

Cliff Walkers: Zhang Yimou's ongoing accommodation to China's ruling elite

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Veteran director Zhang Yimou's *Cliff Walkers* released in April is a spy thriller about four Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agents on a secret mission inside Manchukuo, the puppet state established following the Japanese invasion of northeast China in 1931. Based on a script by Korean novelist Quan Yongxian, the film is a prequel to *The Cliff*, a popular 60-part television series broadcast in China in 2012 and written by the same author.

Zhang's movie is one of the scores of film and television shows screened this year to coincide with the centenary of the CCP, officially marked on July 1, and the occasion to unleash a barrage of propaganda to bolster the regime's public image.

The National Film Administration in April ordered compulsory screenings of contemporary and older propaganda films, up to five times a week and for the rest of the centenary year. "All distribution units, theaters, and screening units must actively prepare for film screenings, produce promotional material and run publicity campaigns" in order to foster "love of the party, country and socialism," it declared.

President Xi Jinping has established a special department to investigate anyone involved in "historical nihilism"—i.e., challenging the official narrative and falsified history of the CCP, which is not "socialist" or "communist." Rather it presides over a capitalist economy and represents the interests of the wealthy few—some of whom are to be found in its ranks.

This is the context in which the lavishly produced *Cliff Walkers* was released and is now showing in tens of thousands of Chinese cinemas, with screenings in North America, Europe and Australia.

Set some time in the early 1930s, Zhang's movie is a highly-fictionalised story with only tenuous connections to actual events in Manchukuo. The brutal puppet state became a staging ground for Japanese imperialism's full-scale military assault and occupation of China, beginning in 1937 and continuing until 1945.

Codenamed *utrennya*, or Russian for "dawn," the four Soviet-trained CCP agents' mission is to reach Harbin, the region's largest city, and rescue a former Chinese prisoner of war. He is the sole survivor of a firing-squad execution of three other Chinese agents at a concentration camp run by the Japanese army. The agents hope to expose the torture and other barbaric

crimes, including medical experiments, being committed by the Japanese military.

The film begins with spectacular footage of the four agents—a husband and wife and a younger man and his girlfriend—parachuting into a dense snow-covered forest and beginning their dangerous journey. The agents separate into two teams but are ambushed by security forces. They eventually make their way to Harbin.

There are torture scenes, violent clashes and shootouts between the agents and Japanese-allied counterspies and collaborators, the combatants all stylishly dressed in black coats and fedoras. The movie culminates in a spectacular car chase in Harbin's snowbound streets and alleyways.

The film includes a subplot, introduced towards the end and involving the married agents. Even as they are being hunted by Japanese spies and police, the couple are searching for their two children who they left behind when they went to the Soviet Union for training. This attempt to give some humanity and emotional depth to the story is flat and unconvincing.

Like a James Bond thriller, *Cliff Walkers* is hollow; all surface action with no serious character development and nothing socially critical or historically enlightening. The constant stream of spectacular and rapid-moving action scenes is mind-numbing and deadens critical thought. This is "heroism" without content: the "self-sacrifice" of tough individuals rather than mass resistance of workers and peasants to the Japanese occupation.

Cliff Walkers concludes with a political genuflection to Beijing, the film's end credits declaring that the film is "Dedicated to all the Heroes of the Revolution," implying some sort of connection between the stubborn determination of the Chinese agents with the current ruling bureaucratic apparatus, and the unthinking loyalty it expects from its subjects.

Zhang's movie does not falsify what the CCP or the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy did during the Japanese occupation, or their disastrous political manoeuvres. Instead, it simply ignores these issues and anything politically controversial.

Likewise, the Japanese concentration camp depicted in the film, a possible reference to Unit T?g?, a notorious human experimental division operating inside Zhongma Fortress, south of Harbin, is deliberately vague. It was the forerunner of the

Japanese army's Unit 731, established between 1936–39, and responsible for killing thousands of Chinese prisoners in biochemical weapon and other barbaric experiments up until 1945. *Cliff Walkers* dodges any exploration of this issue.

