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# Negotiating cultural trauma in tourism

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## ABSTRACT

This study responds to call for an evidentiary frame that incorporates the contested views of cultural trauma in dark tourism sites. Central to this contestation is a failure to break down the victim-perpetrator binary that particularly struggles for truth-seeking transnationally and trans-generationally. This requires a new and critical heritage interpretation, addressing traumatic historical lessons and reaching a reconciliation for future integration and inclusivity. With employment of semi-structure interviews and participant observations, this study of the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders illustrates how dark tourism and counter-monuments play a critical role in transforming massacre trauma into commemorative practices. Designing and building new tourism space and artworks as counter-monuments proves to be one significant encoding practice that negotiates more mundane and interactive peacebuilding and reconciliation. Such negotiation contributes to a more meaningful and holistic understanding of cultural trauma, heritage interpretation, memory and identity. Its implications can inspire future research to explore tourism's transformative potential for remembering, forgetting and healing.

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Cultural trauma; difficult heritage; interpretation; counter-monuments; negotiated encoding; dark tourism

## Introduction

Tourists' increasing curiosity on traumatic sites has redirected scholastic attention to the ways how the contested past is remembered, represented and interpreted (Causevic & Lynch, 2011). A number of studies focus on the representation of cultural trauma in Holocaust and genocide sites with reference to public remembrance, historical education and national identity building (Alexander, 2004; Iliiev, 2021). Despite the prevalence and popularity of traumatic sites for touristic consumption, recognizing and incorporating the contested views of cultural trauma proves to be a challenging and complicated task (Light, 2017; Logan & Reeves, 2009; Macdonald, 2009).

Recent scholarship on the colonial past in East Asia moves beyond the politics of remembrance, with greater emphasis on non-binary and opposing views, particularly through an awareness of negotiations and interactions with Western cultural practices (McCarthy, 2016). However, scarce attention is placed on the unresolved cultural trauma relating to the Sino-Japan Wars, which requires constant negotiation between the past Sino-Japan relations and the present geopolitical tensions in East Asia and world wide (Bieler, 2020). Accordingly, representing and interpreting cultural trauma leads to an amalgam of tensions and conflicts. It is often the case that the official interpretations of difficult heritage follow a single ideological framework of states or powerful political and cultural institutions (Farmaki, 2017; Jensen, 2019). The questions of how to incorporate the dissenting voices in traumatic sites warrant greater attention from both academics and practitioners.

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Negotiating cultural trauma lacks an evidentiary frame that can guide the representation and reconstruction of traumatic events for touristic consumption (Dawes, 2014). In this light, it calls for more systematic traumatic sites' study on the political and social responsibilities in healing the wounds of war atrocities and adding new values for contemporary uses. Through an interpretive lens (Chen, 2012), the following questions need to be fully explored; what messages should be represented by traumatic sites, how cultural trauma is negotiated by commemorative practices, and to what extent the meaning of the difficult past can be articulated during tourism experiences. Central to this exploration is a way to create a reflexive space where heritage interpretation plays a crucial role in addressing the lessons of traumatic history, adjusting its tragedy aesthetics, evoking transnational and transcultural responses to the cultural trauma and promoting world peace and social harmony (Xie & Sun, 2018).

As a symbol of visitors' aesthetic appreciation for grief and empathy (Sodaro, 2018), counter-monuments become a new hybrid genre to show cultural trauma's potential for 'creativity and aesthetic responses to the experience of shattered worlds' (Bieler, 2020, p. 339). As a critical model of commemorative practice, counter-monuments also challenge monumental and top-down approaches to difficult heritage. They can reframe a different understanding of cultural trauma that both victims' and perpetrators' interpretation of trauma can co-exist. This coexistence is important to reach a reconciliation for future integration and inclusivity. This paper aims to illustrate the ways in which the inherent fragility and fluidity of cultural trauma can be incorporated as part of a counter-hegemonic narrative, with the establishment of counter-monuments facilitating more open dialogues with a wider interpretive focus.

This paper also brings attention to dark tourism, particularly the way it negotiates cultural trauma, transforms historical empathy and contemplation towards wider cultural inclusiveness and social solidarity. A number of scholars perceive tourism as a social practice of meaning-making (Soica, 2016; Timothy, 2018). Other scholars have explored the relationships between identity building and visiting traumatic sites in Holocaust studies, geopolitical relations and post-conflict tourism development (Cheal & Griffin, 2013; Light, 2017; Yang et al., 2020). Although visits to memorials provide a locational authenticity (Chhabra, 2019; Wang et al., 2021), the increasing touristic consumption renders the traumatic sites vulnerable and contentious, as well as exposing the fragility of meaning-making (Osborne, 2017). This paper thus attempts to examine how cultural trauma can be negotiated through dark tourism and counter-monuments as a new counter-hegemonic narrative in the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, China. With a specific evaluation on varying interpretation and negotiation processes, this paper is expected to contribute substantially to an experiential and humanistic understanding of cultural trauma within a wider social sciences context.

## **Contestations of cultural trauma and tourism**

### ***Contestations of cultural trauma***

The contestations of cultural trauma continue the debates on remembering and forgetting and relevant policy design of transforming memorials into dark tourism sites. Cultural trauma is perceived as a 'contentious discursive process framed by a dichotomy between perpetrator and victim that is spurred by a powerful, unforgettable occurrence' (Eyerman, 2019, p. 93). It occurs when 'members of a collective feel ... subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways' (Alexander, 2004, p. 1).

