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Cold War Erasures and the Asian American Immigrant Family in Ha Jin's *War Trash*

Forthcoming article in *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 5.2, Fall 2019. Special issue on "Forgetting Wars," eds. Tina Chen, Josephine Park, and We Jung Yi.

Abstract

This article interrogates the ideological processes that have produced, sustained, and regulated the Asian American nuclear family as a privileged site for claiming citizenship in the post-1965 era. Through a reading of Ha Jin's novel *War Trash* (2004), which presents a grandfather's memoir of surviving a prisoner-of-war camp during the Korean War, I argue that the idealized nuclear family facilitates the erasure of the figure of the post-Cold War Asian immigrant as a racialized enemy, producing instead an image of the Asian American as a potentially desirable citizen. Examining the novel's staging of the disclosure of the narrator's forgotten Cold War past, I argue that the family comes to serve as a vehicle for both repressing memories of war and potentially recovering them.

The historical category of the Asian American immigrant has always contained a multiplicity of discordant figures. Ha Jin's novel *War Trash* (2004) begins with three generations of an Asian American immigrant family living together in the suburbs of Atlanta. The narrator, Yu Yuan, an elderly grandfather on an extended visit to the U.S., is a Chinese veteran who was incarcerated in a UN prisoner-of-war camp during the Korean War. His son, in contrast, is an engineer who immigrated to the United States to receive an elite education and stayed to work, settle down, and start a family. Yu describes his daughter-in-law simply as "Cambodian-born," a pithy yet roundabout designation that evokes a specific past of colonial violence, war, dispossession, and displacement without exactly naming it (4). Finally, his young American grandchildren

represent the classic promise, and pressure, of the immigrant second generation (Yu mentions that he hopes his grandson will grow up to be a doctor). This archetypal, hyphenated Asian American family, like all immigrant families, results from a particular geopolitical and economic conjuncture. Yet Yu Yuan's past as a soldier and POW represents a strand of history that he feels he must keep hidden.

Indeed, *War Trash* explicitly renders Yu Yuan's experience of the Korean War as a secret history that he is driven to narrate for future generations in the form of a memoir, which comprises the bulk of the novel. While Yu is adamant that his tale represents nothing more than his own personal story, his fictional memoir also serves to recover a collectively forgotten past for the novel's contemporary readers: the true (if lightly fictionalized) story of the political crisis that took place in the prison camp on Koje Island, South Korea during the Korean War. Framing Yu's wartime memoir with the scene of its writing, Ha Jin brings together two different narrative genres: he presents a Cold War foreign spy story wrapped in a contemporary American multicultural immigrant family narrative. By embedding a story of the past in the present, Jin thematizes the forgetting and remembering of war, presenting the story of the Cold War POW as one that must be passed down to a contemporary audience that has seemingly surpassed Cold War modes of thinking. The novel's structure thus centers the unspoken histories of war that lie within the immigrant family.

On its face, *War Trash* is a fascinating and generative text for examining the cultural memory of the Cold War in the United States because it focuses on a dramatic, largely unknown historical episode within America's so-called "Forgotten War" in Korea, and does so from the unexpected perspective of an enemy soldier. The novel's sympathetic protagonist and narrator Yu Yuan makes for an unlikely hero for American audiences: he is not just a victim of Cold War violence, but an agent of it, a soldier on

the Communist side battling American troops. He thus represents not an innocent to be rescued, but an enemy to be rehabilitated. Because the novel opens with the now-elderly Yu Yuan describing his present-day American surroundings before dropping us in the world of the Korean War, the suspense in his narrative of combat, capture, and detention lies not in the question of his survival, but his transformation. How and why does the Chinese Communist soldier become the kindly Asian American grandfather we meet in the novel's opening pages? More broadly, under what conditions can America's racialized enemy come to embody a potentially desirable American citizen?

Examining American legacies of the Korean War, Grace M. Cho (2008) observes that the Korean war bride "operates as a figure for the disappearance of geopolitical violence into the realm of the domestic" (14). In this essay, I consider how the nuclear family operates as an ideological formation that places the memory of Cold War violence under erasure, allowing the post-Cold War Asian immigrant to become conditionally folded into and included within U.S. society. In a close reading of *War Trash*, I trace how the novel positions the heteronormative, reproductive family unit as a formation that can uniquely transcend Cold War bipolar thinking. Such an investment in the nuclear family, I argue, is bound up in a restrictive understanding of citizenship and who deserves to access its privileges, and thus functions as deeply political in itself. My reading thus interrogates the ideological processes that have produced, sustained, and regulated the Asian American nuclear family as a privileged site for claiming citizenship in the post-1965 era. Ultimately, I argue, for those who can adhere to its guidelines, the nuclear family facilitates the erasure of the Asian immigrant as a racialized Cold War enemy, producing instead a picture of the Asian American as exemplary citizen.

