




# Cultural Memory and Symbol Construction: A Study on the Decoding of 'Dead to Right' by Young Audience

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**Abstract.** Based on Jan Assman's cultural memory theory as the core framework, combined with Hall's coding / decoding theory, this paper explores how the film 'Dead to Right' constructs the cultural memory of the Nanjing Massacre through symbolic narrative and ritualized communication in the 'post-memory' era, and how young audiences decode and identify with this memory construction. The study found that the film successfully constructed a "cohesive structure" through the creative and ritualized communication strategy of core symbols such as "photo studio" and "photo"; the decoding of the young audience presents a pluralistic situation of dominant, consultative and confrontational coexistence. By creating a dual narrative framework of 'civilian perspective' and 'historical witness', the film effectively realizes the intergenerational transmission of historical memory and the strengthening of national identity, which provides a useful reference for the new mainstream cultural film.

**Keywords:** cultural memory, symbol construction, youth audience, 'Dead to Right', decoding, Nanjing Massacre

## 1 Introduction

In the "post-memory era" (Hirsch, 2008), as firsthand witnesses fade, historical understanding becomes increasingly mediated. Film, as a powerful modern medium, plays a crucial role in transmitting historical memory. Jan Assmann emphasizes that collective memory depends not only on inherited consciousness but also on external storage systems—oral, textual, visual, and cinematic—to counter forgetting.<sup>[1]</sup>

While international research on WWII cultural memory is extensive, domestic studies rarely combine war film analysis with memory theory, especially as mainstream patriotic films struggle to engage young audiences. The 2025 film \*Dead to Right\*, however, offers a valuable case. Set during the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, it follows citizens protecting photographic evidence of atrocities. With a box office over 3 billion yuan, a Douban score of 8.8, and 65.7% of viewers aged 25–39, it presents a paradigm for cultural memory transmission and youth reception in post-memory times.

This study employs text analysis, in-depth interviews, and comparative research. The text analysis examines \*Dead to Right\*'s symbolic systems, narrative structure, and perspective, exploring how its "small-scale" storytelling personalizes grand history. In-

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depth interviews were conducted with 10 viewers aged 18–30, selected via stratified sampling, focusing on viewing motives, symbolic interpretation, and emotional response. A comparative analysis with the 2011 film *The Flowers of the War* highlights differences in narrative angle, symbolism, and memory construction, contextualizing *Dead to Right*'s innovative approach and its reception among youth.

## 2 Literature Review

Jan Assmann's cultural memory theory provides the basis for this study. He divided collective memory into 'communicative memory' and 'cultural memory'. The former relies on the oral experience of the living person, which is fluid and transient. As Jan Assmann pointed out, its core carrier is the contemporaries, usually only maintain about 80-100 years, with the death of the witnesses and die;<sup>[1]</sup> Cultural memory aims to break through the time limit of communicative memory and achieve cross-generational transmission. It fixes and rehearses key information about the past through external and institutionalized media forms such as text, images, and rituals. Cultural memory focuses on the 'absolute past', and its function is to 'stabilize the self-image of the society from the time level', and strengthen the cohesion and identity of the group.<sup>[1]</sup> The transition from communicative memory to cultural memory is a conscious and institutional process of cultural construction. The core operation mechanism is to establish a "cohesive structure" -that is, to enable the past to be vividly recalled in the present, and to establish a meaning structure that links the past with the present.<sup>[1]</sup> The cohesive structure reorganizes and solidifies social knowledge through selective narrative and symbolic systems, and refines the complex past into a standardized and emotionally appealing overall image to serve the current identity needs. The coexistence of memory and forgetting constantly reconstructs its own identity boundary.

