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Foreign Friends and Problematic Heroes: Remembering a Global World War Two in Early Twenty-first Century Chinese Cinema

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Engaging with the growing scholarship on China's War with Japan (1937–1945) as part of a global World War Two, this article queries how the internationalization of China's War of Resistance has been (re)constructed in popular fiction films since the 2000s. It analyses representations of Sino-foreign interactions in China's mainstream onscreen memorialization of the war and how these productions have sought global recognition. It argues that, despite not always appreciated by foreign audiences and critics, depictions of China's war effort have been imbued with a considerable degree of ambiguity, comprising praise for forms of transnational solidarity and a growing assertion of China's role in a conflict of global significance. The article also explores the role of war cinema in projecting Chinese nationalism to domestic and international audiences and reflects on recent films whose exhibition problems signal changing constraints on what can be shown as heroic representations of China at war.

KEYWORDS World War Two, China, East Asia, cinema, memory, gender

Introduction

The start of a continuous state of warfare between China and Japan in July 1937 marked the beginning of the Second World War in East Asia. The conflict had been shaping up since Japanese military forces had occupied the Chinese North-eastern provinces known as Manchuria in 1931. China's War of Resistance Against Japan (*KangRi zhanzheng* 抗日战争) had a profound influence in Chinese cultural production (Hung, 1994). That culture of resistance had enduring legacies, vividly epitomized by the case of the song 'March of the Volunteers' (*Yiyongjun*

jinxingqu 义勇军进行曲), composed for the 1935 film *Children of Troubled Times/Fengyun ernü* 风云儿女 (dir. Xu Xingzhi) and later adopted as the national anthem of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Studies about 1930s and 1940s Chinese cinema have investigated the production, reception, and narratives of 'left-wing films' (*zuoyi dianying* 左翼电影), the role of the film industry in the formation of an urban culture of modernity (including critical insight on the participation and representation of women in Chinese motion pictures), and the connections between Shanghai and Hong Kong in film production before and during the war with Japan (Zhang, 1999; Li, 2000; Pang, 2002; Fu, 2003). However, scant attention has been paid to changing filmic depictions of China's Second World War experience as a global event in recent years. The present article does not provide a comprehensive overview of Chinese films about the conflict or those representing foreigners — that would be too monumental a task to be achieved in a short, single-author piece. Instead, this work considers a sample of popular Chinese films from the 2000s where Sino-foreign encounters are represented. All of these were major productions from leading directors, included foreign stars amongst the cast and/or multinational crews. Most were designed to draw large audiences at a global level, achieve considerable box-office success or attract international recognition — despite not always accomplishing these objectives. This article will provide a deep analysis of the narrative and characters in these films, exploring representations of Sino-foreign interactions, with particular attention paid to gender, language, and plot. This study will also reflect on the ambitions for, and limits to, international success by looking at the promotion and reception of some of these films, notably Zhang Yimou's *Flowers of War/Jinling shisan chai* 金陵十三钗 (2011). Finally, the article will cover two highly publicized Chinese war film failures in 2018 and in 2019, and the change in officially-sanctioned public memories of the war in China that they suggest.

The reassessment of China's role in the Second World War in recent decades has led historians to revisit major events, figures and trends, and consider overlooked actors, including Nationalist policymakers and soldiers, Chinese collaborators with the Japanese occupiers and women. The role of violence features prominently in this scholarship. According to one estimate, at least 14 million died and more than 80 million became refugees (Mitter, 2013: 5–6). Historians have probed into state and non-state responses to the social and environmental effects of the war — including a massive refugee crisis — and how these responses transformed China and its relationship with the world (e.g. MacKinnon, 2008; Lary, 2010). Several studies have focused on the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai, which was composed of a Chinese municipality, the French Concession and the largely British-dominated International Settlement — the latter two remaining nominally 'neutral' and unoccupied until the Japanese takeover in the early 1940s (e.g. Yeh, 1998). Recent studies on the Chinese resistance capital of Chongqing — where the Nationalist government, that ruled China at the time, relocated to, in order to flee the Japanese occupation — also emphasize its international character. This was manifested in a

plethora of areas, including its diplomatic, social, and intellectual experiences (e.g. Chang & Zhou, 2017), as well as in the realm of film criticism and exhibition (Bao, 2009). Other works centre on rural areas, including a major famine in Henan province generated by a flood caused by the Nationalists' decision to break the Yellow River dikes to stall the invading Japanese forces (Muscolino, 2015). For years absent from the mainstream historiography of the Second World War outside of Asia, the scale and significance of China's sacrifice as a 'forgotten ally' has now been recognized by major works in English (Mitter, 2013; van de Ven, 2017). The decision by the main Chinese leader at the time, Chiang Kai-shek, to resist Japan — without major external assistance until late 1941 — had momentous consequences. It enabled a second United Front between Chiang's Nationalists and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which despite the tense relationship between the two parties during the war, effectively halted large scale Nationalist campaigns to suppress their Communist rivals. The CCP grew exponentially during the war — both in terms of the number of party members and of the number of troops it commanded — and, unlike the Kuomintang (KMT/Nationalist Party), by 1945 it was in a stronger position than it had been before the war with Japan. Chinese resistance kept Japan bogged down in China, preventing the former from attacking the Soviet Union alongside Germany. The conflict eventually led to the end of most colonial interests, concessions, and privileges in China. Different historians have also highlighted how tensions and disagreements between Chiang Kai-shek and his American chief of staff, Joseph Stilwell, in the 1940s had a profound and damaging impact on Sino-American relations (van de Ven, 2003: chapter 1; Taylor, 2009: chapters 5–6; Mitter, 2013: part four; van de Ven, 2017: chapters 9–10).

Filmic representations of China's war with Japan, which are seemingly ubiquitous in the twenty-first century, are as old as the conflict they portray, although they have undergone important variations. The abrupt end of the Second World War in China was followed quickly by the defeat of Chiang's Kuomintang-led government in the Chinese Civil War and its subsequent flight to Taiwan. World War Two was a problematic subject for Mao's China, which wished to prioritize the construction of socialism in a 'New China' over dwelling on the past as a victim of Japanese aggression. In the Cold War years, combat films did feature in Chinese cinemas on both sides of the Taiwan strait but were more concerned with present political needs than with a realistic depiction of the past (Zhou, 2016: 233).