As I argue below, *War Trash* demonstrates how the nuclear family can both contain and efface the memory of Cold War violence. In what follows, after briefly situating the novel's narrative in the real-life historical and political context of the Koje Island prisoner-of-war camp during the Korean War, I examine the fictional memoir at the heart of *War Trash*, focusing on the motif of a political tattoo forced on the narrator during his time as a prisoner. Then, tracking the tattoo's revision and erasure over time, I show how the intense violence and coercion that mark the narrator's experience of the Korean War gives way to a different logic in the novel's frame narrative set in the present-day United States, where the family comes to provide an apparently neutral, apolitical way to circumvent the Cold War ideological divide. Through this reading, I argue that the narrator becomes legible to the reader as a potential American subject precisely to the extent that he evinces an attachment to American family values and leaves behind the apparent markers of Cold War thinking. However, the novel's staging of the project of disclosing a forgotten Cold War past also suggests that such an act of erasure can never be a finished project. To conclude, examining the irresolution of the novel's final scene of familial disclosure and attempted remembrance, I suggest that the novel's embrace of the nuclear family represents not an exit from ideology, but an occasion to reconsider our political investments in the present day.

War Trash and the UN Prison Camp on Koje Island

Ha Jin's fictionalized account of the real-life UN prisoner-of-war camp on Koje Island introduced the camp's history to English-speaking readers when *War Trash* was published in 2004. Like Jin's previous works, *War Trash* was widely acclaimed for its stark realism and message of universal humanism,[1] although its similarities to existing

Chinese-language sources also led to charges of plagiarism.[2] Literary critics have read the novel's tale of Cold War incarceration in relation to contemporary U.S. geopolitical conflicts and carceral spaces: for example, Jing Tsu (2010) argues that the novel's practice of translation makes the Korean War prison camp into an allegory for the U.S. military prison camp at Guantánamo Bay (110), while Joseph Darda (2015) argues that the novel "interrogates the war on terror through the historical lens of the Korean War" (88). Jodi Kim (2017) argues that the novel's graphic depiction of violence and coercion in the camp reveals the POW camp to be a "spatial exception" that structures a "nexus of militarism, imperialism, and settler colonialism," or what she calls "settler modernity," in Asia and the Pacific through the present day (575).

The historical UN prison camp on Koje Island is noteworthy for its role in prolonging and complicating the Korean War. In 1952, the United States formulated a plan according to which tens of thousands of Chinese and North Korean soldiers imprisoned on Koje Island would be offered the unprecedented opportunity to refuse repatriation to their Communist homelands and instead declare their allegiance to the anticommunist free world. This odd policy of non-forcible repatriation was designed to theoretically affirm democracy in two ways. On the mass level, soldiers who had been forced into fighting for Communism would defect to the free world, proving the desirability of liberal democracy as a way of life; in the lofty words of President Truman, U.S. troops on Koje Island "must not use bayonets to force these prisoners to return to slavery and almost certain death at the hands of the Communists" ("Truman" 1952). On the individual level, soldiers would be given the dignity of individual choice, as each would be allowed to exercise free will to decide his fate. This framing of repatriation as a "moment of liberal individual choice," as historian Monica Kim (2013) observes, was intended to serve as "evidence of the rational, objective, and

compassionate modes of governance" that the United States employed in Korea as it attempted to produce new kinds of subjects through interrogation (18). Historian Susan Carruthers (2009) argues that the strategic concern of the United States government at this particular moment in the Korean War and the larger Cold War "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" (184). Attempts to implement the policy of non-forcible repatriation led to rampant violence and coercion in the camp over a period of months, culminating in the kidnapping of the camp's American commander by a group of protesting Communist prisoners in May 1952. Instead of a propaganda victory, then, the policy of non-forcible repatriation gave rise to a long and embarrassing legal and political crisis for the United States, and confusion, mistreatment, and death for many of the prisoners.

