

THE KOREAN WAR IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: HOW AND WHY THE KOREAN WAR IS  
REMEMBERED AS A VICTORY

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the historical memory of the Korean War, and why it is remembered as the victory that it is. Often referred to as “the War to Resist America and Aid Korean” (*KangMei-YuanChao*) in China, the Korean War began less than a year after the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established. By entering the war, China paid heavy military, economic, and diplomatic costs but was not able to achieve the goals it aspired to at the beginning of the war. Nevertheless, these setbacks are not reflected in the official, public narratives of the war, which instead portray it as a just war and a complete victory.

I examine the war as portrayed in a 2002 middle school history textbook and in the national museum dedicated to the war, located in Dandong, Liaoning, China, as well as state efforts to shape the narrative of the war as it was being fought. The war has been carefully interpreted to portray China and the Chinese military as just, heroic, and victorious. To achieve this goal, details (such as Chinese casualty numbers and North Korea’s invasion of South Korea) are omitted. This narrative has bolstered the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by defining the PRC as a just country capable of standing up to any outside force. Finally, I argue that the Korean War should not be ignored in the context of China’s international relations because it demonstrated that what is referred to as China’s “Century of Humiliation” (1840-1949) had ended.

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## *Introduction*

On July 27, 1953, a ceasefire halted the Korean War. After three years of fighting, the war ended almost where it began, with the opposing forces arrayed along the thirty-eighth parallel, stalemated. Periodic saber-rattling on the Korean Peninsula serves to remind us that, sixty years later, a final peace treaty has yet to be signed. In the United States, the Korean War is often referred to as the “Forgotten War,” overshadowed by the complete victory of the Second World War. In China, this is not the case. When the war began in June 1950, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had been founded less than a year before. And when it committed troops to the war in October, the Korean War became the first major event in the new government’s foreign relations. To this day, the war is remembered as a glorious and just victory in China. However, it is not immediately obvious that the Korean War could or should be remembered in this way. This memory has come about only because of the deliberate efforts of the Chinese government.

## *The Costs of the Korean War*

The Korean War is remembered as a victory in China, but given how the war developed and ended, it is surprising that the war should be remembered this way. Even more so than for the United States, the Korean War exacted an enormous cost on China while offering mixed successes in return.

When Chinese forces entered the Korean War, Mao Zedong had high hopes for what they might accomplish. In his October 2, 1950 telegram to Stalin outlining his plans for China’s intervention, Mao acknowledged that the fight against American troops

would be difficult, but he still hoped to “annihilate and drive out the invading armies of the United States and other countries” from the Korean Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> As the Chinese People’s Volunteer Forces<sup>2</sup> (CPVF) entered Korea and achieved their initial success, his hopes were bolstered. Initial plans called for demanding the complete withdrawal of American forces from the Korean Peninsula as a condition for a cease-fire.<sup>3</sup> Mao’s armistice demands in December 1951 went even farther and demanded that the U.S. military also leave Taiwan. These demands were formulated in part to display his confidence about the course of the war, as the Chinese and Soviet leadership still hoped to advance the entire length of the Korean Peninsula and push the American forces out.<sup>4</sup> Entering the war, Chinese goals were far greater than securing a Korean buffer state. They hoped to gain complete victory over the peninsula, a hope that was not met.<sup>5</sup>

Even as China failed to achieve its goal, the war exacted a heavy price on the country, both in terms of men and materials. The exact number of the Chinese war dead is difficult to know. The Chinese forces probably suffered between 800,000 and 900,000 casualties, including 300,000 to 400,000 dead.<sup>6</sup> Among the dead was Mao’s oldest son,

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<sup>1</sup> Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 177.

<sup>2</sup> While the Chinese forces fighting in the Korean War were officially known as the Chinese People’s Self Defense Forces (CPVF), they consisted of soldiers from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and were lead by PLA generals. The name change was an effort to avoid an all out war between the United States and China that would have spread into Chinese territory. Zhou Baoshan, “China’s Crouching Dragon,” in *Voices from the Korean War: Personal Stories of American, Korean, and Chinese Soldiers*, ed. Richard A. Peters and Xiaobing Li (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 87; Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 175.

<sup>3</sup> Chen Jian, “China’s Changing Aims during the Korean War, 1950-1951,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1992): 26.

<sup>4</sup> Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s*, trans. Neil Silver (New York: Routledge, 2012), 194-196.

<sup>5</sup> Chen, “China’s Changing Aims,” 40.

