

Mediating forgetting as memory activism: The *Hedao* community's independent documentary and online activism in contemporary China

Memory Studies

2025, Vol. 18(2) 456–474

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/17506980251320916

journals.sagepub.com/home/mss**Mingkun Li** 

King's College London, UK

Abstract

Memory activism under authoritarian regimes remains underexplored. In contemporary China, counter-memories face systematic censorship and repression. How can activism persist in such conditions? What do activists aim to remember and how do they ensure the survival of their work? This article examines the *Hedao* community's documentary and digital archiving efforts (2012–2024) to promote remembrance of their experiences as child labourers during the Cultural Revolution and their struggles for compensation under suppression. Through textual analyses of three documentary series, thematic analysis of 73 archives and document research, I argue that their memory work engages in what I term *mediating forgetting*. Drawing on amnesiology, I propose that forgetting – the reduced accessibility and availability of certain information – is not merely a state to be countered but also both an object of remembrance and a strategic tool for memory activists. First, the *Hedao* community's documentaries expose how contested memories were deliberately erased or concealed by the regime and its consequence, fostering awareness and reflection on forced forgetting. Second, their digital archives safeguard censored counter-memories. Third, the community deliberately preserves their work in hard-to-access digital spaces. This strategy, termed 'status of latency', allows them to evade immediate suppression while ensuring their work remains intact for future rediscovery, sustaining the potential for mnemonic and social change over time. This study offers a comparative perspective for current discussions on memory activism and opens up a new opportunity to explore the significance of forgetting, rather than only remembering, in memory activism studies.

Keywords

China, digital archive, documentary film, forgetting, *Hedao* community, latency, memory activism, memory in authoritarian context, Third Front

Corresponding author:

Mingkun Li, King's College London, Strand London, WC2R 2LS, UK.

Email: mingkun.li@kcl.ac.uk

Studies on memory activism – defined as ‘the strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels’ (Gutman and Wüstenberg, 2023: 5) – are heavily rooted in the Western model of the sovereign nation-state (Gutman and Wüstenberg, 2023: 10). Recent research has explored memory activism in non-Western contexts (Amin, 2023; Black et al., 2024; Mandolessi, 2023), but these largely focus on democratic or post-authoritarian contexts, with limited discussion of authoritarian regimes like China (Hartnett and Dodge, 2021). In non-authoritarian contexts, the ‘politics of regret’ creates a climate where contested pasts can be acknowledged, and memory activism is allowed despite various challenges (Gutman, 2017; Olick, 2007; Sodaro, 2023).

In China, the regime tightly controls the representation of contested pasts, such as the Cultural Revolution (CR, 1966–1976), in official narratives and spaces (Chen, 2020). In recent years, activists have worked to preserve and share popular (*minjian*) memories – those memories that are different from or oppose the official narrative – through alternative media, such as documentaries (Edwards, 2015; Meng, 2016), independent journals (Béja, 2019) and online forums (Liu, 2019). Yet, in the last decade, these memories have been branded as ‘historical nihilism’, posing threats to ‘ideological security’ and were censored or repressed more systematically and seriously (Xu et al., 2022). The CR Museum and other media challenging the official narrative have faced successive bans since 2016 (Veg, 2019: 14), while 2 million items related to ‘cyber historical nihilism’ were removed as part of the ‘Qinglang’ campaign initiated by China’s Cyberspace Administration (CAC) in 2021 (Mai, 2021).

How does memory activism function under the ‘memory loss’ context? What do activists aim to remember? How do they ensure the continued survival of their work? To address these questions, I turn to the *Hedao* community, who have been using documentaries and digital archives since 2012 to preserve and share their experiences as child labourers during the Cultural Revolution and their struggles for compensation in contemporary China. The *Hedao* community is comprised of members of the Third Front students (*sanxianxuebing*/TFS). The Third Front movement (1964–1980) was a large-scale migration of technology and workers for war preparation in China (Meyskens, 2020). As part of this, 25,800 junior high school graduates were mobilised by Shaanxi Revolutionary Committee to build the Xiangyu Railway in Shaanxi, earning them the name ‘Third Front students’. These youths endured harsh labour conditions, leading to numerous deaths and lifelong disabilities, yet received little recognition or compensation (Wen, n.d.). Since 2011, they have petitioned for compensation from the government, but their efforts were suppressed in 2014 (Weiquanwang, 2015).

Laohumiao (aka Zhang Shihe), a prominent citizen journalist, activist and member of the TFS, began filming their stories in 2012. More TFS joined the film crew, and it became a small, informal and fluid community of under 10 people, which I refer to as the *Hedao* community in this article.¹ By 2020, they had produced more than 20 documentaries about the memories of child labour experiences and the struggles for compensation (Laohumiao, 2020a). In 2018, they established a Bulletin Board System (BBS) website, *Hedao*, to preserve more TFS memories like archives and literature.² They claim to promote democratisation in China through the above memory work (Hedao, n.d.). Despite facing censorship, surveillance (Hedao Crew, 2019) and the authorities’ complete ban on other larger platforms associated with TFS (Third Front Student Community, 2020; Tianshui Cyber Police, 2021), their work persists, with the website and most films still available as of June 2024.³

This article explores how the *Hedao* community’s media practices contribute to memory activism. Using textual analyses of three documentary series, thematic analysis of 73 archives and document research, I argue that their activist memory works engage in what I term ‘mediating forgetting’. Inspired by the concept of ‘amnesiology’, I first redefine and complicate the notion of

forgetting, placing it at the centre of discussions on memory activism. Forgetting is not merely an inaccessible state of the past that memory activists attempt to commemorate. Rather, it is both the object of remembering and a strategic tool employed by memory activists.

Mediating forgetting has three key meanings: first, the documentaries produced by the *Hedao* community not only preserve the memory of child labour but also reveal how and why these memories were deliberately erased or concealed, as well as their consequences in contemporary China, encouraging understanding, awareness and reflection on this forced forgetting. Second, the *Hedao* community has used digital archives to rescue counter-memories that faced censored. Third, the *Hedao* community has deliberately distributed and preserved their work in hard-to-access digital spaces. This strategy, described as ‘temporary forgetting’ or a ‘status of latency’ (Assmann, 2006), enables the community to avoid immediate suppression and censorship. By doing so, they ensure their work remains intact and available for future rediscovery, maintaining the potential to inspire mnemonic and social change over time. This study offers a comparative perspective for current discussions on memory activism and opens up a new opportunity to explore the significance of forgetting, rather than only remembering, in memory activism studies.

Introducing ‘amnesiology’ in memory activism

Ann Rigney (2012: 221) argues that forgetting deserves to be studied in its own right, as something as complex and necessary as remembering. Recent scholarship has increasingly explored the categories and effects of forgetting, highlighting its intricate relationship with remembering (Assmann, 2014; Connerton, 2008; Misztal, 2010; Nourkova and Gofman, 2024; Plate, 2016). However, in memory activism, forgetting remains a secondary concept – often seen as a byproduct or adversary of commemoration – without clear definitions or sustained analysis (Di Lellio, 2023; Kidman and O’Malley, 2020; Walters, 2023). As Rigney (2023: 21) points out, most memory studies focus on ‘the ways that ‘forgotten’ or actively suppressed memories are brought into public visibility’. To address this gap, I draw on amnesiology, which examines forgetfulness as ‘a made condition . . . that requires being studied in and for itself’ (Plate, 2016: 144).

