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# HEROES AND OTHERS: RECONSTRUCTING MEMORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CHINESE WORLD WAR II FILMS

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### Abstract:

This study critically examines the portrayal of Chinese and Japanese images in Chinese World War II films, highlighting their role as tools for reconstructing cultural memory and shaping national identity. Focusing on a corpus of films produced between 1980 and 2010, the paper employs a comparative analytical framework that integrates discourse and semiotic analyses to explore both hero narratives and enemy representations. The findings demonstrate that these films utilize recurring visual and narrative motifs not only to recount historical events, but also to encode symbols of collective trauma and national resilience. Overall, this study underscores the power of Chinese World War II films as dynamic media for the rearticulation of historical narratives and the ongoing construction of national memory and identity.

### Keywords:

World War II Film, Character, Cultural memory, National Identity

## Introduction

Chinese World War II films have long served as a potent medium for rearticulating historical trauma and constructing national identity. These cinematic texts do not merely reenact past events; rather, they operate as complex cultural artifacts through which collective memory is

continuously negotiated and redefined (Assmann, 2011; Tam, Tsu, & Wilson, 2014). Despite a rich body of descriptive scholarship that has explored the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of these films (Bordwell, 2003; Elsaesser, 2017), a critical gap remains. Prior studies often focus on surface-level reenactments of history without sufficiently interrogating the systematic visual and narrative strategies that actively reconstruct cultural memory and forge national identity.

This study aims to fill that gap by adopting a critical and analytical approach to examine how recurring motifs in Chinese World War II films serve as ideological tools. In doing so, it focuses on films produced between 1980 and 2010—a period during which Chinese filmmakers both revisited and reshaped wartime narratives in response to evolving political and cultural contexts. The research contends that these films employ carefully constructed hero narratives and enemy representations to encode symbols of collective trauma and resilience. In this framework, heroic figures—whether depicted as members of the Eighth Route Army or as Nationalist military leaders—are presented not only as embodiments of honesty, bravery, and ingenuity but also as critical agents in consolidating a resilient national spirit.

Central to this inquiry are the key concepts of cultural memory and national identity. Drawing on Assmann's (2011) conception, cultural memory is understood as a dynamic process by which historical events are continuously reinterpreted and embedded within cultural texts. National identity, meanwhile, is framed as a collective construct shaped by shared values, narratives, and symbols (Sun, 2011). By critically engaging with both classical theories and recent scholarship (Hu, 2020; Ouyang, 2019), this study argues that the visual and narrative strategies in these films play a decisive role in mediating public perceptions of history and in reinforcing state-sanctioned narratives of nationhood.

To achieve these aims, the research employs a comparative analytical framework that integrates discourse analysis and semiotic analysis. This methodological approach facilitates a nuanced examination of both hero narratives and enemy representations, highlighting how specific cinematic motifs contribute to the construction of a dualistic narrative—one that celebrates national resilience while simultaneously delineating a clear opposition between the “self” and the “other.” The selection of films from 1980 to 2010 is justified by the period's distinctive socio-political transformations, which have significantly influenced the evolution of wartime representation in Chinese cinema.

## Literature Review

Early scholarship, notably around 1995 and 2005, laid the historical foundation by documenting and evaluating films produced during the war period. Works such as *The Anti-Japanese War and Chinese Cinema* (Cheng, J. & Shao, Z, 1995) and Chen Xihe's (2005) *Chinese Film and Theater During the Anti-Japanese War Period* provided comprehensive reviews of films made between 1937 and 1945. These early studies underscored the dual functions of wartime cinema in China: first, as propaganda vehicles that promoted anti-imperialism and patriotism, and second, as cultural texts that reflected colonial narratives of enslavement. Huang Fu Yichuan's (2005) *A History of Chinese War Films* further extended this historical perspective by presenting a chronological account of war-themed films, thereby establishing the basis upon which later theoretical research was built.

Subsequent research shifted from mere historical recounting to examining the evolution of these films in response to changing socio-political contexts. For example, Shi Bogong and Du Dongkai (2015) analyzed anti-Japanese war films from 1979 to 2015, revealing how shifts in Sino-Japanese relations and changing aesthetic tastes have led to significant transformations in creative concepts, narrative structures, and visual styles. Their work highlights a phase transition in Chinese wartime cinema, reflecting broader changes in the film industry and public perception of historical events. Similarly, Qian Qingguo's (2002) study on the evolution of narrative forms in Chinese revolutionary war films offers a typology that spans over fifty years—from socialist realism and extreme Cultural Revolution films to documentary-style realism and the experimental approaches of Fifth Generation directors. These studies demonstrate that Chinese World War II films are not static re-enactments of history but dynamic texts that evolve in tandem with shifts in political ideology and cultural sentiment.

