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## The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War by David Cheng Chang

Austin Dean

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, [austin.dean@unlv.edu](mailto:austin.dean@unlv.edu)

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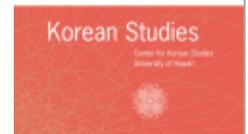
*The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War* by David Cheng Chang (review)

Austin Dean

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book, which she dedicates to “those who live and die under the system it describes,” will withstand the test of time.

Sung-Yoon Lee  
*Tufts University*

*The Hijacked War: The Story of Chinese POWs in the Korean War*, by David Cheng Chang. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. 496 pages. ISBN: 9781503604605, \$40.00.

David Cheng Chang deftly weaves together archival sources from around the world and numerous interviews to illuminate the story of Chinese prisoners of war during the Korean war: their path to the war, their experience in detention camps, debates in world capitals about what to do with them, and their lives after returning to the People’s Republic of China or Taiwan. *Hijacked War* is an important and valuable book that speaks to a number of fields: Chinese history, Korean history, Cold War history, and even Critical Prison Studies.

The first several chapters set the scene and traverse familiar ground. He details the course of the Civil War between the Nationalist and Communists from 1945 to 1949, relations between North and South Korea, and the outbreak of the war and initial fighting in June 1950. These chapters, mostly background for Chiang’s main concerns, could be dull but by incorporating personal histories of individual soldiers who later become prisoners of war, he avoids this fate and establishes one of the key perspectives of the book: moving between elite-level diplomatic history and individual experiences.

The real story begins after the huge swings in momentum in the conflict between June 1950 and the summer of 1951 when a slow, grinding war of attrition began. In the first year of the conflict United Nations forces had captured approximately 21,000 soldiers from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). What to do with the prisoners was not a simple matter and the “ideological, diplomatic and military contest over the repatriation of prisoners” became a key aspect of cease fire negotiations (p. 4).

International law was straightforward but U.S. officials found it unsatisfactory. According to the Geneva Convention, signed in 1949, “Prisoners of War shall be released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of active hostilities” (pp. 218–219). There could be no transfer

of prisoners on a one-to-one or partial basis. All prisoners had to be returned together and at once. Moreover, all prisoners would be returned to their home country. In this case, all soldiers captured from People's Volunteer Army would be transferred back to the PRC. However, U.S. officials, first for military, and then for strategic and ideological reasons, sought some other formula to govern the exchange of prisoners. Rather than following the letter of the law, they sought to implement "the spirit" of the Geneva Convention (p. 219). Ultimately, after much bureaucratic back and forth, confusion, and intervention by President Truman, the United States settled on a policy of "voluntary repatriation." Based on screening of detained prisoners, individual prisoners could choose whether to return to the PRC or somewhere else—namely Taiwan. U.S. civilian leadership assumed the "number of prisoners refusing repatriation [to the PRC] would be limited, and the Communists would eventually accept it with some arm twisting." The U.S. military went along because "they assumed they could bomb the Communists into submission" (p. 240). As Chiang concludes, both lines of thought proved to be "wishful thinking" and conundrums created by the policy of "voluntary repatriation" prolonged the war.

Chiang then takes the reader inside POW camps to examine the process of "voluntary repatriation." The formulation looked simple to policymakers in Washington, D.C. but it played out in the fraught atmosphere of the prison campus. Here Chang brings the story back to individuals and focuses on several core questions: "Why did the Chinese prisoners make starkly different choices? Why did some 14,000 men reject home and 'return' to a place to which they had never been before? . . . Under what circumstances did they make their choices? Did they actually have a free choice as the term 'voluntary repatriation' suggests?" (p. 5). It is in this latter half of the book where the author's many interviews with former POWs brings depth and texture to life in the detention facilities and the decision to participate in voluntary repatriation, or refuse it.

The book is engagingly written and Chang excels at portraying the combustible and violent environment of the POW camps as well as the complex choices facing prisoners. Because these sections are so gripping, the book might have benefitted from getting to this central place, and this central dilemma, earlier in the narrative. The reader does not arrive at the three key chapters that serve as fulcrum of the narrative, "Civil War in the POW camps" and "The Debate About Prisoner Repatriation," and "Screening" until page 175. These three chapters could be put to use in undergraduate classes on Chinese history or the Cold War. The book as a

whole would likely work best in graduate level courses on U.S. diplomatic history, military history, Chinese history, Cold War history, or even Critical Prison Studies. In a graduate class it might be profitably paired with *Prisoners of Empire: Inside Japanese POW Camps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020) by Sarah Kovner, a book that takes a similar approach but focuses on a different historical moment. We should be thankful that Chang has written a volume that is at once careful, detailed, and meticulous and one that still appeals to an audience with diverse interests. It is no small feat.

Austin Dean  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*