

Rebuilding the Symbolic Boundaries between the East and West: Occidentalism in *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

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ABSTRACT. The article explores the concept of Occidentalism and its portrayal in the recent Chinese blockbuster film, *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. The author contends that the movie represents a resurgence of Occidentalism in Chinese popular cinema, reinforcing the East-West binary and promoting a narrative of Chinese superiority. The discussion begins by contextualizing the historical origins of the East-West binary and its role in shaping Western identities and justifying practices like colonialism. The article also highlights the intricate complexities and contradictions within the film, as well as its implications for China's cultural and political landscape, specifically the shift in China's attitude towards the West during President Xi Jinping's tenure. The article emphasizes the growing closure of the Chinese mindset, exemplified by the adoption of "wolf-warrior diplomacy" and the portrayal of the West as an adversary in the media. This shift is also discernible in Chinese popular cinema, exemplified by films like *Wolf Warrior 2*, which de-

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pict Chinese protagonists triumphing over villainous Western characters. The author underscores the essentialist portrayal of the Chinese in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* as morally and spiritually superior to their Western counterparts. By creating a stark binary opposition between the East and West, the movie accentuates cultural differences and constructs them as insurmountable. Additionally, the article explores the film's narrative structure, its influences from Western and Chinese cinema, and the depiction of key characters, including General Douglas MacArthur and Mao Zedong.

RÉSUMÉ. *Reconstruire les frontières symboliques entre l'Orient et l'Occident : L'occidentalisme dans 'The Battle on Lake Changjin'.* L'article explore le concept d'occidentalisme et sa représentation dans la récente superproduction chinoise, *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. L'auteur soutient que le film représente une résurgence de l'occidentalisme dans le cinéma populaire chinois, renforçant le binaire Est-Ouest et promouvant un récit de supériorité chinoise. La discussion commence par une mise en contexte des origines historiques du binaire Est-Ouest et de son rôle dans la formation des identités occidentales et la justification de pratiques telles que le colonialisme. L'article met également en évidence les complexités et les contradictions du film, ainsi que ses implications pour le paysage culturel et politique de la Chine, en particulier le changement d'attitude de la Chine à l'égard de l'Occident pendant le mandat du président Xi Jinping. L'article souligne la fermeture croissante de la mentalité chinoise, illustrée par l'adoption d'une «diplomatie du loup-garou» et la présentation de l'Occident comme un adversaire dans les médias. Cette évolution est également perceptible dans le cinéma populaire chinois, comme en témoignent des films tels que *Wolf Warrior 2*, qui mettent en scène des protagonistes chinois triomphant de méchants personnages occidentaux. L'auteur souligne la représentation essentialiste des Chinois dans *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, qui sont moralement et spirituellement supérieurs à leurs homologues occidentaux. En créant une opposition binaire entre l'Orient et l'Occident, le film accentue les différences culturelles et les présente comme insurmontables. En outre, l'article explore la structure narrative du film, ses influences sur le cinéma occidental et chinois, et la représentation des personnages clés, notamment le général Douglas MacArthur et Mao Zedong.

MOTS-CLÉS :
film de guerre ;
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RESUMEN. *La reconstrucción de las fronteras simbólicas entre Oriente y Occidente: El Occidentalismo en 'The Battle on Lake Changjin'.* El artículo analiza el concepto de occidentalismo y su representación en la reciente superproducción china *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. El autor sostiene que la película representa un resurgimiento del Occidentalismo en el cine popular chino, reforzando el binario Este-Oeste y promoviendo una narrativa de superioridad china. El

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debate comienza contextualizando los orígenes históricos del binario Oriente-Occidente y su papel en la conformación de las identidades occidentales y la justificación de prácticas como el colonialismo. El artículo también destaca las intrincadas complejidades y contradicciones de la película, así como sus implicaciones para el panorama cultural y político de China, en concreto el cambio de actitud de China hacia Occidente durante el mandato del Presidente Xi Jinping. El artículo destaca la creciente cerrazón de la mentalidad china, ejemplificada por la adopción de la «diplomacia del guerrero lobo» y la representación de Occidente como adversario en los medios de comunicación. Este cambio también es perceptible en el cine popular chino, ejemplificado por películas como *Wolf Warrior 2*, que presenta a protagonistas chinos triunfando sobre villanos personajes occidentales. El autor subraya la representación esencialista de los chinos en *The Battle at Lake Changjin* como moral y espiritualmente superiores a sus homólogos occidentales. Al crear una dura oposición binaria entre Oriente y Occidente, la película acentúa las diferencias culturales y las presenta como insuperables. Además, el artículo explora la estructura narrativa de la película, sus influencias del cine occidental y chino, y la representación de personajes clave, como el general Douglas MacArthur y Mao Zedong.