<sup>6</sup> By comparison, the combined UN casualties amounted to about 500,000 with about 80,000 dead. Philip West, “The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance in Chinese Popular Culture,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* vol. 1, no. 4 (1992): 393-394; Xiaobing Li, Allan R. Millett, and Bin Yu, “Introduction,” in *Mao’s Generals Remember Korea*, trans. and ed. Xiaobing Li, Allan R. Millett, and Bin Yu (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 246 n. 6.

killed in an air raid while serving as an interpreter.<sup>7</sup> An additional 20,000 to 21,000 Chinese soldiers became prisoners of war. When more than 14,000 of these prisoners refused to be repatriated to Mainland China and chose to go to Taiwan instead, the communist leaders suffered a propaganda defeat as well.<sup>8</sup> Between 1950 and 1953, the Chinese government spent 33 to 43 percent of its total budget on defense, with a total of 6.2 billion yuan spent on the war.<sup>9</sup> This expenditure placed a strain on China's domestic spending as the country struggled to rebuild an economy ravaged by decades of invasion and civil war.<sup>10</sup>

The war also brought political and diplomatic costs. In 1949 and the first half of 1950, the PRC had hoped to quickly retake Taiwan and put a decisive end to the Chinese civil war. Although China was not been able to secure direct Soviet aid to achieve this goal, the Chinese military nevertheless accelerated its preparations to launch an attack against Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> The initial goal was to begin operations in the summer of 1950.<sup>12</sup> However, once the Korean War broke out and the U.S. Seventh Fleet was deployed to the Taiwan Straits, these plans were put on hold indefinitely.

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<sup>7</sup> Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 183, 342 n. 93; Hong Xuezhong, "The CPVF's Combat and Logistics," in *Mao's Generals Remember Korea*, trans. and ed. Xiaobing Li, Allan R. Millett, and Bin Yu (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 121.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremy Brown, "From Resisting Communists to Resisting America: Civil War and Korean War in Southwest China, 1950-1951," in *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 106, 403 n. 3; West, "The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance," 395; Richard A. Peters and Xiaobing Li, *Voices from the Korean War: Personal Stories of American, Korean, and Chinese Soldiers* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 38.

<sup>9</sup> Bin Yu, "What China Learned from Its 'Forgotten War' in Korea," in *Mao's Generals Remember Korea*, trans. and ed. Xiaobing Li, Allan R. Millett, and Bin Yu (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 25.

<sup>10</sup> Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 223.

<sup>11</sup> Chen, "China's Changing Aims," 9; Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War*, 85-86.

<sup>12</sup> Chen, "China's Changing Aims," 9 n. 2.

Moreover, when the United States and the PRC found themselves fighting each other in Korea, it scuttled any chances of reconciliation.<sup>13</sup> Following the Chinese communist revolution, some U.S. leaders assumed that conflict between the United States and China was inevitable.<sup>14</sup> Others, however, predicted a Sino-Soviet split and felt China and the United States could one day be partners.<sup>15</sup> If we consider the attitudes of the Chinese leadership, reconciliation at the time was unlikely. Mao was much more interested in furthering China's revolution than in normalizing relations with the West.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the war hardly improved Sino-American relations. The Korean War instead pushed China closer to the Soviet Union. After the Korean War, the alliance between China and the USSR entered its strongest period. However, the war also exacerbated the two countries' differences over ideology and weakened Chinese leaders' respect for their Moscow counterparts.<sup>17</sup> Leading up to the war, Stalin reneged on his promise of air support and pressured the Chinese to intervene in Korea when he had been unwilling to aid them in retaking Taiwan.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the tensions between Beijing and Moscow that led to the Sino-Soviet split increased.<sup>19</sup> The war both isolated China and eroded the diplomatic relations it retained.

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<sup>13</sup> Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 202.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* vol. 24, no. 4 (1980): 574; Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: the Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War," 574-575.

<sup>16</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 38-39, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War*, 124-125, 174; Chen Jian, "China's Changing Aims," 41.

<sup>19</sup> Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War*, 177; Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 175; Chi-Kwan Mark, *China and the World since 1945: An International History* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2012), 28.

*Leaders' Doubts about the Korean War*

Furthermore, while the Korean War is remembered positively in public, Chinese leaders have held opposite views, at least privately. These countervailing attitudes further complicate portraying the Korean War as a Chinese success. Before China committed troops to Korea, most Chinese military officers and Politburo members argued against becoming involved in the war. They stressed the need to rebuild China's economy and solidify the new regime's power over the entire country.<sup>20</sup> Lin Biao, one of the best generals in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), refused to command the Chinese forces sent to Korea.<sup>21</sup> Even Mao, who was in favor of intervening, had second thoughts.<sup>22</sup>

