

Interpreting in POW Camps in the Korean War

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Few studies to date have dealt with the role of interpreters in POW camps in violent conflicts in the history. In the Korean War, Chinese captives were kept in several POW camps, administered by the U.S., in South Korea. Due to historical and political reasons, the Chinese POWs were divided into two factions, one loyal to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the other to Kuomintang (KMT). Each faction was trying to convert more POWs to its side.

The U.S. then were in urgent need of English-Chinese interpreters, and camp discipline was to a large extent dependent on the mediation practice of bilingual inmates. ZHANG Zeshi, a CCP member, aware of the division between the Chinese inmates and the advantageous position an interpreter held, managed to become an interpreter by self-recommendation in the hope that he would identify more POWs who remained loyal to CCP, and fight against KMT.

On the one hand, ZHANG was a figure both political factions wanted to win over, as he frequently acted as U.S. officers' agent. On the other hand, he underwent identity crisis by not being trusted by both sides. This paper, drawing on ZHANG's autobiography and the author's personal interview with him, memoirs and biographies of interpreters in the war, along with a variety of other documents about that war, attempts to explore ZHANG's motivation to interpret, his identity crisis and ethical struggle as a POW interpreter.