Disgraced Soldiers: Frustrated Experience of Reeducation for the Repatriated POWs of the Chinese Volunteer Army in the Korean War

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The Korean War was the first war Communist China’s military forces fought against foreign forces on foreign soil.¹ That experience not only tested the tenacity of new China’s military on the battlefield but also challenged the country’s newly instituted, often incomplete, military rules and regulations, especially the policy on prisoners of war at international level. The war situation on the Korean Peninsula took drastic turn within the first four months since the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950. The entry of the United Nations Command (UNC) on the side of South Korea in July and the participation of the Chinese People’s Volunteers (CPV) army in support of North Korea in October escalated the once a civil war to an international conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The first wave of the Chinese military forces to cross the Yalu River into North Korea on October 19, 1950 had six armies totaling 300,000 troops. By the time of the signing of the Armistice Agreement in July 1953, roughly 2.3 million Chinese troops had participated in the war.² The war also produced 21,814 CPV prisoners of war under the UNC custody. As a result, the POW issue remained a point of dispute at the ceasefire negotiation table. By September of 1953 as Operation Big Switch unfolded to exchange POWs on both sides, 7,110, only one-third of the total CPV POWs, chose to return to

¹ The Communist military forces were reorganized into the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 1946 to begin the civil war against the Nationalist government. The PLA was renamed the Chinese People’s Volunteers (CPV) for China to enter into the Korean conflict on the side of North Korea in mid-Oct. 1950.
Communist China. As for those who returned, Communist China’s attitude and policy towards them was disheartening. Forced confession, persecution, punishment, and humiliation turned the former “war heroes” into the enemies of the state. This paper intends to explore the limited POW policies of the Communist military that impacted the lives of the CPV POWs after the Korean War.

Characteristically, and from the beginning, the Chinese Communist military had a one sided POW policy, one that handled enemy’s captives effectively. Chinese Communist military forces went through an important structural transformation during different historical periods from the Red Army (1927-37), to the Eight Route Army and New Fourth Army during China’s War against Japan under the United Front agreement (1937-46), and to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA, 1946-present). Prior to the final victory on mainland China in the fall of 1949, the Communist forces, for an extended time period, remained small in numbers as opposed to the military of the ruling Nationalist government. That disadvantage demanded not only a vigorous recruitment strategy but also a productive policy toward enemy captives in order to expand the influence of Communist ideology and goals. In both theory and practice,

3 Although sources from both Chinese and English scholarship show slightly different numbers over the total CPV repatriates, numbers provided here are the closest to accuracy after combining information from both sides. In general, 1,030 CPV POWs (sick and wounded) were returned in Operation Little Switch (April 20-May 3, 1953) and 6,080 in Operation Big Switch (August 5-September 6, 1953). 440 more CPV POWs agreed to be repatriated after further persuasion by Communist Delegate in mid-October 1953, making the total CPV repatriates 7,110. See Xu Yan, The Chinese Forces and Their Casualties in the Korean War, 57-58; Walter Hermes, Truce Tent and Fighting Front (Washington DC: Center of Military History United States Army, 1992), Appendix B.

4 For the detailed experiences of the repatriated CPV POWs, see Da Ying, Zhiyuanjun zhanfu jishi [Story about the CPV POWs] (Beijing: PLA Literature Press, 1986), 275-78 and He Ming, Zhongcheng: zhiyuanjun zhanfu guilai renyuan de kanke jinhli [Loyalty: Frustrating Experience of the CPV Repatriated POWs] (Beijing: Chinese Cultural History Press, 1998).

5 Communist military forces during China’s war against Japan (1937-45) were reorganized into two major armies, the Eight Route Army and the New Fourth Army, under the general command of the Military Commission of the Nationalist Government as a result of the Second United Front agreement following the Xi An incident in December 1936. The Communist forces were renamed as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 1946 at the start of the War of Liberation against the Nationalist government following the end of WWII.
Communist military forces applied the principles of “disintegrating the enemy,” “transforming the POWs,” “no execution, no humiliation, and no beating up of the POWs” to both captured Japanese and Nationalist soldiers. The policy of “rewarding those who laid down their arms and punish those who continue to resist” worked productively to disintegrate enemy forces from within through political propaganda of the captive Japanese and turned them into a force of opposition against the war. Mao Zedong, in his famous essay, “On the Protracted War,” in 1938, pointed out that the political work within the Communist military forces should focus on three major principles to include “the unity between officers and enlisted men, unity between the military and the people, and the disintegration of the enemy forces.” “To apply these principles effectively,” Mao continued, “we must start with this basic attitude of respect for the soldiers and the people, and for the human dignity of prisoners of war once they have laid down their arms.”

It was clear that from the beginning of China’s war against Japan, Mao made the issue of prisoners of war as equally important as other political issues within the Chinese Communist Party and the military.

