937) and the sexual enslavement of tens of thousands of women.
- 2 See Min Zhou and Hanning Wang, "Anti-Japanese Sentiment among Chinese University Students: The Influence of Contemporary Nationalist Propaganda," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 46.1 (2017): 167–85.
- 3 Wang clarified this detail in a personal email exchange in 2022. The official site of the festival also stated that although there was debate over the "portrayal of war as a game," "[t]here was consensus ... that [it] expressed a universal anti-war theme, rather than being about a particular conflict." See "F/T Emerging Artists Program: F/T Award winner announced" (2013), at www.festival-tokyo.jp/13/en/news/2013/12/ft-emerging-artists-program-ft-award-winner-announced.html, accessed 14 August 2023. Moreover, Wang has often made it clear that his production is more concerned with exploring "the relation between men and their beastly nature, guns and wars." See "Landmine Warfare Premiers in Japan, Wins the Only Prize of the Festival" (*Dileizhan 2.0, Riben shouyan, huo xijujie weiyi jiangxiang*), Phoenix Television (*Fenghuang Weishi*) at http://phtv.ifeng.com/program/xingguangdajuyuan/detail_2014_05/20/36408726_0.shtml, accessed 14 August 2023. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese-language sources are by the present author.)
- 4 The original title of the film is *Dileizhan* (*Landmine Warfare*, 1962), codirected by Wu Jianhai, Tang Yingqi, and Xu Da. It is part of a patriotic series including also *Didaozhan* (*Tunnel Warfare*, 1965) and *Nanzheng beizhan* (*From Victory to Victory* [Fighting north and south], 1952).
- 5 See Yingjin Zhang, "War, History, and Remembrance in Chinese Cinema," in *Divided Lenses: Screen Memories of War in East Asia*, ed. Michael Berry and Chiho Sawada (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 21–39, at 27–8.
- 6 See James Reeve Pusey, *Lu Xun and Evolution* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), xii.
- 7 Wang Chong and Zhao Binghao selected the texts together. Zhao was born in 1988 in Zhengzhou, Henan Province. He is an independent artist, working as dramaturg and screenwriter.
- 8 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 12 This is a term used by Daniela Koleva, *Memory Archipelago of the Communist Past: Public Narratives and Personal Recollections* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 41, as she argues for ex-communist countries' tendencies to remember officially only the victimhood narratives shaping their recent past.
- 13 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 3.
- 14 Florian Schneider, *China's Digital Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 16 Orna Naftali, "These War Dramas Are Like Cartoons: Education, Media Consumption and Chinese Youth Attitudes towards Japan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27.113 (2018): 703–18, quote at 709.
- 17 Tarryn Li-Min Chun has written extensively about Wang's theatre praxis. See "Wang Chong and the Theatre of Immediacy: Technology, Performance and Intimacy in Crisis," *Theatre Survey* 62.3 (2021): 295–391, at 299.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 297.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 295.
- 20 Wang Chong, in-person interview with the author, Beijing, 10 August 2017. In 2022, Wang left China temporarily while active on the international stage, from the United States to Australia and Europe.
- 21 More specifically, works such as *Ying'er* (1992), a novel written by the Chinese poet Gu Cheng (1956–93), and Jiang Rong's (b. 1946) *Wolf Totem* (*Lang tuteng*, 2004) are referenced in this version of the performance, as is C. G. Jung's (1875–1961) *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1959).
- 22 For the production in Tokyo, Wang used a slightly different collage of texts, adapting his references to the knowledge of the Japanese audience. As he states in the program of the festival, "I have nothing to say in the performance, because everything has been expressed by the Japanese, the Chinese, the landmines, Friedrich Engels, Yukichi Fukuzawa, Carl Jung, Albert Einstein, Osama bin Laden, and Conan Edogawa." See Wang Chong in "Festival/Tokyo F/T 13: Emerging Artist Program" (2013), 11, www.festival-tokyo.jp/13/program/13/pdf/FT13_TP_koubo_web.pdf, accessed 10 February 2025.

