

# **Realism, Perspective and the Act of Looking: A Comparison of Chinese Cinematic Representations of the Second Sino-Japanese War**

Isaac Leong  
*Brown University*

Edited by  
Zoe Zacharopoulos, Alexander  
Vaughan Williams, Lillian Schoeller  
and Nicole Tsung

## INTRODUCTION

Jiang Wen's *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000) and Lu Chuan's *City of Life and Death* (2009) belong to a new generation of Chinese cinema representing the traumas of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45). As sixth-generation Chinese filmmakers, Jiang (born 1963) and Lu (born 1971) both began their filmmaking careers in China's post-socialist era when the gradual opening of China's film market to foreign investment transformed the landscape of Chinese cinema.<sup>1</sup> Their films, in many ways, reflect on the social contradictions of their time—not only in regard to China's unequal economic rise, but also to the amnesia that celebrates China's spectacular imperial past while ignoring its more recent and less glorious history.<sup>2</sup> In this context, China's "War of Resistance against Japan" is perhaps the most brutal part of its "century of humiliation and exploitation."<sup>3</sup>

Undeniably, the atrocities inflicted on the Chinese people during the Sino-Japanese War have left a lasting wound on the national psyche. Yet, collective memory of this period—more specifically, its cinematic representations—has evolved alongside the changing priorities of the Chinese government. With fierce contestations for political legitimacy between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

---

1 Vivian Lee, "The Chinese War Film: Reframing National History in Transnational Cinema," in *American and Chinese-Language Cinemas: Examining Cultural Flows*, eds. Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip (New York: Routledge, 2014), 101.

2 Gary Xu, *Sinascapes: Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 38-39.

3 Yinan He, "History, Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict," *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 50 (February 2007), 8.

and the exiled Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) party, early Chinese films depicting the war tended to glorify the CCP as the only resolute and successful force fighting Japanese imperialism. Simultaneously, these films typically portrayed the KMT as corrupt, incompetent, or otherwise traitorous collaborators.<sup>4</sup> Echoing the Japanese narrative that pinned wartime responsibility on a narrow “military clique,” the socialist “Red Classics” of this period also avoided elaboration on Japanese war crimes for fear of “disseminating sentimentalism and capitalist humanism.”<sup>5</sup> It was not until the 1980s, with the attempt to heal the Communist-Nationalist fissure, that the official narrative of the war began to sharply change emphasis, stressing the Chinese-Japanese conflict much more than the domestic, ideological one. In these representations, the nationalistic message of popular resistance against the Japanese enemy is emphasized, and anyone who collaborates with the Japanese is quickly and uncritically denounced as an unpatriotic traitor. This narrative of righteous resistance offers a kind of vindication for the Chinese nation who, while remaining historically defeated by the Japanese, can find celebration of victorious battles on screen. As Chinese writer Yu Hua notes, there is “a joke that more Japanese have been ‘killed’ at Hengdian (China’s largest film studio) than at all the actual battlefields put together—more, even, than the total population of Japan.”<sup>6</sup>

Set against this new backdrop of Chinese war films, *Devils on the Doorstep* and *City of Life and Death* seem to depart radically from traditional cinematic representations of the War of Resistance, and perhaps as a consequence, caused significant controversy in China. The former was banned from formal release in China, with the Chinese Film Bureau citing “errors in historical representation” and labelling the film as being “insufficiently patriotic.”<sup>7</sup> The latter, although not banned, was criticized by the Chinese media for its sympathetic portrayal of, and even identification with, its protagonist: a Japanese soldier plagued by guilt for witnessing the atrocities committed by his fellow soldiers against the Chinese. In this regard, the strong reaction to both films indicates how uneasily they sit with usual nationalist narratives about the Chinese “self” and Japanese “other.” Not only is the Japanese enemy humanized in some way, both films also problematize the issue of wartime collaboration and sideline the CCP’s role in leading the national

---

4 Timothy Tsu, Sandra Wilson and King-fai Tam, “The Second World War in postwar Chinese and Japanese film,” in *Chinese and Japanese Films on the Second World War*, eds. King-fai Tam, Timothy Tsu and Sandra Wilson (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2-3.

5 Yinan He, “Remembering and Forgetting the War: Elite Mythmaking, Mass Reaction, and Sino-Japanese Relations, 1950-2006,” *History & Memory* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2007), 49. ‘Red Classics’ (translated from the Chinese term hongse jingdian) refer to art works that reflect the ideological underpinnings of the CCP and often are used with reference to works that were approved during the Cultural Revolution.

6 Yu Hua, “China Waits for an Apology,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/10/opinion/yu-hua-cultural-revolution-nostalgia.html>.

7 Timothy Tsu, “A genealogy of anti-Japanese protagonists in Chinese war films, 1949-2011,” in *Chinese and Japanese Films on the Second World War*, 23.

resistance.

The relationship between both films extends beyond the content of their similarly controversial and unconventional representations of the war. Though utilized for somewhat different purposes, Lu Chuan's use of the black-and-white format in *City of Life and Death* owes a certain "creative debt" to Jiang Wen's *Devils on the Doorstep*, which pioneered the use of the medium to represent the Second Sino-Japanese War in an age of color cinema.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, this aesthetic decision to film in black and white is an attempt by both films to grapple with the broader issues of realism and artificiality, especially within the context of historical trauma. In representing the traumas of the war, both films also employ first-person perspectives and narratives, albeit in different ways. While *Devils on the Doorstep* depicts the experiences of war from the narrow perspective of an ordinary Chinese peasant, *City of Life and Death* adopts an approach common in the genre of docudramas by switching between different perspectives, though focusing on the experiences of a conscience-stricken Japanese soldier. Despite both films showing some commitment to representing the ordinary and subjective experiences of the war, the latter's approach effaces individual histories and uses the victim's perspective merely as melodrama in a more conventional narrative of Chinese victimhood.<sup>9</sup> By comparing both films in their relationship to realism and nationalist remembrances of the war, I argue that while the representation of the war in *City of Life and Death* reflects predominant historiographical problems concerning the Sino-Japanese War, *Devils on the Doorstep* is a more self-reflexive attempt to subvert and deconstruct nationalist narratives of the war.

Set in the last year of the war in the Japanese-occupied part of northern China, *Devils on the Doorstep* captures the horrors and absurdity of the war from the perspective of a group of Chinese villagers who are mysteriously tasked by the Communist resistance to house and interrogate two captives—a Japanese soldier and his Chinese translator. Among the villagers, Ma Dasan—a strong, straight-minded, credulous and bumbling peasant—becomes the unwilling protagonist. Initially a farcical comedy depicting the confusion of the villagers who are unsure about how to deal with this unexpected and unwanted disruption of their lives, the story takes a darker turn when Dasan is tasked with killing the two prisoners. Partly because Dasan is unable to do the deed, and partly because the executioner he employs turns out to be a fraud, Dasan and the villagers eventually agree

8 Jie Li, "Discolored vestiges of history: Black and white in the age of color cinema," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no. 3 (2012), 250.

9 Dai Jinhua, "I Want to Be Human: A Story of China and the Human," *Social Text* 29, no. 4 (2011), 141-142. My understanding of melodrama is borrowed from Amos Goldberg's exploration of the relationship between the victim's voice and melodrama. See Amos Goldberg, "The Victim's Voice and Melodramatic Aesthetics in History," *History and Theory* 48, no. 3 (Oct 2009), 220-237.

to return the prisoners to the Japanese army in return for food. While this deal is initially honored by the Japanese army, the celebratory banquet unexpectedly turns into a cold-blooded massacre of the entire village by the carousing Japanese soldiers, leaving Dasan as the sole survivor and witness of the massacre. When the war ends and the Japanese soldiers are pardoned by the returning Nationalists, Dasan finds himself unable to deal with the guilt and tries to kill every Japanese soldier he can in revenge. However, he is quickly subdued and in an ironic turn of events, executed, at the order of the returning Nationalist government by the same Japanese soldier that he saved.

