



FROM TRAUMA TO SACREDNESS: THE ROLE OF SPATIAL SYMBOLS IN THE CONTRUCTION OF CULTURAL MEMORY IN CHINESE WORLD WAR II FILMS

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Abstract:

Chinese World War II film constructs cultural memory through sites. These films do more than recount historical events. They turn physical space into symbolic sites that carry emotional and ideological meaning. However, the role of site needs to be stated more clearly as an organizing principle that links narrative meaning to emotional response and identity formation. The analysis draws on cultural memory theory to show how site organizes narrative meaning and emotional response. It focuses on how spatial categories operate through visual framing and symbolic repetition in cinematic space. The findings show four interrelated spatial categories. Commemorative sites highlight collective sacrifice, and traumatic sites evoke shared suffering. Sacred sites link the present to cultural origin and spiritual endurance, while homeland sites express belonging, continuity, and the defense of territory. Together, these spatial categories form a layered memory structure that moves from trauma toward sacred significance. Through visual framing and symbolic repetition, cinematic space becomes a medium for shaping identity. In this way, Chinese World War II films transform geography into cultural memory, linking the past to the present and reinforcing a shared national consciousness.

Keyword:

Chinese World War II Film, Cultural Memory, Sites, National Identity, Trauma Representation



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Introduction

Chinese World War II films are more than historical narratives. They are memory texts. Through images and narratives, they reconstruct the past and shape collective identity. These films often return to specific sites. Cities, rivers, landmarks, and rural land become symbolic. They carry meanings beyond their physical form.

Memory is not spontaneous. It is shaped by culture and repeated through media. Jan Assmann (2008) distinguishes communicative memory from cultural memory. Communicative memory is informal and short-lived. Cultural memory is formal and institutionalized. It survives across generations. Aleida Assmann (2011) explains that cultural memory needs stable media. These include texts, monuments, rituals, and especially sites. Sites serve as anchors of remembrance. They give memory a place and a form.

Pierre Nora (1989) uses the term *lieux de mémoire*. These are sites where memory crystallizes. They emerge when real memory fades. In modern societies, people remember through symbolic sites. Film is one of the key media that creates such sites. Through framing, repetition, and emotional tone, films make the past visible and present.

This paper analyzes how Chinese WWII films construct memory through sites. It focuses on four types of sites. First, commemorative sites, where victories or heroic deaths occurred. Second, trauma sites, where national suffering took place. Third, sacred sites, linked to cultural origins and national values. Fourth, homeland sites, which express continuity, family, and emotional attachment to land.

Each of these sites appears repeatedly in war films. Taierzhuang and Changde are examples of commemorative sites. Nanjing is a trauma site. The Yellow River and the Great Wall are sacred sites. Rural land stands for the homeland. Through these spatial structures, films shape how people remember. They also shape how people feel about being Chinese.

This paper argues that cinematic site is not neutral. It is an active medium. It organizes memory, structures emotion, and affirms identity. By analyzing these films, we can see how Chinese cultural memory moves from trauma to sacred meaning.

Literature Review

Memory studies provide the foundation for this research. Jan Assmann (2008) shows that cultural memory is built on formal systems. These include education, ceremony, and symbolic media. Aleida Assmann (2011) stresses the importance of stability. Memory needs durable

forms. Without structure, it fades. Sites are key to this process. They allow the past to be seen and felt.

Pierre Nora (1989) explains why modern societies need symbolic sites. In his view, direct memory has become weak. People now rely on artificial forms. Sites replace lived experience. They give memory a visible form. His concept of lieux de mémoire has shaped the field deeply. In Chinese cultural tradition, site has always mattered. Rural land carries ancestral meaning. Fei Xiaotong (2012) describes the ethical bond between people and land. Land represents continuity, family, and duty. It is not just property. It is identity. In war films, this emotion appears again. Land becomes something to defend, not only with weapons, but with memory. The Yellow River is a sacred symbol. It is called the mother river. Huang Renyu (1999) explains that Chinese civilization began there. It stands for origin and life. The Great Wall is another sacred site. It marks the boundary of national defense. Chen Yu (2023b) points out that it has become a modern symbol of national spirit. In films, these sites appear to affirm cultural strength.

