



A departure from classic war films, *Taihang Mountain* centers on army leader Zhu De, instead of the common protagonist, former chairman Mao Zedong.

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Shooting from a new perspective

While battle movies are not as popular as they once were in China, August First Film Studio is keeping the red flag flying and updating the genre. **Sun Li** reports.

War movies are no longer a popular category for jaded audiences, but August First Film Studio, a unit of the Chinese military, has been enhancing the charisma of the genre.

Founded on Aug 1, 1952, to coincide with the anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1927, the studio has produced more than 2,200 films that range from features to documentaries. Many of them are considered to be timeless masterpieces and have won prestigious awards.

As the studio is about to celebrate its 60th anniversary, a retrospective is underway on CCTV-6, showcasing a series of classic revolutionary films, which mostly premiered in the 1950s and 1960s.

Feng Enhe, a veteran actor with the studio, says when August First is mentioned most people automatically think of the studio's black-and-white movies.

"In the past, people didn't have as much entertainment as today's folk do," the 62-year-old says, adding that watching films was a major pastime and patriotic revolution-themed films were then in vogue.

"Blending intriguing plotline, intensive battle scenes and vivid portraits of characters played by marquee idols of that time, many old war films of the studio have been seared into the collective consciousness," Feng says.

"For people around and above the age of 40, August First's old films are still a hot topic."

Liu Jianwei, vice-president of the studio, acknowledges the studio is encountering a challenge replicating its erstwhile cinematic glory.

"The thing is, almost every monumental event of the various war periods in which the PLA were involved, has been covered in previous decades," Liu says.

"Even though you know a film is a remake of a classic, it has to have some changes to avoid being a cheesy repetition and win over audiences.

"In the mid-1990s, Hollywood blockbusters marched into domestic cinemas and stole the spotlight," Liu continues.

"Foreign war movies that feature more realistic and grandiose combat scenes and often bring a human touch to the harshness of war have influenced audiences' taste for military movies."

"The war film as a genre is not as

popular as it used to be. Also competing for viewers' attention these days are other categories of films such as comedies and costume dramas," Liu adds.

As a PLA-backed studio, August First has advantages when it comes to shooting war films.

In the early 1990s, to chronicle the War of Liberation (1946-49), the studio produced a three-part film that is 25 hours and 10 minutes long, in total. More than 3 million PLA soldiers participated in the filming of the epic.

To shoot *Sky Fighters* (2011), a *Top Gun*-style film featuring a state-of-the-art jet battle, the studio borrowed real J-10 fighters.

"But to revive war films, the essential thing is to make changes," Liu says, noting one stereotype of classic war films is that the heroes are always flawless, while the villains are stereotypes.

"If the studio does not abandon this outdated narrative and characterization, its films will be ignored," Liu says.

Representing this change is *Taihang Mountain* (2005), a film about the first three years of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-45).

Instead of centering on former chairman Mao Zedong, a common protagonist in films set during this period, the

movie omitted Mao and focused on Zhu De, another army leader.

Another example is *My Long March* (2006), which depicts the famous military maneuver led by the Communist Party of China, from 1934 to 1936, from a child soldier's perspective.

Song Yeming, a director with the studio, believes modern war movies need to cater to the post-1980s audience.

In Song's *The First of August* (2007), a film about the birth and the rise of the PLA, Hong Kong actor Ray Lui plays the general Ye Ting.

Using Hong Kong stars, rather than "special-type" actors who have a strong physical resemblance to political leaders, is a trend in today's war films as Hong Kong casts can enlarge the film's appeal to the mainland's young audience, Song observes.

Even if the changes work, war films are not likely to be as popular as they used to be, August First's Liu says.

"In peacetime, the army's mission has changed from attacking, to defending the country. So the angle and the subject of today's war films also require modification," Liu says.

Liu says war films should be broadly defined and points to two films on which he was a screenwriter, namely *Stands*

the Last Great Wall (2009), about a group of soldiers rescuing victims of an earthquake; and *Shenzhou 11* (2011), about astronauts carrying out a manned space docking mission.

"Both the two films I wrote bear the core imprint of war movies," Liu says.

"The enemy now becomes the natural disaster and modern soldiers deal with space warfare. To complete a mission nowadays is like winning a war in the past. It requires collective efforts and it values people's courage, wisdom and fortitude."

Commenting on the studio's latest film about the CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection's anti-corruption campaign, Liu says the conception of the "war film" will continue to evolve.

The studio is also involved in film dubbing and produced the Chinese soundtrack for such blockbusters as *Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor*.

The studio is expected to conduct more dubbing missions for foreign war films in the future as the annual quota for foreign films to China has increased from 20 to 34, Liu says.

