

# *Narrative Transformations in the Visual Representation of the Korean War Resistance—from "Battle on Shanggailing Mountain" to "The Sacrifice"*

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**Abstract:** The War of Resistance Against US Aggression and Aid to Korea aligns, as the first war of national defense and safeguarding after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, has left an indelible mark on the collective memory, with the film "Battle on Shanggailing Mountain" becoming an unforgettable symbol for a generation. With the arrival of the 70th anniversary of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army's entry into the war, there has been a surge in the creation of film and television works centered around the historical theme of the Korean War Resistance, and the film "The Sacrifice" has emerged in response. Although both "Battle on Shanggailing Mountain" and "The Sacrifice" take the Korean War Resistance as their narrative focal point, these two works are separated by 64 years, and their narrative methods and emphases have undergone significant changes. A careful comparative analysis of these two films, examining their strengths and weaknesses, can provide important insights and references for future creative endeavors in the field of film and television works related to this historical theme.

## **1. Development of films about anti-American aid to North Korea**

As films centered around the theme of the Korean War Resistance, both "Battle on Shanggailing Mountain" and "The Sacrifice" inevitably delve into the portrayal of individual heroic figures that emerged from the battles of the Korean War Resistance. These emblematic warriors and their exceptional deeds often serve as the nucleus of a comprehensive narrative imbued with profound emotions and core values. Consequently, a character-driven narrative serves as a vital storytelling structure and approach in this genre of films. However, despite their shared focus on character-driven storytelling, "Battle on Shanggailing Mountain" and "The Sacrifice" diverge significantly in terms of their chosen perspectives and narrative frameworks.

The film "Battle on Shanggailing Mountain" is a classic work of the "Seventeen-Year" period. Its narrative follows a more traditional approach, focusing on the character of Zhang Zhongfa, the platoon leader of the Eighth Company. Zhang Zhongfa is assigned to replace the Seventh Company and defend the strategic Shangganling Heights. The film introduces other characters such as the guard, the instructor of the Seventh Company, and the female medic Wang Lan. With Zhang

Zhongfa as the central figure, the story unfolds as he is influenced by these characters, leading him to make crucial decisions. In the face of challenges, Zhang Zhongfa undergoes personal growth, driven by the sacrifice of the instructor and the encouragement from Wang Lan. The narrative builds up to a climax, portraying Zhang Zhongfa as a heroic figure and conveying the patriotic spirit and ideological themes of the entire film.

The film "The Sacrifice" in the new century's cinematic works adopts a narrative structure that features a group portrait without an absolute protagonist. The storyline is not a single-threaded progression but divided into four chapters: "Soldiers," "Enemy," "Anti-Aircraft Gun Squad," and "Bridge Structure body" The director employs multiple narrative threads, multiple characters, and a complex structure rarely seen in films about the Korean War, creating a unique landscape within the genre. <sup>[1]</sup>Through the primary perspectives of the infantry division of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, the anti-aircraft artillery unit, and the American pilot, the film vividly portrays the Battle of Triangle Hill from three different viewpoints and positions. This narrative approach offers audiences, especially those who are avid fans of films about the Korean War, an unprecedented and spectacular viewing experience. As explained by director Guan Hu, "Every individual sacrifice is valuable," the film, from such a unique perspective, immerses us in the river-crossing battle, constantly switching perspectives, witnessing the loss of lives "beside us," and simultaneously recognizing that each Chinese volunteer soldier is an ordinary individual. It portrays the spirit of fearless sacrifice in a more palpable manner.

## 2. Differences and Similarities in Character Portrayal

In the film "Battle on Shangganling mountain" the character portrayal predominantly revolves around the depiction of a quintessential hero. The emphasis is placed on the conflicts and personal growth of this heroic figure. Throughout the narrative, Captain Zhang serves as the central character, and the film intricately portrays his language, actions, and emotional expressions. He embodies the role of a leader within a grassroots combat unit during the Korean War, effectively reflecting the plight faced by numerous soldiers during that era.