English-language accounts of the prisoners' uprising on Koje Island range from the earnest to the sensationalistic, but nearly all foreground the extreme ideological commitments of the prisoners. One former prison guard begins his memoir of the war by alluding to the practice of forced tattooing, writing, "Deeper than skin markings, on the part of prisoners of every ideological complexion, was a fanaticism and hatred intensified by the corrosive effects of captivity" (Weintraub 1964, 6). This U.S. soldier comes to see the decision to individually "screen" prisoners for repatriation as an unprecedented "step forward for human history" (47), momentous not just for the outcome of what he calls "our private little cold war" in the prison camp, but for "men all over the world" (74). In contrast, a pair of British journalists sympathetic to China describe the screenings they witnessed as scenes of intimidation, violence, torture, and even murder masked by a ruse of humanitarianism, wherein any prisoner who desired to be repatriated to China or North Korea "was at once branded as a 'diehard

Communist,' with all the brutal treatment that entailed" (Burchett and Winnington 1953, 136), while an Indian officer who oversaw the repatriation screening process described witnessing anti-Communist "terror tactics" that "negate[d] all assumptions or assertions about Freedom of Choice" (Carruthers 215).

Although these accounts diverge in their conclusions about the goals and the results of the non-forcible repatriation policy on Koje Island, they share a common view of the prisoners as fundamentally ideological creatures. Part of what makes *War Trash*'s narrative so compelling is that it asks us to instead imagine the crisis in the prison camp from a prisoner's perspective. In contrast to the characterization of the Koje Island prisoners as essentially ideologically driven, the narrator Yu Yuan maintains what Jodi Kim (2017) calls a "near-fetishistic avowal of neutrality" as he narrates his inner thoughts and feelings to the reader throughout his memoir (571). He explains that despite having joined the "Chinese People's Volunteer" Army, he was never a true Communist, having matriculated at the military academy before the Communists came to power in China in 1949. When the Korean War started in 1950, he felt, as "most Chinese" did, that "it was obvious that MacArthur's army intended to cross the Yalu River and seize Manchuria… As a serviceman I was obligated to go to the front and defend our country" (8). Once taken prisoner, he defends the Communists when pressed--for example, he confesses at one point that he "believed in socialism," since the Communists "had brought order and hope to the land" (122)--but makes clear to the reader that his participation in any "pro-Communist" activities is purely strategic, since he means to return to China and will need to answer for himself there after the war. He reasons, "Whether I join them or not, they'll never leave me alone, so I mustn't stand aloof. Either you become their friend or their enemy. The Communists don't believe anyone can remain neutral" (123). However, despite his status as a Communist soldier,

Yu's knowledge of English and ability to translate between languages makes him useful to the leadership among both the Communist and Nationalist prisoners as well as the U.S. forces, giving him--and us--a window into the camp's inner workings.[3]

Going against our Cold War common sense, then, the novel depicts Yu Yuan's position as a Communist soldier during the Korean War as more a historical accident than the result of deeply held political convictions, and his participation in political agitation in the camp as more a strategic gambit to survive than a marker of his true loyalty to any party. Although he is literally an enemy soldier representing Communist China, the novel thus denaturalizes Yu Yuan as America's Cold War enemy. Instead, he becomes legible to American readers as a rational individual with whose predicament we can, and should, empathize. This readerly act of crossing the ideological border goes against the staunch Cold War thinking on display among Yu's captors and fellow prisoners. For example, Yu notices the way that the American soldiers refuse to see their prisoners as individuals: when an American lieutenant berates him and his comrades for ruining the career of General Bell, the camp's fictionalized commander, he comments that the lieutenant "took [the kidnapping] personally, thinking of General Bell as a specific individual…though he still regarded me as no more than a Red" (192). When he is called upon to provide translations during General Bell's kidnapping, he is "amazed" to overhear Bell on the phone with another American general speaking not of official matters, but about Bell's wife and family, physical health, and mental well-being. "They treated each other as friends, not as comrades who shared the same ideal and fought for the same cause," he writes; "They hadn't mentioned any ideological stuff. What a contrast this was to Chinese officers, who, in a situation like this, would undoubtedly speak in the voice of revolutionaries, and one side would surely represent the Party" (181). Here, Yu glimpses in American small-talk a vision of a way of life he

desires for himself. It is particularly fitting that the conversation between the American generals begins with the welfare of Bell's wife and family--a topic that Yu considers to be separate from "ideological stuff," and precisely what Yu most cherishes. In the novel's depiction of these exchanges, then, *War Trash* does more than just recover and represent a forgotten historical episode of the Korean War for posterity. Rather, it asks us to appreciate a mindset that is capable of transcending the Cold War ideological binary altogether.

