

# *Narrating History and Memory: A Comparative Reading of Shujuan and Boku in Geling Yan's The Flowers of War and Murakami Haruki's Killing Commendatore*

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**Abstract:** According to Pierre Nora's argument on the relationship between memory and history, these two concepts are not synonyms but antonyms. In the modern world, critical history begins from rational reflection, and it represses memory, which correlates more to the personal narrative field. The memory theory gives us the insight to reexamine the narration in literary works reflecting the war memory. This paper demonstrates different voices in narrating the individualized traumatic memory of the Nanking Massacre through the comparative reading between fictional works of Murakami Haruki and Geling Yan, *Killing Commendatore* and *The Flowers of War*. Shujuan, the protagonist in the novella of Yan, is both the observer and survivor of the massacre. Her storyline obtains two heterogeneous narratives that respectively belong to the field of personal memory and history; while her responsibility of memorizing the unrecorded experience makes her to pick a historical view to narrate her past. 'Boku,' the first-person protagonist in Murakami's fiction, on the other hand, is a contemporary character with no experience or direct memory of the war. However, he gets connected with the war memory through the Murakami-style surreal experience. His experience demonstrates how personal memory can console the trauma after the war, usually neglected by the grand history. In the paper, I argue that although the two authors are from different cultural backgrounds and apply different styles, their narrations that focus on the personal memory field show the consoling power that connects the past and present and heals the trauma left by the war. Further, their fictions still contribute to the political and historical discussions on Nanking, presenting the power against revisionists and bridging the conflicts inside the discussions around such a traumatic historical issue.

**Keywords:** memory, history, Nanking Massacre, Asian literature

## 1. Introduction

On December 13, 1937, the Japanese army captured Nanking, the capital city of the Republic of China. There, in a 6-week bloodbath, it is estimated that more than 300,000 Chinese citizens were slaughtered. This was known as the Rape of Nanking, which 'stands out as perhaps the most disturbingly violent and controversial event in the history of Nanking.' [1] The discourse of Nanking becomes even more complicated and contested in the contemporary era. While historians collect material evidence to demonstrate the scale and damage of the massacre; revisionists, driven by their

political motives, still deny the validity of such evidence and even the existence of the incident itself. [2] It seems that eighty-five years after the tragedy, a consensus with regard to the true history of the Rape of Nanjing is yet to be reached.

In this paper, beyond considering the historiographical controversy of the Rape of Nanking, I will closely examine two literary works that memorializes the Rape of Nanking: Geling Yan's *The Flowers of War* and Murakami Haruki's *Killing Commendatore*. Building on the French historian Pierre Nora's theorization of memory and history, I try to uncover another way to deal with the memory of Nanking beyond the historical context.

In Pierre Nora's essential essay, *Between Memory and History Les Lieux de Mémoire*, he sharply points out the division between memory and history. He suggests that memory is an immediate experience, often tied to one's sense of life; while history is an intellectual re-narrative designed to compensate for the absence of a sense of the past in modern life [3]. Informed by Nora's theory, I argue that the existing historical narratives of the Rape of Nanking put the traumatic event in a grand narrative of history in opposition to personal memory, and in so doing, it represses the individual memories of the trauma of the massacre, which then resurface under the shadow of fictional writings. This paper probes the individual memory of the Rape of Nanking by revisiting the protagonists of the two above-mentioned fictional works: Shujuan and Boku, to explore how individual memories are rediscovered by literary imagination from the status of being repressed by grand historical narratives. Focusing on the individualized traumatic war memory, the two authors both reproduce the personal experiences that cannot be recorded in the grand narrative of history, and articulate the peripheral voices that have been hitherto marginalized. One step further, I argue that Yan and Murakami, though working on the fictional realm, actively participate in the ongoing historical and political discussions in the real world. Their narratives of individual memories are by no means meant to trivialize the history with insignificant details, but constitute active reflection on historical trauma, the relevance of history to the present time, and how contemporaries should deal with war trauma and war responsibilities in their daily lives.

