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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **War Remembered, Revolution Forgotten: Recasting the Sino-North Korean Alliance in China's Post-Socialist Media State**

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#### **Abstract**

From October 1950 to July 1953, the nascent Chinese state entered into a strategic alliance with North Korea; hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers shed blood on the Korean peninsula in defense of the socialist homeland and advancing Communist internationalism. But since the end of the Korean War, China has moved from revolutionary idealism and political radicalism in Mao's era to the current post-socialist pragmatism and materialism. As the ideological winds shift, China's contemporary propaganda apparatus must redefine the Korean War in order to reconcile the complexity of the war and wartime alliance with contemporary political concerns and popular views. By focusing on a documentary film, *The Unforgettable Victory*, produced by China's leading state-run film studio in 2013, this article explores the ways in which the official media of the post-socialist era presents the past revolutionary war. The new film celebrates the splendid valor of Chinese soldiers, civilians' heroic sacrifices, and the war's nationalist legacy; however, it purposefully forgets the revolutionary fervor and internationalist sentiments that once forged the Sino-North Korean alliance and empowered wartime mobilization. This article examines the process of remembering and forgetting, and reveals government propaganda's latest efforts to demobilize contemporary viewers while infusing the past revolutionary war with ideological clarity and political certainty in post-socialist China.

Keywords: Korean War, China, documentary film, post-socialism, media marketplace, propaganda, war memorialization

The year 2013 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War armistice. On July 27, President Barack Obama, accompanied by the U.S. secretary of defense, congressional leaders, and war veterans, attended a commemoration ceremony at the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. This gathering marked the first time that a sitting U.S. president participated in a formal ceremony to honor the service and sacrifice of American and United Nations troops in the Korean War. Thirteen time zones away in Seoul, South Korea's newly elected president,

Park Geun-hye, delivered a speech before a crowd of more than four thousand people. In it, she remembered soldiers and civilians killed during the conflict. Across the 38th parallel, another political spectacle unfolded before an international audience. Goose-stepping soldiers, rows of tanks, and missile launchers marched triumphantly through the main square of Pyongyang to celebrate the day that North Koreans called “the Victor Day in the Fatherland Liberation War.” The ritualized parade and the impressive show of the country’s latest arsenal rallied its people behind the young leader Kim Jung-un, whose grandfather Kim Il-sung had started the war sixty-three years earlier.

Although China played a decisive role during the war and sustained heavy combat casualties,<sup>1</sup> it was conspicuously absent from this international spectacle of war commemoration, holding neither victory celebration nor memorial service on this historic day. In the absence of public state ceremony, the Chinese public was greeted almost three months later by a twelve-episode documentary film, *Buneng wangque de weida shengli* (不能忘却的伟大胜利, *The Unforgettable Victory*), which took China’s preeminent state-run documentary producer, the Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio (hereafter, Newsreel Studio), a year to produce. On the night of October 25, the film was aired on the country’s predominant state television network, China Central Television (CCTV). For one hour on twelve consecutive nights, the film brought the war to life for contemporary viewers.<sup>2</sup> It aimed to offer a gateway into the past—“a full panorama of the Korean War”—through which the Chinese public could commemorate the service and sacrifice of Chinese soldiers and civilians in a place seemingly far from their homeland and at a time distantly removed from the present (Shen 2014).

*The Unforgettable Victory* represents one recent example of the sustained efforts by generations of Chinese documentary producers to utilize black-and-white footage to present the Korean War to the Chinese public. During the war, more than one hundred filmmakers went to the battlefield. Embedded with army units, they recorded Chinese soldiers fighting, working, and living on the front lines. Others filmed the vast home front, where mass mobilization swept across both Chinese cities and the countryside. These wartime films portrayed North Korea as the prime victim of the war, a country invaded by “American imperialists” and their “henchmen” allies. The survival of North Korea and its alliance with China held the future of the Chinese revolution, as the two countries united in a crusade to safeguard territorial integrity and

independence, defend the right to adopt the socialist path for national revival, and contribute to the international Communist movement. These films were made not only to mobilize popular support of the Chinese government's war efforts but also to preserve official memory of the war and to pass that memory down from generation to generation.

Yet "the historical memory of a people, a nation, or any aggregate," historian David Blight reminds us, "evolves over time in relation to present needs and ever-changing context" (2002, 120). Since the end of the Korean War in the summer of 1953, China has witnessed the rise and fall of Mao's socialist revolution; since his death in 1976, and particularly since the 1990s, China has moved from revolutionary idealism and political radicalism to the current post-socialist pragmatism and materialism. In the area of China's foreign relations, old enemies such as the United States and South Korea have evolved into close trading partners. In contrast, the bilateral relationship between China and its old ally North Korea rapidly deteriorated on the eve of the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War armistice.<sup>3</sup> In early 2013, China supported the two United Nations Security Council resolutions that condemned North Korea's rocket launch in December 2012 and its third nuclear test in February 2013. Moreover, China's decision to send Vice President Li Yuanchao to attend Pyongyang's ceremony on Armistice Day was widely regarded by political analysts as a sign showing China's growing anger at North Korea's belligerent policies and provocative actions. Despite his position, Li was not a member of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo, the formal apex of power that runs China. "While not exactly a snub," international observers noted, "it is hard to imagine that the absence of a senior Chinese Politburo member from the podium in Pyongyang was not intended to send a message" (Xu and Yu 2013). In his meeting with Kim Jong-un, Li did not strike the chord of memory his host probably desired to hear. Instead of reaffirming the historical alliance that the two countries forged at war, he urged North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions for the sake of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula (*RMRB* 2013). The commemoration saga in Pyongyang, once again, marked the strained relationship between China and North Korea, undergoing significant change from, to borrow political scientist Andrew Scobell's words, "comrades-in-arms to allies at arm's length" (2004). In this regard, China's post-socialist reform has brought profound changes to its foreign relations. Concepts such as anti-imperialism and Communist internationalism, which once helped the revolutionary state

define the strategic value of China's alliance with North Korea, are no longer ideologically fashionable or politically advisable (Mansourov 2003; Albert and Xu 2016).