With specific reference to war atrocities or colonial history, a failure to recognize the differences between victims' and perpetrators' accounts hinders tourists from achieving a shared historical understanding of the difficult past (Yang, 2005). For instance, the interpretation of victims' accounts largely serves for rebuilding identity, reliving historic memories and historical consciousness and fortifying collective belonging (Farmaki, 2017; Jensen, 2019). This acknowledgement has important

political implications on history (re)writing and representation. Graml (2020) indicates that the massacre sites, charged with the values of an officially sanctioned common heritage and a shared past, provoke public acknowledgement of Austria's national identity. In this way, the memory of victimhood is utilized as an invaluable source for learning and reflection. Its interpretation often remains unified, homogeneous and unequivocal, mainly delivering the state's dominant paradigm of national identity building and social cohesion promotion.

Including the perpetrator's account, on the other side, is a politically challenging and sensitive task. Perpetrators' accounts can raise uncomfortable questions on testimony's moral responsibilities, often leading to an identity threat, a crisis of meaning and even a loss of trust and authority (Lischer, 2019; Schmidt, 2017). Therefore, perpetrators' interpretation of trauma often runs counter to the agendas and processes of past reconciliation. For instance, Japan's denial as a war crime perpetrator has led to intensifying the geopolitical tensions and conflicts in East Asia (Armstrong, 2019; Kim et al., 2016), thereby failing to reach regional reconciliation. In the case of Rwanda, the state emphasizes on forgiveness and reconciliation which, however, is contradicted by the pressure on victims and survivors to claim reconciliation with unrepentant perpetrators (Schwenkel, 2009). Such imbalance calls for attentiveness to the contestations of the victim-perpetrator binary so that the commemorative practises 'do not offer false consolation but provide a sense of an unsettling awareness that neither closure nor the continued cultivation of hate-filled memories is an option' (Bieler, 2020, p. 348).

Recent studies have contextualized cultural trauma to break down the victim-perpetrator binary, but their contentions particularly struggle for truth-seeking transnationally and trans-generationally (Marshall, 2004; Schmidt, 2017). As time and forgetfulness gradually erode the power of memorials, those victims' stories have moral and cultural significance that are seen as powerful and capable of being remembered (Brockmeier, 2002). While the contradiction and pressure imposed on the perpetrators' interpretations result in silence. For example, Straus (2017) criticizes the oversimplification of perpetrators' stories, which can blind us in a period of genocide or mass violence, while leading to the analysis of the act of violence only. This can obscure rather than clarify the full picture of violence. Concurrently, Eyerman (2019) relates cultural trauma to a 'meaning struggle, where individual and collective actors attempt to define a situation by imposing a particular interpretation on it' (p. 42). This meaning struggle leads to perpetrators' identity threat, notably a doubling of self, emerging from the difference between 'guilt feelings (motivated by narcissism and looking backwards) and sense of guilt (motivated by victims and looking forward)' (Anderson, 2018, p. 98). This identity threat can result in the perpetrators' individual stories as misinterpreted, forgotten and even lost over time.

There emerges a need for a new interpretive frame through which the disparity and inequality between victim and perpetrator, a main constituent of meaning struggle, can be repositioned and articulated for negotiation and resilience. It also raises questions on the balance between remembering and forgetting, and whether or not the interpretation of cultural trauma is capable of encouraging tourists to experience and to engage within commemoration.

### ***Heritage interpretation, tourism and counter-monuments***

In suggesting how to interpret and negotiate war atrocities, Yang (2000) emphasizes the significance of adopting a constructive framework which 'addresses historical-empirical as well as moral-political dimensions of the event ... recognizes both particular as well as the universal aspects of the experience' (p. 168). This concern stresses the significance of heritage interpretation in maintaining the moral and political functions, as well as facilitating meaningful dialogues and psychological resilience.

A number of scholars examine the role of interpretation in enhancing heritage healing, reflection and emotional engagement (Sigala & Steriopoulos, 2021; Simpson, 1993; Waterton & Dittmer, 2014). The concept of hot interpretation (Uzzell, 1989), with greater emphasis on active and emotion-

centred interpretations, is particularly helpful to understand how historical messages, meanings and values are articulated amongst residents and tourists at difficult heritage sites. Buzinde and Santos (2009) evaluate how tourists decode slavery tourism through an adoption of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings. In their research of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. Watkins et al. (2010) suggest effective interpretation and memorial design features can affect visiting experiences and mourning processes. Most studies have confirmed the educational dimensions of interpretation in representing traumatic history and promoting international peace. Limited attention has been, however, placed on the ethical and psychological dimensions that can challenge nationalistic and authoritative heritage discourses (Davies et al., 2013; McKernan, 2017).

In the hot interpretation of difficult heritage (Zhu, 2021), official monuments often serve as a visual representation of contestation as well as a focus for the commemoration of trauma and collective memory. The traditional function of state-sponsored national monuments as 'self-aggrandizing locus for national memory' (Young, 1992, p. 270) fortifies the very foundations of national existence and legitimacy. Recent motivations for creating monuments have diversified and monuments are increasingly criticized for failing to remember (Stevens et al., 2018). Therefore, there is a need for further systematic analysis of interpretation strategies, especially reconsidering and challenging the objects, meanings and features influenced by the Western perspectives.