If after 1949, CCP 'propaganda and party historiography emphasized the heroic victory of the revolution and downplayed the nation's suffering at the hands of the Japanese', a certain 'culture of victimhood' emerged in the post-Mao period and came to coexist with the former dominant revolutionary narrative (Denton, 2014: 133–135). That emphasis on victimhood in the national identity is predicated on processes of 'othering', with Japan and 'the West' serving as 'the other' (Gries, 2004; Suzuki, 2007). This has been accompanied by what Waldron (1996) and Coble (2007) describe as a 'new remembering' of China's war with Japan: since

the mid-1980s, there has been a marked shift in PRC historiography and public commemoration to acknowledge more openly the contribution of the Nationalists to Chinese wartime resistance and victory. This revisionist shift was partly motivated by a renewed attention to 'reunification' with Taiwan in tandem with growing nationalism in China in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, and to a more vocal 'anti-Japanism' which surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s. This, as Leo Ching stated, 'served both to contain an emerging Japanese nationalism and to legitimize state power in the wake of massive economic reforms and popular discontent' (Ching, 2019: 46). A series of issues left unsolved from the war have affected Sino-Japanese relations in the last decades, including representations of the war in Japanese textbooks, war reparations to victims such as forced labourers and sex slaves (the euphemistically called 'comfort women') and disposal of abandoned chemical weapons (Rose, 2005: 2). The battle of war memories has also resurfaced in relation to sovereignty disputes, notably over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which became particularly strident in 2012. This resurgence of nationalism in the post-Cold War East Asia is not unique to China (Hasegawa and Togo 2008), although it emerged there in a specific context of post-Mao economic reforms and ideological splintering.

In cinema, evoking national woes included a clear gender dimension, which drew on previous cinematic tropes. In Mao's China, women sometimes took centre stage in war films but even heroic protagonists did not often escape a tragic fate, such as in *Daughters of China/Zhonghua nü'er* 中华女儿 (dir. Ling Zifeng, 1949) or *Zhao Yiman* 趙一曼 (dir. Sha Meng, 1950). As Zhou posits, female characters were 'essential and expendable at the same time' (2016: 242). This gendered representation of victimhood can be seen as one of the most enduring continuities in filmic representations of the war, notwithstanding the fact that some recent films leave out women's active participation in the war effort altogether, concentrating instead on martial male figures, notably conventional soldiers and guerrilla fighters. This subaltern position of female characters attests to Shuqin Cui's argument that Chinese cinema since the 1980s has been marked by a 'return to history in search of neglected masculinity' (Cui, 2012: 504).

However, the public remembrance of wartime China was not only one which emphasized victimhood. It also stressed the 'the heroic achievements of China in the war and its contribution to the global defeat of fascism' (Coble, 2007: 403). This became particularly pronounced in the early twenty-first century, as the projection of China as a major international power gained momentum. An obvious symbol of this was the hosting of the 2008 Olympics and, in 2011, the overtaking of Japan as the second biggest economy in the world. China's 'international role' was (re)discovered in some ways in historiography and popular culture, creating 'a new sense of continuity between the recent past and the present' (Mitter, 2017: 268). This 'presentism' is linked with geopolitical issues such as China's territorial claims in the East and South China seas (ibid.: 269, 273), which, by their very nature, draw *international* interest.

China's War of Resistance is one of the most marketable topics in Chinese popular culture today, inspiring a myriad of cinema and television productions that draw millions of viewers. State-sponsored narratives emphasizing China's 'century of humiliation' (*bainian guochi* 百年耻辱) at the hands of foreign invaders — a cornerstone of the patriotic education campaign introduced in the 1990s in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre — only partially explains the quantity of productions focused on the war. In fact, this is not merely a top-down imposition but, as William Callahan observed, 'patriotism has generated an active consumer market for its symbolic commodities' (Callahan, 2006: 187). In terms of Chinese war films, Gai (2015) suggested that the pursuit of audiences and profit has led to increasingly violent imagery (p. 310). Studies on Chinese television have noted the importance of dramas about the war against Japan for a 'billion-yuan patriotic propaganda industry', being fairly 'bullet-proof' topics for producers, given their pro-government line (Sun, 2018). The conflict has been considered 'the government's favourite theme' and 'the safest and most profitable theme for TV productions' (Song, 2016: 206). Still, history remains 'the most restricted subject matter' in terms of film censorship in mainland China (Meyer-Clement, 2017: 425). Controlling narratives about the past is paramount for Chinese leaders and as films about the Second World War demonstrate, that narrative is not only relevant for domestic purposes but for international ones as well.

Whilst Chinese television dramas and a good deal of films on the war of Resistance cater to a predominantly domestic market, a series of high-profile motion pictures, several of which were co-productions with foreign studios, aim to attract international audiences and recognition. War cinema can be seen as a genre in itself, although most of the films considered in this article can also be seen as blockbusters (*da pian* 大片), involving action-driven narratives, costly productions, grandiose settings, and thousands of participants. Importantly, some of these epic-scale movies followed models of advertisement and distribution successfully established in 'New Year's Comedies' (*hesui pian* 贺岁片), involving key figures associated with that Chinese genre: directors Feng Xiaogang and Zhang Yimou, and the major private studio Huayi Brothers (Zhu, 2010). Chinese 'global blockbusters' such as Zhang Yimou's *Hero/Yingxiong* 英雄 (2002) involved international elements in the production team and/or the cast, aimed to reach global audiences through their screening in prestigious film festivals and ensuring regular theatrical distribution overseas. Drawing creatively from Hollywood models, whilst not exclusive to Chinese war cinema, is particularly germane for these major productions, with films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1998) often cited as inspiration.

Films are central to what Carol Gluck describes as the terrain of 'vernacular memory'. She states that visual media has 'had the greatest impact of changing public views of the war' in different parts of the world (2007: 55). In China one can argue that visual depictions of the war have been crucial to the abovementioned 'new remembering' trend, notably in making depictions of Nationalist figures and

symbols part of the everyday public memory. James Reilly further notes how the interplay between official state narratives and popular approaches to the past has shaped collective memories of the war since the late 1990s, highlighting the role of ‘history activists’ who often align with state discourses but take their views on the wartime past further, even sparking visible protest actions (Reilly, 2004, 2011). This tension between popular and official memories will be addressed later in the article through the case of the film *The Eight Hundred/Ba bai* 八百 (2019).

The increasing amount of popular culture output concerning China’s War with Japan is very much connected to contemporary politics but its role in licencing, even if inadvertently, alternative memories of past traumas should not be easily dismissed. The interplay of history, politics, economics, and cultural production have led to growing scholarship on the representation of Sino-Japanese relations and issues of historical memory, where film studies, as well as other fields such as videogaming (Nie, 2013), have featured prominently. Amongst other considerations, scholars have provided overviews of different ‘phases’ in Chinese war cinema (Tsu, 2015; Zhang, 2016), probed into changing depictions of Japanese characters (Yau, 2013) and included film in their analyses of war memory (Gao, 2015). Yet, most of these studies overlook the representation of non-Japanese foreign ‘others’. This article will build on this important scholarship and, through a detailed reading of a series of films, will shed light on visual representations of China’s participation in a global war.

