

Historical Visualization: The Role of Chinese Historical Films in Shaping National Identity

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Citation: Wang, J. (2026). Historical visualization: The role of Chinese historical films in shaping national identity. *Herança*, 9(1), 98-108. <https://doi.org/10.52152/heranca.v9i1/1165>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 14 Jul 2025

Accepted: 05 Sep 2025

ABSTRACT

The role of historical film in the overall memory of the people and shaping the nation identity is an important phenomenon, particularly within a culturally diverse society such as China. Although the ideological symbolism in individual movies, and the way these methods have evolved over the years, has been addressed in the current literature, the systematic analysis of how changing cinematic techniques and emotional storytelling have helped a nation form their identity at various times in history is still lacking. This paper will fill this gap by discussing how the Chinese historical cinema changes over time during the Republic period and up to the present day in terms of their narrative techniques, visual symbols and use of new technology. The study explores selected movies in three great periods of embryonic, mainstream socialist and commercially transformed periods via a qualitative, multi-modal analysis framework. It explores how camera effects, focalization, and emotional appeal are used to fulfill the need to have the past and the present collide and be real. The results indicate that the classic national allegories give way to emotional descriptions of the identity of individuals and groups, which is frequently achieved by de-heroization and humanization of the main characters. It is these changes in cinema that allow people to work with the history of the country, not only at the intellectual level, but also at the level of the gut. The research comes to the conclusion that modern Chinese historical cinema is effective to close certain gaps between the past and the present and to translate abstract national ideas into living emotional experience building a strong cultural identity in digital epoch.

Keywords: Cultural Memory; Revolutionary Cinema; Commercialization; Technological Innovation; National Identity.

INTRODUCTION

History and national identity have been an issue of scholarly concern. According to You (2025) in *Imagined Communities*, nations are constructed socially by the use of common symbols, narratives and cultural memory. Zeng et al., (2025) goes on to stress that memory is not passively stored in texts, but rather reformulated in media, especially in visual forms, such as films. Historical films become an essential tool of visualizing the past of China and strengthening the sense of collective identity in the context of China. Nevertheless, although numerous works research the ideological content and artistic methods of single films, few studies research how the visual narration of historical films works as a tool of national identity formation in various eras of cinema.

This paper answers this question: What are the visual, emotional, and narrative processes by which Chinese historical films build and reshape the national identity over time?

One such issue is the following question: What are the movie techniques that allow these movies to connect the memory of past and the cultural values of present-day culture?

The general aim of the study is to analyze the evolution of Chinese historical films beginning with the formative nationalist forms of Chinese history all the way to the current technologically advanced films in order to observe how history is recreating itself to meet the ideological or emotional needs of the changing audiences. The paper also relies on the theories of narrative discourse, focalization, and collective memory and pays close

attention to case studies of some of the most prominent films created in three major periods: the Republican era, the socialist revolutionary period, and the post-2000 commercial transformation phase.

This paper is organized in the following way: Section 1 deals with evolution of the genre of Chinese historical films. The visual and narrative tools of representation of national identity are examined in Section 2. In section 3, the effects of emotional resonance and de-heroization on audience identification are discussed. The end also looks back on the over-arching consequences to cultural memory and national solidarity in the digital era.

THE EVOLUTION AND GENRE DIVERSIFICATION OF CHINESE HISTORICAL FILMS

The course of development of Chinese historical films is a magnificent picture scroll, which has undergone the process of germination and explosive development under the influence of the wave of the times, creating a complete and diversified genre system.

The development course of Chinese historical films resembles a vibrant tapestry, evolving from its early stage to a flourishing and diverse genre shaped by the changing times). **Table 1** below represents the development process of Chinese Historical Films.