During the War of Liberation (1946-49), the newly reorganized People’s Liberation Army under Mao’s leadership applied a vigorous policy intended to breaking up the morale and fighting spirit of the Nationalist forces. The captured Nationalist troops, often in large numbers, were either let go back home with travel money or recommissioned into the PLA. In a positive sense, the Communist POW policy during war time worked quite efficiently to disintegrate the

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7 Mao, On the Protracted War, 106.
enemy beyond the battlefield. From late 1948 to early 1949, for example, some 1.8 million Nationalist troops surrendered to the PLA forces. One of the major factors for was the effective tactics of Communist political propaganda on the policy of POWs.

This success, however, is but one side of the coin. Communist China’s military forces, from their inception, seem to have no clear written rule on dealing the POWs of their own. In principle and from a cultural perspective, it is a disgrace and a humiliation to become a prisoner of war. Throughout China’s revolutionary period, Mao continued to emphasize the principle of the Communist military as a “force of pressing forward with indomitable will, and a force to triumph over all enemies and never be overcome by the enemies. No matter how difficult the circumstances were, as long as there is one soldier alive, he must fight to the end.”\(^8\) The particular features of China’s war against Japan determined the more tragic fate of the Chinese POWs in the hands of the Japanese military. From September 1931, Japan had waged an undeclared war against China. It was not until December 9, 1941 when an official declaration of war was issued by the Chinese Nationalist government. Although the Japanese representatives signed the 1929 Geneva Convention, their government never ratified it.\(^9\) Akira Fujiwara, who served in the Japanese Imperial Army in China Theater for four years, is now a professor emeritus with a number of published books on the Japanese military war atrocity in Asia. According to Fujiwara, in August 1937, Emperor Hirohito issued a directive to remove the restrictions of international law on the treatment of the Chinese POWs. Hirohito’s decree also


ordered the Japanese military officers to stop using the term “prisoners of war.”\textsuperscript{10} As a result, most of the Chinese POWs were killed during captivity. Some would argue that the stronger contempt the Japanese soldiers held toward the surrendered allied soldiers led to further brutal treatment, including murder, of the allied POWs. In the wake of Pearl Harbor with the firm establishment of the wartime alliance of the United Nations against the Axis Powers, the Japanese government informed the International Red Cross that its military would observe the Geneva Convention regarding POWs.\textsuperscript{11} With China’s Nationalist government taking charge in the war in the Pacific Theater, the Communist military leadership never had an opportunity to deal with the POW matter officially.

One of the eminent tasks the new Communist regime faced following the founding of the People’s Republic of China in October 1949 was to create a set of military regulations for the PLA. Since it was a time consuming undertaking, the Central Committee Military Commission decided to, for the time being, borrow the military regulations from the Soviet Army. In a few month in early 1950, the PLA staff drafted the military regulations regarding various issues while paying little to no attention to the creation of a Chinese version of the “Fighting Man’s Code.”\textsuperscript{12} There might be a reason that the code was not needed right away: the War of Liberation was over and it was time to think about political and economic reconstruction of the new regime. However, that thought was too soon.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
Just as the outbreak of the Korean War came as a surprise to the new PRC leadership on June 25, 1950, the desperate appeal from North Korean leader, Kim Il-Sung, to Mao Zedong requesting China’s urgent military assistance arrived unexpectedly on October 1, the first anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Although Mao had ordered the assembly and reorganization of four armies into “Northern Frontier Defense Army” and had stationed them along the Yalu River since July, China’s decision to organize the Chinese People’s Volunteer force and to enter the war on the side of North Korean came in less than three weeks. As Xu Yan, a well known Chinese military historian, pointed out that Communist China was not ready to take “a major part in the Korean War” barely one year following the founding of the new regime. The hasty assembling and reorganization of the Chinese troops under a new title of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (CPV) did not prepare its soldiers and their leadership to face the upcoming challenge beyond the battlefield.

The United Nations Command entered the Korean War less than a month in July of 1950 since the outbreak of the conflict on the side of South Korea. The CPV joined the North Korean military in October making the war on the Korean Peninsula a regional as well as an

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14 To be precise, it was in 18 days from October 1 to 19 that the Chinese leadership completed the elaboration and organization of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army and the decision to enter into the Korean War on the side of North Korea. See Feng & Li, *Mao Zedong and the Korean War*, 30.
16 Out of the first nine CPV armies to enter the Korean War, three armies, the 26th Army, the 27th Army, and the 50th Army consisted of almost exclusively the surrendered Nationalist forces quondam units toward the end of the Liberation War period (1948-49). Those former Nationalist soldiers, under the Communist officers, were deployed hastily to the Korean War battle front and suffered high casualties. They were quick to surrender to the UNC forces as well. They composed about two-thirds of the CPV POWs as a result.
international one in nature. The fighting on the battlefield turned from massive army engagement in extensive battle lines on both sides to tug-of-war around the 38th Parallel. By June of 1951, the war reached the stage of a stalemate for both sides. The Korean War Armistice Talks began on July 10, 1951 with the United Nations Command team facing the Communist delegates (including the CPV and North Korean military representatives). Four months later, both sides began to debate over the POWs issue clashing over the interpretation of 1949 Geneva Conventions and the execution of the POW repatriation. After much quarrelling, both sides agreed to the “voluntary repatriation” through screening inside the POW camps. The screening process lasted for about three months between April and July of 1952. Despite the “April 6 Statement” by the North Korean Supreme Command and the CPV Headquarters to the Communist POWs under UNC custody, by the time of the Operation Big Switch between August 5 and September 6, 1953, out of the 21,310 CPV POWs, only about 6,670 chose to be repatriated back to PRC. These were the elite CPV soldiers who firmly believed in Communist cause and remained loyal to the new Communist regime. The remaining some 14,235 non-repatriates elected to go to Taiwan and they were transferred to the island in early 1954.

