

# The past today: analysing Asian Historical Movies

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## **Abstract**

This thesis analyses collective memory in Contemporary Asian Societies through historical movies. It takes a borderless approach to infer the perception of the past in the Asian continent, filling the gap in a field mostly dominated by case studies. Asian historical movies are used as the data source of the analysis, following the historiophoty framework designed by White (1988) and Rosenstone (1988), where films are used instead of documents to analyse collective memory and history. The analysis was based on finding patterns in the data. The results highlight the implications of state-controlled media in shaping collective history versus its contestation from independent film makers, cyclical versus linear conceptions of time, the relative importance of accuracy in memory, and the reactions to collective trauma in film production. This study scratches the surface of an immense body of knowledge, and an serves as a call to the research of collective memory in the context of borderless Asia.

## **Keywords**

Asian historical movies/films; Collective memory; History in the present; Historiophoty; Transnational cinema; Connected history; Borderless Asia.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Research problem, aim, and key concepts

This thesis aims to understand how Asian societies perceive, interpret, and illustrate their histories by using Asian Historical Movies as a data source. Through identifying patterns, connections and cross-cutting themes in the movies, the thesis puts forward an understanding of how collective memory operates in Asia through the medium of film. Collective memory is a sociological concept that can be roughly defined as when “(...) members of a group share a similar set of cultural tools, especially narrative forms when understanding the past” (Wertsch, 2008, p. 325). Since movies involve a great part of society, including not only the production team but also its audience, cinema can also be appointed as a materialization of collective memory. However, collective memory is not a solid block, but rather a mosaic of perspectives and ongoing reactions to these perspectives. Thus, the reception of each movie was also considered, as an intent to avoid generalization and consider the heterogeneity of collective memory.

In other words, the goal of this research is to put forward a generalized idea of the main ways history is portrayed in Asian films and, thus, by Asian societies. Following the precepts of historiophoty, film, along with other types of mass media, is the main way of interaction between people and their past, in contrast to textual means, often reserved to an academic setting. The concept of historiophoty, first explained by Hayden White (1988, p.1193), means “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse.” White (1988) appoints the historical film as a significant indicator of how society perceives history, arguing that this type of research data is often forgotten yet vital to understanding society in a broad sense. Historiophoty contrasts with Historiography, which uses written sources to understand the past, often excluding films and other forms of emotive or creative storytelling about the past. Furthermore, film can be used as a source for popular understandings of history by most of society since it does not only reflect the logic of who produced and distributed the movie, but of the large audiences that made these movies popular. As such, the research contributes to a broader issue – understanding how the past is perceived in contemporary Asian societies.

This research follows an inductive logic. Therefore, there are no pre-assumed hypotheses nor expectations related to the findings of this project. The methodology used is

based on the creation of a database capable of organizing and coding the information from 30 selected Asian Historical Movies. The information from this database was then analysed with the aim of finding patterns, themes, and other overarching findings related to collective memory, contributing to solving the stated problem through historical films.

## **1.2. Background**

*For an academic historian to become involved in the world of motion pictures is at once an exhilarating and disturbing experience. Exhilarating for all the obvious reasons: the power of the visual media; the opportunity to emerge from the lonely depths of the library to join with other human beings in a common enterprise; (...) Disturbing for equally obvious reasons: no matter how serious or honest the filmmakers, and no matter how deeply committed they are to rendering the subject faithfully, the history that finally appears on the screen can never fully satisfy the historian as historian (...). Inevitably, something happens on the way from the page to the screen that changes the meaning of the past as it is understood by those of us who work in words. (Rosenstone, 1988, p. 1173)*

Historical cinema has been an important part of entertainment, social convivence, and memory since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Asia, historical film has been used for national identity creation (e.g. Roy, 2018), trauma management (e.g. Censka, 2017), and historical questioning (e.g. Bielecki, 2018), besides its obvious artistic value as a visual medium. Films are some of the most widespread, accessible, and abundant means of mass media, with the capacity of mirroring and transforming societies. Nonetheless, as Rosenstone (1988) noted, the relationship between historians (or, more broadly, academics) and historical film has always been conflicted – due to the perception of historical films lacking accuracy, formality, or relevance.

This project centres on historical films, letting this contested type of data lead the way of the research. Substituting documents for movies, the archive for the cinema, and text for motion pictures. The focus is shifted from the formal historical content in films to the people producing, advertising, distributing, watching, commenting, or, more broadly, interacting with the films. Thus, the spotlight is on how historical films influence and are influenced by society.

## **1.3. Research questions**

- 1) What can historical film portray about the perception of the past by modern-day Asian societies?

- 2) How are historical narratives shaped in Asian historical films and what do these choices transmit about the perceptions of history?
- 3) How can historical films illustrate a borderless approach to Asia and memory?

#### **1.4. Academic contribution**

There are no accessible extensive studies on historical film from a transnational point of view. There is no practical research done on how historical films can mirror the wider society's perceptions of history, although theoretical pieces have defended this idea, e.g. White (1988), and Rosenstone (1988; 1995). Most of the literature on Asian historical movies is case study based, e.g. Jirattikorn (2003), Mubarki (2014), Hoang (2020). None of these pieces has the aim of understanding Asian cinema as a fluid, borderless, and connected reality. Thus, there is a clear gap in the existing literature.

This text provides a novel interpretation of collective memory in Asia by using historical film, an unusual, though insightful, tool for research. Nonetheless, this thesis is limited by the extensive body of knowledge it proposes to study and the time and resources necessary to produce a thorough and deep analysis. Thus, this research is an introductory study on collective memory in Asian historical films that can be applied to other regions, frameworks, and by using different methods.

#### **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis consists of five chapters. After the introduction, chapter two presents the existing literature, divided between case studies on specific historical films or national cinemas, trauma and collective memory in film, and transnational cinema. After delineating the research gap, chapter three provides the theoretical framework – collective memory and borderless Asia. Chapter four explains how the research was conducted, based on the historiophoty framework. Finally, chapter five presents and discusses the results of the data analysis, in the form of five findings.

## **2. Literature Review**

This section illustrates the existing literature on Asian historical movies, transnational cinema, collective memory and trauma in film, and other practical applications of the theories used in this research. This literature review is divided into three thematic groups. Firstly, case studies on a specific movie, topic, or national cinema. The second group covers the relationship



between collective memory and film, including pieces on “prosthetic memory” and trauma. Lastly, an introduction to transnational cinema and possible practical applications in the context of Asia.

## 2.1. Case Studies

The case studies have diverse themes and approaches. Nonetheless, they can be grouped according to the core concepts used by each of them. Political ideology, nationalism, and nation-formation are covered by Isaacs (2008) for the case of Kazakh cinema, Jirattikorn (2008) for the movie *Suriyothai* (2001), and Roy (2018) regarding the movies *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Bajirao Mastani* (2015). All these pieces argue that historical movies are often a mirror of nation-building and nationalistic ideas, patronized by political entities who often fund and support these productions.

Nationalism, Islamophobia and “otherness” are present in Hindi language movies, analysed by Mubarki (2014) and Rezavi (2022). Both authors strongly criticize the negative image of the Mughals portrayed by popular Indian movies, namely in *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008). While Rezavi (2022) argues that the villainization of Islam is conscious and fabricated by the directors, Mubarki (2014) attributes it to the instinctual connection between the nation and Hinduism, arguing that the duality of inter-faith marriage is the prime example of that phenomenon. While Hindu women are praised for their dignity and the plot seeks to protect them against Muslim men, symbolizing “Bharat Maa” (Mother India), Muslim women are eroticized and regarded as second-class.

Social class and post-colonial issues are analysed by Ingavani (2007). The author concludes that bourgeois heritage movies are contributing to the self-exotification of Thai people. Feminist perspectives are employed by Ho (2019), Hannula (2020), and Yahaya (2017). These pieces link a specific feminist theoretical concept with one or several movies, such as emancipation, chastity, and marriage, to name a few. Their arguments are generally critical towards the films, arguing that they are promoting patriarchal practices.

Choi and Sakamoto (2021) analyse the memory-shaping power of the South Korean film *Battleship Island* (2017) through the wide media network that surrounds the film. Through the transnational intersection of online marketing, popular reception, and political uses of the film, the authors conclude that the use of fictional stories in historical film can manipulate the

idea of the past by creating believable alternative versions of it. Thus, this study crosses transnational memory with cinematic explorations.

Li and Lin (2014), Cenka (2017), and Hwang (2023) take a broader approach to the topic of historical film. Li and Lin (2014) employ a rather similar approach to this thesis, using collective memory and historiophoty as a background to understand Taiwanese historical cinema and how it can be used as a mirror to society. The essay aims to understand how the Japanese colonial past is depicted by selected Taiwanese movies. The conclusion is rather theoretical, reinforcing the efficiency and applicability of historiophoty.

Cenka (2017) explores the possibility of Korean War cinema serving as a medium for creating and spreading a new Korean War cultural memory. It uses three movies as examples of a change of paradigm - from portraying the Korean War as North Korean aggression to depicting it as a national tragedy, focusing on compassion and solidarity instead of antagonism and hatred. Cenka (2017) interacts with the discussion on collective memory by arguing that contemporary South Korean war movies (and their use for educational purposes) can contribute to creating and strengthening the unification paradigm within Korean popular media.

Hwang's (2023) book has a broad interdisciplinary scope. It analyses multiple Korean movies through the lens of fate and freedom, identifying common tropes, such as King Sejong as the popular basis of cultural identity, the relation between the deranged monarchs and morality, and the forces of nature as a defensive mechanism against foreign invasions. Hwang (2023) portrays an extensive image of South Korean historical movies and their symbology and interpretations of the past.

Trauma and war are covered by Jha (2018), Valančiūnas (2021), Healy (2010), and Bielecki (2018). Jha (2018) analyses the act of witnessing the Partition between India and Pakistan through film. The author concludes that the feelings of betrayal and guilt are present in both sides of the conflict. Witnessing pain has a transformational potential, which is the core of Buddhism, as Siddharta Gautama began his spiritual journey after witnessing a corpse, an old man, and a sick man. Thus, movies about trauma can be the trigger to change political and historical beliefs in society.

Bielecki (2018) also covers the transformational potential of this kind of film but applied to the mass killings of 1965-1966 in Indonesia. By using the example of *The act of killing* (2012), produced by an American director, the author argues that the film aimed to

change public perceptions in Indonesia, shaping a new collective memory through the hand of a foreign agent. “The director emphasises not only the importance of Indonesia returning to these 'unspoken' and 'forgotten' crimes but also the urgency of Western powers accepting responsibility.” (Bielecki, 2018, p. 230) After illustrating the debate on how the movie promoted a discussion on this sensitive and forgotten topic, the author concludes that it is of extreme importance to use art as a means to start a conversation about the painful past.

Valančiūnas (2021) analyses cinematographic production on the Sri Lanka Civil War through the hands of the diaspora. Similar to Bielecki (2018), the author recognizes the limitations of film production in some Asian countries, due to censorship and other types of pressure from political institutions and civil society. Thus, the author concludes that the diasporic space is a fruitful context for illustrating the haunting scars of war that are still present in Sri Lankan collective memory and identity.

