

## Shaping Memory: Representations of the Korean War in Chinese Films

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**Abstract:** Compared with other media, film serves as an indispensable visual medium for shaping memories, and this holds true for the remembrance of the Korean War as well. This article surveys the narrative strategies and visual symbols used in Chinese films depicting the Korean War across different periods, aiming to explore how these films contribute to the construction of historical memory and portray cultural metaphor. Building on Maurice Halbwachs's theory of Collective Memory and other related memory theories, this study primarily employs text analysis as the main method and selects a total of 32 Chinese feature films depicting the Korean War from the 1950s to the present as the research sample. The investigation has revealed that the films depicting the Korean War produced in China have completed the construction of memory through a process of "record," "reconstruction," and "continuation." Furthermore, during different periods, the representation of the war in these films goes beyond a mere replication of historical sources. Instead, it is constructed within a framework of social discourse schema and historical narratives consistent with the political and economic context of each era. These memories provide insights into the "spirit of the times" or the political propaganda, offering an analytical lens on the collective consciousness and cultural climate of that era. Currently, those films tend to emphasize the significance of "peace" in memory construction, highlighting the image of the Chinese military as a "virtuous and righteous" force. This reflects creators' thinking on the concept of a community of human destiny in the context of globalization, and also conveys the long-term vision of examining history and building the future.

**Keywords:** Chinese Films, Korean War, Collective Memory, Narrative Strategy, Peace Concept

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1925, the French social psychologist Maurice Halbwachs introduced the concept of *Collective Memory* in his book "Les Cadres sociaux de la memoire", which "did propose a new way of thinking about memory".

According to Halbwachs, although memories are possessed by individuals, it is the collective group that provides the context and means for the reproduction of memories. Thus, as he argued that “there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection”. In addition, Halbwachs explored the idea of memory reconstruction and highlighted that “it is not a given but rather a socially construction notion” (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992), which is not static but rather dynamic and continually adapts and transforms in response to the prevailing ideological consciousness. However, Halbwachs' theory was limited to a "*present-centered perspective*" and did not fully consider the continuity of society. As a result, his theory did not address important issues such as memory transmission and continuity. With the continuous advancement of technology, scholars have increasingly focused on the role of media as a carrier of communication and memory. Studies such as the *Cultural Memory* research by Mr. and Mrs. Asman and the *Social Memory* research by Harald Welzer have explored the functions of different media in information dissemination and memory storage. These studies have complemented the theory of collective memory by examining the role of various media in memory formation and preservation. “Since its invention film has had an almost symbiotic interaction with memory” (Sinha & McSweeney, 2012), which constantly possess the capability to evolve into potent vessels of cultural memory, capable of crafting and shaping depictions of history (Memory, 2008). With its visually immersive narrative techniques and vibrant visual storytelling, film has the ability to bring the past back to life on the screen, providing the most concrete and palpable means of invoking collective memory (Te Hennepe, 2023). Since the 1950s, China has produced over 30 feature films depicting the Korean War (some films released online are not included), contributing not only to the construction of collective memory among the public regarding that historical period but also facilitating a further affirmation of their national identity and sense of belonging (Pickowicz, 2010). These films mainly focus on the stage during which the Chinese army entered North Korea and participated in combat, also known as the "War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea" period. The existing research on Korean War films from the perspective of memory or collective memory mostly revolve around the political stances of different participating countries, implicitly containing narratives based on nationalism and reflections on war. “In the US context, the Korean War is described as a forgotten war (Eperjesi, 2018).” Rankin Cortland attempts

to explore this reason. Using Astrid Erll's theory of *Media and Cultural Memory*, the scholar identifies narrative strategies in American Korean War films that hinder remembrance and contribute to the war's collective amnesia (Rankin, 2022). In addition, in Korean films, the portrayal of this war often emphasizes the tragic nature of national division and delves into the country's history of trauma (David, 2017; Martin, 2014). Some research also focuses on non-mainstream narratives of memory (Sun, 2015), attempting to explore the relationship between personal memory and collective memory from a "post-memory" perspective (Koh, 2021). In contrast, since Chinese-produced films about the Korean War primarily focus on the period of China's involvement in the conflict, scholars examine the shaping of memory in these films from perspectives such as the Cold War environment, international communism, political propaganda, and national consciousness (Ma, 2017; Pickowicz, 2010). Additionally, scholarly discussions on this subject often take place within the broader context of memory studies in Chinese films from the early years of the People's Republic of China. For instance, Weiling Chen examines various visual expressions of political memory construction at the national level and references the classic Chinese film portraying the Korean War (Chen, 2017), *Heroic Breed* (1964). She argues that such films exhibit unique political aesthetics, employing cinematic techniques that amplify collectivism and class solidarity, while evoking a sense of revolutionary romanticism and poetic sentiments. This article primarily focuses on Chinese films about the Korean War. Based on memory theory, it deeply analyzes the collective memories constructed by these films during different periods. This allows for the tracing of shifts in the films' political propaganda perspectives influenced by adjustments in national policies at various stages, as well as the resulting "redefinition" of the war. Additionally, this article aims to provide new insights and directions for academic innovation in the field of Korean War imagery and memory.