Counter-monuments can be seen as a new response to challenging traditional monumentality. Drawing on Holocaust memorials built in Germany in the late 1980s, Young (1992) argues that counter-monuments refers to 'its own physical impermanence, but also to the contingency of all meaning and memory- especially that embodied in a form that insists on its eternal fixity' (p. 295). This physical transformation invites multi-sensory engagement rather than just affirming the stable and fixed official meanings and identities grounded in monuments.

As a critical commemorative practice, counter-monuments attempt to 'visually complement or change the appearance of earlier monuments' (Michalski, 1998, p. 205). The connotations of this term can be shared with those of such terms as anti-monument, dialogic monument, deconstructive or non-traditional monument (Stevens et al., 2018). We adopt the dialogic approach here to refer to coupled counter-monuments, and their negotiations to reflect the past and to reframe their status as a historical witness. This approach enables curators, architects and directors to search for new modes of commemoration which 'fulfill the need to not only re/construct the tacitly accepted social meanings traditionally embodied in monumental commemorations but also to de-construct the axiological fabric of the collectivity' (Krzyzanowska, 2016, p. 470).

Despite the recent upgrades of hot interpretations in memorial sites, scant attention has been placed on the roles of counter-monuments in the existing literature on dark tourism. As a socially mediated attribution, dark tourism sites facilitate tourists' psychological access to commemorating traumatic events, sharing their sense of distress, fear and depression, and seeking a loss of community bonds and reform collective memory (Hanif & Ullah, 2018; Hirschberger, 2018; Kappmeier & Mercy, 2019; Stratton, 2019). Existing dark tourism research has focused on tourists' motivations, emotions, visiting experiences and residents' engagement (Wang et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2016), but there exists a lack of in-depth empirical examinations of cultural trauma and its negotiation through tourism.

It is important to note that excessive commodification or touristification of cultural trauma can lead to a loss of its historical values and intrinsic meanings. Increasing touristic consumption and commodification of memorial sites are rather considered as 'an inappropriate and even immoral vehicle for the presentation of human suffering and troubling events' (Nelson, 2020; Strange & Kempa, 2003, p. 387). These critical stances even further increase dissonance and moral conflicts between dark tourism and memorial sites.

However, tourism can play a critical role in delivering and sustaining the key lessons learnt from cultural trauma throughout generations. An appropriate level of commodifying memorials through tourism can develop new and different appeals and uses, thereby achieving authentic cultural meanings and social functions over time (Park, 2022; Samuel, 1994). Recent dark tourism studies recognize

tourism's meaning-making potential in facilitating tourists' cognitive learning about death and representing difficult heritage through various forms of interpretations (Sharma, 2020). Although the scholastic focus has shifted to people's contemplation of death and atrocities and their affective and emotive experiences (Stone, 2012; Stone & Sharpley, 2008), there remains very little discussion on the roles of negotiated encoding in enhancing past reconciliation, peacebuilding and social inclusiveness (Büscher & Fletcher, 2017; Farkić & Kennell, 2021; Kulusjärvi, 2020). In this regard, an advanced research on the multifarious relations between touristic consumption and the interpretation of traumatic sites is required (Iliev, 2021; Tarlow, 2005). This paper thus aims to open up more discussions on tourism and counter-monuments as a more dynamic and discursive frame of past reconciliation and peacebuilding, which can be applied to other memorial sites and museums (Deturk, 2017).

## **Applications to Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, China**

In order to provide an in-depth analysis of changing negotiation processes of cultural trauma, we opted for undertaking qualitative research in one of the most prominent dark tourism sites in China over a period of seven years (2011–2018). A number of scholars criticize that qualitative research cannot verify new theoretical insights (Horesh et al., 2013), further drawing on the practical limitations of case study in terms of its validity and reliability (Chowdhury, 2014; Hall et al., 2004). This study, rather, aims to offer researchers more real-time opportunities to handle missing data in a one-time case study (Kallio et al., 2014; Xiao & Smith, 2006). It adopts a historical realism ontology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) operated by qualitative interviews and participant observations. Rich data comprising direct interview transcriptions, observation notes and other policies and documents demonstrate the appropriateness of the qualitative approach in cultural trauma studies, particularly in terms of counteracting the epistemological weakness of case study - generating common-sense knowledge from the one-time and naturalistic observations (Campbell, 1975). This qualitative research is expected to contribute a critical understanding of negotiating cultural trauma over time and across social and cultural changes.

The site, the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders, is qualified as one of highly visited Chinese traumatic sites to examine cultural trauma, incorporating China's economic and social changes within a wide war memorial narrative. The Memorial Hall was built to commemorate the Nanjing Massacre in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). As 'the delivery of patriotic education through heritage' (Yan, 2017, p. 135) had been prioritized in China's heritage tourism, the Memorial Hall was politically used by the Chinese state in glorifying the one party rule, as well as consolidating the national identity. The Memorial Hall presents national ceremonies of the Nanjing Massacre, as well as Chinese patriotism and collective memory. After the 13th of December in 2014, the Memorial Hall was promoted as a national memorial site to serve the geopolitical Chinese Dream (Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, 2016).

