

Contested Images of China, Japan, and Russia: Landscape and Language in *Purple Sunset* (2001)

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the innovative ways in which film director Feng Xiaoning contests conventional images of China, Japan, and Russia and resituates racial identities at a life-and-death threshold at the end of WWII in *Purple Sunset* (2001). The spectacular natural landscape of Northeast China (or Manchuria) provides an unusual stage for three isolated human beings (a male Chinese laborer, a Japanese schoolgirl, and a female Russian soldier) who are lost in the wilderness and struggle to outsmart their enemies and outgrow their predestinated identities, and their different uses of language heighten the fragility of human communication and existence. The outcome is at once tragic and heroic, and the film succeeds in capturing the beauty of life and death and the contested nature of memory and identity.

Keywords

landscape, language, images, memory, China, Japan, Russia, war film

Introduction: Staging the Purple Sunset

Near the end of *Purple Sunset* (dir. Feng Xiaoning 2001), the battle is over, and Nadja (Anna Dzenilalova), a female Russian army nurse, admires the beautiful sunset—“Look at the sunset; it’s purple,” she says in Russian. Against the huge glowing sun, we see the silhouettes of Japanese POWs throwing down their guns one by one. The soundtrack switches to English as we hear a radio announcement: “After this inhuman war, peace returns to the world. All races, the white, the yellow, and the black of all beliefs can live together peacefully to build a new world. In that world, people will respect each others’ life and dignity.”

The symbolism of the sunset, referenced in the film’s title and captured several times at critical moments in the film, can hardly escape the viewer, for its breathtaking beauty at once signals the end of one era and the beginning of another. Within the film’s diegesis, World War II has just ended, and the era of peace is announced to have arrived in which surrendered Japanese POWs as well as Japanese civilians are going home. Yet, the purple sunset is staged here not so much as a joyful celebration of the victory of China and Russia over Japan as a somber reflection on the indescribable human costs of the war, as evident in the final on-screen list of 74 million wartime deaths in major countries, including 2 million in Japan, 6 million in Poland, 7 million in Germany, 20 million in the former Soviet Union, and 35 million in China.

Alongside the public acknowledgment of tragic numbers, traumatic private remembrances persist. Yang (Fu Dalong), an able-bodied male Chinese laborer forced to work in the Japanese concentration camp who has survived acts of war atrocity one after another, has no family to return to. The film's ending sequences cut to Yang in his old age, holding a Japanese female doll-head music box (*bayinhe*), which originally belonged to Akiyok (Chie Maeda), a Japanese schoolgirl who grew up in Northeast China (or Manchuria, as preferred in the Japanese parlance then) and was ruthlessly gunned down by a Japanese officer after the announcement of Japan's unconditional surrender in August 1945. The image of old Yang holding the music box also appears at the very beginning of the film and thus bookends the entire narrative, encoding Yang as an aging, inarticulate witness to the fragility of human memory. After Yang's death, the music box is returned according to his wish to the Northeast wilderness, gradually buried under a flurry of golden maple leaves. Objects of human memory may perish, but the natural landscape remains resilient and vital, composing an image of transcendence beyond national, racial, and linguistic barriers.

It is my contention that the war film constitutes a public arena of remembrance in which contending parties—from rival nation-states to rivals within a nation-state and generations of artists and audiences—produce, exhibit, and receive war images and narratives in their respective efforts to reshape history and memory and to reassert their agency and identities in drastically different sociopolitical environments. By emphasizing screen images as acts of remembrance, I am following Jay Winter's recommendation that we “shift from the term ‘memory’ to the term ‘remembrance’ as a strategy” to rethink “the notion of memory as unstable, plastic, synthetic, and repeatedly reshaped” (Winter 2006: 3-4). As with many other national cinemas, Chinese cinema has propagated certain images of public memory and national identity; as with memory and identity, screen images are unstable, plastic, and repeatedly reshaped. Through a survey of war film in Chinese cinema and an analysis of *Purple Sunset*, I draw attention to the intricate ways in which private remembrances on the Chinese screen corroborate, challenge, or subvert officially sanctioned collective memory in China. In *Purple Sunset*, conventional images of China, Japan, and Russia are revisited, and racial identities are reshaped during a life-and-death struggle at the end of World War II, a struggle that heightens the contested nature of memory and identity, foregrounds the gap between language and culture, but ultimately aspires to a transcendent view of natural landscape.

