The Past is Not Dead

On Ken Liu's 'The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary'

Berny Tan

Originally written for a class on Transcultural Memory, taught by Professor Astrid Schmetterling, as part of the MA in Contemporary Art Theory at Goldsmiths, University of London.

I. BATHING IN TIME AS WELL AS LIGHT

The concept of a black hole, an astronomical object so massive and dense that even light cannot escape it, has existed for centuries. It was proposed by an English philosopher and clergyman, John Michell, in 1784, predicted by Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity in 1915, and named 'black hole' only as recently as the 1960s. It has long been thought impossible to capture an image of a black hole, which is by definition unseeable. What we have created in its stead, both in scientific research and popular culture, are detailed, often mesmerising illustrations. That is, until April 10, 2019, when the first ever image of a black hole was unveiled to the world. In comparison to those illustrated representations, this blurry image – a dark core at the centre of a warm orange halo – might seem visually unremarkable. But it is only this image, among all representations of black holes, that within itself so drastically collapses time as it is still commonly understood: as this linear flow in one direction from past to present to future, sectioned into clearly defined constructs of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years – each coming one after the other.

Scientists captured the data for the image of the black hole in April 2017. This black hole is at the centre of the Messier 87 galaxy, fifty-five million light years from Earth. The image is the visualisation of information that took fifty-five million years to travel at the speed of light to our planet, which means it is what that tiny corner of our universe looked like fifty-five million years ago *there, in relation to our time* – not 'April 2017', and yet as it could only possibly be seen in April 2017 on Earth. We are seeing something humans only first theorised a few hundred years ago, which is the yawning length of a few human lifetimes, and simultaneously an inconsequential blip in the grander scheme of things – considering black holes have existed for at least the thirteen billion years of our observable universe. We are seeing the product of a network of eight radio telescopes, collectively known as the Event Horizon Telescope, positioned across four continents, synchronised with atomic clocks precise to a trillionth of a second, capturing radio waves over a period of ten days. The reason why we are only seeing this in April 2019 and not in April 2017 is that the amount of data took two years to be gathered and processed – in fact, our current digital systems are unable to transfer files that big, and they had to be transported in physical hard drives.[1] But it is also these digital systems that gave millions of people the opportunity to see the image via the internet, on their computers and their smartphones, on the same day, in all the time zones of the world. Such is the multitude of temporal registers contained within this single image.

---

[1] Brian Resnick, "This is the first-ever picture of a black hole," *Vox*, last modified April 10, 2019, https://www.vox.com/2019/4/10/18302343/first-picture-black-hole-eht-photo-event-horizon.

And so it is true: "Every night, when you stand outside and gaze upon the stars, you are bathing in time as well as light." (113) You are receiving the light that has travelled from distant astronomical objects to Earth. That is how Ken Liu's 2011 novella, 'The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary', begins. It tells the story of a Chinese American historian, Dr Evan Wei, and a Japanese American physicist, Dr Akemi Kirino, a husband-wife team who use a form of time travel, called the Kirino Process, to expose the horrific war crimes committed during World War II by Unit 731 of the Imperial Japanese Army. This biological and chemical warfare research and development unit covertly undertook lethal human experimentation, within a sprawling complex located in the Pingfang district of Harbin in northeast China (then part of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo). As Dr Kirino explains in the opening pages, the Kirino Process is based on her discovery of the Bohm-Kirino particles, pairs of subatomic particles bound by quantum entanglement: "One member of the pair shoots away from the Earth, riding the photon that gave it birth and traveling at the speed of light. The other remains behind, oscillating in the vicinity of its creation." (115) By measuring one, you measure its twin, and in doing so, "it is as though we have found a way to place a telescope as far away from the Earth, and as far back in time, as we like." (116) But the measurement can only be taken once. The Kirino Process allows only a single person to travel into the past, to collect and consume the information contained in those twinned particles. They cannot interact or interfere. Afterwards, that section of the past becomes inaccessible. A new witness can be created, but their testimony cannot be corroborated.

Though 'The Man Who Ended History' is a piece of speculative fiction, its time travel technology is built on broad scientific principles similar to those which made the image of the black hole possible.[2] They both involve capturing information – once thought unseeable, or unmeasurable – that has travelled at the speed of light from their origin, contained in Bohm-Kirino particles in the story, and in radiation (on a wavelength invisible to the human eye) in the case of the Event Horizon Telescope. In both cases, this information can only be retrieved from the past; the Kirino Process does not allow one to travel freely to the future. He thus uses the literary device of time travel – in a form scientifically recognisable to us – not to create a wholly alternate reality, but to make our reality, and our recent past, more acute. Much of the story focuses on the geopolitical fallout resulting from Dr Wei and Dr Kirino's methodologies, mirroring and magnifying the chillingly familiar ways in which memory, history, and historiography have played out – and will continue to play out – in response to the traumas of our world. Richard Terdiman defined memory as "the past made present"; Michael Rothberg

[2] Even quantum entanglement is not Liu's invention; it has been experimentally confirmed, though not entirely understood. Laura Dattaro, "The quest to test quantum entanglement," *Symmetry*, last modified November 6, 2018, https://www.symmetrymagazine.org/article/the-quest-to-test-quantum-entanglement.

elaborates on this, saying that it suggests memory is firstly "a contemporary phenomenon, something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present", and secondly "a form of work, working through, labor, or action".[3] Liu's time travel is an artifice of memory that, in creating new vessels in the present for a lived experience of the past, sharpens the same mechanisms already embedded within memory; the story he has constructed, which weaves through multiple perspectives on this historical trauma, is akin to "working through" (even if this process leads to more questions than answers).