Significant academic contributions have recently been made to the tourism studies of the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, with specific reference to tourists' emotions, motivations and experiences (Wang et al., 2021; Xie & Sun, 2018; Zheng et al., 2020; Zhu, 2021). For example, Zheng et al. (2020) highlight that positive emotional experiences result in direct positive effects on spiritual meaning, while negative emotions indirectly create meaning through the mediating effect of learning benefits at the Memorial Hall. Wang et al's study (2021) confirms the positive effect of awe on national identity during tourism experiences at the Memorial Hall. But this positive effect does not contribute to increasing tourists' revisit intention. Zhu (2021) argues that interpreting the massacre narrative at the Memorial Hall, despite new interpretational techniques being employed for hot interpretation, is still driven by China's political agendas and nationalistic sentiments. Importantly, he calls for a re-assessment of cultural trauma for the deeper levels of hot interpretation including peacebuilding and reconciliation. Our paper thus tries to examine the potentials of negotiated encoding for more open and inclusive interpretation of this traumatic past.

Given the focus of this research on the negotiating processes of cultural trauma over time, conducting three sets of interviews with a purposive snowball sampling proved to be useful in enhancing the validity and reliability of this research. Varying individual experiences and views were also critical to develop a more holistic interpretation of cultural trauma. The interviewees were selected based on their responsibilities, roles and activities, which related to the Memorial Hall's design, planning, operations and marketing. They also had sufficient knowledge and experiences in dealing with the research questions regarding the negotiation process of cultural trauma and touristic consumption. Each interview lasted from thirty minutes to two hours, accounting for more than 140 hours for transcription (Table 1).

The first set of interviews during February–April 2011 broadly examined the scope of cultural trauma, objects, interpretation, tourists' motivations and experiences in designing and marketing the traumatic site. This stage helped us to identify key research themes and the relevance of the sources of data. We then continued the second set of interviews during May–June 2012 to evaluate new sub-themes and more site-specific and contextual issues that emerged from the first stage of data collection. We also conducted the third set of interviews in May–June 2018 in order to further the theoretical and practical contributions of the negotiated encoding after the Memorial Hall completed the new extension project. Participant observations were effective in uncovering the changes in interpretation techniques, the use of the Memorial Hall and varying tourism practices. We also collected policies, government reports and promotional materials, both offline and online, to avoid personal bias and invalid interpretations. These data collection methods provided access to an ongoing negotiating process, as well as a comprehensive and critical understanding of cultural trauma memories in a post-conflicting setting.

We triangulated all primary and secondary data and employed NVivo for data analysis. A thematic approach was adopted to categorize the themes and to evaluate their 'descriptive, interpretive or explanatory' relationships (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2011, p. 180; Rivas, 2012). It followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) guidelines on qualitative data reduction, a process of 'selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data' (p. 10). After the data was coded, the arguments based on the constructs and interrelationships of different nodes were interpreted. This analytical process helps us to develop conceptual interpretations derived from the data and also probable thematic relationships that are sufficient to answer the research questions.

## Findings and discussions

### *Contestations of interpreting Nanjing Massacre*

The findings of this study reveal that hot interpretations of the Nanjing Massacre promote an array of victimhood narratives with moral purposes. It is observed that the perpetrators' accounts are excluded in the Memorial Hall, such as the individual stories from Japanese veterans, officers and soldiers. Due to many burial locations having lost the track and most of the bones having been relocated since the massacre (Qian, 2009; Reilly, 2001), the authorities of Memorial Hall mainly focus on the oral, written and visual records of the victims' accounts. This priority clearly delivers the nationalistic perspectives of the massacre, thereby strengthening national and cultural legitimacy of China. This supports Wang (2008) and Zhu (2021), who argue that the Chinese Community Party interpreted victimhood, not only for its patriotic education, but also creating a shared political and social identity.

A high wall in the Memorial Hall displayed the motto 'Past experience, if not forgotten, can serve as a guide for the future'. One of the curators highlighted the contrast between big words 'VICTIMS 300000' on the roof and the small spotlights '*representing the individual death on the floor, which effectively encoded a sense of sympathy for the Nanjing Massacre*'. These visual representations help to unfold an aesthetic memory boom (Bieler, 2020), in terms of promoting a collective

