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**Vulnerability of Humanity: A Comparison of Anti-war Films in China and Japan**

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## **Introduction**

The visit to the Yasukuni Shrine on Dec. 26, 2013 by Abe Shinzo, the Prime Minister of Japan, infuriated the international community, especially its close neighbors China and South Korea. While the Shrine honors millions of the civilians who lost their lives during the second world war, it also commemorates major convicted war criminals such as Tojo Hideki, making it a controversial site because of its symbolism of the Japanese militarism in the past. However Abe explained that it was not his intention at all to hurt the feelings of the Chinese and South Koreans as his effort was to promote peace and democracy, the spokesman of Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed anger by declaring such act heavily offended the Chinese people and those who were victims of the war, and the visit was not at all “acceptable”.<sup>i</sup> I remembered being deeply frustrated by this news just like other Chinese nationals, who grew up seeing movies and being told the history of the severe destruction and brutal killing done to our country by the Japanese during the war.

The tension between China and Japan has rooted since then. While several decades have passed after Japan’s defeat and China has successfully reemerged as one of the world’s most powerful countries, the psychological wounds of the Chinese never alleviate with the history being remembered in a hard way: all Japanese are demons, they are killing machines, and they never apologize for their mistakes. Such description is over-exaggerated for sure, yet it has its reason to be stated from a certain point of view. At this special occasion of the 79-year anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre, most Chinese people would recall what we learned about the infamous event from our textbooks: starting from Dec. 13, 1937, the Japanese military occupied Nanjing and killed more than 300,000 unarmed civilians in the

course of approximately 40 days. Women were raped, children were stabbed one after another, the entire city became more terrifying than hell; among all the inhumane acts that one could imagine, the most notorious case was the “killing 100 people with sword” contest carried out by two Japanese generals.<sup>ii</sup> Any human being with a normal heart would feel the grief and indignation in these words, needless to say how the Chinese feel when we think about the suffering our people went through. With much emphasis in the history of humiliation and Japanese influence left on the Chinese land both physically and mentally, the hatred towards Japan is maintained even till today. Chinese people refer to Japanese people as “little Japanese demons (小日本鬼子)”, and especially the older generation would still tell the kids to “study hard and fight back Japan.” I could still remember domestic protests where people smashed down Japanese-made cars and Japanese-brand supermarkets, saying “we refuse to use Japanese products”, while those were purchased and operated entirely by our own people, and China still remains as Japan’s biggest trade partner. Regardless of the extremity of such activism, the kind of patriotism demonstrated in these public opinions is the product of the long-term stereotyping of Japan achieved by the Chinese cinematography. In nearly all Chinese films that deal with the anti-Japanese war, demonizing Japanese and heroizing Chinese is the most common theme applied. However, most of the films we watched in this course describe the war from the Japanese perspective, which is a lot different from those from the Chinese. In this essay, I would like to argue that Chinese people’s perception of the war is heavily influenced by Chinese anti-war films, which is essentially biased. In order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the war, it’s important to look at the history from different angles, such as how the war is described in Japanese films.