A substantial body of literature has since emerged that can be broadly classified into four interrelated strands. First, several scholars have explored the role of Chinese World War II films in constructing collective memory and ethnic identity. Research by Wang Xia (2020) on massacre-themed films, for instance, argues that these works play a critical role in mediating between historical truth, artistic expression, and national culture. Li Juan (2013) extends this analysis by applying visual narrative theory to films depicting the Nanjing Massacre, highlighting how these cinematic representations contribute to the construction of an ethnic collective memory that aligns with contemporary national values. Tao Fuwen (2020) also emphasizes the importance of decoding visual symbols in war films, arguing that these images not only recount historical events but also serve as mechanisms for cultural self-awareness and national solidarity.

Second, an important research trend has been the examination of the technical, artistic, and representational techniques employed in these films. Scholars such as Hu Tingting (2017) have scrutinized the ways in which Japanese characters are visually and narratively constructed, noting that stereotypical representations serve to reinforce a binary opposition between the “self” and the “other.” Chen Guo's (2019) analysis of *When Will the Moon Be Bright* further illustrates how innovative narrative strategies and character portrayals challenge traditional modes of historical representation. Studies focusing on artistic variations—for example, Xie Songsheng's (2022) case study on the different versions of *The Eight Hundred*—demonstrate that artistic expression in war films varies significantly with the political context, underscoring the intricate relationship between historical truth and aesthetic innovation.

Third, research has also examined the broader social functions and cultural significance of these films. Scholars like Jia Leilei (2002) argue that war films are crucial in constructing and subverting national images, as they not only depict historical events but also actively contribute to the formation of a collective national identity. Hou Wei and Zhao Wenliang (2013) further contend that the representation of heroism and collective memory in war films plays a pivotal role in reinforcing state-sanctioned narratives and in legitimizing national power. Other studies, including Yu Pengliang's (2008) research on nationalism in Chinese World War II films, adopt perspectives from nationalism studies to analyze how these films articulate anti-Japanese sentiments in a globalized cultural landscape.

Fourth, the impact and evaluation of Chinese World War II films have been scrutinized in terms of their ideological effectiveness and cultural resonance. Researchers such as Wang Zhen

(2016) and Li Xiaohui (2015) critically assess how these films influence public discourse and national consciousness. Qu Chunjing and Zhang Tian (2010) raise questions regarding the capacity of these films to present a nuanced reflection of historical events, while Tang Dekun (2012) points to the limitations of the genre, including market constraints and the oversimplification of complex historical narratives.

Despite extensive and multifaceted research on Chinese World War II films, significant gaps persist in the literature. Much of the existing work is predominantly descriptive—focusing on historical recounting, technical analysis, or socio-political evaluation in isolation—and there is a notable lack of integrative studies that combine discourse and semiotic analyses to reveal the deeper cultural codes embedded in these films. Furthermore, while many scholars have concentrated on films from the wartime period of 1937-1945 or on representations of the Nanjing Massacre, few have systematically examined films produced between 1980 and 2010—a period marked by rapid socio-political reforms and a rearticulation of national narratives in cinema. This study addresses these gaps by employing a comparative analytical framework that uncovers the active role of recurring visual and narrative motifs in reconstructing collective trauma and forging a resilient national identity. By focusing on this critical transitional period in Chinese cinematic history, the research not only bridges classical theoretical perspectives with contemporary debates on cultural memory and nationalism but also challenges prevailing frameworks that have traditionally viewed war films as static historical documents. Ultimately, the study deepens the understanding of film as a dynamic medium that actively mediates historical memory and national identity, providing fresh insights into the processes by which cultural trauma is transformed into a narrative of national resilience and enriching scholarly discourse on the construction and contestation of collective memory in modern China.

## Methodology

This study employs an integrated approach combining textual analysis, film semiotics, and comparative analysis to investigate the construction of Chinese and Japanese character portrayals in Chinese World War II films. First, textual analysis is used to examine film scripts and narrative structures, revealing the language and narrative strategies employed in constructing heroic and antagonistic figures. Second, film semiotics is applied to decode the visual symbols, compositions, and emblematic elements within the imagery, thereby elucidating how these visual strategies transmit cultural memory and ideological information. Finally, comparative analysis systematically contrasts the construction of Chinese and Japanese character portrayals, exploring the similarities and differences in how these images reflect national identity and collective memory. This integrated methodological framework provides a multidimensional perspective for critically analyzing character construction in film and contributes to uncovering the unique role of Chinese World War II films in constructing and reinforcing national identity.