Similarly, Healy (2010) analyses the film production on the Vietnam War from the diaspora in the US. The author argues that the perspectives of the Vietnamese War in film have shifted from an appraisal of national heroes and victory to a more conscious lament of the tragedy suffered by civilians because of the war. Film has more recently started to portray other kinds of experiences related to war, not only focusing on the stories of soldiers and generals. This shift is motivated by the Vietnamese diaspora, far from the censorship and propaganda of the country.

*By illuminating the shared pain, films, fiction and memoirs help to bring former enemies closer. The Americans are gradually discovering Vietnamese perspectives; the refugees are listening to voices from Vietnam; and the Vietnamese inside Vietnam are finally learning about the traumas of their compatriots in exile. The emphasis on being authentically human (...). (Healy, 2010, p. 346)*

## **2.2. Trauma and collective memory in visual media**

The concepts of collective memory and trauma have been theorized by Landsberg (2004) and applied to practical cases by Kal and Rhee (2022). On the topic of trauma, Hong Kal and Jooyeon Rhee (2022) explore historical, social, and environmental catastrophes and traumas in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Kal and Rhee (2022, p.389) argue that “visual representations allow those who did not directly experience traumatic events to participate in the act of witnessing.”

Alison Landsberg (2004) connects both collective memory and historical film by identifying an attribute in mass media – developing and implementing “prosthetic memories” into the audience. Through the highly appealing images and emotions of films, which develop bodily sensations in the filmgoer, the public can become familiar with significant episodes in history that they have not experienced directly, or that were once foreign to the audience. “These memories are not “natural” or “authentic” and yet they organize and energize the bodies and subjectivities that take them on” (Landsberg, 2004, p.26). Landsberg (2004, p.26) asserts that this capability of acquiring a memory through mass media can make the audience susceptible to manipulation by those producing it. There is a fine line between created memories, that can be influenced by mass media and historical narratives. Thus, blurring this line can transform the historical narratives, pushing history closer to the prosthetic memories shaped by mass media.

Kal and Rhee (2022, p.389) borrow the idea of “prosthetic memory” from Landsberg (2004) to argue that movies can make collective traumas transgenerational and transnational by making the effects of historical events continue into the present. This form of mediated witnessing is the basis of the collective cultural memory of historical and social traumas.

### **2.3. Transnational cinema**

During the 2000s to the early 2010s, a new field of study emerged from the global studies movement, intending to understand film through a global and borderless lens. Labelled as “transnational cinema” by Deborah Shaw and Armindo de la Garza (2010) (among other contributors to the journal *Transnational Cinemas*), the new field “[allowed] film studies to address the changing relationship between cinema, states and nations, and explore the reconfiguration of cinematic landscapes through practices of globalization” (Shaw & Garza, 2010, p. 5). The seminal pieces produced by the early contributors of this journal have opened the way to more modern approaches to transnational cinema, and the application of this framework to different contexts.

Maharam (2021) utilized the transnational lens as a framework to examine films from Maritime Southeast Asia, a region characterised by a shared worldview, values, and principles, but rarely analysed as such by film studies scholars. The author’s research found that transnationalism is a reliable way to avoid the constraint of state-centrism in the discussion of films from these Southeast Asian countries. “It becomes insufficient to define national cinema

solely by contrasting one national cinema with another” (Maharam, 2021, p. 145). Critical transnationalism deals with interlinked cultural and historical subjects that have often been omitted from national perspectives.

On the dichotomy between national and transnational in the context of cinema, Song Hwee Lim (2019) argued that national ambitions have transnational implications, thus, they must be analysed as an interdependent phenomenon. Lim (2019, p. 3) takes the case of the Chinese film industry and its relationship with the country’s exercise of soft power through entertainment. Although producing films to engage with their own history and culture, China tends to use orientalist “exotic images to attract foreign audiences”. In other words, Lim argues that not only is cinema a transnational phenomenon, but also that some cinema industries sought after that “transnationalness” by making films appealing to global audiences (e.g., through self-exoticization). Furthermore, this globalization of cinema is the product of national ambitions, related to soft power.

Yang, Clini and Dasgupta (2020) add that considering the conjuncture of resurgent nationalisms and increasing fortifications of actual and symbolic borders, focusing on cinema as a borderless medium can be particularly insightful. They complement Lim’s ambivalence between national ambitions and transnational applications with the example of the Hindi-language industry, which actively seeks the next universal hit, regularly opting for co-productions and other forms of cooperative work with other Asian agents. The use of shared experiences and global issues as the story’s plot (migration, environmental crisis, discrimination, etc.) also promotes connection between different audiences. For instance, movies about the life of Indian migrants in Dubai have attracted audiences from countries experiencing the same things, namely in Southeast Asia and China. (Yang et al., 2020, p. 181)

On the same note, Athique (2019) attributes the success of Hindi language cinema in Thailand and the Philippines, among other Southeast Asian countries, to the connected history of the region. The author argues that Indian soft power in Southeast Asia has its roots in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when Buddhism, Shaivite, and Hindu culture spread across the Southeast Asian region. These shared mental and cultural concepts facilitate the understanding of Indian filmic discourse and semiotics. Athique (2019, p.488) concludes by arguing that transnational cinema can be the base for Inter-Asian dialogues, “disrupting existing preconceptions, and accelerating processes of civilisational exchange in a more densely mediated Asia.”

Transnational cinema is closely related to transnational experiences and memories, as Amanda Weiss (2021) argues through the example of East Asia. Weiss' article analyses and compares three co-productions made in East Asia about WWII. These transnational films are only possible through sharing cultural heritage, a transnational memory and collective trauma that generate consensus among the agents involved in the movies. "As a strategy, shared Asian identity may be a way for East Asian films to bridge national trauma and unite as a region" (Weiss, 2021, p.130).

These examples attest to the efficacy of using the lens of transnational cinema to understand a variety of topics and phenomena. This research is based on the idea that cinema is a fluid and borderless medium, that must be compared across national borders to extract conclusions about collective memory and the perception of the past in the present.

The many topics covered in this literature review illustrate the diversity of themes that are included in this thesis, as well as the multitude of pathways that the same data, methods and theory can take. While the case studies present different cinematic explorations on isolated cases, the transnational approaches aim to understand the connections between Asian societies through film. Nevertheless, none of the literature aims to understand how Asian societies perceive their past, opting for different approaches. For the case of the second section on collective remembering in film, although central to this research, none of the pieces takes a borderless approach to collective memory in Asia. Thus, the purpose of this thesis is unique and fills a clear gap in the body of knowledge presented – to combine collective memory with transnational cinema in the context of Asia.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This section is dedicated to crucial concepts forming the theoretical approach of this project. They are related to collective memory, the core theory of this research, and the borderless lens through which Asia, society, history, and cinema can be understood.

#### **3.1. Borderless Asia and Connected History**

There are many ways to divide Asia in circles of influence. Some outdated perspectives have identified the different regions of Asia as Islamic, Indian, Chinese, and Southeast Asian, while more recent research has suggested a division based on analytical themes such as

colonialism, nationalism, and mobile landscapes, striving to find patterns in the continent's history (Tagliacozzo et al., 2015, p. 3).

To connect Asia is a harder task than to divide it. Especially because the term and concept of "Asia" was not invented by Asians themselves, but by the Greeks to differentiate the "us" Europeans from the exotic and unknown "others". Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2016) has posed the question if there is one or many "Asias". Although networks connected the continent's interior and exterior, no conquest, religion, or culture was able to unify Asia. The idea of Pan-Asianism was created and propagandised by Japanese imperialists during the Meiji Restoration. However, their conception only includes India and China as the two civilizational forces, excluding Central Asia, the Middle East, and the impact of Islam on the continent. Subrahmanyam considers Pan-Asianism, in this Japanese view, as racist, Islamophobic, and distorted, serving only the goals of an Imperial Japan that was preparing to dominate Asia. Subrahmanyam (2016) concludes that there are many "Asias". (Subrahmanyam, 2016, p. 46)

What connects these "many Asias"? Pichayapat Naisupap has suggested the iconography and iconology of the composite elephant<sup>1</sup> as an element shared by most cultures of Asia. "To recall the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam's need to write a connected history, the composite elephant can be one of the "fragile threads" that weaves together various polities in Asia, especially within the Indian Ocean world" (Naisupap, 2023, p. 11).

Subrahmanyam (2016) suggests the Mongol Empire, the largest land-based political formation in world history, as a crucial connecting element in Asian History. Even the three main points of Asia that the Mongols were unable to conquer - Japan, India, and Southeast Asia - have actively engaged in trade, cultural exchange, and diplomatic ties with the Empire. The memory of the Mongols stayed relevant in these areas, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia, through Timur, and in India by the hand of the Mughals, who claimed to be descendants of Chinggis Khan (Subrahmanyam, 2016, p. 24).

This thesis is based on this concept of borders in Asia, a continent with shared cultures, influences, and histories that do not necessarily correspond to the post-colonial borders created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although recognizing the immense diversity and nuances of culture, religion and history in Asia, the framework used allows us to search for connecting threads

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<sup>1</sup> A composite elephant is a figure of the elephant formed completely or partly by other elements such as other kinds of animals, humans, plants, etc.

among the continent's present, only possible by a shared past. This does not mean the oversimplification of a complex Asian mosaic, but an understanding beyond the traditional bordered and nation-dominated approach of geographic and cultural space.

### **3.2. Collective memory**

The debate on collective memory is influenced by the ideas of Halbwachs (1992), Wertsch and Roediger (2008), and Plantinga (2021). Halbwachs (1992, p.35) attributed the first meanings to the concept, arguing that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present. This mechanism of understanding history is stored and distributed by social institutions, which is then absorbed by individuals on many occasions, such as celebrations, or even historical films. This idea contradicts the existence of an “individual memory” of the past, defended by Wertsch and Roediger (2008). These authors argue that collective memory is more so a space of contestation than a body of knowledge, and contestation is more individualised than collective. What makes memory collective is a “cultural tool kit”, such as symbols, concepts or narratives that are shared by society. However, each individual reads the past differently (Wertsch & Roedinger, 2008, p. 322).

Plantinga (2021) disagrees with this individualizing view, agreeing with Halbwachs (1992) that there are institutions with a rhetorical power over collective memory, especially historical film. Film is a mass medium, where the audience can be immersed in an emotionally charged storyline. Thus, Plantinga (2021, pp.131-132) concludes that “the historical fiction film is a form of global storytelling with the potential for significant influence in the formation, consolidation, and/or alteration of collective memory (...) [that] may unify a culture by celebrating key events in its past.”

This thesis is based on the premise that societies have a collective memory constituted by ideas, symbols, concepts, and narratives about the past. Collective memory is constituted by individual interpretations that are based on shared precepts. It can often be contested by social groups, forming a mosaic of interpretations and understandings of the past. One limitation that might be appointed to collective memory is its call for generalization – present straight away in the word “collective”. Although the individual understandings are not considered by collective memory, the mosaic it illustrates is, in essence, a representation of the many individual pieces.



