

The Battle at Lake Changjin: A film that does nothing to shine light on the Korean War

Ben McGrath
17 December 2021

The Battle at Lake Changjin is a Chinese film about a major defeat of the United States during the 1950–1953 Korean War. It premiered at the 11th Beijing International Film Festival on September 21 before being released to wider audiences throughout China on September 30. Since then, it has become the highest-grossing film globally of 2021 as well as the highest-grossing film in China of all time, earning RMB5.757 billion (US\$905 million).

The popularity of the film demonstrates a striving among layers of the population for an understanding of the country's revolutionary past at a time when US imperialism is ramping up threats against China. For many with no knowledge of the Korean War or its causes, *Lake Changjin* represents an opportunity to delve into this past.

The reasons why many people have seen the film are far different from why the film was produced. For the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bureaucracy, the purpose is to promote blind nationalism, with a film that does nothing to explore the conditions in China or internationally at the time that drove hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers to sacrifice themselves in Korea. The viewer is supposed to believe that soldiers served and died for nothing more than love of country.

To understand the limited, one-dimensional character of *Lake Changjin*, it is necessary to outline the context which is for the most part is completely absent the film. The period immediately after World War II was one of revolutionary upheavals throughout Asia, virtually all of which resulted in disastrous defeats as a result of their Stalinist leadership.

The same could have taken place in China. In China, Stalin, had envisioned the establishment of a buffer state for the Soviet Union that would be acceptable to Washington and sought to subordinate the CCP to the government of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang (KMT), or Nationalists.

Reflecting the political weakness of the widely hated KMT, Chiang Kai-shek, however, rejected any coalition with the CCP. The corruption and brutality of the KMT dictatorship resulted in a massive revolutionary movement that culminated in the 1949 Chinese Revolution, with the Nationalists retreating to Taiwan under protection of the US Navy.

The Chinese Revolution, however, took on a deformed

character, with Mao and the CCP initially planning for an extended period of the so-called “democratic” stage of the revolution in alliance with elements of the Chinese bourgeoisie before the “socialist” stage. In reality, this meant a defense of capitalism and strangling the revolutionary working-class movement.

The US lead-up to and invasion of Korea sharply altered these plans. The military intervention of imperialism was not only directed against Korea, but China as well. In response, the CCP was compelled to carry out sweeping reforms in China, including against private property, in order to meet the demands of China's revolutionary masses. Many of the most backward practices in society were eliminated, including attacks on women and children. Illiteracy was largely eliminated. For these reasons, the Chinese working class and farmers continue to view the 1949 Revolution as an enormous advance.

Though the Korean War officially began on June 25, 1950, it had been prepared since the Japanese surrender in 1945. Washington at first demanded a “trusteeship” for Korea, dividing the peninsula and carried out a reign of terror against striking workers and others opposed to the US occupation. Washington then installed the dictatorial Syngman Rhee as president who continued the wave of right-wing terrorism, ultimately killing hundreds of thousands of people suspected of left-wing tendencies or even simply being related to suspected leftists.

The US intended to wipe out all support for revolution in the South and then use it as a base of operations against the North and then China. When the war began, the North Korean forces had the upper hand against the deeply unpopular Rhee regime, taking nearly all of the peninsula in a matter of weeks, save for the city of Busan, in the southeast.

On September 15, the US military, under the guise of a UN mission, invaded at Incheon, pushed the North Koreans back across the 38th parallel and threatened to invade China on October 7. The US carried out a genocidal war, complete with devastating bombing runs of the peninsula, including dropping 866,914 gallons of napalm between June and October 1950, according to historian Bruce Cumings.

MacArthur had also discussed dropping “between 30 and 50

atomic bombs”—in his words—“strung across the neck of Manchuria.” Washington considered introducing hundreds of thousands of Chinese Nationalist soldiers from Taiwan into Manchuria and in the south around Shanghai.