Humans have constructed the linearity of time, and upon that construction, built our day-to-day lives, our societies and economies – our histories. We see the past as that which has passed into the before. We think that it is by putting the past *behind* us that we continue to exist *in* the present, move *forward* into the future. (Being *behind* also implies being unseen, unacknowledged, buried.) 'The Man Who Ended History', even in its relative brevity, is a rich and complex narrative that asks: what do we do, what is the 'right thing to do', when we are startlingly reminded of the fragility of this construct – when we are forced to confront the fact that the past is still with us, both *cannot* and *should not* be *behind* us? How can we make the things we presumed unseeable, seeable? In bathing ourselves in time, and all the cruelty and injustice it contains, how do we also bathe ourselves in a different kind of light – something approaching truth and redemption?

II. A TRUTH GREATER THAN ANY FICTION

The two-part title of Liu's novella begins with a declaration so hyperbolic – 'The Man Who Ended History' – that to take it as a statement of sincerity is also to reveal its overt fiction (how could history end, how could one man be responsible for this?). Yet the second part of the title – 'A Documentary' – is a deliberate reference to a nonfictional medium that examines and records some aspect of reality. This juxtaposition is immediately reaffirmed by Liu's narrative structure: the entire story is written as a transcript of a documentary film. This is hinted at on the first page, in which text formatted in italics and within square brackets describes the movements of a camera. Then, the documentary itself (titled, of course, *The Man Who Ended History*) is directly announced with the inclusion of its opening credits. When dissected, these credits reflect yet again the collision of allegorical and factual. The documentary is stated to be a collaboration between "Remembrance Films HK Ltd." and

---

[3] Michael Rothberg, "Introduction: Theorizing Multidirectional Memory in a Transnational Age," in *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3-4.

"Yurushi Studios" – *yurushi* (許し) is Japanese for forgiveness – and is a "Heraclitus Twice Production" – Heraclitus was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher to whom the statement "No man steps in the same river twice" is attributed.[4] This symbolism is followed by a statement indicating the political climate within which the story is set: "This film has been banned by the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China and is released under strong protest from the government of Japan." (115) This sets up the expectation, even before the introduction of the specific history of Unit 731, that the narrative will examine a contested history related to World War II, given the extant tensions between Japan and China regarding the events of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–1945). The rest of the story is then structured into successive scenes labelled with underlined subheadings denoting the character and context of each scene. The reader is subtly informed that the story is set in an indeterminate near future within the twenty-first century: at any point where a date is stated, it is accompanied by a year identified only as "20XX". It is close enough to our own time for us to believe that the story proposes a possible future reality; perhaps it is a cautionary tale.

It is within such a narrative structure, where fact and fiction are repeatedly overlapping, that we encounter the brutal realities of Unit 731. In the third scene, archival news footage introduces Unit 731 to provide context for Dr Wei and Dr Kirino's time travel project. The transcript describes the complex in Pingfang as the "Asian Auschwitz", where "Japanese army doctors directly killed thousands of Chinese and Allied prisoners through medical and weapons experiments, vivisections, amputations, and other systematic methods of torture. At the end of the War, the retreating Japanese army killed all remaining prisoners and burned the complex to the ground […] There were no survivors."[5] (117) Liu references real events and historical figures to contextualise Unit 731 to align his fictional universe with the reader's reality: for example, by stating how "General MacArthur, supreme commander of the Allied forces, granted all members of Unit 731 immunity from war crimes prosecution in order to get the data from their experiments and to keep the data away from the Soviet Union." (117) Furthermore, in the appended author's notes, Liu dedicates this story to the victims and meticulously lists his sources. Against this backdrop, the technological novelty of time travel does not dominate the narrative, but is instead used as mechanism to experience memories that, though constructed by Liu, nonetheless reiterate real, documented atrocities committed

---

[4] This brief reference is ambiguous, but Liu could perhaps be saying that time travel, or any return to history (e.g. through memory), is a return to the same river, its same pain and trauma. Heraclitus is also often characterised as "the weeping philosopher", which could perhaps suggest grief or melancholia.