I argue that socio-cultural forgetting is not about society functioning like a brain capable of forgetting. Instead, it is a rhetorical concept that refers to the reduced accessibility and availability of certain information and its modes of presentation within social or cultural contexts. This lack of accessibility can prevent individuals from engaging with information, leading to personal forgetfulness. Forgetting does not mean complete disappearance (unavailability); it often involves difficulty in accessing it (Singer and Conway, 2008).

Discussions of socio-cultural forgetting typically revolve around five questions: Who is involved? Forgetting may occur naturally but is often induced by actors, such as the state (Fang, 1990) or the public (Hillenbrand, 2020). What mechanisms are used? Silence (Hillenbrand, 2020), suppression (Connerton, 2008), censorship (Sun and Zhao, 2022) and distraction (Nourkova and Gofman, 2024) can all render information inaccessible. Who is affected? Identifying the groups impacted by restricted access to information is crucial. What are the consequences? Forgetting may have different implications, depending on the content, methods and affected groups (Misztal, 2010). And what is the duration? Some information may be temporarily inaccessible but later rediscovered, or vice versa.

In this article, forgetting refers to the growing inaccessibility of information that challenges China’s official historical narratives. Based on the above questions, forgetting takes various forms. Forced forgetting involves the regime’s deliberate efforts to erase or conceal memories that threaten its legitimacy. Public silence also contributes to erasure. Activists counter this by creating and preserving counter-hegemonic memories, which often remain hidden to avoid destruction. This

strategy aligns with Assmann's (2014) concept of 'preservative forgetting' or the 'status of latency', where cultural memories are stored in a temporarily inaccessible state, awaiting rediscovery to transform into 'active memory' in the future (Assmann, 2006: 221).

The primary goal of memory activism is to 'chang[e] the present view of the past' to foster social change (Gutman and Wüstenberg, 2022: 1072). However, I argue that 'publicly commemorating the past' is not the only approach. Forgetting should not merely be seen as the state of the memories that activists seek to restore; it can also serve as an object of remembrance, a strategy for activism and even a goal of activism.

First, forgetting can be an object of remembrance. Remembering forced forgetting does not aim to alter the content of public memory but to examine and expose the mechanisms of it. Public memory shapes the collective view of the past, including the representations and mechanisms that amplify, centralise, diminish or marginalise these memories. While memory activism often focusses on recovering forgotten events, it frequently overlooks the structures that facilitate their erasure. Activists can expose these mechanisms, raising awareness of how forgetting is produced and sustained and encouraging reflection and intervention.

Second, forgetting can be a strategic tool. In authoritarian contexts, public commemoration may risk total erasure by the regime. Activists often engage in what Mpofu (2023) calls clandestine remembering – preserving memories quietly, away from public visibility. Drawing from post-authoritarian cases, once-hidden memories have proven pivotal during transitional periods once rediscovered (Jelin, 2003). I reconsider these secret memory works through the lens of 'status of latency', recognising their temporary forgotten state while acknowledging the hope they will be rediscovered and intervening in public memory.

Third, forgetting can even be a goal of activism. Shaping public understanding of the past sometimes involves determining what should be forgotten, such as deconstructing hegemonic narratives (Rigney, 2023) or letting go of memories that perpetuate hatred (Gutman, 2023). This aspect, often referred to as 'constructive' or 'therapeutic forgetting' (Assmann, 2014), plays a crucial role in social transformation, although it is not the focus of this article.

Independent documentary and archive, and forgetting

Previous research on independent documentaries highlights how these practices in China serve as memory activism. As a visual cultural practice independent from official and commercial agendas (Cui, 2010), these documentaries employ a range of aesthetic approaches – such as observational oral histories (Berry and Rofel, 2010), participatory on-site filming (Robinson, 2013) and performative modes (Pernin, 2014) – to investigate and disseminate forgotten memories. These include memories of the Mao Era, as seen in Hu Jie's work and the Folk Memory Project created by the Caochangdi collective (Edwards, 2015; Meng, 2016; Pernin, 2014) and memories of ongoing issues like the rights defence movement in Ai Xiaoming's work (Zeng, 2017). Filmmakers' memory work also encompasses archives collection, film distribution and circulation (Berry and Rofel, 2010). They aim to challenge the dominant discourse and reflect on authoritarianism to contribute to social change (Edwards and Svensson, 2017).

However, there are two important aspects that have been overlooked in existing discussions: first, how do these documentaries not only represent memories, but also capture forced forgetting itself? The memories documented by these independent documentaries often exist in a state of concealment that the documentaries themselves capture. This has been mentioned by previous scholars, but generally as a side note rather than a dedicated exploration. Examples include documentaries capturing contemporary ignorance about the CR (Edwards, 2015: 90) and how mainstream media conceal the darker aspects of the Sichuan earthquake (Zeng, 2017: 190). These

examples prompt a deeper investigation into how independent documentaries help people remember not just forgotten events but also the mechanisms and consequences of forced forgetting in contemporary China.

Second, what do these community-based archives store? While archives created alongside these documentaries are frequently mentioned, they are rarely analysed in detail (Berry and Rofel, 2010). Recent discussions on archival activism have underscored the importance of independent, community-based archives, which address the ‘absences, misrepresentations, and marginalisations’ present in official archives or preserve memories related to social movements, thereby fostering social change (Flinn et al., 2009). In this article, I will also examine the role of archives in memory work to better understand their significance.

Online activism and forgetting

The *Hedao* community chooses to distribute documentaries and maintain archives through digital platforms, and they face significant challenges. Unlike memory activism in democracies, which actively promote their agenda (Gutman and Wüstenberg, 2022), online activism in China has a profound and complex relationship with ‘forgetting’. Online activism in China, first under the threat of forced forgetting, facing a rigorous and intricate censorship system that deletes or preemptively blocks anything deemed a threat to the party-state’s rule (Zeng, 2020). Methods of enforcement are a popular subject for scholars, including its enforcers, such as state (Xu et al., 2022), platforms (Sun and Zhao, 2022) and participatory censorship (Wang and Ge, 2023) as well as detection methods, both manual and automated (Sun and Zhao, 2022).

Under such censorship pressures, activists employ various strategies to ensure the continued availability of information, adapting the accessibility of their work according to the context. These strategies are often described as ‘digital hidden transcripts’ (Yang, 2009: 60). These methods include disguising content, using codes or metaphors to obscure sensitive information (Gao, 2022; Wu, 2024), burying sensitive details in a mass of information (Cao et al., 2022), moving actions to private spaces (Yang, 2009: 62) or even caching sensitive data on overseas servers (Sun and Yin, 2024; Zeng, 2020). These strategies may make information less accessible to some audiences but contribute to ensuring its longer accessibility for others. The *Hedao* community employed more extreme measures to limit accessibility to ensure longer-term survival but sacrificed their immediate effectiveness. The discussions above highlight the dilemma faced by Chinese online activists between effectiveness and sustainability, often resulting in either complete disappearance or limited impact. However, I reconsider this dilemma from the perspective of ‘status of latency’, suggesting that forgetting and remembering are interconnected and can shift over time. I advocate for a long-term perspective to reassess the value of the works preserved by current activists.