Table 1. Development Process of Chinese Historical Film

Development Stage	Time (Year)	Representative Works	Narrative Characteristics	Social Function
Embryonic Period	1920-1949	<i>The Peach Blossom Fan, Mulan Joins the Army</i>	Using historical love tragedies to reflect national crises	Awakening family-country feelings and 凝聚抗战精神 (condensing the spirit of resistance against Japan)
Mainstream Period	1949-2000	<i>The Founding Ceremony, The Long March</i>	Grand narrative focusing on revolutionary history and emphasizing political mobilization	Strengthening the identification with socialist ideology
Commercial Transformation Period	2000-Present	<i>The Battle at Lake Changjin, Wolf Warriors, The Longest Day in Chang'an</i>	Diverse narrative + technical innovation, integrating commerce and historical connotations	Promoting the popularization of historical themes and activating cultural consumption

During the budding period of 1920-1949, the country experienced intense social turmoil and national crisis, and historical movies became an important carrier of national sentiment (Genette, 1980). Most historical films in this period evolved from costume dramas, driven not only by a desire for artistic innovation but also by a deep sense of national pride and the ambition to promote Chinese cinema. The 1927 film *The Peach Blossom Fan* takes place during the turbulent late Ming Dynasty. Its creators followed the tradition of early filmmakers by carefully consulting historical records and classical literature to accurately reflect the period's settings and costumes. This film continued the early filmmakers' commitment to grounding their stories in authoritative historical and literary sources (McLuhan, 2000). Through the delicate portrayal of the love tragedy between Li Xiangjun and Hou Fangwei, the film integrates the national moral integrity of the literati into the narrative. The classic scene of Li Xiangjun's blood staining a fan and turning peach blossoms into flowers is a powerful metaphor from the opera symbolizing that the fate of the nation concerns every individual (Lu, 2022). During wartime, it stirred audiences to reflect deeply on the intertwined destinies of family and country. In 1930s Shanghai, known as the "isolated island" period, historical films increasingly reflected contemporary crises by revisiting stories of ancient heroes. The 1938 film *Sable Cicada* used the "beauty plan" as a metaphor for the anti-invasion theme, and transformed Sable Cicada's intellect and skill into a spiritual symbol for fighting against the power of the enemy. In the same year, "Mulan in the Army" highlighted Hua Mulan's family and national loyalty, especially her decision to join the army in place of her father (Zhou, 2025). The montage featuring silhouettes of galloping horses and beacon towers evoked a strong emotional response, reflecting the people's commitment to the fight against terrorism. The

1940 film *Yue Fei* emphasized loyalty and righteousness, portraying the general's battles against the Jin Dynasty as a call for unity in resisting Japanese aggression (Lu, 2016). Meanwhile, Xi Shi employed the metaphor of "tasting bitterness while lying on firewood" to turn the legend of the beauty who saved the nation into a vivid allegory for perseverance and resistance against foreign invasion. While these films preserved the style of traditional costume dramas, they reinterpreted historical allusions to comment on contemporary issues. These stories were needed to keep the culture of the country and morale high even in hard times especially in areas controlled by the Japanese.

In order to see the development of the Chinese historical films it is imperative to see how the historical films not only present historical events but also influence the ideological system which shapes the national identity (Tu & Yue Chen, 2025). Movies (especially in the times of the Republican and socialist revolutions) were great instruments to advance the common memory and ideological interests of the state. At these times, the great stories of revolution and sacrifice prevailed in the explanations of the national highway to unity and the visual rhetoric of political mobilization and unity. The strong symbols such as close up shots of the revolutionary leaders were used to strengthen the ideological foundation of socialist unity by giving 'the people a feeling of national pride. This speech and visual rhetoric, this plot, was used to solidify the national identity of the people and made such films a foundation of the cultural tool of this state. **Figure 1** below shows *The Peach Blossom Fan* (1963, Xi'an Film Studio).