## 2. Untold Realities in History, Memory and Literature

Text-based historiography tends to be skeptical to personal memory, because memory can be easily distorted 'by physical deterioration and old age nostalgia,' [4] which points out the unreliability of memory. Memory is far from the "mere video-type of what is truly happening, but highly affected by other elements and even suffused with 'others' memory." But even memory could not be a reliable historical material, it would still reveal the reality in some extents(Freeman, 263); that is, the memory exposes the psychological activities of its creator at the specific historical time, and those untold psychological reality could be rediscovered through the analysis of individual memory, which will become an supplement of our already constructed historical narrative. Literature is akin to memory in terms of its capacity to reflect the vicissitude of historical experiences. It possesses the power to 'break the monologue of reality.' [5] and can be the 'seismograph of a people's dream and nightmare, hopes and apprehension,' which usually goes deeper than other forms of analysis. [6] In other words, it can achieve the 'primary affected, embodied, individualized experience,' which the public discourse tends to fail to capture. [7] Such power of literary works can be even more obvious in the field of the wartime trauma.

Building on these insights of literature and memory, I will use my analysis of the two literary works to further put the theory of memory and history into the analytical reading of literary texts. Nora posits that in the division between history and memory, the latter—the personal, subjective memory—has been violently repressed 'beneath the gaze of critical history.' And I plan to undertake the task of excavating memory from the hegemony of history to redeem the 'primary affected, embodied, and individualized experiences' in this paper. I attempt to conduct a comparative reading

of Geling Yan's *The Flower of War* and Murakami Haruki's *Killing Commendatore*, to look at how the authors strive to rediscover the personal voices and bring back the individualized memory depressed by the grand historical narratives of the Rape of Nanking.

### 3. Shujuan: Between Memory and History

Geling Yan is a Chinese-American novelist and journalist, famous for compelling her readers with plots inspired by historical events and vivid portrayal of characters. Her fictions usually shed light on political issues relevant to patriotism and colonialism, commenting on contemporary politics. [8] Her *The Flowers of War* is the novella first published in 2006 in Chinese. An adapted version was republished in 2011 in both Chinese and English, which will be the version I mainly discuss in this essay. This novella tells a story in Nanking 1937 of how thirteen prostitutes save several female students in a missionary school. It is the typical style of Yan: to picture a specific story of several individuals, with usually peripheral identities, under a grand historical background.

The story of Yan's novella begins from the falling of Nanking and lasts about one week. After Nanking is occupied, thirteen prostitutes come to the church to seek for protection. At first, female students in the church show hostility to these prostitutes, but their disgust to these 'contaminated women' gradually diminished after being attracted by their 'beauty of obscenity.' Before the Christmas Eve, when Japanese soldiers break into the church and 'invite' these female students to their 'Christmas party,' which is actually a massive rape, prostitutes sacrifice themselves to replace these students and earn the time for these students to escape from Nanking.

Besides its heroic storyline of self-sacrifice, Yan applies a half-memoir style to narrate the story, depicting the one-week in Nanking mainly from two perspectives: the viewpoint of Shujuan, and the omniscient viewpoint of the author, 'Wo.' The author calls Shujuan as her aunt, and she was one of the female students in the church. The narration of Shujuan follows her ever-shifting psychological activities and her unique observation as a sensitive adolescent girl, while the narration of 'Wo' focuses on introducing the macro historical background and replenishing how Shujuan comments the history she experiences after she grows up. In this section, I will try to demonstrate how Shujuan's narration combining with the omniscient viewpoint of 'Wo' presents a personal memory narrative independent from the grand historical narratives, and figure out how Shujuan's memory is constructed by Yan Geling as a response to the history of the war. In this section, I will also illustrate how Yan's narrative become a powerful rebuttal to revisionists who resist the existence of the massacre, and give out a far cry for the unspoken voice of these female victims in the war.

From Shujuan's viewpoint, her one week in Nanking during December 1937 is not suffused by blood, flesh, and uncountable atrocities. With the protection of an American church, her experience is separated from the bloody scenes in Nanking city after the massacre. When she first time sees the prostitutes flood into the church, the author (Wo) with her omniscient view comments: "Shujuan did not know that she just saw a tiny clip of the cruel massacre in historians' mouth...The walls of church and her Godfather protected her from the most bloody scenes." At that time, she is feeling panic of her first menstruation and indulges herself in the jealousy to her younger sister, who has been taken away to America by her parents one year before. The reason of her jealousy is also irrelevant to the historical crisis she was in. She feels jealous because 'her parents have left her to witness such a vile scene' presented by these prostitutes. [9] She cares obscenity more than the coming historical crisis at this time.

Shujuan's mind presents us with the raw memory of her at that exact time, a temporal experience without meditation. Her own jealousy can be trivial for readers who already fully realize the great coming historical tragedy, but this subtle deviation between personal feeling and macro history has presented readers with a different picture of so-called reality of history, as an opposite of the 'meditated history,' the grand history narrative that readers are familiar with.

