



David Cheng Chang. *The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 238 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5036-0460-5.

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Published on H-War (May, 2020)

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The story of the 170,000 Korean and Chinese prisoners of war (POWs) held by United Nations forces, especially by Americans and South Koreans, in the Korean War is a very important one which has been addressed from a variety of angles, most recently in scholarly works by Monica Kim, Susan Carruthers, Teresa Suzuki, and Charles Young, but important aspects of this history remain to be fully explored. [1] One aspect overlooked into the substantial historiography of the Korean conflict is the specific detention of the Chinese POWs and their role in the armistice negotiation between the United Nations Command and Communist regimes regarding the awkward concept of “voluntary repatriation” endorsed by US authorities. This topic appears particularly crucial to examine in order to understand the complexities of the Korean War, an armed conflict that was both civil and international in nature and how it played out behind barbed wire. It is exactly this objective that David Cheng Chang reaches in his first book, *The Hijacked War*.

Chang, assistant professor at the University of Hong Kong, proposes a new regard on the treatment of the 21,000 Chinese soldiers, part of the People’s Volunteer Army sent by Mao Zedong by October 1950 to support the North Korean army, captured by the UN forces. The particularity of this group of captives is that 14,342 of them refused to

be repatriated to Communist China and declared their allegiance to the Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek. The situation provoked violent confrontations in POW camps between Communist and anti-Communist elements. By looking at the journey and conditions of detention of Chinese prisoners, Chang illuminates military aspects as well as political issues and high-level diplomacy involving these captives. Under moral and humanitarian principles, the Truman administration decided by 1951 not to force repatriation of POWs who declared their wish not to return to Communist China. In the context of the Cold War, US authorities also chose to use those nonrepatriated prisoners in the psychological/political warfare programs against the Soviet bloc. The results of the nonrepatriation and political warfare policies, as Chang argues, were, however, a failure and reflect rather the US miscalculation and mismanagement of the POW issue as well as the ignorance, negligence, and arrogance of Washington vis-a-vis Communism and China.

Because of this failure, according to Chang, the history of Chinese POWs is absent from the post-war historiography and public memory, a sign of a “collective amnesia” that could explain the concept of “Forgotten War” often used to describe the Korean conflict.[2] Chang’s argument is particularly critical about the US voluntary or nonforcible

repatriation policy. The armistice negotiation began in the summer of 1951 and the Chinese POWs quickly became the most sensitive issue in the talks. Chang suggests that only this point impeded the negotiation, which caused the continuation of the conflict. It seems that US policymakers, in particular those in Washington, underestimated the number of anti-Communists among POWs and then, tried to diminish the number of nonrepatriate prisoners in order to negotiate successfully with Communist authorities. But at the same time, the psychological warfare policy in camps meant that diehard anti-Communists controlled the screening process for repatriation and the political struggle. In addition, the ambivalent and improvised US policy on repatriation, “promising freedom for prisoners, but denying to right to return home for many” (p. 16), made the situation more serious for the nonrepatriated prisoners and fueled anti-Communist violence.

As major consequence, the US government’s position on Chinese POWs hardened and became irreversible, which hijacked the discussion in Panmunjom and extended the war for two more years at the cost of thousands of American, Chinese, and Korean lives. Meanwhile, the new and fragile Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek installed in Taiwan (or Formosa) became an important player in the Korean War even if it remained officially non-involved. At the end of the conflict, nonrepatriated individuals were transferred to Taiwan and only 7,109 prisoners choose to return to Communist China. Chang concluded that Taipei was the main winner of the war because Chiang Kai-shek received official recognition while both the United States and Communists China only tried to avoid the humiliation. According to Chang’s provocative argument, US president Harry S. Truman and his secretary of state, Dean Acheson, should be blamed for their “ill-informed, misguided policy on the disposition of Korean War prisoners known as ‘voluntary repatriation’” (p. 17): “Truman’s lack of intellectual curiosity and his penchant for simplistic moralizing, coupled with the inattentiveness and sub-

servience of his advisors, [Dean] Acheson in particular, led him to adopt a self-righteous moralistic policy that, once announced, immediately became irrevocable. By the time top officials in the State and Defense departments realized the complexity and gravity of the issue, it was already too late to reverse course” (p. 15).