## 2. A KIND OF “GENRE” FILM IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE(1950S-1970S)

During the 1950s to the 1970s, accompanied by a series of resounding anthems, films depicting the Korean War and praising the Chinese People's Volunteer Army emerged as a significant theme in Chinese narrative film. The number of such films reached an impressive total of 17, representing a golden age in the history of Chinese-made Korean War films. In this

particular stage, the production of Chinese films depicting the Korean War was constrained by material and technological limitations. These films were not adept at portraying large-scale, macroscopic war scenes. Those black-and-white visuals were simple and straightforward, consistently emphasizing and glorifying revolutionary romanticism. In terms of content presentation and memory construction, these films exhibited a direct political nature and conveyed a distinct sense of the era, the combative spirit, and the historical context. Political propaganda took precedence over aesthetic experience, and the films focused more on social indoctrination than on entertainment appeal. They were inclined towards spiritual hymns rather than critical reflection. Similarly to other Chinese films of the same period, a series of "stereotypical" film works, heavily influenced by political discourse, inevitably became imbued with a certain ideological radiance when portraying war memories.

## 2.1 Preservation and Documentation of the War

In the wake of the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement on July 27, 1953, China's involvement in the "War to Resist America and Aid Korea" officially came to an end after more than three years. Following the cessation of hostilities, the Chinese populace remained immersed in a post-war patriotic fervor, witnessing a surge in national self-confidence and pride. Concurrently, the burgeoning film industry turned its attention quickly towards the recently concluded battlefield, swiftly prioritizing the production of films centered around the Korean War as a crucial agenda.

In 1956, the film *Battle on Shangganling Mountain*(Figure 1), which was produced by Changchun Film Studio and directed by Meng Sha, was released. It marked the first narrative film depicting the War to Resist America and Aid Korea, and it to the historical events, the film evoked a retrospective examination of the ongoing war within the framework of the prevailing social order, preserving the memory framework of contemporaneous war events. As the first narrative film depicting China's involvement in the Korean War, it received widespread attention upon its release. Given its close temporal proximity to the actual historical events, the collective social memory framework still retained a direct retrospective connection to the war events. Prior to the filming, the movie conducted several field surveys and gathered oral accounts from war veterans, ensuring a meticulous portrayal of historical events. The casting process extensively involved genuine volunteers from the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, thus maximizing historical accuracy. This approach established a symbiotic relationship between the film's narrative context

and the tangible social context, creating a reflected connection. Consequently, the depicted collective memory possesses a genuine quality and vividly reflects the distinctive imprints of the era.



**Figure 1:** Battle on Shangganling Mountain

In the following decade, China continued to produce films set in the Korean War, such as *Flying in the Sky* (1958), *In front of the letter* (1958), *Friendship* (1959), *Guards On The Railway Line* (1960)...While these films maintained an overall narrative tone centered around battles and heroes, they expanded beyond the confines of war storytelling and gradually started exploring alternative perspectives. In terms of thematic selection, these films centered their narratives around various technical branches of the armed forces, highlighting the Air Force Volunteer Army, Tank Volunteer Army, Railway Engineer Volunteer Army, and other military units. They aimed to depict combat scenes from multiple angles, showcasing the prowess and contributions of these specialized forces. Films such as *Flying in the Sky* (1958) and *Hero Tankman* (1962) exemplify this approach by focusing on the experiences and achievements of these specific military units during the Korean War. In terms of narrative perspective, these films not only celebrated the portrayal of typical heroic characters but also paid attention to the people and emotions on the home front. For example, the film *In front of the letter* (1958), produced by Shanghai Film Studio, took the viewpoint of a sacrificial soldier's wife and mother, which offered a different angle of contemplation on human nature and life and death outside the direct battlefield. In terms of plot development, these films also ventured into incorporating elements of counterintelligence and espionage, as seen in films like *Guards On The Railway Line* (1960) and *On the 38th Parallel* (1960). By introducing thrilling confrontations and a multitude of suspenseful twists, these films added a sense of dramatic narrative tension. This choice not only enhanced the entertainment value for the audience

but also served to expand the memory dimensions of the war. Paul Connerton posits that film can be understood as a form of “inscription practice” (Connerton, 1989), which are largely intentional endeavors that rely on media (VanValkenburgh, 2017). This practice involves the creation of a space and environment wherein collective memory converges and coalesces. In doing so, film not only extends the functions of individual memory but also serves as a simultaneous record and preservation of present-day historical memory. The aforementioned films provide multifaceted depictions of the Korean War, albeit not as exact replicas. Nevertheless, they are preserved in the form of visual archives, transforming them from fleeting short-term memories into enduring and continuous deep-seated memories that hold social and historical value. These films have a significant impact on people's understanding of this historical event, offering an important perspective through which it is perceived.

## 2.2 Propaganda and Education Driven by Politics

The 1950s and 1960s were an extraordinarily significant period in terms of politics, economy, and culture in Chinese society (Nakagane, 2022). It was a time marked by distinct characteristics and unique historical circumstances. The juxtaposition of the darkness and suffering of the old society with the excitement and joy of the new socialist life formed the prevailing social mentality during this period. The ruling party had an urgent desire to establish a legitimate and esteemed political position in the hearts and minds of the people. They sought to rewrite the history of the war by emphasizing the hard-won victories, with the aim of reaffirming the direction of the nation's progress. Therefore, during this period, artistic creation can be seen as a new political practice that revolves around politics and serves the ideological and cultural needs of the majority. Your sentence has a couple of grammatical issues related to verb agreement and sentence structure. Here's a corrected version: Constrained by this unique historical environment, the majority of films produced in the newly established People's Republic of China adhered to the principle of "centering around politics and serving it" and demanded harder, overtly political narratives that reinforced the Party's version of history (Pickowicz, 2013) and fulfilled the need for ideological unity within the nation. Similarly, the recording and portrayal of memories related to the Korean War by domestic films were largely premised on political education. They played an irreplaceable and crucial role in promoting the independence and self-reliance of the new post-war regime and highlighting the peaceful environment of domestic

