

Changes of Japanese Female Characters in Chinese Films about WWII

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Abstract

World War II (WWII) is a significant topic for movie makers in China because of its unforgettable influence on Chinese history. The culture boom in China has served as a key driver of growth for the movies on World War II in recent years, however, studies on the role of females in the war are far from sufficient. This study summarizes movies on World War II created by Chinese directors, analyzes the images of Japanese females based on a chronological order, and discovers changes in the description of female characters in such movies. As a result, the analysis shows that more Japanese females are appearing in the movie works and the females' images are becoming much more enriched than previous. This implies that Chinese society has become more tolerant towards Japanese culture and the relaxing social and political mood in China has promoted the creation of such movie works. This study integrates the three factors -- WWII, China and females -- and functions as an addition to the previous study on WWII.

Keywords: Chinese films, WWII, Japanese Female Characters, social changes in China

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Introduction

The film, as a product of the social process, is also an important device to reflect historical process. Every piece of art is an integration of society and culture; thus, it can be used as a source for historical study [1]. As argued by Marc Ferro, the film is not only “an agent and source of history”, but also reveals the interrelation between social changes and historical events. Thus, it is called the ‘spokesperson’ of history [2]. It plays a key role in awakening people’s mentality [3]. As a historical force or historical document, the film can affect people’s attitudes and behaviors in modern society [4]. The film tells about people’s past life. It has been widely accepted that films have the power to mobilize public opinion [5].

Even nowadays, World War II still exerts a great impact on people [6]. The sheer scale of World War II stories has always been a great source of inspiration for filmmakers [7]. In fact, the film world always has anything more to say on this topic. Since the World War II ended in 1945, many films about this the war have been made. However, screenwriters and directors constantly find new ways to tell the story.

During the World War II, China’s confrontation with Japan in mainland China is one of the most famous battles, which is also called The Second Sino-Japanese War (July 7, 1937 - September 9, 1945). It is an unforgettable part of Chinese history and explains why WWII has become one of the most popular themes for film and TV drama creation in China. Chinese people are very eager to learn about the Sino-Japanese War and improve their understanding about this important historical concept through such artworks [8].

When it comes to war, male soldiers are the first image people tend to discuss. In fact, women also participate in the whole process and play an important role in the war. As men fight on battlefields, women are the major social power to maintain the normal life of the society. Many reports also address that it was the female labors who supported industries during the wartime. Females sacrifice the same as males during the war. Hence, their contribution should not be ignored. Females appear in films and TV dramas about World War II, but very few studies have ever focused on the role of Japanese female characters. The analysis of Japanese female characters in Chinese films on WWII will be a breakthrough to the field of film critics. It will also show the post-war changes in Chinese people’s cognition towards Japan and Japanese people.

Table 1: Films about the World War II
 (Data Source: Based on Google and Baidu. Keywords: Film, WWII)

FILM	U.S. A	CHINA	JAPAN	UK	TOTAL
1936-1949	176	2	49	38	264
1950-1959	89	6	10	47	148
1960-1969	67	7	9	27	106
1970-1979	21	8	9	16	50
1980-1989	23	9	10	12	52
1990-1999	25	15	8	12	60
2000-2009	43	24	11	34	115
2010-2015	16	20	4	6	43
TOTAL	460	91	110	192	

Table 1 shows that many films and TV drama works related to World War II have been made in the United States, Britain, China, and Japan. U.S.A has the largest number of such films at the early stage. However, the number of films reduced in recent years. On the contrary, China's films and TV works were much less at the early stages. But the number began to increase from 1990. This again suggests that Chinese movies about WWII have become more and more popular with Chinese audience.

