

Cultural Reviews

The Lament of a Chinese POW

A Review of *War Trash*

Ha Jin

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BY WU NINGKUN



Ha Jin has lived abroad in the United States for more than 20 years, and has published many poems and novels in English in the past 15 years. A common theme connects these out-

standing works—that of the author's compassion for his motherland and his suffering compatriots. Ha Jin's 1999 novel, *Waiting*, sings a beautiful requiem to the desires and broken dreams of an anonymous generation; the book won him the National Book Award for fiction. His 2002 novel, *The Crazy*, cries out for the suffering of several generations of intellectuals, amplifying the message of Lu Xun's masterpiece, *Diary of a Madman*. Ha Jin's latest English novel, *War Trash*, centers on the miserable fate of Chinese prisoners captured in the Korean War, a topic unfamiliar to most readers.

A novel written in the form of memoir

War Trash is a novel written in the form of nonfiction memoir. The memoir's narrator is Yu Yuan, a prisoner released after the Korean War.

Yu Yuan is a second-year student at the Huangpu Military Academy at Chengdu when the People's Liberation Army liberates mainland China. The PLA takes over the academy and promptly sends former Nationalist officers and cadets alike to the Southwest Military Academy of Military and Political Sciences for a year-long "reindoc-trination." Upon graduation from the academy, Yu Yuan is posted to the 180th division at Chengdu as a junior clerical officer. Since his superior intends to keep the division permanently garrisoned in Chengdu City, Yu Yuan is able to look after his widowed mother, who lives in the same city, and can look forward to marrying his fiancée after her graduation from the Sichuan Teachers University the following

year. He could not be more pleased with this outcome.

But Yu Yuan's good fortune does not last long. Weeks before the Chinese New Year in 1951, the 180th division is suddenly ordered to move north in order to check the American invasion of Manchuria and to assist the North Koreans. Yu Yuan is obliged to bid farewell to his mother and weeping fiancée and depart with his division, which incorporates former Nationalist officers.

The troops receive a brief training and learn to use Russian weapons. They also attend propaganda sessions in which America is ridiculed as a "paper tiger" unable to withstand a single punch. The division is renamed the Chinese People's Volunteers in order to relieve the Chinese government of official responsibilities.

On the night of March 17, 1951, Yu Yuan crosses the precarious bridge across the Yalu River with his comrades, entering bomb-scarred Korea. For weeks, the inexperienced and ill-equipped soldiers stagger for hundreds of miles on foot.

Lacking proper food supplies and real-time communication with headquarters, the division marches blindly into enemy-occupied territories. Strafed by American airplanes from above and besieged by fierce enemy fire on the ground, the "volunteers" pay heavily for the Communists' "human sea" strategy, strewing dead soldiers across the countryside. After a landslide defeat, the 180th division is fragmented, and regiments flee in all directions. Soldiers either desert or are abandoned by their officers during failed attempts to wage guerilla warfare without support from locals. Finally, out of ammunition and food, some five thousand soldiers are captured, including Yu Yuan.

Yu Yuan begins his imprisonment with a shrapnel wound in his left thigh sustained during his capture. After receiving medical treatment at the Prisoner of War Collection Center in Pusan, Yu Yuan is transferred to an enormous prison camp at Koje Island, 25 miles southwest of Pusan. He is assigned to Compound 72, which houses some 8,000 POWs from China and North Korea. Most Chinese prisoners are soldiers from the 180th division, including the Division Commissar Pei Shan himself. Yu Yuan takes on the pseudonym Feng Yan to hide his real identity.

A struggle for allegiance

The Nationalist government in Taiwan intervenes in the repatriation of Chinese prisoners to persuade them to set sail for Taiwan. As a result, a war breaks out amongst the Chinese prisoners along party lines. Supporters of Nationalist China openly slaughter prisoners who refuse to go to Taiwan, while Communist sympathizers hang one of their own in secret for betraying the true identity of Commissar Pei to the Americans during an interrogation session.