However, being private does not mean that the words depicting Shujuan's psychology is a faithful presentation of her raw memory. Instead, we will realize that these descriptions of Shujuna's mind is also a piece of narrative constructed from the narrator's perspective, which she deduces from Shujuan's records of that time. In Chapter 15, Yan writes:

*"My aunt Shujuan recorded what happened after four o'clock afternoon at 21. December, 1937... I am not a historian as my aunt. I am a novelist... I will revivify the event according to my imagination through the fictional words."*[10]

The monologue of 'wo' demonstrates that the psychology of Shujuan, far from being a first-hand presentation of the her personal experience, but still the meditated production of memory, constructed by the second generation narrator. For the storyteller, 'wo,' she can only get in touch with the grown Shujuan, and all her presentation of Shujuan's traumatic memory come from this grown Shujuan's talking and writing. The narrator could jump to cite her aunt, the grown Shujuan's words, while suddenly go back to depict the memory of young Shujuan, which is certainly her revivification of the past. This changing narrating angles contributes to two images of Shujuans: the young one who could only be seen through the fictional representation of her psychology, and the grown one who can record the events she experienced in the past through historical hindsight. Furthermore, when we consider that 'wo' is also another fictional representative character, it may come to the conclusion that there are five layers of narrations in the story: first, what truly happened in Nanking; second, the temporary memory of young Shujuan, her personal experience; third, the meditated memory given by grown Shujuan; fourth, the imagination of 'wo;' and fifth, Yan's narration of the whole story.

Through this multiple-layers narration, Yan has 'blurred the boundary between fiction and reality,' and at this gray area, she finds her own distinctive voices. [11] After escaping from Nanking, Shujuan spends her life time seeking for these prostitutes, and becomes a historian using material evidences and historical writings to record what has happened in Nanking. It reflects what Nora identifies as the anxiety of materializing the memory that people feel compelled to write down what they have experienced because the 'true memory,' those senses of connecting with the past has diminished. [12] On the one hand, grown Shujuan spends her lifetime on recording what happened in Nanking in December 1937, and her recordings contribute to the materialized history of what has happened in Nanking. She can picture a grand image of Nanking, talk with old Japanese soldiers, and recollect materials from the countryside, and most importantly, she writes down how these prostitutes save them, which gives the material evidence for this story to be held as a memory. On the other hand, she leaves her own feeling unspoken, or at least half-spoken. She used to be a conservative person, with strong misogyny, but after living with these prostitutes, she has changed her mind. But these intrinsic experience seem to be personal, and therefore unspeakable for historical writing which grown Shujuan is good at. Her after-generation, therefore, applies the fictional imagination to rebuild her personal memory narratives. These two narratives, combined together, contributed a distinctive story independent from the grand historical narratives. It constructs the story about how prostitutes save the female students of rich families, overturning the gap in social classes; it constructs the story about how female resist the sexual violence in the war, distinctive from the traditional war narration of men's resistance; it constructs the story of a girl's self-emancipation, an alternative personal narrative different from the macro war narration of Nanking.

In the premier, a flashback opening, Shujuan finds the leading prostitute of those thirteen, Yumo, in the War Crime Tribunal. She could recognize her back, a delicate back shape; but when she sees her face, she finds it become an 'ambiguous (似是而非的 Sishierfei de)' face. [13] Yumo attends the Tribunal to offer the testimony to prove the massive rape of Japanese armies, for which She becomes a piece of living material evidence for the atrocities of Japanese. Being an evidence pushes her to lose

her own image and becomes a typical victim of the war. Her back shadow is still a part of the personal memory of Shujuan, holding in the private ground, while her face diminishes and she herself falls into the field of the grand historical narratives, the narratives of the binarism between victims and perpetrators. The ‘ambiguous face’ is the metaphor of such a loss, the repressed personal memory. Such a loss implicitly foregrounds the significance of fictional works, that is, its capacity to revivify these ‘ambiguous faces’ with the affective vicissitude to rescue personal memory.

#### 4. **Boku: A Bridge between the Present and the Past**

As one of the most celebrated Japanese writers, Murakami Haruki’s novels are always described as surrealistic and detached from mainstream society. His novel *Killing Commendatore* was published in 2018 and raised controversies in Japanese society, as the Rape of Nanking in the novel is addressed. The number of studies of *Killing Commendatore* is still relatively scarce, but scholars have widely discussed the theme of war and memory in Murakami’s other novels. Jay Rubin demonstrates the ‘constitution and comprehension, and the ethical response to the trauma of War’ in Japanese society in Murakami’s *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. He further argues that Murakami has treated the war as a psychological baggage of the Japanese postwar generation. He also affirms that *Wind-up Bird Chronicle* is a turning point in Murakami’s career from detachment to commitment to history and society. [14] Joshua P. S. Kim, similarly, argues that the detachment of Murakami’s works is not a signal of escaping from reality; instead, it is a necessary self-exile as reality can be too depressive to endeavor. [15] My discussion of *Killing Commendatore* is informed by these studies that actively investigate Murakami’s ethical commitment to issues of war memory and responsibility.

