



**The Highlighted Life:
The Humanistic Orientation of War
Narration in Chinese Children's
Films of the New Period**

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SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English, Vol. 55, Issue 2, 2018

Abstract

Compared with earlier works in the genre, the narration of war in Chinese children's films of the New Period (post-1978) demonstrates a trend of transformation from political to humanistic orientation, which is closely related to the revival of humanism. Moving away from the traditional hero narrative, the creators of Chinese children's war films have developed growth narratives that emphasise the complexity of human nature, cruel narratives of reflection, and playful narratives which make use of laughter and irony — all of which can be seen to be modes within the humanistic convention. These narratives re-examine the meaning of war and revolution, reflect deeply on the relationship between war and the fate of children, closely observe human feelings and human nature in war situations, and highlight the individual's life against the backdrop of the course of history. Involving experimentation and innovation, such narratives of war of the New Period point to a deeper and more diversified development in Chinese children's films, which though they provide a unique window into lives affected by war also hold up a mirror that reflects a global understanding of war and peace.

Keywords: children's films, New Period, war narration, humanistic orientation, aesthetic innovation

In the first half of the twentieth century, China experienced frequent wars, including three domestic revolutionary wars and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Given the frequency of these experiences, war has become an important historical theme of contemporary Chinese children's films. For more than twenty years between the founding of the People's Republic of China (October 1949) and the end of the "Cultural Revolution" (October 1976), the main focus of children's war films in China was to create a fearless little hero. And its core ideology was to promote patriotism, revolutionary heroism and optimism, and to praise a revolutionary history of bloodiness and cruelty. Since the convening of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CPC (Communist Party of China) in December 1978, which marked the beginning of the "New Period" of reform and the opening up of Chinese society, great changes have been seen. War films have consistently been one of the most important genres of expression in children's film in China, yet compared with the previous era of patriotism and adherence to the national cause, this expression subsequently experienced a huge transformation from political narrative to individual narrative, presenting diversified aesthetic styles that closely relate to the cultural and literary trends of the modern era. With the launching of the New Period's ideological liberation movement, literary and art circles in China abandoned the founding principle of political leadership as the first standard. Ideological phenomena, such as rethinking what constitutes the concept of the "human" and issues surrounding human nature and human feelings, as well as humanitarian ideals, exerted great influence on literature and art in the early 1980s. As a result, this humanistic literary trend has entered the mainstream of Chinese creative endeavour, and has resulted in the promotion of literature and art, including films, which review history from a humanistic perspective, and seek new interpretations and evaluations of the tragic events that occurred in the making of the modern Chinese nation and their effects upon individuals within the nation.

Correspondingly, the emphasis in literature and art regarding the concept and expression of war has also changed. Previous Chinese war films featuring children paid close attention to the moral and political justices and injustices of war and highlighted heroism, while ignoring human nature and the emotional circumstances surrounding the survival of the individual and his or her ultimate fate. Yet since the 1980s, a number of creators of children's films have more closely examined the relationship between war and people – especially that between war and children – from humanistic and life-oriented dimensions, and have explored human nature and human feelings in times of war, making many innovations in narrative connotation, perspective, strategy and style, thus promoting a deeper and more diversified thematic development in such films. The German phenomenologist Moritz Geiger has noted:

When we talk about the spiritual content of a work of art, we are referring to two different things: we first mean the spiritual content implied by the theme of the work, and implicit in the objects presented by the works of art; secondly, we refer to the spiritual content of the artistic concept presented through its expression.
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It is important to consider these differentiations when assessing the spiritual content reflected in the humanistic narrative of Chinese children's films. This article will focus on the exploration of these two aspects of theme and artistic expression and their complementary relationship.

1. Growth Narratives with Individual Traits

With the encouragement of ideological emancipation at the beginning of the New Period, most creators of children's war films no longer focused on the political construction of the image of the "little hero", but concentrated more on the individual growth processes of children in the war. They no longer depicted the children of these great heroic deeds as revolutionary symbols and spiritual representatives, but exerted more energy into portraits of their lives and emotions, through heroizing them, but also through developing them as individual child characters of flesh and blood.

In the 1980s, a common practice emerged in many children's war films: introducing animals as important characters in war films and in combining the stories and struggles of children and animals. In films such as *The Cry of a Deer in the Green Valley* 《鹿鸣翠谷》 (1981), *The White Dragon Horse* 《白龙马》 (1981), *Tiger Racing* 《赛虎》 (1982), *The Man Who Helped Me on the War Horse* 《扶我上战马的人》 (1983), *The*