Collective memory was chosen as the core theory of this thesis because of its interconnectedness with the three pillars of the research - transnationality, the past, and historical films. Firstly, not disregarding the importance of nationalism in memory, collective memory is largely a borderless phenomenon, as the past did not contemplate borders the same way society does today. Second, social perceptions of the past can be used interchangeably with the term collective memory, having a very similar meaning. Lastly, historical films are both a mirror of pre-existing perceptions and a tool for influencing collective memory. Thus, collective memory through a borderless lens is the best-suited theory for this project.

## **4. Methods**

This section describes the methodological approach and the research path that was followed, constituted by three fundamental steps – data selection, the creation of the database with relevant information from each film, and the analysis of the data.

### **4.1. Ontology and Theory**

This topic is not highly researched. Apart from the theoretical pieces on collective memory, historiophoty, and transnational cinema, with which I engage, the rest of the literature available are case studies that lead to isolated conclusions. In other words, there is no body of literature where a hypothesis or an argument can be built upon. Therefore, an inductive research logic was used as the methodological basis. This strategy can be defined as when “the researcher infers the implications of his or her findings for the theory that prompted the whole exercise” (Bryman, 2012, p. 24). I did not have any preconceptions built around the topic, test any hypothesis, nor did I expect any kind of conclusion.

In terms of ontology, constructionism was essential to formulate the research, as collective memory is assumed as an ever-changing and multi-layered phenomenon. “Instead of seeing culture as an external reality that acts on and constrains people, it can be taken to be an emergent reality in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction” (Bryman, 2012, p. 34). Similarly to culture, memory is dynamic, subject to constant construction and reconstruction according to the current conditions of a region or community.

## **4.2. Historiophoty: history through film**

This thesis follows the methodological approach of historiophoty, meaning the use of historical film as a source to understand modern-day perceptions of the past. Therefore, although many disciplines are involved in this research, such as film studies (especially for the creation of the database) and history, the main disciplinary basis is under the sociology umbrella. Not only do most theories and concepts come from areas of sociology, namely memory studies and historical sociology, but also because the study aims to understand Asian societies.

The debate on historiophoty and the study of history through film has valuable contributions from Hayden White (1988) and Rosenstone (1988) and (1995). In 1988, Rosenstone produced the polemic article “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film”. In this piece, he argues that historical film is the ultimate connection between past and present, using moving pictures, emotions, and sounds. This medium represents a new possibility of representing the past, allowing narrative history to recapture the power it once had with historical romances and literary imagination. Rosenstone (1988) strongly criticizes historians for disregarding historical film for its lack of accuracy and scientific depth, arguing that historiography often has the same issues, by neglecting the high levels of subjectivity and inaccuracy of written sources. (Rosenstone, 1988, p. 1174)

Hayden White (1988) responds to Rosenstone, putting forward his idea of historiophoty. He challenges some of Rosenstone’s (1988) arguments by disagreeing that historiophoty is a better means of communicating and illustrating history, capable of substituting historiography. The use of images in historiography is not a novelty. The verbal discourse is often complemented with images without compromising the accuracy of the narrative portrayed, contrasting with historiophoty (White, 1988, p. 1195).

White (1988) also engages with the collective memory debate, appointing the historical film as a significant indicator of how society perceives history. This type of research data is often forgotten yet vital to understanding society in a broad sense, contrasting with the less inclusive and accessible historiography. Furthermore, movies can be used as a source for most of society since it does not only reflect the logic of who produced and distributed the movie, but of the large audiences that made these movies popular.

### **4.3. Research Design**

This thesis is designed as a critical analysis of a data sample, covering a time frame from 2001 to 2023, where the unit of analysis is the Asian continent. When considering the overarching question of the research – how Contemporary Asian societies perceive their past – this study can be considered a cross-sectional study, as it used a medium-sized sample of historical films as the data source to answer this question. This type of research design is often used to find patterns of association and “examine relationships between variables” (Bryman, 2012, p. 59). Thus, it is compatible with the aim of the research. Firstly, it allows us to find patterns among samples of similar data through the use of a database. Secondly, it is suited for studies that are not case studies nor big data projects, proving to be efficient in middle-sized samples of qualitative and descriptive data. Finally, cross-sectional design is a flexible system. Although it is designed to find patterns, the organization of the data also allows to study the cases individually or to analyse the data in a more general fashion, if necessary.

### **4.4. Data selection**

The research started by delineating the criteria for the selection of the movies. This process lasted until the last movie was watched and required flexibility. Although the criteria did not change from the beginning, a series of obstacles such as time constraints and the availability of the movies online and with English subtitles, shaped the movie sample.

The thirty movies selected follow a set of filters and conditions, such as release date, origin, veridic nature, and film genre, among others. This data set is a representative sample aiming to portray a balanced reflection of the totality of existing films under these conditions. Firstly, since this study focuses on modern-day societies, the selected movies are all from this century, the oldest from 2001 and the most recent from 2023. The choice of 2001 as the limit is justified by the social, political and cultural significance of that year. Besides the global impact of 9/11, 2001 can be seen as the year when information and digitalization were becoming widespread. The expansion of the digital era beyond Western countries was essential to the production, distribution, and popularization of the movies included in this dataset, as well as the shifts in collective memory and the understanding of the past through a new lens. In other words, the 21<sup>st</sup> century inaugurated a digital and visual era worldwide.

This study does not consider borders and nationalities in its essence, aiming to portray a transnational panorama of the Asian continent. Opposite to local and national issues, cinema

impacts and portrays many countries, not only the country of production. Following the logic of transnational cinema, films are not only a transnational phenomenon by nature, but they also seek to be as transnational as possible. In other words, some cinema industries try to internationalize their products by making films appealing to global audiences (Lim, 2019, p. 4). The same can be applied to the analysed films, which have massive audiences outside their production country and portray historical narratives that include various modern-day nations, or even a different country from the one producing the film.<sup>2</sup>

Continuing with the description of the criteria, the selected movies are not only about Asia but made in Asia by Asian people. Films where the director or production team is not Asian are being excluded, such as the Cambodia-related movie *First They Killed My Father* (2017) produced by Angelina Jolie. The movies need to focus on historical narratives/events/personalities, as opposed to period dramas or the mere use of history as a background set. In other words, the movie needs to aim to be historically accurate and to tackle a historical element. Anything that includes fantasy, imagination, and over-the-top fiction is excluded, e.g. *RRR* (2022). No animated movies were analysed since these do not aim to be accurate. TV series and documentaries are outside the scope of this research.

The sample includes movies from 13 countries and in 15 languages proportionate to the number of existing movies following the criteria<sup>3</sup> and the size of each country's box office.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Mandarin and Indian films are more prevalent, while smaller industries like the Filipino and the Vietnamese have only one movie each on the sample. Naturally, other countries with very few or no movies compliant with the criteria, such as Laos and Sri Lanka, are not included in the database.<sup>5</sup>

#### **4.5. Database**

The creation of the database was crucial to this methodological approach. The database was created on Microsoft Excel, with the main aspects that were to be analysed in each movie. These categories are highly inspired by film studies theories and concepts, namely semiotics, (Chandler, 2022) and plot. (Koenitz, 2023) The second step was to select the films and add them to the database.

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., the Japanese movie *Kingdom I* (2019) about the Three Kingdoms conflict in China.

<sup>3</sup> Based on IMDb search engine.

<sup>4</sup> Based on *The Numbers* (2024), a webpage providing detailed financial information on the film industry.

<sup>5</sup> See figure 1 to 8.

The database is divided into 7 parts, with an additional notes section. The first part has the basic information of the film, such as the name, director, and release year. The second part outlines historical information such as the century and years it depicts. The next aspects are related to film studies. The third part covers the main character and the villain. This configuration allows them to be either individual or collective. They are analysed through their role in the movie, their characteristics and the emotions provoked to the audience.

The plot is constituted by 4 stages – setting, development, climax, and resolution. This four-act narrative structure is based on Kishōtenketsu (ki – introduction, shō – development, ten – twist, ketsu – conclusion), opening the possibility for a non-conflict plot. (Koenitz, 2023, p. 9) Kishōtenketsu has its origins in East Asia and has been the predominant narrative structure for most literature and filmic entertainment of the region. According to Koenitz (2023), other types of narrative structures apart from the Aristotelic three-stage plot, or the five-act system, present in Western movies, have often been marginalized. By challenging the normalized Eurocentric notions of narrative and basing the database in Kishōtenketsu, it is possible to get a better understanding of Asian films.

The focus on emotions in the last two categories is justified by the collective memory framework. In other words, emotions are essential to both the imagination of the past and cinema. Thus, they are good indicators of possible interpretations of history. The fifth part covers semiotics, following the three signifier categories created by Peirce in the 1860s – index, symbol, and sign, interpreted by Chandler (2022) as “symbolic (fundamentally unmotivated, arbitrary, or purely conventional), iconic (based on perceived resemblance), and indexical (based on direct connection).” (Chandler, 2022, p. 30)

The sixth part aims to interpret the movies and their historical perspective. It defines the main message of the movie and allows an analysis of the accuracy and highlight of the narrative. The seventh part was added to consider the contestation of the historical perspective shown in the movie and its overall reception inside and outside of the country of production. Sources such as movie reviews on the internet, news, and blog posts were used in this section. Finally, the notes section includes information regarding box office, funding, political connections, and important quotes from the movie.

#### **4.6. Data analysis**

After watching the movies and filling out the database, the information was analysed to find patterns, themes, or shared interpretations. Other broad conclusions on collective memory in Asian historical films emerged spontaneously from the analysis by crossing it with information from the literature.

To help the analysis, the content of the database was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. For instance, the reception of each movie was divided into categories regarding popularity and the reception of the plot, such as ‘well received’/ ‘highly successful;’ ‘mixed reactions’/ ‘somewhat successful;’ ‘controversial’/ ‘unsuccessful’; and ‘no information’ for the case of reception. The same was done with the topics of the movies, divided into five categories - ‘love stories,’ ‘life of a political/military figure,’ ‘life of an activist/religious figure,’ ‘succession conflicts,’ and ‘wars and revolts. The accuracy was quantified on a scale from 1 to 10, using film reviews and academic articles produced by historians and specialists about the movie’s plot. The relation between these and other factors was transformed into charts to support the data analysis and allow the visualization of the results.<sup>6</sup>

Other analysis techniques were used, not necessarily related to the data’s quantification. For textual analysis of the database, the website ‘voyant-tools.org’ was used to understand the relations between the most used words and their patterns across the lengthy text of the file. It also allowed to identify collocates, meaning the words connected to a specific term in the context of the sentence. The findings emerged from the qualitative and textual analysis, using some of the literature as the starting point for the analysis.

#### **4.6. Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council. This thesis covers sensitive topics, such as memory, trauma, and identity. Since the discussion around these concepts might be interpreted as insensitive, or even personally motivated, special care was taken when writing the findings of the research.

Regarding reflexivity, I am aware that my Western background and personal political biases could have been an obstacle to understanding and interpreting Asian historical movies. Nonetheless, efforts were made to avoid any kind of critical distortions throughout my work,

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<sup>6</sup> The results of the analysis can be found in the appendix, figure 9 to 16.

such as distancing from commenting on the political stances of the films or other opinion-based views they might portray.