War Film: Paradigms of Nationalism, Patriotism, and Heroism

A brief survey of war film in China in this section is meant to help us understand the formation of public memory and conventional images in the twentieth century. For people familiar with war film in China, the dominance of official history and collective memory is all too obvious. In terms of large-scale warfare, Chinese cinema covers the following:

- (1) the War of Resistance against Japan (*kangri zhanzheng* or the Second Sino-Japanese War; hereafter “the Resistance War”) in 1937-1945, which devastated much of China's territory (Zhou and Zhang 1995);

- (2) the Civil War between the Communists and the Nationalists in 1945-1949, which concluded with the former's victory on the mainland and the latter's retreat to the island of Taiwan;
- (3) the Korean War in 1950-1953, during which the Chinese "volunteer army" fought side by side with North Korea against South Korea and the U.S.-led United Nations troops.

In terms of political interpretation, the Communists shared with the Nationalists (during the latter's rule on the mainland before 1949 and in Taiwan from the 1950s through the 1990s) a sustained effort to glorify Chinese heroic resistance and to denounce Japanese wartime atrocities. However, the Nationalists became the arch-enemy when the Communists established the People's Republic of China in 1949 and its state-own studios started to produce war films in large quantities in order to legitimize its rule and indoctrinate its audiences.¹ The Korean War provided the Communists with another stage to propagate its ideology of anti-imperialism and self-reliance in the socialist period of the 1950s-1970s, although films exclusively addressing this war would become increasingly fewer from the 1980s.

As a genre, war film refers to "films about the waging of war in the twentieth century," in which "scenes of combat are a requisite ingredient and these are dramatically central" (Neale 2000:125). In fact, "dramatic" and "central" are two appropriate words to describe much Chinese cinematic treatment of the Resistance War since the early 1930s, which typically aims to promote heroism and martyrdom in times of national crisis, and the trend continued from wartime through the postwar period in the late 1940s. When it comes to the socialist and immediate post-Mao periods, Chinese war films are dominated by what I elsewhere describe as the "paradigms of nationalism, patriotism, and heroism" (Zhang 2002: 182-85). Not surprisingly, the Chinese term "hero" (*yingxiong*) is prominently featured in several early socialist films: both *Heroes of Lüliang Mountain* (dir. Lü Ban and Yi Lin 1950) and *New Story of Heroic Sons and Daughters* (dir. Lü Ban and Shi Dongshan 1950) dramatize Chinese villagers' resistance against Japanese invaders under Communist leadership.

During the socialist period, war films could be further divided into two subcategories: (1) Communist hagiography and (2) military strategy. *Daughters of China* (dir. Ling Zifeng and Zhai Qiang 1949), which glorifies eight female resistant fighters in Northeast China who drown themselves in the Mudan River rather than letting themselves be captured by the Japanese, would join similar war films in an extended list of historical figures enshrined in the hall of fame by Communist screen hagiography. As for military strategy, *From Victory to Victory* (dir. Cheng Yin and Tang Xiaodan 1952) restaged major battles in the Civil War and paved the way for exhilarating combat films to come. Large-scale fighting and intricate military strategy would produce a "thriller cycle" (*jingxian yangshi*), which includes *Reconnaissance across the Yangtze* (dir. Tang Xiaodan 1954). Interestingly, twenty years later, when Chinese feature production was resumed after a hiatus in the early chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976),

¹ Large state-own studios (for example, Beijing, Changchun, and Shanghai) were given annual quotas for war film productions from the early 1950s onward, and the August First Film Studio was established in 1952 to specialize in the production of war- and military-themed (*junshi tici*) films (Zhang 2004: 189-99).

Reconnaissance across the Yangtze (dir. Tang Huada and Tang Xiaodan 1974) and *From Victory to Victory* (dir. Cheng Yin and Wang Yan 1974) were two prominent color remakes in the war film genre that were judged politically safe by studios and artists in a precarious time besieged by ultraleftist ideology.

