

**Detention, Repatriation, Humanitarianism:  
On the Korean War POW in Ha Jin's *War Trash***

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Introduction

Early in Ha Jin's 2004 novel *War Trash*, the narrator Yu Yuan sits in an overcrowded prison compound on Kojé Island, a small island off the southern coast of Korea. It is April 1951, and he and his fellow prisoners, soldiers of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, have been captured by UN forces during the Korean War. While Yu is determined to return home to China to take care of his aging mother and marry his sweetheart after the war is over, many of his erstwhile comrades have decided to refuse to return to China and instead throw in their lot with the Nationalist government-in-exile in Taiwan. When the prisoners are informed of the UN's plan to proceed with individual screenings to determine whether each prisoner will return home or "forcibly" refuse repatriation, they are pressed to make their final decisions. Representatives of the Nationalist leadership in Yu's compound urge their fellow prisoners in no uncertain terms to refuse repatriation, warning that they will surely be punished as traitors and failures should they choose to return home. "I don't want to be tortured and butchered like a worthless animal," one leader in the compound proclaims, "so I've decided to leave for the Free World, to wander

as a homeless man for the rest of my life. Our tragedy is that our homeland is no longer a place where we can live decently like human beings” (104). This speaker depicts Communism as a system so brutal and unforgiving that permanent exile represents a preferable and more life-affirming prospect, but Yu is not so convinced. Even as the Nationalist leadership escalates its tactics, beating, torturing and even executing those who state their intention to return home, Yu stands firm in his desire to return to his hometown, despite his private fears of potential punishment by the Communist state—especially given the tattoo forced upon him by Nationalists at Koje. “FUCK COMMUNISM,” it reads. For the time being, he concentrates on simply surviving the prison camp.

Curiously, as Yu’s story of his experience in the prison camp unfolds over the course of the novel, we find that the significance of the larger official war between Communists and anticommunists in Korea dissipates in the face of the mounting drama of the internecine war-within-the-war between the Nationalists and Communists in the Chinese compounds of the camp at Koje. In fact, in the same breath that Yu laments the dehumanizing aspects of warfare, he recalls with appreciation one Dr. Greene, a woman doctor from the U.S. who treated his potentially life-threatening wounds when he was first taken prisoner by the UN. Earlier in the novel, as he heals from the surgery that saved his leg, Yu concludes that what makes Dr. Greene “different from others” is that she “treated [him] with genuine kindness, which must have stemmed not just from her professional training but from real humanity” (66). With the others around him, including his supposed comrades, Yu confides, he cannot feel safe, because “there was always some ulterior motive behind every activity and every statement, and I had to take care not to be victimized” (66). In contrast, with Dr. Greene, he can sense the inherent “goodness” that “[flows] out like water from a fountain, constant and effortless” (66). Amidst all

the ideological violence and politicking in the prison camp, it just so happens to be the American doctor, radiating maternal energy and a genuine care for Yu's individual health and happiness, who reminds Yu of the beauty of life and humanity. If even his enemy in the war is willing to treat him with human kindness and care, he reasons, then all hope may not yet be lost.

In this brief episode from *War Trash*, we encounter a range of fictional characters who represent the many sides of Ha Jin's fictionalized (and impeccably researched) version of the repatriation crisis on Kojima Island: the violent, unpleasant, die-hard Communists and anticommunists whose reign of terror in the prison camp leads to misery and death; their terrified victims in the camp, ordinary men forced to make crucial life decisions under unspeakable duress due to the vagaries of the Cold War; the humanitarian American doctor, a beacon of goodness and light who rises above the ideological traps of war where few others can; and finally Yu Yuan himself, the exemplary individual free thinker who can move among these poles and humanize the absurdity of war with the complexity and depth of his thoughts, feelings, and motivations. It is precisely the universal humanity of the narrator's voice that garnered the most acclaim from reviewers of *War Trash* when the novel was first published in 2004. According to the reviewer at the *New York Times*, for example, Yu Yuan's narrative voice, while "not especially familiar...to an American ear," is "recognizably, authentically, universally human" in every sentence and reveals a "moral perspective" with which we can all identify (Banks). The review printed in the *Kansas City Star* similarly lauds Ha Jin's "observance of the humanness that characterizes the POW camps" as the "great strength" of the novel (Volin). The reviewer writes, "At its end, Ha Jin's novel is not a story of Korea, or POWs, or even Yu Yuan, but of what it means to be human" (Volin). Transcending his particular conditions, Yu Yuan comes to exemplify the human condition. But how does this transformation take place, and to what ends?

