

Soldiers scorned take final stand

The reward for Chinese POWs who served in the Korean War was cruel persecution. Fifty years on, they want redress

Calum MacLeod and Lijia MacLeod in Wuhan

In a hotel room in the Yangtze River port of Wuhan, a dozen elderly Chinese men fight back tears to sing a song written almost five decades ago inside an American prisoner-of-war camp in South Korea. At the end of the song, their tears flow freely for friends lost in the conflict, and for their own bitter treatment by the country that sent them to war.

At the place beyond the reach of sunlight, during those hard days/Your blood dyed red the foreign land.

To pursue the truth, you'd rather die than submit.

People from the motherland will never forget your courage.

Veteran Zhang Zeshi penned the words for a friend killed in the camp. Fifty years on, he concedes that the Chinese people did forget. "All of us who returned to China had fought bravely, but we were all forgotten," he recalls angrily. "Worse still, we were treated as traitors rather than heroes." Their crime - failure to die for the motherland in battle against the United States aggressors.

Yet these were the patriots. Mr Zhang and his ageing chorus in Wuhan last month were among about 6,000 captured Chinese soldiers who insisted on returning home - more than 14,000 fellow prisoners of war (POWs) preferred exile in Taiwan. The POW dilemma deadlocked peace negotiations that began in July 1951. An armistice was finally signed in July 1953, though a peace treaty still eludes the divided Korean peninsula.

"Because of us, the war dragged on for two more years, during which so many more soldiers died," remembers Zhao Zundao, a committed communist who persuaded many POWs to return. "It looked

Aid Korea". Despite the initial success of Beijing's "human wave" tactics, US air power stranded thousands of Chinese soldiers. In May, 1951, Zhang Da stumbled starving and alone into a peasant cottage, begging for help from the people he had come to liberate. He was astonished when the lone farmer's wife betrayed him to the enemy. "At that moment, my whole world collapsed," he says. "I had thought I might die heroically on the battlefield, or return to my homeland in triumph. I had never contemplated a third possibility."

The unthinkable proved just as brutal as the real conflict. Zhang Da's POW camp on Cheju Island was riven by Cold War hostilities. "My time in prison was by far the worst time I suffered during the Korean War," he recalls. China demanded the return of all POWs, but the US refused to repatriate anyone unwilling to return. China ultimately accepted a proposal to screen every inmate. "But the whole process was neither free nor fair," he complains. "We were under terrible pressure to choose Taiwan. Those who dared to declare openly their wish to return to China were persecuted, and even killed. The Americans knew what was going on, and encouraged it."

"The American camps were dominated by pro-Taiwanese prison officers who exercised white terror," adds Mr Zhao. "We communists who wanted to return had to form underground groups." Mr Zhao's "Communist United Association" led thousands of inmates to commemorate China's third national day on October 1, 1952. When riots followed attempts to raise makeshift Chinese flags dyed red with blood, US troops shot dead more than 50 POWs.

"We POWs were used as pawns," concludes Zhang Zeshi. "The Americans wanted a free choice, not because they cared for us or human rights. They just wanted to win."



It's over

North Korean troops carry Chinese volunteers, following the 1953 armistice. Chinese POWs returning home, however, received more hostile treatment

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Zhenhua in Sichuan. In the early 1980s, an officer from the local county visited his home to relay the news of his rehabilitation. Li was not at home. When he returned and learned an officer had been to see him, and fearing further attacks, he hanged himself.

Mr Zhao was among the few party men from the camps to retain membership and escape with only a disciplinary warning, though during the Cultural Revolution he was accused of being a "counter-revolutionary".

He has long felt embittered by the authorities' decision not to recognize the Communism United Association, and he plans to write to President Jiang Zemin to demand recognition of his organisation. "That's my biggest wish before I die," he says. It will be an uphill struggle. So paranoid is the party's fear of alternative organisations that the ageing veterans are forbidden from running any formal network of POWs.

Zhang Zeshi, who wrote *Diary of a POW* in 1993, plans another book to discuss why China got involved in the Korean conflict. "China was tricked into it," he says. "It was not a war of great victory as we always claimed. It was a mistake, a wasted war, a wrong war."

