

Configuring the Memories of Second World War in Two Chinese films: *The Sinking of Lisbon Maru* (2024) and *Dongji Rescue* (2025)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how contemporary Chinese cinema reconfigures the memory of the Second World War through a comparative analysis of *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* (2024) and *Dongji Rescue* (2025), two films centered on the same historical incident yet radically different in form, aesthetics, and ideological orientation. Drawing on theories of postmemory, multidirectional memory, and moral spectatorship, the study analyzes how Fang Li's participatory documentary filmmaking reconstructs the Lisbon Maru tragedy as a transnational, ethical project of remembrance grounded in familial testimony, embodied investigation, and humanitarian witnessing. In contrast, *Dongji Rescue* transforms the event into a nationalist war epic that privileges Chinese savior narratives, heroic masculinity, and graphic violence, aligning closely with contemporary state commemorative discourse. Through close textual analysis, the article interrogates how each film negotiates the tensions between nationalism and transnationalism, historical trauma and commercial spectacle, and private mourning and official memory. By placing these two films in dialogue, the article argues that Chinese WWII cinema operates as a dynamic and contested memory field in which historical meaning is continually reconstructed rather than fixed. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that cinematic representations of the Lisbon Maru incident illuminate broader struggles over how China's role in the global Anti-Fascist War is remembered, moralized, and communicated in the present.

Keywords: Second World War, Postmemory, Multidirectional Memory, Nationalism, Transnationalism

I. Introduction

On 3 September 2025, the People's Republic of China (PRC) staged a large-scale military parade in Beijing to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-1945). During the parade, President Xi Jinping delivered a nationally televised speech emphasizing China's role in the Second World War (WWII), asserting that "with huge national sacrifice, the Chinese people made major contributions to saving human civilization and safeguarding world peace" ("Chinese people have made huge contributions"). As Parks Coble observes, "Beijing's stress on nationalism as an ideological prop for one-party rule" has precipitated a resurgence of victimhood-centered memory with the War of Resistance against Japan as its focal point (396). This heightened emphasis on WWII commemoration is likewise reflected in the Chinese film industry. In August 2025, two WWII-themed Chinese blockbusters—*Dead to Rights* (dir. Shen Ao) and *Dongji Rescue* (dir. Guan Hu and Fei Zhenxiang)—were released nationwide, rekindling popular enthusiasm for revisiting wartime memory. One month later, the critically acclaimed documentary *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* (2024) was re-screened across China. The strong public reception of these films has contributed to a renewed wave of memorialization of China's War of Resistance against Japan, a war that continues to cast a long shadow over contemporary Chinese socio-political life and plays a central role in shaping national identity.

A brief overview of the development of China's WWII-themed film industry provides a useful foundation for contextualizing these recent cinematic phenomena. Since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese film industry has been deeply entangled with successive political campaigns, leading Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar to argue that "the national informs almost every aspect of the Chinese cinematic image and narrative repertoire" (2). During the Maoist era (1949–1976), the state-owned studio system produced a large corpus of films centered on the War of Resistance in which heroic Party cadres, resilient Chinese civilians, and demonized Japanese soldiers constituted the dominant character types within what Yingjin Zhang terms the "paradigms of nationalism, patriotism, and heroism" (33). Following the implementation of the Reform and Opening-Up policy in 1978, the Chinese war film industry experienced renewed vitality in the 1980s, aided by the introduction of Western film theories and cinematic techniques. From the 1980s through the early 2000s, a growing cohort of avant-garde filmmakers developed what Lingzhen Wang

describes as a “socio-politically disengaged, formally experimentalist, and culturally masculine and reflective style,” offering more critical and introspective representations of the War (253). Since the 2000s, Chinese war blockbusters have proliferated with increasingly diverse themes and aesthetics, generating mixed responses among domestic audiences; notably, some productions have sought to incorporate international perspectives by narrating the war through foreign protagonists or engaging in transnational co-productions.

This paper examines two films, *The Sinking of Lisbon Maru* and *Dongji Rescue*, both of which excavate a neglected episode of World War II—the 1942 torpedoing of a Japanese cargo ship carrying 1,816 British prisoners of war, many of whom were killed by their Japanese captors and later rescued by Chinese fishermen. This article examines how the same wartime incident is reconfigured through divergent cinematic modes—documentary realism and commercial war epic—to produce competing regimes of memory. Methodologically, the study combines close textual analysis of film form, narrative structure, and film aesthetics with theoretical insights drawn from Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, Michael Rothberg’s multidirectional memory, and scholarship on moral spectatorship and nationalist war cinema. It asks how these two films negotiate the tensions between nationalism and transnationalism, humanitarian ethics and heroic mythmaking, and private remembrance and official commemoration, thereby revealing how contemporary Chinese WWII cinema participates in the ongoing reconstruction of the global Anti-Fascist War within shifting political, cultural, and market frameworks.

