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FROM MONOLITH TO MULTIPLICITY: REFIGURING THE “JAPANESE DEVIL” IN PRC WAR CINEMA, 1949–1966

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Abstract

This paper challenges the assumption that PRC cinema in the Mao era rendered the “Japanese devils” (guizi)—a derogatory epithet for Japanese invaders; guizi literally means “devil/ghost”—as a monolithic enemy. Drawing on films from the founding of the PRC through the Seventeen Years period (1949–1966), it maps a dynamic spectrum of representations shaped by shifting policy, aesthetics, and industrial practice. I first situate early depictions (1949–1951) within a documentary-inflected realism featuring inconsistent labels (guizi, ribenzi, dongyangren), sparse individualization, and a strong emphasis on female heroism. I then show how socialist realism institutionalized “typical settings/characters” and encouraged “exaggeration,” crystallizing an

iconography: toothbrush moustaches, hybrid pidgin “guizi language,” nocturnal raids, and chiaroscuro staging. Two phases emerge—“realist typification” (1954–1962) and “romanticist typification” (1962–1965)—exemplified by Guerrillas on the Plain (1955), Landmine Warfare (1962), and Tunnel Warfare (1965). Against this tide, several works registered meaningful deviations, humanizing or complicating Japanese figures (e.g., Railway Guerrillas (1956); Three Attacks on a Mountain Town (1965); Jin Yuji (1959)). I also identify a classical village-siege narrative that canonized CCP grassroots leadership while occluding KMT battlefronts and victimhood. Finally, the Cultural Revolution’s model-opera aesthetics refixed the guizi as formulaic foils within a pedagogy of class struggle. The result is a historically contingent, heterogeneous archive rather than a single stereotype.

Keywords:

Japanese Devil, War Cinema, CCP, Typification, Mao Era, Nation-Building