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### Media Representations of the Nanking Massacre

The Nanking Massacre was known as the forgotten holocaust of World War II, an act of utter barbarism committed against the Chinese people by the invading Japanese. Within the span of six weeks, from December 13, 1937 to January 1938, several thousand Chinese soldiers and civilians were inhumanely killed and women were brutally raped. In order to shed light on the atrocities committed upon thousands of Chinese, historian Iris Chang took up the arduous task of gathering information and evidence of the Nanking Massacre and produced her non-fiction book *The Rape of Nanking*, which was written in a “Westerncentric” and victimization narrative (Kinney) to facilitate a better reception of the historical event in the Western world. Since then, her book has gained attention in the international world, prompting the making of several filmic reproductions of the Nanking Massacre. Although the films do present the Nanking Massacre, each film is portrayed through a different perspective, thus offering different representations of remembering the Rape of Nanking. In three specific films, *Nanking*, *The Flowers of War*, and *City of Life and Death*, the respective point of view of each cinematographic production characterizes a memory of the Nanking Massacre, but also functions as a virtual memorialization of the historical tragedy in remembering the Chinese’s strength and suffering while displaying the ongoing struggles of reconciliation between Japan and China.

As each film serves as a representation of the Nanking Massacre, it demonstrates the act of memorialization, which reflects the way how society views and remembers the Nanking

Massacre. Through memorialization, there exists the hope of the attempt towards healing and peace between the two opposing sides as well as the unification of the people in their shared feelings of respect and loss for the dead. Moreover, as the films are a virtual memorialization, it becomes easier for the international community to access these memorials, and thus greatly expands and gathers together a larger community in commemorating the Nanking Massacre. Although the films memorialize the same historical event, each film portrays a different memory of the Nanking Massacre, and therefore exhibits the different perspectives of how society continues to remember and view the historical tragedy. For the documentary film *Nanking*, the movie is conducted through a Western perspective, and thus honors the Western goodness. In *City of Life and Death*, the historical tragedy is presented through a multi-perspective narrative, remembering the Chinese suffering and strength while refraining from completely dehumanizing the Japanese. Lastly, *The Flowers of War* portrays both the West's and the Chinese's perspectives, commemorating the Westerners' aid as well as the Chinese's heroism and sacrifice. Regardless of these differences, the films share the same intention of memorializing the Nanking Massacre while revealing the ongoing struggles of reconciliation between Japan and China.

Because the production of *Nanking* was inspired by Iris Chang's book, the documentary's Western perspective exposes a facet of Orientalism in which Western power and superiority is exhibited through the Western missionaries, presenting the memory of the Nanking Massacre in an Orientalist outlook. Orientalism, as asserted by Edward Said, is the relationship between the Occident and the Orient, in which the West maintains superiority and dominance over the East. This relationship is first apparent between the missionaries and the Japanese, where the Japanese seemingly respect the Westerners more so than the Chinese simply by the fact that the missionaries are Westerners. Furthermore, the Western missionaries appear to be praised and

admired by the Chinese as being god-like for saving so many of their people, which is evidently seen as the Chinese interviewees still revere Minnie Vautrin as their American Goddess.

Moreover, the Chinese's position as a victimized people of the Nanking Massacre prolongs the notion of a submissive Orient to the Occident and of the white savior image. Through this portrayal of the Westerners and the Chinese, *Nanking* reduces the Chinese as a helpless, hopeless people who can only survive with the help of their Western saviors from the evil Japanese.

