

Chinese experience of the Korean War

Ha Jin. 2004. *War Trash*. New York: Pantheon Books, 352 pages, ISBN 0 375 42276 5



Ball-Point Pen Drawing Confiscated from a North Korean Prisoner of War, Koje Island, 15 July 1953

Courtesy New York Public Library Propaganda Collection (Box 11).

Adam Cathcart

The Chinese experience of the Korean War (1950-1953) remains little noted and barely understood. No one, other than the Koreans themselves, sustained heavier casualties in the war than the Chinese, who buried more than 100,000 men in Korean soil, including the napalm-saturated body of Mao's eldest son. Beyond domestic propaganda denouncing the American-led UN forces, China's intervention in the Korean War sharpened her hostility to the capitalist West, prevented the integration of Taiwan with the mainland, and cut deeply into the masses of young men who had joined the war as 'volunteers'.

Ha Jin confronts this consequential subject in his novel *War Trash*, the unadorned first-person narrative of a Chinese POW in Korea. True to the actual experiences of Chinese communist POWs, the novel is long and quite frequently depressing. Beginning with its dark wrapping and sheer girth, the reader apprehends a sense of the work's unrelenting sobriety. Unlike *Waiting*, his celebrated story of romance amid the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the political currents that seethe underneath the surface of *War Trash* are not calmed by any semblance of a love story. Developed female characters do not exist in this book, and counter-narratives, subplots, and flashbacks are similarly absent. Basking in depression, *War Trash* is a brutally slow exploration of the prisoner's world, and as such, represents

Ha Jin's most challenging and edifying work to date.

Readers familiar with such classic Korean War films as *Pork Chop Hill* will recognize the muted strain of fatalism that winds like a dirge through *War Trash*. The men in the prison camps are nothing more than insignificant flotsam, war trash, pawns in a grinding chess match centering on the truce village of Panmunjom. For momentary victories at the negotiating table, leaders on both sides would unscrupulously sacrifice the lives of hundreds in battlefield offensives or prison camp uprisings. The text thus mirrors the inner desolation that the inconclusive truce talks created. Those interested in military history and the Korean War will be pleased with the layers of detail in Ha Jin's work, whose kinship with the list of reference works unobtrusively located as back matter is clear. As such, *War Trash* straddles the boundary between history and fiction, and bids to join the company of Solzhenitsyn's gulag literature.

The writing is often aimless, as the recollections of the old can be, but the reader frequently wanders into inlets of beauty. In one episode showing the transfer of prisoners from Koje Island to Cheju-do, the narrator relates the following tableaux: 'Once we were clear of the hill slope, the muddy beach appeared, spreading like a long strip of unplanted paddy fields. At its northern end, at the beginning of the wharf, were anchored two large black ships, the sides of their prows painted with white

Korean words that none of us could understand' (p.200). Born in China but resident in Atlanta since 1985, Ha Jin has become well-known largely on the strength of such sentences.

Less poetic but more useful are the novel's descriptions of the everyday activities that governed life in the POW camps. Unrestrained by American regulations, prisoners communicated across distinct compounds via hand signals, or by slinging rocks with messages that fluttered over fences. *War Trash* contains a few meditations on the role of singing and the arts as cathartic necessities for camp culture. One pris-

oner learns to read, which in the muted tones of the novel, brings satisfaction to the narrator. Rarely, however, are emotions overplayed. While homesickness among the troops receives sympathetic treatment, this text seldom wallows in sentimentality.

Like the 2,000,000 mainland Chinese who were thrust into Korea as 'volunteers', the narrator encounters an array of nationalities, testifying to Korea's inundation by foreign soldiers. Americans appear as solicitous doctors, embattled black soldiers sympathetic to communist doctrine, and angry sergeants capable of torture. No one communicates particularly well, and language barriers appear frequently, reminding the reader that, for the Chinese troops who trudged across the Yalu River and into the pockmarked netherworld of the DPRK, Korea was a strange and foreign land. In this predicament, the Chinese troops shared a root concern with their western rivals who were steadily pouring into the confusion of Pusan.

Amid the polyglot forces inundating the peninsula, *War Trash* paints North Koreans as perhaps the most interesting. North Korean POWs flare throughout the text as haughty firebrands whose nationalistic furor and personal pride can never be squelched. In discussing the need for 'patient negotiation' with the Americans, notes the Chinese narrator, 'our Korean comrades tended to be too hot-blooded', noting that Kim Il Sung's men 'wouldn't share the same earth and sky with the American imperialists. In the camps, this pride manifested itself in fierce North Korean resistance to American control. Indeed, one of *War Trash's* most harrowing episodes chronicles a prison rebellion instigated by a core group of North Korean POWs.

Faced with the abduction of an American general by a shock brigade of communist POWs, American soldiers quell the Cheju compounds with the full force of tanks. Facing hundreds of American troops bristling with weaponry, the Koreans run futilely forward,

armed only with bamboo spears and shouts of 'Mansei!' (p.187). This episode, like other repudiations of proletarian Korean nationalism, demonstrated a deep need among the prisoners for images of a dominant North Korea, as seen in the accompanying drawing. In the midst of prison camp struggles, Ha Jin credits the Americans their share of brutality, but does not spare the prisoners for their own folly. Preparing for an all-out rumble with the guards, Chinese prisoners create signs reading 'Respect the Geneva Convention!' even as they sharpen their shanks.

The Chinese-North Korean camaraderie that pervades *War Trash* exists today only in propaganda artefacts and wartime kitsch hawked by vendors along the northern bank of the Yalu River. Nevertheless, Ha Jin faithfully chronicles Chinese soldiers singing North Korean songs and participating in smaller, yet more beautiful gestures. During one particularly intense denunciation of their American captors, a Chinese soldier breaks into sobs, and is silently handed a towel by his Korean comrade. In another episode describing the preparations for a camp uprising, the narrator finds himself in the depths of an underground compound, hosted by a princely and solicitous North Korean who somehow has a radio through which he allows his Chinese friend to hear, at last, news from home. This book is like that – dreary, almost impassable, until an unexpected flare from underground infuses life with emotion and rare companionship.

In a way we are all prisoners of the Korean War, and live in the world it created. Divisions and loyalties remain lashed into place, frozen across an artificial barrier that time has hardened into a nigh-unbridgeable chasm. In 1953, Ha Jin's narrator crossed north of the 38th parallel towards home, but the rest of us are still waiting for the war to end. ◀

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