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Guardians of Nanjing Library's old books

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To Nanjing Library's veteran ancient book restorer, Yang Laijing, mending ancient books is like doing a jigsaw puzzle.

"It's a time consuming job," says Yang, who has been doing the job for 40 years.

"I treat it like playing a game. Otherwise, I wouldn't have the patience and energy. Most young people find the job too dry and are not willing to take it up," Yang adds.

Nanjing Library is known for its ancient book collections. It has 1.6 million volumes of ancient books and 700,000 volumes of books printed from the 1910s to 1940s, also known as *minguo* books.

Among them, 140,000 volumes are rare books, and about 200 titles are precious and priceless books from the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties.

The library has many firsts in the field of ancient books. It has, for instance, cooperated with local universities to train bachelor students in repairing ancient books.

The *minguo* books were printed on paper using Western papermaking methods. Thus, the repair procedures are similar to the West.

But for ancient Chinese books, the way to restore them is unique. They are usually worn out on the edges. To repair the pages, a new piece of paper is stuck at the back of the original piece. This is done as the pages are printed only on one side.



MEI JIA / CHINA DAILY
Shen Xieyuan, a retired expert on ancient books, still works at the Nanjing Library daily.

"Our equipment and skills in restoring ancient Chinese books surprise even visiting foreign experts," says Chen Xujun, director of the repair center under the library's Historical Archives Department.

Chen says though worm holes can be fixed by machine, the library only trusts its rare books in the hands of experienced repairers like Yang.

"Yang is so experienced that he only needs to touch and look at a book to be able to tell the date of publication and edition," Chen adds.

The library also has veteran experts on ancient books like Shen Xieyuan, 89, a keen history-watcher who is also up-to-date with the latest news.

Although he has long retired, Shen still goes to the library daily to help sort out and catalog the ancient books.

The director of the Historical Archives Department Chen Li says the library is proud of the condition of its rare and ancient books.

In 2006, it acquired bookshelves made with camphor, costing 12 million yuan (\$ 1.9 million).

The shelves follow a computerized system and are housed in rooms with the optimum temperature and humidity, to prevent the books from degenerating.

"The walls of the rooms are as thick as a bank," Chen says.

She says the library is among the few libraries in the country that opens its ancient book collections to readers daily.

Although the library has been using microfiches since the 1980s, it's now publicizing its collections to the public through publishing and digitization.

"We are gearing up to use the latest technology to digitize these treasures to reach out to the public," Chen says.



(Left to right): *Shenzhou II*, which depicts astronauts on a manned space mission, broadens the boundary of war films. Actress Yao Chen stars in *My Long March*, which narrates the story from a child soldier's angle.



The joy of helping others

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Xie Guojiang has helped more than 3,200 poor children in the last 18 years.

But the 37-year-old says he is the one who benefits the most from the whole experience.

"You can't imagine how happy I am whenever I see smiles on the faces of the kids," says Xie, a soldier.

He was put into the media spotlight after he saved six people from a 6-meter

deep reservoir recently.

The day started off well with Xie enjoying one of his rare holidays with his wife and 5-year-old son in a suburb of Jinan, Shandong province. As the family was about to pack their things to head home, Xie heard shouts for help from a reservoir some 60 meters away. He rushed toward the voices and found six tourists in the water, with their faulty boat nearby.

Without thinking, Xie jumped into the water and pushed a small boat

toward the six people. One by one, he rescued the tourists, including two children, and put them on the boat.

But Xie had to be hospitalized after the incident as the polluted reservoir water infected both his digestive and respiratory organs.

Dozens of people — friends and strangers — visited him at the hospital and filled his ward with flowers.

Among his visitors is Wu Guansheng, an acquaintance he met 17 years ago, in a hospital. Xie was then in his

second year in the army in Shandong's Linyi city. He was hospitalized in the same ward as Wu's father who was diagnosed with end stage lymphatic cancer.

Wu's father passed away after a few days and Wu's disabled mother had to remove Wu and his younger sister from school due to the family's poor financial situation.

Learning about the situation reminded Xie of his own plight. Born to a farmer's family in Rugao, Jiangsu province, Xie did not go to school because of poverty.

"But in the 1990s, the situation was different from the one when I was a boy. Society was powered by knowl-

edge. Only knowledge can elevate farmers' children from poverty," Xie says.

He volunteered to contact the local government to help the Wu's, while he himself sent allowances to the family so that the children would be able to continue their studies.

"Besides money, Xie wrote to us every month to encourage us," Wu says.

Wu managed to finish his secondary education at a technical school and has been working at a local company in Linyi since. "Seeing children like Wu, who is now able to stand on his own feet and contribute to the country, is my greatest joy," Xie says.