Adventure of a Little Cavalry 《小骑兵历险记》 (1988), *Black Horse* 《黑马》 (1989) and many more, animal characters enrich the plot and enhance the interest of the story, providing a relationship between humans and animals that evokes a passionate emotional dimension through both its portrayal on screen and its connection with its audience. In *The Cry of a Deer in the Green Valley*, a fifteen-year-old soldier named Tie Zi, who has been attacked by Japanese aggressors at the garrison of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army, finds a surviving baby beside a martyred corpse. He carries the baby into the forest to search for troops, while feeding the baby with a doe's milk and when the doe is attacked by wolves, he shoots the wolves to save the doe. The battles between deer and wolves in the forest are clearly symbolic: The mother doe fights the wolf for revenge, a representation of the brave battle of justice against evil, and the tender intimacy between the child and the doe adds warmth to the cruel war scene. Ultimately, the sounds made by Sika Deer echo across the green valley of Changbai Mountain, forming a symbolic artistic space, and implicitly conveying the desire and call for peace. In a number of other films, horses are featured in important roles or as clues to the thematic thrust of the story; on a political level, a child's love for a horse may be reflective of his or her love for the Party, affection for the revolutionary armies, and respect for the sacrificial heroes. But these children's emotional bonds with horses also shows their lively curiosity and playful nature and the horses act as intermediaries in bringing together the children and adult heroes, lending a simple emotional humanism not only to the representation of children in the narratives, but also to that of the adult protagonists.

Yet, in comparison to the representation of animal elements in such films, an even more effective method of deepening a film's emotional reach and relatability is to narrate the story from an individual perspective. Many films use the method of an old soldier, now in a more peaceful time, recollecting his past deeds to review the war from an individual perspective and to examine the revolutionary choices. Huang Shuqin's *Friends in Childhood* 《童年的朋友》 (1984) starts with the memory of the old Hou Zhi and narrates his unforgettable childhood experiences in the war years through a series of flashbacks. The film emphasises the simple warm feelings between comrades from the perspective of Little Hou Zhi's personal experience, and especially highlights the love between the young girl Tian Xiujuan and the heroic squad leader, and her cherished memories of her comrades who died for the revolution. Zhang Yuqiang's *War Episode* 《战争插曲》 (1987), which also features recollections and flashbacks, uses a similar technique. The prologue is a soliloquy of the old Xiuju as she walks along the lake: "I will never forget my cruel but beautiful childhood, whether it is at this moment or in the future, even though it is only an episode of war." The main part of the film is seen from the perspective of young Xiuju, a correspondent in charge of passing secret information, who is escorted to the women's squad of Shanwa Village to study. Self-willed and stubborn, she wants to fight rather than study, and has a strong childlike character and disposition. The film uses the individual to represent the collective, discovering the rich feelings hidden in the hearts of the female soldiers in the women's squad through the eyes

of a young Xiuju, who highlights and affectionately portrays their heroic deeds. Compared with the magnificent revolutionary narrative, this individualized “war episode” portrays the soldier image in the flames of war from a more authentic, delicate, and comprehensive dimension. At certain moments in the narrative, the story cuts back to the scenes of an old Xiuju recalling different stories, a technique of pulling back from the action of the main story, which lends the film a subjective and meditative mood and allows the audience to reflect on the more humanistic elements of war and its effects.

In the New Period, children’s films have attempted to provide a more realistic depiction of the mentality, emotion, and the growth process of the little hero. The heroic deeds of Wang Erxiao, a cowherd who sacrificed himself to kill the Japanese invaders, are well known in China and are often favoured by Chinese children’s war films. Both Zhang Chi’s *Little Cowherd* 《二小放牛郎》 (1992) and Shen Dong’s *The Little Hero* 《少年英雄》 (2002) tell this same story, providing credible representations of the transformation of children from ordinary cowherd to little hero. The two add the roles of a sister and teacher to introduce an emotional element, and to show Erxiao’s gradual mental and emotional change of state from fear, loneliness, and timidity after losing his loved ones, to bravery and having no fear of death, to gradually embracing the thought of killing his enemy. Such developments in personality and mindset make the characters more vivid and rounded to the viewer, the better to convey the strength of the individual against the odds. In director He Qun’s *A Kid’s Kite* 《童年的风筝》 (1995), the young boy Sannir is seen again and again running in panic, emphasising his emotional state and the mental pressure caused by war. Scenes of running appear six times in the narrative and form a rhythm that becomes a symbolic action, from the initial fleeing from fear to the reversal of running back to kill the spy. Such action delicately evinces the spontaneous awakening and struggle of children in the war of life and death. A further motif in the film is the image of a kite, which appears repeatedly not only as a symbol of national culture and spirit but also of children’s desire for free play, peace, and tranquility. As the carrier of emotion, the kite contrasts the children’s happy growth with the destruction of life brought about by violent war, investing the film with a poetic quality that is based on reality but also extends, through symbolic connections, beyond reality. A further example, *Being a Son and Comrade* 《儿子同志》 (2005), is a film produced to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the New Fourth Army. The hero, Little Lizheng, is a young soldier who gradually moves from being naughty and capricious to becoming sensible and strong. The film does not directly depict the bloodshed and cruelty of the battlefield, but is set in the Peace Primary School, a peaceful land on the edge of the war, to illustrate children growing and experiencing love and pain in their daily lives.

