

# China's Mainstream Blockbuster "Heroic Quartet": A Multilayered Strong Nation Narrative from Diplomacy to Soft Power

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the political backdrop that enables the commercial success of four mainstream blockbusters centred on the Korean War: *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021), *The Battle at Lake Changjin II* (2022), *The Volunteers: To the War* (2023), and *The Volunteers: The Battle of Life and Death* (2024). Collectively labelled the "Heroic Quartet" for their thematic coherence, these films are analyzed through the lens of their political context, policy framework, production model, ideological foundations, and cultural soft power. By employing a critical political economy framework, this research reveals how the "Heroic Quartet" reflects the intricate interplay of China's political, economic, and cultural dynamics during a transitional period defined by the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline for the Development of Chinese Films. We argue that these films serve as strategic vehicles for projecting China's image as a "strong nation" by interweaving assertive elements of nationalist pride with diplomatic narratives designed to counter external provocations and internal sociopolitical expectations. More broadly, they contribute to constructing a cohesive national narrative framework, where cinematic storytelling serves as ideological reinforcement and a tool for China's cultural diplomacy.

**Keywords:** Chinese Blockbuster, Political Economy of Chinese Media, The 14th Five-Year Film Guideline, Cinematic Diplomacy, China's Soft Power

## Introduction

Since the early 2020s, a series of historical war films depicting the 1950 Korean War have emerged, with *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (Changjinhu 长津湖, 2021; dir. Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, Hark Tsui 徐克, Dante Lam 林超贤) portrays the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPVA) persevering through extreme cold and harsh conditions to challenge the perceived invincibility of the U.S. military, playing a pivotal role in securing victory in the Battle of Chosin Reservoir (BoCR) (Wu, 2021). With a box office revenue of 5.772 billion RMB, it became the highest-grossing film of 2021 and the all-time box office leader in Chinese cinema history (Yin

& Sun, 2022). Its sequel, *The Battle at Lake Changjin II* (Changjinhu Zhi Shuimenqiao 长津湖之水门桥, 2022; dir. Hark Tsui 徐克, Huang Jianxin 黄建新, Qin Tianzhu 秦天柱), continued this success, grossing 4.067 billion RMB and becoming the highest-grossing film in mainland China in 2022, receiving widespread audience acclaim (Yin, 2023). The sequel focuses on the latter stages of the BoCR, particularly the Battle of Shuimen Bridge, depicting the Seventh Company's mission to intercept U.S. forces following their battles in Xinxingli and Xiadiyuli (S. Liu, 2022). Together, the two films form a comprehensive cinematic retelling of the BoCR in the Korean War, presenting a unified conflict narrative and highlighting the "iron will" of the Chinese people (Ding, 2022).

It is important to note that *The Volunteers: To the War* (Zhiyuanjun Xiongbing Chuji 志愿军: 雄兵出击, 2023) is not a sequel to *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021) but the first instalment of the "Volunteers Trilogy," directed by Chen Kaige. Centered on the Korean War, the trilogy aims to depict the full trajectory of the conflict, from its outbreak to victory over 2 years and 9 months (Zhan, 2023). Despite earning only 0.862 billion RMB at the mainland box office (H. Liu & Shi, 2024), *The Volunteers: To the War* (2023) saw significant online engagement, amassing 6.23 billion views on Douyin and a 7.3/10 rating on Douban. By intertwining battlefield narratives with China's diplomatic resistance at the United Nations, the film constructs a thematic portrayal of "China's unwavering determination and the people's bravery" (Zhan, 2023; Zhao, 2023). Its sequel, *The Volunteers: The Battle of Life and Death* (Zhiyuanjun Cunwang Zhizhan 志愿军: 存亡之战, 2024), released in mainland China on September 30, 2024, grossed 1.186 billion RMB as of November 11, 2024 (Yushui Wang, 2024). It focuses on the Battle of Cheorwon (BoC), where 25,000 CPVA soldiers resisted 50,000 UN troops for 12 days, forming an impenetrable "Great Wall of Steel" that forced the enemy to negotiate (Douban, 2024). Those four films have sparked widespread audience discussion, pushing Korean War cinematic narratives to new heights and further reinforcing them as key contributors to contemporary Chinese war narratives.

This unified narrative termed the "Heroic Quartet," is the focal point of this study. The resurgence of "Heroic Quartet" reflects a shift in China's cinematic strategy, moving from historical commemoration to an instrument of ideological reinforcement and international discourse. This study examines the "Heroic Quartet" as a cinematic and political phenomenon. It explores three key questions: What drives the renewed focus on Korean War films? How do they function as ideological tools in contemporary Chinese diplomacy? How do state policies and market forces shape their production and reception? By addressing these questions, this study reveals how policy, capital, and ideology interact to establish war cinema as a vehicle for national storytelling and global soft power projection.