Trauma studies are also important. Cathy Caruth (1996) sees trauma as an incomplete experience. It returns later in narrative form. Dominick LaCapra (2001) argues that trauma should not be simplified. It must be represented ethically. In Chinese WWII films, the Nanjing Massacre is a key trauma site. Its portrayal shows how films try to balance memory with moral weight.

Existing film and memory studies of Chinese World War II cinema have largely approached these films through historical narration, trauma, collective remembrance, and, more broadly, nationalism or propaganda, emphasizing how war narratives promote unity and pride. However, this scholarship has paid less attention to spatial form and rarely examines spatial representation as a vehicle for national memory, treating cinematic space not as a passive backdrop but as an active structure that organizes cultural memory and identity. Few studies ask how sites function within filmic narration, or how cinematic sites work to organize memory by producing a distinctive emotional and moral order. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on how sites structure cultural memory and shape the meanings through which the past becomes collectively recognizable.

Methodology

This study uses cultural memory theory to analyze Chinese World War II film. It treats film not only as narrative but also as a cultural medium. Films shape how viewers perceive the past. They do this through symbolic forms. By assigning memory to specific sites, films stabilize meaning and create emotional order.

The research focuses on how sites in film perform memory work. It selects four main types of sites. These are commemorative, traumatic, sacred, and homeland. The analysis looks at how each site appears, what it signifies, and how it contributes to cultural memory. It follows a close reading approach; this study selected ten films as the research materials. This study did not employ any other analytical frameworks apart from the framework of cultural memory. It studies scenes, symbols, and spatial framing. It examines how memory becomes visual, emotional, and collective.

Furthermore, this study employs textual analysis to examine outstanding Chinese World War II films from 1980 to the present, spanning the entire golden era of Chinese film to ensure the comprehensiveness of the film samples. Through the analysis of these film samples, this paper validates the role of location as a mnemonic medium in the construction of cultural memory.

Memory Sites and Cinematic Space

Sites of Heroism

Battle sites of major World War II engagements are crucial for constructing war memory in Chinese film. These locations function as commemorative places that, according to Aleida Assmann, have witnessed significant suffering or achievement and are remembered as long as communities translate them into shared narratives. Rather than using direct quotations, her concept suggests that sites inscribed with trauma or victory gain meaning through collective remembrance (Assmann, 2016).

In Chinese World War II films, cities like Taierzhuang and Changde are commonly represented due to their historical and symbolic resonance. While Nanjing is often portrayed as the most important site of trauma, Taierzhuang and Changde are featured as commemorative battlefields that exemplify heroic resistance.

The Battle of Taierzhuang, depicted in films such as *The Battle of Taierzhuang* (1986), marked a pivotal moment in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Historically, it was one of the few major victories of the Chinese forces. This engagement occurred between March and April 1938 and halted the rapid advance of the Japanese army. The film emphasizes how, during a period of national crisis and military defeat, this victory restored hope and morale. The narrative aligns with historical accounts that portray the triumph as a symbol of national unity and resistance (Mitter, 2013; Wakeman, 1997). The battle revealed Chinese soldiers' capacity to confront and repel the invading forces, and the cinematic retelling reinforces its long-lasting educational and patriotic impact.

Changde, often referred to as China's Stalingrad, is represented in *Death and Glory in Changde* (2009) as a site of heroic sacrifice rather than victory. Despite not winning the battle, the film emphasizes the determination of the 57th Division, who resisted a much larger Japanese force under extreme deprivation. This resistance, portrayed through brutal street battles and near-total annihilation, represents perseverance and refusal to surrender. Scholars have described this battle as emblematic of China's capacity to endure immense suffering and still uphold national dignity (Zhu & Yuan, 2013).

