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► **To cite this version:**

Samia Ferhat. Collective Memory and Images of the Past in China and Taiwan: Debates on the Cinematographic Representation of the Enemy or the Japanese Coloniser. 2018. halshs-01871355

**HAL Id: halshs-01871355**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01871355>**

Preprint submitted on 26 Jan 2019

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# Collective Memory and Images of the Past in China and Taiwan – Debates on the Cinematographic Representation of the Enemy or the Japanese Coloniser

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*This text is the English translation of the article “Mémoire collective et images du passé en Chine et à Taïwan : débats autour de la représentation cinématographique de l'ennemi ou du colonisateur japonais”, published in 2012 in the Journal Études chinoises (vol. XXXI-2, p. 153-177).*

*The article was translated by Alice Lin and readproof by Sébastien Le Pipec.*

The war of resistance against Japan, which took place on the continent of China from 1931 to 1945, was a historical moment particularly valued until the mid-2000s in the official accounts released by the authorities in Beijing and Taipei alike. The narratives on either side of the Taiwan Straits have for a long time recounted the events in a markedly similar fashion, just like the meaning drawn from it. The focus was on the nature of a bitter conflict whose victorious outcome came to reward the unwavering determination of a nation that sacrificed itself. Therefore, the discourses that accompanied the commemorations inevitably referenced the bloodshed of soldiers and civilians, united in their shared desire to lead the Resistance in order to meet the imperious need to be part of the Chinese nation. Indeed, if in 1964, Chiang Kai-shek evoked the "stubborn and bloody struggle" »浴血奮戰 which revealed the "patriotic[ greatness] of the nation's spirit" 愛國保種的民族精神,<sup>1</sup> Hu Jintao, for his part, spoke in 2005 of a "stubborn and bloody war" 浴血奮鬥 during which the "remarkable spirit of the Chinese nation" 中華民族的偉大精神<sup>2</sup> expressed itself. Similarly, in 1995, when relations between China and Taiwan were particularly

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<sup>1</sup> *Zhongyang ri bao* 中央日報, 15 October 1964, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Speech delivered on 3 September 2005. <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/3665666.html>, retrieved in June 2008.

tense, the memory of the anti-Japanese war became an opportunity for the two governments to recall the “sacredness of the nation” 民族大義, which they grounded on the principles of unity and solidarity in the face of adversity.<sup>3</sup>

This similarity in terminology does not necessarily represent a perfect match between the official accounts in China and Taiwan, although it is possible to assume that there exists an analogy regarding the representations of the war of resistance. For, indeed, historical memory is strongly marked in its normative vocation by the political and social context of the society that produces it. The official accounts cannot but evolve in both content and terms<sup>4</sup>. If the political fragility and diplomatic isolation of Beijing had initially led to a narrative that highlighted the leadership of the Communist Party supported by its Soviet Allies, this very narrative was to change significantly during the 1990s. For example, the historical context of the Second World War was more thoroughly assessed and analysed, which undoubtedly led to an objective revision of the Kuomintang (KMT)’s role in the conflict. The 1995 commemorations became an opportunity to acknowledge the contribution of other nations in the struggle against fascism.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, on occasion of the celebrations of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory in 2005, Hu Jintao, in making the aggression of 1931 the starting point of the Resistance, implicitly highlighted the role of the armed forces under the command of the Nationalist government.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, it was the Republic of China that Hu Jintao paid homage to in his speech celebrating the permanent seat that was secured for the ROC in the United Nations Security Council.<sup>7</sup> This view on history, heavily influenced by the new international ambitions of Beijing, as well as the implementation of a policy of appeasement towards Taiwan, seemed suitable for the gradual formation of a memory that overcame a strictly partisan and Sinocentric narrative. The ambition

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<sup>3</sup> *Renmin ribao* 人民日報, July 7, 1995, p. 1 ; Zhang Rui-de 張瑞德, « Jinian huodong yu zhengzhi » 紀念活動與政治 (Commemorations and Politics), in *Jinian qiqi kangzhan 60 zhou nian xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 紀念七七抗戰六十周年學術研討會論文集 (Proceedings of the symposium on the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the struggle of resistance that began on 7 July 1937), Taipei : Guoshiguan Yinxing, 1998, p. 1109.

<sup>4</sup> Historical memory (or official memory) may be regarded as 'how collective experience of the past is commemorated and written'. See Marie-Claire Lavabre, *Le fil rouge - Sociologie de la mémoire communiste*, Paris : Presses de la fondation nationale de Sciences politiques, 1994, p. 21. It is what Johann Michel calls a 'memorial regime'. See Johann Michel, *Gouverner les mémoires – Les politiques mémorielles en France*, Paris : PUF, 2010, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Han Fudong 韓福東 *60 nian de jinian yu wangji* 60 年的紀念與忘記 (60 years of commemoration and the forgotten), *Phoenix weekly*, June 2005, 18, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> Generally, the event of the Marco Polo Bridge in July 1937 sets the beginning of the war of resistance, i.e. when the policy of the second united front between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party became effective.

<sup>7</sup> Speech on 3 September 2005, op. cit.

was obviously to promote a vision capable of integrating different perspectives. If recollections of the past in China evolved in a more fluid manner in order to satisfy a dynamic that is both inclusive and unifying, on the other side of the Strait, the historical narrative split and grew more confrontational.

