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## Ha Jin's Critique of the Political Allegiance in War Trash

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*The Korean War as part of the Cold War has been ignored for years and very few writers have shed light on this war through literature. While other novels focus on the soldiers and the mass victims of the war, Ha Jin chooses a special group of people—the prisoners of war (POWs)—to satirize the cruelty of the war. Contrary to other Chinese writers who glorify the war as a victory for China, Ha Jin denies the political rightness of the war. This paper argues that by focusing on the plight of the POWs rather than that of soldiers, Ha Jin critiques political allegiance as meaningless, and brings in more of an anarchic view. Having the anarchic view in the backdrop, the following discussion will be divided into two sections on two subjects—the persecution of political institutions and the suffering of POWs—to examine how Ha Jin illustrates the cruelty of war and the inhumanity of political regimes. The first section starts from the national perspective to examine how the ideological machine gave illusory promises to POWs while their sacrifice turned out to be meaningless in the end. The second section focuses on the POWs to explore the mental torment they experienced as a result of their political allegiance as well as how their faith became invalid in the prison camps.*

**Keywords:** *Political allegiance, War Trash, POWs, Ha Jin, Korean War*

### Introduction

Since the end of the Korean War in July 1953, a few literary works have been published about the war to discuss its influence on people in the involved nations (China, North Korea, South Korea, and the US). These novels include *The*

*Martyred* (1964) by Richard E. Kim, *Silver Stallion* (1990) by Junghyo Ahn, and *The Foreign Student* (1998) by Susan Choi. Starting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the ideological divisions imposed on writers were not as intense as during and directly after wartime, writers began to turn back to the battlefield to ponder the influence of this war on soldiers and non-soldiers in a bolder way, such as with *The Guest* (2005) by Hwang Sok-yong and *The Surrendered* (2010) by Lee Chang-Rae. While most of these novels depict either the miserable outcome of the Cold War friendship between South Korea and the US or the trauma of Korean or American individuals, Ha Jin cast his eye on a special group of underrepresented actors—the Chinese prisoners of war (POWs). In his Pen/Faulkner Award-winning work *War Trash*, Ha Jin tells the story of Chinese soldiers sent to North Korea to fight against American armies, who were captured as POWs. Narrated by the protagonist Yu Yuan in a fictional memoir format, most of the story happens in the POW camps where the POWs are terrorized, and political conflict and struggles take place frequently.

The academic discourse on this novel can be organized in three main categories. The first group of scholars examines the “documentary manner” of this book and its authenticity in relation to real events. In his notes at the end of the book, Ha Jin includes a list of references to claim that “most of the events and details are factual.”<sup>1</sup> This fictional novel engrosses readers with a strong sense of realism. Book reviewer Russell Banks commented that Ha Jin’s application of two traditional Western literary methods— “the novel in the form of a nonfiction memoir, and the nonfiction memoir as prison narrative”— adds to the reader’s confusion between what was invention and what was reportage.<sup>2</sup> What’s more, the similarities between the story in *War Trash* and Zhang Zeshi’s biography, led to Ha Jin being accused of plagiarism, which does make the story seem more plausible and fact-based. The second group of scholars approaches this work from a diasporic perspective and states that, as an immigrant writer, Ha Jin occupies a middle zone between two cultures. His writings are full of nostalgia for the native culture while also identifying with immigrant culture. Wang Shanmei argues that different from Chinese American writers like Amy Tan or Maxine Hong Kingston, who were born in America, Ha Jin is a new migrant writer who lives in the dissonant condition of remembering his home country while reconstructing his new

1 Ha Jin, *War Trash*, (Vintage Books, 2004): 351.

2 Russell Banks, “View from the Prison Camp,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2004.

identity in the immigrant country.<sup>3</sup> Sun Chao states that diasporic writers like Ha Jin are lost in heterogeneous cultures and therefore are easy to be marginalized, but the marginalized position can also give them a unique perspective for observing the world.<sup>4</sup> In this conflict, Ha Jin tends to blend and form a complex cultural identity. However, previous studies by Chinese scholars only center on Ha Jin's cultural conflict, without recognizing his resistance to political ideology. Therefore, this paper argues that what Ha Jin tries to do is not to reconcile two cultural and political systems, but to distance himself from both by critiquing the inhumanity of the war. The third group of scholars represented by Yumi Lee and S. Sabitha discuss personal identity and human rights in terms of the political background of the novel. Sabitha claims that Jin's characters mainly suffer as a result of alienation and identity crisis, while still believing that there was humanity in the war camp, primarily with the American doctor character, Dr. Green.<sup>5</sup> However, this so-called humanity disappears when Dr. Green leaves, and the pen that he gifted Yu Yuan is subsequently broken by other American soldiers.

