Novel about POWs wins PEN/Faulkner Award

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War Trash, by Ha Jin, New York: Pantheon Books, 2004, 352 pp.

"*In a hellhole like this we ought to help each other.*"

Ha Jin's *War Trash* has won the 2005 PEN/Faulkner Award. Unquestionably, part of the reason is its subject matter. A major portion of the novel recounts the time a Chinese soldier spends in an American POW camp during the Korean War.

The novel appeared shortly after the exposure of American torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib near Baghdad in April 2004. In the following 18 months, disclosures of similar treatment at Guantánamo and Bagram air force base in Afghanistan, as well as crimes committed by individual units, have generated anger and shame throughout American society.

People have sought an explanation, and, in the absence of serious historical analysis of these war crimes in the mainstream media, an earnest artistic effort that deals with the same issue has received attention.

Ha Jin is the author of several novels, collections of short stories, and books of poetry, including *Crazed* and *In the Pond*. A previous novel, *Waiting*, won both the PEN/Faulkner Award and the National Book Award in 1999. He left China in 1985 to study at Brandeis University and decided to stay in the United States after watching footage of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre on television. He is currently a professor of English at Boston University.

War Trash is narrated by Yu Yuan, a retired schoolteacher, while he is visiting his son's family in Atlanta. Yuan has a middle-class background, having been a student at the Huangpu Military Academy where the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-Shek had his base. He and most other students surrender to the Stalinist People's Liberation Army during the revolution of 1949.

The narrator's writing style is that of an educated and plainspoken man, who has spent his life relating ideas, and perhaps weighing them, too. Since Yu Yuan is somewhat reserved about his emotions, the language is also restrained, without flair or verbal fireworks. We find sharp, simple descriptions—about an American doctor: "Her hair and her clothes exuded a whiff of tobacco; she must have been quite a smoker."

There is a certain propriety in Ha Jin's language—"silky skin, slim fingers"—that may be a little too controlled and redolent of the writing workshop. But he is an intellectual from an extraordinary literary tradition, and Chinese poetry about war finds its way into the text on more than one occasion, adding a soft historical texture to the book.

Yu Yuan is appointed a junior officer in the PLA. Stationed near his mother and fiancée, he is reasonably happy. The Stalinists have brought a peaceful end to the civil war. He plans to get married soon.

But East Asia in 1951 is a volatile place. The Americans have invaded Korea, and the Mao regime wants to forestall an attack on China. Yu Yuan's unit is mobilized unofficially as the "Chinese People's Volunteers" and sent across the Yalu River into Korea.

Underequipped and poorly trained, his unit suffers many casualties and attempts to fight a guerilla war in the countryside. But the Americans capture Yuan and his comrades. He lives in POW camps for the next two years.

It is there—this is the heart of the novel—that he learns to conduct a struggle against American capitalism at the height of its power and influence in the world.

The Americans use Chinese Nationalists as their proxies in the camps. They divide the prisoners into those who want repatriation to China and those willing to go to Taiwan.

The second group receives better accommodations and double the rations. The Nationalists consider the prisoners who seek repatriation to be Communists. Some of them are publicly whipped. Yuan's superior officer is forced to stand for hours until he falls asleep and cuts himself on barbed wire. At a mass meeting, the Nationalists disembowel one Communist and beat to death another. One night, Yuan himself is knocked unconscious and wakes with the tattoo "Fuck Communism" on his belly.

Early in prison life, after the violence, hunger and cold have begun, Yuan asks himself in despair: "How easily could humanity deteriorate in wretched conditions? How low could an ordinary man fall when he didn't serve a goal larger than himself?"

The novel proceeds to show that adherence to a goal larger than the individual is precisely how these men recapture self-respect. Yuan is a relatively non-political person, but the hypocrisy and sadism of the Americans and their Nationalist agents turn him into an active resister with other soldiers under Stalinist leadership.

This was the spirit of the times for much of the world. Both the Chinese and Korean people were on the move, in 1951, against foreign and national oppressors. Ha Jin shows these same social processes occurring in a POW camp. With great sympathy, the novel details the feelings for justice and fair treatment that animate Yuan and the other prisoners. They suffer though beatings, torture, even deaths of their fellows, but are able to assert themselves as complete human beings. There is the "feel" of a particular era and location in *War Trash*.

The historical grounding (Ha Jin appends a bibliography of material he used on the Korean War) helps to give precision to the behavior of his characters. That is, there are distinct social types: the collaborator, the weak ones who lose heart and die, the leaders who are indeed animated by a goal larger than themselves.

The artistry of Ha Jin shows itself in the characters he creates: Yu

Yuan, his leader Commissar Pei, the various Chinese Nationalists, and even American soldiers are highly individualized. And yet they all project something of the social type. That is, these evolved characters show the distinct imprint of their social histories.