Since 2020, in response to COVID-19 and global economic pressures, the Chinese government has prioritized high-quality growth, domestic economic circulation, technological self-sufficiency, and ideological reinforcement, while advancing cultural soft power. The 14<sup>th</sup>

"Five-Year Guideline"<sup>1</sup> (2021-2025) for the Development of Chinese Films (Shisiwu Zhongguo Dianying Fazhan Guihua "十四五"中国电影发展规划; hereafter the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline) aligns with national objectives, aiming to establish China as a "strong film power" by 2035 and positioning the film industry as a pillar of national soft power (News, 2021). However, beyond a strategic vision, this policy institutionalizes direct financial support, thematic prioritization, and market incentives to ensure the sustained prominence of state-aligned narratives. Through subsidies, production quotas, and promotional advantages, war cinema has been actively shaped into a dominant cultural force (News, 2021).

Amid these developments, the "Heroic Quartet" has emerged as a crucial instrument for reinforcing national narratives and engaging in global discourse. Existing literature on these films falls into three main categories: (1) studies on their ideological and aesthetic role in shaping national identity (Liu, 2022; Na, 2023; Niu & Liang, 2022; Qin & Dong, 2022; Xu & Zhang, 2022; Zhan, 2023; Zhao, 2023); (2) analyses of their function in geopolitical positioning and ideological competition (Nicieja, 2023; Niquet, 2022; Thakur, 2023); and (3) research on their place in China's evolving film industry and commercialization trends (Chen, 2022; Kuang, 2022). However, few studies examine how these dimensions intersect within China's political economy. This study fills this gap by investigating the interaction between state policy, market forces, and ideological imperatives in shaping contemporary Chinese war cinema.

This study employs textual analysis and a political economy approach to critically assess the "Heroic Quartet" within China's ideological and diplomatic framework. By analyzing policy directives, production mechanisms, and narrative strategies, this study demonstrates how these films serve as instruments for reinforcing nationalist sentiment and enhancing China's cultural influence. Unlike previous research that focuses on aesthetic or ideological aspects alone, this study highlights the structural mechanisms—state intervention, financial incentives, and market dynamics—that drive the resurgence of Korean War cinema.

This study first examines the diplomatic narratives between China and the United States since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) within the framework of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, alongside the ideological expressions in Korean War films. It elucidates the return logic of the "Heroic Quartet" in contemporary cinema, laying a theoretical foundation for subsequent policy analysis. Within this framework, the study explores the impact of the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline (2021–2025) on film production, analyzing how policy directives shape the industrial landscape of mainstream cinema and drive its commercialization. Through a systematic analysis of four representative films, it traces their production processes and political-economic underpinnings, illustrating how policy, capital, and market mechanisms interact to facilitate the emergence of the "Heroic Quartet" and shape the trajectory of contemporary Chinese mainstream cinema. Furthermore, the study examines how these films reflect contemporary ideological

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1 The Five-Year Guideline is a series of social and economic development initiatives issued by the Communist Party of China since 1953 in the People's Republic of China. Planning is a key characteristic of the nominally socialist economies, and one plan established for the entire country normally contains detailed economic development guidelines for all its regions. To more accurately reflect China's transition from a Soviet-style command economy to socialism with Chinese characteristics, the plans since the 11th Five-Year Plan for 2006 to 2010 have been referred to in Chinese as "guidelines (规划)" instead of as "plans."

imperatives and contribute to China's diplomatic narrative. Finally, it investigates the practical pathways of the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline in the construction of national soft power, assessing how the "Heroic Quartet" aligns with China's strategic objectives of becoming both a "strong film power" and a "cultural powerhouse." We argue that interpreting a cultural product requires grounding in a country's political and economic conditions to objectively assess its empirical significance and understanding of its ideological narrative.

#### *Korean War Films And Diplomatic Narratives Under the Framework of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*

The Korean War, which began in June 1950 as a civil conflict between North and South Korea, escalated into a broader confrontation between China and the United States due to international intervention, leaving a lasting impact on Sino-American relations (Hao & Zhai, 1990). The historical trajectory of Sino-American relations is reflected in policy shifts and embedded in cinematic narratives. Korean War films have served as a key instrument in shaping diplomatic narratives and national identity. By reflecting shifting Sino-American relations, these films serve as a medium for ideological messaging and geopolitical positioning. Their evolving themes—from revolutionary resistance to strategic competition—illustrate the intersection of cinema, diplomacy, and state policy in China's global engagement (Pang & Pang, 2019; Song, 2003).

#### *Hostility and Revolutionary Narratives (1949–1978)*

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government adopted a Soviet-style planned economy rooted in socialist political economy principles, emphasizing political interests in economic activities. As the sole investor and market intermediary, the state exercised full control over cultural production, prioritizing political and propagandistic effectiveness. Within this framework, serving socialist political objectives has become the primary directive of cultural policy and artistic creation, strongly emphasizing revolutionary heroism and class struggle as central themes in cultural narratives (Zhang, 2006a).