development. Halbwachs emphasizes the educational role of Collective Memory when discussing family memory. He argues that grandparents often bridge the generational gap within the family by sharing their memories with their grandchildren. In traditional rural societies, before the advent of newspapers, elementary schools, and military service, the education of the younger generation depended greatly on the knowledge and experiences passed down by the older generation. Nowadays, the development of media technologies has not only transcended the spatial limitations of the conventional "family" unit but has also, in terms of time, preserved and perpetuated the once ephemeral oral transmission of education between generations in a more stable form. Undoubtedly, the victory of China in the Korean War holds great significance for the newly established nation. It is essential for people to remember the heavy price paid to achieve this victory, and film naturally becomes an important medium for post-war education and awareness. Those films extract and re-encode the existing historical memories, resulting in a highly integrated fusion of artistic creation and spiritual significance. On one hand, they unfold the contradictions, faithfully recreating the battle scenes and narrating the arduous struggles on the battlefield. On the other hand, they emphasize the depiction of heroic individuals, praising the fearless spirit of revolutionary heroes who are willing to fight and sacrifice. "Potent cultural symbolism is deployed to represent China as a collective cultural and spatial entity to which all citizens are steadfastly loyal (Pickowicz, 2010)." Meanwhile, the image of the enemy is vague in this context, which is defined as anyone whom the state and Party designate as such (Pickowicz, 2010). To sum up, all portrayals in the film are aimed at showcasing the righteousness of the newly established regime and the nation, as well as the resolute image of facing challenges without fear, effectively stirring the audience's thoughts and emotions, establishing common goals, and consolidating unity. Furthermore, apart from the depiction of battle scenes, the memory construction during this period also includes the portrayal of industrial development in the domestic rear. Mei Xinyu stated this war can be seen as the starting point of China's industrialization (Mei, 2020). Beyond the battlefield, the Chinese people, despite numerous obstacles, utilized their strong organizational mobilization capabilities to explore avenues of economic development by substituting labor for scarce capital, actively propelling domestic industrialization. In the film *Battle on Shangganling Mountain*(1956), the ceaseless flowing river, the towering and winding Great Wall, and the flourishing crops serve as metaphors for the burgeoning development of the newly formed and splendid motherland.

The billowing smoke from factories, the interlaced power lines against the sky, and the imposing dams all symbolize the representative icons of advanced productive forces. Additionally, another film titled "*Heroes in the Factory*" (1960) depicts the production environment of a factory, showcasing workers tirelessly manufacturing materials to support the battlefield amidst the rapid operation of machinery. This portrayal cleverly resonates with the social context of contemporary China, which emphasized technological innovation and specialized production. Consequently, it inspires a broader audience to actively participate in their homeland's industrialization and production development. By placing industrial landscapes at the forefront, these films offer a unique perspective that organically integrates multidimensional memories of the Korean War era.

### 2.3 Reenactment of the Spirit of the Cultural Revolution

During the period from 1966 to 1976, the dramatic changes in the domestic landscape also altered the development trajectory of Chinese cinema. Scholars of film history have become accustomed to characterizing this era as one of destruction, regression, and darkness. In the eve of the Cultural Revolution, nearly all domestic and foreign narrative and documentary films were effectively banned from exhibition, with only a few films allowed to be screened, primarily consisting of news documentaries centered around Chairman Mao's meetings with the Red Guards. It wasn't until the late 1970s that the films from the early 1960s were reevaluated and made accessible for viewing once more. During the same period, *Model Plays* emerged onto the historical stage, "with the primary task of creating heroic proletarian models" (Fan, 2013), while also underscoring the collective, "mass" quality of the "model works" (Harris, 2010). The Korean War films filmed in China during the Cultural Revolution were characterized by a simpler aesthetic and a strong political propaganda focus, distinct from those produced in other eras. These films emphasized heroic figures and the ethos of collectivism, effectively mobilizing the masses to participate. They reinterpreted traditional culture and historical themes to align with the political agenda and ideological education of the time. Broadly speaking, these films can be categorized into three distinct stages. In the first stage, certain films that had been banned from screening were granted restoration during the commemorative agenda, serving a ceremonial function in memory construction. At the end of 1970, on the 20th anniversary of China's participation in the Korean War, five films, including *Heroic Breed*(1964) and *Fight the Invaders*(1965),



were re-released after undergoing certain modifications. During the same period, a similar film from North Korea was also screened. These films effectively served as political megaphones, focusing primarily on heroism and the spirit of battle in memory construction. They also emphasized the depiction of Sino-North Korean relations and the celebration of internationalist spirit. This also reflects the geopolitical tensions and ideological conflicts of the Cold War era, as well as the reflection of Third World internationalism. In the second stage, revolutionary *Model Plays* were adapted into films. The straightforward expression conveys a clear political message, thereby enhancing political propaganda efforts and cultivating an enduring memory of heroism. In 1972, the film *A Surprise Attack of A White Tiger Regiment*(1972)was released, which adapted a modern Peking Opera play of the same name, one of the eight revolutionary model dramas(Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** A Surprise Attack of A White Tiger Regiment

