



The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War

by David Cheng Chang.

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In his new book, historian David Cheng Chang (Hong Kong Univ.) offers readers a well-researched study of the personal experiences of Chinese POWs during the Korean War (1950–53). United Nations forces captured and detained 21,451 Chinese Communist soldiers. After the truce agreement (27 July 1953), 14,342 of them refused repatriation to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), opting instead for Nationalist-held Taiwan. The PRC government labeled thousands of Chinese POWs as “brainwashed” and “tortured” victims, deserving execution for abandoning their families and betraying their country. For nearly seventy years, the PRC’s media and general public, including family members, have asked why those fourteen thousand POWs chose to “return to a place to which they had never been” and “under what circumstances ... they [made] ... their choices” (5).

Chang seeks the answer by exploring Communist stories from “the other side of the hill,” as told in interviews with over eighty-four former Chinese POWs in Taiwan, China, the United States, Argentina, and Brazil. For the first time, we have an English-language account of the war from inside the POW camps. The author’s oral history tells a war story from the perspectives of both the Chinese soldiers and their families. His research illuminates aspects of the war previously unknown to Western historians and military experts. Anyone interested in the Korean War and Chinese history will find this compelling book both instructive and fascinating.

Chapters 1–4 examine the young POWs’ family backgrounds, education, and military experiences as they were “caught up” (17) in the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and then the Civil War (1946–49) between the Chinese Nationalist Army¹ and the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) Army, also known as People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Many POWs served in both armies. Although they had survived the fighting, many suffered terribly from physical and mental trauma. For instance, former Nationalist soldier Li Da’an was “beaten half to death” by his Communist captors in 1948. He asked his wife to bring poison for his suicide. After his release, he joined the Chinese Volunteer Force (CVF, i.e., the PLA troops in the Korean War) and decided to defect to the United Nations Command (UNC) in Korea.

Soon Li was conscripted as a civilian truck driver for the CPV [Communist Party Volunteers]. After completing four trips to the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, Li deserted and wandered to Shenyang. Unable to find a job, he had no choice but to return to the truck unit. Li re-crossed the Yalu River on February 27, 1951, and defected on March 2. Once in UN prison camps ... Li would become the founding leader of the first anti-Communist POW organization. The Communists had underestimated these truck drivers. (69)

1. I.e., Kuomintang (KMT) or Guomindang (GMD).

Chapters 5–7 put a human face on these Chinese soldiers and officers on the Korean front, detailing their desertions, defections, and captivities by the United Nations Forces (UNF). Liu Bingzhang, for instance, a second lieutenant in the Nationalist Army, “had no choice but to surrender and join the PLA” when his 92nd Army capitulated to the Chinese Communists in 1948.

The nearly two years under the Communists did not transform but embittered him. He resented the fact that the Communists confiscated 21 out of 24 mu [ca. 4 acres] of land owned by his family in Shandong. Liu lamented, “People with education are not respected by Communists and are held up to public ridicule at their pleasure.” (107)

At 3:00 a.m., 24 Oct. 1950, Liu, a 26-year-old captain in the CVF’s 590th Regiment, “deserted his unit in Taechon, sixty miles southeast of the Yalu. Liu walked three miles south, and surrendered to the Republic of Korea (ROK) 1st Division at 6:00 am” (106).

Chapters 8–10 explain why the Chinese POWs were divided amongst themselves and how Communists and Nationalists continued to wage a civil war inside the UNF camps in 1951–53. For one thing, since very few of the American and ROK soldiers had any experience in prison-camp duty, the camps’ administration was reportedly “chaotic.” Hardcore militants on both sides battled it out inside the wire, while their incompetent guards did nothing. In February 1952, the UNC began screening prisoners to determine who among them who wished to be repatriated to China and North Korea and who did not. Once prisoners understood the UNC was insisting on voluntary repatriation, loyal anti-Communists attacked Communist prisoners who wanted to return to the PRC. Beatings were common, and both sides occasionally convened kangaroo courts in compounds under their control and sentenced recalcitrant prisoners to death, sometimes by torture. Chang clarifies the repatriation decisions made during the screenings, noting that the POW issue paralyzed peace negotiations and extended the war into 1953.

Chapters 11–13 elaborate further on the tragic consequences of the POW issue for negotiations in the spring of 1952. It sparked riots in many UN prison camps, led to Brig. Gen. Francis Dodd’s kidnapping and the October 1st massacre at Cheju. The most notorious incident occurred at Koje-do, a small island off the coast of South Korea, holding 150,000 Communist prisoners. By July 1952, the rioting there had killed 115 prisoners.

Chapters 14–16 explain the new directions negotiations took at Panmunjom after Joseph Stalin died in March 1953. The breakthrough came on 28 March, when Chinese and North Korean negotiators suddenly agreed to exchange sick and wounded POWs. Two days later, the Chinese issued a statement promising a solution to the POW problem and suggesting that all POWs who did not wish to be repatriated should be turned over to a neutral state. The POW exchange began after the Korean Armistice was signed (27 July 1953).

In telling the stories of Chinese POWs, Chang’s stress on social history points to other topics in Chinese military history, such as recruitment, indoctrination, political control, awards and punishments, and other aspects of prisoner policy. Personal stories bring fresh insights into Communist POWs’ motivations and perceptions. In their own words, they provide compelling firsthand accounts of their war experiences in Korea as well as their family lives before and after the war. Their stories deepen our understanding of the war. The author places veterans in their social context and clarifies why some served in the Chinese Nationalist Army and then became Communist “volunteer soldiers” in Korea. Rather than attempting a comprehensive study of the war, he adopts a “limited” approach, concentrating on the voices of the Chinese POWs.

Oral history, of course, has its weaknesses. The book suggests there were two wars in Korea: the first (June 1950–June 1951) was fought over territory; the second (late 1951–July 1953) over pris-

oners. Chang writes that the Chinese POW issue “emerged as the main stumbling block in the armistice negotiations” (10) and had a critical effect on the conduct of the rest of the war. While personal accounts of the war are invaluable, we must not exaggerate the influence of Chinese POWs on the armistice and the outcome of the war.

Other scholars of the War have emphasized the strategic motives of major actors in prolonging it. Rosemary Foot points out that the Truman administration adopted voluntary repatriation because Congressional Republicans agreed with it.² Once the war became stalemated in fall 1951, Kathryn Weathersby argues, “Stalin contributed to prolongation of the conflict by pressing the Chinese and North Koreans to maintain a hard line in the armistice negotiations.”³ The Soviet leader sought to prolong the war, drain American resources, and open a rift between Washington and its allies. Hence, William Latham Jr. concludes, “In fact, Stalin’s death probably had far greater influence on the Communist negotiating position than any combination of stick and carrots Washington or the United Nations offered.”⁴ Chen Jian maintains that Chinese strategy for “ending the war was determined by the rationale behind the transformation of China’s state and society and the promotion of its international prestige and influence.”⁵

We should be grateful to David Cheng Chang for amplifying the voice of Korean War POWs, but must not forget the role of overriding Cold War strategic factors in prolonging the War. These include specific countries’ domestic politics and national interests, as well as security concerns. Their leaders used the POW issue to continue the war, rather than the inverse.

2. *A Substitute for Victory: The Politics of Peacemaking at the Korean Armistice Talks* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1990).

3. “Stalin, Mao, and the End of the Korean War,” in *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963*, ed. O.A. Westad (Stanford: Univ. Pr, 1998) 90-116.

4. “Kaesong and Panmunjom,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Korean War*, ed. J. Matray and D. Boose Jr. (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2014) 399.

5. *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: UNC Pr, 2001) 116-17.