The Nanjing Massacre is at a key point in the transformation from communicative memory to cultural memory. The creation and dissemination of *Dead to Right* is essentially a practice of transforming history from relying on communicative memory to cultural memory. The concept of "cohesive structure" helps to understand how the film transforms historical memory into a cultural memory that can be perceived and resonated by young audiences through symbol construction and civilian perspectives such as "photos" "cameras" and "photo studios." As Liu Xueting (2025) points out, this narrative transforms history into a memory carrier that can be perceived by the public through the construction of the 'field of memory'.<sup>[2]</sup> In the construction of cultural memory, memory and forgetting are always accompanied. In terms of national development, it is an important way to strengthen collective memory to continuously construct new identity through 'repetition' and 'selective memory'. By focusing on the stories of ordinary people and selectively diluting the bloody scenes, the film reflects the normative and stereotyped power of national discourse on memory, aiming to construct a new way of memory in line with the present.

In addition, Stuart Hall's coding / decoding theory provides a theoretical basis for analyzing the audience's differential interpretation of media content. According to Hall,

the production of media content is a ' coding ' process permeated with ideological factors ; the audience 's interpretation of the content is a ' decoding ' process, which is influenced by the social environment and cultural background. There may be three positions of dominance, negotiation and confrontation in decoding. The dominant decoding means that the audience fully accepts and understands the intention of the coder, and even guides their own life practice according to the ideological factors, so as to achieve the best communication effect considered by the coder. <sup>[2]</sup> Negotiated decoding, that is, the audience has a certain resistance while identifying the status of the coder, showing a contradictory decoding process. <sup>[2]</sup> Adversarial decoding, the audience 's ' complete resistance to the dominant hegemony ' <sup>[3]</sup> status, do not accept the views and intentions of the encoder.

The semiotic theory provides a tool for analyzing the content of the film. The film 's creative team has constructed a " cohesive structure " about history through selected symbols and narrative strategies such as " camera " and " photo studio " to encode specific historical memory and national identity. However, if only focusing on symbol shaping and emotional cohesion at the collective level, it may simplify the complex symbiotic relationship between individual experience and collective identity, which is mutually constructed, transformed and interdependent, rather than the existence of binary opposition. <sup>[4]</sup> Therefore, when analyzing the acceptance of this film, we should take into account the film 's shaping of collective memory and the differentiated decoding of young audiences based on their own understanding and individual experience.

### **3 Visual Symbols Construct A ' Cohesive Structure '**

In the film, the ' photo studio ', as the core symbol, plays the function of memory space. The photo studio is not only the main place for the story, but also the ' memory museum ' in the war. This space records the important moments of life such as the birth, graduation and marriage of citizens, and also witnesses the development process of the city. During the Japanese occupation, it became an isolated island in the war. Photos and films together constitute the memory plate of Nanjing City, telling the prosperity and vitality of Nanjing before the war. This setting makes the photo studio beyond the simple physical space and become the carrier of memory and spirit.

The ' photos' and ' negatives ' constitute another set of core symbols, which bear the function of historical witness. In the film, the film recording the Japanese atrocities is not only a key prop, but also a core element to promote the plot and reveal the truth. The image in the film has a dual role : it can be used by the Japanese army for aggression propaganda, and it can also become a weapon for the Chinese people to resist aggression. The duality of this application reveals the paradox of the media. As a media tool, the instrumentality of photography itself is not good or evil, and its use is determined by the power structure. <sup>[5]</sup> That is, the essence of media power - the image itself is neutral, and its value orientation depends on the user 's position and purpose.

These symbols in the physical sense construct the audience 's memory and emotional anchors. At the same time, the film sublimates the construction of memory at the cultural and spiritual levels through the core metaphor of ' development ' : development

reflects the glimmer of human nature and the indomitable soul in the desperate situation, and transforms the painful memory into an unfading brand in the national blood. This multi-level symbol design makes the film's memory construction have a rich interpretation space.

For a clearer understanding of the symbolic differences between this film and other mainstream war films, Table 1 compares the symbol selection of *Dead to Right* and *The Flowers of the War*.