II. Participatory Filmmaking and Postmemory in the Documentary *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru*

This section examines *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* (hence after *The Sinking*) as a documentary that mobilizes participatory filmmaking, postmemory, and moral spectatorship to reframe a long-silenced wartime atrocity within a transnational memory framework. Through film director Fang Li’s embodied investigative presence, intimate domestic testimonies, and ethically restrained modes of address, the documentary reconstructs the sinking of Lisbon Maru not merely as a historical event but as an ongoing postmemorial process. In doing so, it situates Chinese, British, and global wartime experiences in a multidirectional field of remembrance that foregrounds ethical witnessing over nationalist closure.

Historically, the sinking of the Lisbon Maru was a little-known yet catastrophic episode of WWII in the Asia-Pacific region. In early October 1942, the Lisbon Maru, a Japanese military transport vessel, departed Hong Kong carrying more than 1,800

British prisoners of war (POWs) captured after the fall of the colony. Unmarked and secretly holding POWs in sealed cargo holds, the Japanese ship was torpedoed on 1 October by the U.S. submarine *USS Grouper* off the Zhoushan Islands, Zhejiang Province, China. Rather than immediately evacuating the prisoners, Japanese guards reportedly sealed the cargo holds and later opened fire on POWs who attempted to escape, resulting in devastating loss of life. More than three hundred POWs were rescued by local Chinese fishermen (Banham 457), over 800 perished through drowning and mass shooting (29). The Lisbon Maru incident was an ironclad proof of Japanese military's cruelty and disregard of the Geneva Conventions to protect the human rights of the POWs, who stopped shooting and started to save the British soldiers only after they saw the Chinese fisherman's coming to rescue. For decades, this tragic incident remained marginal in both British and Asian wartime historiography, obscured by military secrecy and postwar geopolitical priorities.

The Sinking, produced and directed by Fang Li, has emerged as a surprise box office success in China after its nationwide release on September 6, 2024, grossing approximately \$5 million in limited release. *The Sinking* is narrated through director Fang's own investigative voice, which guides viewers across archives, survivor testimonies, life writings and maritime sites to piece together the Lisbon Maru's sinking and its tragic aftermath. The documentary adopts a slow, poetic mode of storytelling that combines archival research with embodied acts of Fang's searching for the historical truth, including animated re-enactments of POWs' self-rescue and interviews with descendants of victims and local witnesses. Rather than presenting an objective historical account, *The Sinking* foregrounds the ethics of remembrance itself, framing the recovery of the Lisbon Maru memory as an ongoing process of historical justice and intergenerational trauma. Internationally, *The Sinking* has received critical acclaim for its conveying of historical immediacy. Some film critics commend the documentary's empathetic humanism and transnational perspective, noting its powerful reconstruction of shared trauma and moral courage across British, Chinese, Japanese, and American narratives (Hoad; Goldsbrough). However, some reviewers point to the documentary's structural flaws and Fang's self-centered narration as diminishing its coherence and emotional focus (Betancourt; Scott). Most critics concur that *The Sinking*'s moral ambition—to rescue a forgotten history out of oblivion and foster transgenerational and transnational remembrance—positions the documentary as a vital act of cinematic redress against historical erasure.

The Sinking predominantly adopts what film scholar Bill Nichols identifies as the participatory mode of documentary, a mode that “emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject,” in which filming unfolds through interviews,

conversations, and other forms of direct engagement (179). Rather than remaining an off-screen objective observer, Fang is audibly and visibly present throughout the film: he provides voice-over narration in Chinese while appearing on camera as he tracks down survivors and interviews descendants of the victims in English. As Nichols notes, the participatory mode produces a “sense of bodily presence, rather than absence,” generated through synchronous sound exchanges that locate the filmmaker unmistakably “on the scene” (184). Fang’s corporeal presence thus becomes a central organizing principle of the documentary, situating him as both an interlocutor and a connective thread linking the past historical trauma of the Lisbon Maru’s sinking to its contemporary resonances and afterlives.

In *The Sinking*, Fang is consistently framed as a persistent truth-seeker whose relentless investigative journey buttressed the narrative of transnational remembrances of WWII war traumas. Over an eight-year period, Fang’s team contacted more than 380 descendants, collected over 10,000 historical photographs, conducted in-depth interviews with more than 130 individuals, and even employed sonar technology to locate the shipwreck in the East China Sea (Fang, “Echoes of the Lisbon Maru”). Fang’s efforts are not relegated to background production history but is narratively foregrounded in the documentary, reinforcing the sense that historical knowledge and immediacy emerges through sustained interpersonal engagement rather than detached archival authority. Addressing concerns about his hyper-visibility in the film, Fang has remarked that his role as a storyteller requires him to “link all the stories together,” emphasizing that animation or special effects cannot convey the “human story of the war” (Pan). As he explains, “when I’m going back to the history and the recreations and then returning to the family interviews, I have to be there” (Pan). This insistence on presence manifests on screen through moments of emotional proximity: Fang converses with survivors as a confidant, weeps alongside descendants, visits family graveyards, and ultimately organizes a commemorative ceremony near the shipwreck site that brings together descendants and witnesses. These scenes underscore how participatory documentary practice intertwines personal affect with historical inquiry, embodying what Nichols describes as representations of the historical world that are “both contingent and committed,” shaped by the filmmaker’s situated perspective and ethical investment (187).