The symbolic weight of Changde lies in its portrayal of sacrifice for the homeland. The film details how 8,000 soldiers held back 30,000 invaders and ultimately lost nearly all their lives. Through this narrative, the audience is reminded of the ideological message that prioritizes the nation above individual survival. This aligns with cinematic strategies that aim to evoke collective responsibility and patriotic identity (Lu, 2003).

Together, Taierzhuang and Changde are framed in film as emblematic locations that embody the national spirit. Taierzhuang symbolizes hope and the possibility of victory, while Changde stands for endurance and sacrifice. By focusing on these battlefields, Chinese World War II

films contribute to shaping a resilient cultural memory that links geography with ideology, heroism, and historical identity.

Sites of Heroism

Nanjing, as a unique site within the symbolic system of China's World War II memory, has become synonymous with the Nanjing Massacre. The Nanjing Massacre occurred between December 1937 and early 1938, during which Japanese forces massacred over 300,000 people in the city of Nanjing and forced more than 20,000 women into sexual slavery as comfort women (Zhu, & Yuan, 2013; Yoshida, 2001, 164). Today, the Nanjing Massacre is regarded as a core event of China's World War II history, symbolizing Japan's aggression against China during the war. Nanjing has thus become a central symbolic location in China's World War II memory, carrying complex recollections of wartime suffering, national trauma, and the spirit of resistance.

Films such as *Don't Cry, Nanking* (1995), *City of Life and Death* (2009), *The Flowers of War* (2011) and *Dead To Rights* (2025) vividly depict the memories surrounding the Nanjing Massacre. Through portrayals of wartime Nanjing, the suffering of ordinary people, and the resistance of soldiers, these films construct multiple layers of symbolic meaning.

Focusing On Historical Trauma and Cultural Memory

In these films, Nanjing is not merely a backdrop for wartime events but a symbol of profound suffering during China's War of Resistance Against Japan, embodying the traumatic dimension of cultural memory. The brutal atrocities committed by Japanese forces after occupying Nanjing are depicted, exposing the crimes inflicted upon Chinese civilians and immersing audiences in the harrowing reality of the Nanjing Massacre. This collective trauma is repeatedly presented in films, reminding viewers of the brutality of war and the tragedy of history, while evoking anger toward aggression and mourning for the deceased. In *Don't Cry, Nanking*, the Japanese forces disregard international agreements and commit atrocities against both the residents of Nanjing and those within the Safety Zone. Even after revealing her Japanese identity, Rieko cannot escape brutal violence, and both she and her husband Chengxian ultimately meet a tragic end. In *City of Life and Death* and *The Flowers of War*, the massacre's horrors are recreated with harrowing realism, drawing viewers into the depths of collective trauma and underscoring the profound harm war inflicts upon humanity. *Dead To Rights* centers its narrative on Nanjing as a core trauma site. By portraying a group of civilians seeking refuge in a photography studio during the Nanjing Massacre and developing photographic evidence of Japanese atrocities to preserve the truth, the film both exposes the violence committed by the Japanese army and reinforces Nanjing's symbolic role as a site of national trauma. By revisiting this trauma, these films compel audiences not only to remember history but also to reflect on the value of peace.

A Symbol of National Struggle and the Spirit of Resistance

In Chinese World War II films, Nanjing often represents a place of forced and tragic struggle. Despite its eventual fall, the determined resistance of Chinese soldiers and civilians against Japanese invaders forms a central theme. By portraying the steadfast defiance of civilians and soldiers in the face of despair, Nanjing is not merely a site of suffering but also a symbol of resilience and resistance. This symbolic representation endows Nanjing with profound