As a docudrama about the Nanjing Massacre, *City of Life and Death* adopts a vastly different approach to represent the traumas of the Sino-Japanese War. Switching primarily between the perspectives of the ordinary Japanese soldier Kadokawa Masao, the Nazi Party member John Rabe, and his fictional secretary Tang, the film tells a “collaged” story about the fall of Nanjing and the establishment and subsequent dissolution of the Nanjing Safety Zone.<sup>10</sup> Without a coherent dramatic narrative, three plot points stand out in the film, each centering around one of the three main characters: Rabe is pressured into providing the Japanese army with one hundred Chinese comfort women from the Safety Zone he sets up; Tang collaborates with the Japanese in an attempt to protect his family after Rabe announces his recall to Germany; and Kadokawa, stricken by guilt after witnessing the horrors and brutality of war, releases two Chinese prisoners and commits suicide at the end of the film. Given Lu Chuan’s style of realistic representation, it is needless to say that scenes of executions, mass shooting, and rape form the *mise-en-scène* of the film.

### THE GAZE IN CINEMATIC REALISM

Borrowing from Daniel Morgan, I propose that cinematic realism can be thought of in two different ways that correspond with the two films discussed in this paper.<sup>11</sup> Following the canonical understanding of André Bazin’s theorizations of film realism, the first conception, corresponding with Lu Chuan’s interpretation in *City of Life and Death*, sees realism as “a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the

---

10 Yanhong Zhu, “A past revisited: Re-presentation of the Nanjing Massacre in *City of Life and Death*,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 7, no. 2 (2013), 87-88. While most of Lu’s characters are ostensibly “historical analogues” inspired by real characters that have been written about, the two Western foreigners in the film—John Rabe and Minnie Vautrin—are actual people who lived in Nanjing during the massacre and documented it extensively in their diaries and correspondence. Together with other foreigners, they helped to set up the Nanjing Safety Zone.

11 Daniel Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2006), 443-481.

irreversibility of time.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, as Morgan argues, realism need not be understood as a set of stylistic conventions that have come to define the realist aesthetic. Instead, he suggests that Bazin “sees a more complicated relation between style and reality. Though a film, to be realist, must take into account... the ontology of the photographic image, realism is not a particular style, lack of style, or a set of stylistic attributes, but a process and mechanism.”<sup>13</sup> Seeing realism as a way of interpreting reality thus enables “realist” films, like *Devils on the Doorstep*, to explore alternative stylistic and imaginative resources in their representation of reality.

Discussing the use of black and white in *City of Life and Death*, the film’s cinematographer Cao Yu explained how the use of black and white not only provided the film with “a sense of reality” and “spiritual abstraction,” but was also necessary in avoiding the gory excesses and pornographic pleasures of the horror genre.<sup>14</sup> However, when mediating between these sometimes conflicting goals, the film seems to prioritize the achievement of authenticity and realism. In conducting research for the film, Lu Chuan and the rest of the production team spent weeks on end at the Jianchuan Museum Cluster in Sichuan combing through close to five hundred thousand photographs depicting the Sino-Japanese War with the main purpose of imitating the “reality effect” of the most compelling historical photographs.<sup>15</sup>

The pursuit of realism and authenticity in cinematic representations of the Nanjing Massacre is not new and is perhaps, in the context of Japanese denial of the massacre for more than half a century, a symptom of a broader national anxiety to “‘prove’ that it actually happened.”<sup>16</sup> A comparison can be made here between *City of Life and Death* and its cinematic precedent, Mou Tun-fei’s *Black Sun* (1995). Blurring the line between documentary and fiction, *Black Sun* integrates documentary footage of the Nanjing Massacre into its dramatized and fictional narrative. In one of the most shocking images of the film, the meticulously reenacted execution of an elderly Chinese monk by a Japanese soldier cuts to the actual photograph which the scene is based on just as the gunshot is heard. In many ways, the recreation of such gory and violent images seems to be, at best, an attempt to bear testimony to the most excessive, horrific, and spectacular scenes of the Nanjing Massacre, and at worst, an exploitative atrocity film. Even though Lu

12 André Bazin, *What is Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 25.

13 Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin,” 445.

14 Li Yue, “Dancing with the Camera: A Special Interview with Nanjing! Nanjing!’s Cinematographer Cao Yu” (in Chinese), May 11, 2009, <http://old.pku-hall.com/WYPPZZ.aspx?id=456>. Note that Nanjing! Nanjing! is the alternative English-language title for Lu Chuan’s *City of Life and Death*.

15 He Xi, “Nanjing! Nanjing!’s Sichuan Connection” (in Chinese), April 24, 2009, <http://www.cinema.com.cn/YingYuTianXia/2245.htm>. I borrow the concept of the “reality effect” from Roland Barthes, who argues that what we call “real” is “never more than a code of representation.” See Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 80.

16 Michael Berry, “Cinematic Representations of the Rape of Nanking,” *East Asia* 19, no. 4 (2001), 88.

Chuan disavows the medium of horror in representing the Nanjing Massacre and does not use archival footage to shock the audience in the same way that *Black Sun* does, there is a similar attempt to mimic reality in *City of Life and Death*. Using the existing visual culture of the Sino-Japanese War to create the film's "aura of authenticity," Lu Chuan develops the setting of the film by drawing on documentary photographs that would be familiar to a Chinese audience exposed to scenes of a war-ravaged Nanjing.<sup>17</sup>

The appropriation of and reference to archival footage in the name of historical realism, however, poses its own problems. In referring to "historical analogues" in the name of realism, there is an underlying assumption that archival photographs and film footage can capture the past as it happened—an objective, dispassionate record of scenes and events.<sup>18</sup> Yet, as Susan Sontag suggests, this is an impossible task for photography as "people quickly discovered that nobody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that cameras furnish an impersonal, objective image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what's there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world."<sup>19</sup> In the context of war and genocide, however, the issues of realism are not only a theoretical debate, but have implications for our attempts to understand that past. Aside from film footage taken by the American missionary John Magee and a few other exceptions, the vast majority of all surviving visual records of the massacre were produced by the Japanese.<sup>20</sup> The collection of photographs that *City of Life and Death* was based on was in fact acquired from Japan and taken by Japanese soldiers and camera crew during the invasion of and subsequent massacre in Nanjing.<sup>21</sup> Although the motivations that lie behind the production of these images were very different from those of contemporary filmmakers like Lu Chuan, the mimicking of these photographic visions risk reproducing the very gaze of the perpetrator. As Elie Wiesel discusses in the context of the Holocaust:

For the most part the images derive from enemy sources. The victim had neither cameras nor film. To amuse themselves, or to bring back souvenirs back to their families, or to serve Goebbel's propaganda, the killers filmed sequences in one ghetto or another...The use of the faked, truncated images makes it difficult to omit the poisonous message that motivated them...Will the viewer continue to remember that these films were made by the killers to show the downfall and the

---

17 Rebecca Nedostup, "City of Life and Death (Nanjing! Nanjing! 2009) and the Silenced Nanjing Native" in *Through a Lens Darkly: Films of Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing*, eds. John Michalczyk and Raymond Helmick (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 64.

18 Shao Yan, "In the film we have kept our integrity: Exclusive interview with Lu Chuan" (in Chinese), *Dianying shijie*, April 2009, 24-29.

19 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 88.

20 Berry, "Cinematic Representations of the Rape of Nanking," 95.

21 He Xi, "Nanjing! Nanjing!'s Sichuan Connection."

baseness of their so-called subhuman victims?<sup>22</sup>

Yet as Wiesel recognizes, these photographs serve an important purpose, whether for “eventual comprehension of the concentration camps’ existence” or as a representation of how the perpetrators perceived their role in war and genocide.<sup>23</sup> In this context, the problem with Lu Chuan’s appropriation of the photographic record is how it treats these photographs as an objective truth that allows one to unproblematically access the past. Rather than acknowledging the limits of the visual archive for our understanding of the Nanjing Massacre, *City of Life and Death* seems to reproduce the gaze of the perpetrators without self-reflexivity. In a startling sequence, hundreds of disheveled Chinese men, mistaken by the Japanese to be Chinese soldiers, are passively herded to the execution grounds and later mowed down by a barrage of bullets. At the end, the audience is almost made to identify with the Japanese perpetrators as the camera zooms in on the back of a Japanese soldier looking down on a sea of individually indistinguishable corpses, accompanied by non-diegetic and somewhat triumphant martial music.



*A Japanese soldier, standing on a pedestal, gazes out on a sea of Chinese corpses after a mass shooting. Scene from **City of Life and Death.***

In relying on historical photographs, the realist cinematography of *City of Life and Death* also runs the risk of being tacitly pornographic in its depiction of sexual atrocities committed as part of the Nanjing Massacre. By transforming grainy photographs of women’s bodies into the aesthetic medium of cinema, the naked bodies of rape victims become a spectacle to fulfill the “public fantasies” associated with watching rape on-screen.<sup>24</sup> The relationship between reality and

22 Elie Wiesel, “Foreword” (trans. Annette Insdorf) in Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xii.

23 Wiesel, “Foreword,” xii.

24 Amanda Weiss, “Contested Images of Rape: The Nanjing Massacre in Chinese and Japanese Films,” *Journal*

interpretation must again be problematized, and the gaze of the perpetrator is even more pernicious in inscribing meaning onto sexual atrocities. As film scholar and feminist Tanya Horeck argues, since the same scene of rape can be interpreted differently depending on the viewer and context, representations of rape in cinema are “battles over the ownership of meaning and of reality.”<sup>25</sup> In the context of *City of Life and Death*, sexual assault survivors are depicted as passive and disenfranchised victims whose voices never get heard. The subjectivity of the rape victim is not only effaced by the photographic gaze of the Japanese perpetrator, but continues to be suppressed in representations of rape within national discourse. As Chungmoo Choi convincingly argues in reference to the comfort women issue in Korea, “comfort women discourse displaces the women’s subjectivity, which is grounded on pain, and constructs the women only as symbols of national shame. As such, the primacy of the discourse on comfort women attends not to the welfare of women’s subjectivity but to the national agenda of overcoming colonial emasculation.”<sup>26</sup> Applying Choi’s analysis to the context of the Nanjing Massacre, it is telling how the “Rape of Nanking” continues to persist as a popular moniker for the “Nanjing Massacre,” which has been for many years the standard in both English and Chinese language scholarship. By conflating actual experiences of sexual atrocities with the metaphorical rape/penetration of the national homeland, the name appropriates rape into a masculine national discourse that obfuscates individual experiences of pain and trauma.

In its representation of rape, *City of Life and Death* operates firmly within this national discourse. Depicting most of the Chinese characters in the film as an indistinguishable mass, Lu again represents the massive scale of sexual victimization at the cost of reducing the nature of these women to mere victims of rape. Like the “numbers game” which dominates national contestations over the history of the Nanjing Massacre between China and Japan, it is not the individual and subjective experiences of trauma, but its scale that counts towards the national narrative of victimhood.<sup>27</sup> Images of rape and sexual abuse abound in the film, but two female Chinese characters seem to stand out: Xiao Jiang, a prostitute, and Jiang Shuyun, a teacher. In one of two moments of dramatic self-sacrifice in the film, Xiao Jiang is the first to volunteer herself as one of the “100 comfort women” given to the Japanese army so as to spare the rape of other girls within the Safety Zone. While

---

of Women in Culture and Society 41, no. 2 (Winter 2016), 437.

25 Tanya Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 13.

26 Chungmoo Choi, “The Politics of War Memories towards Healing” in *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, eds. Takashi Fujitani, Lisa Yoneyama and Geoffrey White (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 399.

27 Daqing Yang, “The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre: Reflections on Historical Inquiry,” in *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, ed. Joshua Fogel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 151. See also Fujiwara Akira, “The Nanking Atrocity: An Interpretive Overview,” in *The Nanking Atrocity, 1937-38*, ed. Bob Wakabayashi (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 51-52.



in the other sequence the Nationalist soldier Lu Jianxiong calmly stands up to face a certain but heroic death, Xiao Jiang's sacrifice of her body is "naturalized by virtue of her being a prostitute in the first place."<sup>28</sup> Raped to death, Xiao Jiang's nude body is tragically and unceremoniously tossed into a pile of other bodies. Conversely, Shuyun's death happens in a far more merciful and sympathetic manner. Captured by Japanese soldiers near the end of the film, Shuyun begs Japanese soldier Kadokawa to shoot her so as to save her from being sexually abused. It is thus implied that while Shuyun's chastity is more important than her survival, for Xiao Jiang the sacrifice of her body and ultimately her life to protect the "pure" schoolgirls is an expectation. In doing so, the film fetishizes both the chastity of the schoolgirls and the illicit sexuality of the prostitutes. Such a portrayal fails to explore the individual subjectivities of the female characters, instead presenting them as symbolic rather than real figures. Like the discourse surrounding comfort women that prioritizes "a narrative of virgins forcefully kidnapped and raped over other experiences of victimhood," the filmic representation of rape in *City of Life and Death* marginalizes the traumas suffered by individual rape victims, as it is the "compromised" and "indecent" women who are raped and their deaths neatly mark the national humiliation as a distant past.<sup>29</sup>

#### OBJECTIVITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Entangled with the film's quest to "recreate the world in its own image," the pursuit of an objective representation of the Nanjing Massacre seems to be the film's *raison d'être*. In this regard, a significant portion of *City of Life and Death* is framed from the perspective of the detached and presumably impartial Western observer.<sup>30</sup> Without a coherent narrative arc, the film is framed by a series of postcards written in English, by the American missionary Minnie Vautrin.<sup>31</sup> The film opens with a series of postcards that establish the historical background of the Nanjing Massacre, narrating the progress of the Japanese army from Beijing to Shanghai and finally to the then-capital Nanjing. Interestingly, there is no evidence that Vautrin actually wrote and sent postcards like these during the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, even though she and Rabe—the two Westerners central to the film—detailed the fall of Nanjing extensively in their own diaries.<sup>32</sup> It is thus

28 Nedostup, "City of Life and Death," 65.

29 Weiss, "Contested Images of Rape," 437.

30 As Michael Berry notes, the reliance on presumably impartial and objective foreigners to authenticate the Nanjing Massacre is not new to Chinese cinema, and he traces this "legitimizing power of the West" to Luo Guanqun's *Massacre in Nanjing* (1987). See Berry, "Cinematic Representations of the Rape of Nanking," 90-91.

31 Kevin Lee, "City of Life and Death," *Cineaste* 35, no. 2, Spring 2010, <https://www.cineaste.com/spring2010/cityof-life-and-death/>.

32 John Rabe, *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe*, trans. John Woods (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998). Minnie Vautrin, *Terror in Minnie Vautrin's Nanjing: Diaries and Correspondence, 1937-38* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

revealing that the film chose to imagine what Vautrin, rather than any Chinese character, would have written in her correspondence. In this case, the film's quest for authenticity is implicated by the same notions of objectivity and detachment that plague the historiography of the Nanjing Massacre.

Even though a vast collection of oral testimonies given by survivors has been collected, historical scholarship on the Nanjing Massacre has been slow to acknowledge and use these testimonies as reliable evidence.<sup>33</sup> Significantly, when Japanese reporter Honda Katsuichi published an extensive collection of interviews with Chinese survivors of the Nanjing Massacre and other Japanese war crimes, he was accused of "presenting the Chinese side of the story uncritically" and deniers were quick to seize on any discrepancies in the testimonies as "evidence of the fabrication of the Nanjing Massacre."<sup>34</sup> While there are undoubtedly limits to the ability of oral testimonies to serve as unquestionable facts, the testimonies of victims illuminate a particular contingent and subjective truth that cannot otherwise be understood. The fetishization of objectivity and neutrality thus leads one to prioritize the written records of detached Western observers, consequently obscuring a historically significant part of the Nanjing Massacre. Considering how Western foreigners were either expelled from the city by December 15 or otherwise confined within the Safety Zone, they could have only witnessed at best "a fraction of what actually happened afterwards in a larger area with hundreds of thousands of residents."<sup>35</sup>

In the face of continuing Japanese denial, reflected most notably in a statement made in 2012 by Mayor Takashi Kawamura stating that the "so-called Nanjing Massacre is unlikely to have taken place," the quest for objective detachment is simultaneously understandable and obfuscating.<sup>36</sup> On one hand, the eyewitness testimonies of detached Western observers like John Rabe and the American missionaries present at the scene of the Nanjing Massacre are perceived, even within China, to provide an objective account of the massacre that can be used in the battle against denial. Yet on the other, the testimonies of Western observers can only be testimonies of themselves and of their immediate context. If, as Leo Tolstoy suggests, the gap between a real event and the various fragmentary and distorted recollections of it can only be overcome "by collecting the memories of every individual (even the humblest soldier) who had been directly or indirect-

---

33 Yang, "The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre," 139-143. Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking* also describes the Chinese trauma of the Nanjing Massacre primarily through the lens of Western observers, relying heavily on the diaries of American missionaries Minnie Vautrin and John Magee, as well as the German businessman and Nazi Party member John Rabe. See Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic, 1997).

34 Yang, "The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre," 142; Honda Katsuichi, *The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998).

35 Yang, "The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre," 139.

36 Paul Armstrong, "Fury over Japanese politician's Nanjing Massacre denial," CNN, February 23, 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/02/23/world/asia/china-nanjing-row/index.html>.

ly involved in the battle,” then the attempt to frame and understand the Nanjing Massacre from the narrow perspective of Western observers elides the voices of Nanjing residents and survivors who undoubtedly experienced and remembered very differently from foreign bystanders.<sup>37</sup> Even though the choice to emphasize the role played by Western observers may not have been an ideal one for Lu Chuan, it is nonetheless an inadvertent effect of historiography that relies on written-documentation generated by Western observers—the famous *The Rape of Nanking* by Iris Chang is one prominent example.<sup>38</sup> Belonging to a different world, the computer-animated yet realist postcards written in Vautrin’s hand reveal the limits of a Western perspective in representing the trauma of the Nanjing Massacre—its language is detached and devoid of the emotions that often underlie the testimonies collected from Nanjing residents and survivors.



*One of the postcards written by Minnie Vautrin shown immediately after brutal scenes of massacre and rape. Scene from **City of Life and Death**.*

### RETHINKING REALISM

Even though *City of Life and Death* and *Devils on the Doorstep* share the distinctive stylistic feature of black-and-white cinematography, its use in the latter film subverts the canonical understanding of realism and reveals the constructed nature of the photographic image. Jiang’s endeavor is an interesting and ambitious one, not only because cinematic realism originated in black-and-white cinematography, but also because, as highlighted earlier, war newsreels are frequently incorporated into documentary and docudrama films to enhance the authenticity of historical

37 Carlo Ginzburg, “Just One Witness” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 95.

38 Lu Chuan declined an offer to direct a film about the Nanjing Massacre that, according to him, “valorized” the role of John Rabe. See Keen Zhang, “City of Sorrow: Competing film portrayals of the Nanjing Massacre,” *China.org.cn*, April 30, 2009, [http://china.org.cn/culture/2009-04/30/content\\_17702091.htm](http://china.org.cn/culture/2009-04/30/content_17702091.htm). Interestingly, the heavy influence of Western-centric historiography on *City of Life and Death* can be observed from how the main character Kadokawa Masao was reconstructed from a “historical analogue” found in Vautrin’s diaries. See Vautrin, *Terror in Minnie Vautrin’s Nanjing*.

narratives. In a similar way, historical documentation is often perceived to possess a certain realist quality as a black-and-white text with fixed meaning, even though like photography, it is mediated by layers of language and interpretation.<sup>39</sup>

Like *City of Life and Death*, Jiang's film shares a close relationship with historical photographs of the Second Sino-Japanese war. In an interview, Jiang revealed how, in preparing for the film, they "took photographs of our actors in their costumes and made Xerox copies of them and placed them next to Xeroxes of actual historical photographs. No one could distinguish between them."<sup>40</sup> Yet, unlike *City of Life and Death*, *Devils on the Doorstep* makes neither pretension to being a documentary nor attempts to imply the historicity of the narrative.<sup>41</sup> Instead, the film uses the visual medium associated with realism to make a self-reflexive critique of the relationship between history as the past and history as a representation. In the final moments of *Devils on the Doorstep*, the black-and-white aesthetic switches to color just as Ma Dasan is beheaded in an execution ordered by the returning Nationalist government. In this scene, we are shown Dasan's execution first from the perspective of a Chinese villager watching the public execution, and then, in the only subjective shot in the entire film, from the disturbing perspective of Dasan's decapitated head, watching as the crowd cheers.<sup>42</sup> Unlike scenes of execution and death in *City of Life and Death*, the depiction of violence in this scene is swift and hardly pornographic. The lack of sentimentality and horrific excess—the two elements that characterize portrayals of violence in *City of Life and Death*—makes this scene, in some ways, even more brutal and disturbing.

On one level, by shifting attention away from the violence and to the act of watching it, Jiang criticizes the passive act of spectatorship that the surrounding Chinese villagers are guilty of and that we, as the audience, are complicit in. The spectating peasants exhibit no sympathy for Dasan, laughing and howling in a manner reminiscent of how the Japanese soldiers laughed and watched while butchering Dasan's entire village. While parallels can be drawn between the reactions in these two situations, the contexts and the actors within it are obviously not analogous. Yet it is also the semblance of law and order in the case of Dasan's execution that makes this scene especially troubling. While the Nationalist government claims to restore civilization to a village previously ruled by the savage

---

39 This is encapsulated in the Chinese phrase "白纸黑字" (baizhi heizi), which literally means "white paper with black words" and refers to the fixity/conclusiveness of written evidence.

40 Li, "Discolored vestiges of history," 250.

41 Jerome Silbergeld, *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 150.

42 In doing so, the film departs the realm of conventional realism and into the realm of surrealism. See Kristof Van den Troost, "War, Horror and Trauma: Japanese atrocities on Chinese screens," in *Chinese and Japanese Films on the Second World War*, 62-63.

Japanese devils,<sup>43</sup> they are guilty of what Michael Taussig calls “mimetic excess” by appropriating the very savagery they are meant to abolish.<sup>44</sup> Of course, this critique folds back on and implicates the spectators, who are not troubled by the brutality but behave with a veneer of civility which they believe divorces them from the plight of the victims.

On another level, the shifts in perspective in this final scene expose the inherent gap between representation and reality, and consequently, the appropriation of wartime suffering and trauma by national narratives of the past. As the camera shifts away from Dasan’s perspective and to a frontal shot of Dasan’s decapitated head, the moving picture transforms into still photography and then into iconography.<sup>45</sup> Not only is this implied by the woodcut-like texture of the final shot, the image itself closely resembles widely-circulated atrocity photographs that have become a cliché in depicting Japanese wartime cruelty.

In this way, the multiple shifts in perspective force the audience to question the truth and reliability of each perspective and to eventually acknowledge the gap between these different representations of reality and reality itself. Jiang further interrogates the relationship between representation and reality using Lu Xun’s *The True Story of Ah Q*, to which Jiang frequently compared his film.<sup>46</sup> The novella tells the story of an ordinary Chinese peasant with the ability to transform personal humiliations and defeats into victories through deliberate renaming and misnaming. Though Ah Q is eventually publicly executed for committing theft, the narrator turns away from his satirical tone and presents this moment in a sympathetic and reflective manner. Lu Xun writes at the end of the novella: “Naturally all agreed that Ah Q had been a bad man, the proof being that he had been shot; for if he had not been bad, how could he have been shot?”<sup>47</sup> Turning the target of satire from Ah Q to the villagers, Lu Xun highlights the artifice of allegedly true representations: whether Ah Q’s stories of his defeats/victories, the court’s narrative of Ah Q’s guilt, or even, in a self-reflexive turn, the narrator’s/ Lu Xun’s

---

43 This is, of course, a reference to the eponymous “devils” in the film. In fact, Jiang Wen’s connection of the “devils” to the Japanese soldiers is even clearer in the original Chinese-language title of the film “鬼子来了” (*guizi lailie*), with the *guizi* (literally “devils”/“ghosts”) being frequently invoked in both wartime and postwar parlance to refer to the Japanese. See Julian Ward, “Filming the anti-Japanese war: the devils and buffoons of Jiang Wen’s *Guizi Laile*,” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 2, no. 2, September 2004, 107-108.