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17 The UNC position changed from “one-for-one” exchange of the POWs to voluntary repatriation while the Communist side wanted a total return of their POWs.
18 The non-repatriates were first handed over to the neutral nation, India, and then transferred to their chosen destinations. These are not the exact numbers since a few died during custody and two escaped. For details of the POWs debate at the Korean War Armistice Talks, see Pingchao Zhu, Americans and Chinese at the Korean War Cease-Fire Negotiations, 1950-1953 (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 168-69. He Ming, Jianzheng: chaoxian zhanzheng zhanfu qianfan jieshi daibiao de riji [The Evidences: The Diary of the CPV Persuasion Representatives during the Korean War POWs Repatriation] (Beijing: Chinese Culture and History Press, 2001), 412-13. Two-thirds of the 14,200 CPV non-repatriates were the former Nationalist surrendered troops and the rest were soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the Communist China’s military forces. See Zhang Zheshi, Wuode changxian zhanzheng: Yige zhiyuanjun zhanfu de liushi nian huiyi [My Korean War: A Sixty Years of Recollections of a CPV POW] (Jincheng Press, 2011).
Losing one third of its POWs was obviously a big embarrassment for Communist China.\(^{19}\)

On September 30, 1953, a Letter from Kim Il Sung, the Supreme Commander of the North Korean Military, and Marshall Peng Dehuai, the Supreme Commander of the CPV, pleaded to all the Communist non-repatriates:

> We are fully aware of your longing for motherland and of your suffering during captivity. Some of you were forced to be tattooed on your arms, to confess, to join certain organization, to take part in certain activities, or to hold certain position. We believe you were under pressure and forced to do that and should not be held responsible. We hereby announce firmly: regardless of the aforementioned activities you might participated during captivity, all of our POWs should not be questioned and blamed for after they return to their homeland. All of the repatriates can be reunited with their families and rejoin their motherland reconstruction undertaking and live peaceful lives. We are sending representatives to welcome you home.\(^{20}\)

In the next three months, Communist representatives continued to persuade the non-repatriates, hoping to get more to return. By the end of the deadline, the Communist side was able to extract 440 for the CPV and 188 for North Korean POWs making the CPV repatriates a total of 7,110.\(^{21}\)

For the 7,110 CPV repatriates, the September announcement appeared to be a great encouragement and an official acknowledgment of their correct choice. The Gate of Triumph to welcome the CPV repatriates hugged them with a sense of relief and glory as the trucks carrying them crossed the Bridge of No Return from Panmunjom into the Communist controlled area in Kaesong, North Korea. The CPV repatriates would stay in Kaesong for about three weeks to rest, regroup, and rejoice over the freedom they had long lost before heading back to China by train. Upon arriving northern China via North Korea, the CPV repatriates received

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\(^{19}\) Ninety percent of the North Korean POWs chose to be repatriated. See Hermes, *Truce Tent and Fighting Front*, Appendix B, 515.

\(^{20}\) He Ming, *The Evidences*, 411-412.

warm welcome with a military marching band and crowds on the streets. They took different routes stopping for visits of tourist attractions along the way. Yet, the destination of the “Welcome Home” trip was not their respective hometowns and the excitement of returning to motherland would end in a small village named Jinjiazhen (金家镇) in Changtu County (昌图县), population 16,000, located almost in the northern most of Liaoning Province that borders North Korea.

Soon, most of the repatriates arrived at Jinjiazhen to gather for the debriefing. Administratively, they came to be under the supervision of “Repatriates Management Administration.” (RMA, 归管处)22 Structurally, the RPA was actually the former wartime CPV POW Camp Administration holding the American POWs. The director of the RMA, at Colonel rank, was assisted by staff members mostly from that office. The RPA was run directly by the Central Military Commission in Beijing through Northeastern Military Garrison in Shenyang. Over 6,000 of the repatriates were organized into four military educational regiments and stationed in Jinjiazhen. A small number of repatriate officers were selected to serve at the ranks of captain or lower.23

Most of the repatriate officers at the rank of major and higher received special assignment to work for the CPV Persuasion Team during the post Cease-fire arrangement in order to get more CPV POWs to return to China. As a result, they arrived Jinjiazhen a couple of months later in January 1954 and were organized into a special group staying with the RMA

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23 Ibid.
staff and were under the direct administrative control of the RMA director.²⁴ Politically, a
generic political concept of “Authority,” 组织, occupied a dominating position representing the
tripod power of the CCP, the military and the government in the minds of the ordinary Chinese.
The RMA was this authority to the repatriates on behalf of the tripod power. On the daily basis,
the repatriates were reminded of showing loyalty, remaining honest, and making confession to
this Authority which determined not only the political but also personal lives of the repatriates.

