

Sound Texture and Sound Network: The Audio Memory of China's Anti-Japanese War Films (1979–2025)

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Abstract

The year 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of China's victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan and also the 120th anniversary of the birth of Chinese cinema. As an artistic medium that integrates audio and visual elements, film serves not only as a vivid reflection of history but also as a crucial vessel for preserving memories of wartime trauma. However, the cinematic "soundscapes" —a key component of historical memory related to the war—have long been overlooked by researchers. By reviewing the development of sound representation in Chinese anti-Japanese war films since the reform and opening-up era, analyzing the underlying logic between cinematic sound and wartime memory as well as ideology, and summarizing the evolutionary patterns of sound narration across different historical periods, we can provide a historical reference framework for the modernization transformation of contemporary Chinese cinema and ensure that the collective echoes of the Chinese people's shared experiences during the war are not drowned out by the tide of forgetting.

Keywords

Anti-Japanese War films; auditory evidence memory; sound landscape; post-memory.

1. Introduction

The year 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of China's victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan and the 120th anniversary of the birth of Chinese cinema. As an artistic medium that integrates audio and visual elements, film serves not only as a vivid mirror of history but also as a crucial vessel for preserving memories of wartime trauma. However, the cinematic "soundscapes" —a key component of historical memory related to the war—have long been overlooked by researchers. By reviewing the development of sound representation in Chinese anti-Japanese war films since the reform and opening-up era, analyzing the profound connections between cinematic sound, wartime memory, and ideology, and summarizing the evolutionary patterns of sound narration across different historical periods, we can provide a historical framework for the modernization of contemporary Chinese cinema and ensure that the collective echoes of the Chinese people's shared experiences during the war are not drowned out by the tide of forgetting.

2. Sound Texture Thawing: The Embodied of Voice Cracks and Memory (1979–2000)

Reform and opening-up not only completely transformed the face of China but also brought a fresh breeze to the film industry. In 1979, at the Fourth National Conference of Literary and Art Circles, Comrade Deng Xiaoping stated that "the Party's leadership over literary and artistic work is not about issuing orders or demanding that literature and art subordinate themselves to temporary, specific, or direct political figures. Instead, it is based on the characteristics and development laws of literature and art, aiming to help artists create the conditions for

continuously thriving the literary and artistic cause, enhancing its standards, and producing outstanding literary and artistic works as well as performance achievements worthy of our great people and great era." The increasingly favorable environment for literary and artistic work enabled film directors to break free from the constraints of the "three prominences" principle—no longer creating stereotypical characters with "high, complete, and idealized" traits—but instead focusing more on the individual images of anti-Japanese soldiers to highlight their revolutionary spirit and inner world.

2.1. The Medium of Sound: The Emergence of Individual Sound Texture and the Reclusive Dwelling in the National Domestic Soundscape.

Between the 1980s and 1990s, China produced nearly fifty anti-Japanese war films. In terms of aesthetic form, filmmakers of this period tended to shift the focus of the war from the foreground to the background, directing the camera toward the inner psychology and unique emotions of the characters. On the other hand, after the 1980s, China's film sound technology gradually aligned with international standards, enabling films to evoke immersive experiences through auditory elements. Under the combined influence of these two factors, the sonic narrative in anti-Japanese war films began to transcend the vertical ideological boundaries of soundscapes. For example, in Li Jun's 1979 film **Anxious to Return**, the Northeastern folk song "Yan Nan Fei" appears four times throughout the film; each recurrence carries greater weight as a representation of protagonist Wei Desheng's memories of his prosperous life. After four repetitions, audiences no longer need to simply categorize musical cues as plot-related or non-plot-related. Instead, these musical cues can interconnect in countless ways, creating diverse sensory blocks of memory and free emotion. When "Yan Nan Fei" plays for the final time at the end of the film, the pure emotional surge resulting from this repetitive structure transforms Shan Xiurong's melodious voice from a tool for revolutionary mobilization into a tangible vehicle for the emotions during Wei Desheng's farewell to Yuzhen. Another audio experiment is seen in Luo Guanqun's 1987 film **Massacre in Nanjing**. During the Japanese army's inhumane massacre, the director silenced all sounds, leaving only the faint click of the camera shutter audible to the audience. In this profound silence, the audience's auditory perception is fully engaged as they strive to discern any recognizable sound cues. Consequently, the tragedy of the Holocaust is captured through each frame, evoking a sense of terror akin to a bullet piercing the body. Yet the director does not stop there: after a prolonged pause, the film cuts to infant cries and blood scattered across the floor. Silence itself is terrifying; what breaks it is even more unsettling. The sudden eruption of cinematic imagery following extended silence intensifies this anxiety, transforming the tension between sound and silence into direct sensory stimulation. The audience's bodies unconsciously merge with the brutal historical trauma depicted on screen, ultimately imprinting the pain of memory onto their tangible physical experience.