44 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1992). David Wang applies the same concept to his analysis of Lu Xun’s literature, who was traumatized by his experience of the First Sino-Japanese War and subsequently turned to writing literature as a way of ‘saving China’s soul’. See David Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 35.

45 Li, “Discolored vestiges of history,” 254.

46 Lu Xun, “The True Story of Ah Q,” in *Call to Arms* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2010), 141-212. Cheng Qingsong and Huang Ou, *My Camera Doesn’t Lie* (in Chinese) (Beijing: Zhongguo Youyi, 2002), 72-73.

47 Lu Xun, “The True Story of Ah Q,” 209.

“true story” of Ah Q.<sup>48</sup> While the motivations for Lu Xun’s literature must be read against the social and intellectual milieu of the May Fourth Movement, his critique of the “violence of representation” and of the privileging of certain voices over others remains highly relevant to the study of Chinese representations of the War of Resistance.<sup>48</sup> In this regard, Jiang’s dialogue with *The True Story of Ah Q* highlights how conventional historical narratives about the war, framed as narratives of heroic national resistance and eventual triumph, ultimately purge history of its horrors and violence.

### DECONSTRUCTING NATIONALIST TROPES

Like Lu Xun’s novella, *Devils on the Doorstep* must also be situated within the social context in which Jiang grew up. In various interviews, Jiang reveals how the images of Japanese “devils” in the film are based on “their looks, as I remembered them.”<sup>49</sup> Born in 1963, Jiang obviously did not see Japanese soldiers firsthand, but nonetheless had a certain image of them based on the representations of the war he grew up with. Growing up during the Cultural Revolution, Jiang was familiar with images of the Japanese devil created in the “Red Classics” and other revolutionary films of that time. In these black-and-white propaganda films, such as *Railroad Guerrillas* (1956) and *Mine Warfare* (1962), the Japanese soldiers, always referred to colloquially as *guizi*,<sup>50</sup> were treacherous but ultimately silly and comical figures that would be easily ambushed and defeated by patriotic villagers.<sup>51</sup> Cognizant of the problems with such representations, Jiang resists conventional stereotypes of the Chinese peasant as ones which would avenge the nation for Japan’s brutal occupation.

*Devils on the Doorstep* attempts to do this by considering how ordinary people experienced the war and faced up to the “prospect of imminent death during wartime.”<sup>52</sup> Like “Survival,” the novella from which the film was adapted, *Devils on the Doorstep* shifts away from the dominant perspective of patriotic Chinese soldiers and focuses on ordinary peasants’ quotidian struggle for survival.<sup>53</sup> Even though the mysterious resistance fighter catalyzes the tragic chain of events, he is

48 Feng Zongxin, “Fictional Narrative as History: Reflection and Deflection,” *Semiotica* 170, no. 1, 2008, 189; Andrew Jones, “The Violence of the Text: Reading Yu Hua and Shi Zhecun,” *Positions* 2, Winter 1994, 593. See also Martin Huang, “The Inescapable Predicament: The Narrator and His Discourse in ‘The True Story of Ah Q,’” *Modern China* 16, no. 4, October 1990, 435.

49 Cheng and Huang, *My Camera Doesn’t Lie*, 75.

50 A derogatory term referring to the Japanese and other foreigners. See note 42.

51 Ward, “Filming the anti-Japanese war,” 107-108. See also Xu, *Sinascapes*, 43-44.

52 You Fengwei, *From ‘Survival’ to ‘Devils on the Doorstep’* (in Chinese) (Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 1999), 5.

53 You Fengwei, “Survival,” in *Life Channel* (in Chinese) (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue, 2005).

ultimately a marginal figure in the film, appearing only once to drop off the two prisoners and, unlike in the “Red Classics” that Jiang alludes to, is never a heroic figure that leads the peasant resistance. Thus, resistance against the Japanese, the arch-signifier of the Chinese war mythology, is represented in the film as an abstract ideology foisted on the reluctant peasants, with a heavy and palpable dose of the absurd.<sup>54</sup>

Rather than portray heroic and martial resistance, the film depicts the daily life of a Chinese village under Japanese occupation as if told from the perspective of the peasants themselves.<sup>55</sup> *Devils on the Doorstep* opens not with a scene of soldiers fighting or of Japanese “devils,” but of daily life in an ordinary village in Japanese-occupied China. It is clear from the opening sequence that despite having been a base for Japanese navy reservists for eight years, the village has been relatively untouched by the war. As Japanese sailors parade through the village playing their jaunty naval song, local Chinese children clamor in excitement while waiting for the Japanese commander to hand out candy. The commander then stops to bark instructions at one of the adult villagers to bring him clean water that night and the latter responds pliantly, like one of the children, even calling the Japanese soldier *sensei* (Japanese for “teacher”). While there is certainly a clear sense of hierarchy governing their interactions, and perhaps some fear in the peasant receiving the orders, there is no hatred and vengefulness as one might expect. Instead, the villagers adapt to the occupation with ingenuity, compromising with Japanese soldiers so as to create for themselves a space of autonomy and local “resistance.” From this perspective of the peasants, one can appreciate how the daily life of the war was motivated by a palpable sense of survival more than any abstract and ideological notion of nationhood. Yet it is also the everyday struggle for survival that reveals both the cruelty of war and the resilience of humanity, whose historical struggles against violence often get drowned in “black-and-white versions of history that pay attention only to the grand schemes of antagonism, such as class, nation, and ideology.”<sup>56</sup>

54 Haiyan Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 256.

55 Much of the film is shot within the claustrophobic interiors of village houses, where the villagers discuss and deliberate what to do with the prisoners. The use of language and poetry also reflects the playfulness and lyricism of peasant storytelling methods. See Ward, “Filming the anti-Japanese war,” 112.

56 Xu, *Sinascapes*, 44. See also Ward, “Filming the anti-Japanese war,” 113.



*Chinese peasant children dancing to the tune of the Japanese naval song, excitedly awaiting candy from the Japanese naval commander. Scene from **Devils on the Doorstep**.*

By representing the War of Resistance from below, Jiang also blurs the lines between wartime collaboration and resistance, perhaps explaining state and popular censure against *Devils on the Doorstep*.<sup>57</sup> The issue of collaboration during the War of Resistance has been a thorny issue in Chinese national memory. Broadly remembered as a “good war” which legitimized the nation, the party and the experiences of some who lived through it, national remembrances of the Second Sino-Japanese War tend to emphasize the Chinese as “positive and patriotic figures who are at the same time victims of savagery by others, rather than authors of their own misfortune.”<sup>58</sup> In this national narrative, collaborators, like the translator Dong Hanchen in *Devils on the Doorstep* and Rabe’s secretary Mr. Tang in *City of Life and Death*, are dismissed and demonized as hanjian, a term that is conventionally used to mean “traitor” but literally means a “betrayers of the Chinese race.”<sup>59</sup>

Even though both films address the issue of collaboration, the discourse of salvation in *City of Life and Death* ultimately places the nation above the individual and fails to challenge nationalistic representations of collaboration. Hoping to protect the rest of his family from the brutality of the Japanese army, Tang collabo-

57 Even though *Devils on the Doorstep* won the Grand Jury Prize at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival, Jiang’s success was almost completely ignored in China. His film was later banned for release in China. Chinese critics have argued that the film was “insufficiently patriotic” and had “grave errors in the representation of historical truth.” See Wang Fanghua, “*Devils on the Doorstep*’s Black and White Emotions through a Color Filter” (in Chinese), *Dianying Pingjie*, August 2013, 36-37.