Figure 1. *The Peach Blossom Fan* (1963, Xi'an Film Studio)

The revolutionary themes in the movies that were produced between 1949 and 2000 which is commonly referred to as the golden age of historical films contributed greatly to the formation of socialist ideologies in the masses memory (Feng & Liu, 2025). The fascination with the revolutionary events and heroes of such films shows the revolutionary events and heroes of the Communist Party obviously and leaves the struggle of the Communist Party in the minds of people and helped to create a common story and values. They proved to be precious means of spreading socialistic thoughts and they cannot be replaced by any other source as they had a major role in creating political identity and reinforcing the foundation of the socialistic system (F. Dong & Dong, 2023). *The Founding Ceremony* (1989) was created as a joint undertaking and a large number of departments were engaged in the production with the Party closely monitoring the film to ensure that it was in line with official leadership and ideological objectives. The technique transformed images of war and revolution into ideologically crafted stories. There was a powerful low-angle view when Chairman Mao stood solemnly in the Tiananmen Rostrum and said: The Chinese people have stood up. This is followed by the camera sweeping across the excited masses on the ground. This is a very strong contrast that makes people remember the revolutionary course of the Party and enhances the sense of unity, which is repeated by the rousing chant: Long live the people."

Chinese film makers have transformed the manner in which historical films are produced since the early 2000s (Qian, 2024). They started narrating stories differently and through superior technology besides reaching a larger audience. One of the most popular genres has been taken over by war films. These productions succeed in maintaining the gravitas of historical material, and in using advanced screen technologies to recreate historical battles in forms that connect with modern audiences. As an example, take *The Legend of the Demon Cat* (2017). The movie is designed in the height of the Tang dynasty and takes another route unlike other war films (Qianyu, 2024). It takes a poetic visual style where beauty is given more emphasis instead of direct conflict. One scene in the film is notably memorable: a lavish feast, during which the camera effects created using motion capture show the golden glow of the jars of wine, and the graceful motions of the sleeves of the dancers. The movie depends on symbolic images to show the power of the Tang empire and great cultural self-confidence and does not resort to straightforward descriptions of war. In sharp contrast to the poetic style of *The Legend of the Demon Cat*, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021) delivers a raw and realistic portrayal of war. The crew spent more than six months building a life-size battlefield, often filming in temperatures that dropped to minus 30 degrees Celsius. They used detailed digital modeling to recreate the terrain with impressive accuracy. One long tracking shot shows soldiers running through heavy snow, with each flake animated through finely tuned particle effects. The film's 4K resolution brings the cold to life, as you can almost feel it. The film shows a freeze-frame of the so-called "Ice Sculpture Company." Their eyelashes and blood droplets freeze in mid-air, and burning tanks appear in the background. This layered image clearly shows how harsh their conditions were and the price they paid. *Operation Red Sea* came out in 2018. Dante Lam directed the film and shot many scenes at sea using ARRI Alexa Mini LF cameras. Drones filmed dramatic chases over Somali waters. Slow-motion scenes show precise missile strikes and coordinated team moves. The clear 4K images show water splashes and flying bullets in detail, making viewers feel like they are part of the modern naval battle. *The Eight Hundred* (2020) had a large budget of 200 million yuan. The crew carefully built a full-size replica of the Sihang Warehouse for filming. They used IMAX cameras to capture clear scenes of bricks and rubble flying through the air. In the famous "flag defense" scene, CGI Japanese planes were combined with real footage of a waving Chinese flag. The film shows the torn flag changing into the glowing city skyline of the International Settlement. This effect mixes grainy 16mm film style with cool digital colors, turning the 1937 war experience into a powerful and emotional image. These examples show that technology shapes how history is portrayed on screen. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* used motion capture to recreate soldiers' exact postures from the 1950s. *Operation Red Sea* ensured military accuracy by matching equipment and training actors in real hand signals (Lenoir & Caldwell, 2016). These films use cutting-edge technology not as a gimmick, but as a tool to express deeper themes of national identity and memory. Instead of watering down their historical message, the commercial side of these films has sometimes made them more powerful and widely appreciated. In today's Chinese historical cinema, emotional storytelling, technological finesse, and reflections on national identity converge, offering a distinct and compelling narrative form. [Figure 2](#) below represents *Legend of the Demon Cat*.



