

Simulacra and Media Genealogy: Notes on **MAST** *T01_[01.1a-37.1c]-T04_[01.1-80.1]*

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In the 2010s, China's television programs became obsessed with World War II-themed anti-Japanese TV drama series (*kangri ju*), a sub-genre depicting Chinese resistance against Japanese invasion from the 1930s to the mid-1940s, known as the Second Sino-Japanese War or the Anti-Japanese War (*kangri zhanzheng*). This phenomenon has garnered considerable attention from both popular media and scholarly research. Some media reports have highlighted several key factors for the popularity of these Anti-Japanese TV series in China, including the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, and the patriotic anti-Japan campaign led by the Chinese government (Murong and Cunningham). Some scholarly research suggests that this type of TV series is a significant form of "cultural governance" and has analyzed the dynamic relationship between government manipulation, market demand, and popular imagination (Song). Building on World War II-themed anti-Japanese TV series, I produced a body of work titled *T01_[01.1a-37.1c]-T04_[01.1-80.1]*¹, which is in the form of an archive comprising videos, photographic reproductions, scrapbooks, and objects. This archive aims to locate, produce, preserve, and analyze a period of history constructed by countless photographic images.

¹ <https://www.t01-t04.org>.

This essay examines *Type I_37 Photographs of Zhou Weiguo from 1932 to 1945* and *Type II_Research of 17 Remains of Xiaowangzhuang Battle from T01_[01.1a-37.1c]-T04_[01.1-80.1]* through the perspectives of simulacra and media genealogy, respectively. *Type I* is a series of photographic images manipulated physically and discursively, such as folding, wrapping, scratching, and dyeing photographs, and juxtaposing them with appropriated materials from archives throughout their production and display. Revealing multiple layers of adaptation and imagination during the production of anti-Japanese TV series like the making of *Type I*, I argue that this kind of TV series is a hyperreality, a reality without origin or reality (Simulacra and Simulation 1). The focus of my work is ultimately beyond a TV screen: the constant interplay between consumerism, entertainment, nationalism, governance, and propaganda that constructs an understanding of symbols, signs, society, reality, and history to form a national identity. *Type II* reproduces and displays scenes of archaeological excavations at the beginning of an anti-Japanese TV series. Reviewing the development from media archaeology to media genealogy and engaging with thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and media archaeologists like Erkki Huhtamo, *Type II* offers a genealogical perspective on anti-Japanese cultural works. It traces their evolution from street theater (jietou ju), a type of dramatic performance in public venues to rally support for the war of resistance in the 1930s, to contemporary memes and cybernationalism, illustrating that anti-Japanese TV series are always in a dialogue with our past and future media experiences.

Simulacra

Type I_37 Photographs of Zhou Weiguo from 1932 to 1945 follows the life journey of Zhou Weiguo, the protagonist of an anti-Japanese TV series titled *Snow Leopard* (xuebao). The series first aired in 2011 and was remade in 2014 due to its popularity. It narrates the story of a college



Fig 1. Installation view of T01_[01.1a-37.1c]-T04_[01.1-80.1].

student from a wealthy family named Zhou Weiguo, who is determined to join the army to defend his country after witnessing the atrocities of the Imperial Japanese Army. All 37 photographs of Zhou were made directly from screenshots, approximately one photo for each episode, and printed on various types of inkjet paper: glossy, semi-glossy, matte, etc. These photos were then physically manipulated through folding, wrapping, scratching, and dyeing with coffee and soy sauce to make them look old. Instead of displaying the original prints, all 37 photos were re-photographed with color control patches in a standard archival preservation approach. Each photo includes an information sheet that records the "metadata," including title, author, date, dimension, keyword, copyright status, and a paragraph of description, which is a direct transcript from the synopsis. Each photo is accompanied by a laboratory report, directly inspired by and appropriated from the Image Permanence Institute's Graphics Atlas, "a sophisticated resource that presents a unique, object-based approach for the identification and characterization of prints and photographs" (Image Permanence Institute). Each laboratory report includes two material qualities of the photo that indicate the conditions and contexts in which it

once existed, such as "layer structure," "obscured paper fibers," "silver mirroring," "tideline staining," and "resinous accretions," among others. Finally, *Type I* is housed in an imaginative institution called the Photograph Permanence Laboratory.

