

Appropriating Rape: Sexual Violence in Cinematic Narratives of the Sino-Japanese War

Maria Magdalena Bastida Antich

International Relations and Chinese

This paper examines representations of wartime sexual violence during the Second Sino-Japanese War in Chinese and Japanese contemporary cinema. It explores the ways in which these visualisations of rape can distort or testify to the experiences of victims while also contributing to the (re)production of narratives of the nation. In analysing and comparing images of sexual violence in Lu Chuan's *City of Life and Death* and Wakamatsu Kōji's *Caterpillar*, this paper argues that the representation of wartime rape in Chinese and Japanese war cinema is inescapably shaped by masculinist mythology of the nation, whose notions of sovereignty are articulated through the exertion of power over women's sexualities and bodies. It is concluded that the gendered logics that inform post-war national discourses in China and Japan hence limit the space to honour the subjective pain of victims and survivors.

Keywords: Sino-Japanese War, cinema studies, war, rape, nationalism

The Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) was rooted in China's national resistance to Japan's decades-long imperialist project to exploit Chinese raw materials and labour. Historical narratives of the atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese Army in China during the war constitute a major pillar of the national discourses of contemporary China and Japan (Weiss, 2015). Given the widespread use of rape as a weapon of war during the Japanese invasion, discourses on wartime sexual violence are also deeply imbricated in narratives of the nation (Weiss, 2015). In China, historical events like the Nanjing Massacre, during which the Japanese army is estimated to have raped more than 20,000 women and girls, are framed as part of a humiliating imperialistic aggression committed against the Chinese nation (Yang, 1999:884). In Japan, the opinion towards wartime sexual

violence is divided: while progressive groups strive to investigate and denounce Japan's past abuse, ultranationalist revisionists deny accounts of war atrocities, claiming they are exaggerations or even inventions (Yoshida, 2000:70-132). The reproduction of these historical narratives crucially relies on technologies of mass culture. These technologies, such as cinema, create 'transferential spaces' through which audiences perceive themselves to be accessing experiences of historical events they have not lived through, building 'prosthetic memories' (Landsberg, 1997:66). Contemporary cinematic representations of wartime sexual violence raise the important question of how the visualisation of rape can distort or testify to the experiences of victims and recognise or undermine their subjective experiences of trauma (Projansky, 2001).

This paper examines the ways in which the representation of wartime sexual violence during the Second Sino-Japanese War in Chinese and Japanese contemporary cinema is shaped by the cinematic medium, and how this representation contributes to the (re)production of narratives of the nation. By examining and comparing images of sexual violence in Lu Chuan's *City of Life and Death* and Wakamatsu Kōji's *Caterpillar*, this paper argues that the representation of wartime rape in Chinese and Japanese war cinema is inescapably shaped by masculinist mythology of the nation, whose notions of sovereignty are often articulated through the exertion of power over women's sexualities and bodies.

Images of Wartime Rape in Chinese and Japanese Cinema

City of Life and Death: Women's Rape as a Symbol for the Nation's Trauma

The Nanjing Massacre is a crucial event in the contemporary memory of China's 'century of humiliation' (*bainian guochi*); nationalist discourses of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are importantly built on discourses of victimisation from experiences of Japanese colonial aggression to legitimise the Party State and foster nationalism (Kinney, 2012). Drawing on Chungmoo Choi's (2001) observation on the framing of discourses on Korean comfort women within patriarchal nationalism in South Korea, this section examines how the cinematic depiction of sexual violence that occurred during the Second Sino-Japanese war can serve to recognise the patriarchal logics of the war, while also reproducing a Chinese masculinist narrative of the nation.