This post-socialist condition raises questions about earlier historical understandings of the importance of the strategic alignment and the Korean War, as well as the revolutionary legacy encoded in historical memory. The Korean War was the first major military campaign launched by the nascent Chinese Communist state, and official history credited it as one of the “three major movements in the formative years of the nation” (*jianguo chuqi sanda yundong* 建国初期三大运动). Along with the Land Reform (*tugai* 土改) and the Campaign to Suppress Counter-Revolutionaries (*zhenfan* 镇反), it solidified the Communists' rule over China. But the two domestic campaigns appear ambiguous and even problematic in the context of current political discourse, in which the post-socialist government actively encourages private entrepreneurship and property ownership and puts a high premium on “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会). The Korean War campaign stands out and stands alone in defining the initial history of the People's Republic. If not clarifying the cause and finding a purpose for China's participation in the conflict, the war and wartime alliance could become meaningless, and the history of this campaign could slip into the black hole of memory. Put differently, while seeking to reinterpret the Korean War, the post-socialist state has no intention to resuscitate the increasingly enervated revolutionary discourse; nevertheless, it cannot let the war, which has been so essential to the founding myth of the People's Republic, fade away from political discourse and public memory in the new millennium.

Documentary producers are not alone in reinterpreting the revolutionary past and making sense of it in the context of contemporary political situations and popular concerns. Sociologist Keun-Sik Jung (2015) has shown that officials at the Memorial Hall of the War to Resist America and Aid Korea in Dandong City, the only national Korean War memorial in China, decided to soften the anti-American and anti-South Korean rhetoric when they renovated exhibitions in 1993.<sup>4</sup> Filmmakers face the same task of remembering the Korean War in the midst of shifting ideological winds, along with their own challenges. Like museums, television networks in China and film studios such as Newsreel Studio are exclusively state-owned and are thus expected to promote official messages and educate the masses. But besides functioning as the government's ideological watchdog and mouthpiece, they are also ensconced in a booming

cultural industry shaped by market rules and driven by consumer demands. By one count, approximately seven hundred television stations operated in China in 2007, delivering programs on nearly three thousand channels (Hazelbarth 2007). As such, documentary channels and filmmakers find their films in competition with reality shows, crime dramas, Korean soap operas, and Hollywood blockbusters. Operating in the media marketplace, producers of *The Unforgettable Victory* had to carefully and creatively package official messages in order to make them sensible to contemporary political and popular discourses. An examination of the official media's exhaustive effort to make sense of the complex and often controversial Sino-North Korean alliance showcases how the official meaning and memory of the Korean War evolved over sixty years, and how documentary makers (re)attempt to infuse the profoundly ambiguous war with ideological clarity and political certainty in China's post-socialist media state.

### **Documentary Films, Cinematic Propaganda, and the Post-Socialist Media Marketplace**

The Chinese Communist Party has long recognized the importance of cinematic propaganda.<sup>5</sup> Propaganda officials long ago found that films produced provocative images and thus animated political information, turning it into something more direct and compelling. Music was a crucial component. Played in parallel with film narrative and paired with film scenes, music was incorporated into the visual action, greatly enhancing the film's emotional impact. Moreover, commentary through the voice of narrator(s) guided viewers to grapple with the political messages embedded in the images. Because films possessed immense power to transmit didactic messages to viewers by arousing emotions like anger and sympathy, they educated and excited people and became indispensable instruments and powerful weapons to facilitate, in political scientist Elizabeth Perry's words, the Communist Party's "emotion work" of "mobilizing emotional energy for revolutionary purposes" (Perry 2002, 112).

Less than one week after Chinese troops crossed the Yalu River to launch their combat mission, the first Chinese film crew from the Newsreel Production Unit of the Beijing Film Studio arrived at the front on November 3, 1950 (Lan 2001). In three years, they produced five newsreel digests and thirteen short and long documentary films (Shan 2005, 129). These filming efforts culminated in the production of the two-part documentary *Resist America and Aid Korea*, the first portion of which, produced in 1951, has survived as an example of classic wartime cinematic propaganda.<sup>6</sup> On December 28, 1951, the film debuted in 265 cinemas in forty cities in

China (*RMRB* 1951a).<sup>7</sup> In less than two months, it was reported that, in Shanghai alone, about two million people had watched the film in cinemas; countrywide, the number of viewers exceeded ten million (*RMRB* 1952). The 1951 propaganda film shows that the rising revolutionary propaganda state developed both the political will and resources to produce, guide, deliver, and sharpen its war mobilization messages.

In contrast, *The Unforgettable Victory* made in 2013 brings to light the complex interplay between state sponsorship and censorship, on the one hand, and filmmakers' initiative and popular reception, on the other, enacted in the volatile post-socialist media marketplace. According to Shen Fang (2014), who directed *The Unforgettable Victory*, the idea to produce a new documentary series about China's Korean War experience occurred in 2010 during her interview of Chi Haotian (1929–), a retired three-star army general and former defense secretary. General Chi, a Korean War veteran himself, inquired if Shen had “any plan to do something for old soldiers like him”—that is, any plan to make a new film in honor of Chinese soldiers' service and sacrifice during the war. Shen was inspired. In the following two years, she filed a film proposal at Newsreel Studio, obtained a production permit from media control bureaucracies, and secured external funds from a national cultural organization called China Association for Promotion of Chinese Culture (*Zhonghua wenhua fazhan cujinhui* 中华文化发展促进会; hereafter, CAPCC). After the film was completed and before it could be released for broadcasting, it had to pass an in-house review conducted by Newsreel Studio and CAPCC, and submit to the scrutiny of government media censors (*Zhonghua wenhua fazhan cujinhui* 2013b).

Notably, the Chinese state remains a powerful force that monitors every step of a film's production and distribution. Shen and members of her film crew are state employees. High-ranking officials endorsed the initial production proposal, as government approval is required before a film can be made and aired. CAPCC, the film's financial backer, proclaims on its official website that it is a cultural organization founded in June 2001 by “leading Chinese academics and artists.” However, a close look at the background of the organization's president and two vice presidents discloses its extensive ties to the Chinese government. For example, its president, Xu Jialu (1937–), holds the position of vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Moreover, the organization works closely with various government agencies, including the Central Propaganda Department, Ministry of Culture, and

Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council. It has also been advocating the Chinese government's Taiwan policies for years (Zhonghua wenhua fazhan cujinhui 2013a).