Methodology

In this study, I employ textual, thematic and document analysis to explore the memory activism of the *Hedao* community. I use two interconnected criteria to select samples: works that challenge the official, hegemonic historical narrative or reflect issues about the inaccessibility of these resistant works or people. I have referenced *The Shaanxi Provincial Party History*, *Shaanxi Local Chronicles* and *Ankang City Party History* to determine what constitutes official historical narratives and ideologies. These sources depict the TFS as heroes who voluntarily overcame harsh environments, difficult living conditions and engineering dangers to construct the Xiangyu Railway. The official accounts emphasise their significant contributions to the nation and advocate the ‘Third Front spirit’ – ‘dedication, hard work, unity, and innovation’ – as ideals to be emulated (Research Office

of the Party History of the Shaanxi Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2015; Shaanxi Provincial Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 2007; Zhang, 2018).

The sample set consists of 23 of a total of 26 documentaries available as of July 2023, with 11 excluded as being unrelated to the criteria, a duplicate or too short in duration. The final sample comprises: seven from *Archiving Between Life and Death* (*Shengsicundang*) (excluding the seventh, which was unavailable), *Where is the Path?* (*Hedao*) (one episode) and *Diary of the Work of the Third Front Students* (*Sanxianxuesheng Gongzuorizhi*) (four episodes). I also meticulously reviewed all documents across seven main sections on *Hedao website*, excluding ‘Cinema’; this resulted in a total of 1348 documents of which 78 documents (five duplicates) were relevant to challenging official historical hegemony.⁴

This article begins with a textual analysis of these documentaries, which are not treated as absolute truths but as evidence that activists observe, believe in and work to represent memory and forgetting. A thematic analysis – defined as ‘a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79) – was conducted on 73 documents from the *Hedao website*. Thematic coding revealed three key themes: countering the historical narratives of the TFS, deconstructing martyrdom and Third Front spirit and remembering/encouraging TFS-related petitions and protests.

Mediating forced forgetting as memories through independent documentary

These documentaries represent not only the memories of child labour, but they also urge audiences to remember and critique the ongoing forced forgetting in contemporary China – highlighting issues, such as hegemonic narratives, public silence, legal restrictions and the harm caused by institutionalised forgetting. I will show that using forgetting as the object of remembering is an important mode of memory activism because it not only remembers forgetting as a violation of people’s rights but also fosters understanding, alertness and reflection to promote better resistance.

Dialogue and narratives of martyrdom as forgetting: Where is the Path?

The documentary *Where is the Path? (01): I’m Wu Nan’s Mother* (Laohumiao, 2020b) was filmed in 2012, but was only released online in 2020 (Laohumiao, 2020a; Wen, n.d.). The central issue is whether Wu Nan, the only TFS to be officially recognised as a martyr, genuinely merited the honour. The participants in this discussion include Zhang Darong (his mother), Wang Nong (his friend) and Laohumiao himself. In China, honouring martyrs is a crucial part of remembering the past and maintaining its legitimacy (Hung, 2008). The dialogue between Zhang, Wang and official materials around martyr narratives is a key way in which the documentary reveals how the pervasive commemoration of martyrs contributes to forgetting the contested past.

Presenting dialogue between interviewees is an important approach in independent documentaries (Cui, 2010; Meng, 2016). I argue that ‘dialogue’ does not refer only to literal speech but to the juxtaposition of different voices on the same topic in the film. First, the film remediates the official version of the martyr’s narratives and enables Zhang and Wang to have dialogue with and around it to reveal that official remembrance is underpinned by forgetting the unpleasant past. The film shows directly the details of many official materials that portray Wu as a martyr, such as official documents, newspapers and photographs of commemorative rituals on screen, enabling the audience to read the content carefully. Zhang also recalls the narrative in the more official materials.

The wealth of material forms a powerful voice in the film: Wu is a martyr because he died in 1972 after rushing into a collapsing tunnel to save his teammates.

The film then juxtaposes different voices alongside the official ones, namely, the testimonies of Wang and Zhang. The rendering of testimony relies on a certain visual language, as Cui (2010: 13) has stated: ‘the speaking subject takes a central position as the film transmits testimony’. The documentary employs numerous medium and close-up shots, directing the camera to Zhang and Wang’s expressions and words. This centres these individuals, who are well-versed in the martyr narrative but have remained silent for a long time, as they become the main focus of the presentation, thereby allowing the audience to capture their testimony.

Because the official voices, along with those of Zhang and Wu, are consciously edited together to form a dialogue, the audience gradually becomes aware of the three strategies used by the official martyr narrative to promote forgetting: omission, distraction and distortion. The first, omission, is shown through the direct deletion of information detrimental to the martyr narrative. Zhang and Wang emphasise the students’ starvation, overwork, suffering and parental anguish, which is deleted in the official narrative shown previously. While omission is about the art of deletion, distraction means adding and emphasising certain information to obscure other information. It is also known as the ‘politics of “switching memory to”’ (Nourkova and Gofman, 2024: 1491). Zhang is dissatisfied with the ‘tall, big, complete’ socialist rhetoric that sanctifies Wu. She states that this rhetoric includes fictional details, such as Wu having applied to join the party before his death. The rhetoric allows people to focus on the touching details of the martyr’s story, distracting them from other elements that may well fall apart on closer inspection. A final technique is distorting key facts. According to Wang’s recollection, after the first collapse of the tunnel, Wu, as the platoon leader, mobilised three companions to push the mine car into the tunnel, but died when it collapsed a second time. The official report, however, falsified this in the story of the rescue of his teammates and became the centrepiece of the narrative of martyrdom. The aforementioned juxtaposition allows the audience to constantly recognise how the official narrative they have just seen and heard makes the unpleasant past inaccessible through these three strategies. This, in turn, encourages the audience to reflect on similar pervasive propaganda in everyday life and become more aware of the existence of forgetting.

Dialogue is not a rehearsed operation but rather random and dynamic, with its contingencies captured by the camera due to the *‘xianchang’* style – the documentary captures the unexpected events that occur on set (Robinson, 2013: 5). The dialogue between Wang and Zhang reveals public silence – the deliberate concealment of controversial elements by the martyr’s mother, which also supports the official martyr narrative and contributes to forgetting. Although Zhang dislikes the official narrative, she considers her son a martyr because he rushed into the tunnel during the collapse demonstrating his noble character. However, suddenly, Wang interjects and starts a dialogue with Zhang. He reveals that Wu had, in fact, pushed the cart into the tunnel in his urgency to resume work, only to inadvertently cause the tunnel to collapse a second time. This was driven by the necessity of achieving unattainable work goals within an extremely short timeframe as mandated by official orders. Wang’s revelations change Wu from a hero in his mother’s speech to a victim of the party-state’s errors during the CR.

The film retains this disruptive dialogue and uses close-ups to capture Zhang’s reaction. With tears in her eyes, Zhang is silent and hesitates several times before she finally says slowly, ‘What he said’, pausing before adding, ‘It is the truth’. The original Chinese of this final phrase, *‘dao shi shishi’*, expresses a feeling akin to not being willing to agree with what Wang has just said, although she knows it is true. Together, Zhang’s words and expressions reveal that she deliberately avoided, and was still trying to avoid, the information Wang revealed. Connerton (2008: 67) proposes ‘forgetting as a humiliating silence’, namely, people’s refusal to mention an aspect of the past because

of shame. Zhang expresses guilt, sadness and despair over her son's death in this film and she wants to prove that her son's death was meaningful and that he was not merely a victim of the party-state. The official martyr narrative rationalises and valorises Wu's death, providing her with spiritual comfort. Therefore, over the past 40 years, Zhang has repeatedly participated in official commemorative ceremonies that she knew were problematic, yet she never questioned or challenged them publicly.