Foreign comrades at the margins

Since its early days, Chinese cinema adopted a markedly anti-imperialist outlook. As Johnson notes, ‘racist images of China in western cinema [had] played a crucial role in stimulating [Chinese] film-makers [...] to produce anti-colonial depictions of Chinese civilization’ (2009: 118–119). The hallmarks of this Western imperialist gaze had been gathered in China ‘from the midst of modern warfare, missionary activity and ethnographic travel’ (ibid.: 110). It is interesting to note how current films on World War Two in China both cite and challenge these tropes. Indeed, as Lee (2015) observed ‘filmmakers make use of proven formulas and genre conventions in Hollywood war films to serve specific aesthetic, ideological, and commercial agendas’ and seek to negotiate ‘competing political and economic demands’ (102).

The end of the Second World War was a crucial milestone in terms of China’s post-colonial sovereignty. The country was successful in its war of resistance against Japanese imperialism and also in dispelling long-resented Western colonial concessions and legal privileges. Considering how best to represent these achievements in film points, on the one hand, towards the need for a decolonized cinema, and, on the other, the need to engage with foreign ‘others’, unavoidable participants of a *world* conflict. The question of who has the legitimacy and the means to tell China’s war history on screen and who gets to embody the players in that narrative has been challenged in surprising ways in recent years. Foreigners are no longer

unequivocally at the centre, as they had been in old Hollywood representations of the war in China. More often than not they are either minor characters or compete with Chinese for the role of the ultimate ‘hero’. This is clearly illustrated by several high-profile fiction films from the 2000s.

Bearing in mind Chinese cinema’s pursuit of a global public, which has been less accomplished than coveted, it is noteworthy that a significant number of films have sought to emphasize the wider cosmopolitan experience of the Second World War in China. Their content matters for what it reveals about China’s representations of the ‘other’ — and what, in turn, it says about China’s public memory of its role in a global war. As Geng Song has argued in his analysis of different television series: ‘Representations of both foreigners in China and Chinese people overseas display a zealous pursuit of transnational modernity and a cosmopolitan identity in a global age and at the same time significantly reinforce a China-centred nationalist view of the world’ (Song, 2015: 118). This assessment is applicable to most of the films considered in this article.

One of the features that showcases the cosmopolitan portrayal of the war in major Chinese film productions is the use of language. Many of the films in which international encounters feature prominently are multilingual, combining different languages that underscore the global atmosphere of the conflict being depicted. This polyphony has been regarded in analyses of specific films as representing a ‘transnational vision of humanity’ (Zhang, 2016: 31). One of the films where this is central is Feng Xiaoning’s *Purple Sunset/Ziri* 紫日 (2001). It is spoken in Chinese, Russian, and Japanese and includes scenes of radio broadcasts in other languages, eliciting the sense of a shared history of the Second World War, and bringing together a combination of different national narratives. The film can also be read as an evocation of the influence of Soviet cinema in China as Soviet films were arguably the strongest presence in the early years of the PRC (Zhou, 2016: 234). Yet *Purple Sunset* disavows an obvious socialist realist aesthetic, and while it speaks of a past camaraderie, it is noteworthy for the apparent apolitical motivations of the Chinese protagonist.

As most films discussed in this article, *Purple Sunset* begins by situating the plot in the realm of memory, evoking documentary cinema conventions. It opens in a village in Hebei province, in the year 2000. There, in an oral history mode, Grandpa Yang recalls his past life, notably his experience in August 1945. After the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, their soldiers invaded Manchuria where Yang barely escaped an execution alongside other Chinese prisoners. Saved by soldier Nadja, who also saves a Japanese girl settler, Yang and his two companions spend a good part of the film trying to flee enemy occupied territory. During this time, a form of empathy develops among this odd bunch, separated by nationality, gender, and class. In its portrayal of a Russian soldier — far from a rare presence in Chinese visual popular culture — the film not only evokes memories of the old socialist alliance, but also subverts hierarchies of the past in a gendered way. On the one hand, as Gieslmann notes, the characters of Yang and Nadja are ‘allies by definition’ and the

film ‘aims at creating a sense of nostalgia for the (successful) Sino-Russian relationship’ (2014: 97, 99). However, that friendship does not start off as that of equals. As Nadja observes at one point, she is expecting obedience from Yang, who is a mere farmer whereas she is a second lieutenant. She also carries a big gun, with its obvious suggestions of masculine power, here held in the hands of a woman. In one tense scene, Yang has to fire the gun to protect himself and the Japanese girl from a tiger, a task that lays outside his competencies; this underscores the problems inherent with Yang assuming the role of virile protector. Yet Nadja’s resolve is equally fragile. She lacks the courage to use the gun to kill a deer for much needed food. Furthermore, she is considerably sexualized. She spends most of the film wearing a short skirt, which arguably might not have been the most practical garment for fighting the Japanese in Manchuria, and later she is stripped of it altogether in a scene where she is reduced to a familiar position of mere object of desire: when victory is announced, she celebrates by taking off her clothes and swimming naked in a lake. This representation echoes what was noted by Song (2015) on depictions of Russian and Eastern European women in Chinese television series (113–117). Finally, as we return to the present at the end of the film, she is denied the power of voice, movement, and audience. Whilst we hear old Yang’s voice retelling his war memoirs to his younger relative, we see a silent and lonely Nadja, now bound to a wheelchair, depositing a flower on a war memorial in Moscow with passers-by looking on, but not interacting with her. *Purple Sunset*, thus sends an ambiguous message: whilst evoking memories of past Sino-Russian solidarity and conveying a relatively anti-war message, it also suggests that the power of telling the story of the war in the Northeast now belongs to China alone.

A similar reading can be made of *Children of Huang Shi* (*Huangshi de haizi* 黄石的孩子 (2008), a film hailed as ‘the first truly transnational co-production to deal with the atrocities’ in Nanjing (Berry, 2016: 178). Even if highly fictionalized, these representations of the conflict nod to the seriousness of their topic by conjuring a sense of ‘truth’ via documentary-style moments. *Children of Huang Shi*, like *Purple Sunset*, closes with an oral history moment, when we see the children in the title, now elderly men, evoking the memory of George Hogg. At the start of the film, the Oxford-educated journalist pretends to be a Red Cross worker to get into Nanjing, where he witnesses first-hand, the brutality of the Japanese invasion: first when seeing the execution of a group of Chinese civilians, later by being sentenced to death for photographing the incident. When about to be executed, Hogg is saved by Chen Hansheng (‘Jack’), a Chinese Communist guerrilla leader who will accompany him in different scenes of the film. In *Purple Sunset* Yang was saved by a Russian soldier, here Hogg is saved by a Chinese cadre, but both are saved by communists.