The story of the UN prison camp on Kojima Island that *War Trash* tells is one in which Cold War politics of left and right are transcended by a politics of humanity. Indeed, Ha Jin's novel seeks to underscore the universality of the post-ideological human, and the reception of the novel, as seen in the above reviews, applauds this apparent transcendence. But this paper begins from the premise that the category of the human has never been universal. Rather, the human subject of liberalism has always been constrained by categories of race, nation, and gender—categories thought to mark the capacity for free choice. In the Cold War era, this universal subject is re-imagined and re-configured through a politics of humanitarianism. The central question that this paper explores is thus: in the case of Kojima Island, how does the Asian communist enemy become the bearer of human rights from the perspective of the U.S. state—and in the eyes of the American reader?

In what follows, I begin by briefly discussing the ideological construction of the U.S. state as the protector of freedom in the Korean War period. Then, reading journalistic and other firsthand accounts of the events surrounding the repatriation crisis along with legal and historical documents, I consider how this understanding of the U.S. as leader of the “free world” comes to bear on our historical understandings of the prison camp on Kojima Island. I examine how on both sides of the Korean War and the Cold War, the figure of the human became key to framing political struggles over citizenship. Finally, returning to *War Trash*, I offer a reading of the novel in relation to these questions. I argue that in *War Trash*, the narrator Yu Yuan becomes “recognizably, authentically, universally human” only insofar as he inhabits the position of the rational, free-thinking human subject capable of choice, a position coded as American. In the end, I argue, although the novel frames his exercising of free choice as a rejection of Cold War bipolar politics, Yu Yuan becomes human by embracing the life of a free individual living by his

own moral compass and telling his own story—an exemplary construction of American liberalism.

### Discourses of Freedom and Slavery in the Early Cold War

The struggle for power between the United States and the Soviet Union that defined the Cold War era is often characterized as, first and foremost, an ideological battle between two superpowers committed to diametrically opposed, inevitably warring worldviews: capitalism versus communism, freedom versus totalitarianism. As President Truman put it in the speech announcing his now-eponymous doctrine in 1947, the United States' primary objective in the Cold War era was to guarantee for itself and its allies "a way of life free from coercion," entailing a commitment to "help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes."<sup>1</sup> Other Cold War documents referred more plainly to a grand, apocalyptic battle between American freedom and communist "slavery." But as Cold War scholar Anders Stephanson has noted, this framing of the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union as a battle between "freedom" and "slavery" is itself an American construction with a long genealogy. In his essay "Liberty or Death: The Cold War as US Ideology," Stephanson argues that this pairing of terms dates back to the very inception of the United States as a nation. He links Cold War phraseology – "Better dead than red!" – to such iconic American utterances as Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death" and Abraham Lincoln's admonition that our nation, a "house divided," could not permanently endure as a land "half slave and half free." He explains that in

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of the "Truman Doctrine" speech can be found here: [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp).

the conceptual field formed by the pair “freedom” and “slavery,” freedom is understood to be “always already under threat, internally as well as externally” and hence in need of constant vigilance and defense (85). In its American Cold War iteration, slavery – variously named fascism, communism, and totalitarianism in the 1940s and 1950s – is defined as that which “cannot tolerate the very existence of freedom as an idea and must systematically attempt its liquidation” (85).<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Stephanson argues, not only the United States, the “vanguard defender” of freedom, but the “basic principles of humankind” are represented as being at risk of annihilation by the Soviet system, and in this way, the ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union is elevated to a question of “antagonistic ‘ways of life’” (87). This ideologically constructed antagonism makes the Cold War fundamentally an American project.