The film reveals that the inaccessibility of the contested past in China's public space is not simply due to party-state censorship or people's ignorance but is also a deliberate collaboration between official remembrance and silence by informed people, such as the mothers of the martyrs. According to Hillenbrand (2020: 2), 'the hushing of history is a densely collective endeavour in China. The silences of the present are conspiratorial'. This reminds the audience to remember this forgetting, maintained by the pervasive official commemorations and public silence, urging them to stay vigilant.

Witness and laws to facilitate forgetting: Diary of the Work of the Third Front Students

The series *Diary of the Work of the Third Front Students* (Laohumiao, 2015), consisting of four episodes, was released in 2015. Li Naitang is the leader of the Third Front petitioners who tried to promote this contested past and was arrested in 2014 (Weiquanwang, 2015). This series synchronises the lives of Li's family and the work of his lawyers in March 2015 when he was under arrest. Whereas, *Where is the Path?* aims to explore forced forgetting through dialogue, this series presents it as witness. The 'witness' mode means that filmmakers 'are not neutral observers or recorders of history, but active witnesses who investigate, perform, confront, and intervene in order to find out the truth' (Edwards and Svensson, 2017: 12). These films witness a situation in China where the party-state utilised legal means to block the work of those activists seeking to bring the contested past to the public. Forgetting here refers to the inaccessibility of the activist and their memory work.

Witnessing means capturing the present state – the people and information that are 'inaccessible' – rather than presenting the complete story. When the documentary was filmed, Li had already been at a detention centre for a year on the charge of 'disturbing public order' while awaiting trial. As such, Li, who is the subject of the documentary, is completely absent from the film. The representation of forgetting seems to be a paradox – if forgetting implies the inaccessibility of information and there is no way to speak about a representation of that information. However, Plate (2016) argues that vacancies, cut-outs and omissions can be presented as traces of forgetting, prompting an awareness of the otherwise invisible forgetting. This is achieved through the film's focus on space and interviews with people around Li.

Pernin (2010) notes that independent documentarians must consider the centrality of both space and terrain in which they are located to choose their filming strategies. The beginning of the first episode uses many long shots to film the gates of the police station, courthouse and shape of the buildings. Li is inside these buildings, but the camera is unable to enter. The camera distance suggests its detachment from Li, emphasising his inaccessibility. In the second episode, the camera focusses on spaces in Li's home, highlighting his entire domestic space, including calligraphy, photographs, books and furniture. All are reminiscent of Li, but he remains physically absent. These spaces emphasise his captivity and serve as a metaphor for the situation in which the activists find themselves, the memory of them being restricted and thus forgotten.

Second, the documentary series adopts methods commonly used in other independent documentaries, such as allowing Li's family, friends and lawyers to narrate their memories and impressions of him and his work. However, even after four episodes, viewers are unable to get a complete, linear story. The police withheld access from Li's family following his arrest; indeed, they were given very limited information. Li is not shown in the film, and there is no voice-over narration about him or a personal testimony from him. This makes it even more difficult for the audience to share in a memory of what he experienced. On the surface, the documentary fails to remember Li, but his absence is a presence that gives the audience a direct sense of the state of forgetting resulting from the implementation of the law.

While filming, the filmmaker actively investigates the reasons behind this inaccessibility – Li's arrest and trial is also experienced by the audience. For instance, the trial is in progress in the third and fourth episodes of the series. Although the camera cannot witness the trial directly, symbolising once again the 'inaccessible state', the filmmaker eventually interviews two lawyers, revealing how the regime breaks procedural justice to promote forgetting. They disclose many procedural errors by the prosecution, such as arbitrarily altering the location of the pre-court deliberation and neglecting to submit the necessary materials for Li's conviction. However, the lawyers anticipate Li will be found guilty, because they speculate the Shaanxi Provincial Political and Legal Affairs Commission intervened in the initiation, process and judgement of the case. This commission is an organisation within the Communist Party responsible for 'unifying the thoughts and actions of the various departments of politics and law by the line, guidelines, policies, and deployment of the Central Committee of the Communist Party' (Song and Zuo, 2014). The department's controlling role in the legal system ensures that the law can be a tool for the party-state to control the controversial past and its associates. Gutman (2016: 575–576) points out that laws that 'address the historical record or the shared perception of the past' can be regarded as memory laws, and one type 'bans a negative perception of a violent past'. The documentary makes this covert process visible and serves as another reminder to be cautious about trusting rulings called 'justice', as they may serve the purpose of forgetting.

Performativity and the consequences of forgetting: Archiving Between Life and Death

The first two documentary series analysed here focussed on how film can visualise forced forgetting. One might pose the question: why does this matter? In fact, in China, the government often legitimises forgetting, claiming that controlling and forgetting the contested past and the people who challenge the regime is in the interest of a 'harmonious society' in the Hu era and 'national security' in the Xi era (Fu and Distelhorst, 2018). *Archiving Between Life and Death* has eight episodes, most of which were produced and released in 2012 (Laohumiao, 2012). It focusses on the lives of those who are sick, have been injured or disabled as a result of their participation in the Third Front movement. This section elaborates on how the films in this series critique the negative consequences of forgetting by focussing on the 'performativity' which 'carries significant themes through bodily gesture, tone of voice and facial expression' (Nichols, 1991: 122; Pernin, 2014: 19). When the suffering of these people is neither permitted to be presented nor given attention in society, it leads to institutional forgetting, which 'places individual and collective memories outside the public sphere in which policymaking occurs' (Goggins, 2024: 1241).

In the first episode, the documentary puts Li Baoping's body in the centre position. He has suffered from silicosis for a long time because his lungs were damaged during the construction of the railway.⁵ Through the use of close-ups, the audience can clearly see Li's emaciated face, bloodshot

eyes and empurpled lips due to a lack of oxygen. The camera moves, zooms in, explores and follows the details of Li's body. He lifts his shirt and voluntarily shows his body to the camera. His abdomen bulges abnormally, and his chest is flat due to the swelling of his lungs, which squeezes his other organs. The other TFS around Li look at his body and discuss the government's indifference to them and their long wait for compensation, saying: 'Life can't wait; the body can't wait'.

How is all this related to forgetting, and is it not simply caused by the experience of child labour back then? The rest of the documentary explores this question. Through the oral accounts of these sick and disabled individuals, their conversations and related documents, the documentary reveals how government denial, the absence of archives and bureaucratic buck-passing contributed to their exclusion from official policies, ultimately worsening their plight. In episodes 1, 3 and 5, they discuss how, although the campaign from years ago could be seen as the cause of their illnesses, it is the government's prolonged neglect that has worsened their conditions to an irreversible state. The government failed to provide them with medical examinations or certificates verifying their exposure to hazardous airborne particulates. This neglect resulted in missed opportunities for early diagnosis and treatment. The absence of relevant documentation has made it impossible for them to claim compensation through medical insurance. In episode 5, a man who was injured at the Third Front claims that he has contacted various government departments at the provincial, municipal and district levels, each of which shifts responsibility to the other, unwilling to take ultimate responsibility for providing medical help and compensation. The use of close-up shots to showcase objects, such as his complaint letters, correspondence with various government departments and government notices is tangible evidence of institutional forgetting – they have long been neglected by policy.

At this point, reflecting on the first two documentaries, when official commemorations deliberately omit their suffering, and activists are unable to bring their demands to the public, their pain becomes increasingly inaccessible within the cultural fabric of society. This allows the government's negligence to continue unchecked and uncriticised, while societal ignorance perpetuates indifference.