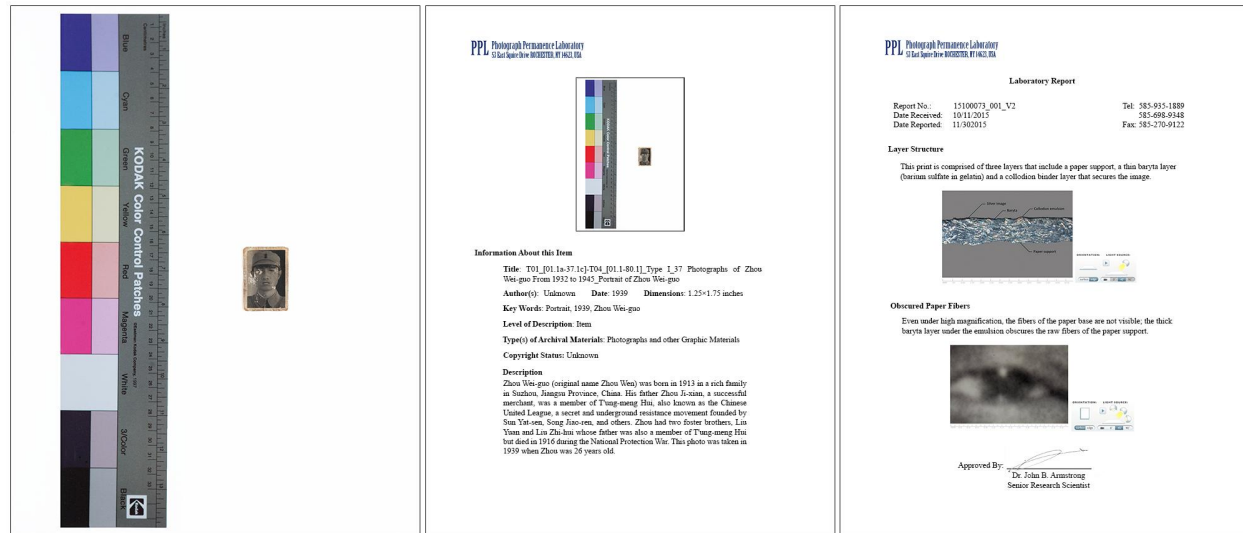


Fig 2. *Type I_37 Photographs of Zhou Weiguo from 1932 to 1945_Portrait of Zhou Weiguo.*

In the triptych display of *Type I*, without access to the original prints, audiences have no choice but to rely on the information sheets and laboratory reports to interpret the re-photographed photos with color control patches. This display, once installed in Beijing, nearly led a historian of modern Chinese photography to request access to the photos and archives of the imaginative Photograph Permanence Laboratory for his research project. An experienced photo historian believes in the authenticity of this triptych display because the technical aspects of mechanical reproduction, as indicated by the laboratory reports for each photograph, generate fundamental discussions about photographic images: originality, archiving, objectivity, documentary value, and indexing.

However, with the increasingly ubiquitous nature of image production and distribution, Baudrillard contends that mass media transforms the lived, unique, eventual character of the world into a system of signs that simulates reality (*The Consumer Society* 123, 126). The process of producing *Type I*—including taking screenshots, physically manipulating the images, abandoning the original inkjet prints, re-photographing with color control patches, and juxtaposing these with information sheets and laboratory reports—resonates with Rosalind Krauss’s engagement with Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra. Krauss argues that “the burgeoning of the copy not only facilitated the quotation of the original but splintered the supposed unity of the original ‘itself’ into nothing but a series of quotations” (290). What *Type I*, and the entire *T01_[01.1a-37.1c]-T04_[01.1-80.1]* project produce, preserve, and analyze are not the representations of history, but history itself.

Believing that “Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra,” Baudrillard reveals that “Disneyland exists to hide that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America that is Disneyland” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 12). In 2023, Diane Severin Nguyen created a film work titled *In Her Time*, and later, a re-edited version titled *In Her Time (Iris’s Version)* at the Hengdian World Studios in Zhejiang Province, China. Hengdian, hosting one of the largest film studios in the world with vast architectural replica sets spanning 5,000 years, is also a popular destination for tourists interested in theme parks and the entertainment industry, akin to Disneyland. *In Her Time* follows the journey of a young actress named Iris in Hengdian as she rehearses for her debut leading role in a war film depicting the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, a brutal assault on Chinese civilians by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II. The work, which employs ethnofiction—a style that fuses fiction and reality—features montages of rehearsal scenes, role-playing, and monologues in public transportation and Iris’s apartment,

interviews with Iris, her smartphone video footage, and metaphorical images of violence such as a rifle poking through soap bubbles. Nguyen deliberately maintains ambiguity in the narrative, stating that the film questions the possibility for an individual “to find agency or authenticity within a predetermined script” (Whitney Museum of American Art). Throughout *In Her Time*, the actress struggles to connect the profound trauma of modern Chinese history—which she did not personally experience—with cultural products like films and books, as well as other forms of trauma she faced in her life as a nameless actress and migrant worker in the systems of patriarchy and capitalism, all of which become part of the history during the reenactment.



Fig 3. Diane Severin Nguyen, *In Her Time (Iris's Version)* installation at Whitney Museum of American Art, photo by the author.