Indeed, the early 1990s in Taiwan were characterised by increasing ambitions for independence expressed by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and by an emerging concern on how to envision the island's history. For those who valued the Taiwanese idiosyncrasy, the recollections of the past were to be detached from the Chinese and continental view. While 25 October was celebrated as the day of the "retrocession of Taiwan" 光復 following the 50-year-long Japanese colonisation, the commemoration organised by the city of Taipei in 1995, was celebrated in a more neutral fashion as the "End of the War."<sup>8</sup> The change in evocation became more pronounced in the early 2000s with the election of Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 as president of the Republic. The 25 October lost its holiday status and was officially recognized as marking the "end of the war" and no longer the "retrocession of Taiwan" 光復. Moreover, the colonisation period was no longer qualified as a period of "Japanese occupation" 日劇時代 but of "Japanese government" 日治時代. This evolution in terminology not only allowed for a trivialisation of the event by isolating it from its historical context of the two Sino-Japanese wars, but it also favoured a positive assessment of the colonisation by virtue of its social and economic contributions.

The approach of the Chen Shui-bian government provoked numerous controversies. Criticisms were voiced by opposition movements holding on to a more conventional reading of the Anti-Japanese War and the colonial period, the two events being viewed inseparably linked. In 2011, Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九, the mayor of Taipei and member of the KMT expressed his regret over the authorities' disregard of the Anti-Japanese War in which, in his view, many Taiwanese decided to engage. In addition, he voiced his incomprehension over a perception that

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<sup>8</sup>Yan Chiong-zhen 彥瓊真 'Taibei shi zhengfu zhongjie kangzhan yiyuan yaoqiu guangfu' 台北市政府終結抗戰議員要求光復 (The government of Taipei ends the war, the deputies demand the retrocession), *Zhongyang ri bao* 中央日報, 25 October 1995, p. 3.

erased the atrocities and brutalities committed by the Japanese army, a memory that was being replaced by an embellished interpretation of the colonisation period.<sup>9</sup>

As a matter of fact, this last point highlighted by Ma Ying-jeou reveals a perception that remains closely associated with this specific historical period both in Taiwan and China. Beyond the variations in the narrative concerning the role or merit ascribed to the different protagonists in the conflict, what remains entrenched in the memories, still vivid to this day, are the ghastly assaults onto the civilians. It is likely that the intensity of this perception, notably in China, is partly due to the politics of memory which, since the mid-1980s, have placed paramount importance on the commemoration of the Nanking massacre. Indeed, the inauguration of its memorial in 1985 has contributed to reviving the memories of the crimes committed by the Japanese occupants, amplified by the concurrent rise of revisionism in Japan and of Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's numerous visits to the Yasukuni sanctuary.<sup>10</sup> However, as Joël Candau underlines, it would not be entirely accurate to assert that individuals' representations of the past are strictly tied to collective acts of remembrance.<sup>11</sup> Collective memory is not bound by historical memory, and the variety of representations that the former comprises attests to the plurality of individual memories. These in turn evolve according to the environment in which the "recollecting subjects"<sup>12</sup> are situated. That is why, as Roger Bastide suggests, collective memory could be envisaged as a "system of interrelations of individual memories;"<sup>13</sup> each individual memory being but a "point of view on the collective memory."<sup>14</sup>

This relativistic approach, which points out the impossibility of defining a scheme of representations unanimously shared by all the members of a group, is, however, no impediment to the recognition of a "vulgate" that, in any given society, exemplifies how a moment in the past or a historical event is perceived by the majority. It is often through the media and products of

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<sup>9</sup> Dong Zhi-lin 董智林, 'Bu jie Li Deng-hui weihe zai xin bo tao, bu jie rijun canbao lishi bei zhongyang zhengfu danhua' 不解李登輝為何再掀波濤，不解日軍殘暴历史被中央政府淡化 (Why does Lee Teng-hui still create turmoil? Why does the central government tone down on the violence and brutality of the Japanese military?), *Lianhe Bao* 聯合報, 8 July 2001, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Louis Margolin, *L'Armée de l'Empereur*, Paris : Armand Colin, 2007, p. 429 ; Rana Mitter, 'Le massacre de Nankin : mémoire et oubli en Chine et au Japon', *Vingtième siècle*, 94, 2007, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> These acts include commemorations and anniversaries, constructions of museums, steles, narratives, etc. See Joël Candau, *Anthropologie de la mémoire*, Paris : Armand Colin, 2005, p. 67-68.

<sup>12</sup> An expression borrowed from Johann Michel, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Roger Bastide, « Mémoire collective et sociologie du bricolage », *L'Année sociologique*, 21, 1970, p. 94

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Paris : Albin Michel, p. 94.

mass culture that such a perception is disseminated. Additionally, in light of the strong impact of the vulgate, this common perception could resonate with a real experience of the past – the vivid memory of events. That is why, even though it would be wrong to consider the vulgate as a mere invention of the past, it still remains a univocal evocation that frees itself from the "diversity of the social body, space and chronology,"<sup>15</sup> as Pierre Laborie put it.