The distinction between the East and West is one of the most diffuse, contradictory, and confusing cultural notions (Maxwell, 2011, pp. 8–11). The term “East” is used to refer to a vast geographic region that includes China, Japan, Korea or Vietnam but also India and Kazakhstan as well as Russia (especially its Asian part) and the Middle East. Even more confusingly, the “West” refers to a large expanse that includes Europe, but also North America, Australia and New Zealand. Today, the East vs West binary opposition may seem increasingly imprecise, restrictive and simply outdated (Maxwell, 2011, pp. 11–13). Already, Edward Said showed in *Orientalism* (2003 first published in 1978) how artificially amplified East-West differentiation could hinder mutual understanding between nations and could be used to justify a variety of dubious policies, including colonialism and imperialism. In this view, Orientalism is an imperialist epistemology indicating that the disparities between Western and Eastern civilizations are inherent and fundamental.

Despite its inherent imprecision, the dichotomized pattern of thinking remains deeply ingrained in the popular imagination. Indeed, the East-West distinction is a surprisingly durable notion. Politicians, journalists, academics, and the general public find it extremely difficult to discuss the contemporary world without relying on this distinction. Apparently, for those who use it, it expresses a relevant difference, even if problematic or purely imaginary. At the same time, the resilience of the distinction does not necessarily imply semantic stability (I write about it more extensively in Nicieja, 2018, pp. 33–35). In fact, as Bonnett notes, the East-West dichotomy has undergone constant redefinition and transformation, moving beyond its initial geographical distinction to assume predominantly cultural and figurative significance, rendering actual geographic locations irrelevant over time (Bonnett, 2004, p. 2).

In the past, the sharp distinction between the East and West played an essential role in establishing strong and cohesive Western identities. Scholars, intellectuals and politicians in the West deliberately used the East-West discourse to naturalise a seemingly insurmountable barrier between the two cultural realms. They cultivated the vision of the West as possessing moral, intellectual, and cultural superiority over civilizations outside the Western sphere. In recent years, however, the function of the East vs West distinction has shifted. Today, it seems to be more important for many Eastern or global South countries to build their own strong national identities vis-à-vis the imaginary and symbolic West. This predisposition has led to the proliferation of officially sanctioned movements and ideologies in countries such as China, Iran or Russia which envisage themselves not only as different but also superior to the West. The East vs West distinction has become a handy rhetorical tool for the political elites

in these countries to provide legitimation for their policies. They often highlight the differences between their societies and those of the West, emphasizing their distinct lifestyles, values, practices or worldviews as well as their assumed moral, intellectual, and cultural superiority over the Western sphere. They have developed the discourse of Occidentalism as a counterpoint to Orientalism. In this way, Occidentalism is on the one hand developed to oppose Orientalist practices, but on the other, it steeped in the same assumptions, and thus remains an extension of Orientalist epistemological frame.

In the specific context of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xiaomei Chen (2002) applies the term Occidentalism to define the local appropriation of Western discourse. She sees Occidentalism as a range of practices that involve the active participation and indigenous creativity of the Orient in the process of self-appropriation, even in the face of being appropriated and constructed by Western Others. By constructing the Western Other, the Orient has found a means to engage actively in its own self-definition and reclamation. As Chen further elaborates, "Occidentalism uses the essentialization of the West as a means for supporting a nationalism that effects the internal suppression of its own people. In this process, the Western Other is construed by a Chinese imagination, not for the purpose of dominating the West, but in order to discipline, and ultimately to dominate, the Chinese self at home" (2002, p. 3). Thus, the Chinese Orient has engendered a distinct discourse through its constant revision and manipulation of imported Western theories and practices. This discourse is characterized by a unique fusion of the Western construction of China and the Chinese construction of the West, wherein these elements interact and permeate one another.