Despite the state's omnipresence in contemporary China's media marketplace, the production of *The Unforgettable Victory* also illustrates that government control is not necessarily absolute, clearly defined, or strictly enforced at all times or in all settings and situations. Rather, state power is often a process through which multiple self-interested state or quasi-state agents negotiate to reach agreement over the allocation and exchange of government resources. Again, CAPCC's involvement in the film's production provides a good example of this phenomenon in action.

In light of CAPCC's core political mission, which is to improve "cross-strait relations" and to promote "traditional Chinese culture," the new documentary series about the Korean War—a bloody Cold War conflict—is not the kind of project CAPCC normally sponsors.<sup>8</sup> To explain the sponsorship, CAPCC's vice president, Xing Yunming (*Guangming ribao* 2013) stated that he regarded it as fulfilling a civic duty of serving government. In his words, to recapture the Korean War history "boosts the Chinese national spirit" (*zhenfen minzu jingshen* 振奋民族精神) and "supplies spiritual energy" (*tigong jingshen dongli* 提供精神动力) to the government's current efforts to "build socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*jianshe you Zhongguo tese de shehuizhuyi* 建设有中国特色的社会主义).

But other factors besides serving the state likely also crossed Xing's mind. Many media scholars have persuasively argued that the Chinese government in the reform era "retains the power of ultimate sanction" but "exercises that power reactively rather than proactively" (Berry 2009, 83; see also Hong, Lu, and Zou 2009; Zhu 2012). It generally allows entrepreneurial producers to explore their own professional interests and profit from the vibrant media market, as long as the exercise of entrepreneurship and resulting media products do not transgress the state's propaganda red line. The government's power over the media is expressed directly, through censorship, and more frequently indirectly, by cultivating a patron-client relationship with the media marketplace under its watch. This is achieved by "allocating lucrative contracts to suitably obedient State and commercial organizations, or taking them away if they do not comply" (Brady 2006, 64). CAPCC apparently understands the importance of winning government favors and has been skillful and successful at loyally serving the ideals of the state in



the hope of gaining more favors. The organization takes pride in its record of winning major national awards such as the “Best Works in Five Cultural Aspects Award” from the Central Propaganda Department, the “Golden Eagle Award” from the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and the “Rainbow Award for Television Works” from the China Radio and Television Association (Zhonghua wenhua fazhan cujinhui 2013a). In this regard, one could deduce that CAPCC invested in *The Unforgettable Victory* in an attempt to win government awards, which could offer a competitive advantage to help CAPCC receive more government grants and contracts.

Apart from political and institutional considerations, there is a personal factor at play in this project as well. Another CAPCC vice president, Xin Qi, recalls that seven members of his family participated in the war. Therefore, the memory of the Korean War is deeply personal for him. Xin has been motivated to look for venues to refilm the war, rather than keeping his personal memories of the war to himself. Upon learning of Director Shen’s project, he agreed to help without hesitation (*Guangming ribao* 2013).

An examination of the process in which *The Unforgettable Victory* was produced reveals that the documentary series is neither a state-commissioned project, like the wartime propaganda masterpiece *Resist America and Aid Korea*, nor an independent film. A host of state agents and quasi-state agents, including a decorated war hero, professional documentary makers, and resourceful institutional leaders, all played a role in the film’s making. Each may have come to the project with a different agenda—recapturing past revolutionary glory, winning government favor, reviewing war history as a personal experience, or pursuing professional interest—yet these varied agendas were not mutually exclusive. They overlapped and helped forge a partnership between CAPCC and Director Shen’s crew, thus enabling the production of the new documentary series. The post-socialist propaganda state thus releases its absolute control over cultural production, opening room for documentary makers to negotiate between and navigate through government priorities, quasi-government and corporate funding, and personal and professional interests. It is within this post-socialist media marketplace that *The Unforgettable Victory* attempts to retell the old revolutionary story of the Korean War.

### Friends and Foes: The Politics of Naming

*The Unforgettable Victory* begins with remarks by two Chinese Korean War veterans: Yu Yongbo (1931– ), a retired three-star general and former director of the General Political Department of the People’s Liberation Army, and the above-mentioned Chi Haotian, the former defense secretary. Both gave extensive interviews to the film’s producers and were listed as consultants. The gray-haired generals appeared before the camera to represent the hundreds of thousands of Chinese war veterans whose service and sacrifice at war are honored in the film. More importantly, having been top military commanders, they spoke on behalf of the state in whose name the war was waged more than sixty years prior. Their remarks represent the official voice of the war. The film begins with General Yu explaining why the Chinese government made the decision to intervene in the conflict: “We must fight this war, and we didn’t have a choice.” He continues, “The enemy had come to our doorstep, and they forced us to enter the war.” Speaking in a calm but firm voice, General Chi points out the war’s larger meaning:

The war was a struggle between good and evil. It was the victory of the good and defeat of the evil. It laid the foundation of new China. China would not have enjoyed peace for sixty years if it had not fought the war.

To Korean War veterans, as well as those who grew up in Mao’s China, such remarks by two decorated war heroes are unsurprisingly familiar, as they basically reiterate the official definition of the war first drawn in the wake of China’s entrance in 1950.<sup>9</sup> It seems that neither the end of the Cold War nor the breathtaking economic reform in post-Mao China have altered, let alone rewritten, the official history of the Korean War. The meaning of this war as China’s “self-defense” and “holy war” appears to be frozen in time, sealed safely in its original revolutionary framework of interpretation. However, by closely examining *The Unforgettable Victory*, it is clear that the film producers do, in fact, offer some subtle, yet strikingly less revolutionary, revisions to the official and orthodox narrative of war.