Like the protagonist Toru in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, who, living in post-war Japan, experienced Japanese imperialism as "an opera that I have often heard about but never seen", in *Killing Commendatore*, the protagonist ‘Boku’ also went through the internal reflection to get connected with the memory of war. As the consistent style of Murakami, internal reflection of Boku is not presented as the monologue; instead, he uses surreal metaphors to replace the reflective words. The most representative metaphorical scene in this novel that stands for a internal retrospect should be when ‘Boku’ uses the knife to kill the commendatore coming from the painting in the sanatorium of Amada Asahiko. Amada Asahiko is a famous Japanese painter, as ‘Boku’ described. He has passed through the WWII, during which time his lover was killed by Nazis, and his little brother, a sensitive young man committed suicide after he was forced to kill Chinese captures on the battlefield of Nanking. Masahiko, the son of the old painter, takes Boku to the sanatorium of him as his father is near-death and here Commendatore appears and asks Boku to slay him.

Taking the whole novel and its long paragraph on introducing the historical background of this story happened in a modern era, the surrealistic plot is embedded with a strong symbolism meaning that refers to the question on how Japanese people could connect them with that past war when they cannot feel it real, and why the modern Japanese people should still care about on the past trauma they have made. In this story, Boku seems to make a deal with this Idea, Commendatore. As we learn later in the novel, the Commendatore goes to the place where Mariye Akigawa, a young girl who has missed some days before, and offers her help; after that Commendatore comes back to ‘Boku’ and requires him to pay the price, which is to kill it. But in fact, as Commendatore has stated, the idea is unable to interfere with the real world:

*“...the human realm is ruled by three elements: time, space, and probability. Ideas, by contrast, must remain independent of all three.”* [16]

If Commendatore has no way to interfere the reality, it may be reasonable to suppose that the plot here are somehow indicating that all the action come from Boku himself. Such a pattern, to make the

internal voice came out as a tangible, but surrealistic being, is not rare in Murakami's fictions. Like the voice of wind in *Just Hear the Wind* and the boy called crow in *Kafka on the Shore*, Commendatore can be considered as merely a metaphor of internal retrospect. Meanwhile, the metaphorical writing of Murakami also presents us with another view of point to illustrate the being of Commendatore, a kind of figurative idea that cannot be ignored, but also cannot be interpreted either. It could possibly be the subconsciousness of 'Boku,' which appears after he sees the painting 'Killing Commendatore' in Tomohiko's attic. 'Boku' comments afterwards that the painting Tomohiko did was not only 'for himself, but also for those who were no longer of this world, a kind of requiem to their memory.' In fact, a more robust explanation of Boku's murder should be that the existential meaning of this 'idea' is to be "assassinated," that is, to be deconstructed into a perceptible memory. Through such an action, Boku is able to appease the long-cherished wish of the dying artist, and at the same time to dive into the back of the world (i.e. the subconscious of Boku) to complete the introspection of the self. Through this kind of introspection, Boku approaches the 'war' inside of him and connects his present world with the past memory of war.

