

## *Chinese War with American Characteristics: The Battle at Lake Changjin (2021) and Contemporary War Film Style*

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### 1. Introduction: War film in China and the United States

The monumental war epic, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021, 长津湖), is undeniably one of the most interesting recent Chinese cinematic productions. While it has not gained widespread international acclaim, this paper argues that its stylistic complexity and significance in the domestic Chinese media market warrant closer examination. Directed by a trio of acclaimed directors, Chen Kaige, Tsui Hark, and Lin Chaoxian (also known as Dante Lam), *The Battle at Lake Changjin* depicts the bravery of soldiers and the integrity of their commanders during the Korean War (1950-1953). With a staggering budget of nearly \$200 million, it holds the record as China's most expensive

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movie (Brzeski 2021; He 2021; Kuipers 2021)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, it has achieved the status of the country's highest-grossing domestic production and the second highest-grossing film of 2021 (Koetse 2021; Zhang 2024). This article suggests that the unprecedented success of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* in China can be largely attributed to its sophisticated cinematography and innovative stylistic diversity, which have rendered the film's otherwise rigid ideological message more attractive to Chinese audiences.

Many Western viewers find *The Battle at Lake Changjin* a particularly baffling work (Hoad 2021; Kuipers 2021; Brzeski 2021; Zhang 2024). The movie carries an explicitly anti-American message and revitalises a rich tradition in Chinese war cinema of representing the West as corrupt and immoral. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the war film has been a key propaganda tool, and plots themed around the "War to Resist American Aggression and Aid Korea"<sup>2</sup> have remained among the most emblematic. In fact, these films have developed into a separate subgenre with their own set of recognizable tropes that involve scheming American generals, perfidious enemy combatants, self-sacrificing Chinese soldiers, and spectacular battle sequences staged against the background of patriotic songs (Lim & Ward 2020: 118). The most notable Chinese classics of the Korean War include *Shanggan Ridges* (上甘嶺, dir. Sha Meng, Lin Shan, 1956) and *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (英雄儿女, dir. Wu Zhaodi, 1964). In *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, echoes of those productions are easily recognisable. The movie immediately stands out for its pronounced tendency to glorify heroes, portraying their extreme sacrifices as both unproblematic and admirable. At the same time, *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, despite its explicitly anti-American sentiment, is indebted to many famous American war stories. Even a cursory glance at *The Battle at Lake Changjin* betrays inspiration derived from such seminal titles as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998, dir. Steven Spielberg), *Pearl Harbor* (2001, dir. Michael Bay), *Black Hawk Down* (2001, dir. Ridley Scott), *We Were Soldiers* (2002, dir. Randall Wallace), *Tears of the Sun* (2003, dir. Antoine Fuqua), or *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006, dir. Clint Eastwood).

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<sup>1</sup> In global revenue in 2021 *The Battle at Lake Changjin* was surpassed only by *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021).

<sup>2</sup> This is how the war is named in formal discourse and historical books in China.

This influence is particularly evident in the movie's visual and stylistic choices, which draw heavily on the techniques developed over the years in American war cinema. For the American war film tradition, news and newsreel photography (i.e., photos and films taken during actual combat) have remained the most profound and enduring formal influence (Allison 2018; Fernandez-Ramirez 2019). In many early movies, the actual documentary material was directly inserted between the re-enacted footage. This became a common practice not only to reduce production costs but also to enhance a sense of authenticity (Stubbs 2013: 82). On the most basic level, the influence of authentic material has led to the stylistic dissociation between the battle and non-battle sequences in war films (Allison 2018: 9). While the non-combat sequences in most war films follow the cinematographic and editing practices of the classic Hollywood style, battle scenes ditch those rules of "invisible editing" in favour of montage techniques and vivid visual juxtapositions. Smoothness and transparency created in the non-combat scenes are replaced by fragmentation and sharp contrast. Typically, battle sequences include many elements that would be considered disqualifying errors in other contexts. For instance, glare from the sun's rays, shaky framing or out-of-focus elements of the foreground blocking the vision.<sup>3</sup>

The list of conventions developed over the years that distinguish war films is, of course, much longer. Apart from shaky camera movements and improvised composition, Fernandez-Martinez points to the presence of multiple perspectives and the use of forward and backward leaps in filming<sup>4</sup> (Fernandez-Ramirez 2019: 110). Combat sequences also frequently adopt point-of-view shots (POV) taken from the perspective of soldiers, aircraft pilots or the enemy. One of the most fundamental editing strategies in war films is shot/reverse shot killing. It isolates both the shooter(s) and the victim(s) in their own framing. As Bender explains, "the initial shot normally presents an individual soldier firing his weapon, followed by an immediate cut to the victim apparently being hit by the bullet" (Bender 2013: 80). Other editing

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<sup>3</sup> Such battlefield shot may include blurry branches, elements of defensive infrastructure or passing soldiers. Also smoke, soil, dirty water, and even blood spattered on the camera lenses may block the clear view.

