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**Revisiting the Sichuan Army:  
Legend under the Power**

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by

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

### **Revisiting the Sichuan Army: Legend under the Power**

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The Sichuan Army during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) is always a popular topic in Chinese academia, while the Western historians rarely discuss its significance. When I first begin my research two years ago, I tried to restore the significance of the Sichuan Army to make it recognized to the Western scholarship. However, after searching the primary sources of the army, I realized that they were simply portrayed as nationalistic and patriotic. I began to deepen my research by combining the materials from the Communist Government, the Nationalist Government, the local archives, and the oral history from both educated and uneducated soldiers. Upon my research, I find that the Sichuan Army is a complex subject to explore. In fact, besides the contribution to the war, the Sichuan Army reveals not only the political struggle between Chiang Kai-shek and the warlords from the top level, but also the reactions of the Sichuan Army personnel to the war from below.

## Introduction

In 2009, a new TV series, *My Division Leader, My Division* [我的团长我的团], was launched in Mainland China. The series depicts the ordeals of a military division that belongs to the Chinese Nationalist Army (the army of the Guomindang, GMD/KMT). The division is deployed with other units to fight against the Japanese Army in Burma in order to secure supply lines in Southwest China during the World War II. The series became the most popular television show of that year because it revealed the personal experiences and emotional reactions of the GMD soldiers, along with information about the tremendous casualties they suffered. More significantly, it represents the first time that the Chinese media has focused on the contributions of the Nationalist Army rather than the Communist forces in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The series points out that the soldiers of the division share similar nationalistic sentiments with those who were led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Therefore, even though the soldiers believe that they are the victims in the power struggle within the Nationalist Government because the division is assigned a suicidal mission, a spontaneous nationalism arises and impels these soldiers and officers to fulfill their orders and bravely face death.

The political divergence inside the Nationalist Party can be traced to warlordism. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, China was a nation exhausted by the conflicts of warlords. The establishment of the Nationalist Government, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, promised to push China forward into a new era of peace, prosperity and national pride.<sup>1</sup> Revolutionaries inevitably discovered, however, that because Chiang compromised with those former warlords to establish his government instead of eliminating them, the country under the Nationalist Government became a combination of rival factions with conflicting interests, rather than a united nation

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd Eastman, *Seeds of Destruction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 1-2.

during the 1930s. The brittle relationship between Chiang and the warlords caused Chiang to restrict military and economic expansion in regions commanded by warlords in order to preserve his own interests in the Nationalist Government rather than solve the common administrative issues on which both their successes depended. In order to allow himself to attain a decisive voice and absolute power both in the party and in the nation, Chiang often placed more value on his own organized and trained army, the Central Army, than on the provincial armies of the former warlords.

In this paper, I will examine the case of the Sichuan Army to illuminate the continuous power struggle between Chiang and the warlords of the Sichuan region during the Second Sino-Japanese War. I argue that this complicated political relationship led to the tension between Chiang's treating the Sichuan Army as second-class military units and championing them later for nationalistic purposes. By diminishing the strength of the Sichuan Army, Chiang was able to maintain his absolute leadership position from a military perspective. Meanwhile, praising the dead Sichuan soldiers as national heroes would enhance Chiang's reputation with the Sichuan people. Chiang's strategies regarding the Sichuan Army and the Sichuan region made him the only one who benefited from the war.

Wartime China is always a popular topic to discuss. The Second Sino-Japanese War attracts scholarship with its significance within both the larger context of World War II and its domestic impact on the Chinese economy and politics.<sup>2</sup> In the last decade, historians expand the field to many different fields. J. Megan Greene points out that scholars are shifting their focus away from "high politics, military actions, international relations, and atrocity" and are exploring the

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<sup>2</sup> J. Megan Greene, "Wars as Dividing Lines? Rethinking the Significance of the Sino-Japanese War in Twentieth Century China", in *Frontiers of History in China, Volume 13, Issue, (2018), 176.*

dimensions of “everything from education and healthcare to labor, economic development, and institution building in both occupied and free regions of China.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there are few scholars focusing primarily on one specific army alone during the Second Sino-Japanese War.

This paper puts a military history of soldiers from below and a story of power struggles from above in dialogue together. Historians in China have rarely done this before. Studies on wartime Chinese history used to address the questions regarding the success of the CCP in 1949. Scholars usually adopted a CCP or a GMD perspective. Chalmers Johnson argues that the peasants in the Communist region spontaneously devoted themselves to the war effort because of mass nationalism. Mark Seldon challenges Johnson’s argument and shows how the CCP influenced the peasants so that a sense of nationalism would emerge. Other China scholars understand the inner power relations of Chiang’s government. Lloyd Eastman asserts that “whenever possible, he [Chiang] ordered the regional forces into combat with the Japanese while holding the Central Army divisions in reserve, protecting their personal and precious equipment. In distributing weapons and equipment, he invariably favored his central forces over the provincial armies.”<sup>4</sup> By focusing primarily on the Yunnan province, Eastman points out when the Nationalist army collapsed under the attack of the CCP, “the principal leaders of Yunnan during the war opted for Communist rather than Nationalist rule.”<sup>5</sup> Because of the estrangement caused by Chiang, Long Yun, a former warlord of the Yunnan region and a general of the GMD, refused to cooperate with Chiang in the Chinese Civil War and eventually joined the CCP’s leadership. However, Eastman does not emphasize the military aspect in the context of high politics and power struggles.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>4</sup> Eastman, 143-144.

<sup>5</sup> Eastman, 41-42.

Although some historians have expressed their views on this military component, the subject has been studied from above while overlooking the different factions inside the military. Hans J. van de Ven explores the military aspect by focusing on the Chinese Nationalist Army between 1925 and 1945. The Nationalists under the leadership of Chiang were praised in the West for defeating the Japanese empire and successfully transforming China into a modern nation-state during WWII but were suddenly criticized for their corruption and the incompetence in the military after the war. Van de Ven investigates the myths and truths of Nationalist resistance and argues that Nationalists took advantage of the war to seize control of China. Van de Ven provides a perspective based on the United States' version but reassesses the actions of the Allied powers during the war.<sup>6</sup> However, van de Ven considers the Nationalist Army as a whole unit provided with advanced weapons and proper training by the United States. The case of the Sichuan Army indicates that the provincial forces experienced the war differently.

The Sichuan Army itself merits a place in history. First, the army undeniably made a great contribution to the war. The Yunnan army dispatched around 400,000 soldiers during the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, as one of the most important resistance forces, the Sichuan Army contributed more than 3.5 million soldiers to the war effort. Twenty percent of the Nationalist Army came from Sichuan province, and one out of every 15 Sichuan locals went to the frontlines of the war.<sup>8</sup> The Sichuan Army provided a huge amount of manpower and made tremendous sacrifices in the war against their national enemies. Second, the study of the Sichuan Army

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<sup>6</sup> Hans van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China: 1925-1945* (Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia: Routledge, 2012), 2-5.

<sup>7</sup> Chen Zuying and Xu Jiping, "Dianjun chuzheng zhan nanbei, gongxun zhuozhu chuan qianqiu, 滇军出征战南北，功勋卓著传千秋" ("People Will Remember the Contribution of the Yunnan Army During the War"), (*Yunnan ribao*, Communist Party of China News, July 12, 2015), <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/n/2015/0712/c85037-27291235.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "Chongqing suiyue: haixia liangan kangzhan wenwu zhan, 重庆岁月—海峡两岸抗战文物展" ("Memory of Chongqing: Documents on Sino-Japanese War from Taiwan Exhibited in the Mainland China"), (*Xinhua News*, Xinhua Network, Aug 17, 2010.) [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2010-08/17/c\\_12456128.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2010-08/17/c_12456128.htm).

belongs to an unexplored part of Chinese historiography. It reveals the complicated power relations through the lens of the military. Moreover, the wartime experiences of soldiers and officers verify the ramifications of the power struggle inside the Nationalist government and represent military history from below.