One of the notable changes is that the new film no longer uses wartime political vocabulary to refer to the United States as “imperialist invaders” (*diguo zhuyi qinluezhe* 帝国主义侵略者), “war-peddlers” (*zhanzheng fanzi* 战争贩子), “war criminals” (*zhanfan* 战犯), or “schemers” (*yinmoujia* 阴谋家). In the case of South Korea, old names with negative connotations such as “running dog” (*zougou* 走狗), “gang of bandits” (*feibang* 匪帮), and

“puppets” (*kuilei* 傀儡) are replaced by “Republic of Korea”—the country’s official name. The way in which the enemy is named is politically crucial. In revolutionary discourse, filmmakers refused to call enemies by names they chose for themselves because to do so was thought to give undue recognition to those the war sought to denounce and destroy. While devising and utilizing derogatory terms to name enemies, wartime propaganda also attempted to establish political affinities and emotional bonds between the revolutionary forces, represented by “Korean revolutionaries” (led by Kim Il-sung and the Workers’ Party) and the Chinese Communists, by means of emphasizing Korean comrades’ brave struggle to liberate their country from Japanese colonial rule and their valuable contribution to the Chinese revolution. By highlighting the camaraderie between Korean revolutionaries and Chinese Communists, the war propaganda reframed the political mission of “Resist America and Aid Korea” as a reciprocal form of moral obligation—China repaying the precious support given to them by their Korean comrades. By invoking the traditional concept of reciprocity, they justified China’s involvement in the Korean War, a conflict taking place well beyond its borders. The exercise of naming was a crucial component of a larger war mobilization project. It not only identified enemies and allies but also transformed them onto a moral index to promote a sense of “holy war.” It elevated China into a kind of global commandship leading the crusade to free Asia and many other areas from the scourge of colonial subjugation and capitalist exploitation.

Besides naming, visual images and accompanying music also helped mobilize viewers of *Resist America and Aid Korea*, which begins with images of North Korea’s majestic mountains and rushing rivers, followed by images of reclaimed farmlands, machines and factories, new schools and hospitals, and North Korean women wearing *hanbok* (traditional Korean dresses) dancing around a monument dedicated to Russian soldiers (see figure 1). The way the camera moves from awe-inspiring nature imagery to remarkable industrial feats and social developments suggests how greatness in the material world was charged with spiritual power, enshrining the leadership of the Workers’ Party, the will of Kim Il-Sung, and the spirit of the Communist revolution.



Figure 1. A sequence of shots in *Resist America and Aid Korea* depicting North Korea's natural landscape, a street in Pyongyang, Kim Il-Sung University, and the Monument to Russian Red Army Martyrs.

Then the peaceful—almost paradisiacal—life of North Koreans is contrasted with the iconic image of John Foster Dulles, special envoy to Japan for President Truman and later President Eisenhower's secretary of state, peering across the 38th parallel (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Scene from *Resist America and Aid Korea* showing John Foster Dulles visiting American troops at the 38th parallel.

Two sets of images promoted the conspiracy theory that blamed America for instigating the violence. Once the war was under way, viewers were confronted with images of broken

bridges and damaged roads, public buildings and private homes in ruins, and corpses of women and babies (see figure 3). These graphic images of war violence were immediately followed by images of airborne American bombers, and the commentary drew a powerful connection between the war dead and America's military action:

We love peace, and we have never come to the eastern side of the Pacific Ocean to either kill a single American or occupy an inch of American soil. But today, the enemy wields a knife over our head, which leaves us no choice but to rise up in self-defense.



Figure 3. *Resist America and Aid Korea* showed war atrocities committed by American troops.

Just as it had contrasted North Korea's innocence with America's brutality, *Resist America and Aid Korea* took pride in Chinese soldiers' bravery by showing them marching through North Korea's frozen terrain in full combat gear to pursue retreating enemies and deride the cowardice of American troops, who were shown running away from battles and abandoning military equipment and the bodies of fallen fellow soldiers (see figure 4). Music also contributed to the parallel structure of the film's narrative. While triumphant music rose every time Chinese troops charged enemies, Americans' actions were paired with incongruent, ear-piercing music to evoke negative feelings in viewers.





Figure 4. Chinese Volunteer Army soldiers advancing triumphantly and defeating the American army.

Image, music, and commentary corresponded to and collaborated with each other in the 1951 film; they provided a seamless interpretive framework that glorified combat, stereotyped enemies, elicited emotional reactions from viewers, and mobilized viewers to action. However, when they work together again in *The Unforgettable Victory* of 2013, they seem to direct post-socialist viewers along different paths of perception and attention. American generals, such as Douglas MacArthur and Matthew Ridgway—architects of America’s war campaign once denounced as fanatic warmongers and cold-blooded killers in China’s wartime propaganda—are now presented in a positive manner. For example, MacArthur is introduced as “a five-star general, the youngest superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, and a decorated war hero who successfully led multiple amphibious assaults in the Second World War” *The Unforgettable Victory* also treats Ridgway more favorably:

On December 25, 1950, fifty-six-year-old Ridgway receives the assignment as General Walker’s replacement to command the 8th U.S. Army and is required to report for duty immediately. Ridgway, who is an astute strategist and well-known for rigorously training his soldiers, packs quickly, draws up his will, brings with him his photo with his wife, and boards the airplane bound to the Far East on Christmas Eve.

The way Ridgway is described is strikingly similar to the film's portrayal of General Deng Hua, vice commander-in-chief of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army:

Facing the rapidly deteriorating military situations [in North Korea], Deng Hua has to bid farewell to his wife who is about to go into labor. Upon leaving, he speaks to her: "Clay pots may break in a well; generals may die in battle." Then he boards the northbound train to the front.

Two generals commanding armies that were locked in a bloody battle made the same decision to leave loved ones behind and to answer their government's call to duty. They were fierce enemies on the battlefield, yet they are presented as sharing the qualities of professionalism and patriotism, which made them both devoted husbands, model soldiers, living examples of heroism, and icons to stimulate national pride. In this way, the practice of naming is not as much a propagandistic device to generate animosity as a possible step toward closing a dark chapter of Cold War hatred and achieving political and spiritual reconciliation in the post-Cold War world.

