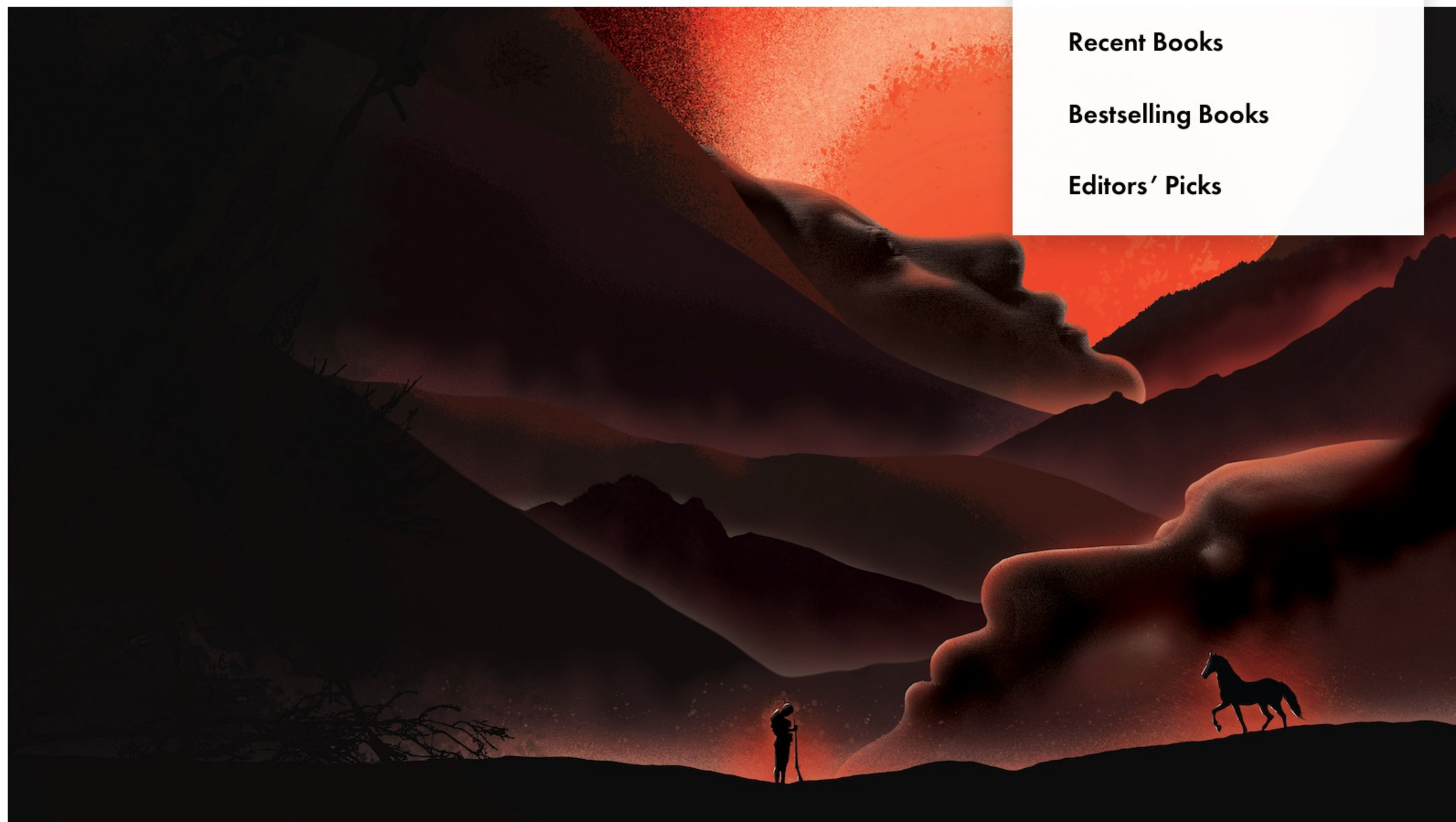


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SINOIST BOOKS

REVIEW

Washing the Past

A new novel about the Chinese Civil War feels true to the author's experience of it, but also amplifies the Party's preferred version of history.

