

# A TALE OF NANJING ATROCITIES THAT SPARES NO BRUTAL DETAIL

By MANOHLA DARGIS, MAY 10, 2011



Two terrible faces stare out from “City of Life and Death,” a fictionalized telling of the Rape of Nanjing, a pair of indelible bookends for this anguished film. The first belongs to Lu (Liu Ye), who, with hundreds of other soldiers, has been rounded up by invading Japanese troops amid a frenzy of violence. The close-up of Lu’s impassive face locked in unspoken emotion floods the screen. Much later, after innumerable deaths and acts of barbarism and heroism, the face of a woman will similarly fill the screen in close-up, her frantic eyes stretched wide, as if they had been permanently shocked open by what they have seen.

These faces are mirrors of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians tortured and killed during the mass butchery also known as the Nanjing (formerly Nanking) massacre and recounted with reverberant melancholy in “City of Life and Death.” Some 70 years after it made world news, the story of Nanjing has begun to re-emerge in fiction and nonfiction books and films, including Iris Chang’s 1997 “Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II,” the first full-length history in English. Written and directed by Lu Chuan, “City of Life and Death” hews close to the account that Ms. Chang (an American whose grandparents fled Nanjing before the siege) culled from survivors and other sources.

History weighs hard and steady on “City of Life and Death” without encumbering it. Mr. Lu provides little background and context for the massacre, which occurred nearly half a year after the start of the second Sino-Japanese war (1937), doubtless because his Chinese audience needed no such instruction. Instead, after briefly setting the scene through a series of handwritten postcards, he opens with Japanese troops breaching the monumental wall that once circled Nanjing. Restlessly and with increasingly clear narrative purpose, he begins cutting between the Chinese surging to escape and the advancing Japanese soldiers who refuse to let them pass, a tactic that sets the film’s insistent contrasts — the immense and the intimate, the mass and the individual, the cruelties and the kindnesses — immediately into dynamic, dramatic play.



Liu Ye, left, in “City of Life and Death,” which closely follows the accounting in Iris Chang's 1997 book, “Rape of Nanking.” Credit Kino International

Mr. Lu’s last film was “Mountain Patrol: Kekexili,” a surprisingly tense fictionalization of the attempts to stem the illegal trade in the Tibetan antelope, or chiru, which has been driven to near extinction because of consumer lust for its wool (shahtoosh). He is an extraordinary visual artist and here, working in wide screen and shooting in black and white, he singles out specific images — dead and naked prostitutes stacked in a cart like wood, a sole dead woman tossed in a ditch — that encapsulate a multitude of horrors. Watching this film, you are reminded of how much needless explaining characters do in American cinema.

Among the dozen or so men and women who emerge from this chaos is Miss Jiang (Gao Yuanyuan), a teacher who, with other Chinese and a few foreigners, struggles to protect the thousands who attempt and sometimes fail to find refuge in the safety zone. Though drawn in vague strokes (a crucifix suggests what inspires her extraordinary bravery), Miss Jiang emerges as a vivid presence, someone to hang onto. Improbably so does John Rabe (John Paisley), a German Nazi based on the real employee of the Siemens China Company who saved thousands. (On returning to Germany after the siege, he sent a report about the atrocities to Hitler, but was silenced to protect relations between the allies.) Equally startling is the young Japanese soldier Kadokawa (Hideo Nakaizumi), an increasingly shocked and desperate witness.

After the end of World War II, as Ms. Chang writes, the cold war helped keep the silence surrounding Nanjing. The Japanese refused to acknowledge the massacre officially, while the Chinese, anxious to maintain relations with Japan, did not press the case, a tragedy twice over for the massacre’s victims. “City of Life and Death” doesn’t address the politics of this silence, but Mr. Lu’s insistence on humanizing the Japanese, particularly through Kadokawa, is itself boldly political, and moral. By refusing to turn the Japanese into the monsters or beasts of history, he affirms both that their ravenous savagery was horribly human and that there was a ghastly price paid by soldiers ordered to “kill all, loot all and burn all.”

“City of Life and Death” isn’t cathartic: it offers no uplifting moments, just the immodest balm of art. The horrors it represents can be almost too difficult to watch, yet you keep watching because Mr. Lu makes the case that you must. In one awful, surreal interlude, severed male heads swing from

rope like ornaments, while in another, Japanese soldiers — having buried some Chinese men alive — stamp down the earth as if planting a crop.

However appalling, these are relatively restrained images, and the use of black and white, which keeps the screen from flooding red, is a minor mercy. That the reality was unspeakably worse is obvious, a truth that makes “City of Life and Death” bearable and still necessary.