Nichols also emphasizes that the participatory mode of documentary extends beyond filmmaker and subject to implicate the spectator as a participant as well. Fang’s empathetic engagements frequently function as ethical cues that guide the viewer’s own affective response. In one particularly sequence, Fang accompanies the granddaughter of British Royal Artillery soldier Montague Glister to her grandfather’s grave. When

Fang asks, “Your granddad is only a gravestone here?” she replies quietly, “Yes, no ashes, no body, no nothing.” In another scene, the son of Master Gunner Charles Brooks struggles to articulate the enduring pain of losing his father: “It’s not just the killing that takes place on the battlefield, it’s the results for the families forever. Look at me—I can’t talk about it. I don’t know why.” As the old man breaks down in tears, Fang responds simply, “I understand.” The interview abruptly stops here. These emotionally-charging moments do not resolve trauma or offer narrative closure; instead, they model an ethics of listening, what Dori Laub has described as an “empathic listener” who is active, empathetic, trustworthy, and deeply engaged to testimonies of historical traumas (68). Fang’s restrained responses and physical proximity function as ethical cues that shape what Lisa Cartwright terms moral spectatorship, a mode of viewing grounded in attentiveness, responsibility, and affective alignment. By allowing grief to unfold without narrative resolution and by modeling an ethics of listening, the film positions spectators as moral participants who are invited to bear witness to the enduring consequences of wartime violence for families, rather than to consume trauma as historical evidence or emotional excess.

It is noteworthy that most of the interviews conducted by Fang are staged within the domestic interiors of survivors and descendants, most often in living rooms, a setting that deliberately cultivates an atmosphere of intimacy and intergenerational loss. Rather than functioning as neutral backdrops, these domestic spaces anchor historical testimony in everyday familial environments, emphasizing the inheritance of memory within private family life. Marianne Hirsch has coined the term “postmemory”, which describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural traumas of preceding generations—experiences they do not remember directly, but know through stories, images, and affective practices transmitted within the family. These mediated experiences, Hirsch argues, are conveyed so deeply and emotionally that they come to function as memories in their own right. Postmemory is a “a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” (Hirsch *Generation of Postmemory* 6). In *The Sinking*, memory is not solely retrieved from an external archive but emerges from within the domestic spaces, activated through familial narration, family photographs and letters, and the descendant’s emotional testimonies. Through these postmemorial family stories, the film reanimates young British soldiers who would otherwise remain confined to cold, linear historiography, restoring to them specific characteristics, love and sorrows, moral integrity and iron will so that they appear not as anonymous figures within casualty statistics, but as individuals with recognizable faces and impressive, heroic deeds.

In front of the camera, interviewees frequently exhibit one or more family photographs of deceased relatives as they speak, and several read aloud family letters sent by the victims shortly before their capture. As Vera Knútsdóttir observes, “photographs of deceased family members are granted an aura and become important, yet complex images for mourning” (182). In a similar vein, Hirsch underscores the centrality of photography to familial memory, arguing that “the family photo both displays the cohesion of the family and is an instrument of its togetherness: it both chronicles family rituals and constitutes a prime objective of these rituals” (*Family Frames* 7). This dynamic is particularly evident in a scene in which the daughter of Warrant Officer Edward Upton presents a blurred newspaper photograph published in the *Hong Kong Telegraph* on 1 July 1940, captioned “This Morning’s Evacuation Scene.” In the image, her mother stands on the left side of the queue facing away from the camera, her three-year-old sister beside her mother, while on the right side her father carries a baby carrier containing the two-week-old infant who would later become the interviewee herself. “I’m afraid it is the only picture I’ve got with my whole family,” she sadly remarks. Hirsch notes that “postmemory reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture” (*Postmemory* 6). Presented as a newspaper clipping rather than an intimate family portrait, this unusual family photograph comes to bear the weight of irretrievable familial wholeness and historical rupture, condensing both the fragile continuity of family life and the irrevocable violence that would soon shatter it.