<sup>4</sup> It means changing the size of frames that present the same event without changing the perspective or angle.

conventions include “shooter-within-the-same-shot killing” and “an implied off-screen shooter” (Bender 2013: 84).

All the above-mentioned techniques are frequently and effectively deployed in *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. However, the film’s creators have managed to refresh the genre and achieve a unique formal originality by additionally incorporating new stylistic techniques that are not typically found in war narratives today. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* successfully fuses the familiar conventions of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century American war films with the contemporary “drone age Cinema” commonly associated with action films. In particular, the film employs advanced aerial cinematography and dynamic combat sequences that skilfully embrace the most modern filmmaking trends. This blending of old and new styles provides an attractive viewing experience and simultaneously pays homage to the historical evolution of war films. The result is a visually stunning and emotionally impactful portrayal of the events at Lake Changjin highlighting the filmmakers’ overall competence and commitment to pushing the boundaries of the genre.

## 2. Making combat visually compelling

American war films from the late 1990s and early 2000s brought a new sense of realism to representing the experience of combat thanks to the use of erratic, handheld and low-angle cinematography that imitates footage captured by an embedded camera operator positioned among the fighting soldiers. Combined with dynamic montage techniques, the films give a sense of direct participation in violent action. The impact on the audience is additionally enhanced by meticulous visualisation of war carnage and carefully deployed sound effects. Thus, the films repeatedly overwhelm the audience with a graphic depiction of the devastating effects of war on the human body. Relying on advanced makeup techniques and digital image enhancements, these productions revel in graphic representation of death and horrific injury. We see details of severed limbs, torn-apart carcasses and pulled-out bowels, imagery usually associated with gore and slasher horror films (see figure 1).

The shocking representations are enhanced by complex sound engineering that not only focuses on the realistic reproduction of battlefield sounds but also on subjective individual sensations. For instance, they simulate the



**Figure 1.** Revelling in shocking representations of death. A still from *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

sound of a pounding heartbeat or the hiss one hears after being deafened by a blast.

The drone age cinema offers unparalleled mobility and kinetic dynamism in shots. The camera, or what simulates camera movement in the case of computer-generated imagery (CGI), smoothly transitions between radically different perspectives. Within one relatively short take, the frame can shift from an extreme wide shot depicting a broad landscape with barely visible human figures to extreme close-ups of a character's eye or hand. Moreover, we often see the camera hovering among the characters instead of using more typical editing sequences or tracking shots.

In this article, I adopt the term “drone age cinema” from Steen Ledet Christiansen. Following the author, I do not limit its meaning exclusively to footage taken from drones but also to images representing a non-human perspective and those impossible to achieve with standard cinematic techniques (Christiansen 2016). These include wide-angle shots of computer-generated military equipment (e.g., ships, airplanes, or bombs) as well as swooping, bird's-eye-view camera movements that could only be created with virtual cinematography in a digital landscape.

*The Battle at Lake Changjin* not only embraces the drone age cinema aesthetic but also elevates it to a level not seen before in cinematic representations of war. The film conjures up a large-scale audiovisual spectacle that repeatedly switches between very intimate, embedded perspectives of

individual combatants and sweeping, broad panoramic vistas. This formal strategy of overwhelming the viewer with aural and visual effects is deployed very efficiently. The destructive sublime conjured up in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* works to obscure the extreme ideological rigidity of the film's political message.

The stylistic amalgamation is manifested on various levels in *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. Yichuan Wang calls it “a panoramic film structure” that explores diverse aesthetic styles by creating a broad and scattered perspective (Wang 2022: 199). Wang uses a term borrowed from the tradition of Chinese classical painting, where scattered perspective signifies a lack of one fixed point of view. In contrast to Western painting, where such a point of view is usually easily identifiable, traditional Chinese painting introduces several different fields of horizon in the same picture. That is why it can also be called a “pointless perspective” or “moving viewpoint perspective” (Yan 2019: 1092–1093). Indeed, a moving viewpoint perspective is one of the imperatives underpinning the formal construction of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. The film combines two major narrative frames that further encompass several self-contained subplots. Thus, apart from following the most extensively covered subplot – Wu Wanli's (Jackson Yee) development from an unruly, mischievous brat into a heroic soldier and conscious, mature patriot – we have the stories of Wu Qianli (Wu Jing), Wanli's older brother; Mao Anying (Huang Xuan), Mao Zedong's son; and Yang Gensi (Ou Hao), one of the most famous Chinese heroes of the Korean War.

