

The Impact of Evolving China-Japan Relations on Chinese Film Creation

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Abstract:

This study employs a historical periodization framework to analyze the influence of China-Japan relations on Chinese film creation from 1949 to 2025. The research demonstrates that the political dynamics between the two nations have directly shaped the construction of Japanese characters in films, bilateral exchange patterns, and the selection of creative themes. During the adversarial “Seventeen Years” period, film creation was highly ideological; the subsequent period of rapprochement promoted a humanized turn and technical co-productions; since the new century, globalization and the complexification of bilateral relations have catalyzed diversified expression, deepened cooperation, and cultural reflection. Consequently, Chinese film has transformed from a tool of state propaganda into a platform for cross-cultural dialogue, reflecting the complex interplay of political, market, and cultural forces.

Keywords: China-Japan Relations, Chinese Film, Image Construction, Film Exchange, Cultural Reflection

Introduction

As a core element of East Asian international politics, the long-term fluctuations in Sino-Japanese relations have profoundly influenced Chinese cinematic creation. Framed by a historical periodization from 1949 to 2025, this study examines how film serves as a vehicle for state ideology, public sentiment, and cultural diplomacy by analyzing the evolution of Japanese character portrayals, film exchange activities, and political-economic factors. Research indicates that Chinese film creation has shifted from singular political narratives to diversified, humanistic expression. This transformation has not only enriched the art of cinema itself but also provided crucial soft cultural support for the improvement of Sino-Japanese relations.

1. Chinese Cinema of the Seventeen-Year Period (1949-1966)

In the early years of the People’s Republic of China, situated within the Cold War structure, China and Japan belonged to opposing camps and lacked formal diplomatic relations. This macro-context set the framework for Chinese film creation, imprinting it with distinct temporal characteristics regarding the portrayal of Japanese characters, film exchanges, and ideological expression.

1.1 .The Shaping of Japanese Characters

Chinese films from 1945 to 1966 uniformly portrayed Japanese people as the brutal and arrogant “guizi” (devils). This portrayal, based on post-war

collective memory and political exigencies, adhered to the class struggle doctrine of the “revolutionary art and literature line,” consolidating self-identity by simplifying the “Other.” For instance, Japanese military roles in films like *Guerrillas of the Plain* and *Tunnel Warfare* were depicted in a stereotypical manner, emphasizing their cruelty and foolishness, thereby constructing a narrative framework of good versus evil. This characterization not only reflected the adversarial state of Sino-Japanese relations at the time but also, through mass media, reinforced public anti-Japanese sentiment, serving the purpose of state ideological education.

1.2 .The Introduction and Dissemination of Japanese Films in China

During the 1950s, China primarily imported films from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, while the introduction of Japanese films was highly selective. The release of the left-wing film *No, We Must Live* in China in 1954 marked the re-entry of Japanese cinema. Subsequently, films reflecting social contradictions and anti-war themes, such as *Twenty-Four Eyes*, were introduced through events like “Japanese Film Weeks.” These works depicted the sufferings of ordinary Japanese people, somewhat mitigating the animosity among Chinese audiences, while their realist techniques offered narrative and technical references for Chinese filmmakers. However, exchanges were strictly politically controlled; only left-wing films like *The Crab-Canning Ship* that aligned with ideological needs were imported, while works by directors such as Akira Kurosawa were excluded due to ideological differences.

1.3 .The Dominant Role of Political Ideology

Throughout this period, Chinese film creation was incorporated into the state propaganda system, with changes in Sino-Japanese relations directly determining film content. When relations thawed briefly in the late 1950s, slightly more humanized Japanese characters appeared, such as the Japanese soldier reflecting on the war in *The White-Haired Girl*. However, when tensions escalated in the early 1960s, the portrayals immediately reverted to negative stereotypes. Political campaigns like the “Anti-Rightist Movement” and the pre-Cultural Revolution ultra-leftist movement further intensified the narrative of class hatred in films. For example, the 1963 film *Zhang Ga, the Soldier Boy*, despite employing a child’s perspective, still emphasized the atrocities of the Japanese army. This fluctuation confirms film’s role as a “tool of state discourse,” where creative freedom was subordinated to political demands. Simultaneously, Chinese filmmakers selectively absorbed

advanced editing and cinematography techniques from Japanese left-wing cinema, albeit strictly within the confines of the ideological framework.

During the 1949-1966 “Seventeen-Year” period, the image of the Japanese in Chinese cinema was solidified into the symbol of the “guizi” under Cold War antagonism, with exchanges being limited and highly politicized. The normalization of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations in 1972 and China’s reform and opening-up policy fundamentally altered this landscape. From 1978 to 2000, as bilateral relations entered a “honeymoon period,” the large-scale introduction of Japanese films not only dismantled stereotypes but also spurred technological and narrative innovation in Chinese cinema. The rise of co-productions marked a shift towards two-way interaction, laying the groundwork for deeper integration in the new century.