While family photographs enable later generations to see and imaginatively “touch” the past, Hirsch also cautions that such images function as screens of projection, onto which loss, longing, and belated understanding are inscribed. *The Sinking* repeatedly mobilizes this specific function through its film language, framing family photographs and portraits of the deceased in sustained close-up shots accompanied by voice-over testimony. As Mary Ann Doane observes, “the close-up transforms whatever it films into a quasi-tangible thing, producing an intense phenomenological experience of presence...[and] that deeply experienced entity becomes a sign, a text, a surface” that invites close reading (38). Fang exploits this tension between affective immediacy and semiotic distance, allowing still images to oscillate between material traces of life and symbolic carriers of loss. This filming technique is especially poignant in the sequence devoted to Lance Corporal John Weaver. His nieces read aloud an affectionate letter John wrote shortly before the fall of Hong Kong—also the last letter he sent to his mother before being taken as a POW. In the letter, John joyfully confides his love for, and intention to marry, a Hong Kong girl called Leung Sou Kam. A postwar letter from the British Embassy, dated 1947, confirming that John and Leung had indeed

married in Hong Kong, but that Leung lost all contact with him after his embarkation on the Lisbon Maru, remaining unaware of his death until years later, when the news left her devastated. As this miraculous yet tragic love story is recounted, the camera slowly zooms into close-ups of the portrait photographs of John and Leung, both smiling, youthful, and oriented toward an imagined future. Their innocent, hopeful expressions stand in stark contrast to the irreversible rupture that followed, rendering the still images as affective sites where promise and loss collide. In this way, the film transforms photographic intimacy into a postmemorial encounter, compelling viewers to confront the disjunction between what these images once anticipated and what history ultimately foreclosed.

In unfolding family stories, *The Sinking* foregrounds material remnants as crucial mediators of postmemorial transmission. Beyond family photographs and letters, the film carefully exhibits personal belongings that have been preserved across decades, each item embodying an intimate, affect-laden connection to the deceased. As Hirsch and Spitzer argue, testimonial objects “testify to the historical contexts and the daily qualities of the past moments in which they were produced, and, also, to the ways in which material objects carry memory traces from one generation to the next” (78). In the documentary, such testimonial objects function not merely as illustrative props but as self-evident witnesses whose materiality compensates for the absence of firsthand testimony. They condense embodied experience, affect, and historical violence into tangible forms that can be handled, displayed, and narrated in the present. In one scene, the old Mrs. Shelley, the daughter of Sergeant Gerald Taylor, presents her most cherished childhood possession: a girl doll dressed in a Japanese kimono, sent to her as a gift by her father. Growing up without any confirmed knowledge of her father’s fate, Shelley spent her childhood sustained by her mother’s reassurance that her father might return “on the next train.” Mrs. Shelley recalls how she views the doll as proof of her father’s love and a material anchor for an otherwise abstract paternal presence. Speaking through tears, she reflects, “to go through a childhood without your father... may be unimportant to others, but it is important for me.” As she speaks, the camera juxtaposes her father’s portrait photograph with an image of the seven-year-old Shelley clutching the doll, visually binding past and present through the mediating power of the object. In this moment, the doll operates as a testimonial object: a material survivor that bears witness not only to an individual life cut short by war, but also to the enduring affective labor of postmemory across generations.

In an interview, Fang Li explains his motivation for making the documentary: “I felt the lost lives aboard the ship were silent histories awaiting witness. This conviction drove me to produce the documentary” (“Echoes of the Lisbon Maru”).

Despite its critical acclaim and commercial success, *The Sinking* has also attracted sharp criticism from some Chinese viewers, who argue that the film devotes disproportionate attention to British POWs at the expense of Chinese experiences. The Chinese fishermen's rescue appears relatively late in the narrative—near the final third of the film—when survivor Cyril Mace recounts his attempt to swim away from the ship under Japanese machine-gun fire and his miraculous rescue by a middle-aged Chinese fisherman. A Chinese netizen blogged his disappointment on *Weibo* (Chinese version of *Twitter*), “this is entirely a documentary from the British perspective - the British defending Hong Kong, the British being captured, the love and family ties of the British, the British being loaded onto ships, the British struggling to survive at sea, the British being rescued” (Guo). In response to these mixed criticisms, Fang has insisted that the Lisbon Maru tragedy “is not just a part of Chinese or British history—it is part of our shared human memory,” emphasizing that documenting it was “a global endeavor” (“Echoes of the Lisbon Maru”).

Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory offers a productive framework for reconciling Fang's narrative choice with the Chinese viewers' criticisms. Multidirectional memory conceptualizes remembrance as a dynamic, dialogical, and non-zero-sum process, in which memories are not owned by discrete groups or confined within fixed national or ethnic boundaries, but emerge through “ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” across different historical experiences (Rothberg 3). As Rothberg further argues, the emergence of collective memories takes place in a field of overlapping and intersecting discourses, where remembrance is shaped by comparison, analogy, and mutual illumination rather than exclusion. Viewed through Rothberg's perspective, *The Sinking* does not present the event solely as a British military tragedy or relegate it to the margins of Chinese wartime history; instead, it frames the Chinese fishermen's rescue as a crucial point of contact between distinct yet historically entangled experiences of WWII violence on a global scale. As some Chinese film critics have noted, Fang's cinematic articulation of universal values condenses “empathy for individual tragedies, the subjective perspective of active historical engagement, and the humanistic care embedded in documentary aesthetics into a force that produces historical truth” (Wu). Such an approach not only aligns with the logic of multidirectional memory but also resonates with the PRC's prioritized cultural policy of “promoting Chinese culture abroad,” by presenting Chinese wartime experience as ethically generative and globally communicable without subsuming it into a triumphalist national narrative.

