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## Ha Jin's *War Trash*:<sup>1</sup> Novel as Historical Evidence

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Historians of war and their readers invariably, some more than others, seek to know the reality of what it was like to be directly involved in war. John Keegan has discussed this urge and the difficulties of satisfying it in the long introduction to *Face of Battle*. Just as invariably, they are frustrated by the evidence of that reality. Anyone who has ever been involved in the creation and maintenance of official records, so voluminous for war, is aware of how these records misrepresent the human reality. Accidentally, incidentally, deliberately, blatantly, subtly, record keepers omit, distort, and simply lie about what they might have set down in the record. After all, their concern at the moment is with simply keeping the record, not with its historical value.

A smaller body of evidence is personal, written by people—usually men—who were themselves directly involved. But personal records, memoirs of war, also have their problems. The writers are a peculiar, unrepresentative group. For whatever reason, they are a small minority of survivors who felt the urge to write about their experience after the event. Not too long ago, professors in graduate seminars advised their students to discount the values of memoir evidence. It was “fool’s gold,” the professors argued, full of tempting revelations not readily found in archival records, but riddled with the flaws of human memory, and weakened to an extent difficult for any reader to know by the natural human desire to tell the story that the writer wishes were true. Today, attitudes toward the memoirist have shifted strongly; memoirs are among the most highly valued, imaginatively explored, and uncritically exploited of historical documents, for history in general and war in particular. The creation of oral-history records, and their use by military historians like S.L.A. Marshall, exemplify this shift in attitude.

A problematic sub-category of the memoir is the war novel. Many are pure imaginative fiction, like *The Red Badge of Courage* or *Killer Angels*, written by someone fascinated by the war but who had no direct personal experience of it. But others are thinly novelized memoirs. With Erich Remarque, James Jones, and Tim O’Brien we are invited to seek the real truth beneath the veneer of fiction. Almost every military historian has a shelf of favorites in this sub-category, as well as of the memoirists, despite the risks of relying on personal evidence.

One of the toughest problems in knowing what we want to know, quite reasonably, about the immediate human experience of war lies on the other side of the hill—with the enemy, whose knowledge, resources, intentions, morale, and judgment in wartime were critically important to what happened and yet were and often still are shrouded in fog. Many years ago, Douglas Southall Freeman insisted that the wartime studies of Robert E. Lee and his lieutenants should be done while maintaining the “fog of war” that they themselves experienced. Not many of us today would agree with Freeman, and some might sus-

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<sup>1</sup> Ha Jin, *War Trash* (New York: Pantheon, 2004; paperback May 2005).

pect that he simply lacked the interest in doing research on Yankees, but a quick survey of military historical writing shows that most of our work, for whatever reason—personal interest, missing language skills, or inaccessible records—is thinner on one side, usually the side of the “enemy.” Especially in the most recent wars is this a crucial problem, when archival access is still restricted and participants are dying off.

A troubling case for those who would readily grasp and use any available personal evidence is that of Guy Sajer, the Alsatian-born memoirist who joined the German Army and served to the end of World War II on the Eastern Front. Sajer’s *Le soldat oublié*, published in 1967, translated in 1971 as *The Forgotten Soldier*, was an instant classic, depicting the horrors of a disintegrating Wehrmacht fending off the unstoppable Soviet Army. According to his French publisher, Sajer (a pseudonym) began to write his story in 1952, when he was ill, in a school notebook. Five years later he had filled seventeen notebooks with penciled recollections; urged by friends, he published excerpts in a Belgian magazine. But in the 1990s, several critics found factual errors and discrepancies in the text and raised serious questions about the historical veracity of the work as a whole (see *Army Historian* 1992 and *The Journal of Military History* 1998), calling the book “historical fiction” and “a hoax.”

Whatever the truth about Sajer, his case is one that should raise healthy doubts about a recent work by an award-winning Chinese-American author, Ha Jin, whose *War Trash* (2004) purports to be a straightforward account set down for the author’s grandchildren of his service during the Korean War as a Chinese soldier in the PLA, and later as an American POW (the “war trash” of the title) on Koje and Cheju Islands. It was published as a novel, but the text invites the reader to accept it as a memoir, perhaps with some names disguised. Even now, we know so little about the Chinese side of the Korean War that the temptation is very strong to accept the book as valuable historical evidence. Each reader can raise the obvious questions; what follows is a summary account of Ha Jin’s story as it appears in *War Trash*.