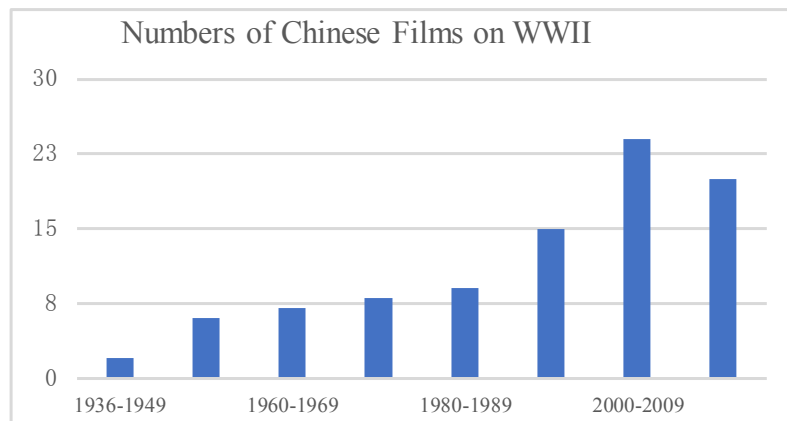


Figure 1: Numbers of Chinese Films on WWII

This point is also addressed in (Fig. 1). The economic growth promoted the creation of Chinese films on WWII around 1990s. And the explosive growth from 2000 can be attributed to the fast spreading of multimedia and internet. It has been reported that although the film industry in China has been significantly affected by the sudden growth of TV dramas on WWII, the number of such movies has been growing, and their quality is much better than TV dramas.

Previous Study

A. Films about WWII

Current studies of World War II film have focused on some very specific points related to this topic. Most of the studies about films on WWII discuss the relationship between films and history from a macro perspective, such as the influence of WWII on human society. They also investigate the relation between the film styles and WWII combat genres, as well as the historical and social change in those films. Many of such studies focus on the images of soldiers and heroes, and most of them are males.

Since the WWII, Japanese characters in Chinese films have been portrayed as “Devils”. To a great extent, it is the result of the propaganda in China about Japanese people. In fact, the Japanese images in Chinese films are affected by political and historical background as well as other factors. After the relationship between China and Japan began to improve, some new changes have been brought about to those screen images of Japanese [9]. With the prosperity of popular culture in China, Japanese images in Chinese films become more diverse. In fact, this diversity most directly reflects the Chinese people’s attitude towards Japan and Japanese people [10].

B. Women in the War

As far as the authors are concerned, very few studies have ever taken women as their research objects related to film critics. The three most remarkable studies include: (1) the women pilots in the WWII, (2) prostitute’s image in the WWII films, (3) the female agency during WWII in Hollywood [11]. There are very few reports on the changes of presentation skills and approaches for female characters in films about WWII. We intend to make this preliminary study to combine the three important factors – Chinese films, WWII and Japanese females – together and make a new attempt to examine changes of Chinese people in both film creation and social attitudes towards their past fighting partner during the war.

US researchers have conducted analyses on the role of women in the war from the perspective of military service and female labors. The surge in the employment rate of women functions as an important symbol of the improvement of women’s social status and roles at that time [12]. Women made an indelible contribution to America’s victory in World War II [13]. During World War II, many women continued to their involvement in society and started their new career after leaving the army. Because of their outstanding performance, US women obtain more and more recognition and support after WWII.

Generally speaking, most of researches on Japanese women are concerned about their social status within the country. Many of them discuss changes in their educational backgrounds and their role as workers in society [14]. This study serves as a good addition to gender study about Japanese females.

C. Characterization

It is a very controversial issue as what point of views should be valued when researchers analyze a character image in films. Personally speaking, it is of great necessity to understand how an author creates a character and what he/she would like to present to the audience most. At current stage, there are still few researches on how to analyze film characters from a systematic perspective since the evaluation framework is far from being well established. This paper aims to build an analytical approach for film character images and make more exploration on this topic from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

They are developed by actions, speech, appearance, and the interaction between each other. Moreover, the actors/actresses' and directors' preoccupations, sense of values, lifestyles, preference, fears, aspirations as well as dreams have a strong impact on the characteristics of their roles. In most cases, the descriptions regarding a character are indirect and incomplete. Audience need to learn about the characters from the atmosphere and the environment. As remarked by Jenny Watson [15], the change in characterization is the key to understanding the plot of a film.