Additionally, the portrayal of other characters in the film serves multiple purposes. Firstly, they act as catalysts for driving the plot forward and advancing the development of Captain Zhang. Characters such as the division commander, the instructor from the Seventh Company, nurse Wang Lan, and the guards fulfill these roles. For instance, the primary storyline of the film is initiated when the division commander assigns Captain Zhang the mission of providing support to the Seventh Company. Subsequently, upon the Eighth Company's arrival at the Shangganling position, the appearance of the instructor from the Seventh Company introduces the central conflict, focusing on the contest for control of the Shangganling position and the transition from defense to offense. The pivotal moment occurs when the injured instructor entrusts the position to Captain Zhang without relinquishing an inch, thereby triggering inner conflicts within the main character. Furthermore, the initial setback in battle, coupled with the inspirational song sung by Nurse Wang Lan, leads to tumultuous inner emotions within Captain Zhang. It is through the influence exerted by these supporting characters that the transformation of Captain Zhang's actions and the formation of his heroic persona are realized.<sup>[2]</sup>

Consequently, in "The Sacrifice" the primary objective is to construct a heroic character, delving into their internal conflicts and personal growth. The portrayal of other characters serves to propel the narrative and facilitate the progression of the main character, ultimately contributing to the portrayal of a hero in the film.

### 3. "Differences in Emotional Expression"

In terms of emotional expression in films centered around the theme of the Korean War, "Battle on Shanggailing Mountain" to "The Sacrifice" employ distinct methods to convey emotions, each reaching different heights.

"Battle on Shanggailing Mountain" utilizes a more subdued approach in its emotional expression. It relies on subtle details to evoke a range of emotions and creates a sense of emotional fluctuation throughout the viewing experience. Through carefully crafted dialogue, poignant musical scores, and deliberate character actions, the film establishes itself as a timeless classic within the Korean War film genre, known for its nuanced portrayal of emotions.<sup>[3]</sup>

In terms of dialogue, although the film only depicts the events related to the Seventh and Eighth Companies, from a historical perspective, it is not difficult to see the immense sacrifice in this battle. Despite having the opportunity to film large-scale battle scenes given the filming conditions at the time, the director chose to portray the brutality from a different perspective. In the opening scene of the film, the Seventh Company's commander shouts into the telegraph machine, "We have repelled the enemy's 14th charge. Now we only have one platoon left. The enemy is launching their 15th assault on us." When Captain Zhang leads the Eighth Company to take over the position, the Seventh Company is left with only four soldiers. As the film comes to its final scene, depicting the twelve-minute-long battle to recapture the main peak, the soldiers undergo inspection by the division commander. The camera pans over the eight remaining soldiers. Division Commander: "Is everyone here?" Zhang Zhongfa: "Everyone is here." The division commander falls silent. He shakes hands with each soldier and then approaches Captain Zhang, noticing the two water bottles hanging on his uniform. The film had previously mentioned these two water bottles at the division headquarters, as Captain Zhang had the habit of drinking water during combat. Normally, the water bottles would be carried by the communications soldier Yang Decai. The division commander lowers his head and says, "Go rest now."

Director Sha Mon employed such camera shots to depict the harshness of war. Throughout the film, apart from the scene where the volunteer soldiers throw explosive tubes into the enemy fortifications and block the firing holes with their chests during the final assault, there are no other explicit and sensational shots. However, the director's use of subtle details, such as the sole apple in the trench and the pierced water bottle, deeply touched the hearts of generations. These impactful scenes have become timeless classics in films depicting the Korean War.

In contrast to the subtle emotional expression of "Battle on Shangganling," the film "The Sacrifice" employs a more grandiose approach. Through its multi-threaded narrative and ensemble cast, the film immerses the audience in various perspectives and panoramic views, offering a glimpse into the Battle of Jincheng. As a contemporary Chinese industrial film, especially within the genre of modern war epics, intense battle scenes with gunfire, explosions, and the chaos of war have become integral components of emotional storytelling in war films. By utilizing extensive visual effects, the filmmakers recreate the battleground of Triangle Hill, providing a visually striking and emotionally charged experience for the viewers. In contemporary war cinema, the combination of visual and sound effects often enhances the emotional expression, enabling the portrayal of more realistic heroism and the brutal realities of war. Traditional film productions, such as "Battle on Shangganling," faced challenges in replicating authentic war scenes due to logistical constraints and technical limitations in shooting within North Korea. However, the emergence of modern film industry has effectively addressed these issues. The final chapter of "The Sacrifice" titled "The Bridge," employs innovative visual effects techniques to recreate scenes and symbolic imagery that would otherwise be difficult to achieve using practical props and stunts. This segment showcases a three-dimensional modeling approach, incorporating elements such as sculptures, sand

