Tokyo-bashing World War II dramas help underpin Communist rule – but are raising tensions between East Asia’s giants.

Why China’s directors love to hate Japan

BY DAVID LAGUE AND JANE LANHEE LEE
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Shi Zhongpeng dies for a living. For 3,000 yuan ($488) a month, the sturdily built stuntman is killed over and over playing Japanese soldiers in war movies and TV series churned out by Chinese film studios.

Despite his lack of dramatic range, the 23-year-old’s roles have made him a minor celebrity in China. Once, Shi says, he perished 31 times in a single day of battle. On the set of the television drama “Warning Smoke Everywhere,” which has just finished shooting here at the sprawling Hengdian World Studios in Zhejiang Province, he suffers a typically grisly fate.

“I play a shameful Japanese soldier in a way that when people watch, they feel he deserves to die,” Shi says. “I get bombed in the end.”

For Chinese audiences, the extras mown down in
a screen war that never ends are a powerful
reminder of Japan’s brutal 14-year occupa-
tion, the climax of more than a century of
humiliation at the hands of foreign powers.

About 170 Japan war dramas were ap-
proved for production in 2012 alone, ac-
cording to a Reuters analysis of scripts
submitted to China’s official broadcast
watchdog, the State Administration of
Radio Film and Television. Japanese for-

eign-policy scholars say more than 200
were made last year. One Chinese scholar
estimates that seven out of 10 TV dramas
involve Japanese war themes.

This well-nursed grudge is now a com-
bustible ingredient in the dangerous territo-
rial dispute over a group of rocky islands in
the East China Sea, the most serious row
between the two Asian powers since Japan’s
1945 defeat. It is debatable which side has
the better case for ownership of the islands,
known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in
China. The United States, Japan’s security-
treaty partner, refuses to endorse either claim,
only insisting the dispute be settled peacefully.

But decades of officially sanctioned ha-
tred for Japan in China means Beijing is
now caught in a propaganda trap of its own
making. It has little room to negotiate or
step back now that forces from both sides
are circling in a potentially deadly stand-

off. Nationalism in Japan also makes con-
cessions difficult for Tokyo. But the stakes
are potentially higher for China’s ruling
Communist Party under its new, strongly
nationalistic leader Xi Jinping.

“It is going to be very hard for the cur-
rent Chinese leadership if they want to
compromise,” said He Yinan, a professor
at New Jersey’s Seton Hall University who
studies the impact of wartime memory on
Sino-Japanese relations. “It will be rejected
by the public, and the leaders know it.”

The tensions and the propaganda go far
beyond the current spat. Underneath it all
lies a struggle for power and influence in
Asia between China and Japan - and po-
litical struggles within China itself. Many
China watchers believe Beijing’s leaders
nurture anti-Japanese hatred to bolster
their own legitimacy, which is coming
under question among citizens livid over
problems ranging from official corruption
to rampant environmental pollution.

POLITICS DRIVES OUTPUT
As sparring continues in the East China Sea,
open hostilities rage on Chinese screens.

On the hilly, forested set of “Warning
Smoke Everywhere” at Hengdian, the
world’s biggest film lot, lead actor Jing
Dong plays a young Chinese sniper tak-

ing on the invading Japanese in a second
television version of a 2011 action film of
the same name. In one scene, Jing and his
comrades scramble through a village to
reach a new firing position. In an interview
between takes, the actor rejected sugges-
tions that politics drives the output of these
TV dramas and films.

“It’s a theme people have liked for a long
time,” he said, wearing his Chinese Nationalist
uniform with its distinctive German-style,
coal-scuttle helmet. “That’s a fact.”

The film original, starring veteran Hong
Kong actor Tony Leung Ka-fai, was also
released for foreign audiences with the
English title, “Cold Steel.” Adapted from
a popular Internet novel, it tells the story
of Mu Liangfeng, a young hunter who is
drafted into the Nationalist army for his
marksmanship. He duels with a ruthless
Japanese sniper, Captain Masaya, in a series
of bloody encounters. Both marksmen are
in love, Mu with a war widow and Masaya
with a Japanese military nurse. But the film

“it is going to be very hard for
the current Chinese leadership to
compromise.”