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In 1949, when the Communists take power in China, Yu Yuan is a second-year student at Huangpu Military Academy (“like West Point”) at Chengdu, Sichuan. Disgusted by the corruption of the defeated Nationalists, Yu and his classmates readily accept the new regime. Upon graduation he is assigned to the headquarters of the 180<sup>th</sup> Division, whose mission appears to be regional reconstruction rather than military readiness. But all changes in the spring of 1951 when the division is ordered to Hebei, near Manchuria, and prepares to enter Korea. Soviet weapons replace those used in the civil war, and senior officers from the old Nationalist army are also replaced. After resting and training for about six weeks at Dandong, on the Yalu River, the division crosses into Korea on the night of 17 March 1951. Each infantryman carries a “submachine gun, two hundred rounds of ammunition, four grenades, a canteen of water, a pair of rubber sneakers, a short shovel on the back of his bedroll, and a tubed sack of parched wheat flour weighing thirteen pounds.”

For the next six weeks the division marches four hundred miles south through mud, ice, snow and early spring cold, to Yei-hun, close to the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, dividing the two Koreas. U.S. air attacks make daylight marching impossible once south of Shandeng, and

night marches are exhausting and chaotic. One night air attack, with illuminating flares, catches his unit in a canyon and kills about a hundred men in five minutes. When Yu and his comrades arrive at the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, only a third of them can stand on their feet. On the march, they run out of food, and some suffer food poisoning from eating wild plants.

Yu forms a relationship with Pei Shan, an impressive soldierly Commissar of the division, and Chang Ming, a clerical officer who is Pei's orderly and a Beijing University classics graduate. Pei notes that Yu reads and speaks English well, having been taught by a missionary in his home town, and advises him that the skill is a "weapon."

Although Chinese troops recently arrived from Manchuria are "bone-weary," a new offensive to wipe out all American and South Korean forces north of the 37<sup>th</sup> Parallel begins on 22 April 1951 under a full moon "as usual," with a huge artillery and rocket preparation. The attack quickly drives ten miles or more into enemy lines, but also outruns its own supplies, and finds itself caught in "magnet tactics"—the enemy keeping close contact in order to inflict casualties. On 22 May comes a full American counterattack, and the 180<sup>th</sup> Division is ordered to fall back to the Han River, at first behind it, and then in front of it to protect other retreating Chinese forces. In the confusion of contradictory orders, the division is trapped. Out of food and water, pounded by artillery and air attack from all sides, former members of the Nationalist army begin to desert. An American plane flies slowly overhead, an "endearing female voice" calling in Mandarin over a loudspeaker for the Chinese soldiers to lay down their arms, and the division breaks up into small groups. Yu attaches himself to the group led by Commissar Pei, who breathes defiance and determination. After a month of marching and hiding, the group shrinks to 34 men, living on rainwater and an occasional dead animal. Guerrilla tactics are considered, but without knowledge of the countryside or the Korean language, Pei rejects them. Small foraging parties and patrols fail to return. Yu passes the time by reading a paperback of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to improve his own English, and teaching basic English phrases to his emaciated comrades. One day they are ambushed, and Yu's war ends in the flash of a grenade explosion. He wakes up in a jeep, hearing American voices and with no feeling in his left foot. Remembering that Americans are said to castrate their prisoners, he grabs his crotch only to find a bandage on his thigh.

His left femur badly broken, Yu finds himself in the hospital of the POW Collection Center at the southeastern port city of Pusan, which reminds him of Dandong on the Yalu for its bustling military traffic. After rough surgery, he is told he will not lose his leg. Summer turns to Fall as Yu's leg heals slowly and imperfectly. Major Greene, an angelic female surgeon, saves the leg in a pair of follow-up operations. Born and educated in China, speaking perfect Mandarin, she gets him to take his first steps, while he teaches her the calligraphy she had neglected to learn in her Shanghai schooling. Limping along the hospital fence, Yu sees Commissar Pei in an adjacent compound. Pei directs him to cultivate the relationship with Dr. Greene to glean information about the peace talks, then under way at Panmunjom. Soon after the Spring Festival of 1952, Dr. Greene tells Yu he is on the list to be shipped to Kojé Island, where most of the Chinese and North Korean POWs are being held.