[5] At least 3,000 men, women, and children are estimated to have died at Pingfang. The types of warfare developed by Unit 731 were also tested in field trials in Chinese cities that killed at least 10,000 people. Tsuneishi Keiichi, "Unit 731 and the Japanese Imperial Army's Biological Warfare Program," trans. John Junkerman, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 3, no. 11 (November 2005), https://apjjf.org/-Tsuneishi-Keiichi/2194/article.html.

by Unit 731. At the core of the story is the testimony of Lillian C. Chang-Wyeth, the niece of one of the victims, and one of only two characters to describe their time travel experience. Her heartbreaking descriptions of the experiments she witnessed are alternated with an interview with Shiro Yamagata, a former member of Unit 731, whose honest and in parts nauseating first-hand accounts verify Lillian's recollections. By pivoting between victim (by proxy) and perpetrator, two witness perspectives from seemingly opposing sides of that history become mutually reinforcing. 'The Man Who Ended History' is, if not a 'true' documentary, then at very least a surrogate for one.

In studying the dynamics of cultural memory, Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, through the work of David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, have discussed the complexity of "remediation", in which various forms of media have "continually been 'commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other'". There exists a "double logic of remediation": a desire for "immediacy, of offering 'an experience of the real'", as well as "an act of hypermediacy that, by multiplying media, potentially reminds the viewer of the presence of a medium and thus generates an 'experience of the medium'" rather than of the past.[6] In 'The Man Who Ended History', historical trauma is remediated through not just through the fictional novella, but also the documentary film, and all the types of media which documentary films in turn remediate. Yet, the "experience of the medium" enhances rather than neutralises the "experience of the real". Consider the relationship between Liu's universe and our own reality as a form of stereoscopy. In this technique, two images of the same scene, just slightly offset from each other, are presented separately to the left and the right eye. The brain then combines the images to give the viewer the perception of three-dimensional depth. Liu's medium-within-a-medium appears to seamlessly and disconcertingly integrate with and remediate our own reality. Fiction and reality come together as a pair of offset images that, combined in the mind of the reader, engender a clarity and depth about a history that might otherwise be in danger of being relegated to just one inconsequential episode in all the barbarism that marks human history, or even World War II alone. Beyond producing dimensionality in the reader's knowledge, this medium-within-a-medium becomes an immersion-within-an-immersion – we are steeped in the full weight of his words as well as the implied temporal and audiovisual experience of a documentary film. The story becomes a more dynamic, affective *fictional* space to feel horror, empathy, outrage, confusion, helplessness, conviction – *about a real history*. Liu does not succumb to the "double logic of remediation";

---

[6] Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, "Introduction: Cultural Memory and its Dynamics," in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 3-4.

instead, he allows hypermediacy and immediacy to enter into a generative symbiotic relationship. The multiplied medium fortifies and illuminates the otherwise silent real.

Towards the end, Liu includes a segment featuring a character called Ienaga Ito, a Professor of Oriental History from Kyoto University. Ito describes personal eyewitness accounts as vehicles of "a truth greater than any fiction", which are also vulnerable to accusations of "factual deviation and inconsistency" and inscribed as "*mere* fiction". "[Narrative] is irreducibly subjective," Ito says, "though that does not mean that they do not also convey the truth." (155) One could use these very words to refer to the novella itself, which is simultaneously upfront about its "factual deviation" – it involves time travel after all – and asserts its representation of the "truth" of Unit 731, in all its subjectivities, with disturbingly believable political consequences. Underpinning this unabashed artifice is an awareness that the story is but a vessel; it is the fiction that elevates its truths, and makes them "greater than".

III. TRUTH IS DELICATE, AND IT HAS MANY ENEMIES

A documentary film draws from a variety of sources and perspectives to create a fuller picture of its subject. It can function as a standalone archive, bringing together diverse materials within one framework of experience. Disparate elements can be interwoven to resist a straightforward, linear narrative, and to better elucidate different sides in points of conflict without necessarily having to provide a satisfying resolution where one does not exist. Eleonora Fabião writes, "There is no such thing as a full and homogeneous subject interacting with a full and homogeneous archive and reflecting a full and homogeneous reality."[7] In borrowing the documentary form, 'The Man Who Ended History' imagines and unfolds a heterogeneous archive, comprised of forty scenes that range in form from recollections by Dr Kirino, to interviews with academics, to man-on-the-street segments, to appropriated media footage. In fact, only a quarter of these scenes involve a direct description of Unit 731 experiments; the rest demonstrate how the surfacing of this historical trauma intersects with, and has ramifications for, the personal, political, historiographical. The following diagram (figure 1) illustrates this multiplicity, classified into seven categories. Liu has choreographed an elaborate dance using different sources that traverses the spectrum of personal to impersonal (depicted by the blue line), and which unravels a variety of attitudes toward the Kirino Process (depicted by the symbols + for positive, – for negative, ± for ambivalent, and ∅ for apathetic).

[7] Eleonora Fabião, "History and Precariousness: In Search of a Performative Historiography," in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, eds. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol: intellect, 2012), 131.