The verbal accounts of people and their tangible evidence of the forgetting and the body itself become a testimony to the harm caused by forgetting. When giving their testimony, the injured eyes (episodes 4 and 5), the stooped backs (episodes 1, 2 and 6) or the paralysed bodies (episode 8) are deliberately highlighted in close-up shots. The forced pauses, heavy breathing and weak voices when they speak are also deliberately preserved by the film. The testimony they speak reverberates through their bodies, emphasising that their suffering is not seen or dealt with by society and the government, and is further exacerbated. This makes their bodies living archives that bear witness to the harm of forgetting. Byrnes (2020) explains that by focussing on the body through a participatory camera movement, independent documentaries attempt to mobilise viewers' own bodily experience and connect it to the body on camera. By visualising the physical pain caused to them, the documentary pushes viewers to understand forgetting on both the cognitive and often overlooked physical level of its long and painful effects. As a result, this documentary reminds people that forced forgetting is not an abstract concept but about living, breathing and suffering human beings.

Mediating forgotten memories on the *Hedao* website

The documentaries present narratives, legal issues and consequences related to forgetting, while the website archives 73 documents that resist official historical hegemony on behalf of the TFS (see Table 1). I call these documents 'forgotten' memories, not only because they are omitted, distracted and distorted parts of the official historical narrative but also because they might face

Table 1. Results of thematic analysis.

Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Resistance to official historical narratives	Harm	1. Occupational injuries/death 2. Non-occupational injuries/death 3. Physical/mental abuse and suicide due to CR
	Accountability	1. Government's neglect of safety measures 2. Corruption 3. Forcing and brainwashing child labourers into hazardous work 4. Inadequately low wages
Deconstructing the 'Martyr/Third Front Spirit'	Undermining achievements	Poor quality of the Xiangyu railway
	Martyr Narrative	Wu Nan should be seen as victim rather than hero
Rights advocacy	Third Front Spirit	Third Front Spirit is a form of ideological propaganda
	Supporting/remembering protest and petition	Supporting protesters like Li Naitang, updating on rights advocacy and recording related memories
	Preserving advocacy materials	Materials related to silicosis and long-term disabilities and other petition documents

CR: Cultural Revolution.

ensorship in public space for confronting official history and 'insulting' martyrs (Xu et al., 2022) or encouraging rights advocacy (Zhu and Jun, 2021).

Many documents resist the official historical narrative concerning the TFS providing detailed accounts of the physical and psychological harm they endured, once glorified or downplayed by official histories. While official narratives mention casualties, they often reduce these to mere statistics, minimising their significance while glorifying the suffering as a heroic sacrifice for the state (Zhang, 2018). Many of the oral histories on the *Hedao* website offer first-person accounts that vividly describe the injuries or deaths of friends or recount personal experiences of near-death incidents or injuries. These narratives depict terrifying and gruesome scenes, refusing to view them as honourable and instead expressing fear, grief and pain. For instance, in medic Lin Jianjun's oral history, she describes, '[p]eeling off the asphalt from their skin often caused bleeding, revealing fresh red subcutaneous tissue . . . My words would never reach them again, and this is an indescribable sorrow and heartache' (Lin, 2020). They also bear witness to the mental trauma suffered by the individuals involved.

In addition, some of the archives document deaths and injuries unrelated to the railway construction, but rather focus on the violent consequences of the CR more generally, as well as other incidents. The CR has been officially labelled a 'leftist' mistake of the Party and has been subjected to strict censorship, limiting its presence in the public discourse (Veg, 2019: 2). Although the Third Front and the CR were deeply intertwined, official history treats them as separate movements, emphasising the Third Front's role in correcting and compensating for the economic damage caused by the CR through infrastructure development (Zhang, 2018). However, the oral histories in the archives reveal the inextricable link between the two, including political persecution, abuse and the resulting suicides. For example, a report that combines official records and oral history details how Jiang Weimin, a TFS, was labelled a 'counter-revolutionary' for expressing dissatisfaction with excessive labour and hunger and subsequently committed suicide after prolonged abuse.

Although the regime later rehabilitated him, these records were concealed in the official history (Wang, 2020). Many memories recount the systemic discrimination faced by individuals on the railway due to their 'bad' class background. Others give voice to casualties that the official history cannot recognise as 'sacrifices', such as rape and accident.

Other documents emphasise the party-state's responsibility for these tragedies. In the official narrative, the suffering of the TFS is depicted as the result of unavoidable forces, implicitly absolving the government of blame (Shaanxi Provincial Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 2007). However, some documents highlight that these incidents occurred due to cadres' lack of safety awareness, poor management and insufficient safety measures. Several examples highlight official exploitation, including the use of child labour, often without voluntary participation. The official narrative emphasises the significance of the Xiangyu Railway and uses it to justify the casualties of TFS (Zhang, 2018). However, the archives indicate that the 'designing while constructing' approach led to poor quality, requiring 6 years of repairs before the railway could be fully operational.

If the aforementioned archives primarily critique the government during the Mao era, the remaining documents challenge contemporary government. Some documents deconstruct the martyr narrative surrounding Wu Nan, portraying him as a victim rather than a hero. Others critique the *'Third Front Spirit'* as an attempt to avoid and legitimise the movement's contentious aspects, arguing that it repeats the political propaganda from the Mao era. The website also archives some documents related to the petitions and protests of TFS, including diagnoses of silicosis and patient testimonies, documents and photos about petitions, and updates on Li Naitang, encompassing public support for him and recent developments in rights protection. These archives provide information for those concerned with ongoing rights defence movements, preserve documents that activists might need and safeguard records for future research on the movement. In summary, we can discern the complementary roles of documentary and archive. The former illustrates how hegemonic narratives, silence and legal control actively facilitate and maintain the forgetting of contested pasts, while the latter preserves what these mechanisms have erased. Together, they offer a dual function, documenting both the mechanism of forced 'forgetting' and the content that has been forgotten.

Mediating memories as 'forgetting'

The dilemma faced by contemporary Chinese online activism lies in how to expand public influence without falling prey to censorship, essentially balancing the need to increase accessibility while ensuring the preservation of availability. As a result, most activism and censorship play a 'cat-and-mouse' battle – where activists prioritise expanding influence while strategically reducing accessibility (Zeng, 2019: 76). However, they ultimately face inevitable removal from domestic websites (Zeng, 2019). The *Hedao* community adopts an alternative approach, prioritising reduced accessibility over public visibility. This strategy results in their work receiving limited attention, but it ensures the long-term preservation of documentaries and sensitive archives. I refer to this approach as mediating 'temporary forgetting' or 'status of latency' and argue that it is employed in documentary-making, distribution and website operation.

Between 2012 and 2015, most of the documentaries created by the *Hedao* community were filmed in public spaces. However, starting in 2017, the ongoing oral history project shifted to a more private approach. Before 2019, the primary filming location was at Laohumiao's home in Xi'an, although they occasionally filmed at other locations and allowed non-TFS to participate (Hedao Crew, 2018). In April 2019, a planned filming session in Baoji City was cancelled after being blocked by state security, followed shortly by the onset of COVID-19 (Hedao Crew, 2019).

