

# Exploring the Innovation and Breakthrough of Chinese War Film from the Perspective of Affinity to the People in the New Era

## -- Take the Film The Eight Hundred as an Example

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### Abstract

Guan Hu, one of the famous Chinese directors, spent about 10 years making The Eight Hundred which is the Chinese epic war movie, and the movie was the first business movie about the main rhythm when the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak. Before releasing, this movie had grossed over 100 million RMB at the box office because of the preview. When it was previewed on the first day, the movie took in 50 million RMB at the box office, updating the record after the global epidemics, and its attendance rate was up to 77%. It is highly significant for people to restore their confidence and to refresh the Chinese film industry. From the perspective of affinity to the people, the essay will analyze its writing purpose of affinity to the people, lots of veritable heroes who were successfully built by the artistic skill of affinity to the people. This film truly shows the cruelty of war and profoundly discusses the humanistic connotation and value pursuit of the theme of war. Meanwhile, The Eight Hundred is related to modern construction and the introspection about war film in the New Era, achieves innovated breakthrough in Chinese traditional war film, and provides an effective reference for improving its quality in the era of media convergence and rapid market development.

### Keywords

War Film; Affinity to the People; Heroes.

### 1. Introduction

Unlike general war films, this film told a story that the loser won the enemy at the end of the Songhu battle. Although they would sacrifice and had to retreat in the end, soldiers of the 88th division of the 524th regiment in the National Revolutionary Army still stayed in Sixing warehouse in Shanghai for 4 days because of fighting against Japanese enemies. In the film, the city is divided into two areas by Suzhou River. One of two areas is British and American concession which is a bustling paradise, but another is the hell that gunfire licked the heavens and casualties were high. Citizens and reporters across the river saw that 400 soldiers persisted in guarding the warehouse and bravely fought the enemy. Its strategic meaning is much larger than the actual meaning. Guan Hu and his team have taken a different tact, from the perspective of ordinary people, to lead people to understand the previous experience of failure directly. Except for this purpose, audiences could face the terrible and strength of the enemy in the war and be guided to think about the practical significance of war and cherish a peaceful environment more deeply.

## 2. Introduce the Affinity to the People in the New Era

According to Dictionary of Aesthetics edited by Zhu Liyuan, affinity to the people means that in content reflects people' life and destiny, shows emotions and wishes of the people, represents people' s interests and requests. Also, it expresses the thinking, aesthetic view and idea of the people and absorbs and takes advantages of folk art. In form, it is easy for people to accept and enjoy. The specific content will change constantly with social and historical development form since this concept evolves with history.

People-centered literary ideology was established at the Chinese National Symposium on Literary and Artistic Work on October 15, 2014. The connotation is that the literary needs to be based on the people, go deep into life, take root among the masses and regard the people as the main body of artistic creation. Moreover, this concept that enriches the essence of socialist literature has been raised to the supreme position in literary composition. The government of China accurately perceived new variations of literary in the new era and determined people-centered literary communication concept. The key is not in elite intellectuals but should be in the broad masses and improving ordinary people's cultural status and discourse right.

The nativity emerging of mew media importantly changed lifestyle and sense of worth, which makes literary and artistic communication down to earth . However, popular literature and art are not vulgar and stodgy work. Literary creation must put the social benefit in the first place and integrate mainstream ideology of affinity to the people into literary and artistic communication.

Currently, there is a contradiction between economic and social benefits for creative orientation in the literary and artistic circles. Sticking on the affinity to the people could condense the spiritual consciousness of serving the people into collective values. Beside, it is beneficial to lead writers to create works that can enrich the spirit of people, spread great literary thought and increase the channel of the mainstream value education.

## 3. The Innovation and Breakthrough of War Film in the Perspective of Affinity to the People

### (1) the Depiction of Civilian Heroes

As for Chinese war films, revolutionary leaders and combat heroes totally are regarded as protagonists to show their invincible status and the spirit of fearless sacrifice. But these characters are so similar that lack vividness and profundity. Therefore, shaping characters has gradually formed the model of binary opposition: it highlights the image of heroes with thick eyebrows and big eyes fighting tenaciously, and deliberately vilifies the image of the enemy's cowardice, greed for life and fear of death; it highlights the noble sentiment of Chinese army's hard work, simplicity, diligence and thrift and to contrast, depict extravagant, corrupt and extravagant enemy. The monotonous way makes the public gradually lose interest in domestic war films. The creators began to care about the real needs of the masses and understand the real life of ordinary people, tried to avoid shaping the tall and powerful image of Chinese soldiers in traditional war films and focused on the inner thoughts and spiritual growth of individuals in the era of war because the film *The Eight Hundred* focused on people-centered literary and artistic communication concept. The warehouse guards were composed of exiled soldiers and former soldiers of general Xie Jinyuan. If the director only described how the 88th army with German mechanics fought against the Japanese army, the film characterization will still fall into a relatively old-fashioned and single mode.

Director Guan Hu found a new way and chose the theme of group image growth, which was not limited to the main force of German mechanical division, but started with a group of scattered soldiers. The director has focused on a group of small people with different characteristics.