## **Anti-war films in China: “Fighting back the Japanese demons”**

Released in 2009, the film *City of Life and Death* is probably one of the most graphic and indelible films that accounts for the devastation of the Nanjing Massacre. Since the publication of Iris Chang’s “*Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*” in 1997, stories about the butchery have begun to be known by the world. As a recent effort that condemns the atrocities, *City of Life and Death* stands out for its shooting techniques, narrative approach, and more importantly, the way the event is interpreted by the director Lu Chuan, who makes this film in his mere 30s and represents the newer generation of filmmaking on the anti-war subject in the Chinese market. Without much dialogue or even color, the black-and-white pictures of *City of Life and Death* manage to convey the brutality of the war by explicitly illustrating killing and death. In one of the scenes, the Nanjing refugees are crowded into a church by Japanese soldiers. In the hopeless situation, the Chinese civilians show surrender by putting up their hands and begging the Japanese to release them, yet the Japanese still shoot them as they try to clear up Chinese soldiers. Shortly after, when the remaining Chinese soldiers are caught and circled by the Japanese troops, they heroically shout out “China shall not perish” using the last breath of their lives before they are killed by the Japanese. In addition to the inhumanely massive killing, the film also reveals the anguished fate of women who were drawn by the Japanese military to provide “comfort”. In a scene appeared later in the film, the Japanese “request” 100 Chinese comfort women, “promising” they will release the rest of the civilians in return. After those women are tortured to death, their naked bodies are simply thrown away and dumped out with other corpses. As sexual pleasure is forcibly provided to the Japanese in exchange of the dignity of the Chinese as a nation, the film indicates the cruelty of the Japanese

army by showing their most merciless nature.

However, a novel approach that's used in this film is the narration shot from the viewpoint of a young Japanese soldier Kadokawa. Different from other typical Japanese military men, Kadokawa embodies the humanity and benevolence that's largely absent in the portraying of Japanese people in other Chinese films. While he also fights in the war for his nation, as he's supposed to, he witnesses the brutal crime Japanese soldiers commit to the Chinese people, and acknowledges the bitter fact that the Japanese has come to "enjoy" killing people just like killing animals. As a young man who hasn't been long exposed to the viciousness of the world, Kadokawa also falls purely in love with a Japanese prostitute whom he has sex with for the first time and is the only person he wants to take care of amid all this chaos. When he learns that she has been killed at the end of the film, and finally understands all other events happen around him that reflect the true nature of the war, he lets go of two Chinese hostages, and eventually kills himself too.

Doubtlessly the film showcases the cruelty of war by putting all Chinese civilians at the victim's position. In contrast, the featuring of an average Japanese soldier Kadokawa, whose morality is challenged by what he sees in the war, is the director's intention to interpret this historical event with as little bias as possible. Lu Chuan recognizes the commonality of anti-war films in China, which is the constant demonization of the Japanese, and he conveys his idea in interviews that China should reexamine the history with more critical thinking in the expression.<sup>iii</sup> By restoring the humanity of a Japanese soldier and empowering him to reflect the true psychological struggle from an "abnormality" in the enemy, Lu Chuan asks the audience of *City of Life and Death* to think deeply about the relation between the invading and

the invaded, that in fact, both are victims as they both experience the cruelty of the war, and the loss of humanity as an inevitable consequence.

With no official apology so far from the Japanese government and increasing activities of visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, the discussion of wartime responsibility triggers heated debate. Being a traumatic past for the Japanese people themselves, the defeat has firmly proven pro-war ideologies like the “Great East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere” wrong. Regardless of the confusion in the categorization of war criminals, most top military figures behind the war effort have been convicted justifiably. Yet in order to preserve national pride, the conservative right-wing powers continue to deny the happening of the war and the atrocities Japanese militarism had caused by eliminating or alleviating the description of the Nanjing Massacre and other crimes in textbooks, as well as avoiding open discussion on such topics.<sup>iv</sup> In the eye of Chinese people who were directly victimized by the invasion, the absence of apology and distortion of history further exacerbates the Chinese’s impression of Japan. Usually compared to Germany which has made a public apology to the crime it committed during the war, when the then chancellor of West Germany Willy Brandt kneeled down in a commemoration to Jewish victims in Warsaw in 1970 and asked for forgiveness of the holocaust, Japan, without equivalent effort to admit its crime, is often seen as a country of dishonesty and cowardice as a whole.