In the years since the war, Chinese leadership has continued to express its doubts about the war and its conduct, at least privately. Peng Dehuai, the commander of the CPVF in Korea, "admitted that the Fifth Campaign was one of only four mistakes" in his career.<sup>23</sup> This campaign resulted in heavy Chinese and North Korean casualties and forced them to withdraw to the north.<sup>24</sup> Other leaders expressed doubts about the war as a whole.<sup>25</sup> Top leaders such as Hu Yaobang are reported to have ruled out ever becoming involved in a similar conflict.<sup>26</sup> Some claim that by 1960, Soviet and Chinese leaders argued over just who approved the war with Chinese leaders insisting that Joseph Stalin and Kim Il-Sung planned and initiated the war without Mao's input.<sup>27</sup> When Kim Il Sung was visiting China in 1975, Mao himself is believed to have convinced Kim to emphasize

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<sup>20</sup> Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 180.

<sup>21</sup> Chen, *China's Road to the Korean War*, 173-174; Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 176.

<sup>22</sup> Chen, "China's Changing Aims," 25; Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War*, 155; Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 176, 180.

<sup>23</sup> Yu, "What China Learned," 22.

<sup>24</sup> Yu, "What China Learned," 22.

<sup>25</sup> Yu, "What China Learned," 28.

<sup>26</sup> Yu, "What China Learned from Its 'Forgotten War' in Korea," 26.

<sup>27</sup> Yang Kuisong, introduction to Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s*, trans. Neil Silver (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2-3.

peaceful rather than military reunification of the Korean peninsula in public.<sup>28</sup> In private, at least, those who commanded the war were eager to distance themselves from the enterprise.

After the war, Chinese leaders also made clear that they did not want to become entangled in another such conflict. As the United States escalated the war in Vietnam, China sent material support but made clear that it would not become directly involved unless the United States attacked China or invaded North Vietnam.<sup>29</sup> In the 1970s, Nixon was reportedly assured that China would not intervene on North Korea's behalf if it initiated another war, and since the 1990s, Pyongyang has been told the same.<sup>30</sup> China's military adventures since the Korean War—its punitive expeditions against India in 1962 and Vietnam in 1979—were deliberately limited in scope and duration.<sup>31</sup> China's massive contribution to the Korean War has proven to be a singular event, and not one that is likely to be repeated.

### *The Just Victory*

Despite all these factors that suggest that the Korean War entailed a great cost for China without succeeding as planned, the war is nevertheless framed as a victory for China, and a just one at that. This framing is on display in official narratives of the war,

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<sup>28</sup> Yu, "What China Learned from Its 'Forgotten War' in Korea," 251 n. 76.

<sup>29</sup> Mark, *China and the World since 1945*, 61.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt, *Policy Performance in Divided Korea during the Cold War Era: 1945-91* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2010), 34; Andrew Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arm's Length*. (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2004), 19.

<sup>31</sup> Mark, *China and the World since 1945*, 52, 99.

such as school history textbooks<sup>32</sup> and the museum in Dandong,<sup>33</sup> China, that is dedicated to the war.

That the war was a victory cannot be mistaken from these accounts. The war is presented as an entirely victorious one. The textbook informs the reader that once the Chinese forces entered the war, they and the North Korean Army forced the American forces back to the thirty-eighth parallel through a series of campaigns that consisted of “five battles and five victories.”<sup>34</sup> The ceasefire that ended the war was also a “huge victory” for the Chinese and North Koreans, while the Americans were compelled to sign it.<sup>35</sup> The museum portrays the same victory. The Fifth Campaign, Peng Dehuai’s regrets aside, is described as a victory for the Chinese forces that shifted north to strengthen the front along the thirty-eighth parallel.<sup>36</sup> The final assessment of the war is that it was successful in defending the peace and security of China and North Korea and that a “peaceful solution to the Korea issue” through an armistice had been China’s purpose from the beginning.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The textbooks I consider here are junior middle school textbooks published in 2002. However, other textbooks display much of the same features; consider Peter Hays Gries, Jennifer Prewitt-Freilino, Luz Cox-Fuenzalida, and Qingmin Zhang, "Contentious Histories and the Perception of Threat: China, the United States, and the Korean War-an Experimental Analysis," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 435.

<sup>33</sup> The city of Dandong is located in Liaoning province in northeastern China. It is located on the Yalu River, which separates China from North Korea. During the Korean War, many Chinese soldiers traveled through Dandong to cross into Korea. The author visited the museum, called the “Resist America Aid Korea Museum” (*Kangmei Yuanchao Jinianguan*) in May of 2011. All discussion is based on that visit, in addition to photos and notes taken during that visit. Photos from the museum can be found at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson>.

<sup>34</sup> “Wuzhan wujie,” Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe Lishi Shi [People’s Educational Publishing House History Section], *Zhongguo Lishi [Chinese History]*, vol. 4. (Beijing: Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2001), 106.