Still, life at Jinjiazhen for the first three months was quite relaxing and worry-free. The
repatriates received medical care, were fed with special meals on a daily basis, entertained
regularly with movies and stage performances, and overwhelmed with myriad of
commendations for their bravery during captivity. It was almost like they were to be regrouped
and revived in order to return to their military units or to take new jobs after all this was over.

Li Chi 李炽, a CPV repatriate, recalled:

> When I first arrived at Jinjiazhen, the RPA carders encouraged me to rest well
> and get fit in order to take new assignments. I was very excited and looking
> forward to the new opportunity ahead. I studies hard, exercised a lot and was
> so eager to make contribution to motherland’s reconstruction. I wanted to
> make up for the time I lost during captivity.²⁵

But they rejoiced too soon.

By mid-November, 1953, the RMA began the official debriefing which included political
assessment (政审) of each repatriate’s behavior during captivity and then make reassessment
based on the conclusion of the investigation. This process lasted for one whole year when all

²⁴ Ibid., 121-22. Wu Decheng, the Political Commissar, once the acting Commander of the 180th Division (at the
rank of colonel), 60th Army of the CPV Third Army Corps, was the highest ranking CPV officer in captivity. He was
captured in July 1952, 14 months after the combat set back of the 180th Division in the mountains between
Chunchon and Sachangri area. Also see Hong Xuezhi, Kangmei yuanchao zhanzheng huiyi [Recollections on the
²⁵ Ibid., 123.
the repatriates went through four stages from political verification and education, confession, reassessment, to reassignment. This was where the ordeal of the CPV repatriates began, and it was a long and heartbreaking journey for them.

While there was no specific official policy for RPA to follow in debriefing the repatriates, major principles were based on several political assumptions and cultural understanding of what POW meant to soldiers who were supposed to die fighting and shed their last drop of blood. The Korean War posed to the Chinese Communists for the first time a question of POWs in large number under foreign control on foreign soil. China’s new regime met the challenge by enforcing a rigorous policy based on Communist ideology and traditional moral principle.

Before crossing the Yalu River into the Korean battlefield, every CPV soldier pledged the following:

We are the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army. In order to resist American brutal invasion, support the struggle of liberation of our Korean brothers, and defend the interests of the Chinese people, the Korean people and the people in Asia, we volunteer to go to Korea to fight alongside the Korean people to defeat our common enemy... We pledge to overcome all the difficulties, uphold the spirit of revolutionary heroism, and demonstrate bravery and valor on the battlefield...

This CPV pledge simply demonstrated the CPV soldiers’ determination prior to combat. Neither the PLA nor the CPV provided any standard or Code of Conduct for the fighting men in case of captivity. By August 1953, the RPA still had not come up with a specific set of policy to handle the CPV repatriates in terms of their debriefing and future transition back to military units or civilian life. What laid there was just a general statement similarly to the Western

26 Ibid., 124.
notion of *Fighting Men’s Code* among the CPV soldiers: “I will never collaborate with the enemy in order to stay alive. I will never become a traitor.” (决不苟且偷生，决不叛变投敌) As one of the RPA carders referred to a list of rhetoric to the repatriates at the beginning of the debriefing: “There are no such words, ‘to be captured’ in the dictionary of Communism.” “To become a POW means ‘losing one’s honor.’” “To come back as a POW, you are guilty to the people.” “If you are a Communist member, you should have die fighting [on the battlefield]. Why did you come back alive?” With these assumptions, all the repatriates were presumed guilty regardless of their performance on the battlefields and how they were captured.

On November 16, 1953, for those in the 2nd Educational Regiment, there began the first stage of the political review process with the focus on patriotic and socialist education. According to the Political Commissar Major Hong of the RMA, all the repatriates were to understand the “Twenty-word Principle” from the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCPCC), *warm welcome, patient education, verifying situation* (under captivity), *Cautious handling*, and finally *proper reassignment*. This Twenty-Word Principle was to become the standard to guide the entire debriefing process of the CPV repatriate in the next 11 months.

*Warm Welcome* intended to give the repatriates a peace of mind upon returning and for them to feel the care from the government and the CCP leadership. *Patient Education* focused on cleansing repatriates’ minds of enemy indoctrination. The repatriates were to eliminate feelings of suspicion, pessimism, or complaint of their unfortunate experience as POWs. They

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30 Zhang Zeshi, *Zhanfu Shouji [A CPV POW’s Accounts]* (Xining, Qinghai People’s Press, 1995), 224.

31 In Communist China, most of the government policies actually were issued and executed by the CCP. See He Ming, *Loyalty*, 124-25.
needed to trust the RPA and the CCP leadership. **Verifying Situation** relied on repatriate’s report regarding his behavior during captivity, information from each individual repatriate’s original unit, witnesses’ testimonies, and finally RMA’s reassessment. Repatriates were supposed to make honest confessions over what they did during captivity. **Cautious Handling** included decisions on each repatriate’s military discharge, CCP membership, and disability status based on the final findings through “political evaluation.” It set the yardsticks for “wrong doings” (犯错误) for becoming prisoners of war and, during captivity, for those who became turncoats, surrendered to the enemy, were forced to get anti-Communist tattoos, etc. Finally, **Proper Reassignment** attempted to have every one of the repatriates relocated according to their specific situation. The repatriates were told not to be overly worried or anxious about their future.\(^{32}\) Although still baffled by what would come next, most of the repatriates appeared to want to believe that the RMA were going to guide them through the debriefing process until all was settled.