Kojé-do is a bad place, 25 miles off Pusan, used since ancient times to confine enemies and other prisoners; the Japanese put American POWs on Kojé. An immense camp segre-

gates Chinese and Korean POWs into separate compounds. A Hispanic guard searches Yu, and snatches the souvenir fountain pen given to him by Dr. Greene as a souvenir. When Yu protests, the guard punches him in the face, accusing the “Red gook” of having stolen the object, labeled “Made in U.S.A.,” from a dead American soldier. Entering the compound, Yu sees the insignia of the old Nationalist army everywhere, and realizes that supporters of Chiang Kai-shek are in control. The American guards stay outside the gate, leaving 8,000 inmates to run their own affairs. Wang Yong, a former corporal in the Nationalist army, commands the 500-man unit to which Yu is assigned. When Yu evades Wang’s order to sign up for shipment to Taiwan, he is put into one of the shabby, overcrowded tents housing only the minority who insists on being repatriated to mainland China. Most are not Communists, but want only to go home to their families. But repatriation of prisoners has become a red-hot issue in the negotiations at Panmunjom, and in the POW compounds the issue is potentially lethal.

Boredom and depression, gambling, and fighting, mostly over food, are endemic in the Koje camp, but those in Compound 72 who refuse to sign up for Taiwan are singled out for special abuse by their anti-Communist leaders. Yu is desperate for something to read, having lost his copy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* when he was captured. The pro-Communist tents are impossibly crowded, and movement, even between tents, is restricted. Rations are half those given to the other prisoners. The real ruler of the compound is Liu Tai-an, a former sergeant in the Nationalist army, who surrendered to the Americans at first opportunity, and is rumored to have had two months training in Guam before being sent back to be the enforcer in the predominantly anti-Communist Compound 72. Liu has a personal bodyguard and terrorizes everyone; the Americans call him Little Caesar. A more sympathetic inmate is young Bai Dajian, who turns out to have been a year behind Yu at the Huangpu academy, and has a horrific tale of his own capture, when he lost two fingers to frostbite. When Dajian bitterly denounces the criminal incompetence of their Communist commanders in the war, Yu shushes him, knowing that spies are everywhere.

About three weeks after arriving, Yu sees his old divisional comrade Chang Ming, who tells him that Commissar Pei is there, in another compound. Yu stays in touch with Ming as well as he can through four rows of barbed wire

On Sundays, a Chinese-American Methodist minister, Father Hu, preaches to the prisoners in an assembly hall; benign in manner, Hu is known to be strongly pro-Nationalist, and Yu fears to break the boycott of his services by his pro-Communist tent mates. Instead, Yu, whose mother was a Catholic, attends the smaller Catholic services of Father Woodworth. One of the few who can understand Woodworth’s English sermons, Yu makes contact with him and says he wishes to have a Bible. The Bible comes through command channels, when his immediate commander, Wang Yong, summons Yu for a session of anti-Communist browbeating, then hands him a parcel containing an American Standard Version.

The danger is that Yu becomes visibly more involved with both Chief Wang and Father Woodworth. Yu is soon translating hymns from English to be sung by Woodworth’s small congregation. Ming tells him that Commissar Pei is unhappy when he hears this news of collaboration with an anti-Communist Catholic priest, and after a brief but intense argument with Woodworth about political choice Yu stops attending his services. Later, he is

summoned again to Wang's headquarters. Alternately bullying and begging, Wang urges Yu to choose Taiwan, because when his ability and English fluency take him to high office in the Nationalist regime he can help Wang and his other old pals from Compound 72. Plied with drink, Yu fends off Wang's demand, but staggers out the door into an ambush. When he awakes, he finds a tattoo on his belly—**FUCK COMMUNISM**.

He is lucky; others who persist in their intention to return to mainland China are tortured or killed. Nor is the other side less ruthless; when someone in the nearby pro-Communist compound betrays Commissar Pei, who like all the prisoners has given his captors a false name and identity, Yu is shocked to meet the mutilated corpse of a divisional buddy, who had aroused the suspicions of Pei's protectors, hanging on a fencepost. At a "study session" called by the anti-Communists on the night before the prisoners are to begin being screened for their choice, one defiant man is eviscerated and another beaten to death in front of Yu and his terrified friend Dajian. Tattoos are literally carved off the flesh of men who refuse Taiwan. Yu and Dajian fearfully promise at knifepoint to reject repatriation to the mainland.

Violence and threats continue through the early morning in April 1952 as men pack their gear to move to the screening tent. An American sound truck broadcasts the message in Korean, Chinese, and English that all who choose Taiwan may be risking retaliation against their families at home; Chief Wang curses the Americans for their candor. In a tent full of unarmed United Nations guards, and facing a Mandarin-speaking American Army captain, Yu chooses the mainland, and is quickly ushered into a truck taking him to another compound. Later he learns that Dajian, separated from him in the queue, has been bullied into choosing Taiwan.