This research paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, I review the political background of the Sichuan Army before the eruption of the Sino-Japanese War and examine the role of military units in a pre-war Chinese political context. I also summarize the military history of the Sichuan Army by referring to different primary sources available in Mainland China. The second section showcases how Chiang propagandized the Sichuan Army in the wartime Sichuan region by controlling the content of newspapers issued from the Nationalist Government. In the last section, I describe the way Chiang treated the Sichuan Army once the war began, which was the complete opposite of Chiang's portrayal of the treatment they would receive, and reconstruct the actual wartime experiences of soldiers and officers using both oral histories and memoirs.

## The Power Relation in Sichuan

### *Before the Second Sino-Japanese War*

Before the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, a "power struggle" dominated the Sichuan region. After the death of Yuan Shikai (1916), the first president of the Republic of China (who later declared himself emperor), the Sichuan region, like other regions facing a political vacuum, entered the Warlord Era. Sichuan warlords were mostly local military commanders who controlled the military, politics and finance in their territories and required their people and soldiers to be loyal to them instead of the nation or the ideologies of the Communist or Nationalist Parties. Warlordism was a total disaster for the local people because of

the inabilities of the warlords' to maintain both military and economic stability. The Sichuan region and the rest of the country suffered from significant loss of human life and disunity.

Although Chiang Kai-shek and his reestablished Nationalist Government launched the Northern Expedition in 1926 and two years later the military expedition successfully reunited the eastern part of the country, the Warlord Era in Sichuan did not end until one of the warlords, Liu Xiang, ended the warring with other warlords in 1932. However, even though other warlords, like Deng Xihou and Yang Sen, recognized Liu as the “Lord of Sichuan,” they set up their own garrison areas so they could independently formulate their own military and political affairs.<sup>9</sup> Because of this, Liu Xiang was unable to place the Sichuan region under his own rule.

As well as the divisions inside the region, Liu Xiang faced pressure from the central government of the Nationalist Party. In 1932, Chiang Kai-shek became aware of the potential capability of the Sichuan Army and tried to break the warlords' domination in order to control the region. He used a strategy of giving orders to the Sichuan warlords in the name of national defense, which the warlords could not refuse. Two years later, when the Red Army, which was considered a rebel force by the central government, began the Long March, Chiang realized that this was his best opportunity to recover Sichuan. In practice, he appointed Liu Xiang as “commander in chief of suppressing bandits” and ordered him to lay siege to the Red Army. Nevertheless, because Liu Xiang and the other warlords were not willing to sacrifice their own forces to achieve Chiang Kai-shek's political aspiration and Liu believed that it was his best chance to use “suppressing the Red Army” as an excuse to retrieve the territories controlled by

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<sup>9</sup> Deng Hanxiang, “Liuxiang yu Jiangjieshi de gouxin doujiao, 刘湘与蒋介石的勾心斗 (the Intrigue between Liu Xiang and Chiang Kai-shek),” recorded in *Sichuan wenshi ziliao jicui, Di Yi Juan, Zheng Zhi Jun Shi Bian, 四川文史资料集粹, 第1卷, 政治军事编 (Treasured Sichuan Historical Accounts, volume 1, the volume of politics and military affairs)*, (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Press, 1996), 131.

the other warlords, the encirclement was a total failure.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Chiang had his reason to start a forced entry into Sichuan; he suggested sending ten divisions into Sichuan as reinforcement.

Faced with pressure from both inside and outside, Liu had to find a balance between both sides while remaining in power. In 1934, the situation in the Sichuan region pushed Liu to make a quick decision. On the one hand, the local economy had not recovered from the warlords' chaos, which had lasted for more than a decade. Liu Xiang's government's financial system was on the edge of collapse because Liu and the other warlords had issued their own paper money, with no foundation fund or limit, to maintain financial stability. The negative impact of inflating the paper currency was, according to Chiang Kai-shek, "worse than the bandits."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, since the warlords had failed to maintain and rebuild civil facilities to protect people from natural disasters, the majority of the Sichuan region experienced either flood or drought, which resulted in diminished harvests from the farmlands. Peasants and civilians starved to death while local military commanders continued to raise taxes for their own benefit.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the Sichuan region was in danger of rebellion and war.

Therefore, Liu Xiang decided to seek assistance from Chiang Kai-shek. At the end of 1934, Liu went in person to Nanjing, the capital of the Nationalist Government, to negotiate and defend his interests. Liu's action coincidentally resonated with Chiang's goal of setting up the Sichuan

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<sup>10</sup> *Chengdu wenshi ziliao xuanbian, Di Er Juan*, 成都文史资料选编, 第2卷 (*Selected Chengdu Historical Accounts, volume 2*), (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Press, 2007), 256-258.

<sup>11</sup> Chiang Kai-shek, *Jiangjieshi guanyu jinhou Sichuan gejun bude zixing yinzhou piaobi diangao*, 蒋介石关于今后四川各军不得自行印铸票币电稿 (*the Telegraph from Chiang Kai-shek on the topic of Preventing Sichuan armies from privately issuing paper money*), (1935), included in *Zhonghua minguoshi dang'an ziliao huibian, Di Wu Ji, Di Yi Bian*, 中华民国史档案资料汇编, 第5辑, 第1编 (*The collection of archival source of the Republic of China, volume 5, edition 1*), (Jiangsu: Fenghuang Press, 1994), 275-276.

<sup>12</sup> *Sichuan wenshi ziliao xuanji, Di San Qi*, 四川文史资料选辑, 第3辑 (*Selected Sichuan Historical Accounts, volume 3*), (Sichuan: The Committee of Sichuan Provincial Records, 1988), 159-160.

region as his strategic rear: he needed one experienced chief commander to administer the region on his behalf. As a result of the negotiations, Liu allowed Chiang to send his advisory crews to supervise Liu's army. In exchange, Liu and his government would receive both political and financial support from the Nationalist Government, which made Liu the true "Lord of Sichuan," and Chiang allowed Liu to maintain a certain autonomy in Sichuan. According to Chiang's diary:

The situation in Sichuan is complicated. Soldiers are not loyal to commanders, which is concerning. Therefore, we (our government) should foster one of the local warlords to take charge of the Sichuan region while the central (Nationalist) government should reorganize financial and currency systems and arrange for economic and industrial development without military interference.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the apparently successful negotiation, Chiang Kai-shek continued to resent the fact that he did not hold power over one of China's largest provinces. In 1935, therefore, he decided to send the principal force of his Central Army into Sichuan to control the province. Meanwhile, Liu's Sichuan Army was required to reduce by one-third both its military personnel and expenditure.<sup>14</sup> Faced with Chiang Kai-shek's intervention, Liu attempted to unite a variety of political factions, including Feng Yuxiang's subordinates and even some communists, to work together to oppose Chiang. Moreover, Liu imitated Chiang's Whampoa Military Academy, which had produced a loyal and close-knit group of senior officers. He did so by constructing his own military union called Wude Union, which consisted of Liu's trusted senior military officers, to unite, control and supervise the army. Chiang's intervention was not successful, and the power struggle continued until the Xi'an Incident in 1936, when Chiang was kidnapped by his own

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<sup>13</sup> Gao Sulan, *Jiangzhongzheng zongtong dangan shilve gaoben*, 蒋中正总统档案事略稿本 (*the bibliographical manuscript of President Chiang Kai-shek's record*), (Taipei: National History Archive, 2008), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Robert A. Kapp, *Szechuan and the Chinese Republic: Provincial Militarism and Central Power, 1911-38*, trans. Ying Zhonglai and Li Weijian (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Press, 1985), 129.

generals and forced to cooperate with the Chinese Communist Party. Liu Xiang saw this incident as his chance to get rid of Chiang's influence in Sichuan.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, as Chiang Kai-shek successfully maintained his leadership of the country, in the middle of 1937, he began to target Liu Xiang and planned to replace Liu with his own trusted commanders. The Army Rectification Conference, which took place in early July, 1937, in Chongqing, was Chiang's first step toward controlling Sichuan's military and civil governance.