The film combined traditional Peking Opera martial arts techniques with modern military tactics, magnifying the bravery and sacrifices of heroic characters. It incorporated performance styles and distinctive aesthetics unique to the Cultural Revolution era. Overall, the anti-American and anti-imperialist sentiment is strongly present in the films of the first two stages, with a significant number of antagonist figures appearing in the construction of memory. In the third stage, anti-American sentiment began to fade, while the "red revolutionary" elements remained prominent. Starting from 1973, the production of domestic narrative films gradually resumed, and the films depicting the Korean War did not experience a significant decrease in quantity compared to other genres. Instead, they exhibited a relatively stable level of development. Films such as *Fierce battle of unknown River*(1975) and *Eagle in the Sky*(1976)emerged as representative

works during this period. From a narrative perspective, these films depicted the historical events within the framework of the prevailing creative mode of storytelling during the Cultural Revolution era. This mode adhered to the common narrative pattern of urging the masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers to break free from superstitions, liberate their minds, and achieve victory by embracing Chairman Mao's Thought. This narrative approach was not only the mainstream ideology in Chinese artistic circles at the time but also reflected the prevailing policies among the intellectual community as a whole. The film *Eagle in the Sky*(1976) narrates the courageous actions of the pilots who dared to break free from theoretical constraints and, under the correct guidance of Chairman Mao's strategic thinking, adjusted their combat plans, thereby reversing the tide of the war and achieving victory in the struggle. Behind its storyline, the film carries deeper allegorical implications, reflecting the comprehension and resonance with the spiritual essence of the higher echelons of leadership. It embodies a sublime revolutionary aesthetic style that emphasizes the unity of spiritual politics and signifies a profound understanding of the revolutionary spirit. In summary, from the 1950s to the late 1970s, domestically produced Korean War films in China were played a significant role in constructing collective memory by capturing the essence of the era, reflecting the dominant ideologies and aspirations of the time. The filmmakers firmly grasped the political consciousness within the contemporary social framework, aligning their narrative structures, settings, and character portrayals with the prevailing cultural beliefs and spiritual needs of the time. Without exception, these typified films depicted elements of struggle, sacrifice, heroism, and revolution in a pure, passionate, and poetic manner. These films revitalized people's revolutionary beliefs, guided the formation of a firm political and emotional support among the general public, and repeatedly reinforced the affective memory of the nation's history of resistance and war.

### 3. BREAKING AND CREATING DURING THE REFORM PROCESS (1980S - THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY)

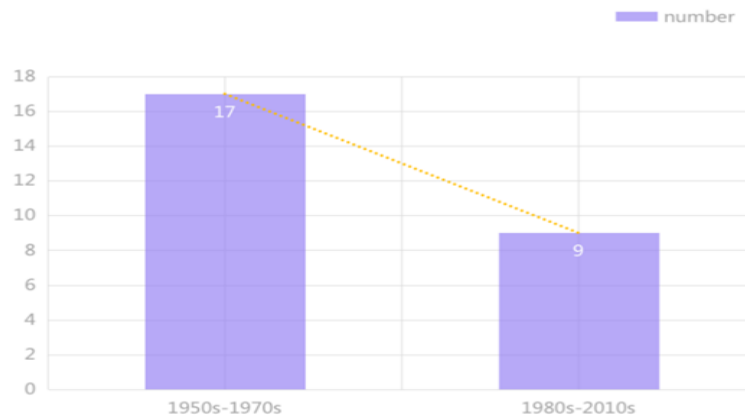
In the 1980s, China entered a period of reform deepening and social transformation, accompanied by an upward trajectory in the living standards of its populace. During this period, the nation placed considerable emphasis on comprehensive reforms spanning economic, political, and cultural domains, while concurrently pursuing an independent and peaceful diplomatic policy. The overarching objective was to cultivate

a conducive global environment for long-term peace and stability, thereby facilitating China's pursuit of modernization. The cultural realm, including the domain of cinema, also undergoing continuous innovation, gradually transforming from a publicity-driven industry to a market-driven industry (Zhu, 2003). However, despite the Chinese government's growing support for a market economy, it has consistently maintained its official ideology in the realm of film. Films continue to be a crucial medium for serving the Party and educating the populace (Chu, 2010). Therefore, the construction of historical memory regarding Korean War films during this period was influenced by internal and external policy backgrounds, the cultural creation environment, and the transformation of the film market. Compared to the previous stage, these films engage in a process of forgetting, deconstructing, and reconstructing memories, thereby forming a unique aesthetic value that reflects on the present through the lens of the past.

### 3.1 Selective Forgetting of Certain Memories

When discussing social memory, Connerton argued that it is not only characterized by transmission and continuity but also by control and influence over reality (Connerton, 1989). Throughout the process of memory perpetuation, the dominance of power in shaping memory cannot be evaded. In 1972, Nixon's visit to China signaled the advent of a new phase in Sino-US relations, and the Western world gradually began to adopt a more lenient approach towards China. Subsequently, as China embarked on its comprehensive reform and opening-up endeavors, adjustments were made to the diplomatic strategy of the 1970s, which involved a shift towards an independent, peaceful, and friendly foreign policy. Constrained by the current political environment and the dominant societal memory framework, artistic works during this period subtly diminished the vivid portrayal of the historical period of resistance against the Korean War aid, reflecting a selective omission of memory influenced by power control and mainstream ideological influences. Moreover, with the impetus of the intellectual liberation movement and the promotion of the capital market since the reform and opening-up, the Chinese market also experienced a period of comprehensive revitalization and development. The wave of commercial film development diluted the seriousness of political indoctrination that films had long undertaken, enriching their leisure and entertainment functions. As Habermas argued that "Memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time" (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992). When the creation of film and television content flourishes under

industrial innovation and when the public's demand for entertainment outweighs spiritual aspirations, war memories such as the resistance against the Korean War are no longer the central focus of collective interest. Consequently, during this period, there was a gradual decline in the shared thoughts and reduced interaction among members of the collective regarding this historical event, leading to the fading of collective memory.



