

Video: “The Battle at Lake Changjin”: China’s Anti-war Film

Film Review

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For decades, Hollywood has produced a plethora of films extolling American military prowess in warfare. Aside from Oliver Stone films and a few others, e.g., Casualties of War, usually these Hollywood films depict the United States as a force for good defeating fascists and other evildoers. Never-ending US militarism has provided a cornucopia of potential war scripts for Hollywood. Currently designated bête noires have already featured in Hollywood war films. In 1984, Hollywood made Red Dawn about an invasion of the US by the Soviet Union. In 2012, Red Dawn was updated to the other source of US demonization, China. However, capitalism and the lust for profits caused a switcheroo. The Chinese market is very lucrative for Hollywood. Consequently, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) bogeyman was substituted in as invading the American homeland.

The Soviet Union and Russia have produced [a number of war films](#), albeit to little fanfare in the West. In the western world, Hollywood has been ruling the movie roost. Recently, however, Chinese film production has grown by major leaps and bounds, and blockbusters have been among the film fare. China is now the [world’s largest cinema market](#), and it is expected to continue to grow.

The major Chinese film of 2021 was a war epic, *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. It was produced at a cost of \$200 million and grossed \$905 million worldwide. It was commissioned by the Communist Party of China for its 100th anniversary in 2021. (It is currently [available on Youtube](#) with English subtitles.)

Trailer

The year previously, 2020, China honored the 70th anniversary of its People's Volunteer Army (PVA) that made the sacrifice to fight the [War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea](#). This war is encapsulated in *The Battle at Lake Changjin*.

A basic outline of what preceded China's entry into the war on the Korean peninsula is that the DPRK and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south were engaged in a civil war, a war precipitated by the US splitting the country in two. The DPRK had advanced throughout the ROK except for a small southern pocket when the US decided to interpose itself into the war on the side of the ROK. The US would also manage to bring the United Nations on board, bringing other countries to its side. This massively tipped the scales, and the war pushed north over the 38th parallel. China had warned the US on numerous occasions to stay away from the Yalu River that delineates the Korean border with China. (For detailed and footnoted substantiation read A.B. Abrams' *Immovable Object: North Korea's 70 Years at War with American Power*. [Review](#).)

Near the beginning of the movie, viewers see US planes strafing the environs of the Yalu River. China was very reluctant to enter the war, having not so long ago emerged from its own civil war. At the time China was a poor country looking to get back on its feet. But as pointed out in the film, that generation had to fight to spare a future generation from having to fight the war.

Thus, the 9th Army of the PVA is sent across the Yalu River during the frigid winter of 1950. The PVA was ill equipped, and they were going up against the best equipped and most formidable army of that epoch. At Changjin Lake temperatures plunged to -30°C. The film depicts ferocious fighting, numerous casualties, gore, and deaths on both sides. The remnants of the fleeing UN army made it to the port in Hungnam and escaped on vessels. The UN-US military would retreat back over the 38th parallel.

China had won that battle, but jingoism is muted.

Despite warnings from the Chinese side, the US breached the Yalu River, and China responded. Nowadays, a scenario plays out in Europe where Russia has warned the US against further eastward expansion.

The US ought to have drawn some lessons from the debacle of losing to "[Mao Zedong's peasant army](#)." But history reveals the US was forced to withdraw from Afghanistan by peasants with AK-47s; to flee from peasant fighters in Viet Nam; told to leave from war-ravaged Iraq; and it is still mired in the abject embarrassment it helped cause in Syria, reduced to being a [thief of oil and wheat](#).

The Battle at Lake Changjin also commits Hollywood-style theatrical excesses. However, there is no glorification of warring in the film. The sensitive viewer can only conclude that war as a means to settle differences or to impose oneself on another is barbaric and immoral. But when one side resorts to violence, the other is forced to fight back or to submit. As Mexican revolutionary [Emiliano Zapata put it](#): a choice of dying on one's feet or living on one's knees.

The film's obvious message is that warring must be rejected by the peoples of all countries. But not only that: violence in all its forms must be rejected by humanity. The violence of oppression, brutality, inequality, poverty, racism, intolerance, etc all carry the seeds of greater violence that leads to all-out war.

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