JOHANNA COSTIGAN — DECEMBER 7, 2023

FICTION

HISTORY



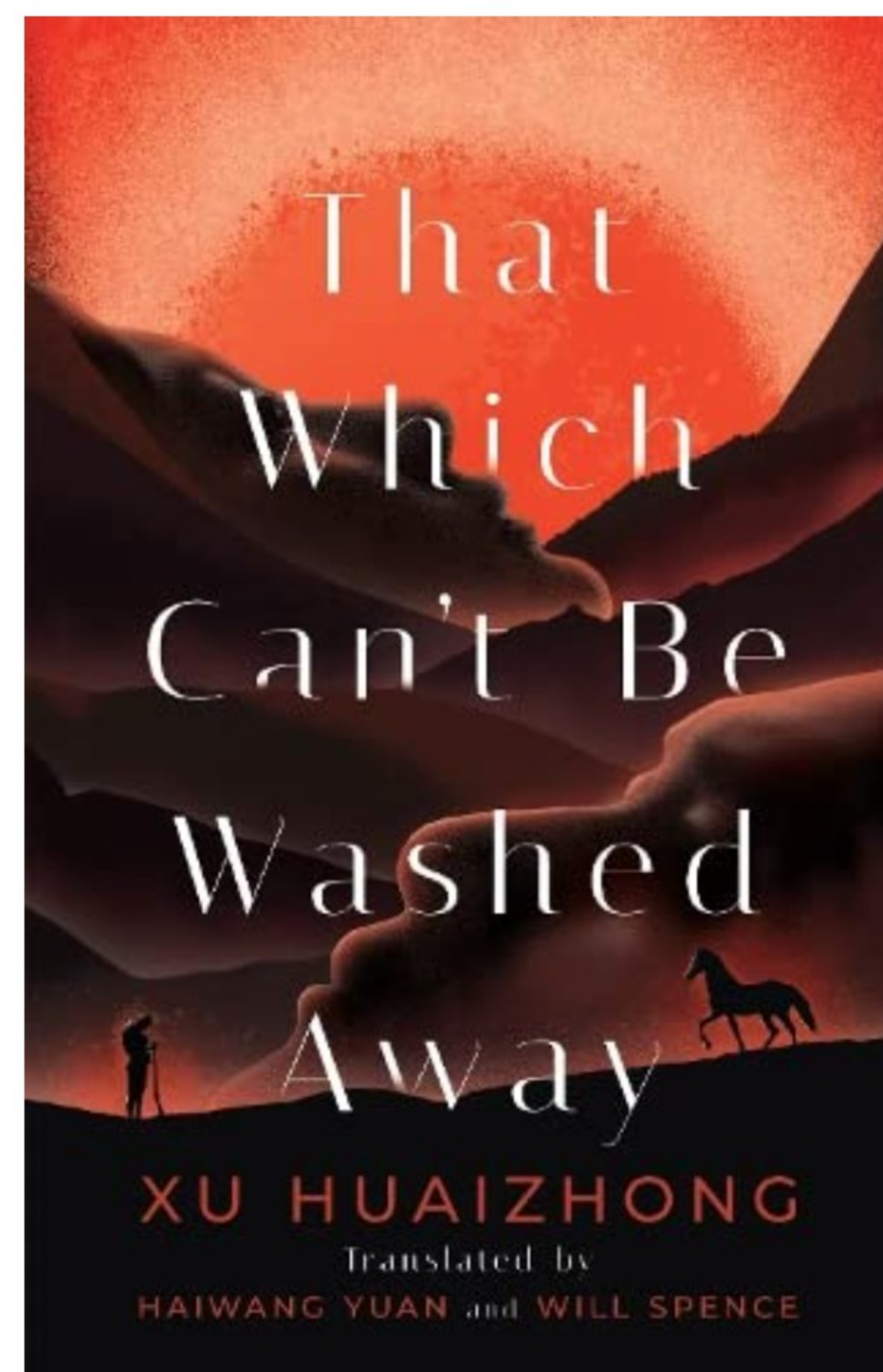
The origin story of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is rooted in epic wartime drama. When Japan invaded in 1937, the Republic of China was just 25 years old. While China's defense against the Japanese army remains an essential patriotic talking point of the Communist Party (CCP), the official narrative has, to varying degrees over the decades, ignored the Nationalist Party's (KMT) dominant contributions under [Chiang Kai-shek](#). Throughout WWII, Communist forces were less exposed to the front lines and could recruit and train soldiers and supporters. While the CCP and KMT had technically set their power struggle aside due to the national emergency of the invasion, the United Front did not preclude the Communists under Mao from preparing for the coming clash. Sure enough, once WWII ended, the Chinese Civil War between the two vying parties began in earnest, lasting from 1945 to the Communist victory in 1949.