Following China's reform and opening-up policy, the country embraced a wealth of innovative foreign film content and production techniques, significantly broadening domestic filmmakers' perspectives and fostering innovation in cinematic expression. The Fifth Generation directors further pioneered "imagery aesthetics" in wartime films, employing "anti-traditional" filming methods to create groundbreaking approaches for war-themed works. Wu Ziniu's **The Evening Bell** (1988) stands as a prime example: the director deliberately eschewed conventional war films' gunfight scenes, instead utilizing non-narrative sounds—wind, water droplets, bell tones, and metal friction—to depict the underlying psychological tension between Chinese and Japanese forces. French writer Charlotte Delbo observed that her traumatic experiences at Auschwitz concentration camp were "encased beneath a membrane of memory that separates them from the present self," highlighting the fundamental paradox of traumatic memories—their inability to be forgotten or freely recalled like ordinary memories. In **The Evening Bell**,

when an Eighth Route Army unit approaches a Japanese underground ammunition depot, the camera focuses on distorted Japanese figures within a dim tunnel, accompanied by nearly 20 seconds of continuous water droplet sounds and white noise. Unlike conventional sound effects that can be easily categorized, this noise exists outside narrative logic, mirroring Delbo's concept of the "memorial membrane" that abruptly intrudes into the audience's sensory experience. These unpredictable, fleeting sounds mirror authentic war memories—unattainable through precise mental capture, yet capable of instantly evoking profound awareness of painful pasts through intense sensory impact in similar contexts.

2.2. The Body as an Acoustic Container: Multisensory Encoding of Individual Memory

By the 1990s, rapid advancements in film technology and increasingly diverse audience preferences had transformed cinematic experience. In January 1993, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television issued the "Several Opinions on Deepening Mechanism Reform in the Film Industry," urging studios to embrace market competition. This market-driven reform fostered a diversified landscape that expanded the boundaries of 1990s sound experiments—originally limited to single-auditory modes—into innovative approaches utilizing cross-sensory synesthesia for memory expression. Films from various genres—including mainstream productions such as **The Meridian of War** (1990), **Nanjing 1937** (1995), **The Lu Gou Qiao Incident** (1995), **Blood over Tai Hang** (1996), and **The National Anthem** (1999); commercial films like **Steel Meets Fire** (1991), **Bloodshed on the Jialing River** (1992), **SanMao's Army Life** (1992), **Stepping into Glory** (1994), **Behind Enemy Lines** (1995), **Great Victory** (1995), and **The Legend of the Yellow River** (1999); and art films such as **Devils on the Doorstep** (2000)—all exemplified the seamless integration of sound with sensory perception.