The majority of these films explore the emotional growth of the individual through the use of nostalgia and sentiment, and from a first-person perspective. This kind of individualized, nostalgic children’s film has

displaced the grand political narrative of children's war films, which was common after the founding of New China and which were linked with the fate of the nation. Later films much more clearly emphasise spiritual and emotional growth and the idea of the individual being equal to, or prioritized over, the collective. The growth of children in war situations no longer resembles the previous model of heroic growth, but rather a growth that is full of diverse personality traits, complete with childish characteristics and character flaws. The creators pay attention to what may be considered the "normal" growth of the individual against the "abnormal" environment of war, and pay far less attention to the more politically-oriented "leap forward," which at its roots represents the revolutionary spirit and Communist ideology of the collective. Many of the films show evidence of individuals' spontaneous growth, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, and, although less overtly heroic in the plot action, are nevertheless more alive in their representation of, and strong affinity with, the temperament of children. Such films also provide greater individual emotional content, through combining the concepts of "righteousness" and "emotion", the former emerging from the latter and being more powerful because of it.

The images of the mentors in these children's war films have also changed considerably in comparison to such figures in the films of the same genre before the New Period. These characters are no longer the spokespeople of symbolic revolutionary ideas, but unique individuals with human traits and feelings, such as Captain Yunfeng in *War Episode* and the "Comrade Dad" in the film *Being a Son and Comrade*. These mentors have none of the grandiose rhetoric of their antecedents, but only the simple understanding and expression of war, life, and emotion. It is through the edification of their words and deeds that children change their emotions, ideologies, characters, and actions. In *Being a Son and Comrade*, the titles of "Comrade Son" and "Comrade Dad" signify the affectionate bond of the "father and son" beyond their blood relationship, and their sense of equality and understanding beyond their age and level. Thus, the news of the sacrifice of Little Lizheng's father is concealed in an effort to shield the child from the casualties of war. Commander Yang's love and care for Little Lizheng evinces the older generations' hopes that children would stay away from the harm and horrors of war. The female teacher in *Goodbye, Our 1948* 《再见，我们的1948》 (1999), directed by Guan Hu, also acts as a mentor. As she forbids her students from stealing guns she tells them that "life is the most important thing," offering a humanistic lesson that is not seen in previous children's war films. It is also worth noting that children's war films in the New Period have made breakthroughs in their depiction of enemies. For instance, compared with the stereotype of the fierce, treacherous, and dehumanized enemy in previous war films, the enemy leader in *Young Prisoners of War* 《少年战俘》 (1989) shows certain positive character aspects and a sense of humanity. Providing a humanized – rather than dehumanized – image of the enemy allows a re-examination of war, and of lives lived in these conditions, from dual perspectives.

This in turn provides a more natural and realistic atmosphere of daily life and of the growth of individuals, and works to suppress overt political ideology which, while still present, is submerged in the narrative.

2. Cruel and Reflective Narratives

Chinese children's war films prior to the New Period often appeared to be overflowing with revolutionary optimism, though their creators were not particularly concerned about the bloodiness and cruelty of the war itself. Although they also depicted the deaths of heroes, they were more interested in highlighting this heroic sacrifice in order to achieve a collective success: "The ruin or destruction of the value of individual life in the war is finally dispelled by the collective victory. The result is that this understanding of the value of moral value replaces the value of the noumenal life" (Wang 2005). Since the New Period, children's war films have begun to focus on the situation of ordinary children in wars, to reflect more deeply on war and the survival of children, and to reveal the tragic fate and spiritual trauma that wars have brought to children. Under this thematic focus of strong humanistic ideals, children are represented as the innocent victims of war. As early as 1962, Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's *Childhood of Ivan* used poetic film language to express the trauma of children in war; the use of fantasy scenes throughout the film reflected the brutal realities of such circumstances. Although the film was translated into Chinese in the 1960s, in the context of an era when political ideology dominated all else, war films featuring children at that time paid more attention to the praise of the revolutionary struggle and the image of the little heroes, while ignoring the avant-garde creative ideas embodied in *Childhood of Ivan*. It was not until the mid-1980s that Chinese children's films began to explore this alternative perspective and to project what may be called the "cruel narrative" of war. The cruelty and tragedy of war are particularly highlighted through plots in which child captives fall into the enemy's grip. The earliest and most pioneering of these films is Wang Jixing's *Fantasy in the Monsters' Den* 《魔窟中的幻想》 that was released in 1986, which focuses on the conditions of war smothering innocent and weak lives, and is of a strong exploratory nature in terms of its thematic depth and use of artistic techniques. The film adapted the story of "little Radish Head" in Luo Guangbin and Yang Yiyan's war novel *Red Crac* 《红岩》 (1961). The boy called "little Radish Head" is the son of a pair of imprisoned revolutionaries who, because he is born in prison and deprived of a normal life, is full of curiosity about the outside world. In pursuit of a visual realisation of the emotional and psychological experience, the film places four distinct fantasies in the plot: school, eating, going to town, and a birthday. These dreams are the visual appearance of the inner world of little Radish Head, and are intertwined with his cruel reality. The director adopts a dual structure, which focuses on the consciousness and rich inner world of the characters, but also on a direct expression of strong

emotional feelings. He pursues these multi-level and multi-dimensional expressions in the structure, through symbolic techniques in the environmental appearance, and through visual images. With regard to the colour conception, Wang elaborates:

[T]he whole film is finished by the cross-contrast of reality (high-key processing, highlighting black-and-white contrast), nightmare (monochrome black-and-white film effects, highlighting the contrast between light and shade), fantasy (warming treatment, highlighting the candlelight effect) and going to the world (cool treatment, highlighting green saturation), contributing to the great contrast but general balance in the overall appearance and visual images of the film. Among them, black as the motivating color is seen throughout the film, providing accumulating hints to little Radish Head's miserable fate. (Wang 36)

The film also pays special attention to the use of music and sound effects to reinforce the environmental atmosphere and to represent the mood of the characters. In the background music, a female voice hums a song with no lyrics from time to time, showing the desire of the characters to grasp an unattainable freedom that is seemingly floating in the air. The music speaks of strong desires and longing, enriching the ideological connotation of the film and enhancing its artistic appeal. In its pursuit of the ideographic function of visual and auditory images, this has become a lyrical film-poem, full of mystery and tragic poetry, with a narrative secondary to the primary purpose of the film, which is to clearly depict the heavy shadows over the soul of little Radish Head in prison and his longing for light and freedom. The film, then, involves abstract, complex, slow, and repressive artistic expressions, which, while effectively targeting mature viewers, do not necessarily conform to children's appreciation habits, and may hinder their acceptance of the messages contained in the narrative.

Compared with the symbolic expression seen in *Fantasy in the Monsters' Den*, *The Young Prisoners of War* (1989), directed by Du Yuzhuang, uses far more realism in its technique. The film tells the story of teenagers in the Red Army being captured in the early 1937 battle with the army of Kuomintang (the National Party of China) and their continuing resistance. The prelude stops in a freeze-frame portraying the fierce battle waged by the young prisoners, which introduces a solemn tone to the narrative. Most of the young prisoners of war make a firm political stand, and undertake a hunger strike to protest the wearing of the Kuomintang uniform. During their unyielding struggle with the enemy, several of the young men die, one after the other, but one of the most memorable images of the teenagers is seen through the character of a prisoner of war with a weaker personality, named Tang Baoyuan. He wears the enemy uniform for fear of being bitten

by the wolf-dog guarding the prison. He endures the reproaches, snubs, and beatings of his companions, but bravely sacrifices his life in a time of crisis to protect his companions. His confession before his death reveals his mind and his repressed grievances, as he protests: "I am not a traitor!" The film displays the young man's inner struggles and spiritual pain, providing a deep metaphysical examination of the mental and spiritual anguish experienced by children in war. In *The Young Prisoners of War*, children accomplish heroic deeds through their own struggles and, while the sacrifice in itself is honourable and heroic, the action of the film also questions the cost of such heroism.

Ye Daying's *Red Cherry* 《红樱桃》 (1995) focuses directly on the physical and mental devastation of children caused by war, revealing the emotional and spiritual distortion or destruction of children war prisoners. The director claimed that the film metaphorically sighs with "the sad feeling on the two children's fate in the war. Of course, this sigh comes from our touch on the conscience of all mankind" (Ye 50). The film was made to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of China's victory in World War II and the Anti-Japanese War, and is the first Chinese war film to move the setting to a foreign country. The film depicts the tragic experiences of the Chinese revolutionaries' children in the Ivanovo International Children's House in the Soviet Union whose parents were persecuted by German forces during World War II, and the irreparable damage done to children's bodies and minds by the brutalities of war. The German general, a murderous psychotic who uses tattooed human skin for lampshades, carves fascist spiritual totems into the delicate skin of a young Chinese girl named Chuchu, supposedly in the name of aesthetics and art. Though Chuchu survives, she seeks to rid herself of these marks by burning them off with a firewood, but succeeds only in scarring herself. The historical humiliation tattooed on her back, in both a physical and psychological sense, can never be washed away. The cruelty of the war is also manifested in the storyline of the boy, Luo Xiaoman, who, out of his hatred of the Nazis, shoots the German prisoners of war with a slingshot and sacrifices his own life in killing them. It is a sacrifice that should have been avoided, yet his vengeful hatred of the Nazis overrides his fear of them and makes his decision easy. In order to highlight the sins of war, the director deliberately adds pre-war, wartime, and post-war situations to the plot for comparison: pre-war children's homes are full of laughter and happiness, while war artillery shatters the children's peaceful lives, bringing them fear, hatred, and death; and post-war Chuchu painfully carries with her the shameful marks left by the Nazis on her body and becomes the living symbol of the remembrance of the sin of war and the evil that can be present in humanity. At the end of the film, after Chuchu has been rescued by the Soviet army, Soviet officers agree to skin grafting for Chuchu, though they suggest leaving the Nazi eagle emblem on her skin as a reminder to future generations. But for the victim Chuchu, this "warning" will still constitute a "visible" marker of her humiliation. The film focuses on the powerless individual as the victim of power relations, offering a profound reflection on the dignity of life in opposition to the brutality of totalitarian ideologies. However, *Red Cherry*