In the post-Mao China, those tendencies towards Occidentalism and self-Orientalisation, persisted simultaneously changing their character. Beginning in 1978, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the PRC government began implementing the policies of reform and opening, many of which apparently aimed at dismantling, or at least softening, the sharp East-West divide. The new regime became committed to building a globally connected and internationally significant China (Berry, 2018, p. 38; Liu, 2003, p. 5). Newfound Chinese willingness for international cooperation was accompanied by general eagerness for Western and particularly American culture. It could be noticed in various aspects of Chinese society, including the widespread study of English.¹ Before the outbreak of the global pandemic, Chinese students were often sent to study in Western countries, primarily English-speaking ones, and tour-

¹ English became a compulsory subject in Chinese schools in 2001 (Hu, 2005; Hu & McKay, 2012).

ism from China to the West was constantly growing. The Chinese fascination with the West was also evident in popular culture, with Chinese fashion, film, television, and music increasingly embracing Western styles and forms through both direct import and adaptation.

President Xi Jinping's ascent to political leadership in 2012, has marked another turn in China's domestic as well as foreign policies. The subsequent consolidation of his power has resulted in extension of censorship, further repression of dissent and crackdowns on various freedoms throughout China, but particularly in Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang. In terms of foreign policy China adopted a confrontational attitude to its adversaries later dubbed "wolf-warrior diplomacy". The COVID-19 pandemic that originated in China was later used as a pretext to close the country off from the outside. At the same time, English ceased to be compulsory in Chinese schools ('Why China Is Turning Away from English', 2022). This trend has been reinforced by the representation of the West in the media as an enemy, not a mere rival (Lemaître, 2022). All these developments suggest a closing of the Chinese mind and a further drift towards tighter authoritarianism.

The shift in tone and attitude towards the West and the US has also become evident in Chinese popular cinema. In recent years, many of the most popular films made in the People's Republic of China feature fearless protagonists who are not only successfully competing against Westerners, as for example in *The Wandering Earth* (2019), but are openly seeking their defeat in direct combat. The later tendency became epitomised in *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), a story of a disgraced People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldier who fights with Western mercenaries in some unspecified African country. Soon after the release *Wolf Warrior 2* broke all Chinese records for attendance and box-office revenue (Teo, 2019). Revealingly, despite the film's explicit anti-Western message, it articulates those anti-Western sentiments referring to the conventions and concepts developed in Hollywood. Critics as well as the audience immediately pointed to the striking similarity of the film's narrative and formal construction to *Rambo*, a series of American action films from the 1980s (Berry, 2018; Teo, 2019). In fact, *Wolf Warrior 2* can be viewed as an indirect homage to Hollywood action movies of the late 20th century. It relies on a flipped American paradigm of a hyper-masculine, hyper-fit Chinese saviour who rescues not only his fellow countrymen but also the locals from Western villains. *Wolf Warrior 2* even perpetuates old (and usually avoided today) Western stereotypes about Africa as a homogenous continent beset by of violence, poverty, and mysterious contagious diseases. The apparent contradictions of *Wolf Warrior 2* start to make more sense when we filter them through Xiaomei Chen's

theoretical framework of Chinese Occidentalism. We can see them as a part of a long tradition of repurposing Western ideas for the anti-Western political agenda.

In 2021 *Wolf Warrior 2* lost its status of the most popular and profitable film in Chinese history to *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, another locally-made blockbuster. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* cost \$200 million to produce and earned over \$820 million at the box office (Brzeski, 2021). But not only the financial success makes *The Battle at Lake Changjin* even more interesting creation for analysing Occidental tropes in Chinese films. Both cinematic hits are built around the conflict between the noble, virtuous Chinese and villainous Westerners. However, in the case of the former production, the contrast between America and China is much more essentialist in its character. In *Wolf Warrior 2* the Chinese are able to prevail against their foreign adversaries largely thanks to their ultimately more effective equipment, logistics and training. The foreign mercenaries were unable to acknowledge China's new powerful status because they were blinded by ignorance and racist prejudice. In the climactic showdown between the two antagonists, Big Daddy (Frank Grillo) and Leng Feng (Wu Jing), the Westerner throws a dismissive line at his opponent: "People like you will always be inferior to people like me". Enraged Leng Feng's retort is as swift as it is brutal. After beating Big Daddy into a bloody pulp, he triumphantly whispers into the dead man's ear "That is fucking history".