Official depictions of these back-to-back wars — WWII and the Civil War — have changed throughout the CCP's time in power, to accord with the Party's goals at a given time. When it was important to normalize relations with Japan or Taiwan, for example, the cruelty of the Japanese and KMT armies would be downplayed. When nationalism needed a boost, playing up narratives of invasion and victimhood has come in handy.

Chinese literature's engagement with national history, especially books that trace traumatic events in collective memory, has also been subject to ebbs and flows. While censorship and state intervention in publishing have been a consistent curb on writers since the founding of the PRC, writers have enjoyed times of relative freedom in depicting Chinese history

through creative writing, from memoir to fiction. The most immediate example is the “scar literature” that bloomed after Mao Zedong’s death: stories of harrowing experiences during the Cultural Revolution that were permitted under Deng Xiaoping, in an era eager to assign blame and move on.

Xu Huaizhong’s novel, *That Which Can’t Be Washed Away*, is a more recent engagement with the past. It was published in Chinese in 2019, titled 牵风记 (literally “diary of pulling the wind”), and won the prestigious Mao Dun prize that year. The book, translated by Haiwang Yuan and Will Spence, was released in English earlier this year by Sinoist, a specialist publisher in translated Chinese literature whose mission is “adding nuance and dimension to the discussions that go on in English about the Chinese-speaking world,” according to founder Wang Ying. The book takes place during the Chinese Civil War, and its main characters are fictionalized and flawed CCP fighters. The novel follows two soldiers as they create, preserve and contend with their memories of the war, both in real time and in retrospect.



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If Xu felt hampered by the political conditions under which he wrote — namely, the strict limitations on historical discourse under Xi Jinping — the book gives little sign of it. Perhaps that has something to do with Xu’s personal relationship to the war in question. Born in Hubei in 1929, he joined the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) at age 16, in 1945 shortly before the start of the Civil War, and used his artistic skills for the Communist cause by writing and designing propaganda. He was later awarded the rank of Major General and held a senior position in the PLA writing school, and [mentored](#) various other literary writers to come out of the army, notably Mo Yan.

While avoiding any condemnation of the official Party narrative of the Civil War, *That Which Can’t Be Washed Away* also circumvents an overtly pro-CCP tone or plot. Its sober description of a stifled love affair, rolling tragedies and imperfect military strategy carry the authority of at least partial autobiography. For example, the novel does not gloss over the horror of fighting a war, even for the “right side.” Glory is present, but obligation and loyalty are stronger driving forces among the soldiers. In what feels true to Xu’s experience of the Civil War — rather than a sanitized piece of propaganda — his characters often show more interest in preserving their lives, relationships and reputations than in pursuing victory in combat.

“ Chinese literature’s engagement with national history has been subject to ebbs and flows ”

Wang Keyu, the 19-year-old protagonist, is a talented musician and literacy teacher turned CCP propagandist. At the start of the novel, she is on her way to board a boat, but misses it. This chance event leads her to meet Qi Jing, her future commander and

love interest. Reflecting on their meeting, the narrator takes a brief mystical detour: “A completely different inevitable historical opportunity can flow from an accidental change in the smallest chain of events.” Lines like this are rare in the novel, which prioritizes plot development over editorializing. But the narrator has at least one guiding bias: a belief that the outcomes of seismic historical events are predetermined by fate. Xu’s characters not only identify the significance of their circumstances as they are happening, but also remain steeped in them long after the fact.



Xu Huaizhong (*Sinoist Books*)

This might be where Xu’s ideas on the human cost of living through historical turning points could clash with the CCP’s sanitized versions of war history. As we observe in the epilogue, Qi Jing — who survives the war — cannot (or will not) pull himself away from his memories. Qi, who makes remembering his fallen friends a lifelong project, shares unmissable characteristics with the author, who finished the novel late in life and just a couple of years before his death in 2022. Beyond its possible overlaps with his own life, Xu’s depiction of Qi as trapped in survivor’s guilt can be read as a commentary on how soldiers are treated once their duty has been served. What else can or should they contribute? Where do they fit?

Earlier in the novel, seven female PLA fighters are trapped on a mountaintop by enemy KMT forces. They remember the famous [story](#) of the “five heroes of Langya mountain,” in which five Chinese soldiers in WWII jump to their deaths rather than surrender to the Japanese, and decide to emulate its martyrs. The story, while a classic example of propaganda that has been questioned by historians, is still held up by the CCP as a model example of wartime bravery. (In 2016 a Beijing court found Chinese historian Hong Zhenkuai [guilty](#) of defaming the five martyrs by doubting its veracity).