According to Trish Turner, there are eight methods of characterization which are generally used in films: physical description, name analysis, attitude and appearance, dialogue, thoughts, the reaction of others, action or incident, physical and emotional setting. As storytellers, actors/actresses "tell the story" through their characterization. It is of primary significance to create new elements out of the characterization of films [16]. WWII is an old topic for the world, needless to say China.

Many scholars have devoted to the analysis of the character images in these works and endeavored to discover more as the unique features. Although character analyses have been conducted as a major research approach, most of the researchers have established their arguments by using one specific method in their analysis, such as speech or personality changes [17]. In this study, the authors propose that critics on character images should focus on their group features. This proposed method integrates various elements in character creation and offers a more considerate perspective for the examination of the character images. Fig. 2 below shows the analytical method the authors use in this study.

Quantitative Perspective	Qualitative Perspectives
Number of characters of a specific identity group	a. Identity b. Positive and negative identity c. Storyline (Have/Haven't) d. Change of appearance (Clothes & Accessories) e. Changes in lines

Figure 2: Analytical Method

Methodology

This paper analyzes Chinese films on WWII, which have been created since the foundation of People's Republic of China. Japanese female roles are the research target. Their appearance, occupation, background, action, speech and the interaction they have with the surrounding people are explored in detail. The authors observed all Japanese female roles in these films and intended to discover identical features of this group character. This study argues that the changes in Japanese female images in Chinese films on WWII embody the constant demand for objectivity in Chinese audience's cognition about Japan.

A. Comparison with male roles

According to Fig. 2, the number of characters is listed as the only method for quantitative study. It refers to the number of Japanese female characters appearing in each film. We believe that quantitative analysis should also be used for critical study on group characters. Although this is not a serious statistical method, it requires long-time of hard working. By adding this to the evaluation system, this study demonstrates one item in numerical form at the least. In order to make our explanation more convincing, we use the number of the Japanese male characters as a contrast.

As to the qualitative perspectives, identity lists on the top. It refers to the occupations of the Japanese female characters in the movie stories. Positive and negative identity denotes whether the identifications of the female roles in the movie ties are acceptable to general audience based on the Chinese sense of value. Thus, the positive characters are defined such as victims, wives, and mothers, while spies, military officers, lovers and prostitutes are considered negative. Some of characters don't belong to any of these two groups, such as ordinary people, waitresses, dancing girls, and passers-by. They are called the "Unbiased" group.

Independent storyline refers to the strength and impact of the role on the whole story. If the female role exerts a propelling effect on the story development, an independent storyline about her is recognized in this study. For example, if a waitress appears at the background of a shot, she is classified as a no-storyline character. However, if a female spy, an officer's wife, gets involved in the murder and promotes the development of the plot of the scene, she is labeled as a character with "independent storyline".

Change of appearance refers to the changes of costume, hairstyle and accessories. For the case of Japanese female characters, changes in their clothes between Kimono and suits are notable. Change in lines refers to the speaking chances of the female roles and the language they use.

B. Two stages

The history of China can be divided into two stages since its foundation in 1949. During the time 1949-1976, the government put a very strong emphasis on strengthening the power of Communist Party. Enhancement of its regime had the superior priority in people's daily life within the country, and all entertainments and

cultural activities were supposed to serve these political purposes. All artworks, including films, are supposed to create to fulfill the political purpose.

The most noticeable happening during that period of time in China is the well-known Cultural Revolution. It lasted for about ten years, 1966-1976. All films at that time must serve political purposes. Free creation of artworks was totally forbidden, and many artists were tortured and imprisoned.

At the early 1970s, the political situation in China became much more relaxing. The Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, and China started its economic reform and opening-up in 1978. With the booming of China's economic power, cultural activities and entertainment have realized great progress. There is one decisive historical happening, which has contributed enormously to the progress in the production of Chinese films on WWII -- the normalization of the diplomatic relation between China and Japan in 1972. For twenty-seven years, there were basically no official exchanges between these two countries. Chinese people are more willing to know about the truth related to this significant historical happening, and they also started to observe their past enemy country from a more humane and natural perspective.