### *The Significance of the Army Rectification Conference*

Since the Sichuan region had been under military control for a long time, it did not have a mature civil service bureaucracy. Therefore, at the Army Rectification Conference, Chiang Kai-shek initially presented two proposals to limit Liu Xiang and the other warlords' power: disarmament and the reduction of Liu's influence by isolating the administrative system from Liu's military junta.<sup>16</sup> Liu was afraid that he would quickly lose his dominance in Sichuan if he accepted the two proposals; therefore, in response, he proposed that the scheme be broken up into two steps: first, the number of Sichuan Army soldiers would be reduced and then the new Sichuan government would be established. Liu believed that such a two-step process could buy him some time to strengthen his power in the government. Chiang Kai-shek agreed that the conference would focus only on the military aspect because he was also worried that infuriating Liu Xiang could lead to Liu's resistance to Chiang's rule.

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<sup>15</sup> *Sichuan Wenshi Ziliao Xuanji, Di Shisan Ji*, 四川文史资料选辑, 第13辑 (Selected Sichuan Historical Accounts, volume 13), (Sichuan: The Committee of Sichuan Provincial Records, 1988), 147.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

The resolution of the conference involved three parts. First, the Sichuan Army was required to reduce by one-fifth its military personnel.<sup>17</sup> Second, senior officers (those ranking on or above regimental commander) would only be appointed by the Nationalist Government. Third, the soldiers' pay and provisions would also be uniformly assigned by the Nationalist Government as a national tax expense.<sup>18</sup> By controlling both the personnel and management of the army, Chiang Kai-shek seemed to have prevailed in the power struggle against Liu Xiang and the Sichuan warlords.

However, during the conference, the Japanese began their invasion of Northeast China, which led to the resolution remaining unexecuted. In fact, the significance of the Army Rectification Conference was neither how successful nor how frustrating it had been; it was the turning point for the Sichuan Army. Before the conference, the Sichuan Army had been a tool for political struggle. The warlords who had controlled the most powerful armies, with more manpower and better equipment, automatically gained privilege in the political discourse. Therefore, when faced with wars and battles against other warlords or the Red Army, the warlords' first rule was not to defeat the enemy but to preserve effective strength. The situation changed, however, when the Sichuan Army was faced with an invasion from another nation, and the goal changed to one of conquest, instead of winning the power struggle. The Sichuan Army was left with little time to adjust itself to the realities of modern warfare.

### *The Sichuan Army in the Second Sino-Japanese War*

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<sup>17</sup> Instead of one-third of the Sichuan Army, both Liu and Chiang accepted a reduction of one-fifth since Liu could not convince Chiang to give up the proposal and Chiang could not push Liu too far, in case it resulted in an unexpected situation, such as a war.

<sup>18</sup> *Sichuan Wenshi Ziliao Xuanji, Di Shisan Ji*, 四川文史资料选辑, 第13辑 (*Selected Sichuan Historical Accounts, volume 13*), (Sichuan: The Committee of Sichuan Provincial Records), 150-151.

Immediately following the July 7 Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which marked the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the Army Rectification Conference, Chiang Kai-shek convened a national defense meeting to discuss possible strategies to confront the Japanese invasion. During the meeting, Liu Xiang realized that the Sino-Japanese War would focus Chiang on the Japanese invasion. He therefore allied with the CCP and Li Zongren, another warlord, and signed the “Chuan [Sichuan] Gui [Li Zongren’s army] Hong [Red Army] Agreement” to form the United Front in Sichuan. He stated that compared to the crisis the nation was facing, the power struggle that he and Chiang were in should be put aside, and he determined that he would send 300,000 soldiers along with thousands of tons of grain to support the war.<sup>19</sup> However, Chiang Kai-shek took advantage of Liu’s national benevolence by reorganizing Liu’s troops and dispatching them to different parts of China. When Liu realized that he no longer retained military power in Sichuan, it was too late for him to take back his decision. One year later, in 1938, he died in his own bed. Five major Sichuan generals inherited his Sichuan Army, including Deng Xihou and Yang Sen, who later became famous during the war.

At the beginning of the war in Mainland Chinese territory, the Sichuan Army, as promised, sent around 300,000 soldiers to the front. The Nationalist Government appointed Liu Xiang as the Commander of the Seventh War Zone, and the Sichuan Army formed the battle array of the war zone. The Sichuan Army was divided into two army groups. The first of these, the 22nd Army Group, had three corps under Deng Xihou’s command and was sent to Central China (Shanxi and Shandong provinces); this army was controlled by other warlords, not directly by

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 151-152.

Liu Xiang. The second army group, the 23rd Army Group, contained two corps and three independent brigades that had been Liu Xiang's own troops back in Sichuan. This army group was later deployed to the Jiangnan region.<sup>20</sup> As well as the two major army groups, seven more corps and brigades came into existence during the later period to support the frontiers. The total number of soldiers who joined the battlefields was over 400,000 and the number of Sichuan people who actively participated in the war activities (providing food, transporting supplies, etc.) was 3.5 million.

Even through the Sichuan Army deployed a tremendous number of soldiers to the war zone, the army itself was poorly organized and equipped. Although Chiang Kai-shek promised Liu Xiang that the Sichuan Army would be provided with the necessary equipment for the war, such as weapons, food supplies and medical assistance, the weapons and training that the soldiers and officers received were so poor that when they were dispatched to the war zone, they could hardly be called an army. According to the Nationalist Government's requirement for military equipment, each squad should have had sixteen people, including two squad leaders, eight rifle soldiers and six machine gunners; however, machine guns were extremely rare in the Sichuan Army. Some platoons, which comprised three squads, did not have any machine guns. The army's uniform became another agent for Chiang's regional restriction in Sichuan. The only unified dress they had were their shoes: straw sandals that the soldiers wore without socks. The rest of the uniform differed from one soldier to the next. As long as their clothes and trousers were of similar colors, the soldiers were allowed to wear them. The army ate mostly vegetables; which types depended on what had ripened that season and sometimes they ate cabbage every

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<sup>20</sup> Ma Xuanwei and Wen Xianmei, *Chuanjun Kangzhan Jishi*, 川军出川抗战纪事 (*Record Event of Sichuan Army during the Anti-Japanese War*), (Chengdu: Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences Press, 1986), 16-23.

day. Meat was so rare that the soldiers only ate it twice a month.<sup>21</sup> Training was also neglected by the officers and commanders. The soldiers had been required to train and practice three times a day, but right before entering the war zone, they were no longer training themselves.<sup>22</sup> Even worse, due to a lack of logistical support, wounded soldiers could not receive medical attention. For instance, the 41st Corp, one of the corps of the 22nd Army Group “did not organize the wartime medical forces [including first-aid shelters, stretcher units, etc.]. Therefore, any soldier who sustained a minor injury but was still able to move himself had to retreat from the battlefield on his own, while those who were seriously wounded and incapacitated were left behind and executed by the enemies cruelly.”<sup>23</sup>

Because of backward logistics and military strategies, the Sichuan Army suffered tremendous casualties during the battles. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, 263,000 soldiers were killed, over 350,000 were injured and 26,000 were reported as missing in action.<sup>24</sup> Many senior officers, including the commander of 36th Army Group Li Jiayu and several division leaders, were killed. The Sichuan Army joined every single major campaign during the war and their ultimate sacrifice won them a certain reputation as “national heroes.”