Similarly, *Guerillas on the Plain* (dir. Wu Zhaodi and Chang Zhenhua 1974) is another rare remake of a film with the same title (dir. Su Li and Wu Zhaodi 1955), but this time, the film belongs to the “folk legend” genre (*chuanqi yangshi*) popular during the socialist period (Huangfu 2005: 119). Elements of folk culture are also discernible in two war films produced for military education: *Landmine Warfare* (dir. Tang Yingqi, Xu Du, and Wu Jianhai 1962) and *Tunnel Warfare* (dir. Ren Xudong 1965), and their repeated showings nationwide—frequently in the open air—throughout the Cultural Revolution acquired for both of them a legendary status while exerting a tremendous impact on children’s memories. Indeed, the Communist regime solicited children’s active participation in watching war films. *The Letter with Feathers* (dir. Shi Hui 1954) and *Zhang Ga, the Boy Soldier* (dir. Cui Wei and Ouyang Hongying 1963) present legendary child heroes who always outsmart their Japanese enemies and experience thrills in military fighting as they are initiated into the Communist revolution.

Evidently, Chinese war films have practiced something similar to what James Chapman sees as the notion of “war as adventure” in Hollywood productions. Chapman finds “the pleasure culture of war” evident in all societies where children play at being soldiers and collecting war toys; the war film, therefore, “is a vehicle through which ruling elites set out to indoctrinate the masses with the mentality necessary for the perpetuation of the warfare state” (Chapman 2008: 185). In China, such cinematic perpetuation of the warfare state has lasted for decades and has yielded a collective memory, in which Communist heroes—real as well as fictional—have become household names. Producing and exhibiting war films thus function as rituals of collective remembrance strictly controlled and widely propagated by the party-state.

The paradigms of nationalism, patriotism, and heroism underwent modifications in the post-Mao period, as Chinese filmmakers sought to explore alternative modes to the still-dominant paradigms. A general trend was to integrate human qualities (*renxing*) into otherwise one-dimensional, almost abstract figures of heroism and martyrdom, and this would lead to scenarios where even top Communist leaders, albeit still in stereotype, are now increasingly given emotional moments and humorous dialogue (Hong 1998: 93-106). Another noticeable development is that, contrary to the socialist period when heterosexual romance was either absent or disguised in war films, in the post-Mao period, such romance would become a dramatic centerpiece in home-front dramas like *The Call of the Front* (dir. Li Jun 1978).

Yet, collective memory of official Communist history is only modified or dressed up by the elements of humanity suggested above, along with emergence of a more tolerant historical view, according to which the Nationalist army’s decisive contribution to the Resistance War is acknowledged in combat films such as *The Battle of Taierzhuang* (dir. Yang Guangyuan and Zai Junjie 1987). Overall, the Communist party-state has continued to invest in war films, in some cases more excessively than ever before, as in several mega-series of films to commemorate the

anniversaries of the People’s Republic, the Communist Party, and the Liberation Army. The most recent example of “main melody” (*zhuxuanlü*) films is *The Founding of a Republic* (dir. Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin 2009), which includes a parade of senior Communist leaders and stages several battle scenes. The film broke the Chinese domestic box-office record with takings of RMB 415 million (Yin 2010: 6) and set an unprecedented example of recruiting many top Chinese and Hong Kong stars to play for free.² Once again, *The Founding of a Republic* demonstrated the unsurpassed power of the party-state to produce and disseminate officially endorsed collective memory, although the true effects of such heavy-handed top-down procedure require further study.

Stereotypes and Variants: Screen Images of Asians and Eurasians

One noticeable result of the decades-long official production and exhibition of war films in socialist China is the prominence of stereotypes in the so-called Red Classics (*hongse jingdian*), works made to glorify Communist heroism and martyrdom. Not surprisingly, popular war films, especially those set during the Resistance War, have now become the stock pile of Communist images of legitimacy and legacy. Not only did stereotypes continue in the color remakes of war films during the second half of the Cultural Revolution, they have acquired afterlives in a large number of new adaptations and reproductions of familiar tales in multi-episode television dramas and even animated films.

We may pause at this juncture to reevaluate such stereotypes constructed and propagated through war films in China. Here is a chart of comparative features of Chinese, Japanese, and Russians on the Chinese screen.

	Chinese	Japanese	Russian
Role	victim	aggressor	liberator
Value	courage	savage	strength
Nature	nobility	wickedness	kindness
Personality	flexible	vicious	stubborn
Sexuality	reserved	perverse	displayed

In spite of the extensive Soviet influence in China’s cultural sphere from the 1950s through much of the 1960s, Russians rarely occupied center stage in Chinese films. One reason was the increasing tension between China and the Soviet Union in the early 1960s. Another reason might be that China already exhibited a significant number of Soviet films during the period (Chen 2009), and certain lines of dialogue (dubbed in Chinese) from Soviet titles such as *Lenin in October* (dir. Mikhail Romm 1937) and *Lenin in 1918* (dir. Mikhail Romm 1939) had subsequently become everyday reference points in Chinese popular culture. This is why dialogue lines and scenes from Soviet films, along with Russian songs and music, are evoked nostalgically in *In the Heat of the Sun* (dir. Jiang Wen 1994), a fantastic tale of an army kid’s coming of age during the chaotic years

² These stars include internationally recognized Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Vivian Wu, and Zhang Ziyi, as well as dozens of nationally known stars in mainland China.

of the Cultural Revolution.