Following this line of thinking, we can compare the approach to visualisation of history offered in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* to a famous Song dynasty handscroll painting by Zhang Zeduan (张择端, 1085–1145), *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (清明上河图). The painting derives its appeal from simultaneously providing a grand perspective (it is almost five meters long) and meticulously represented details of everyday life. In the same way, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* balances sweeping panoramic views taken from a very agile, constantly moving camera and detailed, sometimes naturalistic, footage of individuals involved in the war. Moreover, while some sequences in the film aim at a faithful reconstruction of the events and conveying a sense of verisimilitude (especially the battle scenes), other sequences are highly stylised, evoking dreamlike states and idyllic atmospheres (e.g., the “homecoming” scene opening the film).



### 3. Narrative perspectives in war films

To familiarise viewers with the complexities of military conflict, most war films employ one of two distinct narrative perspectives. The first, the general perspective, gives the audience knowledge of the historical context. Viewers see real historical figures, maps, explanatory texts, or hear voiceover narrations presenting the most important facts related to the reconstructed events. However, to reflect the horrors of war in a more relatable manner, war films also present the perspectives of individual soldiers directly engaged in the hostilities. Tanine Allison names these two opposing visual perspectives, “embedded” and “remote.” Both have profound stylistic consequences.

The embedded point of view offers subjective imagery. The camera appears to take on the visual viewpoint of a particular character directly involved in combat and often strives to emulate documentary footage with blurry, shaky, and error-filled shots (Allison 2018: 17). By contrast, the remote perspective favours a grand vision, broad narrative, and a god’s-eye view (Allison 2018: 19). Formally, the remote perspective translates into fewer close-ups, long takes, and a focus on grand strategy and massive assaults (Binns). The camera becomes more depersonalised and omniscient, having access to sites on both sides of the conflict. *The Longest Day*, a grand American war epic from 1961, epitomizes the remote perspective. It famously reconstructs the D-Day landings from multiple narrative positions: American, German, French, and British, military commanders, soldiers, and civilians.

Most war films today blend the “embedded” and “remote” perspectives, but usually one of them remains dominant. Therefore, the prominent examples of the remote, grand view, like *The Longest Day* or *Tora, Tora, Tora*, still include short sequences from the perspective of individual soldiers involved in combat. However, for most of the time the audience sees the command centres and follows the decision-making process. *Saving Private Ryan* is on the opposite side of the spectrum. The main narrative focalisers are Captain John H. Miller (Tom Hanks) and later the titular Private James Ryan (Matt Damon). At the same time, the remote perspectives occasionally appear in *Saving Private Ryan*. Most importantly, before Miller is dispatched to bring Ryan home, the spectators can overhear the discussions at the United States Department of War and General Marshall’s (Harve Presnell) order to bring Ryan back from the frontline. The viewers also get to see the delegation sent to inform Mrs. Ryan of her sons’ death on the battlefield.

The first distinct stylistic quality of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* arises from its approach to representing the remote vs. embedded perspective. Unlike many iconic war films, the Chinese production evenly balances these two perspectives, providing views from both the trenches and the military headquarters. Consequently, the film's dense narrative structure involves frequent shifts between several subplots. The first subplot focuses on the embedded perspective, featuring the two Wu brothers at its centre: the older, Wu Qianli (Wu Jing), and the younger, Wu Wanli (Jackson Yee), both members of the 7th Company of the Ninth Corps of the Chinese People's Volunteers Army dispatched to fight in Korea. However, in addition to this embedded perspective, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* devotes much of its screen time to presenting more distant views of the war in which the Wu brothers must fight.

The remote narrative threads are composed of short, visually appealing sequences. Thus, at the beginning of the film, the audience gains the sense of the size and potential of the American contingent through a series of sweeping panoramic views. These are dynamic images of air raids and gatherings of military equipment and personnel. Another series of vantage points presents the commanders on both sides of the conflict. We are aligned with the commanding officers and military administration, including key players Mao Zedong (Tang Guoqiang) and Douglas MacArthur (James Filbird).

All parts and narrative levels of the film are characterised by considerable stylistic variation and formal exuberance. Camera work, composition, sound design, and mise-en-scene are all coordinated to create an almost incessant string of spectacular views and displays. The key effect the directors aimed to achieve seems to be a sense of hyper-kinetic dynamism. We not only have frequent shifts in viewpoints, but individual scenes are built through dynamic, mobile frames. There are also significant shifts between purely mimetic and poetic style and balancing between realist reconstruction and stylisation.