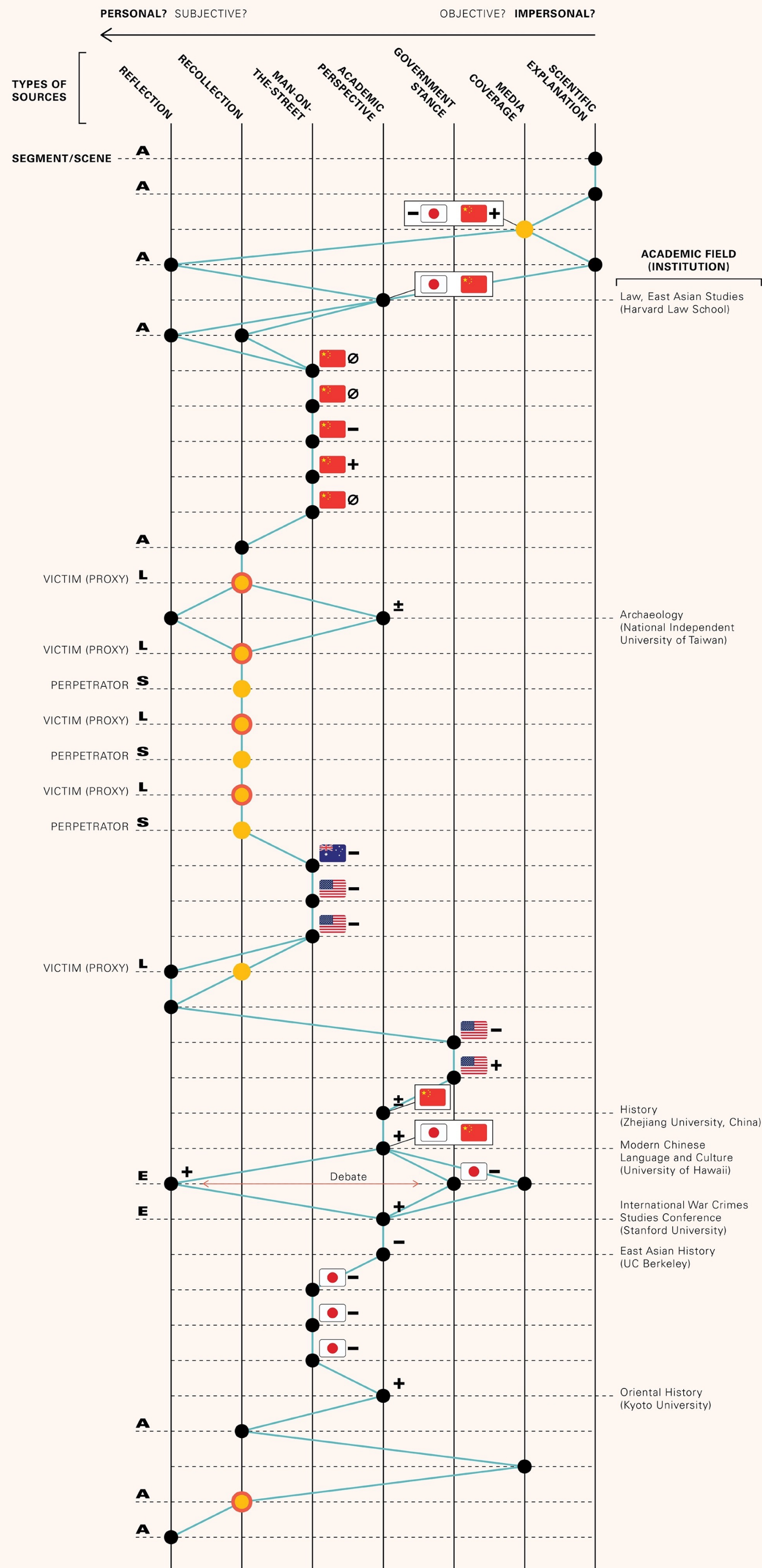

Fig. 1 Diagram interpreting the structure of 'The Man Who Ended History', emphasising the interweaving multiplicity of perspectives and sources in the novella.

Every time the reader thinks they are in agreement with one position, the next segment might destabilise their point-of-view.

An important thread of the narrative is the various government responses to Dr Wei and Dr Kirino's project. Although the documentary itself contains no direct iteration of the official positions of the governments of Japan and China, their stances are indirectly represented through other sources – often as described by various academics, who can then unearth deeper motivations that these governments might omit or obscure. For example, in the fifth scene, Archibald Ezary, a professor of law and East Asian studies at Harvard, asks a key question: "as control over a territory shifts between sovereigns over time, which sovereign should have jurisdiction over that territory's past?" (120) Japan both claims the history of Unit 731 'belongs' to them, since the complex was in an area considered Japanese territory during the Second Sino-Japanese War, yet tries to shift the responsibility for these war crimes to its predecessor government. China, on its part, was not even governed by the Chinese Communist Party as it is today (and within the timeline of the story), but by the Kuomintang who eventually fled to Taiwan. Later, it is revealed – by a Chinese historian, Li Ruming – that despite support from the Chinese government, who wanted to "promote Western understanding of China's historical disputes with Japan" (145), Dr Wei attempts to keep his project independent of government interference to preserve its credibility. The Chinese government rescinds its support because Dr Wei refused to allow them to monitor his work; eventually, they shut down his project entirely. (145) Following this scene, Bill Pacer, a professor of modern Chinese language and culture, discusses how in the decades just following World War II, the People's Republic of China attempted to use and then repress memories of the war in its quest to "build a Socialist utopia". (147) Liu's narrative reflects not only that the political entities are mutable and cannot merely be defined by their present geographical and legislative boundaries, but also that these political entities might choose to have control over the historical narrative at the expense of the disclosure of truths, even in situations where the truth might be potentially beneficial to them.