How did the United States deploy the concept of freedom in the Cold War, and to what ends? The United States’ self-styled ideological position as the defender of the world’s freedom against the constant threat of encroaching communism became essential to its bid for global hegemony in the 1950s. Scholars have argued that this Cold War deployment of the idea of freedom happened in the four following ways. First, in the military arena, the defense of freedom became a key justification for the implementation of an ambitious vision of national security that, according to Melvyn Leffler, demanded the strategic establishment of a global network of U.S. military bases in the interest of maintaining a sphere of influence throughout the Western

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<sup>2</sup> Stephanson notes that this construction of the enemy also has a longer lineage. He links the notion of an arbitrary, lawless, tyrannical power – namely, Stalin’s Soviet Union – to Montesquieu’s concept of the “Oriental despot,” the secretive, all-powerful ruler who crushes his anonymous subjects with his despotic will. This imagined contrast between east and west, Stephanson argues, becomes an integral part of the emerging liberal understanding of a legitimate social order defined by the consent of its members. Stephanson posits that the United States saw the coalition of World War II as “an embryonic form of ‘international community’ in that contractual sense” and hence came to see the Soviet Union as “lawlessly break[ing] the given agreements” (89). In this way, he concludes, the “contractual theory of liberal ‘society’ served...to exacerbate the negative view of the Soviet adversary” (89). See also William Pietz’s essay “The ‘Post-Colonialism’ of Cold War Discourse,” in which he argues that the theory of totalitarianism “made police terror into Oriental despotism” (70), thus “displacing the human essence of fascism into the non-Western world” (58) as a means of preserving the integrity of Western civilization.

hemisphere and preserving a favorable balance of power across Europe and Asia.<sup>3</sup> The rhetoric of defending freedom, in this view, facilitated the United States' larger and longstanding goal of seizing global power through military and economic domination.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, as Penny von Eschen has shown, the U.S. actively drew upon the cultural capital of the concept of freedom in its attempt to “win hearts and minds” globally. In particular, eager to counter charges of racism that could potentially damage its reputation as leader of the “free” world, the U.S. State Department sponsored tours of popular jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie throughout the decolonizing Third World in the 1950s and 1960s in an effort to promote American culture.<sup>5</sup> Such concerted efforts to disseminate American cultural forms, a second way that the U.S. state worked to “spread freedom,” often preceded or coincided with its military efforts in the same regions.

Development projects in the newly minted Third World were a third important way that the United States waged its ideological battle for freedom in these years. According to historian David Ekbladh, because systems “with broad prescriptions for the organization of political, social, cultural, and economic life” such as liberalism and communism banked on the promise of a better way of life for their adherents, development became “crucial to understanding how the United States confronted other ideological systems when they emerged as threats” (2). In *The Global Cold War*, Odd Arne Westad characterizes the Cold War as a contest between the United

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<sup>3</sup> See Leffler, “The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-48,” 348-349.

<sup>4</sup> See also Williams, McCormick, other revisionist historians who place Cold War agenda in a longer history of U.S. economic and territorial expansion.

<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, others have investigated the state's deployment of other artistic forms such as Abstract Expressionism during the Cold War. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2001). For other studies on the U.S. state's efforts to manage international perceptions of domestic race relations during the Cold War, see Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002), Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005) and Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003).

States and the Soviet Union to take up the mantle of modernity in the wake of World War II and the crumbling of the Eurocentric world order. Countering mainstream views of the Cold War as an era of rigid bipolarism, Westad argues that the U.S. and the Soviet Union were in many ways more similar than they were different: both claimed to offer the Third World “a road to high modernity through education, science, and technological progress” (92). He sees the Cold War as less a monolithic ideological face-off than a conflict between competing modes of modernity, each of which aimed to prove its superiority by winning over – and developing – the decolonizing nation-states of the Third World. The “proxy” battlefields of the Third World thus take central importance in Westad’s view of the Cold War, which he sees as largely “a continuation of European colonial interventions” of old—with the important distinction that the objectives of the U.S. and the Soviet Union were no longer “exploitation or subjection” but rather “control and improvement” (5). Like Westad, Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo argues that American development discourse in this era replaced the erstwhile colonial “civilizing mission” with a rhetoric of freedom, marked by “imperatives of self-determination, independence, free trade, industrialization, and economic growth” for its beneficiaries (20).

Finally, in contrast to the above critiques of the United States’ attempts to spread freedom as neocolonial in nature, some have viewed U.S. power in the decolonizing Third World as an “anticolonial” force in this era. Melani McAlister describes the postwar United States as anticolonial in that it “took over from the European colonial nations the role of a preeminent world power” after World War II (46). If anticolonial movements, supported by the Soviet Union, opposed the continuation of European colonial rule, then what McAlister calls the “genius of U.S. foreign policy” in the late 1940s and early 1950s was its ability to “develop a better appreciation of the potential of third world nationalism and anticolonialism than the old



colonial powers did” (47). In other words, supporting national independence movements in the Third World could offer the United States the opportunity to challenge both European and Soviet power. U.S. policymakers could draw on the anti-British, revolutionary rhetoric that “formed the heart of American national origin stories” to suggest that “an American-dominated international order would best guarantee the expansion of democracy and secure the liberty of all nations” (47). In this way, even the United States’ neoimperial expansion – military, economic, and cultural – in the Third World in the 1940s and 1950s could be corralled under the rubric of spreading freedom.