With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, China and the United States entered direct military confrontation. Beyond its intervention in the war, the U.S. led Western nations in imposing economic blockades, diplomatic isolation, and military containment against China. The "Mutual Defense Treaty" between the U.S. and Chiang Kai-shek (1954, Mei-Jiang Gongtong Fangyu Tiaoyue, 美蒋共同防御条约), along with the Taiwan Strait Crises (1954, 1958, Taihai Weiji, 台海危机) and U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, further deepened hostilities. However, following the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict, the U.S. began adjusting its China policy, with the Restoration of the Lawful Seat of the People's Republic of China in 1971 and the visits of Kissinger and Nixon, marking the start of a thaw in relations between China and the United States (Song, 2003; Tao, 2004a).

Amid this geopolitical shift, Korean War films solidified the ideological division between China and the U.S., depicting American forces as imperialist aggressors (B. Zhang, 2006a). The "Resist America, Aid Korea" (Kangmei Yuanchao, 抗美援朝) narrative reinforced the "most lovable people" (Zui Keai De Ren, 最可爱的人) trope, praising the heroism of Chinese volunteer soldiers. Films such as *Battle on Shangganling Mountain* (1956) and *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (1964) shaped domestic perceptions of heroism and reinforced

ideological solidarity within the socialist bloc (Tang, 2020; F. Wang & Li, 2021; Zou, 2020). However, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) brought severe stagnation to the Chinese film industry, disrupting production and innovation.

*Cooperation and Marginalization (1979–2000)*

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening policy initiated the era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, prioritizing economic development and easing state control over the cultural sector. The film industry shifted toward market-oriented reforms, transitioning from political propaganda to commercial exploration, with entertainment films gaining prominence (B. Zhang, 2006b). Simultaneously, China's foreign policy moved from anti-American struggle to peaceful coexistence and economic cooperation (Tao, 2004b).

In 1979, China and the United States established diplomatic relations, entering a period of détente. China shifted from ideological confrontation to pragmatic cooperation, with the U.S. becoming a key economic partner. Under Deng Xiaoping's strategy of "keeping a low profile" (Taoguangyanghui, 韬光养晦), China downplayed anti-American rhetoric in favour of broader global engagement. Despite political differences, economic ties expanded rapidly, with the Engagement Policy facilitating China's technological and economic integration (Song, 2003). However, relations faced setbacks. The 1989 June Fourth Incident led to suspended high-level exchanges and partial U.S. sanctions. The 1993–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis heightened tensions as the U.S. increased arms sales to Taiwan. In 1999, the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia triggered strong anti-American sentiment. While economic cooperation continued, political and security tensions remained a defining feature of Sino-American relations (Song, 2003; Tao, 2004b).

With China's reform and opening, war films receded as diplomatic priorities shifted toward economic cooperation. The ideological portrayal of the U.S. softened, and the film industry pivoted toward commercial genres (B. Zhang, 2006b). Even during crises such as the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy, war films did not re-emerge as a dominant genre.

*A New Type of Major-Power Relationship and the Resurgence of Nationalism (2001–2016)*

China's 2001 WTO accession accelerated globalisation, ushering in a phase of great power rise. The 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2010 Shanghai World Expo reinforced national pride. In 2016, Xi Jinping introduced "Four Confidences," emphasizing culture as a key instrument of national soft power (Feng, 2016). The government promoted the commercialization of mainstream narratives, merging political messaging with market-driven production.

In the 21st century, Sino-American relations shifted from counterterrorism cooperation (2001–2008) to strategic competition (2008–2016) as economic, diplomatic, and military interactions grew more complex. Following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. sought cooperation with China, but the 2008 financial crisis weakened the U.S. economy while strengthening China's global position, prompting a shift from engagement to competition. By 2010, tensions over the South China Sea led the U.S. to adopt the "Pivot to Asia" strategy to counter China's rise. In 2012, disputes over the Diaoyu Islands escalated, with the U.S. reinforcing its military commitment to Japan under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty while

maintaining limited diplomatic engagement with China. In 2014, cooperation emerged with the U.S.-China Joint Statement on Climate Change, yet by 2016, strategic tensions deepened as the U.S. pressured South Korea to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defence system, triggering strong opposition from China. These developments highlight persistent strategic divisions, with the U.S. adopting a more assertive stance as China's global influence expanded, pushing bilateral relations into a phase of comprehensive competition (Xie, 2020b).

With China's global rise, war narratives resurfaced, emphasizing China's strength rather than outright hostility toward the U.S. The success of mainstream films such as *The Founding of a Republic* (2009) and *The Founding of a Party* (2011) demonstrates the commercial viability of state-driven narratives, setting the stage for war films' re-integration into mainstream cinema (Yang, 2023).

