

Memorial Hall of the Victims: portrait photography, war-political narratives and transformation from exhibition media

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Abstract. This study takes the Memorial Hall of the Victims of Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders as a case to discuss how the portrait photography exhibitions transform the modern individual into a collective mind, especially from the period or memory of the War of Resistance. By analyzing the inherent attributes of portrait photography, this article situates the general effect of the media and genre, as well as the mode of narrative in this specific type of museum exhibition.

Keywords: War of Resistance, Portrait Photography, Exhibition Media.

1. Introduction

Portrait photography exhibitions are a prevailing artistic form of war remembrance in China, mostly consisting of photographs of war participants or survivors, especially those from the period of the War of Resistance (WOR, 1937-1945). These photography series are always executed by one single artist or team with patriotic overtones - the process is described as 'racing against time' - and the works exhibited are newly commissioned, rather than dating from wartime [1]. Considering the main case study of this paper - 'Time Witness - Art Portrait Photography Exhibition of Survivors of Nanjing Massacre' (2021, Nanjing, Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders) - a more specific narrative strategy would be included. The Nanjing Massacre is one of the iconic atrocities carried out by Japanese forces during WOR, widely regarded as evidence of national humiliation and victimhood. However, apart from the victimhood, what exists simultaneously and indispensably is the victor narrative, borne out in China's ultimate victor over Japan - the epitome of the imperialism invader [2]. Since war museums in China are largely used as the basis for patriotic education, these exhibitions are inevitably characterized by a patriotic-education overtone, and the target audience is every citizen [3]. Going beyond the inherent subject of the exhibitions themselves, their role in and ability to turn individual experiences into collective memory also draws support from the specified type of museum these exhibitions are situated in. Both 'China' and 'war' partly predetermine the ultimate collectiveness of whatever is displayed inside: museums in China are strong serves of overt ideological propaganda, where the inculcation of patriotism is realized through their openly-stated self-positioning, strategies of publicity, and the format of visiting; war museums, due to the nature of war, usually adopt the strategy of 'collective anonymity' which grows out of war's essentiality in defining a nation and its sacredness. The essay takes the War of Resistance Museum (Beijing) as an example to examine how and why war museums in China are especially effective in this processing of collective memory. It is necessary to declare that, despite its strong ideological and didactic intentions, the exhibition is still expected to be perceived as an 'art exhibition', as its name suggests.

The paper will analyze the inherent attributes of portrait photography exhibitions: misalignment and reset of 'time' in the exhibition - the continuity and overlapping of past and present as visualization of memory, and the tangling relation between the two opposite war narratives and how this script molds the audience's response; and will discuss the specific type of museums the exhibitions are held - war museums in China - as external factors.

This study aims to situate the general effect of the media and genre, as well as the mode of narrative in this specific type of museum, of such exhibitions in a more specific context - China's current perception of WOR - and to explore how these qualities, together, make these exhibitions powerful in the transformation from individual to collective. Although this article will mainly focus on one

exhibition and one museum, the discussion is also possible to stimulate wider discussion around this kind of exhibition in general. It is also noteworthy that this form of an exhibition and its official accounts may have the potential danger of over-politicizing art. Although it will not be discussed in detail in this paper, this art-politics relation should be borne in mind when analyzing such propagandic art.

2. Internal factors: artistic execution and narrative of War of Resistance

2.1. Wiping out the temporal gap: portraiture as genre and photography as media

By bridging the temporal gap between past events and the present audience, the exhibition visualizes the memory of war and imprints the corresponding sentiment on the public. Reconstructing the representation of past events to serve the present has been an important ideological and historical strategy in China since the Mao era [4]. The particular effectiveness of these exhibitions in this mediation of past and present is realized through the inherent qualities of the medium (photography) and the genre (portraiture), as well as the special identity of the protagonists.