Although even the RPA carders were not offered a complete guidelines from the higher command of the Chinese military and CCP leadership to review the repatriates’ performance during captivity, three major facets emerged to take over the political assessment process. First of all, the repatriates were to reveal under what circumstances they became POWs. That was crucial to determine the nature of their captivity. Second, the degrees that the repatriates were engaged in Communist or anti-American activities during captivity were closely measured by the RPA staff. That would decide if the repatriates were collaborating with the enemy during captivity. Third, to what extent the repatriates might have exposed military secrets to

\(^{32}\) He Ming, *Loyalty*, 124-25.
the enemy was carefully examined. This assumption, often was up to interpretation and varied person by person, if confirmed by the RAP Authority, could place many in a much serious category of a “traitor” or a “spy.” This set of concepts, however, was incompatible with the “Twenty-word Principle” provided to the repatriates at the beginning of the debriefing. To a great extent, the repatriates were often misled to make unnecessary confessions, exaggerate their missteps, and make up “wrong doings” or “crimes” they never did, in order to trade for “Authority’s” understanding and excuse. The complication of the insufficient military regulations and imposed CCP principles, combined with cultural perception and military traditions, created a confused political environment for the CPV repatriates who went in with hope and great expectation and were about to leave with extreme disappointment, a sense of betrayal, and heartbreak. More obscurely, the repatriates debriefing process, obviously a military issue, was treated as one of political in nature and all of the final assessments became a political imprint in each repatriate’s employment and life.

Two days later, Major Hong from the RMA gave a thoughtful speech in an attempt to motivate everyone to make confession. “Why do you have to confess?” according to Hong, enemy’s purge, torture and indoctrination led some of the CPV captives to become demoralized and they might have leaked military secret to the enemy.\(^{33}\) So, they must confess what mistakes they might have made during captivity in order for the Authority to better understand their situation in enemy’s hands. Still, most of the repatriates were not sure what to confess. The RPA carders instructed the repatriates to apply the concept of the “Fighting Men’s Code,” which glorified a soldier’s death in the battlefield, to scrutinize their performance under

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 125.
enemy’s custody in order to reveal their “wrong doings.”

To seduce the repatriates to confess more of their missteps, the RPA began to show several war movies, all ending with main characters who died fighting. The implication was obvious: all of the movie characters died fighting and they were revolutionary martyrs and heroes. On the other hand, the repatriates who did not take the “supposed heroic action,” therefore were not heroes.

To explore further the guilty conscience among the repatriates, a memorial service was held to remember those who died in the POW camps. Over one hundred CPV martyrs were named and their sacrifices were venerated highly at the service. The remembrances of the dead seemed to push more repatriates to be lost in thought: sentiment of shame and disgrace began to overwhelm their conscience. Subconsciously, they were inclined to confess. Captain Nan Yangzhen of the 538th Regiment, the 180th Division of the 60th Army, who also served as the CCP branch secretary in the POW camp, recalled:

The logic we were led to follow was that if we were not wounded or did not resist when captured, then we must be surrendering to the enemy, an act of dishonor. Based on such an assumption, most of the repatriates exaggerated their “wrong doings” by confessing as “coward POWs who ‘surrendered’ to the enemy.”

Others tried to argue for their active resistance in the POW camps but only to be told that it was not the time for them to “show off” their bravery and accomplishments. Some repatriates could not think of anything they could believe to be “wrong doings” and did not think they had much to confess. They were then seriously reprimanded for not being honest to the CCP Authority (组织). Repeatedly, the RPA kept reminding the repatriates of the importance to

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34 There was no specific tenet of the “Fighting Men’s Code” in the Chinese Military but a general concept of what a soldier was supposed to do on the battlefields. The closest statement could be the “Fighting Pledge” of the CPV.  
35 He Ming, _Loyalty_, 126.  
36 Ibid., 127.  
37 Ibid., 128.
keep a proper attitude toward the Communist Party, the country, and the people and it was time for them to “demonstrate their loyalty and honesty to the CCP” by making sincere confessions.\(^{38}\)

While facing mounting pressure from the RPA Authority to comprehend the meaning of “becoming a POW” under any circumstance, the repatriates tried, repeatedly, to present their heroic deeds inside the POWs camps. The organization and structure of the CPV led to the complication of its POW population. With about two-thirds of the CPV POWs being the former Chinese Nationalist soldiers, confrontation between them and the rest of the die-hard CPV Communist loyalists was almost irreconcilable. Communist Party transitory branches were spread throughout the POW camps. Routine meetings were held and resistance were organized to keep morale high among the CPV soldiers. Yet, tension began to escalate especially when in early April of 1952 the UNC decided to screen all of the POWs in order to separate the repatriates from the non-repatriates.\(^{39}\) Nearly all of the former Nationalist soldiers under UNC custody refused to return to Communist China while the die-hard Communist loyalists put up a tough fight in an attempt to persuade the non-repatriates to change their minds. The efforts eventually became implacable on both sides as they struggled to resist and to persist. Kangaroo courts were held inside the POW camps to try some of the non-repatriates. Severe beatings also took place on the repatriates. Some repatriates paid the price with their lives, while others were tortured and forced to have anti-Communist tattoos on their bodies. Ironically, those tattoos later at RPA were seen as signs of betrayal and

