

# Analysis of Historical Views in *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary*

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## Abstract

As a highly regarded Chinese-American science fiction writer, Liu Yukun's science fiction *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* published in 2012 combines science fiction elements with historical event against the background of Unit 731 of the Japanese Imperial Army's violent behavior in Harbin, showcasing the views of the East and West on Chinese traumatic history. This article combines new historicism to examine the relationship between history and individuals within the text, as well as the historical views upheld by all parties.

## Keywords

Historical Science Fiction; New Historicism; Historical Views.

## 1. Introduction

*The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* is a typical multi-voice, intertextual novel composed of nested narratives and collaged texts. The novel tells the story in the form of a documentary about Dr. Wei's use of the Bohm-Kirino particles to expose the crimes committed by Unit 731 of the Japanese Imperial Army in China. The Bohm-Kirino particles contribute to eliminate deliberate distortion and denial of history. This blurring of the boundary between history and fiction, the collage of a large number of historical texts, the fusion of multiple genres to disintegrate a single historical narrative, and the adoption of an open dialogue structure narrative method are in line with the characteristics of historical metafiction.

There are relatively few researches on *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* both domestically and internationally. Liu Hanbo (2018) focuses on the Chinese imagination used by Chinese-American science fiction writers in their creation and authors' ethnic identity. It is believed that Liu Yukun frequently constructs Chinese imagery in his works, explores ethnic identity and historical consciousness, and closely interprets different technical discourses. Although accusing the 731 troops of wrongdoing, they did not exercise moral judgment, and instead explored the essence of history from the perspective of technological philosophy; This reflects the cultural identity of Chinese science fiction writers as cultural "viewers" and the cultural appropriation strategies he adopts.[1] Wang Yutong (2019) analyzes the ideological content of the novel. *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* unfortunately failed to win the Nebula Award due to controversial history it involves, which refers to the crimes of Unit 731 of the Japanese Imperial Army. The period of history has been persistently ignored by Japanese right-wing forces and mainstream American forces. The suffering of the victims is enough to move the hearts of any audience, but supporters of Japan and US still question the narrators' detailed loopholes in the name of rationality. The factual consensus will not be reached without emotional consensus, and universal consensus is still threatened by ideological barriers, which is also one of the most urgent tasks for the increasingly divided humans.[2] Based on the theory of Post-Colonial Criticism, Zhang Zhehui (2020) analyzes the text from the perspectives of three eminent contemporary theorists, aiming at the readers' better understanding of the work, and eliminating ethnocentrism, racism, unilateralism and

hegemony; keeping history in mind and justifying the names of innocent humans who have been persecuted; safeguarding world peace, and building a community with a shared future for mankind.[3] Xu Gang (2021) takes *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* as an example, focusing on the dialogic nature of discourse and the polyphonic nature of the text in the novel. Previous researches have paid little attention to the relationship between man and history in the text. This article analyzes the attitudes of all parties in the text towards Chinese traumatic history, while revealing the complexity of the relationship between individuals and history and the historical views held by all parties [4].

## 2. Collective Nature of History for Victims

Collage is the key to understanding Liu Yukun. It is not only the narrative arrangement, writing strategy, and artistic style within the text, but also the attitude, stance, and narrative motivation outside the text. Through the narratives of Chinese administrative personnel, intellectuals, victims' relatives, and college students, the novel reveals how Chinese as victims view their relationship with ethnic trauma in the past. Looking at historical science fiction from the perspective of new historicism, it is not difficult to find that while deconstructing and reconstructing history, science fiction literature breaks free from the objective historical narrative and political ideology of order and symbolization.[5]The text presents the narrative of ordinary Chinese, rather than objective historical narratives. Some of these ordinary Chinese show indifference to ethnic trauma and believe that everyone should look forward. They believe that looking back will not bring practical benefits to ordinary people.