Since then, all filming has been concentrated at Laohumiao's home, with the announcement of a new fixed filming process. TFS interested in being interviewed can contact the community through a QR code on the *Hedao* website (Hedao Crew, 2020). Once the filming schedule is confirmed, details, such as the location, participants and process are posted on the website, and two observers, who must also be TFS, are recruited through the website (Hedao Crew, 2023a). Afterwards, the *Hedao* community posts photos and basic information about the filming on their website. In these public announcements, the filming is framed as 'social gatherings and oral history', distancing it from any political agenda, collective movement or public activism (Hedao Crew, 2023b). All information related to filming, recruitment and other details are only published on the *Hedao* website and are not shared on mainstream social media platforms. This strategy allows them to depoliticise their activities, reduce visibility in the public sphere and ensure the long-term continuation of their filming projects.

Creative distribution of their documentaries is also key. The first episode of the 2020 *Hedao* Project was the last video the community publicly released on mainstream video-sharing platforms. Subsequent oral history videos have been circulated privately, with individuals able to request them through the contact information provided on the *Hedao* website. Prior to this, their documentaries employed various strategies to circumvent censorship. First, they uploaded different or identical versions of their videos across multiple mainstream video-sharing platforms, including Tencent, Youku, Sohu, Xinpianchang and Bilibili (Laohumiao, 2020a). Due to the varying review mechanisms and personnel on each platform, even if a video were to be censored on one platform, it would not necessarily be removed from others (Sun and Zhao, 2022). For example, the *Archiving Between Life and Death* series was censored and made inaccessible on both Youku and Tencent, but remained available on Sohu. Second, their videos are labelled with depoliticised tags irrelevant to the content. The tags for *Hedao* (1) on the Bilibili platform included 'positive energy', a term coined by Xi Jinping as a political slogan, 'life record' and other unrelated terms (Laohumiao, 2020b). Finally, the videos were also backed up on Laohumiao's YouTube channel.⁶ These strategies directly or indirectly reduced the accessibility of the videos while simultaneously ensuring their continued availability for those who knew where to look.

Finally, the *Hedao* community has also reduced the visibility of its website and sensitive information. By operating independently of mainstream social media platforms where online activism frequently occurs, they can exist under the radar. The Internet censorship system in China involves three components: the government, platforms and individuals, with large platforms implementing particularly strict reviews (Sun and Zhao, 2022). Sensitive content on the *Hedao* website could potentially be flagged by platform-based automated or manual censorship under categories like 'insulting martyrs', 'historical nihilism' or 'protests'. However, by maintaining an independent website, *Hedao* ensures that control over content review remains in the community's hands. Moreover, *Hedao* does not operate accounts on mainstream platforms, such as WeChat Public Accounts, WeChat or Douyin for promotional purposes. This makes it less likely to attract attention from authorities or the general public, thereby avoiding regulation or reporting.

Furthermore, sensitive information constitutes a small proportion of the content and is distributed randomly, making it difficult to detect. Of 1348 posts, only 78 contain sensitive information (including duplicates), accounting for just 5.7%. These 78 sensitive documents are scattered across seven different website sections and do not appear in concentrated clusters (see Table 2). The remaining 1200-plus posts include news, essays and photography unrelated to the Third Front, official reports on the Third Front, historical materials and academic papers, and depoliticised oral histories aligned with heroic narratives. Although the site includes thematic categories, none explicitly relate to sensitive topics; instead, they refer to general genres, such as literature, news and books.

Table 2. Proportion of ‘sensitive’ information by sections.

Name	News	Third Front news	Third Front compilation	Third Front writer	Cultural life	Oral history museum	Personal release
Total number	260	136	228	525	47	82	70
Documents resisted official historical hegemony	0	14	26	22	3	1	12

Through their efforts, the *Hedao* community has preserved this memory work, but low engagement – few clicks and views – suggests a failure to intervene effectively in public memory currently. How, then, should we understand this type of memory activism? This question might be approached through a hypothetical scenario.

Imagine a future in China where individuals can explore and commemorate the past more freely. One day, someone uncovers the history of TFS. The most accessible materials are official narratives, repeating heroic tales, while few TFS members remain alive. However, in a quiet corner of the digital world, someone discovers the *Hedao* website, filled with archives and documentaries. In that moment, silenced stories are heard, hidden truths revealed, forced forgetting exposed and reflections on authoritarianism emerge. The *Hedao* community’s memory work then reshapes public memory, leaving a lasting impact on the future.

This scenario may seem distant in the current Chinese context, but the experiences of countries transitioning from authoritarianism remind us that it is not impossible, highlighting the crucial role silenced memories play when they resurface in the public consciousness, such as truth-seeking, history-writing and democratisation (Jelin, 2003). More importantly, while such a future may not be guaranteed, it certainly cannot happen without the memory work of the *Hedao* community. Through this article, these memories are gradually being reactivated and transmitted transnationally. Assmann’s (2014) concepts of ‘preservative forgetting’/‘status of latency’ and ‘archival memory’ (Assmann, 2006: 221) are two sides of the same coin. From the perspective of ‘forgetting’, the neglect, inaccessibility and temporary uselessness of these archives may seem disheartening. However, they remain as ‘memory’, awaiting the day they are transformed into ‘active memory’ (Assmann, 2006: 221), shaping public perception and understanding of the past. Emphasising the ‘latency’ of this memory work not only underscores the importance of preserving memory but also encourages a more optimistic, proactive approach to memory activism, even in harsh contexts and even if its impact has yet to be fully realised. As the *Hedao* community has expressed, they hope their preserved works will serve not just the Third Front community, but also historians and a wider audience – not only for the present but also for the future, believing that a ‘democratised world’ will ultimately come (Hedao, n.d.; Laohumiao, 2018).

Conclusion

This article explores how the *Hedao* community uses independent documentaries and online archives to preserve memories of a contested past and forced forgetting within a ‘status of latency’, thereby sustaining the potential to shape public memory in the future. By offering a perspective distinct from democratic or post-authoritarian contexts, this study aims to contribute more broadly to understanding the critical role of forgetting in memory activism.

Forgetting can first be understood as the state of the past that activists seek to commemorate. This is the most commonly addressed aspect of memory activism. The *Hedao* community illustrates this by using media practices to document and preserve alternative histories, filling gaps in mainstream narratives and ensuring neglected memories endure.

Forgetting can also be critically remembered. The *Hedao* community's independent documentaries, using dialogue, witnessing and performativity, reveal how contested pasts are erased through official narratives, public silence and judicial complicity and its consequence. Beyond reviving forgotten events, these works prompt reflection on the mechanisms sustaining forgetting. This critique should be not limited to authoritarian regimes; practices like propaganda, censorship, surveillance and algorithmic bias also marginalise memories elsewhere. By exposing these processes through art and media, activists can raise awareness and create conditions for marginalised memories to resurface.

Finally, forgetting can be a strategic tool. The *Hedao* community doesn't aim to directly shape public memory through widespread distribution of their work. Instead, they use limited distribution and community-based platforms to preserve materials while keeping them less visible. This 'status of latency' approach is crucial in high-risk environments. While relevant in authoritarian contexts like China, it also offers insights for memory activists navigating rising risks in other contexts that are growing increasingly conservative or even authoritarian. This concept encourages a long-term view of memory activism, recognising the potential of memory work that may not have an immediate impact but can be important in the future.

Further issues, such as the potential role of 'therapeutic forgetting' (Assmann, 2014) in fostering reconciliation in societies in conflict, remain to be explored. I believe that examining memory activism through the lens of forgetting will open new avenues for discussion. After all, remembrance is always accompanied by forgetting.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the Special Issue editorial team, the four anonymous reviewers, and Chris Berry, Jennifer Althenger, Qian Licheng, Avital Avina, Yi Meixuan, Noemi Lemoine-Blanchard, and Xu Ying for their valuable feedback.