The price the Sichuan Army had to pay to win such a reputation was high. The first military campaign the army engaged in was the Battle of Shanghai. During the battle, under the leadership of Yang Lin, the 26th Division of the 20th Corp was one of the best performing military units. It amassed an outstanding record, including recapturing multiple war fronts and

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<sup>21</sup> Liu Zegang and Lin Zhibo, *Wenshi ziliao xuanbian kangri zhanzheng*, 文史资料选编抗日战争(Selected Historical Documents on Sino-Japanese War), (Beijing: National History Resources Committee, 2012), 765-768.

<sup>22</sup> Pai Lun, “Sichuan de jundui, 四川的军队” (“Sichuan’s army”), (*Tan Feng*, 1937). 1.

<sup>23</sup> Lei Yunxian, Chuanjun di ershier jituanjun kangzhan zai shanxi, 川军第二十二集团军抗战在山西 (The Anti-Japanese War of the Sichuan 22nd Army Group in Shanxi Province), in *Wenshi ziliao xuanbian kangri zhanzheng*, 文史资料选编抗日战争 (Selected Historical Documents on Sino-Japanese War), (Beijing: National History Resources Committee, 2012,) 679-690.

<sup>24</sup> Xinan minzhong dui kangzhan de gongxian, 西南民众对抗战的贡献 (*The Contribution of Southwest people to the Second Sino-Japanese War*), (Guizhou: Guizhou Renmin Press, 1992), 6.

eliminating record number of enemies. Nevertheless, more than 70 percent of the corp's soldiers were killed on the frontlines<sup>25</sup>

The Division had four regimental commanders, two were killed; fourteen battalion commanders, thirteen were killed . . . There were fewer than ten people who survived for each company . . . On October 15th, the 804 Regiment was ordered to retrieve lost field. The Regimental commander led his people to successfully recapture the ground while . . . company and platoon commanders were either killed or injured, and there were only 120 soldiers who remained!<sup>26</sup>

Casualties in other combat divisions were also horrifying. According to Hu Yichu, a second lieutenant of the 134th Division of the 20th Corp, “the dead bodies were piled up even higher than the trench of the fields, which were over two meters high.”<sup>27</sup>

The Sichuan Army's first victory was the Battle of Tai'erzhuang. During the spring of 1938, Deng Xihou, the commander of the Sichuan Army's 22nd Corp, held its position for more than three days to block an attack from the enemies' reinforcements from the north, which bought time for Li Zongren and his army to annihilate more than 20,000 Japanese troops. Unfortunately, the price for this success was high. The entire army group lost more than half its soldiers.<sup>28</sup> In particular, one of the divisions of 22nd Army Group, the 124th Division, was practically wiped out by the enemies after three days of defense.

There were numerous cases of “ultimate sacrifice” in the Sichuan Army. However, the Sichuan Army gradually lost its voice during the later period of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The reason for this was complicated. First, Chiang Kai-shek never suspended his aim of fully controlling the Sichuan Army. By doing so, he split the corps into different divisions and placed

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<sup>25</sup> Ma, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Gao Hua, “Wangmingzhang xunguo yu chuanjun kangzhan, 王铭章殉国与川军抗战” (The Death of Wang Mingzhang and the Sichuan Army's Anti-Japanese War), in *Wenshi Jinghua, 文史精华(Essence of Culture and History)*, (Hebei: Hebei Renmin Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Hu Yichu, “Chuanjun di yisansi shi zai nanxiang zhandou zhong, 川军第一三四师在南翔战斗中”(The Battle of Nanxiang of 134th Division of the Sichuan Army), in *Wenshi ziliao xuanbian kangri zhanzheng, 文史资料选编抗日战争* (Selected Historical Documents on Sino-Japanese War), (Beijing: National History Resources Committee, 2012), 530.

<sup>28</sup> Ma, 46.

them under the command of his trusted generals. Worse, the Sichuan Army's divisions were treated differently from Chiang's Central Army. They were usually the last to get supplies and rewards but the first to join the battles. As a result, they regarded themselves as an "inferior army" and "not important to the war."<sup>29</sup>

However, in Sichuan, a voice rose to praise the Sichuan Army's soldiers as national heroes, and their ultimate sacrifices were considered evidence of nationalistic behavior. The case of the Sichuan Army became the Nationalist Government's most popular theme to propagandize nationalism and arouse nationalistic feelings. In the next section, I will examine the nationalistic project executed by Chiang through the local media in the Sichuan region.

### The Nationalistic Project in the Sichuan Press

The press in Republican China functioned as a battleground for different parties and powers to spread propaganda advancing their political purposes. Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, the Chinese Communist Party, Sichuan warlords, and the local intellectuals all published their own newspapers because the press held the unique position of being able to relay to the people the revolutionary strategies, state constructions, democratic reforms, and nationalist projects of each of these parties. An effective dissemination of news would actually serve the parties' practical interests both in gaining support from the people and in actually making people accept new party rules and disciplines.<sup>30</sup> Although there were also non-governmental and non-

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<sup>29</sup> Zhang Zhonglei, "Yuxi chetui ji lijiaoyu de xisheng, 豫西撤退及李家钰的牺牲" (The Retreat of Yuxi and the Death of Li Jiayu), in *Yuan Guomindang jiangling kangri zhanzheng qinliji, 原国民党将领抗日战争亲历记 (The Personal Experience of Former Guo Mindang Generals during the Sino-Japanese War)*, (Beijing: Wenshi Press, 2013), 382.

<sup>30</sup> Huang Jiuqing, *Kangzhan shiqi Sichuan de xinsenjie yanjiu, 抗战时期四川的新闻界研究 (Study of Sichuan Press during the Second Sino-Japanese War)*, (Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, 2009), 1. Barbara Mittler also mentions in *A Newspaper for*

political publishers, such as merchants and foreign investors, who entered into the press during this time, this paper will analyze strictly those newspapers that served the political purposes of the government in the Sichuan region.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the press in CCP controlled Sichuan region expanded to match the activity of the Communists' publications. On April 1, 1929, the Sichuan Military Committee of CCP published the *New Society Daily*, which was the first newspaper targeted at local Sichuan readers. This newspaper initially stated that it would “hold the dauntless spirit, stand at the head of the epoch, and speak out for those who were oppressed (by the local and Nationalist government)”.<sup>31</sup> Because of its radical attitudes toward Chiang Kai-shek's government, the *New Society Daily* was suspended from publication only two months after its first edition was printed. However, the governmental control of the press did not stop the CCP from publishing other newspapers. When the CCP began to set up revolutionary bases in the Sichuan region in 1932, it published several newspapers. Among these was the *Sichuan Morning News*, which turned out to be one of the most influential of the new publications. Taking a lesson from the *New Society Daily*, the *Sichuan Morning News* refrained from directly attacking the Nationalist government and instead stated explicitly that it represented the interests of the poor people and regarded the facts collected from the public as standards of publishing.<sup>32</sup> Hence, the CCP publications were able to retain a degree of power in the Sichuan Press until the Second Sino-Japanese War.

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*China? Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872–1912* that China was a country where the government monopolized the public sphere.

<sup>31</sup> Huang, 38.

<sup>32</sup> Liu Changfu, *Sichuan Xiao Bao Tan Wei, 四川晓报探微 (Micro Search on Sichuan Morning News)*, in *Chengdu Shi Liao Tan Wei, 成都史料专辑 (Special Edition for Primary Sources on Chengdu Newspapers)*, (Chengdu: Chengdu Wan Bao Bao Kan Zhi Bian Ji Shi, 1989), Edition 8, Volume 3, 20.