An anonymous executive says that the people who were killed there in Harbin were mostly peasants, and they died like weeds during that time all over China. Bad things happen in wars, that's all. [6]This viewpoint reflects the starting point of the contradiction between politicians and writers. The latter respects human emotions and place great importance on personal emotions, while the former is often hard-hearted. In order to achieve historical goals, they always say that sacrifice and blood is necessary.[7]College student Nie Liang has high expectations for Dr. Wei's technology, believing that it will help the West join us in condemning Japan's crimes against China. On the contrary, college student Fang Rui believes that when Westerners see this, they are going to call you a fenqing and a brainwashed nationalist. These people's narratives help the novel break free from objective historical narratives to some extent. As the only victim's relative, Lillian C. Chang-Wyeth strives to seek truth and comfort her loved ones. Chang-Wyeth confronts her aunt's suffering and expose the cruel crimes committed by Unit 731. Chang-Wyeth's aunt Changyi is missing after being taken away by the Japanese in 1941. Chang-Wyeth's father still regret for his sister Changyi's suffering before his death. In order to fulfill her father's last wish, Chang-Wyeth agrees to participate in Dr. Wei's time travel experiment and becomes the recipient of first-hand information to make out what happened to her aunt after being taken away by the Japanese. Through time travel, history itself is transformed into objects that can be touched, grasped, and possessed. The author restores and presents the individual's historical existence experience through the torment of Chang-Wyeth's aunt. Unlike ordinary time travel fiction, *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* emphasizes the tension between history, reality, and the future. Chang-Wyeth, who has returned from history to reality, no longer believes that the law can provide justice to victims and their families, so she wants to expose the crimes of the Unit 731 in a television hearing. She demands heartfelt apology from Japanese. At the same time, the US government must acknowledge their wrongdoing and apologize for victims. Because the US government not only turned a blind eye to anti-human atrocity of Unit 731, but also took over the experimental data which is obtained by performing gruesome experiments on thousands of Chinese and Allied

prisoners throughout the war as part of Japan's effort to develop biological weapons and to conduct research into the limits of human endurance.

As a Chinese intellectual, Chung-Nian Shih, who is the director of the Department of Archaeology at National Independent University of Taiwan, questions Evan's choice to use the relatives of the victims as experimental subjects. Although Evan wants to bring comfort to the victims' families, it means that a large number of precious historical information are wasted and could no longer be reproduced. There are moral arguments for and against his choice: is the suffering of the victims above all a private pain? Or should it primarily be seen as a part of our shared history? Li Ruming, director of the History Department at a certain university in China, also believes History is not merely a private matter. Even the family members of the victims understand that there is a communitarian aspect to history. I understand why he did it, but I cannot agree that his choice was right. It is difficult to identify with his sacrifice of Chinese history to achieve his noble ideals as a Westerner without the permission of Chinese people. Chung-Nian Shih and Li Ruming emphasize the collective nature of history, which indicates that Chinese intellectuals believe that the relationship between individuals and history is inevitably intertwined with collective interests.

It is better to say that literature has rediscovered various possibilities of history and found a current position for history, rather than saying that literary texts reproduce history. The *Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* reproduces a cruel history that occurred in Harbin, China. With science fiction elements, it gives new possibilities to Chinese traumatic history, breaks through the barriers between history and the present, and demonstrates the attitudes of Chinese with different identities towards the trauma in the past.

### 3. Denying the Victim's Memory by Perpetrators

Japanese government has always denied history. Japanese war criminals as perpetrators deny that they committed crimes against Chinese people in Pingfang, Harbin. By presenting the attitudes of Japanese war criminals, officials, intellectuals, and ordinary people towards Japanese crimes, the novel reveals their selfishness and ugliness.