58 Rana Mitter, “China’s ‘Good War’: Voices, Locations, and Generations in the Interpretation of the War of Resistance to Japan” in *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post-Cold War in Asia*, eds. Sheila Miyoshi Jager & Rana Mitter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 188-189.

59 Yun Xia, *Down with Traitors: Justice and Nationalism in Wartime China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 5.



rates with the Japanese by informing on Chinese “soldiers” living within the Safety Zone, simultaneously earning for himself the titles of tomodachi (Japanese for “friend”) and hanjian.<sup>60</sup> While this portrayal of Tang humanizes him far more than most representations of collaborators in Chinese cinema, and consequently seems to put him in a moral gray zone, the film ultimately adopts the nationalist narrative as Tang redeems himself and sacrifices his life for the sake of another, morally untainted Chinese compatriot.<sup>61</sup> By making Tang atone for his sin of collaboration, Lu projects patriotic heroism as a form of fantasy and an imaginative attempt at self-salvation. By telling the story of wartime collaboration as a heroic narrative of salvation, *City of Life and Death* not only obfuscates individual narratives and understandings of collaboration, but also suggests that the individual may somehow lose his life to save the nation to which he belongs. It is telling that Tang’s last words to his Japanese executioner were “my wife is pregnant again,” suggesting again that his patriotic death ensures the longevity of the Chinese nation.<sup>62</sup> In this regard, the film seems to be an attempt to “undo Japanese imperialism and injustice through a patriotic narration of the unity of the Chinese nation,” subordinating the individual to the nation, and ultimately failing to uphold collaboration as a possible moral choice.<sup>63</sup>

In contrast, *Devils on the Doorstep* problematizes the meaning and morality of collaboration. Even though the most obvious collaborator—the translator Dong Hanchen—dies at the end of the film, his death is not a heroic one that absolves him of his guilt or puts the Chinese nation on a pedestal. It is instead an absurd execution filled with grim irony. When the KMT soldiers return and replace the Japanese dictatorship with a Nationalist one, the first order of business is the punishment and execution of wartime collaborators. Made an example by the Nationalist government, Hanchen is denounced as “scum who aided the Japanese to slaughter their own compatriots.” He is portrayed by the KMT military spokesperson, a comical figure speaking with a high-brow accent that distinguishes him from the village folk, as having “aided tyranny and avoided arrest,” his hands “stained with Chinese blood,” and “only execution will quell the masses anger.”<sup>64</sup> The irony of the KMT’s statements cannot be more clear—not only are Hanchen’s hands not “stained with Chinese blood,” Hanchen himself is not the typical oppor-

60 Not only is the line between “soldier” and “civilian” blurred in the film and in reality, where a significant portion of the Chinese resistance army was composed of poorly trained and ill-equipped conscripts, most of the “soldiers” in the Safety Zone were also injured and disarmed, as Tang makes clear.

61 Zhu, “A past revisited,” 102.

62 Lu Chuan, *Nanjing! Nanjing!: City of Life and Death*, 2009.

63 Siu Leng Li, “The theme of salvation in Chinese and Japanese war movies,” in *Chinese and Japanese Films on the Second World War*, 82.

64 Wen Jiang, *Devils on the Doorstep*, 2000.

tunistic collaborator who has betrayed his people to serve the enemy.<sup>65</sup> Rather than acting strictly as a translator for Hanaya, the Japanese soldier for whom he works, Hanchen deliberately mistranslates Hanaya in an attempt to preserve the peace. For example, the comical opening encounter between the villagers and the prisoners reads something like this:

Village head:	So what's his name? Have him tell us himself.
Hanaya (in Japanese):	Shoot me! Kill me! If you've got the guts, cowards!
Village head:	Has he killed Chinese men? Violated Chinese women?
Villagers:	How come his name is so long?
Village head:	Has he killed Chinese men? Violated Chinese women?
Hanaya (in Japanese):	Of course, that's what I came to China for!
Hanchen (translating):	(hesitating) He's new to China. Hasn't seen any women yet. He's killed no one. He's a cook. (turning to Hanaya) Why are you doing this?
Hanaya (in Japanese):	I want to anger these cowards! I won't cooperate with swine!
Hanchen (translating):	He begs you not to kill him!

From this sequence, it can be observed how Hanchen is not a spineless stooge of the Japanese and does not merely “turn Japanese into Chinese and Chinese into Japanese.”<sup>66</sup> Through his mediation of language, he instead opens up a “humane channel of communication” that offers some hope of rapprochement between the Chinese and the Japanese.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, without a translator, the town square becomes like the Tower of Babel when the Chinese KMT first return. It is comical how the KMT representative and the accompanying American and British soldiers, despite their military rank, are unable to “order” a Japanese peddler to move his goods off the road or even just to stand still. Unable to communicate with each other whatsoever, they eventually drive their military jeep over his goods and use the language of force to achieve their goals. Seen in this context, Hanchen is not merely a passive translator who is servile to his Japanese masters but is instead an active agent who uses language as a way to shape reality and avoid violence. In his use of language, Hanchen can perhaps be compared to Guido in Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* (1997), a controversial film that similarly used both humor and surreal scenes to represent the Holocaust. As the main character who generates most of the comedy of the film, Guido turns the threats issued by con-

65 Paola Voci, “The Sino-Japanese War in *Ip Man*: From miscommunication to poetic combat,” in *Chinese and Japanese Films on the Second World War*, 46.

66 Jiang, *Devils on the Doorstep*.

67 Silbergeld, *Body in Question*, 93.

centration camp guards into instructions for a game so as to shelter his son from the horrors of their experience. Unable to stop the perversity of the camp and the likely death that awaits both of them, Guido's translations are at least an attempt to protect his son's childhood and innocence. In this regard, Guido and Hanchen both purposefully sever the link between words and their signified reality so as to seek a way out of an otherwise entrapping situation and to reclaim the possibility of survival.<sup>68</sup> Crucially, Hanchen's "translations" help the peasants overcome the social and cognitive distance that Hanaya strives to enlarge with his racist vitriol and yearnings for martyrdom, possibly avoiding violent confrontation and defusing the situation.



*Dong Hanchen and Hanaya Kosaburo panting after frantically shouting over each other during the interrogation – Hanaya shouting in Japanese and Hanchen in Chinese. The latter deliberately mistranslates Hanaya's demands to be killed. Scene from **Devils on the Doorstep**.*

By looking at the discourse surrounding collaboration (hanjian) from the perspective of the villagers, *Devils on the Doorstep* also exposes the ambiguous and populist aspects of the label. Even though the Nationalist legislature established the hanjian crime as early as August 1937, in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese attack in Beijing, the term was broadly defined and indiscriminately used.<sup>69</sup> In part, this may have been because positions about collaboration and

68 Paola Voci, "The Light out of the tunnel: Re-thinking Chinese cinema's war film realism," *Parol* XXVII, no. 25,

2014, 93. See also Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "The Secret Histories of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1, 2001, 255.