Early stereotypes of the Japanese can be traced back to *March of the Guerrillas* (dir. Cai Chusheng and Situ Huimin 1938), a patriotic picture produced in Hong Kong when much of Shanghai had fallen into Japanese hands. Based on the image of a Japanese officer in the film, a historian observes “the strutting caricature of the Japanese, who appears on the screen more a figure ripe for ridicule than a superhuman fascist, embodying all the Chinese racial stereotypes about the Japanese: sex-crazed, alcoholic, and dim-witted” (Fu 2003: 75). However, it is important to note that, to counterbalance the one-dimensional stereotypes that would become dominant in Chinese popular memory for decades to come, the film directors projected unusual forward-thinking by arranging for a small group of Japanese pacifist soldiers to make their first appearance on the Chinese screen: they help Chinese guerillas defeat the Japanese troops stationed in the village. The unusual precedent of the Japanese pacifist soldiers was followed in another war film, *The Light of East Asia* (dir. He Feiguang 1940), which cast real-life Japanese POWs who had turned pacifist in hinterland China during the war (Zhang 2008: 75).

Decades later, pacifist ideas returned in several films intent on retrieving and promoting Sino-Japanese friendship. *The Go Masters* (*Mikan no taikyoku*, dir. Duan Jishun and Jun’ya Satō 1982) features Sun Daolin as Kuang Yishan, a Chinese go master whose finger is chopped off because he refuses to play a game with a Japanese officer during the war. More recently, pacifist ideas are incorporated into *The Go Master* (dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 2006), a biographic picture of Wu Qingyuan, a Chinese-Japanese whose life witnesses the ups and downs of the relationship between the two countries. Even Zhang Yimou, reputedly China’s best-known director internationally whose directorial debut, *Red Sorghum* (1987), dwells extensively on war atrocities, including a graphic scene in which Japanese soldiers order a Chinese captive to be skinned alive, would feel obliged to reconstruct screen images of Japan in *Riding Alone* (2005). Co-directed with Yasuo Furuhashi, the film stars Ken Takakura (or Gao Cangjian as he is popularly known in Chinese), a male Japanese star whose masculine roles made a deep impression in post-Mao China.

To a considerable extent, the post-Mao Chinese productions and co-productions mentioned above involve what I would call “screen diplomacy,” which expressly aims at demilitarization of Japanese images by way of retrieving Sino-Japanese friendship ties and restoring human compassion on both sides. Yet, for a real challenge to dominant stereotypes that have structured official history and popular memory in China, we must turn to a disruption in the genre of the war film that took place from the mid 1980s onward.

Challenge to Official Memory: Intervention of the Early “Fifth Generation”

A fundamental challenge to dominant stereotypes of Chinese heroism and martyrdom arose in the mid 1980s when a new generation of film directors sought to place war and revolution in an entirely new perspective. Armed with a transcendent view of humanity and disquieting images of brutality, “the Fifth Generation directors looked forward to salvation: not only their own salvation, but also the salvation of memory, history, nation, and subsistence” (Dai 1993:44). No doubt, early

Fifth Generation films like *One and Eight* (directed by Zhang Junzhao, 1984) and *Red Sorghum*, both featuring brutal images of war and violence, pointed to a new direction of visual realism markedly different from stage-like socialist realism.

We may take a look at *Evening Bell* (dir. Wu Ziniu 1988), an exceptional war film intended symbolically to “bury wars” and to signify “the burial and termination of a tragic but heroic era” (Dai, 1993:44). An outspoken director, Wu Ziniu (b. 1952) did not hide his voice of dissent when he asserted in a 1988 interview that “we cannot forever stay with the heroism of the past decades, promoting national spirit and endorsing the invincibility of the Communist Party and its armies.... We have too many such films. Can’t we do something different? Can’t we represent war from a higher angle?” (Liu 1988: 112). As I have demonstrated elsewhere, *Evening Bell* is precisely such a “different” war film aspiring to a “higher angle,” namely that of humanity transcending geopolitical nationalism (Zhang 2003: 81-88). A small team of Communist soldiers is dispatched to bury their fallen comrades, but they encounter a group of Japanese troops who have been hiding in a cave without any knowledge of Japan’s surrender and who have cannibalized Chinese laborers during a prolonged period of hunger. Despite their outrage, the Communist soldiers decide to leave food for the Japanese and take them as POWs instead of killing them in revenge.

