

**Understanding China's Participation in the Korean  
War (1950-53) Through Propaganda Songs**

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# Understanding China's Participation in the Korean War (1950-1953) Through Propaganda Songs

## Abstract

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was just a year old when it entered the Korean War (1950-53) in support of the fraternal socialist regime of Kim Il-Sung in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). A dedicated 'Resist America, Support Korea' (*kangmei yuanchao* 抗美援朝) campaign was launched, which called upon Chinese people, who had just risen from the rubble of a long-drawn Civil War, to take up arms, yet again, and support the war effort. The zeal with which the Chinese fought the war, despite its enormous human and economic cost, continues to puzzle historians to date.

Through a study of fifteen propaganda songs released by the Communist Party of China (CPC) during the early 1950s, this paper analyses the role of propaganda songs in the war effort and examines the scholarly debates surrounding China's participation in the war. It notes that domestic considerations, primarily, strengthening regime legitimacy at home in the face of persistent challenges, formed the chief reason behind the CPC's decision to participate in the war.

**Keywords:** Korean War, propaganda songs, Communist Party of China, regime legitimacy

“However many years US imperialism wants to fight, we are ready to fight right up to the moment when it is willing to stop, right up to the moment of complete victory for the Chinese and Korean peoples.”

- Mao Zedong<sup>1</sup>

## **China Enters the War**

The Korean War (1950-53) stands as the single bloodiest conflict in the modern history of the Korean Peninsula. It constituted a unilateral attempt by North Korea to reunify the peninsula after its fateful and arbitrary partition in 1945, following Imperial Japan’s defeat in World War II (1939-1945). Though the North succeeded in the initial phases of the war, it soon faced a massive pushback from the United Nations forces led by the American General Douglas MacArthur, who aggressively pushed into Pyongyang. China’s timely intervention provided much-needed relief without which the socialist regime of Kim Il-Sung would have been easily wiped out (Cumings 1997).

The trajectory of the PRC’s decision to participate in the War merely a year after its establishment presents an interesting study. Mao Zedong, who had begun deploying his troops<sup>2</sup> weeks before the United Nations launched a counteroffensive at Incheon against the advancing North Korean forces, anticipated two possible outcomes, first, the prospect of a North Korean victory in which case the aid of Chinese troops would be rendered unnecessary, and second, the scenario of a North Korean defeat which would necessitate counteroffensive measures by the Chinese (Goncharov et al. 1995: 168).

Despite recognising the possibility of going to War in support of North Korea, Mao was wary of an aerial attack by the United States on Chinese territory, which could have been disastrous for its nascent economic reconstruction programme that followed a long-drawn Civil War (1927-1949). This was one of the primary reasons why Mao did not respond immediately to a joint request from Stalin and Kim Il-Sung for Chinese participation in the

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<sup>1</sup> Mao Zedong. Speech at the Fourth Session of the First National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (February 7, 1953). *Quotations of Chairman Mao Zedong*. Marxists.org

<sup>2</sup> Chinese military troops were first named ‘Northeast Frontier Force’(NFF) and later ‘Chinese People’s Volunteers’ (CPV) to avoid participating as a sovereign military force, which would have amounted to an official declaration of war and could have invited an American attack on Chinese territory.

war and chose to call his troops ‘People’s Volunteers’, officially known as the Chinese People’s Volunteers Army (CPVA).

China entered the War on 19th October 1950, when the volunteer troops secretly crossed the Yalu River, months after North Korea launched the military offensive on 25 June 1950. The first decision in this regard was made at a Politburo meeting on 2 October 1950, when Mao devised the slogan ‘Resist American aggression and Aid Korea, Protect our Homes and Defend the Motherland’ (*kangmei yuanchao, baowei jiayuan, baowei zuguo* 抗美援朝，保卫家园，保卫祖国), which received wide accolades from the members of the Politburo for presenting a perfect blend of ‘internationalism and patriotism.’ As reflected in the slogan, the logic behind the ‘Resist America, Support Korea’ campaign was to counter threats to China’s sovereignty. However, a subsequent telegram that Mao sent to Stalin expanded upon its ramifications for the defence of the ‘entire East’, and requested air cover from the Soviet Union as a precondition for the deployment of the Chinese troops (Goncharov et al. 1995: 176).

While Mao had attained a prominent position within the Party by the early 1950s, his decision to deploy the troops did not go unopposed. Leaders like Zhou Enlai, Ren Bishi, Chen Yun, and Lin Biao presented several reasons to remain aloof, the economic repercussions of going to War, the irrelevance of participating on behalf of North Korea, the need to focus on ‘liberating’ Taiwan, prioritise fighting the counter-revolutionaries at home, as well as wiping out domestic opposition to CPC’s rule (Goncharov et al. 1995: 180-2). Mao’s supporters were, however, confident that the War would remain non-nuclear and limited and hence supported the intervention in the name of the existential security threat that the war presented to China’s Northeastern region. A dramatic turn of events transpired, when Stalin retracted his promise to provide weaponry and air cover, but eventually, he agreed to do so. Mao informed the Politburo of his decision to send the troops, noting that they would “resort only to action and no talk”. Only the senior cadres were to know of the regular developments in the war and the Party committees were advised to refrain from discussing it too much through propaganda (Mao, as cited in Goncharov et al. 1995: 198-99). Decisions regarding the war were restricted to a small leadership circle centred around Mao, with all others left with no other option but to comply.