Figure 2. *Legend of the Demon Cat*

THE CORE MECHANISM OF HISTORICAL FILMS IN SHAPING NATIONAL IDENTITY

Visual Symbolic Reconstruction and Narrative Expression

Historian F. W. Racker believes films are better at representing history than written words. He says films can simulate real life by combining images and sounds, using quick cuts to bring events alive. Through empathy, films help viewers feel the experiences and emotions of historical figures, in a way that truly brings the past to life (Smith, 2022). When filmmakers use camera techniques in telling historical stories, they break the usual limits of time and space to rearrange and retell events. This helps turn facts into stories that audiences can actually see and feel. This way, films go beyond simple timelines and turn big historical processes into clear, rhythmic visuals. Historical films also use emotion to connect events to the audience's feelings. By dramatizing stories and adding emotional depth, they keep history accurate while moving viewers. This mix of time and space helps people understand history on a deeper level and feel connected to it. In the film 1921, the director uses a calendar montage to break the year down into seasonal symbols. The camera pans over month boards on Shikumen walls. The peach blossom pattern for March reflects on rain-soaked wooden window panes. Chen Duxiu's silhouette appears in slow motion as raindrops fall along brick cracks (Li, 2021). The words "Founding of the Party" stamped on July's month board match the sound of cicadas in the alley. Sunlight streams through bamboo curtains, casting light spots on the floor near Mao as he sorts documents. This storytelling breaks away from traditional, straightforward timelines. When the camera shifts from the wet green stone road in March to the sunlit deck in July, a pomegranate tree in the Shikumen courtyard blooms fully. This naturally links key moments leading up to the Communist Party's First National Congress. During the "South Lake Meeting," the director overlaps the lake's reflection with a faded month board. As the camera films a boat cutting through the water, the reflection shows not just the 1921 sky and clouds, but also today's Shanghai skyline. This folding of time and space visually connects the boat meeting from a century ago with Pudong's skyscrapers now. The film creates emotional impact through small details. In the "First Congress" scene, the director highlights the ticking of an old clock. Each pendulum swing matches a close-up of a month board page turning. When the camera moves over 58 buttons on a table—representing party members—the outside cicadas suddenly stop. Only the soft clinking of buttons and voices inside remain. This design turns abstract history into vivid symbols. The audience almost holds their breath, following the rhythm until the last button falls. At that moment, a piece of the "Internationale" plays outside the frame. This deepens the emotional connection by syncing with viewers' breathing. Throughout the film, light and shadow in the Shikumen alley shift—from the gloomy rain of March to the lively cicadas in July (Lin, 2018). This change in rhythm matches the flow of history and helps viewers see China's journey from dormancy to awakening in 1921 through the seasons.

Narrative theorist Genette introduced the idea of "focalization" in Narrative Discourse. He distinguishes between "who sees" (the focalizer) and "who tells" (the narrator), which helps us understand different narrative perspectives (Genette, 1980). Genette divides focalization into zero-focus, internal focus, and external focus; internal focus further breaks down into fixed, variable, and multiple types. In Nanjing! Nanjing!, the director moves beyond a simple, traditional viewpoint by switching perspectives back and forth. This breaks away from a straightforward, black-and-white ideological view and invites the audience to engage with history in a more complex and conflicting way. Rather than just changing viewpoints, this technique guides viewers through Kadokawa's personal world using thoughtful camera work, revealing the tangled human emotions amid the chaos of war. One especially powerful moment is Kadokawa's suicide scene. The falling lily petals sharply contrast with the burning city behind him, vividly showing his inner struggle. As a soldier on the invading side, the lily he holds stands for a lingering hope of redemption, while the raging fire behind him reminds us of war's harsh cruelty. The camera stays on Kadokawa's trembling fingers as he releases the lily, letting petals drift into the flames. This quiet moment captures how war strips away human warmth and connection. The film uses Kadokawa's perspective to show not just the events of history, but also the deep personal and spiritual pain that war trauma brings. The film invites the audience to experience the fragile humanity that still exists in a harsh reality, instead of just showing violence. This perspective encourages a more thoughtful reflection on what war truly means.