The Battle at Lake Changjin offers a return to that very history when the geopolitical circumstances and the balance of power were less advantageous for the PRC. It is not a story about taking over global leadership in which the aspiring powerhouse replaces the outgoing and decadent empire. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is set in the times of the Korean War (1950-1953) when the freshly established People's Republic of China was in a much more precarious position. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is a victorious underdog narrative. Americans become defeated (at least the film presents it in this way) by the nominally weaker and inadequately-equipped army. Thus, to a much greater extent than *Wolf Warrior 2*, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is a story built around moral and spiritual superiority of the Chinese set against their inherently inferior adversaries. In terms of its structure, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is arguably a more complicated and original tale. Naturally, it would be disingenuous to call *The Battle at Lake Changjin* devoid of any outside influences. On the contrary, it is not hard to recognise numerous inspirations from many canonical Western war stories. At the same time, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* cannot be simply dismissed as a Chinese knockoff of a Western text to the extent that *Wolf Warrior 2* is a pastiche of the 1980s American action films. But apart from American influences, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* draws

just as readily on the rich heritage of Hong Kong cinema (two of the films directors are from Hong Kong) and Chinese propaganda film made in the 1950s and 1960s. The highly eclectic character of the film is additionally underlined by the fact that as many as three highly accomplished and experienced directors, Chen Kaige, Tsui Hark and Dante Lam, have taken the credit for it. Such collective directorship of a single coherent feature film (not a collection of vignettes or short films) is rare, even in China.

The Battle at Lake Changjin has a multi-threaded structure. At first the audience follows the story of two brothers, Wu Qianli (Wu Jing) and Wu Wanli (Jackson Yee) who are ordinary soldiers fighting in the same unit of the Chinese Volunteers' Army. But in the second part of the film, they recede into the background and give way to grandiose battle scenes in which individual performances are less significant.

The film creates its own, strongly Occidentalist view of the world where Chinese values have positive connotations and the ones associated with the United States are clearly negative. Thus, the main axis of the film's plot is based on recurring underlining of the difference and symbolic creation of a sharp binary opposition, with one, the Chinese side, elevated and presented as superior. Time and again, the film emphasizes the "essential Chinese spirit" and higher morale as well as motivation that enabled them to overcome superior military capacity of the American side. The film suggests that the material disadvantages of the Chinese soldiers in that war were compensated by their spiritual and motivational superiority. In other words, the film amplifies cultural differences and constructs them as unsurmountable.

The Battle at Lake Changjin opens with a self-Orientalising scene reminiscent of the Chinese fifth generation directors' films.² Influenced by the aesthetics of classical Chinese paintings, the scene portrays one of its central characters, Qianli, returning from war to his elderly and frail parents. He is carrying the ashes of his fallen older brother, Baili. Qianli's arrival also carries a glimmer of hope for brighter days to come. Having received generous provisions of money and land from the communist government, he embodies the promise of a more prosperous future. However, this idyllic existence is swiftly shattered with the eruption of the Korean War. Qianli is compelled to heed the call to arms once more. He must now defend his nation and safeguard the modest gains afforded to him by the recently established People's Republic of China.