Lu Chuan's *City of Life and Death* ('Nanjing! Nanjing!', 2009) depicts female victimisation and agency in the Nanjing Massacre through three different female characters: Xiaojiang, a Chinese sex worker; Jiang Shuyun, a Chinese teacher who works in the city's demilitarised zone; and Yuriko, a Japanese comfort woman. *City* breaks with the dichotomy drawn between Chinese victimhood and Japanese aggression that characterises mainstream cinema on Nanjing: the film constitutes an unprecedented move in Chinese cinematography to relate Chinese women's



Fig 1. A wretched Xiaojiang looks silently at soldier Kadokawa as he mistakes her for Yuriko.

experience of sexual violence with that of Japanese women (Zhu, 2013). This is illustrated in the sequence in which Japanese soldier Kadokawa enters a comfort station where one hundred Chinese women have been brought and mistakenly takes Xiaojiang to be Yuriko, asking her why she is there (Fig.1). Kadokawa's confusion effectively juxtaposes the identity of Xiaojiang and Yuriko, drawing a line of parallelism between Chinese and Japanese women's common experiences of victimhood from sexual violence (Zhu, 2013). Kadokawa's long silence after recognising it is not Yuriko suggests a reflection on the injustice of comfort women's fate beyond distinctions of nationality: why should Xiaojiang's presence in the comfort station be any less worth questioning? In the same vein, *City's* narrative of the Nanjing Massacre includes an exploration of Yuriko's victimhood as a Japanese comfort woman. This is shown in the sharp contrast between the two encounters that occur between her and Kadokawa: in the former, a fresh and confident Yuriko shows tenderness for the soldier on discovering he is virgin; in the latter, Yuriko is portrayed as exhausted and emotionally numb after weeks of abuse by the Japanese military (Fig. 2).

City's two main Chinese female protagonists are depicted heroically in relation to their assertion of agency to reject Japanese sexual dominance: Xiaojiang volunteers to serve as a sex worker for the Japanese to guarantee the safety of Chinese women and children in the demilitarised zone, and Jiang Shuyun asks Kadokawa to shoot her in order to prevent her rape by Japanese soldiers. As pointed out by Yanhong Zhu (2013:100), *City* limits women's agency to a choice of 'martyrdom or sexual slavery with regard to the Japanese'. The film hence proves able only to conceive of two types of heroines: the patriotic motherly figure that complies with traditional/local notions of female chastity, and the comfort woman that chooses to



Fig 2. Two encounters between Yuriko and soldier Kadokawa: while in the first (*above*) Yuriko seems fresh and tender, in the second (*below*) she is worn out and apathetic.

sacrifice herself for the nation. Accordingly, Xiaojiang's rape and death are heroic as she sacrifices her body and sexuality for the nation; Shuyun's death is heroic as she chooses her chastity over her survival. The film hence resembles other Nanjing films in the sense that it subsumes women's experiences of wartime sexual violence into a broader narrative of national humiliation and trauma. *City's* framing of female heroism also reproduces the figure of the female martyr, which has been used by communist and nationalist regimes to mobilise women for 'the endeavour of building a strong nation state' (Zhu 2013:100). While Lu Chuan's two-year battle with government censors over the humanisation of Japanese soldiers indicates the film's divergence from mainstream Chinese cinema on Nanjing (Kraicer, 2010), *City* still presents women's agency within the limited possibilities of a nationalist discourse.

City articulates the struggle to defend China's sovereignty against Japanese aggression through the 'masculinist protection' (Young, 2003) of Chinese women's bodies and sexualities. This is illustrated in the sequence when a group of Japanese soldiers break into the Nanjing Safety Zone, a demilitarised camp created in 1937 by an international committee of Western missionaries and businessmen with the aim to provide food and shelter to Chinese refugees. In the scene, the committee's leader and Nazi party member John Rabe, together with his secretary, Mr. Tang, discover Japanese soldiers sexually assaulting a group of girls in one of the Zone's residential buildings and attempt to courageously intervene. The insistent focus on Rabe's and Tang's facial expressions of horror pushes the viewer to empathise with

their feeling of failure for not having been able to prevent the events from happening. The visualisation of the girls' rape serves only to depict the perverse and sexually aggressive masculinity of the Japanese, and the benign and protective masculinity of Rabe and Tang. Conversely, the girls are left faceless, nameless, and voiceless. The scene closes with Rabe's question, 'How many children were raped here tonight?' The girls' subjective experiences of physical pain and psychological trauma are reduced to a number for Rabe to make sense of the episode ('Six girls, sir'). The girls' rapes in the film are not depicted to bear witness to their personal traumatic experiences of pain, but rather to serve as a catalyst for Mr. Rabe's and Mr. Tan's heroic intervention. The on-screen erasure of the girls' experience of victimhood is coherent with feminist analyses of narratives of sexual violence through a male gaze, whereby rape becomes a 'conversation between men' (Thompson and Gunne, 2010:8).