- 23 See Zhou and Wang, "Anti-Japanese Sentiment," 169.
- 24 See Wang Chong in "Festival/Tokyo F/T 13: Emerging Artist Program" (2013), 11.
- 25 Kirk A. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 134.
- 26 Zheng Wang, in "History Education, Domestic Narratives, and China's International Behavior," in *(Re) Constructing Memory: Education, Identity, and Conflict*, ed. Michelle J. Bellino and James H. Williams (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2017), 171–88, at 175), argues that "because its success in gaining national independence gave legitimacy to the CCP, victory in the 'War of Resistance' (against Japan) and the civil war (against KMT and the U.S.) have been central to official post-war histories." After the 1980s, "'China as victor' was slowly replaced by 'China as victim' in nationalist discourse. This change of narratives is found in official documents, history textbooks, and popular culture."
- 27 See Zhang, "War, History, and Remembrance," 27.
- 28 See Mo Tian, "The Legacy of the Second Sino-Japanese War in the People's Republic of China: Mapping the Official Discourses of Memory," *Asia Pacific Journal* 20.11.4 (2022): 1–17, at 7.
- 29 See William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 30 See Rui Gao, "Cacophonous Memories of the War: Revision of the Official Narrative on the War of Resistance against Japan in Post-Mao China and Its Limitations," in *Routledge Handbook of Memory and Reconciliation in East Asia*, ed. Mikyoung Kim (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 26–46, at 30.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 32 See Yang Lijun, "A Clash of Nationalisms: Sino-Japanese Relations in the Twenty-First Century," in *China-Japan Relations in the 21st Century: Antagonism despite Interdependency*, ed. Lam Peng Er (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 83–101.
- 33 Rossella Ferrari, "Trans-Asian Spectropoetics: Conjuring War and Violence on the Haunted Stage of History," *Transnational Chinese Theatres: Intercultural Theatre Networks in East Asia* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 207–79, at 226.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 208.
- 35 Fu Jin, "Hong Kong: The Opportunities for Intangible Cultural Heritage Transmission," quoted in *ibid.*, 227.
- 36 Jessica Nakamura, *Transgenerational Remembrance: Performance and the Asia-Pacific War in Contemporary Japan* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), x.
- 37 Ferrari, "Trans-Asian Spectropoetics," 209.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Numerous Chinese reviews categorize this show as "antiwar" (*fanzhan*). See, for instance, "The Warfare of Landmine wins The Art Festival in Tokyo" (*Xin bian huaju Dileizhan duode Dongjing yishujie guiguan*), *The Cultural Drama Web* (*Xiqu wenhuawang*), at <https://news.sina.com.cn/s/2013-12-09/000428918923.shtml>, accessed 11 February 2025.
- 40 Timothy Y. Tsu, "A Genealogy of Anti-Japanese Protagonists in Chinese War Films, 1949–2011," in *Chinese and Japanese Films on the Second World War*, ed. King-fai Tam, Timothy Y. Tsu, and Sandra Wilson (London: Routledge, 2015), 12–25, at 13.
- 41 See Hiroshi Seto's original Japanese version of "Destroying Traditional Values in Antiwar Performance *Landmine Warfare 2.0* by Théâtre du Rêve Expérimental" (*Dento-teki kachikan hakai to Hansen no ishi-maki-den jikken gekidan "Jirai-sen 2.0"*), *Theatre Arts* 58 (Spring, 2014), at www.asahi-net.or.jp/~ir8h-st/tanbun_015.htm, accessed 10 July 2022.
- 42 The museum opened for the general public in 2005 and represents a tourist trademark for Chinese visitors to Haiyang City. See, for instance, "Shandong Haiyang Mausoleum of Landmine Warfare" (*Shandong Haiyang dileizhan jinianguan*), 4 December 2015, at <https://m.krzzjn.com/show-1035-76627.html>, accessed 18 July 2022.
- 43 Wang took the list of names from the Internet and integrated it into the script in the performance.
- 44 For China's self-image as a regional peacemaker in East Asia, see Jing-Dong Yuan, "Culture Matters: Chinese Approaches to Arms Control and Disarmament," in *Culture and Security: Multilateralism, Arms Control and Security Building*, ed. Keith R. Krause (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2005), 85–128, at 118.
- 45 See Wang Chong in Liao Danlin, "Disarming *Landmine 2.0*," *Global Times*, 21 November 2013, www.globaltimes.cn/content/826702.shtml, accessed 4 June 2023.
- 46 Qingfei Yin and Kosal Path, "Remembering and Forgetting the Last War: Discursive Memory of the Sino-Vietnamese War in China and Vietnam," *Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 9.1 (2021): 11–29, at 11–12.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 16.

