



Fighting for Peace:

Narratives of Chinese Forces
on UN Peacekeeping
Missions' Frontlines

Yu Yin



China Intercontinental Press



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Prelude

East Timor became the world's first new sovereign state of the 21st century on May 20, 2002. But its independence from Indonesia left the country very unstable. In 1999, the Chinese government decided for the first time to send police officers to participate in the UN peacekeeping operation in East Timor. Time has come to test Chinese officers' abilities in dealing with complicated situations in a foreign land.

There are more than 30 ethnic groups in the island country. Any conflict among them could have severe consequences. The UN peacekeeping police are extremely careful when dealing with the ethnic conflicts. At one point, two middle school students from different ethnic groups got into a fistfight, and one of them sustained a head injury. Hui Xiaoxuan, an officer from Northwest China's Gansu province, was sent to the site, but the troublemakers had already left. He asked a local interpreter to find the wounded. The interpreter was afraid of getting involved in the conflicts and led the officers to wander around town.

The next morning, a Pakistani policeman ran back to the police bureau and told Hui a man had been killed near the power station. Hui immediately gathered more than 20 officers and hurried to the site. The victim came from the same village where the student had wounded his classmate the day before. The settlement where the victim was killed was known as "the home of ferocious fighters".

When the police tried to take the body, the locals refused to let them. They also refused to agree to an autopsy on the site. The air grew tense. The three local interpreters sneaked away; none of the local police officers had any better ideas. The villagers switched between Indonesian and their own language during the negotiations, making it impossible for Hui to communicate with them. The crowd grew restless, swearing and screaming at increasing volumes. Hui reported the situation to the UN peacekeeping headquarters in East Timor's capital Dili, and asked for a helicopter, but the signal was very poor.

Then, even worse news came. Just more than 20 km away, five trucks loaded with angry residents from the victim's village were approaching, picking up

hundreds of retaliators armed with knives and guns along the way. The local village had also rallied their kinsmen and prepared for an armed battle. It seemed a massive, violent feud was inevitable.

Hui ordered a swift survey of the site and led his team to block the bridge through which the retaliators had to pass with two police cars. In no time, the five trucks zoomed into sight. All of the men had wrapped their heads with scarves, leaving only their eyes exposed. They disembarked and approached the bridge. Facing a bloody battle, many police officers turned back and a few even ran away. The retaliators stopped and shouted: "It's none of your business! Go away! If you dare to shoot, we'll kill you all!" But Hui remained calm. He felt it was the crucial moment to test the ability and necessity of the UN peacekeepers. One step backward would seriously smear the operation's image. He put on his bulletproof vest, loaded his weapon and stood in the middle of the bridge. He was very touched to see that when most policemen kept their distance from the looming danger, an Australian policewoman named Kelly stood next to him.

The deadlock lasted for more than two hours and finally ended at noon. The police officers sweated heavily under the scorching sun and bulletproof vests. Several were dehydrated. The retaliators couldn't stand the heat any better and eventually scattered. Hui repeatedly called the headquarters, but the signal was still too poor to communicate. He climbed a tall tree and finally got through. Out of concern about their safety, the headquarters ordered them to immediately retreat.

Hui had to obey the order and pulled back. Before their cars could reach the police bureau, they heard a deafening explosion and fire engulfed the entire town. More than 200 children and elderly people ran to the police bureau's gate, crying and begging for help. Everyone knew that blind hatred could destroy even the police bureau at any moment.

But Hui decided they would not stand by and watch the innocent be murdered. He opened the gate to let in the refugees. Looking at the horrified faces of the young and old, he said: "We have no way back. We have to stay. If we can't even protect our police bureau, how can we maintain peace?" All the police officers loaded their weapons and stared at the screaming mob outside.

At 4 pm, two helicopters arrived carrying more than 50 UN peacekeeping soldiers with the rapid response force. The mob immediately scattered. A crisis had finally ended. The police later found three dead bodies in town and

discovered more than 30 houses had been burned down. Through Hui's careful organization, the police later tracked down all the arson and murder suspects, restoring peace to the area.

Hui Xiaoxuan, who was born in 1962, was sent to East Timor twice — in September 2000 and October 2002 — before carrying out another peacekeeping mission in Haiti in September 2009.

The United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) have been lauded as the international organization's most successful missions. In September 1988, the UN peacekeeping forces won the Nobel Peace Prize and were honored as "soldiers of peace". And the UN itself won the Peace Prize in October 2001. Upon bestowing the honor, the Norwegian Nobel Committee said: "By awarding today's first Peace Prize to the UN as such, the Nobel Committee aimed in its centenary year to proclaim that the only negotiable route to global peace and cooperation goes by way of the United Nations."