Historical films about trauma face a tricky task. They need to be truthful without turning suffering into just a spectacle. At the same time, ignoring harsh facts can weaken the important message trauma carries. Filmmakers should show historical wounds honestly while giving them a deeper meaning beyond just individual pain (Nichols, 2016). To do this well, they must balance accuracy with careful storytelling. In The Flowers of War, the broken stained glass in the church stands for both destruction and hope. During the Japanese attack, shrapnel breaks the image of the Madonna on the glass. In a key scene, Yumo and other women protect the schoolchildren by using their own bodies as shields. The shattered glass and blood create a stark pattern on the ground, making the massacre's horror unmistakably clear. Later, survivors repair the stained glass, transforming personal trauma into a powerful symbol of collective resilience. The film also focuses on small, intimate details—like close-ups of

Yumo's eyes before she dresses and faces death, and the careful way she arranges her cheongsam. These moments prevent the female characters from becoming mere symbols of suffering. Instead, they highlight their dignity and active resistance, adding ethical depth to their portrayal.

The de-heroization of national figures is becoming a very interesting phenomenon in Chinese historical films in the post-2000 period (Xu, 2025). The said ideological change is not merely an aesthetic decision but also it is a strategic decision to make the common people appear as the foundation of the power of the nation (Wang, 2024). Movies such as the battle at lake changjin and operation red sea apply the best technology to make the soldiers real people and not superheroes. By making them weak and insecure, these films have given a more relatable image of heroism. This methodology is used to advertise a national identity based on the solidarity of the common people as opposed to the mythicizing of individual heroes. It demonstrates the contemporary ideological paradigm, which is less focused on the power of the people and their solidarity, and less about the traditional heroism of the state leaders or other mythical characters. It is this reorganizing of the story that has enabled the Chinese films to remain up to date with the changing socio political landscape.

According to them, they need to consider the empirical evidence, the audience survey, the box office receipts, and the review in the social media to give more objective news about how popular the Chinese historical movies are in the emotional sense. Depending on the viewer, their responses may differ sharply, based on factors such as age, political affiliation and their level of understanding of past events. A good example would be the box office smash hit of Wolf Warrior 2 which suggests that the emotional attachment to the patriotic story is everywhere, especially with nationalistic audiences. These films can be evaluated about how the audience feels by including information on the demographics and the mood of the audience.

Although it cannot be denied that some of the films of the so-called patriotic film industry such as Wolf Warrior 2 have an enormous emotional weight, there is a substantial amount of criticism, which claims that these films propagate hyper-nationalism. Critics claim that the exaltation of military power and patriotism among other things can lead to the creation of a violent national identity through such films. This point is especially true in regard to post-2000 commercial revolutions within Chinese cinema, where nationalist themes frequently become mixed with market-oriented plots. These valuable insights would provide a less partisan view of the ideological implications of historical films and acknowledge the problematic nature of historical films.

Not all generations have the same level of emotional reaction to historical films. The younger audience is more impacted by visual effects and narrative style because they may not have any direct connection with the historical events described. Conversely, the older generations and especially older people who had experienced the events described, or have relatives and friends involved, might overreact to the films. Such a generational gap shows how national identity is changing and that younger audiences can be drawn to the modern interpretation of the past, whereas older generations are more attracted to the traditional, ideologically favorable version of the past.

The Image Transmission Mechanism of National Values

Comolli and Narpone, in *Film, Consciousness, Ideology, Criticism*, argue that ideology is involved in filmmaking right from the very first shot (Comolli, 2015). This includes everything from theme and style to form, meaning, and narrative tradition—all reflecting how ideology is communicated. They view film as a system that expresses, transmits, and shapes ideology, making it a powerful tool for ideological purposes. Similarly, Daniel Dayan notes that a film is made up of a series of carefully produced, selected, and edited shots that together convey a particular ideological perspective. In historical films, collectivism often comes through in the way scenes are arranged and how characters behave. This turns abstract ideas about group consciousness into vivid, visual language. By showing collective behavior on screen and using film's unique power to manipulate time and space, these films make the spirit of collectivism more tangible and impactful. Through these images, historical films lift meaning from the personal and familial level up to national identity. They help audiences see how individual fate is closely tied to the fate of the nation, highlighting their inseparability.

