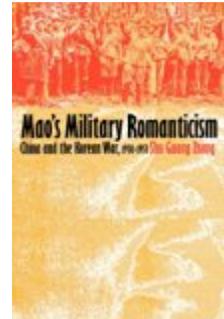


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Shu Guang Zhang. *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. xiii + 338 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0723-5.

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Like any complex international event, the history of the Korean War is a three-dimensional puzzle of many sides. Since Allen S. Whiting's classic study, *China Crosses the Yalu* (1960), a significant number of scholarly works have considered China's adventurous intervention in the Korean War. In the last few years the "forgotten war" has not only been remembered afresh, but has also been rendered a hot topic in the field by an emerging new historiography based on new Russian and Chinese sources. The book under review is a salient example of the new history of the Korean War. Its careful examination of the Chinese People's Republic's military behavior throughout the Korean conflict picks up the narrative left by Chen Jian's *China's Road to the Korean War* (1994): thus the new story about "the other side of the river," to borrow Edgar Snow's metaphor, is complete. For now, at least.

Intended to offer a full coverage of China's military activities in Korea and to interpret these activities within a new conceptual framework, the book is structured effectively. Chapter One establishes the study's position in the ongoing debates on the Korean War, indicating its "cultural approach" to studying China's intervention (p. 9). Chapter Two then sets the historical and intellectual background for the Chinese strategy in the war by offering a concise depiction of Mao Zedong's military philosophy, characterized by its emphasis on the potential of human capabilities. Chapters Three and Four describe China's defensive posture before the Korean War and how that posture changed after Beijing decided to flex its military muscle in the Korean Peninsula. Zhang's brisk and rich discussion of the shifting military fortunes of the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) between October 1950 and the summer of 1952, the subject of Chapters

Five through Seven, is first-rate military history. Chapters Eight and Nine can be read as informative essays on, respectively, the CCP's political works in the CPV and Beijing's tactics in the negotiations for a cease-fire, both of which serve the book's main theme well. In the concluding chapter, Zhang highlights the impact and consequences of the of the Korean War in China and suggests some lessons that should be learned from the conflict.

Primarily using new Chinese sources to detail China's fighting experience, the book fills a major void in the English-language historiography of the Korean War. It sheds light on certain key issues of the war that have been murky until recently. Was Beijing promoting an all-front strike against the United States? We are told that after the Korean War began, Mao only wanted a defensive buffer zone along the Chinese-Vietnamese border and recalled the overzealous General Chen Geng, who sought to give the American imperialists a "two-pronged blow" (p. 69) in Korea and Vietnam, from the Chinese military mission in Vietnam. Also, to what extent could Beijing influence Kim Il-sung before China's entry into the conflict? Not much, says Zhang; Beijing's warning about a U.S. landing at Inchon was ignored by Kim, and this foreshadowed a by-no-means smooth relationship between the Chinese and North Koreans during the war. Zhang also suggests that while CCP leaders saw propaganda value in accusing the United States of using bacteriological weapons in Korea, they were also serious enough about the threat to take concrete preventative measures against such an event. Finally, in response to the question of whether Beijing's fear of American nuclear power induced the Chinese to make their final concessions at Panmunjom, the book notes that in the view of the CCP leadership, the chance of Washington's use of

tactical nuclear weapons in Korea was slim even under the seemingly more aggressive Eisenhower administration. Therefore the CPV paid greater attention to preparing a defense against a more likely threat of a US/UN amphibious attack.

The study's intended contribution, however, lies in Zhang's interpretive framework, as illustrated by the book's title. He notes that the concept of Mao's "military romanticism" is borrowed from Stuart Schram, an authority on Mao's thought and career (p. 11). Students of modern China may also be familiar with Maurice Meisner's treatment of Mao's subjective, or "voluntarist," revolutionary style in his popular text *Mao's China and After* (1986). Yet, to my knowledge, no one before Zhang has identified Mao's revolutionary romanticism as the main thrust behind the PRC's bellicose behavior in the international scene in the 1950s. According to Zhang, present at the core of the CCP's military strategy were three "images" that justified the PRC's first war abroad and determined its choice of enemy. Two of these are China's self-images of "national liberation" and "moral superiority," and the other is an "adversarial" image about the United States (pp. 253-54). Seeking an understanding of the Chinese intervention through these elements in China's "historical" and "human consciousness" (pp. 9, 261), Zhang follows the intellectual path pioneered by Akira Iriye. Yet, unlike Iriye's interpretation in *Power and Culture* that shows a dichotomy between the U.S.-Japanese relationship at the "power and culture" levels, Zhang's work presents a relationship in which Beijing's military culture led to its power struggle with the United States in Korea.