Fabião describes the ontology of a fragment within an archive: "a fragment does not evoke a supposed whole of which it was originally a part, but rather, it generates in and by itself successive provisory wholes."[8] Liu's narrative structure allows the fragments of these other histories to emerge; other "wholes" and their associated dynamics, such as the political developments in post-World War II China, interact with the deceptively singular history of Unit 731. Yet, though this inextricable entanglement feels deliberately unstable *as a reading experience*, one also gets the sense that the very complexities that Liu's fragments describe

---

[8] Ibid.

inadvertently trap the truth in a state of paralysis *within the narrative*. When the reader discovers that a Comprehensive Time Travel Moratorium has banned the use of the technology, one feels that this has effectively suffocated the possibilities of reliving histories and generating new witnesses. But Liu does not let us forget that the desire to repress and silence historical traumas originates not just from governments, but from laypersons as well. He represents this in the form of three sets of unnerving man-on-the-street segments, featuring people from China, then Western countries (Australia and the US), then Japan. In the first set, the dominant theme is apathy or resignation ("What is the point of digging up memories like this now?"), and the impracticality of revisiting these traumas ("You can't eat, drink, or wear memories"). (126) In the second set, there is skepticism; an acceptance that "bad things happen during wars" (the implication being that cruelty is justified in times of war, even a cruelty as abominable as the experiments of Unit 731); an accusation that China deserves what came to them because of its own wrongdoings. (137-138) Finally, in the third set, there is an accusation that Unit 731 was fabricated, and a declaration that the truth should be silenced because it brings "great shame" upon Japan. (154) What is consistent across all these perspectives, regardless of the interviewee's country of origin, is a compulsion to erase, or to find excuses to do so. The truth is painful and difficult and overwhelming; it is a fragment entangled with numerous other painful and difficult and overwhelming fragments.

In due course, the reader discovers that Dr Wei committed suicide in the wake of the controversy surrounding the Kirino Process and the resultant Moratorium.[9] The story thus contains only two scenes that directly represent his voice. In one, he delivers a keynote speech at a war crimes studies conference, in which he says, "truth is delicate, and it has many enemies". (152) These enemies manifest in different forms – as governments; as apathy, resignation, and skepticism; or even as other histories. Liu presents these enemies through this story in forty segments, shows how they threaten the "delicate" truth of Unit 731. But the novella's structure also allows Liu to counterbalance these enemies, by bringing his protagonists back into the narrative through other fragments. Fabião, again: "Fragments challenge totalitarian orders; they resist unification and linearity by affirming themselves as open force fields that attract and repel other fragments composing mobile systems of relational meaning."[10] Through the voices of characters such as Dr Wei or Lillian, Liu can

---

[9] The trajectory of Dr Wei's arc was inspired by Iris Chang, an American-born Chinese journalist most famous for writing *The Rape of Nanking*, the first major English-language book to chronicle the 1937-38 Nanjing Massacre perpetrated by Japanese Imperial Army. Chang committed suicide in 2004; she had been suffering from depression, and was also researching another Japanese war crime, the Bataan Death March. Margalit Fox, "Iris Chang, Who Chronicled Rape of Nanking, Dies at 36," *The New York Times*, last modified November 12, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/12/arts/iris-chang-who-chronicled-rape-of-nanking-dies-at-36.html.

[10] Fabião, 131.

reiterate an ethics of remembering, one that feels more urgent when positioned adjacent to the dangers of forgetting. Dr Wei ends his speech with this: "The fact that we can never have complete, perfect knowledge does not absolve us of the moral duty to judge and to take a stand against evil." (153) It is through heterogeneity, unresolved and fragmentary as it is, that a more profound truth can be uncovered – not just the specificities of Unit 731, but the overarching moral imperative to acknowledge the traumas of the past, in all their complexities.

IV. END HISTORY AS MERE HISTORY

What, then, is that 'end of history', that initially read as so hyperbolic? Besides its title, Liu's novella references the concept at five points in the story [emphasis mine]:

1. Dr Kirino recalls watching Andrey Iskanov's 2008 film *Philosophy of a Knife*, which is based on Unit 731, with Dr Wei: "history as he understood it ended for Evan. **The distance he had once maintained, the abstracts of history at a grand scale**, […] **lost meaning to him** in the bloody scenes on the screen." (128)
2. In a televised debate with Ambassador Yoshida of Japan, Dr Wei first states that history could erase and silence victims once "memories would dim with old age and death". (151) Then, he maintains that with the Kirino Process, "we have now come to the end of history. What my wife and I have done is to **take narrative away, and to give us all a chance to see the past with our own eyes**." (152)
3. Victor P. Lowenson, one of Dr Wei's former professors and the only academic featured in the documentary to categorically criticise the Kirino Process, says: "Dr. Wei has **ended the process of rational historical inquiry and transformed it into a form of personal religion**. What one witness has seen, no one else can ever see. This is madness." (154)
4. Dr Kirino laments the failings of their work: "He had sought to **end history as mere history, and to give the past living voices to speak to the present.** But it did not work out the way he had intended. The past did come to life, but when faced with it, the present decided to **recast history as religion**."[11] (156)
5. Finally, in an obituary for Dr Wei by *The Economist*: "Seeking to **end controversy in history**, he succeeded only in causing more of it. Seeking to give voice to the victims of a great injustice, he succeeded only in silencing some of them forever." (160)