The French philosopher Henri Bergson articulated in his work **Matter and Memory** that sensory experience is not merely a passive reception of external stimuli but also involves interaction with memory. This perspective was further developed by Laura U. Marks, a philosophy professor at Simon Fraser University, who argued that visual images evoke "embodied," unconscious memories. It is evident that both Bergson and Marks emphasized that the "imagery" within the memory field does not arise solely from retinal projections but rather constitutes a synthesis of bodily perception and cultural experience shaped by multisensory interactions. In **The Legend of the Yellow River** (1999), the flashback sequence triggered by auditory priming depicting Japanese soldiers' massacre of a village serves as a classic example of cross-sensory narration in wartime cinema. Through sustained musical accompaniment, this flashback becomes a momentary pause, a prolonged state that facilitates a continuous examination of Japanese atrocities. Moreover, the interplay of auditory, visual, and olfactory senses ensures that wherever the protagonist's gaze reaches, there is tangible evidence of Japanese invaders' acts of burning, killing, and looting—the pain of Chinese civilians being stabbed with bayonets, and the lingering odor in the air after their deaths—all persist as physical sensations. This integration of individual sensory modalities is both concrete and far from simplistic one-to-one correspondences; various senses form a permeable membrane that overlaps and merges, blurring the originally subtle boundaries between the body and its internal or external environment. They are less containers and more channels for transmitting and bridging memories.

2.3. Using Sound as a Bridge: The Cross-Cultural Transmission of War Memories

War memory should not be defined as a cultural product unique to any single nation-state; rather, it must be understood as a cross-cultural phenomenon among multiple countries affected by fascism. In her essay "Memories of Travel," German writer Astrid Erll examines

Johann Herder's concept of "container culture," which posits that cultures exist as distinct entities always maintaining differences from one another. Erll argues that this traditional monolithic cultural theory significantly hinders cross-cultural studies of memory. Indeed, Herder's theory of container culture obscures the fluidity of memory beyond the presupposed framework of nation-states: when we treat memory as exclusive to fixed groups, its inherent complexity and permeability become difficult to fully comprehend. Moreover, the role of social formations outside nation-states in shaping cultural memory has grown increasingly prominent—world religions, global diaspora communities, European left-wing movements, as well as football, musical cultures, and consumer culture all contribute to transnational networks of memory.

In 1972, China and Japan signed the Joint Statement between the Governments of the People's Republic of China and the Government of Japan, marking the normalization of bilateral relations. The Sino-Japanese Friendship Treaty came into effect on August 12, 1978, fostering not only economic cooperation but also cultural exchange in film arts. Notable collaborative productions include **Teru Hasegawa in Youth** (1980), **The Jade Butterfly** (1980), **The Unfinished Chess Game** (1982), **The General and the Orphans** (1984), and **Bell of Purity Temple** (1991). Among these, **The Unfinished Chess Game**, directed by Duan Jishun and Sato Junmi, stands out as the most influential work. Through the cultural medium of Go, the directors sought to portray the trauma inflicted by war on both nations while highlighting humanity's yearning for peace. Before its Japanese release, hundreds of audience members queued in the rain outside Tokyo's Hibiya Cinema to purchase tickets for the screening the next noon, demonstrating the film's immense impact. Although marketed as a work on Sino-Japanese friendship, the directors skillfully employed music as a fluid medium to embed wartime trauma into collective consciousness across cultural contexts. When Eiko Shiratori's rendition of "Dream of Love" ("Hug me tightly—love is like a dream") echoed amidst the Great Wall and green fields at the film's conclusion, it transcended mere war storytelling, using emotional contrasts of joy and sorrow to underscore the brutality of conflict. The persistent chorus melody goes: So please don't worry about me; before your tears run dry, don't say another word. Let us embrace each other tightly. So before parting, don't utter a single word more. Let me enjoy the final warmth in your arms, as if sowing seeds of traumatic memories within the audience's consciousness. This narrative strategy enables Japan's younger generation to comprehend the psychological trauma of war victims solely through auditory synesthesia, even without a full understanding of the war history. The fact that Japanese audiences still vividly recall "the melody echoing across the green land" thirty years later sufficiently demonstrates that war memory shaped by sound transcends national and cultural stereotypes.

3. The Soundnet Experiment: The Digitization of War Echoes and the "Post-Memory" Theater (2001–2025)

The digital transformation of film and television art has propelled the sonic landscape of China's Anti-Japanese War films, evolving into a revolution transcending time and space within the dual dimensions of technological innovation and shifts in memory forms. The digitization of cinematic soundscapes is reshaping the paradigm of war memory through two approaches: first, by employing acoustic simulation techniques to dissolve perceptual boundaries between screen and reality, immersing viewers in an experience of "presence" within memory; second, leveraging the plasticity of digital media to weave fragmented individual memories into a "post-memory" theater. Furthermore, the digitalized soundscapes with composite modalities facilitate a shift in Anti-Japanese War films from Plato's notion of "visual-spiritual centrism" toward auditory narrative paradigms, while also signifying a transition of collective memory from archival "monuments" to dynamically generated "ecosystems."