Portrait photography includes two-way mobility of the past and the present, visualizes the flow of time, and ultimately extracts the notion of time to achieve the perpetuation of the image and its embedded information. According to Roland Barthes's thesis, a photograph is 'an illogical conjunction of the here-now and the there-then' [5]. Photography emotionally brings the audience back to the past through the photograph's immediacy [6]. Its nature of capturing the transience enables its closeness to the past reality and detachment from temporal fleetingness [5]. Barthes points out the photograph's ability to be the testament to a unique temporal-spatial existence of a specific event, and the moment this event is shot by the camera, it is immortalized and stops following the passing of time [6]. Functioning as commemoration, portraiture, as stated by Louis Marin, brings the past into the present by presenting a stimulus to memory [7]. On this basis, the subject of the image becomes unquestionably authentic, gaining the viewer's trust despite their awareness of the photograph's artificial nature. As Susan Sontag points out, the photograph not only 'captures and certifies experiences', but also 'gives an appearance of participation in the historical events' [8]. This quality allows the contemporary public, growing up without direct involvement on the battlefield, to approach closer war experiences. In this exhibition, all the survivors have been interviewed and their traumatic stories are publicly displayed in the labels accompanying the portrait photographs. Through these vivid, detailed war scenes from the first-person viewpoint, the audience is brought back to the live scene of the atrocity. Meanwhile, portraiture as a genre suggests the reappearance of the represented individual and their stories [7]. Given the public educational purpose of this exhibition, the viewers are supposed to focus on the survivors' suffering experiences rather than their entire life. From the outset, the documentary purpose of portraits in this exhibition is to authenticate the protagonists' status and stories from the Nanjing Massacre. Moreover, as it is the elders in this case that are being portrayed, the focus is their aging rather than their actual age, which visualizes the passing of time [7].

In this exhibition, the abovementioned qualities have an emotional impact in exaggerating the lingering trauma of the survivors. Most of them are captured during a dynamic process - assumably the story-telling. In figure 1, the figure's facial features are unnaturally distorted with all the irregular wrinkles, through which the unimaginable brutality she experienced and the ongoing trauma she is still suffering is entirely unfolded. The photographer uses high linear and chromatic contrasts to highlight her skin textures-trace of the passing of time. Consequently, the static and silent nature of the photograph is offset by the dramatization of physiognomic details. The man in figure 2 is gnashing his teeth and clenching his fist as if he is - and probably he was - telling the audience about the most detestable experience in his life. since he is presented in close-up, the audience is compelled to immerse themselves in a face-to-face dialogue with this witness. While all these gestures are momentary, the technique of photography pauses and extends these highly selected moments into permanent ones. Even though the audience is well aware of the transience of these captured moments,

they are nonetheless convinced by their apparent authenticity and invited to re-experience the past, realizing how high the degree of trauma could be. Of particular note is the black-and-white execution of the photographs - not restricted to this exhibition, but a characteristic of almost all this genre of the exhibition. It reminds the viewer of the artificial nature of the work, for it strips off the important signal of contemporary reality - colors - and acts as an indicator of the temporal distance between the audience and the image. It recalls those documentary or factual images in newspapers, further enhancing the authenticity of the experiences and emotions. The monochromatic palette and the weakening of background undermine temporal specificity and turn the exhibition into a more permanent and universal monument. As a result, the most resonant and impressive part of this victimhood is shown to permeate throughout the time.