<sup>35</sup> “Weida shengli.” *Zhongguo Lishi*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> “The Fifth Campaign,” accessed May 8, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124120070>.

<sup>37</sup> “Heping jiejie chaoxian wenti.” “Museum of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea: Preface,” accessed May 8, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124133586>; “Beginnings of the Korean Armistice Negotiation,” accessed May 8, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124120662>.

In addition to being a decisive victory, the war is depicted as a just war in which China aided its neighbor North Korea against foreign invasion and American imperialism. At the outset of the war, Mao created the slogan “Resist U.S. aggression and aid Korea, protect our homes, and defend the motherland” to build support for it.<sup>38</sup> Both the museum and the textbook repeat this phrase, and refer to the war as the “War to Resist America and Aid Korea.”<sup>39</sup> The war is thus put in the frame of a justified, defensive war. The textbook’s account goes further than the museum’s does by referring to the American forces as imperialists and invaders throughout.<sup>40</sup> However, both sources make clear that China fought the war to defend itself and its neighbor from outside attack.<sup>41</sup> The North Korean invasion of the south and China’s complicity in the beginning of the war complicate this a narrative, but those events are glossed over.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting that the official narrative described above appears to resonate with the narrative adopted by Chinese people themselves. A 2006 survey asked Chinese college students about their perceptions of the Korean War. On a seven-point scale (with 7 indicating a strongly positive response), “[China] won” received an average score of 4.96, “[It was a Chinese] victory” received an average score of 4.80, and “[China was] Heroic” received an average score of 4.74.<sup>43</sup> These scores were significantly higher than those American college students reported. While the survey was conducted over a

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<sup>38</sup> Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 176.

<sup>39</sup> *Zhongguo Lishi*, 105; “Museum of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea: Preface,” accessed May 9, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124133586>.

<sup>40</sup> *Zhongguo Lishi*, 105-107.

<sup>41</sup> *Zhongguo Lishi*, 105; “Forced to Make a Decision of Resisting U.S. Aggression and Aiding Korea,” accessed May 8, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124117200>.

<sup>42</sup> Yang Kuisong, introduction, 3; Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War*, 130-131; Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 54-55; Peters and Li, *Voices from the Korean War*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Gries, Prewitt-Freilino, Cox-Fuenzalida, and Zhang, “Contentious Histories,” 443.

fairly small population, the results nevertheless indicate that the image of the war described above reflects popular beliefs.<sup>44</sup>

### *Was a Positive Interpretation Inevitable?*

While the Korean War had negative effects for China, one might argue that the Chinese government would never allow the Korean War to be interpreted in a negative, or even neutral way. The war came at too crucial a time in the establishment of the PRC for the government to allow it to be interpreted in a way that did not reflect well on the new regime. It is worth noting that in the fall of 1950, as China dispatched troops to Korea, the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was still tenuous. Throughout China, anti-communist flyers circulated and anti-regime graffiti appeared on public walls.<sup>45</sup> Some provinces were only nominally under CCP control, while anti-government activities sprang up even in areas that had previously been calm.<sup>46</sup> As a result, the Chinese leadership was eager for a victory.<sup>47</sup> About a month after the CPVF was sent to Korea, the regime increased censorship of newspapers and films while also promoting “Resisting America and Aiding Korea” activities.<sup>48</sup> From the outset, perceptions of the Korean War were being shaped to be positive.

However, it is unsatisfactory to assume that the Korean War was destined to be interpreted positively simply because of the nature of the Chinese regime. Propaganda no doubt played a role in shaping perceptions of the war, but to understand how and why the

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<sup>44</sup> Gries, Prewitt-Freilino, Cox-Fuenzalida, and Zhang, "Contentious Histories," 439-440, 443.

<sup>45</sup> Masuda Hajimu, "The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society: Public Reactions and the Shaping of 'Reality' in the Communist State, October-December 1950," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no. 3 (2012): 12-13.

<sup>46</sup> Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 181; Hajimu, "The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society," 13-15, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Hajimu, "The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society," 34.

<sup>48</sup> Hajimu, "The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society," 20-23.

Korean War has affected China and Chinese attitudes, we should not assume such an outcome. Efforts to cast the war in a victorious light still could have backfired because other narratives were available.