#### Cold War Bipolar Politics on Kojima Island

The Korean War was the first U.S. war to be fought under the emerging ideological conditions laid out above. And in April 1952, the United Nations announced an unprecedented plan to institute a policy of “voluntary” repatriation for the North Korean and Chinese prisoners of war being held in its prison camps, a policy derived from the conviction that, in President Truman’s words, U.S. troops “must not use bayonets to force these prisoners to return to slavery and almost certain death at the hands of the Communists” (“Truman”). All prisoners were to declare in individual “screenings” their choice to either return home to live under the communist system or remain indefinitely in the UN prison camp to await resettlement elsewhere in the “free world.” The United States hoped that instituting a policy of what it came to refer to as “non-forcible repatriation” would be a major propaganda victory in the Cold War. Reports that scores of North Korean and Chinese prisoners of war wanted to defect to the “free world” would have

served to confirm the American narrative about the horrors of the communist “slave world” and demonstrate to the world the superiority of democracy as a system.

The American rationale for insisting on a policy of non-forcible repatriation was that the United States had a duty to protect the human rights of anticommunist prisoners whose lives would be in danger back at home due to Communist reprisals. As such, most American commentators on these events felt that the UN Command’s decision to step in represented an ethically necessary humanitarian measure. In *Mutiny on Kojé Island*, a journalistic account of the POW repatriation crisis published in 1965, for example, the author Hal Vetter reprints the set of questions used by the UN Command to individually screen Chinese prisoners in April 1952. He reports that prisoners’ responses to these questions, which had been “carefully selected to elicit true and unbiased answers” (37), were to be noted on their identification papers, and they were to be segregated and held separately thereafter according to their chosen final destinations:

1. Will you voluntarily be repatriated to Communist China?
2. Will you forcibly resist repatriation?
3. Have you carefully considered the impact of such actions on your family?
4. Do you realize that you may remain here on Kojé-do long after those electing repatriation have returned home?
5. Do you realize that the United Nations cannot promise that you will be sent to any certain place?
6. Are you still determined that you would violently resist repatriation?
7. What would you do if you are repatriated in spite of this decision? (37)

Commenting on this sequence of questions, Vetter finds it “difficult to imagine how a fairer test of the prisoner’s intentions could be devised”; indeed, he argues, the questions are “weighted

heavily in favor of repatriation” (38), demonstrating both the evenhandedness of the U.S. and the strength of the convictions of those prisoners who elected not to repatriate to China. His view that these questions were intended to encourage rather than deter prisoner repatriation aligns with that of contemporary legal commentators in the U.S. such as Jaro Mayda, whose article on “The Korean Repatriation Problem and International Law” in the journal of the American Society of International Law cites the “circumstances under which the prisoners were polled” as “persuasive proof” of the UN Command’s desire to return as many prisoners as possible to North Korea and China (421).<sup>6</sup> In Mayda’s analysis, the UN Command took up the “voluntary repatriation” policy only reluctantly; he refers the reader to US Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s claim that “a prisoner of war who does not want to go back is a problem ... something one does not want to happen” (421). Demaree Bess in the *Saturday Evening Post* similarly argues that the seven questions used for screening “were frankly designed to encourage the