As described by Zhang, Mao's military romanticism was as much a result of his self-education in military science, consisting of the Marxist dogma on war as class struggle, the Clausewitzian motto on the continuity of war and politics, and the wisdom of Chinese military classics, as it was a tested system of political-military thought emerging from the CCP's own revolutionary struggle. Always facing a stronger enemy, either Chiang Kai-shek or the Japanese, had led Mao during his career to perfect a "weak army's strategy" (p. 25) that sought to use the revolutionary army's superior "subjective conditions" (high morale, popular support, and flexibility and tenacity in a protracted struggle) to corrode the enemy's "objective" superiority in technology and firepower. Mao's romance with the revolutionary fighting machine, however, was balanced by his pragmatic prescription for peculiar tactics aimed at maximally reducing the enemy's military effectiveness with minimum

cost. Such a combination had enabled the CCP to survive its most difficult times and had helped it eventually to turn the tables on the Kuomintang. Beijing assumed that that the strategy would work equally well in Korea.

Although he does not reject the view held by some historians that China's entry into the Korean War was provoked by the crossing of the 38th parallel by U.S. troops (p. 85), Zhang contends that Beijing's decision to intervene in the conflict, as well as its strategies during the war, had much to do with CCP leaders' confidence in their own military prowess. As both creators and captives of the Maoist military dogma which was centered on human factors, CCP leaders and generals chose to ignore the discrepancy between China's military power and that of the United States, willingly confronting their number-one enemy in Korea. The CPV's initial success in Korea, which Zhang suggests was due to "sheer good luck," (p. 119) left leaders in Beijing "intoxicated." They consequently made another irrational decision in early December 1950 to push the CPV across the 38th parallel. In its fourth and fifth offensives, however, the CPV's luck ran out and it was forced to adopt a defensive posture by the spring of 1951. Mao now had to give up his pursuit of a quick victory, although he continued to uphold his military philosophy and remained willing to prolong the war in order to achieve some unrealistic objectives in the armistice negotiations.

As is made clear in the book, "military romanticism" explains not only Beijing's intervention, but also the CPV's awkwardness in Korea. CCP leaders were repeatedly surprised in the war because, according to Zhang, it was unlike anything previously experienced by the CCP's armed forces. The CPV's mobility and numerical advantage tended to disappear in dealing with the U.S./U.N. forces' high technology and superior firepower. It also found itself fighting an unfamiliar positional warfare for the better part of the war. Fighting in a foreign country, the CPV also had to cope with new problems of logistics and public relations with Korean residents, and it had an extra burden in conducting military diplomacy with its North Korean ally. Above all, the Korean War was the "very first instance of a limited war in the nuclear era," (p. 256) a situation which tended to invalidate the principal assumptions of the Maoist strategy. The CPV's "subjective" conditions continued to work to a certain degree: facing the enemy's superior firepower and assisted only inadequately by Moscow, the CPV had no choice but to compensate for its own weakness in technology with intensified political works among its troops. Thus, this "highly politicized and mobilized army" (p. 214) at

times fought with bare fists or launched a sneak attack during Korea's severe winter with the troops wearing no boots. Yet, as a whole, the Korean War proved that Maoist military romanticism was obsolete as a useful strategic system in modern warfare. Unfortunately, according to Zhang, this lesson was not immediately learned by the CCP leadership. Instead, after the armistice, Beijing celebrated its victory in the Korean conflict. In the years to come, Mao's military romanticism would continue to have an inebriating effect on small and weak states and to entail "grave risks to global security" (p. 261). Zhang identifies the Vietnam War as such a case, and his most recent example is Saddam Hussein's performance in the Gulf War.

Zhang's study is a solid achievement. However, certain questions may be raised for the purpose of discussion. First, the importance of military romanticism vis-à-vis other factors in Beijing's decision making needs further clarification. A fear to lose can prevent one from fighting, but a confidence in winning does not necessarily prompt one to fight. Zhang argues that Mao's "optimistic willingness" was "no less" a factor than a security concern in inducing Beijing's decision to intervene (p. 85). In an array of reasons for China's action, exactly how important was "military romanticism?" China's intervention in the Korean War was necessarily motivated by more complex reasons than an "I can win" mentality. As China's first military intervention abroad in its post-treaty century era, Beijing's act of war in Korea needs to be understood in a larger historical and political context. China's search for restoration of its "centrality" in Asia had continued for a century, and Korea's geo-strategic and political importance to China had remained the same since the Qing Dynasty. It is interesting to note that the CCP's view of Korea in the 1950s was not different from that of Kuomintang during World War II. Neither wanted Korea to be controlled by a big, hostile power; for the KMT the Soviet Union, and for the CCP the United States. While the KMT's wartime anti-Sovietism in Korea received no sympathy from the United States, the CCP's anti-Americanism was encouraged and assisted by Moscow. Zhang does mention historical, political, and geo-strategic considerations in Beijing's policy making, but his discussion of these factors pales beside the book's omnipresent theme of military romanticism.