Some of these narratives would have come from soldiers who returned from the Korean War well aware of the suffering the war entailed. Recollecting his time during the Korean War, one Chinese captain described entering a system of defensive tunnels with his unit of two hundred soldiers. Twelve days later, they were relieved but only six soldiers of the unit remained. He expressed pride in holding the position against all odds, but in the end, his mourning for his lost comrades comes across more strongly than any sense of victory.<sup>49</sup> Another captain did not demand that his coworkers respect his service in the war because he considered himself lucky just to be among its survivors.<sup>50</sup> Yet another remembered the inadequate supplies and frostbite that incapacitated his unit for months.<sup>51</sup> These were loyal soldiers, often veterans from the Chinese civil war, and they had received political education before heading to the front.<sup>52</sup> This political education would have contained all the messages these soldiers needed to interpret the war as the Chinese government intended. Nevertheless, these soldiers' memories complicate the story of a victorious war.

A more troublesome and equally important population returning from the war would have been "liberated soldiers," former Nationalist soldiers who joined the PLA at the end of the civil war, or anti-communist partisans who surrendered and were

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<sup>49</sup> Zheng Yanman, "The Chinese Go Underground," in *Voices from the Korean War: Personal Stories of American, Korean, and Chinese Soldiers*, ed. Richard A. Peters and Xiaobing Li (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 183-184.

<sup>50</sup> Zhou, "China's Crouching Dragon," 93.

<sup>51</sup> Wang Xuedong, "The Chosin Reservoir: A Chinese Captain's Story," in *Voices from the Korean War: Personal Stories of American, Korean, and Chinese Soldiers*, edited by Richard A. Peters and Xiaobing Li (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 122, 124; Yu, "What China Learned," 16-17.

<sup>52</sup> Zhou, "China's Crouching Dragon," 86.

conscripted into the CPVF.<sup>53</sup> These soldiers would also have returned home aware of the realities of the war in Korea, but with more mixed feelings about the regime. Moreover, one can expect that these mixed feelings would persist long after the armistice. These soldiers continued to face harassment for their past loyalties, despite fighting in the war.<sup>54</sup>

Those who remained at home during the war could have challenged the narrative as well. At the beginning of the war, some Chinese people complained that the war was not justified and that China was interfering in other countries' affairs by sending troops to Korea. Others thought China too weak to challenge the United States.<sup>55</sup> Official news sources, meanwhile, were distrusted and people found other sources where they could, including Hong Kong newspapers and Nationalist Party (KMT) radio broadcasts.<sup>56</sup> The government did not have complete control of the interpretation of the Korean War at the time of the war, and all of these personal accounts or skeptical views could have permeated society instead.

Finally, we should not overestimate the degree to which the 'just victory' image of the Korean War is unchallenged in China today. Academics there are writing more critical assessments of the Korean War, and publishing the results.<sup>57</sup> Despite all of these challenges, however, the war remains thought of positively. The positive image of China's involvement in the war is a deliberate interpretation. Therefore, it is important to examine how and why the war could be construed as a victory.

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<sup>53</sup> Zhou, "China's Crouching Dragon," 86; Brown, "From Resisting Communists to Resisting America," 125-127.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, "From Resisting Communists to Resisting America," 127-128.

<sup>55</sup> Hajimu, "The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society," 9-11; Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 181.

<sup>56</sup> Hajimu, "The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society," 9, 31.

<sup>57</sup> Neil Silver, "Translator's Acknowledgements and Thoughts," preface to *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s*, by Shen Zhihua, trans. Neil Silver (New York: Routledge, 2012), xi; Yang Kuisong, introduction, 1.

### *Why the Korean War Could Be a Victory*

A variety of factors allow for the positive interpretation of the Korean War in China. One of the most important is that while the war was not a clear-cut victory, it was not a defeat either. The war did not achieve all the Chinese leadership hoped for in their more optimistic moments, but North Korea did emerge from the war intact. The traditional relationship of Korea as the strategic lips that covers China's teeth was preserved.<sup>58</sup> This idea of North Korea as a buffer has not died away since.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, while the CPVF suffered massive casualties, it was able to hold its ground against a technologically superior opponent. The Korean War demonstrated that China could stand up to any foreign power, and thus provided an indisputable end to China's "Century of Humiliation."<sup>60</sup>

Meanwhile, the very casualties and the hardships the troops suffered has become part of the victory narrative. The willingness of so many soldiers to risk their lives in the face of an enormous technological imbalance transforms tragedy into heroism.<sup>61</sup> Incidents from the war have also been used to create heroes for the new China. These heroes have been the focus of widespread propaganda efforts ever since.<sup>62</sup> The textbook itself devotes half a page to detailing the exploits of some of these figures.<sup>63</sup> According to

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<sup>58</sup> Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 182.

<sup>59</sup> Scobell, *China and North Korea*, 3, 17.