“More than anything,” the narrator remarks of the seven soldiers contemplating suicide instead of surrender, “they must keep their honor and avoid leaving a permanent stain on themselves.” He awkwardly references “numerous records in military history of female soldiers meeting death with remarkable grace and composure,” often checking their reflection in a pocket mirror before sacrificing themselves. This would give them the chance to fix any out-of-place hairs before jumping to their deaths.

And so, albeit without checking their make-up, the surrounded soldiers launch their grenades at the enemy and jump off the cliff, copying the Langya mountain playbook. The twist is that they survive. They are taken as prisoners of war, a release is quickly negotiated with a trusted go-between, and the seven women are returned, mostly unharmed.

““ The Nationalists, defeated and retreated, were as silenced in reality as they are in Xu’s novel ””

It adds to the novel’s credibility that the KMT soldiers in it are depicted mildly. Xu, or his narrator, resists any urge to demonize enemy forces. More telling is that the KMT is not

mentioned with much frequency or detail at all, which downplays its involvement and presents the war more as Communists fighting *to* create the new China rather than *against* the then-ruling party. This aligns with the version of events Xu would have absorbed through his experience coming of age during the Civil War, when the mandate of excited nationalism — of creating a new country — overtook any specifics of what the KMT and CCP were fighting over in the first place. The Nationalists, defeated and retreated, were as silenced in reality as they are in Xu’s novel.

Today, as the Civil War fades further into history, authorities historicize it more decisively. Accounts in propaganda campaigns and in state media focus on model veterans (such as Liu Yiquan, who [described](#) fighting in the war against Japan as “his most precious memory.”) And, more often, on the martyrs. The dead are more malleable than the living, and can be conveniently worked into any narrative.

Last spring, the CCP [celebrated](#) the five-year anniversary of China’s Heroes and Martyrs Protection Law. A People’s Daily [commentary](#) declared:

“

Today, when we remember the martyrs and pay homage to the heroes, we are faced with images of their courage and resolution, dedication to the country, the great responsibility they carried on their shoulders and their bravery in the face of death.

”

[Festivities](#) hosted in September by Zhejiang province’s Veterans Affairs Ministry praised martyrs, including awarding veterans in attendance the “Martyrs’ Certificate of Glory”. In Shanghai, army recruits visited a martyr memorial hall ahead of Martyrs Day on September 30. According to the *People’s Daily*, one soldier [commented](#): “Like my predecessors, I want to carry forward the spirit of hard work and contribute to the cause of strengthening the motherland’s army.”

That Which Can’t Be Washed Away engages with how to preserve fallen soldiers’ memories in ways that are noticeably agreeable with the Party’s official narrative of martyrs. In a particularly horrifying chapter, an 11-year-old Peking opera singer is killed by KMT forces as collateral damage. We’re told that the PLA-affiliated theater troupe leader had convinced his parents to allow the child to join the Communist cause. The troupe leader found the “only object young Chunhu had left behind” — his armband, which noted his name, gender, unit, ethnicity, title and birthplace. The narrator notes it was not until the early days of the PRC that this “martyr’s armband” was sent to his parents, along with a plaque designating their home as belonging to a martyr’s relatives. There is no speculation about what level of comfort this may have given Chunhu’s parents.

The narrator describes memory as a biological reality rather than a psychological experience. “When we talk about ‘memory,’” he writes, “we are referring to the neural connections of the human cerebral cortex recognizing the imprint of something experienced or understood, which can be recalled and reproduced.” This comes during a dramatic scene toward the end of the novel where the young protagonist Wang Keyu and her fellow soldier are looking for shelter, separated from their brigade and increasingly desperate. Yet even as he writes about memory, Xu holds out that parts of it are impossible to understand, let alone convey. “For Wang Keyu, this was just an internal experience, generated in a trance — something that could not be expressed in words.”

Xu seems of two minds as to whether memories of war are documentable. Personal memory helps to craft official history (and, in turn, condonable recollection). In their search for shelter, Wang tells her friend that she “remembers” a certain cave, which the narrator tells us she had never been to. Wang is severely injured, and dies of exposure shortly after. But false memory is an understandable coping mechanism. This novel, filtered through the psyche of its author, might help prove as much. Ending his protagonist’s journey by telling us that she is lying to herself makes her forced forgetting seem like more than a consolation. It reads like an instinct. It’s one Xu Huaizhong likely knew well. ■



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