The impressive array of formal and stylistic devices used in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* makes it a visually attractive spectacle, duly appreciated by millions of Chinese viewers. Nevertheless, the filmmakers' enthusiasm for embracing diverse formal solutions is not extended to their treatment of the film's psychological and historical complexity. The characters are shallow, and the presented historical perspective is exceedingly simplistic. Undeniably, war films often sacrifice historical fidelity for spectacle and unified ideological appeal. Biased presentations, favouring one point of view or one side of the

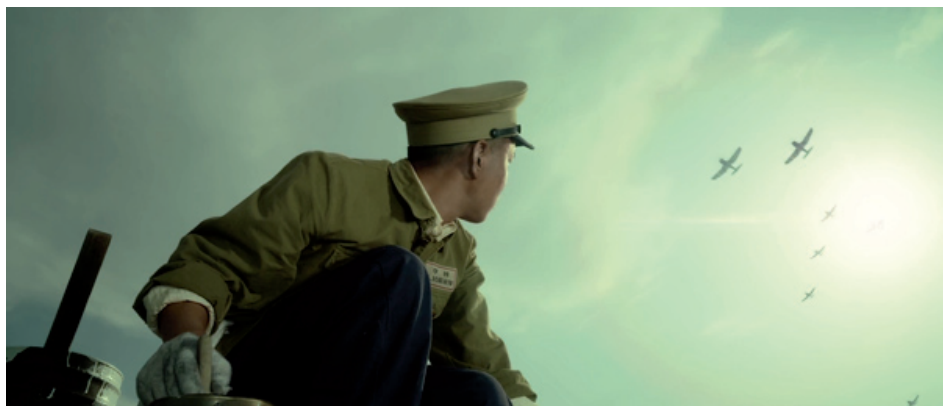


conflict, are the norm. However, even against this general standard, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* seems extraordinarily hostile to any historical nuance. The Korean War was a formative event for the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC). Mao's decision to help the North Korean side by sending troops was risky and costly. It was possible to problematise the international as well as the domestic context of the conflict and still produce a cinematic vision presenting the Chinese in the unquestionably positive light. Meanwhile, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* reduces the conflict to a binary clash of good versus evil, with the Chinese clearly personifying the good. The plot suggests that the Korean War was primarily about the Americans attacking China, and in response, the Chinese volunteer army heroically defeated the arrogant aggressors. This interpretation aligns seamlessly with the officially sanctioned Chinese Communist Party (CCP) narrative on the Korean War. However, this simplistic narrative has alienated many viewers from beyond China. The Korean War was a conflict that involved many nations, but *The Battle at Lake Changjin* depicts it as essentially a Sino-American affair. The result is a complete erasure of the Koreans (those from the south as well as those from the north). Surprisingly, even with a running time of almost three hours and pretensions to present a comprehensive and multilayered perspective, not a single Korean character appears throughout the entire movie.

Another glaring outcome of the intentionally polarising approach is the straightforward depiction of the Chinese involvement as an indisputable military triumph. Although the Chinese were vital to the war's outcome, the conflict ended in a stalemate and return to the pre-war division. The Chinese saved North Korea from annihilation (Hall & Stein 2016: 98). However, this was only achieved at a horrendous human cost. According to estimates, the People's Volunteer Army lost from 33, 000 to 72, 000 soldiers (Wada 2014). Admittedly, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* aptly illustrates the scale of Chinese sacrifice. Throughout the film and its sequel, *The Battle at Lake Changjin II: Water Gate Bridge* (2022), all characters from the 7<sup>th</sup> company die, and Wu Wanli remains the campaign's sole survivor. At the same time, the film glosses over and even glamourises the shortcomings of the Chinese leadership. With little concern for individual human life, Chinese commanders sent their soldiers to fight in extreme weather conditions without ensuring proper food supplies and even warm clothes. The most fundamental objectives of the war were achieved, but the casualties were extreme (Guan 2022).

#### 4. Contrasts and juxtapositions

Resting the story on strong contrasts extends to most aspects of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*'s plot. The opening sequences of the film depict Wu Qianli, a veteran of the Chinese Civil War, returning home with the ashes of his fallen heroic brother. But apart from the ashes he also brings hope for better life in China after years of foreign occupation and civil war. Wu Qianli brings money and government allotted land to his parents, but the idyll does not last very long. The veteran is summoned to fight again for his motherland, this time in Korea. The homecoming sequence is followed by spectacular images of American military might. We are shown a gigantic invading fleet, relentlessly shelling the Korean coast, and an indiscriminate American bombardment of the settlements at the Yalu River, the border between Korea and China.