This paper argues that, by focusing on the plight of the POW rather than a soldier, Ha Jin critiques political allegiance as meaningless and brings in more of an anarchic view. With the anarchic view as the backdrop, the following discussion will be divided into two sections on two subjects—the persecution of political institutions and the suffering of POWs—to unfold how Ha Jin displays the cruelty of the war and the inhumanity of political regimes. The first section starts from the national perspective to examine how an ideological machine imposes illusory promises onto POWs since their sacrifices ultimately turn out to be meaningless. The second section switches the focus to the individuals in the prison to examine through the mental torment of the POWs experience as a result of political allegiance and how their faith becomes invalid in the prison.

3 Wang, Shanmei, "Liusan yu guilai: kuawenhua shiyuxie de Ha Jin yanjiu 流散与归来:跨文化视阈下的哈金研究 [Emerging or Merging: Study on Ha Jin from the Cross-Cultural Perspective]" (Phd Dissertation, Jilin University, 2018), 42.

4 Sun, Chao, "Cong Ziyoushenghuo tantao Ha Jin de lisan xiezuo从《自由生活》探讨哈金的离散写作 [Research on the Diaspora Writing of a Free Life by Ha Jin]" (MA Thesis, Harbin Normal University, 2011), 25.

5 Sabitha, S. Politics of Identity on Ha Jin's *The War Trash*. *Literary Endeavour*, 435.

### Illusive Political Commitment

In *War Trash*, Ha Jin firstly shows readers how political forces manipulate the masses during wartime. Shirley Quan says that Ha Jin's work "illustrates the difficulties that one faces when living in an oppressed society."<sup>6</sup> Political oppression in this novel can be observed from how the Communist party treats POWs when they were in American prisons and then when they are repatriated to their home country. In the prison, political movements were carried out at the expense of the POW's lives. When they were repatriated to their home country, even when they were politically loyal or honored, their state viewed them as useless "trash".

Anarchists claim that all forms of government rest on violence and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary.<sup>7</sup> Anarchists believe that no political or governmental power is necessary because they think that a country is a power machine that protects the interests of the ruling class by oppressing people, and that the nation is nothing but an excuse used by the state to destroy the freedom and equal communication of human beings. According to anarchists, the political institution is a tool used to create contradictions among oppressed people in order to maintain the ruling order. In the prison camp in *War Trash*, political force is represented through the character of Pei Shan, the Commissar of the 180<sup>th</sup> Division of the People's Liberation Army. He has the highest rank in his squad, and spares no efforts in maintaining the rule of the Communist party in the prison camp.

Pei Shan and his squad were separated from the rest of their division at the start of the war, and they had to wage guerrilla war in the mountains for months, waiting for the opportunity to return to North Korea. Unfortunately, however, most of his soldiers were captured by the enemy. As the highest-ranking officer in the camp, Pei Shan became the backbone of the Communist Party. Everyone regarded him as the embodiment of the Party and believed that being obedient to him equaled being loyal to the Party: "These men had no gods to worship, so they could only project their religious feelings on a leader, a human being, whose return to us might have been a fluke."<sup>8</sup> Under the leadership of Pei Shan, two movements (or

6 Shirley N Quan, "Review of Ha Jin *Waiting*," *Library Journal*, October 15, 1999, 105.

7 Emma Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader* (New York: Schoc-kenBooks, 2011), 21.

8 Ha, *War Trash*, 208.

contradictions) take place as a means of protecting the interests of the party.