Because of the fixed impression, Lu Chuan’s humanity approach in *City of Life and Death* also leads to controversy in China, as some people point out that humanizing the “Japanese demons” is extremely disrespectful to those who have fought and sacrificed during the war. Other critiques claim that the film doesn’t portray much of the heroic resistance of Chinese

people, as other anti-war movies usually do in which some Chinese soldiers can “rip up Japanese by hand (手撕鬼子)”, that in *City of Life and Death* the Chinese civilians are simply put out there and shot by Japanese guns. While I don’t disagree with such opinions given the ruthlessness of the war in truth, I think that’s where the stereotype comes from as a result of what the prevailing traditional anti-war films tell people what the war was like. One example is *Battle of Taierzhuang*, a movie released in 1986 that was based on the true battle that took place in 1938 in Eastern China. The Battle was regarded as the first major Chinese victory during the war where the KMT army captured hundreds of Japanese soldiers and confiscated large amount of Japanese military supplies, serving as a valuable moral boost to the Chinese people. The film *Battle of Taierzhuang* doesn’t contain much discussion of humanity or wartime justice as the uplifting outcome automatically makes the Japanese invasion illegitimate. Moreover, the victory and sacrifice in the battle emphasizes the bravery and skillfulness of the Chinese and the evil nature of the Japanese, which is considered “appropriate” and common to be shown in anti-war films to the Chinese audience.

*City of Life and Death* is therefore a bold experiment as it challenges the idea of Japanese being equivalent to demons by showing what’s truly going on in the war: humanity is forcibly deserted in a larger environment of cruelty that extends beyond the battlefield. The next two films that I will be analyzing interpret the war from the Japanese perspective, which may be less graphic in the ways they are portrayed but equally profound in terms of their criticism of the war’s ruthlessness.

### **Anti-war films in Japan: an approach with more humanity**

Released just a year before *City of Life and Death*, *Kabei: Our Mother* by Yamada Yoji



illustrates the desperation of life during the war on a domestic scale. Despite the initial advantages in economy and military strength, Japan gradually lost its competence as the war proceeded unexpectedly in favor of China. In order to promote war effort, the government imposed strict thought controls and limited freedom of speech to the public, including propaganda and censorship which tried to legitimize Japan's invasion into other Asian countries, as well as the use of Kempeitai and thought police as the ultimate method to destroy political freedom.<sup>v</sup> In school, children were required to undergo more physical training as that would help "build up the morale of the nation."<sup>vi</sup> Women, besides having to handle more household responsibilities because most men have been drafted to the military, were trained to use bamboo spears as weapons in preparation to enter total war.<sup>vii</sup> Every aspect of life was linked to spiritual readiness to the war. Yet with the final defeat brought close by the severe bombing and people's increasing loss in faith of the war, the mobilization was proved to be useless as the misery of life remained throughout the war period.

In *Kabei: Our Mother*, such domestic struggle is brought to the audience by showing the suffering of an average Japanese family. As the father Tobei, who is a university professor that spreads anti-war ideas, is arrested for "thought crime", the mother Kabei is forced to sustain the family singlehandedly by working multiple jobs from day to night to bring up their two daughters. Despite the extreme hardship of life all burdened on herself, Kabei firmly believes her husbands' justice and embraces his opposition of going to war with China. In one of the scenes, Kabei brings her daughters to a new year's meal at her father's house. At the dinner table, her father starts condemning Tobei's "foolish behavior" as he thinks Tobei is a traitor of the country and his "grand ideas" can do nothing but bring misery to the people around him.

He doesn't think his daughter deserves such treatment and threatens Kabei to leave her husband and come back to her hometown, but Kabei bluntly refuses as she confesses that she has never regretted marrying Tobei, and would wait till he comes back.