2.From the “New Period” to the New Century (1978-2000) Between 1978 and 2000, following the signing of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship and China’s reform and opening-up, Sino-Japanese relations entered a “honeymoon period,” characterized by increasingly frequent bilateral cultural exchanges. The large-scale introduction of Japanese films during this time not only reshaped Chinese audiences’ perceptions of Japan but also profoundly influenced the themes, narratives, and techniques of Chinese cinema.

2.1 .The Introduction of Japanese Films and the Shift in Chinese Perceptions of Japan

After 1978, Japanese films such as *Manhunt*, *Sandakan No. 8*, and *Love and Death* were introduced to China through official channels. Their modern narratives and humanized characters deconstructed the previous stereotypical image of the “guizi.” Taking *Sandakan No. 8* as an example, the film reveals the trauma of war through the fate of “Karayuki-san” (Japanese women sent overseas), prompting viewers to reflect on history and humanity. The writer Ba Jin praised its educational significance in “touching upon universal human emotions.” This dissemination of imagery facilitated a shift in public perception of Japan. A 1988 survey indicated that 70% of Chinese people held a positive view of Sino-Japanese relations. Meanwhile, actors like Ken Takakura and Momoe Yamaguchi became popular idols, and their screen images even sparked consumer trends, such as the “Dochū-style” trench coat, reflecting deep cultural interaction.

2.2 .Reference and Innovation in Chinese Film Creation

The improvement in Sino-Japanese relations encouraged Chinese filmmakers to actively learn from the develop-

ment experience of Japanese cinema. Third and Fourth Generation directors like Xie Jin and Wu Yigong incorporated more humanistic concern and realist techniques into their works. For instance, *The Bell of Purity Temple* invited Japanese actress Komaki Kurihara to participate, using the story of war orphans to convey themes of friendship, while also adopting long takes and natural lighting to enhance emotional impact. Zhang Yimou's *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* also tells a story of borderless paternal love from a cross-cultural perspective. On a technical level, Chinese cinema learned techniques such as hand-held camera work and deep focus cinematography from Japan; Zhang Yimou's *To Live* utilized such visual styles to strengthen a sense of realism. Feng Xiaoning's *Purple Sunset* echoed the themes of Japanese anti-war films in its narrative structure, highlighting shared humanity. Furthermore, the low-cost introduction of Japanese films and the co-production model provided Chinese cinema with capital and market experience, aiding the industry's internationalization process.

2.3 .Co-productions and Two-Way Exchange

Sino-Japanese co-productions became a significant achievement of this phase. The 1982 film *The Unfinished Chess Game*, co-written and co-directed by both sides, used the experience of Go players to reflect on the trauma of war. It won an award at the Montreal World Film Festival and was hailed as a work of reconciliation. Co-production practices not only facilitated technical exchange but also allowed Chinese filmmakers to access Japan's mature industrial model, accelerating the modernization of China's film industry. Although differences in historical perception and scriptwriting led to narrative conflicts, the co-production model significantly expanded the space for cross-cultural collaboration, laying the foundation for subsequent projects like *The Dunhuang*.

Sino-Japanese film exchanges from 1978 to 2000 propelled Chinese cinema away from a singular model of political propaganda towards the exploration of humanity and realist expression. The introduction of Japanese films and co-production practices not only reconstructed Chinese audiences' perception of Japan but also accumulated experience for the internationalization of the Chinese film industry. Entering the 21st century, with China's accession to the WTO and fluctuations in Sino-Japanese relations, film creation further exhibited new characteristics such as thematic diversification, deepened cooperation mechanisms, and intensified cultural reflection, marking the entry of bilateral cultural exchange into a more mature stage.

3.The New Century (2000-2025)

After China's accession to the WTO in 2001, it accel-

erated its integration into globalization, and the film industry continued to transform under the dual pressures of marketization and internationalization. Between 2000 and 2025, Sino-Japanese relations developed tortuously amidst political friction and economic-cultural interdependence. In 2018, the two governments signed the "Film Co-production Agreement," further promoting deeper cooperation. During this phase, Chinese cinema intentionally downplayed direct political narratives, turning instead to thematic diversification, character complexity, and deepened cultural introspection, using artistic expression to foster mutual understanding between the two peoples.