"FUCK …U…S…": Revising the Cold War Ideological Binary

Perhaps the most evocative index of Yu's struggles with ideological dogmatism is the tattoo forced upon him in the prison camp. Shortly after his incarceration, he finds that the camp has organized itself into two fiercely divided factions: the Nationalists, who are agitating to be sent to "Free China," or Taiwan, and the Communists, who demand that they, and all Chinese prisoners, be returned home to China as dictated by international law. As the leadership on each side uses increasingly violent tactics to intimidate and coerce the prisoners, Yu considers his options. In the upcoming individual repatriation screenings, he plans to choose to go back home to China to be reunited with his mother and fiancée. But after a night of drinking with the Nationalists, who are trying to recruit him to their side, Yu is clubbed in the back of the head and blacks out. He wakes up in the Nationalists' tent and, to his horror, he sees "two English words tattooed on my belly, right below my navel: FUCK COMMUNISM" (97).

Yu is terrified by the new slogan on his body, certain that he will never be able to return to China. But over the course of the novel, the tattoo comes to represent not just the brutality of the situation he faces, but an unlikely way for him to manipulate those who control his fate. When necessary, he is able to deploy the tattoo as evidence of his allegiance to the Nationalists (he was willing to get tattooed with an anticommunist slogan!) as well as his resistance to their demands (they tattooed him in retribution for his noncompliance!). By the end of his time in the prison camp, he has switched sides no less than five times, all the while privately maintaining his resolve to return home to China when the war ends.

Yu's true motivation for wanting to return to China, he insists again and again, is to be reunited with his mother and fiancée: a personal reason, as he continually reminds the leaders of both sides in the camp, not a political one (65). Thus, when it is his turn to undergo the final screening that will determine his destination, his desired political or national affiliation does not enter his thought process. Rather, as he sits before the various arbitrators and "persuaders" in the UN tent, his mother and fiancée are at the forefront of his mind. Even if he could bring himself to move elsewhere and begin a new life without them, he fears that they would be harassed or punished by the Chinese government for his desertion; as he writes, "it grew clear to me that there was no way I could go elsewhere without implicating my mother and my fiancée," and so he tells the arbitrator that he wants to repatriate. Once he makes it back to China, however, he is crushed to find that his idealized family no longer exists. His mother has passed away during the three years he has been gone, and his fiancée has since moved on, asking Yu to stop bothering her, since "she couldn't possibly marry a 'disgraced captive'" (344). Her reaction mirrors that of the Chinese government, which regards the repatriated POWs as traitors and failures. Rather than being rewarded for their service and loyalty,

the returned soldiers, all dishonorably discharged, have been relegated to the "dregs of society" (345).

Yu recovers remarkably quickly from the jettisoning of the future he had imagined with his fiancée, the figure whose idealization had sustained him for two years in the camp and driven his most important life decisions. But writing from the U.S., Yu remembers that when he first returned to China, "I felt as though time had played a cruel joke on me. If only I had known about my mother's death when I was Korea; if only I had foreseen that home was no longer the same place" (344). Had he chosen simply for himself, he would have sought to go to a "third country," a "neutral English-speaking country" where he could be free of the ideological split between the Communists and Nationalists (325).[4] Instead, Yu Yuan suffers through his return to an unwelcoming China. Over time, he is able to salvage his dream of starting a family: he is assigned to teach English in a middle school in a new city, where he marries one of his fellow teachers. He and his wife raise a son and daughter who both go on to graduate from college. Their son makes his way to the U.S. to obtain a master's degree in civil engineering, and Yu proudly informs us, "I even have two American grandchildren, and I love them dearly" (347). This surprising ending to Yu's tale of war, capture, and a harsh return to China underscores the utility of his commitment to a neutral position: in the end, the family he worked to build becomes a formation that can cross over from one pole of the Cold War to the other, from Communist China to the neoliberal United States.

It is soon after Yu's repatriation to China that his troublesome tattoo takes on a new appearance. In China, he finds a clinic where he can finally have his "embarrassing mark" removed (341). The doctor at the clinic removes the tattoos of some of his fellow repatriates completely, while 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 one with a message more fitting for Yu's new situation: it now reads, "FUCK …U…S…" (341).

