

# INVENTING THE VICTORY: THE COMPARISON BETWEEN THE GREEK TRAGEDY *PERSIANS* AND THE CHINESE FILM *THE BATTLE AT LAKE CHANGJIN*

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## ABSTRACT

*The Greek tragedy Persians and the Chinese film the Battle at Lake Changjin both narrate the momentous victory against the adversaries. This paper contends that, within the two works, the victory, instead of being historically recorded, is intentionally invented: on the one hand, both creators magnify the victory not only in a military sense but in an ideological sense; on the other hand, the playwright and the director subtly bring the feeling of pity and fear to the audience to stimulate them to seriously reflect upon the war. Such a comparison, for one thing, will remind us to not to oversimplify any work—we should grasp the complicated artistic ambivalence, instead of being restricted to any fixed educational sense; for another, it is intended to improve the mutual understanding in the contemporary world, particularly at a time when enmity between China and the western countries is escalating.*

## KEYWORDS

*Greek Tragedy, Chinese Film, Comparison, War*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Greek tragedy Aeschylus' *Persians* created in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and the Chinese film *the Battle at Lake Changjin* (abbreviated as *Lake Changjin*) premiered in 2021 both narrate the momentous victory against the adversaries—the former is adapted from the battle of Salamis between the Persians and Athenians in 480 BC while the latter reflects the military conflicts between China and USA in Korean War of 1950s. Under the initial impression, the two works are naturally deemed to celebrate the historic events for political propaganda purposes, and that could be part of the reasons why they are both well-accepted within their own political camps—Aeschylus' *Persians* won the first prize in the public contest in tragedy at the City Dionysia, and the film *Lake Changjin*, within less than 40 days since its release, has become the second highest grossing movie in Chinese film history.

Nevertheless, this essay contends that within the two works, the theme of victory connotes much more than the propaganda. The victory, instead of being historically recorded, is intentionally invented. The term “inventing”, borrowed from Edith Hall's article “Inventing the Barbarian”, connote both “creativity” and “intentionality” within this essay: the former aspect highlights that both creators depict or imagine some scenes which nobody knows whether it really happens or not, while the latter complements that there are in fact some profound purposes hidden behind this kind of invention. Overall, this essay concludes the notion “victory” in both Aeschylus' *Persians* and the Chinese film *Lake Changjin* into two aspects: on the one hand, by depicting some dramatic details to highlight the polarization between their own city/nation and its antagonist, both creators magnify the victory not only in a military sense but in an ideological sense; on the other hand, however, the playwright and the director also secretly bring the feeling of pity and fear to the audience along with the victory. In other words, by vividly presenting the two sides of the victory, the creators aim to exhilarate the audience with

some positive depiction of the ideological spirits within their respective political camps while, simultaneously, to tranquilize them and stimulate them to reflect upon the cruelty of war.

Such a comparison will remind us not to oversimplify any work—we should grasp the complicated artistic ambivalence, instead of being restricted to any fixed educational sense. Moreover, it is also intended to improve the mutual understanding in the contemporary world, particularly at a time when enmity between China and the western countries is escalating—Aeschylus' reflection upon the conflicts between Persians and Athenians might inspire us how to view the relations between China and the USA in a more sensible way.

## 2.COMPARABILITY BETWEEN PERSIANS AND LAKE CHANGJIN

Before the discussion of how the victory is invented, it is necessary to analyse why it is reasonable to compare the ancient Greek tragedy in 480 BC with a modern Chinese film released in 2021. The most significant factor is the similarity of the social backgrounds of the two works—for one thing, “backgrounds” here refer to the time of the battles narrated within the drama or film, and this would be called the internal background in this essay; for another, they also refer to the time when the works were created, and this is called the external background.

In terms of Aeschylus' *Persians*, its internal background is the real Battle of Salamis happened in 480 BC. This is the time when the Athenians, though winning at the Battle of Marathon ten years ago, were still confronted with the concessive threat from the Oriental Persians—actually, the power of Persia had penetrated many parts of Europe, including Thrace, near the Greek world. Similarly, the internal background for *Lake Changjin* is the Korean War in 1950s. At that time, China, shortly after defeating the Japanese invaders in World War II, was again trapped into a new form of war, namely the cold war between the communist and capitalist camp. Although the American troops did not directly attack China but North Korea, China still possessed a strong sense of crisis since North Korean, also a member within its communist camp, is so close to its mainland.