Near the end of *The Sinking*, viewers are confronted with a commemorative reunion organized by Fang near the shipwreck in October 2019, host as a belated funeral

for relatives to bid farewell to their loved ones and a requiem for the dead whose bodies are forever sealed within the Lisbon Maru. Descendants of the POWs and local Chinese witnesses gather together on a boat, casting flowers into the sea, embracing one another for emotional support, and delivering tribute speeches that momentarily suspend national, linguistic, and generational boundaries. Son of Charles Brooks recites the Royal British Legion's exhortation: "They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. We will remember them." The British ritual of remembrance is recontextualized within a transnational maritime space, transforming national commemoration into a shared ethical gesture. The film thereby invites viewers to inhabit a position of ethical witnessing—observing acts of mourning that are restrained, collective, and unresolved. Memory here circulates across national histories and familial lineages, producing a shared moral space in which inherited loss, ethical spectatorship, and historical responsibility converge and congeal.

III. The Chinese as Saviours in the Commercial War Blockbuster *Dongji Rescue*

Much like Fang Li's documentary *The Sinking*, the 2025 WWII-themed blockbuster *Dongji Rescue* also takes the Lisbon Maru incident as its narrative foundation. However, the two films diverge sharply in genre, narrative focus, aesthetic strategy, and ideological orientation, resulting in markedly different modes of remembering the same historical event. This section examines *Dongji Rescue* as a paradigmatic example of contemporary Chinese commercial war cinema, analyzing how its nationalist reframing, heroic mythmaking, gender politics, and spectacularized violence transform a transnational humanitarian episode into a China-centered rescue narrative that aligns with state commemorative discourse while generating significant controversy among domestic audiences.

Dongji Rescue blends the historical tragedy of the Lisbon Maru with Hollywood style heroism and quasi-mythic pirate imagery within an overarching metanarrative of China's War of Resistance. The film opens with sweeping panoramic shots of the isolated Dongji Island then under strict Japanese occupation, establishing an aura of deprivation, fear, and humiliation as the 263 local fishermen are forbidden from going to sea. Set apart from the community are two young, orphaned brothers, Ah Bi and Ah Dang, rumored to be descendants of pirates and therefore marginalized as social outsiders. When Ah Dang encounters a British POW, Thomas Newman, drifting at sea, he secretly rescues and shelters him despite Ah Bi's warnings. A Japanese military unit soon arrives to search for the escaped British prisoner and brutally kills several villagers to enforce compliance. Adhering to an ancestral maritime code that mandates rescuing anyone in peril at sea—and fueled by resentment toward the Japanese—the local fishermen ultimately sail toward the sinking ship to save the trapped POWs. The rescue,

however, comes at a high cost: both Ah Dang and Ah Bi perish in the turbulent sea waves. Interwoven with the main plot is a romantic subplot between Ah Bi and the beautiful fisherwoman Ah Hua, who is portrayed as a moral catalyst and later emerges as a leader mobilizing the villagers for the perilous rescue mission.

Following its release, *Dongji Rescue* drew substantial criticism for its plot, characterization and twisting of historical facts, and ultimately underperformed at the box office, grossing less than \$60 million—well below its reported production budget of \$80 million. Reviews generally describe *Dongji Rescue* as a technically accomplished but thematically problematic historical drama that transforms the Lisbon Maru incident into an ultra-nationalistic, China-centered rescue narrative while taking excessive liberties with historical facts. Some critics praise the film's IMAX-shot underwater sequences as “simultaneously visually gorgeous and suspenseful,” yet argue that its reliance on a conventional male hero's journey turns a story of collective action into one dominated by an individual “nautical superman” (Berra). Berra contends that the film's “flagrant invention” ultimately reduces what could have been “a tribute to pure humanism beyond borders” into “another full-blooded resistance/revenge story,” aligning it with familiar patterns of stereotypical Chinese war blockbuster imbued with high-pitched nationalism and chauvinistic heroism.

At its Beijing premiere, the slogan emblazoned on the promotional poster—“Every Chinese can be a hero”—firmly anchored the film's intention to reframe the Lisbon Maru incident through a nationalist lens centered on the Chinese agency. Although the main narrative draws upon the historical sinking of the Lisbon Maru, the choice of the film title *Dongji Rescue* foregrounds the Dongji island and its inhabitants, displacing the transnational dimensions of the event in favor of a localized heroic myth. At the premiere, director Guan underscored this emphasis by asserting that “the most important part is the representation of the Chinese fishermen, ordinary Chinese people like us,” whose bravery, he argued, marks them not only as lifesavers but also as witnesses to Japanese wartime crimes (Z. Wang). This ideological framing is reinforced throughout the film by the construction of the male protagonist Ah Bi as a “Die Hard”-style action hero: he singlehandedly kills three armed Japanese soldiers and rescues an entire boatload of British POWs against giant siphon-induced waves, superhuman feats diverge sharply from the historical records. One scene shows Ah Bi secretively boarding the sinking ship and prying open the locked holds with a steel rod, despite historical evidence indicating that the British POWs initiated their own escape and that Chinese fishermen arrived hours later. Reflecting on recent Chinese commercial war blockbusters such as *Dongji Rescue*, film critic Fan observes that one thousand British POWs are reduced to passive, “abstract symbols” awaiting Chinese salvation in the film,