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cowardice.\textsuperscript{40} In order to reduce internal complication inside the POW camps, most of the CPV POWs were shipped to Cheju Island about fifty miles south of the Korean mainland, where the repatriates were segregated from the non-repatriates. On Cheju Island, the CPV repatriates organized the “Red POWs Camp” and continued to carry out hunger strikes, sabotage activities, and various “underground political propaganda.”\textsuperscript{41} They constituted a core force in keeping high spirits among the repatriates until the final exchange of POWs in August 1953.

Characteristically, nearly all of the over 7,100 repatriates were the one-third die-hard Communist CPV POWs who upheld their beliefs and eventually returned to China. Was that enough to prove their loyalty to the new Communist regime that many paid their lives to defend? But this unyielding resistance inside the POW camps was neither appreciated nor recognized by the RMA Authority as a demonstration of perseverance of the repatriates under captivity. Denied of their uncompromising integrity as POWs, the repatriates were forced to search deeper into their souls and wondered what else they could have done before and during captivity to show their allegiance to their country and Communist belief. Regrettably, in the face of the lofty ideal of courage, honor, and loyalty, the uncompromising integrity of the repatriates were seriously questioned by the country they defended and the military they served.

Meanwhile, one document was being circulated among the repatriates for them to study. One rhetorical sentence especially caught their attention: “The Communist Party members are not supposed to be captured.”\textsuperscript{42} This political notion was intended to force the

\textsuperscript{40} Da Ying, \textit{Zhanfu jishi}, [\textit{Story of the CPV POWs}], (PLA Literature Press, Beijing, 1986), 134-60, 240-41.
\textsuperscript{41} He Ming, \textit{Loyalty}, 45-62.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 129.
repatriates to explore probable realities of their “wrong doings” during captivities. According to collective recounts of many repatriates, they slowly erred on the wrong side of the logic to exaggerate their “mistakes” such as giving away their military unit numbers to be equivalent to “revealing military secrets to the enemy.” Similarly, to be captured when losing means to resist meant to “succumb to the enemy” and to put up fight inside the POW camps was only euphemistically or indirectly seen as collaborating with the enemy. All of these speculations and behaviors seemed to beg to admit disloyalty and dishonesty of the repatriates during captivity.

Zhang Zeshi, a division staff member in charge of propaganda work in the 538th Regiment of 180th Division, 60th Army, joined the CPV in 1950 after graduating from Qinghua University and went to Korea with his unit in March 1951. He was captured two months later along with several thousand soldiers of the Division. Because of his knowledge of English, Zhang served as a translator in the POW camp. That “job,” however, became his major problem. The RPA warned the repatriates that they had better confess before their “mistakes” were exposed by fellow POWs. Under pressure, Zhang came up with two major “missteps.” First, he had a grenade when captured, a fact that he became a POW when he still had the means of resistance. Second, he agreed to work as an English translator for POW camp administration in order to get more food, a “severe Rightist tendency of cowardice and an act of losing a fighting man’s spirit” as he blamed himself. That was Zhang’s self evaluation, significantly exaggerated yet was considered a better case than those who felt that they had

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43 Ibid., 130.
44 Since July 1952 all of the CPV POWs were locked up in the POW camps in Cheju Do, an island located at the southwestern end of South Korea. See Jonathan F. Vance, ed., The Encyclopedia of POWs and Internment, (ABC-Clio, 2000), 154.
45 Zhang Zeshi, A CPV POW’s Accounts, 232.
little to nothing to confess. Accordingly, every repatriate was required to prepare a report of confession to be evaluated and approved through the chain of command from his respective squad all the way to the Northeastern Military Region via RMA. If the report was unacceptable, it would be returned to the individual for rewrite or revision. Those with their reports approved would receive the final conclusion.46

Slowly but still vaguely the RPA began to wrap up the confession process by laying out four categories in order to determine each repatriate’s final assessment. First, those who demonstrated act of valor, leadership and tough fighting spirit during captivity would have their military roll, CCP or Youth League membership resumed, and would receive complimentary citation as well.47 Second, those who experienced, although briefly, low spirit but quickly corrected and took active part in POW camp resistance could have their military roll resumed but with CCP or Youth League reprimand record. Third, those who experienced significant lower spirit but gradually recover to join the POW camp fight could only keep their military role prior to captivity but were to be expelled from the CCP or the Youth League. Fourth, those who surrendered to the enemy on the battlefields, became turncoats, or worked for the enemy inside the POW camps would be expelled from the military roll, the CCP or the Youth League.48