## 5. Findings

The following section presents five results of the research – the first four are patterns found in the data, and the last one is a question that remained open.

### 5.1. The dichotomy between state-controlled media and independent media as a space of contestation

According to one of Wertsch and Roedinger's (2008) descriptions of collective memory, this concept represents a space of contestation rather than a body of knowledge. It is "a space in which local groups engage in an ongoing struggle against elites and state authorities to control the understanding of the past" (Wertsch & Roedinger, 2008, p. 319). When comparing this concept to the data analysed, two questions arise. In countries where the state authorities control media, who is responsible for shaping the historical narratives? How do democracy and freedom (or lack thereof) interact with the remembering of the past?

There is a clear dichotomy among the data analysed, which divides it between state-controlled media, more prevalent in China and Kazakhstan, and independent media as a tool for contesting collective memory, with Taiwan and South Korea as the prime examples. This division is motivated by the political principles followed by these two groups, with authoritarian systems on one side and democracies on the other. This aspect influences the source of funding, the degree of artistic and intellectual freedom, and the consequent censorship and control executed by each state government.

For the first group, both Kazakh movies analysed were fully funded by the government, being the most expensive movies in the country's history until today. They possessed explicit political messages, denoting political exploitation and manipulation of history to fulfil nationalistic ambitions. *Nomad: The Warrior's* (2005) main message demonized the Jungar and Chinese invaders while praising the unity of the Kazakh people, sending a clear message against external menace. The movie *Tomiris* (2019), produced by the daughter of Nursultan Nazarbayev, covers the life of Tomiris, a Massagetae queen of Iranian descent. This movie manipulates a poorly known historical figure's memory to serve a modern political purpose. Tomiris is presented as the daughter of a powerful chieftain (just like Darina Nazarbayeva,

daughter of Nursultan), who was groomed to be the female heir. This version of Tomiris' story, very similar to Darina Nazarbayeva's path, is an instrument to normalize women in power and strengthen the support of Darina, who is preparing to be the next president of Kazakhstan (Adilbekov, 2019).

For the case of China, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021) follows the same pattern, but at a much larger scale, as it is the most expensive non-English film ever made (\$200 million) and also the highest grossing (\$913 million) (N.A., 2021b). This movie presents a distorted view of the conflict between China and the US during the Korean War. It sends a clear message of glorification of national martyrs. It demonizes and ridicules North American troops, while completely omitting the participation of Koreans on both sides of the war. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* presents North Korea as part of China, considering this war a patriotic fight against invaders. This movie is a direct call to today's China-US rivalry - aiming to remind Americans of what China is capable of.

The second group of movies is characterized by independent productions, funded by entertainment companies, crowdfunds, or by the individuals involved in the creation of the movie. The two exclusively Taiwanese movies analysed are prime examples of contestation narratives, defending vernacular memory against official memory, supported by state authorities. *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale* (2011) highlights a piece of knowledge often omitted by the institutions in power – the protagonism of Taiwanese indigenous people against Japanese colonizers. It praised the folk hero Mouna Rubao from the Seediq tribe, who sacrificed his life to protect the green Taiwanese landscapes from Japanese exploitation. This movie has been considered part of the Taiwanese nationalist movement for freedom and independence. Due to its controversial topic, which counters in many ways the government's perspectives on the past, the director had difficulty in gathering funds for the film, which took him 15 years in total and did not include the contribution of the government of Taiwan. This does not mean that this movie was a small production. On the contrary, *Warriors of the Rainbow* is the most expensive production in Taiwanese cinema history (Tsai, 2011).

Similarly, *Untold Herstory* (2022) illustrates the resistance against Kuomintang's oppression during the White Terror period. It softly tackles a topic that is still very sensitive to many who lived through the 30 years of Martial Law. Taiwanese people consider the topic highly relevant for today's Taiwan, as the country's independence is at risk, Chiang Kai-Chek's admirers are taking over the country, and the culprits for this disaster have not been punished.



It is a clear wake-up call to Taiwan's deteriorating politics and reminds the younger generations of what happened during that taboo period of Taiwanese history. This movie was fully funded by a crowdfunding campaign conducted worldwide (Cody, 2022).

In the case of these two Taiwanese movies, the goal was not only to contest “official” state-promoted memories but also to allow transgenerational and transnational remembering of these traumatic events. As Hong Kal and Jooyeon Rhee (2022, p.398) argued, these movies counter collective remembering with “the act of witnessing through visual media”.

Some South Korean films can be included in this group, but for different reasons and presenting different characteristics. *The Fortress* (2017) presents a story of a humiliating defeat from the Qing invasion of Joseon in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This slow-paced drama criticizes indecisiveness and prejudice against so-called barbarians, which led to a painful yet expected and avoidable defeat against the almighty Qing. This movie is intended to be a comparison between the past and present. From the director's perspective, South Korea is between their loyalty to the US (the Ming) and the emerging power, China (the Qing). Although it might be hard for Koreans to turn the page and forget about their loyalty to the ones who saved them (e.g., the role of the US in the Korean War), they cannot be indecisive as the Joseon Emperor was. South Korea should turn to the new rising partner without prejudice, embracing China (Sun-ah, 2017). *The Fortress* is filled with regret, uncommonly highlighting shame and defeat instead of praising moments of victory and heroism, more common in state-funded cinema.

This is just one of many examples of South Korean movies transmitting similar messages. Although the goal of these films is not to remember traumatic events from recent history, as for the case of Taiwan, it serves its role of contesting romanticized views of the past and urging for a political transformation in the country.

This dichotomy between authoritarian state production of memory and independent contestation is not a black-and-white phenomenon, but occurs along a spectrum. In fact, 14 of the 30 analysed movies present a direct connection to the current situation of the producing country, mentioning an ongoing social, political or diplomatic conflict, a social critique, or even serving as ideologic propaganda, for instance.

Some movies are not manipulated by the state but by other institutions of power. For instance, *Mat Kilau* (2022) from Malaysia was produced and funded by members of a far-right ultra-conservative Islamic organization close to the political structures of the country. It distorts

the story of the Pahang Uprising against the British through promoting ethnonationalism and racism against Chinese, Indians, and other Bumiputera. Although not the same as the Kazakh and Chinese movies produced by the central government, *Mat Kilau* promotes the same manipulation of memory to achieve national political goals.

To conclude this section, the source of funding, the political environment, and the current social and economic state of a region can deeply transform the memory constructed and reflected by the movies. Disregarding the provenance of these films, and the goals behind them, popular visual media is capable of shaping collective memory. Thus, one cannot consider collective memory solely as the act of contesting or witnessing knowledge from the past, but also as being part of a large-scale project of remembering a constructed past. Voluntarily or not, remembering is constructed by many agents, which in authoritarian countries generally happens to be the state. Internalizing historical narratives produced with a political goal is a natural process. Thus, more importance should be given to these politically motivated “prosthetic memories” (Landsberg, 2008) apart from the “contested memories.”

## **5.2. Collective forgetting: the absence of Japanese and Vietnamese historical movies**

Instead of focusing solely on the existing data, one should also note what is missing in the dataset, namely the multi-layered presence of Japan. Besides being the third country with the highest box office revenue and the fourth with the largest number of film productions worldwide, Japan has produced very few historical films in the present century (about 13 excluding period dramas).<sup>7</sup> *Kingdom* (2019), the only Japanese movie in the database, depicts an overdramatized and fictionalized version of the life of a Chinese warrior, Li Xin. Besides, it is a live-action adaptation of a famous manga. The historical aspect of the story is merely accessory. How can this phenomenon be explained through the lens of collective memory?

As noted by Hashimoto (2023), Japan had a popular culture production increase during the 1950s. In post-war pacifist Japan, many movies were produced about traumatic historical events. During this period, producing media and discussing topics about the past was the response to collective trauma:

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<sup>7</sup> *The Numbers*, 2023 and *IMDb*'s search engine

*These trauma stories have been rife with anger and resentment towards the military command that caused mass deaths of their own soldiers. Pointing to the countless strategic errors, impossible war plans, misguided invasions, and disregard for the value of human life, this genre developed a persuasive antipathy towards the military that it indicted.* (Hashimoto, 2023, p. 88)

Why was the production of films reflecting on Japan's past halted? From the 1990s, historical revisionism movements emerged in Japan from ultra-conservative sects of society. Instead of questioning the ethics of the Japanese Imperial rule, the blame is turned to the foreign enemies, who provoked Japan into committing errors. Many war crimes and humanitarian disasters provoked by the Japanese were denied, such as the existence of "comfort women" (Hashimoto, 2023, p. 95). The further from the events, the easier memory blurs or gets forgotten. According to David McNeill (2023), this justifies the emergence of historical revisionists. "It seems safe to assume that as direct memories of the war fade, conflicts in how Japanese see the past will grow" (David McNeill, 2023, p. 106).

Besides the divisions created by historical revisionists, collective trauma from the dramatic events of World War II, such as the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki started to seep into Japanese society, resulting in the tabooing of these topics. As Hong Kal and Jooyeon Rhee (2022) noted, "the inability to access and reclaim the traumatic past is a psychological symptom that is often conditioned by the socio-political circumstances that follow an event" (Kal & Rhee, 2022, p. 387). Thus, the unstable political and economic environment of the 1990s, considered by many a "lost decade", (Hayashi & Prescott, 2002, p. 228) may have affected the management of collective trauma in Japanese society.

The economic, political, and social shock lived in the 1990s impacted mass media, halting the production of visual entertainment related to the past and substituting it with other kinds of successful entertainment, such as games, anime, and manga far from the traumatic topic of World War II. This phenomenon clearly lingers until today. A historical movie in Japan, no matter the topic, would probably divide opinions, trigger the sensibilities of the audience, and be unsuccessful. This would mean less profit, the fuel of the film industry. Besides, the producers and directors might not feel eager to touch on such delicate topics since they themselves are also a part of the socially fractured collective trauma.

The same can be said about Vietnam, whose traumatic memories of the Vietnamese War and the conflict between “brothers” from the same country are still taboo topics. In Kal and Rhee’s (2022) article on traumas during the visual age in Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam, very few examples of Japanese and Vietnamese visual media are presented. Most of the visual production analysed emerged from South Korean artists, even when depicting the Vietnamese War or the Fukushima disaster. In contrast to Japanese and Vietnamese society, which has divided views on the past and, thus, a more heterogeneous memory of recent history, South Koreans are more open to discussing and comparing their perspectives on history (Hwang, 2023, p. 117). Despite also participating in collective trauma, the war did not result in a unification of the belligerent parts like the division between North and South Korea. This, along with the memory politics of demonizing North Koreans, created an open space to debate the recent past and use films as a tool of contestation, instead of creating taboos around it.

The few existing Vietnamese historical movies do not illustrate the recent past, nor emphasize the historical aspects deeply in the plot. Just like *Kingdom* (2019), the only analysed Vietnamese movie, *The Last Wife* (2023) is a love story adapted from a famous novel. Although many considerations are taken about 19<sup>th</sup>-century Vietnamese society, history is not the focus of the movie and many filmgoers have criticized it for its historical inaccuracies. Thus, it is possible to conclude that collective trauma and divisions among Japanese and Vietnamese society are a hypothetical answer to the lack of historical films, especially about recent history.