Poor Yu Yuan is caught up in this cruel power struggle. He feels no affection for Communism and is not a Communist Party member. But he wants to return to China, because he believes his widowed mother and fiancée are waiting for him. When faced with violence and death threats from the pro-Nationalists, however, he reluctantly declares his intention to be repatriated to Taiwan. At the last moment during the UN screening, however, he changes his mind and is sent to a pro-Communist prison compound.

At this compound, imprisoned Communist Party members have already established a firm military hierarchy headed by Commissar Pei. The regime includes every prisoner in the compound and aims to wage war against pro-Nationalists in other compounds in order to win over more prisoners for repatriation to China.

As a graduate of Huangpu Academy¹ under the old Nationalist regime, Yu Yuan knows he is not trusted by the pro-Communists, and indeed, he is harshly criticized during a self-examination "study" session. He realizes that if he wants to return to China, he must ingratiate himself with the Communist Party and participate in pro-Communist/anti-U.S. activities. Yu Yuan's expertise in English allows him to play a substantial role as translator during various anti-American protests and insurgencies in the prison. As a result of his conscientious service, he steadily gains the confidence of his leaders.

One day in late February 1953, the Americans issue an order calling for four prisoner-officers at the Pusan POW Collection Center to be "re-registered." One of the officers named in the order is Chang Ming, a close aid of Commissar Pei. Fearing that the order might be a trick by the Americans to charge officers as "war criminals" or even to kill them, Commissar Pei instructs Yu Yuan to take Chang Ming's place. Unfor-

tunately, the Americans foil the plot, forcing Yu Yuan to confess everything and redeclare his resolve to be repatriated to Taiwan. He is promptly sent to a pro-Nationalist prison, where he is again denounced by the Nationalists.

War heroes become war trash

In hopes of being reunited with his mother and fiancée, Yu Yuan ultimately decides to return to mainland China,² only to find a different fate awaiting him. Out of the 22,000 Chinese soldiers captured during the war, only 8,000 return. After risking their lives in battle to defend their country and protect their families, and continuing to fight their enemies even after being captured and confined to POW camps, they believe the motherland will welcome them back with a warm embrace.

To their surprise, the motherland condemns them as a horde of disgraceful cowards who have betrayed their Party and their country by not fighting to their last breath. In special “study sessions,” they are forced to confess to crimes they committed during imprisonment, and to expose the crimes of others. The government makes an example of the repatriated soldiers, expelling every CCP member from the Party and issuing each soldier with a dishonorable discharge. Varying in accordance with the degree of offense and the level of repentance, soldiers are either jailed or sent to labor-reform camps. Not even Commissar Pei, whom the prisoners looked up to as the embodiment of the Communist Party, escapes this fate:

What surprised me most was that the top officer, Commissar Pei, didn't fare any better than the rest of us. In other words, he and we had all been chessmen on the Party's board, though Pei had created his own board and placed his men on it as if his game had been identical with the Party's. In fact he too had been a mere pawn, not much different from any of us. He too was war trash.

Finally, Yu Yuan receives news that his mother passed away a year ago, and that his fiancée has broken up with him, the war trash. Comrade Chang Ming is sent back home to work as a drudge, and his girlfriend ends up marrying his former classmate at Peking University. In contrast to Chang Ming, Yu Yuan is treated more leniently; he is given a job in a middle

school teaching Chinese, geography and later English. He lives an inconspicuous life and marries a beautiful colleague. They raise a boy and a girl in their happy family, and both children graduate from college. His son goes to the U.S. for graduate studies and raises a family of his own.

A journey toward enlightenment

Against a backdrop of history too sad to reexamine, Ha Jin realistically and painstakingly illustrates Yu Yuan's journey from a naïve optimist to an enlightened soul, while undergoing torment of body and mind.

Yu Yuan risks his life in battle to defend his motherland and submits to the leadership of the Communist Party during captivity. In the beginning, he believes that he will gain the trust of pro-Communist regime, but things do not turn out the way he imagined. Even his application to the newly formed prisoners' United Communist Association is rejected. He becomes preoccupied with self-examination:

I wondered why I was so eager to seek their approval. Why worry so much about joining that organization? Perhaps I dreaded isolation and had to depend on a group to feel secure. Why couldn't I remain alone without following anyone else? One should rely on nobody but oneself.

