The Chinese experience of the Korean War


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 lost 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 masques 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 Solzhenitsyn’s gulag literature, the Korean War will be pleased with the inconclusive truce talks created. 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 weapons, the Koreans run futilely forward, armed only with bamboo spears and shouts of ‘Mansul’ (p.187). This episode, like other repudiations of proletarian Chinese nationalism, demonstrated a deep need among the 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 prisoner 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 song, 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, hustled by a pricely 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 – eerie, almost impossible, until an unexpected flare from under ground 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 together, crossed 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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