**Table 1.** List of interviewees.

Numbers of interviewees	Occupation	Relations with the Memorial Hall	Set one of interviews	Set two of interviews	Set three of interviews
1	Director, the Memorial Hall, Z	Take forward the Memorial's vision, oversee the strategies of the Memorial, direct the operations in learning, public education, finance, staffing and external communications.	Yes	No	No
2	Deputy Director, the Memorial Hall, L	Take responsibilities for the Memorial's everyday operation, manage the commercial operations, contractors and consultants as required.	Yes	No	No
3	Deputy Director of Public Service Office, the Memorial Hall, W	Ensure a safe visiting environment, maintain the facilities and grounds, support and deliver visitor experience of high quality.	No	Yes	Yes
4	Deputy Director of Archives Office, the Memorial Hall, C	Lead curatorial management, ensure the collections and archives maintained, preserved and interpreted at an excellent standard.	No	Yes	Yes
5	Curator, the Memorial Hall, Z	Categorize historical objects, manage collection and design exhibitions	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Curator, the Memorial Hall, L	Categorize historical objects, manage collection and design the new exhibition.	No	Yes	Yes
7	Volunteering Interpreter (Chinese), the Memorial Hall, T	Explain the Memorial's history, the history of the Massacre, the content collection and the interpretation of counter-monuments.	No	Yes	Yes
8	Volunteering Interpreter (Chinese and Japanese), the Memorial Hall, C	Translate the Memorial's content into Japanese and explore the stories behind the existing interpretation and counter-monuments.	Yes	Yes	Yes
9	Volunteering Interpreter (Chinese and English), the Memorial Hall, C	Translate the Memorial's content into English and explore the stories behind the existing interpretation and counter-monuments.	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	Architect, F	Participant in the Memorial's interior design (e.g. space)	No	No	Yes
11	Architect, L	Participant in the Memorial's interior design (e.g. lighting).	No	No	Yes
12	Architect, S	Participant in the Memorial's design of sculptures.	No	Yes	Yes
13	Architect, X	Participant in the Memorial's extension project on the peace park.	No	Yes	Yes
14	Architect, Y	Participant in the Memorial's extension project on the new square.	No	Yes	Yes
15	Research Librarian, The Second Historical Archives of China, Y	Research specialization on the history of the Republic of China (1912–1949).	Yes	Yes	No
16	Research Librarian, Jiangsu Provincial Archives, C	Research specialization on the social and economic history of Republic of China (1912–1949).	Yes	Yes	No
17	Research Librarian, Nanjing City Archives, Z	Research specialization on Sino-Japan relations during the Republic of China (1912–1949) and the history of the Chinese Communities Party.	Yes	Yes	No
18	Fellow, Jiangsu Provincial Academy of Social Sciences, Q	Research specialization on tourism economy.	Yes	Yes	No

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** Continued.

Numbers of interviewees	Occupation	Relations with the Memorial Hall	Set one of interviews	Set two of interviews	Set three of interviews
19	Fellow, Institute of Modern History Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, S	Research specialization on Japan studies and Sino-Japan relations.	Yes	Yes	No
20	Professor, Nanjing University, Z1	Research specialization on heritage tourism, tourism policy and planning.	Yes	No	No
21	Professor, Nanjing University, Z2	Research specialization on Japan history.	Yes	Yes	Yes
22	Professor, Nanjing University, Z3	Research specialization on contemporary China history.	Yes	Yes	Yes
23	Professor, Nanjing University, C	Research specialization on engineering and architecture design.	Yes	Yes	No
24	Associate Professor, Nanjing University, Z	Research specialization on International Peace Studies.	Yes	No	No
25	Professor, Nanjing Normal University, H	Research specialization on tourism policy and planning.	Yes	Yes	Yes
26	Professor, Nanjing Normal University, L	Research specialization on urban tourism, urban planning and sustainability.	Yes	Yes	No
27	Professor, Southeast University, Z	Research specialization on urban tourism, research and consultancy.	Yes	No	No
28	Professor, Southeast University, Y	Research specialization on urban studies.	Yes	Yes	No
29	Associate Professor, Southeast University, S	Research specialization on museum studies, heritage interpretation, visitor engagement.	No	Yes	Yes
30	Associate Professor, Southeast University, W	Research specialization on contemporary China history.	No	Yes	Yes

victimhood for tourists' grief and empathy. One of the curators also explained how a new exhibition immediately drew tourists' attention to an ideology of victimhood:

*An exhibit involving drops of water falling and a light next to the photograph of a victim turning off every twelve seconds, in particular, switches tourists' mood immediately. Its representation means that 300,000 people were killed during the six weeks, one life perished every twelve seconds. This is absolutely horrific.*

The narrative of victimhood that is perceived as a common sense paradigm in the Memorial Hall has left little space for perpetrators' accounts. The main focus of interpretation is still placed on claiming and reinforcing Chinese victimhood, as evidenced in the 'we-they' polarization and utilizing 'Don't forget' in the massacre narrative (Brockmeier, 2002; Zhu, 2021). Consequently, the Japanese perpetrators are often represented as 'rigid stereotypes of a subhuman combination of sadistic monsters without conscience' (Zhang, 2020, p. 151). This results in the perpetrators' accounts largely being missed in the Nanjing Massacre narrative.

This confirms Bieler's analysis (2020) that the contested elements of cultural trauma through the politics of representations become increasingly difficult for conversation between victims and perpetrators. Zhu (2007) explains why representing such victimhood is so important to China:

*We shall never forget that weakness invites aggression that causes the whole nation to suffer; we shall never forget the historical lessons of the invasion and people's sufferings. We shall, with patriotism, self-reliance and initiative, work hard for socialism with Chinese characteristics, for the reunification of the country, and for world peace. (p. 41)*

The former Memorial Hall's Director stated that negotiating perpetrators' account was impossible at an early stage of developing the Memorial Hall:

*Most anti-Japanese themed works in Chinese museums attempted to represent national hatred in the last few decades, which was inevitable at the time. However, we now emphasise that our suffering was down to the fact that we were weak so unable to seek peace until we became stronger.*