Figure 1. Su Jia, Liu Suzhen, Unknown, Photograph

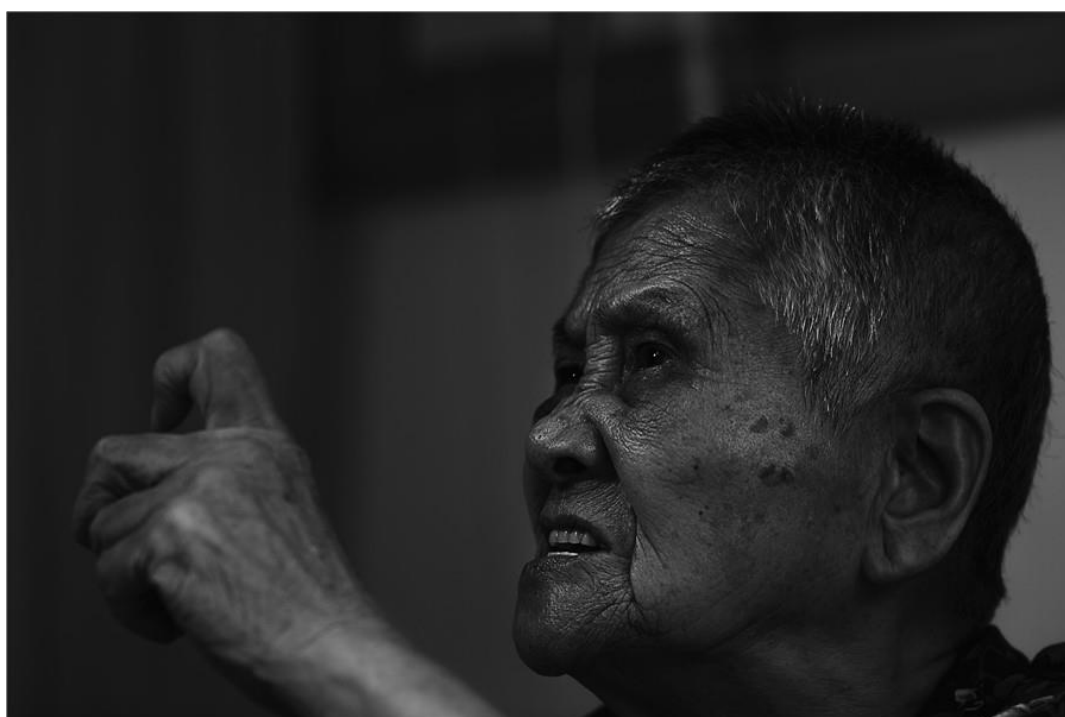


Figure 2. Su Jia, Zhou Xiangping, Unknown, Photograph

The ability of portraiture to extend the protagonists' past experiences, combined with photography's extraction of a transient moment from the linear flow of time, divestitures the notion of time from the artworks and perpetuates the momentary. Mark Strand argues that, whenever history is being mentioned, people are thinking it in a commemorative dimension which concerns more about future remembrance than merely about recording the past [9]. Especially with the propagandic ambition of the ruling party, this kind of exhibition aims at the continuity of war memory and the national spirit that sprang out of it. While there is a continuum between the 'awareness of the past and its presence in the present', the stability and wholeness of the inheritance of memory are guaranteed [9]. Portraiture retains the experiences and existences of the survivors and, as suggested by Walter Benjamin, offers a 'last refuge' in the remembrance of them [10]. Furthermore, it not only deals with time; more importantly, it is a settlement for the new generations that lack any direct involvement in the war, for whom historical consciousness can be encapsulated in these exhibitions [11].

Using the qualities of portrait photography, these exhibitions can create a grander and more coherent narrative with certain present scripts that go beyond the power of one single artwork. Along with the 'Time Witness' exhibition, another similar exhibition, this time explicitly telling a victor's narrative should be mentioned - 'The Memory Never Fades - Portrait Photography Exhibition of Veteran in War of Resistance' (2018, Beijing, Chinese People's Anti-Japanese War Memorial Hall). These two exhibitions illustrate how, behind the overt narrative, the seemingly opposing status in war is smoothly inserted. This mutual inclusion functions as justifying the existence of both sides - victim and victor - and signifying the uniqueness of China's national spirit. This narrative perspective gains its power not only through the images of protagonists, with their primary memory, but also through the audience's experience of accepting a certain version of memory, which ceaselessly contribute to the shaping of collective memory.

Moving from single artwork to the whole exhibition, the supplementary function of text should be introduced. Sontag suggests the insufficiency of photographs in creating a moral stance - although they can reinforce an established one [8]. The malleability of the photograph provides those who decide on the narrative of the exhibition space for maneuvering the overtone. In doing so, they guide the audience's emotion to be situated in a particular narrative structure - in the 'Time Witness' exhibition, the victim narrative, and 'Memory Never Fade' one, the victor narrative. Nonetheless, this orientation of sentiment is not a definitive one; it still allows individual perception to some extent. In the 'Time Witness' exhibition, the exhibition panels accompanying the works are brief yet evocative. No strong emotional expressions are used; rather, the story is succinctly stated from the first-person view. The survivors' descriptions of their feelings and inner reactions are plain yet powerful enough to be resonant with the audience. In the text accompanying Jin Zhimao's photograph, it says, '...(I) didn't dare to cry if so, I can't live either.' Sharp contrasts are made between the unvarnished style of the text and the unimaginable brutality delivered through those words. Through such an approach, the exhibition guarantees a space for the audience to process and digest the narrative individually. Additionally, their stories are mostly about witnessing their families being killed first-hand, which invites the audience to imagine 'what if I was one of them?'. The highly individualized and detailed fragments of the atrocity vivify the events beyond quantifying the deaths - all of them are, or were, as real as us. That is when the past trauma begins to implicate the people in the present. The countless individual tragedies coalesce into a shared victim narrative of the nation - a presently peaceful nation whose strength could be verified through conquering Japan even after such atrocity.

In both cases, the protagonists share similarities in their direct participation in the war, whether passively or proactively. Compared with first-hand documentation from the battlefield, the portraits of war participants created decades after the war, provide the public, who mostly live in a relatively peaceful era, with a palatable representation of war and trauma. Time dilutes the physical brutality of war, making it easier for the audience to gaze directly and contemplate, but the never-ending trauma - both individually and nationally - is still preserved and even enhanced.