The reference to cannibalism in *Evening Bell* reminds us of the recurrent images of brutality, especially decapitation, in Wu Ziniu’s other war films.³ Arguably, Wu might have intended scenes of decapitation in his unconventional war films to substantiate a Benjaminian vision of history as barbaric and catastrophic: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 1969: 256). The subversive equation of civilization with barbarism destabilizes the fundamental grounding of heroism in times of war, and the line between victim and victimizer is purposefully blurred so that both would appear to be the equally helpless victims of war from a “higher” view of humanity that transcends military, racial, and national identities. In *Evening Bell*, the idea of the Japanese themselves as victims of war is unmistakably present in the pre-credit sequence, where a tragic group suicide is committed by the Japanese soldiers with raging blazes and machine-gun fire.⁴

In many ways, Feng Xiaoning (b. 1954), a latecomer in the Fifth Generation, shares Wu’s esthetics of visual violence and an intention to challenge official memory. Feng establishes his own reputation as an experimental war film director with *The Meridian of War* (1990), in which twelve children lose their lives in order to save one nameless injured Communist soldier. Similar to Wu’s films, *The Meridian of War* is packed with brutal war scenes and subtly questions the disregard of human life in the dominant discourse of heroism and martyrdom in Chinese war films. Different from Wu’s focus on the barren landscape in *Evening Bell*—a visual tribute to early Fifth Generation films like *One and Eight* and *Yellow Earth* (dir. Chen Kaige 1984) , Feng is more

³ Other than those mentioned in the text, Wu Ziniu’s war films include *Joyous Heroes* (1988), *Between Life and Death* (1988), and *The Big Mill* (1990), all of which feature disturbing images of Communist characters who, far from being “joyous” and “heroic,” suffer from miserable conditions in life and death (Zhang 2002: 178-79).

⁴ Such extraordinary sympathy for the Japanese further accounts for the months of difficulties in which *Evening Bell* struggled to pass censorship in China (Zhang 2003: 84-85). A comforting note is that when it passed censorship, the film went on to win the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival.

interested in spectacular landscapes. Just as *The Meridian of War* features the winding paths of the ruined Great Wall, Feng's award-winning trilogy of "war and peace" incorporates cross-ethnic, interracial, and transnational relationships in three picturesque areas—Tibet's grasslands and snow-capped peaks, mountains along the Yellow River, and forests in the Great Xing'an Ridges bordering China and Russia.⁵

More specifically, in *Red River Valley* (dir. Feng Xiaoning 1997), a young Chinese woman (Ning Jing) caught in a love triangle between a Tibetan herdsman and a Tibetan prince joins forces with patriotic Tibetans in resisting the British invasion of Tibet. The film ends with Jones, a British man sympathetic to Tibetan culture, gazing at the distant sacred snowy peaks that bear witness to the war atrocities that unravel on screen. The Western perspective is continued in *Grief over the Yellow River* (dir. Feng Xiaoning 1999), where Irving, an aging American ex-pilot, assumes the voiceover and recounts in flashbacks the emergency landing of his reconnaissance aircraft near the Great Wall and his rescue by heroic Chinese villagers and soldiers during World War II. Irving falls in love with an "angelic" Chinese army nurse, An Jie (Ning Jing), who in the end sacrifices her life so that Irving can escape the Japanese by swimming across the Yellow River (Zhang 2002: 197-201). In *Purple Sunset*, Feng Xiaoning has worked out a different triangle, this time, a male Chinese labor camp survivor (Yang), a female Russian soldier (Nadja), and a Japanese schoolgirl (Akiyok) recruited to fight during the final days of World War II. Speaking in Chinese, Russian, and Japanese, the three characters gradually transcend their differences and develop trust and friendship as they journey across forests, hills, rivers, grasslands, and swamps. A tragedy occurs at the end when the Japanese girl, who has finally turned pacifist at heart, dies when she rushes to announce Japan's surrender and is shot by a Japanese officer who is in the middle of killing a crowd of Japanese civilians, including young boys, because they appear unwilling to commit group suicide.