In Shiro Yamashita's recollection of Unit 731, he believed that there was nothing unusual about the terrible behavior against humanity. I did not think that the work we did at Unit 731 was particularly strange. After Shiro Yamashita was captured, he began to reflect on his crimes against Chinese and opposed all the anti-human crimes brought about by the war. After Shiro Yamasana's confession, denying historical crimes and distorting historical facts still exists, indicating that new technology only provides people with channels to understand truth. For example, Shimaro Yamashita's partner deliberately conceals the truth, and he refused to plead guilty so as to make sure the prosperity of modern Japan without the heavy burden of the past. Japanese ambassador Yoshida refuses to acknowledge the crimes of Unit 731 in the Cross-Talk. On the one hand, he regards the victim's testimony as a story. I am not sure that telling stories is what historians should be doing. If you want to make fiction, go ahead, but do not tell people that it is history. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. And there is insufficient proof for the accusations currently being directed against Japan. This provocative statement uses confusion and exchange of concepts to deny the crimes of Unit 731. It is necessary to distinguish the relationship between history and story. In early usage, history is a narrative record of events, and its closest etymology is *histoire* in French, *historia* in Latin, and the earliest traceable etymology is *istoria* in Greek. The etymologies initially had the meaning of inquiry, later extended to results of inquiry, and finally carried the meaning of account of knowledge. [8] The victim's memories and narratives are the results of the inquiry, in line with historical etymological meanings. The representative of new historicism Hayden White is happy to see the emergence of different types of history in a broad sense, such as memory

research, oral history, and witness literature, which bring new objects, concepts, and ways to analyze history. On the other hand, Ambassador Yoshida questions Dr. Evan's experiment, believing that time travel only creates illusions for participants, who did not witness truth. He believed that he would become the ultimate winner of the debate, as men's memory would eventually fade and blur, and then memory can be fabricated arbitrarily by deniers.

As a Japanese intellectual, Ienaga Ito, professor of oriental history at Kyoto University affirmed Evan's subjective emotions. Emotions will not distort the narratives of the experimental participants, but rather made narratives more authentic. Men strive to tell stories about ourselves throughout their lives, which are the essence of memory. Telling stories is the way man can still tolerate in this ruthless and accidental universe. We refer to this tendency as narrative fallacy, but it does not mean that the narrative does not involve the truth. The path of revealing the truth is always winding, and Ienaga Ito believes that while people affirm the validity of witness testimony, revealing the truth still faces new challenges. With a little money and the right equipment, anyone can eliminate the Bohm-Kirino particles from a desired era, in a specified place, and so erase those events from direct experience. It can be said that there is a symbolic relationship between the particularity of the Bohm-Kirino particles and the victims. The Bohm-Kirino particles symbolizes the 731 survivors, and the death of the survivors means that the witnesses of that traumatic history will no longer exist.

Ordinary Japanese in the novel also refuse to admit charges. Japanese housewife Kazue Sato believes that Chinese are too skilled at fabricating their own history. Dr. Wei claims to be an American, but in fact, he is still a Chinese. We cannot believe a single word of what he said. Japanese retired soldier Hiroshi Abe, believes the soldiers who confessed have brought great shame upon their country, which indicates Japanese militarist ideology after the war. There is not enough evidence to prove that the specific experiments conducted by Unit 731 have become a shield to deny history. In the documentary, Japanese ask trivial questions to the experiment participants and use the strictest standards to review hundreds of details in order to cover up the crimes of Unit 731. Once there are some minor contradictions and discrepancies, the victims' testimony is completely overturned, such as how many pockets are in the shirts of military personnel in the camp, and whether they used anesthesia during the experiment. Once there is a discrepancy between the interviewee's previous and subsequent answers, it can be used as an excuse to overturn their testimony.

The Japanese authorities attempt to conceal the truth until no one strongly opposes Japanese cruelty. Historical memories will eventually fade, and the voices of the past will eventually become invisible, which is Japanese ultimate goal. Liu Yukun's science fiction has a self-dissecting nature, which is a process of self-questioning and refutation. He placed the science fiction as a background for interrogation within the novel, allowing humans to use this possibility as a mirror to reflect their ugliness and lowliness, sin and cunning. In the novel, the Bohm-Kirino particles become a mirror, reflecting the ugly and cunning side of Japanese government.