#### *Unpredictability and the Revival of Korean War Films (2017–Present)*

Since 2017, China has entered the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, with the government advancing the "Cultural Power" strategy, prioritizing the enhancement of national cultural influence and the strengthening of its international discourse power (X. Wang et al., 2021).

Amid rising tensions, the 2018 U.S.-China trade war saw the United States impose technological restrictions and military containment on China, while escalating trade war tensions, such as sanctions on Huawei, TikTok, and DeepSeek, along with the broader impact of COVID-19, further intensified bilateral competition, fueling a rise in domestic nationalism. In this context, the 2021 14th Five-Year Film Guideline explicitly prioritized the marketization of mainstream narratives, with the state leveraging special funding, policy incentives, and promotional campaigns to reintegrate Korea War films into the mainstream market (Chen & Zhang, 2023; News, 2021; Xie, 2020a).

*The Sacrifice* (2020) marked the resurgence of Korea War films in the New Era, followed by the "Heroic Quartet," which set new box office records in Chinese film history and served as a strategic tool for the government in shaping national identity and strengthening cultural soft power. By constructing a "strong nation narrative," these films reinforce domestic national identity while projecting China's rising status in the global order (Jin, 2022; Qin & Dong, 2022; Zhan, 2023). Against intensifying geopolitical competition, the revival of New Era Korea War films reconstruct Cold War-era narratives, reinforcing a "righteous resistance" discourse to counter Western containment strategies, highlighting the integration of the film industry into China's broader national strategy.

From the early political propaganda of New China's founding years to the market-driven moderation following reform and opening, and ultimately to the resurgence of mainstream war films in the New Era, each phase has been deeply shaped by policy directives, social sentiment, and the international landscape. The evolution of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, shifts in U.S.-China relations, and the development of Korea War films exhibit a highly interconnected dynamic. Against this backdrop, the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline provided a systematic policy framework for the future of New Era Chinese cinema (News, 2021). The film industry has become integral to the "strong nation" strategy, playing

a crucial role in shaping national identity, reinforcing cultural cohesion, and responding to the international discourse environment, reflecting the deep interaction between global political shifts, cultural soft power, state policy, and the film industry.

### The 14th Five-Year Film Guideline

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and global shifts in cultural influence, the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline (2021–2025) institutionalizes film as a strategic tool for ideological consolidation and global discourse competition (Han, 2024). Within this framework, war films—particularly Korean War narratives—have been prioritized as state-endorsed cinematic projects, securing preferential access to government funding, regulatory support, and market-driven promotion strategies. As part of the High-Caliber Film Strategy, these films have been systematically integrated into China's national soft power agenda, ensuring their dominance in both ideological narratives and box office performance (News, 2021).

The "Heroic Quartet", particularly *The Battle at Lake Changjin* series, was spearheaded by the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (PDCPC), with execution managed by the Beijing Municipal Publicity Department and project approval overseen by the Beijing Municipal Film Administration (Teng, 2021). In contrast, *The Volunteers* series was entirely state-funded, underscoring the government's direct role in financing and producing contemporary war films (Hu, 2024). Between 2021 and 2024, these films received funding from the National Film Development Special Fund (NFDSF), primarily for promotion and distribution (Office, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). This fund, jointly administered by the Ministry of Finance (MF) and the PDCPC, is overseen by the National Film Development Special Fund Management Committee (NFDSFMC) (PDCPC, 2019). As a key financial instrument, it plays a crucial role in supporting films that align with state ideological and cultural objectives.

Beyond direct state subsidies, the "Heroic Quartet" benefited from structured policy recognition, reinforcing its status as a central ideological product within the national film industry. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* and *The Volunteers: To the War* received the Special Prize and Outstanding Work Award at the 16th and 17th "Five-One Project" for Spiritual Civilization Construction, underscoring their role in cultural messaging and national historical memory construction (Online, 2024; O. o. t. PDCPC, 2022). This state recognition was accompanied by extended market privileges, including exclusive screening windows, prioritized distribution schedules, and state-facilitated audience engagement strategies. Such measures ensured that these films not only met ideological objectives but also achieved commercial success, securing their dominance in China's domestic film market.

In addition to direct funding and state recognition, policy-driven market interventions played a pivotal role in ensuring the long-term dominance of the "Heroic Quartet". One of the most significant regulatory strategies was the deliberate extension of theatrical release windows, securing prolonged market visibility and ideological reinforcement. Unlike standard commercial films with 1–2 month screening periods, these war films received extended screenings, with *The Battle at Lake Changjin* running for nearly four months and *The Volunteers* series similarly benefiting from prolonged exhibition (Network, 2023; Teng, 2024; Xiao, 2022; M. Xu, 2021). These extended-release strategies, coupled with state directives to cinema chains and regulatory bodies, sustain the cultural prominence of war films beyond their initial theatrical run. This approach reinforces domestic cultural consumption patterns,

strengthens their ideological narratives, and mitigates competition from foreign films and newly released domestic productions.