Although this phenomenon is present in both Vietnam and Japan, the scale and impact are not comparable. Being Japan the second largest cinematic market in Asia, the number of historical movies released this century is quite close to Vietnam’s, with a much smaller industry. Why did collective trauma and social division impact Japan more than any other country?

Japan was the protagonist of many crucial events of Asian contemporary history. Apart from being a victim of many disasters, the Japanese military was also the perpetrator of tragic events, in the context of the Japanese colonial empire and the Pacific theatre of World War II. Through the textual analysis of the database, it was possible to understand which terms are used the most and what are they connected to in the sentences. Surprisingly, despite there being only one Japanese movie in analysis, the term “Japanese” was the fourth most-used word in the database (159 times).<sup>8</sup> It is the most used proper noun, with a direct meaning in the analysis,

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<sup>8</sup> Textual analysis made through the website “Voyant tools”. <https://voyant-tools.org/>

preceded by “movie” (275), “sadness” (202), and “drama” (178), and succeeded by other words of the same kind, such as “king” (157), “people” (142), and “women” (132).

When analysing the collocates, the words that appear related to the term “Japanese” in the sentences, the first results are “soldiers” (12), “ships” (8), “sadness” (8), and “oppression” (6). In fact, 4 of the 30 movies depict the Japanese as a collective antagonist of the story. The depiction of the Japanese military as a collective villain, without highlighting a specific personality (e.g., a general), is the most omnipresent element across the data in terms of character type. The Japanese are the only cohesive group in the villain category, as the data appears rather scattered and heterogeneous. This factor has clearly deepened an “aversion to the past” in contemporary Japanese society, motivating feelings of guilt and shame from a shared national past as the “villains” of Asian recent history. Thus, collective trauma has an immobilizing effect in Japan, more than in any other country.

Apart from recent history, why are there no recent films depicting the rich Japanese ancient, feudal, and modern history? What has contaminated the collective memory of pre-war Japan? The omnipresence of the same imperial family as the core of Japanese history might be an adequate answer.

When observing the extensive and eventful history of the Japanese archipelago, there is one common denominator – the monarchy. As Kenneth Ruoff (2022) noted, “the Japanese have placed tremendous stress on dynastic legitimacy.” (Ruoff, 2022, p. 20) This aspect accentuated the correlation between the past of Japan and the trauma of the Second World War, as there is an actual blood continuity among the agents partaking in Japanese history.

After the end of World War II, the paradigm changed, and so did the public image of the Chrysanthemum Throne. “Japan’s defeat in 1945 represented a critical turning point not only in the history of the nation but also in the history of the monarchy.” (Ruoff, 2022, p. 3) This transformation was motivated by the connection of the imperial house to the horrors of the war, conflictive with the image of Tennō (literally “Ruler of Heaven”) as divine. Thus, the monarchy remained a delicate subject into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Motoshima Incident is an example. In 1988, as Emperor Hirohito was dying, Nagasaki Mayor Motoshima Hitoshi publicly argued that the emperor was responsible for the war, and, thus, for its consequences. As Ruoff (2022, p. 2) reminds us: “Motoshima’s interpretation of Hirohito’s wartime role was

neither new nor extreme, yet he was ostracized by the political establishment and threatened by violent right-wing groups.”

The same can be applied to historical films. The relation between monarchy and war has inevitably contaminated the idea Japanese people have about the past in a broader sense, not exclusive to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also about the last two millennia, as monarchy has been present *de facto* or mythologically since then. Therefore, history has been relayed to a secondary role in Japanese visual media. Although stories about samurais and ninjas are common and popular, they are not active elements of memorialization and remembering in Japan, as none of these media products intend to be accurate or reminiscent of the actual past. Contrasting to the majority of Asia, Japanese media does not praise political figures, nor highlight warlike events, opting for fictional stories with historical inspirations.

Concluding this argument, the Japanese and Vietnamese lack of historical films can be explained by collective trauma around the past, which provoked a lack of interest in remembering through media. Specifically for the case of Japan, the omnipresence of the Imperial family across Japanese history and the social pressure to not criticise the decisions of the emperor has created a taboo on the country’s past, which arguably contaminated the production of historical films of any kind.

### **5.3. The role of accuracy and scientific history in collective memory**

Collective memory and historical films are a distant projection of history as a science, which in itself is a distant projection of the actual past. Film in particular is not only subject to the fragmented information existent of the past, but also to the obligation of creating something entertaining, dramatized, and profitable. For these and other reasons, there are different levels of accuracy in historical movies.

Folk, imagination, and legend are central in many Asian historical films. As “visual media production has to reconstruct the past using fragmental documentation” (Wu, 2022, p. 125), the use of fiction is essential to glue the historical narrative together. Initially, this research was meant to exclude non-accurate films. Although efforts were made to avoid extreme fictionalization, e.g. mythical animals, superpowers, etc., it would have been impossible and incorrect not to include movies partially fictionalized, as so are most Asian historical movies.

The line between myth and the actual past is often blurred in the context of collective memory, as many societies perceive undocumented events, disregarded by academia as mere legends, as something that actually happened. For instance, the Hindi movie *Padmaavat* (2018) is based on a 16th-century fiction poem about a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Rajput queen, Padmavati, who committed *Jauhar* (self-immolation) along with 10,000 other women to save their honour from the greed of the Muslim ruler Allaudin Khilji. For this reason, “Padmavati is deified and held as a symbol of female honour among Rajputs even today.” (Tilak, 2018) However, “while Khilji is a historical figure, most historians believe there is very little evidence Padmavati existed in real life. But some historians, largely based in Rajasthan, disagree.” (*Ibid*)

The possibility that Padmavati could have not existed in the past, among other reasons, caused uproar in Rajasthani and other north Indian communities, calling for the boycott of the film, and threatening the director and the cast (Sharma, 2018). These communities perceive the queen as a factual historical character, and not as a legendary queen, protagonist of a Sufi poem. Accurate or not, these interpretations must be understood as central components of culture and identity. Inaccuracies are recurrent in the data source and should not be omitted from the analysis, as they illustrate important information about collective memory.

Accuracy has been at the centre of the debate on historiophoty. Hayden White (1988) argues that film will never be as accurate and truthful to historical events as written discourse, constituting the most significant obstacle to the use of film to understand history. Rosenstone (1988) disagrees, pointing to the relative importance of accuracy and scientific history in how society understands the past, which is something overlooked by most historians, who tend to obsess over the flaws of a movie instead of understanding its potential to transmit history to a large audience. “(...) the chief importance of these works may lie less in their accuracy of detail (...) than in the way they choose to represent the past” (Rosenstone, 1988, p. 1183).

The historical films analysed in this study allow a contribution to this debate starting by illustrating the role of historical accuracy and its relationship with the success and reception of each movie. After qualifying the success and reception, and quantifying the level of accuracy of each plot,<sup>9</sup> the relationship between these variables was clear.<sup>10</sup> The higher the accuracy, the more positive the reactions and reviews were. Regarding the success of the movie in terms of box office, streams in on-demand platforms, and international popularity, ‘somewhat

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<sup>9</sup> Accuracy was quantified on a scale from 1 to 10, based on history specialist’s reviews and articles on the film.

<sup>10</sup> See Figures 11 to 14

successful' had an average accuracy of 7, and 'successful' had around 6.8, being the unsuccessful films the least accurate ones. Thus, on the surface, it is possible to conclude that accuracy is generally preferred by the audience. What explains this phenomenon? What does this correlation mean for collective memory?

The answer may lie in the many types of reasons motivating the lack of accuracy of a movie. Among the analysed data, 8 films were identified with an accuracy below 5, on a scale from 1 to 10. Among these 8 films: 3 were an adaptation from a history novel or manga; 2 were *Wuxia*, meaning an East Asian martial arts film using history as a backdrop; 2 were the product of conscious political manipulation of history; and 1 was a folk tale. As a disclaimer, belonging to these categories does not mean that the movie is inaccurate, as there are other films based on novels, for instance, that can portray an accurate historical narrative.

From these 8 films, the most controversial and unsuccessful were the ones distorted by political biases, while *Wuxia* and the folk tale had the more positive outcomes. Thus, it is possible to assume that the political manipulation of history is one of the main reasons explaining the audience's preference for accuracy. Among these controversial movies, there is the Kazakh movie *Tomiris* (2019) and the Malay movie *Mat Kilau* (2022), mentioned in the previous finding for manipulating the historical narrative, and, by association, the collective memory of the audience, generating contestation.

The reception of the plot's category named 'no information', which obtained the lowest accuracy levels of the database, corresponds to films where no information can be found about how the audience reacted to the historical aspects of the narrative. From the three movies, two are Japanese and Vietnamese movies, apart from a *Wuxia* new-school film *The Assassin* (2015), directed to an audience interested in new-wave movies, instead of the historical aspect. Apart from this isolated case, the lack of information on the reception of the plot is centred in the two countries where collective trauma was identified as an obstacle to historical film production. This is not a coincidence, as a society without interest in remembering the past would not be concerned about accuracy and historical details. Confirming the previous finding, accuracy does not serve any role nor is expected from film, since the past does not play a vital role in Vietnamese and Japanese societies, which tend to create taboos around historical topics, as seen previously.



To sum up, accuracy can have different roles in collective memory and its relevance is nuanced. Two different examples can illustrate the distinct roles accuracy can play in collective memory – *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), a case where the inaccuracies were well received, and *Princess Khutulun* (2021), a movie that was poorly received due to the adopted interpretation.

Rezavi's (2022) study case on *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008) focuses on the inaccuracies of these movies while neglecting the meaning behind each flaw or distorted perspective. The understanding of Akbar in an overly positive light is rooted in South Asia's need for a political role model in times of social instability. Although "Akbar was actually not so benevolent at all times as he is found to be in *Jodhaa Akbar*" (Rezavi, 2022, p. 242) this image of the Mughal emperor as a fair ruler who accepted all faiths and social classes is directly correlated to Indian contemporary society, admiring a figure whose acts are still relevant (and, for some, needed) today (Vera & Kurniasari, 2016, p. 1382). For this reason, *Jodhaa Akbar* was extremely successful and praised for the historical view and message it transmitted.

*Princess Khutulun* (2021) is a Mongolian film about the princess heir of the Great Khan, one of the most admired women figures in Central Asian history until today. This film opted to focus on Khutulun's fictional love story with Ablai and her efforts to protect the golden sutra. This choice was appointed by many as the reason for the film's lack of success, even by one of the screenwriters, who has written an extensive reflection on the team's errors (N.A., 2021a). Khutulun is praised for her ambition, independence from marriage obligations, fighting skills, and wealth. "Khutulun had been a part of Mongolia's popular culture before the twenty-first century, she has been mainly remembered in relation to Mongolian traditional wrestling" (Biran, 2020, p. 73). Because the princess is today perceived as a role model for these reasons, the movie's narrative on a partly fictionalized love story was the cause for the contestation of this perspective, as Khutulun fulfils a different role in collective memory.