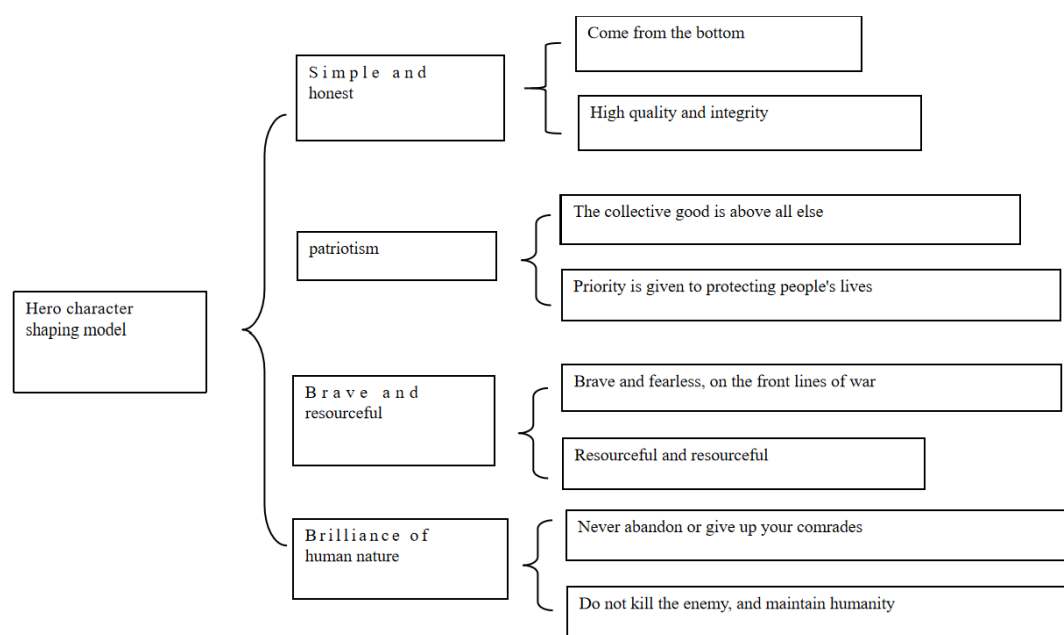
## Character Analysis

### *Chinese Heroes*

In war films, the portrayal of heroic figures is not only a core narrative element but also a crucial carrier of cultural memory (Bordwell, 2003; Elsaesser, 2017). The representation of heroes is intimately linked to collective memory, national identity, and the audience's historical understanding (Assmann, 2011; Tam, Tsu, & Wilson, 2014). In Chinese World War II films, the depiction of heroic figures stands as the most important narrative element.

Historically, the hero narrative has been the most significant and enduring technique in these films, creating a fixed pattern of representation that persists to this day (Ouyang, 2019; Hu, 2020). Typically, Chinese World War II films distinguish between two types of heroic figures: those represented by the Eighth Route Army (the Chinese Communist military) and those portrayed by the Nationalist Army (the Kuomintang military) (Zhang, 2011). While the former is universally prevalent, the latter appears only sporadically, depending on the prevailing political needs and national stance (Gong, 2013).

### *The Hero of The Eighth Route Army*



**Figure 1: Hero Template of the Eighth Route Army**

First, the characters are fundamentally portrayed as honest and simple. On the one hand, this is primarily because the Chinese Communist Party originated from the peasant class rather than a regular army. This characteristic is reflected in many films. For example, in *Grief Over the Yellow River* (1999), Heizi, a squad leader of the Eighth Route Army, hides Owen and Anjie in his home and explains that before participating in the war, he was a farmer with a wife, daughter, and elderly father. However, after his wife was killed by the Japanese army, he entrusted his daughter to his father and resolutely joined the army (Zhang & Xiao, 2008).

In *The Meridian of War* (1990), the child soldiers (children's army), when introducing themselves, talk about which village they come from. Some of them were fostered by villagers after their parents joined the army, and eventually, these children also joined the army. In *Evening Bell* (1989), the film begins by explaining that after this small squad of Chinese soldiers helps farmers reclaim their land, they sit together reminiscing about their backgrounds, all of which are from rural areas and had families persecuted by the Japanese army (Zhang & Xiao, 2008).

In *Eight Women Die a Martyr* (1987), among the eight female team members, except for Leng Yun, who comes from an urban background and was originally a primary school teacher, the other seven team members include those from bandit camps and ordinary peasant backgrounds.



*One and Eight* (1983) depicts the backgrounds of anti-Japanese heroes, including ordinary farmers and prisoners.

In *Grief Over the Yellow River* (1999), Anjie of the Eighth Route Army comes from a bandit background. On the other hand, such backgrounds and fundamental characteristics better reflect the hardships of civilian life during wartime. They all possess integrity. For example, in *Grief Over the Yellow River*, when Owen picks fruit from a civilian's tree, the squad leader leaves money on the tree. In *Cow* (2009), Niu Er wants to return the cow to the Eighth Route Army, but they immediately refuse, stating, "*We do not take a needle or a thread from the masses*" (*Cow*, 2009).

Thirdly, bravery and ingenuity make the portrayal of heroic figures the most captivating aspect for the audience. On the one hand, all heroic figures face death fearlessly and courageously charge to the front lines of the war. This is depicted in different ways across fourteen films. For example, in *Santa Joins The Army* (1992), there is the suicide squad; in *City of Life and Death* (2009), there is the resolute defense in front of the safety zone; in *The Meridian of War* (1990), the child soldiers sacrifice themselves one after another to deliver orders; in *Grief Over the Yellow River* (1999), the Eighth Route Army members sacrifice themselves to escort their ally Owen; in *One and Eight* (1983), characters voluntarily apply for frontline combat; and in *Eight Women Die a Martyr* (1987), the eight female warriors move from the rear to the front lines to cover the main force's retreat, ultimately jumping into the river after firing their last bullet.