<sup>60</sup> The "Century of Humiliation" refers to the period between 1840 and 1945 during which China was subject to unequal treaties and suffered repeated invasions. Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism*, 245; Gries, Prewitt-Freilino, Cox-Fuenzalida, and Zhang, "Contentious Histories," 434.

<sup>61</sup> West, "The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance," 400.

<sup>62</sup> See the collections on Luo Shengjiao, Huang Jiguang, Qiu Shaoyun, and Yang Gensi at "Models and Martyrs," Last modified January 2, 2013, <http://chinese posters.net/themes/models.php>; Stefan R. Landsberger, Anchee Min, and DuoDuo, *Chinese Propaganda Posters* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2011), 4, 7.

<sup>63</sup> The section on heroes fills half a page of a section three pages long. *Zhongguo Lishi*, 107.

the text, the war produced “uncountable moving heroes” for China, most of whom sacrificed themselves for their cause.<sup>64</sup>

Jonathan Mercer’s description of emotional beliefs adds another layer to understanding the memory of the Korean War as a heroic, just war. In his analysis, emotion and beliefs are intertwined and cannot be separated.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, these emotional beliefs such as justice and nationalism tend to reinforce themselves.<sup>66</sup> As noted above, China’s involvement in the war was cast as justified from the beginning.<sup>67</sup> However, if China entered the war to promote justice, China must be a just country, in turn suggesting that any war it entered would be for the sake of justice. This belief suggests a further, rational reason for China’s involvement: demonstrating China’s love of justice and anti-imperialism serves as its own reward, both at the time and afterwards.<sup>68</sup> Because of its involvement, China has been able to cast itself as just and righteous for decades, its material gains and losses aside. This connection between rationality and emotional belief accords with Mercer’s argument that not only emotion and belief are connected, but reason too is inextricably intertwined with them.<sup>69</sup>

The emotional belief in the correctness in China’s actions is reinforced by the selective reinterpretation of the war’s events. As a stalemate, the Korean War is particularly susceptible to manipulation.<sup>70</sup> Few interpretations of its events are precluded by its outcome. Equally important in the Chinese case has been sources’ selective disregard or obfuscation of events. As mentioned above, the events that led to hostilities

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<sup>64</sup> “Wushu kegekeqi de yingxiong renwu.” *Zhongguo Lishi*, 107.

<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs,” *International Organization* 64, no. 01 (January 20, 2010): 5-7.

<sup>66</sup> Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs,” 7, 9.

<sup>67</sup> Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 176.

<sup>68</sup> Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs,” 11-12.

<sup>69</sup> Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs,” 5.

<sup>70</sup> Gries, Prewitt-Freilino, Cox-Fuenzalida, and Zhang, “Contentious Histories,” 440.

are not clearly stated in either the history textbook or the museum. The textbook instead moves directly from the beginning of the war to the U.S. advance across the thirty-eighth parallel.<sup>71</sup> The museum gives a bit more detail on the events before China intervened, but it too elides the North Korean invasion of the south.<sup>72</sup> Of course, disregarding certain events in this way is not surprising. The subjective and emotional interpretation of the war disinclines people from giving weight to evidence that runs contrary to their beliefs, and as a result, established beliefs about the Korean War have yet another reason to persist and propagate.<sup>73</sup>

Still another means for reinforcing the interpretation of the war is the absence of figures that give a sense of Chinese casualties. While the museum tallies the number of enemies “annihilated” in each campaign, a similar count of Chinese casualties is not apparent.<sup>74</sup> The museum only hints at the scale of Chinese losses with references to “fighting a bloody war” and suggestions that the CPVF was short of men before the Fourth Campaign.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, the textbook limits itself to revolutionary heroes. This lack is shared not only by the museum and the textbook, but also by other sources. Many Chinese military histories only tabulate the enemies’ casualties, leaving Chinese casualties out, or noting losses in the text but never totaling them.<sup>76</sup> Chinese accounts of the war have long tended away from giving an accurate sense of Chinese casualties. At

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<sup>71</sup> *Zhongguo Lishi*, 105.

<sup>72</sup> “U.S. Aggression of Korea and Chinese Territory Taiwan,” accessed May 9, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124134772>.

<sup>73</sup> Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs,” 24-25.

<sup>74</sup> “Jiandi.” “The Fourth Campaign,” accessed May 9, 2013,

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124101741>; “Period of Mobile War,” accessed May 9, 2013,

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124117780>; “The Crush of the Summer and Autumn Offensives by the ‘UNC,’” accessed May 9, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124103913>; “Battle of Sanggamyeong,” accessed May 9, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124125128>.

<sup>75</sup> “Yuxuefenzhan.” “Museum of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea: Preface,” accessed May 9, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124133586>; “The Fourth Campaign,” accessed May 9, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124101741>.