lamenting that “the rescue narrative of international humanitarianism articulated in the documentary *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* is flattened into a one-dimensional, nationalist rescue discourse” in *Dongji Rescue*’s fictional retelling (104).

A retrospective glance at earlier Chinese World War II-themed blockbusters with an international focus reveals a discernible shift in narrative orientation: from depictions of “foreigners as saviours of the Chinese from the Japanese” to more recent representations of “the Chinese as saviours of foreigners from the Japanese.” The 2009 Sino-German coproduced film *John Rabe* exemplifies the former tendency by recounting the efforts of the real historical figure German businessman John Rabe, who established the Nanjing International Safety Zone and provided refuge for tens of thousands of Chinese civilians during the Nanjing Massacre. Similarly, the 2008 Sino-Australian coproduced film *Children of Huangshi* narrates the true story of British journalist George Hogg’s rescue of a group of Chinese orphans fleeing Japanese military violence. China’s most famous director Zhang Yimou’s war epic *The Flowers of War* (2011) further extends this paradigm through a fictionalized account in which a fake American priest, played by Christian Bale, attempts to protect Chinese schoolgirls from Japanese soldiers during the Nanjing Massacre. In these films, the foreign saviour figure often functions as an ostensibly neutral, third-party observer whose presence mitigates the binary opposition between Chinese victims and Japanese perpetrators, while articulating universalist ideals of humanism, compassion, and peace. Yet such cinematic representations of privileging the “Schindler-like” foreign saviours have also provoked sustained criticism within Chinese audience. As film critic Chen Linxia incisively argues, the construction of Western saviours in *John Rabe* ultimately re-centers Western values and epistemologies, rendering Chinese suffering as an object to be looked at and morally validated, and thereby reinscribing a hierarchy in which Western universal values are implicitly reaffirmed through the spectacle of China’s history of pain.

Notably, the narrative shift from foreign saviors to Chinese figures as saviors closely aligns with the PRC’s contemporary cultural policy surrounding the commemoration of the Second World War. In his address marking the 80th anniversary of victory, President Xi Jinping underscored China’s central role in the global Anti-Fascist War, emphasizing that the Chinese people paid an enormous price—sacrificing tens of millions of civilian and military lives—in resisting Imperial Japanese aggression across China and Southeast Asia. This state-endorsed emphasis on Chinese agency and sacrifice is echoed in filmmakers’ own articulations of intent. In an interview, *Dongji Rescue* director Guan Hu explicitly framed the film as a vehicle for asserting China’s historical contribution on the world stage: “This movie can indirectly tell the world that

the Chinese people did not rely on others' help, and that our countrymen played a significant role in the global anti-fascist war" (Z. Wang). As discussed earlier, *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru*, particularly after being selected as China's official Oscar submission, has been widely interpreted as part of a broader cultural strategy to project an image of China as a peace-loving nation aligned with historical justice and humanitarian values. *Dongji Rescue* extends and intensifies this logic by foregrounding the moral righteousness, collective heroism, and sacrificial spirit of ordinary Chinese people, thereby translating official commemorative discourse into a populist cinematic language that affirms national dignity and wartime legitimacy.

Dongji Rescue opens with a non-diegetic confession by the male protagonist Ah Bi, who explains that he and his younger brother Ah Dang are orphans marked by distinctive neck tattoos that signify their lineage as descendants of pirates. As Fan observes, this piratical identity is clearly borrowed from Western cultural traditions, in which pirates are conventionally coded as mythic, hyper-masculine social outlaws endowed with exceptional physical prowess and moral autonomy (102). Spatially, the two brothers are segregated from the local community, residing on the far edge of Dongji Island in a dwelling staged as an ahistorical, fairy-tale-like refuge. The mise-en-scène of their home—pristine interiors, objects devoid of visible wear, and conspicuously anachronistic accessories such as modern-style sunglasses—further detaches them from the material conditions of 1940s coastal China. This temporal dissonance is underscored in a scene where Ah Dang attempts to communicate with the British POW Thomas by presenting a world globe and inviting him to locate Britain, an object that, as Hu notes, would have been exceedingly unlikely in the possession of a wartime Chinese fisherman (27). Beyond these symbolic markers of mysticism and otherness, the two brothers' physical abilities are repeatedly exaggerated: they are filmed scaling steep cliffs and navigating violent seas with unrealistic speed and agility, their bodies framed as sites of near-superhuman endurance. In the final scene, the already drowned Ah Bi and Ah Dang, in a surrealistic way, swim towards each other and reunite in the deep blue sea, accompanied with the voice-over "they come from the sea and in the end, they returned to it. I believe, there is their home. The place they are meant to return to." Together, these narratives and visual strategies elevate Ah Bi and Ah Dang from historically grounded figures into quasi-mythical action heroes, reinforcing the film's departure from realist wartime representation in favor of a stylized, heroic fantasy.