As an immediate response to this event, the film shows Mr. Tang cutting his wife's hair as she cries, telling her and his sister-in-law that they must wear men's clothes from now on in order not to be sexually attractive in the eyes of the soldiers (Fig. 3). This coercive act of 'protection' of women's bodies indicates how (Japanese) sexual violence is depicted as an act of imperial emasculation of the colonised (Chinese) men, whose response requires the performance of aggressive masculinity articulated through the exertion of power over colonised (Chinese) women's bodies (Nandy, 1983). Similarly, narratives and representations of wartime rape in the Pacific War, such as that of Korean comfort women or Chinese women and girls in Nanjing, are appropriated and instrumentalised to justify militarised masculinist nationalism (Choi, 2001; Weiss, 2015).



Fig 3. Mr. Tang cuts his wife's hair as she cries.

Caterpillar: Rape as a Weapon Against Japanese Patriarchal Nationalism

Mainstream Japanese war cinema reflects how, in the aftermath of World War II, the Japanese experience of post-war misery and the perception of a ‘victor’s justice’ being applied excessively and unjustly on Japan generally obscured recognition of the suffering of Asian populations inflicted by Japanese imperialism. Accordingly, there are few high-profile Japanese cinematic representations of wartime sexual violence committed by the Japanese military during the Second Sino-Japanese War (Weiss, 2015). Chinese films representing the widespread murder and rape in the Nanjing Massacre, such as *Don’t Cry, Nanking* or *City of Life and Death*, have been fiercely attacked by the Japanese right and denied access to the Japanese market (Nagaoka, 1998; Wu, 1995). Against this background, some Japanese left-wing filmmakers have attacked Japanese nationalist ideology by dismantling the glorified figure of the masculine soldier, as well as representing the brutality of wartime sexual violence in shockingly explicit ways. Wakamatsu Kōji’s *Caterpillar* (Kyatapurā, 2010) is an excellent example of how the on-screen visualisation of rape is used as a left-wing critique of right-wing nationalism and its patriarchal core.

Caterpillar begins with credits overlaid onto footage of Japanese troops advancing in China in 1940. Immediately after comes a horrifying scene where Lieutenant Kurokawa violently rapes and murders a Chinese girl while shouting racist insults at her. The focus on the girl’s eyes while this happens is followed by a fade-out effect: the image of one of her eyes is slowly replaced by the red circle of Japan’s national flag (*hinomaru*). From the beginning, Kōji hence announces his unequivocal condemnation of Japan for her murder. During an unspecified battle in China, Kurokawa is appallingly maimed, and is brought back home quadriplegic, mute, and partially deaf. He becomes completely reliant on the care of his wife, Shigeko. Having lost the ability to move or speak, his wife witnesses his gradual devolution into an animal, ironically contrasting with the townspeople’s veneration of Kurokawa as a ‘war god’ (*gunshin*). Kurokawa’s pathetic existence is particularly emphasised in a sequence where he awkwardly scribbles the words ‘I want to do it’ in a notebook while voicelessly mouthing ‘please’, begging Shigeko to have sex with him (Fig. 4).

Revealed in a flashback, the viewer learns that Kurokawa used to beat and rape Shigeko, hating her for allegedly being unable to bear children. The reversal of power relations on his return from the war becomes an opportunity for Shigeko to victimise him in retribution for his past abuse: she begins to dare him, mocking his appearance and manner of speaking. Shigeko’s desire to make Kurokawa suffer can be clearly appreciated in a scene in which she forces him to wear his military uniform and parades him around the town. By exposing the *gunshin*’s situation of total dependency on her, she humiliates him while also showing her virtue as a wife. The war veteran’s emasculation is complete when Shigeko rapes him while