**Figure 2.** Changing perspectives – a low angle shot. A still from *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

Although different in character and narrative function, those two sequences are united by a high degree of stylisation. All the scenes are digitally animated. In the case of images of American attacks, the results are rather controversial. The scenes are rendered exclusively through CGI technology. Although the computer graphics seem meticulously rendered, even an untrained viewer quickly recognises the synthetic origin of the images. The sequences of the American invasion appear to be more akin to a sophisticated video game than a top-budget motion picture. The artificiality of the animations is only

partly compensated by their impressively dynamic character. The images are constantly in motion. The computer-simulated camera either moves very fast or presents reality from extreme angles, producing surprising and intriguing images. For instance, the scenes of the aerial assault on the Chinese border rely heavily on extremely low angles that amplify the sense of threat and anxiety (see figure 2). On other occasions, an extremely high-angle shot is deployed, for instance, in a scene where we see a soldier painting the runway, ostensibly unaware of the imminent threat from the American airplanes. The high position from which he is depicted enhances his vulnerability. The dynamically changing angles create a strong stylistic contrast with the preceding sequence, where the camerawork is much more static and predictable.

The film also makes frequent use of dominant colours to emphasise the ideological message or generate the desired mood. For example, in the opening homecoming sequence, the setting is washed over with yellow (see figure 3). The film's creators repeatedly use this colour in many key scenes depicting Chinese soldiers. For example, before the soldiers are dispatched to Korea, their uniforms seem almost glowingly yellow, thus corresponding to the autumn foliage in the background. Also, in the two crucial night-time battle scenes, yellow and orange are dominant hues, thus standing out from the almost colourless daytime scenes. Yellow is one of the top two colours in Chinese traditional culture, representing the earth, the importance of the Yellow River, and power and wealth, but also, most crucially in this context, heroism (Feng 2016: 45; Ho 2018: 29).

Red, the other prevailing colour in Chinese culture, in *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, usually dominates in the scenes depicting Mao Zedong. In several sequences, we see the Chinese leader placed against a distinctly red background. Mao also works as a foil and narrative counterpoint. From the very beginning, the directors create the contrast between the two leaders, Mao and MacArthur, emphasizing the contrast through varied stylistic means. MacArthur's figure is unveiled early in the film and is presented against an aggressively combative soundtrack. The musical score emphasizes power, but also his allegedly bombastic personality. Apart from amplifying MacArthur's impression of arrogance through music, cinematography also works to reinforce that effect. MacArthur is rarely portrayed from a distance. More often, the audience sees him through extreme close-ups that draw attention to some distinctive aspects of his dress or behaviour.

In the first scene where MacArthur appears, the camera pans and cranes to present an extreme close-up of MacArthur's sunglasses, in which we see reflections of the exploding rockets and artillery fire directed at the Korean coast. The second scene, where MacArthur disembarks from a boat to deliver a motivational speech to the soldiers, is even more revealing. Here, the camera presents him through extreme high-angle boom shots and segments him by zooming in on details: his pipe, glasses, and shoes. Such cinematographic dismemberment amplifies an impression of bogus grandeur and self-importance. All these stylistic measures make MacArthur a collection of parts and images, rather than a coherent, relatable character (see figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Self-aggrandising MacArthur (James Filbird) portrayed from an extremely low angle. A still from *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

The special stylistic treatment that MacArthur receives becomes even more evident when juxtaposed with the way Mao Zedong is depicted. Mao is presented in a style of social-realist art. In the scenes with Mao, the usually lively cinematography becomes stable and predictable, without unusual angles or extreme close-ups. Most of the scenes depicting Mao do not feature any background music. Instead, wide shots portray the Chinese leader either quietly contemplating his next move or discussing matters with other prominent party functionaries. While the opening scenes on the river with Qianli reflect classical Chinese paintings, the sequences with Mao and other PRC leaders seem to take direct inspiration from social-realist paintings and CCP propaganda posters (see figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Social-realist inspiration: Chinese leadership deciding on their next move. A still from *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

The scene that probably most vividly illustrates the directors' predilection for flashy stylisation is the moment of Wu Wanli's spiritual transformation into a mature patriot. In the sequence, set in the railway carriage taking the soldiers to Korea, Wu Wanli learns from his older brother, who is also his commander, that he will not be issued live ammunition. He subsequently throws a tantrum and tries to jump from the speeding wagon. However, when Wanli opens the carriage doors, he sees that the train is passing near the Great Wall of China. The soldiers become literally mesmerised by the spectacle of the famous Chinese monument at sunset. Washed over with red light, they are overwhelmed by the ostensible beauty and gravity of the sight (see figure 5). Intriguingly, rather than using photography of the existing location, the Great Wall depicted in the film is an overly artificial computer-generated animation, as if location photography would not be compelling enough to evoke an appropriately strong emotional response.