Furthermore, audience mobilization strategies at various administrative and entity levels played a crucial role in the success of the "Heroic Quartet." Provincial and municipal government agencies actively organize collective screenings for Communist Party members, civil servants, and affiliated institutions, ensuring a foundational audience base while expanding the films' market reach (Anonymous, 2021; Gonghui, 2021). These government-facilitated screenings contributed to box office revenue and reinforced the films' ideological narratives, aligning with the broader objectives of the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline.

The "Heroic Quartet" exemplifies how state policies systematically shape contemporary Chinese war cinema, transitioning it from a propaganda medium to a state-supported, market-integrated cultural industry. The 14th Five-Year Film Guideline has institutionalized financial subsidies, cultural endorsements, market regulations, and audience mobilization as key policy instruments to ensure that state-aligned narratives achieve both ideological penetration and commercial viability. This case illustrates how China's film industry, under centralized cultural governance, strategically aligns policy, capital, and ideology, fostering a sustainable model of state-backed, commercially viable mainstream war cinema.

### **The state-led "Heroic Quartet"**

Amid rising geopolitical tensions and intensifying global discourse competition, the "Heroic Quartet" exemplifies China's strategic use of cinema as an instrument for national image construction and ideological reinforcement. Positioned at the intersection of state policy, capital investment, and ideological control, these films were not merely commercial ventures, but structured cultural interventions aimed at shaping historical narratives and consolidating national identity.

Zhang (2006c) argues that the dynamic interplay between investment and consumption entities is crucial in shaping the film product structure. This structure, in turn, reflects the underlying configurations of capital and market forces, highlighting the interconnectedness of economic dynamics and cultural production. This theory has also been validated by Chen (2000).

Since the Reform and Opening, China's film market has transitioned from a government-controlled model, where the state was the sole investor and market controller, to a diversified investment structure involving multiple entities (X. Chen, 2000). Investment entities in China's film industry now consist of the government, private capital, foreign capital, and individual investors, each with distinct philosophies. Government investments align with political ideology, balancing values and profit. Private and foreign capital focuses on profitability but maintains ideological boundaries, with foreign investors funding culturally significant films but avoiding those praising the Communist Party. Private capital may back ideologically aligned projects if profitable, while individual investors often emphasize personal artistic expression (B. Zhang, 2006c). Within this investment framework, contemporary mainstream blockbusters in China are typically the product of government-led



initiatives, private-sector leadership, or collaborations between the two. The "Heroic Quartet" exemplifies this production model.

The production of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* series followed a state-dominated investment model, with four out of seven production entities being state-owned enterprises. Beijing Bona Film Group Co., Ltd. (BBFGCL), Alibaba Pictures (Beijing) Co., Ltd., and Beijing Dengfeng International Culture Communication Co., Ltd provided commercial backing, but state-owned Huaxia Film Distribution Co., Ltd. (HFDCL, directly lead by the PDCPC), China Film Co., Ltd. (CFCL, national-level film company), and Shanghai Film (Group) Co., Ltd. (SFCL, state-owned sole proprietorship) led production, ensuring regulatory control. The August First Film Studio (AFFS), China's only military-backed film studio, played a key role in scripting and production oversight, reinforcing military-approved narratives (Yin & Sun, 2021). Furthermore, an interview with producer Yu Dong, revealed that these projects were commissioned by the PDCPC, with coordination and joint production overseen by the Beijing Municipal Publicity Department (BMPD). The Beijing Film Administration (BFA) handled project approval and review as part of these key initiatives (Yang, 2021).

Moreover, the project enlisted the collaboration of three acclaimed directors from Hong Kong SAR and mainland China—Chen Kaige, Hark Tsui, and Dante Lam—who jointly directed the film, and assembled a cast of many prominent Chinese actors, who willingly participated in both leading and supporting roles (Huang, 2021). These productions, although created within the framework of a market economy, continue to exhibit characteristics reminiscent of a planned economy, reflecting a hybrid model of production. Their influence parallels that of *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) (a privately produced mainstream blockbuster, that achieved a box office revenue of 5.694 billion RMB). However, the production process of these films is considerably more intricate, involving a complex interplay of state-led directives, private-sector collaboration, and extensive oversight by public institutions. This unique approach underscores the evolving nature of China's film industry, where market-driven strategies coexist with planned economy mechanisms, allowing for the promotion of state narratives while achieving substantial market penetration.

The *Volunteers* series followed a similar SOE-led model, with China Film Co. (CFCL) assuming primary production responsibilities (Yu, 2023). Unlike *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, this series featured a more centralized directorial and production approach, reflecting a shift in state-driven narrative control strategies.