The persistence of a mother in this unusually difficult time is a vivid example that speaks against Japan's political and social upheaval. With nearly no illustration of the deadly battlefield or intention to explicitly heroize any military figure, the director uses a female protagonist to further emphasize the devastating living condition for the average Japanese people. In another scene, Yamazaki, who is Tobei's previous student and has been helping the family since Tobei was sent to prison, is also leaving to join the military. To Kabei, there's basically no one left in the world for her and her family to rely on as the war keeps taking away the dearest people in her life. It is a true portrait of what average Japanese people experienced every day during the war. As more and more men were drafted to the military, those left behind had to take up responsibilities in households while bearing the loss of immediate family members. Japanese people have long endured the imbalance of family and social structure, but they managed to carry on with the war, until the carpet-bombing strategy brought the ultimate disruption to Japan. The desperation reached its upmost condition when the bombs exploded and brought away lives in thousands and millions. According to Dr. Kubota Shigenori, there were dead bodies floating everywhere in the city and one could hardly tell if the flying objects were limbs or pieces of burnt wood.<sup>viii</sup> To an extent, there was no difference in terms of wartime devastation between Nanjing after the massacre and Tokyo after the bombing. Regardless of being the invader or the invaded, Japan and China both experienced the havoc during the war in its worst form, where people were killed, families were torn apart, houses

were burned to ashes, and most importantly, humanity was suffocated.

Different from *Kabei: Our Mother*, *The Eternal Zero* shows the cruelty of war in a more direct way by telling the story behind the infamous kamikaze attacks. When the war condition turned unfavorably for Japan, the kamikaze mission was launched to be used specifically against the US Navy ships since late 1944. As most well-trained army pilots were already consumed at this point of the war, college students were “asked to volunteer” in the suicidal tactic. While some of them willingly sacrificed for their country, many saw no hope in such strategy but still went on fighting because they essentially had no other choices. The movie *The Eternal Zero* featured just a man like that. Miyabe, as a Special Attack Training Officer, knows exactly how heartbreaking it is as he has to send his students to the mission and see them die every day. In one of the scenes, he speaks about the nature of the strategy after losing some of the pilots in the mission: most of the suicidal planes are shot down by the opponents before they can even get close enough to attack them. He sees no point in those bright young men dying pointlessly like this as he thinks they are the ones who are supposed to live on and build their country after the war. On one hand, he values life so much because there is something he really wants to live for: his family; on the other hand, he also realizes that his own wish has led to more sacrifices of his students, because he is supposed to guard them during the battle but he always ends up running away. For this reason, he is seen as a coward by some in the movie, but who’s there to be judged if what he really wants is to spend his entire life contributing to his country by doing positive things and protecting his family, rather than just die pointlessly and achieve nothing in the war?

Although the movie is based on a novel and some of its plots are dramatically exaggerated,

it serves its purpose to show how humanity is harshly challenged under the war condition. Again, when we talk about wartime responsibility today, it's hard to trace back who exactly was to be blamed to have started the war. According to Maruyama Masao, the ideology of ultra-nationalism was formed as Japan woke up to a new world order with its own increased national strength. By only emphasizing national sovereignty and control on internal values, it lacked explanation of external laws to direct the country's path.<sup>ix</sup> With no clear guide to people's thoughts and behaviors, the Japanese developed their own ways to interpret "nationalism", and going to war unfortunately became the ultimate channel. The worship of the Emperor had become an extremely abstract concept as people started to make assumptions about what they thought the Emperor would ask them to do. Eventually, the nation had fell into a tumultuous state as the people themselves were "driven by some force that they did not really understand."<sup>x</sup> Miyabe, as the protagonist of the film, sees through the problem and believes survival and protecting his loved ones are the only practical ways to make a difference. However, under this large environment where almost everyone thinks dying "honorably" is the best way to demonstrate loyalty to their country, Miyabe's faith can't stand or be accepted by the general public, therefore he eventually chooses to die himself too because he has to give up his insistence as a redemption to those whom he didn't guard during their previous kamikaze battles.