The bucolic portrayal of poor villagers yearning to live in peace after years of war and hardship is contrasted in the film with the CGI-rendered scenes depicting

² This similarity is far from accidental. Chen Kaige, one of the three directors of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, is one of the most prominent representatives of the fifth generation of the Chinese filmmakers.

menacing American war machinery. The contrasting imagery is further amplified by other sharp juxtapositions developed throughout the film. The narrative perspective repeatedly shifts between Chinese and American viewpoints, juxtaposing both the plight of ordinary soldiers as well as their commanders. Thus, the plot is built around sharp binary oppositions that create a contrast between the East and West. Modesty and determination of the ordinary Chinese are put against the arrogance of the American military leaders. While the Chinese, both soldiers and their commanders, appear driven by patriotism and a candid desire to protect their motherland, the Americans emerge as political opportunist, exercising their imperial ambitions. American arrogance is most vividly personified by the character of Douglas MacArthur (James Filbird), the film's chief villain. Quite ironically from the Western perspective, MacArthur's self-destructive ambition is put against an apparently stoic and composed Mao Zedong (Tang Guoqiang). While MacArthur is aggressive, bellicose, and is shown drawing plans to invade China and crush the revolution, China's leader is depicted as a wise and thoughtful statesman.

Scenes featuring MacArthur in the film unfold against menacing soundtrack. The rowing camera shows the American general through series of extreme close-ups that focus mainly on details such as his shoes, sunglasses, pipe or clenched fists. None of those techniques are used to present Mao. Whenever Mao appears in the frame, the camera is stable, rendering him in a style reflecting the aesthetics of Chinese propaganda posters and social-realist paintings. In many scenes we see the Great Helmsman brooding over important decisions alone (often in the early morning hours when others are asleep) or surrounded by considerate and attentive advisers. As depicted in the film, Mao's decision-making process starkly contrasts with MacArthur's seemingly arbitrary and sporadic directives, a distinction that emerges prominently within the film's narrative. Furthermore, the movie accentuates Mao's altruistic nature by depicting his consent to dispatch his own son to the Korean front, ultimately portraying his son's death in the war as a simultaneously futile and heroic. Through this, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* creates a clear clash between two vastly different ideologies, with Mao and the newly established People's Republic of China representing Confucian harmony,³ while MacArthur and the United States embodying rapacious imperialist ambition.

In order to maintain such uncomplicated symbolic order, the film sticks to a very narrow interpretation of history. The Korean War was a significant Cold War

³ In reality Mao Zedong was strongly opposed to Confucianism and worked hard to eliminate it from Chinese practices.

proxy conflict, and China's role in it was complex (Guan, 2022). *The Battle at Lake Changjin* does not bother to reflect any of these nuances. Instead, it frames the Korean War as basically a direct Sino-American clash (Guan, 2022). Quite astonishingly for a film about the Korean War, it does not feature even a single character from Korea. Such starkly simplifying arrangement provides motivation for the extreme sacrifice expected from the Chinese soldiers. From the perspective drawn by the film, the conflict with the Americans is a purely defensive war, not a foreign expedition. It also aligns with the official Chinese interpretation of history. The soldiers may be in Korea but their goal is to prevent American aggression on China. The Chinese have to wage a bloody war on a foreign land in order to prevent even more disastrous conflict.

The self-Orientalising dimension of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is also emphasized by the exploration of the themes of filial piety and unconditional devotion to the collective. In the course of the film, one of the brothers, Wanli, metamorphoses from a mischievous rascal, we see at the outset, to a fully-fledged revolutionary hero. The hero's journey is completed in the sequel to *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, *The Battle at Lake Changjin II* (2022), also known under the title *Water Gate Bridge*. The sequel ends with a scene that reconstructs the homecoming sequence from the beginning *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. However, this time it is Wanli returning to his parents with Qianli's ashes.

The Americans in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* are depicted as a mortal enemy that must be ruthlessly destroyed, but there is also a narrow margin of humanity given to them. The film singles out several individual American soldiers and presents their mundane concerns. The enemy is not, as it is customary in war films (including numerous Western war films), a faceless mass. Predictably, the amount of screen time given to the Americans is not comparable to the Chinese side. One does not even expect any representational symmetry in this case. While a parallel is drawn between the military commanders on both sides, there is a noticeable absence of a comparable parallel between the soldiers of the opposing formations. The narrative in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* aligns us with several ordinary American soldiers at the beginning, but their stories are not pursued. Despite this, the film's more nuanced portrayal of the American side, especially when we compare them to Americans in *Wolf Warrior 2*, highlights their personal struggles, providing a more complex view of the conflict on the personal level. At the same time rather than weakening the Occident-Orient contrast it makes it more natural and acceptable for the audience. For instance, a scene when Chinese soldiers try to eat frozen potatoes huddled in the snow, is immediately juxtaposed with a lavish Thanksgiving feast organised in the US military camp.