How can China really meld into today's world?

Overseas studies, inspections and tours, trade negotiations, cultural exchanges, sports events — these are only transient.

According to UN rules, peacekeeping police officers from various countries must be regrouped under the order of the UN and join an international family that uses English to communicate. The peacekeeping officers live and work together, covering one another in the most dangerous moments. It is no exaggeration to say that the peacekeeping police officers have created a precious opportunity for China to really understand the world and for the world to really understand China. In this sense, the peacekeeping police officers can be regarded as "global Chinese".

On Feb 5, 2010, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi delivered a keynote speech at the 46th Munich Security Conference and expounded upon the roles China plays on the international stage, as the country pursues peaceful development. He pointed out that China has been an active participant in international peacekeeping missions. In 1990, the country dispatched five military observers to the UN Truce Supervision Organization. Over the following 20 years, China has contributed 14,000 personnel for 18 UN peacekeeping missions. As of Jan 12, 2010, there were still more than 2,100 Chinese police officers, troops and staff officers carrying out missions in 10

assignment regions. These include East Timor, Sudan's Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Lebanon and Haiti. China has sent the largest number of peacekeepers among the permanent UN Security Council members. But China has not sent combat forces or set up any so-called "military bases" in any of the peacekeeping assignment regions. The country's peacekeepers have built and repaired more than 2,000 km of roads and 200 bridges; cleared 8,700 landmines and other explosives; transported more than 430,000 tons of cargo more than 7 million km; and treated more than 60,000 medical patients. Sixteen sacrificed their lives during these missions. Half of them were police officers, and the other eight were soldiers. (Two died in car accidents, two passed away from illness and four lost their lives to attacks).

UN Under Secretary General for Peacekeeping Alain le Roy told media at a 2009 Beijing forum on international peacekeeping missions that China had actively cooperated with, and participated in, many UN-organized peacekeeping operations. The country's international peacekeeping budget was nearly \$6.9 billion in 2008 and reached \$7.8 billion in 2009. As a developing country, China's peacekeeping funds rank seventh in the world. All of the operations China has joined have been carried out under the leadership of the UN, and the UN welcomes China to expand the scale of its participation in peacekeeping, Le Roy said.

On May 29, 2010, the Day of UN Peacekeepers marked the beginning of Peacekeepers Week at the Shanghai Expo's United Nations Pavilion. UN staff laid wreathes for the 217 UN peacekeepers who sacrificed their lives over the past 14 months. Among them, four Chinese peacekeeping police officers — He Zhihong, Li Qin, Zhao Huayu and Zhong Jianqin — who lost their lives in the Haiti earthquake in January 2010, were honored with the Dag Hammarskjöld Medal, the UN's award for those killed during peacekeeping missions. China's 2,045 Chinese police officers and troops make it the No 1 contributor of peacekeepers among the Security Council's five permanent members and a core force of UNPKO, UN peacekeeping official Maxwell Kerley said.

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Epilogue



Joining the Fight for Peace

On Oct 25, 1999, the United Nations Security Council passed *Resolution 1272* to deploy nearly 10,000 peacekeeping troops and military observers in addition to about 2,000 peacekeeping police to East Timor. China was the Chair of the UN Security Council in 1999. To carry out the resolution precisely and smoothly, the Chinese government decided, upon the UN's request, to dispatch 15 police officers to participate in the UN peacekeeping operation in East Timor.

In November 1999, Lian Changgang, vice-dean of the Criminal Investigation Department of the China Criminal Police College in Shenyang, Liaoning province, arrived in Beijing on a business trip. After finishing the business, Lian visited his old boss, Liu Yanfeng, chief of the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Public Security. Liu was quite happy to meet Lian and asked about his achievements. He told Lian that the Ministry of Public Security had chosen 14 police officers to join the first team from China to UN's peacekeeping operation in East Timor. There was still one vacancy. He asked Lian if he was interested.

Through a strict selection process, Lian became the last member accepted for the Chinese team. Little did anyone foresee that he would excel and later become the "Number Two" most important official among peacekeeping police officers from more than 40 countries in East Timor.

By Feb 25, 2009, China had sent 14 patches of peacekeeping police officers to East Timor, making tremendous contributions to the birth and stability of the first republic in the new millennium. Xanana Gusmao, the first President of East Timor, said that East Timor has very good relations with China and that China plays a big role in the world and is very important for maintaining world peace.