These are just two of many examples where historical inaccuracy can transmit insights into collective memory. To conclude this argument and tie it into the historiophoty debate, although fictionalization can be an obstacle for historiophoty, it is an asset for the study of collective memory and contestation. As Rosenstone (1988) argued, accuracy is not essential to all historical films, as they can take many forms and be inspired by fictionalized elements, such as novels and folk tales, or simply relay history to a second plan, as *Wuxia*, or films from Japan or Vietnam, and still be worthy of scholarly attention. On the other hand, White's (1988)

argument of valuing accuracy in historical film can also be confirmed by the overall preference of the audience for accurate films, particularly despising films that have been manipulated by politics, or that have preferred an alternative view, omitting the most popular perspective on a personality or event, as seen in *Princess Khutulun* (2021). Thus, accuracy should be tackled as a multi-layered phenomenon by scholarship, valuing the insights of fiction, instead of bluntly rejecting it.

#### **5.4. The duality of cyclical and linear time conceptions in film and memory**

In the context of South Korean historical filmography, Hwang (2023) identifies the presence of Buddhism, the oldest textual and institutionalised religious-philosophical tradition on the peninsula, in the cyclical and transitory conceptions of time depicted in many films. The author argues that Buddhist thinking is hidden behind metaphoric, allegoric and semiotic frameworks, such as the organization of flashback sequences, the connection between events in different timelines, and occasionally, reincarnation stories. These elements are introduced almost subconsciously by the directors, who are part of a Buddhist mental framework shared by most South Koreans, and merge with more modern linear ways of perceiving time, as argued by Hwang (2023, pp. 4-5):

*A sense of cyclical time takes a major role, often integrating differing historical settings or varying chronologies within the same setting, and thus highlights the recurring presence of Koreans' collective past. In such a way, circular notions of time powerfully modify the overarching dynamic of cumulative and linear progression, especially in films set in the modern era.*

The author believes that this phenomenon is more common in modern-era historical films as mixing and merging different timetables seems more feasible when the chronological gap is not so great.

Based on Hwang's (2023) reflection, this section aims to identify traces of cyclicity and linearity in the movies' narratives and discuss the impact time conceptions can have on collective memory. Firstly, the definition of cyclicity needs to be extended. Although Hwang (2023) only identified flashbacks, connections between different timetables, and reincarnation, cyclical time could also include legacy and generational elements, such as the repetition of a

sequence or conflict across generations, and the eternity of suffering or happiness after physical death, for instance. By contrast, linearity could be defined as a narrative with a tragic or happy ending, where the conflict is resolved, and the narrative's universe progresses at the end.

After qualifying the films based on these aspects, 7 presented a cyclical conception of time, 11 depicted a linear narrative, and 12 did not have a defined temporal logic. Mandarin and Kazakh movies are prevalently linear, while Indian and South Korean movies are considerably more inclined to cyclical narratives. A significant percentage of Southeast Asian movies do not have defined time conceptions or appear to be in a middle term between the two, namely Thai, Indonesian, and Filipino movies.<sup>11</sup>

One example of each type of narrative - *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (2004) and *Shadow* (2018) - can illustrate the dichotomy between the two different time conceptions and depictions of time. These films illustrate the implied meaning of Vedic and Buddhist conceptions of time versus the modern linear paradigm, respectively. *Puteri Gunung Ledang* is a Malay movie based on the folk love story between Gusti Putri, a Hindu princess from Java and Huan Toah, a Muslim admiral from Melaka. The lovers are not destined to be together. Gusti Putri was cursed by the Sultan of Melaka, who wished to marry the princess but was refused. She shall stay alone in Mount Ledang and never meet anyone after dawn, or the visitor would die. Huan Toah tries to visit her every day but fails continuously, as the princess avoids meeting her lover, as it might result in his death. The narrative does not have an end and the conflict is prolonged. This legend still survives, and Malaccans believe that every day, the admiral persists in visiting the princess, repeating the cycle of suffering and sacrifice constantly – reminiscing the legend of Sisyphus.

*Shadow* is a Chinese movie depicting the fictional story of a shadow (a double of an important individual) during the violent times of the Three Kingdoms era. Ying, a poor wanderer, is the double of an influential commander who is hiding in a cave to protect himself from being assassinated by his many enemies. Ying lives an agonizing life, putting himself in danger for someone who mistreats him. After defeating the enemy kingdom, the shadow kills his master and the king, becoming the ruler. In contrast with the previous example, this narrative presents a setting, a conflict, and a definitive resolution that ends the conflict and improves the cinematic universe, as the shadow climbed the social ladder, and the villains were

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<sup>11</sup> See Figure 15

defeated. It illustrates a progressive worldview, where the passage of time generally means an improvement of the cosmos.

What justifies both temporal understandings? What can be said about the countries and regions they are connected to? Cyclicity is present in India, South Korea and Malaysia. As Hwang (2023) argued, the Korean case can be justified by the importance of Buddhism on social mentalities in the country. In the case of India and Malaysia, countries with a strong Vedic legacy, it is possible to argue that the Hinduist time conceptions, which are also at the core of Buddhist time conceptions, could have influenced these film's narratives, and, by association, their understanding of history. "In Indian philosophy, the "wheel of time" (Kalachakra) sees the ages of the universe come around over and over again" (Thomson, 2023). This idea grounds the understanding that history is composed of never-ending cycles. Although narratives of suffering cycles, intra-dynastic conflicts, revenge legacies, or eternity are not exclusive to Vedic and Buddhist societies, their impact on the collective memory of these communities is undeniable.

Linearity has likely emerged from Judaic-Christian mentalities, later reapplied by Marx to history, who believed that "history is inexorably moving towards a better world" (Thomson, 2023). Either through tragic or happy endings – apocalypse or utopia – there is a belief that conflicts end. China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Vietnam all share the same element, which is likely the cause for linearity – Marxism. Either through the influence of the USSR or Maoism, these countries experienced (or still experience) some form of socialism, that likely engrained linearity into collective memory, substituting, juxtaposing, or merging with cyclical temporal conceptions in countries with Buddhist influence, such as China and Mongolia.

Some of these movies transmit clear messages close to Buddhist and Vedic philosophy for the case of cyclicity, and Marxist theory for the case of linearity. The Vietnamese movie *The Last Wife* (2023), depicts a conflict between oppressed peasants and the corrupted elite. This class struggle ends with the defeat of the governor, and the liberation of the peasant woman and her family from poverty. The Hindi movie *Bajirao Mastani* (2015) depicts a tragic love story between the Marathi Peshwa Bajirao and the Muslim-Hindu princess Mastani. The conflict is not resolved, and the lovers are believed to die together and be reincarnated. Death is not the end of suffering and love, being heavily inspired by Vedic reincarnation cycles.

Regarding Hwang's (2023, p. 177) observation that cyclical narratives would be more common in recent past plots (1980s-2010s), the same cannot be identified in the data, as cyclicity was only present in films depicting the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>12</sup>

To conclude this finding, temporal and cosmic interpretations strongly impact the societal perception of the past, as it is mirrored in the analysed films. Its direct impact on memory might be too philosophical and not suited for this research. Nonetheless, there is a clear connection dichotomy between linear and cyclical understandings, providing a new perspective on historical film and memory.

### **5.5. Transnational historical movies as the cultural cement for newly formed regional alliances?**

As noted by Yang, Clini and Dasgupta (2020), South-South economic and diplomatic cooperation has been in effect since the anti-colonial movement and extended to the non-aligned movement throughout the Cold War. ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) are the two most successful examples in Asia of regional economic initiatives. However, these institutions do not provide a specific cultural cement. "This can be traced to the uneven colonial experiences and plurality of Asia or to national rivalries that have endured the passage of time" (Yang et al., 2020, p. 178).

Both ASEAN and SAARC seek to build a sentiment of belonging in their members and lack the cultural integration to do so. Although the cultural connections among the countries of these regions are undoubtable, their institutional integration is still weak. These younger institutions seek inspiration from the most successful example of regional integration, the European Union. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN is promoting increased integration, which, for example, is expressed in *ASEAN Vision 2020* (Jönsson, 2010, p. 42). In the case of SAARC, strong bilateral rivalries (e.g., India and Pakistan) are the biggest obstacle. During the 18th SAARC summit, the need for cooperation in cultural and artistic projects was at the centre of discussion (Kumar & Goyal, 2016, p. 131). However, these regional integration policies have not produced the expected results. As Jönsson (2010) concluded, "the quest for a regional identity is a political (elite) project and without an accommodating, inclusive and pluralistic

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<sup>12</sup> See Figure 16

society, a common regional identity will be hard – if not impossible – to create” (Jönsson, 2010, p. 70).

When analysing the “transnationalness” of cinema, memory, and history in East Asia, Weiss (2021) recognizes the power of film in uniting a region. “As a strategy, shared Asian identity may be a way for East Asian films to bridge national trauma and unite as a region” (Weiss, 2021, p. 130). Yang, Clini and Dasgupta (2020) identified the same potential in cinematic co-productions, arguing that they can be used to better diplomatic relations and the overall image of a foreign country and its nationals in a society. Thus, can one argue that co-productions, historical film, and the invocation of a shared past, culture, and memory are important region-building tools?

This argument has many flaws. The movies analysed in this research suggest otherwise – the most popular historical films in each country tend to villainize neighbouring countries, depict traumatic conflicts between them, and generate negative reactions in the “demonized side” of the story. Starting by the SAARC region, the Hindi movie *Panipat* (2019) is an insightful example of this phenomenon. Ahmad Shah Abdali, considered the founding father of Afghanistan, is the villain of the story. His goal is to become the Emperor of Hindustan by defeating the Marathis and supporting the decaying Mughal Empire. Abdali is depicted as a ruthless, violent, and unpredictable individual. He does not provoke trust or admiration in his troops, who easily desert and betray him. This movie was extremely criticised in Afghanistan, one of the biggest markets for Indian movies. It involved protests, diplomatic letters and worsened the relations between the two countries. In social media, the hashtag #boycottpanipat has gone viral, especially in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other Muslim countries (Mohmand, 2019).

In the case of the ASEAN region, the Thai movies *Bang Rajan* (2004) and *Suriyothai* (2001) depict the villanization of the Burmese as a collective enemy of Thailand. In the first example, the Burmese are simply demonized for invading Siam. Their emotions, characteristics, or intentions are not at all explored, being only identified by the white cloth around their heads. By not developing the antagonists’ role, *Bang Rajan* promotes the idea of the Burmese as a collective enemy, whose acts cannot be explained. *Suriyothai*, one of the most successful Thai movies ever, follows a similar pattern, although not as evident.

The online reviews of the movie do not hide the anti-Burmese sentiment either. Some Thai netizens argued that the horror *Burma Provoked in Siam* is today being paid for in the form of dictatorship, while Thailand is thriving in a democracy. Lung Jan (2022; 2023), a Burmese netizen, has affirmed in her popular blog that these two movies are an example that “anti-Myanmar resentment is still deeply rooted in Thai collective memory, oral traditions, historical literature (...) and movies” (Jan, 2022, automatically translated from Burmese).