## 5. Battle sequences

From a formal point of view, as a representative of a war film genre, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* stands out most vividly through its battle sequences. The film features at least four such sequences, each varying significantly in length and construction. Traditionally, the battle sequences form the core of





**Figure 5.** Mesmerised by the Great Wall at sunset. A still from *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

a war film. At the same time, in terms of form and style, they often stand out from the rest of the movie. Tanine Allison compares combat sequences to songs in the musical genre (Allison 2018: 93), and underscores that “battle and fighting scenes exist in tension with narrative – sometimes reinforcing the emotional course of the story, sometimes contradicting messages in the plot, and sometimes opening up varied sensations that can be read in multiple ways” (Allison 2018: 8). Scenes of combat produce audiovisual attraction and powerful sensations but also suspend the development of the plot (Fernandez-Ramirez 2019). If dialogue scenes privilege transparency, clarity, and unity, combat sequences employ spectacle, movement, experimentation, and disunity (Allison 2018: 9). A frequently used technique in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is the juxtaposition of close and distant views of battle, which intentionally disorients the viewer. Over decades, filmmakers have developed many conventions characteristic of war films, and the creators of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* took extensively from this rich source. The film contains numerous scenes and sequences featuring the established ways of reflecting audio-visually the chaos and confusion of combat.

The combat scenes in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* are distinguished by their highly mobile, hovering camera and digitally rendered imagery that simulates such footage. Beyond the embedded perspective, the audience is presented with sweeping panoramic views that show the scale of the operations. Drawing on the experience of seminal American predecessors, the creators of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* have updated the war film formula

with innovative special effects and dynamic camera movements characteristic of modern drone-enhanced cinema. For example, the film includes bullet time shots and speed ramping, techniques common in action films but less frequently seen in war movies. The film also stands out for its use of long takes with a distinctly mobile camera.

These stylistic choices can be seen as both a continuation and an amplification of methods employed in earlier successful Chinese combat films such as *Operation Mekong* (2016), *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), and *Operation Red Sea* (2018). Shared visual motifs among these films include bullet time shots and detailed animations of projectiles impacting their targets or detonating. These techniques not only increase the films' visual appeal but also serve a clear ideological purpose. They highlight the skill and resourcefulness of Chinese soldiers in contrast to their better-equipped yet seemingly less resolute adversaries. Like its predecessors, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* emphasizes themes of heroism and martyrdom, explored through both collective sacrifice and individual acts. Formal devices such as slow-motion photography, vivid sound design, hyper-realistic makeup, and digital enhancement are utilised to underscore these themes, creating a powerful spectacle often rooted in the naturalistic portrayal of horrific injuries and the dramatic death scenes of key characters

Constant shifts between a low-angle camera placed among the fighting soldiers and long sweeping aerial takes result in a moving or scattered viewpoint perspective known from Chinese paintings. The spectators get a grand, overarching view of the developments as well as meticulous and quotidian detail. This sense of omniscience, not common in Western war films, is further enhanced by deployment of multiple frames and split-screen images. The tension between detail and the grand view is most dramatically showcased in the film's first significant combat sequence. In this scene, we see the soldiers, led by Wu Qianli, who must cross an empty riverbed, exposing themselves as easy targets for American airplanes. The film's first battle sequence is its most atypical. Instead of actively defending against enemy assault, the soldiers attempt to evade machine-gun fire from the incoming airplanes. The scene is relatively brief yet formally striking. It is primarily composed of long takes, the longest of which lasts nearly three minutes. These takes show soldiers lying prostrate on giant boulders, tensely awaiting the actions of the American pilots. The sequence eschews standard editing techniques in favour of long



takes captured by a hovering, drone-like camera. The sense of omniscience provided by the mobile camera is further amplified by interspersed smaller frames showing close-ups of the American pilots' cockpits and their radio communications (see figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Frames within a frame: presenting several viewpoints without interrupting the take. A still from *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

As the soldiers wait, the camera intrusively hovers above and among them. The long take culminates in an extreme close-up of Zhang Xiaoshan's (Shi Pengyuan) eye, reflecting the fast-approaching American planes. This moment marks the end of the character's life, as he is subsequently torn apart by enemy gunfire. At this pivotal moment, the music fades, leaving only the ominous drone of airplane engines and the pilots' radio chatter audible. Later, when the shooting ceases, a dramatic musical score resumes and the audience sees the devastating aftermath. As the planes return and the soldiers prepare to retaliate, the scene conveys drama through the use of multiple frames – a stylistic choice that is rare in contemporary cinema, especially in combat films. The audience is presented with consecutively appearing tiles showing close-ups of soldiers or their weapons against a black background (figure 7). Here, the internal frames add visual variety and highlight the soldiers' individual reactions. The dynamically changing frames, paired with the emotive soundtrack, aim to heighten the emotional response of the audience. The close-ups on the faces isolate the soldiers and illustrate their determination in the face of imminent death. When the planes are called off



**Figure 7.** Dynamically moving multiple frames reflecting the individual soldiers' determination. A still from *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

for another mission, the style shifts immediately. The camerawork switches to long takes, slow-motion and wide shots highlighting the gory aftermath of the attack: the blood-drenched boulders and mutilated bodies.