## **Conclusion**

Despite having watched many Chinese anti-war films in which Chinese people were brutally killed by Japanese enemies, I, surprisingly, found myself shedding tears when I was watching *Kabei: Our Mother* and *The Eternal Zero* in class. Never have I thought I would be

sympathetic with the miserable life and distorted society of the Japanese during the war, especially as a person who has heard first-hand stories about the Japanese invasion told by my own grandparents from Manchuria. It was at that moment that I realized what the war really meant: it was a sorrowful destruction to humanity as a whole, not just a single nation or simply the invaded. The Chinese would never forget about the war and humiliation, not only because as a historical fact it would be permanently embedded in our national identity, but also because the plots of anti-war films would constantly remind us of how our people have suffered during the war. In *City of Life and Death*, the scenes of massive killing and raping of Chinese civilians are so ruthless that one can hardly take in during one sitting, yet the portrait of the soldier Kadokawa leads to the implication of humanity remained in Japanese people, which is given more emphasis in Japanese anti-war films like *Kabei: Our Mother* and *The Eternal Zero*. The protagonists of both films experience the war in a deeply miserable way as the war takes away their loved ones and challenges their morality, essentially because Japan itself at that time was immersed in a chaotic state of mind. The ideology of ultra-nationalism became so abstract that Japanese people eventually led themselves to the wrong direction of development. I believe the Japanese also would not forget about the war, not only because of the deadly bombings and the enormous defeat, but also for the number of people died and sacrificed who would have helped build the country in a more effective way, just like what Miyabe in the film believes.

Both the Chinese and Japanese films portray the brutality of the war, while the former more often demonstrates patriotism by largely heroizing Chinese and demonizing Japanese, and using graphic pictures to provoke the audience's indignation and woeful feelings, the latter emphasizes that the Japanese are also victims of the war by showing their people's suffering

more on a psychological level and the moral debate. The Chinese people are used to viewing the war from our own aspect as victims due to typical Chinese anti-war films, which is very much reasonable, yet to an extent it is also biased as it doesn't help us develop a more comprehensive understanding of the war. When we think our people were the only victims of the war, there were in fact many more, including those Japanese who were forced to join the military and go on battles, those pushed to "volunteer" in the kamikaze missions, those imprisoned for their promotion of peace and anti-war ideas, and those left and survived while bearing the loss and responsibilities amid all the turmoil and destruction.

War is essentially a special time in history as truth and justice is hard to be judged. Just like anti-wars ideas were viewed as "treason" during wartime in Japan, stereotyping all Japanese to be "demons" or "killing machines" is not a fair idea in the present day. We learn about history not only because we need to remember the past as civilized human beings, but also because it helps us draw lessons from yesterday's mistakes and make sure we don't repeat the tragedy in the future. As a Chinese national who is immensely influenced by and sympathetic with my country's sacrifice, I think we should never forget about the humiliation, nor should we carry on our lives with fixed hatred towards Japan or other countries that have attacked us in the past. There are still wars going on around us even till today since social conflicts continue to set people apart. As history has already revealed, it's simply not worth it keeping hating each other. Instead, it's loving and understanding that should be valued by all, as humanity doesn't deserve to be lost again.

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- <sup>i</sup> “Japanese Prime Minister Abe Visits Controversial Yasukuni War Shrine,” *CNN*, December 28, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/25/world/asia/japan-pm-war-shrine/>.
- <sup>ii</sup> John Dower, *Embracing Defeat, Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York, NY: W.W Norton & Company, 1999). P505-507.
- <sup>iii</sup> 新华社, “新华社: 《南京!南京!》背后的中国电影新生代,” *CCTV.com*, April 24, 2009, <http://shipping.cctv.com/20090424/104454.shtml>.
- <sup>iv</sup> Dower, *Embracing Defeat, Japan in the Wake of World War II*. P 491.
- <sup>v</sup> Saburo Ienaga, *The Pacific War*, n.d. P 113
- <sup>vi</sup> Havens, *Valley of Darkness: The Japanese People and World War Two*, n.d. P 26.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.* P 188
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.* P 179
- <sup>ix</sup> Masao Maruyama, *Theory and Psychology of Japanese Ultra-Nationalism*, n.d. P4
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.* P 16

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