My People, My Homeland weaves its narrative through five segments that blend personal stories with the larger theme of hometown growth. By connecting individual lives to community changes, the film creates a heartfelt portrayal of ordinary people's ties to their roots. In each segment, the protagonist's personal choices and emotions closely connect with changes in their hometown. In Hello Beijing, the director uses a skillful lens technique to alternate between the excitement of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the reconstruction after the Wenchuan earthquake. The grandeur of the Bird's Nest Stadium contrasts with the resilience shown amid the ruins. This visual contrast ties major national events to personal experiences. A key scene shows Zhang Beijing tearing up his Olympic ticket to give it to a boy from Wenchuan. The slow-motion shot emphasizes this moment, where the tearing sound syncs with the earthquake alarm. This creates strong empathy, highlighting Zhang's decision to give up his own desire for the greater good. This choice of "giving up the small family for the big family"

is powerfully conveyed through the camera. Fei Xiaotong described the Chinese concept of family and country as ripples in water: family is the innermost circle, and the country is the larger, outer one (Barbalet, 2021). The director cleverly merges these circles through the ticket-tearing shot. By watching films like this, audiences deepen their cultural identity of “family and country as one.” From a small personal sacrifice to national concern in crisis, this cultural value is subtly embedded in everyday choices.

Through the narrative strategy of “de-heroization”, the portrayal of heroes in new-age war movies is undergoing an aesthetic transformation from traditional divinity to modern humanity, and the transcendent divinity endowed on traditional heroes is gradually giving way to the light of human nature that can be touched, and the heroes that were once looked up to are no longer suspended in the clouds, and their fears, struggles, and the feelings and desires of ordinary people are captured by the camera. The camera captures their fears, struggles and ordinary human emotions and projects them in details as real and tangible life existence. Such a narrative discredits the sacramental framework of classical heroes and portrays heroes as individuals, braiding personal and national history to form a very strong sense of national identity. The action of this account denies the elevated and noble model of heroism and is focused on the psychological revolution and value awakening of ordinary people in the war. At the same time, the civilian heroes in the streets and alleys of the city are being spiritually crowned through the screen, and the toughness, kindness and responsibility they show in their daily practice are sublimated into a new “spiritual height of the times” by focusing on and refining them in the image. Through the focus and refinement of images, they are sublimated into new “heroes” that express the height of the spirit of the times. The portrayal of heroes in *Operation Red Sea* is a typical sample of the transformation of historical movies from “divine heroes” to “human heroes” (Chen et al., 2024). The movie does not use the traditional hero narrative in the “lone hero to save the day” narrative method, the characters of the Dragon Commando team through the battlefield battlefield cruelty and human details to shape. In “*Operation Red Sea*”, when Xu Hong, a blaster, was overturned by an air wave during the desert pursuit, the director gave him a close-up shot of the sand penetration of his tactical undershirt and the blood stains on the corner of his mouth. These details deconstruct the hero’s “aura of divinity”, and instead re-shape a real, “human” hero with detailed depictions of physical trauma and physiological reactions. In the core scene of “Ivia rescuing the hostages”, the director, through the cross-cutting of multiple narratives, disassembles the hero’s behavior into the technical operation of teamwork. The camera captures the details of captain Yang Rui’s tactical sign language command formation, and also records the close-up of correspondent Zhuang Yu’s concentration on repairing the communication equipment; it also presents the trembling movement of machine gunner Zhang Tiande when Tong Li injects adrenaline after he is shot, and follows Gu Shun’s trajectory trajectory as he suppresses the enemy from the high ground. This de-divinized narrative approach converts the transcendent action of the classical hero into the business of the contemporary soldier. When Zhang Tiande murmurs “Eat Candy” before he dies, the camera slowly pulls up from his blood-stained candy package, forming a cruel contrast with the gunfire of the battleships in the distance, which puts his personal desire to “Eat Candy” together with his national mission to “Fight! This way of putting personal desire “to eat candy” and national mission “to fight” together, through the subjective perspective of the soldiers, heroism is deconstructed as “perseverance in fear” rather than “innate fearlessness”. They are not mythical gods of war, but ordinary people who use their professional skills and flesh and blood to carry out their missions, and this kind of portrayal gives heroism a perceptible and empathetic foundation in the contemporary context.