A number of non-governmental organizations and individuals, such as journalists, novelists and historians, have recently attempted to bring attention to the perpetrators' accounts, but they are usually unable to reach a wider audience. Due to a lack of cultural and financial support from the government, the historical record of perpetrators' accounts fails to be recognized in Chinese national historical narratives. This is a result of political authorities that fail to acknowledge others' trauma, except those from the victims (Alexander, 2004; Reston, 2017). Three curators highlighted the tensions in both representing the massacre event as a collective cultural trauma and incorporating perpetrators' accounts at an individual level. One of them mentioned this tension in the Chinese context as

*Sites of death, trauma and darkness may cause emotional and cultural stress, so that dealing with perpetrators' stories and relevant evidence should be very careful.*

The difficulties of including perpetrators' accounts are also related to international politics. Problems arise from the dissenting views of the deaths in different Japanese media and historical education, particularly Japanese school textbooks have not really acknowledged its atrocities during the Nanjing Massacre (Saito, 2016). This clearly encapsulates how certain historical events can be interpreted and remembered differently, reflecting each state's political agendas and views. One associate professor expressed his concern:

*If Japanese youths haven't been educated about the Nanjing Massacre, how are they able to accept Japanese people's past wrongdoings during the Sino-Japan war?*

Japan's interpretation of the Nanjing Massacre and their denial of public apology are closely related to 'compensate for the economic and political stagnation since the 1990s' (Saito, 2016, p. 3). This act of collective forgetting manipulated by the Japanese government is strategically put in place in order to avoid identity threat and meaning crisis, as well as strengthening nationalism. Challenging the perpetrators' distortion of historical memory becomes a complex and sensitive task, which needs to be, however, urgently dealt with (Seo, 2008).

The recent attempts in recognizing the significance of including the stories from Japanese military officers and soldiers can be understood as a critical turn for negotiating cultural trauma. Although including the perpetrators' accounts in the Memorial Hall can contradict China's official rendering of the past, it can serve as an effective tool in facilitating more balanced reflections on war responsibilities, conflicts and memories that are forgotten through transnational and transgenerational transmission.

There also emerges an increasing awareness that the Nanjing Massacre cannot be interpreted only by a single group. Rather, there has been a critical call for a collective community that incorporates remembering and forgetting in contemporary commemorative practices. This collective community can contextualize cultural trauma to avert the intensive and closed interpretation of trauma grounded in nationalistic struggle (Anderson, 2018). In order to move beyond the victim-centred interpretation of massacre, one Chinese historian highlighted the collaboration among,

*historians, scholars and other interest groups, associated with a careful consideration of historical consciousness, significance and interpretations of Nanjing Massacre in wider transnational dialogues and cultural exchange activities.*

The remembrance of the Nanjing Massacre thus becomes a common memory, neither excluding the victim's nor perpetrators' accounts (Yang, 2000). This allows the Memorial Hall to reposition itself as a contemporary heritage site for relieving the nationalistic tensions inherent in their wartime past. This is also important to integrate the dominant and oppositional historical messages, and to make their own rules to interpret the Nanjing Massacre within relatively less restricted settings.

### ***Negotiated encoding through tourism and counter-monuments***

Visits to the Memorial Hall enable people to negotiate cultural and political ambivalence, especially with regard to war memorials (Bieler, 2020). Dark tourism plays a key role to bring more reflective and healing opportunities into wider peacebuilding debates. It guides both tourists and residents to enter a theatre of cultural trauma (Denton, 2005; Smith, 2016; Wang et al., 2019). The striking visual experience is embedded in the visiting routes to evoke people's moral feeling and to offer the possibility of healing from this darkest tourism site. One of the Deputy Directors stated that dark tourism authenticated the Nanjing Massacre through '*a new, open and positive cultural environment for people engaging in a meaningful dialogue*'. Another Deputy Director highlighted tourism's articulation for individual's spiritual satisfaction as

*We cannot simply judge who is right or wrong, but history can ... tourism at least allows everyone to see, to listen, to interact and to discover the truth by themselves.*

Dark tourism in this way reshapes a counter-hegemonic narrative, facilitating tourists' conscious and unconscious self-reflection on 'life stories, intellectual and artistic trajectories' (Boukhris, 2017, p. 689), as well as reframing the current debates regarding Sino-Japan tensions and violence that take place in wider geopolitical contexts. This counter-hegemonic narrative navigates the official and hegemonic memories into an aesthetic commemoration context. Thus, Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall is not an isolated historical phenomenon, or as 'a code to be broken' (Dewsbury et al., 2002, p. 438), but a space for rediscovering and reconciling cultural trauma in the contemporary tourism context. A tourism professor explained why:

*Tourism can enliven the memory of this traumatic event. Without tourism, including Japanese perpetrators' accounts in China's current historical and political narrative is impossible and the Memorial Hall is just a place of storing material evidence.*

Another professor in history emphasized the importance of dark tourism to reach a shared understanding of the Nanjing Massacre:

*Given the highly contested interpretation and representation of death in today's political context, Chinese tourists may face even stronger emotional stress and anxiety. Developing dark tourism is our first step to bring different groups towards a transnational dialogue, although it may include conflicted interests, linguistic barriers and cultural differences.*

The former Hall's Director also confirmed the balance between tourism negotiation and the power of memorial discourse as a necessary response to the geopolitics in global war history:

*Negotiating is not an easy job, but it is necessary to moving forward the transnational dialogues, particularly when there are many critiques on China's state-strengthening and re-birth of Japanese militarism.*

Tourism here plays a critical role in enabling individual reflection on contemporary commemoration. It elucidates upon the ways in which the Memorial Hall becomes a place to redefine new remembrance. Although transnational dialogues, historical interpretations and tourism consumption may be subjective or have bias, they form a collective community as the part of promoting peace and reconciliation. This is in line with Qian and Liu (2019) that peacebuilding is not a single Chinese matter, but should be recognized by a global audience.