**Figure 3:** A Table of War Themes in Chinese Korean War Films in Two Stages

Based on data analysis (Figure 3), the production of films centered around the theme of the Korean War, specifically the "resistance against the US and aid to Korea," has witnessed a drastic decline since the 1980s. Over the past three decades, there have been only around ten feature films released on this subject, highlighting a significant disparity compared to the prolific output of contemporary military and revolutionary war-themed movies. From the 1980s to the end of the 20th century, a mere six works were produced. The 21st century has seen an even scarcer number of domestically-produced films addressing the Korean War, with only a few exceptions, such as *38th Parallel* (2000), *Women Soldiers on the 38th Parallel* (2000), and *Assembly* (2007). Notably, *38th Parallel* (2000) has yet to be publicly released, and *Assembly* (2007) merely provides a superficial mention of the historical period of the Korean War. Consequently, films revolving around the Korean War have gradually faded from the public consciousness, undergoing an inevitable process of being forgotten and consigned to oblivion. However, it is important to note that this does not imply complete oblivion, but rather a deep burial, awaiting reawakening and reactivation in due course.

### 3.2 Reflecting History and Reflecting Warfare

In China during the 1980s, under the influence of new international dynamics, foreign policies, and the commercialization of the film industry, the collective memory related to the Korean War was gradually shifting

from the center to the periphery. Consequently, the motivational impact associated with the formation of national spirit was also experiencing a weakening trend. During the 40th anniversary symposium on the Korean War, scholars and experts emphatically pointed out that despite the United States' apparent strategic shift from armed aggression to peaceful evolution since late 1952, the concept of peaceful evolution, while presenting itself as a peaceful endeavor, carries even greater inherent dangers compared to armed aggression. They stressed the imperative for socialist countries to maintain heightened vigilance and adopt pragmatic policies and strategies. Moreover, the rapid socioeconomic transformations in China during this period have not only brought about wealth benefits to different social strata but have also intensified the confusion in value judgments and behavioral patterns, leading to a sense of disillusionment among many individuals whose expectations of societal values remained unfulfilled. Consequently, it becomes increasingly crucial to further comprehend the Korean War and strengthen propaganda and educational endeavors surrounding it. Such an approach not only facilitates revisiting collective memory and rectifying the existing dearth of knowledge, particularly among the younger generation, but also serves to reinforce and stabilize the dominant ideology, guiding individuals towards rediscovering their faith. Despite the pressures exerted by the domestic and international political and cultural environment, filmmakers persistently explore novel avenues, refraining from blindly exacerbating historical conflicts in their creative pursuits. Instead, they endeavor to produce works that resonate with the zeitgeist and construct memories from unique perspectives that align with the contemporary context. In this period, a more authentic form of realism gradually took the lead. Filmmakers also adopted this new narrative style to depict the Korean War. For example, they attempted to portray the harshness behind the war in a more direct and violent manner, bringing past memories back into the audience's view. One representative work is the film *The Rail Artery*(1998), directed by Sanyi Li(Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** The Rail Artery

In the film, without large-scale equipment, soldiers fill a ten-meter deep trench using their shoulders and hands. Enemy planes fly overhead, dropping countless bombs that instantly destroy railways and bridges, engulfing the scene in flames and smoke. The objective language of the camera faithfully reproduces numerous fragments of the battlefield, narrating the cruelty of war. Clearly, compared to the optimistic revolutionary fervor depicted in Chinese Korean War films of the 1950s and 1960s, those of the 1980s and 1990s placed greater emphasis on authentically representing historical motivations. They formed a reexamination of this period of history and presented a renewed portrayal of the spirit of war. Furthermore, while exploring authenticity, these films began to reflect on war and human nature. They not only actively shaped mainstream ideologies but also emphasized humanization and the narrative of everyday life, catering to the demands of the audience. To sum, the forms of expression in these films were profound but not pessimistic, genuine but not banal. Works such as *Star of the Heartstrings*(1981), *In the Depths of the Soul*(1982) and *Battlefield*(1983) avoided depicting the front lines directly. Instead, they approached the war from the perspective of emotions between characters, shifting the focus from the brutal and heroic aspects of war to contemplation of human nature behind it. Their content was more gentle, their emotions more relatable, transforming memory into not just a singular memory of past wars but a comprehensive memory with warmth that encompasses the past, present, and future. On the another hand, the reenactment of the Korean War memory through the medium of film also served as a latent response to and reflection of the ongoing and tumultuous conflict in the southern border region at that time. During that time, not only did Vietnam and other countries invade Southeast Asian nations, but they also brazenly encroached upon the borders of China. In response to such intolerable circumstances, the People's Liberation Army launched a defensive counterattack against Vietnam during the Spring Festival of 1979. Hence, in their narrative approach, these films prominently emphasized the righteousness of the decision-making process regarding participation in combat, subtly implying metaphors for the contemporary world's historical development and the dynamics of Sino-US relations. Furthermore, the films placed significant emphasis on portraying the Party Central Committee's adeptness under the leadership of Chairman Mao in maneuvering through the complexities of international affairs. The extraction of such memories also provided a certain degree of guidance in the struggle against anti-peace subversion during that period.