Is there a vulgate on the period of China's occupation and Taiwan's colonisation? It is evidently difficult to answer such a question without conducting in-depth fieldwork. However, the regrets expressed by Ma Ying-Jeou in 2001, which rallied many supporters, allows to think that the modesty of the commemorations of the victory of the war of Resistance and Taiwan's retrocession posed a problem in that the supposed indifference of the government was equated with the non-recognition of the war's sufferings. The protests by Ma Ying-Jeou were thus not so much motivated by his will to see the victory celebrated, but rather by that of conjuring up the ordeals experienced by the Chinese population, and in an analogous perspective, the Taiwanese population. It seems that the prevailing idea about this historical period that ought to be preserved is the inhumane and barbaric behaviour of the Japanese enemy. This need for a communitarian identification based on this negative depiction of the Japanese enemy can lead to debates and controversies as diverging memorial discourses emerge.

Indeed, in the last decade, the cinematographic production has tended to offer a particularly original portrayal of the Japanese protagonist, be it regarding his involvement in the Sino-Japanese conflict, the Pacific War, or the colonisation of Taiwan. Clearly, directors wish to depict the old enemy as an ordinary individual. Moreover, this normalisation paradoxically allows to reconstruct the individual in his entire complexity by granting him, notably, the capacity to make choices and to have a grip on the events he witnesses. What is most interesting about his intervening is that the Japanese character generally does not act by the book of his national affiliation. For example, Clint Eastwood's *The Letters of Iwo Jima* (2006) shows a Japanese soldier running away in front of the enemy instead of committing suicide as he had been ordered.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in *City of Life and Death* 南京！南京！（2009）by Lu Chuan 陸川, a soldier

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<sup>15</sup> Pierre Laborie, *Le chagrin et le venin – La France sous l'Occupation, mémoire et idées reçues*, Paris : Bayard, 2011, p. 51

<sup>16</sup> The Battle of Iwo Jima that took place in the spring of 1945 was one of the deadliest wars in the Pacific. Clint Eastwood explores both the American and Japanese points of view in his film *Flags of Our Fathers* (2005), and

chooses to set his prisoners free instead of executing them. As for Taiwanese Wei De-sheng 魏德聖, he, in *Cape N°7* 海角七號 (2008), chooses to show the weakness and the vulnerability of a Japanese teacher falling in love with a young Taiwanese girl. At the time of defeat, he is made to express his shame caused by his being Japanese. As a matter of fact, these directors' approach has been under attack as evidenced by the controversies sparked on the occasion of the release of *Cape N°7* and *City of Life and Death* both in Taiwan and China. The criticisms voiced on these works reveal the difficulty for a section of the audience to distance themselves from the generally accepted representations of the past.

Hence, this article aims to reflect on the dynamics linking memory, history, and cinematic representation. This paper focuses on three key areas. Firstly, we will discuss the impact of memorial constructions and images on identity. Then, we will seek to understand in which way cinematic evocation can disrupt the bearings linked to the past, and consequently spark off debates and controversies. In the final part, examples from Taiwanese and Chinese filmography will be put in perspective thanks to Clint Eastwood's films, which in turn will illustrate new viewpoints that somehow contribute to the gradual formation of a new reading of the past.

### **Transmission and Crystallisation of Memory: Images to Say the Unspeakable**

To set out with our discussion, I would like to use the work produced by one of the students from the Faculty of Languages at Paris Nanterre University. I will name her Lina. In the senior year of her BA, Lina had to write a paper on the Nanjing Massacre. With her permission, I will use an excerpt from her paper which, in my opinion, illustrates the impact the war of resistance and the Japanese occupation in China has had on the memory of a family of Chinese origin. Now, Lina's experience should undoubtedly not be established as a norm – the content of her work may well be an indicator of the potential importance this moment of history has taken on in the individual and collective imagination. It also implicitly suggests how films dealing with it are received and interpreted. Lina's paper was built around two main sources: the book *The Army of*

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*Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) respectively.

*Emperor* by Jean-Louis Margolin, and the documentary *Nanking* by Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman (2007)<sup>17</sup>. Let us have a look at how Lina justifies the choice of her case study:

*My father is Cantonese but was born on Cambodian soil. My mother is Cantonese but was born on Laotian soil. Forced to flee the civil wars in their countries, they moved to France in the 70s. My parents wanted their children to integrate into the French community, and therefore they chose to settle down in the city of Puteaux, far from neighbourhoods where the majority of the population is Asian, such as the Paris 13th district.*

*Having studied in Catholic schools, I felt I was French a lot more than Chinese for a long time. My parents, however, insisted that their children be taught Chinese traditions and values such as the importance of education, family, respect for others, and dignity. My father also wanted to teach us the important landmarks in Chinese history, but I found that he rarely brought up Japan's role in his narratives. I had already observed amongst other people of Chinese origin a certain distance and even coldness in their relationship with the Japanese. When I asked questions about the subject my father would elude and my mother would simply change subject. At the time, I hadn't even heard of the Sino-Japanese war. For my parents, it was certainly too delicate a subject to discuss with a child.*

*Once I was in high school, my parents decided that I was mature enough to deal with the issue of Sino-Japanese relations. They did not go into details for fear of frightening me, so I knew that I was only being told parts of the story. I started to do research on my own. Then, the subject came up at university during a lecture on Chinese Civilisation. The documentary we watched in class (*Nanking* by Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman, 2007) touched me deeply and helped me understand why Sino-Japanese relations would always remain turbulent. My parents have always been extremely urbane with the Japanese but I know that they have remained resentful and will never forget about the Nanjing Massacre.*

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-Louis Margolin, op. cit.