In fact, *War Trash* introduces Yu as a character through his narration of the problem of his tattoo. In the novel's opening lines, he explains that even after five decades, his tattoo remains a source of "constant concern": he fears discovery by the authorities when he travels between China and the U.S., and when in public in 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). Most of all, however, he worries about how to explain the tattoo to his young grandchildren. Because he has kept his wartime past hidden from them, he must keep the telltale tattoo hidden as well. In other words, he worries that the tattoo, if made visible, will wrongly mark him as an outcast in the eyes of the state, capital, normal society, and even his own family — as the "war trash" of the novel's title.

The revision of Yu's tattoo from FUCK COMMUNISM to FUCK … U…S… creates a visual gag that also serves as a kind of thesis for the novel's view of Cold War politics. That you cannot spell "communism" without the letters "U" and "S" functions as more than just a joke for Ha Jin. Rather, it encapsulates the novel's fundamental suspicion of any kind of party mentality. While the messaging of Yu's tattoo has been flipped, he remains just as ambivalent about the revised tattoo as he ever was about the original, voicing a calm, measured neutrality that renders both versions of its militancy absurd. Moreover, the tattoo fails to achieve its intended effect, both before and after its

revision. Emblazoned with the first message, Yu is repatriated to Communist China; with the second, he freely enters the United States. His response to his forced tattoo is thus to attempt to opt out of a limiting Cold War mindset by subverting its message.

Perhaps because of this ironic disidentification, critics have proposed reading his tattoo in excess of its stated ideological framework. For example, Jodi Kim (2017) suggests reading the second term of "FUCK … U…S…" as "us," a move that she argues allows readers "to reckon with slippages and ambiguities of meaning—and more broadly of alliance and ideological affiliation—that Cold War bipolar logics elide" (572). Daniel Kim (2014) further suggests that we interpret "…U…S…" as speaking to "us," the novel's contemporary Asian American readers who must confront the messy history of the Korean War and "claim a sense of ownership…not only for what was done to us but for what we did to each other, and what we did to ourselves" (296). Building on these readings, I want to suggest here that Yu's revised tattoo holds several interpretive possibilities. We might read in his tattoo a simple rejection of ideology altogether: fuck the party mentality that sustained decades of Cold War violence, fuck the ideological zeal that led to the existence of this forced tattoo, fuck "us." At the same time, we can read in the revised tattoo a rejection of solidarity and collectivity that instead champions the liberal individual: fuck "us," I'm choosing me. Ironically, this latter stance aligns with an American ethos and a neoliberal rationality, suggesting less a rejection of all ideological thinking than an endorsement of communism's ideological opposite. In the slippage from "FUCK U.S." to "FUCK US," then, the tattoo both expresses an ideological message and contains its opposite, subtly affirming what it appears to denounce.

Indeed, the novel's framing of Yu's story insists that we understand his story to be a spontaneous and idiosyncratic individual creation, not a group affair. Before

leaving China, Yu hears that Commissar Pei, the former leader of the camp's pro-Communist faction, has passed away, his dying words an entreaty to his fellow repatriates to "Please write our story!" (349). As though in response to Pei, Yu ends his memoir with the following words:

> Now I must conclude this memoir, which is my first attempt at writing and also my last. Almost seventy-four years old, I suffer from gout and glaucoma; I don't have the strength to write anymore. 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 closing words function both as a warning for the fictional audience of his memoir and as a sly directive for the readers who have just finished *War Trash*. For the novel's audience, the final sentence asks us to resist the urge to generalize based on the narrative we have just read. Within the novel's fictional frame, the meaning of Yu's last words mirrors this gesture: his life story was never an "our story" (fuck "us"). His claim that he has "never been one of them" extends beyond his dissatisfaction with the Communist party in China. Rather, it speaks to a more fundamental aspect of his character: Yu Yuan sees himself as his own person, a self-possessed, rational individual acting in accordance with his own personal moral compass in a world of followers. He resists being folded into the collectivity of the rest of the repatriates, insisting on the uniqueness of the text he has penned. In this insistence, ironically, he becomes truly American, creating the conditions for a future erasure of his past as a racialized Cold War enemy.

