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Recording the absurdity, desiring the real: *Devils on the Doorstep* as a historical satire

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Devils on the Doorstep is a historical film on the Sino-Japanese War directed by Jiang Wen in 2000. Despite acclaims from worldwide, the film was subsequently banned in mainland China by the Chinese Film Bureau, claiming that the film "distorted history" and was "not patriotic sufficiently". Curious about the differences between the "censored" and "uncensored" Chinese narratives, this essay set out to compare *Devils on the Doorstep* with other Chinese historical films on the war. The distinctions are three-fold, namely Director Jiang's choice of telling a war story through a local peasant's perspective; the film's uncovering the root of the war through its precise analysis of Japanese and Chinese cultures; the delirious and seemingly absurd tone in which the film presents the chaotic and brutal reality of the war.

Following an overview of Chinese cinematic representation of the war, this essay introduces the film and the insights the three distinctions provides. In essence, *Devils on the Doorstep* is an unprecedented attempt of deconstruction—by switching the perspective and cutting to the core of the cultural conflicts, this film breaks down the barrier of "otherness" and deconstructs the notion of patriotism. The film ultimately undermines the rationality of the war by posing a question on the root of the war and provoke the audiences' contemplation. To imagine the imaginable, make sense of the illogical, *Devils on the Doorstep*'s absurd representation of the war offers a possible approach.

A quick tour of the dominant Chinese narratives

Following a chronological order, film-production on the Sino-Japanese War can be divided into three phases, each branch of films serving for different historical purposes. The first group of films was produced during the war (1931-1945), as passionate slogans, they glorified the war and

called on people to devote themselves. The second branch emerged soon after the establishment of the PRC, praising the Communist Party for their contribution to the war. These films manifested the characteristics of moral lessons. From 1980 to 2000, after the launching of the "Reform and Opening-up" program, the new generation of Chinese war films became more commercially inclined.

From 1934 to 1945, during the timespan of the war, the very first generation of war films tells stories about how Chinese citizens left their families and joined the war passionately. These include *Children of Troubled Times*, *Blood on Wolf Mountain*, and *Crossroads*. Interestingly, the film *Blood on Wolf Mountain* compares the Japanese army to the wolves that harass the villages continuously, indicating Japanese invader's brutalness. With direct depictions of battle scenes and characterizing Japanese soldiers as inherently evil, monstrous figures, these films evoked nationwide patriotism. Moreover, these films narration also triggered a sense of aggressive excitement—people were convinced that joining the war is, in essence, a heroic act that could change the country's destiny. Hence, underneath the glorification of the war, embedded a patriotic logic—love your nation, join the war.

The years 1955 to 1965 witnessed the second batch of Sino-Japanese war films. These films tend to exaggerate the role the Communist Party played in the war while overlooking that of Kuomintang's. Among which two films, namely *Letter with Feather* and *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* focus on children in the war. They tell stories about how a young boy helped the Eight Route Army to fight against Japanese invaders with witty tactics and eventually achieved his dream of joining the Communist Party. These films emphasized the bonds between the Eighth Route Army and local villagers, depicting harmonious pictures in which villagers support the Eight Route soldiers selflessly. These include *Tunnel War* and *Railway guerrilla*, both of which tell stories about the Eighth Route soldiers fought with the Japanese army together with local villagers. It is interesting to note that the Japanese army no longer takes many parts in these films. Despite the fact that these

films are essentially war films and Japanese invaders is undoubtedly a major party of the story, this branch of films only tell stories on the side of Chinese citizens. Many of this branch of films, including *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* and the *Tunnel War* are nominated as "Embodiment of Patriotic Educational Films" by the Chinese Film Bureau. The political implication and the patriotic logic of these films is rather clear.

Following the launching of the "Reform and Opening-up" program, from 1980 to 1995, the third generation of war films emerged. These films focus on individuals' life in the war and were obliged to omit historical details for the sake of story-telling. They show features of commercial films rather than historical films, and the war serves merely as a background. The narratives for this generation of films narrowed down their scope and accounted for the individual's destiny in the historical context of the war. For instance, the film *One and Eight* tell the story of a mistakenly-imprisoned Eighth Route soldier educated eight criminals and then all of them joined to the War and fought together. Another example would be the *Red Sorghum*, a young distillery girl's tragic story in the war.