*The case study allowed me to discover and explore an issue I am very much concerned about. Through this research, and particularly what I have learnt from it, I must now admit that I feel more Chinese than French, and wish to learn more about my origins... to the delight of my parents.*

Lina's story tells us how her family built the process of identifying themselves with their community, by proceeding to a highly selective recovery of a portion of the family's experience tied to the history of their country of origin. In this regard, two points are particularly worth emphasising.

Firstly, Lina's parents have not personally experienced the Japanese Occupation since they were born at the beginning of the 1950s outside China.<sup>18</sup> They have nonetheless preserved the memory of that period - a painful memory that cannot be uttered in words, but instead transmitted through a hyper-emotional investment, beyond the silences. This emotional investment is both felt and observed by Lina. The behaviour of her parents and other members of the Chinese community seem strange to Lina. Her inability to translate this behaviour into words will induce her to conduct her own research and investigation, hence the choice of her case study.

Secondly, Lina's parents were both born into Indochinese families. On her mother's side, the links to China are very distant since the family lived there several generations ago; on her father's side, there is a gap of two generations separating their French experience from the Chinese one. Families on both sides have lived through four wars: World War II, the First Indochina War, the Second Indochina War (the Vietnam War during which Communist soldiers were based in Cambodia and Laos), and civil wars in Cambodia and Laos that occurred when the Communists came to power. However, the history passed down in the family is specifically a Chinese one, and the imagination of the war is focused on the memory of the Japanese invasion

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<sup>18</sup> According to indications given by Lina, it is possible to trace certain elements of the family's history: Her father was born in Cambodia and her mother in Laos in the early 1950s. Both her grandfathers were born in China near Canton. The paternal grandmother was born in Cambodia, while on her mother's side, in Laos. Lina's father arrived alone in France at the age of 17, while the rest of the family chose to remain in Cambodia and did not survive the Civil War. Her father is the only survivor. Lina's mother arrived in France at the age of 23 accompanied by one of her brothers, and the rest of the family went to Canada. Lina did not know her paternal grandparents and very rarely saw her maternal grandmother. Family memory, such as that related to national history, is therefore transmitted from parents to children.

and occupation in China.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the values transmitted by Lina's parents intentionally and consciously are closely linked to Chinese traditions. This shows how the process of community identification is based on the stimulation of a specific memory: Lina's family demonstrates a clear desire to connect with the Chinese community by promoting the culture of origin and by passing down the historical memory that is specific to China. Moreover, the narrative of Lina's personal journey shows that after completing her research and having translated into words the memory of the Sino-Japanese War, she was able to revert her identity references and state that she now feels more Chinese than French. Here we can refer to the work of Ernest Renan who asserts that the vividness of the sense of belonging to the group, and in a broader sense to the Nation, is primarily fuelled by "the common possession of a rich legacy of memories,"<sup>20</sup> and it is these painful moments (wars, sufferings, loss) that will be valued because, in this area, "mourning is more valuable than triumph."

The second point on which Lina's experience sheds light is the role and function of images in the memory process. Lina repeatedly emphasised the silence which, in her family, enveloped the subject of the Japanese Occupation in China. That silence was justified by her parents' will to obliterate evocations likely to shock or frighten her. On this point, I cannot but make the connection with what Lina's parents experienced during the wars in their home countries, experiences they never spoke about. It seems to me, in this case, that we have what we might call a phenomenon of two 'overlapping memories.' It seems that the one emotionally invested by Lina's parents is only the time when the Japanese occupied China; but their silence might cover up a trauma which goes far beyond this moment of history, and which might be linked to what they have experienced in Cambodia and Laos. However, Lina tries to account for her parents' behaviour and build her own narrative of the past by investigating the Japanese occupation in China. There are nonetheless grey areas that Lina was unable to translate into words: what her parents were unable to tell her. It was precisely those events that she strove to have a glimpse of and to display, for lack of having heard about them. Yet how did she exactly proceed? She turned them into images. In her assessment of the human toll of the Nanjing Massacre, Lina used two photos to illustrate the brutality the civilians experienced – two extremely violent images.

The first one displays the bodies of children piled up on a river bank, which allegedly is the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation ?*, Paris : Mille et une nuits, 1997, p. 31.