tables, and models. The result is a novel perspective that elevates the emotional impact. The bridge, constructed by human bodies, serves as the focal point, and the switching of perspectives in the cinematography initiates a three-dimensional representation, integrating elements of sculpture, sand table, and model into the final sequence. This unique approach adds depth to the emotional expression of the film.

#### **4. New Breakthrough: Multi-perspective Narration, Ensemble Cast, and Spectacular Expression**

From 1956 to 2020, from "Battle on Shangganling Mountain" to "The Sacrifice" from the exploratory period of Chinese cinema during the "Seventeen Years" to the thriving development of the Chinese film industry before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent recovery, the Chinese film industry has undergone tremendous changes. Throughout this journey, films based on the theme of the Korean War have been an integral part of the development of Chinese cinema from its inception to the present day. Among them, "The Sacrifice" stands as a representative work of contemporary Chinese films on the theme of the Korean War. Whether in terms of public attention, box office success, or the discussions surrounding this new era film on the theme of the Korean War, it is evident that this film holds great significance as a representative work in the genre.

As a new-era film on the theme of the Korean War, "The Sacrifice" exhibits significant breakthroughs and innovations compared to previous films in the same genre, as well as war and mainstream films in general. While there may be varying opinions and discussions about these breakthroughs and innovations, the exploration they represent is undoubtedly worthy of recognition.

First and foremost, the film "The Sacrifice" introduces a new narrative approach that is rarely seen in previous works of its genre, including mainstream war films. Through its four chapters titled "Soldiers," "Enemy," "Anti-aircraft Gun Team," and "Bridge," the film repeatedly presents the perspective of the Sacrifice in different angles. <sup>[4]</sup>This narrative perspective offers war film enthusiasts an immersive visual spectacle, as it constantly shifts between the perspectives of different factions. The multi-angle storytelling system allows the audience to experience the battle from a "God's eye view" and witness the actions and thoughts of various camps and groups involved.

This unique perspective aligns with director Guan Hu's statement during interviews, where he mentioned that "every sacrifice is meaningful." Translating this statement into the film's portrayal, it aims to bring the value and significance of these sacrifices to a broader audience, allowing more people to see and understand them. <sup>[5]</sup>

Furthermore, in the 21st century, Chinese film production, particularly in the war genre, has drawn inspiration from Hollywood's visual effects technology to deliver stunning sensory experiences to the audience. In the film "The Sacrifice" numerous special effects shots were employed using advanced technology to recreate the destructive scenes of war. In the making of the film "Battle on Shangganling Mountain," the director aimed to recreate the battlefield as realistically as possible, but during that time, when practical shooting was predominant, achieving grandiose shots relied on costly explosion effects and a large number of personnel. However, such visuals fell short in providing a fully immersive sensory experience for modern audiences, especially for war film enthusiasts. Despite criticisms of its plot and narrative, the film "The Sacrifice" deserves recognition for the spectacular explosion effects, green screen effects, modeling effects, and the sensory stimulation achieved through its multi-perspective cinematic spectacle, delivered by the film's visual effects team, which caters to the wide range of film enthusiasts. <sup>[6]</sup>

Finally, it is worth mentioning the recent innovation in the context of Chinese cinema, which has

allowed films like "The Sacrifice" to showcase new content and expressive approaches during such a significant period. In recent years, more filmmakers in China have been daring to innovate and break new ground, enabling the creation of films like "The Sacrifice" that provide audiences with a fresh experience, especially on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Korean War and the Chinese involvement in it. This film represents a new wave of mainstream cinema that dares to explore new territories and offer novel perspectives to film enthusiasts.