He Yina
Seton Hall University professor of diplomacy
draws a clear distinction between the moral qualities of the two combatants.

“I want to marry a samurai, not a murderer,” Nurse Ryoko tells Masaya after accusing him of massacring civilians.

In the remake, director Li Yunliang says he isn’t trying to demonize the wartime enemy. “The Japanese soldiers in our drama also have emotions,” he says. “It’s the war bringing suffering to both China and Japan.”

The Communist rulers in Beijing will still find much to like. Pre-publicity material suggests the new storyline will have a harder political edge, concentrating more on the martial qualities of Communist forces who formed a united front with the Nationalists.

**WAR STORIES**

Some film reviewers in China say that with the censors declaring so many other subjects off limits, it is only natural that the war dominates story-telling in a competitive market for viewers and advertising.

“Only anti-Japanese themes aren’t limited,” says Zhu Dake, an outspoken culture critic and professor at Shanghai’s Tongji University. “The people who make TV think that only through anti-Japanese themes will they be applauded by the narrow-minded patriots who like it.”

Zhu estimates war stories make up about 70 percent of drama on Chinese television. The state administrator approved 69 anti-Japanese television series for production last year and about 100 films. Reports in the state-controlled media said up to 40 of these were shot at Hengdian alone. State television reported in April that more than 30 series about the war were filming or in planning by the end of March.

On any given night, state-owned television channels bombard Chinese viewers with the heroics of the two major Communist armies in combat with the Japanese, the Eighth Route Army and New Fourth Army. Elaborate plots tap the period’s rich history of deception, betrayal and collaboration.

In January, a tense seminar in Hong Kong brought together opinion makers from both sides, including senior retired military officers. There, the role of wartime drama was singled out as a major factor in plunging ties between the two nations.

“Yes, the Nanjing massacre did happen,” Yasuhiro Matsuda, a professor at Tokyo University and a former Japanese defence ministry researcher, told the seminar. “Yes, Japan did invade China. These are facts. But, when there are more than 200 movies coming out, you can imagine the negative effect.”

When Tokyo nationalized the disputed islands last September, buying them from a private Japanese owner, it provoked sometimes violent anti-Japanese protests in cities across China. In a telling indicator of the hostile mood in China, demand for Japanese products is falling across the board. Japanese exports to China for the year through March dropped 9.1 per cent to 11.3 trillion yen, according to Japanese customs figures.

Out in the East China Sea, both sides are so far exercising restraint. The risk of conflict through accident or miscalculation, however, remains high. Under Xi, China has intensified an air and sea campaign that military experts believe is aimed at wearing down Japanese forces around the potentially resource rich islands.

Anti-Japanese films were instrumental in fashioning some of the Communist Party’s foundation myths.

In the early years of the People’s Republic, these films showed Mao Zedong’s patriotic Communist guerrillas leading a heroic resistance. In contrast, Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists were portrayed as corrupt, ineffective and aligned with treacherous foreign powers, principally the United States. A vast majority of Chinese born before the 1970s remember the black-and-white classics from this period.

One of them, “Tunnel Warfare”, is the world’s most-watched film, with an estimated 1.8 billion viewers by 2006, according to the August First Film Studio in Beijing, the Chinese military production house that turned out the 1964 landmark and many others like it. In “Tunnel Warfare,” Maoist guerrilla strategies inspire resourceful peasants to
dig extensive tunnel networks beneath their village homes, from which they emerge to harass the occupying Japanese.

Regular screenings during an era of tight political control and virtually no alternative entertainment meant generations of viewers saw these movies many times. They are often crude, with voiceovers making sure viewers get the point. The brutality of Japanese troops toward Chinese combatants and civilians is a staple, but the films paradoxically avoided over-vilifying the invaders. Japanese characters are rarely developed. Plotlines concentrate on Mao’s triumph in leading the resistance, rather than the clear battlefield superiority of the invaders, which had Chinese forces in retreat right up to the end of the war.

In this period, Chinese film makers conformed to a wider geopolitical strategy, where Beijing was anxious to avoid alienating Tokyo, historians say.

The Communist Party wanted diplomatic recognition from Japan and also sought to drive a wedge between Washington and its most important regional ally. Strict censorship ruled out researching or publishing material about Japanese atrocities. In a move that would be unthinkable today, Beijing treated convicted Japanese war criminals leniently at the 1956 war crimes trials it held in Shenyang and Taiyuan. None of the 51 prisoners who stood trial were executed or sentenced to long terms.