Ah Bi's unbridled masculinity is further accentuated through his passionate love with Ah Hua, the adopted daughter of the village chief, who herself occupies a comparable position of social marginality. Endowed with physical prowess and more

determination, Ah Hua is portrayed as more decisive and forward-looking than most of the male villagers; chafing against the island's rigid patriarchal order, she longs to flee to Shanghai with Ah Bi in pursuit of personal freedom. Upon learning of the Lisbon Maru's sinking, Ah Hua is the first to urge the villagers to untie their boats and rescue those adrift at sea, only to be abruptly silenced by a young man who insists, "Kibosh. Women out at sea is against the rules." Her characterization as a freedom-loving and strong female leader signals the directors' intention to subvert the stereotypical female roles that have long dominated Chinese war epics, which—aimed primarily at male audiences—tend to mediate historical trauma through the moral awakening or heroic maturation of a male protagonist. For example, in the recent box office sensation *Zhanlang 2* (*Wolf Warrior 2*, 2017), the female characters are either one-dimensional or decorative, and merely function to reveal the psychological growth of the male protagonists: "the female figure is sexually configured and objectified in relation to male masculinity, nationalism, and male lineage" (L. Wang 146). In *Dongji Rescue*, Ah Hua's defiance reaches a symbolic climax when she storms into the village temple, wields a mattock to smash open a concealed wall, and retrieves hidden guns and gunpowder. Addressing the assembled villagers, Ah Hua delivers a rousing call to action, "Either they [the Japanese] kill all of us, or, if they fail, even if only one of us remains, we are heading out to sea today. To hell with the blockade!" In her last sentence, Ah Hua repudiates the patriarchal authority: "Women cannot sail out? I am breaking this rule today!" In *War and Gender*, Goldstein states that "masculine war roles depend on feminine roles in the war system, including mothers, wives, and sweethearts" (5). *Dongji Rescue* breaks down such stereotypes of women as decorative objects for male growth through the characterization of Ah Hua, who is free from the dual bondages of the Japanese domination and the chauvinist, patriarchal rules.

Despite its declarative slogan that "every Chinese can be a hero," *Dongji Rescue* has also provoked wide-spread indignation and dissatisfaction among Chinese viewers for its unflattering portrayal of Chinese villagers. For much of the film, most of the islanders are depicted as numb, submissive, and backward-minded, passively venerating the Japanese emperor and complying with the Japanese occupiers' orders without resistance. The narrative repeatedly underscores the humiliating spectacle of an entire community being controlled through fear by only two armed Japanese soldiers. Paradoxically, while remaining docile toward Japanese authority, these villagers ostracize and bully Ah Bi and Ah Dang and enforce oppressive patriarchal norms upon their womenfolk. Collective resistance only emerges after the villagers intercept a coded message revealing that the Japanese intend to massacre the entire

village, suggesting that the villagers' revenge is driven less by ethical conviction than by imminent existential threat. This representational logic recalls modernist cinematic tendencies from the 1980s to the early 2000s, which often reconfigured Chinese peasants from revolutionary subjects into ahistorical, ignorant, and pre-modern masses (P. Zhang 10). As Zhang Huiyu incisively observes, in these cultural productions "the peasants who were once mobilised by the revolution and given the position of the historical subject have become the subject of pre-modern times" (102). Although *Dongji Rescue* ultimately re-elevates the villagers into courageous heroes during the climactic rescue sequence, this transformation appears abrupt and instrumental, retrospectively legitimizing a narrative arc that initially deprives them of agency and dignity.

The character Interpreter Li epitomizes this morally-ambivalent representation of ordinary Chinese villager. A middle-aged collaborator whose mantra is "we must stay down," Li initially appears as a sycophantic enforcer of Japanese authority. As the narrative unfolds, however, Li's collaboration is reframed as a strategy of survival, motivated by a desire to shield the villagers from the punishment. In the film's final act, Li was shot by the Japanese and undergoes an epiphanic awakening: he tears off the red armband symbolizing his allegiance to the Japanese and joins the perilous rescue at sea. This trajectory aligns with a recurrent trope in China's WWII cinema, in which *hanjian* (traitors or collaborators) are granted narrative complexity yet ultimately redeemed through patriotic sacrifice. As Yun Xia observes, since the 2000s such figures have been rendered more psychologically nuanced, prompting audiences "to ponder the complicated circumstances of wartime collaboration and to imagine the characters' internal struggles between conscience and the will to survive" (183). Nevertheless, in contemporary war blockbusters, this ambiguity is often resolved through martyrdom. Characters like Interpreter Li achieve redemption by dying heroically, their deaths serving both as moral warning against betrayal and collaboration and as narrative mechanisms that reabsorb treacherous figures into a nationalist framework of sacrifice, loyalty, and moral rectitude.