These two examples illustrate the rivalries between some ASEAN and SAARC countries and how historical films can worsen or pass these feelings of hatred to the next generation. Thus, the question remains unanswered – are films useful in region-building, or does nation-building speak louder when it comes to defining the plot of a movie? For cinematography to work along with regionalism, a complete shift of paradigm would be necessary. Nationalism, an ideology strongly rooted in fabricating foreign enemies to unify a community and strengthen an identity, would need to be relayed to a second plan. Since this is unlikely to happen, film, especially historical film, does not appear as a reliable tool for region-building in newly formed institutions, such as ASEAN and SAARC.

## **5.6. Discussion and Theorization**

The findings of this thesis have diverse themes and different starting points. Nonetheless, they all share the same core foundation - collective memory in Asian historical film and its implications in the many facets of Asian societies. This last section summarizes the findings and connects them by following the logic of a spider web - the axis is collective memory and Asian historical movies, and all the ends are intertwined in some way with each other.<sup>13</sup>

Starting from the first finding, collective memory is impacted by the dichotomy between the state control of mass media to create and manipulate memories and the use of cinema to contest these “official” memories. Narratives created by autocratic political systems have implications for accuracy and regional cooperation. Firstly, manipulation means a less accurate narrative, which differs from collective remembering, generating controversy in the audience. These historical narratives may include the villainization of neighbouring countries, by reviving past rivalries and creating a national enemy, with the ultimate goal to unify the nation and build an identity around it. This hinders the creation of cultural bonds in newly

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<sup>13</sup> See figure 17.

formed regional alliances through film and memory, as it opposes members from the same group.

Historical distortions with political motivations generate contestation from independent groups, particularly prevalent in democratized countries. These interpretations tend to highlight errors of the past that might be repeated in the present. More or less explicitly, they illustrate a cyclical understanding of history, fearing that society might be retroceding instead of advancing, in contrast to linear conceptions of time, suggesting that society is always progressing. Linearity is generally more present in regions with Marxist influence, both in the present and the past, corresponding with some of the countries where the state is influential over mass media. Thus, linearity can explain why reviving past enemies in the present can be justified in these cases – historical elements are perpetuated in time *as-is*, while cyclical logics regard historical elements as temporary and subject to constant change, although they might return in a different form.

Trauma that leads to collective forgetting impacts the production of historical films, as topics related to a traumatic past become taboo and history is relayed to a second plan in mass media. This aspect means less accuracy in films and less importance given to accuracy by the audience. Nevertheless, trauma can also have the opposite impact leading to the production of movies on a traumatic topic. When the topic is a historical event shared by different countries, the production of historical movies (e.g., co-productions) can create a shared cultural platform through which regionalism can be built.

Returning to the logic of the spider web, these are just some of the links between the findings, but other connections are possible as they all share the same centre – collective memory and Asian historical films.

## **6. Conclusion**

This thesis has addressed the main research problem of how Asian societies perceive their past. Through the use of historical films as data, borderless Asia as theory, and historiophoty as method, this study has contributed into the field of collective memory. Many patterns emerged from the research and were transformed into theoretical premises. This last chapter is a summary of the findings and discussion, followed by a reflection on the research process.



Four patterns and one question were discussed in the findings of this thesis. Firstly, the dichotomy between state-controlled media and independent contestation has highlighted the impact political systems have on collective remembering, as in countries such as China and Kazakhstan, the political authorities can manipulate the historical narrative through funding and censorship. On the other side, democratic countries such as South Korea and Taiwan are prone to contest these “official” memories. This first finding on political systems and film is strongly connected to other aspects. Regarding accuracy, while political biases tend to distort the past, the use of film and public responses to film as contestation stories allows for confrontation of distortions of the past for political benefit in the present. While linearity is more recurrent in countries with a socialist legacy, cyclical understanding of time is more common among regions with Buddhist and Vedic backgrounds.

Accuracy’s role in collective memory is multi-layered, and both Rosenstone (1988) and White (1988) were correct in their arguments when applied to the Asian context. Although Asian societies prefer accuracy in films, less accurate stories also have an important role in memory, especially legends and folk tales. Thus, fictionalization should not be perceived as an enemy of history and historians, but as an important tool to understand collective memory. Inaccuracy is particularly relevant in countries with collective trauma, where historical films are limited in number, and the past carries painful scars, such as Vietnam and Japan. However, trauma can also have a different impact on societies. Instead of collective forgetting, the production of films can enhance the remembering of tragedies, depending on the participation of that country in the traumatic event, fulfilling the role of perpetrator, victim, or both.

The question of historical films and memory as the cultural cement for regionalism has remained without a certain answer, as the findings highlight positive and negative points. Nonetheless, this thesis has contributed to a multiplicity of debates brought up in the literature: the relevance of accuracy; the influence of time conceptions in memory, the possibility of conducting a borderless project on Asia; and to apply transnational cinema onto multidisciplinary research, such as the study of memory; among others. However, this is an introductory study on these topics, that only scratched the surface of an immense body of knowledge, available to be explored through other theories, approaches, and methods. Additionally, the data analysed was a representative sample of an extensive and cumulating list of historical films produced in Asia, that could benefit from a broader dataset.

This thesis has proven that it is fruitful to conduct borderless research on Asia. Particularly, the fields of historical cinema, memory, and historiophoty have a lot to gain from a borderless approach. Returning to the initial citation from Rosenstone (1988) which introduced this thesis, substituting text for motion pictures has proven to be an effective means to understand how Asians perceive their past, bringing the historian and the social scientist closer to the object of analysis while still allowing a bird's-eye view.

# Appendix

## I. Database composition

FILM INFO				HISTORY			
name	year	director	country	language	main event	century	date
Shadow	2018	Yimou Zhang	China	Mandarin	Conflict during the Three Kingdoms era	3	220-280
The Battle of Lake Changjin	2021	Kaige Chen; Tsui Hark; Dante Lam	China	Mandarin	The Battle of Chosin Reservoir	20	1950
The Flowers of War	2011	Yimou Zhang	China	Mandarin	The Nanjing Massacre	20	1937
The Warlords	2007	Peter Hon-sun Chan	Hong Kong; China	Mandarin	The Taiping Rebellion	19	1860
The Assassin	2015	Hsiao-Hsien Hou	Hong Kong; Taiwan; China	Mandarin	The life of Assassin Nie Yinniang during the Lushan Rebellion	9	812
Bajirao Mastani	2015	Sanjay Leela Bhansali	India	Hindi	The love between Peshwa Bajirao and Mastani	18	1720-1740
Asoka	2001	Santosh Sivan	India	Hindi	The life of King Asoka	-3	-280
Panipat	2019	Ashutosh Gowariker	India	Hindi	The Third Battle of Panipat	18	1761
Pawankhind	2022	Digpal Lanjekar	India	Marathi	The Siege of Panhala and the Battle of Pavan Khind	17	1660
Ponniyin Selvan I	2022	Mani Ratnam	India	Tamil	Succession conflict in the Chola Empire	10	950
Jodhaa Akbar	2008	Ashutosh Gowariker	India	Hindi	The love between Emperor Akbar and Jodhaa	16	1580
Kartini: Princess of Java	2017	Hanung Bramantyo	Indonesia	Javanese	The life of Activist Kartini	19	1893-1900
Sultan Agung	2005	Hanung Bramantyo; X. Jo	Indonesia	Indonesian	The life of Sultan Agung	17	1613-1646
Buya Hamka	2023	Fajar Bustomi	Indonesia	Indonesian	The life of the Activist Hamka	20	1930-1960
Kingdom	2019	Shinsuke Sato	Japan	Japanese	The life of Warrior Li Xin	-3	-228
Tomiris	2019	Akan Satayev	Kazakhstan	Kazakh	The life of Queen Tomiris	-6	-
Nomad: The Warrior	2005	Sergei Bodrov	Kazakhstan	Kazakh	The life of Ablai Khan	18	1730
Puteri Gunung Ledang	2004	Saw Teong Hin	Malaysia	Malay	The love between Gusti Putri and Huan Tuah	15	-
Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan	2022	Syamsul Yusof	Malaysia	Malay	The life of Warrior Mat Kilau and the Pahang uprising	19	1892
Princess Khutulun	2021	Shuudertsetseg Baasanjargal; Shuudertsetseg Baatarsuren	Mongolia	Mongolian	The life of Princess Khutulun	13	1260-1306
Felix Manalo	2015	Joel Lamangan	Philippines	Tagalog	The life of Religious figure Felix Manalo	20	1900-1963
The Fortress	2017	Hwang Dong-hyuk	South Korea	Korean	The Qing invasion of Joseon	17	1636
The Great Battle	2018	Kwang-shik Kim	South Korea	Korean	The Siege of Ansi	7	645
The Throne	2015	Joon-ik Lee	South Korea	Korean	Succession conflict between King Yeongjo and his heir Sado	18	1750
The Admiral: Roaring Currents	2014	Han-min Kim	South Korea	Korean	The life of Admiral Yi Sun-sin and the Battle of Myeongnyang	16	1597
Untold Herstory	2022	Zero Chou	Taiwan	Mandarin	Women resistance in the White Terror period	20	1953
Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale	2011	Te-Sheng Wei	Taiwan	Seediq	The Wushe Incident	20	1930
Bang Rajan	2004	Tani Titikul	Thailand	Thai	The battles of Bang Rachan	18	1767
Man Suang	2023	Ning Dhubtien; Chatchai Ketnust; Pond Withayakhajornmet	Thailand	Thai	Political conflict during the end of King Rama III's reign	19	1851
The Last Wife	2023	Victor Vu	Vietnam	Vietnamese	A love story during the Nguyen Dynasty	19	-

CHARACTERS		PLOT				SEMIOtics			MESSAGE		RECEPTION	NOTES	
main character	villain	setting	development	climax	resolution	symbols	icons	indexes	focal point	historical interpretation			
role	characteristics	emotions	role	characteristics	emotions	topic	emotion	topic	emotion	topic	emotion	topic	emotion

Figure 1. Excel Database

MOVIES BY LANGUAGE	
language	Number of films
Mandarin	6
Korean	4
Hindi	4
Thai	2
Malay	2
Kazakh	2
Indonesian	2
Seediq	1
Tamil	1
Tagalog	1
Vietnamese	1
Japanese	1
Mongolian	1
Javanese	1
Marathi	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>30</b>

Figure 2. Movies by language

MOVIES BY COUNTRY	
Countries	Number of films
India	6
South Korea	4
Indonesia	3
China	3
Taiwan	2
Malaysia	2
Kazakhstan	2
Thailand	2
Hong Kong; China	1
Philippines	1
Mongolia	1
Hong Kong; Taiwan; China	1
Vietnam	1
Japan	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>30</b>

Figure 3. Movies by country

MOVIES BY CENTURY	
century	Number of films
20	6
18	5
19	5
17	3
16	2
-3	2
3	1
9	1
15	1
7	1
-6	1
10	1
13	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>30</b>