The "Heroic Quartet" is not merely a product of policy-backed market mechanisms, but a deliberate cultural project designed to reinforce China's national identity and global positioning. These films construct a historical memory centered on resilience, unity, and anti-imperialist struggle, aligning with contemporary narratives of China's rise as a strong nation. By intertwining state-led capital structures with ideological oversight, these productions ensure that war films are not just entertainment but strategic tools of cultural engineering. Their success reflects the effectiveness of China's film industry in integrating nationalism into mass culture, securing widespread public engagement while shaping the collective consciousness.

### Patriotism in Adversity

In the Korean War, known in China as the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea, the CPV, despite inferior equipment, fought for over two years and nine months and defeated the technologically advanced United Nations forces led by the United States. This victory fostered the "Spirit of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea," later enshrined in the CPC's spiritual heritage (Na, 2023; Qin & Dong, 2022). The *Battle at Lake Changjin* series depicts the iconic Battle of Chosin Reservoir, while the *Volunteers* series adopts a panoramic perspective, portraying the entire Korean War from China's viewpoint.

The *Battle at Lake Changjin* series departs from traditional patriotic films, rejecting American-style "individual heroism" and emphasizing the collective spirit of the Seventh Company through Wu Wanli's (starring: Jackson Yee 易烊千玺) perspective (Jin, 2022). The film opens with Wu Qianli returning home with his brother Wu Baili's ashes, only to be recalled to his unit the next day. His younger brother Wu Wanli secretly follows and joins the Korean War. The narrative emphasizes a core Chinese value: when family and national interests conflict, safeguarding the nation takes precedence as the foundation of familial security (Qin & Dong, 2022). Furthermore, the portrayal of key figures such as the political instructor, artillery squad leader, and sniper unifies the Seventh Company's collective narrative, and the act of the soldiers voluntarily omitting their names when their numbers are called underscores the essence of collectivism. This spirit is further elevated to a patriotic ideal when the political instructor proclaims, "If we don't fight this war, the next generation will have to. We risk our lives, so they won't have to face war again." At the end of *The Battle at Lake Changjin II*, as the campaign ends, Wu Wanli, severely injured, reports the Seventh Company's numbers at the train station: "Seventh Company, 157 expected, 1 present." This emotionally charged moment serves as a counterpoint to the earlier scene in *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, where the soldiers march to war in unison. Together, these scenes encapsulate the series' core narrative of collectivism and patriotism, creating a powerful thematic symmetry that reflects the "iron will" of the Chinese people and nation.

Unlike *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, which primarily focuses on depicting the battlefield, the *Volunteers* series reconstructs the entire course of the Korean War chronologically. The first instalment devotes significant attention to addressing the question, "Why did China enter the Korean War?" Despite concerns over the power disparity between China and the U.S., Zhou Enlai's statement, "China can only survive by winning," underscores the war's critical importance. The *Volunteers* series represents an advancement of the collectivist spirit, presenting a multifaceted depiction of the Korean War. Through parallel editing between the Battle of Songgufeng and the United Nations negotiations, the series effectively underscores the intricate relationship between war and politics (Zhan, 2023). The second instalment highlights the dynamic interplay between personal emotions and patriotic sentiment, fostering a profound emotional connection with the audience. This narrative transitions between macro and micro perspectives, showcasing the collective and patriotic spirit of unity among Chinese leaders and citizens. It encapsulates the "Great Wall of Steel" ethos, symbolizing their resolute resistance and national defence.

The "Heroic Quartet" is not merely a commercially successful film series but a ideological project that reinforces China's evolving national narrative under the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline. These films serve as a visual and narrative articulation of China's "strong

nation” ethos, emphasizing collectivism, resilience, and national unity. By reconstructing the Korean War as a foundational moment of China's defiance against hegemonic powers, they contribute to the state's broader cultural strategy of shaping historical memory and reinforcing contemporary patriotism (Wu, 2021). The "Heroic Quartet" advances a historical narrative that evolves from individual sacrifice (“iron will”) to national invincibility (“Great Wall of Steel”), reinforcing China's position as an unyielding sovereign power. This ideological shift reflects a broader transformation in China's state discourse—moving from post-war recovery to proactive geopolitical assertion. The "Great Wall of Steel" metaphor resonates beyond the Korean War context, symbolizing China's contemporary military modernization, territorial sovereignty (Taiwan, South China Sea), and economic resilience against external pressures (U.S. trade sanctions, technological containment) (Qin & Dong, 2022).

Moreover, as a state-sanctioned cultural product, the "Heroic Quartet" extends beyond domestic ideological reinforcement to serve as a strategic tool in shaping China's global narrative. These films project China's military and diplomatic legacy onto the international stage, asserting its historical legitimacy and contemporary geopolitical standing. This cinematic nationalism aligns with China's expanding efforts in global media influence, positioning Chinese war films as a counter-narrative to Western historical interpretations.