"Our Story": The Redemptive Asian American Family

Yu disdains the notion that he has written an "our story" for his former comrades, but he does fashion his memoir expressly as an "our story" for one select group: his family. Linking the letters etched on his skin to his own act of writing, he explains to readers in the novel's prologue that his motivation for writing the memoir we now hold in our hands is to tell the true story behind his 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). In other words, naming his grandchildren as both the imagined future readers of his memoir and the motivation for his decision to write it, Yu rejects the horizontal, communal "us" of his Cold War past in favor of the vertical, more limited "us" of his immediate family and the generations that may follow. The novel thus takes the history of an unknown, unusual, and inherently politicized wartime episode and delivers it in the intimate form of a family story, allowing for its remembrance within what seems to be a safely apolitical frame. At the same time, his explanatory note at the novel's outset presents a generational logic that places readers in the position of Yu's Asian-American grandchildren, attempting to unpack the meaning of the writing on his skin and on the pages before us. For this post-Cold War Asian American audience, I argue, *War Trash* demonstrates how the nuclear family becomes a vehicle for both repressing memories of war and potentially recovering them.

War Trash turns on the idea that Yu's desire to settle down with a family is a neutral, rational, natural one, as opposed to the ideologically determined choices of his fellow prisoners: recall the narrator's claim that family talk falls outside the category of "ideological stuff" (181). But of course, the family unit has always been central to American citizenship, and hence constitutively political. As Lauren Berlant (1997) observes, issues of marriage, reproduction, sexuality, and family "do not arise as private concerns: they are key to debates about what 'America' stands for, and are

deemed vital to defining how citizens should act" (1). Describing this view of the family as part of what she calls the "intimate public sphere," Berlant develops a critique of the American view that "the intimacy of citizenship is something scarce and sacred, private and proper, and only for members of families" (3). In *War Trash*, the dream of building a heteronormative, reproductive nuclear family doesn't just offer Yu Yuan a way out of the prison camp; it offers him a way into the United States. According to his description of his family's immigration process, his adult son entered the country as a graduate student in engineering and presumably gained status as a highly skilled worker who could then marry, have children who would be American citizens, and sponsor additional family members for immigration from China. After Yu's extraordinary drama of possible nonrepatriation and statelessness, his son's experience a generation later presents an iteration of a conventional post-1965 Asian American immigration story--one that hinges on the normative family unit. In fact, it is what we might call Yu's family values that provide the hinge between the wartime setting of the prison camp on a Korean island and the multicultural strip malls of the Atlanta suburbs decades later. In *War Trash*, the reproduction of the heteronormative nuclear family--first Yu's own family in China, and then his son's in America--is crucial to the novel's happy ending.

The U.S. state has long been concerned with regulating raced sexuality and producing racialized family formations, excluding, disallowing, criminalizing, and breaking apart certain kinds of families while encouraging and rewarding others. Tracing the "sexual history of Asian diasporas," Chandan Reddy (2011) locates the "Chinese prostitute" and "Chinese bachelor," figures central to the 1875 Page Act and 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act respectively, within a "genealogy of sex" that once figured the Chinese as deviant and incompatible with American citizenship (151). However, Reddy observes that since the 1980s, the U.S. state "has actively worked to produce a

racialized and gendered labor migration" by privileging the nuclear family form (158). This preference for heteronormative nuclear families can be traced to provisions in the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act which laid out a policy of family reunification, whose explicit purpose was to reunite nuclear families. Such a policy, of course, has the effect of hindering and criminalizing immigration by those in other kinship arrangements, especially queer and gender-nonconforming people. Moreover, as Reddy argues, since the 1980s, the emphasis on family reunification has made the family unit "a site and apparatus of state regulatory power," displacing the labor of recruiting and supporting new immigrant workers back onto the nuclear family (160). Historian Mae Ngai (2004) further notes that the family reunification policy came to shape the class character of generations of Asian American immigrants. The 1965 INA outlined a preference for highly skilled and trained workers; as Ngai recounts, these provisions spurred immigration by members of the "professional and technical classes" in the 1960s and 1970s. By the mid-1980s, she writes, "occupational migration from Asia decreased relative to migration under the family preference categories, but family-based immigration of the first brain-drain generation replicated its class composition" (262).