As a result, the director's choice of utilizing a Western perspective for *Nanking* forces the audience to view the Nanking Massacre only through the missionaries' perspectives, imposing a tunnel vision upon the audience to admire the goodness and greatness of the god-like missionaries and to pity the poor, suffering Chinese. Hence, the Chinese interviewees no longer function as witnesses to the historical tragedy, but bolster the image of Western superiority and power. Furthermore, the connection between morality and Christianity fuel the Orientalist notion of the West's goodness and supremacy over the East. As missionaries, the Westerners believe in the Christian religion and thus, share a set of beliefs and values; in contrast, the Japanese are shown to be unreligious. Prompted by the Christian faith and its moral values, the missionaries are compelled to have compassion and pity as well as a strong moral desire to protect the innocent, which obliges them to stay in Nanking for the sake of the Chinese. Therefore, the film suggests that the Christian religion enables the missionaries' formation of a moral conscience whereas the Japanese's lack of Christianity contributes to their immorality, triggering their horrendous acts of violence upon the Chinese people. The documentary then reinforces the Japanese soldiers' immorality by only presenting interview video clips of some Japanese soldiers and their unremorseful reactions towards the Nanking Massacre, which authenticates the Japanese as monsters and inhumane beings. This portrayal of the Japanese thus highlights the

traditional negative view of the Japanese and denounces the Japanese while implying the demand for Japan's apology and responsibility. Accordingly, *Nanking*'s Orientalistic representation of the Nanking Massacre empowers its Western audience to feel a sense of authority over the East, which resonates well within the West, but also within the Chinese audience who sustain their image as the victimized and sufferers of the Nanking Massacre. Not only does *Nanking* fulfill Iris Chang's goal of uniting "Chinese and Western helplessness and resistance" against the Japanese (Kinney), but the film also reinforces the concept of "us versus them", the West and Chinese versus the Japanese. Although the documentary portrays the horrible nature of war, *Nanking* asserts that the Japanese's lack of morality ultimately causes the atrocities while accentuating the West's instrumental importance to the survival of the Chinese people. Consequently, the Nanking Massacre is then memorialized as a historical event where the suffering Chinese people were saved by the blessing of the Westerners' presence and their great act of bravery and humanity.

Another feature of Orientalism is seen in *The Flowers of War*, as the historical fiction film demonstrates a sentimentalized and romanticized view of the Western gaze upon the Orient, displaying a different memory of the Nanking Massacre through this Orientalist perspective. Based on the book *The Flowers of War* by Geling Yan and directed by the famous Zhang Yimou, the Chinese film features Hollywood star Christian Bale and Chinese actress Ni Ni. Fundamentally, *The Flowers of War* centralizes on glorifying the beauty of the Chinese women's heroism and selfless act for the innocent girls, but because of Christian Bale's Hollywood label, the Chinese film tends to focus on his character more so than the Chinese characters. According to Jing Yang's academic journal on Hollywood's classic white savior narrative in *The Flowers of War*, Zhang Yimou reinvents the "tale of a white man's chivalrous rescue of a Chinese woman

during his adventure in the exotic East” through Bale’s character, John Miller. In the hopes of fulfilling Zhang Yimou’s unification of the West and East, John “functions as a reliable witness reporter for Western audiences” (Yang) to provide them with a character they can connect with, which encourages recognition and reception of the Nanking Massacre in the global audience. However, by using Hollywood’s white savior formula, *The Flowers of War* establishes an Orientalist discourse with the “cultural, hierarchical, and gendered relationship of the East-West encounter, and the often submissive Chinese woman character” (Yang). The film’s concentration on John’s role as the white savior as well as his romance with Yu Mo, the Chinese brothel woman, demonstrates an Orientalist stance of the West’s desire to conquer the exotic East and establishes John as a symbol of Orientalism.

As John Miller is forced into the white savior as the film progresses, the film reveals the submission of the East to the West, and evidently ascertains that the Chinese are powerless without the aid of a Westerner. But although John Miller is essentially the only hope for the Chinese’s survival, he is unable to achieve the rescue of the convent girls through his own means as opposed to the brothel women’s courageous sacrifice, which exhibits a twist of the stereotypical masculine protector image overtaken and possessed by the female gender. With John’s powerless position, many Western audiences complain that John comes ““second”” to the Chinese women (qtd. in Wilkinson 2012)<sup>1</sup>, which displays the West’s struggle to reclaim superiority and dominance against the constant depictions of the empowering, charismatic Chinese women. However, the Orientalist discourse is finally realized towards the end of the film, where Western superiority and dominance is regained with a rushed romantic sequence between Bale’s and Ni Ni’s character. Before, Yu Mo had regarded John with contempt, but on