Purple Sunset: Rewriting at Ground Zero

The group suicide scenes staged at the beginning of *Evening Bell* and near the end of *Purple Sunset* clearly remind us of Benjamin's subversive vision of the history of civilization as barbaric. In addition, the scenes also reconstruct the Japanese not just as ruthless war perpetrators but as helpless war victims as well, thus complicating issues of identities in times of war. More than *Evening Bell*, *Purple Sunset* rewrites identities at ground zero, setting three characters at a threshold of life and death in a vast wilderness and confronting them with political, racial, and linguistic barriers.

Politically, Nadja and Yang are allies, and Nadja initially plays the role of liberator as the

⁵ Feng Xiaoning's films have won major awards nationally and internationally, and some did quite well at the box office. For instance, *Red River Valley* earned RMB 10 million and was ranked number two in 1997; *Grief over the Yellow River* was China's official entry for the Oscars Best Foreign Film competition; and *Purple Sunset* won Best Picture at the Hawaii International Film Festival as well as Best Cinematography at China's Golden Rooster Awards. For more details, see Dangdai dianying (2002: 58).

Soviet tanks crush the Japanese concentration camp and rescue Yang, who is the only survivor of a group execution. Nonetheless, whereas Nadja remains kind to Yang most of the time, the conventional image of Russian strength is compromised as Nadja's male superior (a big brother figure) is tricked by Akiyok into a field littered with landmines and killed in a non-heroic way. True, Nadja is just as stubborn as her superior, and she is unrestrained in her displays of emotions and sexuality, as when she first embraces and kisses Yang after she is reunited with the group and then swims completely naked in a lake after Japan's surrender. Her feminine qualities, however, do not reduce her bravery in driving an armored vehicle and defeating the vicious Japanese officer at the end.

Racially, Akiyok does not live up to the Chinese stereotype of Japanese viciousness, although she remains hostile to the Russian and the Chinese till the very end and displays her wickedness to varying degrees. Her first appearance is accompanied by an unexploded bomb, which prompts the Russian officer to shoot at a wood cabin and kill Akiyok's sister. After tricking the officer to death in the mine field, Akiyok leads Nadja and Yang through the wild forests for days and returns to the Japanese camp, exactly where they started. It is only after listening to the emperor's radio announcement of Japan's unconditional surrender in Japanese that Akiyok finally abandons her combatant identity. Having no mother or sister, she apologizes for the Japanese killings in the war and even asks Yang to be her brother, thus hoping to close the racial gap widened by warring nations. With nightmarish remembrances of Japanese atrocities (repeated in his traumatic flashbacks), Yang can only respond to Akiyok, "Go back and live a happy life."

Linguistically, Akiyok, Nadja, and Yang speak Japanese, Russian, and Chinese respectively, and they rely on gestures, eye contact, and facial expressions to communicate through much of the film. While it is true that only Nadja and Yang are given voiceover segments in the film, thus highlighting their agency in negotiating between private and public memories, significantly, all three characters are initiators of flashbacks of their own, which help articulate their perceptions and emotions. Akiyok's flashbacks trace her recruitment to the war effort when Manchuria faces an imminent Soviet attack, and her romance with schoolboy Onishi further exposes the destructive nature of Japanese militarism. Nadja's flashbacks help move the plot forward while revealing glimpses of her war-ravaged remembrances. In comparison, Yang's flashbacks are the most dramatic of all three, and they represent war atrocities as visual documents of barbarism in the Benjaminian sense.

Given such obvious political, racial, and linguistic barriers, the three characters strive to outwit their enemies and slough off their predesignated identities, and their use of different languages only serves to heighten how vulnerable are human communication and existence. Lost in the wilderness and lacking sufficient food, they must rely on each other to survive, yet their protracted mutual distrust undergoes rounds of test before they all agree that "their lives are linked together," as Nadja puts it in a voiceover. In order to tease out the film's dramatic tension, let us analyze scenes associated with three prominent objects—an army knife, a submachine gun, and a music box.