Nevertheless, two extension projects on the existing site of mass execution and burial aim to open up the dialogues between the traumatic past and the present touristic consumption. New sculptures and architecture, as a form of counter-monuments, put the Memorial Hall in a dialogic approach to negotiate cultural trauma. The aesthetic and symbolic commemoration, engendered by the introduction of counter-monuments, provide artists with opportunities to deconstruct and reconstruct traumatic experiences for tourists' emotional engagement.

Several curators and interpreters highlighted how the new instalment of a peace park, a peace fountain and the statue of the Goddess of Peace delivered the new initiative of looking forward

to peacebuilding. In particular, the Statue is a Chinese female figure, holding a baby in her left arm and a dove in her right hand (Qian & Liu, 2019). This artwork is used to symbolize a past-future connection, aligned with peacebuilding (Weaver et al., 2018).

According to one curator, the new space for peace creates 'an emotional landscape where people are able to switch to other emotions, other than just being angry or upset'. Visiting the Memorial Hall and confronting death here not only fulfils tourists' curiosity and morality, but also deals with their emotional distress, thereby facilitating healing and resilience (Prayag et al., 2021). Another volunteer interpreter explained how the new peace park helped to transcend a sensitive political use of cultural trauma by creating a relatively comfortable space for different engagement. She stated:

*Other than those pictures and videos delivering very intensive messages, this peace park transforms people's mood immediately, by allowing them to stop, to relax, to feel, to think and even to reflect.*

One professor in engineering and architecture design illustrated how new sculpture groups effectively raised tourists' awareness of this humiliation:

*Instead of promoting commemoration through textbooks only, the sculptures create a different narrative of this traumatic event, consisting of tourists' personal emotions and individual reflection.*

These counter-monuments reframe the Memorial Hall's status as a historical witness, articulating cultural trauma both literally and symbolically, and connecting the past, present and future. Their expressions reach beyond atrocity and invite people to practice their historical empathy (McKernan, 2017). Here, the creative spatial arrangement reduces the psychological and moral barriers but brings the possibility for tourists to access the negotiation of this traumatic past (Chhabra, 2019; Xie & Sun, 2018). The display of contemporary artworks also encourages a reflection on the fragility of humanities, individual resiliency and moral conflicts in contemporary geopolitical context (Stevens et al., 2018). One of the former Directors highlighted how the artists' involvement moved beyond a normative approach to traumatic sites that were often represented with mass skulls or bones:

*We invited Wu Weishan, the Dean of the Art Research Centre of Nanjing University, to design these sculptures. These sculpture collections should be seen at a glance to evoke tourists' emotions layer by layer. A sense of grief thus arises from our inside, an universal humanity as the fundamental principle of being human.*

Active leading roles played by artists in these counter-monument projects challenge a conventional textual-based and politically charged process of heritage encoding (Krzyzanowska, 2016; Osborne, 2017). This transformation, charged with strong personal emotions, continues remembrance of the past to the present. The new interpretational and commemorative practices, harnessed by negotiated encoding, are open for tourists' reading, interpreting and reflecting on the Massacre history and Sino-Japan relations, thereby enhancing tourism's transformative force in developing new narratives of war and peace. This finding confirms McKernan's (2017) view that the visual interpretation system facilitates tourists' preferred and negotiated reading and reflection. Counter-monuments, thus, function as aesthetic interventions, so that artists and tourists could experience more dynamic commemorative practices.

The second extension project adds a new urban function to the Memorial Hall as a public leisure space for Nanjing residents. Although a new exhibition - namely 'Three Victories' is still driven by China's political agendas and nationalistic sentiments (Zhu, 2021), the new memorial space initiatives towards urban life are seen as a conspicuous effort to solidify a sense of 'moving forward to the future'.

The new oval memorial square, including grass, trees and other natural elements, creates a relatively relaxed and leisure space for the public. Its symbolic design attempts to represent a meaning of 'merit'. This meaning is related to sublimating the process of negotiated encoding into a broader social practice of researching war and peace. This can be seen as what Yang (2000) suggests as a

constructive framework, which enhances moral and universal aspects of difficult heritage. One of the architects who designed this memorial square explained:

*The role of architecture is gradually changing in urban development. The centre of the venue is an oval memorial square, symbolising China's victory in the War of Resistance and the vision of 'consummation'. The whole building presents a modest and gentle spatial form, which a green park blends with urban life. (The Architectural Society of China, 2021)*

The new square as a counter-monument represents both material and symbolic commemorations of cultural trauma in urban space (Krzyzanowska, 2016). The multi-modal and dialogic form of commemoration, which was initiated by the architects, allows both tourists and residents to experience emotional processing, rather than being just drawn to and reminded of the haunting memories. An architect stated:

*The new memorial square opens for community use even when the main exhibition rooms are closed. This openness provides more flexibility for remembrance, not just for a certain day, but as a part of everyday life.*