By means of reflection, dominant Chinese narratives have always been a process of "othering"-- iconizing Japanese army as the "other", the demon-like figure who brings in tragedy and catastrophes. The othering process occurred for a reason--more often than not it takes an external force to enhance inner solidarity. For dominant Chinese narratives, their stories rely on the good-versus-evil logic and they need an evil figure to support this rationality. This othering process implies an assertation of righteous—China as an innocent victim while Japan as the brutal devils. Narratives of this type nurture the sentiment of hatred among Chinese viewers, and there started a self-referential cycle. Film producers would always adopt this othering mechanism catering to the audience and thereby self-reinforcing the black-and-white rationality.

Comparatively, *Devils on the Doorstep* is a bitter discord among the Chinese unison singing the tragic-heroic national fables. The discordance turns out to be so severe that the censors were

obliged to do something about it. The film, while challenging the censorship, is ultimately undermining the patriotic logic behind the dominant narratives. It is high time to put *Devils on the Doorstep* into conversation with the censors as well as other voices in China.

Devils on the Doorstep and its deconstruction of otherness

Though essentially a war film, *Devils on the Doorstep* does not contain any direct portrayal of the battle scenes. Instead of the typical narration about the direct interactions between soldiers, the film focus on a peasant's life during the war. The story took place in a remote village in China during the Second Sino-Japanese War, under Japanese occupation. The protagonist, a local peasant, encountered a mysterious person who handed him a Japanese soldier and his interpreter, forcing him to keep them in his house and look after them until he returned. The mysterious person never came back, and the villagers were too afraid to execute the prisoners. The villagers reached an agreement with the troublesome Japanese prisoner that they would send him back to his troop while getting some food in return. The Japanese captain, though reluctant, agreed with the deal and even held a feast with the villagers to show his etiquette. However, because one of the villagers' innocent joke offended the Japanese Captain, the feast turned into a chaotic massacre and almost the entire village was killed. The film was shot in black-and-white purposefully, and the conversations between different characters are presented hilariously. Critic Stephen Holden from the *New York Times* considers the black humor presented in the film as "Grimly amusing."

Contrastingly, the absurdity embedded in the film was clearly not appreciated by the censors in China. According to the Chinese Film Bureau's document regarding the film, they believe that the film "distort history" because it misrepresented the local villagers. The Bureau holds that the film paints the villagers in poor light on purpose since the villagers' failure to distinguish "us against the enemy" is foolish and ridiculous. The Bureau thinks that the bond between the Japanese soldier and the villagers is absurd because the villagers were supposed to hate the Japanese. The document also points out a specific scene in which the Japanese Captain distributed candy to the

children in the village. The Bureau demand that this scene to be changed, and they suggest that the Japanese Captain should not actually hand any candy to the children—he should take it back and the candy is supposed to be used as a hoax. It is clear that the censors hold onto the belief that Japanese soldiers should be presented as villains, whereas they are not presented sufficiently "evil" in the film.

The Bureau's comment shed light on what the dominant Chinese narratives have always taken for granted—the other side of the war. While the dominant narratives adopt the prior assumption that entire Japanese army was composed of brutal killing machines, director Jiang Wen set out to question this assumption. The film deconstructs the otherness through two ways, namely changing the angle of narration, presenting the falsified understanding between two nations.

Firstly, the film challenges the dominant assumption firstly through its change of the angle—the film tells the story through the peasants' eyes, especially a peasant who was under Japanese occupation for almost eight years. It is historically true that the Japanese army took control of the Dongbei area and then sustained the occupation in peace for almost eight years. Therefore, unlike the soldiers who bare military responsibilities and adopt a patriotic belief as well as hatred towards the enemy, local villagers, who have never witnessed violence directly, have a relatively vague understanding of the war. At that time, who owns the territory is not people's major concern, given that they were struggling to support their livelihood and food supply would be their prior and practical concern. Hence the seemingly absurd plot that Chinese villagers show no resentment towards the soldiers is in fact plausible. The "self and other" logic is nothing but a fabricated myth.

On top of that, introducing historian William Guynn's arguments would help explore the relationship between the dominant discourse on the otherness and its influence on collective memory. In the book *Writing History in Film*, Guynn argues that the basis for the construction of collective memory is a precise definition of individual identity (166). Individual memory, in this case, is considered as an act of individual recollection. Guynn argues that the film's memorial

function is heavily based on the establishment of the identity of the person (167). Thus, the unique folk perspective the films takes gives rise to the villagers' disoriented identity in the historical context, thereby evoking the viewers' reflection on the truth—how do people define themselves in the war? Is it really as simple as the "us and the enemy," black and white logic?