Yangzi. On the second snapshot, you can see the body of a woman half naked. The deep notch which is visible on the top of her thigh and the stake planted in the right lower abdomen hint at the barbarous acts which were inflicted upon her.<sup>21</sup>

The photos in Lina's case study were deprived of either sources or captions; they were neither explained nor quoted in the text. It was as though, for Lina, the photos spoke for themselves and formed a straightforward response to her harrowing questions. In fact, Lina unveils specific features of images in her approach, be they photographic or film: their ability to convey, beyond words and narrative constructions, emotions related to the entity represented. When I looked at these images, I was stunned and awestruck— something she herself must have felt and may have been, in her mind, what her parents wanted to protect her from. To illustrate Lina's approach, we can take on Jean-Luc Godard's assertion that images "enable us to talk less and say more, or rather to say more [about something] without having to say it."<sup>22</sup>

Apart from this primary function of images as actual vector-sensor, another function exists: the transmission of knowledge – knowledge related to the past. However, as Georges Didi-Hubermann suggests, image is not to be regarded as a material thing, but above all and most importantly, as an act. It reveals the intention of the person who has conceived it, and it produces effects that often exceed the initial intent.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the multiplicity of representations created by an image, as Lina's experience demonstrates, can contribute to the formation or, on the contrary, the upsetting, of a crystallised memory. Receiving the image is to accept "the uncertainty of having seen."<sup>24</sup> The expression "having seen" is to be understood in a very broad sense. It is not necessarily about 'having experienced,' it also refers to the entire representation that an individual may harbour regarding the past. To accept "the uncertainty of having seen" can be translated as accepting a third eye's gaze. However, cinematographic productions may prove particularly disturbing on that matter.

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<sup>21</sup> Both images can be viewed at the following addresses respectively:

[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Nanjing\\_Massacre\\_infants.jpg](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Nanjing_Massacre_infants.jpg)

[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Nanjing\\_Massacre\\_rape\\_killed.jpg](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Nanjing_Massacre_rape_killed.jpg)

<sup>22</sup> Youssef Ishaghpour, *Archéologie du cinéma et mémoire du siècle – Dialogue avec Jean-Luc Godard*, Tour : Farrago, 2000, p. 81.

<sup>23</sup> Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Images malgré tout*, Paris : Éditions de minuit, 2003, p. 143-144.

<sup>24</sup> The expression is by Jorge Semprun, cited by Georges Didi-Hubermann, *ibid.*, p. 111.

## The controversial reception of images from the past

In order to understand how a film can possibly clash with the public's perceptions and points of reference, we will look at the Taiwanese film *Cape No. 7*, and at the Chinese film *City of Life and Death*.

Both films have been received somewhat warmly, notably *Cape No. 7*, which won awards in both national and international festivals. What is the message of these two films, and what were the criticisms expressed against them?

*Cape No. 7* draws a parallel between two romantic relationships, one that takes place during the Japanese colonial rule, and the other one nowadays. The former depicts the relationship between a Japanese teacher and his Taiwanese student named Tomoko. The latter narrates the love affair of a singer in a Taiwanese rock band named Aga with a young Japanese woman, whose name is also Tomoko. The relationship taking place during the colonial era unfolds through the letters written by the teacher during his return trip to Japan shortly after the retrocession. Both he and his student agreed to depart from the old colony together, but incapable of keeping his promise, the teacher sets off alone, leaving Tomoko behind. Upon the teacher's death, his family, discovering the ties that bound him to the girl, decide to send the letters to his designated recipient. Marked with the address of the colonial period, the package ends up in the hands of Aga who goes in search of the teacher's student, in so doing satisfying his Japanese girlfriend's vow.

The film *City of Life and Death* by Lu Chuan, which deals with the conquest of Nanking by Japanese troops in December 1937, presents the emotional and psychological development of a young soldier, Kadokawa. Horrified by the devastation wrought in the city and unable to bear the guilt with which he feels overwhelmed, Kadokawa commits suicide eventually, after saving the lives of two Chinese prisoners.

The main criticism to *Cape No. 7* was that its mode of representation was deemed too romantic for the colonial period. This is mostly expressed through the bittersweet relationship between the Japanese settler and his indigenous student. This contravened the necessary gravity that is expected to drape any reminder of that time of Taiwanese history. For Chen Yi-zhong 陳

宜中, a researcher at the Academia Sinica, the film reveals the painful love story between Taiwan and Japan (*Liushi nian lai de xiangsi zhi qing* 六十年來的相思之情) that, in his opinion, is ongoing sixty years after their separation. He denounced, in particular, the negative role attributed to the Kuomintang government, which was portrayed as a "foreign force devoid of feelings" 外力無情 in the film. This impression is most obviously demonstrated in the last scene where Taiwanese people are shown bidding farewell to the Japanese under the watchful eye of Chinese soldiers. According to Chen, the film refers to the Taiwanese's plight that originates from waiting in vain for Japan's love 等不到日本的愛. The union between Tomoko and Aga could be seen as a symbolic repairing to a certain extent. The choice of romance was bound to have harmful consequences on the youth who need clearly defined points of reference.<sup>25</sup>

The feeling of nostalgia conjured up in the film, which some consider to be particularly highlighted, was also severely condemned. Instead of evoking sentiments of anger and resentment, the film, quite unexpectedly, exhales regret. Therefore, the writer and essayist Wang Feng 王丰 likens *Cape No. 7* to a "thick shrub of poisoned herbs" 株大毒草. He saw in it the effects of the poison of separatism that, since it has been instilled deep inside the Taiwanese society, has been corrupting perceptions: China, the land of the ancestors, is the object of hatred, while Japan is desired and admired.