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<sup>1</sup> R. Wilkinson’s movie review of *The Flowers of War* cited in Jing Yang’s “The Reinvention of Hollywood’s Classic White Savior Tale in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Pavilion of Women and The Flowers of War”

the day of the Japanese victory celebration, Yu Mo and John have sex, with John promising to take Yu Mo “home”. In this sexual exchange, Yu Mo’s tragic, scarred past is “miraculously healed” and her submissiveness “reaffirms the white hero’s potent masculinity, which had been previously jeopardized” (Yang). Not only does John’s sexual conquest displays the West’s desire for and dominance over the Orient, but also Ni Ni’s line, “Take me home now”, expresses a “spiritual submission to the West” (Yang), completing the white savior image as well as fulfilling Said’s Orientalist perceptions. Therefore, even though John Miller is portrayed as a secondary character in *The Flowers of War*, the fact that he is a Westerner permits Orientalism to be enacted in the film, verifying that the utilization of a Western character and Hollywood actor tempts the notion of Orientalism and its romanticized view of the Orient, and consequently portrays the memory of the Nanking Massacre through this Orientalist lens.

While *The Flowers of War* represents the memory of the Nanking Massacre through a sentimentalized Orientalist perspective, the film’s portrayal of Chinese victimization also challenges the Chinese perspective of male heroism through the depiction of the bravery and martyrdom of the Chinese brothel women. It would be natural to assume that Christian Bale’s character would undertake the role of the male protector as he is the Westerner ensuring the Chinese’s survival. In addition, Yanhong Zhu’s academic journal, “A Past Revisited: Re-presentation of the Nanjing Massacre in *City of Life and Death*”, provides a social context of Chinese society in which “[w]omen were identified with the backwardness of the nation”. This perception of “the victimized woman [soon] became the symbol of the Chinese nation itself” during the time of Imperialism, where foreign powers increasingly became aggressive towards their domination over China (qtd in Ko 1994: 1-2)<sup>2</sup>. Hence, the film’s portrayal of the Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Ko *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in*

prostitutes as victimized women promotes the Chinese resonance on their position of victimization and displays women's lack of agency during this warring time. When the brothel women are introduced into the story, they are shown as "fetishized objects of male desire" with their bright, gaudy appearances and personalities which contrast greatly against, and perhaps corrupt, the holiness and pureness of the convent girls and the cathedral (Yang). Furthermore, with the shameful connotation of the term "prostitute" and the ancient poem's description of the brothel women in the film: "Prostitutes never care about a falling nation; they sing and dance while others are dying", the Chinese women are seen as even more disdainful and pitiful through the eyes of the characters and of the audience. However, with Yu Mo's declaration of "[doing] something heroic and [changing] the old way of thinking", the Chinese brothel women's noble act of sacrifice transforms the masculine stereotype of heroism through the exertion of their limited agency as prostitutes and women, and thus gain redemption of their name and status in the process.

The Chinese women are then seen as having a higher moral standing than John Miller in the face of atrocity, revealing that through the women's bravery, the Chinese nation still maintains strength and resilience in their so-called "victimized women", but also calls upon empathy for the women's tragic end. Therefore, the prostitutes and their act of sacrifice present the struggles of women in warring times with their limited agency, but also represent that heroism does not pertain to masculinity alone. This portrayal forces especially the Chinese audience to question their standpoint on the stereotypical view of masculine heroism, the masculine protector image, as well as the hidden strength that resides in women and even in the lowliest of the low, the prostitutes. By providing a Chinese perspective and a Western

perspective, *The Flowers of War* thus represents a memory of the Nanking Massacre of both viewpoints, depicting a memory of how both the West and China each remember the historical tragedy in their respective ways as well as a new outlook on the stereotypical image of masculine protection.

