In the fall of 2021, the center-left pro-government South Korean newspaper Hankyore published an article titled Why South Korea Should Fear China’s Renewed Interest in the Korean War on a Chinese blockbuster film, The Battle of Chosin Reservoir, about the actions of Chinese volunteers in the winter of 1950.

Directed by cult director Chen Kaige and the equally famous Tsui Hark and Dante Lam of Hong Kong, the film cost 1.3 billion yuan ($210 million, one of the most expensive films in production, not just in China, but in the world). It grossed $828.1 million at the box office, becoming the highest grossing film in 2021.

The release of the war drama was part of celebrations to mark the centenary of the Communist Party of China. The film was commissioned by the National Radio and Television Administration, the CPC Central Military Commission, and Communist Party branches in several cities. An intense propaganda campaign accompanied it, and as Huang Jianxin, one of the film’s scriptwriters, said at the premiere, this film “aims to get the message across - You can’t threaten China.”

In the film’s credits and descriptions of events, the four-character term “kan mei yuan chao” was constantly used, which is the official designation of this war in China and conventionally translated into English as “resistance to American aggression and aid to Korea.”

In late November 2021, South Korea held an annual ceremony to commemorate the soldiers who died in the Battle of...
Chosin Reservoir. Key participants included Hwang Ki-chul, Minister of Patriots and Veterans Affairs and Christopher Del Corso, US Chargé d’Affaires to ROK.

Another curious fact: The New York Times wrote about the detention of a certain journalist who criticized the film, questioning the reasonableness and justification of the Chinese army’s actions during the Korean War. For this, he was allegedly charged with Article 299 of the Chinese Criminal Code, which provides for up to three years in prison for insulting Chinese heroes and martyrs.

However, when trying to check these facts, it turned out that the article with this number describes “desecration of the flag and emblem of the People’s Republic of China by burning, defacing, blotting out, soiling, trampling on them by feet in a crowded place.”

This is not the first popular Korean War film in China. In 2016, “My War” was released, and in 2020, The Sacrifice was directed by the famous director Guan Hu, with a gross of $174 million. A South Korean film distributor canceled its plan to release this movie from the country’s perspectives amid backlash from war veterans and political conservatives: the distributor withdrew its application for the age rating, even though at the beginning, it was given 15+. But even that has drawn angry protests from Korean War veterans: “We cannot help but be shocked and angry at the permission of the propaganda movie produced from the perspectives of China and North Korea at a time when the Chinese government continues to restrict Korean cultural products since the deployment of the THAAD (missile defense system in South Korea).”

Recall that last year, the topic of the Korean War was also the subject of heated historical debate. When BTS, the most promoted K-pop band, received an award from the non-profit organization Korea Society for promoting US-Korean relations on the 70th anniversary of the Korean War on October 7, 2020, and the band’s frontman said that “we will always remember the history of pain that our two nations shared together and the sacrifice of countless men and women,” Chinese newspaper The Global Times wrote, “BTS hurts the feelings of Chinese netizens and fans during a speech on the Korean War”.

The anger was so great that Samsung Electronics and Hyundai Motor removed K-pop-related products from the Chinese market.

Xi Jinping’s October 23, 2020 speech caused just as much excitement as the Chinese President pointed out that seventy years ago, an “imperialist invader expanded the flames of war to China’s doorstep.” But the Chinese people were able to “shatter the American military’s myth of invincibility.” According to him, the Communist Party’s decision to enter the war 70 year’s ago was made to “safeguard peace and resist aggression”.

In this context, let’s talk not so much about the film’s artistic merits but rather about its propaganda message, for the benefit of several curious moments.

First, Korea is present in this film solely as a territory where Chinese volunteers fight American troops. Neither North nor South Koreans are featured, and they are hardly mentioned. Part of this can be put down to the fact that at this point, the North Korean army was “in the process of reforming,” and South Korean troops were so scattered in the first Chinese strike that the Americans had to fight, relying only on troops from other UN member states. But in this film, compared to others, this type of confrontation is particularly emphasized.

Secondly, the film is made within the discourse that the Korean War is perceived as one of the three wars in which China assisted Korea but a Sino-American war on Korean territory. This approach was reflected in Xi Jinping’s statement when he said that the purpose of the Korean War was to probe China’s strength, and the fact that the volunteers fought back helped prevent the Korean War from turning into a World War III.

This will seem strange to the general reader, but Xi Jinping is partly correct. Because the USA did not understand the genesis of the Korean conflict and that it was primarily a civil war between the North and the South. In Washington, it was perceived as the beginning of some global plan aimed at the communization of Asia. Consequently, many in Washington were convinced that Korea was a start and that a Soviet threat to Japan or a Chinese invasion of Taiwan could follow. That is why the USA immediately began to introduce troops into the Taiwan Strait and strengthen Taiwan, which, in turn, was harshly perceived as a threat to China’s interests.

Third, the Chinese decision to send volunteers is shown to be highly smoothed out and appears to be immediate. Mao sends his only son to war, and his death is shown as a personal tragedy that affects both the leader of the country and the ordinary citizens.
In reality, the country’s leadership was split in half when discussing the issue because the government had just finished a brutal civil war and needed a breather, and sending troops to Korea was putting an end to the annexation of Taiwan. Significant non-combat losses of volunteers were connected with the fact that the troops in summer uniforms were thrown into the winter, where the average temperature was -30°C. The film demonstrates no centralized supply of cotton jackets, and some fighters heroically froze right at the combat post.

However, Mao opted for a solution whereby China is not officially involved in the war, and the Chinese troops are supposedly volunteers. Such a move is indicated by both the trophy plans for the war against communism seized in Seoul, which by no means were a North Korean fabrication, and the belief that if North Korean sovereignty is successfully eliminated, MacArthur and Lee Seung-Man could well cross the border and begin fighting the “red evil” already on Chinese territory. After all, almost at the beginning of the war, MacArthur authorized hot pursuit to fly into Chinese territory. Then, as part of the destruction of support infrastructure, American aircraft began bombing Chinese territory.

Fourth, the Americans are shown as challenging and worthy adversaries. There is no demonstration of cartoonish stupidity and inability to fight a war not in comfort, nor a demonstration of atrocities for the sake of atrocities. Americans are acting quite in the Patton paradigm (No bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country) and are putting up a decent resistance. The theme of air supremacy is also exhaustively covered.

In “The Sacrifice,” the US military is also shown as a serious and worthy adversary, whose technical superiority and high training can only be overcome by mass heroism.

The main antagonists are General Oliver Smith and Colonel Alan D. MacLean, who directly confronts the heroes in battle.

General Smith is shown as a good strategist, intelligently organizing defense and then a retreat and honor the fallen Chinese heroes. He is credited with the “We are not retreating, We’re just advancing in a different direction!” meme.

Colonel McLean commanded a combat team of two infantry battalions, an artillery battalion and other attached forces totaling 3,200 bayonets and became the highest-ranking Army officer killed during the Korean conflict. But while in the film he is mortally wounded on the battlefield, in reality, he tried to stop the friendly fire in the confusion of the night, went missing, was injured and died of his wounds on his way to a Chinese prisoner-of-war camp.

This approach to the image of the enemy seems more correct to the author than the portrayal of him as a “horde of orcs,” swooping by thousands and beaten by hundreds. Victory over a solid and intelligent enemy is more deserved and merited, and the failures do not raise questions about how one could lose to such a one.

Overall, the film’s political subplot shows very well how the entry into the Korean War was seen then and how it is seen now, as the Sino-American standoff of recent years calls for films that actualize the USA-China conflict.

Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, leading research fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.