The first political movement in the camp involves “raising the national flag”. Before Pei Shan is discovered by American soldiers to be the leader of the Communist Party, he establishes the United Communist Association in the camp with the help of Hao Chaoling in order to enlarge the association and strengthen their leadership. In order to unite and organize the association members in the camp, they drafted and announced a Constitution<sup>9</sup> under the leadership of Pei Shan. Later, when his identity is revealed, he organizes a “raising of the national flag” movement by giving directions to people outside the cell via “The Pei Code”.<sup>10</sup> All decisions during this movement were made by Commissar Pei solely, and he made the decision to raise the flag in order to improve the morale of the others in the camp. The narrator Yu Yuan believes that this decision will enrage the Americans and put the lives of the whole camp in danger. But for Commissar Pei, the death of some of the prisoners is a necessary evil and also the most effective way to get the attention of the outside. Despite the loss of some prisoners’ lives, this action is declared as a “glorious victory” by Commissar Pei to maintain public morale. Furthermore, he gives everyone a second-class merit citation, though these ironically prove to be useless after the war. The Commissar declares all sacrificed comrades to be “Hero Fighters”,<sup>11</sup> but compared to the damage in casualties, this illusory award was nothing but a proof of control by political regimes. The true nature of this political regime, as implied in the physical condition of Pei Shan, is one of extreme impotence. Pei suffered from stomachaches caused by an ulcer and was unable to physically take part in the movement. Similarly, political forces are unable to guarantee the life of their followers, rather relegating them the real action while they take a backseat from active participation.

The second movement orchestrated by Pei Shan was the abduction of American General Matthew Bell. In order to strengthen the leadership of the Communist Party and attract the attention of frontline leaders, the

9 The Constitution was composed of four parts—“Principles”, “Organization”, “Members”, “Discipline”—to organize the members in the United Communist Association, but it turned out to be a formalism with many of its rules broken by the Party members.

10 The Pei Code was composed of a booklet of simplified Morse Code and a Walking Telegraph Code. People inside the cell have a chance breathe fresh air every day. At that time, they can communicate secretly with the outside via The Pei Code by taking specified strides and decoding the code.

11 Ha, *War Trash*, 242.

Chinese and North Korean communists in the camp worked together to capture General Bell. This not only forces Bell to admit the American maltreatment of the prisoners, but also provides effective evidence for peace negotiations on the frontline, which was viewed as a huge victory along with the aforementioned “flag-raising” uprising. However, the narrator Yu begins to have doubts and says, “my enthusiasm about the collective struggle had begun to wane. At heart, I was starting to doubt the wisdom of abducting General Bell.”<sup>12</sup> Though they were technically successful with the abduction, many innocent soldiers were killed in the process. Moreover, after the success of this movement, General Bell is dismissed from his position, and replaced by another general who continues to torture and persecute the POWs.

The persecution of political regimes persists when POWs are repatriated to their home country. Even if they were politically loyal or honored during the war, this all turns to dust upon their return. The party sees their captivity as a betrayal of their country and as the POWs recount, “the leaders in Beijing had washed their hands of us.”<sup>13</sup> Many of them go out of their way to curry favor with the authorities, “expose” others, and degrade themselves even more. Some of them even admitted that they were indeed “cowards who helped the enemy”.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, all of the POWs were expelled from the party, and many were treated as traitors or spies and imprisoned once again. Important characters in the novel ended up with a miserable life: Ming, abandoned by his fiancée, was sent back to Szechuan, where he carried water to the public baths; Shanmin became a peasant in his hometown; Chaolin, who once had “merits” for his performance on the battlefield, was assigned to a steel workshop. After the war, Pei was dismissed from the military and expelled from the Party, becoming “war trash”, with all of his oral commendations from the war becoming nothing. His experience shows the futility of political power and the meaninglessness of personal sacrifice for political belief. His ignorance of human rights for his political movements in the camp is criticized by Yu Yuan who finds it intolerable to “use men like beasts of burden, like burning firewood”.<sup>15</sup> When individuals attempt to become masters of the political community, they are, in fact, mere cogs in the operation of the state machine.

12 Ha, *War Trash*, 190.

13 *Ibid.*, 341.

14 *Ibid.*, 344.

15 *Ibid.*, 72.

