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Progression 1 Essay Final Draft
Advanced College Essay
06/12/2024

Who Lives, Who Dies

The first time I watched *The Flowers of War* I was10, too young to fully understand the intense emotions of the film. All that I could remember was a sense of rage and sorrow, particularly during the most gut-wrenching scenes. The memory of the horrifying massacre and ravaged scenes in the film was deeply implanted in my mind, bodies all over the cities, children and women being killed and raped, haunting me for many years and deterring me from watching it again.

During my middle school years, I had learned about the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Nanjing Massacre through a Chinese curriculum saturated in strong subjective tones. In the 11th grade, however, I rewatched the film, and encountered Western perspectives on this history in school, which presented these events from a more detached, objective perspective. The two education systems made me realize how different cultural values can vary narratives and decisions. It is this distinct contrast in narratives that encouraged me to rewatch *The Flowers of War* with a new mindset in 11th grade, seeking to understand why it had such a huge impact on my childhood.

The film *The Flowers of Wars*, directed by Yimou Zhang, is set in the background of the Nanjing Massacre and illustrates three very different groups who find themselves seeking refuge together in a Catholic church. Unlike other films like *City of Life and Death (2009)* that explore multiple stories or the macro-level events of the massacre, this film focuses on one story and in one location. The groups–an American pretending to be a priest, a group of courtesans, and a group of schoolgirls and their young teacher–are initially filled with mutual dislikes and strong prejudices against each other. However, within only a few days, they evolve from reluctant strangers to close companions, and reach the peak of their connections in the self-sacrifice of the courtesans, led by Mo, to save the schoolgirls. The film navigates sensitive themes: the subtle social status of the courtesans, the convergence of Eastern and Western cultures, and a historical event that continues to evoke profound sorrow among Chinese people. Zhang's use of color, sound, and camera angles vividly portrays the struggle for survival of these extremely authentic characters in this tragedy.

This film asks us to consider: is sacrifice worth it? Who should sacrifice, and why?

The film centers on a clear "mission" for the characters: to safely lead the schoolgirls out of the hell-like Nanjing city at that time. Throughout the film, four groups make enormous sacrifices for this cause. Initially, it is the Chinese soldiers, led by officer Li, who could have escaped the city but chose to fight the Japanese soldiers that were chasing the schoolgirls instead. In one particularly powerful scene that has stayed with me since I was ten, the soldiers, ill-equipped to stop tanks, use their own bodies as shields to cover a man strapped in bombs, allowing him a chance to approach the tank closely. There is no word in the scene and all we can hear is the noise of the machine guns and explosions. This sequence, captured in a frontal angle shot, conveys a clear sense of desperation as each soldier falls, one after another, in a relentless sacrifice of life to this cold, giant machine. The moment seems like an eternal nightmare, as if it

will never end. It continues to even greater despair: as the smoke clears, another tank rolls in, passing the old one, rolling over the bodies of the soldiers we have just seen sacrifice themselves. Director Zhang's decision to frame the two tanks together in one shot not only puts the audience in officer Li's misery but also asks a central question of the film through this brutal scene at the beginning: When viewed from the perspective of outcomes, should people continue to make sacrifices when they seem less effective? And should we praise such sacrifices?

After reviewing the first ten pages of comments on Douban, China's largest film review website, most accept the soldiers' sacrifice for the schoolgirls with no question. The questions begin when viewers consider the sacrifice made by the courtesans for the students. Why is there no controversy over the soldiers' actions? Perhaps the answer lies in the unquestionable duty of soldiers to protect civilians—a responsibility deeply implanted in their roles. As depicted in the film, when Mo's friends satirized officer Li by saying that he and his men failed to fulfill their duties (leading to the fall of Nanjing), officer Li is overwhelmed with shame and doesn't say a word. He is unable to refute their insults or explain that they risked their lives in their efforts; he is trapped by his own conscience and the unshakeable sense of duty that perhaps ties them to the massacre. Ultimately, officer Li sacrifices when once again exposing himself to protect the students. The aim to discuss why they are willing to sacrifice is to explore this "taken-for-granted" sense of duty, this willingness to die rather than surrender. What are the internal, strong motives officer Li and his men have to behave with such profound spiritual strength, to choose sacrifice without hesitation or doubt about the meaning of their actions?