3.1 .Increasingly Diversified Character Portrayal

The portrayal of Japanese characters in 21st-century Chinese cinema shows a significant trend towards diversification, breaking through the previous monolithic positioning of the "guizi." Films began to depict characters with cultural depth and human complexity, such as the officer Tanaka Ryuichi obsessed with Peking Opera in *Forever Enthralled*, whose characterization explores cultural conflict and human contradiction. Some works, like *Lift Your Head Up*, deconstructed the heaviness of history through comedic means, transforming the image of the Japanese military into an entertainment symbol. Furthermore, films like *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* focused on ordinary Japanese people, showcasing shared humanity through universal themes such as father-son bonds, further diluting historical baggage. This diversified portrayal, while enriching character depth, also promoted cultural understanding and emotional resonance between the Chinese and Japanese publics.

3.2 .Transnational Flow of Cast/Crew and Content Capital

He Ping's *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* pioneered this trend by inviting Japanese actor Nakai Kiichi to play a constable, breaking national boundaries to build narrative tension. Such collaborations were not limited to blockbusters; art films also actively introduced Japanese actors to expand their reach. For example, Zhang Yimou's *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* assembled renowned actors like Ken Takakura and Nakai Kiichi, while Zhang Yibai's *Shanghai* featured a Japanese cast including Masahiro Motoki, highlighting the depth of cross-cultural integration in performance arts. John Woo's *The Crossing* brought together a transnational ensemble including Takeshi Kaneshiro and Masami Nagasawa, reflecting the scaled trend of talent flow between Chinese and Japanese cinema. Simultaneously, Japanese narrative resources such as anime

and novels became significant capital for Chinese film adaptations. The 1988 film *Peacock King*, adapted from the manga by Masakazu Katsura, grossed over 1.7 billion yen, demonstrating the market potential of cross-cultural IP. Subsequently, works like *A Battle of Wits* (adapted from a manga) and *Endgame* (a remake of the Japanese film *Key of Life*) continued to explore localization strategies. The adaptation of four films from Keigo Higashino's novels, including *The Devotion of Suspect X*, underscores the enduring influence of Japanese literary IP. However, behind successful cases lie adaptation challenges: despite a \$40 million investment, John Woo's remake of *Manhunt* failed to meet box office expectations in both markets, reflecting the difficulty of integrating the narrative core with the local context.

3.3 .Deepening Cultural Introspection

The reflection on the history of the Sino-Japanese War in 21st-century Chinese cinema shows significant deepening. It evolved from early portrayals of Japanese civilians as war victims in films like *The Cherry* and *The Bell of Purity Temple* towards narrative dimensions possessing greater humanitarianism and cultural inclusivity. Post-2000, this introspection became particularly prominent in films dealing with the Nanjing Massacre: Lu Chuan's *City of Life and Death* broke through the traditional binary opposition by depicting the psychological struggle and suicidal confession of a soldier, Kadokawa; Zhang Yimou's *The Flowers of War* exposed the hypocrisy of militarism through the contrast between an officer's "false benevolence" and "true evil," while highlighting the resilience of the Chinese people; the co-production *John Raber* reinforced the spirit of humanitarianism through an international perspective. Through multi-dimensional historical restoration and exploration of humanity, these films not only advanced the artistic level of Chinese cinema but also constructed a deeper foundation for cultural dialogue in Sino-Japanese relations.

Between 2000 and 2025, against the backdrop of the complex evolution of Sino-Japanese relations, Chinese cinema significantly enhanced its artistic expression and cultural connotation through the deepening of themes, cooperation, and introspection. These advancements have promoted public understanding and provided soft support for bilateral relations. Looking forward, based on its local roots, Chinese cinema can further integrate an international perspective, participate in building an Asian film community, and contribute more to the diversity of world film culture.

Conclusion

A retrospective view from 1949 to 2025 reveals that the evolution of Sino-Japanese relations has driven a clear developmental trajectory in Chinese film creation, moving from political dominance towards cultural pluralism. During the "Seventeen-Year" period, film served as an ideological tool reinforcing narratives of national opposition; the thawing of relations in the "New Period" prompted a shift towards humanized and realistic expression; since the new century, globalization and the complexities of bilateral relations have further spurred image diversification, deepened cooperation, and intensified cultural reflection, making cinema an important medium for promoting public understanding. This process demonstrates that Chinese cinema has not only responded to political changes but has also actively participated in shaping the cultural dimension of Sino-Japanese relations. As Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges continue to deepen and the concept of an Asian film community gains traction, Chinese cinema, grounded in its local context, can further integrate an international perspective, contribute Chinese wisdom to the diversity of world cinema, and, in the digital age, continue to promote cross-cultural dialogue and peaceful coexistence by engaging with new issues such as new media exchanges and youth historical consciousness.

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