Conversely, the historical fictional film *City of Life and Death* presents the Nanking Massacre with a multi-perspective narrative to portray a broader memory of the historical event in order to account for a global memorialization of the Nanking Massacre, dispersing the claim of a one-sided memory and memorialization of Chinese victims versus Japanese perpetrators. Scholar Zhu's article discusses that the depiction of Chinese victimization and Japanese barbarism was a popular and recurring theme in filmic reproductions of the Nanking Massacre, which became a propelling factor to director Lu Chuan's decision of presenting a different version of the Nanking Massacre with a multi-perspective narrative. Additional insight to the director's purpose in producing the film was given through an interview conducted by Yuankai Tang, where director Lu Chuan stated that he wanted to "[show the audience] that the Chinese did resist the invaders and [to restore] the real image of brave Chinese during the tragedy". Lu Chuan felt that many Chinese remembered only the cold body counts as opposed to the resilience and strength of the Chinese; thus, he gave faces to the victims to depict that each one of them were "alive and vigorous" (Tang), who include some featured Chinese characters: Chinese soldier Lu Jianxiong, Mr. Tang, Miss Jiang, and Xiao Jiang. Through this cinematographic technique, Lu Chuan displays that the Nanking Massacre was not simply a historical event of Chinese victimization and of Japanese brutality or of "perpetrator and victim", but that the film demonstrates that the memory of the Nanking Massacre engages all who are involved, and not simply the Chinese, as seen with the perspective of Japanese soldier Kadokawa. Hence, the



director's desire to share this message with his audience led him to produce *City of Life and Death* with a theme of humanity as well as to bring together pathos and logos as a way for the audience to think about and be in touch with the historical event. By utilizing different perspectives, Lu Chuan's film demonstrates to the audience the importance of taking into account the viewpoints of those involved and how perspective leads to the bigger picture of the Nanking Massacre. Brought together, the film conveys how multiple perspectives create historical memory and representation, as well as the fact that every human being falls victim to the destructiveness of war.

In order to counter the popular depictions of the Japanese as immoral monsters, Lu Chuan chooses Kadokawa to portray the Japanese's humanity, and in doing so, challenges the Chinese traditional negative view of the Japanese. When *City of Life and Death* introduces Kadokawa, the film illustrates the humanity of the Japanese through his experiences during the Nanking Massacre. In a scene where Kadokawa and his troop find a large group of Chinese refugees hiding in a cathedral, the Japanese fire their guns at a confessional booth when panic erupts amongst the Chinese. Bodies of women and children tumble out of the booth and he stares in complete shock, stuttering, "I didn't mean to!" Kadokawa's genuine response at his horrible act shows his guilt as well as his acknowledgement of his moral wrongdoing, demonstrating the awareness of a moral conscience and his human heart. As the movie progresses, Kadokawa and his comrades are seen drinking, dancing, and laughing together. In another scene, Kadokawa is seen with the Japanese comfort woman, Yuriko, celebrating New Year's together. These scenes of the Japanese display how they are still humans and not monsters. Like any other people, the Japanese are seen expressing their emotions, celebrating holidays, and finding comfort and comradeship during a warring time. The culmination of war's destructive nature is finally seen in

Kadokawa's final moments during the Japanese victory dance where he imagines himself silently screaming during the beating drums and where he commits suicide after allowing two Chinese prisoners to escape. The psychological trauma and damage seen in Kadokawa portray that even the victors do not leave unscathed from the atrocities of war. Not only does the film present a Japanese memory of the Nanking Massacre through Kadokawa's perspective, but it also illustrates that there is still humanity within the Japanese who are similarly victims subjected to the negative impacts of war. The film thus acknowledges that the Nanking Massacre is not a one-sided memorialization, but includes all that are involved in the atrocity, delivering a memorialization of the victimized Japanese for the Japanese country as well.

However, this humanizing element is limited to these few Japanese while the Japanese army as a whole retains the negative judgment<sup>3</sup>. The portrayal of the Japanese monsters is seen through their brutality demonstrated in the strategic executions of groups of Chinese POWs who are shot across fields and on ocean shores and buried and burned alive. In addition, the film shows the Japanese raping women as well as a Japanese soldier tossing a child out the window, conducting the cruelest of all crimes upon the life of an innocent child. By presenting both Kadokawa and the Japanese army, *City of Life and Death* does not attempt to dismiss or offer excuses for the Japanese's cruelty, but to show that "the massacre is not committed by a group of monsters... but by a group of human beings doing what monsters do" (Zhu). Thus, through these two differing representations of the Japanese, the film also acknowledges and emphasizes the complications of reconciling the view of both Japanese portrayals in the Chinese culture.