46 He Ming, Loyalty, 132.
47 The Youth League is an organization especially for the younger generation prior to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership. Technically, the Youth League membership is the prerequisite for application for the CCP membership.
48 See He Ming, Loyalty, 132. Under the fourth category, the punitive expulsion from the military roll is not necessarily the equivalent to the US military dishonorably discharge. Although the Chinese military did not have a comprehensive set of regulations for military discharge, the punitive decision of “expelling from the military roll” was not of criminal in nature. Technically, “expelling from the military roll” could be seen as discharge with disgrace and without military benefit as a result. It was clear that most of the punitive discharge for the repatriates were made only for that specific occasion.
As the 1953 waned, it appeared that about 80 percent of the repatriates could hope to be considered for the first and second categories with a very small number of them to face a more severe punishment of the “twin expulsions” (expulsion from the CCP and the military roll) in the final assessment. Once again, their relief was a little too soon. In early March, a new instruction from the higher Military Headquarters in Northeastern Region brought about a sudden turn of event overnight to increase the punitive bar for most of the repatriates. The initial intent of keeping the CCP membership for 80 percent of the repatriates was elevated to expelling over 90 percent of them. Most of the repatriates initially were considered to have their military roll restored would be able to keep their military roll only prior to the captivity. That meant they would receive ordinary discharge with little to no pension and no job opportunities in civilian life. This change of mind at the Authority level generated an enormous tremor among the repatriates. They sensed the seriousness of the incoming final assessment for them as a result of the sudden change of policy. Many believed that this change of mind was incompatible with the CCP Twenty-word Principle they were initially informed of and some tried to argue with the RMA cadres for their cases accordingly before the final decision was made. Their last attempt, however, was made in vain.

By the second half of May in 1954, official conclusions for repatriates at the rank of captain or lower arrived. Four months later, the fate for ranking officers above captain was

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49 He Ming, *Loyalty*, 133.
50 One of the military benefits in Communist China include job arrangement and one time monetary pension for officers and enlisted men from the urban area for those who receive honorably discharge. Since there was no comprehensive regulation on military discharge in the Chinese military, it was obvious that the decisions on the repatriates were largely influenced by the political view. For the CPV repatriates, “keeping military roll prior to the captivity” was equivalent to Other than Discharge (OTD) in the US military and “expulsion from military roll” to dishonorably discharge short of court marshal. And the latter would lose all the benefits including government arranged jobs.
determined. It officially ended the political assessment with conclusions for each of the repatriates. Ninety-two percent of some 2,900 CPV Communist Party members were expelled from the CCP. The remaining 120 CCP members received political reprimand and warning. Out of the 6,064 repatriates 700 were excluded from the military roll and 4,600 were allowed to keep the military roll only prior to their captivity.\footnote{He Ming, Loyalty, 138.} After the political assessment was determined, majority of the repatriates were given equivalent to Other than Honorable (OTH) discharge with special remarks such as “internally controlled,” “spy suspect,” or “questionable CCP member” in their personal files.\footnote{In Communist China, a personal file accompanies an individual to different employments and is considered an important political dossier. Individuals cannot see the contents in their political files. Only the Communist Party authority has the authority and access to insert or delete any record in the file.} The most absurd fact was that most of the political assessments were not based on careful investigation, instead on repatriates’ own confessions which to a great extent deemed to be exaggeration of the facts under pressure. This indiscreet and irresponsible process, as one of the repatriates lamented, “was a battle we were bound to lose.”\footnote{He Ming, Loyalty, 156.} These political records were to accompany the repatriates for over three decades of life on a rough and bumpy road.

Feeling wronged, lost, and even shameful, many repatriates broke into tears and cried for days. The excruciating pain in their heart could not be imagined. A few attempted to commit suicide. Col. Wu Chengdu, the Political Commissar of the 180\textsuperscript{th} Division, was the highest CPV ranking officer to become POW. During CPV’s fifth campaign (April 22-June 16, 1951), CPV’s 12\textsuperscript{th} and 60\textsuperscript{th} armies were separated by the UNC forces. As the result, the 180\textsuperscript{th} Division
(of the 60th Army) were isolated and soon surrounded by the U.S. 24th Division. Under a chaotic situation, Wu decided to organize some hundred wounded soldiers on the retreat. By the end of the campaign, the division suffered a seventy-nine percent casualty rate and those who were captured consisted of twenty-one percent of the entire CPV POW population.

Exhausted and blinded by nyctalopia, Wu and two other soldiers were captured on July 10, 1952, after fourteen months fighting behind enemy line. Inside the POW camps, Wu continued to assume leadership and carried out various forms of resistance especially during the screening process. While the RMA Authority showed no interest in recognizing his record of commandership and fighting spirit during the briefing, Wu was instead labeled traitor and stripped of the CCP membership and military roll at the final political assessment.

Consequently, Wu was demoted to the rank of captain and received a discharge equivalent to OTH discharge. Upon hearing the decision, Wu fainted right away and remained in a trance for over two months. Disbelieved, he tried unsuccessfully in late 1954 to appeal the decision to the PLA Northeastern Military Command.