Besides the active participation of the CCP in the local press, military newspapers held another advantage in that the local warlords controlled a majority of the Sichuan region during this period. Thus, military newspapers published by these warlords occupied an important position. Every warlord had personal newspapers to exert an influence on the local people. For instance, Liu Xiang, the Lord of Sichuan, published three newspapers; Liu Wenhui, Liu Xiang's largest enemy although later defeated by him, established four newspapers; and generals such as Deng Xihou and Yang Sen, who became famous during the Second Sino-Japanese War, founded their own newspapers representing their voices. Military newspapers were edited by progressive intellectuals to make these papers resonate with young students, soldiers, and elites from different government circles in order to inspire loyalty to the military governments.<sup>33</sup>

Although the Sichuan Press reached its pinnacle in the early 1930s, Chiang Kai-shek did not pay much attention to it until the war with Japan broke out. Chiang Kai-shek made this decision for two reasons. First, the main focus for Chiang's government was retrieving the Central Soviet Area (located in Jiangxi and Fujian provinces in the southeast mainland) that was controlled by the CCP. Second, the major battlefield for public opinion was in the economic center of Shanghai, and the political center of Nanjing. Moreover, as mentioned previously, Chiang Kai-shek and Liu Xiang became temporal allies at the end of 1934, and Liu was put in charge of dealing with the problems caused by the CCP. As a result, even though Sichuan generals (warlords) did not get actively involved in the military campaigns against the "red bandits," most of the military newspapers chose to report on several successful battles in order to strengthen the power and dominance of the Nationalist government.<sup>34</sup> For instance, *Ji Gong*

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<sup>33</sup> Huang, 41.

<sup>34</sup> Huang, 41–42.

*Public Newspapers* was founded by the Wude Academy (constituted of Liu Xiang's trusted officers) and began to circulate news of the military campaigns when the Red Army started the Long March. Journalists hastened along with Liu's army to report the most recent military movements. Unfortunately, the newspapers failed to report the fact that Liu's army was constantly being defeated by the Red Army and that the leading general eventually decided to retreat from the frontier.<sup>35</sup>

Chiang Kai-shek's media control was strategic. As the only legitimate government in China, Chiang's Nationalist Party adopted highly autocratic news policies in controlling and supervising the press during the early 1930s. Yet while the official newspapers focused on the daily activities of party elites, investment strategies of the capitalists, and the suppression of the CCP, previous warlords still held their own standards of reporting because of the factional struggles between the Nationalist government and the Sichuan officials.<sup>36</sup> When the Japanese soldiers invaded Chinese territory, however, the multivariate environment in the Sichuan Press shifted immediately. The Japanese Army's successful campaigns forced both Chiang Kai-shek's government and the press newspapers to retreat from the occupied cities along the east coast to the inland cities in western China, and the Sichuan region immediately became the center for circulating propaganda to influence public opinion. Realizing the war potential of the manpower and resources in Sichuan, Chiang Kai-shek launched the nationalistic project to put the Sichuan region under his control.

The nationalistic project was a series of policies that aimed at uniting the voices in the Sichuan Press. Under pressure from public opinion on actively fighting against the Japanese

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<sup>35</sup> *Sichuan Sheng Zhi, Bao Ye Zhi, 四川省志, 报业志* (Sichuan Provincial Annals, Newspapers Annals), (Sichuan: Sichuan Sheng Di Fang Zhi Wei Yuan Hui, 1996), p. 76.

<sup>36</sup> Huang, 215-216.

intruders, Chiang Kai-shek had to accept the idea that the nationalistic interest was more important than anything else.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, the sense of nationalism blooming all across China made Chiang take a moderate strategy of proposing the nationalistic idea as a way of unifying the people to fight against the foreign enemies. This strategy allowed Chiang to win the public support morally and practically. On April 1, 1938, the national congress passed “the Creed of State Founding in Sino-Japanese War,” which explicitly emphasized protecting freedom of speech among newspapers “under the premise of obeying *the Three People’s Principles (the fundamental principle of Nationalist government)*.”<sup>38</sup> What’s more, in order to regulate the nationalistic articles and publications, “the Act of Advocating the Creed of State Founding in Sino-Japanese War, Establishing Wartime Press Publicity, and Promoting the Development of Press Industry” was issued six months later with three parts. From the military aspect, “(the press) shall strengthen the faith of victory and recognize the development of war situation, meanwhile actively report and promote the recruiting, training, and mobilizing the people into the war.” Politically, “(the press) shall consolidate national unity.” Journalists were promised extra privileges for reporting the news of the war and battles.<sup>39</sup>

Chiang Kai-shek’s policies regarding the press satisfied journalists’ professional and political aspirations to speak out in their own voices. On the other hand, his policies highly resonated with the emerging nationalistic feelings among the public. These policies eventually

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<sup>37</sup> Huang, 216.

<sup>38</sup> “Kangzhan Jianguo Gangling, 抗战建国纲领, (the Creed of State Founding in Sino-Japanese War), (draft resolution, Republic of China, the National Congress, 1938), <http://m.kdnet.net/share-8820664.html>.

<sup>39</sup> “Yonghu Kangzhan Jianguo Gangling, Queli Zhanshi Xinwen Zhengce, Cujin Xinwen Shiye Fazhan An, 拥护抗战建国纲领, 确立战时新闻政策, 促进新闻事业发展案(the Act of Advocating the Creed of State Founding in Sino-Japanese War, Establishing Wartime Press Publicity, and Promoting the Development of Press Industry)”, (draft resolution, Republic of China, the People’s Political Council, 1938), <https://max.book118.com/html/2014/1113/10247585.shtm>.

permitted Chiang to unite the Sichuan Press. Hence, Chiang's moderate strategy ended up making the wartime newspapers more intensively regulated.

The local newspaper *Xin Xin News* shows one example of the impact of the nationalistic policies. *Xin Xin News*, established by Deng Xihou in 1935, was the most influential newspaper in Sichuan. Its daily distribution occupied more than half the total number of Sichuan newspapers being circulated. During the war era, articles focusing on protecting the homeland, supporting the frontier, and encouraging morale took up more than 60% of the total layout of the *Xin Xin News*.<sup>40</sup> The main topic of the news was that

Fighting against the nation is the only way to survive! Surrendering to the Japanese soldiers is a dead end! Instead of living in humiliation, die for reputation! What the enemy fears most is we Chinese unifying altogether! ... Before we achieve the ultimate victory, we should never ever negotiate with the enemy!<sup>41</sup>

Besides printing inspiring propaganda, the *Xin Xin News* also made great efforts to report the news coming from the frontiers and provide positive comments on the Sichuan Army. In 1938, one year after the Sichuan Army joined the war, an article memorializing the Sichuan Army illustrated that “in both northern and southern battlefields there were Sichuan soldiers heroically fighting against the Japanese enemies ... and we should remember their sacrifice in this glorious war.”<sup>42</sup>

The *Xin Xin News* was not the only newspaper that highly praised the efforts of Sichuan soldiers. In 1938, the *Xin Yu Weekly* published an article titled “Female Soldiers in Sichuan.” In this article, the author described the Sichuan female soldiers as passionate, hardworking, and brave. Although young, they were willing to serve for the country. They helped with civil

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<sup>40</sup> Huang, 184–186.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 185-187.

<sup>42</sup> “Chuanjun kangzhan guonian nianji, 川军抗战过年念记(Commemorating the Sichuan Army for their efforts to the Anti-Japanese War)”, (Sichuan: *Xin Xin News*, 1938, Edition 13), 1.

projects such as organizing public activities. Meanwhile, they were eager to acquire political and logistical knowledge in order to better serve the army and the country.<sup>43</sup> The article, which shared an image of hardworking and devoted women, showcases governmental propaganda pushing civilians to join the army and contribute to the nation.