ORCID iD

Mingkun Li  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8223-2718>

Notes

1. I call this community *Hedao*, as this is the name of their most important documentary series *Hedao* and of their website. Other members include Yufu, Bangzi, Kebozhuren and more. I used their nicknames here. They have been involved in filming for a long time, but not necessarily in every shoot. Laohumiao is always the director of those films, as well as the creator of the website and the initiator of group activities. He can be seen as the leader. For more information about the members, please refer to the end credits of *Archiving Between Life and Death* series, *Diary of the Work of the Third Front Students* series, *Hedao* (1), as well as the filming information posted on the *Hedao* website. See: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/18034850_0_0_11.html.
2. The website showcases materials collected by the *Hedao* crew related to the Third Front, such as documents (data, papers and oral histories), art, videos and news, and features literature created by TFS writers, updates on *Hedao* documentaries and news unrelated to the Third Front. For more details, see: <http://www.hedao.vip/>.
3. In 2021, the Shaanxi Province CAC permanently shut down the Third Front Student Network (*sanxianxuebingwang*), which had been active for 16 years as a primary community forum for TFS.

4. I excluded 'Cinema' because its content is already covered in the documentary analysis, and the films are hosted on mainstream platforms, not archived on *Hedao*.
5. According to the UK NHS website, 'Silicosis is a long-term lung disease caused by inhaling large amounts of crystalline silica dust, typically over many years'. See: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/silicosis/>.
6. See: <https://www.youtube.com/user/zhangshihe/videos>.

References

- Amin N (2023) Activist voices: post heroes. In: Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. London: Routledge, pp. 127–130.
- Assmann A (2006) Memory, individual and collective. In: Goodin RE and Tilly C (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 210.
- Assmann A (2014) Forms of forgetting. In: *Public lecture at Castrum Peregrini*, 1 October. Available at: <https://h401.org/2014/10/forms-of-forgetting/7584/> (accessed 24 January 2025).
- Béja J-P (2019) Writing about the past: an act of resistance. An overview of independent journals and publications about the Mao era. In: Veg S (ed.) *Popular Memories of the Mao Era. From Critical Debate to Reassessing History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 21–42.
- Berry C and Rofel L (2010) Alternative archive: China's independent documentary Culture. In: Berry C, Rofel L and Xinyu L (eds) *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement for the Public Record*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 135–154.
- Black S, Kennedy R and Kent L (2024) Memory, activism and the arts in Asia and the Pacific. *Memory Studies* 17(3): 471–479.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Byrnes C (2020) Men at work: independent documentary and male bodies. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 14(3): 157–180.
- Cao X, Zeng R and Evans R (2022) Digital activism and collective mourning by Chinese netizens during COVID-19. *China Information* 36(2): 159–179.
- Chen LL (2020) *The Great Leap Backward: Forgetting and Representing the Mao Years*. New York: Cambria Press.
- Connerton P (2008) Seven types of forgetting. *Memory Studies* 1(1): 59–71.
- Cui S (2010) Alternative visions and representation: independent documentary film-making in contemporary China. *Studies in Documentary Film* 4(1): 3–20.
- Di Lellio A (2023) Activist voices: art. In: Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. London: Routledge, pp. 422–425.
- Edwards D (2015) *Independent Chinese Documentary: Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Edwards D and Svensson M (2017) Show us life and make us think: engagement, witnessing and activism in independent Chinese documentary today. *Studies in Documentary Film* 11(3): 161–169.
- Fang L (1990) The Chinese amnesia. *The New York Review of Books*, 27 September. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/09/27/the-chinese-amnesia/> (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Flinn A, Stevens M and Shepherd E (2009) Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream. *Archival Science* 9(1): 71–91.
- Fu D and Distelhorst G (2018) Grassroots participation and repression under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. *The China Journal* 79: 100–122.
- Gao S (2022) The online activism of mock translanguaging: language style, celebrity persona, and social class in China. *Discourse, Context & Media* 47: 100608.
- Goggins S (2024) Contesting public forgetting: memory and policy learning in the era of COVID-19. *Memory Studies* 17(6): 1241–1258.
- Gutman Y (2016) Memory laws: an escalation in minority exclusion or a testimony to the limits of state power? *Law & Society Review* 50(3): 575–607.

- Gutman Y (2017) *Memory Activism: Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel-Palestine*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Gutman Y (2023) Post-conflict and mid-conflict spaces. In: Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. London: Routledge, pp. 249–252.
- Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (2022) Challenging the meaning of the past from below: a typology for comparative research on memory activists. *Memory Studies* 15(5): 1070–1086.
- Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (2023) Introduction: the activist turn in memory studies. In: Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. London: Routledge, pp. 5–15.
- Hartnett SJ and Dodge PS-W (2021) Memory activism and the rhetorical politics of public secrets forced forgetting, and dangerous remembering. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 24(4): 685–725.
- Hedao (n.d.) Women Shishei/Yaozuo Shenme [Who we are/what we want to do]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/item_17899037_1360463.html (accessed 13 August 2023).
- Hedao Crew (2018) He Dao Paisheng Pianchang Huaxu – 007 [Behind the scenes of Hedao filming – 007]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/10317157.html (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Hedao Crew (2019) Hedao Juzu Tongzhi (Baoji Pianchang) [Notification from the Hedao Crew (Baoji filming location)]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/13070381.html (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Hedao Crew (2020) Jilupianhedao Paishegongzuo Zhongyao gonggao [Important announcement of Hedao Crew]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/18793155.html (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Hedao Crew (2023a) He Dao Wang Gonggao Ben Yue 12 Riyou paishengrenwu [Filming task scheduled for the 12th of this month]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/26840017.html (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Hedao Crew (2023b) Sanxian Lishi Kouyi Paisheng Jintian Wancheng Liang Wei [Third Front oral history filming completed for two individuals today]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/26260699.html (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Hillenbrand M (2020) *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hung C (2008) The cult of the red martyr: politics of commemoration in China. *Journal of Contemporary History* 43(2): 279–304.
- Jelin E (2003) *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kidman J and O'Malley V (2020) Questioning the canon: colonial history, counter-memory and youth activism. *Memory Studies* 13(4): 537–550.
- Laohumiao (2012) Shengsi Cundang [Archiving Between Life and Death]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/@chinahukan/search?query=%E7%94%9F%E6%AD%BB%E5%AD%98%E6%A1%A3> (accessed 21 February 2025).
- Laohumiao (2015) Sanxianxuesheng Gongzuo Rizhi [Diary of the Work of the Third Front Students]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=%E4%B8%89%E7%BA%BF%E5%AD%A6%E7%94%9F%E5%B7%A5%E4%BD%9C%E6%97%A5%E5%BF%97 (accessed 21 February 2025).
- Laohumiao (2018) Zai Zhegelanmulu Wodiyige Laishuohua [I am the first to speak in this section]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/10371043.html (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Laohumiao (2020a) Laohumiao Paishe: 26 Bu Sanxian Jilupian Qingdan (Jiezhi 2020nian) [Filmed by Laohumiao: list of 26 Third Front documentaries (as of 2020)]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/10307659.html (accessed 13 August 2023).
- Laohumiao (2020b) Hedao (01): Woshi Wunan De Mama [Where is the Path? (01): I'm Wu Nan's Mother]. Available at: https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV14Z4y1N7PR/?vd_source=ad1a85216ba14287d01530aca029a71b (accessed 13 August 2023).
- Liu J (2019) Contested past: social media and the production of historical knowledge of the Mao era. In: Veg S (ed.) *Popular Memories of the Mao Era: From Critical Debate to Reassessing History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 61–79.
- Liu J (2020) 5761 Budui Yiyuanyu Sanxian Xuesheng Bing [5761 unit hospital and Third Front student soldiers]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/18411316.html (accessed 11 August 2024).