This new space also helps to release the tensions between tourists and residents, especially the latter who want to live a quiet existence without any extra attention (Heidelberg, 2015). By representing this traumatic past through tourism, one architect highlighted the interpretations of a new Memorial Hall associated with Chinese harmonious philosophy:

*The new design represents Chinese philosophical thinking - of being harmonious. It integrates commemoration with everyday life, material with immaterial, and contestation with openness.*

This harmonious principle breaks the spatial limitations and incorporates war perpetrators and contemporary geopolitical relations, thereby leading to a new reflection on the Massacre. The empty spacious square, rather than concrete buildings, facilitates quiet yet powerful remembering of the past and new patterns of expression that allow for more multiple and contextualized commemorations. Here, negotiated cultural trauma shifts the emphasis from the elite-driven nature of collective commemoration to the counter-monumental commemoration characteristic of more open individual reflections.

The new Memorial Hall's design, especially its meaning-making features, reflect the idea of culture and heritage inclusivity and urban integration (Ashworth & Page, 2011). It constructs a new counter-hegemonic narrative that highlights both collective and individual dimensions of massacre as a human tragedy, not just as Chinese suffering and pain. It is also important to explore its wider political, cultural and moral implications in contemporary society. The new Memorial Hall, thus, becomes an effective medium to bridge between the nation's painful past and its future urban tourism uses.

## Conclusion

To recognize the contestations, as well as universal values of (re)interpreting cultural trauma, are both crucial and become even more timely, especially when the diplomatic relations, economic and social dynamics are changing in post-conflicts countries. This study mainly evaluates the negotiation of cultural trauma in the tourism context. It is a response to a call for further evaluation on the conflicting views of cultural trauma often disregarded or excluded in a unified national historical narrative.

While much of extant literature on negotiating difficult heritage focuses on tourists' decoding (Iliev, 2021; Zheng et al., 2020), this study brings attention to the representation of cultural trauma, which is not only embedded with national significance, but also being negotiated through tourism and counter-monuments in urban context. It shifts the focus of interpreting cultural trauma from the historical details towards negotiating relations between historical discourse and heritage experiences in a broader experiential context where tourism plays a key role. This new

perspective enables cultural trauma to be negotiated with other material/immaterial dimensions, political and social structures over time and across space. It is hoped that other scholars and heritage practitioners can rethink the discursive relations between interpretation, reconciliation and co-creation of the meaning of cultural trauma.

The application of Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall illustrates that the contested aspects of cultural trauma can become mediated by both dominant and oppositional interpretations, thereby displaying the different layers of engagement. The findings emphasize the significance of including the perpetrators' accounts through negotiated encoding, along with representing the victims' accounts in the national heritage framework. It is revealed that artists and architects play a critical role in transforming Massacre trauma into commemorative practices. Designing and building new tourism space and artworks as counter-monuments proves to be one significant encoding practice that negotiates more mundane and interactive commemorations. Such negotiation contributes to a more meaningful and holistic understanding of trauma, heritage, memory and identity. The more open and healing centred approach can benefit other heritage site managers to mediate the relationships between national authorities and tourists, collective national discourses and individual reflexive dialogues, and meaning-making processes and meaningful heritage experiences. Future research can examine other heritage encoders' responsibilities and capacities for more interactive communication between different heritage users, as well as developing more heritage products and experiences for recovery and resilience.

This study also paves the way for future research on tourism's moral and social contributions, which can be examined in other urban contexts. As a practice of meaning-making (Soica, 2016), tourism serves as a multi-dimensional agent of interpretations, experiences and engagements for cultural trauma which shifts its focus from difficult national and political contestations towards a resilient healing process. It has a transformative potential to express less politically charged views but leave more inclusive and aesthetic room for varying emotions of different individuals, either tourists or residents. This finding reinforces Park's (2016, p. 21) emphasis on tourism as a 'safe area in which oppositional, flexible and alternative reading of national memory and belonging are facilitated' in post-conflict settings. Dark tourism, in this light, contributes to alleviating the tensions in Sino-Japan relations and facilitating reflexive engagement with the country's difficult past. The value of this study is to provide an alternative interpretive lens of cultural trauma in contemporary dark tourism production and consumption, thereby developing new narratives and approaches. It is hoped that this study can inspire other researchers to explore in more depth tourism's transformative process of remembering, forgetting and healing in varying traumatic sites.

With a specific focus on the roles and perspectives of heritage encoders, this paper does not include the negotiation processes of heritage decoders, such as tourists and residents. In order to enhance the understanding of negotiated encoding of cultural trauma through tourism and counter-monuments, future studies are invited for the evaluation of tourists' decoding and residents' perspectives and experiences on a constructive path to cultural trauma. The critical focus needs to be placed on how both encoding and decoding of cultural trauma can continue the impact on heritage interpretation, trauma negotiation and tourist engagement at difficult heritage sites. Examining residents' perspectives can also help scholars and practitioners to better understand different priorities of heritage interpretation at a local and national level. Finally, given this research was conducted before the pandemic, a comparative study on the negotiation of cultural trauma before and after the pandemic, with greater emphasis on any changes and differences emerged during this difficult time, can yield insightful results for future tourism policy-making and heritage management strategies.

## **Disclosure statement**

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