On the other hand, although they may lack the professional military training of regular armies, they still use their own ingenuity to fight against the Japanese forces. For instance, in *The Meridian of War* (1990), a scout uses his binoculars and the sun to ignite the cannon and repel the Japanese army. A veteran uses road signs to lead the Japanese off a cliff, and a bugler uses his memory to locate buried landmines. In *City of Life and Death* (2009), Lu Jianxiong uses the advantage of alleys to conduct guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. In *Grief Over the Yellow River* (1999), Anjie not only understands English, enabling communication with the American airman Owen, but also collaborates with Heizi to devise a plan to cross the Yellow River using gourds.

Finally, Chinese soldiers possess a humanitarian spirit that the Japanese forces lack. On one hand, they maintain an attitude of "never abandoning or giving up on anyone and believe that the higher the rank or the older the age, the more they should be on the front lines" when dealing with their comrades. In *One and Eight* (1983), the Eighth Route Army does not abandon the prisoners when facing the Japanese army but instead evacuates with them. During the evacuation, even when a prisoner falls ill, Instructor Wang Jin does not leave him behind but carries him to keep up with the group. After the Eighth Route Army section chief is severely wounded in battle, a female nurse refuses to give up on treating him, and the prisoners do not flee but instead take up arms to fight the Japanese.

In *City of Life and Death* (2009), Lu Jianxiong is always the first to charge into battle, ensuring his subordinates and the child soldiers evacuate first. In *The Meridian of War* (1990) (Li, 1990), whenever danger arises, the veteran, citing his age, rushes to the front to shield the younger soldiers, setting an example with his actions. On the other hand, when facing the enemy, they can restrain their hatred and show kindness. For example, in *Evening Bell* (1989) (Wu, 1989), the squad led by the platoon leader discovers a starving Japanese messenger but does not kill

him for revenge. Instead, they prevent their subordinates from doing so, thereby saving his life. When encountering a starving Japanese unit hiding in a cave, they still provide food to them (Wu, 1989; Chen, 2010).

### ***The Hero of The Eighth Route Army***

Nationalist heroes in Chinese World War II films are rare, but two classic works, *The Battle of Taierzhuang* (1986) and *Death and Glory in Changde* (2010), depict China's frontal battlegrounds during World War II (during World War II, the Nationalist army was responsible for frontal resistance, while the Communist army managed the rear battlegrounds) (Liu, 2015; Wang, 2012). In these two frontal battlegrounds, the heroic figures are historical figures, primarily Nationalist military leaders. Although their characterizations are similar, they significantly differ from the heroes of the Eighth Route Army. Nationalist heroes are characterized by two main traits: excellent military skills and a strong sense of patriotism. This is because the leaders of the Nationalist army were mostly graduates of military academies, and the army was a strictly organized regular force. Therefore, the leaders possessed strong military expertise and strategic thinking (Chen, 2010; Sun, 2011).

In *The Battle of Taierzhuang*, Li Zongren and Zhang Zizhong serve as examples. Li Zongren not only had strategic plans for combating the Japanese but also demonstrated the inclusiveness expected of a leader. The Sichuan Army, a unit of the Nationalist army, faced defeat and was ostracized by other units. However, after analyzing the site, Li Zongren concluded that the defeat was not due to the army's capabilities and integrated them into his battle plans. Zhang Zizhong, another leader, chose a strategy of luring the enemy deep despite doubts and fought to the death. His leadership ensured the position's security, laying the groundwork for the victory at Taierzhuang. Building on this, Li Zongren mobilized troops to encircle and annihilate the Japanese forces, leading to a significant victory at the Battle of Taierzhuang, which severed the Japanese advance into North China (Liu, 2015).

In *Death and Glory in Changde*, Nationalist army leader Yu Chengwan, a graduate of the Whampoa Military Academy, was promoted to major general at 31 and to lieutenant general commanding a division at 41. He was praised by the Japanese commander as a versatile talent. Yu mastered the knowledge of the enemy and identified weaknesses in Japanese combat strategies to exploit. Although Changde was lost due to the Japanese use of biochemical weapons, Yu successfully adjusted his strategy in subsequent battles and reclaimed Changde (Wang, 2012).

Patriotism is the core of all heroic images. In *The Battle of Taierzhuang*, Li Zongren denounces Han Fu for abandoning the city and fleeing, reporting him to Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang Kai-shek orders that resisting the Japanese takes priority and sentences Han Fu to death. Zhang Zizhong's troops not only fight to the death but, as depicted at 1 hour, 4 minutes, and 38 seconds into the film, a subordinate unit sacrifices itself to create an opportunity to lure the enemy deep and annihilate the Japanese in one strike (Liu, 2015; Chen, 2010).