In a speech delivered at Duke University, the renowned Chinese writer Yan Lianke wryly remarked that the number of Japanese characters killed annually in Chinese WWII-themed films and television dramas would, if taken literally, equal the entire population of Japan (qtd. in Ching 3). This exaggeration incisively captures a long-standing representational tendency in Chinese war cinema. As Shuk-ting observes, "the demonization of the Japanese Imperial Army is a perennial theme of Chinese war films, reflecting both the dominant official narrative of the war and discourses entrenched in popular culture" (69). *Dongji Rescue* conforms closely to this tradition

through its repeated deployment of graphic violence to signify Japanese inhumanity. One of the film's most harrowing sequences depicts a Japanese military unit arriving on the island to search for a missing British POW: after ordering villagers to assemble, the enraged lieutenant commands his soldiers to bayonet a Chinese fisherman, his wife, and their young son to death. The scene is staged to maximize moral shock, with the lieutenant remaining disturbingly impassive—even faintly smiling—as if savoring the spectacle of slaughter. In another highly theatrical episode, the village schoolteacher Chen is executed after a failed assassination attempt: chained to a stake on a mountaintop, he is doused in petroleum and burned alive as Japanese officers warn the villagers that this is the fate awaiting anyone who defies imperial authority. The violence is not confined to Chinese victims alone; after recapturing the British POW Thomas, a Japanese officer publicly decapitates him to terrorize the remaining prisoners.

Such scenes exemplify what Wang and Chew identifies as the excesses of post-2005 War of Resistance against Japan (WORAJ) screen culture, shaped by fluctuating censorship regimes and fierce market competition, and increasingly criticized as “ridiculous” for their exaggerated spectacles that fuse political orthodoxy with commercial sensationalism (9). Similarly, Geng Song argues that dialogue in many WORAJ dramas “subscribes to a type of essentialist racial ideology that delineates the Japanese as the subhuman or even nonhuman Other,” reducing historical violence to moral caricature (58). Yet the insistence on exaggeration should not obscure the fact that historical reality was often even more devastating than cinematic representation suggests. For instance, the Doolittle Raid in 1942, led by Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle, involved American bombers attacking Japan, with most crews crash-landing in Zhejiang Province, where Chinese civilians aided them to be transported to safe places, incurring brutal Japanese retaliation including massive killings of an estimated number of 250,000 Chinese (J. M. Scott). Against this historical backdrop, the hyperbolic violence of films like *Dongji Rescue* simultaneously draws legitimacy from real wartime atrocities while flattening their complexity into a familiar, morally absolutist visual grammar.

Taken together, *Dongji Rescue* demonstrates how the Lisbon Maru incident is reconfigured within the dominant grammar of contemporary Chinese war blockbusters, in which nationalism, heroic masculinity, moral absolutism, and spectacular violence converge to produce a simplified and emotionally charged historical narrative. Its portrayals of villagers, collaborators, women, and Japanese soldiers oscillate between symbolic empowerment and reductive stereotyping, revealing the tensions inherent in translating historical trauma into commercially viable nationalist spectacle. While *Dongji Rescue* draws its legitimacy from real wartime atrocities and resonates with

state-sanctioned commemorative discourse, its reliance on exaggerated heroics and moral binaries ultimately narrows the ethical and historical complexity of the Lisbon Maru story. In contrast to Fang's documentary, which invites multidirectional remembrance and moral spectatorship across national boundaries, *Dongji Rescue* illustrates the limits of nationalist memory work when global histories of suffering are subsumed under a singular, triumphalist narrative of wartime redemption.

IV. Conclusion

By juxtaposing *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* and *Dongji Rescue*, this article demonstrates how contemporary Chinese WWII cinema constitutes a contested site where memory, ideology, and aesthetics intersect. While Fang Li's documentary mobilizes participatory filmmaking, postmemory, and multidirectional remembrance to foreground ethical witnessing and transnational humanitarianism, *Dongji Rescue* reclaims the same historical episode through the grammar of nationalist spectacle, heroic masculinity, and moral absolutism. These contrasting strategies illuminate the broader dynamics through which wartime memory is selectively rearticulated to serve divergent cultural and political imperatives. As Yingjin Zhang reminds us, war films function not merely as representations of history but as acts of remembrance that "leave deep marks on collective memory," continually corroborating, unsettling, or reshaping dominant narratives (22). Taken together, the two films underscore the instability of collective memory itself, revealing how cinematic remembrance remains open to revision, negotiation, and ethical reimagining in an era of intensified nationalist commemoration and global memory circulation.

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