If *Resist America and Aid Korea* was used by the Chinese government to energize the home front and mobilize popular support, this article argues that *The Unforgettable Victory* showcases post-socialist filmmakers' attempt to *demobilize* viewers. The approach has shifted in large part because China's configuration of enemies and the alignment of allies have changed dramatically since the war ended sixty years ago. The United States and South Korea have become important partners to China on critical issues such as global trade and regional security; thus, neutral terms are used in the later film to reflect a new diplomatic reality. In contrast, former ally North Korea has become one of the most isolated states and heavily sanctioned countries in the twenty-first century, due primarily to its repeated nuclear provocations, which threaten security and stability in Northeast Asia and beyond. China has supported several United Nations Security Council sanctions on Kim Jong-un's regime, including backing the most recent resolution passed in the aftermath of North Korea's fifth nuclear test on September 6, 2016, to cut the country's coal exports and thereby choke its few sources of hard currency. However, Kim refuses to give up its nuclear program, which not only poses a long-term threat to regional security but also renders North Korea an "uncertain ally," "uncomfortable neighbor," and strategic liability to China's national and global interest (Chung and Choi 2013; Browne 2014). When China and North Korea were close allies fighting against common "imperialist enemies,"

filmmakers opened the 1951 film by “saluting the victorious North Korean People’s Army and the Chinese Volunteer Army.” But with the souring of the bilateral relationship sixty years later, the new generation of filmmakers honors only “the commanders and soldiers of the Chinese Volunteer Army” in the beginning segment of the 2013 film (see figure 5); in doing so, they seek to keep the memory of Chinese soldiers alive but relegate the alliance to history.



Figure 5. The emphasis on the North Korean ally in *Resist America and Aid Korea*, which disappears in *The Unforgettable Victory*.

Distribution venues and viewing platforms have changed as well, prompting filmmakers to adopt a new approach to neutralize the meaning of the war. Unlike *Resist America and Aid Korea*, which was screened in cinemas and public places upon its release, *The Unforgettable Victory* was first broadcast on the Documentary Channel on CCTV and then made available for viewing on major video-sharing websites.<sup>10</sup> The television-based distribution process significantly limits the film’s intended propaganda impact, as it does not unite audiences; rather, scholars argue, it “reinforces the increasingly visible class divisions in society by segmenting audiences into different socio-economic groups” (Zhu and Berry 2009, 7). CCTV’s viewer survey indicates that the Documentary Channel (on which *The Unforgettable Victory* was aired) primarily attracts urban male viewers from the background of “three highs” (*sangao* 三高)—high income, high educational level (college degree and higher), and high age (fifty-five and older) (He 2013, 93). When the channel’s programs target specific viewer groups, propaganda fails to reach a mass audience. Second, the fact that viewers no longer watch films in cinemas, but on television, computers, or other types of mobile devices, ensures a private viewing



experience. In Mao's era, film viewing in the cinema setting aided propaganda work by creating a close and controlled environment in which viewers listened to official messages directly, uninterrupted by work or domestic chores. The viewing session, often preceded or followed by meetings and discussions, thus became an extended political rally. The sequence of activities produced a continuous persuasive process and a well-rounded political education to create a political congregation, spread official messages, and rally viewers behind government causes. In contrast, viewers in contemporary China make their own decisions over which channels and programs they watch and whether to tune in to or shut off the propaganda.

### **Civil War versus Cold War: The End of China's Internationalist Ambition**

Referring to enemies in neutral terms represents one of several ways in which post-socialist filmmakers began making a conscious effort to distance their reinterpretation of the meaning and legacy of the Korean War from the original revolutionary narrative. Spearheading the reinterpretative effort, filmmakers reexamined the root causes and nature of the conflict. *The Unforgettable Victory* sets out with a seemingly objective perspective through the calm and firm voice of the narrator:

Soon after it emerged from Japanese colonial enslavement, Korea plunged into a division between north and south. The United States and the Soviet Union agreed to form separate governments—the Republic of Korea in the south and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north—established respectively in August and September 1948. Seventy-five-year-old Rhee Syng-man and thirty-six-year-old Kim Il-sung became heads of the respective states. In October, the Soviet Union transferred administrative authority over the territory north of the 38th parallel to the Korean people and completely withdrew its troops from Korea. Half a year later, the United States announced its decision to withdraw its troops from the south. However, its civilian personnel and military advisors stayed; they supplied the South with military equipment and helped to train 50,000 South Korean troops. By this time, there was a standoff between two ideological rivals and hostile regimes on the Korean peninsula.... At 4:40 a.m. on June 25, 1950, the Korean War broke out.

This statement places the origin of the Korean War in the escalating Cold War confrontation between the Communist bloc led by the Soviet Union and the “Western world” headed by the United States.

To be clear, wartime propaganda also argued that the war lay rooted in the domestic strife between two Korean regimes in the aftermath of the Second World War. It accused the South of being the prime mover who first attacked the North; the North rose up in self-defense, not only defeating the South's invasion but also transforming the effective defense into a spirited offense and a sweeping campaign to "liberate" the South and unite the peninsula. However, it is quite obvious that North Korea and South Korea were more alike than different in *The Unforgettable Victory*. Both nations were created under a superpower's protection, and both held the conviction that the North-South division was temporary and unification inevitable. Ultimately, unification would be achieved through blood and iron, requiring the total victory of one regime and the destruction of the other. While making preparations for the approaching war of unification, both sides actively sought external military support and political endorsement, and both embraced the role of proxies and later shed blood for superpowers' geopolitical interests. In this regard, the film argues that, although sworn enemies to each other, both regimes were victims, first unified as one country under the grip of Japanese colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century and then divided by a proxy bloodbath in the Cold War. This ideology of shared victimhood changes the nature of the war. Instead of North Korea standing up to defend its independence against an invasion by the United States and South Korea, the war becomes a "civil war" in which two rival regimes are locked in a bloody conflict to pursue a strikingly similar cause: the unification of the peninsula.

This new interpretation is decisively non-ideological and morally neutral. "The term civil war," to borrow historian Tobie Meyer-Fong's insights, "eliminates implicit value judgments and transcends the totalizing political and moral narratives that emphasize national priorities over individual and collective suffering" (2013, 11). The producers of *The Unforgettable Victory* posit that both Koreas were members of a respective ideological bloc in addition to being sovereign states; leaders such as Kim Il-sung and Rhee Syng-man were nationalists and pragmatists. Their wartime decisions and policies were characterized by precarious balancing acts between fulfilling ideological obligations and advancing respective political and pragmatic interests. The South had every reason to attack, as did the North. The new interpretation states a historical fact yet refuses to enter the risky business of identifying an invader and a victim.