Hogg’s ‘long march’ in the company of dozens of orphaned children and a woman acting as medical intermediary named Lee Pearson does at times seem to reproduce white saviour tropes of old Hollywood. Both protect and seem to guide the infants, with skills and medical supplies that earn them respect amongst them. And yet, the

film is slightly more ambivalent. Looking at Lee, for example, Taylor-Jones suggests that the decision to ‘placing the ability of medical aid into the hands of an untrained Westerner effectively removes the ability of self-care from the local population and implies a hierarchy of capability that confirms existing East/West dynamics’ (2017: 192). However, one should note that the medicine Lee carries is supplied by a Chinese merchant woman. Furthermore, not only is Lee portrayed as a ‘friend of China’ who left her comfortable colonial life to ‘serve the people’, she is also depicted less positively as an opium addict.¹ Hogg might seem like a typical righteous foreigner, but he is also ridiculed, for example, in Chen’s letter of introduction that pokes fun at him by translating his surname to ‘豬’, that is, ‘hog/pig’. Most importantly, Hogg’s itinerary for safety is chosen by his Chinese saviour, who also escorts the group in crucial moments. In reality however, it was New-Zealander Rewi Alley that played a major role in employing and supporting Hogg in China, including accompanying him in his trek to Gansu province. His noted absence from the film suggests a need to stress that the ultimate saviour figure here should not be a white male, but the Chinese Communist Party represented by a local cadre. Chen is depicted as physically strong, military powerful, and patriotic — he is a brave fighter and a good strategist — hallmarks of *wu* (武) masculinity as defined by Kam Louie and Geng Song (Song, 2016: 211–212). The character of Chen contrasts with Hogg, depicted as physically feeble despite his good intentions.

One may note that this fictional reimaging of events affects viewers’ comprehension of what really happened; for example, a key figure — Alley — is left out of the picture. However, the impressive escape of the children and the myriad of complex characters and institutions shown interacting in wartime China provides a relatively convincing account of the period and rightly suggests the global nature of the war being fought in China. As Hogg says earlier in the film: ‘The next great war has already begun, the folks back home just don’t know it yet’. This international outlook is also reflected in the film’s cast and crew. Hogg was played by Irish actor Jonathan Rhys Meyers, Lee by Australian Radha Mitchell, Chen by the Hong Kong superstar Chow Yun-Fat and merchant Wang by the Chinese-Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh, who had starred alongside Chow in Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon/Wo hu cang long* 臥虎藏龍 (2000), a successful global Chinese blockbuster. An Australian-Canadian-Chinese production, *Children of Huang Shi* was directed by a Canadian-British, Roger Spottiswoode. The film was released in several countries, achieving good box office results in South Korea, France and, especially in Australia and Spain, grossing more than a million dollars in each. All in all, this is a fairly successful example of the filmic globalization of China’s Second World War experience.

¹The character Lee was inspired by New Zealander missionary nurse Kathleen Hall but neither her nationality nor her Christian faith is mentioned in the film with reference to Lee.

Searching for a Chinese war blockbuster of global appeal

The 2000s saw major Chinese directors, linked to both critical acclaim in the festival circuit and domestic box office success in New Year films, delve into stories of the war in China. These were the cases of Zhang Yimou with *Flowers of War* and Feng Xiaogang with *Back to 1942/Yijiusier 一九四二* (2012), both of which include Western characters played by Hollywood stars with the potential to appeal to wider international audiences. The foreign stars' screen time in these films varied considerably, but their presence also illustrates the changing representations of foreigners, ambiguity, and the role of gender.

Flowers of War is again set during the Nanjing massacre, an event which has merited a considerable number of publications by both historians (e.g. Fogel, 2000; Yoshida, 2006; Wakabayashi, 2007) and film studies scholars (e.g. Berry, 2001; Zhu, 2013; Van der Troost, 2015; Schultz, 2016; Taylor-Jones, 2017). Cinematic depictions of this atrocity had been made before, yet when it was released internationally, Zhang Yimou's film was hailed as 'a watershed for China's ambitions film industry' (Gritten, 2012). The director made his aspirations clear in an interview with the *New York Times*: 'I did want to get an actor famous in the West, because I want this film to be globalized and reach a lot of audiences' (quoted in Rohter, 2011). The famous actor was Christian Bale, known, amongst other things, for playing Batman in the early 2000s instalment of the movie franchise. Curiously, his film debut was in a 1987 Steven Spielberg film about the Second World War in China, *Empire of the Sun*, based on J. G. Ballard's eponymous memoir. In *Flowers of War*, he plays John Miller, a character that does not exist in Yan Geling's original novel (Yan, 2012), despite her also having penned the film script. In the novel, the church where the action takes place is kept by two real clergymen, not the fake priest of the film. In any case, both novel and film seem to depict Christianity as subtly associated with foreigners. There are, however, important differences. In the book, the most senior priest is a complex figure, with his own conflicting power relationship with a China-educated American priest working under his wing. The film flattens the Western presence, and Miller remains a superficial character, dismissively described by Yau as 'an American hero responsible for saving terrified Chinese girls' (2013: 76). But this view of Miller as a quintessential white male saviour should also be problematized. For one, the film is narrated not by him, but by one of the young students — atypical in that it privileges a female voice.²

We first see Miller escaping the Japanese in the streets of Nanjing, wearing a hat reminiscent of the iconic cowboy figure in Hollywood westerns. He is not exactly a virtuous and benevolent helper but a greedy and selfish alcoholic, initially only interested in saving his own skin and getting some money. As a mortician hired to bury the church's priest, Miller decides to stay within the safety of the temple. Soon, the

²This contrasts with earlier examples of Chinese filmic representations of wartime international encounters such as *A Time to Remember / Hongse lianren 红色恋人* (dir. Ye Daying, 1998) which was narrated by an American man. This film also failed in its ambitions for global success (Yang, 2012: 189).

girls residing in the church's school are joined by a group of Nanjing sex workers, leading to the development of a form of empathy amongst them, although most interactions inside the church space revolve around the 'foreigner' (洋人 *yangren*). In one of the most violent scenes in the film, a group of out-of-control Japanese soldiers pursue the girls to rape them in the church while Miller, at that point in an alcoholic stupor, tries to hide himself. Later, while trying to stop the brutality, he is quickly rendered unconscious by a blow from a Japanese soldier and tragedy ensues. In contrast, a Chinese soldier outside the church manages, single-handedly, to drive off the Japanese. Whereas in the book, the brave Chinese soldier surrenders while recovering inside the church to spare the women; in the film he opts to stay outside so as not to endanger them and goes down fighting amongst the ruins of the abandoned capital. Like in *Children of Huang Shi*, the contrast is evident between the Chinese soldier's heroic image of martial masculinity and the Western male protagonist, depicted as flawed and weak. If Miller is eventually transformed from a rogue into a protective and responsible male, he only assumes that uncontested leadership once the soldier is out of the way and after 'pleas' from different Chinese characters 'push' him 'into the saviour role' (Yang, 2014: 256). Even so, his heroism is arguably later outshone by the collective sacrifice of the sex workers, who take the place of the schoolgirls to be sent to the Japanese. Alongside this hierarchy of multinational heroes, there are also other parallels with the films discussed earlier that offer interesting visions of an internationalized China. Yu Mo, the charismatic leading prostitute in *Flowers of War*, speaks English with Miller because, like Madame Wang in *Children of Huang Shi*, she was educated in a Western Christian school. These references are not just subtle evocations of the cosmopolitan possibilities of the Chinese Republican period, whose international educational endeavours will no doubt ring familiar to present-day China. By presenting Chinese characters as the most effective bilingual intermediaries, these films suggest China's capacity to enable international cooperation in its own right.