3.1. The hyper-realistic simulation and memory collapse in War Sound Network

Since the beginning of the 21st century, both film production technology and the forms of human memory have undergone varying degrees of transformation. On one hand, the "digital rhetoric" of visual and auditory elements has evolved from all-around surround sound (ADSS) to Dolby Atmos, and from digital cinema systems (DTS) to stereo variable area (SVA). These rapid innovations and iterations in production techniques collectively point to a central question: how acoustic engineering can further break down the barrier between the screen and the audience. In 1987, China's "Science and Technology Committee for Radio, Film, and Television" issued several recommendations on the development of film technology, including the proposal that 35-mm optical stereophonic films should adopt the internationally widely used Dolby 4-2-4 stereo format. In 2002, the Recording Department of the Film Production Base under China Film Group introduced the world's most advanced large-scale digital film mixing consoles and digital recording equipment, achieving fully digital stereo sound production for films. Compared to early films, "digital soundscapes present the entire narrative material to a greater extent as an inseparable, completely decentralized, and highly immersive 'real' continuum of surround sound effects centered around the audience," truly embedding viewers within the sound of the cinematic world. Digital technology has created an aesthetic similarity between screen space and physical space; what audiences hear in theaters is no longer sound accompanying the visuals but a continuous, diffuse sound field.

On the other hand, modern society is experiencing a fundamental rupture in the nature of memory; as a historical entity, memory has lost its authenticity and integrity. French philosopher Pierre Nora described traditional societal memory as a spontaneous, continuous, and unconscious collective practice rooted in daily rituals, customs, and intergenerational transmission—a vast, warm family that silently maintains a symbiotic relationship with the past through language, behavior, and tradition. However, the "acceleration of history" in modern society has destroyed this memory's "real environment," replacing it with reliance on archives and monuments. In this context, digital soundscapes emerge as a medium to bridge the isolation of memory, leveraging technological means to reconstruct its background: subtle ambient sounds, unspoken spatial reverberations, and even silent breaths are transformed into auditory cues that fill gaps in memory and serve as new "shells" for historical recollection.

Taking Zhang Yimou's post-2000 war-themed films as an example, the 2009 release **The Flowers of War** employed Dolby 7.1 surround sound technology to create precise spatial audio effects that conveyed the characters' psychological states amidst the brutal conflict. This audio system significantly expanded cinematic possibilities: during scenes where two female students and John take shelter under a boiler, audience members could distinctly hear the echoes from bullet impacts causing vibrations, along with subtle breathing sounds. While dialogue drives narrative progression, the sound design vividly portrayed characters' inner fears in tangible terms. Viewers immersed in this environment were enveloped by the immersive authenticity of the surround sound, experiencing the characters' mental states through its auditory "illusion." Film sound engineer Tao Jing emphasized that sound design should not only recreate wartime realism but also evoke memories of everyday life. He illustrated this concept with the "bullets in fog" effect: "When scorching bullets penetrate damp mist, the sound should resemble the 'whoosh' of molten metal meeting water—a fragile yet directional auditory phenomenon" This hyper-realistic auditory experience temporarily awakened collective memory potential suppressed by archival records, reintegrating isolated individuals into a coherent "memory continuum." The 2021 film **Cliff Walkers** also employed Dolby 7.1 audio technology, with 90% of its sound effects created through post-production processing. The sounds of ropes tightening around the necks and each snowfall are vividly reproduced, immersing viewers in a three-dimensional "image-sound" space and allowing

them to engage with the historical narrative as if present on-site. Thus, audio technology enables the presentation of subtle cinematic elements; by capturing, refining, enhancing, and expressing a "reality" that transcends everyday perceptual limits, the visual representation achieves a more realistic and dynamic effect.