He feels as lonely and helpless as when he was at the pro-Nationalist camp:

What's the difference between you people and the Communists? Where in the world can I ever be among my true comrades? Why am I alone? When can I feel at home somewhere?

Although placing the hero of *War Trash* in a different historical period, Ha Jin continues the theme he wove through *Waiting* and *The Crazy*, drawing out the protagonist's mental and physical suffering in an effort to illustrate the soul-scorching pain and despair of a decent common man.

Ha Jin skillfully employs interesting detail to reflect matters of life and death for the heroes of this book. Two days before Yu Yuan departs for Korea, his fiancée asks him to make love to her, hoping to conceive a baby with which to remember him. After a night of lovemaking, she breaks her jade barrette in two and gives him a half as token of her eternal love. This half barrette

helps Yu Yuan endure his days in prison. Warm memories of and fantasies about her comfort his lonely and suffering heart, encouraging him to fight to return home alive. In the end, his waiting and yearning result in a broken dream, symbolized by the broken barrette that Yu Yuan treasured next to his heart for three years. In resignation, he sends the broken barrette back to her.

At the pro-Nationalist-dominated camp, the prisoners tattoo the words “Fuck Communism” on Yu Yuan's belly against his will. These words torment his mind to no end. After their return to China, the soldiers are sent to the “Repatriation Center” to await their fate. At the center Yu Yuan finds a doctor to change the tattoo to “FUCK . . . U . . . S . . .” But the stigma is deeply engraved in his memory, reminding him time and again of his miserable years at the prison camp, and ultimately compelling him to put his story down in words.

At the age of 73, Yu Yuan comes to the U.S. to visit his son's family. Based on his memory and material he has collected, Yu Yuan finally writes the memoir he has been planning to write for more than half of his life. He hopes that his children and grandchildren will one day read these pages “so they can feel the full weight of the tattoo on my belly.” This reminds me of the cries of the great historian Sima Qian, who was castrated two thousand years ago.

Consolation from the Bible

Ha Jin gives the suffering Yu Yuan a glimmer of light during harsh conditions. Yu often attends mass at a Catholic church when he first arrives at the prison camp. He translates hymns for Father Woodworth and receives an English Bible that he reads regularly. The Communists reprimand him severely and repeatedly for his association with Father Woodworth, and later seize his Bible. Still, his contact with the priest awakens religious desires in him. When being interrogated for impersonating Chang Ming at the “re-registration,” he asks the American officer for another English Bible, and is given a Bible to take with him to the pro-Nationalist prison camp. Unlike most prisoners at the new camp, who spend their days gambling or playing chess, Yu Yuan reads his Bible daily, especially the Book of Ecclesiastes, which informs his understanding of the vanity of human life. This understanding releases him from his feel-

ings of personal gain and loss, so he can face the future with a free heart.

War Trash is first and foremost a deeply moving story, but at the same time, it is also a shocking account of real history. In the author's note at the end of the book, Ha Jin writes, "This is a work of fiction and all the main characters are fictional. Most of the events and details, however, are factual." To ensure an accurate representation of the past, Ha Jin researched more than 20 English and Chinese works on the Korean War.

China's involvement in the Korean War amounted to a mere three years. But an event that turned thousands of adored soldiers into war trash certainly qualifies as an important and unforgettable chapter in modern Chinese history. Ha Jin translates the story of these war prisoners into a lament worthy of the different travails experienced by millions of inhabitants of the Celestial Kingdom over the past 50 years.

Translated by Elisha Huang

This review was originally published in Chinese in the November 2004 issue of Hong Kong's *Open Magazine* (Kaifang).

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES:

1. Huangpu Military Academy at Chengdu was the most prestigious military academy of the Nationalist regime.
2. In the book, Yu Yuan initially decides to repatriate neither to China nor to Taiwan, but to a third country, but runs into his old Communist prison mate, Chaolin, at the final and deciding repatriation interview by UN officials. Fearful that Chaolin will report his treasonous decision to the Communist Party and create problems for his mother and fiancée, Yu Yuan feels he has no choice but to return to China.