There is also the meaning of "military romanticism." There are two well-known sayings in Chinese military classics—"an army puffed up with pride is bound to lose" (*jiaobingbibai*) and "an army burning with indignation is bound to win" (*aibingbi_sheng*). Since both are

about the "subjective" quality of an army, they are relevant to military romanticism. Yet obviously they illustrate two very different conditions. As Zhang correctly points out, the Maoist strategy begins with a fundamental self-consciousness of weakness. The strategy's optimism mainly reflects a philosophical attitude about the eventual result of a war and should not be confused with unrealistic and overconfident decisions on strategy. In Zhang's discussion of Beijing's decisions at different junctures of the war, the distinction between "jiao bing" and "ai bing" tends to blur. The analysis of Beijing's strategies may go a step further by separating those decisions based on the premise of the original Maoist strategy from those that indicated Beijing's own violation of the fundamentals of that strategy.

A related question concerns the book's thesis of a "people's war against the U.S./U.N. high technology war" (p. 214). The thesis would perfectly suit the Vietnam War, but its application to the Chinese-American conflict in Korea seems to indicate a rare oversight on Zhang's part. The problem is the definition of "people's war." In the setting of twentieth-century Asia, such a war indeed involved the practitioner's military weakness versus its enemy's military superiority. But there is a more important social-political dimension. The CCP has opted for the "fish and ocean" metaphor in describing the relationship between its armed force and Chinese society. Ironically, in the Korean War the CCP leadership itself took the fish out of the ocean once it despatched Chinese troops to Korea as "volunteers." The low-tech quality of the CPV troops was not "the essence of China's people's war" (p. 215) as Zhang contends; actually, in Korea the CPV lacked the sine qua non for a people's war: a favorable social environment that can empower the "people's army" but strangle the "people's enemy." A people's war in Korea could only be fought by the Koreans themselves. Despite Mao's rhetoric, the CPV, as a foreign army in Korea, was fighting a conventional war. In a few places Zhang mentions that the CPV headquarters instructed its troops to carry out guerilla warfare behind the enemy lines. This would be an interesting topic for Zhang to explore further, as the result might just show the CPV's inability to do so. As Zhang indicates, the CPV did not have an easy relationship even with the Korean population under Kim Il-sung's control. It can be argued, therefore, that Beijing's assumption that the CPV would be able to fight in Korea as the Eighth Route Army or the PLA had fought in China was a far more serious misconception than its equation of the U.S. Army with the Kuomintang or the Japanese armies. In other words, according to the

“people’s war” logic, the real challenge to the CPV and Maoist military romanticism in the Korean War was the land and people of Korea, not America’s high technology.

To treat China’s war in Korea as what it was, the PLA’s first conventional military mission abroad, can only assist Zhang’s purpose of showing the inadequacy of the Maoist strategy. This approach would allow the author to take a more detached stance from CCP leaders’ own perceptions wrapped in ideology and to examine the transition of the Chinese state in the early 1950s. After all, the CPV operation was the PRC’s own first “police action” in Asia. How indicative was the action of Beijing’s self-image and its prescription for China’s international environment? What were the political implications of the CPV operation to the Chinese-Soviet and the Chinese-Korean relationships? The CCP leadership’s own statement about its “internationalism” (pp. 248-49) certainly does not reveal the nucleus of Beijing’s intention in these regards. These questions may not be central to Zhang’s investigation, but a fuller explanation of the international political context may help the reader to have a better grasp of Beijing’s policy making. For instance, Zhang disagrees with Chen Jian’s “China’s changing war aims thesis” (pp. 304, n4) and contends that Mao consistently pursued the restoration of the 38th parallel. This seems to imply that politically Beijing was better prepared than Washington for the limited nature of the conflict. Yet did Beijing alone decide its war aims? How important were Kim and Stalin in Beijing’s policy making?