Underscoring the concept of "civil war" is the new international meaning that post-socialist filmmakers endeavor to find for the Korean War. Wartime propaganda asserted that the

war prepared Chinese to embark on an internationalist crusade against imperialism beyond Chinese borders and out in the “immediate zone.”<sup>11</sup> The Korean War made this internationalist agenda ideologically correct, politically urgent, and geopolitically desirable. Only by fighting globally would China be able to protect its Communist victory locally. Furthermore, the propaganda campaign had created a global map of Communist coalition. China and North Korea fought on the front lines, and they were backed by a larger and stronger international socialist brotherhood.

The concept of internationalism rises and falls in China’s political discourse. It first emerged during the early stages of the Chinese Communist movement, when Chinese Marxists identified the Chinese revolution as an integral part of the global working-class revolt against international capitalist exploitation. By repeatedly invoking the concept of internationalism in party documents, the Chinese Communists reaffirmed its “working-class party” identity, which also allowed it to pass the Communist International’s ideological scrutiny. The concept was widely disseminated and intensely promoted during the Korean War because Chinese leaders regarded the conflict as a perfect setting to launch a new global revolution under China’s leadership. Three years after the Korean War ended, the term “internationalism” was first written into the Chinese Communist Party’s charter, which solemnly declared that the party “strives to support Communists, progressive people, and laborers to fight for the improvement of all mankind” (Xuanbianzu 2007, 63). The charter was subsequently revised in 1969, 1973, and 1977. Each time the internationalist commitment was reiterated the enemies increased, including old enemy “American imperialists,” new foe “Soviet revisionists,” and ultimately “reactionaries in all countries” (Xuanbianzu 2007, 81).

Once radical politics subsided, the Chinese Communist Party rephrased its internationalist commitment in the party’s first post-Mao charter, promulgated in 1982. In it, the Party still vowed to uphold “proletarian internationalism” and opposed imperialism, hegemony, and colonialism. However, it no longer pointed a finger at the United States or the Soviet Union as China’s archenemies (Xuanbianzu 2007, 100). In 1992, less than a year after the Cold War ended, the Communist Party convened another national congress and completely removed the term “internationalism” from its charter (Xuanbianzu 2007, 124). This disavowal of internationalism sent a message to the international community that China was no longer ambitious about building a global socialist coalition. The demise of internationalism in post-

socialist political discourse prompted China to take a new course in its relationships with the two countries on the Korean peninsula. In April 1992, Chinese president Yang Shangkun (1907–1998) arrived at Pyongyang to celebrate Kim Il-sung’s eightieth birthday. Before the celebration ended, Kim approached his Chinese comrades with a draft of the “Pyongyang Declaration,” in which North Korea and a score of leftist parties pledged to continue upholding and promoting socialism in the post–Cold War world. Kim hoped China would lead the charge. Much to his disappointment, China bluntly refused to endorse the declaration. Four months later, China unilaterally decided to normalize its relations with South Korea.

The deterioration of the China–North Korea alliance, so inconspicuously displayed before domestic and international media, is more than a matter of policy difference between two countries. It is deeply rooted in China’s post-socialist worldview and domestic agenda, which undermines, if not destroys, the ideological foundation of the alliance. Back on the screen, the very ideals of communism and internationalism for which the Sino–North Korea alliance stood sixty years ago has become outdated and alien to contemporary Chinese political and popular discourses. When the old revolutionary terms and political rhetoric are dropped, fundamental questions such as “Why did we fight?” and “Was the war effort worth it?” remain and compel the new propaganda state, and particularly makers of *The Unforgettable Victory*, to answer.

### **Motherland, the Socialist Homeland, and the Changing Meaning of Patriotism**

The answer to these questions is found in patriotism. As the argument goes, China felt threatened by the war’s projected geopolitical implications and was deeply offended by the United States’s provocative stance and arrogant attitude toward China. To support this argument, the film exhausts a long list of evidence: the United States was sending the 7th Fleet to patrol the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. Air Force was descending on the island of Taiwan, a U.S. delegation headed by General MacArthur was meeting with Chiang Kai-shek, and U.S. ground forces were moving across the 38th parallel toward the Chinese border despite China’s stern warning. In sum, America’s actions not only posed grave threats to the nascent Chinese state’s security, they also mounted an assault on China’s deeply held national pride. In response, China entered the conflict to secure its borders and fend off future threats. The ultimate victory abroad helped to consolidate the new Chinese state. As such, the war became the best expression of patriotism.

For a moment, *The Unforgettable Victory* seems to read the war from virtually the same patriotic script that wartime propaganda did sixty years before. *People's Daily* editorials in 1950 had drawn readers' attention to the series of American provocations along China's border and in neighboring countries:

The American navy and air force are invading Taiwan; America has announced its plan to intensify military actions in the Philippines and Vietnam; America has invaded China's airspace, shooting and bombing [Chinese civilians]; and American navy vessels not only invade the territorial waters of North Korea but also fire at Chinese commercial ships. (*RMRB* 1950)

The editorial emphasized that these skirmishes and provocations, along with the Korean War, demonstrated America's hostility toward and calculated actions against China. Therefore, the Korean War represented a new episode of the long battle China fought to gain national independence. Yet the patriotic terms at war were ideologically encoded. From the very beginning, *Resist America and Aid Korea* drew viewers' attention to the socialist nature of the North Korean revolution:

Under the leadership of the Workers' Party, the Republic passes the democratic reform program. It quickly rebuilds infrastructure and transportation facilities damaged by the Japanese and nationalizes the industry. This is Kim Il-sung University, where hundreds of thousands of youth from all over the country congregate to receive education that will prepare them to become cadres to lead national construction. The government builds new family houses for workers. It launches land reform to distribute lands to millions of peasants. The land area under cultivation has increased and agricultural production has grown rapidly. The Korean people no longer "live like beasts of burden" (*niuma shi de shenghuo* 牛马似的生活).

The message urging the Chinese people to embrace North Korea as a socialist ally was loud and clear; the manner in which it was delivered was compelling, too. Both the interpretive framework and narrative structure, and even the language, were borrowed directly from propaganda films about the Chinese Communist revolution. Chinese viewers could easily make connections between the North Korean revolution shown in the film and their own experience in land reform, the elevation of the working class to the position of the leading force of the revolution, and other social and cultural reforms programs initiated by the Chinese Communist Party. If the notion of internationalism motivated Chinese people to make contributions to the revolutionary state's

growing internationalist ambition, the patriotism rallied people to support China's alliance with North Korea as an expression of one's loyalty to the socialist motherland.