69 Xia, *Down with Traitors*, 11-12.

resistance were constantly evolving. Despite its efforts to present itself as a resistance government, the KMT practiced a policy of non-resistance towards Japan for years and did not completely reject the idea of peace talks with Japan until August 1937.<sup>70</sup> Combined with the encouragement of popular vigilantism in the prosecution of collaborators, the label of collaboration gained a populist valence that empowered passive victims of the war with “an opportunity to redeem their passivity with a display of patriotic fervor.”<sup>71</sup> Not only is this evident at Hanchen’s public execution, the villagers in the film constantly throw around the term *hanjian*, struggling to reach a stable meaning for the term and to reconcile that meaning with their own understandings of right and wrong. Is it collaboration to return the prisoners to the Japanese? Is it collaboration to feed the prisoners? Conversely, what if one were to starve them to death instead? What about the simple act of referring to the Japanese soldiers as “teacher” (*sensei*)? Eventually, however, the decisions made by the villagers remain outside the demands of nationalistic loyalties and discourse. When they find out the Japanese prisoner Hanaya is a peasant like them, the villagers, rather than “coming out with hackneyed expressions of hatred for a despised enemy,” acknowledge respect for someone with whom they have common ground and find solidarity with.<sup>72</sup> While their identification with Hanaya and exchange with the Japanese army may be seen through the nationalist lens as collaboration and fraternization with the enemy, the villagers ultimately complicate the nationalist dichotomy between collaboration and resistance, and open up the possibility of acknowledging the indiscriminate use of the demonizing label *hanjian*.<sup>73</sup>

Unlike in *City of Life and Death*, collaboration in *Devils on the Doorstep* is always presented as an active choice, albeit under the oppressive conditions of war and occupation. By representing the war from the perspective of a single village, Jiang Wen confronts the complexity of communal decision-making in the village and avoids portraying his characters as one-dimensional and passive victims of the war. In contrast, the capacity for choice is evaporated in *City of Life and Death* when a kaleidoscope of perspectives is presented without interrogating any single one. Tang’s collaboration with the Japanese is presented as a natural consequence of his fear and uncertainty upon hearing about Rabe’s recall to Germany. Likewise, even the film’s protagonist—the sympathetic Japanese soldier Kadokawa—is presented as a character stripped of choice. In many ways, he is the morally upright and pure Japanese soldier corrupted by the brutality and arbitrariness of war. In the

---

70 Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 203.

71 Xia, *Down with Traitors*, 7.

72 Ward, “Filming the anti-Japanese war,” 114.

73 Xia reaches a similar conclusion from the analysis of postwar trial records of Chinese *hanjian*. See Xia, *Down with Traitors*, Chapter 2.

only scene where he kills, his shooting is an impulse without any lethal intention.<sup>74</sup> He is also only an observer to the brutal scenes of rape and massacre, seemingly absolving him of responsibility by attributing these acts to the universal character of war. Forced to witness the brutality, yet in no position to stop it, Kadokawa endures the trauma and guilt of war, himself becoming a victim of the war he is complicit in perpetrating. Confronted with this choiceless situation, Kadokawa ultimately commits suicide to rid himself of his guilt.<sup>75</sup> Such representations of the dehumanizing aspect of the Sino-Japanese war are, however, neither new nor exclusive to cinematic depictions of the war. Many soldiers who testified to the atrocity in Nanjing put the blame squarely on the war, and while these statements are truthful and useful to some degree,

...blaming everything on the war is at best inadequate and at worst can be used as an excuse to avoid confronting the crucial issue of agency, for even in the most brutal of wars not everyone killed or raped civilians. Acknowledgment of the dehumanizing impact of war, although highly important, cannot replace a critical analysis of the individual decisions as well as the particular political institutions.<sup>76</sup>

Even though *Devils on the Doorstep* focuses more significantly on the Chinese experience of the war, it can be considered a cinematic attempt at critically analyzing the individual decisions made during the war. Jiang's attempt at doing so can be appreciated by comparing his film with the original novella on which it is based. Told using the mode of heroic resistance, You Fengwei's "Survival" presents the village chief who receives the two prisoners as acting primarily out of a sense of political duty. As kind-hearted folks, the villagers treat the prisoners humanely; but when it is revealed by the communist leadership that the prisoners are no longer of use and should be executed in situ, the villagers eventually carry out what amounts to a military command.<sup>77</sup> When confronted by the interpreter-prisoner, the chief's only defense is: "Tell you what, you and the Jap devil's capital punishments were decided by the resistance fighters, not us. We are just carrying out their orders. Understand?"<sup>78</sup> By justifying their actions as an order, the villagers are able to relieve themselves of the moral burden.

74 Stephanie Brown, "Victims, Heroes, Men, and Monsters: Revisiting a Violent History in *City of Life and Death*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 6, 2015, 531.

75 Zhu, "A past revisited," 95-97.

76 Yang, "The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre," 157-158.

77 Tian Yu, "From Red Sorghum to *Devils on the Doorstep*: Conceptual evolution in Chinese film adaptations," *Postscript* 23, no. 3, Summer 2004.

78 Translation from Haiyan Lee. See Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, 258.

In contrast, the film version presents the choices available to Dasan even amidst the oppressive conditions of occupation. Even though the mysterious resistance fighter forced Dasan to take in the prisoners at gunpoint, Dasan is later conscious of the choices available to him and his fellow villagers. For example, he speaks out against the option of killing the two prisoners even though they present a palpable and constant threat to the lives of the villages. To Dasan, killing the prisoners is “just not right” and he insists that “we [the villagers] can’t just decide to kill them. It’s just not good.”<sup>79</sup> Even though he eventually fails to convince the other villagers and it is decided through the drawing of lots that the task of executing the prisoners would fall on him, Dasan is still able to carve out space for himself to do what intuitively feels right to him. Acting against fate, he chooses to hide the prisoners instead of killing them as was ordered by his fellow villagers. Thinking of himself as an active agent rather than a passive victim, Dasan ultimately blames himself for the Japanese massacre of his village and attempts to seek revenge for it. While holding himself responsible for the deaths of his fellow villagers denies him “the complication of moral luck,” it is nonetheless clear that attributing what happened purely to luck “voids the subject of moral responsibility.”<sup>80</sup> In this context, *Devils on the Doorstep* presents the possibility for choice, no matter how limited, under the conditions of war and occupation. For Jiang, the conditions of nationalism and war are no longer adequate or exculpatory justifications for acts of violence—not only did Dasan choose to shelter the prisoners in spite of an execution order, the Japanese soldiers also chose to commit the senseless acts of violence even after the Japanese Emperor Hirohito’s surrender. In the final scene of the war, the burning village is disturbingly set against Hirohito’s radio announcement of unconditional surrender, ironically asserting: “Should we continue the fight, not only would the Japanese nation be obliterated, but human civilization would be totally extinguished.”<sup>81</sup> Framed in this way, the orgy of violence at the end of the war is not so much a direct military command even if it is linked symbolically with the Emperor, but is instead a choice made by Japanese soldiers, having fraternized with the Chinese, to purge themselves of the polluting effects of proximity.<sup>82</sup>

## CONCLUSION

By visualizing wartime atrocities, cinema claims a place in the public consciousness of history by recording, re-envisioning, and investigating the past. For *City of Life and Death*, the representation of trauma is an indisputable testament to the

---

79 Jiang, *Devils on the Doorstep*.

80 Translation from Haiyan Lee. See Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, 262.

81 Jiang, *Devils on the Doorstep*.

82 Silbergeld, *Body in Question*, 105. See also Xu, *Sinascapes*, 49.

violence and brutality of the Second Sino-Japanese War. In adopting the aesthetics of conventional cinematic realism, the film posits that the past can be recreated in its own image and that the audience can thus be somehow transported back into that past. Referring to the use of three-dimensional dioramas in the War of Resistance Museum just outside Beijing, the museum guide states that by “cleverly taking models, artifacts and tableaux and making them into one, so that the eye cannot distinguish between what is painting and what is a model, [it feels] as if you were placing yourself on the battlefield at the time [of the event itself].”<sup>83</sup> While used in a different context, the realist sensibilities of dioramic representation seem to be equally characteristic of *City of Life and Death*. Yet as Hayden White argues, the scale and intensity of the traumatic events of the twentieth century make it impossible for any single human agent to have a full and conscious view of the causes, effects and moral implications of such events. Consequently, any expectation of representational objectivity must be set aside as well. The failure of humanist historiography for White means abandoning realist storytelling techniques and seeking literary modernism, which “provide the possibility of de-fetishizing both events and the fantasy accounts of them which deny the threat they pose, in the very process of pretending to represent them realistically.”<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, the relationship between realism and other modes of representation are far more complicated. In this regard, *Devils on the Doorstep* is realistic without necessarily being realist.<sup>85</sup> By acknowledging that the past cannot be recreated in its own image, the film forces a critical rethinking of cinematic realism that achieves, in some ways, a more truthful representation of the Second Sino-Japanese War

---

83 Rana Mitter, “Behind the Scenes at the Museum: Nationalism, History, and Memory in the Beijing War of Resistance Museum, 1987-1997,” *China Quarterly* 161, March 2000, 288.