also introduces commercial elements into what is otherwise a serious literary and artistic film, in terms of the body of a young girl being displayed multiple times on the screen. For example, the girl is forced to show her tattoo to the General's guests during a German officers' banquet, surrounded by the male audience. Her helplessness is contrasted with the ferocious intoxication of the spectators, and emphasises the inhumanity of war, yet also risks sexualising the young female form and catering to the curiosity and titillation of the audience. There is, then, another inherent paradox in the choice of scenes in the film itself: does the director's public exhibition of the girl's body within the film also covertly constitute a disrespect for her life?

The Meridian of War 《战争子午线》 (1990), directed by Feng Xiaoning, is another children's war film with a solemn tone that adopts distinctive techniques. A group of young soldiers of the Eighth Route Army, accompanying children who are not soldiers, are forced to go westward along the Great Wall due to an incomprehensible order, and pay a heavy price for the miscommunication. In order to protect their companions, the young soldiers sacrifice their lives to kill their enemies, a representation of the heroic deeds of the whole Chinese nation, many of whom fought bloody battles and sacrificed themselves in order to defeat the Japanese invaders. Yet the focus of this film is not only to exaggerate this heroism, but also to show the tragedy engulfing the lives of young people, and to express profound humanistic concerns regarding the nature of war. The film contains many touching stories within the main narrative, such as children refusing to kill rabbits to satisfy their hunger, and their sentiments contrast strongly with the cruelty of the enemy, the latter's absence of humanity, and their indiscriminate slaughter. The ultimate deaths of all the children in the film is heart-breaking for the audience: the little girl Wen Gongtuan, in order to protect everyone and distract the enemy, is forced to run to the edge of a cliff where she cannot escape. As she clings to the edge of the cliff, crying out "Mama" in her extreme fear, the call echoes through the empty valley and tears at both the other characters' and the audience's hearts. When she falls to her death, her song once again sounds out: "Bye-bye, Mama, I've grown up today!" The child's longing for love and life and her senseless death shock the audience into comprehending the needless waste of life involved in such conflicts. In another emotional scene, Cao'er, a seven-year-old girl who is blinded by poisonous Japanese gas bombs, dies of starvation while counting the stars in the sky, with tears in her eyes, and half a piece of bread that she has left for the wounded, vividly juxtaposing the child's innocence and innate goodness and the evil of war.

In terms of their artistic conception, the majority of these films employ distinct criticism and reflective themes in order to focus on the contrast in time and space between periods of war and peace, oscillating between sequences of reality and dreams. In addition, each uses rhetorical methods of imagery to reinforce symbols of sacrifice as well as senselessness. *Red Cherry* successfully uses parallel narratives of time and space and contrastive montages to reinforce its depiction of the tragic nature of the events as they take place in Moscow and Belarus. A detail related to the title of the film is that the protagonist, Chuchu, has red cherries

forced on her face by the German officer, a scene which is followed by a close-up of the German officer piercing the girl's skin. The beads of blood that ooze down her face and the bloodied cotton balls covering the floor provide a strong visual impact for the audience; the pervasive representation of the colour red highlights the ravaging of life by war, arousing the audience's pity for the victims, and providing a connection to a universal conscience that rejects war. On the other hand, *The Meridian of War* makes full use of recollection and flashback, and alternates between the present and the past to shorten the distance of space and time and to enhance the sense of history, presence, and modernity. The narrator not only gives an account of the events, but is also a participant in the story through his recollections. The chronological setting begins in 1990, when an elderly nurse climbing westward along the Great Wall looks over the mountains, and recalls how she and a group of children had carried stretchers along the Great Wall during the Anti-Japanese War. The director deliberately chooses the magnificent and desolate scenery of the Great Wall as the main setting of the story. He uses the Great Wall as a symbol of the Chinese people's struggle against Japanese aggression, and as a symbol of their courage and strength. In describing the physical and emotional weight of the war, the film also highlights, through sudden narrative jumps in time and space, the children's dreams of brighter times, expressing their desire to study and to live happily in a peaceful environment to demonstrate the happy life of the children of New China. Through the criss-crossing of the past and present in time and space, the contrast between times of war and peace, of audio and visual imagery, the film reinforces the thematic message that war destroys lives. It combines the ideological narrative with a humanistic narrative, in order to not only highlight the solemnity and vigour of the national spirit, but also encourage people's contemplation of the major binary of "war and peace" in human history. The film inherits its concept of war and creative style from the Soviet film *Childhood of Ivan*, and infuses it with the Chinese nation's own history and cultural memory. Director Feng Xiaoning describes the film's structure and mode along these lines: "It is a combination of various styles. The traditional structure has the characteristics of poetry and prose. While it pursues poetic Romanticism, it goes after documentary realism and focuses on the use of film language too" (Feng 84). These techniques emphasise the film's rich ideological connotations, which create both its appeal and shock value for the audience.

