

# The Path of National Awakening From the Perspective of National Defense: A Study of *The Eight Hundred*

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National awakening and the cultivation of national defense consciousness among the populace are deeply interconnected, forming a central narrative theme in Chinese films about the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. The collective historical memory of the Chinese people's wartime experience, which embodies the awakening of public defense consciousness, provides a significant historical reference for contemporary national defense development. This paper takes the film *The Eight Hundred* as a case study, analyzing its dialogues and scenes to trace the process through which national defense consciousness awakens among ordinary people. It concludes that such awakening is an inevitable outcome shaped by moral exemplars and cultural heritage. As an important medium of cultural transmission, War of Resistance-themed films not only construct and perpetuate national defense awareness through historical narratives but also inspire contemporary society to strengthen its defense consciousness through cinematic representation. Furthermore, these films serve as a window for international cross-cultural dialogue. Especially on the 80th anniversary of the victory in the War of Resistance, they showcase to the world the spiritual strength and national resilience of the Chinese people in resisting foreign aggression.

**Keywords:** *The Eight Hundred*, national defense consciousness, national awakening, Chinese War of Resistance films, collective memory

## Introduction

Directed by Guan Hu and released in August 2020, *The Eight Hundred* is a war film based on the 1937 Battle of Shanghai. It depicts the story of the "Eight Hundred Heroes" from the National Revolutionary Army who defended the Sihang Warehouse on the banks of the Suzhou River against Japanese forces. Upon its release, the film grossed 2.883 billion yuan domestically and topped the global box office in 2020, receiving numerous awards.

Due to differing cultural contexts and national conditions, most Western World War II films focus on the European theater, emphasizing individual heroism and reflections on war, while rarely portraying the awakening of public defense consciousness. In contrast, Chinese War of Resistance-themed works are rooted in local combat experiences and consistently highlight the inseparable bond between the people and the war. As one scholar notes, "The people have always been the soul of anti-war films, and patriotism has always been their driving force" (Xiao, 2015, p. ). The awakening and cohesion of national defense consciousness among the people constitute a central theme in China's War of Resistance narratives. From a national defense perspective, this paper explores

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the path of national awakening by analyzing dialogues and narrative scenes in *The Eight Hundred*. It examines the underlying drivers of national awakening—spiritual benchmarks and cultural genes—and concludes by highlighting the significant role of film as a medium in shaping contemporary national defense awareness. Against the backdrop of today's complex international situation, revisiting this historical narrative holds profound implications for consolidating the concept of whole-nation national defense in the new era.

### **Bystanders on the Shore: The “Dormant” State of National Defense Awareness**

At the beginning of the film, the stark contrast between the two sides of the Suzhou River vividly illustrates the “dormant” state of the people's national defense consciousness: The northern bank, where the Sihang Warehouse stands, is engulfed in smoke and fire, while the southern bank, the foreign concession, remains bustling and peaceful. This divided landscape reflects the public's failure to recognize the connection between national security and personal fate, revealing the prevalent weakness in national defense awareness at the time.

The people's misconceptions about the national defense situation were manifested in several ways:

First, they believed that war merely entailed a change of power and was solely the military's responsibility, failing to recognize its relevance to their own lives. Remarks such as, “Those who wanted to run have already run away. What's there to fight for?” and “What does the Japanese have to do with me?” reveal a widespread belief that the Japanese invasion had no bearing on their lives. Some even adopted a self-centered view, suggesting, “If all the Nationalist Army withdraws, everything will be peaceful”.

Second, they placed undue trust in foreign powers, assuming that foreign concessions guaranteed absolute safety. For instance, questions like, “If the Japanese come over here, we won't be in danger. The British won't run away, right?” and “The French won't let the Japanese in, for sure”, reflect their illusions about foreign protection.

Third, they had not yet realized that “national defense is the responsibility of all the people”. At this stage, the people's national defense consciousness remained unawakened, and the “bystander syndrome” was prominent. A wife's question to her husband who closely followed the battle— “What does it have to do with you?” — epitomizes this disconnect. Compared to long-term and broader considerations, most people remained preoccupied with daily subsistence. To them, the soldiers' desperate resistance resembled a theatrical performance, and they failed to recognize that the bloodshed and sacrifice were for the people across the river and for the homeland shared by 400 million compatriots. This “dramatized” perception essentially placed them in a safe “audience seat”, creating a serious “alienation effect” from the real national defense crisis.