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<sup>6</sup> International legal scholars publishing in the United States at the time generally agreed that the U.S. and UN were in the right to refuse to “forcibly” repatriate prisoners of war despite the clause in the Geneva Convention that seemed to specifically disallow such a refusal. Jan Charmatz and Harold Wit, writing in the *Yale Law Journal* in February 1953, find that “even the sacrosanct principle of territorial sovereignty can be overridden to protect human rights”; in the case of a state that “treats its nationals in such a way as to shock the conscience of mankind, intervention in the interest of humanity may be legally permissible” (408). Josef Kunz similarly argues at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of International Law in April 1953 that the UN’s liberal interpretation of the Geneva Convention is “fully justified from a humanitarian and ethical point of view” (110). That same month, in the *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, J.A.C. Gutteridge argues further that the principles of “no detention by force and no repatriation by force” are “implicit” in the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, as they are “consistent with the maintenance of the general rule...[that] all prisoners of war shall be free to return to their homelands” when hostilities end (216). In July 1952, Pitman B. Potter calls the repatriation crisis a “sociological situation” in which, since the “old law [is] defective from ethical and humanitarian view points, the captor must frankly refuse to be bound by it” despite the legal and practical risks associated with such an action. Writing a year later in the same journal, the *American Journal of International Law*, Potter concludes that the very use of the term “prisoner of war” is “somewhat anomalous” in the Korean case and asks whether a “state of war” truly exists in Korea: “if so, between whom and whom?” (661). As such, he suggests that the “old rules” concerning the treatment of prisoners of war need to be revised to “cover captives taken in an international police action” (662). Lastly, in the autumn 1953 issue of the *International Journal*, Norman Alstedter claims that the “Western World’s unity was tested possibly more severely by the Korean truce negotiations than by Communist aggression in Korea” in the first place (256) and argues that the “western powers” must become “organized for making a unified policy” for “affairs in the Far East” (265). Charmatz and Wit agree, adding that the “burden” of providing for any nonrepatriates “should not be placed on detaining powers alone, but rather on some international organization” (414).

return of the maximum number” of prisoners (53).<sup>7</sup> According to Bess, “powerful political pressures had been building up in Washington to get a Korean truce at almost any price” (52) – including the cost of the consigning thousands of prisoners of war to life under communism. But the UN Command decided to step in rather than let that happen.

In *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing*, historian Susan Carruthers agrees that the UN’s screening process on Kojima Island aimed to pressure prisoners to return home rather than refuse repatriation. In the postwar era, she argues, the United States maintained an “ideological investment in escape—in captive peoples’ right to flight” that belonged to a postwar historical moment that saw “freedom of movement” as a universal and fundamental right for all peoples (88).<sup>8</sup> The primary concern of the United States government at this particular moment in the Korean War and the larger Cold War, she argues, “lay neither in offering prisoners real freedom of choice nor in securing the largest possible number of ‘converts,’” but rather in “[tapping] the symbolic potential of defection while averting the calamitous blow to U.S. prestige that would ensue if UN Command forces ended up repatriating anticommunist prisoners at gunpoint” (184). In her view, in its “indoctrination efforts” in 1951 and beyond, the U.S. primarily aimed not to foment a mass defection, but rather to “win ideological converts” who might carry the lessons of freedom with them back home (184). According to Carruthers’ reading of the situation, the UN never intended for repatriation to become such a contentious issue as to hold up negotiations, but rather wanted to come to an agreement with China and North Korea as quickly as possible. For this reason, when China

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<sup>7</sup> On the *Saturday Evening Post* and its significance to the “middlebrow” culture of Cold War America, see Melanie Klein’s *Cold War Orientalism*.

<sup>8</sup> She further notes that in practice, however, the United States “was less welcoming to mobile humanity than advocates of [freedom of movement] implied” (88), both refusing to let certain Americans leave its borders (Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker) and denying entry to the vast majority of “escapees” from Communist states. Although Truman recommended that a “right of asylum” be included in U.S. immigration law in the form of a “Special Migration Assistance Act,” Congress instead passed the McCarran-Walter Act, which Carruthers argues “did its best simply to sidestep the question of refugee resettlement” (80).

refused the U.S. proposal for voluntary repatriation in early 1952, the UN responded by “trying to *reduce* the number of nonrepatriates” by “[posing] leading questions that emphasized the desirability of returning home” and “stressing that the UN Command would accept no responsibility for those who refused repatriation” in the questionnaire documented above (184). At the same time, she notes, the nonrepatriate category was narrowed “to exclude those who merely *preferred* not to return” (184) – marking a shift from the language of “voluntary” repatriation to that of “no forced” or “non-forcible” repatriation – in order to further lessen the number of nonrepatriates, placating China while protecting anticommunist prisoners and maintaining a symbolic victory in the eyes of the rest of the world.