In *Death and Glory in Changde*, Commander Yu leads his troops to first ensure the evacuation of civilians. The entire army adheres to the principle of “when the company commander dies, the platoon leader takes over; when the platoon leader dies, the squad leader takes over” and vows to coexist with the city, delivering a heavy blow to the Japanese. Despite eventually losing to the Japanese biochemical weapons (gas bombs), Commander Yu personally fights on the

front lines to ensure the safety of Changde's civilians. Only 83 soldiers survived the battle. It was due to the civilians' pleas that Commander Yu was not sentenced to death and quickly reclaimed Changde (Wang, 2012).

Although the templates for these two types of heroic figures differ, their commonalities are evident. These heroic symbols, on one hand, represent a historical reenactment of the World War II era, concretizing China's suffering during this period. The entire nation was nearly mobilized for war, including women and children. The path to resisting the Japanese was fraught with difficulties, and the country paid a tremendous and painful price to avoid annihilation. On the other hand, the excellent qualities they exhibit represent the national characteristics. The Chinese have developed a solid national spirit based on patriotism, unity and harmony, a desire for peace, diligence and bravery, and self-improvement. These qualities correspond precisely to those of the heroic figures. Thus, it is evident that Chinese World War II films encode the collective memory of World War II and the national spirit of the Chinese people into their heroic characters (Sun, 2011; Zhang & Li, 2018).

Firstly, heroic figures, represented as symbols, have been distilled into the emblem of China's World War II, helping viewers understand the past's suffering and resistance through their personal experiences and sacrifices. These heroic symbols connect the present individuals with historical events, inspiring audiences to reflect on the war through individual stories. This emotional connection influences viewers' understanding of history and reality to a certain extent (Chen, 2010; Sun, 2011).

Secondly, these symbols are closely related to the construction of national identity and the national spirit. *Identity is closely related to cultural memory; it is the core issue of cultural memory. As a means of confirming identity, cultural memory involves both individuals and groups in the process of self-imagination and self-existence confirmation. At the same time, it envisions the future and how to proceed forward* (Ouyang, 2019).

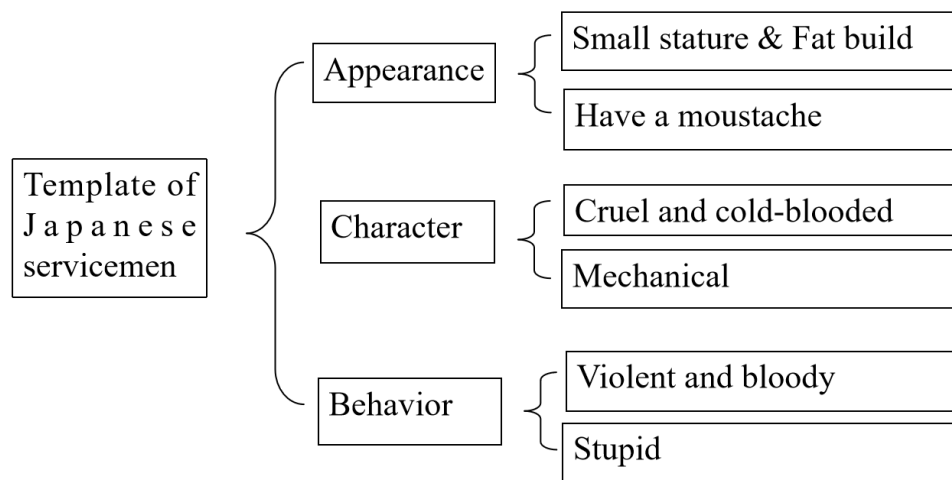
*Film audiences are subjects of desire and identification; they long to align their views with the film during watching. Through the mirroring of fictional stories, they locate themselves in history and confirm their values within the contemporary society* (Hu, 2020). In the context of globalization, when faced with the infiltration of foreign cultures or external threats, these heroic images can evoke patriotic feelings and a sense of unity among the audience.

Lastly, one function of cultural memory is legitimation. The World War II period is a unique chapter in Chinese history. Besides the Japanese invasion, there was an internal power struggle between two political parties. During World War II, the armies of both parties participated in the resistance against the Japanese invasion to varying degrees. In 1949, the Communist Party of China established the People's Republic of China. *Reference to the Anti-Japanese War (literally, the 'Resist-Japan War' [KangRi zhanzheng] or simply the 'Resistance War' [Kangzhan]) is central to postwar Chinese nationalism, legitimating governments while providing a focus for popular patriotism* (Tam et al., 2014, p.2). Therefore, in Chinese World War II films, heroic symbols predominantly feature the image of Eighth Route Army heroes. This portrayal enhances the legitimacy of the government under the Communist Party of China, fostering a closer link between patriotism and loyalty to the party.