- Mai J (2021) 2 million posts deleted for 'historical nihilism' as party centenary nears. *South China Morning Post*, 11 May. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3132957/china-deletes-2-million-online-posts-historical-nihilism> (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Mandolessi S (2023) Latin America. In: Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. London: Routledge, pp. 295–299.
- Meng J (2016) Documenting the past: performativity and inter-subjectivity in the memory project. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 10(3): 265–282.
- Meyskens CF (2020) *Mao's Third Front: The Militarization of Cold War China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Misztal BA (2010) Collective memory in a global age: learning how and what to remember. *Current Sociology* 58(1): 24–44.
- Mpofu S (2023) Clandestine spaces. In: Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. London: Routledge, pp. 275–279.
- Nichols B (1991) *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Nourkova VV and Gofman AA (2024) The 'sites of oblivion': how not to remember in a world of reminders. *Memory Studies* 17(6): 1483–1500.
- Olick JK (2007) *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. London: Routledge.
- Pernin J (2010) Filming space/mapping reality in Chinese independent documentary films. *China Perspectives* 2010(1): 22–34.
- Pernin J (2014) Performance, documentary, and the transmission of memories of the great leap famine in the folk memory project. *China Perspectives* 2014(4): 17–26.
- Plate L (2016) Amnesiology: towards the study of cultural oblivion. *Memory Studies* 9(2): 143–155.
- Research Office of the Party History of the Shaanxi Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China (2015) Zhonggong Shaanxi Shengwei Dangshi Yanjiushi: Disan Zhanxian de Lishi Gongxian yu Xianshi Qishi [Historical contributions and contemporary implications of the third front]. Available at: <http://sxdsw.org.cn/dsyj/zdxj/fUj6F3653.htm> (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Rigney A (2012) *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rigney A (2023) Decommissioning monuments, mobilizing materialities. In: Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. London: Routledge, pp. 21–27.
- Robinson L (2013) *Independent Chinese Documentary: From the Studio to the Street*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shaanxi Provincial Local Chronicles Compilation Committee (2007) *Shaanxisheng Difangzhi [Shaanxi Local Chronicles], Volume 62(2): Gongqingtuangzhi [Communist Youth League Chronicles]*. Shaanxi: Shaanxi Renmin Chubanshe [Shaanxi People's Publishing House], pp. 388–390.
- Singer JA and Conway MA (2008) Should we forget forgetting? *Memory Studies* 1(3): 279–285.
- Sodaro A (2023) Museums. In: Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. London: Routledge, pp. 214–218.
- Song S and Zuo Y (2014) Zhengfawei Gaige Jiasu Jianshao Anjian Ganyu [Accelerated reform of the Political and Legal Affairs Commission reduced intervention in cases]. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180423232438/http://news.hexun.com/2014-10-23/169597767.html> (accessed 1 September 2023).
- Sun T and Zhao Q (2022) Delegated censorship: the dynamic, layered, and multistage information control regime in China. *Politics & Society* 50(2): 191–221.
- Sun Y and Yin S (2024) Opening up mediation opportunities by engaging grassroots data: adaptive and resilient feminist data activism in China. *New Media & Society* 26(5): 2851–2871.
- Third Front Student Community (2020) Sanxianxuebinglian Dashiji (tuichanghou) [Important things of Third Front student (after leaving)]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/16224246.html (accessed 2 August 2024).
- Tianshui Cyber Police (2021) Shaanxi Zhongquanchujijianzhi Wangluoluanxiang Yifayingzao Qinglangkongjian [Shaanxi takes strong actions targeting online chaos, creating a clear and bright cyber-

- space according to the law]. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250221095139/https://baijia-hao.baidu.com/s?id=1714740714314916085&wfr=spider&for=pc> (accessed 21 February 2025).
- Veg S (2019) Introduction: trauma, nostalgia, public debate. In: Veg S (ed.) *Popular Memories of the Mao Era: From Critical Debate to Reassessing History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 1–18.
- Walters B (2023) Reenactment. In: Gutman Y and Wüstenberg J (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. London: Routledge, pp. 391–393.
- Wang EN and Ge L (2023) Fan conflicts and state power in China: internalised heteronormativity, censorship sensibilities, and fandom police. *Asian Studies Review* 47(2): 355–373.
- Wang Y (2020) Yiwei Sanxianxuesheng de Feidianxing Siwang [An atypical death of a Third Front student]. Available at: http://www.hedao.vip/hedao/vip_doc/16963663.html (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Weiquanwang (2015) Shaanxi ‘Sanxian Xuebing’ Weiquanlingxiu Li Naitang Laoxianshengneiyifeifajihuzui Panchu Youqituxingernian [Mr Li Naitang, a rights leader of the ‘Third Front Students’ in Shaanxi, was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment for unlawful assembly]. Available at: https://wqw2010.blogspot.com/2015/11/blog-post_94.html (accessed 13 August 2023).
- Wen T (n.d.) Xiangyuxian shang de xueseqingchun [Bloody youth on the Xiangyu Railway]. Available at: <https://nodebe4.github.io/mjls/1989-06-04/%E6%96%87%E6%B6%9B-%E8%A5%84%E6%B8%9D%E7%BA%BF%E4%B8%8A%E7%9A%84%E8%A1%80%E8%89%B2%E9%9D%92%E6%98%A5/> (accessed 26 July 2022).
- Wu X (2024) Passing on the ‘whistle’: users’ creative engagement with platform censorship in an online relay campaign in China. *Media, Culture & Society* 46(5): 905–924.
- Xu J, Gong Q and Yin W (2022) Maintaining ideological security and legitimacy in digital China: governance of cyber historical nihilism. *Media International Australia* 185(1): 26–40.
- Yang G (2009) *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Zeng J (2017) Visualizing truth-telling in Ai Xiaoming’s documentary activism. *Studies in Documentary Film* 11(3): 184–199.
- Zeng J (2019) You say #MeToo, I say #MiTu: China’s online campaigns against sexual abuse. In: Fileborn B and Loney-Howes R (eds) *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 71–83.
- Zeng J (2020) #MeToo as connective action: a study of the anti-sexual violence and anti-sexual harassment campaign on Chinese social media in 2018. *Journalism Practice* 14(2): 171–190.
- Zhang T (2018) Ankangshi sanxian jianshe zongshu [Overview of the Third Front in Ankang City]. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240619003708/https://dys.ankang.gov.cn/Content-159329.html> (accessed 11 August 2024).
- Zhu H and Jun L (2021) The crackdown on rights-advocacy NGOs in Xi’s China: politicizing the law and legalizing the repression. *Journal of Contemporary China* 31(136): 518–538.

Author biography

Mingkun Li is a fourth-year PhD candidate in the Film Studies Department at King’s College London. His research focusses on how various social actors promote public memory of the Third Front movement through and around screen media in post-socialist China. The Third Front movement was a secret, large-scale technological and personnel migration initiated by the Chinese party-state for war preparation in China between 1964 and 1980. He has presented his work at several conferences, including the Seventh Annual Conference of the Memory Studies Association and the 2023 Mnemonics Summer School.