#### The Humanitarianism of “Non-forcible Repatriation”

Viewed through an ideological filter that pits American freedom against Communist slavery, the UN Command’s decision to allow prisoners to reject repatriation to China and North Korea appears to be a political ploy dressed up as a humanitarian intervention. But for some, the stated humanitarian aims of the non-forcible repatriation policy were paramount, and sincere. The memoirs of Stanley Weintraub, a young GI who served as a guard in a POW hospital at this time, for example, reveal great pride in the U.S. military’s protection of the human rights of prisoners. Just after the UN announces it will be screening prisoners for voluntary repatriation in April 1952, he writes home to explain to his family what is taking place in the camp:

*It may sound corny, but the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of April were momentous days for men all over the world as a result of the screening begun and accomplished. It signifies a step forward in human history. We dare not turn back. We have committed ourselves irrevocably to a*

*policy unheard of before, the principle that men have the right to ask for our protection from unwanted Communist domination, and that we must guarantee their right to decide for themselves whether they prefer to live under Communism or to reject it. The middle ground of passive looking-on has about disappeared. (47)*

Here, Weintraub elevates what might appear to us now as mere Cold War hyperbole to a groundbreaking principle of human rights. The act of screening is figured as nothing less than a “step forward for human history,” momentous not just within the walls of the hospital that provides the setting for what Weintraub later calls “our private little cold war” (74), not just for the North Korean and Chinese prisoners who will live its consequences, but for “men all over the world.” The “unheard of” policy that Weintraub describes offers a Cold War vision of human progress, one that irrevocably splits men into a “we” and a “they,” celebrating the obliteration of any potential “middle ground.” This refusal of “passive looking-on” calls upon every individual prisoner—not just the fortunate prisoners at Koje, but eventually all the prisoners of Communist domination in the world—to make a choice, to irrevocably state a “preference” for Communist systems or a rejection of them, even if such a rejection does not necessarily entail the privilege of entry or citizenship in any other preferred location. Given that the possibility of neutrality has disappeared in this particular vision of human history after the Korean War, U.S. troops emerge as the most fitting guarantors of this act of self-determination (“we must guarantee their right to decide for themselves”). The exercise of individual freedom of choice becomes the marker of a fully human existence, and the Communist world, which offers no such freedom, emerges as a shadowy outside to that existence. In fact, the U.S. state’s magnanimous act of proffering a choice to those living under Communism is seen as an act itself in need of humanitarian protection and enforcement. And if individual choice is understood to be the hallmark of

humanitarianism, then the Communists, who fear and abhor choice as such, have already lost legitimacy in the eyes of the rest of the world.

The UN's non-forcible repatriation policy in Korea firmly places humanity on the side of the free world and brutality on the side of its enemy. But according to the standards of existing international law, it was actually the UN Command that was violating the human rights of the prisoners by denying them the right to be released and repatriated in a speedy manner. As stated in Article 118 of the Geneva Convention of 1948, all prisoners of war had the right to be "released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of active hostilities." Thus, we find that even as the prisoners on Koje Island are imagined by the U.S. to be subjects in need of humanitarian intervention and protection, symbolic of populations living under Communism worldwide, the prisoners themselves come to deploy a rhetoric of humanitarianism to different political ends. That is, if the United States claimed that its position on repatriation was based on "the principles of humanity and the preservation of the rights of the individual" – the same "values" said to have pushed the United Nations to enter into war in Korea in the first place (Vetter 193) – then the communist prisoners of war invert this claim, accusing the United Nations of depriving them of their newly valuable human rights. The messaging that emerges from inside the prison camp, whether in the form of banners and flags raised in the compounds or notes smuggled out and published in the Communist press or official communiqués, is all remarkably consistent on one point: that it is the UN, not Communist China or North Korea, that is transgressing prisoners' human rights and violating international law.

At a key moment in the unrest over repatriation at the prison camp, for example, North Korean prisoners in the communist compounds of the camp orchestrated the kidnapping of U.S. Brigadier-General Dodd, commander of the UN camp on Koje Island, and issued four written

demands after taking him hostage. These demands call for the guarantee of basic human rights in the camp, an end to the “illegal” practice of voluntary repatriation, an end to forcible screenings, and recognition by the UN Command of a “PW Representative Group” as a negotiating entity. It is the prisoners’ first demand I’d like to examine more closely here:

1. Immediate ceasing the barbarous behavior, insults, torture, forcible protest with blood writing, threatening, confine, mass murdering, gun and machine-gun shooting, using poison gas, germ weapons, experiment object of A-bomb, by your command. You should guarantee PW human rights and individual life with the base on the International Law. (Vetter 127)