### Japanese Characters

The battlefield of World War II in China was primarily a confrontation between China and Japan, with third-party countries mostly acting as allies or witnesses (Liu, 2017). Thus, the symbolization of Japanese soldiers in Chinese World War II films serves as a representation of China's dominant ideology and its perception of both World War II history and Japan (Chen & Zhang, 2015). The depiction of Japanese soldiers in these films is generally consistent, with only a few reflective or epic films diverging from this trend (Wang, 2014). However, these exceptions do not significantly affect the majority of Chinese audiences' stereotypical impressions of Japanese soldiers.



**Figure 2: Template of Japanese Servicemen**

In Chinese World War II films, Japanese soldiers are often portrayed with fixed physical traits, such as short stature, slightly overweight builds, and thin mustaches above the philtrum. These visual characteristics are reinforced and repeated across multiple works, including *Santa Joins the Army*(1992), *The Meridian of War*, *Eight Women Die a Martyr*, *Don't Cry, Nanking*, *Devils on the Doorstep*(2000), *Cow*, *City of Life and Death*, and *The Flowers of War*(2011).

The reasons behind the symbolic representation of Japanese soldiers can be summarized into three aspects. Firstly, this portrayal reinforces the "otherness" of the aggressor, aiming to separate Japanese soldiers from the cultural context of China and create a deliberate sense of foreignness (Chen & Li, 2015). This differentiation deepens the audience's perception of a clear divide between us and them. The otherization of Japanese soldiers facilitates emotional detachment among viewers, thereby intensifying the antagonistic image and forming a more explicit opposition (Chen & Li, 2015).

Secondly, the physical traits of Japanese soldiers—short stature, mustaches, etc.—become a part of the visual symbol system (Liu & Zhao, 2014). These stereotypical attributes strengthen the audience's perception of Japanese soldiers, allowing viewers to identify their roles visually without needing an in-depth understanding of the plot (Liu & Zhao, 2014). Filmmakers utilize these visual symbols to quickly immerse the audience in a specific historical context and evoke an automatic sense of distance and vigilance towards Japanese soldiers (Liu & Zhao, 2014).

Lastly, these specific characteristics, such as short stature and slight obesity, may imply an inherent weakness, contrasting with outward strength or superficial toughness (Sun, 2017). This form of depiction not only diminishes the enemy visually but also carries metaphoric implications of national revenge and resilience (Sun, 2017). By symbolically exaggerating the weaknesses of the enemy, filmmakers inspire viewers' aspirations for national rejuvenation (Sun, 2017). This approach is evident in many anti-Japanese war films, fostering both aversion to Japanese soldiers and a reinforced belief in the revival of the nation and its people (Sun, 2017).

Beyond physical traits, Japanese soldiers are primarily characterized as cruel, cold-blooded, and mechanical in personality, while their behavior emphasizes violence, brutality, and foolishness (Zhang, 2018). Specific data illustrating these traits are presented in the table below.

**Table 1: Japanese Character Image Characteristics Data**

Film Title	Film moment	Film plot	The characteristics presented
The Meridian of War(1991)	00:30	A bugler uses a telescope lens to ignite the cannon barrel, creating an opportunity for escape, and the remaining Japanese soldiers are eliminated by a collective effort.	Mechanical Stupid
	00:51	A group of child soldiers uses ropes and markers to lead Japanese soldiers off a cliff, rescuing their companions.	Stupid
	01:20--01:27	The child soldiers employ landmines to cut off Japanese logistics and supply lines.	Stupid
Santa Joins The Army(1992)	00 : 44	Japanese encampments are littered with animal corpses, revealing their brutal slaughter of animals.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	00 : 45--00 : 46	After feasting and sleeping, an entire Japanese troop is captured by a few Chinese soldiers.	Mechanical Stupid
	01 : 20	In the forest, Sanmao and his companions exploit the Japanese soldiers' disdain for Chinese people and their competitive nature by challenging them to mimic bird calls, using the opportunity to eliminate the well-armed Japanese unit.	Stupid
Don't Cry,Nanking(1995)	00 : 16	The Japanese military conducts a comprehensive bombing of Nanjing, with no evacuation of the city's civilians.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	00:49	Japanese soldiers massacre civilians, including children, employing horrific methods such as grinding children to death on millstones or placing grenades in their arms before detonating them.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	00:57--01:05	Numerous methods are used to massacre large numbers of civilians and prisoners.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	01:20	Japanese soldiers compete in killing contests, with one soldier boastfully claiming to have killed 105 people.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody

Devils on the Doorstep(2000)	01:45	Japanese soldiers storm the safety zone, slaughtering civilians, raping women, and even assaulting a pregnant Japanese woman.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	00:03,00:11,00:18,00:58,01:41	A Japanese squad conducts mechanical patrols of villages, distributing candy.	Mechanical
	00:03--00:15	During interrogations, there are frequent miscommunications between Chinese and Japanese personnel due to language barriers.	Stupid
	00 : 37	A veteran Japanese soldier teaches new recruits slaughter techniques, merely to steal a chicken, but ends up frightened by villagers.	Stupid
	01 : 30	Hanaya, a captured Japanese soldier, returns to his unit only to face discrimination and beatings for having been a prisoner.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	01 : 58	The entire Chinese village that rescued Hanaya is massacred, and the village is burned to the ground.	Cruel and cold-blooded
	02 : 15	Hanaya uses a Japanese katana to kill Ma Dasan, the man who had saved his life.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
City of Life and Death(2009)	00 : 14	Japanese soldiers storm a church, shooting young women.	Cruel and cold-blooded
	00:32--00:42	Mass killings of Chinese prisoners and civilians are carried out by the Japanese military, employing methods such as shootings, live burial, drowning in rivers, bayonet stabbings, and burning victims alive.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	00:48--00:50, 00 : 37, 01:20--01:26	Scenes inside a comfort station depict Japanese soldiers venting their sexual desires. Comfort women are abused to death or driven insane.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	00 : 52, 00 : 57	Japanese soldiers enter the safety zone and rape women, treating it as a game.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	01 : 10	Japanese soldiers invade the safety zone, assaulting Minnie Vautrin (an American) and church administrators, killing all wounded soldiers, raping women, and throwing children out of windows to their deaths.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	01 : 37	Japanese soldiers shoot refugees.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	00 : 05	Japanese soldiers using bayonets to kill civilians.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
The Flowers Of War(2011)	00 : 42	Japanese forces invading a church within the safety zone, violently raping female students, assaulting an American priest, and slaughtering Chinese soldiers. During searches, many absurd and crude acts are depicted.	Stupid Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
	00 : 47	Japanese soldiers, faced with unarmed priests and female students, mockingly put down their guns and draw katanas, preparing for gruesome executions.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody

01 : 19	Japanese soldiers surrounding a church release the priest but follow orders to prevent the female students from leaving.	Mechanical
01 : 23	Japanese forces subject Chinese women to violent rape and abuse.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody
01 : 24	After using Chinese interpreter, Japanese soldiers casually killed him.	Cruel and cold-blooded Violent and bloody

In numerous Chinese World War II films, the portrayal of Japanese soldiers is highly stereotypical (Chen & Wang, 2012). They are often depicted as cruel and inhumane, with little to no individuality, instead appearing as a collective force characterized by mechanical obedience and cold detachment (Johnson & Lee, 2010). Their behavior is marked by extreme violence and bloodshed, particularly toward vulnerable groups such as women, children, the disabled, and the elderly, as reflected in the examples provided in the table (Smith, 2015). At the same time, they are frequently portrayed as foolish and lacking any semblance of military competence or skill (Chen & Wang, 2012). The simplistic and brutal symbolization of Japanese soldiers serves the purpose of ensuring that the memory and symbolic meaning these portrayals carry can be fully decoded and received during dissemination (Johnson & Lee, 2010).

On the one hand, they function as antagonistic tools within a binary opposition framework (Smith, 2015). However, as the eventual victor of World War II, China also adopts an approach that trivializes and ridicules Japanese soldiers to legitimize its triumph and foster national identity (Chen & Wang, 2012). These symbols embody the collective memory of China's invasion and suffering, the historical fact of Japan's aggression, and China's ultimate victory in the war (Johnson & Lee, 2010). The Japanese soldier archetype serves as a representation of collectivism and mechanization, symbolizing Japanese militaristic aggression as well as the identity of the defeated (Chen & Wang, 2012). Their repeated appearances in films aim, on the one hand, to highlight the inhumane atrocities committed by the aggressors, emphasizing the opposition between us and them, and evoking profound historical memory and indignation among viewers (Smith, 2015).

On the other hand, the depiction of Japanese soldiers as foolish seeks to psychologically diminish the threat of the invaders, alleviating the audience's fear of war (Chen & Wang, 2012). This portrayal creates a sense of emotional satisfaction and a psychological balance in the desire for revenge, strengthening the audience's confidence in their nation's strength (Johnson & Lee, 2010). The caricatured foolishness of Japanese soldiers also serves as an ideological expression, illustrating the moral and intellectual deficiencies of the aggressors (Smith, 2015). This portrayal reinforces the righteousness of the anti-Japanese resistance (Chen & Wang, 2012). Many studies have shown that through such depictions, films can enhance the audience's identification with national heroism, inspiring admiration for bravery and the wisdom embodied in the spirit of resistance (Johnson & Lee, 2010).