Additionally, *Devils on the Doorstep* also deconstruct the concept of otherness through emphasizing the miscommunication between the Japanese soldier and the Chinese villagers. In the film, the Japanese prisoner's interpreter mistranslate the prisoner's words all the time in order to ease the villagers and thereby secure his own safety. The translator distorts the Japanese soldier's rude remarks into words of praise and begging for mercy. The interpreter's falsified translation blinds the villagers, which buries the root of the massacre in the end.

To conclude, *Devils on the Doorstep* highlights the people's ignorance of the war and therefore deconstruct the historical myth of the nationwide resentment towards the "other". The real situation is that people were kept in ignorance of the war and unaware of the situation, so the "othering" in this context is nothing but a myth. The dominant discourse don did not want to admit the humiliation China suffered during the war, thereby constructing a fabricated "othering" myth in which people stand closely together and fight against the ultimate enemy. In response to that, director Jiang suggested in an interview with *Chinese Youth On-Line* that "Denying history would not do us any good." Jiang believes that an honest recollection of the memory of the war should face the tragic, ridiculous or even humiliating reality.

The deconstruction of "Orwellian" patriotism

Beyond the deconstruction of the binary opposition of the self and the other, *Devils on the Doorstep* poses a question on the definition of patriotism in the film. The Chinese Film Bureau implies that the film is. not sufficiently patriotic, in contrast to what director Jiang indicates in the interview with *Chinese Youth On-Line* that he considers himself as an authentic patriot. The

definitions of patriotism diverge between the censorship and Jiang, the former thrives to construct a voluntarism national myth while the latter, as he admits in the interview, believes that real patriotism is to "show the real."

In the light of Carl von Clausewitz's theory that war is essentially a continuation of political intercourse, it might be reasonable to consider the discourse on wars as a continuation of political discourse. English writer George Orwell's analysis of how politics influence the English language offers a way to explore. In the essay, "Politics and the English Language" Orwell claims that the English language at his time is declining for its increasing staleness and stupidity. (355) He claims that the language is filled with useless yet pretentious terms and sentence structures that true meanings are buried under redundancy (355). Orwell lists several patterns for this "Orwellian" language, among which "staleness of imagery" and "lack of precision" stand out especially (357). The former mainly refers to tedious metaphors and monotonous language formations, whereas the latter has rendered the language unreadable with the infusion of grand, and senseless words.

Orwell suggests that the downfall of English language results from politicians who try to avoid taking responsibility by using roundabout expressions to cover things up. Political English is deliberately ambiguous and misleading to hide their real intention from the general public. Orwell believes that it is politics that led to the malfunction of language, which has in turn led to the malfunction of people's minds. This politically-constructed language would restrain people's thinking of word choice and might also degrade the thinking of writers as they use English. To put it in brief, the English language is distorted by the infusion of political jargons and pretentious sentence structures, and this Orwellian language refrains people from thinking efficiently.

Censorship of historical films, therefore, is an Orwellian procedure in the construction of collective memory. If we incorporate Williams Guynn's theory of individual memory into Orwell's analysis on the political effect on the discourse, the language historical films use can, in turn, restrain the viewers and even the artists themselves own interpretation of the history. The "staleness

of imagery" and "lack of precision" are reinforcing the writers and filmmakers as they reshape the audience's collective memory. Hence, writers and filmmakers would end up restrained from creativity. This argument is supported by the article "The Censor in the Mirror: It's Not Only What the Chinese Propaganda Department Does to Artists, but What It Makes Artists Do to Their Own Work" published in *The American Scholar*. The author Jin Ha provides an overview of the mechanism of censorship in mainland China and its influence and claims that the censorship in China is so strong that "self-censorship" has become a necessity for Chinese writers. Jin argues that Chinese artists gradually form a sense of "self-discipline" that restrained them from creativity. Jin concludes, "In the case of China, the way to nurture that talent is to lift the yoke of censorship." (Jin, 30)

It is therefore evident that censorship has shaped an Orwellian language regarding the history of the war, constructing a national fable with a fabricated rationality of otherness. What has been left out from the Orwellian memory would be what the dominant politicians want to avoid—the tragic reality of the war and the national humiliation. *Devils on the Doorstep* is taking a bold action to touch the wound that no one else dares touching, and that explains its "absurdity" at the first sight—contrastingly, the absurd is depicting the real.

The deconstruction of the rationality of the war

Apart from challenging the dominant narratives on the war in China, director Jiang set his eyes on something more significant—he aims to transcend the war between Japan and China and deconstruct the rationality of war itself. Jiang said during the interview that, "War is not just about fighting. War eats up humanity and innocent people were sacrificed." *Devils on the Doorstep* attempts to deconstruct the rationality of the war by showing the individual's authentic understanding of the war. Echoing with Clausewitz's argument that war is the continuation of political intercourse, the film reveals the fact that innocent individuals are disoriented and blinded

in the war, and their understanding of war is ultimately shaped by political discourse. The film addresses this blindness not only on the side of Chinese villagers but also that of Japanese soldiers.