Snow Leopard, the series featuring Zhou Weiguo in *Type I*, was also one of many anti-Japanese TV series filmed in Hengdian, where one billion Japanese soldiers could be hypothetically killed during TV productions in a year (Lv). *Snow Leopard* does not claim its historical origin by stating that it is based on true historical events, nor does it assert its fictional nature. The series is adapted from a novel first published in Iron Blood Military (tiexue junshi), an online forum for military enthusiasts, written by a user named Amateur Sniper (yeyu jujishou), who is an orthopedic surgeon in the real world. The author once stated in an interview that the novel was a mix of stories involving real historical figures and his imagination (xiandai kuaibao). With multiple layers of adaptation and imagination, this kind of anti-Japanese TV series represents a hyperreality, a reality without origin or reality (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). Therefore, the criticism of these anti-Japanese TV series that attributes them to the increasing tension between China and Japan and Beijing's strategy of stirring up nationalism for domestic political purposes (China's TV War Machine) is only partially true. As Baudrillard suggests, the criticism of Disneyland could be an "ideological blank" that conceals the fact that the real is no longer real (*Simulacra and Simulation* 12). Arguing that the television audience is never a homogeneous mass but comprises a wide variety of groups, John Fiske notes that "these groups actively read television to produce meanings that connect with their social experience" (84). Studying the audiences of anti-Japanese series in China, Song Geng contends that "the characterization of Japanese officers and soldiers relies on stereotypes that have become deeply rooted in the Chinese collective memory and imagination for generations, gained from watching films and TV rather than from actual experience" (10). Ultimately, what *Type I* and the entire *T01_[01.1a-37.1c]-T04_[01.1-80.1]* project point to are a constant interplay outside a TV screen,

between consumerism, entertainment, nationalism, governance, and propaganda that constructs an understanding of symbols, signs, society, reality, and history to form a national identity.



Fig 4. Installation view of Type I_37 Photographs of Zhou Weiguo from 1932 to 1945.

Media Genealogy

Type II_Research of 17 Remains of Xiaowangzhuang Battle is a reproduction and display of the archaeological scene in *Forever Designation* (yongbu momie de fanhao) with newspaper clippings of the excavation, 17 pieces of unearthed relics, and a group of photos that record the excavation of these relics, along with a map that depicts the geographic locations of the battle and excavation. *Forever Designation* is an anti-Japanese TV series that aired in China in 2011. In the opening scene of the first episode, an elevated panoramic view depicts an archaeological excavation site. The voiceover narrates that a large number of skeletons and remains from the

anti-Japanese War were excavated at a construction site in the western suburbs of the city, and the government has suspended the construction for excavation works while looking for survivors of the war to identify the skeletons. In the image, various remains, including skeletons, bayonets, and military field rations, among others, are excavated, and an elderly man approaches the scene, picks up a comb that triggers his memory, kneels, and starts to cry. Then, the episode flashes back to wartime to start the main story of the series. This scene of archaeology at the beginning of the series is not necessary because the series can still narrate its story completely without it. However, the actual presence of this scene triggered me to further examine its implications that resulted in the works of *Type II*.

Everything in *Type II* is fabricated: relics are bought from eBay, newspaper clippings are made of screenshots and transcripts of the voiceover, and the map is appropriated from another archaeological report. However, this work is not an antiquarian effort solely interested in the originality of artifacts. Instead, its juxtaposition of images, texts, and objects speculates a genealogical perspective on anti-Japanese cultural works. In the first English-edited volume devoted to media archaeology, Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka point out that “Michel Foucault’s writings have been an important formative experience for many media archaeologists” (2). According to the authors, Foucault is one of the most prominent forerunners of “media-archaeological modes of cultural analysis” (6). Studying Foucault’s methodological influence, Parikka also writes that “archaeology here means digging into the background reasons why a certain object, statement, discourse, or media apparatus or use habit is able to be born and sustain itself in a cultural situation” (6). Colin Koopman elaborates that Foucault expanded his methodology from archaeology to genealogy in the 1970s to “incorporate power into his analysis as a separate element not identical to knowledge, but rather in constant interaction with it” (349).