This strong sense of duty is not personal but rather is culturally rooted, influenced significantly by Confucian values. One of the central concepts in Confucianism is "Yi," which translates to "righteousness." This term has evolved over time, generation after generation, to become a symbol deeply embedded in Chinese social values and behaviors. According to Xinzhong Yao in his article "Confucianism and its Modern Values", Yi means "being in accordance with a rational path and moral principles, [representing] a commitment to moral principles that dictate a life led by duty and the welfare of others"(Yao). It is this Confucian cultural background that explains to us the motives of the sacrifice of Officer Li and his men. The unshakeable sense of duty that drives Li to his fatal act of protection is a direct reflection of Confucian influences, showing us how ancient ethical values continue to impact heroism and selflessness.(Yao) Back to the question of whether the life-cost of disabling one tank is worth it, I believe the answer is yes to officer Li and other soldiers.

Director Zhang undoubtedly agrees that such sacrifices are worthy and deserving of praise, judged not by outcomes but by intentions (though they indeed succeed in saving the schoolgirls.) The second and the most important group making sacrifices for the schoolgirls in the film are the courtesans, represented by Mo.

When we are discussing the courtesans represented by Mo in the film and their motivation, sacrifice becomes an essential theme. Zhang gives his answer through the courtesans' lines, emphasizing "having compassion and righteousness." While "righteousness" was previously explained, let's delve into the concept of "having compassion." The story mainly shows two characters, Dou and Lan, who sacrifice themselves for what they hold dear and precious, both driven by deep emotional bonds. Dou and Lan both endure severe torment before their deaths. When I was reading criticism from some viewers, they argued that Dou and Lan's

actions are senseless, irresponsible, and not truly sacrificial, because their deaths could have been avoided. But is this true?

In the story, a young soldier, only thirteen or fourteen years old, becomes orphaned due to the war. He is entrusted to the care of the courtesans by officer Li. Dou, the youngest among the courtesans and roughly the same age as the soldier, feels a special bond with him. In a miserable moment in the cellar, when he turns gravely ill, Dou expresses a wish to live an ordinary life with him once the war is over. As he nears death, Dou feels extremely sad, and she determines to play one last tune for him with a Pipa that has four complete strings. This necessity drives her to risk her life to retrieve the Pipa strings. Lan, on the other hand, decides to go back for a cherished jade earring she had lost, feeling it is too precious to abandon. These reasons might seem foolish under conventional moral judgments, but they represent “having compassion”, not romantic or familial love, but a commitment to what one personally values, regardless of its worth to others. In times of chaos, with no certainty of seeing tomorrow’s sunrise, acting on one's deepest desires and living authentically may be the best way to live. This is one of the film's central assertions about sacrifice: its value shouldn't be measured by conventional values or outcomes. Instead, evaluation should focus on the individual's faith. Officer Li and his team’s sacrifices to save the schoolgirls are driven by duty and Yi; similarly, Dou and Lan's acts of playing a song for a dying loved one and cherished earrings are motivated by compassion, and they are all equally worthy of recognition.

On their way back to the brothel, director Zhang illustrates the Nanjing’s devastation in a way that is both subdued yet realistic: bodies strewn everywhere, ruined buildings, and ruined roads, all covered in a dust and smoke that leaves everything under the color gray, except for the color red of blood. In this desperate scene, Dou and Lan run into the frame, their colorful coats contrasting against the ruin, symbolizing their vibrant lives. Zhang's use of color is masterful, contrasting the lifeless gray of buildings lacking “compassion” with the vivid colors of those sacrificing for their “compassion.” It is like a silent compliment to the belief that one should hold onto what one values most in uncertain times. Tragically, however, these bright-colored coats that symbolize their life ultimately make them visible targets for the Japanese soldiers hunting them down. This painful end is deeply sorrowful; they should have the right to live vibrant lives, to strive for what they cherish and believe, and to walk on the streets in their coats, yet these rights were stripped away by war. While reading some reviews, I noticed that some viewers even perceived their actions as deserving punishment, failing to reflect on the harsh massacre and the messages of war’s cruelty.