It is noteworthy that this demand, like the three others that follow it, is issued from the subject position of aggrieved POWs, not necessarily ideologically committed Communists as such. Where we might expect to find Communist rhetoric, we find instead that the prisoners deliberately inhabit the language of human rights. U.S. military leadership complained in later hearings that the prisoners’ demands “were so worded that if accepted they would have constituted a tacit admission of a whole list of trumped up crimes that Communists alleged the UN Command had committed against the prisoners” (Vetter 126). That is, they saw the demands as an unfair set of leading questions “of the category, ‘Have you stopped beating your wife?’” (Vetter 126). As such, various U.S. generals argued that there could be no appropriate response to these demands, whose manipulations of the precepts of humanitarianism they saw as both deplorable and deceptive. They saw the Communists’ enthusiastic espousal of humanitarianism in this moment as a mere cynical political tactic. But the UN’s “humanitarian” position on repatriation was, of course, no less instrumental. Placing this demand next to the UN’s own set of leading questions in the screening process that I discussed earlier in this paper, I argue, we



find that humanitarianism as such functions as a contested property that each side would like to claim as wholly its own.

### Recuperating the Human Subject in Ha Jin's *War Trash*

I'd like to return now to Ha Jin's fictionalized account of the events at the Kojima Island UN prison camp in *War Trash*, and to the recurring theme of Yu Yuan's forced tattoo. One night, Yu engages in some heavy drinking with the pro-Nationalist faction that has taken control of his compound and is aggressively recruiting him to join their side and refuse to repatriate to China. He politely refuses every time, and at the end of the night, he is clubbed in the back of the head. When he wakes up from a blackout, to his horror, he sees "two English words tattooed on my belly, right below my navel: FUCK COMMUNISM" (97). The forced tattooing has occurred just before the repatriation screenings are set to begin, and naturally, Yu is terrified by the new slogan on his body, certain that he will never be allowed to return home to his mother and fiancée in China.

Despite his tattoo, however, Yu does manage to make it back home at the end of the novel after many travails, and soon after he returns, he goes to a clinic with other former POWs to have the "embarrassing mark" removed (341). The doctor at the clinic cuts all of the "shameful words and signs" off the skin to remove some of the POWs' tattoos, but in other cases he "just removed a word or two to make a dark phrase unintelligible or give it a new meaning": he "would play with the alphabet" (341). In Yu's case, he decides, the procedure will be simple. The doctor leaves the word FUCK and suggests that they "just [erase] all the letters in the word

COMMUNISM except the U and the S” (341). As a result of the operation, the original tattoo is transformed into a new one that reads “FUCK ...U...S...” (341).

Yu’s ostensibly anti-American tattoo is in fact the very first thing he describes to the reader in the memoir that constitutes the novel. Its prologue opens with the following description:

Below my navel stretches a long tattoo that says ‘FUCK ...U...S...’ The skin above those dots has shriveled as though scarred by burns. Like a talisman, the tattoo has protected me in China for almost five decades. Before coming to the States, I wondered whether I should have it removed. I decided not to, not because I cherished it or was nervous about the surgery, but because if I had done that, word might have spread and the authorities, suspecting I wouldn’t return, might have revoked my passport. (3)

Nearly five decades after the events at Kojé, Yu’s tattoo remains a source of “constant concern” for him, a constant source of political misunderstandings (3). What protected him in China, he reasons, might prove to be a liability in the United States, where he is staying for an extended visit with his son’s family. Even after he has safely made it to the U.S., he fantasizes that an “invisible hand might grip the front of my shirt and pull it out of my belt to reveal my secret to passersby” (3). Although he attempts to conceal the tattoo from his grandchildren, Yu confides to the reader that his true motivation for writing the memoir we hold in our hands was in fact to tell the whole story behind the tattoo to his grandchildren, who he hopes will one day “read these pages so that they can feel the full weight of the tattoo on my belly” (5). The words etched on his body, then, have prompted the words on the page before us, and we are left in the position of Yu’s American grandchildren, attempting to unpack the meaning of the words on his skin and on the page. But at the very end of the novel, after watching an episode of *The Simpsons* in which

Bart is forced by his mother to remove a tattoo on his arm with his grandchildren, Yu decides to look into having his tattoo removed once and for all. He has his son set up an appointment for him with an American doctor (“He told the doctor that I had an anti-American slogan tattooed on my belly by the Communists”) and looks forward to the procedure, which the doctor assures him will be quick and painless (394). At last, his body will be free of the political slogans he has been forced to carry for his entire adult life.