[11] There are two references to the idea that the end of history is also the beginning of its transformation into religion. This is a loaded concept that, for a narrative so dense with exposition, is left relatively vague. It seems the important element here is *faith* – one had to believe in the testimony of the traveller without any proof. (One might draw links to Walter Benjamin, whose *Theses* possess a number of theological influences.)

The 'ending of history', then, is not just the ability to use time travel to relive the past within the present (that would simply be the ending of a linear, irreversible time). Instead, it triggers a crisis of historiography at its epicentre. On one hand, there is the question of the legitimacy of subjective personal memory as *irrefutable* historical proof; on the other, the question of the legitimacy of history as an academic discipline that prioritises the so-called *provable* objectivity of "rational historical inquiry", at the expense of chronicling trauma via other methodologies. This parallels Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in which he argues for "historical materialism" – "[supplying] a unique experience of the past" by "[seizing] hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" – as opposed to a "universalist" "historicism", in which "empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers".[12] As seen in the novella, the "victor" is not simply the one who won the war – Japan was defeated at the end of World War II – but the one who still manages to retain control of the official version of history. By withholding information, the "victor" prevents history from being proven, then written. Victory can be achieved as much as by being silent, as Japan was and still continues to be regarding Unit 731 and other atrocities it committed during World War II. Lillian C. Chang-Wyeth moving testimony of her aunt's torture at the hands of the Japanese is then that "memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger", jolting the reader out of their apathy. Liu's 'end of history' can also be defined as the end of Benjamin's "historicism".

Liu foregrounds personal memory as an incontrovertible part of this 'end of history'; it is framed as a necessary component of the commitment to truth, and a galvanising force for justice. Yet, the novella concludes not with the Japanese government's acknowledgment of the specificities of Unit 731, but with the ban on the Kirino Process and the suicide of Dr Wei. The story demonstrates the perils of this reliance on personal memory when it can be so easily silenced and paralysed. Though it appeared that the Kirino Process could be used to prove war crimes by creating new witnesses, it merely perpetuated the distrust with which firsthand witness testimony by actual victims is already treated. Lillian's travel back in time to witness her aunt's torture was viewed with skepticism because it could not be independently verified, given that you can only send one person back to the past, *once and never again*. Dr Wei and Dr Kirino had made the decision to send relatives of victims, rather than "professional historians or journalists"; this is questioned by archaeologist Chung-Nian Shih: "I understand that he wanted to bring peace to the victims' families, but it also meant large segments of history were consumed in private grief, and are now lost forever to the world." (131) It became easy to point a finger at the witness and say, "I am sorry for whatever it is *you think you have*

---

[12] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Bungay, Suffolk: Fontana/Collins, 1982), 255-262.

experienced." (142) [emphasis mine] Fundamentally, the failure to reconcile the subjective and the objective, or the inability to accept the subjective as equal to the objective, even in the absence of the latter, returned everything to its status quo, as if the Kirino Process had never been invented, as if history had never been 'ended'.

At the conclusion of the novella, a crucial step in this ethical remembering remained missing – personal memories had not entered into public consciousness. Maurice Halbwachs writes on collective memory: "A remembrance is gained not merely by reconstituting the image of a past event a piece at a time. That reconstruction must start from shared data or conceptions."[13] Erll expands on this with her concept of travelling memory: "*all* cultural memory *must* 'travel', be kept in motion, in order to 'stay alive', to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations. [...] They do not exist outside individual minds, which have to actualize and reactualize those contents continually to keep them alive."[14] To 'end history' is to ensure memory persists as lived experience, not just in the mind of Lillian and other relatives who were sent back in time, but in a larger communal understanding of Unit 731, facilitated by an official state acknowledgement of the victims. But Unit 731 left no survivors who could share their experiences, and it was too challenging in the end to prove that the time travellers' memories were as valid as firsthand accounts.

Lillian states that she was born on January 5, 1962, while her aunt was murdered at the Unit 731 complex almost two decades earlier in 1941. She knows her aunt only through the recollections of her father, and a single family photograph. When she goes through the traditional ritual of picking her courtesy name, she in part "reactualizes" these memories by picking a name that is a homophone of her aunt's: Changyi, 長憶 (long remembrance), after her aunt's 暢怡 (smooth happiness). (130) Her family made the effort to preserve the memory of her aunt, and Lillian made the effort to receive and extend its lifetime. To share a memory, both speaker and listener must be open and willing. Lillian's testimony before a US Congressional Subcommittee, which did enter her experience into a public space, might have been enough even without an acknowledgment by the Japanese government. But members of the public were unwilling to partake in this remembrance, and instead chose to sustain the denial (as explored in Section III). Memories cannot travel if their validity is so ruthlessly questioned in the first place, if a collective is not receptive to sharing those memories at all.