This study selected those popular Chinese films on WWII from Baidu and investigates the changes of Japanese female characters in chronological order.

Discussion

A. Before Chinese economic reform and opening-up

1949-1959

This is the period right after the foundation of China. As explained above, the focus of the daily life for the whole country was to struggle with the power from opposition political parties. Films were employed as a tool for political propaganda. In the 1950s, there are six films about WWII where Japanese images appear in the scenes. All of topics are about the Sino-Japanese war and all of them are black and white. There are no Japanese female images in these films at all, not even a single. Moreover, the images of Japanese male characters are all soldiers or military officers. They are labeled as a special group, cruel and vicious, speaking Chinese with a strong Japanese accent. All Japanese male characters wear the army costumes and carry a samurai sword. Their outstanding mustache helps them to be recognized easily in any scene. In the film called "Guerrillas on the Plain" (1955), the Japanese officer characters show up in a film for the first time. The officer named Matsui likes to play an instrument. Compared with the previous films, this description has enriched the character and made a more full and round portrait for the audience.

Although there are no Japanese female images in these movies around that time, there are many Chinese female images. All of these Chinese female characters are described as kind, hardworking, loving and caring. Although they don't seem to have receive any education, but always take very good care of the male soldiers when they are in trouble and even protect them like their own sisters and mothers. In 1957, China made a film called "The Letter with Feathers" which takes children as the

heroes for the first time. This, again, intensifies the ignorance of Japanese female characters in these movies.

1960-1969

In the 1960s, five films on WWII are available and all the images of the Japanese characters are also only males. However, for the first time, in Chinese films, a Japanese male character wears other clothes rather than the determined military uniform. In the film “Struggles in an Ancient City” (1963), a Japanese officer wears a kimono. Moreover, a Japanese officer in these films speak Japanese, rather than Chinese with the strange accent. These small changes reflect the attempts of Chinese artists to present Japanese characters in a way closer to their natural being.

In the film “An Express Train” (1965), a Japanese officer Onokazu is very competent in sinology. He even shows excellent skills in Chinese calligraphy. This is the only film in the 1960s which shows different aspects of the Japanese characters rather than being cruel and vicious alone.

In 1963, Chinese female medic image firstly appeared in “Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy”. In 1965, a Chinese female character is the leader of the army in “The Tunnel Warfare”. Since then, Chinese female characters in films are no longer confined to the concept of ordinary villagers.

1970-1979

From 1970 to 1979, there are no female Japanese characters in Chinese films at all. The Cultural Revolution exerted far-reaching impacts on the education, science and cultural development in the country. There were almost no literature or documents which were newly created during that period of time. Film production is also blank, except for a cartoon entitled “The Little Hero in Ludang”. After the Cultural Revolution, it took China quite some years to resume its framework for education and cultural development in the whole country. Since most of the Cultural heritages were discarded or destroyed, many of the artists had to rebuild their career from scratch. Substantial support from the country was not possible before the national economy was recovered.

A. After Chinese economic reform and opening-up

1980-1989

Table 2: Chinese Films about WWII in 1980s

Time	Title	Number of characters (female/male)	Identity	Positive/Negative	Story-line	Appearance	Lines
1984	One and Eight	0/ soldiers	\	\	\	\	\
1985	Yellow Earth	0/ soldiers	\	\	\	\	\
1986	Great Shanghai 1937	0/ soldiers	\	\	\	\	\
1986	Battle of Taierzhuang	0/2	\	\	\	\	\
1987	Red Sorghum	0/ soldiers	\	\	\	\	\
1987	Massacre in Nanjing	1/4	Geisha	\	No	Kimono	Chinese
1989	Female Ranger	0/ soldiers	\	\	\	\	\
1989	The BoSe Uprising	0/ soldiers	\	\	\	\	\
Total number of female characters				1			
Average of female characters				0.125			