Because Zhang fails to provide even the most rudimentary background to the events his movie is set against, a few basic historical facts are in order. Japan invaded Manchuria in late 1931 following the so-called Mukden Incident—a railway bombing provocation organised by the Japanese military itself—and established its puppet state of Manchukuo in early 1932.

The occupation, which was fiercely opposed by Chinese forces, was in order to secure vital natural resources, food and labour to assist the Depression-hit Japanese economy. It was the first stage in Tokyo's ever-expanding attack on China, which saw an estimated 14 million Chinese killed, and ultimately brought Japan into conflict with US imperialism in Asia and the Pacific in 1941.

The Soviet training of CCP agents in *Cliff Walkers* is not detailed or portrayed in any form, and it is doubtful that such training actually took place. Stalin took no firm stand against the Japanese occupation of Manchuria even though it threatened a Japanese invasion of the Soviet Union. It was only when Japan invaded the rest of China, posing an even greater threat, Moscow provided military assistance to the Kuomintang (KMT) to fight back.

At the same time, however, the CCP in 1937, no doubt pressed by Moscow, entered into an opportunist Popular Front alliance with the bourgeois KMT led by Chiang Kai-shek, the butcher of the 1925–27 Chinese Revolution, whose principal concern was to destroy the CCP.

Four years later in 1941, however, the Soviet Stalinists betrayed the Chinese resistance and signed a non-aggression pact with Japanese imperialism, thus allowing the Japanese military to continue its bloody occupation of China. Stalin maintained the pact until August 1945, when the war in Europe was over and Japan was on the brink of collapse.

Beijing cannot allow any Chinese filmmaker to even touch on these sordid political manoeuvres as it could encourage viewers to question the party's history more widely. By choosing to make an empty action thriller, Zhang avoids dealing with any historical facts while presenting the agents in a heroic light to fit the CCP's current political requirements.

Zhang's latest film is another sad indicator of the 70-year-old's accommodation to Beijing over the past couple of decades.

A leading figure of the so-called Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, Zhang won well-deserved international acclaim for films such as *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *The Story Qiu Ju* during the late 1980s and 1990s.

Regarded as classics of contemporary Chinese cinema, these important artistic and socially critical works dramatised the plight of the oppressed and other layers mainly trying to

survive pre-revolutionary China and were underpinned with a healthy contempt for despots and the powers-that-be.

To Live, for example, his 1994 film about the plight of an ordinary family in 1930s, through the Japanese occupation, the civil war, revolution and Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution was not screened in China until 2008.

In the early 2002, Zhang began moving away from this serious and artistically challenging work, directing *Hero*, a grand-scale martial arts film based on the story of Jing Ke's assassination attempt on the King of Qin in 227 BC and devoid of any critical sentiments. Similar films followed, including the *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006) and in 2016 *The Great Wall*, a vacuous joint American historical blockbuster starring Matt Damon.

Zhang's is not alone among Fifth Generation directors, and other previously "non-establishment" filmmakers, adapting themselves to the Beijing bureaucracy and becoming increasingly wealthy in the process. Zhang is currently in the top 25 richest filmmakers in the world.

Others following this path include Huang Jianxin, director of *1921*, this year's officially sanctioned blockbuster about the formation of the CCP. Over the past decade Huang has directed *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), *The Founding of a Party* (2011), and *The Founding of an Army* (2017).

Zhang's next film, which has been approved for release by Chinese authorities within the next month, is called *The Coldest Gun*. The nationalist big budget film is about a 22-year-old Chinese sniper Zhang Taofang, who set a record by killing or wounding 214 American soldiers with 435 shots in 32 days during the Korean War. Pre-publicity for *The Coldest Gun* suggests that it is China's answer to Clint Eastwood's detestable *American Sniper* released in 2014, and serves the same purpose, to promote militarism and war.



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