#### *Strong Power Image: Film And China's Soft Power under the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline*

In an era of economic globalization, building a positive international reputation has become essential for nation-states, with cultural diplomacy as a key strategy (Sterling, 2018). Since its 1979 Reform and Opening policy, China has rapidly risen as the world's second-largest economy (Maags, 2014). However, despite significant efforts to enhance its global image, China's rise is often framed negatively, particularly by Western media, which portrays its actions, such as aid to Africa, within neocolonialist narratives (Kimaiyo, 2024). The West has long dominated global discourse, with topics, agendas, standards, content, and moral judgments shaped and controlled by Western powers. This hegemony is evident in narratives such as the "Clash of Civilizations," "End of History," "Democratic Peace Theory," "China Threat Theory," and "Neo-Imperialist Powers" (Chen, 2018).

In the global arena, where narratives of power are often shaped by Western media, China's state-backed war cinema serves as a counter-narrative that challenges dominant geopolitical discourses. The "Heroic Quartet" constructs a "strong China" image, reinforcing historical legitimacy and contemporary sovereignty. These films engage in discursive competition, strategically contesting Western portrayals of China's military and political role—offering an alternative perspective that positions China as a defender of global stability rather than an aggressor (Sterling, 2018). This approach aims to enhance China's national reputation, communicate its perspectives to international audiences, and serve as a strategy for mitigating political and regional tensions. Furthermore, it facilitates shared prosperity, fosters cultural exchange, and provides a platform for advancing peace and regional connectivity (Kimaiyo, 2024; Sterling, 2018).

The "Heroic Quartet" is not only a reflection of China's domestic patriotic narratives but also a calculated attempt to position Chinese war cinema within the global cultural sphere. These films reinforce China's soft power strategy, as outlined in the 14th Five-Year

Film Guideline, by offering an alternative historical and ideological perspective to Western-dominated narratives of global conflicts. While their international reception remains limited, largely due to Western audiences' perceptions of these films as state propaganda, compounded by ideological biases in global film criticism platforms such as Rotten Tomatoes and IMDb, they nevertheless serve as a significant cultural diplomacy tool, showcasing China's resilience, historical legitimacy, and military strength to global audiences. Additionally, while Hollywood war films emphasize universal human struggles and moral dilemmas, Chinese war narratives focus on collective patriotism and national unity, which may not resonate with international viewers unfamiliar with China's historical and cultural context.

Soft power enables a nation to achieve its goals in global politics by inspiring admiration for its values, serving as a role model, and fostering a desire among others to emulate its prosperity and openness. Unlike hard power, which relies on coercion or force, soft power is effective only when recognized by others and strategically deployed to align with specific objectives (Cristo, 2005). The Chinese government openly incorporates "ideology" and "soft power" into its policies. As stated in the preamble of the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline, "Film is a vital platform for ideological work, a beloved art form among the public, and a key indicator of national cultural soft power." (News, 2021) Thus, the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline positions soft power as a core component of its "strong nation" diplomatic strategy, aiming to reshape China's image and influence on the global stage and construct new narratives and discourse systems. However, studies suggest that the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline has had a limited impact on stimulating the Chinese film industry. Market performance polarization across genres persists (Han, 2024), and goals such as expanding Chinese cinema's global reach and driving economic and cultural development remain largely unmet (Yin & Zhang, 2021). Between 2021 and 2023, only 9 Chinese domestic films exceeded 3 billion RMB in box office revenue, with the *Battle at Lake Changjin* series leading the way (3 in 2021, 2 in 2022, and 4 in 2023). In comparison, many other film genres consistently performed within hovered around 1.5 billion RMB. This stark contrast highlights a significant market disparity, underscoring the limited number of high-grossing films capable of dominating the domestic box office while most others struggle to achieve comparable success (Liu & Shi, 2024; Yin, 2023; Yin & Sun, 2022).

In the 21st century, China's foreign policy has progressively transitioned toward strong nation diplomacy, with a primary focus on strengthening relations with developing countries. This strategy leverages cooperation with these nations to enhance China's global influence (Aoyama, 2022). While it is uncertain whether the "Heroic Quartet" directly influenced this diplomatic approach, the films embody and reflect the core principles and objectives of this policy. In essence, China seeks to leverage media and cultural products to shape public opinion and support the implementation of its new diplomatic strategies. More specifically, Chinese media outputs are tasked with "effectively telling China's story" and contributing to the construction of a unique "Chinese discourse and narrative framework." (Shixi, 2021) This diplomatic approach represents a shift from China's earlier, more cautious foreign policy tradition, aiming to project a confident and assertive national image while actively addressing and countering unfounded external criticisms and accusations (Aoyama, 2022; Yang, 2023).