2.2. Justified narrative: the coexistence of 'victim' and 'victor'

However, it is not enough to just enable resonance of the explicit sentiment of the event itself. Deeper connotations can only be exposed when placing the moment within a wider frame of historical narrative. In the 'Time Witness' exhibition, the focus is on remembering the humiliation and cherishing the hard-earned peace. Feeling suffocated in front of past suffering, the audience acquiesces to the premise of this memorialization of the victims: that the audience is looking at the victim narrative from a victor's status - the fear of forgetting it is derived from splitting from that passive position, where such events have not recurred for decades. On the other hand, the 'Veteran' exhibition, in which China achieved the ultimate victory, presents their victor status alongside the former victimhood of the nation - the history of being invaded. It is widely believed by the public in China that only China could 'go from so high a civilization to be lowest of the low...and back again' [12]. This rejuvenation of the nation is also justified by Li Ji, which suggests that humiliation is sufficient to save and revive a nation [12]. Here, the victimhood included in the victor narrative serves as proof of the resilience of the Chinese people. Additionally, to separate China from other victors in imperialist countries - those who invaded China - the victimhood also clarifies the innocence of China's victory over Japan.

The indivisibility of victim- and victor-narrative forms a coherent and justified version of the history of China during WOR: when facing victimhood, the nation did not accept it and indeed it counterattacked; the ultimate victory simultaneously proves the national strength and distinguishes itself from those imperialist victories based on China's humiliation. The shameful trauma has been integrated into heroic experiences, and the victory bears no stains. From such a reconciliation of two opposing narratives of war, these exhibitions use guided narratives to place the audience in a predetermined script [13].

To understand the significance of these exhibitions in a wider context, it is necessary to discuss their role in renegotiating the multiple individual experiences of war to help construct the collective memory of the nation. Here, the individual includes both the war participants and witnesses and the audience who are expected to receive patriotic education. The survivors and the veterans act as the groups who maintain a 'living relation to collective memory', sharing common experiences with both sides of history [9]. They speak for those who underwent the same events but, having died, stay forever in the past. Meanwhile, for the contemporary public, the process of learning about history also plays a crucial role in the construction of collective memory as a lived experience in the present [9]. The automatic acceptance of this re-organization and interpretation of war events presented in these exhibitions utilize the ongoing memory of the contemporary public to guarantee the future of this collective memory. In both cases, the homogenization of the individuals is realized through the monochromatic palette, through which the differences between individuals are minimized [6]. Each artwork is displayed in an equal manner; no one is being individually monumentalized. Through legitimizing and consolidating certain shared sentiments, with the aid of emotive and rational strategies for deployment of the image and the text, the grouping of portrait photographs becomes a monument. It is then the individuals are symbolized as part of the national spirit.

3. External factors: war museums in China

To understand how individual experience is processed to construct collective memory from a perspective of grander museological principles, which maneuver behind a particular form of exhibition, it is necessary to discuss the specified type of museums that which this form of the exhibition is held at. WOR museum would be the main supporting case to be examined in terms of the attributes 'China' and 'war'. Under the ideological frame of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), museums in China are distinctively characterized in their overt and intensified claim in serving patriotic education, which is evident in their self-positioning, the strategy of delivering certain messages, and the consequential impact on the audience. On the other hand, representing and memorializing war in the museum has some general strategies in manifesting the favored stance. War

narrative is destined to be unusual given the peculiar properties of war, for it plays a decisive role in a nation's formation and future and unavoidably causes death - a topic that requires careful negotiation to withstand the questioning of ethics.

3.1 Inculcation of patriotism - museums in contemporary China

Since the 80s and 90s, museums in China have been a powerful agent of reinforcing the ruling party's interpretation of the past [13]. Although this may be a worldwide commonplace, in China's context, the political overtones of museums - especially those state-funded regional ones - are exceptionally overt and dominating. For example, outside the Museum of Nanjing Massacre stands a sign saying that this site is an institution for patriotic education, directly self-declaring its role [9]. The museums thus take the first move in defining, or, let us say, restraining, the audience's expected 'learning outcome' toward whatever is unfolding in front of them. Even before entering the display room, the audience has already realized, through the conspicuous signs, how should the exhibitions or the museum itself as a site be perceived in terms of patriotism. Notably, museums in China also have the responsibility of educating school-age students, which always takes the form of school-organized group visiting [9]. This extra focus on the next generation - who have no direct access to wartime experience - implicates an urgency to fill in the gap of memory between generations and to continue the sentiments that grow out of this reconstructed past. Following the overall tenet and keynotes, the way knowledge is passed down in China's museums is usually more of inculcation than one that reserves enough possibilities for open-ended discussions, especially when memorializing and narrating war. As a crucial element of citizenship construction in China, inculcation of patriotism is 'embedded in most of the activities and institutions... (functioning) as part of the educational regime', where the establishment of museums significantly fulfills part of it [13].