### 3.3 Entertainment Attempts on War Theme

Peng Shao pointed out that the selection of media memory is evidently a reflection of certain societal values and cannot exist in isolation from the current social (Shao, 2014), political, economic, and cultural environment. In the late 1990s, driven by the market economy, significant changes occurred in people's consumption patterns, values, and cultural notions. The advent of the market mechanism and reforms in the film industry in China opened doors for the growth of commercial cinema. Concurrently, the involvement of social capital and grassroots resources infused vitality into the production of commercial films in the country (Chu, 2010). With the increasing secularization of culture, filmmakers began to prioritize the entertainment needs of the audience. In this context, the nation's traumatic past about Korean War “has been reshaped as visual entertainment for the era of globalization (Yi, 2018). The films, such as *Dragon Recovery*(1992) were created within this context(Figure 5). They placed the main conflict on the ground-level struggle and confrontation between opposing forces, with guerrilla actions forming compelling plot points that continuously engaged the viewers. The moderate caricaturization and exaggerated portrayal of the enemy characters emphasized the entertainment value of the films. These thoughtful details greatly enriched the films, representing a new endeavor to artistically and entertainingly explore the theme of revolutionary warfare in China.



**Figure 5:** Dragon Recovery

In conclusion, from the period of China's Reform and Opening Up to the early 21st century, narrative films about the Korean War gradually moved away from idealized and romanticized portrayals. Through a series of deliberate forgetting and shifting viewpoints, they began to selectively reconstruct war memories. Under new aesthetic mechanisms, these films presented a diverse range of styles. Filmmakers began to critically reflect

on the historical significance and social impact of this war, adopting a more humanitarian approach in their examination of warfare. The once elevated, rational, and solemn film style gave way to a more nuanced exploration that encompassed a deeper sense of humanity and compassion in relation to the war. In terms of narrative perspective, these films not only celebrated the portrayal of typical heroic characters but also explore diverse aspects of the human experience during war. They delved into the complexities of human nature, depicting characters with flaws, doubts, and internal conflicts. By incorporating such narrative elements, the films aimed to provide a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of the human experience within the broader framework of the Korean War. Throughout the extensive process of dissemination, the incorporation of these new viewpoints on memory construction in the films undeniably reconstructs the collective memory of the Korean War in this era. The previously ambiguous memories retained in the public consciousness are deconstructed and reassembled, thereby enriching the social memory of the war with additional dimensions and perspectives.

#### 4. WAVES OF MEMORY FOLLOWING THE ANNIVERSARY MILESTONE (SINCE 2020)

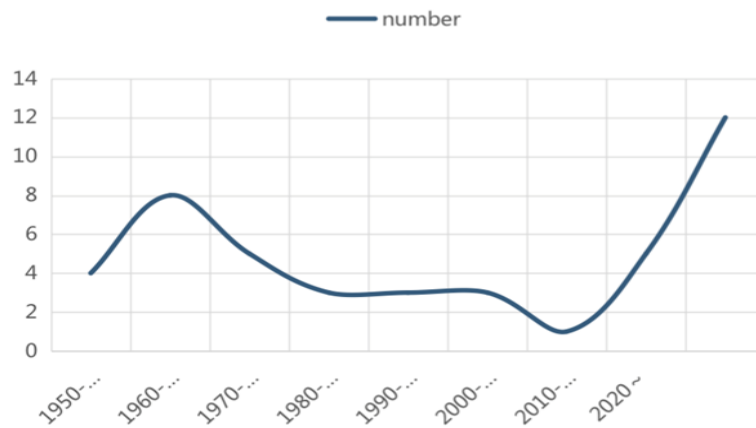
Entering the 21st century, the development of Chinese cinema has witnessed remarkable progress in both quality and quantity. In contrast, the development of films centered on the Korean War has almost come to a halt. This again reflects how, in the post-socialist era, official media propaganda has shifted its focus with changes in ideological trends, gradually prioritizing economic development, improving international relations, and diversifying the cultural industry. Despite a few notable narrative films such as *My War* (2016), they have been insufficient to prevent the memory of Korean War from gradually fading into obscurity. Many scholars have already confirmed that anniversary rituals are powerful triggers for memory. After experiencing a creative slump for nearly 20 years since the turn of the century, these films finally entered a new golden age during the critical 70th anniversary. The Chinese film industry depicted the Korean War from various perspectives and depths, thereby reviving this forgotten chapter of history in the public's awareness.