Similarly, another article published in *Sichuan Military Service Quarterly* in the 1940s depicted a nationalistic university graduate who voluntarily joined the army without hesitation and was ready to “dedicate his nation with his blood and soul.”<sup>44</sup> Army life made this new soldier a more regulated person than before, and the systematic military courses would actually train him as a military professional. The article was a typical example of what the government wanted the Sichuan people to believe: that there were an increasing number of young people willing to serve the nation and that once they joined the army they would receive proper training to help them become good fighters.

It was not only the newspapers that commemorated the leaders of the Sichuan Army; Chiang Kai-shek himself also memorialized those who were either killed or committed suicide in the battles. After hearing that division leader Wang Mingzhang and his whole unit had been completely eliminated by Japanese soldiers during the Battle of Tai'erzhuang, Chiang telegraphed General Li Zongren stating that General Wang Mingzhang accomplished his mission by sacrificing himself. He was a national hero and deserved to be treated with highest respect. Moreover, Chiang personally wrote an announcement of another division leaders' death. In response to the heroic behavior of refusing to surrender to the Japanese Army, Chiang wrote down the word “uprightness” in remembering the Sichuan general.

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<sup>43</sup> “Sichuan de nv zhanishi, 四川的女战士(Female soldiers in Sichuan)”, (Sichuan: *Xin Yu Weekly*, 1938, edition 1), 7-8.

<sup>44</sup> “Cong daxue dao jundui, 从大学到军队(From the College to the Army)”, (Sichuan: *Sichuan Military Service Quarterly*, Edition 1, Volume 1, 1940), 75-76.

The result of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government and Sichuan Press's promotion of the Sichuan Army's anti-Japanese spirit was tremendous. On June 15, 1938, more than forty thousand civilians gathered together in Chengdu to mourn the death of Wang Mingzhang and the Sichuan soldiers. A statue of a general was later erected to memorialize the heroes of the war era. Indeed, Chiang Kai-shek's nationalistic project of ensuring that the Sichuan Press reported the inspiring news and heroic behavior of the Sichuan Army caused an emotional attachment to form between the Sichuan people. The army's sacrifices during the war resonated with the public's nationalistic feelings, and the sacred memorials built in local regions further strengthened the sense of nationalism among the public. The Sichuan newspapers became increasingly nationalistic, reflecting Chiang's continuous goal of raising up nationalistic sentiments among the public and thus requiring them to serve his regime.

### The War in the Eyes of the Soldiers

What did the war look like to the soldiers? In this section, I will examine different cases from generals' memoirs, officers' records, and soldiers' oral histories to show exactly what the Sichuan Army experienced during the Second Sino-Japanese War. I will argue two points. Firstly, the power struggle continued during the war and seriously affected the lives of the soldiers. Secondly, the actual war experience was in fact more complicated and varied than what the media propagandized as an outbreak of nationalism.

*Fighting Against Cold and Starvation*

Logistics play a crucial role in military campaigns. As a Chinese idiom goes, “before the troops move, fodder and provisions go first.”<sup>45</sup> Successful military operations rely on advanced management of the procurement, distribution, maintenance, and replacement of material and personnel. Unfortunately, when the Sichuan Army was deployed to the frontline, the logistics was chaotic due to the power struggle between regional and national leaders. As I have mentioned before, the army itself was far less well-organized and well-equipped under the Nationalist government’s leadership. In this part, I will focus on the individuals. For military personnel in the Sichuan Army, what were their real experiences of the lack of supplies? What was the impact of poor logistics during the battles? Faced with death caused by starvation, cold, and wounds, how did they deal with such a desperate situation?

The following case is a typical example of a soldier experiencing the critical conditions when his army, the 22nd Army Group, was deployed to the Shanxi region under Deng Xihou’s command. The name of the soldier remains unclear.<sup>46</sup> However, army veterans adopted him when he was a child during the civil war in Sichuan, so his attachment to the Sichuan people was strictly limited to the army soldiers and his views toward the war were purely restricted to the army perspective. He later became a cook for the company. In fact, there were quite a few children serving in the army at that time. Most of them were orphans who were taken in by soldiers because military service was the only option for those children to survive. The soldier was a teenager when the Marco Polo Bridge Incident broke out (I call him “teenage soldier” in the rest of the paper), and was deeply affected by the anti-Japanese campaigns in the cities. He

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<sup>45</sup> *Nanpi xianzhi, fengtu zhi xia, geyao*, 南皮县志·风土志下·歌谣 (*Nanpi County Annals, Customs Annals, second volume, poems and songs*).

<sup>46</sup> The author of the oral history does not mention the name of the soldier.

decided to join the combat unit in his company. However, his actual experience of the war was not as romantic as the government slogan described.

...[After I joined the combat unit], the squad leader gave me a brand-new military suit, two pairs of straw sandals, five bullets, two grenades, a pair of leggings, a sheet of straw mat, and a bamboo hat. Soon after, we set off [to the frontline in Shanxi]... I was wondering why we were not assigned new guns. According to a veteran, the Central Government [Nationalist Government] promised us that new weapons, as well as clothing, would be ready in Xi'an [provided by local Commander-in-Chief]. I was very excited when I heard the news, since the old gun did not work very well. I had to aim one foot higher than the target; otherwise the bullet would show up under the feet of the enemies... [We left Sichuan on foot], and when we began to climb the Qinling Mountains, the whole army had a very hard time. What we wore were single layers, short pants, and straw sandals... when we reached the top of the mountain, the snow was more than one inch deep... we did not have thick quilts at night and we had to stay close and warm each other up with our body temperature... there were soldiers who froze to death while the only thing that was warm to drink was ginger decoction, which was not helpful at all... Instead of going to Xi'an, we were ordered [by Chiang Kai-shek] to be directly transferred to the Shanxi region [under the command of Yan Xishan, the Commander-in-Chief in Shanxi]... It was already super cold in Shanxi but we did not have a chance to wear cotton-padded clothes as we expected before...<sup>47</sup>

The oral history provided by the soldier shows that the logistics of the 22nd Army Group was not properly managed. When the army set out to the battle zone it was already the end of August. The army leaders did not realize that the weather was getting cold in other regions, like the Qinling Mountains, where they would cross. As a result, the soldiers had to suffer from the extreme cold with few frost protection measures. Although they tried to use ginger decoction to warm themselves up, this method was useless. Ginger decoction neither protected them from the cold, nor cured them of frostbite. Moreover, the weapons were not suitable for battle. The soldier said that the old guns “sounded like fireworks” and were only good for “hunting rabbits”.<sup>48</sup> The

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<sup>47</sup> Bai Se, *Kangzhan qinglizhe koushu, 抗战亲历者口述 (Oral History of Witnesses during the Anti-Japanese War)*, (Liaoning: Wanjuan Press), 122-127.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

grenades were so poorly designed that every time the soldiers threw them, the Japanese soldiers would have time to throw them back.<sup>49</sup> Hence, the only effective way to kill Japanese soldiers was to hold on to the grenades and perish with them. They had no way to replenish their ammunition either. The soldiers carried only five bullets initially and had to retrieve bullets from the dead.