The film was also the subject of much criticism in China. Before it was released, it already widely circulated across the country as a result of downloads from the internet and hacked DVD sold for paltry sums. It led to particularly passionate debates on online forums. Originally scheduled for December 2008, its issuing was delayed for several weeks. The authorities feared that it would bolster anti-Japanese nationalist sentiments amongst the Chinese youth and that public order would be disrupted. According to the Taiwanese media, Chen Yun-lin 陳雲林, president of the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait 海協會, stated that the film

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<sup>25</sup> Chen Yizhong, 陳一中« Haijia qihao de tairi kulian » 『海角七號』的台日苦戀, 中國時報, 9 October 2008, p. A22.

showed "vivid traces of Japanese colonial influence" 皇民化陰影 and that troubles were likely to arise and to harm the rapprochement between China and Taiwan that had until then appeased the tensions in the Strait.<sup>26</sup> The film was eventually released in Chinese theatres in February 2009. The romance – at the heart of the narrative – became the target of attacks then.

Some Chinese Internet users fiercely attacked the Taiwanese women who, in spite of the humiliations and outrages that had been inflicted upon them during the colonial period, still wished to reunite with the Japanese.<sup>27</sup> Others highlighted the misery of Tomoko's fate. Indeed, she had been abandoned, although she was willing to follow the teacher whatever the consequences might have been for herself. Moreover, the film remains silent about her life after the teacher left. There was no doubt, according to the same Internet bloggers, that the evocation of Tomoko's distress would have undermined the film's emotional impact: the content of the letters, for example, would not have been as compelling.<sup>28</sup>

As these criticisms show, depictions of any sentimental bond between a Taiwanese and a Japanese was problematic. However, themes depicting the emotional connections between Chinese and Japanese during this period were not entirely absent from other films. *Don't cry Nanking* 南京 1937 (1995), by Chinese director Wu Ziniu 吳子牛, and co-produced by China and Hong Kong, tells the story of a Sino-Japanese family who return to settle in Nanking on the eve of the fall of the city. The family then falls victim to the Japanese army's violence. In this case, however singular, it is understandable that the evocation of such a couple has not been a problem due to the fact that, here, the Japanese partner is the woman. Indeed, in the collective imaginary, Japanese women are not accountable for the horrors committed by the Japanese soldiers. Instead, they are often adorned with qualities of gentleness and devotion. In this respect, it is significant that no male character in the family is Japanese. While the Chinese doctor had a son from his previous marriage, the Japanese woman had a daughter. In addition, the feeling of rejection that

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<sup>26</sup> « Chen Yunli yu Hai jiao qi hao » 陳雲林與『海角七號』 (Chen Yun-lin et *Cape n°7*), *Zhongyang ribao*

*wanglubao* 中央日報網路報, 2 December 2008, <http://www.cdnews.com.tw>, retrieved in December 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Discussions of 20<sup>th</sup> November 2008 at <http://ipobar.com/read.php?tid-29330.html>, retrieved in November 2008

<sup>28</sup> « Kan shang qu hen mei Hai jiao qi hao beihou de taiwan ben tu qingjie de zhenglun » 看上去很美『海角七號』

背後的台灣本土情結的爭論 (The Hidden Side to the seemingly beautiful Cape No. 7: Debates on the issue of Taiwanese localism) 8 November 2008, <http://blog.ifeng.com/article/1834919.html>, consulted in November 2008.

might have been induced by this “Sino-Japanese” family, one that is united and harmonious, is largely counter-balanced by the explicit exposition of the Japanese army’s horrific crimes. Thus, the film delivers a message in line with the usual representations.

*Cape No. 7*, on the other hand, portrays a weak and vulnerable man, whose letters confess to his shame. This sentiment stem from his betrayal of Tomoko and also from the burden of being Japanese:

*Tomoko.*

*I beg you to forgive my weakness.*

*Forgive this man who did not dare admit his feelings [...]*

*Tomoko.*

*[...] I am the citizen of a defeated country.*

*The pride of an elite Nation has suddenly become the pillory that fetters the criminal.*

*I am a poor teacher.*

*Why should I endorse the responsibility of the crimes that have become those of an entire nation?*<sup>29</sup>

In keeping with the above, the content of the rest of the letters written by the teacher leads the spectators to complain rather than incriminate him. Likewise, the nature of his bonds with Tomoko carries away the audience, helped in this by the romantic atmosphere of the film to which the soundtrack is a major contribution. Considering the contents of the letters addressed to Tomoko, one can legitimately wonder why some may have negatively perceived the bonds uniting her to the teacher. The teacher’s sincerity ought not to be questioned because of his desertion. Although the fact that he left Tomoko behind is reprehensible, still it should be re-evaluated in the light of the historical and political context of the time which is, to some extent, disclosed in the letters. But, precisely, is that not what is unnerving, or irritating? A man confessing to his being guilty and helpless when confronted to the events by which he has been framed ; it calls into question the way in which the Japanese at the time were widely imagined or represented: brutal men, dominated by their impulses and who did not hesitate to rape, beat, or

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<sup>29</sup> My translation from the Chinese version of the film: DVD *Cape No. 7*, Deltamac, 2009.

kill, capable of the worst of evil deeds without ever suffering the slightest remorse.