Similarly to *Purple Sunset*, the polyphony in the *Flowers of War* also bolsters the cosmopolitan presentation of the film and its potential (not necessarily fulfilled) to be marketed to a wider audience. English, Mandarin, Nanjing dialect, and Japanese are heard. McKenna and Yu note that *Flowers of War* has a 'clear intention to internationalize understandings of Nanjing by interpreting the massacre in a way that is, superficially, attractive to a Western audience' (2016: 26). A multinational production crew was recruited and the script was allegedly 'revised 56 times to maintain a favourable political-cultural-aesthetic balance' (Yang, 2014: 254). Weiss noted that the film was 'significant in linking American and Chinese memory' of the events in Nanjing (2016: 444).

Despite its ambitions of global success, the film, which cost almost \$100 million to produce — the most expensive Chinese film at the time — flopped in the American box office, where it only made \$311,000 (Beech, 2017). Perhaps ironically, that 'failure' was widely reported by Western news outlets (Orzeck, 2012; von

Tunzelmann, 2012). Looking beyond North America, it is worth mentioning that the film was also distributed to other parts of the world, for example, opening in theatres in Turkey, Russia, Lebanon and Brazil. In Europe, it screened at film festivals and commercially, but received lukewarm reviews. The technical achievements of the director were recognized by the critics but the praise was usually followed by disparaging comparisons with his earlier works and decrying the propagandistic discourse in *Flowers of War*. A review in *The Guardian* after the film screened at the Berlin Film Festival, praised Zhang for ‘focusing the world’s attention on China’s cinematic muscle’ and described the film as ‘a globally friendly, putatively inspiring epic that also aims to underscore the US and China’s geopolitical mutual respect’ (Pulver, 2012). A few months later, when the film opened in the United Kingdom, a review in the Sunday edition of the newspaper, *The Observer*, was less enthusiastic, comparing it with ‘mindless kitsch Hollywood’ World War Two propaganda and stating that it ‘contributes nothing of value to an understanding of these events’ (French, 2012). The *Irish Times* review, though not negative, stressed imbalances in the film, describing it as ‘an engaging, muddled historical drama’ (Brady, 2012). In continental Europe, reviews were also unenthusiastic. The most-read newspaper in Italy, *Corriere della Sera* noted when it screened at the Berlin Film Festival: ‘it confirms that the director is no longer a wonderful inventor of form but only an able and professional singer of the State’ (Mereghetti, 2012). In Spain, where the film achieved the best box office results in Europe,³ the review in the daily *El País* noted how the film denied ‘the enemy all complexity and nuance’ (Costa, 2013). In nearby Portugal, a review in the newspaper *PÚBLICO* highlighted comparisons with outdated American models, saying: ‘it is a war melodrama in the old American style, something literally out of fashion, that not even Hollywood has done for decades’ (Mourinha, 2012). In France, the website *Aujourd’hui la Chine*, which specializes on China, was even more caustic, blaming the film’s international failure on the authorities’ interference (Lely, 2011). Foreign critics and audiences’ reticence toward Chinese films with substantial international ambition is not exclusive to war cinema and the tendency to ‘read politics [...] into Chinese films’ (Rosen 2010: 53) has been recognized as a major obstacle in marketing Chinese productions globally. However, it does appear that employing marketable Hollywood film stars has not proved to be enough of a catalyst to overcome negative interpretations of the underlying propagandistic discourse in these films abroad.

A somewhat similar case is *Back to 1942* directed by Feng Xiaogang, a director mostly associated with New Year comedies. It starts, not with the oral testimony of a rural elder or an adolescent but with the voice of Chiang Kai-shek declaring that China’s War of Resistance has become a world war and promoting its joint war effort alongside other powers. This grandiose international projection of

³According to Box Office Mojo, the gross revenue of *Flowers of War* in Spain was \$335,644, more than the one attained in the United States and Canada (\$311,434). The only other market outside of mainland China where the film surpassed Spain’s results was in Hong Kong, where the gross box office was \$1,331,369 (*The Flowers of War*. *Box Office Mojo*. Available from: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt1410063/> [Accessed 9 January 2020]).

China as one of the major Allies is then contrasted with a focus on the daily struggle for survival at the village level, as the common people face famine, freezing cold, and displacement. By following a group of refugees fleeing Henan to Shanxi, the film takes the viewer into a downward spiral where the value of human life and dignity becomes ever more eroded. Feng Xiaogang's film centres on different sets of characters — some fictional and some historical — at distinct social levels, from the leader of the country to the poor farmer-refugee, but also including military commanders, provincial authorities, and a disgraced landlord. The war affects them differently, but it affects them all. It is evocative of a sense of national unity but, also of its costs. It has been argued that the film can be read as a subtle allusion to the great famine during Mao's Great Leap Forward (McKenna & Yu, 2016: 32), which seems particularly believable in scenes stressing the misinformation regarding figures being transmitted to Chiang.

Like the films considered earlier, *Back to 1942* has its own fair share of ambiguities. On the one hand, the corruption of the Nationalist authorities is alluded to at several points, but it is also implied that they had difficult decisions to make regarding mobilization for national resistance. The depiction of Christianity is also relatively ambivalent. There is a Chinese priest, Father Sim, who initially tries to use the tragedies of war and famine to convert more people but later offers pastoral support to the destitute refugees — even though, in a scene that has been seen as catering to Chinese censors, he questions the existence of a God that allows such things to happen. A foreign priest, Father Megan, interpreted by the American actor Tim Robbins (famous not just for his films but also for his leftist political activism) is portrayed in a positive light, although also as insulated from the suffering of the Chinese people by staying inside his large and virtually deserted church. Perhaps more surprisingly, Chiang Kai-shek's Christian faith (he was a Methodist) is also depicted in the film, in a scene where he is seen praying in a monumental church. This location may be interpreted in different ways — one being merely that of visual splendour and decorative value.