The Internet as Participatory Journalism

A Review of *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*

Dan Gillmor

O'Reilly, August 2004

304 pages, \$24.95

BY BOBSON WONG



In March 2002, Joe Nacchio, chief executive of the Qwest telecommunications company, gave a speech at the PC Forum technology conference. According to Dan Gillmor, then a business and technology columnist for the *San José Mercury News* who was in the audience, Nacchio was complaining about the difficulty he had in raising capital. During Nacchio's speech, Gillmor used a wireless network set up at the conference to update his blog, an online journal of short postings. Gillmor posted an entry complaining about Nacchio's "whining," noting that the executive had profited immensely while his company's market value was declining. A few minutes later, a reader e-mailed Gillmor a link to a Yahoo! Finance article detailing how Nacchio had cashed in more than \$200 million in Qwest stock while its price was plummeting. Around the time that Gillmor posted the article on his site, the audience turned noticeably hostile towards Nacchio—apparently because many of the others in the audience were entertaining themselves during Nacchio's speech by reading Gillmor's blog online.

Dan Gillmor tells this story at the beginning of his new book *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* as one of many illustrations of how the Internet has revolutionized the media by enabling journalists to include in their work the expertise of their audience. The book provides an excellent introduction to some of the important issues surrounding Internet governance and regulation.

In *We the Media*, Gillmor argues that the Internet and other forms of new technology have begun to transform the news media from a one-way information transfer controlled by an elite group of journalists into a more grassroots, democratic conversation

where anyone can make the news. The Internet "is the most important medium since the printing press" because it enables interactive feedback from many people. Internet technology like blogs, peer-to-peer networks (in which individuals on a network can access files stored on other users' computers), and Wiki (software that allows users to work together to write a Web site) enable people to create truly interactive and collaborative efforts that are better than anything done by one individual or organization.

According to Gillmor, the power of new technology such as the Internet, cell phones, and digital cameras is the ability to make the news "open source." In open source software, anyone can freely access and modify the underlying code. Unlike proprietary software, where one organization controls the code, open source software generally distributes the workload for identifying and fixing problems among a large group of people who are often scattered around the world. In "open source" journalism, journalists use the Net to improve their work through online tools such as blogs that enable them to get feedback from a large number of readers. Open source journalism is based on the idea that readers collectively know more than any one individual writer.

Although most traditional news organizations are too conservative to use new technology in a truly interactive way, some organizations have been innovative enough to show the potential of open source journalism. For example, South Korea's OhMyNews, a news Web site on which anyone can sign up to contribute articles, is generally credited with helping to elect President Roh Moo Hyun. Roh won the 2002 South Korean election with support from tech-savvy young people and coverage from OhMyNews, in spite of being snubbed by the country's conservative news media.

The benefits of the open source approach aren't limited to journalism. Gillmor believes companies should adopt a more open source approach because keeping secrets is almost impossible in an age where alert consumers can post information instantly online. When Microsoft posted a Web page advertisement featuring a woman identified as a writer who supposedly switched from a Macintosh to a computer running Windows, a person post-

ing on the Slashdot Web site showed the page was fake by noting that the woman's image came from a photo archive.

Politicians can also benefit from adopting a more open approach. Vermont Governor Howard Dean's 2004 campaign for the U.S. presidency was a good example of "open source" politics. Dean supporters created blogs where they shared ideas, organized events and raised a surprisingly large amount of money. Although Dean failed to win the Democratic Party nomination, his campaign would never have gotten as far as it did without the Internet.