meaning, shaping it as a vessel of unyielding national spirit and showcasing the Chinese people's courage and sacrifice in resisting oppression. In *Don't Cry, Nanking*, refugees in the Safety Zone sacrifice themselves to create an escape route for children. In *City of Life and Death*, Chinese soldiers protect refugees in the Safety Zone until their final moments; adult women selflessly shield young girls by willingly entering comfort stations, and a cowardly translator redeems himself by sacrificing his life to protect his pregnant wife. Similarly, in *The Flowers of War*, female characters display extraordinary courage under the brutalities of Japanese soldiers, sacrificing themselves to protect schoolgirls. In *Dead To Rights*, everyone is doing their best to preserve and transmit the evidence of the crimes committed in Japan. Through these perspectives, the films present wartime courage and grant Nanjing a morally elevated symbolic significance.

Conveying Patriotism and a Sense of Collective Identity

Nanjing also serves as a conduit for conveying patriotism, illustrating the interconnection between individual and national destinies. The city's tragic experiences reveal the dependence of individuals on their country and help audiences comprehend the intertwined fate of the nation and its people. In *City of Life and Death*, the film depicts the shared struggle of soldiers, civilians, and even foreigners within the besieged city, emphasizing the collective tragedy of national collapse. In *The Flowers of War*, the anguish of being unable to protect underage girls from becoming comfort women highlights the sense of helplessness in the face of national extinction. In *Dead To Rights*, the photography studio, as a micro site, embodies the process through which the public shifts from silence to awakening. Through images, the development of negatives, concealment, preservation, and the transmission of information to the outside world, this site becomes a pivotal link between past trauma and contemporary memory. This representation reinforces Nanjing's symbolic significance as a trauma site, reconfiguring its commemorative and collective unifying functions within public culture. These films evoke a transcendent collective emotion, fostering an understanding of the unity between the nation and its people. This emotional resonance not only enables audiences to empathize with the historical suffering but also inspires contemporary concerns for national security and sovereignty, deepening the expression of patriotism.

Advocating Peace and Opposing Aggression

In Chinese World War II films, the depiction of Nanjing as a location that exposes Japanese atrocities serves as a crucial medium for promoting the values of peace and opposing aggression. By portraying the brutal acts committed by Japanese forces in Nanjing, these films express condemnation of aggression and a call for peace. Nanjing's tragic memory is not merely a part of Chinese historical recollection but also a shared memory for humanity's collective reflection. These films aim to transcend narrow nationalist sentiments, instead advocating for a universal awareness of peace. In *Don't Cry, Nanking*, Rieko, despite identifying herself as both Japanese and pregnant, is still raped and murdered. *City of Life and Death* not only exposes the atrocities of the aggressors but also depicts the psychological devastation wrought by war on its participants, as seen through the character of a Japanese soldier. This invites viewers to reflect on the nature of war itself. As a warning symbol for peace, Nanjing reminds audiences of the cruelty of war and the preciousness of peace, conveying an ideology that seeks to prevent the recurrence of such historical tragedies.

A Warning for National Development

The memory of Nanjing in Chinese World War II films also carries a forward-looking warning. The tragedy of Nanjing is not merely a historical event but, in cinematic representation, becomes a “warning memory” that emphasizes the idea that weakness invites aggression. Films centered on the Nanjing Massacre use harrowing depictions of invasion and devastation to highlight the importance of national strength. This message underscores the significance of preserving sovereignty and dignity in the modern international context. This ideology resonates with modern China’s vision of national rejuvenation and modernization. Through the memory of Nanjing’s suffering, these films communicate the importance of national strength, urging contemporary audiences to remember history and strive for self-reliance to avoid future humiliation.

In summary, Nanjing’s symbolic role in Chinese World War II films encapsulates a fusion of historical memory, cultural emotion, and ideological significance. The trauma, resistance spirit, and patriotic sentiment that Nanjing embodies are vividly portrayed in films, reminding viewers to remember the past while inspiring the pursuit of peace and national resilience in contemporary society. This multifaceted construction of memory not only resonates emotionally but also fosters intellectual engagement with the nation’s destiny and the pursuit of peace. The story of Nanjing continues to hold cautionary and educational value across different historical periods and social contexts.