By incorporating the use of double space-time structures to connect history with the present, and by recollecting and reflecting on the past, the above-mentioned films provide constant shifts in narrative tone and rhythm. By sporadically inserting the "light and warmth" of our relatively peaceful present existence, they reveal the "heaviness and cold" of past periods of war and ideological conflict. And by means of imagery, they highlight the collective mood and emotional climate of the past and present. This category of children's war films displays a tendency for the use of cruel and reflective narratives in order to focus on the destruction of individual life, and to provide audiences with close-ups, which lead to a greater contemplation on and re-evaluation of the nature of war. These films expound upon the subject of individual and collective existence

during a time of war with a deep sympathy yet also with a grim consciousness, forcing a re-examination of the human condition.

3. Playful, Ironic Narratives

The forms and structures of children's war films in the New Period have been varied. Apart from serious dramas and tragedies, some special comedy forms have also emerged. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Chinese film circles initiated discussions on whether film is an entertainment or an art noumenon. The entertainment function of the film has gradually been recognized and accepted by filmmakers, and a tide of entertainment films has arisen with this acceptance. Because the plots of war films are usually thrilling in terms of action and scenario, they provide the possibility of entertainment, which is the central function of many such films of this genre. As such, a number of directors began to make mainstream ideology war films which met the entertainment needs of the public, and with this production came a new aesthetic paradigm. Representative works of children's war films featuring comic elements during this period are *Sanmao Joins the Army* 《三毛从军记》(1992), *Kid Commandos* 《小鬼特种兵》(2007), and *Yulai Little Hero* 《小英雄雨来》(2009). In terms of their narrative style, they can be summarized as possessing a "playful narrative". At the core of the cruel narrative in the children's war films discussed in the previous section is the consciousness of life and tragedy, and this is matched by narratives that are slow, with a heavy and even oppressive style. The "playful narrative", on the other hand, deploys irony, comedy, and caricature. *Sanmao Joins the Army* was adapted by director Zhang Jianya from Zhang Leping's comic book *Sanmao Joins the Army* (1946). The film utilizes comedic approaches to reflect the tragic suffering of ordinary people, while satirizing the corruption of the Kuomintang and the absurdity of war. The film gamifies the war from the perspective of Sanmao, its central character. The caption at the beginning of the film – "This film is entirely fictitious, and if this is so, it is a great honor" – introduces a humorous tone which reminds viewers to watch this war film from a light-hearted perspective but to remember the grave situation from which such humour arises. The hero is a character from a famous comic book, and this image alone provokes a humorous response from the audience. After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the homeless child Sanmao joins the army. He trains conscientiously and fights bravely, but he often makes jokes. When Sanmao joins the death squad and defeats the Japanese aggressors, he becomes an anti-Japanese hero, but his reward and consequent promotion is to serve the division commander's family as a duty soldier. Commander Niu, Sanmao's superior, ignores military emergencies and fraternises with dancing girls, thus missing the opportunity to fight, which leads to his suicide. Ironically, he is praised by the authorities as a "national soul". Sanmao then joins the commando squad and is dropped into the jungle to fight in a battle but the battle having been completed, the military are no longer

concerned with the squad's welfare. The soldiers are left in the jungle and become savages. By the time of China's victory in the Anti-Japanese War, the three black hairs on his head have turned white and, facing the desolate countryside and cities, Sanmao has no idea where to go and returns to being a tramp on the street. The plot, although very humorous throughout, also contains an undertone of sarcasm and Sanmao's fate provides a salient lesson. A number of humorous anecdotes enhance the irony of the film, such as a photo of Chiang Kai-shek and Sanmao, the disappointing military supplies, and the story of soldiers digging trenches but having no idea how to shoot. The numerous comic details and scenes can be seen as a patchwork of children's games, and this patchwork narrative seemingly dispels the history of suffering, yet the tragic fates of the minor characters in the war constantly undercut this humour. Sanmao, a child forced to fight in the army, exists in poor external conditions but, at the same time, the director adds another level of "pity" to his internal human nature: his sadness and joy lie in "wanting to change his status as a nobody, and becoming somebody. He was obsessed with this desire after continuous defeats, and fought against his fate again and again, but is still unable to rid himself of repeated defeats" (Zhang, 1994 50). Therefore, the film creates what may be termed as "tears in laughter" and is a prime example of meaningful aesthetic effect.