During COVID-19, vaccines became a key tool of public diplomacy, with China emerging as a leader in this "vaccine diplomacy" race. By March 2021, Beijing had provided

millions of free vaccine doses to 69 countries and exported additional doses to 28 nations (Cohen, 2020). China's vaccine diplomacy began in July 2020 with trials in Brazil and, by November, agreements to supply vaccines to numerous low- and middle-income countries. In December 2020, Egypt became one of the first nations to receive vaccines from Sinopharm, a state-owned Chinese company. This effort aligns with China's broader public diplomacy, focusing on Asia, Africa, and Latin America—regions often neglected by Western powers—since the mid-1990s (Lee, 2023). Alongside vaccine diplomacy, China has adopted digital diplomacy, using digital tools to defend its "discursive power" and counter distorted narratives. For instance, in response to foreign media, Chinese Foreign Ministry (CMF) spokespersons frequently issue strong critiques of Western decoupling and confrontational policies toward China while defending the country's policies, sharing these messages both on platforms like Twitter for global audiences and through domestic media for Chinese audiences (Zhang & Tang, 2024). The diverse manifestations of strong nation diplomacy have amplified nationalist sentiment in China, promoting a "dare to fight" in its foreign policy and greater assertiveness in global communication (Sullivan & Wang, 2023). However, they have also heightened concerns abroad, including the "China aggression theory," "China threat theory," and fears of a "new Cold War." (Aoyama, 2022; Yang, 2023)

Strong nation diplomacy aligns with China's soft power ambitions, functioning as a strategic effort to counter unfounded criticisms and establish its discursive framework. Although it has elicited various concerns internationally, examining it through a domestic lens may provide valuable insights and a more nuanced understanding. Firstly, in response to China's rise, other nations have exploited issues such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet, COVID-19, and human rights to attack and discredit the country. Strong nation diplomacy focuses on defending national sovereignty and safeguarding core interests against such pressures (Aoyama, 2022). Secondly, faced with unfounded Western criticism, it aims to construct a new global discourse system that fosters equality and genuine dialogue among nations (Yi Wang, 2022). Lastly, amidst global challenges such as the Iranian nuclear issue, the Korean Peninsula, Afghanistan, the Middle East, and the U.S.-China trade war, strong nation diplomacy seeks fair solutions while promoting a "community with a shared future for mankind" by jointly shaping international norms and participating in global governance (Yi Wang, 2022). The objectives of "safeguarding national interests," "restructuring the global discourse system," and "building a community with a shared future for mankind" are integral to the framework of strong nation diplomacy. These aims also align with China's broader cultural soft power strategy, serving to legitimize its role and status as a global actor on the international stage.

## Conclusion

Since 2021, the "Heroic Quartet" (*The Battle at Lake Changjin* series and *The Volunteers* series) has emerged as a defining example of China's state-driven mainstream cinema, aligning with the 14th Five-Year Film Guideline. These films exemplify the intersection of policy, capital, market, and ideology, illustrating how China leverages war cinema to construct national narratives, reinforce historical memory, and advance its cultural soft power strategy. By integrating historical legitimacy, nationalism, and collective heroism, the films embody China's evolving "strong nation" discourse, reinforcing military resilience, diplomatic determination, and sovereign authority in a complex global landscape.

This study systematically analyzed the policy foundations, production mechanisms, ideological messaging, and global reception of the "Heroic Quartet" and found that its success is not merely market-driven but strategically engineered through state intervention. The films operate within a hybrid model, where the government provides ideological oversight and financial support, while private enterprises play a leading role in commercialization. The National Film Development Special Fund extended theatrical releases, and state-organized collective screenings exemplify how state policies facilitate the mainstreaming of nationalistic war narratives. This state-capital partnership has institutionalized war cinema as both an ideological instrument and a commercial enterprise, ensuring the genre's continued dominance in China's film industry.

Despite domestic box office success and official recognition, the international reception of the "Heroic Quartet" remains constrained. Western critics and audiences often interpret these films as overt propaganda, limiting their effectiveness as soft power tools. In contrast to Hollywood's war epics, which emphasize individual heroism and moral dilemmas, Chinese war films prioritize collective sacrifice and national unity, which may not resonate with international audiences unfamiliar with China's historical and cultural context. This cultural adaptation gap highlights the challenges China faces in expanding the global reach of its war narratives.

Moving forward, this study underscores the need for further research on the global reception of Chinese mainstream films, particularly the role of digital platforms, international distribution, and cross-cultural adaptation in shaping audience perceptions. Given the growing importance of soft power in China's diplomatic strategy, future research should explore alternative film genres—such as science fiction and historical epics—that may have greater global resonance while advancing China's national narratives. The study raises critical questions about how China can refine its film industry's international strategy, balancing ideological integrity with cultural accessibility, to ensure that state-backed cinema transitions from a domestic propaganda tool into a globally influential cultural force.

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