The army knife belongs to Nadja's superior, who uses it to unearth a landmine before he is

killed by another one. After they escape the Japanese chase in the forest, Nadja hands over the knife to Yang and orders him to kill Akiyok—"You are a man." Contrary to the stereotype of Chinese courage, Yang confronts Akiyok but fails to execute the act, because he is incapacitated by a flashback in which his mother is ruthlessly killed by a newly recruited Japanese soldier under repeated order. Yang's traumatized scream returns him to a moment of humanity, a moment when he transcends the binary definitions of victim and aggressor, atrocity and revenge.⁶ The second time Yang raises the knife to Akiyok's neck is when she has led them back to the Japanese camp and hopes to persuade them to surrender to the Japanese. The confrontation between the two rivals is ended when Japan's surrender is announced on the radio. The last time we see the knife is after Akiyok has been gunned down by the war-crazed Japanese officer. Nadja's armored vehicle has crushed the officer, and Yang drops the knife, which pierces the officer's cap on the ground, signifying that justice is served as the war ends.

The Russian submachine gun belongs to Nadja, who is the only soldier among the three. Once, when they are walking across a single-tree-trunk bridge, Akiyok falls into the swamp, and Yang borrows the gun to rescue her. Akiyok slowly sinks but grabs the gun, and at one point, holds it all by herself with the gun pointing at Yang. A moment of hallucination has Akiyok firing at Yang, but Yang regains his composure and succeeds in pulling Akiyok out of the swamp. This otherwise "heroic" moment is followed by a close-up shot of Yang's teary eyes, as he remembers seeing a fellow Chinese laborer wrapped in a sack, set on fire, attached to two grenades, and then blown to pieces on a lake. A second significant moment involving the submachine gun takes place when a wild tiger approaches Akiyok and Yang. In spite of Akiyok's repeated urging, Yang fails to fire because he does not know how to handle the weapon. Only after he accidentally releases the safety trigger and starts firing at the tiger, which runs away immediately, does Akiyok realize that she could have grabbed the gun and controlled her two enemies a long time ago. Indeed, the third moment comes when Akiyok points the gun at Nadja and Yang in the deserted Japanese camp. Contrary to Nadja, who raises her hands in surrender, Yang fearlessly—and furiously—walks toward Akiyok until he is at gunpoint, whereupon Akiyok weeps and drops the gun. Nadja is amazed to see that, as a precaution, Yang has discharged all bullets before leaving the gun aside in search for food. The last moment is linked to Yang again, and this time, he appears as a typical heroic Chinese freedom fighter standing in the armored vehicle and shooting at obstinate Japanese troops in revenge of Akiyok's death.

The Japanese doll-head music box belongs to Akiyok, who treats it as a token of her childhood and her romance with Onishi. Yang picks up the music box when Akiyok first appears. She is taken to lead the group out of the forests, but her cunning has cost the Russian officer his life. Later on, when Yang plays with the music box, Akiyok's flashbacks show her last days with Onishi before he is drafted as a volunteer soldier and taken away from her on a rainy night. Near

⁶ The subversive power of this flashback scene is testified when a critic complains that Yang's remembrances are so fragmented and distracting that the viewers might not know where to direct their sympathy—the victim or the aggressor. Interestingly, it is the very object of this criticism—the film's "lyrical ambience of an aspiration for peace" (Tuo 2001: 99)—that the director wants to achieve through fragmentation of memories and identities.

the end, the music box rolls down a flowery hill after Akiyok is killed. Again, Yang picks it up, and by now, it has become a symbol of lost innocence and crushed dreams. As such, we see it transported to a Moscow war monument years later when Nadja, in a wheelchair, readily recognizes it. We also see bookend shots of Yang holding the music box in his old age. The last shot of the music box is in the thick of a maple forest in Northeast China, where golden leaves flutter down and gently bury it underneath. The serene landscape now takes over the symbolisms accumulated by human objects.

Conclusion: Landscape as Pleasure and Transcendence

As the film's title suggests, landscape takes central stage in *Purple Sunset*. The setting sun first appears when Nadja allows Yang to follow her and her superior after a deadly skirmish with the Japanese troops in a camp that cost most of her fellow Russian soldiers their lives. The second and third sunset shots are more picturesque, as we first see the tiny silhouettes of Nadja and Yang walking up a hill, and then the silhouettes of the three because, against Nadja's orders, Yang has returned to free Akiyok from a tree and bring her along with them. These two shots are one minute apart, but the addition of one human figure gives an extra dimension of humanism to the film. Elsewhere in the film, the three walking in gorgeous landscape scenes are repeated again and again: amidst a vast canvas of golden maple forests, across the rushing water of a mountain river, and even when they run away from the raging flames of a wildfire caused by a downed airplane. Akiyok's knowledge of forest life has saved them from the fire, and for the first time, all three of them break into hearty laughter despite their linguistic differences. Indeed, to show Yang how to escape the fire by laying down flat on a burned area, Akiyok has spoken in Chinese and revealed her bilingual ability.