Through the narrative strategy of “de-heroization,” modern war films are shifting their portrayal of heroes from lofty, godlike figures to more human, relatable characters. Instead of idealized icons, these heroes show fears, struggles, and everyday emotions in vivid detail, making them feel like real people rather than untouchable legends. These films build a strong national identity by linking personal stories with the nation’s history (Huang & Lams, 2025). They move away from traditional heroic figures and instead show how ordinary people change mentally and morally during war. Additionally, the films recognize everyday heroes—people found in cities and alleys. These characters show toughness, kindness, and responsibility, forming a new ideal that connects with modern viewers. *Operation Red Sea* shows this change clearly. The film avoids the usual lone hero cliché. It presents the Dragon Commando team facing war’s horrors and personal moments. For example, when an air blast hits Xu Hong, the demolition expert, the camera focuses on sand cutting his shirt and blood on his mouth. These details make him look real and vulnerable. During the hostage rescue, the film cuts between team members working together. Captain Yang Rui gives hand signals, Zhuang Yu fixes equipment, Zhang Tiande trembles after being shot, and Gu Shun suppresses the enemy. The scene emphasizes teamwork instead of individual heroics. Before Zhang Tiande dies, he whispers “Eat Candy.” The camera pulls back from his bloodied candy wrapper while gunfire sounds in the distance. This moment connects his simple human side with his strong sense of duty. The soldiers show that heroism means facing fear, continuing to act and never giving up on fulfilling one’s duty. They are not mythical heroes but real people who rely on their skills and humanity to complete their mission.

In “*The Eight Hundred*”, the film mainly emphasizes the fears and challenges of the 800 soldiers instead of

making them seem invincible. The camera often focuses on Chen Shusheng's shaking fingers before he jumps with a grenade. It also presents Duanwu's eyes changing from fear to determination. As Duanwu curls up in the warehouse corner, the camera captures the tear streaks on his face through a broken window, sharply contrasting with the neon glow of the distant concession area. This breaks the usual image of fearless heroes and shows the inner conflicts of ordinary people facing duty. The Battle at Lake Changjin takes a different approach by showing the real fears and vulnerabilities of soldiers (Hu & Hua, 2024). For example, Wu Wanli is so scared that he actually wets his pants before going into battle—quite unlike the usual image of fearless, heroic fighters. Another moving scene focuses on veteran Lei Gong, who keeps running even after being shot. The camera stays on his strained face and trembling lips, while the faint sound of his heartbeat slowly fades away, making his sacrifice feel deeply human. This way of portraying heroes, often called "de-heroization," goes against the usual idea of national heroes as perfect and fearless. Rather, the movie presents them as their regular lives with extraordinary problems. The same thought continues in King Kong Chuan, where Commander Zhang Fei sets up a flare to help identify upcoming enemy aircraft. The camera is on his back, lit up in the light of the flare as a folk song in his native tongue plays in the background. The scene links personal sacrifice with the collective memory of the entire country, and with the idea that a country is truly defined by its spirit, not by its legendary figures, but by the courage of everyday people.

Most recent historical movies adopt an alternate style of heroism. They do not focus on reiterating classic ideals but rather encourage viewers to consider more carefully the relationship between personal courage and group force. Such narratives revolve less around the glorification of victory and more around the sufferings that people have undergone in war. Both the courage and vulnerability of the characters make these movies unique to the older representations of heroes as idealized heroes. They still admire heroism but depict it rather realistically and more complexly. The movies stress that fear and doubt usually accompany courage).

The Generation Logic of Emotional Resonance and Identity

The past is linked to the present by historical films that help viewers to connect with the story presented emotionally. Mirror theory can be used to explain why the audience identifies themselves with the characters and stories they see on TV (Cohen, 2018). This awareness transcends what we perceive and extends to our feelings and develops a conversation between the past and the present. Thus, historical movies are a reflection of the society at large. By watching these stories, people get a better idea of who they are, and of their origins. The process brings together a feeling of belonging based on shared historical memory. For example, in *The Age of Awakening*, the sequence "Chen Yannian and His Brother Facing Death" uses slow-motion shots interspersed with contemporary youth commentary (danmu). The shackled brothers walking toward execution gradually overlap, while the danmu phrase "A Century-Across Gaze" appears alongside a close-up of their backward glance. This collision of time and space enables young viewers, both inside and outside the screen, to resonate spiritually through an "idealism" mirror effect. Furthermore, the director slows the frame rate and extends the sound of footsteps to three seconds, aligning the audience's breathing with the visual rhythm and deepening identification on a physiological level. This technique echoes Lacan's "mirror stage," allowing Generation Z to affirm their own values through the choices of historical figures.