Another 'real' figure that takes on particular relevance in *Back to 1942* is Theodore White, a *Time* journalist whose accounts of China during the Second World War and the Chinese Civil War have been considered to be some of the most influential in the West. He depicted Chiang's regime as 'a nasty and corrupt dictatorship' which 'had not been interested in fighting the Japanese and had no concern for the Chinese population' (van de Ven, 2003: 3). White is played by a well-known American actor, Adrien Brody, who would return to wartime China on screen in *Air Strike/Da hongzha* 大轰炸, which will be addressed later. Brody's character is that of a Western witness to Chinese suffering and also a well-minded journalist trying to speak truth to power, in this case, Chiang Kai-shek. He carries the photographic proof of atrocities, although who is the ultimate responsible for these is not clarified — what we see in other scenes might suggest the brutal Japanese forces or perhaps also the corrupt Nationalists. Choosing Theodore White for a character caters to a certain historiographical perspective on the Chinese past — one more familiar to

American audiences though also one critical of the Nationalists. Yet, he is very far from being the main focus of the film. As he tries to sleep in the same improvised camp as the refugees he is following, the *yangren* is quickly robbed of his valuables, only managing to retain his camera, the only possession he needs to serve China's cause — his importance lays not in him as an individual, but only as a foreign observer. It is interesting to note that Feng Xiaogang mentioned in an interview that one of the requirements imposed by the Chinese censors was to 'not over-emphasise the role of American journalists in changing the situation' (quoted in McKenna & Yu, 2016: 31). Once again, this suggests that, for the PRC government to whom all of these films must, to a certain extent, bow, the hegemonic discourse on China's war should certainly not be left to Westerners. Had he been given more screen time, one may only speculate as to whether the film would have had a more impressive international reception — as it was, *Back to 1942* fared no better than *Flowers of War* in the American box office.

If *Back to 1942* and *Flowers of War* challenge the position and importance that foreign characters should have in a film about the war in China, there is an aspect in which they are far more conventional and closer to older Hollywood films on the conflict. Women remain represented, first and foremost, as helpless victims. As Weiss notes in her study of filmic images of war rape, 'these depictions reduce women to a symbol or stereotype, framing their rape in a normative narrative bolstering (masculine) national identity or politics' (2016: 450). Despite the interesting attempts to explore some female agency in *Flowers of War*, the film overall does not deviate from essentialising women into embodiment of collective suffering. In *Back to 1942* this is even more pronounced. Not only do female characters suffer the usual litany of woes (being starved, sold, and raped), all of them are portrayed as devoid of an identity independent from their male kin: from the poor farmer-tenant widow to Chiang's wife, Song Meiling, and even the expressive 'warphan' who leads the parade in Chongqing. There was clearly a missed opportunity here to provide a more balanced portrayal of the war, a conflict where, in fact, women had important roles, like historians such as Danke Li have been bringing to light (Li, 2010).

The filmic globalization of China's Second World War also led to works from perspectives that were not primarily Chinese but where the subaltern role of female characters stands as a common denominator. Florian Gallenberger's *John Rabe* (2009), a German-Chinese-French co-production is a case in point. Rabe was the head of Siemens in Nanjing and, together with a group of other foreigners, chose to stay behind in the city when the Japanese invaded. A member of the Nazi party, Rabe also became the head of the International Committee for the Nanjing Safety Zone that provided refuge to hundreds of thousands of Chinese fleeing the brutality of the war. Rabe's diary (Rabe, 1998), discovered when journalist Iris Chang researched her controversial book *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (1997), is quoted several times during the film. Unlike some of the previous titles, here it is not a Chinese voice *telling the story* but a German one. There is no major Chinese character in the film, where

Westerners take central stage, notably American doctor John Wilson (interpreted by the well-known actor Steve Buscemi), German embassy secretary Georg Rosen (the German transnational star Daniel Brühl), and the French headmistress of Jinling College Valérie Dupres — a fictional character inspired by American Minnie Vautrin. In actuality, Vautrin also penned a well-known diary describing her wartime experience (Vautrin & Tsen, 2010), but in *John Rabe*, this female voice is erased as a legitimate historical source and Vautrin's name and nationality are fictionalized to such an extent that they barely resemble reality. Both Rabe and Wilson, alongside Rosen and Lewis Smythe (another 'true' character), come across as reasonable humanists, planning the more practical aspects of the Safety Zone and using diplomacy to deal with the Japanese authorities without incurring in their ire. The character of Dupres, on the other hand, gives in to emotion and puts everyone in danger by keeping a large number of soldiers hidden inside the Zone. Despite this patriarchal portrayal of a Western woman (to which one could add that of Rabe's wife, whose most memorable quality is her quintessentially domestic baking skills), Dupres is still shown in a slightly more complex light than that of the Chinese characters in the film, who are depicted as either silent, anonymous victims or pitiful subalterns (doctor Xu or Rabe's driver, Chang — whom he derides in orientalist language in one of the film's first scenes). The only possible exemption is Langshu, the girl photographer, although the suggestion of a platonic relationship with Rosen does not avoid the cliché. Unlike Hogg or White in the films mentioned earlier, Langshu's most iconic photographs are not public records of atrocities but of a private fascination with a Western man. Ultimately, under the guise of a cosmopolitan European humanist film, *John Rabe* ends up reproducing sexist and imperialist tropes commonly found in the 1940s Hollywood films.

Nevertheless, *John Rabe* offers an interesting case where memories of two major traumas of the war intersect: The Holocaust and the Nanjing Massacre, through the ambiguities embodied in the figure of Rabe, a Nazi who helped save hundreds of thousands in China. The French subtitle of the film, *le juste de Nankin*, draws a disconcerting comparison between Rabe and those honoured as 'righteous among the nations' for saving Jews during the Nazi regime (amongst whom were Chinese and Japanese diplomats). Still, the figure of Rosen, who was demoted and then stripped of his German diplomatic credentials for his Jewish heritage, is there to remind the viewer that Rabe's individual actions should not be confounded with any sort of collective disavowal of the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis. *John Rabe*, thus seems to sit at an intersection of two 'cosmopolitan memories', defined by Levy and Sznajder as those that 'are based on and contribute to nation-transcending idioms, spanning territorial and national boundaries' (quoted in Chan, 2017: 58).