The reasons why the 22nd Army Group was so poorly prepared for the war were complicated. Firstly, the leaders and officers lacked professional knowledge of managing logistics for the soldiers. They failed to plan efficient strategies for organizing military transportation or replenishing ammunition. More importantly, poor logistics further revealed the disastrous effect of the power struggle between the national leader Chiang Kai-shek and regional leaders. In this case, Chiang promised the army that they would be provided with new weapons and supplies. However, he assigned this mission to local leaders in Xi'an, instead of directly providing the army with his own supplies. The responsibility of supporting the army fell to the regional government in Xi'an, and became an extra burden for them. Therefore, when faced with an emergent situation at the frontline that required immediate backup from the army, the soldiers were pushed onto the battlefield without any kind of support. Under such circumstances, both Chiang Kai-shek and the regional leaders in Xi'an should have realized that the Sichuan Army did not have sufficient supplies to support them in their fight against the Japanese troops. Unfortunately, they decided to ignore that fact. The local government in Xi'an preferred not to spend extra money on armies from other regions. Meanwhile, Chiang looked on the Sichuan army as a consumable in this war. Whether or not they were able to fight against the Japanese

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<sup>49</sup> Fang Jun, *Zui Hou De Chuan Jun, 最后的川军(The Last Sichuan Soldiers)* (Liao Ning Ren Min Press), 1-5.

was not his first concern. The sacrifice of the army would only reinforce his leadership position in the nation.

How did the soldiers in the 22nd Army Group respond to such mistreatment? At this point, they had already suffered from a catastrophic march to the frontlines, and later experienced deadly battles. They realized that their weapons were not comparable with those of their enemies and their logistics was a disaster. They were starving, but no-one cared about them. Hence, they had to take some aggressive actions. The following is another part of the teenage soldier's oral history.

[After we retreated from the frontlines], our troops lacked food, clothes, ammunition, and, most importantly, drugs and medicine. A lot of wounded soldiers had to stay at local people's houses. They were in extreme pain. We tried to take them to the hospitals operated by [Yan Xishan's] Army, but they refused to treat them. Under such circumstances, we had to bring out our ways of doing things back in the Civil War. When we came across a local village, we had not had food for a whole day. Some villagers were having lunch right in front of us. Some soldiers were so starving that they stole the food from the villagers and ate as quickly as possible... Those soldiers were arrested, but other soldiers refused to punish them violently. On the one hand, they were too hungry to hold the stick (one of the tools for executing the military criminal code). On the other hand, they asked the martial judge how they were supposed to fight for the nation when they could not even fill themselves up? The martial judge was speechless... One day when I was digging up wild herbs with my friend, I heard someone shouting and asking us to help move things. After we went to the person, I figured out that another group of Sichuan soldiers could not bear the starvation and they managed to rob an armory, which belonged to Yan Xishan's Army. We had successfully acquired new weapons, sufficient ammunition, and warm clothes. We did not feel ashamed to do that because we knew that no-one would stop the Japanese soldiers from conquering the Shanxi region, and the armory would eventually fall into the hands of Japanese troops. Instead of letting our enemies take advantage of the supplies, it would be better for us to take them.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Bai, 129-136.

The case reveals several astonishing facts about the Sichuan Army. Firstly, although there were strict regulations and harsh punishments, some soldiers decided to take the risk of being punished and violently acquire food from local villagers. Secondly, the martial judge eventually decided not to punish the criminals because he acknowledged the poor status of the soldiers. Lastly, the Sichuan Army robbed an armory that belonged to friendly forces, which was absolutely not the image that was provided by national or Sichuan local media. I would interpret those aggressive actions in two dimensions. On the one hand, their behaviors undoubtedly reveal the fact that the army was pushed into a desperate plight. They could not fight against the Japanese troops with outdated guns, and they had suffered tremendous sacrifices. Nevertheless, those who should have supported them with supplies, in this case Yan Xishan, blamed them for their incompetence during the battles and therefore refused to provide any support to them.<sup>51</sup> The refusal of treatment by local hospitals proved that the army was truly abandoned. The soldiers were left with only one choice, which was violence.

On the other hand, I would argue that the Sichuan soldiers made their own judgments about the war even though they were put into this situation. They were not soldiers following orders and willing to sacrifice themselves for the nation, as the government propagandized. The case of the martial judge shows that the army was not a combination of armed riffraff who enjoyed executing their power through violence and regulations either. In fact, the robbery of the armory shows that the soldiers had a chance to make their own choices. It might not be possible for every soldier to understand the power struggle between high-ranking military and political leaders. However, under the repression of Yan Xishan, the soldiers clearly decided not to regard Yan's army as friendly. They could only rely on themselves to survive in this cruel environment.

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<sup>51</sup> Bai, 132.

Incredibly, the army did not disband. Nor did they choose to harass the local people more frequently than before. Instead, they robbed the armory.

Furthermore, the case of the 22nd Army Group implies that the power struggle was not simply between Chiang Kai-shek and Sichuan warlords. When the Sichuan Army was dispatched into another region, other regional leaders who were previously warlords became involved in the game. The tragic destiny of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Army Group was the direct result of the power struggle between the national leader Chiang Kai-shek, the army leader Deng Xihou, and the regional leader Yan Xishan.

After the armory robbery, Yan Xishan decided not to allow the Sichuan Army to be stationed in his region, and another regional leader, Li Zongren, became involved in the power game. He quickly took over the 22nd Army Group and sent it to the Battle of Tai'erzhuang, which was the first successful battle, as previously noted. According to Li's understanding, the success of the 22nd Army during the Battle of Tai'erzhuang was due to the fact that he attempted to unify the various armed factions. Li "asked Deng Xihou what his army needed so he could provide it... [He] provided [Deng] with 500 new guns, ammunition and mortars..."<sup>52</sup>. In contrast to Chiang Kai-shek, Li placed the Sichuan Army on an equal footing with the other armed factions. The result was that the army was in a better condition to fight against its enemies. Soldiers and officers no longer had to share guns and grenades, or even use swords during the battles. They would certainly have had more confidence and spirit to fight against the well-equipped Japanese troops when they were armed with modern weapons and equipment.

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<sup>52</sup> Li Zongren, "Guanghui de xumuzhan, 光辉的序幕战" (The Glorious Opening Battle), in *Li Zongren Hui Yi Lu, 李宗仁回忆录* (*The Memoir of Li Zongren*), (Guangxi: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2005), 524-526.

The motivation for Li Zongren's claims about his own contribution to the Sichuan Army might be dubious. The statement was initially contained inside his own memorial written in the late 1960s, when Li tried to return to the People's Republic of China. Hence, his memorial could serve a political purpose in differentiating him from Chiang Kai-shek's loyal generals so that he would be accepted and trusted by the CCP government. Also, it is hard to measure the extent to which Li's supplies supported the Sichuan Army's fight to the very end. The cases from other divisions in fact show that, even without Li's weapons, the Sichuan soldiers chose to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Nevertheless, the Sichuan Army during the Second Sino-Japanese War was seriously and negatively affected by the deliberate estrangement created by Chiang. From General Li's perspective, the reason for the Sichuan Army's success in his military campaign was his powerful leadership, and treating the soldiers from different factions as equals so that he could gain their full support. This contrasts with the nationalistic sentiment that Chiang portrayed. Li joined the power struggle by demonstrating his charm and having the support of the Sichuan Army, which Chiang Kai-shek and Yan Xishan failed to have, and Li believed that he had successfully earned a good reputation for the first time. More importantly, the pressure of the logistics issue for the 22nd Army Group was temporary eased.

### *In the Battles*

What did the battles look like from the perspective of soldiers and officers? The army was seriously affected by poor logistics because of the power struggle, and the experience during battle was concise and brutal. In the face of the enemy, soldiers had to make quick decisions in a short space of time. Their reactions varied.