**The Invalidity of Faith**

The anarchist opposes all kinds of institutions, including the state, church, and society claiming that “their promises are null and void, since they can be fulfilled only through man’s subordination.”<sup>16</sup> *War Trash* deconstructs individuals’ political and religious ideologies to present the meaninglessness of political allegiance. The following section will focus on the three kinds of individuals in the camp in order to examine the mental torment of POWs as generated by their political allegiance as well as explore how their faith becomes invalid.

The war took place among three groups of people, namely, American Christians (including US soldiers, officers, and clergymen), Communist Party members, and pro-Nationalists who were forced to the battlefield by the Communist Party and eager to be repatriated to Taiwan rather than mainland China. However, neither religious belief nor political obedience ultimately provided relief or salvation for any of these groups in facing the cruelty of the war.

For the American Christians, their clergyman failed to provide spiritual support to the prisoners. When his true identity as a spy of the American government was revealed, the ordinary followers’ belief in Christianity was broken, turning religion into a “nightmare that oppresses the human soul and holds the mind in bondage.”<sup>17</sup> Here, the clergyman was a repressive authority masked as a savior, who deceived his pious followers and drew them into a darker abyss.

Besides this false religious belief, the American soldiers suffered as a result of their political allegiance. For instance, Richard, one of the GIs, consistently curses the war in his talks with Yu Yuan. Later, Richard and other GIs even ask Yu Yuan for a “safety certificate”, so that in the case that America loses the war, they can survive the Communists by dint of this certificate. Yu refrains from saying to him, “I am standing on Korean soil to defend my country”<sup>18</sup> because he thought that his political allegiance seemed ridiculous and meaningless at this moment. These soldiers, regardless of which country they were from, are fighting to protect their country, but are rewarded with the loss of their families and loved ones, and are often in danger of sacrificing their lives on the battlefield. Thus, Yu Yuan felt that it was inappropriate to talk about the patriotic commitment of “defend(ing)

16 Goldman, *Red Emma Speaks*, 22.

17 Emma Goldman, *Anarchism: And Other Essays* (Massachusetts: Courier Corporation, 1969), 53.

18 Ha, *War Trash*, 139.

my country” because it sounded empty to individuals who were suffering as a result of the war. More than winning the war, the GIs care about their own safety and at times curse the war as meaningless: “I don’t see why I’m here. Fighting for what?”<sup>19</sup> They directly demonstrate their fear of killing and being killed. Gradually, that fear and negation transforms into hatred toward Chinese prisoners, which they take out on them through maltreatment.

For communists, the lives of the soldiers and POWs are extremely difficult, and through this depiction of their hardships, Ha Jin satirizes the inhumane war and futility of superficial political allegiance. Particularly through the story of the tattoo below Yu Yuan’s navel, Ha Jin shows the meaninglessness of the tattoo and its unreliability as an embedded ideological force, since the tattoo can be changed easily. When he was in prison, Yu had no intention of fighting with the two parties and only wanted to return home as soon as possible to reunite with his family. Before the Screening<sup>20</sup>, Yu was knocked unconscious. He woke up to find his belly tattooed with two English words “FUCK COMMUNISM”. The tattoo was supposed to be an impassioned, macho pledge of loyalty, but for Yu Yuan, it was humiliating. It serves to remove him from the pro-Communist camp and classify him under the pro-Kuomintang Nationalist banner. However, since tattoos are superficial, and their meaning can change depending on the situation and interpretation, it is inappropriate to judge the attributes of individuals solely through tattoos. Especially in this case, Yu Yuan was forced to be tattooed, and the tattoo comes to be interpreted in different ways in different periods. Over the decades, the tattoo on Yu’s belly is changed two times, with its meaning overturning each time. After returning to China, Yu Yuan asks a clinic doctor to totally remove his tattoo, but the doctor and the disciplinary officer suggest that he just remove several letters and leave “FUCK...U...S...” The second change of the tattoo is made at the end of the story when Yu Yuan finds a doctor to remove the tattoo completely. Yu Yuan actually held no particular position on the struggle between the Nationalists and the Communist Party, so it is erroneous to judge his political attributes based on the tattoo. Because tattoos can be transformed, they neither represent separation or connection nor do they mark cultural or political differences. The use of tattoos is not necessarily unconventional, but sometimes refers to the pressure placed on individuals by bullying parties

19 Ibid.

20 In *War Trash*, according to military treaties, both sides need to return the captives. During the Screening, the captive could choose where they want to be returned, the Chinese mainland or Taiwan. See Chapter 9 in *War Trash*.

and the fact that political attribute construction is full of inauthenticity and fickleness. Yu Yuan eventually asks the doctor to erase the tattoo because he wants to get rid of the political forces that had been imposed on him. His decision was not just about breaking away from physical marks; it is also about abolishing the national, political factions that divide people ideologically.