Such kind of internal backgrounds are intentionally chosen, since they separately insinuate the external backgrounds which is contemporary with the age of the two creators. For *Persians*, on the one hand, its creation time, namely the year of 472 BC, is still far from the end of Greco-Persian Wars, as is contended by Harry C. Avery that “Persians had not been absolutely destroyed. The empire was still a threat to Greece and the ringing of bells and shouts of joy that marked the final peace were still some twenty years in the future” [1]; on the other hand, however, after the Battle of Salamis which can be deemed a turning point, Athenians were gradually gaining an advantage over their adversaries. The same is true of *Lake Chanjin* as well. As is reported by BBC, “it is no coincidence that the film's popularity comes amid rising tensions between Washington and Beijing.” [2]. Nowadays, China, completely, is no more than the backward nation of 70 years ago—like Athens after 480 BC, both its military force and economic strength have always been soaring. Nevertheless, this causes more attention and hostility from the USA.

As is inferred above, the external backgrounds of the two works are characterized as a patchwork of both the pride and fear—pride is due to the increasing power of Athens or China while fear arises from the outside menace that still exists. Under the circumstances, the two creators deliberately adapted the similar historical situation in the past, namely the internal backgrounds, into their works. Conspicuously, it is intended to strengthen the citizens' confidence and alleviate the feeling of fear, since they can defeat their enemies even in a much worse situation than that of today. Nevertheless, immersed into previous memory of being threatened, the audience would also be reminded of the current danger, thus augmenting the fear again. It is such similarity that validates the comparability between *Persians* and *Lake Changjin*. Furthermore, it also determines the two sides of the victory within both works.

### 3. INVENTING THE IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION

As is well justified in Simon Goldhill’s claim that “the *Persians* is an examination of the opposition between tyranny and democracy in the light of the civic developments in the polis” [3], Aeschylus is intended to show that the essential reason for Athens’ victory is not the military power at sea but the advantages of its democratic system. Therefore, creating *Persians* is to celebrate not only the victory of the Battle of Salamis itself but the victory of Athenian ideology—it is an effective way to enhance the feeling of pride, since it establishes a self-centred standard to distinguish themselves from other barbarians who do not follow their steps. Likewise, “the notion of the barbarian in his developed form as ‘the other’, the generically hostile outsider just beyond the gates, appears at a similar stage in the history of other ancient cultures” [4], and in the ancient Chinese culture, there is indeed a similar way to build a strong sense of self-identity. It greatly influences the theme of the modern film *Lake Changjin*, a quintessence of works that highlight the ideological superiority over the counterpart.

As for Aeschylus’ *Persians*, details that insinuate the differences between democracy and despotism, especially some specific linguistic phenomena, have been pointed out by many scholars. For instance, Ippokratis Kantzios deems the queen’s use of the word “ποιμάνωρ (literally “shepherd”) of the army” to be the evidence for the imperialistic institutional structure in the Persian society [5]; by contrast, when it comes to Athenians, they are described as “neither slaves (δοῦλοι) nor subjects (ὑπήκοοι) to any master” [5].

Moreover, Harry C. Avery notices the abnormally high frequency of using the word πᾶς (whole) to depict Persians, which “is confirmed by a count in Italic’s Index to Aeschylus” [1]:

Table 1

	<i>πᾶς</i> equal to <i>totus</i>	<i>πᾶς</i> equal to <i>omnis</i>	<i>πᾶς</i> as substan- tive	<i>πᾶς</i> totals	<i>ἅπας</i> as adjec- tive	<i>ἅπας</i> as substan- tive
<i>Persians</i>	33	13	19	65	2	2
The other six plays	27	46	74	147	12	6
Fragments	12	8	8	28	4	–

Especially within Xerxes’ order to his commanders that “πᾶς” would be decapitated if they let any Greek soldier get the chance to escape, the word, connoting the universality of the possible penalties, emphasizes the strict hierarchies set by the despotic Xerxes and that “accomplishments can be achieved only through fear of punishment” [5]. However, as an antithesis, for the Athenian troop ruled by a democratic system, “there are no threats of decapitation or the dread orders of a master here, but simply the sound of a trumpet that fires the entire (“πᾶς”) army with courage and confidence as they rush against the enemy” [5].