Nonetheless, the racial tension persists regardless of their reliance on each other's support to survive in the wilderness. In another breathtaking sunset scene, Akiyok expresses her admiration of its beauty, but Yang points out that the purple color means the sun is about to set, indirectly implying the waning days of the Japanese Empire. The huge glowing sun turns into a scene of the three walking at night against a backdrop of a huge moon, an ominous sign foreshadowing the confrontation among the three in the deserted Japanese camp. When the last scene of the purple sunset appears, Akiyok is dead, and the war is finally over. As happens at the end of *Evening Bell*, where the sunset signifies the end of the war, the beautiful sunset captured repeatedly in *Purple Sunset* symbolizes the human aspiration for peace and dignity that ultimately transcends political, racial, and linguistic boundaries.

The scene immediately following the Japanese camp, when Akiyok accepts Japan's surrender and Nadja celebrates the victory by swimming naked in the lake, contains touching moments when the three characters seem to have outgrown their predesignated identities as aggressor, victim, and liberator. "The war is over," Akiyok says with relief. "Over like this?" Yang rebukes in anger, "Why did you come here to kill us?" With tears in her eyes, Akiyok answers in Chinese, "I am sorry... they let us kill people." When the emotional verbal confrontation ends, the two sit by the

lake, and Yang throws bullets into the shallow water one by one. Akiyok thanks Yang for protecting her and, in a redeeming gesture, asks him to be her brother. All the while, Nadja listens to their exchange from a distance, as she floats on the lake, gazes at the blue sky, and cleanses her body and soul in a hard-earned moment of peace and freedom after years of war.

No doubt, Nadja's naked swim in the lake has transformed her into part of the landscape for the viewer. Here, we need to ponder the relationship between cinema and landscape. Nature has been around for millions of years, but human perception is essential for a landscape to take shape and distinguish itself from nature per se. As Martin Lefebvre reasons, through certain mental "framing" or "shaping"—the etymological meaning of the suffix "scape," which derives from "skip" and related terms like "scipe" and "gescape"—human perception gives form to an otherwise "formless" natural environment: "With that frame nature turns into culture, land into landscape" (Lefebvre 2006: xv). It is important, therefore, for us to probe the perception that frames the picturesque landscape in *Purple Sunset*.

Professionally trained in art design and simultaneously working as director of cinematographer on *Purple Sunset*, Feng Xiaoning intended landscape scenes to provide visual pleasure as well as conceptual transcendence to the viewer. In an interview, he refers to Ernest Hemingway's conviction that a man could be destroyed but could not be defeated, and emphasizes that the most crucial aspect of his war films is "a kind of human spirit" (Jia 2002: 47). Indeed, the human spirit in question is conceived at what Wu Ziniu imagines to be "a higher angle"—"higher" in a transcendent view of humanity. This is why one critic believes that in Feng's films, "some emotions have even transcended racial and national limits" (Jia 2002: 52). Another critic similarly praises the sense of transcendence in Feng's films, for they "have transcended a direct representation of the national-racial consciousness" in much of mainstream Chinese productions and helped switch the focus of Chinese war films from military strategy to individual humanity (Zhao 2002: 54).

Landscape and language are two tropes through which Feng Xiaoning succeeds in achieving his goal of transcendence in *Purple Sunset*. Whereas the mutual unintelligibility of different languages forces the three characters to often communicate at a pre-linguistic level, the stringent conditions of the wilderness confine them to a matter of life and death contingent on their sustained group effort. All this has forged a new type of solidarity among them that transcends their pre-given racial, national, and linguistic identities, and what could have better articulated such transcendence than the natural landscape of the Great Xing'an Ridges in Northeast China? Functioning at once to provide visual pleasure and conceptual transcendence, landscape scenes contribute a great deal to the success of *Purple Sunset* in capturing both the tragic-heroic struggle of life and death and the contested nature of memory and identity. As the music box is buried under layers of leaves in the wilderness, the film's ending shot of landscape conveys a sense of lingering music that the director has found so charming in classical Chinese poetry. Just like music, landscape brings humanity together and closer than propagandist verbal expression—and this is an enduring testimony to the power of cinema.

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