After all, Yu, despite his unswerving commitment to returning to China, was never a Communist, a fact he found himself needing to assert again and again to people on both sides of the political divide at the camp on Kojé Island. Before he is beaten up and tattooed by the pro-Nationalists, he tells their leader earnestly, “I’m not a Communist...but I have to go home. I have a sick old mother and a fiancée on the mainland” (93). When the American chaplain of the prison camp tells him, “To me and to my God, Communism is evil,” Yu replies evenly, “But most of us are not Communists at all. We stay with them mainly because we want to go home” (81). The chaplain says, “I can understand it’s a tough choice, but life is full of choices,” to which Yu responds, “For most of us, there’s no choice” (81). Later, when he is placed in a new compound run by a Communist faction, he explains frankly to the compound’s leader, “I admire the Communists’ enthusiasm, dedication, and discipline, but I can’t completely accept the logic of your working method ... The Communists treat every person just as a number...as though human are horses. For me, this is too simple. I believe there must be a power much larger than an individual” (125). This is the same thought that strikes him when he first arrives at the prison camp. He is dismayed to find that the men who “had been good soldiers and seemed high-minded” when led by the Communists are now “on the verge of becoming animals. How easily could humanity deteriorate in wretched conditions?” (69).

Ha Jin depicts Yu Yuan as a man out of place in the ideologically charged environment of the Cold War prison camp. He is determined to keep the promise he made to marry his fiancée and take care of his elderly mother, a moral decision that has nothing to do with Cold War politics. His desire to return to China makes him an enemy of the Nationalists, the Americans dismiss him as a part of the godless Communist horde, and, his lack of faith in the Communists' "working method" renders him forever suspect in the eyes of the Communist party members. It is Yu Yuan's unswerving commitment to his own moral code that allows him to navigate the treacherous divisions of the prison camp: over the course of the novel, he makes and breaks political allegiances in order to preserve his life and achieve his goal of returning home. Far from being a double agent or an equivocator, Yu Yuan is his own man who makes his own judgments and decisions. And he suspects that, as alienated as he may be, the others who have also chosen to return to China are more like him than they will openly admit: "For most of us, there's no choice."

Claiming "no choice" in the face of the demand to declare a political affiliation, Yu enunciates a rejection of the all-encompassing logic of bipolar Cold War politics. But, as I have argued in this paper, even as the Cold War binary breaks down, the project of liberal humanism is fortified. To the novel's last page, Yu is pressed to clarify that his writing of this memoir serves no political or collective end. He recalls, for example, that one of his former comrades, on his deathbed, urged him to "Please write our story!" (349). But Yu takes care to note that this memoir serves no such collective purpose. Ever the individual, he ends his memoir with the following admonition: "But do not take this to be an 'our story.' In the depths of my being I have never been one of them. I have just written what I experienced" (350). Here, Yu's staunch post-ideological position finally reveals his essential humanity, the humanity of the liberal individual.

The “FUCK ...U...S” version of Yu’s tattoo may appear to be a testament to his commitment to Communism, but as he reminds us, he never really joined in any cause either for or against Communism or the United States. Rather, he was able to traverse the two poles, Communist and anticommunist, in his time in the prison camp, relying upon his own inner moral compass to determine his actions. He paid the price for this independence: the initial violence of his forced anticommunist tattoo is never healed or undone, but is rather overlaid with another act of imposed tattooing that also imputes to him beliefs which he does not actually hold. FUCK COMMUNISM allows him to survive his time in the pro-Nationalist compounds at Koje; FUCK ...U...S... allows him to live five decades in Communist China. Both versions of the tattoo would seem to tell an ‘our story,’ but he wants us to read in the journey from one to another a ‘my story’ instead, a story that will conclude in the United States with the erasure of his tattoo. Inhabiting the narrative voice of a loner “just” telling us about an extraordinary life experience, Ha Jin thus aims to reclaim the occluded individuality and humanity of the prisoner of war. In so doing, he circles us back to that deeply politicized notion at the heart of the Korean repatriation controversy, the idealized vision of individual freedom as the hallmark of the human subject.

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