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Xiaobing Li, *China's Battle for Korea: The 1951 Spring Offensive*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xxxviii, 385. ISBN 978-0-253-01157-2.

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While the Korean War occupies a relatively small niche in American military history, it was tremendously important for China as the only major war it has fought since the Communist victory in the Civil War of 1946-49. While the Chinese could not claim total victory, that they stood up to the technologically superior United Nations forces much enhanced the new regime's prestige at home and abroad. However, until quite recently, political considerations prevented Chinese scholars from studying the conflict as it has been in the West; researchers have been denied access to relevant Chinese military and government records. While the Chinese archives are now becoming more open, they are still difficult for most foreigners to navigate and use effectively. Xiaobing Li, a Chinese native and current Director of the Western Pacific Institute at the University of Central Oklahoma is ideally qualified to provide valuable insights into the Chinese experience in the Korean War.

Despite its subtitle, Li's book covers Chinese involvement in the Korean conflict from its beginning and in the larger context of efforts to regain all formerly Chinese territory, including the island of Formosa (present-day Taiwan), still in the hands of the Nationalists. The Korean conflict was an unwanted diversion for the Chinese, who, like the Soviets, had acquiesced in Kim Il-Sung's plans to invade South Korea on the assumption that the Americans would not intervene. When things turned out differently and Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Inchon counterattack succeeded, the Chinese found themselves forced to prevent the creation of a unified American-backed Korea that might be a jumping off point for an invasion of China.

The Chinese army, a product of the recent Civil War, was unprepared to wage war against a modern military force. Much of its equipment had been captured from the Nationalists or the Japanese, and its commanders had little experience in planning and conducting large-scale operations against an enemy with the sort of firepower that the Americans possessed. China's political leaders, including Mao Zedong himself, lacked any real grasp of modern warfare and believed numbers and revolutionary zeal would carry the day.

The book's opening chapters concern the nature and condition of the Chinese military at the outset of the conflict—its institutional structures and leadership. Li, fully conversant with both English- and Chinese-language secondary literature,<sup>1</sup> discusses the training, experience, and attitudes of the common soldiers. He then describes the Chinese offensives against UN forces in North Korea in late 1950, the push south in early 1951, and the UN counterattack that reached the area near the 38th Parallel. He also follows the reactions of officials in Beijing to the unfolding events as well as the discussions of strategic and operational issues by civilian and military leaders at various levels.

As Li shows, Mao was optimistic about the new Chinese offensive launched in April 1951, encouraged both by field commanders like Peng Dehuai, who reported what Mao wanted to hear, and by actual earlier successes. Peng and many of his subordinates recognized that the UN forces had the strength and experience to limit Chinese prospects for a favorable outcome, but went ahead with the planning anyway. They hoped to forestall a feared new UN offensive and especially an Inchon-like landing behind their lines by a large US force known to be assembling in Japan. Here, Li notes, Chinese intelligence was poor, since the Americans intended this force to be a reserve and had only more conventional, limited aims for a new offensive later in the spring. Believing they must strike first, Peng and his generals launched their offensive well before their forces were ready.

1. E.g., he makes good use of Alan R. Millett's masterful two volumes (of a projected three) on the conflict: *The War for Korea, 1945-1950: A House Burning* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2005) and *The War for Korea, 1950-1951: They Came from the North* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2010). See reviews at *MiWSR* 2010.08.01 and 2011-030.

One of the strengths of *China's Battle for Korea* is its attention to organizational and logistical issues. Specifically, Li assesses the fitness of the various Chinese forces to be used in the offensive. The veteran units were understrength, worn down by months of heavy fighting and badly in need of new equipment, replacements, and supplies. Other units were new to the theater and to the kind of war being waged there. The armies' logistical support was inadequate to properly supply such large forces, especially as they moved forward. Painfully aware that previous offensives had stalled largely because of such problems, Chinese commanders wanted to rectify them before resuming the offensive, but now lacked the time to do so.

Li examines the situation of each Chinese force scheduled to participate in the offensive. Of one Army Group, assigned to attack due south toward Seoul, he notes that none of its three armies was in position on time.