## 5. New Challenges: The Need for Precise Ideological Essence and Detailed Descriptions

The film "The Sacrifice" has attracted significant attention from a wide range of film critics since its release. Apart from garnering recognition and encouragement, for any cinematic work, true development can only be achieved through critical analysis. As a groundbreaking piece within the genre of New Period Anti-American Aid Korea films, "The Sacrifice" continues to face numerous new challenges and necessitates introspection regarding its own weaknesses.<sup>[7]</sup>

First and foremost, there is an influential film critic named Kong Li who wrote an article on Douban titled "Why "The Sacrifice" fails to explain why we won." In the article, Kong Li puts forward an important viewpoint that the Korean War was a just war, and the film focuses excessively on the portrayal of interpersonal relationships, failing to highlight the core theme of the Korean War: defending our homeland.

In comparison to the film "Battle on Shangganling Mountain," when the troops faced a major defeat and fell into a deep despair, the commander of the 7th Company promptly stepped forward and proposed the establishment of a temporary combat unit's party branch, organizing a party meeting to criticize and guide everyone's thoughts, correcting ideological mistakes in a timely manner. Party members and youth league members began to play crucial roles. This was crucial not only for the Battle of Shangganling Mountain but also for the achievements on the entire Korean battlefield.

As early as the Gutian Conference, Comrade Mao Zedong emphasized the need to build the Party at the company level. It is through the establishment of an organized and disciplined army that started from a small force of less than 2,000 people in Jinggangshan and developed into a people's army capable of defeating the reactionary class and repelling armed invaders. This was the key to the victory of the Volunteers. However, the film "The Sacrifice" excessively focuses on portraying the spirit of selfless sacrifice without delving into the underlying spiritual source. This issue serves as an important reference for future creations of films on the theme of the Korean War.<sup>[8]</sup>

Furthermore, in the film "The Sacrifice" there is a lack of emphasis on the portrayal of character images and core ideas, unlike "Battle on Shangganling Mountain," which paid attention to details. It is often observed that after the visual spectacle of war films, those without nuanced character development and attention to detail are often forgettable. In "Battle on Shangganling Mountain," memorable scenes include the bullet-pierced water bottle, the sole apple brought with the supplies, and the comforting message from the division commander to the soldiers of the Eighth Company after the battle. These seemingly small moments have become eternal classics in the hearts of Chinese film viewers. Therefore, if films of this genre aim for broader development, it is essential to design scenes with more depth and significance.

In conclusion, after decades of development in New China's film industry, the aesthetic appreciation of film and television works by our vast audience has been continuously improving. It is no longer merely about special effects or grandiose scenes to captivate the hearts of the audience. Looking back at past classic works, we strive to enhance the depth of films by embracing innovation. When facing the production of major historical-themed films, we should delve as deeply as possible into the historical facts, carefully consider key scenes, and create film and



television works that are rich in content and enjoyable for the masses.

## 6. Conclusions

The role of films centered around the theme of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against US Aggression and Aid to Korea, from the time of "The Sacrifice" to "Battle on Shangganling Mountain," is undoubtedly significant in the development of Chinese cinema. Over the decades, as the cinematic landscape in China has evolved, more filmmakers and creators are willing to innovate within the framework of mainstream films. This spirit of innovation holds crucial real-world value for the development of the Chinese film industry, especially for films that embody the core values of socialism with Chinese characteristics, such as those within the realm of mainstream cinema. The question that Chinese filmmakers face today when dealing with such themes as the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against US Aggression and Aid to Korea is how to create films that are clear in their purpose, visually stunning, reflect the subject matter effectively, and are beloved by the people.

The Chinese people have always revered heroes, and the Chinese nation has been a nation with a long history of producing heroes. China is currently in a period of unprecedented transformation, closer than ever to achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, a goal that surpasses any other time in history. The film "The Sacrifice" emerges at this crucial historical juncture. As the pandemic subsides and China faces various international doubts and criticisms, the Chinese film industry is experiencing a revival after the challenges posed by the pandemic. Films depicting the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against US Aggression and Aid to Korea align perfectly with the spirit of this historic period, exemplifying the heroic and indomitable spirit of the Chinese people.

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