The commitment to socialism, once so visible and potent in the Korean War and Chinese revolutionary discourses under Mao, has completely evaporated in the post-socialist film. *The Unforgettable Victory* announces that the war “shows that the Chinese people refused to be bullied by powers and had the courage to resist aggression.” The sense of China being attacked strikes a familiar chord for many Chinese, due not only to the country's traumatic history of suffering in the hands of foreign powers in the first half of the twentieth century but also the intense patriotic education administered by the country's educational bureaucracies since the 1990s (Wang 2014). Such memories of pain and victimization allow filmmakers to claim the moral high ground in presenting China in the Korean War; it also connects the war to other wars China had previously fought in its tenacious battle to defeat foreign enemies and gain national independence. Nevertheless, the argument renders the motherland of China ideologically ambiguous. China's war mission is no longer internationalist—fighting as a member of the international coalition of proletarians to advance the cause of a world revolution against imperialism capitalism. Rather, the enemy is not class specific and the nationalist agenda remains consistent. The sacrifice on the battlefields rallied all people at home to support the nascent Chinese state in rebuilding a nation torn asunder by decades-long foreign invasions. As such, the film establishes a sacred, unbroken, and mythical lineage of patriotism in which the Korean War is a milestone.

*The Unforgettable Victory* ends by praising Chinese soldiers for “achieving a spectacular victory that shook the world,” for which “they shall be honored by the Chinese people and forever remembered in the glorious history of the People's Republic of China.” Soldiers “spilled blood, devoted their youth, and committed their lives [to this war],” the film continues; “they demonstrated before the world both the iron will of the Chinese army and their firm belief in victory.” In an article written by a member of the production team, the author echoes the above statement by remarking that the Chinese people will “never forget their fathers who shed blood on the battlefield, never forget soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice, and never forget China's best sons and daughters who stood strong against the chilly winds [in Korea]” (Zhang 2014). These statements again attempt to define the meaning and legacy of the Korean War all at once without making reference to either socialism or internationalism. As they carefully remember the

splendid valor, heroic sacrifices, and nationalist legacy, filmmakers purposefully forget the revolutionary fervor and internationalist sentiments that once empowered wartime mobilization.

The revolutionary enthusiasm has long gone. Those sweeping changes in post-socialist China's political and ideological landscape compel filmmakers and the propaganda state they work for to confront the meaning of the country's first foreign war and the memory of the revolutionary past, some of which seem to contradict China's present developments. The socialist notion of patriotism has become obsolete and thus must be reformulated before it can help to rescue the ambiguous war memory. When reembracing patriotism, *The Unforgettable Victory* intentionally forgets the socialist nature of the nation-state that initially harnessed patriotic sentiments. It seemingly ignores the very revolutionary agenda for which patriotic soldiers shed their blood more than half a century ago.

In sharp contrast to America's reference to the Korean War as the "Forgotten War," the war was once one of the most remembered wars in the official history of the People's Republic. Both wartime propaganda and official history in the revolutionary era celebrated the Korean War campaign as a crucial event that solidified nascent Communist rule. Furthermore, China's participation in the war served as a linchpin connecting the domestic revolution to the international Communist movement and promoted revolutionary China's preeminence in the global anti-colonial crusade during the Cold War. Documentary films about this war were made in the past to carry out the propaganda and didactic mission—to glorify the combat, mourn the dead, ennoble the cause, and celebrate national unity and Chinese victory. They allowed the revolutionary government to find solace in death and sacrifice, serving as a mediating device connecting homeland with battlefield, living with dead, and past with present. The definition and remembrance of the war campaign created a political culture in revolutionary China that enshrined concepts such as patriotism and internationalism as core political virtues and civic obligations. These ideals were given material form through many war heroes' words and deeds, which in turn were to inspire the living to memorize and emulate. Such official memory of the war built and constantly reinforced emotional bonds between citizens and the state, fostering a national community built on actual and imagined participation in the war and the broader revolution. Ultimately, the government hoped that the positive and carefully formulated war memory would validate the revolutionary state that waged this war and the revolution, of which the war was a crucial part.

For decades, the powerful propaganda of state and revolutionary politics seemed to have sealed the meaning and memory of the Korean War safely in its original revolutionary framework of interpretation. Yet this article shows that the landscape of memory has shifted since the 1990s, as China has gradually but decisively moved away from its revolutionary heyday. Director Shen of *The Unforgettable Victory* recognized the shifting terrain and broken chain of memory and remarked, “For many reasons, the history of the Korean War has been kept off-limits [from public discussion] for a long time and thus is rarely mentioned in the mainstream media” (2014). Her remarks point out correctly that Newsreel Studio had made only two films about the Korean War since Mao’s death in 1976, and *The Unforgettable Victory* appears to be the first such film in almost a quarter of a century. Shen does not specify what has rendered the war history almost invisible, but this article argues that the post-socialist condition weakened and even overthrew many assumptions, structures, and conclusions that once anchored the revolutionary discourse. Cultural critic Wang Hui (2008, 4) defines the post-socialist condition by emphasizing a number of notable developments:

First, there is the transition from a planned economy to the new market economy. Second, China has emerged from the center of the international revolution movement to being the most dynamic capitalist market. Third, China no longer sees itself as a third-world nation fighting against the imperialist hegemony but has entered into a “strategic partnership” (*zhanlue huoban* 战略伙伴) with those former imperialist foes. Fourth, China has abandoned its socialist commitment to leveling class differences but instead allows class stratification to occur, which many believe will return China to a more “natural” or “normal” society.

When the new post-socialist propaganda guidelines urge the public to abandon class struggle and embrace new slogans such as “to get rich is glorious,” it also encourages the public to leave behind the fight for the international proletarian revolution and welcome global capitalism. This puts the memory of China’s revolutionary past, including the Korean War, at risk of being completely forgotten. Indeed, concerns about the fading historical memory are so palpable to the makers of *The Unforgettable Victory* that they seek to redefine the war by carefully remembering splendid valor, heroic sacrifice, and nationalist legacy. In so doing, this documentary film purposefully forgets the revolutionary excitement and internationalist sentiments. It is through forgetting the revolutionary past that the film remembers the war and comes to terms with the post-socialist present.