Recalling the discussion of “righteousness,” when Mo and the other courtesans are discussing whether to sacrifice themselves for the schoolgirls and why they should do so, Mo cites a well-known line from an ancient poem from the Tang Dynasty: “The [courtesan] does not know the grief of a fallen state, still singing of backyard flowers across the river.” (Mu) Although the original intent of the poem was to criticize the nobles and scholars for their ignorance during times of national crisis, Mo and many of the courtesans, who have only had an incomplete education, interpret it as a critique of courtesans unconscious to Nanjing and the country's ruin, still singing and finding joy and ignoring the devastation. This interpretation leads them to willingly “sacrifice” themselves by taking the place of the schoolgirls at the “celebration,” the party for celebrating the fall of Nanjing the Japanese officer forced them to attend. It is not

explicitly mentioned, but everyone knows they will be raped and tortured at this "celebration." The film conveys powerfully that they are motivated by a desire to prove that they are not heartless or without virtue as society perceives them; they are not mere objects or thoughtless decorations.

It is crucial to emphasize that when Mo and the courtesans initially enter the church, their conflict with the schoolgirls starts precisely because they are seen as courtesans, viewed as shameless and impure by the schoolgirls. As Katherina Li discusses in her article "Fragmented Sisterhood in the Nanking Massacre: The Flowers of War", this tension is rooted deeply in societal perceptions and the internal conflict the courtesans face. Li explains that the courtesans' decision to sacrifice was based on a strong desire to redefine their societal roles and prove their inherent worth beyond the prejudiced identity imposed on them. She explains how these women struggle not only with external conflicts with the students but also with profound internal conflicts within their own hearts about their worth and societal roles. She also mentions that the chastity norms are specifically used as a tool of abuse by the schoolgirls who, being culturally and religiously conditioned to maintain purity, view the courtesans with disdain and treat them as inferior (Li). This perception of chastity also influences some audience members' view that the courtesans should sacrifice themselves for the schoolgirls, a notion that I will later criticize for its simplistic and unjust moral reasoning.

Returning to the discussion of Yi, we can tell that Mo and the courtesans are undoubtedly sensitive to their own identities. Even if they always appear that they don't care, a subtle sense of shame about themselves still persists. As stated by Yinghua Lu in "Shame and the Confucian Idea of Yi (Righteousness*)*", the profound connection between social norms and personal morality is critical in understanding the courtesans' actions. Lu explains that Yi deeply influences one's actions through the internal feeling of shame, which arises when actions do not align with moral righteousness. This sense of shame, as Lu discusses, is not just a personal emotion but a social expectation that shapes behavior and societal roles (Lu). Thus, when Mo and the courtesans face disgust from the schoolgirls for their perceived impurity, it is not merely a clash of social classes but a confrontation between differing interpretations of Yi; it highlights a conflict between societal expectations and personal moral judgment. Mo and the others feel ashamed of being courtesans due to societal norms and prejudices against their profession. Yet, they are trapped in this life, having been sold into the brothel by their own families, unable to escape the identity that brings them shame. Yet, they love themselves and so, to stay happy, they convince themselves that what they are doing is right. This understanding from Lu's analysis helps elucidate the complex motivations behind the courtesans' willingness to sacrifice, driven by a deep-seated desire to claim their moral integrity in the face of themselves. Director Zhang does not shy away from this conflict in his film: he presents an authentic analysis of human nature, depicting the conflicts between the schoolgirls and the courtesans. He asks a question that has sparked endless debate among viewers: Is it worth sacrificing for a group of people who look down on oneself, (even though the schoolgirls did not betray them when they were hidden in the cellar during a dangerous situation where the Japanese soldiers are hunting down women and girls inside the church)?