Textbooks from this time mentioned key events and battles but played down the scope and impact of Japan’s occupation. Film makers avoided the dramatic potential of atrocities such as the 1937 Nanjing Massacre. Some historians suggest the Communists were also determined to suppress movies or detailed historical accounts of major campaigns: Otherwise, attention would have been drawn to the role of the Nationalist armies, which bore the overwhelming brunt of fighting the Japanese.

In the sacking of Nanjing, the Nationalists’ capital, Communist forces played little or no role in defending the doomed city.

JAPANESE ATROCITIES REVISITED

This changed in the early 1980s when Chinese film makers began to turn their cameras unsparingly on Japan’s wartime behaviour. Beijing had already won diplomatic recognition from Japan in 1972, and when the disastrous Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping abandoned its ruinous economic policies and began experimenting with market reforms.

For a ruling party desperate to recover its prestige and stamp out demands for political change, revisiting Japanese atrocities provided a useful distraction, historians say. In contrast, the party still vigorously suppresses any effort to document or publicise the calamities of its own making, including the starvation of tens of millions following
Mao’s disastrous Great Leap Forward.

The official desire to foster nationalism intensified after the 1989 Tiananmen protests shook the party to its foundations. “Maybe the leadership realized that a memory of collective suffering at the hands of an external enemy is more effective in bringing people together,” said Kristof Van Den Troost, a film and history researcher at Hong Kong’s Chinese University.

One of the best known films of the era, “Red Sorghum” from 1987, based on a novel by 2012 Nobel prize winner Mo Yan, launched the careers of actress Gong Li and director Zhang Yimou. It pulled no punches, switching from a rich love story set in rural China to a blood-drenched climax in which the Japanese order a local butcher to skin alive a prisoner. “Skin him,” the Japanese interpreter screams at the butcher, who in an act of mercy stabs the prisoner to death and is immediately machine-gunned. The butcher’s assistant is then forced to skin another live prisoner, later revealed to be a communist guerrilla.

As war museums and memorials opened all over China, film makers were free to explore the orgy of killing and rape at Nanjing. Chinese estimates put the Nanjing death toll at 300,000. Japanese and some other foreign estimates are lower.

Today, while hewing to the official anti-Japanese line, some of these films are more subtle than their forerunners. In the 2009 box office hit, “The City of Life and Death,” director Lu Chuan controversially included a relatively sympathetic Japanese character. Sergeant Kadokawa, played by Hideo Nakaizumi, stands apart from his comrades amid the orgy of violence in Nanjing.

But film makers can go too far. Jiang Wen, the male lead in “Red Sorghum,” ran afoul of the state film administrator with “Devils on the Doorstep,” his second film in the director’s chair. The film won the Cannes Grand Jury Prize in 2000 but was subsequently banned in China. It mocks the confusion of peasants in a village in northern China entrusted with holding a captured Japanese soldier and his translator. Though the movie ends in a bloodbath for the villagers, censors attacked it for its sympathetic treatment of the Japanese prisoner and failure to depict the Chinese as selfless patriots.

LUDICROUS PLOTS

While studios continue to pump out drama, there are now signs scriptwriters are scratching for material. Critics inside and outside the government have been scathing about the ludicrous and violent plots of some of the more recent productions.

Some directors have merged war dramas with semi-mystical, martial arts action where virtually unarmed Chinese slaughter platoons of hapless Japanese.

In the television series “Anti-Japanese Knight,” an unarmed Chinese martial art expert tears a Japanese soldier in half from head to crotch, the divided corpse suspended in the air with a skein of blood connecting the pieces. In another scene from the same series, a Japanese soldier’s intestines are wrenched out of his abdomen in a fight sequence.

Under the weight of ridicule and disgust, officials from the State Administration of Radio Film and Television this month ordered a crackdown, insisting studios make “more serious” dramas.

Even Shi, the busy stuntman, is tiring of his role as a Japanese victim. “I’m not good-looking so I play a Japanese soldier,” he said. “I would really prefer playing a soldier in the Eighth Route Army.”

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