#### 4. Multi-Voices of Bystanders

The US official denies the atrocities of Unit 731. They either believe that the atrocities of Unit 731 cannot be confirmed, or hold a skeptical attitude towards them. By presenting the views of American politicians, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens on Chinese traumatic history, the novel reveals the attitude of American bystanders towards Japanese crimes.

American politicians support Japan in order to contain China's development, and they tend to abandon the impact of history on reality. The Japan of today is the most important ally of the United States in the Pacific. Japan is vital in our efforts to contain and confront the Chinese threat. The United States actively ignores Japan's denial of history for political interests. Senator

Hogart believes that it would be a mistake for us to become slaves to history, and to subject the present to the control of the past. His views show the privileged class attempts to escape the influence of history. Representative Kotler believes that the United States should bear corresponding responsibility for the crimes of Unit 731, as the United States helped Japan to exonerate itself and took over the human experimental data of Unit 731. Therefore, representative Kotler demands that the United States Congress can take a clear stance to acknowledge the crimes committed by Unit 731 in China. At the same time, he demands that Japan actively admit the crimes, rather than using denial and evasion strategies to refuse to admit the truth. Here, the text is seen as a place of power, a place of disagreements and changes of interests, and a place where legitimate and opposing forces collide. [9] Congressman Hogart and Colt represents different views towards history.

Archibald Ezary, Codirector of East Asian Studies at Harvard Law School believes that Japan views the law as a weapon and constructs a set of evasive discourse to deny its atrocities committed in Pingfang. Ezary believes that the debate between China and Japan over time travel involves historical sovereignty, which is related to the territorial ownership rights in the spatial dimension on one hand and the regime changes in the temporal dimension on the other. Due to the huge political interests involved in the dispute over historical sovereignty, Japanese government has tried every means to shift the blame and refuse to plead guilty, citing a series of questions, such as who should be the reasonable and legal historical subject within a specific time and region? Who holds the right to interpret history in a specific region? However, you want to parse the robber's logic that we dignify under the name "international law," the fact remains that the people who call themselves Japanese today are connected to those who called themselves Japanese in Manchuria in 1937, and the people who call themselves Chinese today are connected to those who called themselves Chinese there and then.

Evan is a Chinese-American historian and a representative of American intellectuals. Evan never heard of the atrocities of Unit 731, when he was young. He may seem unrelated to revolution and politics, but he has sparked a storm of exploring historical truth. Later, he began to explore the truth about Chinese traumatic history. Evan's attitude towards Japan underwent a significant transformation within the text. In the early days, Evan viewed history from the perspective of the relationship between humans and nature. He believed that history indicates the change of relationship between humans and nature. Evan held an appreciative attitude towards Japanese history. Traditional historicism maintains a distance from the research object in order to gain objective truth of the research object. This one-way, closed, and simplified way of thinking is prone to the worship of a single history. As a Chinese-American, Evan initially did not understand the evil deeds of Unit 731 until he accidentally watched Andrey Iskanov's *Philosophy of a Knife*, which represents the evil deeds of Unit 731. The distance he had once maintained, the abstractions of history at a grand scale, which had so delighted him before, lost meaning to him in the bloody scenes on the screen. The representation of cruelty in front of him has caused a subversive change for Evan to treat Japanese history. He is puzzled by the dual standards of Western politics regarding Unit 731. He is also very confused about Japan's choice of shirking historical issues. He attempts to change men's indifference towards this period of history through time travel, thereby exploring historical truth and justice.

Evan makes the cruelty and evil of Unit 731 visible to contemporary people. A huge evil appears in the lives of the victims, directly destroying their original family life. The author strongly resists conveying an optimistic attitude towards human nature in the text, in order to avoid making readers naive. Evan's speech for the Fifth International War Crimes Studies Conference in San Francisco points out that history is a narrative enterprise, and the telling of stories that are true, that affirm and explain our existence, is the fundamental task of the historian. But truth is delicate, and it has many enemies. Max Weber believes that the reason why people engage in the frustrating and painful sociological research, understanding the various ugliness in society



is to figure out what extent one can tolerate, which means one needs to see to what extent the world is corrupt and to what extent one can face such corruption directly. From a historical perspective, these thinkers aim to understand the extent to which humanity can tolerate the horrors and ugliness of history. Of course, there may also be those who do not want to know this dark side, thus fabricating ideologies.