The CPVA were to observe the highest degree of political and military discipline, demonstrate ‘fraternal feelings and respect’ towards the people and leadership of Korea, and be ready to face any hardships with great enthusiasm (Mao 1950). Zhou Enlai (1989), who had previously opposed the decision to participate in the War, later emphasised its importance in a speech delivered on 24 October 1930:

“China and Korea are neighbouring countries as closely related as lips and teeth. If the lips are gone, the teeth are exposed to the cold. If the DPRK is subjugated by US imperialism, there will be no security for northeast China. Half of our heavy industry is in the Northeast, and half of the heavy industry in the Northeast is in its southern part, within range of enemy bombers. Just in the two months between August 27 and yesterday (October 24, 1950), planes of the U.S. imperialists have invaded our airspace 12 times. Recently they not only flew over the Yalu River but came to Kuandian on reconnaissance, strafing and bombing missions. If the US imperialists get close to the Yalu River, how can we have the peace of mind to go about production?” (Zhou, 1989: 60)

Nie Rongzhen, the acting chief of the PLA General Staff and the Vice-Chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission during the Korean War, also expressed similar concerns:

“It would favour us if our forces entered Korea to fight, and (our intervention) would be extremely advantageous to our country, Korea, the East, and the whole world. It could be disadvantageous to all if we did not send our troops. First, when the enemy reached the bank of the Yalu River, the international and domestic reactionary bluster would surely grow louder. This would not only be disadvantageous to our country, but it would also pose an even bigger threat to Northeast China. The entire Northeastern Border Defence Army would be tied down there, and the electric power plant in South Manchuria would be subject to the enemy's threat.... Our entering the war could be most rewarding; failing to do so would cause great harm.” (Nie, as cited in Li et al. 2001: 43)

While Mao’s decision to limit the information regarding the developments in the war to senior cadres indicated reservations about success on the battlefield and the instability it might stir, Zhou and Nie’s statements clearly highlight the threats China found itself faced with. Even though the element of appeasement and justification of Mao’s decision cannot be ruled out, their statements nevertheless reveal the dangers that American involvement in the



war could bring to Northeast China, which had been perceived as the main base of the economic reconstruction programme.

The war did not prove to be a smooth sail for the Chinese, as they had grossly underestimated American motives and military strength. China erroneously believed that the United States was highly unlikely to deploy all its forces in Asia as Europe dominated its concerns in the immediate post-World War situation, hence, they assumed that Chinese victory would be both certain and decisive (Hao and Zhai 1990: 106).

Concurrently, several issues emerged on the economic front. The war led to a massive hike in prices particularly in the northeastern region and the state was confronted with major challenges such as preventing hoarding and controlling the prices of important commodities like soybean, millet, wheat and hemp. Another problem was to strengthen customs control and keep a check on smuggling particularly, on the outflow of gold. As the war effort intensified, the CPC had to mobilise the masses to increase production, particularly in the heavy industries such as metallurgy, not only for armament production but also for repairing bridges, railways, etc. which was required to mobilise the troops. Production of foodstuffs, cloth, etc. was also to be increased (Li 2023). These demands led to the rise of a nationwide Patriotic Production Campaign (*aiguozhuyi shengchan jingsai* 爱国主义生产竞赛).

While China did not release official statistics on the casualties before the early 1980s, the Americans and South Koreans estimated the total CPVA casualties to be close to 920,000. The Chinese military and hospital records claim that 114,000 volunteers either died in the battle or combat-related accidents; 383,000 were wounded, and 450,000 were hospitalised for the treatment of non-combat-related illnesses (Xu 1993: 56). According to Chinese sources, the participation also came at an immense economic cost, including loans at a repayment rate of 1 billion yuan per year, which were settled much later by 1965 (Goncharov 1998: 201). While the Party leadership justified China's participation in the name of resisting imperialist and expansionist aggression, ensuring national defence, and protecting the interests of the people across the globe, scholars have offered different explanations.

## Scholarly Literature on the Korean War

Scholars have sought to explain China's decision to participate in the war in four broad ways: ideological and security concerns, national interest, the role of the Soviet Union, and domestic considerations.

Scholars like Chen Jian, Thomas Christensen, and Wangli Hu have emphasised the ideological commitments to Pyongyang as a fraternal socialist state and security implications over the Northeastern region as guiding China's participation in the Korean War (Chen 1996; Hu 1998: 315; Christensen 2011). Allen Whiting writes that protecting North Korea was important for China not just for safeguarding its borderlands, which, Whiting believes, had historically been a concern given Korea's position as China's "tributary state", but also because of American involvement in the war. According to Whiting, American participation in the war acted upon China's 'xenophobic attitudes with expansionist tendencies' that were aggravated by the bitter memories of the Century of Humiliation (*bainian guochi* 百年国耻) (Whiting 1960: 2). While assertions regarding China's 'xenophobic attitudes' and 'expansionist tendencies' remain debatable, the CPC leadership did see a historical pattern of threats to its territory in the American military offensive in North Korea. Zhou Enlai had noted:

"The US imperialists are pursuing the policy of MacArthur in the East, using Japan as their base, inheriting the mantle of Japanese militarism and taking their cue from history since the Sino-Japanese War of 1894. They are following the old maxim that anyone wanting to annex China must first occupy its Northeast and that to occupy the Northeast he must first seize Korea. While the Japanese imperialists spent 40 years inching their way towards that goal, the US imperialists want to accomplish it in four or five years." (Zhou 1989, p.62)

Whiting notes that Mao's other concern was that an American victory on the Korean peninsula could embolden the Chiang Kai-shek regime in Taiwan to launch an attack on the mainland and dethrone the CPC government (Whiting 1960: 159). The decision has also been analysed in the light of Mao's commitment to wipe off capitalism from the region and establish the supremacy of communism in the form of an anti-imperialist front while portraying China to be the vanguard of the 'national liberation mission' (*minzu jiefang shiye*

民族解放事业) (Sheng, as cited in Chen 1995; Whiting 1960: 6, 130). This argument is further reflected in one of Mao's articles, where he noted:

“Since the victory of World War II, US imperialism and its running dogs in various countries have taken the place of fascist Germany, Italy and Japan and are frantically preparing a new world war and menacing the whole world; this reflects the utter decay of the capitalist world and its fear of imminent doom. This enemy still has strength; therefore, all the revolutionary forces of each country must unite, and the revolutionary forces of all countries must likewise unite, must form an anti-imperialist united front headed by the Soviet Union and follow correct policies; otherwise, victory will be impossible. This enemy has a weak and fragile foundation, he is disintegrating internally, he is alienated from the people, he is confronted with inextricable economic crises; therefore, he can be defeated. It will be a very great mistake to overestimate the enemy's strength and underestimate the strength of the revolutionary forces.” (Mao 1948)

Sergei N. Goncharov et al. (1995) write that while the initial motive was ideological and clouded with security concerns, Mao soon realised the inevitability of being embroiled in a battle against the United States. He hence decided that the battle must be fought before a defeated Kim Il-Sung government reached Beijing seeking exile, for such a situation would have further complicated the fragile security situation that China found itself in (Goncharov et al. 1995: 194). Improving relations between the United States and the new post-World War II government in Japan, and the strengthening alliance against Communism in the region, also threatened China's security perceptions (Whiting 1960: 34-5). Among proponents of national interest, Patrick C. Roe writes that the primary motive for China entering the War was to prevent a military confrontation on the Sino-Korean border, as it would have adversely affected the heavy industrial centre of Manchuria and deeply impacted the prospects of China's nascent economic reconstruction (Roe 2000: 68).

Bruce Cumings observes that rather than any concerns for its security, China's decision to join the Korean War was a reciprocal gesture for an 'enthusiastic' North Korean participation in the Chinese Civil War, where more than 100,000 Koreans fought for the CPC against Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party (Cumings 1990: 350, 364). Some scholars also emphasise the role of the Soviet Union. Kathryn Weathersby writes that Stalin cleverly manoeuvred China's entry into the War to safeguard North Korea, which he saw as a buffer

state between the Soviet Union and South Korea, and Japan, which were now under American influence. Based on an analysis of telegrams exchanged between Stalin and Mao during the War, Weathersby notes that Stalin cautiously controlled the escalation of tensions so as not to let the war in Korea blow up into a third World War while cajoling the PRC to join the war by emphasising that the United States would not attack its territory (Weathersby 2002: 20).

Michael Sheng supplements the above approaches by bringing Mao's persona to the centre of the decision-making process and argues that his behaviour can be understood in three evolving phases of the War. First, the period before the Incheon landing when North Korea's Korean People's Army (KPA) and the CPVA were flanked from both sides by the UN forces. Second, the first three weeks of October 1950 after the Incheon landing when Kim Il-Sung's forces collapsed, and third, in late October 1950 when the CPVA-KPA alliance succeeded in pushing back the UN forces (Sheng 2014).

Sheng opines that the first phase was marked by an intense ideological aspiration on the part of Mao to become the revolutionary leader of 'all oppressed peoples of the East' (*suoyou dongfang bei yapo de renmin* 所有东方被压迫的人民) as well as to become the 'Lenin of the East' (*dongfang de Liening* 东方的列宁) while being fully aware of the negative consequences that the War might have for China. The second phase saw a hesitant Mao showing reluctance to commit troops to North Korea in fear of a military defeat if faced with the American troops at Incheon. Sheng notes that "euphoria and overconfidence" replaced fear in the third phase, due to which China did not actively pursue peace negotiations, causing further damage to itself (Sheng 2014: 270-2).

Gary D. Rawnsley highlights the international and domestic implications of the Korean War on China. He notes that the CPC popularised the war as an opportunity to "beat American arrogance", challenge American presence in Asia, "project China's rise as a regional, if not a world power", and strengthen support for the Party by wiping out opposition and mobilising the masses (Rawnsley 2009: 285).

To this end, the CPC efficiently utilised its ‘long history of successful propaganda’ to strengthen its support base through various means of mass mobilisation that included posters, pamphlets theatrical groups and songs (Brugger 1981:59). The significance of propaganda songs during the Korean War is contextualised in the socialist conceptualisation of ‘propaganda’ in the next section.

## **Songs as Propaganda**

Defined by Jowett and O’Donnell as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett and O’Donnell 2012), propaganda is viewed negatively in Western societies but not in Socialist systems like China.

Arguing that class consciousness among the working class needed to be developed from without, Lenin described conducting “systematic, all-round propaganda and agitation’ as ‘the starting-point ... or ... the main thread which, if followed, would enable us steadily to develop, deepen, and extend that organisation” (Lenin 1901: 20). This idea was further developed in *What is to be Done?* where Lenin (1902) defined the role of propaganda as a “political exposure” i.e. an activity which could expose the class nature of the socioeconomic and political circumstances and train the masses into revolutionary action (Lenin 1902: 413). In his *Party Organisation and Party Literature* (1905), Lenin noted:

“Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, “a cog and a screw” of a single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organised, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.”

Propaganda was thus a “necessary tool” for regenerating a society from the ruins of capitalism, for inspiring the masses into action and educating them on the policies of the Communist Party (Bukharin Preobrazhenskii 2004: 296).

Under Stalin, propaganda was defined by Socialist Realism. Adopted as the official cultural policy of the Soviet Union by the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934, Socialist Realism was

described by Aleksandr Gerasimov as “socialist in content, national in form” (de Graaf 2017: 303) and focused on inspiring the masses into action by inculcating hope for a better future. A major purpose of art and literature was also to “unite (the masses) into a single family” (Gorky et al. 1934).

These ideas inspired Mao, who, in his *Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art* (1942), stated that to emerge victorious, the Party needed to focus as much on developing a “cultural army” of writers and artists to challenge the bourgeois hegemony in literature and art as on developing a national army to fight the war. He further stated that art must reflect the needs and aspirations of the armed forces, the peasantry, and the proletariat (Mao 1942). Mao expressed similar ideas regarding music in his *Talk to Music Workers* (1956) emphasising the importance of retaining the national character and uniqueness of Chinese music so that songs could reflect the needs and interests of the masses in both form and content (Mao 1956).

Like theory, the CPC propaganda architecture was broadly inspired by the Soviet model that included: oral (*koutou xuanchuan* 口头宣传), written (*wenzi xuanchuan* 文字宣传), imagistic (*yingxiang xuanchuan* 影响宣传) and demonstrative (*shifan xing xuanchuan* 示范性宣传) propaganda (Rawnsley 2009: 285); with songs playing a major role in propagating the ideas of the Party since the early days of the revolution due to their unique psychological impact on the populace.

Peter Wade (1957: 24) argues that music both reflects and constitutes social identities. In a social setting music can not only entice emotions of happiness, pleasure, and anger among the listeners but also possesses the power to form in-groups and out-groups or an ‘us’ vs ‘them’ identity, thus making it a useful tool for political control since ancient times in China (Perris 1983: 2). The Communist Party further developed this tradition and with simple lyrics and catchy tunes; everyone could easily learn and sing the songs irrespective of their educational background (Barnett 1949: 1). These songs were not always written or composed by the Party cadres. The ‘War Song of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army’ (*Zhongguo renmin zhiyuanjun zhange* 《中国人民志愿军战歌》) (henceforth, ‘War Song’) for instance

originated from a poem recited in October 1950 by Ma Fuyao, Instructor, 5<sup>th</sup> Company of the 26<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the First Artillery Division of the Chinese People's Volunteers Army. According to CPC accounts, Chen Bojian, a journalist with *Xinhua News Agency*, heard some soldiers humming it. Fascinated by the song, he made minor changes to the lyrics and published it as an article. The article was read by renowned Chinese musician Zhou Weizhi, who revised the lyrics to make it more impactful and published it as a composition in *People's Daily*. The song soon became so popular that even young children could be heard singing it. In 1953, the 'War Song' was awarded the first prize at the masses' song competition (Dangshi xuexi jiaoyu 2021).

Several CPC-led grassroots efforts were made to popularise these songs. Zou Zetao writes that the 'War Song' was not only published in newspapers but was also broadcast during prime time on radios. Instructions were disseminated on accurately singing it and singing teams travelled the lengths and breadths of villages teaching it to the masses (Zou 2023).

Li Bo writes that the negative propaganda emanating from doubts regarding China's success had 'destabilised mental stability' among the masses and the Party propaganda of the period was specifically focused on 'eliminating both the fear and admiration for the Americans', convincing the 'indifferent masses' to join the CPC's cause (Li 2023).

The following section attempts to map Chinese attitudes towards the War through an analysis of fifteen propaganda songs released by the CPC during the early 1950s. These songs have been selected based on their relevance in forming a discourse on the War. These include *Kangmei yuanchao geji* 《抗美援朝歌集》, Volume I from Northeast China, *Kangmei Yuanchao gexuan* 《抗美援朝歌选》, Volume II from Beijing and *Kangmei Yuanchao chuanguo gedian* 《抗美援朝创造歌典》, Volume III from Shanghai. These have been compiled by the Northeastern Literary Federation (*Dongbei wenlian bian* 东北文联编), the Committee to Defend World Peace and Combat US Invasion headquartered in Beijing (*Baowei shijie heping fandui meiguo qinlue weiyianhui* 保卫世界和平反对美国侵略委员会) and the Working Committee of the Shanghai Branch of the Central Conservatory of Music to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea (*Zhongyang yinyue xueyuan Shanghai fenyuan kangmei yuanchao gongweiyianhui* 中央音乐学院上海分院抗美援朝工委会编).

While depicting different and often overlapping themes, these songs can be broadly categorised into three groups: a) Portrayals of the Enemy, b) Glorifying the Leader and the Party, and c) Participation Beyond the Battlefield.

### **A: Portrayals of the Enemy**

All songs clearly distinguish between the in-group and out-group i.e., the friends and the enemies of the revolution. North Korea and ‘oppressed peoples of the world’ recurrently feature as allies, while the United States and Japan prominently feature as enemies. Particularly interesting is the use of emotive imagery and acts of remembrance to strengthen the boundaries between the two groups, which leaves no doubts about which path to follow.

The song ‘Resist America, Support Korea, Protect Homes and Defend the Country’ (*kangmei yuanchao baojia weiguo* 《抗美援朝保家卫国》) attempts to inspire the people of North Korea and China to rise against the United States by preserving the memories of a common struggle led by them against Imperial Japan in highly emotive tones. The song goes:

美帝国主义太残暴

*mei diguozhuyi tai canbao*

(American Imperialism is very brutal)

历史的教训不能忘

*lishi de jiaoxun bu neng wang*

(The lessons of history cannot be forgotten)

志愿兵渡过鸭绿江

*zhiyuanbing duguo Yalu jiang*

([Chinese] volunteer troops cross the Yalu River)

中朝人民求解放

*zhongchao renmin qiu jiefang*

(The peoples of China and North Korea attain liberation)

当年我们打日寇一起流血去战场

*dang nian women da rikou yiqi liuxue qu zhanchang*

(The very years we beat the Japanese bandits and together shed the blood on the battlefield)

(Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 1: 1-3).



It portrays the United States as a ferocious and merciless monster with ill intentions of violating China's sovereignty. The song hints at the allegations of germ warfare levelled against the United States by Chinese newspapers in the spring of 1952. As per the reports, large numbers of flies, fleas, rats, and mosquitoes were spotted by citizens at unexpected places in Manchuria and Qingdao. Premier Zhou Enlai criticised the 'US Imperialists' war crime of germ warfare' and a nationwide Patriotic Health Campaign was launched to promote cleanliness and vaccination. The campaign was integrated with the broader war effort as posters with the caption, 'Germs rely on pests to spread diseases. To eradicate pests is to defeat the American imperialists', emerged (Bu 2011: 198). The song goes:

张牙舞爪废了病他步步逼近我国境

*zhangya wuzhao feile bing ta bu bu bijin woguo jing*

(With bare fangs and brandish claws, (United States) kills us with the disease.

He (US) gradually approaches our borders)

(Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol.1: 5)

Interestingly, Taiwan and its loss to the Guomindang are also featured in this song. The song blames the United States for 'invading our Taiwan province' (*ta qinlüe women de Taiwan sheng* 他侵略我们的台湾省). Similarly, the song 'The People's Liberation Army strikes Taiwan' (*jiefang da jun da Taiwan* 《解放大军打台湾》) talks about 'liberating' Taiwan by 'bombarding' Chiang Kai-shek's 'imperial dynasty' there (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 1: 33-35).

The most famous song of the period, the 'War Song', similarly labels the United States as an 'ambitious wolf' (*Meiguo yexin lang* 美帝野心狼). It defines the purpose behind China's participation as 'defending peace and protecting the motherland' (*bao heping, wei zuguo, jiushi bao jiexiang* 保和平、卫祖国、就是保家乡) and asks the 'good sons and daughters of China to unite' (*Zhongguo hao ernu, jixin tuanjie* 中国好儿女，齐心团结紧) (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 2: 9).

The song ‘We will Kill the Enemy on the Battlefield’ (*women yao sha di shang zhanchang* 《我们要杀敌上战场》) highlights the glorious ideological camaraderie between China and North Korea while concurrently pointing to the grave threats presented by the United States:

乌云要想遮太阳

*wuyun yao xiang zhe taiyang*

(The dark clouds (United States) want to cover the sun

(China-North Korea alliance))

朝鲜闯进了美国匪帮

*chaoxian chuangjin le meiguo feibang*

(North Korea broke apart the American gang)

(Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol.1: 3-5)

The first line portrays the United States in a negative light by dubbing it as a ‘dark cloud’. Also, it celebrates the ideological camaraderie between China and North Korea by describing the alliance as the ‘sun’ whose rise is inevitable. The United States is further described as a ‘bandit’ (*qiangdao* 强盗) who wants to ‘swallow’ (*tunbing* 吞并) North Korea and ‘invade’ (*qinfa* 侵犯) China’s ‘periphery’ (*bianyuan* 边沿).

Similarly, the song ‘Give Me a Gun’ (*gei wo yi zhi qiang* 《给我一支枪》) attempts to inspire the Chinese people to join the ‘brave’ (*yonggan de* 勇敢的) volunteer forces and describes the United States as a ‘wolf’ (*lang* 狼) whom the Chinese people want to give a ‘good thrashing’ (*tongda* 痛打) (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 1: 12-17). The song ‘Eliminate the Bandits in the Pacific Ocean’ (*ba qiangdao xiaomie zai taiping yang* 《把强盗消灭在太平洋》) lists two enemies in the Pacific region that have been and will be “eliminated”: the “Japanese monster” (*rigui* 日鬼) and the ‘Chiang Kai-shek bandit gang’ (*Jiang feibang* 蒋匪帮) (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 1: 5).

## **B: Glorifying the Leader and the Party**

The initial opposition within the Politburo against Mao's decision to participate in the War is suggestive of the limits to his authority during the early days of the PRC. With hyped-up emotions against looming threats to everything that had been achieved in the past decades of hard struggle, the Korean War served as a perfect way, not just for the Communist Party to re-emphasise its centrality in defining the fate of New China, but also for Mao to elevate his status. Antecedents of the Mao cult, which appeared in the later decades, can be seen in many of these songs.

The song 'We can Definitely Win' (*women yiding neng shengli* 《我们一定能胜利》) notes that the Chinese will certainly emerge victorious because they have the 'Communist Party as the guide of the humanity' (*renlei daoshi gongchandang* 人类导师共产党) and 'Chairman Mao as their wise leader' (*yingming lingxiu Mao zhuxi* 英明领袖毛主席) (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 1: 36-38).

Apart from glorifying the Party leadership by stating, 'the Communist Party of China ensures that our victory has the strength of the people of the world' (*zhongguo gongchandang baozheng women shengli you shijie renmin liliang* 中国共产党保证我们胜利有世界人民力量), the song 'Eliminate the Bandits in the Pacific Ocean' (*ba qiangdao xiaomie zai taiping yang* 《把强盗消灭在太平洋》) emphasises the Internationalism that Communism espouses, which Mao also hints at while delineating the implications of China's participation in the War (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 1: p. 5). The 'Youth Advance Canon' (*shaonian jinxing dian* 《少年进行典》) similarly equates 'eliminating the invader wolf United States' (*xiaomie na qinluezhemeiguo lang* 消灭那侵略者美国狼) to 'defending world peace' (*baowei shijie heping* 保卫世界和平) (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 3: 8). Such songs further legitimise China's participation by expanding it beyond national interests and linking it to a greater cause that contributes to the advancement of the world.

The song 'When the Motherland Needs (us)' (*dang zuguo xuyao de shihou* 《当祖国需要的时候》) instils feelings of patriotism and loyalty towards Mao. The Chinese are encouraged to go to the battlefield at a time when 'the motherland needs them'. Concurrently, they are

described as ‘Mao’s young people’ (*Mao Zedong de qingnian* 毛泽东的青年) and are suggested to ‘march ahead under his banner’ (*zai Mao Zedong de qizhi xia, xiang qian* 在毛泽东的旗帜下,向前) (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 1: 29-31).

Songs such as ‘The Sweet Fruit is Delicious but the Tree is Hard to Ggrow’ (*tian guozi haochi shu nan zai* 《甜果子好吃树难栽》) glorify the hardships the Chinese are confronted with. The imagery that it creates of the eventual beneficial results, or the ‘sweet fruits’ helps in watering down any brewing dissent (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 3: 18-20).

### **C: Participation Beyond the Battlefield**

As the war continued, prospects of social instability, furthered by the immense economic and human cost, became more apparent. Hence, the need to expand the propaganda campaign to justify China’s participation became more intensified as the Party launched several mass campaigns focused on enhancing production, increasing public donations and educating the people on the Party’s policies regarding the war (Brugger 1981:74). Simultaneously, the war strengthened the perceived threat (real and imagined) of a possible attack from Chiang Kai-shek with aid from the United States. The ‘Resist America, Support Korea Campaign’ was thus accompanied by a nationwide campaign to search and arrest ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and Guomindang sympathisers in the mainland (Goncharov et al 1995: 185; Rawnsley 2009: 299). The problem of possible sabotage by the counterrevolutionaries, was emphasised even by Mao in his *Fight For A Fundamental Turn For The Better In The Nation’s Financial and Economic Situation* (1950). In *Don’t Hit Out in All Directions* (1950), Mao defined eliminating Guomindang sympathisers and counterrevolutionaries, as the Party’s ‘general policy’.

In short, the duty to defend the nation was neither restricted to the volunteer troops in Korea nor did it stop at securing the borders from external threats. National defence was as much about safeguarding against ‘internal enemies’ as it was about external ones, building resilience by expanding production, and fighting the war with valour.

The song ‘Completely eliminate counterrevolutionaries’ (*ba fangeming fenzi xiaomie guang*

《把反革命分子消灭光》) encourages Chinese people to report the counterrevolutionaries and help the Party in ‘eliminating’ them. The song attempts to build hatred against them by enlisting their heinous activities:

反革命黑心肠，人民当家他心不甘  
*fangeming hexinchang, renmin dangjia ta xin bugan*  
(Counterrevolutionaries have an evil heart; they are unwilling to be led by the  
people)  
他造谣暗杀偷情报，还要抢劫奸淫烧工产  
*ta zaoyao ansha touqing bao, hai yao qiangjie jianyin shao gongchang*  
(He (counterrevolutionary) cooks up conspiracies, (carries out) assassinations, rapes  
and burns down factories).  
(Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 3: 1)

The song ‘Defend the Fruits of Victory’ (*baowei shengli guoshi* 《保卫胜利果实》) similarly describes the counterrevolutionaries as possessing an “evil conscience” (*hei xingan* 黑心肝). In ‘All are Doing their Jobs’ (*dajia de shiqing dajia gan* 《大家的事情大家干》), counter-revolutionaries are described as “taking money from the United States to spread rumours” (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 3: 5). The song ‘Suppress the Counterrevolutionaries’ (*zhenya fangeming* 《镇压反革命》) describes the counterrevolutionaries as the ‘running dogs’ (*zougou* 走狗) of the United States (Kangmei Yuanchao Geji Vol. 3: 6). Such imageries help in justifying the tragic fate that the counterrevolutionaries met with.

Other songs encourage the populace to enhance production according to the Patriotic Production Campaign to build domestic resilience that enables the PRC to withstand the perils of the war. The ‘Labour Contest Song’ (*laodong jingsai ge* 《劳动竞赛歌》) goes:

我们在生产战线上立大功  
*women zai shengchan zhanxian shang li dagong*  
(We will perform exceptionally on the frontlines of production)  
把祖国建设得顶刮刮来顶刮刮!  
*ba zuguo jianshe de ding guagua lai ding guagua!*  
(We will build the motherland excellently!)

As the name suggests, labour contests were organised at production levels (particularly in metallurgy) to meet the demands of the war. All Chinese, irrespective of their age or sex, were supposed to contribute to enhance production. In 1951, the Party launched a nationwide ‘Patriotic Pact Movement’ (*aiguo gongyue yundong* 爱国公约运动), which saw hundreds of people ‘pledging’ not only to support the CPC in the war and not indulge in practices like hoarding and profiteering, which could prove detrimental to the economy, but also to contribute to the war effort from their meagre earnings. According to official statistics, between June 1951 and May 1952, a whopping 5.565 billion yuan (more than 764 million USD in present value) in arms donations, equivalent to nearly 3,710 fighter jets, was collected (Han 2023).

### **Understanding the “Bellicosity” in Peace**

Elisabeth Forster describes China’s participation in the war as ‘bellicose peace’ by arguing that despite its active participation in the war, the 1954 session of the Soviet Union-sponsored World Peace Council appreciated China as a ‘fortress for the protection of world peace’ (Forster 2019: 1). The World Peace Council (WPC) originated from the merger of the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defense of Peace and other like-minded Soviet-sponsored organisations tasked with slowing down nuclear proliferation in the West and establishing an alternative discourse on peace that criticised ‘American imperialism’ (Zhang 2019). Forster writes that China’s participation in the Council cemented a ‘bellicose understanding of peacefulness’ which instead of ‘rejecting war’, professed a war against the ‘right enemy’. According to Forster, it also proved to be abundantly beneficial for the nascent CPC regime, for it both ‘instilled a bloc thinking’ among the Chinese people i.e., popularised a pro-Soviet alignment and enhanced China’s prestige in the new international order of the Cold War era (Forster 2019: 1). Similarly, Sei Jeong Chin explains how the CPC utilised the Korean War to legitimise hatred against the United States and used it to label all dissenters as American agents and spies (Chin 2023: 23).

These arguments need to be historicised and also problematised. China's foreign policy that Forster has dubbed 'bellicose peace', can be traced back to the Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) adopted on September 29, 1949. Chapter I, Article XI of the Common Programme notes:

"The People's Republic of China shall unite with all peace-loving and freedom-loving countries and peoples throughout the world, first of all, with the USSR, all Peoples' Democracies and all oppressed nations. It shall take its stand in the camp of international peace and democracy, to oppose imperialist aggression to defend lasting world peace." (CPPCC 1949)

In fact, Mao had always been concerned about waging a 'righteous' war. In *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War* (1936), Mao famously described war as the 'highest form of resolving contradictions', hence possessing a class character. Drawing from Lenin (1917), Mao went on to further develop this idea in *On Protracted Warfare* (1938) where he described war as the 'continuation of politics by other means' or 'politics with bloodshed' i.e., a situation which breaks out after all 'usual' means of politics are exhausted. Mao goes on to differentiate between 'just' and 'unjust' wars and notes that Communists must not only 'not oppose just wars' but 'actively participate in them'. The Instructions of the CPC Central Committee on Defending the Movement for World Peace similarly emphasised clearly stating the objective of opposing 'wars of aggression' and safeguarding world peace (Zhongguo jingji wang 2007). For Mao, these 'just' or 'revolutionary wars' are an 'antitoxin' that chastises the enemy and 'transforms' the masses ideologically. Hence, wars are the act of delineating 'correct' ideas from 'incorrect' ones. Wars in this sense, are not just armed struggles but can be regarded as what Lenin (1902: 431) termed 'political exposures'.

Despite the shades of class struggle, a careful study of Mao's *Order to the Chinese People's Volunteers* (1950) and *Our Great Victory In The War To Resist US Aggression And Aid Korea And Our Future Tasks* (1953) as well as the United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) 83 and 84 that called for sending military assistance to South Korea reveals similarities in the objective, at least on the rhetorical level (UNSCR 1950). Both justified the cause of the war as a 'breach of peace' and the other party's refusal to 'cease hostilities' which necessitated an armed response to bring violence to a halt. These resonate with the theoretical tradition of the 'Just War', which argues that wars can be classified as

‘just’, provided they meet two logically independent criteria: first, they are *jus ad bellum* i.e. have a ‘just cause’ and are wars of ‘self-defence’ against ‘aggression’ and second, they are *jus in bello* i.e. they are ‘just’ in conduct and do not violate any customary traditions of war (Walzer 2006: xiv-xv). No clear origins of this thought can be identified. Questions about what a ‘just war’ constitutes and how it must be waged have concerned humanity since its inception (Allhoff et al. 2013: 1). Nevertheless, the thought was as prevalent in the West as in China and the Soviet Union.

Statements about developing ‘bloc thinking’ and ‘wiping out counter-revolutionaries’ need to be similarly contextualised and problematised. While both are true to some extent, it must be noted that such tactics were not unique to the CPC. Korean War Propaganda Leaflets released by the Psychological Warfare Division of the United States Army employed similar strategies to not only vilify Communism, the Soviet Union, China, and Kim Il-Sung but also promote a bloc mentality that tried to convince Koreans on both sides of the border to associate with the United States-led Western bloc. Notable examples include *Addressed to former ROK Soldiers of the 45<sup>th</sup> NK Division* (1951) and *Message to 45th North Korean Division* (1952) (NDSU).

Though the CPC undoubtedly used the ‘Resist America, Support Korea Campaign’ to wipe out dissenters, this also holds true for the rise of anti-communism in both the United States and South Korea. In fact, the ‘red scare’ (both real and imagined) had enveloped the United States ever since the success of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and was further aggravated by the ‘loss of China’<sup>3</sup> to the Communists in 1949. Embroiled in Cold War politics, South Korea similarly labelled all sympathisers of leftist ideologies as North Korean and Soviet spies. Kwang Yeong Shin regards anti-communism in South Korea as a complex outcome of elite politics in South Korea, the role of the US Military government in South Korea, growing anti-communism in American politics as well as deteriorating relations between the Soviet Union and the United States after 1945 (Shin 2017: 3). This ‘red scare’ was heightened and firmly cemented into the South Korean psyche after the Korean War and continues to exist in the form of the National Security Law (Shin 2017: 6). Hence, attempts at developing a bloc

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<sup>3</sup> “Loss of China” refers to a political discourse in the United States during the 1950s, that entailed discussions and recriminations on the reasons that led to the “unexpected” Communist victory over Washington-backed Kuomintang in mainland China in October 1949 (Waldron: 2013). Noam Chomsky describes the “loss of China” as “the first major step in America’s decline” that triggered several policy measures including the lead up to American participation in the Vietnam War (Chomsky: 2012).



thinking and nurturing negative attitudes towards the ‘enemy’ was a common Cold War strategy on both sides, with persecution of ‘internal enemies’ being its worst tragedy.

## **Conclusion**

Chinese responses to the Korean War (1950-1953) reveal the uncertainty that the CPC leadership went through while committing to send troops in defence of North Korea when the dust of a long-drawn Civil War was yet to be settled and hopes of sustained Soviet support remained fleeting. Even though the CPC leadership peppered the official discourse with notions of ideological camaraderie towards Pyongyang and linked the decision with lofty ideals of containing imperialism and restoring global peace, the hesitation in providing unconditional support and concerns about the adverse impacts of the War on the PRC’s fragile security situation and nascent economic reconstruction are hard to conceal. Such strategic calculations point to the limits of explanations that squarely relate China’s decision to participate in the war with ideological fervour and Soviet pressure.

They also call into question claims of Mao’s aspirations of becoming ‘Lenin of the East’ and establishing the ‘supremacy of communism’ in the region. While the argument that such ambitions existed in the minds of the CPC leadership cannot be substantially denied, the analysis presented in this paper proves that the CPC was aware of its limitations since the beginning. Even if such ambitions existed, the Party was also cognizant of the fact that there was next to no capacity to realise them. Similarly, this paper has proven that China did not merely act on the nudges of the Soviet Union. The CPC did not participate until the threat over China’s northeastern region was imminent and continued to display hesitation till the Soviet Union promised support. Concurrently, it cannot be denied that the Truman Doctrine, which promised ‘political, economic and military support to all democratic nations threatened by internal and external authoritarianism’ (i.e. communism) worried a militarily inferior CPC. To the CPC, this threat was further exacerbated by the prevalent discourse on the ‘loss of China’ (Chomsky 2012) in the United States. What then explains the constant rhetorical challenge posed to the United States and Japan, glorification of Mao and Socialism as well as the domestic frenzy to defeat the ‘imperial enemy’?

Given the gaps in scholarly debates, propaganda songs as primary sources can offer some

explanations. An analysis of propaganda songs of the ‘Resist America, Aid Korea Campaign’ reveals that the Korean War was essentially the PRC's war against the remaining challenges to the CPC's rule or more specifically, to Mao Zedong's consolidation of power within China. As argued, the very fact that the decision to send troops required a lot of manoeuvring on Mao's part shows that his position was far from being sacrosanct within the CPC. Moreover, the paper shows how both fear and admiration for the United States continued to exist within China. For the CPC, this presented several challenges. First, the capitalist United States was undoubtedly the ‘enemy’ in ideological terms, and either fear or admiration for its military superiority portrayed the CPC as weak. Second, such a situation could have created social instability which could have aggravated the challenges produced by the war and jeopardised national unity achieved after a hard and bloody struggle. Third, as noted, popular responses to the war depended on several factors such as class, rural-urban divide, educational level, etc. and were not necessarily guided by unanimous and wholehearted support for the decision to participate in the war. According to Sei Jeong Chin, the Chinese masses possessed ‘neither strong animosity against the previous ally nor strong confidence in the possibility of China's victory over the United States’ (Chin 2023: 46). The CPC realised that to consolidate its rule, it needed to mobilise the populace and enhance their identification with the Party. In line with Socialist theory, propaganda was seen as the way out. Hence, propaganda songs of the period focused on ‘exposing’ the threat that the ‘enemy’ presented, emphasised the ‘righteousness’ of the CPC's cause and glorified the inevitability of Socialism's victory – all to pacify and convince the populace that neither was the ‘enemy’ invincible, nor the CPC impotent. Emotive imagery of friends and enemies, and the romanticised descriptions of hardships, amidst a common struggle, that the songs carry, helped in convincing the population that the war was worth fighting. Additionally, the war provided a crucible in which diverse identities were melded together into a collective sympathetic to both the Party and its leader. This paper shows how similar strategies of propaganda and targeting dissenters were employed on both sides. This argument needs to be highlighted and contextualised in the uncertainties and conflicting interests during the Cold War that produced frantic ‘Reds/Whites under the Bed’ attitudes on both sides.

China continues to view the expedition as a success. The book *“Hundred years, Hundred Stories”*: *Red Stories Collection* (“*Bainian bai shi*” *hongse jingdian gushi* 《“百年百事：红色经典故事”》) (2021) lists the ‘Resist America, Aid Korea Campaign’ among the

hundred ‘remarkable stories of valour’ which ‘thoroughly established its (China’s) position in the international community by placing itself at par with the United States’ (*Beijing renshichu* 2021: 46). While the decision might seem like a failed experiment in terms of the economic and human costs, nevertheless, it proved to be a successful venture for the CPC in terms of strengthening popular affinity with the Party and the nation, enhancing regime legitimacy, and further consolidating power.

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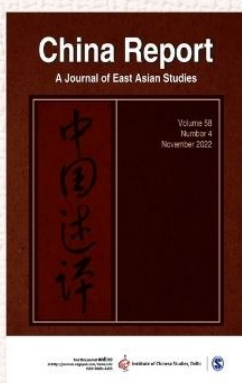


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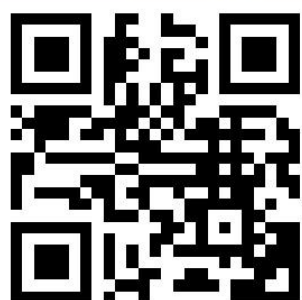
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