The film's distinction lies in its unique reflection, and in its criticism of the cruelty and absurdity of war, as well as of the vanity and ignorance of human nature. Its skillful combination of comedic form and tragic essence leads to its underlying irony, the main feature of irony being that "the literal meaning is different from the real one" — the actual meaning and the apparent meaning of the statement are contradictory, and opposites conflict with, repel, and offset each other. Generally speaking, the important factors that constitute irony in novels are, according to Li Jianjun, "the author's engagement in the non-literal rhetoric in the novel, the contrast between the two polar opposite factors, and the ironist's sense of detachment and distance with ease and confidence" (Li, 2001 106). Irony in films may be interpreted in a similar fashion. The director of *Sanmao Joins the Army* deliberately creates a narrative that is "between a conventional and non-conventional film" (Zhang 49) in order to provide a fresh perspective and gain the audience's favor. The film uses a large number of parodies, ridiculous voice-overs, disorderly combinations in montages, mixtures of different styles, and other postmodernist techniques to break down the traditional conventions of the war narrative. For example, the scenes of Sanmao's participation in the battle are strictly handled in accordance with the historical events of the Songhu Campaign and are reproduced in black-and-white documentaries yet the "documentary" in this film consists of cartoon clips, some true and some false, and this incoherent and fragmented treatment enhances the sense of absurdity and irony. In terms of music, the film mixes music associated with Spanish bullfights, Peking Opera, music from the video game "Contra" and so on. Such collages strengthen the playful atmosphere of the film, alter our habitual understanding of heroes and authorities, and tragi-comically question the rationality of war, while criticizing as despicable the desire for power that is exposed in such circumstances. *Sanmao Joins the Army* breaks down the serious or solemn demeanour of traditional war films through its

humorous style, and reveals the common individual's life as it is lived through, and damaged, by war, while exposing greed and stupidity. It uses humor to depict sadness and sets up a new aesthetic template for Chinese war films. The comic attitude of the film, when compared with, for example, the approach of the Italian war film *La Vita è bella* (1997) or *Life is Beautiful*, directed by Roberto Benigni, shows a fundamental difference. The game in *Life is Beautiful* is merely a ruse within the plot, a deliberate lie woven by the father to keep his child from knowing the cruel truth of the concentration camp, and one which attempts to make the child mistake his imprisoned life as a game. But this well-intentioned trick is finally exposed by the shooting of his father, and the child wakes from the fantasy of the game to understand the cruelty of a war which has destroyed his happiness. In contrast, *Sanmao Joins the Army* takes the game itself as an artistic technique and filter throughout the film, and this sense of play from beginning to the end brings a more direct style of laughter to the audience. Although it could be argued that this treatment weakens the representation of the cruelty of war to a certain extent, the laughter nevertheless stimulates the audience to think about the fallacies of war and the negative traits inherent in human nature.

Entering the twenty-first century, the general development trend in Chinese children's films has centred on the enhancement of entertainment. Children's war films consciously avoid topics dealing with what may be termed as children's "unbearable burdens" and choose lighter narratives of interest to contemporary audiences. Another paradigm of lighter children's war films is the popular genre of action films. Films such as *Kid Commandos* and *Yulai Little Hero* have a pattern of a binary confrontation between justice and evil, focusing on the superb martial arts skills of the children and their intelligence in fighting the enemy. In a sharp contrast to the strength of the juvenile heroes' power and their weakened enemies, these films exaggerate in order to create comedy and provoke laughter. A typical example is *Yulai Little Hero*, which adds many elements of the humour of day-to-day living, while retaining a faithful basis of the core events of the original literary works and bringing a more complete sense of playfulness by foregrounding the child's mischief-loving and arrogant nature. The film's creator considers it to be a combination of *Home Alone* (1990) and the James Bond film series, conveying the fun that seeing a child outwitting villains brings, and also portraying him as a cool teenager — the "James Bond" of the Anti-Japanese War. Yet compared with *Sanmao Joins the Army*, which resonates with irony and tension, this fashionable and popular genre of children's war films cannot be included in the category of narratives that convey irony and reflection. It is mono-themed and lacking in depth, and its attempt to induce laughter highlights nothing more than the superficial victory of heroes over villains, and strength over weakness.

The humorous narrative is a mask that attracts children to children's war films. Yet the eyes behind the mask are often solemn or even more than solemn, tragic. As Thomas Schatz points out, "Whatever its commercial motives and aesthetic requirements are, the main charm and socio-cultural functions of the film are basically ideological" (1). Children's war films that employ comic elements invariably deal with binary

oppositions (such as strength/weakness) and implicit as well as explicit ideology. The criticism of war in these narratives emerges through a desire for justice, a passionate call for humanitarianism, and an appeal to the quirks of ordinary human nature.