Examining Baudrillard's response to Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, an extension of the genealogical approach of *Discipline and Punish* to the topic of sexuality, Rex Butler posits that "Baudrillard both 'genealogises' and makes impossible genealogy. He shows at once what makes this 'genealogical' unwinding possible and its limits" (102). Reviewing the development of Foucauldian archaeology, genealogy and media archaeology, Friedrich Kittler's discourse network of technical media, Wolfgang Ernst's investigation of archives and library science, Siegfried Zielinski's archaeology as (an)archaeology, as well as their interviews with six scholars of media genealogical work, Alexander Monea and Jeremy Packer advocate a genealogical approach to media. According to Huhtamo, television becomes part of media culture when it "gets transfigured by the people who use it" (Ganahl 5) as it can be surrounded by various discourses, audiences, advertising, celebrities, etc. (6). A genealogical perspective can reveal how anti-Japanese and nationalistic cultural works have emerged and endured over time with various forms of practices throughout the history of modern China. Since the invasion of the Japanese in Manchuria in 1931, street theater, a kind of dramatic performance in public venues to rally support for the war of resistance, was one of the many new cultural practices that flourished and popularized during the Anti-Japanese War (Tang). In a recent study of Chinese left-wing poetry in the 1930s, Kang Ling examines poetry reading activities in public spaces as acoustic and technical phenomena to argue the relationship between body, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist resistances, and socialist revolution. In the post-war era, several popular anti-Japanese films were produced in the 1950s and 1960s, including *Landmine Warfare* (dilei zhan), *Tunnel Warfare* (didao zhan), and others. At that time, film teams took projectors to villages to screen these movies in outdoor spaces (Murong). These films focused on "socialist virtues of collectivism, populism, gender equality, self-reliance, and guerrilla strategies" as memories of

the war “remain vivid and important in the legitimization of the Chinese Communist state” (Ching 43).



Fig 5. Cui Wei and Zhang Ruifang performing *Put Down Your Whip* (fangxia nide bianzi), the most popular street theater play in the 1930s.

However, after the postsocialist reform in 1978, the focus of anti-Japanese cultural works shifted to nationalism to consolidate state power amid massive economic reforms and public discontent with inequities caused by the postsocialist market economy and globalization (Ching 45, 46). With the penetration of the Internet and social media since the late 1990s, nationalism began to blend with kuso, memes, parodies, and other cultural forms, fueled by the interplay between entertainment and consumerism with information communication technology. In late 2003, an advertisement for Toyota Prado was published in a Chinese auto magazine, featuring a

stone lion saluting and another lion kneeling down to the vehicle. The stone lion is a unique symbol of Chinese culture. In Lao She's 1946 novel *Four Generations under One Roof* (sishi tongtang), which is a novel about the Anti-Japanese War written during the war and one of the most important works in Chinese modern literature, an old man insists that the Japanese invaded China because they wanted to steal the stone lions engraved on the Marco Polo Bridge in Beijing. Thus, this ad soon sparked nationalistic pushback, and Toyota was demanded to apologize (Li). During the process, a meme went viral online featuring two lions, with one lion's claw stepping on a small Toyota Prado, and the slogan "Prado must be taken down" (baodao budebu naxia). Most recently, the fandom subculture, particularly related to Korean and Japanese celebrity culture, continually impacts nationalistic cultural works in China, treating nation-states as idols and disputes between states as fandom rivalries, exemplified in the wake of cybernationalist incidents such as the D8 Expedition (diba chuzheng) against the independence of Taiwan (Wang, Li, and Wu; Liao, Koo, and Rojas).



Fig 6. An Internet meme features two lions with a claw of one lion stepping on a small Toyota Prado and the slogan "Prado must be taken down."



Fig 7. Internet meme of D8 Expedition, cybernationalist attack on the independence of Taiwan.

In the opening scene of *Forever Designation*, with imagery and voiceover, material evidence of the war is being excavated, and a witness, survivor, and narrator also appears. It seems the series has the authority to tell a story of the Anti-Japanese War. However, the strategy of reproduction and display in *Type II* challenges this authority by demonstrating how everything could prove, interpret, and disavow each other. This approach questions the authority of telling a story of the Anti-Japanese War and speculates a genealogical perspective to uncover that anti-Japanese TV series are always in dialogue with our past and future media experiences, from street theater and public readings of left-wing poems to memes and cybernationalism.



Fig 8. Type II_ Research of 17 Remains of Xiaowangzhuang Battle.

Coda

As one of China's most significant media phenomena in the 2010s, the anti-Japanese TV series reflects the intertwined forces of the global entertainment industry and the country's government-controlled propaganda. My project *T01 [01.1a-37.1c]-T04 [01.1-80.1]*, originating from anti-Japanese TV series, locates, produces, preserves, and analyzes a period of history constructed by countless photographic images. Through the lenses of simulacra and media genealogy on *Type I_37 Photographs of Zhou Weiguo from 1932 to 1945* and *Type II_ Research of 17 Remains of Xiaowangzhuang Battle*, this essay argues that the anti-Japanese TV series is a hyperreality, a reality without origin or reality, and is always in dialogue with our past and future

media experiences. In this respect, as media serves as the transmitting mold of knowledge and power, *T01 [01.1a-37.1c]-T04 [01.1-80.1]* ultimately questions all forms of histories embodied by various media, including television, street theater, poetry, novel, film, and meme.

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