At the new compound Commissar Pei is clearly in charge, and life is better. Rations are shared equally, and for the moment morale improves. Pei organizes his men on military lines, as the Koreans had done. Yu himself, while on a work party, had previously observed and been impressed by the differences between the militant Korean prisoners and the more docile Chinese:

I saw the North Korean prisoners doing morning drill; they were shouting slogans as they marched. Some of them carried thick bamboo poles whose ends had been cut on the slant, pointed like javelins; some held wooden sticks and pitchforks; a few shouldered spades sharpened into halberds; the four men at the front of the column toted aluminum spears made from stretcher poles. They were so spirited that they didn't look like prisoners at all, more like a detachment of militia.

The Korean prisoners are in contact with guerrillas still operating in the hills of Koje, and actively scheme to escape. Chinese in contrast, ignorant of the local language and terrain, are more passive, less active, in captivity. Pei intends to change that.

Newly energized by liberation from Chief Wang and his pro-Nationalist thugs, and recalling all the good things Communism has brought to China, Yu applies for Communist Party membership. He is rejected, perhaps for his Huangpu connections and translating hymns for Father Woodworth—he is never sure of the real reason. And he worries endlessly about the damning tattoo on his belly. Though Pei suspects Yu for his Bible reading, and knows all about Yu's romantic encounter with the American Dr. Greene, he has need of an

intelligent man with excellent English, and lets his aide Ming protect Yu from condemnation as a “petty bourgeois” by the assembled Communists.

Hanging over the Communist-run compound is an awareness that the battle for hearts and minds has been lost to the other side: 14,000 of 20,000 Chinese POWs have chosen Taiwan. Being captured was itself a violation of the PLA code of conduct, and from their leader on down all knew that not glory but disgrace awaited them on their return to mainland China. Pei is determined to redeem whatever he can of a gloomy prospect, and turns to Yu whose English enables him to glean information about Panmunjom and world affairs from the relaxed American guards. On a night working party, Yu manages to steal a pistol from a drunken American officer, and earns a citation for “brave service” from the Party Committee. The pistol is passed on to a Korean compound as part of an effort to coordinate the actions of Chinese and North Korean POWs; their leaders feign illness as a way of holding joint meetings in the local field hospital. Yu is at one of these meetings in late Spring 1952 when the aggressive Koreans propose to kidnap General Bell, the American commander of the whole Koje camp.

Yu translates into English a formal letter to General Bell, complaining of poor treatment and demanding a meeting. When there is no immediate response, the Chinese POWs follow it up with demonstrations and a hunger strike. Bell arrives with his guards, and discussion resolves most of the issues. On 7 May, Pei sends a small Chinese delegation, including Yu as translator, to meet Bell at a general meeting in the North Korean compound. In a carefully rehearsed operation, the Koreans snatch Bell and slam the gates shut. A hostage, Bell sends written orders for a phone line into the compound. The Koreans break out crude weapons, flags, and even insignia in their triumph over the fallen American commander. The Korean leaders congratulate their Chinese comrades for their support in the coup. Yu himself plays a crucial role in the negotiations with Bell, who is released four days later after making major admissions and concessions in a signed document.

While the Korean compound celebrates its political victory, the Americans seal its perimeter, and begin to harass the inmates with tear gas and flamethrowers that destroy the defiant portraits erected of Stalin, Mao, and Kim Il Sung. Airborne troops and a tank battalion arrive, and the Koreans prepare for a battle. On 12 June, tanks break down the gate followed by infantry wearing gas masks. The Chinese delegation is forbidden to fight, and the Koreans assign a detachment to protect it. The Koreans fight fiercely, but machine guns, tear gas, and flamethrowers quickly overwhelm them, and in twenty minutes resistance is crushed, “hundreds ... of killed and wounded” littering the ground. The few Chinese are taken by their captors to a dank, walled-in stone house—the “top jail” reserved for “war criminals” they are told. A few weeks later the low-ranking Yu is released back to the Chinese compound, and makes his report to Commissar Pei. The Americans inform the compound to prepare for a move to Cheju, a much larger island farther out in the South China Sea. Pei refuses to accept Yu’s opinion that the Koreans had made a mistake, but he is also wary when other Chinese leaders urge that the move to Cheju be forcibly resisted.