There are a deserter named Duanwu who only wants to see Shanghai but dare not use guns, a person named Old Abacus who always plans to run away, an illiterate veteran called Sheep Crutch and a timid soldier who is greedy for life and afraid of death. Then the director used the dialects of Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, Henan, Shaanxi, Shanghai, northeast of China, and other places to accurately depict the different personalities of each soldier.

*The Eight Hundred* is different from the portrayal of a single hero in Hollywood war films such as *Bloody Hacksaw Ridge* and *Saving Private Ryan*. It focuses on describing how a group of unknown soldiers transformed into heroes of the war of resistance against Japan in this battle and how to ignite the patriotic enthusiasm of the people on the other side of the river. For example, the deserter Duanwu played by Ou Hao, a Chinese young actor, was forced to join the battle from ordinary farmers. In the early stage of the war, he was one of the ordinary people who knew nothing about the war and were full of evasion and luck. But under the influence of the environment, inspired by the Shandong soldiers who bravely killed the enemy without fear of sacrifice, and stimulated by the cruel killing of their relatives by the enemy, these ordinary people quickly realized that they had already been part of the battle in just two days. They changed from cowardly ordinary people to real soldiers, and finally died to protect the flag and become heroes. Another great example is the reporter Fang Wenxing of *Shenbao*, in English as *Shanghai News*. The depiction of this villain image is different from the simple negative depiction of the villain traitors in the traditional war film. He appears in the film as an "information trafficker". In order to survive, he sold domestic message to the Japanese army, entered the Sixing warehouse due to transporting materials, and witnessed the heroic deeds of soldiers who sacrificed their lives to protect their home and defend their country in the cruel war. Finally, he kept his promise and risked his life to protect the soldiers' suicide notes. He accidentally became a member of the Sixing defense war. After that, the group of living beings in the concession represented by Fang Wenxing presents a common group image of Shanghai society on the other side of the river, such as the prostitute who gives money to the casino, the rogue who risked his life to deliver the telephone line, a material university professor who shot and helped the soldiers on the other side kill the enemy and those who climb over the barbed wire fence to rescue retreating soldiers. Successfully breaking through the traditional binary opposition mode, the director skillfully incorporated China's friendship culture, the truth of human nature and instinctive desire into the images of ordinary people and created many full and rich character images.

## **(2) Expression of War Significance From Multiple Perspectives**

The hero's growth, awakening and sacrifice in the narrow space of Sixing warehouse are important contents of the film. But as an epic war film, the content is particularly thin. The director chose to show the thinking of the war from a fuller and multi-dimensional perspective. Director Guan Hu said that this may be the only battle with audiences in history. The guard battle of Sixing warehouse was extremely fierce, yet the Shanghai concession enjoying singing and dancing was only across the Suzhou River. The director made a strong comparison between the two sides of the river. Every scene in the concession is closely related to the war on the other side. The film shows the war from three significantly complex perspectives: the first is the Chinese soldiers in the Sixing warehouse; the second is the ordinary civilians and foreigners in the concession; the third is the international observers sitting in the air vehicle overlooking the overall situation. Among them, the perspective of international observers is not much, but more as a kind of information hint: can this battle win the support of international public opinion for China? The director's lens focuses on showing the tragic battle and observing every detail of the battle through a telescope from the perspective of the people on the south bank.

Soon after the beginning of *the Eight Hundred*, an extraordinary picture was formed on the big screen: bounded by the river, there was a paradise of lights and wine on the one side and a hell of fire on the other side. However, the battle scenes observed from different perspectives are

not separated. The perspective of the south bank not only shows the people's attention to the war situation but also performs the change of attitudes of all kinds of people in the concession, and gradually forms a confluence from engaging in the battle that is not related to themselves to gradually sympathizing with the other side. At the beginning of the war, people on the south bank still lived their lives. A group of rich women played mahjong, only caring about their house on Feixia Road during the war. They even bet on how long the Chinese soldiers on the other side could resist. After the soldiers raised the flag on the Sixing warehouse building, Chinese people on the south bank began to wake up and gradually joined the battle to pay tribute to the soldiers. Even the hooligan publicly raised people to send telephone lines to the Chinese soldiers on the other side. The enthusiasm of ordinary people to beat back the Japanese enemy and their response to the war are comprehensively presented through the horizontal moving lens of the poor on the shore, the tatami head up the lens of the noble in high-rise buildings, and the high-altitude perspective of the press corps of various countries on airships. Through the three-dimensional pictures of different scenes and multiple perspectives, this film breaks away from the method that writes in a dull way, and adopts a grand narrative method. Therefore, audiences will have strong empathy and a deeper understanding of the meaning behind the battle and understand the hesitation, awakening, growth and sacrifice of each character in the battle.