Sacred Symbols

Sacred sites serve as more than physical landmarks; they function as vessels of memory, carrying the collective imagination and ideological identity of a community (Assmann, 2016). In the Chinese context, the Yellow River and the Great Wall act as key symbolic sites. They embed national resilience, cultural continuity, and collective emotions within spatial narratives. The Yellow River is widely acknowledged as the cradle of Chinese civilization. Its role extends beyond nourishing agriculture. It embodies the origin of sociopolitical order and spiritual identity. The river shaped demographic expansion and imperial cohesion in the Central Plains (Huang, 1999). It also evokes emotional depth, symbolizing the bloodline and vitality of the Chinese nation. This sacred quality stems from its enduring link to life, spirit, and sentiment across generations (Yang, 2005; Wang & Chen, 2021).

In *Grief Over the Yellow River (1999)*, the river operates as more than scenery. It becomes a narrative agent through which personal and national identity unfold. The female protagonist’s request to be submerged in the river indicates a symbolic return to origin. The river protects, witnesses, and absorbs loss. It conveys cultural rootedness and spiritual rebirth. Through visual and emotional framing, the film presents the Yellow River as maternal, defensive, and eternal—interweaving geographical memory with wartime experience (Zhang, 2022).

The Great Wall holds similar symbolic weight. Originally constructed for defense, it now operates as a site of ideological fortitude. It represents vigilance, endurance, and national integration. Historically, the Wall marked cultural boundaries, fostered ethnic cohesion, and resisted foreign incursion. Its presence has generated a powerful image of spiritual and spatial protection (Chen, 2023a; Qian, 2020).

In *The Meridian of War (1991)*, the Great Wall functions as both cinematic backdrop and narrative spine. Soldiers gather strength beneath it; attacks are launched beside it. It becomes a spiritual fortress, linking personal sacrifice with national unity. The film constructs the Wall not only as a defensive monument, but as a living embodiment of shared destiny. Its immovable form mirrors the unshakable resolve of wartime resistance (Li, 2023).

Both landmarks—the Yellow River and the Great Wall—transcend function. As sacred sites, they encode affective memory and ideological meaning. In cinematic language, they operate as metaphors of resistance and cohesion. These spatial symbols stabilize national narratives and promote emotional continuity. They make visible the intangible: home, identity, sacrifice, and memory.

Through repeated representation in Chinese World War II films, these sites acquire performative power. They organize historical experience into visual form. They foster collective pride and inspire a narrative of cultural permanence. In doing so, they turn geographic sites into cultural scripts that shape remembrance across generations.

Land and Identity

The cultural significance of site has reemerged in contemporary consciousness, reclaiming its symbolic power previously diminished by modernization. This resurgence of spatial awareness reflects how communities, such as the Laguna Pueblo Indians in Silko's work, reconnected with place as a means of restoring collective identity. Land lost to occupation disrupted life in ways often incomprehensible to external forces, yet the memory of these sites endures, serving as vessels for belonging and understanding (Assmann, 2016, pp. 349–351).

Land functions as a generational repository of memory, shaping the cultural identity of groups tied to it. In China, land has long held more than utilitarian value; it has been a foundational element of civilization and a spiritual anchor. As an agricultural nation, China's development has depended on land for sustenance, stability, and emotional continuity. Land is intertwined with national sentiment and cultural memory, reflecting both historical experience and symbolic attachment.

Fei Xiaotong argued that land in Chinese agrarian society embodies moral values and serves as the axis of kinship and social organization (Fei, 2016). Land inherited from ancestors does not merely offer shelter—it fosters emotional lineage, sustains memory, and transmits heritage. Rituals such as Qingming tomb-sweeping and Spring Festival ancestor worship reinforce this spatial connection, embedding identity within familial geography. This enduring sentiment underpins the rural emotional structure of Chinese cultural consciousness.