Zhang’s exploration of the cultural dimension of the Korean War is a much needed addition to the literature, yet in this area the reader is also left seeking more. A clear definition of Chinese culture by the 1950s would benefit the reader. The three “images” that Zhang finds in the CCP policy making have quite different historical ramifications. The “national liberation” image could be shared by all twentieth-century Chinese nationalists, the “adversarial” image was mainly held by the CCP after World War II (the KMT had a similar image of the Soviet Union), and the “moral superiority” image was a legacy of China’s Confucian past. If these cultural ingredients led Beijing to “chose to act aggressively” (p. 9) in Korea, what led the CCP to choose these images over others, such as China’s “centrality” in Asia, China as a state of “poverty and blankness,” and the “cryptic” Russians? Is the “culture” in the book a “communist,” “nationalist,” or “Chinese” culture? Zhang’s discussion of the culture of the Chinese peasantry also needs elaboration. To attribute the success of the CCP’s political work

with the CPV troops mainly to peasant soldiers’ illiteracy (p. 259) seems to imply that the Communists’ revolution in China had been largely a Machiavellian feat. The argument based on peasants’ illiteracy also cannot explain why during the Korean War the PLA launched its first massive campaign of literate education within its units.

A bilateral (or multilateral) and comparative approach is always effective for international studies. It may even be requisite for the cultural mode of international studies. After using such an approach to good effect in his first book *Deterrence and Strategic Culture* (1992), however, Zhang, surprisingly, chooses to focus only on the Chinese side in this study. Other actors of the Korean War are not given adequate attention. As a study of international conflicts, the book does not explain why the United States was a “perceived,” but not a real, enemy of the PRC; why Beijing’s decision to cross the 38th parallel was irrational; and why Beijing should alone assume responsibility for prolonging the war after the talks for armistice began. When absorbing Zhang’s argument that the CCP’s military culture, or “images,” dictated Beijing’s policies, the reader may also want to know to what extent Beijing’s perceptions distorted the “reality” about its opponents. Except for a brief summary of the American side in the conclusion, the book does not treat the reader to a cultural engagement between the two sides involved in the war. Therefore, when Zhang quotes Jonathan Pollack on policy making as a process “rarely so rational or unambiguous,” (p. 9) it is unclear whether “rationality” in the book is used in an intra-cultural or an inter-cultural sense. There are cases in history, such as Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor or Hanoi’s refusal to bend to a “breaking point” under U.S strategic bombing, in which the application of “irrationality” would only lead us to the refuge of cultural ignorance. Zhang’s tilt to “irrationality” in his interpretation of Beijing’s policy making therefore tends to compromise his goal in explicating the CCP’s military culture.

Finally, a note on the source materials of the book. In the book Zhang shows how a careful and diligent mining of Chinese sources can yield dividends, though there is no strike at a mother lode. Zhang could also have been more discriminating about using information from Chinese “literary histories,” such as works by Ye Yumeng. Readers of this list familiar with archival research may feel less than fully satisfied with what the Chinese materials can offer. To know how a decision was made, we want to see the entire chain of documents in the policy making process. Today this is still “objectively” impossible in the study of Chinese policy making. Scholars have

to use whatever information the government in Beijing is willing to publish. The published documents are usually final decisions or terse instructions that may help illustrate the current party line on history. Reminiscences and scholarly writings in China still tend to follow the prevailing standard of “political correctness” in China. As for the Korean War, one such example is the question of whether or not Zhou Enlai was among the initial opponent to Mao’s intention to send troops to Korea. In Chinese publications Zhou, the beloved premier, has been portrayed as Mao’s constant supporter, while Lin Biao and Gao Geng have been singled out as Mao’s opponents because they are disgraced officials in the official CCP history. Yet according to new documents from the Russian Presidential Archives (translated and discussed by Alexandre Y. Mansourov in the Winter 1995/1996 issue of the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*) not only did Zhou join Lin in cautioning Mao, but the initial opposition in the party was strong enough to persuade Mao to send a message to Stalin on October 2, 1950 outlining the reasons why China would not be able to intervene. Issues like this have to wait for clarification based on multiarchival research. Zhang’s book presents the Chinese perspective, but sometimes verification from

non-Chinese sources may be needed.

These issues aside, Shu Guang Zhang’s new book further proves his reputation as one of the vanguard scholars in the study of the Chinese Communist Party’s international behavior, and readers can expect to hear more from him. The book is most valuable as it stands, and would benefit both specialists and general readers. Its greatest strength is its detailed and comprehensive coverage of China’s military activities which allows readers to draw their own conclusions. Romanticization of war is certainly dangerous, whether undertaken by a strong or weak state, and for whatever reason. Yet wars have been fought for complex reasons, and “subjective” and “objective” conditions have shaped wars’ courses and outcomes in no uniform pattern. America’s superior technology in the Gulf War did not produce a clear victory for U.S. foreign policy, while the subjectively motivated Islamic soldiers of Chechnya seem to have succeeded in eradicating the influence of the stronger Russia from their land.

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