##### 4.1 Emotional Resonance under Commemorative Ceremonies

Although the media serves as an effective medium for the continuation



of memory, it is inevitable that memories gradually fade or even disappear over time. In this context, periodic commemorative ceremonies are often regarded as effective cues for memory retrieval, as they signify a public commemoration of past history in order to ensure the continuity of collective memory (Connerton, 1989). Since 2020, the Chinese government has extensively promoted the 70th anniversary of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army's involvement in the Korean War as a significant public event. Consequently, the public's awareness of this event has been heightened through the amplified emphasis set by the media agenda. Moreover, the film industry has actively engaged in this ceremonial homage, demonstrating a notable surge in production quantity, artistic caliber, and societal impact (Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** Trends in the Number of Chinese Korean War films

Halbwachs pointed out collective remembrance often has a dual focus, encompassing a physical object or material reality as well as something of spiritual significance, shared by the group and superimposed upon this physical reality (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992). Through collective gatherings like anniversaries and various commemorative rituals, those films frequently interacts with social and cultural spheres, establishing connections between historical experiences and contemporary societal conditions, thus once again evoking deep memories of the history of war. Similarly, constrained by the current complex international situation, Chinese people's national sentiment is at a peak. At this time, films subtly embed reflections on nationalism and internationalism in the process of memory construction, once again evoking and reinforcing the emotional and spiritual certainties linking audiences with memories (Burgoyne, 2003). In other words, the movies reaffirm China's unwavering spirit in defending sovereignty and protecting the nation, and through artistic means, resonate history with the contemporary era. As a result, viewers' emotions are reignited, strengthening their identification with the heroic characters and

historical events depicted in the films.

#### 4.2 Panoramic Display of War Memories

Under the influence of the emerging mainstream film style, films of this era blend a grand historical perspective with captivating micro-level narratives to depict the construction of memory. Departing from a mere replication of a specific historical period or a purely autobiographical approach centered around a single heroic figure, these films, under the scrutiny of historical authenticity, select cross-sections of war. They focus on a specific battle or campaign, employing a bottom-up approach that starts from the perspective of ordinary individuals. In terms of thematic selection, narrative techniques, and visual representation, these films boldly innovate, crafting memory constructs that not only evoke historical connections but also resonate with the contemporary social context and cater to the demands of the audience. As noted by director Yimou Zhang, historical records and details form part of the equation, but what truly captivates audiences is a cohesive narrative with compelling characters, seamless storytelling, and an immersive experience that carries them through the entire journey. For instance, the film *The Sacrifice* (2020) focuses on a bridge-guarding battle that occurred during the latter stages of China's Participation in the Korean War. The film explores a hybrid approach, introducing a chapter-based narrative structure commonly found in commercial films to enhance its dramatic impact within the revolutionary war genre. Simultaneously, it places emphasis on poetic expression. The director employs the symbolism of an unnamed bridge constructed by the soldiers' unwavering determination and resilient national spirit, akin to steel, as a metaphorical representation in the film's final scenes. Furthermore, with the industrialization of China's war-themed film production and the advancements in technical capabilities and material resources, contemporary films in comparison to the Korean War-themed films of the previous century exhibit greater artistic pursuits and explore various forms on the levels of creative thinking and film aesthetics. Through the collaborative efforts of setting design, actor performances, visual effects, and post-production editing, these films present a comprehensive visual depiction of war scenes from a panoramic perspective. Just as Robert Burgoyne said, "it engages the viewer at the somatic level, immersing the spectator in experiences and impressions that, like memories, seem to be burned in (Burgoyne, 2003)." This facilitates a dual presence of time and space for the subject of memory, establishing a profound emotional resonance and effectively disseminating visual culture.

Notably, the film of *Changjin Lake* series stands as an exemplary achievement in this realm, combining aesthetic artistry with spiritual expression. The films *The Battle of Lake Changjin*(2021) and *The Battle At Lake Changjin II* (2022) adhere to the modern industrial film production model characterized by significant investment, large-scale production, extensive marketing, and a wide market reach.

Table 1: Box Office Statistics of Changjin Lake Series Films

Film Name	The Battle of Lake Changjin	The Battle at Lake Changjin II
Year	2021	2022
Opening-Day Box Office(B)	2.05	6.14
Opening-Week Box Office(B)	15.27	25.33
Total Box Office(B)	57.75	40.76
Ranking List	1st	9th

Note: The data is sourced from Maoyan movie data, and the statistical date is September 3, 2023

These films benefit from the collaborative efforts of acclaimed directors and prominent actors, vividly portraying the heroic and tragic history of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army's unwavering courage and sacrifice on the eastern front of the Korean War. By delving into the past, these films further materialize historical existence, meticulously depicting details such as costumes, props, military equipment, tactical designs, and scene coordination. They minimize the occurrence of disconnection or misalignment between narrative and historical contexts as much as possible, offering audiences an immersive and authentic historical experience while evoking strong collective memories and patriotic emotions.



Figure 7: The Battle of Lake Changjin

Overall, the contemporary Chinese films depicting the Korean War films

exhibit a pronounced romanticism characteristic of the market-driven industrial era. These films fearlessly confront, document, and express history, providing a reimagined and interpreted representation of war. Instead of shying away, they extensively employ the language of violent aesthetics to directly confront the brutality and bloodshed on the battlefield, thereby maximizing the elicitation of emotions and memories behind them. This retrospective approach to memory does not simply amplify the trauma; rather, it strategically constructs a narrative that establishes connections with the social reality. Its purpose is to guide the audience in reflecting on war, contemplating the devastation and hardships inflicted on life, the physical pain and psychological trauma endured by individuals in war, and ultimately revealing the yearning for peace and the ultimate care for human nature and individual lives.