Today, Lian Changgang is a professor and assistant to the President of the China Criminal Police College in Shenyang. When talking about his experience in East Timor, Lian said that they had little idea how many dangers they'd be facing on the road of peacekeeping. Neither did they know if the Chinese police officers would take a firm foothold in the "Olympics of International Police". Even less did they know if all of them would be able to return home safe and sound.

Chapter 1

Rites of Passage

At 9 pm (local time), Jan 13, 2000, 10 Chinese police officers reached Darwin, the Australian city closest to East Timor. It was where the United Nations established a training base, a vacation center and a garrison transition station. Every day, UN military personnel and staff officers wearing different uniforms from various countries strolled down the streets or went shopping. Most peacekeeping personnel wore plain clothes and special UN ID cards.

A Malaysian policeman greeted the Chinese officers at the airport and sent them to a university dormitory rented by the UN. The officer said the UN would administer their final exams the next day. The Chinese policemen looked at one another but said nothing. After their 26-hour flight, they were all exhausted.

They had heard about the harrowing exams before boarding the plane. Those who failed would be immediately sent home — a great dishonor to the nation. As the first group of Chinese policemen to participate in a UN peacekeeping operation, they didn't know what to expect from the exams. All they knew was that just a few days before they arrived, several African police officers were sent home. Hearing that made them even more nervous.

Upon learning the university didn't offer breakfast, the Chinese team leader, Xu Zhida, asked the Malaysian officer to take him and two team members shopping at a distant supermarket. During the ride, Xu learned the Malaysian officer would be one of the exam judges. While the other Chinese officers shopped, Xu asked the Malaysian about the time, place and basic requirements of the exam. When Xu briefed his group, everyone was relieved. Like a sports team, they gave one another high-fives and shouted "Yeah!" and laughed heartily.

The team went to take the exams the next morning. The UN has very strict requirements for its peacekeeping police. Every officer must pass three tests before they can receive an assignment.

First is a physical checkup and inoculations.

Second is a test of their English that includes reading, listening and speaking questions. The Chinese officers took the exam with colleagues from all over the world and excelled in the reading section, which they finished quickly. Then two judges with distinctly different accents read aloud a burglary report and a policeman's inquiry. The listening test was designed as such because the peacekeepers in East Timor hailed from all corners of the globe and sounded differently when they spoke English. When they wrote their responses, some officers frowned and fumbled, while others scribbled rapidly and confidently. Then, time was up, and everyone handed in their papers.

Thumbing through the sheets, the Malaysian judge suddenly turned to one of the Chinese officers and said, in a serious tone: "You can go home!" The poor officer turned pale and started sweating. The judge smiled and pointed to the paper. He told the officer that if he didn't want to be sent home, he'd better introduce himself. It turned out that the officer had been too nervous to write his UN ID, which was even more important than his name, as the number would be used constantly throughout the peacekeeping mission. Obviously, the judge was giving the officer a second chance to correct his minor mistake. Giving a self-introduction in English was no big deal, as the Chinese officers had been drilled in this back home. In the end, all of the Chinese policemen passed the second test.

The third exam was a driving test. While training in Nanjing, capital of East China's Jiangsu province, the team had learned about the UN's rules and had practiced driving with the wheel on the vehicle's right side and circumventing poles at 40 km/h. They also had to speed up to 60 km/h and then stop the car within a short distance without killing the engine. Although they didn't say anything, the team members had all believed such training was a bit ridiculous. But in Darwin, they came to realize the training was well devised. Li Ping, a traffic policeman from Tianjin municipality, volunteered to take the driving test first. He easily passed and briefed his teammates on what it was like. All of the Chinese policemen passed the test without much trouble.

After the tests, the new recruits enjoyed a few days' rest. Several UN officials introduced East Timor's situation to the recent arrivals. Every peacekeeping police officer was given \$100 a day to cover food and lodging, which was not easy to find as East Timor's turmoil had left the country with dwindling supplies and soaring prices. Thus, it was wise for them to bring some preserved

food by themselves to pull through the first days.

Domestic and foreign media had taken great interest in China's first group of policemen to join a UN peacekeeping operation. Darwin TV and Hong Kong's TVB both sent reporters to follow the Chinese team. One reporter asked Chinese team leader Xu Zhida if he was scared of carrying out the peacekeeping mission in the dangerous country. Xu replied: "No. We are well trained. We are like a family. We can overcome any difficulty."