As access to information becomes easier, more mainlanders are learning that North Korea precipitated the conflict, not the South. Other liberal scholars are daring to speak out. "The Korean War was wrong," says Li Shenzhi, a pro-democracy scholar formerly at China's Academy of Social Sciences. At the head of North's international department during the war, Mr Li was a member of the explanation teams that Beijing sent to the POW camps to persuade the prisoners to return home. "Mao

Soldiers scorned take final stand: Chinese POWs want to redress history

In a hotel room in the Yangtze river port of Wuhan, a dozen elderly Chinese men fight back tears to sing a song written five decades ago, inside an American prisoner-of-war camp in South Korea. At the end of the song, their tears flow freely, for friends lost in the conflict, and for bitterness at their treatment by the country that sent them to war.

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Yet these were the patriots. Mr Zhang and his ageing chorus in Wuhan last month were among some 6,000 captured Chinese soldiers who insisted on returning home - more than 14,000 fellow PoWs preferred exile in Taiwan. The dilemma deadlocked peace negotiations that began in July 1951. The protagonists finally signed an armistice in July 1953, although a peace treaty is still elusive.

Zhao Zuoduan, a committed communist who persuaded many PoWs to return, said: "Because of us, the war dragged on for two more years, during which so many more soldiers died. It looked like our government loved us so much they would not give us up."

Far from being loved, they became outcasts. Now, they are fighting their last campaign.

"I kept telling them, we must keep going, keep fighting for the interests of PoWs," said Mr Zhang of the Wuhan meeting to mark today's 50th anniversary of the outbreak of war. Through letters, petitions and books, the veterans are lobbying the Chinese government and public to recognise their sacrifice.

Their story mirrors China's own descent from the euphoria of "Liberation" in 1949, to the vicious cycle of witch-hunts and political struggles that slowed only after Mao's death in 1976. Even today, the Communist Party is reluctant to open up old wounds, while the PoWs themselves are learning that North Korea precipitated the conflict, and daring to challenge why China went to war.

Communist orthodoxy maintains that Kim Il Sung's lightning offensive on 25 June 1950 came in response to a US and South Korean invasion of the North. When General MacArthur crossed the 38th Parallel, Peking scrambled a "volunteer" army of 1,200,000 men. Casualties soared to a million dead and wounded.

China demanded the return of all PoWs, but the US refused to repatriate anyone unwilling to return – so every camp inmate was screened. "But the whole process was neither free nor fair," said Zhang Da, just 17 when he responded to the nationwide "Resist America, Aid Korea" campaign. "We were under terrible pressure to choose Taiwan. Those who dared to declare openly their wish to return to China were persecuted, and even killed. The Americans knew what was going on and encouraged it."

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Zhang Zeshi said: "We were used as pawns.. The Americans "just wanted to make a point – look, how many of them wanted to come to the free world". As for the Chinese, "it would just look bad if so many PoWs did not come back".

They finally returned home in late 1953. But China had changed. The tolerance promised by Mao's New Democracy had given way to a more radical agenda as the party pursued its domestic enemies, real and imagined.

The veterans were treated as traitors, publicly humiliated and deprived of party membership. Back in Peking, Mr Zhang was refused work; whenever a potential employer opened the personnel file of a returned PoW, they saw the remark: "Wai Gui Nei Kong" (returned from abroad, to be controlled in use).

A year after Mao's death, he began to appeal to higher authorities against his treatment, and for an end to discrimination; soon he was joined by other PoWs. Finally, in 1980, the government issued a decree ordering the rehabilitation of the PoWs. But the injustices did not stop and the veterans are still shunned and isolated.

In the South Korean capital, Seoul, several thousand veterans from the United Nations forces will gather today to mark the 50th anniversary of the war. In China, no ceremony is planned, but the former PoWs will still remember.

Zhang Zeshi promised: "I will draft a letter to the government which will be signed by many of us, to call for a law on PoWs. Who can guarantee there will not be a war in the future? If there is war, there will inevitably be PoWs, and they, too, should enjoy human rights."