The most vivid attempt at more complex rendition of the US side in the film is realised through the figure of General Oliver P. Smith (John F. Cruz). He stands out as the rare exception among the American military seniors. From the very beginning he recognizes the Chinese potential and he is one of the few to acknowledge that the Chinese joining the Korean War is going to dramatically change the course of the events. In a symbolic scene at the end of the film, General Smith pays homage to the fallen Chinese soldiers he comes across during his army's retreat. Seeing a group of the Chinese who froze to death sticking to their positions in extreme cold, he salutes to honour their sacrifice. Smith thus departs from the simplistic vilification of the enemy that is evident in other sequences of the film. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* portrays the Chinese side as fundamentally different from their Western adversaries. The sacrificial heroism of the Chinese is uncritically romanticized. Despite the recurring depictions of the horrors of combat, the film is lacking in any critical appraisal of war. While ordinary American soldiers dream about returning home, and their leaders envisage a quick and politically advantageous campaign, the Chinese are eager to fight and embrace sacrificial death. There is hardly any rift between the Chinese command and their front-line soldiers.

All the Chinese look united in their determination to defeat the enemy. They dedicate their lives to their motherland and valiantly obey orders. There are very few complaints, even in the face of grotesquely inadequate supplies and equipment. Chinese soldiers do not have winter uniforms for the extreme cold and must sustain themselves on a literally tooth-breaking diet of frozen potatoes. Moreover, each character's demise is glorified as an act of valour and selflessness, rather than absurd coincidence or misfortune. All deaths of the key Chinese characters are meticulously staged, aiming to evoke a profound sense of reverence for their patriotic devotion.

To further amplify the contrasts, the film portrays the Chinese involvement in the war as an undisputable military triumph. In reality the outcomes of the war were far from clear-cut and the conflict ended with a stalemate. Unquestionably, the Chinese intervention saved the North Koreans from annihilation (Guan, 2022). However, the preservation of North Korea was achieved at a horrendous human cost. The film aptly illustrates the Chinese sacrifice on the most rudimentary level of the trench soldier. In the course of the two films, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* and *Battle at Lake Changjin II*, all soldiers from the depicted company die in battle, with one notable exception. Quanli is the sole survivor. Simultaneously, the film glosses over and even glamorises the shortcomings of the Chinese leadership. The Chinese commanders send their soldiers to fight in extreme weather conditions with little concern for individual human life.

The Battle at Lake Changjin may portray Americans and the Chinese as irreconcilable, but in terms of technical execution, it demonstrates a remarkable capacity to overcome cultural boundaries and incorporate foreign practices. Like many Chinese blockbusters made today, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is clearly indebted to the technical and stylistic achievements of Western cinematic art. In this respect, there are few differences between the Chinese production and similar American productions. *The Battle of Lake Changjin* feely incorporates ideas and conventions from influential war films made in the US that emerged at the turn of the 21st century. Movies like *Saving Private Ryan* (1999), *The Thin Red Line* (1999) or *Black Hawk Down* (2001) employed state-of-the-art cinematography and inventive staging methods to create a more captivating and authentic representation of the atrocities of war, while also amplifying the grandeur of the reconstructed battles. The films were distinguished by their depiction of extreme violence and realistic portrayal of wounded and destroyed bodies, complemented by an intense portrayal of emotions such as aggression and fear, conveyed through the use of shaky camera work and dynamic editing. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is a clear continuator of that cinematic tradition. The film blends the poetics of a Chinese propaganda film with the modern technology of cinematic storytelling developed in Hollywood. Similarly to the American precursors, the film's main attractions are spectacular, large-scale battle scenes captured with the state-of-the-art kit. This was particularly evident in the film's extensive reliance on special effects and very dynamic action sequences. At the same time, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* introduces elements that are not often present in Western war films. These include dynamic and highly kinetic camera shots that are mounted on drones and the extensive use of computer-generated imagery (CGI). The difference in approach to depicting combat and horrors of war becomes even more evident when we compare *The Battle at Lake Changjin* with Christopher Nolan's highly acclaimed *Dunkirk* (2017). Both films have similar scattered and multi-layered narrative structure that highlights various perspectives and experiences. But while's Nolan work is chiefly interested in the psychological effects of war on the involved individuals, Chen, Hark and Lam' emphasis is on panoramic picture. They prioritise action and the awe-inspiring spectacle of death and destruction. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* extends its connection with its Western precursor to a new dimension. One hallmark of the American war films of the early 21st century was their representational realism combined with the glorification of heroism of the depicted characters (Gates, 2005). These movies presented an unprecedented level of moralizing and celebration of war, much like *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. Another feature that the film borrows from Hollywood is very faithful reconstructions of