Wolf Warrior 2 opens with a striking low-angle shot of Leng Feng holding the national flag while rescuing an overseas Chinese girl in a war zone in Africa (Kong, 2023). Against a backdrop of explosions and flying bullets, his figure takes on a commanding, heroic stature. This image elevates the hero's actions, inviting the audience to appreciate their deeper significance. The director reinforces national symbolism through three key visual elements. First, Leng Feng ties the vibrant red national flag to his arm as he crosses the battlefield, making it stand out sharply against the gray, war-torn surroundings. Second, the camera zooms in on the national flag at the bow of a Chinese warship launching a missile, with silhouetted crew members saluting nearby. Third, during the end credits, a close-up of a passport appears alongside the words: "When you are in danger overseas, don't give up! Remember, behind you stands a strong motherland," highlighting the light and shadows on the passport chip. These visuals deepen the audience's sense of collective national identity by turning the abstract idea of "country" into a tangible and relatable symbol. In the scene depicting the attack on a Chinese factory in Africa, the director uses scattered Chinese work badges, safety helmets, and distant smoke to create symbolic imagery that quietly conveys the trauma experienced. When the Chinese warship arrives at the evacuation point, the camera cuts between close-ups of frightened African children's eyes, missile tail flames, and the fluttering national flag. This contrast between danger and rescue reinforces the message that "the state protects its citizens." On the audiovisual level, moments of national power are marked by a shift in the soundtrack—from African drum beats to variations of the March of the Volunteers. Meanwhile, the frame rate increases, smoothing the image to enhance the viewer's sensory experience and underscore the psychological message of a "strong nation." The blending of patriotism with action storytelling and cinematic techniques is far more effective than overt preaching.

The passport message in the film's final moments captures this collective spirit, helping deepen the audience's emotional connection to national identity through powerful visual storytelling.

CONCLUSION

Chinese historical films are an effective method of forming the national identity, which is a link between the past and the present. These films have formed a stronger link between the past and the present by using new techniques of narration, emotional appeal, and the utilization of state-of-the-art technology. They not only describe the battles of individual people but the mentality of a nation in general, creating a cultural identity. Visual symbolism, de-heroization, and emotional appeal give the audience the opportunity to immerse themselves in the past and experience history at the intellectual, as well as emotional, level of analysis, bringing the past into the present. These movies are a response to the transforming political and social reality, to conform to the new audience, but still be tied to the old ideologies. They connect individual accounts to a larger national account, and this accounts to the enriched interpretation of the past and its role in shaping the modern self-identity. It is done in such a way that the past is learnt and lived and that instills in them a sense of belonging and something that they remember as a part of them. After all, Chinese historical film is not only entertainment, but it is also the key to nation-building and cultural preservation.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this research. The most significant of these are the following: There is no empirical evidence on the audience, surveys, or box office collections, which could illuminate how various groups of Americans emotionally identify with these films. Besides, a previous emphasis on the state-related filming might also be a restraining factor within the study region since it overlooks the role of independent films or other plots.

Future Directions

To learn how national identity is revealed in various traditions of cinema, further research is needed, with the aim at comparing historical films created in other countries and regimes. It would also be useful to undertake cross-media analysis particularly a study of how digital platforms are used to disseminate historical stories. Also, reception studies will be used (and this is the research about the effect of various categories of viewers, whether young or old, and whether left- or left-wing, on their feelings and thought).

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ETHICAL DECLARATION

Conflict of interest: No declaration required. **Financing:** No reporting required. **Peer review:** Double anonymous peer review.