Conclusion

In summary, since the New Period of reform and the opening up of the nation, the cultural context of the era has provided a relatively free, broad ideological and aesthetic space for a comprehensive and diversified exploration of children's war films in China. Such an approach is beneficial because, as Zhou argues: "To realize the conversion of ideas and the changes of artistic ideas, to excavate the multifaceted nature of war, and to establish the focus of expression of people's spiritual feelings are the inevitable requirements for improving the quality of war films" (Zhou 63). In the development of children's war films over the past forty years, what we have termed *individual* narrative, *cruel* narrative, and *playful* narrative has allowed a re-examination of China's revolutionary history, the nature of war and human nature, and the relationship between war and children, through richly creative thinking and artistic innovations. Although they may differ in terms of style and technique, these films have several factors in common: firstly, in their portrayal of the protagonist, these films have eliminated the previous stereotypes, which laud heroism while despising childishness, instead producing films that accentuate childlike innocence, individual personality, and children's growth in character and spirit; secondly, no matter what kind of narrative the films contain, each includes an emphasis on humanitarianism and a discussion of the lived dimension. They examine the causes and methods of children's involvement in the war, and measure the impact of war on children's fates, focusing on their physical and mental trauma. Many children's war films break from the tradition of revolutionary films that emphasise plot and narrate in single-lined structures. From the perspective of individual narrative, films of the New Period complete an affectionate retrospective and a rational inspection of war through the use of a double-lined structure of separate times and spaces, presenting the complex and entangled experiences of war, such as happiness and sorrow, strength and weakness, love and hate, pity and respect, and the destruction of lives and innocence that war brings. These films are also innovative in their use of visual imagery. Through constructing their themes and styles around a fusion of colour, sound, and light, these films seek to represent children's circumstances and the choices that war forces on them in a different way, providing a unique window into the effects of war on children but also serving as a mirror that reflects global conceptions of "war and peace".

Generally speaking, besides aesthetics and entertainment considerations, undoubtedly, there are educational considerations in children's film. In war narratives, particularly, the ideology of the film-makers

might influence the thoughts of young audiences. Alfred Adler, an Austrian psychoanalyst and founder of individual psychology, believes that consciousness is the key to personality. He notes:

When examining the formation of personality, it is important to pay special attention to the fact that the integrality of personality and its unique goals and styles of life are not on the basis of objective reality, but on the basis of individual subjective view of objective facts. That is to say, the individual's view of objective facts is not the fact itself. So, although humans live in the same reality, they shape themselves in different ways. (5)

Similarly, it can be argued that the directors' views conveyed in the film will also influence audiences in an intangible way. Adler pays attention to the formation of children's personalities and attaches importance to the influence of social culture on individual personality. Discussing the influence of the external environment on children's growth, he provides the example of war:

Prejudice between nations or races is often the root of the outbreak of war. If we want to promote the progress of human civilization, we must eliminate this prejudice that has caused mankind great calamity. In this regard, it is the duty of teachers to explain the real causes of war, rather than to give children an easy opportunity to demonstrate their desire and pursuit of superiority by playing with guns and sticks. This is not a preparation for future civilized life. (166)

The same is true for children's war films, as "teacher's duties" can be replaced by the "duties of film creators or directors". However, we can't help but ask: Can the creator fully understand the essence of war, the value of life, the relationship between individuals and society, and children's growth? Are these understandings objective, integral, and rational? Is it possible to express and explain these concepts clearly with the appropriate artistic images and techniques? For children whose values towards the world, and towards life, have not yet formed, the ideology in the film and its representation of values may affect the formation of children's personality. The sensitivity shown and methods undertaken in handling these problems may determine whether the film has the appropriate complexity, moral correctness, and depth of thought. War narratives of Chinese children's films since the new period, which explore the individual life as the core element of humanity, are evidence of a trend that is consistent with contemporary children's war films from around the world. But comparatively speaking, Chinese children's films explore human nature in the war in a more simplistic way, while a section of children's war films from other countries employ a more multifaceted approach to

examining the complexity of human nature in war, some examples of which would be the French/West German film *Après La Guerre* (directed by Jean-Loup Hubert, 1991), the Iranian film *Turtles Can Fly* (directed by Bahman Ghobadi, 2004), the British/American film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (directed by M. Ark Herman, 2008), the American film *Where Eskimo Lives* (directed by Tomasz Wiszniewski, 2002), and the Danish/German film *Under Sandet* (directed by Martin Zandvliet, 2015). These films reveal in depth the hatred, pain, trials and struggles of children affected by war, but in some ways provide a sharper and a more profound examination of human nature, because they bear a stronger sense of criticism and anti-war spirit. The French thinker Régis Debray wrote in his book *Critique of Political Reason*: “The history of an era is not only its invention and discovery of the history, but also its vision of an ideal country” (Quoted in Iriye 3). These children’s films, which represent the history of war and, in connection with that history, the history of children’s suffering, also contain a strong desire for an ideal peaceful world. In assessing the development of worldwide contemporary children’s films of war, though these films may be set in different regions and depict different landscapes, they contain the same humanistic considerations at their core. They express a demand for peace from different perspectives and in different styles, reflecting the universality of the human conscience and a dedication to protect the future of children. Yet further areas still need consideration, including the hidden origins of war and the continued alienation of humanity and, because war is as much in existence now as it has been in the past, it is important that more films of this genre continue to be made and that this brave exploration continues, both in China and elsewhere.

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