Figure 4. Movies by century

MOVIES BY YEAR	
Year	Number of films
2015	4
2022	4
2019	3
2023	3
2011	2
2005	2
2004	2
2018	2
2017	2
2021	2
2001	1
2007	1
2014	1
2008	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>30</b>

Figure 5. Movies by year of release

MOVIES BY THEME	
main event	Number of films
Wars and belic events	11
The life of political/military figure	9
Love story	4
Succession conflict	3
The life of Activist/religious figure	3
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>30</b>

Figure 6. Movies by theme

FILM INDUSTRIES BY COUNTRY				
Production country	Approx. Number of Movies*	Average Production Budget*	Worldwide Box Office*	Number of historical movies** (2001-today)
China	2911	\$36 M	\$50 724 M	274
Japan	2022	\$31 M	\$18 637 M	13
South Korea	1943	\$16 M	\$9 817 M	82
India	2669	\$15 M	\$8 225 M	336
Hong Kong	487	\$24 M	\$7 502 M	25
Taiwan	184	\$13 M	\$1 024 M	14
Thailand	151	\$7 M	\$229 M	25
Philippines	177	-	\$130 M	28
Malaysia	44	\$25 M	\$53 M	22
Kazakhstan	34	\$29 M	\$29 M	17
Indonesia	84	\$950k	\$19 M	38
Mongolia	19	\$30 M	\$14 M	9
Vietnam	48	\$1 M	\$9 M	15

\*The Numbers (2024) \*\*IMDb's search results

Figure 7. Film industries by language

FILM INDUSTRIES BY LANGUAGE			
Language	Approx. Number of Movies*	Worldwide Box Office*	Number of historical movies** (2001-today)
Mandarin	2325	\$49 307 M	144
Japanese	1769	\$17 524 M	13
Korean	1788	\$9 532 M	75
Hindi	1137	\$7 522 M	125
Tamil	466	\$755 M	15
Thai	125	\$540 M	22
Vietnamese	-	\$319 M	14
Mongolian	-	\$167 M	10
Tagalog	113	\$133 M	11
Indonesian	-	\$105 M	35
Marathi	-	\$8 M	37
Kazakh	-	\$5 M	10
Malay	-	\$321k	20

\*The Numbers (2024) \*\*IMDb's search results

Figure 8. Film industries by country

## II. Data analysis

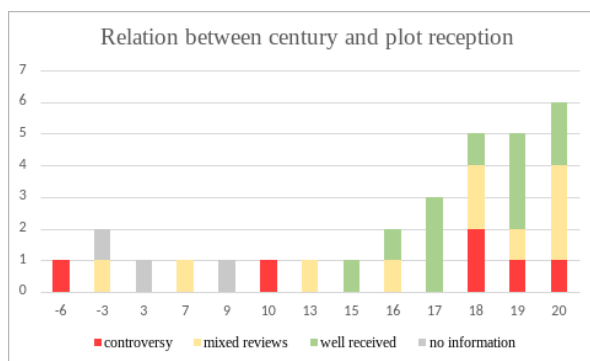


Figure 9. Century and plot reception

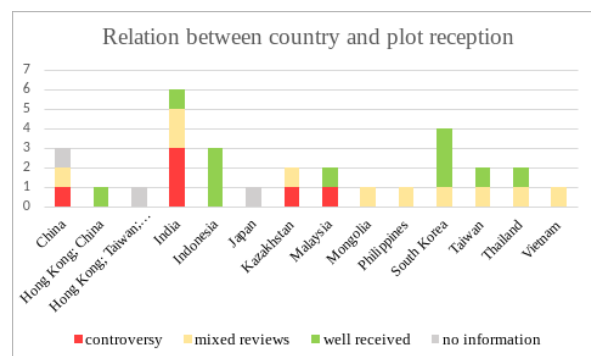


Figure 10. Country and plot reception

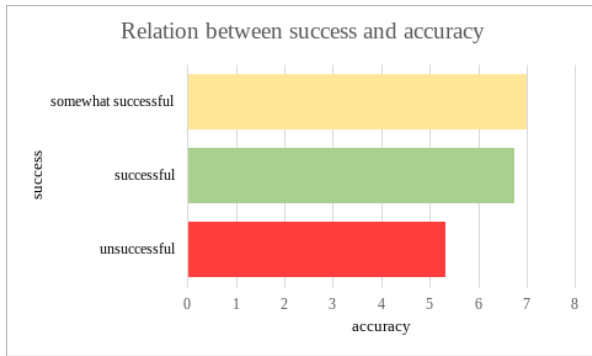


Figure 11. Success and accuracy

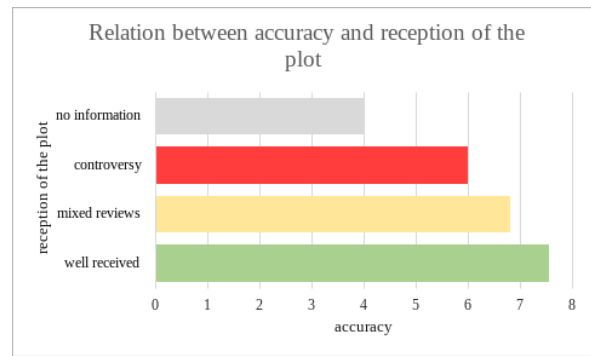


Figure 12. Accuracy and reception of the plot

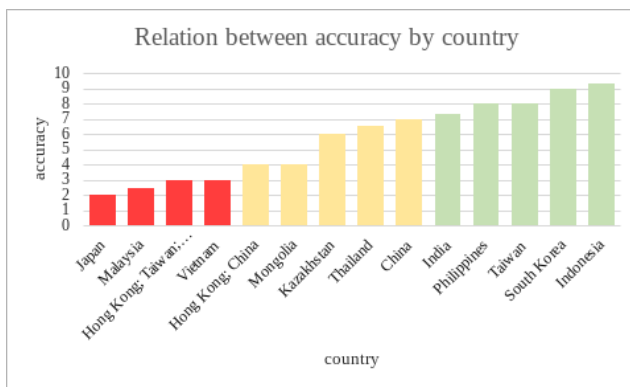


Figure 13. Accuracy and country

inaccuracy	controversy	mixed reviews	no information	well received	Grand Total
adaptation from novel/manga		1	2		3
wuxia			1	1	2
political distortion	2				2
folk tale				1	1
Grand Total	2	1	3	2	8

Figure 14. Reception by inaccuracy type

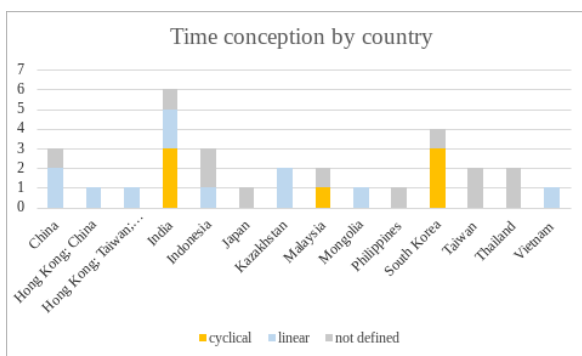


Figure 15. Time conception by country

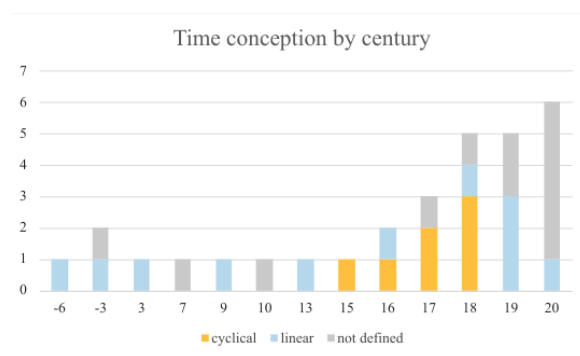
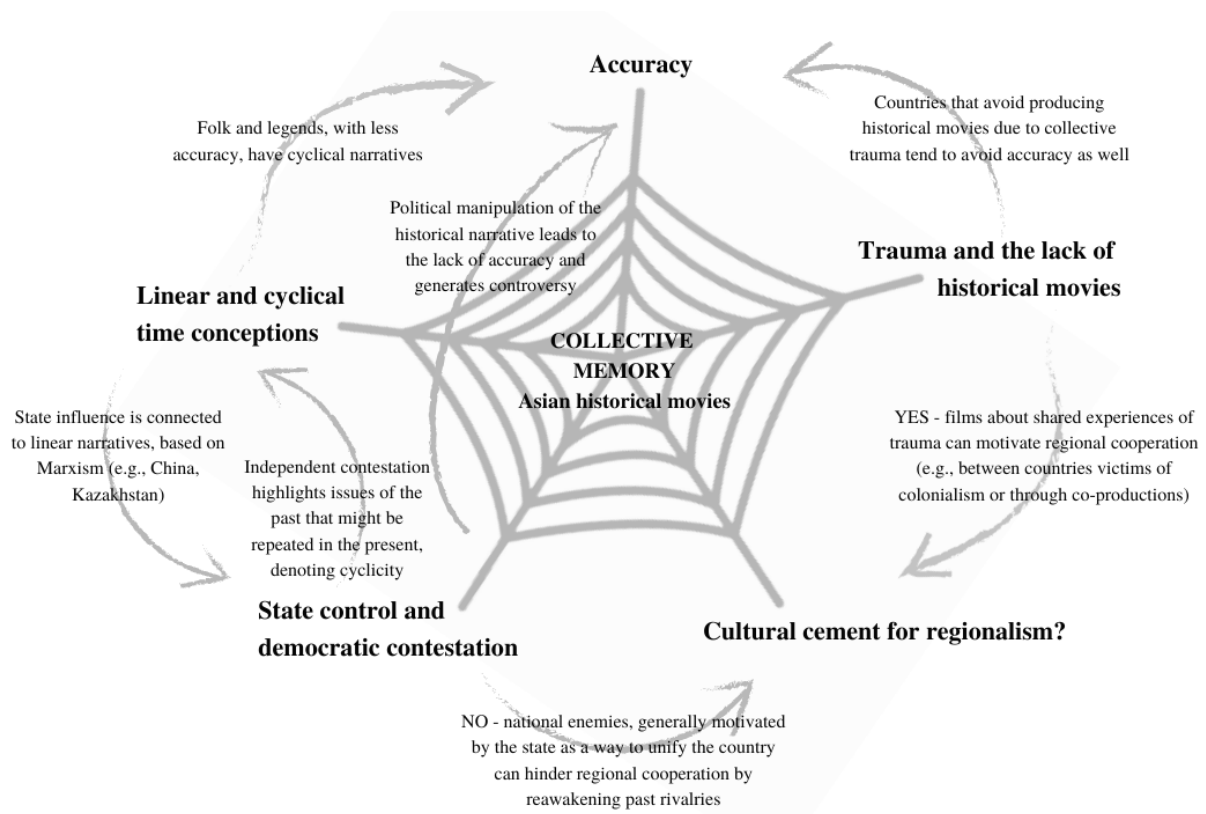


Figure 16. Time conception by century



**Figure 17.** Web of connections between the findings of the thesis

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