The film received acclaims from major Japanese media that it gives an unbiased portrayal of the Japanese army which none of the Japanese films can achieve. Director Jiang deserves all the credit because as an observer, he managed to deconstruct the heroism embedded in the Japanese army. In the film, the Japanese prisoner thinks that it is a loss of dignity to be kept in a Chinese villager's place and he claims that he would commit suicide, which, apparently, he fails to accomplish. There is a shot showing how the prisoner knocks his head against the wall—but very gently and unlikely to cause any injury. There is also a scene when villagers threatened to kill the prisoner, he knelt down and cried that he was only an innocent farmer and had no intention of killing people. The scene was presented with a ludicrous tone, but it is evident that the director is trying to reveal the true logic behind the "heroism." According to what the film implies, the glorification of heroes in Japanese war culture is a fabricated rationality—when it comes to people's own life, the nation's pride and the mere title of being a "hero" is of lesser concern.

The film also challenges the concept of "righteous" in the war by showing the Japanese Captain's drastic change in emotion before he issued the massacre. The captain was irritated by a villager who asked him to sing for everyone. Always believing that the Japanese had a superior civilization whereas the Chinese were uncivilized and inherently inferior, the Captain felt offended. Meanwhile, the news came that Japan had surrendered in the war overwhelmed the Captain. He could not convince himself that his country failed to conquer such a "deserted" an "inferior" place. The massive slay was triggered merely out of the Captain's furiousness, rather than rationality. Referring to director Jiang's saying that "War eats up humanity," the film's ironical representation of Japanese war culture uncovers the truth behind wars. War is essentially irrational and it corrodes humanity.

The local peasants' patriotic logic in the film is also intriguing. Before the villagers sent the prisoner back to his troop, some folks gathered together and discussed whether this is an act of betrayal. The protagonist claimed that this is actually an act of patriotism. He argued that they were demanding food from the Japanese army in return, so they reduced the food supply on the Japanese side. This ludicrous "patriotism" logic in the film shows the director's standing that, after all, the majority of people, no matter the nationality, tend to behave selfishly in the war. The notion of patriotism turns out to be nothing but a myth.

On this note, another film can be referred to as a comparison. The 2009 film produced by a young Chinese director Lu Chuan, *City of Life and Death* presents the story through a Japanese soldier's perspective. This film tries to cast a humane light on the Japanese soldiers with a hope of presenting both sides of the war equally. However, *City of Life and Death* failed to acknowledge the fact that war is essentially a demise of humanity. Seeking the light of humanity in wars might lead to a disappointing result—and that is presumably part of the reason why this film was criticized for its pretentious representation.

Concluding Remarks: The Last Scene With Color

The entire film was black-and-white except for the very last scene, which director Jiang believes is worthwhile. The last scene is when the protagonist Ma was executed for his act of disgrace and the executer happened to be the Japanese prisoner. Ma's head was chopped off, lying on the ground as if it was gazing at the world. The camera then took Ma's perspective of the world, which suddenly had color. This metaphorical reference is worth chewing on. One could not see the true color of the world until the end of his life. The last colorful scene would mark a moment of epiphany not only in Ma's life but also a moment of revelation for the film— we are all blinded. Our protagonist was blinded from the war, unaware of how ruthless his opponent could be. We as viewers were misled by the director—instead of a hilarious comedy about the dramatic story between Chinese peasant and a Japanese soldier, the film narrates the ultimate tragedy of mankind.

Director Jiang stresses the implication that, if there exists war, or the continuation of political intercourse, every one of us is blinded.

Jiang Wen's exceptional demonstration shows an alternative way of narrating history of the war. Using his deliriously witty filming strategies, he tells a folk war story highlighting some elements that was neglected in dominant narratives. *Devils on the Doorstep* deconstructs the typical Anti-Japanese War movies by deconstructing the two assumptions they take, the othering of the Japanese and the fabricated yet impractical notion of patriotism. The film also transcend the discussion about the war itself and develops an inquiry to question the rationality of war itself. The ludicrous and absurd tone director employs in his narrative is his attempt to approach the irrational, to make sense of the insensible. His voice of inquiry transferred the ideological conception of patriotism to the post-modern context, where patriotism could potentially stand for representing the truth and reflecting on the real.

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