During the move, a Chinese collaborator enables the Americans to identify and seize Pei, who until then had successfully hidden his true identity. When the Americans act as if Pei will be kept on Koje, Yu impulsively steps up and threatens that all Chinese prisoners

will refuse to board the ships unless Pei goes with them. The Americans quickly concede, and the move to Cheju goes on.

The Americans have learned from experience, and the new camp is better designed for effective control. It is also better built and more comfortable. Soon after arrival Pei is taken to another stone house, where he will stay from then on. Despite segregation into smaller, separated compounds, the Chinese quickly establish a signaling and communication system. Messages wrapped around rocks are routinely thrown over the wire to adjacent compounds. Classes to teach literacy and other basic subjects, as well as for political education, are soon organized. The Americans recruit men to cook and translate for Pei in his separate jail, and Yu volunteers. Though Ming—less fluent in English but a Communist Party member—is chosen, Yu gets to the jail by being caught with a subversive song in his pocket. Once there, he sees how effectively Pei is able to govern through the primitive communication system.

The next crisis looms in September 1952, when Pei orders all compounds to raise the Chinese flag on National Day, October 1<sup>st</sup>. Using American-issued rain ponchos, mercuriochrome, tin stars, and poles taken from stretchers, they improvise flags, which are raised at dawn on October 1<sup>st</sup>. When American troops and tanks move in to take the flags down, teams of Chinese prisoners resist, though in vain. Yu notes that Pei had done less than the Koreans to prepare for the predictable violence, in which about sixty Chinese die and another hundred are seriously hurt. His doubts about the motives and wisdom of Pei's leadership grow.

The last winter at Cheju comes on with continued friction and occasional violence, reports that the Panmunjom talks are stalled, but nothing major for Yu until Pei signals him to go to Pusan for American-mandated "reregistration," using false identity to take the place of Ming, Pei's Communist aide. Yu is frightened to be sent virtually alone, but follows orders, and at Pusan is caught with the false ID, jailed, then sent back to Cheju, but not to his former compound. In talking his way out of his trouble with the false papers, he agrees to go to the anti-Communist camp at the southern end of the island. There he again meets Chief Wang, telling him as little as possible about his life during the past year, and he is readily accepted into the more relaxed routine of prisoners waiting for shipment to Taiwan. His tattoo protects him.

Near the end of July 1953 news arrives that the armistice has been signed at Panmunjom. The last step for POWs is a "persuasion session," supervised by neutral U.N. troops in the Demilitarized Zone. Arriving in Pusan on 10 September, Yu and his comrades go north near Kaesong. The new arrivals hear stories of prisoner defiance—cursing and spitting at the Chinese Communist officers sitting at the interview. When Yu's turn comes, the officer at the table is one of his former leaders. Recognition is mutual, and Yu immediately sees the peril for his family if he persists in going to Taiwan. Yu—nauseated and dizzy—decides to go home to Sichuan.

Throwing the Bible he had picked up on his last trip to Pusan into the bushes, he rejoins Pei and Ming on their journey through Manchuria. All dread what awaits them. En route, Yu is able to get a military doctor to modify his tattoo; FUCK COMMUNISM is altered to read, FUCK ... U ... S .... But all of them come under attack in the predictable reeducation sessions.

Pei is accused of collaborating with the Americans, and Yu is suspected of worse, including his work for the Catholic priest Woodworth. Ming stands up to defend Yu as a brave warrior who rendered great service to the cause; Ming is told to sit down and shut up, and threatened with loss of his own Party membership, but his speech helps Yu get through the ordeal. Pei gets no credit for his leadership in captivity, and Ming—a university graduate—will end up carrying water for a bathhouse in his hometown. All POWs are dishonorably discharged. Yu, whose widowed mother has died, and whose fiancée has married another man, is lucky to find a wife and a job teaching in middle school. Their son will earn a Master's degree in civil engineering at Georgia Tech, and Yu will have two American grandchildren.

The story ends in Atlanta, Yu packing for his last trip home to China. But before he leaves, Dr. Stone at Emory Medical Center will remove the last traces of his tattoo.

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A bald summary like this one does not do justice to a valuable literary work and political statement. The summary is intended only to guide historians who may want to consult the book as evidence; there they will find a far subtler narrative than presented above, and they may indeed reject some of my own understanding of what happened and why. Ian Buruma presents the results of another kind of reading in *The New York Review of Books*, 24 March 2005.