Yet, there is still one more opportunity to make these memories known, one that lies implicit. In between the written narrative and the written-about documentary lies an

---

[13] Maurice Halbwachs, "Individual Memory and Collective Memory," in *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1980), 31.

[14] Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 12-13, https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605570.

intervening fictional space, the universe within which the story is set. The reader can imagine that the documentary had been made in an attempt to engender a collective memory, where the original Kirino Process in itself could not, steeped in controversy as it was. One can use Joshua Oppenheimer's powerful 2012 documentary *The Act of Killing*, as the basis for this projected redemption. The subject of the documentary is the Indonesian mass killings of 1965-66, in which 500,000 were murdered in a purported anti-Communist purge by a government still in power today. It helped open up a space for discourse regarding this incident: in October 2012, Indonesia's most important news publication, *Tempo Magazine*, published a special double edition dedicated to the documentary, breaking a 47-year silence about the genocide in the mainstream media. The documentary's nomination for an Academy Award further prompted an acknowledgement from the Indonesian government that the genocide was a crime against humanity.[15] Just as *The Act of Killing* uses the reenactment of personal memory as a narrative device (in that case, the memories of the killers themselves, who still consider themselves heroes), 'The Man Who Ended History' is framed by the intimate recollections of Dr Kirino, which forms the emotional core of the documentary. Dr Wei talks of the Kirino Process "taking narrative away", but sometimes you have to return to it – create it not from the position of the victor, but from the margins of that silenced history.

V. THERE ARE NO MONSTERS. THE MONSTER IS US.

'The Man Who Ended History' ends with a revelatory confession that, while initially discomfiting, evolves into a poignant meditation on the human capacity for both savagery and selflessness. Dr Kirino divulges something she had kept secret from her husband: her grandfather was the Director of Pathology Studies at Unit 731. Therefore, she is the granddaughter of one of the primary perpetrators of the war crimes they sought to bring to light. She describes a trip that she took back in time to see her grandfather write a poetic letter to her grandmother in "beautiful calligraphy" (161), which Dr Kirino says was one of her mother's "treasured possessions". (163) Then, immediately after he finishes the letter, she sees someone bring in a human brain on a tray. "'Very good,' my grandfather nodded. 'Very fresh. This will do.'" (163) Liu sets up a paradox – a doting husband, father, grandfather, a man of "literary learning" (163), can also be a war criminal; one who exudes a deep love for his family, can also retract that humanity in the cruel treatment of his victims.

---

[15] Joshua Oppenheimer, "The Act of Killing has helped Indonesia reassess its past and present," *The Guardian*, last modified February 25, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/25/the-act-of-killing-indonesia-past-present-1965-genocide.

Dr Kirino then asserts:

> Yet, my grandfather was not a monster. He was simply a man of ordinary moral courage whose capacity for great evil was revealed to his and my lasting shame. Labeling someone a monster implies that he is from another world, one which has nothing to do with us. It cuts off the bonds of affection and fear, assures us of our own superiority, but there's nothing learned, nothing gained. It's simple, but it's cowardly. I know now that only by empathizing with a man like my grandfather can we understand the depth of the suffering he caused. There are no monsters. The monster is us. (164)

At the crux of this statement, then, is the importance of recognising that we are continuous with the perpetrators, operating as they were in a different time and space (a time and space that we know, in the parameters of the story, can be revisited at least one more time). We might well have the same capacity for evil, for amorality; we are at one and the same time human and monster, and we cannot so easily compartmentalise those parts of ourselves and of humanity at large. As Dr Wei says: "The deniers are committing a fresh crime against the victims of those atrocities: not only would they stand with the torturers and the killers, but they are also engaged in the practice of erasing and silencing the victims from history, to kill them afresh." (151) In refusing to remember – in dismissing the crimes as 'bad things that happen during war', rather than a genuine reflection of something that resides within us all – we affirm, rather than deny, the monstrous.

Ultimately, what Dr Wei wanted was not compensation or prosecution, but "for Japan to acknowledge the truth of what happened at Pingfang. I want to focus on specifics, and acknowledgment of specifics, not empty platitudes." (150) In April 2018, seventy-three years after the end of World War II, the Japanese national archives finally released the full list of names of 3,607 members of Unit 731. It did so in response to a request from a research group led by Katsuo Nishiyama, a professor at Shiga University of Medical Science, who had first requested the disclosure in 2015. Nishiyama hopes that this will encourage further research into Unit 731.[16] Dr Wei's fictional struggle continues today: in a world where time travel *does not* exist, there are still ways to excavate and "work through" the traumas of the past.