The Chinese people were mobilized to defend the newly won gains of the Chinese Revolution which were threatened by the military intervention of US imperialism. Chinese troops were sent to Korea in the People’s Volunteer Army (PVA) not only to prevent the US from reuniting Korea under Rhee, but also from invading Manchuria.

Chinese and US forces clashed at Lake Changjin, also known by its Japanese name, Chosin Reservoir, in a battle that lasted from November 27 to December 13, 1950. The result was a massive blow to US imperialism, preventing it from gaining a larger foothold on the Asian continent. The US military was pushed back to Hungnam, from where it and other UN forces were forced to retreat back across the 38th parallel. It was one of the largest US retreats by sea in history.

However, in the present conflict between Washington and Beijing, the CCP can make no appeal to this revolutionary sentiment. The CCP today oversees a thoroughly capitalist government and seeks to defend its interests against those of the massive Chinese working class. The bureaucracy has no way forward in its conflict with US imperialism except to prepare for war and is even more terrified of an uprising of the Chinese masses.

This sentiment is what lies at the heart of *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. It is meant to cut off the population from the revolutionary movements of the past at a time when there is fear over threats of US attacks on China. The CCP hopes to instill nationalism and totally whitewash historical truth.

The film itself is largely unremarkable and drags on for two hours and 48 minutes. Scenes are notable for all the wrong reasons, with the battles accounting for more than a third of the movie. Filmed with heavy use of CGI, it resembles a comic book or video game, is extremely violent, and lacks seriousness.

The movie stars Wu Jing as Wu Qianli, commander of 7th company, and Jackson Yee as Commander Wu’s younger brother Wanli. It follows Qianli as he returns home to his poor village after fighting in the 1949 Chinese Revolution, only to be forced to return to duty as the Korean War break outs. Wanli decides to join the army to serve under his brother.

There is no attempt at character development. All of the predictable caricatures are present: the wise leader (Qianli), the impetuous youth (Wanli); the grizzled veteran (Lei Suisheng, played by Hu Jun); and the doting father forced to return to war and is of course never without his daughter’s picture (Mei Sheng, played by Zhu Yawen). The running theme throughout the film is the unthinking and selfless sacrifice of the Chinese soldiers, risking life and limb to defeat an enemy armed with superior weaponry.

There is no denying the heroism displayed by the Chinese

soldiers. They were determined to defend the Chinese Revolution and understood a US invasion would bring the return of the hated KMT regime and the oppression of workers and peasants. Within China, the CCP regime itself feared the emergence of a revolutionary opposition and rounded up and imprisoned the Chinese Trotskyists who were its most conscious expression.

The Americans in the film are portrayed as brutish and juvenile, at times cracking racist or derisive comments about the Chinese and Koreans. At one point, the members of the 7th company, freezing and starving, are angered when they overhear an American radio transmission of soldiers talking about wanting to be home for Christmas. While the Chinese troops are fighting for their families and country, the Americans only think of their personal pleasures.

Again, this is a simplistic caricature. Undoubtedly, the anti-communist McCarthyite witch hunt underway in the United States had a significant impact. However, there was far from unanimous support for the Korean War—a fact that is expressed in the opposition of the American Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

SWP leader James P. Cannon wrote in an open letter to the US government that the Korean War “is part of the mighty uprising of the hundreds of millions of colonial people throughout Asia against western imperialism. This is the real truth, the real issue. The colonial slaves don’t want to be slaves any longer.”

The film’s black-and-white, racist portrayal of the Korean War as the “good” Chinese against the “bad” Americans is clearly meant to drive a wedge between Chinese and American workers. In reality, the Chinese working class will find a powerful ally in its American counterpart—a unity that Beijing fears no less than Washington.

As US imperialism ramps up its war drive against China, the only social force that can halt a catastrophic war between nuclear-armed powers is the international working class. A genuine struggle against US aggression against China, Korea, or anywhere else in the world requires the unification of workers and youth in the fight for an international socialist perspective.

The Battle at Lake Changjin is a poor film underpinned by a diametrically opposed outlook hostile to internationalism and socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact