

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Real Manchurian Candidates: Chinese war criminals in the postwar, prisoners of history

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## Abstract

The Manchurian Candidate myth that Americans could be psychologically manipulated and turned into secret agents of a foreign power emerged in the early Cold War. The belief combined fears that Soviet/Chinese mind manipulators were so adept that they could transform honorable American soldiers into turncoats. However, while disquiet about the efficacy of communist brainwashing remained palpable in the aftermath of World War II, the result of China's communist treatment of prisoners of war did not create, as was greatly feared, actual Manchurian candidates capable of misleading their native publics once repatriated. If brainwashing in the American understanding of the term did not occur, what was the actual outcome and what sort of processes were used on Asians who were not part of the communist masses? We need to unravel the PRC's take on the processes of "thought reform" to understand why it kept returning to a policy designed to "re-educate" prisoners of war, often doubly labeled as war criminals. These policies not only reveal how the CCP aimed to render justice beyond the conclusion of its war with Japan but also demonstrate how this practice then grew into a later catalyst for unification plans in PRC-ROC relations during the 1970s.

**Key words:** Brainwashing; Japan; justice; PRC; ROC; Taiwan; war crimes; war criminal

At the start of 1950, French journalist Robert Guillain published a story in *The Manchester Guardian* regarding the Communist Chinese zeal to re-educate the entirety of society by "washing" the brains of its newly revolutionized citizens. The "whole population repeats the yeas and nays as it is taught," he cautioned. What followed, he explained, was not just the formation of a people's democratic dictatorship under a Chinese flag but a nation that was constantly pressured to confess its failings and submit to extensive self-criticisms.<sup>1</sup> Guillain had years of experience in Asia so his critical analysis of how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aimed to legitimize its new authority was read with rapt attention. Edward Hunter, a journalist at times in the employ of the CIA and another long-time Asia hand, quickly wrote up a bestseller furthering this idea of brainwashing. He described horrible scenes where oppressed peasants in "red China" turned into savage fury against a landlord's wife who was first made to strip in public to humiliate her and was then mobbed and killed in the process of pressing her to admit alleged crimes. Hunter was a skilled wordsmith and sprinkled his stories with eye-

<sup>1</sup>Guillain 1950. The research in this article forms a portion of my larger work concerning the pursuit of war criminality in the postwar, tentatively titled *The Construction of Injustice in East Asia: Japan and Its Neighbors*. I would like to thank Dr KJ Chen, the anonymous reviewers, and the editor for their assistance in shaping this work. Jonathan Yeung sourced hard to get materials in Hong Kong. Recent conversations with Dr Haiyan Lee and exposure to her work on justice in China have also greatly informed my understanding. Feedback at talks delivered at Cambridge and Waseda Universities aided in improving my argument.

catching details, rendering the manipulation of once calm country folk seem all the more sinister and an inseparable element of the mystic east. He depicted chaotic China as a site where people subsumed themselves to the masses and could be psychologically led astray to do terrible things they would not normally do.<sup>2</sup> At almost the same time, the Korean War exploded. Guillain's views, along with Hunter's stories of brainwashing, appeared prescient. Proof of such unexplainable behavior for the Americans consuming news of the fierce battles on the Korean peninsula was that numerous American soldiers taken as POWs appeared to recant their political affiliation and demand peace. Twenty-one went so far as to choose to remain in China, to the amazement of the incredulous American public.<sup>3</sup>

American society went into an early Cold War tailspin of anguish, embracing the fear that its patriotic soldiers had broken ranks and that "American democracy had been found lacking."<sup>4</sup> When the dust settled, the rancor and cacophony vilifying the military turned out to lack a basis in truth but the public continued to believe otherwise. Brainwashing appeared to work. But for all the Chinese effort overall few Americans and slightly more than 300 South Koreans chose to stay in China, in contrast to the more than 25,000 Chinese and North Korean prisoners who, when offered voluntary repatriation, chose the freedom of South Korea and the Republic of China (ROC; Taiwan).<sup>5</sup>

The academic Robert Jay Lifton took the trope of brainwashing and added to it a further patina of psychological lacquer. Lifton's research was mainly conducted in Hong Kong as refugees were streaming out of China in the first half of the 1950s and the various bloody counter revolutionary campaigns were in full swing. His evidence base was selected from a country in deep turmoil trying to stabilize its political foundations both domestically and internationally. There is no doubt what the CCP practiced was often inhumane and unjust because it trampled on any concept of human rights. But at least until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the main treatment of those labeled as "war criminals" or "prisoners of war" (Chinese, Japanese, or other) was for the most part focused on reform rather than punishment.<sup>6</sup>

Lifton saw the situation as one where the CCP was trying to shape a national mindset, instilling a cult mentality. Lifton improved on the more orientalist notions of his predecessors' work but he still defined the

brainwashing process specifically as something Chinese, communist, and potentially fatal for democracies. Whatever its setting, thought reform consists of two basic elements: confession, the exposure and renunciation of past and present "evil"; and re-education, the remaking of a man in the Communist image.<sup>7</sup>

Almost coterminous with Lifton's work, a 1959 pulp fiction novel, *The Manchurian Candidate*, appeared and was turned into a notorious film. This moment birthed the popular notion that Americans could be psychologically manipulated and turned into secret agents of a foreign power. The belief combined fears that Soviet/Chinese mind manipulators were so adept that they could transform honorable American soldiers into turncoats, and force the unwilling into becoming a revolutionary drone. If such brainwashing feats were possible, god knows what else the future held! What made the Manchurian candidate effective as a film and potent as a Cold War symbol was that it tapped into the latent American anxiety that the United States could lose to a lesser power through communist brainwashing. In the film and subsequent culture spawned from this idea the "ambiguous geography of evil," charted as the frontier Soviet-China border region of Manchuria, began to gain attention.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Hunter 1951, p. 31; Xiang 2020, pp. 143–88. For a more recent history of the idea of brainwashing see Pick 2022.

<sup>3</sup>Zweiback 1997.

<sup>4</sup>Bogle 2004, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup>Bogle 2004, pp. 120–21.

<sup>6</sup>For details on the much worse treatment of China's other "criminals" see Wang 2017.

<sup>7</sup>Lifton 1989, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup>Jacobson and González 2006, p. 46.

However, while the disquiet about the efficacy of communist brainwashing remained palpable during the Cold War, the result of communist China's treatment of prisoners of war did not create, as the panic suggested, actual Manchurian candidates capable of misleading their native publics once replanted as sleeper spies abroad. If brainwashing in the American understanding of the term did not occur, what was the actual outcome and what sort of processes were used on Asians who were not part of the communist masses? American analyses of Chinese "brainwashing" proliferated, driven in part by its perceived potential to destabilize the mind of the enemy. By contrast, less insight has been spent on examining the situation from the Chinese side. We need to examine their take on the processes of "thought reform" to understand why they clung to a policy designed to "re-educate" prisoners of war, often doubly labeled as war criminals. These policies reveal how the CCP aimed to render justice beyond the conclusion of its war with Japan but also how this practice then grew into a catalyst for propaganda campaigns in People's Republic of China (PRC)–ROC relations up through the early 1980s.

### Who were the Chinese trying to reform?

On the heels of Japan's 1945 surrender, the Chinese were boisterous regarding the causes of Japan's defeat but kept a distance from directly criticizing the Japanese masses. This was a policy both the major Chinese parties had followed since the late 1930s and it worked well. During China's war of resistance against Japan CCP leader Mao Zedong and Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) leader Chiang Kai-shek emphasized that the enemy was Japan's imperial military and financial cliques, not the Japanese people.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of the Japanese empire's demise within East Asia was on a different wavelength from how the western allies viewed the vanquished Japanese imperial military. The KMT took on the mantle of victory without the concomitant power that is normally attributed to a military victor. The Chinese Nationalists defeated Japan in little more than name only, although they did politically secure a seat on the newly established UN security council. While China maintained a unified face to the outside world, to bolster political authority the domestic system of governance demanded justice against numerous groups, labeled as "war criminals" (*zhanfan* in Chinese, *senpan* in Japanese). War crimes trials were important because they proved to the domestic constituencies and the outside world that a postwar new rule of law was being implemented within China in an act of "performance legitimacy."<sup>10</sup> In China such trials came in more formulations than elsewhere. In fact, on the mainland they developed along an inter-related set of axes, each denoting a political layer of latent power on the Chinese mainland that the authorities wished to renovate, expel, eradicate, or imprison. Of the first order were the Japanese war criminals whom the KMT first managed in military war crimes tribunals from 1946 to 1949. In slightly more than 600 cases, almost 900 Japanese soldiers were put on trial and records of those events went on to form a significant element of Chinese history and contemporary Chinese political memory. But the pursuit of Japanese war criminals did not come to a closure with the collapse of KMT rule on the mainland in 1949. Of second order, subsequent to Mao's victory, the CCP began its own investigations around 1952 and then implemented tribunals of another round of Japanese war criminals in 1956. In the immediate postwar the CCP operated a system for Japanese war criminal prisoners in which they were pressured to reform. However, once repatriated to Japan they did not become a fifth column seeking to undermine the Japanese state.<sup>11</sup>

But even with this legal roundup, the pursuit of war criminals on the Chinese mainland was not finished. A third and even more confusing category of war criminals was processed from 1949 until 1975, long after both the Chinese Nationalists and Communists considered the Japanese war criminal issue resolved. These additional war criminals were incarcerated and dealt with in a more domestic vein and initially with less international fanfare. This third strand was individuals the CCP

<sup>9</sup>Chiang said as much in his radio victory speech to the Chinese people. Jiang Jieshi 1945. See also Kishi 2021.

<sup>10</sup>Zhu 2011.

<sup>11</sup>Kushner 2016; Ōsawa 2016.

imprisoned as “KMT war criminals.”<sup>12</sup> This was a very different strategy from what the Chinese Nationalists had done. The KMT viewed Chinese collaborators or those who fought against the Nationalists as traitors (*hanjian*) and dealt with them under domestic Chinese law.<sup>13</sup> The CCP’s decision to use the term of “war criminal” to legally categorize KMT soldiers who had fought against it during the 1945–1949 civil war and after was an unusual legal turn. However, unlike the Japanese war criminals, at first KMT war criminals under the CCP were not permitted to reveal their “story” to the public because they were so rarely actually charged with anything in a courtroom. (This changed in the 1980s when autobiographies lauding their personal stories of redemption began to be published in China.)

The fourth category of “war criminals” was non-Japanese by ethnicity but remained key figures intimately linked to the Japanese empire. This group included former Manchukuo officials, such as Pu Yi (the last emperor of Manchukuo) and Zhang Jinghui (Manchukuo’s former prime minister), among others, who were granted different levels of benevolence depending on the situation. What happened to these third and fourth groups classified as war criminals by the CCP is a central element of the postwar search for justice and partially confronts the myth of Chinese “brainwashing.” However, this historical moment is often elided from contemporary Chinese history because such stories no longer fit the more nationalistic narrative that has arisen over the last thirty years.

“Brainwashing,” as it was labeled in the west, was a form of symbolic justice which advertised that the CCP was magnanimous to those who had previously opposed it and could be persuaded over to the other side of the political spectrum. Once prisoners had demonstrated sufficient “reform,” which was never clearly defined and always remained a decision made at the leisure of the top leaders, those labeled as war criminals were later trotted out as the physical and spiritual manifestation of China’s new socialist justice. This element was apparent in the fact that former war criminals frequently voiced appreciation of their incarceration and often publicly acknowledged that it had afforded them the opportunity to “redo” their lives. Such ideas about reforming individuals who had contravened state-defined norms were not limited to China. Imperial Japan had a long history of *tenkō*, or “ideological conversion.” Numerous Japanese intellectual luminaries chose to discard their leftist convictions and toe the state line during the oppressive 1930–1940s. The state afforded them the flexibility to denounce their ways and avoid imprisonment by embracing the new status quo. It is interesting in the Chinese regard that this has been labeled as brainwashing but in Japan it was depicted in an entirely different manner. I am not suggesting the two processes of thought reform are completely interchangeable but the core remains – a state which allows certain individuals to recant their views to rejoin the mainstream.<sup>14</sup>

Customarily, legal tribunals and processes are fundamental to re-establishing the frontiers of juridical control and to assert political authority within a bounded geographic space.<sup>15</sup> Borders define the perimeters of a state’s legal sovereignty and these contours inform the citizenry of a specific geographic area who will be subject to the laws of that region. These boundaries help to distinguish what is domestic and what is foreign – who is in and who is out. This was precisely the issue that war crime trials or at least incarceration for such crimes tried to ascertain. Chinese history has been traditionally recounted domestically as dynastic change within a defined, unshifting space. In a sense, the Chinese view themselves internally as an indivisible geographic entity where history becomes a series of “taking back” either land or “rights” that had been lost by a previous imperial administration. In this way China is conceived of as a succession of ruling dynasties whose borders are unalterable and this did not change with the arrival of the CCP. This is a problem, however, because the borders of the Chinese empires and the later state were not always clear and thus the policies to reclaim what lands were deemed as “taken” remain open to never ending interpretation. In addition, this move

<sup>12</sup>The CCP announced on December 25, 1948 and January 26, 1949 its intention to “try” Chinese Nationalist “war criminals.”

<sup>13</sup>Xia 2018.

<sup>14</sup>Concerning the history of Japanese social and political pressures that encouraged ideological conversion and some of the responses, see Ward 2019; and Hayter 2021.

<sup>15</sup>Foucher 2000.

to “restore” whatever was seemingly lost to China, with very ambiguous borders, encourages people to rely on state power to push for this restoration of greatness, which in turn is fed by the engine of emotive nationalism stemming from the people.<sup>16</sup>

### How the story has been told

The historiography of how China found justice beyond the framework of its trials of Japanese war crimes was mainly crafted after China’s emergence from the Cultural Revolution in the later 1970s. Initial Chinese treatments of the history of war crimes were touted as “the miracle that shook the world,” and not as brainwashing.<sup>17</sup> In fact, early major mainland Chinese books on the topic mixed Japanese, Chinese, and Manchukuo officials together under the same political label – “war criminal.” The early 1990s produced oral histories of those who had worked on these CCP war crimes investigations and the incarceration of those prisoners. However, when I conducted interviews with some of the Chinese participants of war crimes management for a Chinese documentary in 2019 everyone mostly just clammed up when I asked them about their experiences with KMT war criminals. It was as if their lives never altered course and everything had stopped at a certain moment once the story of Japanese war criminals had been discussed.<sup>18</sup> Most deferred from expounding on how life changed after the majority of Japanese POWs had departed. There was only one tale to tell, and that was the story of the Chinese benevolence toward the Japanese. That narrative was decoupled from other elements of domestic or international history, or the Chinese war criminal episodes. Modern Chinese history was unlinked to anything else, floating out there in an endless cycle in which a single story repeats its own greatness.<sup>19</sup> By the twenty-first century, the central historical story was now more concerned with retelling how the nation regained what it had “lost” rather than digging into issues that would concern the complex parallel story of the Chinese war criminals.

This form of historical narrative that places the fate of Japanese, KMT, and Manchukuo war criminals in the same prisons, treated sometimes the same but also differently, is truncated today. The “other” war criminals within modern Chinese history have been relabeled if not excised out from the international story that all Chinese belong to one patriotic group and the Japanese another. It behooves us to examine why these distinct “war criminal” groups were previously jumbled together and analyze how this change in narrative informs us concerning the ways in which Chinese national history was conceived of before the 1990s movement to raise the level of patriotic education and focus the story more on Japanese imperial malfeasance.

This element is important because at times the Japanese war criminals were trotted out to stimulate thought reform among the Chinese and Manchukuo war criminals. Li Guoxiong, former Manchukuo Emperor Pu Yi’s steward, attended a combined confession session with Japanese war criminals. Only then, he said, did he realize how the last emperor had been in cahoots with the Japanese.<sup>20</sup> Li Fusheng, the man in charge of education at Fushun Prison where many of these war criminals were housed from 1950 to 1972, recalled that former Manchukuo officials sometimes listened to Japanese group sessions and were astounded by these confessions. This mode of interaction held such force that prison officials opened further discussion groups and confession meetings to piggy-back on the effect it had on these Manchukuo officials coming to terms in accepting their past “war crimes.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Kawashima 2016.

<sup>17</sup>Fushun shizhengxie wenshi weiyuanhui 1990; Wang 2009.

<sup>18</sup>June 2, 2019 interview with Zhao Yuyin. See also Shanghai guangbo dianshitai jilupian zhongxin Chen Yinan gong-zuoshi 2021, pp. 223–25.

<sup>19</sup>See the introduction of a work that tries to paint the “grey zone” of Manchukuo and Sino-Japanese history in Jonathan Henshaw, Craig Smith, and Norman Smith, eds., 2021, pp. 3–11. Nayoung Aimee Kwon posits the same goal in her research “to interrogate the inadequacy of the binary logic of resistance and collaboration,” in Kwon 2015, p. 176.

<sup>20</sup>Li Fusheng 2003, pp. 442–43.

<sup>21</sup>Li Fusheng 2003, pp. 445–47; Li Fusheng 2013, p. 252.

### How were Manchukuo and the last emperor judged?

The CCP spent serious time considering what to do with Japanese war criminals, both in terms of how to put them on trial and how to propagate the idea that such men could be reformed under CCP supervision. By contrast, with Chinese and Manchukuo “war criminals” the process was more consistent in its ambiguity.<sup>22</sup>

Former emperor Pu Yi was both enormously lucky and unlucky. He was detained for a lengthy duration but both the USSR and CCP wanted him alive and reformed so they could claim victory in the immediate postwar battle of propaganda legitimacy. When the war ended he was just about to get on an escaping plane when the Soviets rolled into Shenyang and he was taken prisoner. Pu Yi was first transported near Chita in Siberia and then trotted out as a witness to imperial Japanese war crimes at the Tokyo Trial in 1946. This was followed by an appearance at the Soviet trial in Khabarovsk of Japanese war criminals in 1949, and then finally in Shenyang for the CCP trials of Japanese in 1956. Initially, the KMT was eager for Pu Yi’s extradition and frequently made high-level requests to Soviet officials. KMT Foreign Minister Wang Shijie had asked the USSR for a Pu Yi handover in early March 1946. The Soviets had responded in the affirmative and replied that they would get back with a time and place, which was continually delayed. This sort of back and forth regarding the details of a handover dragged on. Then suddenly the Soviets informed the KMT government that Pu Yi would be taken to testify at the Tokyo Trial.<sup>23</sup> According to Soviet archives, Pu Yi himself wrote several letters to Stalin pleading to remain in the USSR because he feared for his life if returned to Nationalist China.<sup>24</sup> It is not entirely clear why the KMT wanted Pu Yi. Perhaps for the media glory of saying they had incarcerated a Manchukuo “war criminal?” At one point the Chinese Nationalist government also wanted to call Pu Yi back to the Tokyo Trial to testify for the KMT but the Soviets refused.

In 1950, Pu Yi was transferred from detention in the USSR to the Fushun War Criminals Prison in China, the same prison where Japanese war criminals were incarcerated. Chinese communist authorities realized he was gravely agitated and worried about his future during this transition. When the entourage stopped for a break at the Shenyang Rail Station Pu Yi saw the table laden with fruits, cigarettes, and snacks. He suddenly turned pale. Turning to Aisin Gioro Yuyan, whom he considered as a nephew, the emperor exclaimed, “Ah, this is a banquet for sending me to my doom!” But for CCP authorities, the main problem was that all those around him kept referring to Pu Yi as “your majesty.” To advance the former emperor’s “thought reform” Fushun prison management focused on three areas: (1) they had to break up the “little court” that surrounded him; (2) get him to admit his war crimes by teaching him how drastic these actions had been; and (3) expose his collaboration with the imperial Japanese, and press him to realize that the CCP’s policies were a way out of his predicament and to not be suspicious. Making Pu Yi testify in the Shenyang courtroom against Japanese war criminals in 1956 was also determined to be a means to cause him to feel more patriotic, the PRC Ministry of Security believed. In this way he would experience a clear break with the first half of his life under Qing feudal rule and then Japanese imperial authority. PRC leaders paid attention to Pu Yi’s shift in attitudes, and in doing so gave him hope for the future they also reasoned.<sup>25</sup>

Along with Pu Yi, the Soviets also incarcerated Zhang Jinghui, the former Manchukuo Prime Minister and his son, Zhang Mengshi, having initially informed them that they were going to be sent to where former emperor Pu Yi was sequestered.<sup>26</sup> The younger Zhang recalled that life outside of Chita was decent, and the men were basically well fed and cared for. Detained but never formally charged in the USSR, many Manchukuo officials remained in limbo.<sup>27</sup> In 1950, Mengshi was also put

<sup>22</sup>Oikawa Takuei charts the range of fates that Manchukuo officials met in an excellent graphic in his book, Oikawa 2019, p. 237. Some died or were executed in the USSR, were imprisoned in both the USSR and the PRC, or escaped to the ROC, etc.

<sup>23</sup>Guomindang Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1948.

<sup>24</sup>Kuznetsov and Karasov 2005.

<sup>25</sup>Wang 2009, pp. 99–108.

<sup>26</sup>Suleski 2017; Zhang Mengshi 2013, pp. 205–06.

<sup>27</sup>Zhang Mengshi 2014, p. 115.

on a train for rail transfer between the USSR and China. And similarly to how the CCP had prepared for the entry of the Japanese war criminal prisoners received from the Soviets, the Chinese train had its windows papered over and he and fellow detainees were taken directly to prison. In his memoirs, Zhang penned that he had to stifle a laugh. In the USSR he was never formally imprisoned but after liberation from Soviet incarceration he was being now actually captive in his homeland.<sup>28</sup> Once it came to power in 1949, the PRC government struggled with how to deal with former Manchukuo government officials like Zhang Jinghui and others. The elder Zhang was not specifically considered a war criminal even though he was classed on par with the last Manchu emperor, Pu Yi, but categorized differently from other Japanese war criminals with whom he was later housed in Fushun Prison.<sup>29</sup>

Not all Manchukuo officials, however, were pushed into prisons for thought reform like Zhang Jinghui or Pu Yi. Some, like Wang Tifu, merely blended into the background. Wang was a diplomat of the Manchukuo government in Nazi Germany for six years and encountered an even less predictable postwar than both Zhangs. He was detained, actually put on trial in 1954, and sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor in a special Soviet military court. However, in March 1958 Wang was suddenly repatriated to China.<sup>30</sup> But he and the other released men were not immediately free. First, the train stopped at the Acheng Training Camp for six months of “study” and sightseeing of new China, aimed to help them complete “thought reform.”<sup>31</sup>

Unlike the Japanese empire and Japanese responsibility for atrocities which were detailed and debated in public war crime trials during the KMT reign, and at least partially under the CCP’s reign, the details and locus of responsibility for Manchukuo was never put to a legal challenge or discussed in a communist Chinese court of law. All of the historical declarations around the “puppet kingdom” came as party instructions or in thought reform campaigns. Guilt surrounding Manchukuo did not generally need to be proven in a tribunal, it was gained through confessions and thus sentencing was rarely if ever handed down. This remained a key reason why the reformation of Pu Yi and other elites formed a central policy for the Chinese Communists. There needed to be a demonstrative effect from the implementation of communist law and pushing for thought reform or the entire enterprise could be called into question from its base.

### The evolution of Chinese war criminal thought reform

The official history of the PRC public security operations acknowledges that the KMT was effective in adjudicating some Japanese war crimes but asserts that the Nationalists “failed to reflect the true wishes and hopes of the Chinese people.” One aspect that the KMT did not bring to justice, in the vocabulary of the PRC, was the three kinds of “domestic war criminals.” These were the sixty-one high ranking members of the Manchukuo administration, including ministers and Manchu royalty, about ten people who served in the Mongol United Autonomous Government, and the KMT war criminals. All together they added up to close to 1,000 key individuals.<sup>32</sup> This lacuna was due, of course, to the fact that the Chinese Nationalists had not legally delineated such individuals as war criminals but the PRC built its challenge to the KMT’s legal justice squarely on this initiative.

The judicial performative aspects of these processes were critical to how the CCP operated and its success.<sup>33</sup> The CCP had already begun to discuss the issue of continuing suppression of counter-revolutionaries in its early years but the party was also concerned with what to do about

<sup>28</sup>Zhang Mengshi 2014, p. 125. Zhang Mengshi’s imprisonment was short-lived and he was soon employed as a guard at Fushun Prison.

<sup>29</sup>Shibutani 2008, p. 81.

<sup>30</sup>Wang 1988, pp. 152–53.

<sup>31</sup>This treatment was similar to PRC prisoners of war who returned from the Korean War and were forced to undergo a re-education process to reintegrate into Chinese society (Wang 1988, pp. 154–55). Abe 2002, pp. 1–13; Feng 2011, pp. 51–54; He 2005, pp. 19–21.

<sup>32</sup>Dangdai zhongguo congshu bianji weiyuanhui 1992, pp. 98–99.

<sup>33</sup>Strauss 2020, p. 144.

the problem of war criminals by May 1955. Mao wished to have the larger issues discussed and debated throughout the party and society before arriving at final decisions. Perhaps, he reasoned, it would not be beneficial to permit an amnesty during the first five-year plan which could feed the vain-glory of those who opposed the PRC.<sup>34</sup> But reformation of war criminals and their subsequent amnesty was part of the CCP's overall propaganda campaigns to highlight its work on justice and the renovation of society. By December 1955, the Public Security Ministry, under the guidance of Mao, issued orders to gather "KMT bandit war criminals" at Gongdelin Prison. At the time Chinese war criminals were dispersed in a variety of prisons throughout the country as there was still no holistic national policy on the matter.<sup>35</sup> Corraling all the KMT war criminals in one place was designed to aid in their reformation.<sup>36</sup> On December 30, 1955 the Chinese communists' People's Liberation Army and Ministry of Public Security delivered a directive "concerning institutions and the unified management of the transfer of currently incarcerated Chiang [Kai-shek] bandit war criminals." Due to the fact that the classification of KMT prisoners was more cumbersome than that of the Japanese, a special set of directives was laid out to categorize them. Having passed arbitrary judgement in this way, about 736 KMT military officers were incarcerated: 46 government members, 27 party members, 117 special force members and others, in total about 997 individuals. Interestingly, this was almost the same number as Japanese war criminals detained in PRC prisons before their trials and release in 1956.<sup>37</sup> A few months later from March 14 to 15, 1956 at a high ranking political consultative meeting Luo Ruiqing, Minister of Public Security, and Deputy Attorney General of the Supreme People's Procuratorate, Tan Zhengwen, put forward the future policy concerning Chinese war criminals: "do not try and do not sentence them, gather them together and reform them, then release them in stages."<sup>38</sup>

By June, Mao had to consider more systematically organizing policy toward Japanese, KMT, and Manchukuo war criminals. There was no need for sentencing, it was felt, benevolent treatment could continue as they were slowly released. Following such a strategy would assist the PRC in "isolating, disturbing, and dismantling domestic and foreign enemies." But Mao was also aware that this sort of approach could be dissatisfactory for a certain sector of the Chinese public, or could also motivate counter-revolutionaries that they need not fear the state. Mao had decided at this point to conduct a large release of war crime prisoners within several years. His reasoning was as follows:

To repeat, these men had already gone through re-education programs while incarcerated for 6–7 years (KMT war criminals), or for more than ten years (Japanese, puppet Manchukuo war criminals), most have already shown different levels of remorse, some have even asked to be allowed to atone and remake themselves into new men. Consequently, at this time there is no need to kill any of these criminals. On the contrary, we are currently in the political attack position against Chiang Kai-shek's group, struggling to peacefully liberate Taiwan, as well as announce that all they have to do is return to the motherland. It does not matter who they are, we will let all bygones be bygones. In these circumstances, if war criminals who were already incarcerated are executed together in actuality there is no benefit. Moreover, it will further help to harden the Taiwan reactionary group, and in the least this is highly harmful and shares little benefit. From the standpoint of benevolent treatment, for the nation and for the people this could be comparatively beneficial.<sup>39</sup>

In 1956, the CCP pardoned approximately 960 Japanese war criminals, sentencing only forty-five to prison terms after a series of trials. However, several hundred KMT and Manchukuo prisoners

<sup>34</sup>Mao Zedong 1991, pp. 133–34.

<sup>35</sup>Ji 2000, p. 23. See Kushner 2016, pp. 290–91.

<sup>36</sup>Shi 2014, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup>Xing 2004, pp. 17–18.

<sup>38</sup>Zhang and Ge 2010, p. 23.

<sup>39</sup>Mao Zedong 1992, pp. 72–73. A more detailed version of this record detailing the positive impact of such a policy can be found in Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party 1956.



remained detained without trial. David Chipp, Reuters resident news correspondent in China, managed to get a personal interview with Pu Yi in the Fushun Prison on August 18, 1956. This would have been soon after Pu Yi's appearance in the Shenyang court testifying against his former Japanese imperial colleagues. China's Ministry of Justice concluded that Pu Yi's attitude had changed so it would be safe to allow the former emperor a public interview with foreign journalists as part of the CCP's propaganda campaign concerning its pursuit of justice and thought reform.<sup>40</sup>

When the CCP finally brought the Japanese war criminals to trial in 1956, eleven years after the end of World War II, the trials were actually part of a larger process in which the Chinese communist government also announced its plan to mete out justice to those former followers of KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek and the Manchukuo war criminals. But while the Japanese defendants saw their confessions trotted out and examined in military war crimes tribunals, the KMT and Manchukuo war criminals mainly remained incarcerated but with little consideration of their legal rights.<sup>41</sup>

### The "Great Amnesty"

Three years later after resolving the Japanese war criminals issues, the CCP government launched its next salvo to grant clemency to a select group of KMT war criminals.

On September 17, 1959, General Zhu De as master of ceremonies opened the Ninth Plenary of the Second National People's Congress. The next day, the *People's Daily* announced the "Chairman of the Chinese People's Republic Order of Amnesty" and wrote that plans were afoot to celebrate the reformation of war criminals and counter-revolutionaries following the upcoming tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese People's Republic.<sup>42</sup> The promulgation was planned as big news and in preparation members of the Xinhua media team were dispatched weeks ahead of time to the Fushun Prison to conduct interviews and collect materials so that their articles and news coverage would be effective when the order was actually implemented.<sup>43</sup> When the first Chinese war criminals were released at the end of 1959 it was from several different prisons around the country but Fushun, where Pu Yi was detained, held a large party on the morning of December 4, 1959. Throughout the country slightly more than 12,000 counter-revolutionaries were granted amnesty, as were thirty-three Chinese war criminals. This was then publicly announced in the *People's Daily* on December 5, 1959.<sup>44</sup> This amnesty of the second tranche of war criminals was reminiscent of imperial China's practices when "a new emperor was wont to proclaim an amnesty upon his ascension to the throne as the founding act of a new reign."<sup>45</sup> Mao was just such a new emperor and keen to continue the tradition of basing imperial benevolence on his will and not on any specific legal codes. The KMT war criminals, after all, had generally not been put on trial, nor had they satisfied any legal conditions for their release. The new leader, Mao Zedong, had merely imperially proclaimed it so.

KMT leaders on Taiwan believed they saw through this usage of Chinese war criminals as legal propaganda. On December 8, 1959, the Central News Agency in Hong Kong reported that, "according to sources in Taiwan," the PRC faced a political struggle among its factions and ever-increasing economic crises. In a provocative statement that would come back to haunt them almost a decade and a half later, the Chinese Nationalist leadership said:

<sup>40</sup>Chipp 1956; Fushun zhanfan guanlisuo 1964. Pu Yi was interviewed on September 27 by a French journalist and in late October of the same year by a Canadian journalist. See Wang 1993, p. 75.

<sup>41</sup>After having been dormant in archival drawers up until the twenty-first century, over the last two decades these confessions have been curated, digitized online, and published in several iterations. A full version of the Japanese confessions was finally released over two large installments, starting in 2015, Zhongyang danganguanbian 2015. A few years later, after having denied that they even housed the materials, the Number Two archives in Nanjing co-produced the full version of KMT-led trial verdicts of Japanese war criminals. See Zhongguo dier lishi danganguan 2019.

<sup>42</sup>People's Daily Newspaper 1959b.

<sup>43</sup>Li Jianyu 2013.

<sup>44</sup>People's Daily Newspaper 1959a. This "benevolent" version of history is retold in a popular 2019 thirty-nine episode Chinese teledrama about the 1959 amnesty, entitled *Teshe 1959*.

<sup>45</sup>Lee (forthcoming).

Due to these factors, even producing this charade of “releasing prisoners” or extolling the “removal of labels” [of having been a war criminal] in a unified front to weaken and shake Free China’s military anti-Communist conviction, while also on the international stage disguising the murderous barbarity of the pseudo-regime, has in essence already been corrected. Observers believe that in actuality the mainland is at its origin a large prison, so transferring [prisoners] from a small prison to a larger prison, at the end of the day is insignificant. There is only one way for the communist bandits, if they want to truly prove they are “releasing prisoners,” to do so. They must allow those prisoners full freedom of movement and let each choose wherever they wish to go.<sup>46</sup>

Zhou Enlai wanted to exploit this moment to build a negotiating bridge with Taiwan so he quickly invited over a group of the released war criminals who had been officers from the Huangpu military academy. This included Du Yuming, Wang Yaowu, and Zeng Kuoqing. Pu Yi was also summoned.<sup>47</sup> On December 14, the premier personally met for three hours with this small coterie. When Zhou approached Zeng, the premier said that it was good to see him and addressed Zeng as “elder brother.” Zeng was supposedly surprised that Zhou recalled that the two had met thirty years prior. Zhou gave them all a pep talk, speaking about how the CCP had given rise to a new and strong China that would wipe away the more than 100 years of humiliation. This was something the KMT had not managed to do in its twenty years of rule, Zhou emphasized.<sup>48</sup>

It was clear the CCP implemented such an amnesty not merely for humanitarian reasons but to employ these former prisoners in a campaign to further strengthen PRC legitimacy. Not long after he was released from the Fushun War Criminals Prison former “last emperor” Pu Yi made at least one trip (which he could not have made solely of his own accord) to Qincheng Prison where he spoke to other inmates. Prisoner Jin Luxian recalled: “He had come to tell us about how he had been reformed and encouraged us to work hard at reforming ourselves to try to achieve awareness of the value of reform through labour.”<sup>49</sup>

A few years after Pu Yi was granted amnesty, his oral memoirs, which had been written down in prison by his younger brother Pu Jie, were transformed into a best seller, *From Emperor to Citizen: the autobiography of Pu Yi*. This was achieved with the considerable assistance of the writer Li Wenda. The oral history had made its way around Beijing and supposedly Deputy Head of the Ministry of Public Security, Yao Lun, had read it and recognized its historical value for social propaganda.<sup>50</sup> In the same manner, during the early 1960s Premier Zhou Enlai utilized the People’s Political Consultative Conference to further drive the message home that the PRC understood justice and reform. This group collected and published the personal testimonies of key former war criminals such as Pu Yi, former KMT General Du Yuming, and many others to champion a national narrative of judicial success to a communist Chinese public.<sup>51</sup> The ideological conversion of the last Manchu emperor, in the form of Pu Yi, assisted the PRC to shape the triumphant narrative of its postwar history. Announcing his transformation into a citizen of the new PRC played a key role in the “appropriation of the ethnic frontier in the national imaginary of the Han state.”<sup>52</sup>

It was also at this point, slightly more than a decade after Mao’s military victory over the KMT, that the government began to order KMT and other Chinese war criminals dispersed throughout China to be corralled into a new prison. On the site of a former temple outside of Beijing, the CCP built a new massive complex, the Qincheng Prison, with Soviet help. Finished in 1960 during the honeymoon of

<sup>46</sup>Reference News 1959.

<sup>47</sup>Yang 2019, p. 54.

<sup>48</sup>Tong 1999, pp. 117–20. Tong Xiaopeng had been Zhou’s personal secretary.

<sup>49</sup>Jin 2012, p. 243.

<sup>50</sup>Jia 2013, pp. 370–81; Wang 2009, p. 106.

<sup>51</sup>Chang 2000; Fromm 2010, p. 4; Tong 2000.

<sup>52</sup>Dan 2011, pp. 195, 258; Leibold 2014, p. 2.

Sino-Soviet relations, it was one of the massive projects with which the USSR assisted the nascent socialist state.<sup>53</sup>

In the spring of 1960, KMT prisoners began to be transferred to Qincheng. The gathering of Chinese war criminals in one prison demonstrated the CCP was investigating its past treatment of war criminals to ascertain the impact and continuity of its re-education programs as it attempted to unify its approach across regions. This organizational push was short lived and subsequently many were then taken to the Fushun Prison, where the Japanese had been incarcerated. Eventually, a progressive policy of amnesties for KMT war criminals was effectuated and on November 28, 1960 a further fifty Chinese war criminals were granted special release, followed by 68 in 1961, 35 in 1963, and 53 in 1964.

Even after their discharge, CCP analyses of former war criminals continued. At one point in July 1964, a Ministry of Justice report on the efficacy of Pu Yi's retraining noted a younger cousin of the former emperor's had said to him: "Du Yuming has a blood debt, you did not incur a direct blood debt." Pu Yi retorted: "I was in the northeast as a running dog of the Japanese for 14 years, supporting the Japanese invasive war, sacrificing more than 10 million of the motherland's people, causing more than 500 hundred billion Chinese yuan's worth of damage to people's wealth and prosperity. My blood debt is even greater than Du Yuming's!"<sup>54</sup> In 1966, the last group of fifty-seven Chinese war criminals was granted amnesty but by this year, when the Cultural Revolution had begun, KMT war criminals would soon be subjected to stringent investigations and criticism sessions. At one point KMT war criminal Wen Qiang recalled in his memoirs that prisoners were no longer able to address each other as "comrades," but used the term "fellow criminals."<sup>55</sup> With the Cultural Revolution in full swing all CCP amnesties ceased.<sup>56</sup> The Cultural Revolution turned China inward to forgetting about its calls for justice and thought reform to the point that suddenly in May 1972, the Ministry of Public Security produced an account of the war criminals who remained in detention. Zhou Enlai immediately ordered further investigations. The findings showed an increasing number of deaths of those incarcerated and that efforts at reform were subsequently in decline. Zhou ordered increased attention to those with health issues and that such treatment "needed to embody the party's policies to prepare the road toward special amnesty in the future." The subtext was that party leaders realized if they released sick and haggard looking, or unrepentant war crime prisoners, the public opinion backlash could prove difficult to manage.<sup>57</sup>

### The 1975 Great Amnesty

As the Cultural Revolution was losing momentum but not yet over, on February 27, 1975 Mao sought opinions on releasing the remaining KMT war criminals. Mao asked: why were such prisoners still incarcerated? Forcing them to recant was not good and was no longer efficient, he maintained. The amnesty campaign of war criminals once again geared up in 1975, after a nine-year hiatus, now under Hua Guofeng as head of the Ministry of Public Security.<sup>58</sup> In March of that year Hua opened a small consultation group to look into Mao's instructions. CCP government agencies and the Xinhua news agency were ordered to come up with a list of the prisoners from the higher ranks of the KMT military and government officials. A decision was taken at a March 17 meeting of The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress to grant amnesty to all leftover war criminals – 293 individuals.

<sup>53</sup>Xing 2004, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup>Fushun zhanfan guanlisuo 1964. Kramer 1987, see sections on his incarceration in the USSR and Fushun War Criminals Management Center, pp. 210–70.

<sup>55</sup>Ji 2000, p. 25; Xing 2004, p. 32. Wen Qiang wrote about the differences between the "detention center" and Qincheng Prison in an early collection of KMT memoirs. See Mu 1996; Wen 1987, pp. 147–53.

<sup>56</sup>Yang 2019, pp. 50–55.

<sup>57</sup>Wang 2009, p. 54.

<sup>58</sup>Former Minister of Security, Luo Ruiqing, had been temporarily purged from the party, having been found in contravention of Mao's policies. See The Work Group of the CCP Central Committee 1971.

On March 18, 1975, the CCP officially released the last wave of Chinese “war criminals.” The standing committee announced: “With this we will have disposed of matters concerning all war criminals in custody.”<sup>59</sup> The 1975 amnesty was composed of Chinese and related war criminals from Fushun Prison. Qincheng Prison had already transformed into the site for political prisoners of a different stripe. Various CCP leaders lauded Mao’s decision to push forward with this last amnesty, even though it came twenty-six years after many of these men had been initially incarcerated. Standing Committee member Xie Jingyi waxed poetically: “The release of all the war criminals in custody by special amnesty fully demonstrates the tremendous revolutionary mettle of the party of the proletariat.”<sup>60</sup>

The announcement was very sudden and on March 19, 1975 at 7am the KMT war criminals in Fushun Prison were told to gather in the exercise hall. There they were informed to their astonishment of the monumental decision by loudspeaker.<sup>61</sup> The men were told they would have their citizen’s rights restored and be able to live like normal Chinese countrymen. However, this special amnesty program was different from the previous releases. In a propaganda move and strategic effort to gain a political upper hand over the ROC (Taiwan) and in the international arena, the Communist leadership allowed the former KMT war criminals to choose the location of their repatriation. Subsequently, ten individuals chose to go to Taiwan as former Chinese Nationalist soldiers. The moment was pregnant with political possibilities. The prison warden, Jin Yuan, who had also been in charge with the Japanese war criminals, told the former KMT officers: “I hereby announce that from now on Fushun War Criminals Management Center is no more. It has become an entertainment hall for guests. The label of ‘war criminal’ is no longer. From today you are just citizens of the Chinese People’s Republic, our comrades, and can teach others.”<sup>62</sup>

In a bid to advance the unification agenda, as well as to further demonstrate Chinese communist benevolent justice, Mao’s political agenda as he lay on his death bed was to allow the last wave of KMT war criminals a choice. They could stay in China, or go to Taiwan, or anywhere else they desired. No sooner had a minority of the former prisoners declared their intentions and been dispatched to Hong Kong that intrigue took over. For years the KMT government on Taiwan had proclaimed that it would welcome the return of loyal KMT soldiers but fearful Chinese nationalist party leaders viewed these ten with great suspicion. Chiang Kai-shek had passed away on April 5, 1975 in the midst of this last amnesty project. His son and heir apparent, Chiang Ching-kuo, was not yet assured of administrative stability and had to carve out a new sense of legitimacy for his own successful political succession. The younger Chiang did not officially become president of the ROC for several more years.

The 1975 last amnesty was actually predicated on two waves of releases, several dozen KMT war criminals in March and then in September about 144 Taiwan special agents who had been dispatched to the PRC as part of Chiang Kai-shek’s “National Glory” (*guoguang*) plan to reconquer the mainland in the early 1960s.<sup>63</sup> Taiwan pro-democracy magazines, stationed in Hong Kong because they were forbidden to publish in the ROC at the time, understood the situation on a deeper level. For several years leading up to the 1975 release, events touting the *Anniversary of the “2.28 uprising” in Taiwan*, memorializing the KMT’s 1947 massacre of Taiwanese, had been held in Beijing and other major mainland cities. Grandly staged in the capital seemingly from at least 1973, more than 100 high ranking bureaucrats, intellectuals, and others joined a well-attended roundtable discussion in Beijing where “they voiced their unity about liberating Taiwan and unifying the motherland...” A former KMT military leader who joined the CCP after surrender, Fu Zuoyi, chaired the first meeting.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup>FBIS 1975.

<sup>60</sup>FBIS 1975.

<sup>61</sup>Zhang Yawen 2013, p. 197.

<sup>62</sup>Zhang Yawen 2013, pp. 198–99.

<sup>63</sup>Lin 2021.

<sup>64</sup>Xu 2003a, p. 77; Xu 2003d, p. 77. At the roundtables Taiwanese were praised for their patriotism, resistance to oppression, and desire to unify the country. Xu 2003b, p. 66; Xu 2003c, p. 48.

Overseas Taiwanese media outlets were quick off the mark analyzing the PRC's moves as well as castigating the KMT's poor response to the PRC's amnesty initiative. One analysis suggested that such a series of pardons was consistent with CCP policy of trying to use judicial benevolence as the means to distance itself internationally from what they had labeled as harsh KMT rule. Maoist ideological DNA, the report suggested, had always predicated itself on the belief that those who opposed its rule could be courted to rejoin through thought reform. Moreover, the CCP was able to show its upper hand in such matters because all during the Second World War its policy toward prisoners had been to avoid abuse and to assist them. This was merely the extension of a long-standing philosophy and it made the Chinese communists look good, the article opined.<sup>65</sup> The moral high ground that the CCP occupied when it released the last wave of KMT war criminals was not lost on the Taiwan democracy movement abroad.<sup>66</sup> Other Taiwanese articles went as far to claim that the CCP improved on the KMT's incapacity to allow its own soldiers to reform. Former KMT General Li Yutang was used as an example. He failed in battles late in the civil war and was summarily labeled a "traitor" by Chiang Kai-shek, only to be executed soon after. At least the Chinese communists offered war criminals a way toward a new life and not certain death, suggested the media critical of the KMT outside of Taiwan.<sup>67</sup>

Chinese Nationalist authorities were paying close attention to how the news was broadcast on the mainland. On several occasions, the central broadcasting agency handwrote transcripts of news concerning how the "Communist bandits approved the special amnesty for ten individuals to travel through Hong Kong to Taiwan."<sup>68</sup> The PRC's Public Security Ministry analyzed the impact on Taiwan and assessed that because the KMT had lionized those Chinese "war criminals" in PRC detention as "martyrs," Chinese Nationalist leaders were now paying close attention to the situation after the start of the amnesty program. The CCP judged that the news was having an impact on Taiwan's martial spirit within military ranks. The PRC's Ministry of Security was stern in its repudiation of Taiwan's attitude, remarking that the KMT's rejection of the ten former Chinese nationalist war criminals represented the regime's "hypocrisy" and "spirit of fear." They incorrectly believed that Taiwan's lack of permission for former KMT soldiers to repatriate would gain international criticism. This never really manifested but rancor did emerge outside of Taiwan in its pro-democracy movements, which harped on KMT waffling on key issues. On the basis of human charity, reason, and law, the CCP analysis suggested the KMT rejection could not be adequately justified.<sup>69</sup> The ten former prisoners were clearly dismayed by the ROC's reluctance after so many years of championing for their supposed freedom. There were so many delays in the KMT's decision-making process concerning its former soldiers that one man was pushed to the brink. In early June 1975, Zhang Tieshi committed suicide in his hotel.<sup>70</sup>

No one, however, was more dismayed than another one of the refuseniks, Cai Xingsan. Cai had been a long-standing KMT official who had even personally worked with Chiang Ching-kuo when they were together in Gangnam, in southern China. In 1949, as the KMT's victory looked more distant and many high-ranking Chinese nationalist leaders were fleeing, Cai told Chiang Ching-kuo that he decided to stay on the mainland and would go underground to fight another day.<sup>71</sup> Eventually the CCP arrested Cai. Charged as a spy he was about to be executed but suddenly was given a reprieve. His sentence was suspended and then for some reason extended for life. Chinese communist authorities sent him to Wuhan and in 1956 to the Fushun War Criminals Prison. Cai recalled being a bit taken aback because he had fought against imperial Japan with KMT forces and was then housed with Japanese war criminals at Fushun, which made him feel like a traitor. The fact that Chiang

<sup>65</sup>Xin Ming, "Zhonggong shifu zhengci poxi, *Jiushi niandai* (formerly *Qishi niandai* magazine)," January 1976, pp. 36–39.

<sup>66</sup>Zhu 1975.

<sup>67</sup>*Jiushi niandai* editorial board special interview 1975, p. 9.

<sup>68</sup>Xu (1975).

<sup>69</sup>Wang 2009, p. 113.

<sup>70</sup>Reference News 1975d.

<sup>71</sup>Reference News 1975c.

Ching-kuo rejected Cai's request to repatriate to Taiwan also puzzled Cai.<sup>72</sup> However, Cai's debacle soon grew into greater misfortune for the Taiwanese leadership. Due to the fact that Chiang Ching-kuo vetoed Cai's request to join his KMT brethren in Taiwan, in his own words Cai became a "loudspeaker" for Chinese justice in Hong Kong. Had Cai been able to repatriate to Taiwan he would ironically have been hampered in such efforts due to the censorship of Taiwan media under the KMT. But Hong Kong was a British colony with a relatively open media. The result was hard biting criticism of KMT politics that spilled forth from Cai's weekly media columns and specials in the Hong Kong-based Chinese press.

PRC leaders closely followed this political friction in both the Hong Kong and foreign media. Soon after Cai's rejected request to emigrate to Taiwan he began to write for several Hong Kong-based publications and to loudly voice his discontent. The first major piece emerged on September 1, 1975 in a popular magazine, *The 1970s*. It was an interview of Cai at the Imperial Hotel where he and the other former prisoners had first been put up with the expectation they would soon depart for Taiwan. The short visit turned into several months as the political struggle unfolded. Because it was known that Cai had once worked closely with the soon to be anointed new leader of Taiwan, Chiang Ching-kuo, Cai's insights made for a juicy story – a former colleague of the KMT leader denied entry to the ROC.<sup>73</sup>

According to news reports at the time, the interviewer noted, the Taiwanese authorities were worried that the former KMT prisoners might be special agents of the PRC or that they were "communist spies," and that others would follow. Cai retorted that the KMT officials should have been aware that he and his cohorts were the last to be released, there were no more war criminals in Chinese prisons. And only he and his nine brethren wanted to go to Taiwan so it was a small number, he explained. Cai also wanted to reiterate his loyalty. "One could say I did my utmost for the Chinese Nationalist Party," Cai said. Another difference with the last wave of released prisoners and previous amnesties was that the former had to submit to investigations and satisfy the PRC authorities, whereas Cai's group did not have to admit anything specific. The interviewer queried if the crux of the matter was more a question of doubts about why the CCP had allowed the prisoners to choose Taiwan? Cai responded that he did not think the release was political. The choice to go to Taiwan came from the former prisoners, not as a suggestion from the CCP, he said. Cai clarified that there might have been more who wished to go to Taiwan but they were worried what would happen after they arrived on the island, given the history of KMT violence against its own.<sup>74</sup> Jin Luxian remembered meeting Cai in Fushun Prison and recalled that he was very politically savvy. "None of them [KMT war criminals] had received sentences and so they could only wait to be pardoned. During study sessions they would all praise the government's policies in a formulaic manner. They were all smooth talkers and capable of winning the guards' confidence."<sup>75</sup>

Such duplicity was not uncommon. Wang Tsun-Ming was a former Chinese Nationalist soldier captured late in China's civil war and then "re-educated" for several months before being redeployed as a CCP soldier to the Korean War. Taken as a prisoner of the communists previously and interrogated, he recalled that "he wildly exaggerated the number of prostitutes he had visited and invented stories of rape." Fabricating and then admitting these sorts of crimes prevented further problems, Wang wrote, because "the Communists believed that all Nationalists had committed rape." Consequently, if someone did not follow this expectation tremendous pressure would ensue to bring truth to the CCP's world view.<sup>76</sup> The whole affair of the former KMT soldiers being refused repatriation made news in East Asia. Japanese media reported that while Taiwanese authorities had initially welcomed the men, KMT leaders were also worried that the Chinese "war criminals" might be agents of the communists.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>72</sup>Fengkuang de taowangzhe 2009. This is the DVD version of the original 2008 Phoenix TV show that aired in Hong Kong concerning Cai Kingsan's life story.

<sup>73</sup>Wu 2014.

<sup>74</sup>Reference News 1975a.

<sup>75</sup>Jin 2012, p. 251.

<sup>76</sup>Wang Tsun-ming 1954, p. 35.

<sup>77</sup>Asahi Newspaper 1975.

Cai's subsequent interviews revealed that the KMT government had requested he apply to enter Taiwan as a refugee and to make an anti-Communist statement. Cai remarked that he was of several minds concerning these conditions. He would enjoy going to see old friends but he was not a refugee and did not wish to be seen as one. The mainland had treated him well and with respect. He was not being driven out of the PRC and he was not fleeing, "thus how could I possibly be a refugee," Cai asked?<sup>78</sup> PRC leaders, and in particular Premier Zhou Enlai, deathly ill with cancer, followed these events closely back in Beijing.<sup>79</sup>

On September 9, 1975, Mao recommended releasing the remaining group of war criminals, the slightly less than 150 agents of the KMT who had been sent to overthrow the CCP. Smarting from the international criticism of having had a former KMT war criminal commit suicide in Hong Kong, KMT leaders debated whether or not to accept the former special agents. On October 5, 1975, sixty-five of these men declared their desire to repatriate but unlike the former KMT war criminals, these agents had actually been ordered by Chiang Kai-shek to depart Taiwan for the mainland and the KMT decided to honor the original mission.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

On September 9, 1976 Mao Zedong died and a power struggle ensued over who would be the subsequent CCP leader. As various strains of Chinese leadership strove to resurrect order from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the early 1980s turned into an era of redemption for some of those who had been purged or denied justice by China's defunct legal system. But even then, not all Chinese war criminals had been released. It was not until 1982 that all lower ranking sub-prefectural level former KMT officials were granted clemency.<sup>81</sup> By the mid-1980s this opening also ushered in the return of Japanese former war criminals to visit China to pay their respects to their former jailors for having granted them, in their word, a second life.

The varied and complex story of the different categories of war criminals on the Chinese mainland is at odds with the current more homogenous descriptions of the PRC's national history and understanding of World War II and the civil war. The disparate memories and legal pursuit of a variety of "war criminals" on the Chinese mainland has transformed into a unified and monochromatic story where the pursuit of justice against the Japanese is the sole focus of the plot. This narrative now contains less sticky edges and leans more toward simplistic historical conclusions. As I see it, the situation created by these previously competitive historical narratives is now more distinctly linked to political lines best summarized by the French historian, Benjamin Stora. In his analysis of the tortured Algeria-French political relationship, Stora wrote that in the twenty-first century history has come to serve a different master. The current Chinese imagination of the war and postwar, validated by war crimes tribunals, has created the ultimate reference on which to base postwar political legitimacy.<sup>82</sup> According to Stora's observations, however, contemporary power brokers have grown increasingly less interested in investigating what historically had actually occurred and more concerned with proving that national leaders had been correct in the past. The CCP aims to maintain that its memory of events

<sup>78</sup>Reference News 1975b.

<sup>79</sup>Zhongyang Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi 2020, p. 703. On September 4, 1975 Zhou commented on the interview with Cai from *Cankao xiaoxi* which garnered his attention.

<sup>80</sup>Tong 1999, p. 127.

<sup>81</sup>People's Daily Newspaper 1982. On the same day an article in the Japanese *Asahi Newspaper* (Asahi Newspaper 1982) noted that Minister of Public Security Zhao Cangbi announced that approximately 4,000 former KMT officials of provincial or lower ranks in detention were ordered released and that if they wished to return to Taiwan, travel funds would be provided. KMT General Wang Sheng ran a short-lived arm of a KMT political warfare branch called the Liu Shaokang office. This office held an internal meeting concerning mainland actions designed to undermine the ROC. Specific reference was made to this last release of KMT officials which was seen as a key node of PRC agitation propaganda. See Chen Tsui-lian 2021; Lin 2021, pp. 151–54; Wang Sheng Papers.

<sup>82</sup>Rana Mitter, *China's good war: how World War II is shaping a new nationalism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020.

is certified, but prefer that actual history, a cool and dispassionate analysis of the past, be avoided.<sup>83</sup> This article has tried to cut against that grain by showing that even while the pursuit of war criminals within China did not necessarily aim at brainwashing, a legacy of doubt remains due to political and domestic security pressure to shape a historical narrative that feeds the present, rather than investigating the more difficult and delicate story of the past.

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