the uniforms, weapons and heavy military equipment, from machine guns to helicopters and tanks.

Like many recent war films, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* strives to present contemporary military conflicts in a naturalistic fashion, emphasizing the horror, confusion, and brutality of combat. While Hong Kong cinema is famous for its gory imagery and wild depictions of violence, films from the mainland are usually much more subdued in this regard. This is mainly because of the strict censorship regulations in the PRC. Chinese censors are notoriously intolerant about displays of disproportionate violence or cruelty. Scenes deemed by them as gratuitous or excessive are usually cut away from both PRC productions as well as the imported films. It seems that in the case of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* the creators were given much greater leeway and allowed for more explicit than usual depiction of brutality and gore.

The Battle at Lake Changjin offers a perspective on China that diverges from the country's usual, officially sanctioned portrayal as a modern and ambitious nation poised to overtake the United States economically and militarily. The film not only offers a nostalgic journey to Mao Zedong's China, but attempts to revive the strong nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments from the period. The plot emphasizes the struggle against foreign domination and the defence of national sovereignty and rendering the message unapologetically Occidental. The film seems to suggest that the Chinese have been superior to the West all the time, even when they appeared weak and backward while the American advantages are fleeting and superficial. What counts is the unwavering spirit and determination, as displayed by the Chinese soldiers, rather than technological accomplishments. By highlighting the contrast between humble and unassuming Chinese soldiers and their ostentatious and overconfident American counterparts, the movie underscores a profound difference that is essential and unchanging.

Despite its enormous success in the domestic market, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* failed to generate similar interest in the markets outside China. Instead, it elicited either indifference or indignation (as it was the case in South Korea where some viewers called for banning of the film for its prejudiced vision of the Korean War). In the 1980s and 1990s America produced its resounding gallery of capitalist superheroes. They expressed the American ambitions and ideas of asserting global hegemony through combination of combat mastery and the possession of ultramodern weaponry. Today, the Chinese government openly contests the international order dominated by the United States. They promote their own image as a benign force that is robust in the defence of its sovereignty, but does not seek world dominance. In his

speeches Xi Jinping likes to portray China as a country that resorts to violence only in self-defence (Pottinger et al., 2022). But looking at the latest cinematic works, like *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, a much more complicated picture emerges. The deep and perverse fascination with American dominance and hyper-masculine violence is hard to hide. Chinese leaders remain in awe of American triumph in the Cold War. One of the favourite phrases in the Chinese political lexicon is rejection of “the Cold War mentality”. However, the films that China produces under its total control, seem to be taken straight from such Cold War mentality framework.

The Battle at Lake Changjin makes an intriguing fusion of Hollywood action and adventure with classic Chinese communist propaganda films. By incorporating cutting-edge technology and updating the genre to meet the standards of the 21st century, the film revitalizes Chinese desire for positive self-representation. Although the movie obviously favours the Chinese perspective and promotes the officially sanctioned interpretation of the Korean War, it still can be quite informative for the Western audience. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* shows very clearly that Orientalism is not exclusively limited to the West. In the similar manner that it has been practiced in the West, the Chinese intellectuals and artists also use a self-referential strategy to construct their own identity and image in the global arena. By analysing the case of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, we can see how the film reproduces and reinforces Orientalist stereotypes about China’s history, culture and politics, while simultaneously projecting a nationalist and heroic narrative. The film thus reveals the contradictory dynamics of Occidentalism and its continuing appeal in contemporary cinema and society.

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