It is worth noting a key difference between *John Rabe* and two other major Chinese productions on the war from around the same year, Lu Chuan's *City of Life and Death/Nanjing! Nanjing!* 南京! 南京! (2008) and Chen Kuo-fu and Gao Qunshu's *The Message/Fengsheng* 风声 (2009): the centrality granted to the foreign actors. In Lu Chuan's film they are present but surrounded by Chinese

figures who interact with them or assist them. The heroism of their actions is not denied, but neither is it elevated above the actions of others. Zhu explains that *City of Life and Death* ‘seeks to globalize the Nanjing Massacre, to break it away from the confines of national and regional conflicts between two nations and place it in a larger and global context of war and atrocity’ (2013: 90). It fared very well in the international box office, earning more than three times the revenue of *Flowers of War* outside of China.⁴ Given the enthusiastic reaction amongst international audiences and the considerable attention it has deservedly received from Western scholars, *City of Life and Death* is, thus, arguably the most accomplished example of that ‘globalisation’, even if not the most politically correct in terms of what Coble defined as the dominant ‘political formula’ of works on the war in China (Coble, 2007: 410). Although its most debated character — the Japanese soldier whose process of psychological destruction the film accompanies — is fictional, the attention paid to historical accuracy and nuanced representation made the film a particularly powerful example of how to help global audiences begin to understand the impact, trauma, and complexity of the Japanese invasion in general, and the Nanjing massacre in particular.

The screen time of foreign figures is even more negligible in *The Message*, a fast-paced thriller set in Shanghai in the 1940s, during the collaborationist regime of Wang Jingwei. One of the interesting features of this film is the fact that although it can be regarded as a transnational production — for example, its team included a Taiwan-based American cinematographer (Jake Pollock) and a Japanese composer (Michiru Ōshima) — it ignores foreign characters almost completely, with the exception of a Japanese officer and, briefly, the general to whom he reports. The city the film portrays was a global metropolis but its non-Japanese foreign residents remain in the background, decorative and anonymous: they can be glimpsed in a jazz orchestra in a bar, playing while one of the main characters dances, in a music-and-dance ensemble performing during a tense lunch scene, or as an enigmatic German choir who appears in different moments rehearsing in front of a large Nazi banner, the latter next to one of the rising sun, a visual reminder of Japan’s participation in the Axis alliance. One of the first scenes in the film is particularly telling: we observe a couple of white foreigners being barred from entering a restaurant — where a private meeting of Chinese collaborators is interrupted by the resistance. It implies that the film does not need the Shanghai Westerners in order to tell an elaborate story of underground resistance under occupation. Indeed, although China’s wartime experience was part of a global conflict, it was also one of competing visions of the nation. The film performed well in Chinese screens, and while it did not have a commercial theatrical release outside of Asia, its value for studies of representations of a global Second World should not be

⁴Box Office Mojo lists the gross revenue of *City of Life and Death* worldwide as \$10,687,316. This estimate appears to exclude domestic box office figures in mainland China (*City of Life and Death*. *Box Office Mojo*. Available from: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt1124052/> [Accessed 9 January 2020]).

dismissed: the parallels to other fiction films set in occupied Europe, produced in the 2000s and centred on women in intelligence and underground resistance are worthy of future comparative analysis.⁵

Limits to the ‘new remembering’

In many ways, the move to globalize images of China’s war is entangled with the political need to provide a party-state-sanctioned narrative of the conflict that is also appealing to wider audiences. So far it has had mixed results, quite often more lukewarm than expected, like the failure of both *Flowers of War* and *Back to 1942* to secure a coveted Oscar nomination might suggest. Whilst the conflict is far from being exhausted as a source of inspiration for audio-visual productions, recent efforts of depicting global China at war have had relatively poor receptions. *Cairo Declaration/ Kailuo xuanyan* 开罗宣言 (dir. Wen Deguang and Hu Minggan, 2015) ended up as the object of online mockery for depicting Mao Zedong in one of the promotional posters rather than Chiang Kai-shek, who was the Chinese head of state in the eponymous summit. It was not released outside of China. An even more spectacular bust was Xiao Feng’s *Air Strike* (2018). With Hollywood A-listers like Bruce Willis and Mel Gibson involved in front of and behind the cameras respectively, it was one of the most expensive Chinese films ever made, and its release was initially scheduled to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of end of the Second World War. Caught up in a tax evasion scandal amongst other difficulties, a number of cuts were made, the Chinese premiere of the film was postponed and then cancelled, and its international release was very far from remarkable (Harvey, 2018). Intending to celebrate the Chinese people’s ‘unbreakable spirit’ (one of the film’s alternative titles) facing the repeated Japanese air bombings over Chongqing, the result was a hole-ridden plot, dialogues that seemed to have been generated by a computer programme from lines of other films, unimpressive CGI, and the unashamed repetition of old models, including Willis as a white-man-knows-best air force instructor who goes as far as slapping one of his Chinese trainees, as well as female characters who remain in supporting roles and whose destiny, regardless of their profession, is merely to be wives. Although, as we have seen, images of female subordination are now fairly common in war films, it is somewhat puzzling to note the depiction of Chinese masculinity as obedient to a foreign ‘master’, a trope that perhaps owes more to Hollywood cinema produced during World War Two than to more recent Chinese works.

A different, though arguably more significant, story of failure pertains to the film *The Eight Hundred*. Years in production, this war epic was directed by Guan Hu, who had previously written and directed *Cow/Dou niu* 斗牛 (2009), an award-winning film about a Chinese peasant protecting a cow during the Sino-Japanese war — a smaller-budget film which was praised for its humanistic tone. *The Eight*

⁵For example, *Charlotte Gray* (dir. Gillian Armstrong, 2001), *Black Book/Zwartboek* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 2006) or *Female Agents/Les Femmes de l’Ombre* (dir. Jean-Paul Salomé, 2008).

Hundred was an extravagant \$80 million production which took a decade to make. It depicts an episode in the Battle of Shanghai in 1937, when a group of 423 Chinese soldiers held out through different waves of Japanese attacks at the Sihang Warehouse in Shanghai, harnessing morale by circulating the rumour that they were in fact 800. Although they lost the confrontation, their long resistance against all odds became a celebrated feat. The event had been adapted to the screen before, once during the war and another in 1975, in a Taiwan production, *Eight Hundred Heroes/Ba bai zhuang shi* 八百壯士. That the same story was now the topic of a major production in mainland China seemed to attest to how far the ‘new remembering’ of the war had gone.

The film’s production involved an international team, which included the American stunt director of *The Matrix* and *The Hobbit* Glenn Boswell, the Australian visual effects supervisor of several *X-Men* films Tim Crosbie, and the Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli performing the theme song (Frater, 2019). *The Eight Hundred*’s ambitious plans for the international market were also evident. Trailers subtitled in English were released in advance and distribution ensured for North America, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Britain, Germany and several Southeast Asian countries. When analyzing *Hero*, Fung and Chan (2010) observed that its success on a global scale was predicated on ‘follow[ing] the norms of a global blockbuster, such as investing heavily in marketing and promotion’ (206). That appears to have been the model *The Eight Hundred* intended to follow.

