

Into another culture:  
chinese society and  
sensitive  
characterization in  
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**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The fictional memoir *War Trash*, written by Ha Jin, describes the life of a POW in the Korean War from 1951 to 1953. As a Chinese-American, Jin provides insight to race-oriented political battles, the tough decision between Communism and Nationalism, and the oppression inflicted on the POWs by U. S. soldiers. Jin also describes what it would be like to be a returning POW and how the values of a Chinese soldier differ from those of an American soldier. Throughout the work, Jin accurately portrays the white characters and effectively keeps stereotypes out of his descriptions.

Yu Yuan is the narrator of the work who describes how he became a low-ranking clerical officer in the 180th division of the People's Liberation Army. His division is sent to fight on the front, often fighting useless battles and losing thousands of men. The division is disease ridden, starved, and extremely tired; as a result, the Americans attack, wounding Yuan and taking him back as a prisoner of war (POW). As a POW, he is sent to Pusan, where he finds himself switching from the Pro-Nationalist camp to the Pro-Communist camp, not because he is Communist but because he wants to make it back to mainland China and see his family. Yuan uses his college education and knowledge of the English language to gain the trust of the camp leaders and become an important part of the communication between the Chinese/Koreans and Americans in the new camps on Cheju Island. Yuan is sent by his superior, Commissar Pei, to be "re-registered" under a different alias; however, the Americans reveal his identity and Yuan is forced to prove his dislike for the Communists. Thanks in part to his "FUCK COMMUNISM" tattoo, Yuan is able to stay clear of major trouble and keep his hopes of returning to China alive. Yuan returns to mainland China only to find

out his mother has died and his fiancée has left him. China views captured soldiers as cowards, therefore he is a “disgrace” in society. He becomes a teacher, and eventually marries and has children, whom he sends to college in hopes that they can have a better life.

Chinese society is based on the core values of family and loyalty to one's country. Because China is Communist, there is a shared sense of togetherness among the prisoners in the POW camps. With this sense of togetherness, the prisoners are able to form an opposing force to the American soldiers. Oftentimes the POWs would lend each other extra cigarettes, blankets, coats, and shoes to other prisoners who were in need. Many times throughout the book, Yuan was addressed as Brother Feng, which shows the intense comradeship the prisoners shared. Along with togetherness, family is a major principle of Chinese society. Every one of Yuan's decisions are a product of his desire to return to his family. Yuan only chooses the Pro-Communist camp because it is the best way to get home to his family. Despite the strong feelings of togetherness and family, loyalty to one's country is the most important value in Chinese society. Throughout the book, POWs who execute brave missions and sacrifice themselves are awarded medals of honor, medals that show they have displayed courage and loyalty to the Chinese motherland. After capturing General Bell, and losing control in a conversation with Bell, Yuan says “You think you can bend our will and force us to betray our motherland? Do you know what the Chinese spirit is? Let me tell you, if we are alive, we are Chinese men; if we are dead, we are Chinese ghosts” (179). This quote displays the intense feeling of loyalty the POWs had for their motherland, China. We Americans

focus on materialistic items; whereas the Chinese society puts a greater emphasis on values such as togetherness, family and loyalty, which are depicted throughout the work.

Throughout the novel, the treatment of white culture and the characters' views of Americans vary from camp to camp. In the beginning of the work, the main character, Yuan, is taught by the Chinese government that the Americans are weak, and can be easily defeated. The soldiers are bombarded with the idea that the Chinese are superior compared to the Americans to help boost the army's morale. Later on in the story, Yuan and many of the prisoners notice that the American soldiers waste valuable food and ammunition; whereas if the Chinese did that, they would be punished. Because of this, Yuan and his comrades begin to view the Americans as undisciplined and lazy. As the story continues, Yuan encounters a multitude of American personalities, including strong-willed leaders such as General Bell, and talkative prison guards like the ones in the camp on Kojima Island. The white characters in this work are extremely believable, considering the fact that all the white characters in the story are military men. General Bell is described by Yuan as "a robust man with a ruddy complexion" (156). Yuan's description of General Bell is very similar to the American "cookie cutter" mold of an Army general. Yuan was impressed during Bell's interrogation with how the general and one of his lieutenants talked on the phone. The conversation was very informal, which provides an example of the personal relationships the leaders of America had with one another. The general structure of war is "us versus them;" however, in *War Trash* Yuan's demeanor changes after a conversation with an American guard. One of the

POW camp guards talks frequently with Yuan, confiding in him and telling him about his life away from war. The guard mentions that he received a letter from his girlfriend telling him that she is leaving him. This information makes Yuan realize that the Americans also have personal lives and are not just here to torture the Chinese. The novel does an outstanding job of describing the white characters in a way that does not include bias or stereotypes, and treats the white characters as being human, not just the enemy.

The concept of nativism, or when an author depicts a culture as being ideal or unrealistic, is not prevalent in Ha Jin's novel *War Trash*. Although he is native to China, Jin masterfully keeps bias out of his cultural depictions. He acknowledges faults in both cultures, and includes the good and bad aspects of American and Chinese society. As stated in the previous paragraph, Jin keeps stereotypes out of his judgement of American culture. He focuses on what their actions display instead of what the Chinese government tells him. Jin also depicts his Chinese culture as less than ideal at different points in the novel. For example, Yuan often criticises the Chinese government for not sending aid immediately to the POWs. He also questions whether or not the Chinese style of fighting war is the correct one. He sees the Americans treating every soldier with respect and going to great lengths to ensure their health and well-being; whereas the Chinese government uses soldiers like ammo, continuously cycling them through the war as they die. When Commissar Pei sends Yuan to be "re-registered," Yuan is upset because he realizes he is just a pawn in the Chinese governments game. After over sixty men died in a battle between the prisoners and the guards, Yuan said " They

ignored the casualties and only cared about the news value of the incident” (244). This shows that the Chinese government was only using the POWs, instead of attempting to rescue them, which sparks a feeling of dislike for the government in Yuan’s eyes. Despite the main character being a Chinese POW, Jin does not fall into the trap of nativism, but accurately portrays both cultures and highlights the good and bad of Chinese and American society.

Overall, Ha Jin uses his novel *War Trash* to show the reader a different side of war. Instead of describing the fighting and battles, Jin expertly guides the reader through the mental and political side of war. Jin also uses his description of both American culture and Chinese culture to show that both sides of the war are not perfect. Although Jin is Chinese, he does a fantastic job of describing both the white characters and their culture without letting the influence of stereotypes or bias get in the way. As Ha Jin once said during an interview about his novel *War Trash*, “ It’s hard to uproot yourself and really become yourself in another soil, but it’s also an opportunity, another kind of growth.”