The uneducated peasant drafted into the army, the intellectual jolted by war and revolution, the political leader motivated by higher ideals, the gangster, the coward who dies or surrenders under pressure, are all here in the POW camps. Genuinely individual characteristics and social type are woven together in a given character, creating neither a stereotype nor an implausible "quirky" phantom, as so much fiction does.

Half a century or more later, these types are still with us. Particularly well drawn is the military-religious hypocrite. At one point, Yuan asks a American prison chaplain, who has given him a bible to read, why the prisoners are not all treated equally, since they are all sinners. He points out that the prisoners who want to return to China live off of half rations. The priest replies: "I'm sorry, but this is the way things should be done," because Communism is such a great evil. Replace Communism with Islam and the scene could have been replayed in any number of American prison camps today.

Yuan himself develops as he begins to understand the real necessity to struggle. Many times the Nationalists attempt to seduce him, and gradually he finds new reasons for refusing to go to Taiwan.

He is able to play an active role in the events leading up to an insurrection in one of the camps, in which the Chinese prisoners confront tanks and hundreds of American soldiers. Protests, hunger strikes and massacres take him though a range of imaginable emotions. But Yuan is able to treat these feelings rationally, and decide on a course of action, or at least a standard of personal behavior, that is not simply passionate and reactive, but cool and thoughtful. He takes the world situation and politics into account.

This is a contradictory, often confusing, struggle. Yuan himself has doubts particularly about the competence of the Stalinists' leaders. The Chinese bureaucracy has been criminally negligent in the first instance by sending the solders into Korea poorly equipped and trained. Its larger political goal consists of pressuring the Americans for a more favorable settlement in the Panmunjom truce negotiations.

Re-establishing its authority in the prison, the Stalinist leadership forms a United Communist Association whose program is limited to "protecting the honor of the Communist Party and the motherland" and supporting the peace negotiations. Soldiers are urged to study hard, but in practice, based on a limited political perspective, this consists only of literacy programs. There is almost no discussion of politics and history. There is no reason to doubt Ha Jin's accuracy in this respect.

There is only one revealing exception: the prisoners put on a play that satirizes the Americans and provides some sort of political perspective. The piece is lovingly prepared and impresses even the American soldiers, one of whom tells Yuan that he didn't know there were artists among the prisoners. But the play essentially presents the United States as a monolith, hungry for world domination, but without internal contradictions of its own.

And yet a social principle that goes beyond nationalism raises itself again and again. One aspect that stands out in the book is the close connection between the United States and China, and not only in war.

Yuan, after all, narrates the story in old age as he is visiting his son's family in Atlanta. A critical element of his ability to survive in the camps is the fact that he can speak and read English. But the novel achieves a certain depth in its early parts when Yuan, who has a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with him, retells its story to his men.

At the start of his imprisonment, Yuan receives help from an American woman surgeon. She has studied in China before the revolution and asks Yuan's help in working on her calligraphy. This first close impression of an American character is entirely sympathetic.

When he is sent on work details outside the camps, Yuan begins to have conversations with one of his American guards, a corporal from Detroit named Richard. At one point, Yuan covers his face in misery at the thought that he might never see his fiancée again. " 'It's tough man. I know it's tough,' he kept saying with some feeling."

Eventually, Richard asks him for something called a safety certificate. The former explains that this is a note written by a POW on behalf of an American solder in case he is captured, asking the Chinese not to shoot him. Yuan writes him one. He talks to other Americans, and, in the end, after a year in the repatriation camp, the Chinese POWs have issued over 150 safety certificates.

The Stalinist leadership, however, makes not the slightest effort for a united political struggle with the American soldiers. And the author may not have a deep insight into this, either. There are only individual gestures, portrayed with a realistic humanism. Ha Jin depicts these incidents without any critical reflection.

This is also the case in regard to the sad epilogue—the prisoners' fate after they return to China. They are put into reeducation camps and told they should have died rather than allow the Americans to imprison them. Their personal lives are destroyed, and no mention is made of the dangerous and courageous struggles they undertook to defend not only themselves, but also China, from American imperialism.

Yuan does not speculate on how this could be. He believes that the government "could use our sufferings to embarrass the enemy," but that "we were no longer a concern." to the party. Then why are they treated like the "dregs of society"? There is something more to this, but no character can speculate on the matter because the author fails to.

We can see the same problem in Yuan's subsequent life. He was rehabilitated, but prisoners who began a new life in Taiwan return to China after 30 or 40 years as honored investors. The world has changed so much that Yuan can now easily visit his son thousands of miles away.

Ha Jin instinctively senses these larger issues; as a talented artist he feels obliged to pose some of them. But the real history of the last century needs to become a deeper and richer part of literary culture. Yu Yuan ended up in a hellhole, and so did many others. Humanity faced great, confusing difficulties. The Chinese Revolution was a titanic event; its evolution has no small bearing on contemporary reality. And there are new American hellholes, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. All this is reflected in *War Trash*, but not as consciously or expansively as it needs to be.