The subsequent battle sequence in the film, while adhering to familiar formal conventions, remains both spectacular and diverse. Noteworthy for its extraordinary length – lasting over 23 minutes – it incorporates several unexpected visual and sound design elements. The sequence is meticulously orchestrated in terms of cinematography and mise-en-scène. It commences as the soldiers from the 7th company, en route to the relocation point, encounter another unit engaged in intense combat with American forces. Witnessing their comrades' dire situation, Wu Qianli decides to divide his forces. While the majority of the group reinforces the embattled comrades, the remainder continues the original mission. This division sets the stage for Wu Qianli, Wu Wanli, and their comrades to plunge into fierce fighting, which marks their first direct engagement with the American forces.

This battle serves as a compendium of nearly all stylistic conventions found in modern combat action films. As the protagonists are shown approaching the battlefield, the camera work, soundtrack, and editing pace undergo a dramatic shift. The frame becomes shaky, as if from a rapidly moving handheld camera. The tension is further accentuated by an accelerated editing rhythm. Furthermore, the heightened pace of editing becomes synchronised with the rhythm of gunfire, with frame transitions mirroring the direction of fired shots.

Additionally, rapid camera pans and point-of-view (POV) shots vividly depict the soldiers' perspectives through their binoculars or rifle scopes.

The second and third battle sequences in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* are distinguished by the use of a musical score in the background, a feature not typically found during intense combat in most Western war films. In *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, the music actively contributes to the construction of the combat scenes. The score is dynamic, changing in volume and style in congruence with the onscreen action. For instance, as soldiers charge enemy positions, the music swells to a lofty and grandiose tone, highlighting the bravery of the Chinese. Conversely, when soldiers crouch or take cover from enemy fire, the music shifts to a more rhythmic and subdued tone, accentuating the tension and anticipation. The film's normally rapid action pace is occasionally moderated by slow-motion scenes, which are used to emphasize weapons (such as grenades or projectiles), dramatic explosions, or the deaths of central characters. Another technique used in the film to decelerate the pace, rare in Western war movies, is the inclusion of cuts to panoramic views of the battlefield. These are extremely long shots with broad aerial views (see figure 8).



**Figure 8.** God's perspective: Panoramic view of the battlefield. A still from *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

Most of the battle action is understandably presented from the Chinese perspective. However, following the established conventions of the war film genre, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* also includes occasional POV shots from

the American side. In this regard, scenes of hand-to-hand combat are particularly dynamic, both cinematographically and editorially. The tension in these scenes is heightened by shaky camera movements and out-of-focus objects that obstruct the view, along with rapid camera pans and tilts. Additionally, unlike many contemporary Western war films, some scenes employ wide-angle shots from a hand-held camera instead of the more typical telephoto lens shots.

The last key distinguishing element that makes the action in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* spectacular are slow motion animations following the individual bullets and showing effects of the destruction they wreak. This is a signature example of drone-age cinema, showcasing perspectives impossible for humans or standard cameras to capture. On several occasions in the film the audience are shown flying bullets rendered in extreme closeup and in slow-motion as they penetrate different objects. One crucial scene made exclusively through computer animation depicts a cross section of a gunpowder sack as the bullet enters it and sets it on fire. Shots simulating a camera following a bomb or bullet have become common in action or superhero movies, but are rarely used in war films, where a naturalistic, documentary-style photography is typically preferred.

The third combat sequence, set near the titular Lake Changjin, stylistically mirrors the earlier battle scenes and may even feel like an extension of the previous sequence. As with the prior scene, the depiction of fighting around Changjin Lake is prolonged, showcasing numerous individual episodes and motifs. In this instance, the Chinese forces take the initiative. The sequence opens with several impressive panoramic shots of the charging Chinese units, which are seamlessly blended with an embedded perspective that captures the shock of American soldiers taken by surprise.

The final battle scene in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* constitutes an independent narrative insert and stands out as the film's briefest (lasting just under two minutes) yet most impactful sequence. This scene reconstructs the story of Yang Gensi, a real historical figure, celebrated in Chinese textbooks for his selfless heroism during the Korean War, where he defended his post against numerous American assaults. Stylistically, the Yang Gensi episode draws inspiration directly from iconic war films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Flags of Our Fathers*. The action is primarily captured in medium close-ups and close-ups and emphasises Yang Gensi (Oho Ou) and his comrades' emotions.