Looking back to the initial questions: why is it necessary to sacrifice? Who should sacrifice? And why would one choose to do so voluntarily? Only the question of "who should

sacrifice”" remains unresolved. Firstly, who can decide this question? Is it the “fake” Father John, or the schoolgirls who hold the absolute status of being "protected"? Neither director Zhang explicitly and repeatedly emphasizes that it is Mo and her group who choose to sacrifice themselves. One may seem to consider the discussion unnecessary because it appears to align with the question of why one would choose to sacrifice. However, this isn't the case. As I mention earlier, many viewers believe that “chastity” is the essential reason why Mo chooses to sacrifice because the schoolgirls still possess their chastity, whereas Mo and her group have lost everything related to it. Throughout the film, director Zhang asks this question through the character of the “fake” Father John, who, while helping Mo and her group change to be like schoolgirls, asks, “What are we doing? Isn’tt everyone supposed to be born equal?” Zhang answers through Mo, who says she is willing to sacrifice because the students represent hope. It is about adults protecting teenagers, the future of the endangered nation. This point of view is also mentioned in this highest-rated online movie review (Ting), which emphasizes that when the courtesans confront the schoolgirls on the first day they met, they ask, “Let me see how you are cleaner than us?” Here, Zhang is also questioning the audience: do you still hold prejudices against them? Are you still using “chastity” as a weapon to attack and objectify women, misinterpreting their purpose of sacrifice?

Zhang uses an almost straightforward approach to vindicate the courtesans and introduces the film’s second key argument: no one is “supposed” to sacrifice, and it shouldn’t be taken for granted. He applauds and aligns with the Western value of equality, emphasizing that Mo and the others shouldn't be expected to sacrifice simply because they have lost their chastity or hold a stigmatized job. Additionally, he also illustrates the voluntariness and nobility of such sacrifices under the influence of Confucian culture. Zhang repeatedly emphasizes that the value of one’s sacrifice should not be judged by their social status but by their beliefs.

Near the end of the film, Mo and each of the courtesans give something meaningful to the schoolgirls: some hand over money they had saved to buy their freedom, some give their cherished bracelets, and one entrusts her beloved cat. Though no words are spoken to explain their actions, it is clear to all of them that they are settling their affairs, leaving their most precious memory and belonging to the young girls as a way to live through them, to relive their own youth, and to hope for a future. Then, Mo and her sisters, dressed in the simple uniforms of students, sing their most familiar and the brothel's most famous tune to the thirteen students on the Pipa that Dou sacrificed her life for. Everything seems so discordant yet harmonious, the cellar is filthy yet sacred; the courtesans are simple yet beautiful; the war and massacre is cruel and brutal, yet human will and belief are strong and determined, life is vibrant.. This might have been their last performance of this song, as in a few hours, they would face brutal treatment. Yet now, they are still singing. Zhang uses montage in that moment to transport the audience into the imaginations of the schoolgirls, the schoolgirls feel as if they have escaped the cold cellar, escaped the fear and hardship under the massacre atmosphere. They see fourteen women, dressed in their finest, singing the most moving song, walking to her slowly, swaying gracefully, just as the legends describe.

In the end, when Mo and her companions are forcibly loaded onto a truck by Japanese officers, everyone is scared and filled with sorrow, and one desperate courtesan even yells that she is not a schoolgirl. This scene really raises my respect for director Zhang, he brings the film

to a new height. Zhang avoids glorifying the courtesans; instead, he uses the shaking camera to fully capture their raw fear of the unknown, of torment, and of death, reminding us of their humanity and their natural instinct to be alive. Yet, it is this very vulnerability that makes their sacrifice all the more precious and profound.

If I hadn't studied the Western perspective of values and history, I would have never understood the profound implications Zhang depicted in this film. Growing up under a society that was deeply influenced by Confucian values, I always viewed the sacrifices of Mo and Officer Li as unquestionable: in the face of national duty, personal sacrifices were expected. Zhang, however, recognizes and embraces the western perspective that all individuals are born equal and that life is precious, and that no one's life should be weighed to determine who should make sacrifices. He also clearly sees human nature's selfishness, fear, and strong desire to stay alive. Yet, under these conditions, the characters he crafts still choose to make sacrifices: officer Li and Mo give up their hopes for survival; John forsakes his diplomatic immunity as an American and stay in Nanjing to protect them; and the young male teacher leading the schoolgirls disguises himself as a girl to make up the number difference (there are 13 students but only 12 courtesans) on the way to truck. It is precisely because Zhang emphasizes the presence of Western values and human nature that their sacrifices are better interpreted: they should not be judged by outcomes, conventional values, or the status of those who sacrifice. All humans are born equal, and everyone has the power to choose; yet, they all willingly choose death, leaving the chance to live for the girls, the future of their nation.

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