The surrealistic experience of Boku could be interpreted as a process for him to build his inner connection with the war, which seems to be far away from his real life. In *Killing Commendatore*, Boku cannot have the direct memory of war as a simple man living in the contemporary Japanese society, and this is precisely the problem that all second post-war generation face with: the war is the "knowledge" that they hear about elsewhere, but it was never a real "memory." As Nora has argued, the real memory is "voluntary and deliberate, experienced as a duty, no longer spontaneous; psychological, individual, and subjective; but never social, collective, or all encompassing," while the memory of the second post-war generation, coming from state education and politician propaganda could not become a part of the personal memory, but merely become written political discourse to be mechanically remembered. [17] It also explains why the present Japanese generation sense little responsibility for the war. But the memory itself will not disappear as Murakami exposes in his own writing. Memory was repressed in the subconsciousness instead of being consciously remembered. Japanese merely 'hear of' the information about the Rape of Nanking. Like the plot appears in the novel, history enters the overt consciousness of Boku in a form of "knowledge" only, although Meshiki told him the historical facts of Nanking in a vivid tone, and Masahiko Amada unabashedly told Boku how his uncle, Asahiko's brother, all these only arises Boku's curiosity about the atrocities and leads him to probe deeper. Instead of indicating the apathy of Boku, the reaction of Boku, in fact, demonstrates why the spontaneously constructed history could not lead to a sense of responsibility. As Murakami said in the interview, "I tried to understand why they did what they did, but I couldn't." [18] The memory of war is unimaginable. But through the symbolic act of killing the 'idea' and entering the back world, Boku becomes capable to experience the trauma Tomohiko suffered. Nanking, in this term, which used to be the subconscious of Tomohiko, now can be experienced by Boku; and in this way, Boku could take the trauma of massacre as a part of memory. Through this symbolic act, the trauma of the narrative of Nanking can transcend the "artificially written history" and be transformed into a personal experience that can be personally imagined.

This process could be considered as the process of painting a portrait of a faceless man, as Murakami mentioned at the beginning of the fiction: he 'had no idea where to begin' but he suppose to 'give form to something that does not exist.' [19] Tomohiko is a painter, so he was able to pass on the trauma he experienced during the war by creating the painting "*Killing Commendatore*," while Boku, as a painter who had not experienced the war, could not depict the trauma by just looking at the painting by the previous generation painter. He has to experience a symbolic scene to make the trauma his own internal experience, in order to transform the "faceless thing" into something that can be portrayed. Another point is that Boku has described himself as a person with the ability to get the essential nature of another one, and that feature help him to draw what he has not factually

experienced, these 'faceless' beings. Through painting, Boku completes the connection between the present experience and the past trauma. The connection, instead of confluence with the grand historical narrative, arises from subjective, personal experiences, which are passed from the former generation to the next one through the surreal method.

## 5. Comparison and Conclusion: The Transcendence of Individual Memory and the Return of Political Context

When Menshiki told Boku about the Rape of Nanking over the phone, he said, "The Japanese killed a lot of people in Nanking, and historians say there were more than 300,000, but what is the difference between 300,000 and 400,000?" People often interpret this statement as that the evil of the massacre does not change depending on the number, but putting this sentence under the context of memory and history, we can interpret it as a statement that emphasizes the written, grand historical narration is such a strange being to all individuals. The mortality of the massacre, the commemorative activities, and the writing of textbooks are like the photo of Doukou, a suffered prostitute in *The Flowers of War*, who was raped and murdered by Japanese soldiers because she went out the safe place to find pipa strings, wishing to play a song for a dying little soldier who she fell in love with. If we do not hear about her personal story, she will become a faceless victim embodied in a photo: we still feel sympathy for her encounter, but her story will be alienated from us. Both Murakami Haruki and Geling Yan's works are fully conscious of the unbridgeable gap between history and personal memory narratives, and their works attempt to transcend the division between history and memory by giving form to the otherwise faceless figures.

Meanwhile, we also see that both Geling Yan and Murakami Haruki do not create a narrative that passively avoids all social history, letting the story simply falling into the personal memory of individual trauma. On the contrary, they respond to the historical discussion of the massacre by exposing the limitation of historiography and public commemoration, and they further actively resist deconstructionist, revisionist narrative in denying the Rape of Nanking. For example, the depiction of Doukou's photos and Shujuan's letters in *The Flowers of War* is precisely a way to show the undeniability of history with the material that carries memory, while Murakami directly recounts the situation of Nanking through the mouth of Menshiki, and further affirms historical facts through the narrative of Masahiko, the descendant of a survivor. These are fierce rebuffs to contemporary Japanese revisionism fueled by ultra-nationalist logic. Moreover, as I illustrate above, two authors' writings powerfully recover the voices of those who are marginalized and rarely heard in Manichean narratives; for example, the prostitutes and comforted women, the ordinary people who were forced to commit murder on the battlefield.

In sum, Geling Yan and Murakami Haruki constructs the personal narrative of Nanking in their fictional works. As departure from and response to the grand history, these personal voices give fictional characters the power to construct individual memories of Nanking and offer the alternative story besides the grand narrative given by the officially compiled, politically informed historiography. Moreover, when it comes to the political discussions concerning Nanking, their works still retain the force to fight right-winged ultra-nationalism and revisionism, and robustly advocates for the unspoken voice, illuminating the power of literature to remedy the historical amnesia underlying the discourse of Nanking.

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