In order to demonstrate his argument and draw the journey of the Chinese prisoners, Chang has examined a variety of archival material as well as conducted interviews. The micro-analysis of letters, diaries, and memoirs of former prisoners, interrogators and UNC officers as well as eighty-four interviews, entangled with diplomatic, military, and intelligence documents, explains the difficult context in which many Chinese captives found themselves. The war against the Japanese occupation army from 1937 to 1945, the Chinese civil war between Nationalist and Communist forces until 1949, and the captivity in South Korea were complicated, violent, and traumatic experiences for many Chinese soldiers. This context is crucial to consider in order to examine the dynamic in POW camps and the 14,000 individuals who “freely” decided their repatriation to Taiwan.

The book is divided into sixteen chapters. The first three analyze the complex and difficult journey of Chinese soldiers during the civil war, their incorporation in the Communist army, and their “voluntary” participation in the Korean War in October 1950. The following part explains the cooperative relationship between the Chiang Kai-shek regime in Taiwan and the US general Douglas MacArthur, commander in chief of the occupation of Japan and then, the United Nations Command. They both supported the psychological warfare against Communism, and underestimated the involvement of China in Korea in response to the crossing of the 38th parallel by the UN forces. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 discuss the military campaign until the dismissal of MacArthur in April 1951, in particular the five Chinese offensives and their impacts on defectors and captured Chinese soldiers.

Chang moves then from the battlefield to the POW camps, while introducing the civil war dynamic in place in compounds between Nationalist and Communist elements. This situation had a significant effect on policymakers in Washington and their decision regarding the repatriation issue discussed at Panmunjom with Communist representatives. In chapters 10 to 13, Chang explains the impact of the US voluntary repatriation policy and the screening process both in camps and at the table of negotiation in Panmunjom. Riots, aggression, murder, and torture were common among Chinese captives in Koje-do and Cheju camps. The US military personnel were deeply involved in this violence. The particular context had a direct impact on the politics, hijacking the armistice negotiations until 1953 and making the final exchange of POWs complicated. The book closes with a short explanation of the special unit 8340, composed of selected Chinese POWs for particularly dangerous reconnaissance and intelligence missions behind enemy lines. This aspect brings the author to the post-Korean War period, the utilization of prisoners for the anti-Communist political warfare and the uneasy journey of former POWs, especially in Taiwan and continental China.

David Cheng Chang offers a fascinating, meticulous, and detailed analysis of the complex Chinese prisoners' experience in Korea. His arguments regarding the failure of the US policies on POW repatriation and reindoctrination, which prolonged the Korean War at the cost of thousands of lives, is particularly critical of the Truman administration's "arrogance toward Chinese and Korean people and ignorance of the Chinese Communists" (p. 372). Not everyone will agree with such arguments. Some scholars on the Korean War, the Truman administration, and international relations during the early Cold War would certainly contest Chang conclusions on Truman and Acheson's lack of interests in the POW issue and the mismanagement and the improvisation of US poli-

cies in Asia, in particular during the second phase of the Korean War, from late 1951 to July 1953.

Though Chang brilliantly exposes an overlooked page of the history of the Korean conflict, a major actor unfortunately remains absent from the narrative (and the archival research): the International Committee of the Red Cross. The humanitarian organization is only marginally mentioned in the book. However, delegates of the Red Cross were the only neutrals admitted in POW camps and they produced thousands of documents. Perspective from such sources would nuance the analysis of the situation in compounds, and highlight the impact of the repatriation and re-orientation policies on the Chinese prisoners. Finally, the experience of war captivity in World War II would also be relevant to examine. Chang argues that the re-education process was something rather illogical in the US policy (p. 375), but he does not contextualize the Korean War in the broader history of war captivity. US military authorities had already experimented with psychological warfare on German POWs through their denazification program between 1944 and 1946. The expertise developed by US authorities in handling Nazi ideology was extended to the conflicts with Communism in Korea. The captivity in Korea did not appear in a vacuum. Having said that, *The Hijacked War* is an excellent and important book making a major contribution to the historiography of the Korean War. This reading remains essential for anyone who seeks to understand this violent conflict, which should not be forgotten.

Notes

[1]. Monica Kim, *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Susan Caruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Tessa Morris-Suzuki, ed., *The Korean War in Asia: A Hidden History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); and Charles S. Young, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number: Exploiting Kore-*

an War POWs at Home and Abroad (NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[2]. Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2013).

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Citation: Jean-Michel Turcotte. Review of Chang, David Cheng. *The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2020.

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