Before the digital age, memory was statically preserved in physical archives within specific locations, governed by principles of selectivity, organization, and spatial anchoring. Digital memory, however, fundamentally dismantles space's role in rigidly shaping memory through its "placelessness." "The logic of online archives is fluid and universal, perpetually in a state of generation" —in other words, digital archives constitute "dynamic life systems that are continuously transformed and updated" French philosopher Bernard Stiegler expanded Husserl's concept of temporal perception of music by introducing the notion of "third memory." He argued that in the digital era, any medium capable of storing memory can become an object transmitted across generations, individuals, or cultures. Distinct from the first memory (instant recall of current experiences) triggered by primary retention, and the second memory (retrieval of vanished yet memorable temporal events) arising from secondary retention, Stiegler defined third memory as a technological entity or digital system. Thus, third memory can be encoded on material carriers; the objectivity of matter ensures its durability surpasses that of conscious memories or personal experiences. Moreover, this materialized form of third memory belongs to the public domain, enabling its sharing and interaction with others. Between 2000 and 2015, China produced nearly 120 films about the War of Resistance Against Japan. Taking the ten highest-grossing films as examples, each was released with digital versions of its theme songs and insert tracks simultaneously available online. Audiences could not only rewatch the films but also revisit the "war melodies" etched in their minds anytime, anywhere. Additionally, viewers-listeners could share their reflections and memories of the film's audio with others—a process that essentially represents continuous memory "generation." The unique cross-temporal and spatial overlay capability of digital music platforms stems from the disregard for temporal and spatial boundaries inherent in digital media. Through users' real-time interactions such as tapping, saving, and sharing audio tracks, this platform continuously stimulates creative proliferation of memories, thereby reprogramming individual perceptions into a fluid network of collective memory within virtual space.

3.2. The Resonance of War and the "Post-Memory" Theater

War films since the new century have been driven not only by advancements in digital technology but also intertwined with the theme of intergenerational memory transmission. In terms of temporal scope, the War of Resistance Against Japan has now spanned eight decades. The war memories ingrained in our ancestors' minds can no longer be transmitted to younger generations in a clearly defined form. Within the media-driven mechanisms for memory reconstruction, cinematic sound—transformed through digital encoding and dissemination technologies—has evolved into a cross-generational memory medium that transcends visual language and possesses autonomous narrative capacity. As Dutch historian Carolyn J. Birdsall elucidated when examining the concept of "earwitnessing": "It must be clarified that, compared to visual memory, sound (as echo) often exhibits an indexical rather than an iconic relationship with memory." Sound is not confined to fixed linear narratives or imagery; instead, it serves to evoke specific emotions. These auditory echoes can be consciously used to recall past events or, more inadvertently—even unconsciously—revive contexts and sentiments associated with particular historical periods.

"The revival of classic songs" stands as a primary means of evoking memories, transforming audiences of the "Sun Dynasty" from mere inheritors of cultural heritage into active architects of cultural memory in the digital age. According to incomplete statistics, nearly seventy anti-

Japanese war films were produced in China between 2016 and 2025. Analysis reveals that five out of the top ten highest-grossing anti-Japanese war films utilized original songs from the war period or earlier wartime productions as theme songs or end credits tracks. In contrast, only one film among the top ten box office hits from 2000 to 2015 employed this approach.

British scholar Simon Reynolds, analyzing contemporary nostalgic practices in audio culture, noted that the first decade of the 21st century could be termed a "re-decade," characterized by cultural revitalization, re-release, remakes, re-enactments, and cyclical reuse. "We have become victims of our increasingly enhanced capacity to store, organize, instantly access, and share vast amounts of cultural data. Never before has a society been so obsessed with cultural products from a bygone era, nor has any society had such effortless and extensive access to historical artifacts." However, when anti-Japanese war films employ traditional music as triggers for collective memory, they transcend being mere symbols of nostalgia. Through streaming platforms and digital restoration technologies, the emotions evoked by these long-forgotten melodies are being passed on to younger audiences via repeated listening and retelling by older generations. Meanwhile, Sun Dai reinterprets these same melodies, reconnecting historical memories with contemporary cultural contexts.