Apart from the word choice, some visible actions and vivid narrations should not be ignored as well—in fact, if we consider it from the perspective of the audience, we will realize that it is relatively difficult to notice the subtle wording, rather, the actual performance on the stage is much more straightforward. The Athenian audience would be impressed by the frequent prostration of the chorus within the tragedy, whenever they meet the Persian queen or Darius’ apparition, since in Athens they might only do it to the divinity. Also, the queen’s description of her nightmare would be unforgettable to them that the Persian woman “kept her jaw submissively in harness” while the Greek one “began to struggle. . . (and) smashed the yoke in half” [6].

In terms of *Lake Changjin*, for China and USA, their most significant ideological conflicts lie in the incompatibility between the communist collectivism and the capitalist individualism. Like Aeschylus, the Chinese director creates a lot of details, everywhere in the film, to praise for the superiority of the Chinese collectivism within the binary opposition.

The most conspicuous one is the close-up of the Chinese and American troops. Throughout the film, it is noteworthy that the advanced military machines of the USA, like tanks, warships and warplanes, frequently appear on the screen. However, when the camera is aimed at the Chinese army, what we see is large groups of real soldiers fighting with the machines, all wearing the same military uniform and merely holding the simple weapons. One of the most controversial shot within the film is that a few Chinese soldiers are attempting to shoot the flying American warplanes from the ground. Many viewers are sceptical of whether bullets can really reach the flying height of warplanes. But this is the real experiences of many Chinese soldiers in Korean war. At that time, China did not establish a mature military industry yet, so the soldiers had no advanced weapons. However, they are not intended to really shoot down the planes, but to disturb their flying path, thus obstructing them to drop the bomb to the ground accurately.

This direct confrontation, between the soldiers made of flesh and the military machines made of iron, is a quintessential representation of the miracle of the spirit of collectivism in China—if people unite as one, even their enemies have much more powerful equipment, they can still gain the eventual victory. It echoes with the lyrics in the national anthem of China that “with our very flesh and blood, let us build our new Great Wall”.

Nevertheless, are the opposing notions mentioned above, namely Athens’ democracy versus Persia’s despotism as well as Chinese communism versus American capitalism, really incompatible with each other? In fact, the pure antagonism is far from adequate to comprehensively describe the real relations of them, and both creators seem to be too naïve in terms of this complicated political issue. But it is reasonable to deduce that the naiveness is intentional—only in this way, namely by inventing a simple binary polarization, the playwright or the director can successfully leave an impression of ideological victory to the audience.

#### 4. INVENTING PITY AND FEAR

Although the ideological victory is emphasized within both works, it is not reasonable to merely deem them the political propaganda. In fact, both creators also invent some elements arousing the feeling of pity and fear along with the joy of victory. It tranquilizes the audience who has already been cheered up by the positive depiction of their ideology, since they are reminded of the cruelty of the war and the dangerous situation that still troubles them.

In terms of the feeling of pity, both Aeschylus’ *Persians* and the Chinese film *Lake Changjin* reflects that under the circumstances of the cruel war, all the people, whether they belong to the victorious country or the defeated one, would suffer the same sufferings, and they are morally related.

In *Persians*, the chorus frequently mourn for the Persian soldiers’ family. For instances, the wives left behind are described as howling for their young husbands— “the beds are filled with tears because the men are missed and longed for.” [6]; as for the parents, they “count the day and tremble as the time stretches out” [6]. It is noteworthy that such description is even before the messenger’s announcing the bad news. Therefore, they cry, worry and fear not for the death of their sons or husbands (since they haven’t been informed yet) but for the loneliness waiting itself, which indicates that, whether the conquering is successful or not, it has caused mental torments to the people. Those Athenian audience would no doubt emphasize with the narration, since most of them also experience the war—like the Persians, apart from being soldiers, they are also husbands, fathers, brothers and sons; their ideology is different, but the love and homesick is utterly the same.