Gillmor correctly identifies the many ways in which the Internet is changing society. But his optimism doesn't take into account limited public access to the technical tools he discusses. For example, Gillmor emphasizes the importance of blogs. But by his own estimate, only about several hundred thousand people blog regularly—a tiny fraction of the total number of Internet users and an even smaller percentage of the total population. Blogging, Wiki and other Internet tools are still the medium of a small, technologically savvy elite. Internet access and Internet literacy are severely limited in poorer communities. In restrictive countries such as China, blogs are one of the few outlets for discussion of taboo topics. But less than 10 percent of the Chinese population goes online, and access is primarily limited to young people in urban areas. The digital divide between those with Net access and those without needs to be narrowed significantly before the Internet can truly become a powerful mass tool for organization and expression.

Nevertheless, Gillmor's main point is still valid: the benefits of open source journalism only accrue when we have an informed citizen population actively participating in the news. However, open source journalism faces a serious threat from governments, telecommunications companies and what he calls the "copyright cartel of entertainment companies," which have combined to centralize control of new technology. This is not a new phenomenon. Established businesses inevitably regard technological innovations as a threat: vaudeville performers sued Guglielmo Marconi for inventing the radio because they no longer had exclusive control over who could hear their shows, and movie studios sued Sony in the 1980s because they felt the

company's Betamax video cassette recorder enabled people to infringe copyright by illegally taping programs. In both cases, technological innovation prevailed in court and technology was proven to be quite compatible with copyright.

With today's new technology, though, the people stifling innovation are winning. With deep pockets and powerful lobbyists, entertainment companies are demanding—and getting—limitations on the fair use of new technology that don't exist with older technology. For example, copying a short video excerpt from a copyrighted DVD into your work is currently illegal, even though copying a brief excerpt from a copyrighted book is legal. Eventually, Gillmor warns, "big corporations and governments will know every copyrighted work you read, listen to, and watch. Anyone with a sense of history should fear such a system." Such restrictions would stifle open source journalism. If amateur journalists had to get permission to quote from a copyrighted work or pay for each citation, most of them wouldn't bother and scholarship would suffer.

Gillmor believes that consumers still have the power to change the technology landscape. He urges people to take action now by writing to elected officials, contributing to Internet free speech organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation and avoiding purchases from companies that cheat artists and abuse fair use.

Gillmor is doing his part to advance participatory journalism. He believes that copyright should be a sensible bargain that gives creators fair reward for their value while allowing others to use their work fairly. *We the Media* is published under a Creative Commons Copyright license, a "some rights reserved" copyright scheme that differs from the "all rights reserved" of most copyrighted works. The copyright limit of his book is only 14 years. In contrast, current copyright law allows the holder to protect copyrighted works for the life of the author plus 75 years. *We the Media* can even be downloaded online for free from the publisher's Web site. And after writing this book, Gillmor resigned from the *San José Mercury News* to focus full-time on encouraging and enabling more citizen-based media. Clearly, Gillmor practices what he preaches.

We the Media raises more questions than it answers, but this is by design. In

keeping with his open source philosophy, Dan Gillmor urges people to become more active and informed Internet users. The book is a wake-up call for us to either pay attention to how the Internet is being used or get left behind by other innovators. *We the Media* is an important book not just for journalists, but for anyone who is interested in understanding how technology is changing our world.

Resource List

The following Web sites regularly publish articles on China's human rights situation and essays by Chinese writers and intellectuals. Most are in Chinese, but many provide excerpts or summaries of selected articles in English.

China Information Center

<http://www.observechina.net/info/index.asp>

China Monthly (Minzhu Zhongguo)

http://www.chinamz.org/MZ_Magazine/chinamz.htm

ChinaEWeekly

<http://www.chinaeweekly.com/>

Civil Rights Protection (Gongmin Weiquan)

<http://www.gmwq.org/web/index.asp>

Dacankao Daily News

<http://www.bignews.org/>

Epoch Times

<http://www.dajiyuan.com/>

New Century Net

<http://www.ncn.org/asp/zwginfo/index.asp>

Peacehall (Boxun)

<http://www.peacehall.com/>

Ren Yu Renquan

<http://gb.hrichina.org/gate/gb/big5.hrichina.org/subsite/big5/>

Secret China News

<http://www.kanzhongguo.com/>

Xin Haichuan

<http://209.108.201.123/XHC/author.asp>