As shown in Table 2, in the 1980s, eight effective resources are found as films on WWII. In the film “Massacre in Nanjing”, Japanese female images appear for the first time. Although the number of Japanese characters is few, films tend to put a stress on the importance of the Japanese male roles. For example, Sasaki in “Great Shanghai” (1937) finally makes a duel with the protagonist. This scene indicates that Sasaki has certain quality of a hero judged by the Chinese moral value. Apart from the Japanese military officers, Japanese characters started to play various roles, such as the Japanese reporter in “Massacre in Nanjing”. Overall, this period becomes a transitional period and more challenges are shown in Chinese films to present audience with more convincing Japanese character images.

1990-1999

Table 3: Chinese Films about WWII in 1990s

Time	Title	Number of characters (female/male)	Identity	Positive/Negative	Story-line	Appearance	Lines
1990	The Meridian of War	0/soldiers	\	\	\	\	\
1990	International Rescue	1/2	spy	negative	With	Kimono	Chinese
1991	Steel Meets Fire	0/1	\	\	\	\	\
1992	Lost Hero	1/1	waitress	unbiased	Without	Kimono	No line
1992	SanMao Joins the Army	1/ soldiers	passerby	unbiased	Without	Kimono	No line
1994	Tie xue Kunlun Guan	0/4	\	\	\	\	\
1995	Qiao Ben Miao Tao	0/1	\	\	\	\	\
1995	The Sorrow of Brook Steppe	0/ soldiers	\	\	\	\	\
1995	Victory	0/ soldiers	\	\	\	\	\
1995	The Flying Tigers	3/2	Geisha	unbiased	Without	Kimono	No line
1995	The Lu Gou Qiao Incident	1/4	waitress	unbiased	Without	Kimono	No line
1995	Armed Villagers in Fighting Regions	0/1	\	\	\	\	\
1996	Bai Ma Fei Fei	0/1	\	\	\	\	\
1999	Grief Over the Yellow River	0/ soldiers	\	\	\	\	\
Total number of female characters		7					
Average of female characters		0.5					

In the 1990s (Table 3), Japan’s female images begin to increase remarkably in films about WWII. Although some of the female characters, such as dancing performers or waitresses may not have an independent storyline, their frequent appearance shows that Chinese films begin to pay attention to Japanese female characters. At the same time, Japanese male roles have also come out of its past molding images and tend to be described as a normal figure. In all, the Japanese images became more enriched and natural. The stories also start to tell about the contradiction among various Japanese characters. They are being created through various scenes. As a result, more vivid aspects of a human kind are presented. Japanese male characters include reporters, music teachers, spies and so on. They get involved in independent story lines and no longer exist only as background information only. However, all of these characters are negative images. They wear uniforms, kimono, and suits. In the films “The Flying Tigers”, “The Lu Gou Qiao Incident”, and “Lost Hero”, Japanese female characters appear in kimono. They are just service staff (e.g. geisha and waitresses) without independent story lines. In the film “International Rescue”, Japanese girl Nami is a spy who hides herself in the folk.