Zeng Siyu (b. 1911), then commander of the Sixty-Fourth Army and later deputy commander and chief of staff of the Nineteenth Army Group, recalled that his army was not prepared when he received the order to launch the attack on April 22. Some of his troops had not yet arrived at their staging areas, and his artillery pieces were still on their way into position. He called Yang Dezhi, commander of the Nineteenth Army Group, asking for one more day to get his army ready for combat. Yang hung up the phone—meaning “no,” according to Zeng. (108)

Li observes that Yang's armies had time neither for in-country orientation nor even to train with their newly issued Soviet weapons; but Yang, who always followed orders, went forward anyway. Here Li's excellent use of previously inaccessible Chinese sources allows him to delve deeper into the actual functioning of the Chinese military than Western authors have been able to. Though he mostly follows Western historians' characterization of Chinese obedience to orders, he also repeatedly shows dissension and disagreement among the troops and a better appreciation of the realities of their situation than they are often credited with.

Despite these problems, the Chinese managed to drive back the UN forces for about three weeks, inflicting heavy damage on some of the weaker South Korean formations. However, Li follows Western authors in noting that UN commanders, now understanding how the Chinese operated, made effective plans to counter them. For instance, since the battles in North Korea six months earlier, the Chinese had consistently chosen to bypass and infiltrate behind strong points, attempting to isolate and destroy large formations. Now recognizing these tactics, UN forces withdrew in stages to planned defensive positions and concentrated heavy firepower against the advancing Chinese forces and their supply lines.

Besides Western sources for this strategy and its effects, Li brings in Chinese material, noting that, by 20 May, the Chinese had run out of ammunition and

After fighting two almost nonstop major offensive operations within one month, all front-line forces were exceedingly battle-fatigued. Some of the front-line armies had completely run out of food, and many others were nearly in that situation. The HQ of the Twentieth Army had run out of food and for two days could cook only rice powder for its army radio section, about forty staff members and technicians who provided communications between the army group, the army, and its divisions. The other sections of the HQ resorted to sending out staff members as well as officers to dig up wild herbs. Many CPVF Chinese troops were too hungry and exhausted to continue fighting. Some of the Chinese soldiers left their companies in small groups of five to ten men, looking for food on their own. Many were captured by UNF units. (175)

Furthermore, Li adds, bad storms had washed out many of the dirt roads the Chinese were using as supply lines through North Korea, further aggravating the situation. Vivid details like these enhance the reader's understanding of the campaign and the nature of Chinese military operations at the time.

Li takes pains to put a human face on the Chinese military; he provides biographical details on Chinese commanders at various levels and on some ordinary soldiers as well. That is, using oral history interviews and archival materials, Li does for the Chinese side what many Western authors have done for the UN forces. He clarifies how their distinctive military traditions and culture, as well as recent experiences, shaped the decisions the Chinese made and the way they fought.

Living in the United States, Li is also free to strongly criticize the Chinese leadership. He sees the disastrous Spring Offensive as the product of unrealistic expectations in Beijing and a command structure conditioned to follow orders. At the same time, he does show that many Chinese officers grasped the military realities quite well, and tried before, during, and after the offensive to find ways to counteract their opponents' strengths and formulate more practicable plans and expectations. This paralleled the experiences of the UN forces, setting up the stalemate that persisted until the armistice in 1953.

Xiaobing Li has made a major contribution to English-language scholarship on the Korean War. The source material and other evidence assembled here will greatly benefit students and researchers. However, the book does have some limitations. Its maps are too few and too small and omit too many places significant in the text. There is also considerable repetition, as Li covers the same material and reiterates the same points, impeding the narrative flow. More importantly, he does not fully exploit his new research in Chinese sources to challenge or correct (or reinforce) interpretations in the existing Western literature on the war. Thus, readers are left to figure out for themselves what is novel and distinctive about the author's larger interpretation of the war. These are, however, minor problems in a work that puts forward so much new evidence and discerning analysis. *China's Battle for Korea* should be the starting point for anyone interested in the Chinese side of the Korean conflict.