In fact, it seems that the reactions to Lu Chuan's film, *City of Life and Death*, were cast in the same mould; the critics were indeed not very sympathetic when a Japanese soldier was portrayed as having qualities of humanity and compassion.

From the outset, Lu Chuan's objective was to offer a new outlook on the Nanking massacre. The reading of diaries kept by Japanese soldiers during the war, as well as interviews of witnesses of the events, victims and perpetrators alike, aroused his will to actualise the experience of "ordinary people."<sup>30</sup> His project was closely followed by the Propaganda Department of the CCP 中宣部, as well as the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television 国家广电总局. The final product filled with enthusiasm the three authorities, then responsible for monitoring the content of cultural productions: Li Changchun 李长春, Liu Yunshan 刘云山, and Wang Taihua . They considered that the film was outstanding not only by its very innovative way of approaching history, but also because it accounted for "grand humane values" 人性的光辉 and the "spirit of the time" 体现时代的主旋律<sup>31</sup>.

Such appraisals were, however, quickly swept away by the rising protests that followed the film's release in April 2009. The attacks came from the organs of the State, the party and the military, as well as cultural and educational institutions. In less than a month, the central authorities received more than 70,000 messages of protest, as well as numerous letters from senior political and military bodies. Rallies were held in over thirty universities across the country.<sup>32</sup> As for the Japanese actors in the film, they were attacked at a screening in a cinema in Hangzhou. Nevertheless, they were supported by a large part of the audience, who were shocked at such an assault.<sup>33</sup> Tensions were so high that Li Changchun李长春 and Liu Yunshan刘云山

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<sup>30</sup> Brice Pedroletti, *Un long métrage sur le sac de Nankin réveille les passions chinoises*, *Le Monde*, 6 May 2009, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Cen Chen 岑琛, *Nanjing!Nanjing ! Yinfa zhengzhi fengbo* 『南京！南京！』引發政治風波 (*City of Life and Death* lead to political turmoil), *Zhengming 爭鳴*, 6, 2009, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Brice Pedroletti, *op. cit.*



were ready to resign.<sup>34</sup>

Just like for *Cape No. 7*, the most heated debates were also relayed on the internet. The most frequent criticism made against Lu Chuan, widely labelled as "A Traitor to the Nation" 汉奸, was that he had downplayed the extent of the Nanking massacre for the sake of objectivity, highlighting that the Japanese soldier was made of "flesh and blood" 有血有肉.<sup>35</sup> The tragic events taking place when the city was seized were secondary in the film. For some, the director belonged to the movement of Chinese artists who, through their work, have exempted the Japanese from any act of contrition. Others, denouncing the radical historical revisionism expressed in Japanese right-wing movements, considered it impossible to get rid of the hatred they felt towards the former aggressor. Finally, the person who criticised Lu Chuan's desire for making of his protagonist an "ordinary man" made of "flesh and blood" and capable of feelings of pity for the vanquished enemy, praised, however, the film's most successful scene, which shows a grimly determined Japanese soldier throw a little girl through a window, in the very presence of the child's parents. This evidences that there existed a need for a standardised representation of the historical event. The film was to have an educational vocation, as Taiwanese Chen Yi-zhong requested from *Cape No. 7*, in order to set clear points of reference and avoid any confusion in the interpretations and readings of the past. The boundary between the two sides, good and evil, was to be clearly defined. It seems that these directors, all to their concern of accounting for the complexity and ambiguity of reality, tend to dismiss this univocal type of representation specifically.

### **Images Denigrated: delving into the sensitive world of the Japanese protagonist**

In an interview, Wei De-Sheng observes that while it is common to show colonial troops arriving on a territory, the moment of their departure, on the contrary, is rarely dealt with.<sup>36</sup> And

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<sup>34</sup> Cen Chen, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> I refer here to the most significant comments posted on the site [movie.douban.com](http://movie.douban.com) in 2009. If I take into account negative evaluations, it is in no way representative of all opinions: some users proved to be very supportive of the director and his approach. <http://movie.douban.com/subject/2294568/comments>, consulted in April 2010.

<sup>36</sup> See interview conducted by Wei De-Sheng in the show *True Love Blog* 真情部落格, *DVD Cape No. 7*, published

why would that be? One can imagine that filming the departure of the colonisers necessarily involves the evocation of the ties that have bound them to the land they are leaving behind, and hence, its people. It immediately places the audience in their emotional and affective universe.

Similarly, when *Letters from Iwo Jima* was released, Clint Eastwood said that he did not want to make another "John Wayne movie", in which Americans would be shown "killing Asians".<sup>37</sup> Such generic terms used by Clint Eastwood as "Americans" versus "Asians", reveal the fact that in "John Wayne" films, there is no need to single out the adversaries as Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese. At any rate, such film's main objective is to explore the side which bears positive values – in this case the American side. Here, we can summon Allan Dwan's movie *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) in which John Wayne is the main character. In this movie, one single scene stages Japanese soldiers, and even so, they are merely glimpsed, through the loophole of the blockhouse where they stand. And indeed, they may as well have been Koreans or Vietnamese: nothing singles them out. Here, the director shows "the enemy", not individuals.