Similarly, in *Lake Changjin*, when an American soldier is dying, a lovely music box drops down from his pocket, and the broken sound of the Christmas song “Jingle Bells” spreads over the battlefield filled with corpses. Nobody knows who gives it to him and what it means to him, but what we do know is that the battle happens around December—he should have stayed with his beloved ones if it were not for the war. This detail indicates that what the director aims to do is not to intensify the hostility between China and USA, rather, he wants the audience to realize that the so-called “enemies” are also the ordinary people, just like us, who desire for peace and love. After all, nobody wants “Jingle Bells”, the song for happiness and warmth, to be an elegy.

When it comes to the feeling of fear, both works insinuate that the victorious battle does not really tackle the conflicts with their adversaries—neither Persia nor the USA has been annihilated, and the menace still exists. For example, as is pointed out by Avery, after the line 1038, Xerxes, who previously has always been blaming himself as the bane of Persians, no more feels ashamed. Instead, he regains the imperialistic control, and the chorus “no longer attacks him, but meekly follows his commands” [1]. If we can really watch the drama of *Persians*, it is highly likely that, at this time, Xerxes might have changed his shabby garments into a new one brought by the queen, since she says, before meeting her son, that “the misfortune that stings me most of all is to hear of the dishonourable state of the garments that clothe my son’s body. . . I will take proper attire from the palace” [6]. This plot can be deemed a reflection of the restoration of the power of Xerxes. His defeat in Salamis does not affect his dominance in Persia at all, and he would come back for vengeance at any time. As for the related details in *Lake Changjin*, we can see that the director does not tell anything about the result of the whole Korean war. Indeed, the victory is only for a battle at lake Changjin, not for the whole war. In fact, historically, both sides dared not to claim to gain the complete victory, since the American troops only signed in the armistice agreement, which means that the war might break out again. Nowadays the China-USA relationship is in crisis again, under the circumstances, the sensitive audience is less likely to ignore the directors’ intentional blurring the end of the war.

Furthermore, the feeling of fear might arise not only from the threat from the enemy but from the boundaries that human beings are not allowed to step over. Aeschylus attributes the Persians’ defeat to their hubris—they are so arrogant that Zeus, as a chastiser of pride, is angry. Coincidentally, the director of *Lake Changjin* also shows that the American troops are defeated on account of their illusion that they can defeat anyone in the world easily—it can be reflected from the American leader’s boast that it would be a fast war. Although one is theistic while the other is atheistic, they both warn the audience of the danger of being over-confident, especially for those Athenians and Chinese who were/are experiencing the soaring of the national strength.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the victory, with both Aeschylus’ *Persians* and the Chinese film *the Battle at Lake Changjin*, is invented by the creators to have two sides: one side is to show the ideological superiority over the adversaries while the other is to arouse the feeling of pity and fear and to stimulate the audience to seriously reflect upon the war. The comparison of the two works, for one thing, can inspire the following playwrights or directors of how to adapt historical events, in order to cater for some specific purpose, into a creative work; for another, which is more important, we are warned that we should be very careful when we deal with the notions, like victory, appearing in literature works, and it is not reasonable to restrict our interpretation of it merely to the propaganda purposes. Otherwise, it will aggravate the conflicts between different parts of the world, which is completely against the meaning of literature—to help create mutual understanding and sincere empathy. This echoes with Attilio Favorini’s comments on *Persians*, which is also suitable for *Lake Changjin*, that “much critical work is marred by an inclination to

elide its cultivated ambivalence. . . it is not a work which we can, or should, identify too readily.” [7].

In fact, apart from *Persians* and *Lake Changjin*, there are many other books, dramas and films touching upon the theme of war throughout the history. This essay only reveals two sides of the military victory, but it can have other connotations and provoke more meaningful thoughts if we include other related works for discussion. For instance, both Aeschylus and the director of *Lake Changjin* belong to the victorious part of the battle. However, in terms of those authors belonging to the defeated one, how would they adapt the historic events? This inspires the future research to compare more works upon the topic of how to face war from different genres, ages and areas: how the creator’s ideas of war related to their own cultural backgrounds and political camps? What is the similarity and difference when they deal with war? And whether some text or performance is influenced by the other? To figure out these can contribute to our more comprehensive consideration and reflection of war, and hopefully it may give peace a chance.

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