A black hole, where light cannot escape, is an unseeable space. Scientists have only been able to study how it affects the space around it; even the recent image of the black hole

---

[16] Justin McCurry, "Unit 731: Japan discloses details of notorious chemical warfare division," *The Guardian*, last modified April 17, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/17/japan-unit-731-imperial-army-second-world-war.

visualises not the entity itself but the gravitational bending of light in the immediate environment of its event horizon. The black hole is like the original trauma – the event to which we cannot ever in our human experience return (never to be 'seen' again). What we can study, what we can remember and acknowledge, is the horizon of that event – not just what has been objectively proven, but also the *personal* narratives of its victims, and the myriad ways in which it affected (and still affects) the time and space and people around it. Throughout the novella, it is always the personal that anchors the most moving perspectives – in the immediacy of the testimony, and in their willingness to reminisce, to be open and vulnerable. Lillian intones a tender attachment to her aunt because of how her father spoke about his sister; on her second trip to Pingfang, she sings to her dying aunt who cannot hear her. Shiro Yamagata's recount of his time as a member of Unit 731 is made more crushing by his breakdown on camera, in which he expresses remorse for his actions – this was in turn triggered by his recollection of a post-war encounter with a terrified former prisoner of his. Despite Dr Wei's absence, he feels three-dimensional to the reader, because in retelling their story – in retelling the trauma of losing her husband – Dr Kirino talks about how they fell in love. In the process of confronting the monstrous, in the form of both evil and suffering, we also embrace our humanity. Within the horizon of the event, traces of the past remain, if we know where and how to look; the past can be experienced in the present, if we are given, and give ourselves space, to listen – feel – witness – remember.

> *For far too long, historians, and all of us, have acted as exploiters of the dead. But the past is not dead. It is with us. Everywhere we walk, we are bombarded by fields of Bohm-Kirino particles that will let us see the past like looking through a window. The agony of the dead is with us, and we hear their screams and walk among their ghosts. We cannot avert our eyes or plug up our ears. We must bear witness and speak for those who cannot speak. We have only one chance to get it right.*
>
> *– Dr Akemi Kirino*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, 255-266. Bungay, Suffolk: Fontana/Collins, 1982.

Bhabha, Homi K. "Homi K. Bhabha (b. 1949) on 'hybridity' and 'moving beyond'." In *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 1110-1116. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

Brescó de Luna, Ignacio and Alberto Rosa. "Memory, History and Narrative: Shifts of Meaning when (Re)constructing the Past." *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2012): 300–310. https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v8i2.460.

"Black Holes." *NASA Science*. Accessed April 14, 2019. https://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/black-holes.

Bond, Lucy and Jessica Rapson. "Introduction." In *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders*, eds. Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson, 1-26. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014.

Chen, Karissa. "An Interview with Speculative Fiction Writer and Translator Ken Liu." *Hyphen*. Last modified August 21, 2014. https://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2014/8/21/interview-speculative-fiction-writer-and-translator-ken-liu.

Crownshaw, Richard. "Perpetrator Fictions and Transcultural Memory." *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 75-89. https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605582.

Dattaro, Laura. "The quest to test quantum entanglement." *Symmetry.* Last modified November 6, 2018. https://www.symmetrymagazine.org/article/the-quest-to-test-quantum-entanglement.

Devlin, Hannah. "Black hole captured for first time in space breakthrough." *The Guardian.* Last modified April 10, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/science/2019/apr/10/black-hole-picture-captured-for-first-time-in-space-breakthrough.

Erll, Astrid. "Travelling Memory." *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 4-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605570.

Erll, Astrid and Ann Rigney. "Introduction: Cultural Memory and its Dynamics." In *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009.

Fabião, Eleonora. “History and Precariousness: In Search of a Performative Historiography.” In *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, eds. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, 121-136. Bristol: intellect, 2012.

Fox, Margalit. “Iris Chang, Who Chronicled Rape of Nanking, Dies at 36.” *The New York Times*. Last modified November 12, 2004. https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/12/arts/iris-chang-who-chronicled-rape-of-nanking-dies-at-36.html.

Halbwachs, Maurice. “Individual Memory and Collective Memory.” In *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter, 22-49. New York: Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1980.

Liu, Ken. “The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary.” In *Panverse Three: Five Original Novellas of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Dario Ciriello, 113-167. Concord, California: Panverse, 2011.

McCurry, Justin. “Unit 731: Japan discloses details of notorious chemical warfare division.” *The Guardian.* Last modified April 17, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/17/japan-unit-731-imperial-army-second-world-war.

Oppenheimer, Joshua. “The Act of Killing has helped Indonesia reassess its past and present.” *The Guardian.* Last modified February 25, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/25/the-act-of-killing-indonesia-past-present-1965-genocide.

Resnick, Brian. “This is the first-ever picture of a black hole.” *Vox.* Last modified April 10, 2019. https://www.vox.com/2019/4/10/18302343/first-picture-black-hole-eht-photo-event-horizon.

Rothberg, Michael. “Introduction: Theorizing Multidirectional Memory in a Transnational Age.” In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, 1-29. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Tsuneishi, Keiichi. “Unit 731 and the Japanese Imperial Army’s Biological Warfare Program,” trans. John Junkerman. *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 3, no. 11 (November 2005). https://apjjf.org/-Tsuneishi-Keiichi/2194/article.html.