The term "post-memory" was introduced as an academic concept by Marianne Hirsch, a literature professor at Columbia University in the United States, in 1992[8]. She used it to describe the phenomenon of remembering the experiences of our ancestors or parents. Hirsch wrote: "Post-memory describes the relationship between 'descendants' and the personal, collective, and cultural traumas of their predecessors—traumas that can only be 'recalled' through stories, images, and behaviors encountered during upbringing. Yet these experiences are conveyed so profoundly and effectively that they become part of their own memory." Today, ancestral memories have been replaced and amplified by media representations, which continuously reshape historical visual materials to create symbolic audiovisual expressions. French film historian Silvie Lindeperg termed this cross-temporal intertextual dialogue—where films both reference original materials and develop new interpretive dimensions through artistic processing—as "echo-cinema." This theoretical framework is closely linked to the unique role of auditory elements in memory transmission; through repeated reinforcement by media, era-specific sound symbols have gradually replaced authentic historical contexts, becoming emerging memory coordinates within the collective subconscious.

Among the anti-Japanese war films centered on railway themes, "Play My Beloved Earth Pipa" has been performed repeatedly. After the Japanese army occupied China's Shandong Province in 1938, they systematically plundered local coal resources and utilized the railway transportation network to transport supplies back to their homeland. In response to this aggression, anti-Japanese armed forces composed of railway workers and miners waged guerrilla warfare along the waters of Weishan Lake and along railway lines. The song "Play My Beloved Earth Pipa," created based on these events, integrates Yimeng Mountain folk tunes with the distinctive sound of a three-stringed instrument reminiscent of traditional storytellers, deeply embedding the revolutionary narrative within local culture. The composer Lü Qiming stated: "During the Anti-Japanese War and the Liberation War, I encountered many guerrilla fighters who were ordinary civilians. In my view, it was only natural for them to sing songs with strong local characteristics while playing the earth pipa." Thus, "Play My Beloved Earth Pipa" has become an important medium for reviving memories of the war and fostering national resistance consciousness. In 2016, both the insert song and the ending theme song in **The Railway Tigers** adopted this piece; the director adapted the original melody with a modern pop-rock rhythm, creating an intertextual connection between the revolutionary anthem and the film's humorous narrative. Similarly, in 2021, under Yang Feng's direction, the original version of the song was adapted into a more lyrical rendition, sung during the ensemble scene of guerrillas at the film **Railway Heroes** conclusion, with lyrics adding, "A song / so long /

passed through generations' hearts / in echoes / gazing afar / at heroic sons." This transformed the song from a distant era into a tangible ritual of memory transmission. These adaptation strategies not only achieve a harmonious blend of classic melodies with contemporary aesthetics, but also create a "memory trigger" through audiovisual montage. It can be said that the cinematic resonance of **Play My Beloved Earth Pipa** transcends mere artistic recreation, weaving in the digital age a network of "post-memory" that connects the spirit of the War of Resistance against Japan with today's youth, enabling heroic narratives to achieve cross-century expression through sound.

4. Conclusion

By 2025, China's anti-Japanese war films had traversed nearly a century of history. Throughout this cinematic journey spanning centuries, the sonic landscape has consistently served as both a medium of memory and a witness to history. In the future, the sound narration in anti-Japanese war films must continue to strike a balance between technological innovation and humanistic care, rooted in local cultural heritage while enhancing the locality and emotional resonance of sound; through cross-cultural collaboration, international dissemination channels can be further broadened. With the deep integration of cutting-edge technologies such as AI audio technology and spatial audio, sound creation has gained greater capability to meticulously recreate historical scenes, yet faces the risk of excessive technologization eroding humanistic warmth. Creators urgently need to adopt a strategy centered on "technology as the tool and emotion as the core" to rebuild the mutual resonance between cinematic sound and audiences. Only then can China's anti-Japanese war films better stand out in global cultural competition and become another powerful instrument for preserving national memory.

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