<sup>76</sup> West, “The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance,” 393.

the time of the war, propagandistic newspaper reports describe how the CPVF suffered many casualties during combat without specifying just how many.<sup>77</sup>

The outcome of the war and the how its events have been told have played an important role in defining it as a victory, but for this interpretation to become widespread, consistent propaganda efforts on the part of the state cannot be ignored. These efforts began during the war itself with widespread campaigns for “Resisting America and Assisting Korea” and political rallies to celebrate victories.<sup>78</sup> Following Chinese forces’ victories, popular resistance to official narratives decreased. All the while, censorship increased.<sup>79</sup> After the war, films were made about it that not only celebrated the Chinese role in the conflict but also showed leaders deeply concerned about the lives and well being of their men. These depictions were presumably to counter images of massive death tolls and privation that war veterans might have brought home.<sup>80</sup> These films, as well as stories created during the war, have remained current in Chinese popular culture for decades.<sup>81</sup> All these efforts been layered on top of educational materials that promote the victorious image of the Korean War.<sup>82</sup>

### *Why the Korean War Needed to Be a Victory*

Just as the positive interpretation of the Korean War did not occur spontaneously, efforts to shape perceptions of the war were motivated by causes of their own. In addition

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<sup>77</sup> West, “The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance,” 387.

<sup>78</sup> Hajimu, “The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society,” 21-23; Yu, “What China Learned,” 20.

<sup>79</sup> Hajimu, “The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society,” 20, 22, 28-29.

<sup>80</sup> Paul G. Pickowicz, “Revisiting Cold War Propaganda: Close Readings of Chinese and American Film Representations of the Korean War,” *The Journal of American - East Asian Relations* 17, no. 4 (2010): 354, 359, 367-368.

<sup>81</sup> West, “The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance,” 390.

<sup>82</sup> Gries, Prewitt-Freilino, Cox-Fuenzalida, and Zhang, “Contentious Histories,” 435; Hajimu, “The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society,” 22-23.

to feelings of national pride that all Chinese citizens might enjoy by perceiving the Korean War as a victory, Chinese leaders have long stood to gain from promoting these perceptions. Indeed, placing the war in a positive light was so important that military campaigns were altered. At Mao's insistence, the CPVF crossed the thirty-eighth parallel during the Third Campaign to maximize the positive symbolism of the Korean War.<sup>83</sup>

The war also helped to make CCP rule acceptable to the people of China and to solidify the power of the state over the entire country. Conscripting those who had resisted the communist takeover into the CPVF was one way direct way of neutralizing and possibly reintegrating those who had opposed the state.<sup>84</sup> Outside of the battlefield, political campaigns in support of the war were combined with efforts to increase support for the state. The "Campaign to Suppress the Counter-revolutionaries," the "Three-Anti's Campaign" and the "Five-Anti's Campaign" all occurred during the war.<sup>85</sup> Propaganda of the time portrayed those resisting CCP takeover as "the claws and teeth of the American invaders," conflating anti-government activities at home with foreign threats to China.<sup>86</sup> Political mobilization efforts to rally support for the war, propaganda against the state's enemies, and efforts to increase the state's control over society were woven together and reinforced each other.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ironically, some of the Chinese leadership's efforts to create a victorious narrative for the war resulted in making the war less clearly a victory. In pushing across the thirty-eighth parallel in 1950 rather than seeking a ceasefire then, the Korean War was lengthened and casualties and costs of the war increased while the final borderline changed little. Hajimu, "The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society," 4, 33-35, 37; Chen, "China's Changing Aims," 27.

<sup>84</sup> Brown, "From Resisting Communists to Resisting America," 108, 119, 126.

<sup>85</sup> Mark, *China and the World since 1945*, 28.

<sup>86</sup> Brown, "From Resisting Communists to Resisting America," 125-126.

<sup>87</sup> Mark, *China and the World since 1945*, 28.

The war was also used to reshape the image of the Chinese soldier and increase support for the military. Before the war, soldiers were held in low esteem in China.<sup>88</sup> However, during the war, a popular story described the CPVF as “the most beloved people” (*zui keai de ren*).<sup>89</sup> The author of the piece exhorts Chinese citizens to be proud of their country’s soldiers and to admire their “character and beautiful and generous spirit.”<sup>90</sup> Not only did the story enjoy wide circulation during the war, it remains well known and still evokes patriotism.<sup>91</sup> The term “the most beloved people” continues to be applied to Chinese soldiers.<sup>92</sup> Both history textbooks and the museum in Dandong use the term.<sup>93</sup> These soldiers’ willingness to sacrifice for their country became part of the heroic narrative of the war and bolstered the image of the military within China.<sup>94</sup>

The war also resulted in a general outpouring of patriotism that continues to reverberate. As mentioned above, it did not always inspire enthusiasm. Just as often, it was met with apathy or even opposition.<sup>95</sup> However, after the Chinese forces were victorious in a number of battles, public sentiment about the war improved. More importantly, feelings of pride about being Chinese and support for the PRC also increased. However, this support could disappear just as easily if the war turned against China. Carefully controlling the news of the war remained important to maintain support, but so was the significance attached to the war.<sup>96</sup> The war in Korea became an arena for Mao and the Chinese leadership to display their ability to stand up to foreign powers,

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<sup>88</sup> West, “The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance,” 387.