Some practical strategies for facilitating inculcation and avoiding individual interpretation - which has the potential of deviating from official discourse - can be detected in the WOR museum. The WOR museum is representative for it is believed to be one of the most notable institutions that 'deal with China's re-imagined history of war' [9]. Zhang Chengjun once demonstrated the publicity strategy: '(we) send leaflets to all kinds of social units to let people know about our memorial's displays... We wanted to create favorable conditions for all social units to start-up patriotic educational activities' [13]. Another implicit consideration of securing favored interpretations is externalities such as location. Not convenient for transportation, the visitors are more likely to join tour groups - the most common ones are schools and work units - where individual interpretations that might be dissenting can be efficiently suppressed [13]. For the audience's experience, museum visiting cannot be disconnected from the larger system of media campaigns where ideological discourses are ubiquitously penetrated. Therefore, before visiting war museums in China, national information with a patriotic stance - at least the dictions that cannot be more familiar - is already well-known to the public, even not specially prepared for a museum visit. Having long been infiltrated within official discourses and being informed of the nature of such museum visiting, the audience can hardly escape from the grander national narrative.

3.2 Defining the nation-war narratives and war museums

War's fundamental role in a nation's construction of self partly explains why war museums unavoidably and closely serve the aim of all nations - the internal unity of its citizen. As Michael Howard suggests, a nation's self-consciousness is largely built on its differentiation from other counterparts - usually the most memorable incidents in the collective memory - which can be distinctively marked out by the relationship and interactions with other nations; he continues more absolutely: 'No Nation could be born without war' [14]. In China, the remembering of the War of Resistance, the catalytic events of the 'Century of Humiliation', has always been significant - to more or less extent - in shaping national memory. On another level, the need of giving satisfying justifications to the loss of lives in the war requires the memorialization of war to reconcile the

glorious national narrative with the individual trauma, to further justify the legitimacy of the ruling party.

The suitability of placing war in the museum is reasoned by their shared trait - sacrality. While no more words are needed to reiterate the quasi-religious qualities of the museum, the sacred aura of war lies more in the institutional interpretation of war and the (re)construction of its memory. Through integrating countless individual deaths into a collective sacrifice - a sacrifice made not in vain but becomes an indispensable part of the birth of the nation - the equivocal morality of war and its ensuing results are blurred in an unguarded manner. In the War of Resistance Museum, and probably most of the war museums in China, the avoidance of directly using the word 'death' and preference over 'sacrifice' (xi sheng) demonstrates the intention of 'emphasizing the sacral element of war' [15]. The sacrality of the war museum not only comes from the war itself but is also endowed through the specialty of the dual identity of the architecture: it simultaneously functions as a museum and a memorial. Termed as 'memorials', the war museums themselves are monumentalized rather than merely being a vessel or a shell. This monumentality is closely associated with the inculcation of patriotism that characterizes the agenda of museums in China. The sacred nature of war and its ensuing memorialization arises from both the awe of death, out of an instinct and the socially imbued sentiment of venerating those who, at least according to the official discourse such as museum texts, give their lives fearlessly and willingly' in exchange of the survival and prosperity of the nation. As result, the audience would feel obligated in the moral level to learn about the war participants - whether veterans, victims, or martyrs - with moods similar to those of religious events. Their responses and behaviors are therefore reduced to a limited range.