### **(3) An organic balance between romantic poetry and realistic narration**

As an epic war film, *The Eight Hundred* is shot with IMAX cameras, full-length shots, hand-held photography and panoramic scenes, coupled with telescopic perspectives, documentary black-and-white images, skilled cinematography, smooth frame titles, and the creation of a depressing atmosphere of war immerse the audience in intense and realistic war scenes. From the spatial dimensions of the land, waterway, air transit and street fighting, the director shows various combat forms such as gunfight, gas, air raid and hand-to-hand combat. Weapons on display every day upgrade from rifles, machine guns, gun barrels to rockets, tanks, planes. Audiences can see the battle scene in 1:1 high fidelity on an IMAX screen. In order to express the realistic narrative mode better, *The Eight Hundred* not only adopts the shooting mode of big panorama and big vision of traditional war films in terms of the use of the lens, but also focuses on the close-ups of characters' actions and expressions, as well as the dynamic scenes of battles between the enemy and us by using medium and close shots mostly. At the end of each battle, wounded or killed, continuous close-ups and macro shots are used to highlight the fragility of life and the ruthlessness of war.

On the basis of reproducing the realistic narration of the real scenes of the war, the director also creatively adds the romantic poetic narrative expression with traditional Chinese elements. For example, the theater stage of the south bank of the concession "Changbanpo" and the repeated appearance of Zhao Yun's horse fighting group in the imagination of Xiaohubei, as well as the Shandong soldiers singing Zhao Yun's shadow play on the eve of the breakout. These three artistic treatments overlap with ancient and modern lament images by using montage narrative techniques in order to express the Chinese nation's unremitting self-improvement heroic fighting spirit. A song called "Changbanpo" is closely linked with the empathy of soldiers and people in the Anti-Japanese War. In this film, a romantic poetic expression is a white horse repeatedly in and out of the four-line warehouse, which always inadvertently shuttles in the artillery fire, dust haze, and the Japanese negotiation scene. It always draws the attention of the crowd, giving everyone dreams, comfort and bright expectations for the future. In the final battle of crossing the river, the historical picture accidentally seen by the searchlight was not only the death gaze for the soldiers but also the fixed frame of victory. On the other side of the river, countless pairs of tearful eyes and hands stretched to the bridge in their cries are pulling the universal hope placed by men, women and children at home and abroad towards a bright future of peace.

## 4. Contemporary Value of War Films from the Perspective of "The People"

### (1) Convey the spirit of the Chinese nation and build the core values

As one of the important standards to measure the comprehensive national strength of a country and as the spiritual guidance of literary and artistic creation, the national spirit has a great significance to the enrichment and development of literary and artistic creation. With the deepening of the reform and opening up, the trend of thought in literature and art interacts with the trend of thought in society, the values of people are also undergoing great changes under the impact of the post-modernism cultural trend of thought. Represented by *The Eight Hundred* Chinese war movie creation values insist on the principle of "people-centered", promote the national spirit of patriotism, adhere to the concept of film industry and type of principle, pursue movie aesthetics benefit and economic benefit, undertake national narrative and give attention to both the audience aesthetic demand. The film *The Eight Hundred* highlights the self-confidence of Chinese culture and the greatness of national spirit in the context of constructing the Chinese film school in the new era, and it finds the narrative mode of literary works based on the local area and affecting the world, which provides the vitality for Chinese films in the competition of world films. The sublimation of the expression of the theme of national spirit and the human emotion, the balanced focus of the portrayal of great heroes and little people show the new fashion and outlook of Chinese war films. It also shows the strong force of The Chinese national spirit to support the return of national history and emotional identity, using the "quiet" way to inspire the audience's patriotism to connect with the people.

### (2) Enhance country's soft power and achieve the new aesthetic needs

Cultural soft power is the core element of national cultural sovereignty, and the creative development of advanced culture should stimulate the vitality of traditional culture to enhance the competitiveness of Chinese culture in the global cultural landscape. "Every trend of thought is the expression of the specific social relations and the spirit of The Times in that era and region. It will lose its intrinsic specific historical stipulation without the limitation of time and space." Therefore, the connotation of "the people" has evolved into new content with the development of historical times, the profits and aesthetic needs of people in different historical periods are also changing constantly. Therefore, it is required that the contemporary people could enjoy the artistic expression form and expression style of the film, and it should be close to the life of the contemporary people and conform to the aesthetic taste of the contemporary people. Artistic expressions that are too abstract and obscure for people to understand or unwilling to understand although their ideological content has the highest "the people", because they are too far away from the people and hard to be embodied.

The Eight Hundred as the first film in Asia to be shot entirely with digital IMAX cameras, being more in line with the aesthetic characteristics of the Internet age in terms of character setting and narrative plot with getting rid of the traditional mode of the war movies, diluting the political consciousness and expressing the reflection on the war with modern creative consciousness, which is gained the favor again in public. The public could comprehend the thought of "the people" deeply and stimulate literary and artistic innovation better to gradually enhance the country's cultural soft power if they understand and accept this film. The Eight Hundred represents the highest industrial level of Chinese war films at present although, compared with international standards, it has a large area for improvement in industrial details, narrative expression and scene scheduling. The group portraits of civilian heroes shine with the light of humanity, the war interpretation from multiple s, the balance of realistic and freehand narration which demonstrates the spirit of the nation and the exploration of film technology innovation will provide a lot of experience to think and to learn for the creation and development of Chinese war films.

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