Asian American immigration after 1965, then, revolves around the potential for Asian American immigrants to be good citizens who can provide the right kind of labor and, crucially, who have the right kind of family. As Siobhan Somerville (2005) points out, the family reunification policy, which privileges monogamy, heterosexuality, and marriage, can be understood as "part of a broad cultural and political emphasis on sexual discipline and the promotion of the nuclear family" in the post-World War II period (356). She argues that this ideological vision was designed both to promote economic gains, since the nuclear family played a role in restructuring the postwar economy, and to achieve "racialized effects," since the policy "allowed the law to

appear color-blind" while still maintaining a particular racial balance in incoming immigrant populations (356). David Eng (2010) argues further that in the present, a neoliberal politics of colorblindness continues to work to "subsume race within the private sphere of family and kinship relations," a process he terms the "racialization of intimacy" (10). As the family becomes "the displaced but privileged site for the management of ongoing problems of race," he argues, "race is exploited to consolidate idealized notions of family and kinship in the global North" (10). It is precisely in the context of this neoliberal politicization and racialization of intimacy that the idealized family in Ha Jin's *War Trash* emerges as itself a deeply ideological formation. Jin depicts the desire for a nuclear family as something that both precedes and transcends Cold War bipolar logics and politics, and in the novel, Yu Yuan is ultimately rewarded for eschewing Cold War party politics in favor of marriage and children, trading in the homosocial, aberrant, lonely future of his Communist comrades for heteronormative, reproductive futurity and domestic happiness. But I want to suggest that the novel's positioning of the family as separate from "ideological stuff" functions as ideology by other means, reinforcing and naturalizing a view of the heteronormative nuclear family as the essential unit of American citizenship. In the screening tents of the Korean War prison camp, Yu Yuan refuses to denounce communism, thinking instead of his future wife and children. Ironically, it is this very commitment to the family that prefigures him as an exemplary American, rewriting what we think the racialized enemy can be, or become. Lauren Berlant (1997) has commented that in the neoliberal United States, "the nation's value is figured not on behalf of an actually existing and laboring adult, but of a future American, both incipient and pre-historical" (6). Here, she describes the place the unborn fetus occupies in the conservative worldview, but the figure of the

productive would-be immigrant — say, a hardworking Chinese engineer — represents another kind of desirable "future American" in the liberal imagination.

Indeed, from the beginning of his Korean War story, it is Yu's attachment to the idea of family that makes him feel like a potential future American. But in *War Trash*, the idealized family does the work of recuperating not just Yu Yuan, the racialized enemy and Communist soldier, but also the United States as a political space of real freedom. Back in the Koje Island prison camp, the United States represented simply one cynical pole of the Cold War bipolar superpower conflict: America was Yu Yuan's captor and part of the geopolitical problem that had conspired to deny him his life and future, and *War Trash* does not hide that the U.S. military both perpetrated and permitted atrocities against its prisoners in the camp on Koje Island. But five decades later, America has become the place where Yu can see his children flourish and where future generations can come to fruition; it is the place where not just his son the engineer but also his Cambodian-American daughter-in-law can find refuge and make a home; it is the place where Yu can eventually unburden himself and openly reveal his painful wartime secrets. It is in this sense that I argue that the multicultural immigrant family is deployed as a formation that also holds the power to redeem the U.S. state and its Cold War imperial projects in Asia. In the example that *War Trash* provides, the Asian American immigrant family contains histories and memories of war and its losses that go unspoken, including Yu Yuan's ordeal as a soldier and POW as well as, presumably, the violence that displaced his daughter-in-law from Cambodia. But in the novel's retrospective narration of Yu's wartime experience, the United States emerges primarily not as an agent of harm, but as the enabler of a good future in the form of a happy nuclear family--for those who manage to survive America's wars and make their way stateside. In other words, the promise of the nuclear family facilitates the erasure of

the Cold War politics that produced Asians as a racialized enemy population in need of rehabilitation in the first place.

Conclusion: Cold War Erasures

The ending scene of *War Trash* asks readers to consider an act of literal erasure when, in the novel's final pages, Yu's son helps him schedule an appointment to have his fraught tattoo fully erased once and for all. What inspires him to finally look into having the tattoo removed is the most mundane and domestic of American activities: watching reruns of *The Simpsons* on television with his family. "These days I often watch *The Simpsons*, which I like very much," he writes (348). "Last week I saw Bart, the mischievous boy, get a tattoo removed from his arm. This gave me the idea of having mine erased" (348). Naturally, it is watching *The Simpsons*, the iconic American cartoon that lampoons both the nuclear age and the nuclear family, that can resolve his lingering and outdated Cold War anxieties and complete his transformation from foreign enemy to American subject.