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## Notes

- 1 For decades, the Chinese government has regarded Chinese casualty figures as a top military secret and refused to release them to the public for fear of damaging the morale of its army and the civilian population. The restriction was lifted in recent years. The National Korean War Memorial at Dandong (Liaoning Province), working in collaboration with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, estimates that China suffered 183,108 combat casualties (Chen and Yan, 2010).
- 2 Provincial cable television networks aired their own productions, such as the three-hour, six-episode film *The Great Resist America and Aid Korea Movement* (*Weida de kangmei yuanchao* 伟大的抗美援朝), produced by the History Channel of Beijing Satellite Television Network (BTV).
- 3 Despite rhetoric such as “friendship sealed in blood” and “socialist neighboring countries as close as lips to teeth” constantly and lavishly reiterated in cinematic and newspaper propaganda, China’s alliance with North Korea witnessed many episodes of crisis, such as Kim Il-sung’s purge of the pro-China faction within the Workers’ Party in 1956, the ideological clash between Mao’s radicalism and Kim’s alleged revisionism in the late 1960s, and China’s unilateral decision to normalize diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992, to name but a few of the most damaging incidents. As such, scholars argue that the two countries “were uncertain allies who offered only limited cooperation to each other under the ideological and geopolitical imperatives of difficult times” (Chung and Choi 2013, 244).
- 4 Kirk Denton notes that Chinese museums as institutions preserving historical memory have “to confront the problem of how to make revolutionary history—with its conventional messages of self-sacrifice, heroism, and class struggle—relevant to a young audience living in a new economic climate that demand[s] of them very different sorts of values (self-reliance, independent thinking, self-fulfillment, and creativity)” (2014, 76). For another example, Rana Mitter finds that the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945), which “had been dealt with relatively cursorily in public memory and education” in Mao’s China, has seen a great surge in post-revolutionary discourse (2003, 118; 2000). It aids the Chinese government’s deliberate move to promote popular nationalism “in the face of the collapse of Marxism” to woo the Nationalist Party in Taiwan and serve the current foreign policy agenda to defuse Japan’s geopolitical influence in East Asia (Mitter 2003, 121). In his examination of the exhibition strategy at the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall in

- Beijing, Daniel Leese argues that officials “decouple” the memorial “from the overarching discourse of Mao worship and class struggle” and remodel it to “serve new narratives of patriotism” (2012, 94).
- 5 In August 1938, the General Political Department of the Red Army formed its first film studio, in Yan’an. The new agency gave the party actual experience in running a film studio, training film crews, and exploiting the propagandist value of documentary films. Many documentary films made there did not survive the decade of war, but the directors, scriptwriters, and photographers the studio professionally and politically trained played a pivotal role in filming the Korean War. The deputy director of the General Political Department and Red Army general Tan Zheng (1906–1988) headed the studio, but it was Yuan Muzhi (1909–1978), a leftist movie star and filmmaker from Shanghai, who oversaw the studio’s everyday operations. The studio operated for nearly eight years and abruptly ended its production in 1946 in the wake of the outbreak of the Civil War (Shan 2005, 82; see also Wu and Zhang 2008).
- 6 Producers of this film included Xu Xiaobing (1916–2009) as director and a team of twelve photographers. They were also joined by the poet Ai Qing (1910–1996), who penned a 7,500-character commentary; Ke Lan (1920–2006) and Guang Weiran (1913–2002) as songwriters; and He Luting (1903–1999) and Lei Zhenbang (1916–1997) as composers—all of whom were revolutionary veterans and members of the Communist cultural establishment.
- 7 To maximize the propaganda’s impact, government-sponsored mobile projection teams screened the film in factories, stores, markets, hotels, transportation facilities, parks, tourist attractions, temple fairs, and villages. Moreover, the cinematic soundtrack was broadcast via radio, and the full transcript of the film was published in newspapers. By allowing the public to “listen to” or “read” the film without accessing the actual product, radio broadcasting and print media expanded the film’s reach to an audience far beyond the physical setting of the cinema (*RMRB* 1951b, 1952).
- 8 The organization openly and proudly announces its political agenda, which is to oppose the Taiwan independence movement and strive to promote the unification of China. It works to improve cross-strait relations by means of “establish[ing] a wide range of exchanges and cooperation with institutions at home and abroad” (*Zhonghua wenhua* 2013a).
- 9 The similar official definition of the war can be seen in other documentary films made by state studios. For example, the August First Film Studio (*Bayi dianying zhipianchang* 八一电影制片厂) produced a 90-minute documentary film, *The Confrontation* (*Jiaoliang* 较量), in 1995, which sought to rekindle public interest in the Korean War nearly forty years after the war ended. The film wound up in second place at the box office in its debut, was screened more than 1,500 times countrywide, and received two major government awards. Despite the fact that the film was released six years after the Berlin Wall fell and four years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which ended the half-century-long Cold War, *The Confrontation* maintained that “the war was a confrontation of blood and fire and it was a confrontation between just and unjust.”
- 10 Statistics show that cinema attendance in China reached its peak in 1979 with 29.3 billion admissions. It plunged to 10.5 billion by 1992, slightly less than 1 billion by 1999, and

- 0.47 billion in 2013 (Shan 2005, 390). While cinema audiences dropped precipitously from their socialist heyday, television has established itself as the dominant source of news and entertainment for the post-socialist Chinese public. By 2000, there were 1.19 billion television sets, reaching 92 percent of the population (He 2013). In addition, both television stations and channels have developed rapidly.
- 11 According to historian Chen Jian (1996, 94), Mao and other top Communist leaders firmly believed in the existence of an “intermediate zone” in the bipolar Cold War world, which comprised vast areas in Europe, Asia, and Africa and included many capitalist, colonial, and semi-colonial countries. These countries were not yet fully controlled by either the United States or the Soviet Union but were on their way to becoming the target of a looming confrontation between the two superpowers. By confronting the United States and its allies in Korea, Mao demonstrated his ambition of “defending the socialist camp” by “promoting Communist/radical nationalist revolutions in non-Western countries” (Chen 2001, 5).

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