In the preface of *When the Light of the Past Falls*, Liu Yukun points out that he wants to portray a person who believes that men have a responsibility for history. To be specific, men should remember the atrocities of victims and prove the denied history. Evan is precisely such a character who is committed to safeguarding humanity and restoring the true history. The more Evan did, the more he felt he had to do. He would not come to bed, and fell asleep at his desk. He was writing, writing, constantly writing. However, due to the public nature of history, it is destined that it cannot be controlled by personal thoughts, and there is a huge gap between Evan's plan and reality. It can be said that in the face of the times, science fiction still makes sincere reflections and responses, raises very sharp questions, and shapes tragic characters, which has aroused more and more resonance among young people. Evan is such a tragic hero who feels guilty for not being able to save the precious history that is about to be forgotten. He has a strong sense of moral responsibility for Chinese traumatic history, and ultimately chooses to end his life due to his sense of guilt towards this period of history.

Unlike intellectuals such as Evan, ordinary American citizens in the novel are indifferent to the plight of Chinese victims. Patty Ashby is a housewife from Wisconsin, who believes that evil deeds were inevitable during the war. New York actress Sharon believes that Chinese people being harmed by Japanese is a form of karma. She believes that Chinese people are so cruel to dogs that they even eat them. They have also been very mean to the Tibetans. All of these reveal the bystanders' indifference and satire towards the victims' experiences.

Liu Yukun seamlessly links the disputes and debates over the atrocities committed by Unit 731 within a short story, demonstrating the lack of reflection on historical fundamentals by Japanese and the US governments, both of which are striving to get rid of the historical crime on their development.

## 5. Conclusion

Hao Jingfang believes that Liu Yukun's works contain philosophical speculation, and we can see the shape of his thinking from his words. [10] The silent deceased victims and those who refuse to confess their crimes return to people's vision thanks to time travel. The victims, perpetrators, and bystanders are placed under the narrative framework of dialogue. The overlap between the past and the future is reflected in the concept of alternative history, creating a science fiction artistic conception with a strong sense of quality supported by a rich historical and cultural background. In this ever-changing artistic conception, what remains unchanged is the author's profound practical consideration and humanistic reflection on human individuals and history. By examining the relationship between history and individuals in the novel, the novel conveys the importance of facing history honestly. Only when both the victim and the perpetrator face history honestly can a true reconciliation be achieved. Otherwise, due to the denial of the crime by the perpetrators and bystanders, the silent victims in history will never be able to end the traumatic memory.

The text reflects the complexity of the relationship between humans and history, reflecting individuals' attitudes towards Chinese traumatic history through victims, perpetrators and bystanders' perspective. The narrative in the novel combines the personal memories of the victim's relative and members of Unit 731 to make a dialogue between history and reality; The characters in the novel present the controversy between nihilistic and materialistic historical views. Therefore, it is necessary to uphold the Marxist materialist view of history, recognize the

objective laws of social development, and avoid falling into historical nihilism. The value of this genre is to reflect on history, consider the present, and widen our understanding of the world. At the end of the novel, Liu Yukun notes that this story is dedicated to the memory of Iris Chang and all the victims of Unit 731. He first got the idea for writing a story in the form of a documentary after reading Ted Chiang's "Liking What You See: a Documentary." He also responsibly provides detailed information to testify the crimes against humanity committed by Unit 731. The attitude of Japan towards the atrocities of Unit 731 in the text is exactly the same as that of Japan in reality. Through the solid platform of science fiction, historical events that once truly existed can awaken people to explore the truth of traumatic history. While representing history, *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* attempts to participate in a dialogue with the future, conveying dangerous warnings to those who deny history, and further reflecting on history from a grand cosmic scale. As the author exclaims at the end of the text, every moment, as we walk on this earth, we are watched and judged by the eyes of the universe.

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