Land is not only a familial symbol but also a national one. Fan Shumin noted that land worship in Chinese tradition is both sacred and pragmatic, integrating religious, ethical, and aesthetic systems (Fan, 2009). This belief permeates material and spiritual practices—architecture, burial, customs—infusing land with multilayered symbolic meaning. It reflects a deep-rooted cosmology where the earth anchors both personal life and national destiny.

In modern China, land has become a symbol of sovereignty and collective pride. The experience of foreign invasion and subsequent national revival has elevated the ideological weight of territory. Land represents not just resource but dignity, a physical embodiment of

national integrity. The psychological connection between land and identity has only intensified through historical trauma, shaping a cultural narrative of defense and preservation (Zhao, 2021).

Chinese World War II films often depict land as a site of emotional and existential significance. On the one hand, it represents home and bloodline. In *Santa Joins the Army* (1992), Sanmao dreams of postwar life through farming, highlighting land as a symbol of future restoration. Films like *One and Eight* (1983) and *The Battle of Taierzhuang* portray barren fields as symbols of resilience, where rural labor continues amid destruction. In *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000) and *Cow* (2009), protagonists refuse to flee their villages despite danger, reinforcing a cultural ethic of rootedness. These narratives construct land as an emotional and cultural anchor, fusing familial memory with national identity.

On the other hand, land becomes a battleground symbolizing unyielding resistance. In *The Battle of Taierzhuang* and *Death and Glory in Changde*, it is more than background—it is the contested object of sacrifice. These portrayals embed the ideological conviction that territory must be defended at all costs. Blood and soil merge into a singular expression of patriotic belief. Land is not just fought over but spiritually claimed, becoming the space where collective will and cultural continuity converge.

In the dual role of being both the homeland of the Chinese people and a battlefield, land has become a highly symbolic and sacred spatial element in Chinese World War II films. It carries the symbolic weight of cultural survival and ideological endurance. The memory inscribed in these sites transforms physical ground into a site of national belonging and historical continuity.

Conclusion

Chinese World War II films use site as a core strategy to build cultural memory. They do not treat space as background. Instead, they turn it into a site of meaning. Through spatial transformation, these films shape how history is remembered and how national identity is formed. Commemorative sites highlight sacrifice and present collective endurance as something that can be seen and shared. Traumatic sites evoke pain and loss. They ask the viewer to feel, remember, and reflect. Sacred sites link the present to a longer cultural past. They turn rivers and walls into lasting symbols of spiritual strength. Homeland sites express everyday life and belonging. They show how land becomes family, duty, and identity.

The key finding of this study is that these sites—commemorative, traumatic, sacred, and homeland—do not work separately. They operate collectively to construct national memory. Together, they form a layered structure in which different places carry different emotional and moral tasks, and the nation's story is organized through space.

This article's contribution is to clarify spatial representation as a central vehicle of cultural memory in Chinese World War II cinema. Existing discussions often explain these films through nationalism, propaganda, or historical narration, but this study shows that the work of memory is also done through spatial form. By identifying a clear site-based structure and explaining how it organizes meaning and feeling, this article offers a focused framework for understanding how geography becomes cultural memory and how identity is shaped through cinematic space.

The implications of this site-based approach are that spatial representation shapes audience perception and supports identity formation. Through repeated framing and symbolic emphasis, cinematic sites guide how sacrifice, suffering, endurance, and belonging are felt and interpreted. By linking past to present through space, these films make national history emotionally perceivable and morally intelligible, turning memory into something that can be shared as a collective national consciousness.

In sum, site in these films is not empty. It is full of meaning. It holds memory. It shapes identity. It links past and present. Chinese World War II film turns land, walls, rivers, and ruins into sites of remembrance. These sites are not just locations. They are symbols. They speak for the nation.

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