Sharing Clint Eastwood's approach on this point, Wei De-sheng and Lu Chuan want the audience to discover individualities. To do this, they start by assigning faces to their protagonists. Faces that reveal a personality, a trajectory, allowing thus the viewer to keep up with the evolution of their emotions and, to some extent, to feel concern and sympathy towards them.

Who are these faces and what do they display? Usually in films set in this historical context, the Japanese protagonists appear as tough and violent guys, to the point of ridicule, both physically and in their behaviour. More recent productions have endeavoured to assign particularly positive traits to the Japanese characters.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the officer, in the manner of Commander Kuribayashi in *Letters from Iwo Jima*, can be characterised as physically noble and handsome, and morally righteous, responsible, and courageous. The soldiers, meanwhile, appear smooth-faced and with delicate traits, which implies they are presented unsullied and innocent as much as vulnerable. It is often in the long close-ups on faces that directors reveal their humanity. In *City of Life and Death*, the audience shares the experience of the pity, shame, and guilt felt by

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by Deltamac, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> See introduction by Clint Eastwood, DVD *Flags of Our Fathers*, Warner Bros, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> There seems to be exceptions. Indeed, while the Japanese protagonist is a friend to the local population, he is seen blessed with a particularly flattering physique. In addition, he stands out for mastering the Chinese language, unlike his compatriots, who express themselves in Japanese. See for example, *Victory* 梅花 (1976) by Taiwanese director Liu Jia-chang 劉家昌.

Kadokawa over the plight of Chinese women forced into prostitution. The expression of the eyes, constantly spied on by Lu Chuan's camera, indeed reveals the inner conflict of the character, which eventually leads to his committing suicide.

Directors do not simply endow their characters with singularity and reality by exploring their characters' visages meticulously. They try to restore the language they speak in its own musicality as often as possible. In general, the Japanese speaking in films dealing with this period of time use a coarse and harsh language – characters yell their orders, abuse their prisoners, humiliate the civil population. In the same logic as their physical traits, a brutal language keeps the viewer at a distance, whereas sweeter sounds are appealing. It is clearly the objective of Wei De-sheng to convey the music of the poetry of the Japanese language. Following Clint Eastwood's method in *Letters from Iwo Jima*, he allows the unique and intimate voice of his protagonist to emerge via the reading of letters, which enamel the film. A privileged moment for the spectator to experience the sweetness of the text inspired by Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, whose sounds are particularly melodious.<sup>39</sup>

[...]

*The winter ocean is heavy with anger.*

*The whiffs of shame and remorse splash on me as the boat rolls on and on.*

[...]

*I saw pass a school of mullets migrating towards the warm waters of Taiwan's shores. I marked the flank of one of them with my feelings. I hope your father will catch it in his nets.*

*Tomoko, even if its flesh is bitter, you must taste it.*

*Then, you will understand...*

*I'm not leaving you: I just didn't want to lose you [...]*

It is precisely this romantic content, endorsed unreservedly by Wei De-sheng, which upset some of his fiercest critics. The reading of these letters in a recurring scene, nine times throughout the film, gives the tempo. It is the scene where the teacher is writing his letters to Tomoko. Starting with the image of a ship slowly gliding on the sea on a mineral-like soundtrack,

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<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, translation from Chinese cannot render all the poetry of the text.

this scene is particularly pleasant to watch. Often preceded by emotional sequences presenting a fight or a quarrel, each of its occurrences happens to be a source of solace to the viewer. Likewise, the music that introduces the scene progressively functions as a leitmotif, which announces a return to the past in the form of relief and comfort. Thus, this sequence is certainly what causes some viewers in Taiwan to perceive a sentiment of nostalgia for the colonial period in the film.

To conclude, I would like to return to the purpose of studying these films as a reflection on the collective memory and its underlying issues of identity and society. Whether documentary or fictional, a film is able to give clues about how a society wishes to explore the crucial moments in its history at a given time. Furthermore, the variations in the perception and evocation of the past shows what meaning the relationship to otherness can bear, and how it can weigh on social interactions. Therefore, if a film is able to influence the collective imagination, it can also, as Marc Ferro suggested, become an "agent of history".<sup>40</sup>

To illustrate this idea, I would like to refer to one of my students, born in Dongbei (Liaoning), Northeast China, as he commented on the film *Nanking! Nanking!*<sup>41</sup> In 1931, the first Japanese bombings hit the place where his family lived. We can therefore imagine that, in his family's memory, the Japanese occupation is likely to have aroused very hard feelings. I asked him what he thought of the film *Nanking! Nanking!* and of Lu Chuan 角川's character, and here is his reply:

*"In the film, the Japanese soldier, whom we should normally hate, becomes a person for whom it is impossible to feel hatred. He is a Japanese who has compassion for the Chinese. The film reverses the perceptions that we should normally have towards the Japanese. I am grateful to directors who remind us that there also were Japanese soldiers capable of acts of humanity. "*

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40 Marc Ferro, *Cinéma et Histoire*, Paris : Gallimard, 1993, p. 19.

41 This group work organised from December 2009 to March 2010, bringing together ten Chinese and Taiwanese students, and was aimed to explore the memory of the Japanese occupation in China and the colonisation of Taiwan.