Chapter 2

Evil in Eden

Around 4 pm (local time) on Jan 18, 2000, the Hercules plane carrying the Chinese policemen and other UN personnel from Darwin, Australia, landed in East Timor's capital Dili.

The equatorial island country has little pollution and looks like a postcard-perfect tourist destination. But a second look, however, revealed the traumas of the recent turmoil, as most houses had been burned, and snapped telephone lines snaked along the ground and rattled in the wind. Actually, very few public facilities still functioned.

The seriousness of the situation was a reality check for the Chinese officers. The tableau looked like a scene from a war flick. Helicopters thundered just above the ground. Tanks and armored vehicles were everywhere on the streets.



Heavily armed East Timorese soldiers patrol the streets.

Armed peacekeeping troops examined passers'-by certificates. The local people were in rags, and looked lanky and frail. Their eyes showed little expression.

The Chinese team arrived at a shabby compound. The two-story buildings' doors were all pocked with bullet holes, the windows were smashed and some walls were charred. It was difficult to believe this was the UN peacekeeping police's headquarters in East Timor.

There were 13 regional police bureaus under the headquarters. A total of 1,640 police officers from 42 countries were working in East Timor. Peacekeeping in this country was quite different than in other locations. The



The first 15 Chinese peacekeeping policemen who were sent to East Timor in 2000

unrest had destroyed the public security system, and the local police officers were either dead, wounded or had fled. Consequently, the UN police force had to undertake additional security duties and even handle cases involving serious crimes. The work was made even trickier by the fact that the locals knew little about the UN peacekeepers and expressed potent distrust.

The Chinese officers carried more than 100 kg of luggage apiece but discovered upon arrival they would each get just one bottle of water a day. The logistics officer warned them to not drink the local water, as the source had been contaminated, creating a tremendous lack of potable water.

The personnel officer then led the team to the temporary clinic, where they each got a bottle of Doxcig to prevent malaria infections. He told them to take a pill daily and advised them to put on long-sleeved shirts and trousers while on duty, even on the hottest days. Furthermore, they must apply mosquito repellent to exposed skin. Failing to observe these steps increased the risk of infection by malaria, dengue fever, hepatitis, Japanese encephalitis and a number of other contagious diseases.

On the morning of Jan 31, the second batch of five Chinese police officers and other UN personnel arrived in Dili. They soon joined the first group at the UN peacekeeping police headquarters. All 15 Chinese policemen, including high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Public Security and common officers from across the country, were sent to regional public security bureaus as patrol officers or as wardens at the lowest level. Xu Zhida, Xu Shaohua and Li Minghai, for example, became patrol officers at the Dili Public Security Bureau. Lian Changgang and Rao Hao were sent to patrol the remote city of Same. The postings made obvious the lack of confidence in Chinese police officers' capabilities in handling complicated situations in the UN peacekeeping operation.

Chapter 3

A Place Like Hell

At 5 am (local time), Feb 5, 2000, Chinese police officers Lian Changgang and Rao Hao got up and started packing. It was the first day of the Chinese lunar new year, or the Spring Festival, the most important festival in their homeland. They had an apple for breakfast on their way to the Dili Airport, where a UN helicopter would take them to Same, a remote city where they would become patrol officers.

At 7:30 am, the helicopter took off. Both pilots were Russian. There were also 15 soldiers from South Korea, a reporter and an Australian policeman. Half an hour later, the helicopter landed on a patch of ground less than 20 square meters in size, leveled with sand and rimmed with reeds and ditches. An Australian police officer picked up the two Chinese.

East Timor had relied on Indonesia for goods, the flow of which was cut off after its independence. Chaos ensued, and it became hard to find food. There was a shop run by a Chinese in Dili. But Same was much worse off. There was neither electricity nor water in the city. The houses were burnt husks, and the shops were rubble. The bumpy roads were devoid of traffic signs. All communications facilities had been obliterated.

The Chinese officers found themselves standing in front of three rusty tin shacks. John Burrow, director of the Same Police Bureau from Australia, warmly greeted his Chinese colleagues. "Welcome! It's the first time for me to work with Chinese police, and I hope it'll turn out a success." Upon second thought, he added: "Considering the rough trip, you are off duty today. You can hunt for lodging this afternoon and report for duty tomorrow."

UN peacekeeping police officers were eligible for \$100 a day and had to find their own lodging and food. With the help of a local interpreter, Lian and Rao looked for a place to rent. But it seemed no suitable accommodation was left standing. Nor was there any restaurant at which they could quench thirst