**Table 1.** Comparison of symbol selection between ' *Dead to Right* ' and ' *The Folwers of War* '

Type of symbol	<i>Dead to Right</i>	<i>The Folwers of War</i>	Reflected ideological changes
Space symbol	Photo Gallery ( citizen living space )	Church ( West-ern space )	Rely on the Western perspective to the local perspective
Character symbols	Photographers, postmen, actors and other ordinary citizens	Prostitutes, students, missionaries	Special groups turn to ordinary people
Props symbol	Photography, camera, negatives	Colored glass, piano, church	Religious symbols turn to technical symbols
Visual symbols	Black and white photos, red light development	Colored glass, cheongsam	Aestheticism turns to realism

Compared to *\*The Flowers of the War\**, which employs dramatic and highly symbolic imagery—such as the female body and church spaces—to condense historical tragedy into intense, emotionally charged scenes, *\*Dead to Right\** adopts a more subdued, everyday symbolism. It utilizes ordinary objects like the photo studio and camera to convey a restrained yet resilient sense of strength. This approach invites personalized emotional engagement, emphasizing that ordinary individuals can embody heroism in times of crisis, as illustrated by characters such as Su Liuchang pleading for a passport to save others or the photo studio owner's quiet resistance.

The construction of cultural memory inherently involves selective narration, where what is omitted is as significant as what is portrayed. *\*Dead to Right\** consciously avoids explicit depictions of violence, opting instead for implication and restraint—exemplified in scenes such as Feng Hua's psychological breakdown upon repeating "Welcome." This indirect representation reflects a contemporary historical confidence, shifting from graphic accusation toward a more dignified remembrance of national trauma.

Moreover, the film adopts a civilian perspective rather than a heroic one, focusing on the choices of ordinary figures like postal workers, actors, and shopkeepers. Their flaws and vulnerabilities render them relatable, allowing audiences to engage with history on an emotional level and fostering both affective resonance and deeper historical reflection. This narrative shift facilitates a transition from emotional identification to rational understanding, enriching the viewer's connection to the past.

## 4 Community Reconstruction of Ritualized Communication and Memory

Assmann asserts that cultural memory persists through 'text' and 'ritual.' Ritual, as a symbolic and performative practice, structures social action<sup>[6]</sup>, reinforces beliefs, and maintains order. Ritual communication focuses less on transmitting information and more on constructing shared meaning and identity.<sup>[7]</sup>

This is demonstrated in *Dead to Right's* reception. Its premieres, collective viewings, and social media challenges act as ritual communication. Organized screenings create synchronous, empathetic experiences that solidify collective identity and historical memory, sometimes culminating in acts like singing the national anthem.

Social media challenges are participatory digital rituals. They turn viewers into active creators, sparking cross-platform discussions and content. Young users' posts about building a future from memory reflect a successful ritual transfer: history is not just learned but enacted. Each contribution declares cultural belonging, forming a visible 'memory community.' Thus, cultural memory completes a key shift—from a spectacle *watched* to a practice *lived*.

As reflected in James Carey's view of communication rituals, the core of communication is to build a stable meaning order through the sharing of cultural symbols, and ultimately achieve social solidarity and the temporal maintenance of the community.<sup>[8]</sup> Through ritualized activities, the film transforms history from cold facts into memory that can be participated in. The audience strengthens their connection with each other and their sense of belonging to the community in the shared emotional experience.

## 5 Decoding Type and Identity Formation of Young Audience

To explore the decoding types of young audiences, this study conducted in-depth interviews with 10 young viewers aged 18-38. The basic information of the interviewees is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Interviewer coding.

No.	Gender	Age	Subject background
01	Male	20	Science
02	Female	27	Science
03	Female	19	Arts
04	Male	21	Science
05	Male	28	Other
06	Male	29	Science
07	Female	37	Science
08	Female	23	Business
09	Male	25	Arts
10	Female	32	Arts

The decoding of "Dead to Right" by young audiences is not homogeneous, but presents a pluralistic coexistence trend, reflecting Hall's three decoding positions. Through in-depth interviews with 10 young viewers, the study identified three main types of decoding:

( 1 ) Dominant decoding : emotional resonance and identity internalization

Five interviewees showed a dominant decoding tendency. They basically accepted the ideology encoded by the film and showed a high degree of recognition for the historical memory and national identity conveyed by the film. Interviewee 02 said : ' I think every Chinese should go to see this kind of film. Now many children lack this kind of education, but this kind of film gives us the opportunity to know more about this history. We are not qualified to forget and forgive for our ancestors. Such audiences usually have a high interest in history, and have a strong emotional resonance during the viewing process, and even have a strong emotional response. For them, the film successfully transforms the grand history into concrete life experience, and strengthens the existing national identity and national identity.