<sup>89</sup> West, “The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance,” 383.

<sup>90</sup> West, “The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance,” 388.

<sup>91</sup> West, “The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance,” 390.

<sup>92</sup> West, “The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance,” 383.

<sup>93</sup> *Zhongguo Lishi*, 107, 108; “Support the Army and Give Preferential Treatment to Their Dependants,” accessed May 9, 2013, [www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124110079](http://www.flickr.com/photos/ldyson/8124110079).

<sup>94</sup> West, “The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance,” 386, 388-389.

<sup>95</sup> Hajimu, “The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society,” 8-12.

<sup>96</sup> Hajimu, “The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society,” 28-30.

especially when fighting Americans was combined with memories of the Japanese invasion.<sup>97</sup> The connection between the war and the CCP's nationalist credentials continues in that the Chinese victory in the Korean War is viewed as providing definite proof that China's "Century of Humiliation" ended with a communist victory.<sup>98</sup> Taking these factors together, the Chinese government had and continues to have an imperative to promote the war in a positive and victorious light.

*Conclusions: the International Effects*

Despite the negative effects the Korean War had on China, and despite the subsequent regret the Chinese leadership expressed about the war, the Korean War is portrayed as a just, victorious war in China. It is portrayed this way because it could be, and because, from the CCP's perspective, it had to be.<sup>99</sup> The security of the state depended not only on fighting the war, but also on interpreting it afterwards. Taking a broader view of this portrayal, we can see that memories of the Korean War have important ramifications for Chinese international relations. The negative assessment of the war by the Chinese leadership has had some effect on their decisions in the past, as noted above. However, the war's positive interpretation has played a role as well.

In the years since the Korean War, it has often been called upon as proof that China can face any challenge in the international arena and that it does not need to fear any country, especially not the United States. Following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, the United States and other countries imposed sanctions on China. However, the

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<sup>97</sup> Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism*, 245; Hajimu, "The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society," 24.

<sup>98</sup> Gries, Prewitt-Freilino, Cox-Fuenzalida, and Zhang, "Contentious Histories," 434.

<sup>99</sup> Hajimu, "The Korean War through the Prism of Chinese Society," 4, 36.

Chinese diplomat Qian Qichen recalls in his memoir that Deng Xiaoping invoked the Korean War to discount the foreign pressure being put on China.<sup>100</sup> After a NATO bomb struck the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, an editorial in the *People's Daily* warned NATO and the United States not to underestimate China as the weak country it had once been, but to remember the Chinese victory in Korea over the United States.<sup>101</sup>

Finally, we must not forget that historical memory itself can affect international behavior. In his *Never Forget National Humiliation*, Zheng Wang argues that Chinese politics and international relations have been deeply affected by China's historical memory.<sup>102</sup> While he focuses on events before the founding of the PRC, there is reason to believe that memories of the Korean War can play a role as well. A group of scholars surveyed Chinese and American college students about their perceptions of national pride and U.S.-China relations after exposing them to different interpretations of the Korean War. The Chinese students proved to be sensitive to how the accounts they read portrayed the war. When presented with a negative account of the war, students' levels of anxiety about relations between the two countries increased. When given any account of the war, as compared to a control group, their levels of anger also increased.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, the different accounts they read affected whether they thought the United States would avoid conflict with China, and what kind of foreign policy they thought China should adopt towards the United States.<sup>104</sup> Although the Korean War ended sixty years ago, its memory still has the potential to shape foreign relations.

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<sup>100</sup> Qian Qichen, *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 134.

<sup>101</sup> Gries, Prewitt-Freilino, Cox-Fuenzalida, and Zhang, "Contentious Histories," 434.

<sup>102</sup> Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>103</sup> Gries, Prewitt-Freilino, Cox-Fuenzalida, and Zhang, "Contentious Histories," 447-448.

<sup>104</sup> Gries, Prewitt-Freilino, Cox-Fuenzalida, and Zhang, "Contentious Histories," 452-453.

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