Table 4: Chinese Films about WWII in 21st century

Time	Title	Number of characters (female/male)	Identity	Positive/ Negative	Story line	Appearance	Lines
2000	<i>Devils on the Doorstep</i>	6/3	Geisha	unbiased	Without	Kimono	\
2001	<i>Purple Sunset</i>	1/1	a prisoner of war	positive	With	Kimono/ School uniform	Japanese Chinese
2002	<i>Gada Meilin</i>	0/1	\	\	\	\	\
2005	<i>Qixia Temple</i>	0/4	\	\	\	\	\
2009	<i>The Sorrowful Soul of Tengchong</i>	1/3	Chinese man's wife	positive	Without	Cheongsam	Japanese
2009	<i>The Message</i>	1/3	Waitress	negative	Without	Kimono	Japanese
2009	<i>City of Life and Death</i>	1/2	Comfort woman	unbiased	Without	Kimono	Japanese
2010	<i>Taste of Spring</i>	1/1	Japanese business-man's wife	unbiased	Without	Kimono/ Casual clothes	Japanese
2011	<i>The Flowers of War</i>	0/3	\	\	\	\	\
2012	<i>Back to 1942</i>	0/3	\	\	\	\	\
2014	<i>The Land is So Rich in Beauty</i>	2/1	Hero's wife	positive	With	Kimono/ Casual clothes	Japanese Chinese
2016	<i>Wang Mao</i>	0/1	\	\	\	\	\
2016	<i>Railroad Tigers</i>	1/3	Officer	negative	With	Uniform	Japanese
2016	<i>The Wasted Times</i>	1/3	Spy's wife	positive	With	Cheongsam/ Kimono	Japanese Chinese
Total number of female characters		15					
Average of female characters		1.07					

Compared to the 1990s, the first ten years of the 21st century did not show great breakthrough in the story contents and characterization in Chinese films on WWII (Table 4). Nearly all of the Chinese films around that time didn't draw the attention of the audience and failed to gain reputation as much as those foreign films. As explained above, Chinese people started to travel abroad much more than before in the recent two decades. They have had more chances to experience foreign culture and are anxious to know more. The short stay abroad can't meet their needs so foreign films and drams offer them more information.

Around that time, "Nanjing! Nanjing!" was an exception among the national films on WWII. It is considered to be the most compelling and moving film on this topic. Besides the striking scenes, this film also makes a breakthrough in shaping the images of Japanese male soldiers. As invaders of Nanjing City, they have the right to enjoy their normal life without being much bothered. The unique point of "Nanjing! Nanjing!" lies in its storyline. The director Lu Chan didn't follow the routine way to construct the story. The film establishes its plotline based on the experience of a Japanese soldier named Kadokawa. The director aims to examine and judge the war from the perspective of an occupier. At the end of the film, Kadokawa eventually makes his choice: he sends two Chinese survivors out of Nanjing City and then shots himself. The director reveals the true good quality of a human nature. There is no exception even with a massacre. The Kadokawa image has thrown lights on Japanese characters and set off a heated discussion about characterization. Undoubtedly, this film has broken the traditional screen images of the audience about Japanese

characters. Since then, a trend in pursuing more humane qualities has become the mainstream for film production in mainland China.

Conclusion

This study summarizes changes of Japanese female characters in Chinese films on WWII. It clarifies that these changes are strongly related to the social changes in China. As China becomes stronger in economy, people have more chances to learn about Japan through their personal experience. Thus, the description of Japanese characters in such films become more and more abundant. The films no longer vilify and exaggerate the cruelty of Japanese characters images, and more female characters are given an independent storyline. What is more, Japanese characters tend to speak in a normal tone and stance. More natural conversations are adopted in films. In some films, the importance of Japanese female roles is even highlighted.

The above changes reveal the changes in Chinese people's attitude and point of view about the war and Japanese people. These two factors interact and demonstrate reciprocity in the developing process of a society. The authors noticed the increasing popularity of Japanese culture with Chinese young generation. Japanese cognition has become more and more acceptable in China. Although there still exists dispute regarding historical and political issues, the influence of WWII is receding, and Chinese society has become more and more willing to accept the concept of current Japan as what it is. The openness and tolerance of such social changes are sufficiently embodying through those changes in Japanese characters in films. Chinese artists are making efforts to get rid of those stereotyped features of the Japanese characters in Chinese audience and to formulate more objectivity in their presentation and description of such characters. More focus is put on individuality of Japanese characters, rather than label them as an evil group. There is still limitation in the cognition of Chinese films about Japanese characters, but at the least, portraying the characters more as a normal human being has replaced the old stereotyped expression skills. With the enriching of Japanese characters on film screens, China will build a more open and relaxing society. The progressing of the social atmosphere will bright about more tolerance and acceptance towards Japanese country and its culture.

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