#### 4.3 Image Construction of the Justice Army

Recently, Chinese films portraying the Korean War no longer employ a simplistic narrative approach to depict the conflict between adversaries. Instead, they focus more on conveying the Chinese military as a "virtuous and righteous army" and showcasing its pursuit of peace. In the film *The Battle of Lake Changjin* (2021) there is a scene where Wu Wanli, facing a dying commanding officer of the North Korean Polar Bear Division, raises his gun to shoot, but is stopped by his younger brother Wu Qianli. Without lengthy explanations, Wu Qianli simply says, "Some shots must be fired, some shots can be saved." In the film *The Battle of Lake Changjin II* (2022) of the same series, Wu Wanli witnesses an injured American soldier silently getting up from his bed and covering him with the blanket he had been using. This depiction not only illustrates Wu Wanli's rapid maturation during the war but also emphasizes the profound compassion and righteousness inherent within the Chinese military, cultivated through the strict adherence to discipline. It exemplifies a crucial characteristic that sets the People's Army apart from any other military force in history.



**Figure 9:** The image of *The Battle of Lake Changjin*

Indeed, the narrative structure employed in these films cleverly constructs collective memory in the current temporal context. The aforementioned narrative settings serve two purposes. Firstly, they accentuate the Chinese military's treatment of prisoners of war. Prior to the onset of the Korean War, Chairman Mao issued stringent directives on military discipline, emphasizing the steadfast promotion of the honorable traditions of the Chinese armed forces. Throughout the conflict, the Chinese People's Volunteer Army consistently adhered to a policy of benevolence towards captives, in accordance with the principles of revolutionary humanitarianism outlined in the Geneva Conventions. Hence, every action of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army carries implications for the establishment of China's international image. Through the clever narrative arrangements in the films, they skillfully depict small gestures that convey profound sentiments, thereby showcasing a compassionate image of the Chinese military that extends beyond the traditional portrayal of stoic and bloodthirsty heroes on the battlefield. This further underscores that the notion of a benevolent and righteous army is not merely a casual claim, but a substantiated reality. Secondly, the narrative settings underscore the justness of the war, positioning the Chinese People's Volunteer Army as defenders rather than aggressors or perpetrators of bloodshed. The depiction rejects the notion of war and the battlefield as a game of lethal amusement. Instead, it frames the act of taking up arms as a necessary response to aggression, a means to safeguarding one's homeland. Thus, the films convey the notion that while some guns must be fired, others must remain silent. Media memory is always intertwined with specific social realities (Shao, 2014). These films not only construct war imagery but also dynamically establish spaces and settings that facilitate the aggregation and reenactment of collective memory. While engaging in historical retrospection, they concurrently endeavor to discern contemporary significance. Within the present international context, China vigorously advocates for a shared human destiny and steadfastly upholds the prevailing theme of peaceful development. Correspondingly, the aforementioned films convey a consistent message: war is not a purposeless game of carnage but rather a necessary means of resistance and defense. The Chinese people aspire to and actively pursue a peaceful, secure, and mutually beneficial international environment. This narrative discourse additionally encapsulates the significance of producing Korean War films in present-day China, as it concurrently facilitates the construction of collective memory internally and serves as a vehicle for propagating national consciousness externally.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Since the premiere of China's inaugural film portraying the Korean War, *Battle on Shangganling Mountain* in 1956, for over seventy years, films have used unique narrative techniques to continually "record," "reconstruct," and "continuation" this memory. In a broader perspective, the construction of collective national memory in films aligns with Halbwachs's concept of the "social framework." "In each period, society rearranges its recollections in such a way as to adjust them to the variable conditions of its equilibrium (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992)." It implies that memory construction is influenced not only by prevailing political and economic ideologies, as well as official discourses, but also by historical historiographical perspectives, film production techniques, media distribution channels, and audience aesthetic preferences. It goes beyond a mere replication or narration of historical events, as it encompasses diverse thematic elements, aesthetic styles, visual languages, and narrative representations that resonate with the overall memory hues of the era. During the 1950s and 1960s, memory construction primarily served the purpose of political propaganda and education. It revolved around post-war spiritual guidance and domestic industrial development, presenting heroic hymns in a highly romanticized and optimistic revolutionary manner. Given the relatively close proximity of film production to the end of the war, these films achieved a higher level of historical verisimilitude, evoking a strong sense of "realism" in memory construction. They transformed short-term post-war memory into a long-lasting and shareable collective memory, contributing to the construction of historical memory. From the 1980s onwards, under the influence of national foreign policies and the trend of film commercialization, the film industry experienced a period of decline. In order to reinvigorate the spirit, creators stripped away the veneer of triumph from war films, employing objective camerawork to depict the brutality of the battlefield and invoking historical traumas through the prism of memory. Simultaneously, within the dominant social framework, they deconstructed war memory and incorporated popular entertainment elements, thus facilitating a multi-layered retrospective reconstruction of embodied memory. Presently, propelled by the encouragement of national policies and bolstered by advancements in production capabilities, filmmaking is experiencing yet another golden age. Through commemorative ceremonies and promotional rituals, films present grandiose panoramic depictions of war scenes, while also offering compelling narratives of "small but refined" battle stories. These films intertwine notions of peace, benevolence, and

the ultimate value of human life, encapsulating a response to and reflection on contemporary international relations. As Halbwachs stated, these memories are incessantly reenacted; through them (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992), our sense of identity is perpetually sustained as if through a continuous relationship. Over the span of 70 years, more than 30 films have persistently crafted spaces of remembrance for the people through concrete and symbolic elements. While constructing and evoking collective memory, they perpetuate the spirit of war, thereby aiding the people in different stages to achieve and reinforce their identification with the nation and individual identities. In this positive cycle, collective memory becomes increasingly robust.

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