One of the most striking features of this scene is its cinematography, characterized by desaturated colours that render the imagery almost monochromatic. This choice enhances the sombre and gritty atmosphere of the battle. The editing and camera work are spectacularly dynamic, with rapid cuts and swift camera movements orchestrated to heighten the audience's emotional engagement. The result is ironic. Stylistic devices primarily developed in Hollywood are redeployed by Chinese filmmakers to pay homage to the hero killed by the Americans. However, such reliance on Hollywood-inspired techniques can be said of the entire film.

## 6. War film with Chinese characteristics

When it comes to character development and storytelling, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* seems to diverge from the prevailing global trends. Most recent popular films and TV shows, not just those made in the US, often present their main characters as complex and imperfect. These characters are shown accomplishing remarkable deeds and making significant sacrifices, but they are also prone to errors. They are held back by traumas, they harm others, and they do not always act ethically. Put simply, modern protagonists, including superheroes, are expected to have a distinct anti-heroic element. On the other hand, the characters in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* resemble the simple character portrayals in the socialist realist cinema of the Maoist period. Their American adversaries, barring one notable exception, are portrayed as wicked, corrupt, and cynical. This stark, black-and-white portrayal did not seem to trouble the Chinese viewers, but it was met with considerable scepticism in the West, and indeed, globally (Mastro 2024: 52; Rouiaï 2024: 142). For example, *Variety* critic Richard Kuipers described *The Battle at Lake Changjin* as “a very old-fashioned production” and “a well-appointed but rather empty spectacle” with cardboard and unconvincing characters (Kuipers 2021).

That may explain why, despite the high hopes of the political leaders in China, the international public remained either indifferent or, as was the case with the South Korean audience, indignant toward the film (Ryall 2021). Without a doubt, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* demonstrates a profound and inventive connection to the finest traditions of war cinema in its stylistic choices. However, the film also highlights the challenges arising from the ideological demands of the Chinese authorities and the nation's infamously stringent and

unpredictable censorship rules. The effective and sophisticated stylistic form of the film was enough to ignite enthusiasm among the domestic audience. The Korean War epic beat all existing Chinese box office records (He 2021). However, it failed to captivate the spectators from beyond China.

*The Battle at Lake Changjin* is frequently referenced in Western literature on China, though not typically by film critics or cinema scholars. Instead, it garners more attention in the writings of political scientists, thinkers and analysts of international relations. Prominent authors, like Katie Stallard, Ian Williams, Chun Han Wong, Slavoj Žižek, or Susan L. Shirk,<sup>5</sup> to name just a few from recent publications, use the film and its domestic success to illustrate their thesis about the authoritarian and anti-American turn in China under Xi Jinping. All of them highlight what they perceive as a glaring contrast between the film's technical finesse and the crudity of its message. From this perspective, it seems evident that one of the primary objectives of China's current leadership – to elevate the Chinese film industry to global prominence – seems increasingly out of reach. Despite China's accumulated expertise, technological prowess, and financial resources to produce state-of-the-art cinematic experiences, the ideological constraints present in China today seem to render this goal unattainable, at least for now.

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<sup>5</sup> I am referring here to publications by Stallard, Katie. 2022. *Dancing on Bones: History and Power in China, Russia and North Korea*. Oxford University Press; Williams, Ian. 2022. *The Fire of the Dragon: China's New Cold War*. Birlinn Ltd; Wong, Chun Han. 2023. *Party of One: The Rise of Xi Jinping and China's Superpower Future*. Simon and Schuster; Žižek, Slavoj. 2023. *Too Late to Awaken: What Lies Ahead When There is No Future?* Random House; and Shirk, Susan L. 2023. *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise*. Oxford University Press.



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*Chinese War with American Characteristics: The Battle at Lake Changjin (2021) and Contemporary War Film Style*

The article analyses the stylistic elements in the recent Chinese war epic, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021). Because of its scale, cost, and generated box office revenue, the movie has come to epitomize the new ambitions and capabilities of the Chinese film industry. The key argument in the article is that the unprecedented domestic success of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* has been chiefly rooted in its ingenious use of cinematography and its embrace of stylistic diversity. The film exemplifies Chinese stylistic eclecticism that fuses the conventions of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century American war films with the contemporary “drone age cinema” associated chiefly with action films. Thanks to those elements, the otherwise rigid ideological message of the movie becomes more acceptable to the audience, at least in China.

Keywords: *war film, combat, Korean War, Chinese cinema*