Chalmers Johnson's argument on spontaneous nationalism among the peasants could be applied to the Sichuan Army as well.<sup>53</sup> Lieutenant Wang Zhenyong was a teacher in a local elementary school. As a well-educated intellectual, he had a deep-rooted sense of nationalism. Hence, when he heard the news of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, he immediately decided to join the army. He became a clerk officer (someone who did the paper work of the division, such as helping soldiers write letters to their families) of the 22nd Army Group and went into the battle zone with his unit later. When asked about his view of the battles, Wang responded that while his company suffered severe casualties, "once we were sent to the war zone, we would fight against them, against those who invaded the nation! We must not retreat!"<sup>54</sup> For those Sichuan officers like Wang and some other soldiers, the battlefield triggered their fighting spirit and allowed them to respond to the ruthless and inhumane actions of Japanese soldiers, such as robbery, killing, and rape. They united together and started to take revenge for their dead compatriots.

In fact, the officers and soldiers in the Sichuan Army shared the same nationalism as those peasants in the communist regions. Most of the army leaders were themselves nationalists and their patriotic ideas had certainly affected the army. Yang Sen, the commander of the 20th Army, was the first army leader who requested to join the battle along with his army.<sup>55</sup> General Rao Guohua, a division leader, gave a speech to the public before deployment and made his promise that "if we could not expel the Japanese intruders, we would not return to home."<sup>56</sup> During the Battle of Shanghai, Division leader Xie Guji was injured and lost his left arm. However, he

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<sup>53</sup> Fang, 1-5.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Chuanjun yu songhu kangzhan, 川军与淞沪抗战(Sichuan Army and the Battle of Shanghai)*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Press, 2009), 123.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 87.

insisted on commanding the combat and eventually died from excessive loss of blood.<sup>57</sup> Wang Wenti was a new graduate when the war broke out and he immediately joined the Sichuan Army. His most unforgettable memory was the speech given by Yang Sen in which he said, “the war means sacrifice, but it is worth it to become a part of it!”<sup>58</sup> When facing the extinction of the Chinese nation and the violence of the Japanese troops, some officers and soldiers were inspired to step forward and fight the enemies who were trying to dominate their nation.

Moreover, it could also be surmised that at a civilian level, the soldiers in the Sichuan Army fought for the war because they wanted to reunite with their families and friends back home. According to Wang Zhenyong, many soldiers in his company hoped to maintain close contact with their families. Therefore, he became popular among the soldiers since he was the only one in the company who could write family letters for them. The soldiers would be willing to sacrifice themselves to protect Wang so as to keep the only bond between them and their families. During the battle of Zhongtiao Mountain in Shanxi, Wang was left behind and almost captured by the Japanese troops. It was at this time that hundreds of Sichuan soldiers shouted together at the Japanese that they would fight to the death to save Wang. Even though the Japanese soldiers did not understand a single word, they were scared by the battle formation and laid down immediately, which gave Wang a chance to run and return to his company.<sup>59</sup>

Another case that shows the soldiers using letters to communicate with their families was a letter from Han Xichun, a soldier in the 22nd Army Group, written after the battle of Tai'erzhuang. Han told his family that he was injured during the battle, but had already recovered. He was worried about the health of his father and concerned about his own marriage.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>59</sup> Fang, 9.

He was already engaged and hoped that the wedding would not be canceled. He also mentioned his cousin and asked about his situation, since his cousin had also joined the army.<sup>60</sup> The letter was a typical, ordinary one that did not involve any big ideas of nationalism or justice. It simply represented the basic needs of a soldier. After he came back from the merciless battles, the first thing he did was to send his family a message about his safety. In fact, nationalist feeling was a genuine motivation emerged among well-educated soldiers, officers, and general, and attachment to home was a factor. Both of them coexisted inside the Sichuan Army and therefore made the army legendary.

The nationalistic sentiment, however, was not shared among all soldiers in Sichuan Army; neither could all soldiers think of their families during the middle of a battle. The actual objective of a battle was to survive. The teenage soldier that I have mentioned previously was at first highly nationalistic. Nevertheless, he no longer used nationalism to describe the battles once he was pitted directly against the enemy.

The first battle of our company took place on a small hill, which we did not know by name. We were beaten badly at that time, especially when the Japanese soldiers brought up their machine guns... More than a dozen of my brothers died immediately, and my platoon leader was seriously injured... We were able to repel the Japanese soldiers with the support of other companies... The Japanese soldiers charged again... There were less and less soldiers still alive... One injured soldier, whose family name was probably Huang, perished together with Japanese soldiers by using a grenade. Other veterans learned from the soldier and chose to die together with the Japanese. The Japanese finally retreated... I did not behave well during this battle... I was able to survive without injuries only because some veterans covered me up when fighting the enemies with bayonets... [In the later battle], there were only 20 people remaining in our company. We had no time for sorrow... I begged Uncle Li (who took care of me when I was young) to let me ignite the grenade the next time the

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<sup>60</sup> “Dangangguan faxian chuanjun kangzhan laobing zhandi jiashu, yi chenfeng qishi qi zai, 档案馆发现川军抗战老兵战地家书：已尘封 77 载, (a battlefield letter of sichuan army veteran was found at local archive, which has been sealed for seventy-seven years)”, (Chengdu: Chengdu shangbao, 2015.6.1), [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-06/01/c\\_127863502.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-06/01/c_127863502.htm)

Japanese came, but he refused... Uncle Li was killed by enemy artillery fire. The lower part of his body vanished... I cried and the rest of us cried as well... After the battle only five of us survived...<sup>61</sup>

This experience reveals the cruelest part of the battles. There was no time for inspiring nationalistic sentiment or mourning the dead. Soldiers all around were dying, and those who were still alive had to prepare for the next fight. No matter how poor the weapons were, the combat would ultimately turn into a bayonet charge (fighting with knives) and the only way for Sichuan soldiers to fight back was by sacrificing their own lives to protect the others. Those soldiers knew that they would die eventually, and they had two options. Some chose to be killed, while some chose to die together with the enemy. Moreover, the veterans and experienced soldiers chose to protect the younger ones. In summary, the real battle experience among common soldiers was simple, but painful.

### Conclusion

The complex political relationship between Chiang Kai-shek and Sichuan warlords was the product of a power struggle. Chiang wanted to ensure his leadership position in the nation so that it would be intolerable for provincial leaders to maintain a military force in competition with his own central army. For Sichuan leaders like Liu Xiang and Deng Xihou, losing control of the Sichuan Army indicated that they would lose their power in the Sichuan region. Therefore, the Sichuan Army became the central point in the political struggle.

The power struggle continued during the Second Sino-Japanese War. However, Chiang Kai-shek took advantage of Liu Xiang's nationalistic sentiment and purposely forced the Sichuan Army into poor circumstances. The Sichuan Army was divided into different divisions and

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<sup>61</sup> Bai, 139-141.

deployed under the command of different generals. Moreover, Chiang treated the Sichuan Army as a second-class military unit, and he and other generals refused to provide it with proper logistics and weapons during wartime. The Sichuan soldiers suffered a lot from the estrangement that Chiang had created and had to endure tremendous casualties.

In contrast to the actual experience of the soldiers, however, Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist government constantly propagandized the Sichuan Army as national heroes and used the Sichuan Army as a tool to call for nationalistic sentiment among the public. By putting intense control on local media and newspapers, Chiang Kai-shek covered up the estrangement that he created between different armies during the war, while the soldiers became cannon fodder for Chiang's political purpose.

In general, the case of the Sichuan Army enlarged the continuous political struggle and showcased Chiang Kai-shek's mistreatment of regional armies. The Sichuan Army became the tragic victim of the infighting power factions. Moreover, the public, manipulated by the national newspapers and media, focused more on the nationalistic behaviors of surviving soldiers, while ignoring the real experiences of the soldiers when they were disappointed by the power struggle. Revisiting the Sichuan Army reveals the contradiction between the media's fantasy version of the war and the soldiers' actual war experience.

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