84 Hayden White, “The Modernist Event,” in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 32.

85 Silbergeld, *Body in Question*, 82-86.

## References

- Armstrong, Paul. "Fury over Japanese politician's Nanjing Massacre denial." CNN. February 23, 2012. <https://www.cnn.com/2012/02/23/world/asia/china-nanjing-row/index.html>.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z: An Essay*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974. Bazin, André. *What is Cinema*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.
- Ben-Ghiat, Ruth. "The Secret Histories of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1, 2001: 253-266.
- Berry, Michael. "Cinematic Representations of the Rape of Nanking." *East Asia* 19, no. 4 (2001), 85-108.
- Brown, Stephanie. "Victims, Heroes, Men, and Monsters: Revisiting a Violent History in *City of Life and Death*." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 6, 2015: 527-537.
- Chang, Iris. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. New York: Basic, 1997.
- Cheng, Qingsong and Huang, Ou. *My Camera Doesn't Lie* (in Chinese). Beijing: Zhongguo Youyi, 2002.
- Choi, Chungmoo. "The Politics of War Memories towards Healing." In *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, edited by Takashi Fujitani, Lisa Yoneyama and Geoffrey White, 395-410. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Dai, Jinhua. "I Want to Be Human: A Story of China and the Human." *Social Text* 29, no. 4 (2011): 129-150.
- Feng, Zongxin. "Fictional Narrative as History: Reflection and Deflection." *Semiotica* 170, no. 1, 2008: 187-199.
- Fujiwara, Akira. "The Nanking Atrocity: An Interpretive Overview." In *The Nanking Atrocity, 1937-38*, edited by Bob Wakabayashi, 29-54. New



York: Berghahn Books, 2007.

Ginzburg, Carlo. "Just One Witness." In *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, edited by Saul Friedlander, 82-96. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Goldberg, Amos. "The Victim's Voice and Melodramatic Aesthetics in History." *History and Theory* 48, no. 3 (Oct 2009): 220-237.

He, Xi. "Nanjing! Nanjing!'s Sichuan Connection" (in Chinese). April 24, 2009. <http://www.cinema.com.cn/YingYuTianXia/2245.htm>.

He, Yinan. "History, Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict." *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 50 (February 2007): 1-24.

He, Yinan. "Remembering and Forgetting the War: Elite Mythmaking, Mass Reaction, and Sino-Japanese Relations, 1950-2006." *History & Memory* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 43-74.

Honda, Katsuichi. *The Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998.

Horeck, Tanya. *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Hua, Yu. "China Waits for an Apology." *New York Times*, April 9, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/10/opinion/you-hua-cultural-revolution-nostalgia.html>.

Huang, Martin. "The Inescapable Predicament: The Narrator and His Discourse in 'The True Story of Ah Q'." *Modern China* 16, no. 4, October 1990: 430-449.

Jiang, Wen. *Devils on the Doorstep*, 2000.

Jones, Andrew. "The Violence of the Text: Reading Yu Hua and Shi Zhicun." *Positions* 2, Winter 1994: 570-602.

Lee, Haiyan. *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*. Stanford: Stanford

University Press, 2014.

- Lee, Kevin. "City of Life and Death." *Cineaste* 35, no. 2, Spring 2010. <https://www.cineaste.com/spring2010/city-of-life-and-death/>.
- Lee, Vivian. "The Chinese War Film: Reframing National History in Transnational Cinema." In *American and Chinese-Language Cinemas: Examining Cultural Flows*, edited by Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip, 101-115. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Li, Jie. "Discolored vestiges of history: Black and white in the age of color cinema." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no. 3 (2012): 247-262.
- Li, Yue. "Dancing with the Camera: A Special Interview with Nanjing! Nanjing!'s Cinematographer Cao Yu" (in Chinese). May 11, 2009. <http://old.pkuhall.com/WYPPZZ.aspx?id=456>.
- Lu, Chuan. *Nanjing! Nanjing!: City of Life and Death*, 2009.
- Lu, Xun. "The True Story of Ah Q." In *Call to Arms*, 141-212. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2010.
- Mitter, Rana. "Behind the Scenes at the Museum: Nationalism, History, and Memory in the Beijing War of Resistance Museum, 1987-1997," *China Quarterly* 161, March 2000: 279-293.
- Mitter, Rana. "China's 'Good War': Voices, Locations, and Generations in the Interpretation of the War of Resistance to Japan." In *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post-Cold War in Asia*, edited by Sheila Miyoshi Jager & Rana Mitter, 172-191. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Morgan, Daniel. *Forgotten Ally*. London: Penguin Books, 2013.
- Morgan, Daniel. "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics." *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 443-481.
- Nedostup, Rebecca. "City of Life and Death (Nanjing! Nanjing! 2009) and the Silenced Nanjing Native." In *Through a Lens Darkly: Films of Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing*, edited by John Michalczyk and Raymond Helmick,

- 62-66. New York: Peter Lang, 2013.
- Rabe, John. *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe*. Translated by John Woods. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.
- Shao, Yan. "In the film we have kept our integrity: Exclusive interview with Lu Chuan" (in Chinese). *Dianying shijie*, April 2009: 24-29.
- Silbergeld, Jerome. *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.
- Tam, King-fai, Tsu, Timothy, and Wilson, Sandra, eds. *Chinese and Japanese Films on the Second World War*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Taussig, Michael. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Vautrin, Minnie. *Terror in Minnie Vautrin's Nanjing: Diaries and Correspondence, 1937-38*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008.
- Voci, Paola. "The Light out of the tunnel: Re-thinking Chinese cinema's war film realism." *Parol XXVII*, no. 25, 2014: 81-101.
- Wang, David. *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth Century China*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Wang, Fanghua. "*Devils on the Doorstep's* Black and White Emotions through a Color Filter" (in Chinese). *Dianying Pingjie*, August 2013.
- Ward, Julian. "Filming the anti-Japanese war: the devils and buffoons of Jiang Wen's *Guizi Laile*." *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 2, no. 2, September 2004: 107-118.
- Weiss, Amanda. "Contested Images of Rape: The Nanjing Massacre in Chinese and Japanese Films." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 433-456.
- White, Hayden. "The Modernist Event." In *The Persistence of History: Cinema,*

- Television and the Modern Event, edited by Vivian Sobchack, 17-38. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Wiesel, Elie. "Foreword." In Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, xi-xii. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Xia, Yun. *Down with Traitors: Justice and Nationalism in Wartime China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017.
- Xu, Gary. *Sinascapes: Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.
- Yang, Daqing. "The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre: Reflections on Historical Inquiry." In *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, edited by Joshua Fogel, Chapter 4. Berkley: University of California Press, 2000.
- You, Fengwei. From 'Survival' to '*Devils on the Doorstep*' (in Chinese). Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 1999.
- You, Fengwei. "Survival." In *Life Channel* (in Chinese). Beijing: Renmin Wenxue, 2005.
- Yu, Tian. "From Red Sorghum to *Devils on the Doorstep*: Conceptual evolution in Chinese film adaptations," *Postscript* 23, no. 3, Summer 2004.
- Zhang, Keen. "City of Sorrow: Competing film portrayals of the Nanjing Massacre." *China.org.cn*. April 30, 2009. [http://china.org.cn/culture/2009-04/30/content\\_17702091.htm](http://china.org.cn/culture/2009-04/30/content_17702091.htm).
- Zhu, Yanhong. "A past revisited: Re-presentation of the Nanjing Massacre in *City of Life and Death*." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 7, no. 2 (2013): 85-108.