Fig. 4. Scribbles showing “I want to do it” in Japanese, the words desperately written by Kurokawa with a pencil in his mouth so as to beg his wife to have sex with him.

slapping and punching him. Shigeko’s evolution shows not only the dismantling of Kurokawa’s militant masculinity, but also the appropriation and reversal of masculine sexual violence to avenge her own traumatic experience of rape (Weiss, 2015). Shigeko’s act of rape is both the reenactment of the system of violence through which she was victimised, and a response to the Japanese sexual violence inflicted on Japanese and Chinese women. After the incident, Kurokawa begins to have a series of visions showing his past crimes committed as a lieutenant, including flashbacks to Kurokawa’s sexual abuse of the Chinese girl. Interestingly, the girl’s rape scene is now seen from the perspective of the *victim*; Kurokawa sees his own face committing the crime. Kurokawa’s new perspective of the events as both aggressor and victim indicates the strong psychological impact the victimisation by his own wife has left. Tormented, he attempts to kill himself by savagely striking his head against the walls of the house.

Kōji’s film astutely points to the misogynistic logics that sustain nationalist ideology: the existence of comfort stations, the widespread use of rape as a weapon of war by the Imperial Army, and the glorification of the masculine and aggressive soldier relied on notions of male power and female subordination (O’Reilly, 2018). The film dismantles such logics by mocking the toxic and fragile masculinity of the *gunshin*, while also connecting the suffering of Chinese women with that of Japanese women. *Caterpillar*’s release in Japan was predictably met by fierce critiques from right-wing groups, which consequently led to the film’s withdrawal from many theatres (Weiss, 2015).

On the other hand, *Caterpillar* also portrays the problematics of using the visualisation of sexual violence as a tool for political critique. While the representation of wartime rape committed by the Japanese military constitutes an ideological battlefield for the Japanese right and left, neither of the two sides is

interested in testifying to the experiences of trauma of Chinese women and girls. For the Japanese right, the visibility of wartime sexual violence in Chinese and American cinema is seen as an attempt to attack Japanese sovereignty by emasculating the Japanese nation/military; for the left, the representation of rape is used to criticise ultranationalism (Zhu, 2013). Kōji is part of the latter group: he uses rape as the most brutal symptom of the patriarchal power structures that form the skeleton of Japanese nationalism. Yet, in the process of using female bodies as ideological tools, women's subjective experiences of pain and victimhood are erased. In *Caterpillar*, the subjectivity of the Chinese victim is completely disregarded; as with the girls in *City*, she remains a nameless and voiceless body. Further, as pointed out by Amanda Weiss (2015), the pornographic representation of the girl's rape further reduces the possibility of empathising with the female subject. Her rape and the flashbacks to it serve exclusively to explore Kurokawa's subjectivity as a perpetrator, and later as a victim. In contrast, the film develops Shigeko's complex character of both victim and aggressor, and examines her personal experiences of trauma from her husband's sexual abuse. This exclusive focus on Shigeko replicates Japanese war narratives that fixate on Japanese victimhood, while disregarding Chinese experiences of victimisation.

Conclusion

Through its analysis of *City of Life and Death* and *Caterpillar*, this paper has explored the dangers of erasing the experiences of pain and trauma of the victims and survivors of sexual violence when instrumentalising images of wartime rape as part of a political discourse of the nation. *City* constructs a narrative of Chinese victimhood in the Second Sino-Japanese War that articulates China's trauma in terms of the emasculation of the nation. Accordingly, the visualisation of wartime rape is used to condemn Japanese imperialism and lament China's national humiliation; women are used as symbolic bodies to reinforce masculine national myths, rather than being recognised as subjects with legitimate personal experiences of physical and psychological abuse. Whereas *Caterpillar* diverges from mainstream Japanese discourse that ignores the occurrence of wartime sexual violence during the Second Sino-Japanese war in its entirety, the film also instrumentalises images of wartime rape to attack Japanese ultranationalism, rather than revealing the subjective pain of Chinese women and girls. The essay concludes that the gendered logics that inform post-war national discourses in China and Japan limit the representation of wartime sexual violence: rape is appropriated as an experience no longer belonging to the abused.

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