The function of war in constructing a nation is manifested and consolidated through a common strategy in war memorials: collective anonymity. James E. Young points out that one of the essential intentions of war memorials - as important as remembering the commemorated - is to reinforce and construct shared memories of a nation [16]. Individuality is deprived - at least impaired - in serves of the nation's control of war memory, especially the treatment of deaths, as Michael Rowlands suggests, 'nationalist war memorials...turn traumatic individual deaths into acts of national celebration and assertions of collective value' [17]. War museums - also functioned as a sort of memorial in China's case - put this nation-serving gist into practice through abstracting individuals into symbols that impute national ethos. The Hall of Martyrs at the WOR museum is, as Wu Hung suggests, similar to that of the Tiananmen monument on which figures of martyrs are depicted as a single idealized archetype...(being) repeated and multiplied [18]. Similarly, with the sacrifices listed only in chronological order, the martyrs' name tablets play down the inter-individual discrepancies. Instead of making the individuals known to the public, it intends to use those names as symbols that prove the massiveness of the loss and in turn set off the spirit of sacrificing oneself to save the nation, and as a stunning cluster of nameless marks of death to silence the audience. According to Michael King, war museums and memorials can offer a focus where various meanings that war brings to the contemporary public could be brought together [16]. It is a place where everyone can situate their sentiments in yet meanwhile in keeping with the main theme in China.

4. Mutual interactions between the museum and the audience

The impacts of museums on the audience, in general, are fundamental for processing memory. The core ability of (historical) museums in convincing the audience is, according to Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims, not about factuality or reality, but authority - coming from people who are in control of how past realities are told instead of what inherent of the objects. They function far more than merely preserving the memory of specific events. Through the display and juxtaposition of combinations of objects, museums allow 'imaginative reconstruction' of the past to serve present interests [19]. Karp and Lavine compared museums with nations for both of them could be understood as 'imagined communities, where identities are defined and behaviors are guided [20]. Beyond passively imparting knowledge, the audience is also encouraged to project the presented memory

onto themselves, to introspect, and perceive and understand the present - all through the past being told. Situating memory in museums enables it to be preserved, reorganized, continued, and appropriated.

The interaction between war museums in China and the public is not unidirectional: while a memorial 'gives shape to and consolidates public memory', it only gains meaning through interactions with the audience. According to Michel de Certeau, the museum space is only activated through the happening of the activities within it, and these activities - among which the audience's responses are weighted - guide the direction for and give an explanation to the museum spaces. The interactive role of the audience thus fulfills and implements the concepts of museums. In China's war museums, the audience is always expected - or feels obliged - to bring with a heavy heart when facing sacrifices, an ensuing hatred towards the enemy (especially Japan), then gratitude towards the current ruling party, and finally to cherish the hard-won peace. In turn, the collective reactions give a shrouding atmosphere to the museum spaces, where, together with the pre-set tone from the narrating concept, any individual is inextricable from the dominant mood, and any dissenting interpretation is excluded and condemned to be 'wrong'.

5. Conclusion

These exhibitions serve to unify the past and the present as well as signal future continuity, which corresponds to the nature of collective memory as the recurring historical remembering. Their temporal universality complies with the coherence necessary for collective memory. The coexistence of victor and victim narratives constitutes the content of the collective memory, with legitimacy and uniqueness. Specifically, in China's context, the struggle from humiliation to victory is always seen as a symbol of resilience - a quality that is long believed to be representative of recognizing one's Chinese identity. By selecting and reorganizing individual experiences of the past and setting the tone with textual narrative - while still retaining room for individual adaptation within a larger framework - the contemporary audience generates particular sentiments and situates themselves within a predetermined historical script, resulting in a coherent and sustainable collective memory that becomes an essential part of national identity. A national cohesion, based on collective memory and national identity, is forged through the exhibitions' universality - in which every Chinese person can situate themselves, through narrative uniqueness - which distinguishes China's national spirit from other nations, and through the legitimization of history - where a sense of identical superiority springs up. On the other hand, the external circumstance and mode of the narrative of the museums ensure that the dominating ideological discourse could be effectively delivered to the public, regardless of the forms it takes on. It is one of the primary concerns of war museums that, through displaying and reproducing the experience and memory of individuals, a series of collective memories are expected to be scripted, (re)constructed, and appropriated. In those museums, individual experiences are modified with certain ideological overtones and consequently evoke and integrate certain sentiments of the past among the current public. Museums not only serve as the intermediate agent to turn a set of relatively loose public emotions into an organized collective memory but also close the temporal gap by linking the memory to a contemporary value system. While individuals from the past events are used to add credibility to this conceptualized national memory, the present public forms a social polymer, only from which collective memory can absorb and continue its power. The transcending of individuality to collectiveness in the portrait photography exhibition in China's war museum is an all-side attack: genre and media that freeze the time, artistic executions that conceal the differences between individuals, museums that expertise in building shared sentiments in national serves, and even the audience - coming seemingly as irrelevant to the construction of this transcending - is drawn into this memory-building enterprise. A further question that should be discussed in the future, is will there be any room left for the individuals to think independently and critically outside the predetermined framework.

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