Ha Jin also portrays a group of cruel pro-nationalists, who want to be repatriated to Taiwan. In his depiction of this group of POWs, Ha Jin displays how they were dehumanized by their blind political allegiance to nationalism. Yu Yuan believes that hoping for a better life in Taiwan is impractical and has too many uncertainties. The Nationalists mercilessly persecute the POWs who are determined to return to mainland China. They create an atmosphere of terror in the camp, resulting in fighting and killing among the fellow Chinese prisoners. The head of the pro-nationalist group, Liu Tai-an, is a graduate of the Huangpu Military Academy, and he coerces and entices others to go to Taiwan to continue being loyal to Chiang Kai-shek. When the communist Lin Wushen shouts the slogan of “Long live the Communist Party! Long live our motherland”<sup>21</sup>, Liu stabs him and “slit his chest, then pulled out his lungs and heart, all the organs quivering with steam. He cut out the heart and skewered it with the dagger.”<sup>22</sup> The thrilling and bloody description unveils the mercilessness of the pro-nationalist who, as “a sick man”, was “warped by the image of the fictional hero in classical Chinese novels”. Liu was “proud of the analogy” and “relishes his ability to inspire terror”.<sup>23</sup> To compare Liu with the macho hero, Yu Yuan implies that Liu and his fellow men were making a blind choice to believe in the existence of a paradise in Taiwan. His claim of “in Taiwan, you will live a free and happy life”,<sup>24</sup> is nothing but a fantasy from the propaganda of his “Generalissimo Chiang”. What is more, bystanders merely watch the tragedy, with no one daring to speak out to stop it. Long-term, isolated prison life and cruel ideological rule created a group of insane people. The inhuman violence by pro-nationalists in the prison can also be attributed to the Communist Party, who arbitrarily sent those rebels into the battlefield resulting in the spread of such a “virus” in the camp, shaking others’ faith in the Communist party and persecuting the innocent who hoped for nothing but to reunite with their family in mainland China.

21 Ha, *War Trash*, 107.

22 *Ibid.*, 108.

23 *Ibid.*, 110.

24 *Ibid.*, 104.

Overall, through the depiction of three groups of people involved in the war, Ha Jin portrays the meaninglessness of political allegiance and religious belief and unveils the inhumanity brought out by blind political worship.

### Conclusion

While other soldiers were honored by their country for the efforts on the battlefield, prisoners of war had different experiences. When the other soldiers returned home, they were greeted with flowers and applause, and a recognition of their sacrifices. Though they may suffer from post-war trauma, they were supported by others to reduce this trauma. However, things were more complex for the prisoners of war. While imprisoned, they knew that they would likely be mistreated by their country following the war, so they attempted to prove their political allegiance to their party, with the hope that their party would forgive their surrender to the enemy. However, their attempted loyalty and allegiance ultimately turned out to be futile despite their suffering in prison.

In *War Trash*, Ha Jin expresses his opposition and aversion to political ideologies and institutions. From the perspective of political suppression imposed on POWs, in the first part, we found that in the prison, political machines wielded prisoners as a tool for achieving political goals. Returning back to the homeland, the good future of POWs that had been promised by political leaders turned out to be illusory, and the POWs became “war trash”. In the second part, from the perspective of individuals, we found that individuals’ political allegiance and religious belief are meaningless and lead to inhumane behaviors.

As the Korean War has been long neglected by people around the world, the study of the historical fiction novel *War Trash* can help people to look back on this history. It is a valuable literary work for readers and researchers to retrospectively look at the situation of POWs both during and after the war. As current studies on Ha Jin’s work are limited, this paper hopes to shed light on the research on Ha Jin and the Korean War.