Even if it is dominant decoding, young audiences will also value the humanized narrative and restrained expression of the film. Interviewee 01 mentioned : ' Compared with some previous Anti-Japanese War films, ' Dead to Right ' did not deliberately provoke or exaggerate violence, but made me think more deeply about the destruction of human nature by war. This shows that the younger generation is not rejecting the main melody content, but has higher requirements for the transformation of narrative methods, and is more inclined to accept works that respect the audience 's IQ and present historical complexity.

( 2 ) Deliberative Decoding : Selective Identification and Critical Thinking

Approximately one-third of the respondents present a negotiated decoding, agreeing with some content while expressing reservations or critical interpretation. Interviewee 03 not only affirms the film's narrative innovation but also points out its limitations: "The civilian perspective of the film is very new, but I think some places are still conservative, and the real history may be more cruel." Such audiences usually distinguish the film's artistic expression from historical authenticity, affirming the former and holding a more cautious attitude towards the latter.

Some negotiated decoders clearly recognize the film's ideological coding and selective narrative. Interviewee 04 said: "I understand why the film dilutes bloody scenes and emphasizes human struggle and glory as a need for memory politics. But understanding the whole picture of history requires acknowledging its darkest parts too." Such audiences accept the film's basic narrative framework, yet recognize its memory screening and forgetting strategies, maintaining a more complex understanding of history.

( 3 ) Adversarial decoding : ideological questioning and emotional alienation

An adversarial decoding tendency, they are skeptical or critical of the ideology of the film encoding. One interviewee thought that the avoidance of bloody scenes of violence led to a cliff-like decline in the film 's persuasiveness, while the narrative was superficial and overemphasized the role of ' international public opinion '. To some extent, he thought it was historical nihilism. Some adversarial decoders question the emotional effect of the film, believing that too much emphasis on sadness may lead to

xenophobia. They believe that it is necessary to remember history, but it should not be exported in large quantities through sensational expression. This is not really 'powerful'. Such audiences usually have a strong sense of distrust of the official narrative, tend to interpret the political intentions of the film from a critical position, or have confrontation and resistance to the narrative style of the film.

## 6 Summary

Through text analysis, in-depth interviews, and comparative research, this study explores how *Dead to Right* functions as cultural memory and how young audiences interpret it. Findings show that the film constructs a cohesive narrative of the Nanjing Massacre through symbolic and narrative innovation, enabling the contemporary transformation of historical memory. Young viewers' decoding practices reveal a diversity of responses, reflecting the generation's complex and critical engagement with historical memory.

Furthermore, the film offers significant insights for mainstream historical cinema. Its success demonstrates that human-centered narratives and restrained expression can facilitate meaningful dialogue with young audiences. The ritualized communication surrounding the film highlights that memory construction must extend beyond textual representation to incorporate collective participation and interactive practice. The varied decoding also confirms that contemporary youth are not passive recipients, but active, critical meaning-makers. Effective memory construction must therefore respect audiences' interpretative agency.

This study is limited by its sample size and lack of cross-cultural comparison. Future research could expand the scope of participants and incorporate cross-border or digital-media perspectives to further examine how historical memory is communicated and reshaped in new media contexts.

In summary, *Dead to Right* achieves the intergenerational transmission of historical memory through symbolic narrative and ritualized communication. The contemporary construction of historical memory is an interactive process of encoding and decoding, requiring the collaboration of creators, communicators, and audiences. Only by respecting historical truth, understanding audience psychology, and balancing artistic expression with social responsibility can historical memory take root and endure among the young.

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