Although a few voices cried out, “What's so scary about the Japanese? We are a great country! Four hundred million compatriots! If each of us spits, we can drown them!”, such sentiments were still isolated and drowned out by fear of the enemy and the desire to maintain the status quo. A collective consensus on national defense had not yet formed, and the complete separation of individuals from the national defense system represented a typical pre-awakening state.

### **Casting a Giant Shadow: The Initial Awakening of National Defense Consciousness**

After witnessing the soldiers of the Sihang Warehouse repeatedly repel Japanese attacks with their flesh and blood, the people were deeply moved, and their national defense consciousness began to awaken. When the soldiers successfully thwarted a Japanese attempt to infiltrate via the water, crowds gathered by the riverbank

and cheered: “What a fight!” “You guys are heroes!” No longer indifferent bystanders, they began to take pride in the soldiers’ victories.

When the defenders broke the Japanese army’s boast of taking the warehouse within three hours, the people eagerly spread the news: “Three hours are up!” “The Japanese couldn’t win! Our brothers did it!” This victory ignited enthusiasm and confidence in more people, motivating them to participate in the war effort.

Expressions such as, “If only every Chinese person was as brave as them... the Japanese wouldn’t even dare”, “I’ve always been a fast runner. I would like to try!”, and “We should do our best! Donate food!” illustrate a shift in attitude. Those with resources contributed money, while others offered their strength. The wealthy were willing to risk their fortunes, and the soldiers were ready to shed their blood on the battlefield. The people had now joined this great defense war.

### **How to Awaken: The Dual Drivers of Spiritual Benchmarks and Cultural Genes**

The awakening of national defense consciousness depicted in *The Eight Hundred* is not an isolated cinematic narrative but a recurring theme in Chinese War of Resistance works. It reflects the dual core drivers behind the awakening of national defense consciousness.

The awakening of national defense consciousness requires concrete spiritual benchmarks. In the film, the fearless spirit of the Chinese soldiers inspires the disillusioned public, shatters the Japanese army’s arrogance through action, and ignites national pride. The soldiers’ determination to “resist until death” resonates deeply, motivating more people to transition from contemplation to action in supporting the defense war. Throughout the history of China’s War of Resistance, the sacrifices of countless soldiers have consistently served as catalysts for public awakening, transforming scattered patriotic sentiments into a collective consensus on national defense.

The deeper motivation lies in the national defense spirit embedded within China’s traditional culture. From the steadfast patriotism expressed in “restore the house of Han, and return it to the former capital”, to the lofty aspirations in “We will not leave the desert till we beat the foe, although in war our golden armour be outworn”, to the sense of responsibility in “The Rise and Fall of All Under Heaven Is the Responsibility of Every Individual”, the Chinese nation has always regarded national defense as the duty of every citizen. This cultural gene, passed down through generations, drives the inevitable awakening of national defense consciousness.

These time-honored values embody the ethics of “family-country isomorphism”, deeply rooted in the blood of the Chinese nation. They regard the defense of the country and the protection of the family as two sides of the same coin—an inescapable natural responsibility.

### **From Image to Reality: The Contemporary Construction of National Defense Consciousness**

The public awakening depicted in *The Eight Hundred* is, in essence, a reconstruction movement of national defense consciousness. The transition from “individual alienation” to “national connection”, from “emotional indifference” to “patriotic empathy”, and from “passive spectators” to “active participants” reflects the gradual construction of national defense awareness.

“Our national defense is the responsibility of every one of us”. In recent years, from *The Eight Hundred* to other War of Resistance works such as *Dead to Rights*, the awakening of the people’s national defense consciousness has received increasing attention. Compared to foreign WWII films that focus on war heroes and reflections on war, and domestic films that emphasize battle scenes, Chinese narratives increasingly emphasize

ordinary people. The awakening of the people is the core driving force that transforms national defense consciousness from “passive cognition” to “active practice”. The strengthening of national defense consciousness, in turn, deepens the people’s awakening.

National defense power relies not only on advanced weaponry but also on the awakening and cohesion of national defense consciousness. As an educational tool, film enhances textual narratives, guides societal values, inspires national pride, promotes cultural heritage, and introduces national customs to the world. By performing the national spirit, fostering international friendship, and facilitating cross-cultural communication, film plays an irreplaceable role in building the spiritual “Great Wall” of national defense and promoting Sino-foreign cultural exchanges (Wang, 2008). This year marks the 80th anniversary of the victory in the World Anti-Fascist War. Excellent filmic works contribute to constructing a correct view of WWII history, spreading China’s voice, and telling China’s stories on the international stage.

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