*In the absence of official intervention, the collective retreat to the preliminary stage of trauma healing, as conceptualized by Freud, coupled with the spontaneous acquiescence to and even facilitation of the formation and spread of such violent memories, is profoundly thought-provoking. Alarmingly, unresolved pasts and misaligned modes of traumatic memory themselves contribute to the creation of new traumas. The substitution of visual pleasure for justice perpetuates Japan's denial of*

*its historical crimes, creating a secondary trauma that remains inextricably linked to the primary trauma of eighty years ago. Consequently, China's World War II memory remains trapped within a binary moral structure of judgment and historical retrospection, preventing progress to a more advanced stage of collective memory. (Hu, 2020)*

However, the entertainment-driven caricature of Japanese soldiers as foolish often undermines the accurate representation of historical events, leading to a shallow and fragmented understanding of historical facts among audiences. The oversimplified depictions neglect the systematic and profound impacts of Japanese militarism at the time, rendering audiences unable to fully grasp the brutalities of World War II and its complex social causes. Scholar Robert Rosenstone (1995, pp. 70–90) has pointed out that overly entertainment-oriented historical films can mislead audiences about historical events, thereby affecting the public's serious engagement with history.

The symbolic representation of Japanese soldiers diminishes the gravity of war atrocities and traumatic memories, occasionally veering toward the comedic (Chen & Li, 2013). This trivialization causes audiences to overlook the profound harm inflicted on civilians and the significance of national trauma (Johnson & Kim, 2015). Excessive entertainment in such portrayals also blurs the genuine struggles of Chinese military and civilians, undermining the patriotic and educational value of anti-war films (Miller, 2014). Moreover, this symbolic representation can foster national prejudice (Chen & Li, 2013). The implicit and explicit depictions of Japanese soldiers as foolish deepen stereotypical views of Japan and Japanese people, affecting the long-term understanding of Sino-Japanese relations (Johnson & Kim, 2015). While such portrayals played a role in propaganda during the early postwar years, in the contemporary context of globalization, an overemphasis on negative imagery risks fueling transnational nationalism and hindering international understanding and exchange (Miller, 2014).

In summary, the symbolic representation of Japanese soldiers in Chinese World War II films predominantly focuses on reinforcing their identity as cruel, cold, mechanical, and foolish aggressors (Chen & Li, 2013; Johnson & Kim, 2015). This depiction strengthens the “otherness” and enemy characteristics, intensifies collective national memory, fosters patriotic sentiments, and illustrates the nation's collective trauma (Johnson & Kim, 2015). These symbols not only add a layer of nationalistic opposition to the narrative but also carry the collective memory and ideological aspirations of national rejuvenation and resilience (Miller, 2014). They embody a disdain for the aggressor while providing a medium for reasserting the righteousness of the anti-Japanese resistance, confirming national independence, and reflecting on development (Chen & Li, 2013). Such symbolic representations serve not only historical narratives but also ideological purposes, cultivating values of vigilance against regression and remembrance of historical lessons (Johnson & Kim, 2015).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of Chinese World War II films demonstrates a complex and dynamic interplay between narrative construction and the symbolic representation of both heroic figures and antagonistic forces, which together underpin the nation's collective memory and cultural identity. Chinese heroic figures are deliberately and meticulously constructed to embody core national virtues—integrity, self-sacrifice, and resilience—thereby functioning as potent symbols of the collective struggle against historical adversity. Their recurring narrative



patterns, which foreground personal sacrifice and innovative problem solving, not only facilitate the internalization of historical trauma at an individual level but also reinforce a cohesive cultural identity that bolsters national legitimacy. Simultaneously, the stereotypical depiction of Japanese soldiers—portrayed as cruel, mechanistic, and, at times, absurd—serves to establish a clear moral dichotomy that both intensifies the collective sense of victimhood and galvanizes patriotic fervor. This binary framework functions dually by enabling audiences to decode historical events with relative ease while simultaneously reinforcing the ideological imperatives associated with national rejuvenation.

Moreover, the symbolic deployment of visual motifs—consistently portraying Chinese soldiers as both profoundly human and heroic, juxtaposed with the dehumanized portrayal of Japanese soldiers—ensures that the memory of the war remains an enduring ideological tool in contemporary society. These films do not merely reconstruct the past; they actively shape present-day national consciousness by embedding historical trauma within the cultural narrative. Through the mobilization of collective memory, these cinematic texts affirm the enduring strength and moral righteousness of the Chinese people, thereby contributing substantively to scholarly discourse on national identity, cultural belonging, and the legitimacy of historical narratives in a global context.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that this study is not without limitations. First, the analysis is constrained by its focus on films produced between 1980 and 2010, which, although reflective of significant socio-political transformations, may not capture the full spectrum of cinematic representations that have evolved since. Second, while the integrated methodological framework combining discourse analysis and semiotic analysis provides a robust lens for examining narrative and visual strategies, the interpretive nature of these analyses inherently limits the ability to generalize findings across all Chinese World War II films. Future research should consider incorporating quantitative measures and expanding the temporal scope to encompass more recent cinematic productions in order to further refine our understanding of the evolving interplay between film, cultural memory, and national identity.

Overall, Chinese World War II films serve as dynamic cultural artifacts that mediate historical memory and construct national identity. By rearticulating the past through powerful visual and narrative strategies, these films continue to influence public discourse and shape collective memory, thereby offering profound insights into the enduring processes of cultural remembrance and national rejuvenation.

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