However, on the eve of the premiere at the Shanghai International Film Festival in June 2019, the film was suddenly pulled out due to ‘technical reasons’, which was seen as a euphemism for political factors. The event was widely reported in international media (e.g. Brzeski, 2019; Yau, 2019; Yu, 2019). The real reason for the cancellation appears to have been pressure from the China Red Culture Research Association (中国红色文化研究会), a non-governmental group, which deemed the film ‘very inappropriate’ for a year in which the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC was being celebrated (Davis, 2019a). The problem pertained to the fact that the Chinese soldiers depicted in the film were from the KMT — against whom the communists had fought and won a civil war in the late 1940s. The positive portrayal of the Nationalist armed forces was deemed problematic; a particular controversial scene included saluting the Republic of China (ROC) flag. This was China’s national flag when the event depicted in the film took place, but after 1949 (and until the present) it remains in use in Taiwan, not mainland China. Both Nationalist soldiers and ROC flags are not exactly rare in Chinese films about the war. For example, *Death and Glory in Changde/Diexue gucheng* 喋血孤城 (dir. Shen Dong, 2010) also focused on a Nationalist division heroically defending a city against Japanese attacks — and it was released in China shortly after the sixtieth anniversary of founding of the PRC.⁶ The problem with *The Eight Hundred* appears to have been a combination of bad timing, ‘history activism’, and expansion of state control. The positive portrayal of the Nationalists’ wartime record, which was a cornerstone of the ‘new remembering’ had already been deemed potentially

problematic for the PRC authorities on previous occasions. Issues such as the treatment of KMT veterans — now considered ‘national heroes’ — during the Mao years and disagreement over the amount of fighting the CCP did during the war risked eroding the CCP’s legitimacy (Zhang & Weatherly, 2013: 232–235). Criticisms had been contested by party figures even before Xi Jinping assumed the presidency (ibid.: 236–237). The specific criticism that *The Eight Hundred*’s heroes and national symbol were not appropriate inclusions for the most prominent war film to be released during a PRC’s anniversary year also appears to be a manifestation of ‘history activism’. Indeed, grassroots expressions of support for the government’s rhetoric on patriotism and its narrative of history have been seen influencing state media and leading to tighter censorship control over depictions of the war in TV dramas (Wu & Bergman, 2019: 123). Furthermore, both *The Eight Hundred* and *Air Strike* attest to a growing government clout over the film industry in China. In 2018, the Chinese Communist Party Central Propaganda Department became responsible for China’s film censorship authority, replacing the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. It is, thus, unsurprising that stricter controls on positive depictions of the Nationalists have since become apparent.

Interestingly, Guan Hu’s other work as director in 2019 also involved a flag but this time it was the ‘right’ one and the film had no problems with its domestic release. He directed the first segment of *My People, My Country/Wo he wo de zuguo* 我和我的祖国, a patriotic film covering different moments in the PRC history, released to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the 1949 revolution. This film did have a limited international release but it passed unnoticed by audience and critics.

The Flowers of War case analysed above suggested that excessive nationalistic discourse is a factor which generates negative responses from foreign critics. But *The Eight Hundred* debacle evidences two other interconnected limitations to the global ambitions of China’s war cinema in the early twenty-first century. One is that the perception of censorship can generate negative international media attention. The second is that the ambition for box office success, both domestic and global, can be severely affected by political factors. Indeed, *The Eight Hundred* was produced by Huayi Brothers, one of the largest private film studios in China, which was also involved in most of the films mentioned in this article. Once studied as a model of success in Chinese commercial cinema, the company had an *annus horribilis* in 2019, when none of the films in which it had major investments opened in theatres. It registered a net loss of \$94 million until September 2019, with the cancellation of *The Eight Hundred* leading to a fall of 10 per cent in its shares (Hancock, 2019; Leng, 2020). That was followed by the public announcement that the company would ‘deepen its ties’ to the CCP (Davis, 2019b), suggesting the

⁶Tellingly, even the film officially commissioned to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, *The Founding of a Republic/Jianguo daye* 建国大业 (dir. Huang Jianxin and Han Sanping, 2009), included a surprisingly sympathetic portrayal of Chiang Kai-shek (Tang 2015: 187–188).

level of official scrutiny to their productions will increase. The times of private media corporations being ‘dominant forces reshaping film production and distribution in China’ (Kong, 2007: 232) may be about to change.

Conclusion

This article has reconsidered Chinese representations of a global Second World War through a detailed reading of several high-profile fiction films produced in the PRC in the 2000s. To do so, it took on an interdisciplinary approach that considered history and film, and drew insights from political, cultural, gender, and memory studies. Zhang Yingjin observed that ‘war films [...] function as acts of remembrance that leave deep marks on collective memory regardless of whether they conform to official history’ (2016: 22). This article has argued that recent Chinese major productions set in World War Two exhibit a will to reshape the international public memory of China’s participation in the conflict, highlighting it as an experience of global significance. If producing ‘universally appealing’ films is seen as a necessity to ‘expand China’s soft power internationally’ (Zhou, 2015: 242–243), works about a world war provide an ideal subject matter. Many of these films evoke familiar tropes of the role of foreigners in China, as saviours, ‘brothers’, or, in other cases, imperialist enemies, while also emphasizing heroic images of hegemonic masculinity. However, twenty-first century films also challenge these representations in mostly overt ways. Foreigners may have become more visible in China’s war films but their relative importance *vis-à-vis* Chinese characters became eroded and their legitimacy as narrators of Chinese history questioned. In many aspects, the Chinese resistance’s anti-imperialism is reflected in films seeking to overcome imperial legacies of visual representation by highlighting the agency of (some) Chinese characters. However, in other aspects, these fiction films remain far from progressive and arguably nowhere is that more evident than in their schematic renditions of gender. As Lu Chuan’s *City of Life and Death* demonstrates, the most all-round successful cases of Chinese war cinema, hailed by audiences, critics and even historians, are those where the humanity of the participants (regardless of their nationality or gender) is evoked in all its complexity, and the glimpses of the horrors of the war shown onscreen prompt viewers to reflect on the seriousness of what is being depicted.

War cinema has remained a popular genre in China and a *longue durée* analysis of films about the war with Japan since the 1930s until the present is yet to be written. Future studies may also consider convergences and divergencies with how the conflict is represented in Sinophone films produced in Taiwan, Hong Kong and elsewhere and how that has changed over time. The less numerous, but by no means less relevant filmic representations of the Chinese Civil War will no doubt be particularly fruitful when assessing variations in perspectives on the CCP-KMT rivalry. As for the films analysed in this article, they are indicative of the ambiguities of Chinese war cinema in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, when different

concerns — toeing the state-sanctioned narrative of the war, appealing to international audiences, and maintaining the directors' artistic vision — were often difficult to reconcile. As demonstrated by both *Air Strike* and *The Eight Hundred*, big-budget films such as these may even prove to be too vulnerable to internal pressures and no longer be the safe investments and symbols of 'new remembering' they were regarded as being until very recently.

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