On the other range of perspective, the Chinese characters of *City of Life and Death* represent the strength and resilience of the Chinese as a whole in their fight for survival, challenging the memory of victimization of the Chinese. Chinese soldier Lu Jianxiong represents

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Fogli who gave this suggestion

a form of courage as he bravely stands up amidst the Chinese prisoners who refuse to stand upon the Japanese's orders, knowing that obeying the order will lead to the Chinese's execution.

Although his execution and capture demonstrate the futility of resistance, Jianxiong's decision to stand expresses his desire to maintain his integrity as a Chinese soldier who adhered to his duties as a soldier of his country, resisting the Japanese and protecting his country to his last breath. His walk towards his death illustrates his struggle between the desire to live and the recognition of his inevitable doom, but also symbolizes a part of the whole Chinese army who valiantly fought for their country. As for Mr. Tang, an unconventional form of Chinese resilience is presented through his character as he betrays his countrymen by collaborating with the Japanese to help his family survive. His flawed logic, though, leaves him helpless as he recognizes that his family still succumbs to a tragic end. Consequently, Mr. Tang represents a "grey area that... blurs the clear demarcation between perpetrators and victims" (Zhu), revealing that both the perpetrator and the victim can exist in one person and is not necessarily Japanese. But although Mr. Tang's desire to ensure his family's security comes first, he still demonstrates his loyalty to his countrymen by sacrificing his life for his comrade, thus redeeming himself of his crime and guilt.

As for the Chinese women, Miss Jiang and Xiao Jiang, they demonstrate heroism through their acts of sacrifice and bravery with their limited agency, defying the image of the victimized Chinese woman and of the victimized Chinese nation and representing the strength of the Chinese nation as a whole. To save the Chinese soldiers from being taken away by the Japanese, Miss Jiang returns to the Japanese trucks in different disguises, each time claiming one soldier as her family relative. Though she is recognized for her deceptive act, Miss Jiang refuses to be led to her death by the Japanese, asking Kadokawa to shoot her and hence preserving her dignity as a Chinese woman. For Xiao Jiang, she offers herself as the first of the one hundred Japanese

comfort women, illustrating her contribution as a Chinese civilian in resisting against the Japanese and protecting her fellow refugees. Her sacrifice and bravery compel 99 others to accompany her, uniting the Chinese women together in their stand against the Japanese. While both women may be powerless as mere citizens, Xiao Jiang and Miss Jiang's heroism expresses the strength of Chinese women, overturning the perspective of the "victimized woman" and proving the courageous acts of heroism that reside within the women and of the Chinese as a whole who sacrificed their lives to protect their people.

Although all four characters are individually fighting for their survival, altogether, they represent Chinese heroism and resilience as a whole in the preservation of their loyalty to their countrymen and dignity as Chinese. In conclusion, *City of Life and Death* brings forth a new memory of the Nanking Massacre through the Japanese and Chinese perspectives, commemorating Chinese heroism and strength while highlighting the conflict of reconciling the traditional image of the Japanese. Lu Chuan's use of multi-perspective narrative of the Chinese and Japanese perspectives display that both sides are victims to the brutality of war and are human beings fighting for their lives, and not just two opposing peoples, or perpetrators and victims, as the traditional belief perceives and depicts in Chinese culture.

*Nanking*, *The Flowers of War*, and *City of Life and Death* portray the importance of the role of perspective in memory, and thus embody different representations of the memory of the Nanking Massacre. Though the perspectives are different, the goal of each film was to globalize and bring awareness to the historical event as well as to acknowledge the destructive nature of war. The films thus exist as a virtual memorialization in commemorating different memories of the victims, heroes, and perpetrators of the Nanking Massacre while conveying the ongoing struggle of reconciliation between the Japanese and Chinese.

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