- 48 Xiaoling Li, "Legacies of China's Forgotten War: The Sino-Vietnam Conflict of 1979," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 14.1 (2007): 25–44, quote at 41.
- 49 Ibid., 25.
- 50 Ibid., 29.
- 51 Gong Li, "The Triangle of Relationship between China, America and USSR during the Self-Defense War against Vietnam" (Dui Yue ziwei fanjizhan guocheng zhong de Zhong Mei Su sanjiao guanxi), Materials from CPC History (Dangshi wenhui) 8 (1995): 35–7, at 36, 37.
- 52 Ibid., 35, 37.
- 53 See Liu Jianyang, "National Defense Education won the Hearts of War Veterans on Campus" (*Can zhan laobing jin xiaoyuan guofang jiaoyu ru renxin*), *Lei Feng (Lei Feng)* 43.11 (2020): 87.
- 54 Yin and Path, "Remembering and Forgetting the Last War," 23.
- 55 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 9.
- 56 Koleva, *Memory Archipelago*, 41.
- 57 Wang referred to himself and the scene this way in his in-person interview with the author on 10 August 2017.
- 58 Nakamura, *Transgenerational Remembrance*, 72.
- 59 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 7, 2.
- 60 Nakamura, *Transgenerational Remembrance*, 66.
- 61 Joanna Townsend-Robinson, "Expressing the Unspoken: Hysterical Performance as Radical Theatre," *Women's Studies* 32.5 (2003): 533–57, at 535–6.
- 62 Lisa Fitzpatrick, *Rape on the Contemporary Stage* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 144.
- 63 See Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, 164–5.
- 64 Gao, "Cacophonous Memories of the War," 30.
- 65 See, e.g., Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, 198. This slogan emerged as a result of China's humiliation during the Opium Wars (1839–42; 1856–60), the unfair Treaty of Versailles (1919), and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1939–45), when China suffered immensely at the hands of the Japanese occupiers.
- 66 Gao, "Cacophonous Memories of the War," 29–30.
- 67 Zoë Brigley Thomson and Sorchu Gunne, "Introduction: Feminism without Borders—The Potentials and Pitfalls of Re-theorizing Rape," in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, ed. Gunne and Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1–20, at 6.
- 68 See, for instance, Marzia Varutti, *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation after Mao* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2014), 80.
- 69 Thomson and Gunne, "Introduction," 6.
- 70 Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, 179.
- 71 Ibid., 174. Moreover, Denton, *Exhibiting the Past Historical Memory*, argues that "Victims of atrocities—the 'Rape of Nanjing' ... —did not fit well into this heroic narrative" prevalent during Mao (134).
- 72 Lydia H. Liu, "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: Manchuria in Xiao Hong's *Field of Life and Death*," in *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 157–77, at 161.
- 73 See Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, 179.
- 74 See Hitomi Koyama, "On the Necessary and Disavowed Subject of History in Postwar 'Japan,'" in *Critical International Relations Theories in East Asia: Relationality, Subjectivity, and Pragmatism*, ed. Kosuke Shimizu (London: Routledge, 2019), 120–37, at 125.
- 75 See Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*, 179–80.
- 76 Chun, "Wang Chong and the Theatre of Immediacy," 307.
- 77 Lu Xun was extremely active during and after the May Fourth Movement in 1919, a political, cultural, and ideological movement led by the Chinese students following the unfair Treaty of Versailles (1919), when China endured humiliation at the hands of the Western powers. Lu Xun proposed values such as science, democracy, and socially engaged literature as ways to "strengthen" and "save" China. On the other hand, the Chinese Civil War witnessed long acts of violence between the Nationalist and Communist parties that ended in 1949 with the establishment of the People's Republic of China by Mao Zedong.
- 78 This and all other citations from *Lu Xun* have been translated by the present author, after transcribing the text from the recorded performance. However, David N. C. Hull also provided an official version of Li Jing's text, *Lu Xun (Da xiansheng)*, to which I had access.

79 Wang Chong in “Theatre Play *Lu Xun* to be Staged by the End of the Month: ‘Performing Lu Xun’s Stream of Consciousness’” (*Huaju Da xiansheng yuedi shangyan “shi Lu Xun de yishi liu zai wutaishang liudong”*), *Interface News* (Jiemian Xinwen), 16 March 2016, at <https://m.jiemian.com/article/573570.html>, accessed 19 February 2024.

80 See Yan Ping, “‘The Great Master’ Drama Brings to Life a Fresh, Genuine Lu Xun” (*Huaju Da xiansheng chengxian er xinjian de Lu Xun*), 28 September 2015, at <http://ent.sina.com.cn/j/drama/2015-09-28/doc-ifxifmki9567706.shtml>, accessed 5 July 2022.

81 Wang Chong, in-person interview, 10 August 2017.

82 See, for instance, Timothy Cheek, *Living with Reform: China since 1989* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2006), 146.

83 Ibid.

84 For more on the civil groups formed by the relatives of those killed during the 1989 Tiananmen events see Louisa Lim, *The People’s Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105–32.

85 Wang Chong, in-person interview, 10 August 2017.

86 In China the performance was staged between 2013 and 2014 in Hangzhou, where it premiered at the Trojan Horse Theatre (*Muma Juchang*), as well as in Beijing and at the Shanghai Arts Centre.

87 See this comment (by Cheng Liyuanyuan) at www.douban.com/location/drama/25791184/comments/, as well as more audience reviews there or at www.douban.com/location/drama/25791184/comments/?limit=20&status=P&sort=time, accessed 18 July 2023.

88 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 21.

89 Ibid., 3.

90 A number of audience reviews of *Lu Xun* may be consulted at <https://www.douban.com/location/drama/26747660/>, accessed at 17 July 2023. Additional reviews, such as Wang Run’s “Lu Xun’s Last Moments” (*Da xiansheng-Lu Xun zuihou shike*), may be consulted at www.chinawriter.com.cn/wutai/2016/2016-03-16/267721.html, as may Li Jing’s “All Puppets, but Lu Xun” (*Chule Lu Xun, jie wei kuilei*) at https://ent.ifeng.com/a/20160315/42589911_0.shtml, both accessed 1 December 2022.

91 Elizabeth W. Son, “Korean Trojan Women: Performing Wartime Sexual Violence,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 33.2 (2016): 369–94, at 382.

92 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 270.

93 Ibid., 309–10.

94 Wang Chong in “Global Conversations / Sinophone Experimental Performance,” *UCI Illumination*, a live Zoom on 19 April 2023; YouTube video posted 12 June 2023, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0eaASx3UpU, accessed 15 February 2025, quote at 1:17:03.

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