Evidently, there seemed to be more questions than answers. Thirty years later in mid-1980s, some of the CPV repatriates gathered together to reflect on their painful and frustrated experience at the RPA. Seven questions still remained unresolved by the time the repatriates were to depart the RMA:

1. Does becoming a POW, under any circumstance, make one a coward?

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54 Shu Guang Zhang, Mao’s Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953 (University of Kansas, 1995), 152.


56 He Ming, Loyalty, 138 & 141.
2. Would working inside the POW camps mean “working for the enemy?”

3. Would only refusal to be capture and killing oneself be considered faithful and unyielding?

4. Does “revealing one’s CCP/Youth League membership or military ranks to the enemy” mean “losing revolutionary integrity?”

5. Does “having anti-Communist tattoo” inside the POW camps deserve the punishment of “twin expulsion?” (expelled from the CCP and military roll)

6. Why is the “POW Camp Fraternity” considered as counter-revolutionary group?\(^\text{57}\)

7. Why was the dismissal of the “POW Camp CCP-Youth League branch” by the RPA Authority necessary?\(^\text{58}\)

Bearing with them these “unanswered questions” and the burden of negative political assessment, the repatriates left RMA melancholically for their respective destinations to face even bigger challenges in their lives. Despite the feeling of depression, anger, and injustice, most of the repatriates believed that if they tried to put the unfortunate past behind them they could still begin a new life.

The conclusion of the RMA assessment was merely the beginning of the nightmare for the repatriates. Ironically, the CPV repatriates entered the RMA debriefing as war heroes and

\(^{57}\) The “POW Camp Fraternity” was established in July 1951 as a self help group. Since the CPV POWs tried to conceal their CCP membership and ranking officers, the fraternity was a better form to organized different activities and support POWs in various matters. Yet, the RMA viewed it as unpatriotic and reactionary to the political struggle inside the POW camps. For his leading role as the initial organizer of the “POW Camp Fraternity,” Dai Yushu was expelled from the military roll.

\(^{58}\) The forming of the “POW CCP-Youth League Branch” was for the purpose of setting the CCP leadership inside the POW camps. About one-third of the repatriates were members of this group. They hoped that members in this leading group could provide information and speak the verity of their behavior as POWs. The dismissal of this group, unfortunately, meant that no official evidences were under consideration as evidences for the repatriates while in the POW camps. See He Ming, *Loyalty*, 146-55.
left soldiers of disgrace. They survived the war and the POW camps, yet their survival and return to China made them suspects of the Communist course they heroically fought to defend. Regrettably, although there were nearly 7,000 of them, no one seemed to be qualified as a witness to testify for each other’s performance and innocence as POWs. The repatriates were unjustly blamed in the political assessments as traitors, turncoats, cowards, spies, Rightists, or simply someone who lost the revolutionary spirit when became POWs. With these assumptions, all the repatriates were presumed guilty regardless of their performance on the battlefields and how they were captured. The POW status sealed the fate and political life of the CPV repatriates.

As a result of the RMA’s assessments, the CPV repatriates left the reeducation base with a bitter and heart breaking reality to face. Most of them were deprived from the CCP membership, a severe political punishment. Many were dishonorably discharged with no benefit and were stripped of opportunities of education or employment. Some were put in jail for unwarranted charge of “releasing military secrets to the enemy during captivity.” Some were demoted, sent to remote areas to do hard labor, divorced, and even committed suicide. Still, a few tried and failed miserably to appeal their cases to military as well as CCP authorities. But a good many kept wondering how their POW experience turned themselves as enemies of the people. The Chinese society was not ready to reasonably accommodate the CPV repatriates. China in the 1950s and 1960s experienced intensified radicalism and ultra-leftism in a time of fanatical political turbulence and anti-West sentiment throughout the country. During various political movements, the CPV repatriates, now ordinary citizens trying

to settle down for a normal life, became convenient targets and were to bear the brunt of political persecutions.\textsuperscript{60} It was not until 1980 when the CCP approved a PLA document which authorized the rehabilitation process for the surviving CPV repatriates. Despite the reimbursement of pensions and restoration of jobs for those who were still capable of working, the disheartening experience of the CPV repatriates cast the shadow of disappointment and distress in their lives and career. The POW issue will continue to challenge the Chinese military as well as political establishments.

\textsuperscript{60} From 1947 to 1980, there were nearly fifty national movements, big and small, intended to increase public awareness of political, economic, and intellectual developments. The movements since 1954, however, seemed to become more radical and political oriented including Nationalization of Private Enterprises Movement (1954-55), Criticizing Hu Feng’s Intellectual Thought Movement (1954-55), Eliminating Counter-Revolutionaries Movement (1955-57), Political Reform Movement (1957), Anti-Rightists Movement (1957-58), Rural Socialist Education Movement (1957-58), Criticizing Ma Yichu’s Population Control Theory (1958-60), The Great Leap Forward Movement (1958-60), Anti-Rightist Thought Movement (1959-60), The Cultural Revolution (1966-76), just a name a few. These political and economic movements escalated the Chinese population’s radicalism to dig for both existing and new “counter-revolutionaries” who allegedly intended to sabotage socialist construction in the country.