The episode in question, "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire," is *The Simpsons*' series premiere. It first aired on December 17, 1989, just over a month after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the event conventionally used to mark the end of the Cold War in Europe; as such, one might describe it as the first ever post-Cold War television show. (The production of the show is also bound up in the history of U.S.-Asian relations since the Cold War: from this premiere episode to the present day, thirty seasons later, its animation has been outsourced to overseas contractors in South Korea.) In the episode, Bart Simpson, like Yu Yuan, must deal with a tattoo gone awry and a misdirected

message. While shopping for Christmas gifts with his family at the mall, Bart sneaks into a tattoo parlor and asks for a tattoo of a red heart emblazoned with the word "MOTHER." Hearing his cries of pain, Marge, his mother, barges into the parlor, interrupting the session before the tattoo is completed, and so instead of "MOTHER," the tattoo now reads, "MOTH." Marge decides to use all of the family's Christmas money to have Bart's tattoo removed at a clinic, not knowing that her husband Homer will not be receiving a Christmas bonus from his job at the nuclear plant this year. As a result, Homer is desperate to find a way to buy Christmas presents for the family. During a trip to the races where Homer tries, and fails, to win money by betting on racing greyhounds, Bart convinces him to adopt the losing dog, Number Eight, which has been abandoned by its owner. Renaming him as "Santa's Little Helper," Homer brings the dog home as a Christmas gift to the entire family, and Santa's Little Helper becomes a beloved permanent addition to the family.

In the episode, Bart's tattoo serves several functions: it is a sign of Bart's rebelliousness, a nod to the show's countercultural milieu, and a linguistic and visual gag ("MOTH"). But most importantly, it is a tattoo that initially causes a rift, but then binds together the nuclear family. Bart intends for the tattoo to express his love for his mother; the familial crisis that the tattoo and the cost of its removal sparks sets off a chain of events that creates economic hardship but ultimately brings the family closer together**.** And although the episode displays the juvenile yet self-aware brand of humor that becomes the show's trademark, its message is remarkably sincere: it is an episode that affirms by satirizing the heteronormative nuclear American middle-class family. Together, the Simpsons learn to give up materialism and value one another, and on top of this, they complete their family with the addition of a dog. Hence, Yu's passing reference to the episode yields more than just the idea to have his tattoo removed. In

one sense, Yu is Bart, the mischievous boy, stuck with a problematic tattoo that doesn't say what it should. In another, he's Homer, just trying to provide a decent living for his family. Finally, he's Santa's Little Helper, mistreated by his homeland and seeking a loving home and family. And like the *Simpsons* episode, *War Trash* ends by affirming the American family and its future. Having completed his memoir, Yu Yuan sits on the verge of having his miscast, ideologically crude tattoo erased from his skin so that his exterior will finally match his interiority, five decades too late.

The plan to remove Yu's tattoo comes too late to redress the harm it represented over the decades of his life after the Korean War. But I suggest that it is no mistake that the plan to erase the tattoo coincides temporally with the completion of his memoir and its dedication to his grandchildren. If the tattoo symbolized silence, secrecy, and pain over Yu's wartime past, then the act of writing his memoir marks the unraveling of that enforced silence. Instead of being something to hide, his life story and the Cold War secret at its center become something documented and remembered, a text to share and circulate. In this way, the tattoo's erasure doesn't signal the forgetting of the past, but paradoxically the opposite, as the completed memoir invites unknown future generations to unpack and interpret the meaning of this pivotal wartime experience. However, at the novel's end, this neat act of writerly substitution remains incomplete. The appointment to remove the tattoo is made, but we don't know if it is kept; the memoir has been written and earmarked for his grandchildren, but they are not yet able to read or understand it, and we cannot know how they will receive or reconcile with its meaning. I have argued here that *War Trash* shows us how immigrant memories of war are uneasily contained and buried within the idealized nuclear family, revealing a larger truth about the ideological function of the Asian American family in the post-Cold War era. Even in the novel's final gesture of irresolution and uncertainty, Ha Jin

keeps the possibility for excavation, recovery, and reconciliation in the hands of his future generations, keeping this task a private, family-bound affair. But this conclusion also reminds us of the limitations of the nuclear family as a space of possibility and transformation. Ultimately, I argue, the work of contending with the legacies and generational effects of the Cold War will require us to imagine how remembering and sharing forgotten stories of war might create forms of affiliation and kinship that can exceed the boundaries of a preexisting political logic.

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I would like to thank Golnar Nikpour, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Silas Moon Cassinelli for their generous engagement with this essay. Thanks also to Josephine Lee, Mai-Linh Hong, and Takeo Rivera for workshopping a draft at the AAAS Junior Faculty Workshop in 2018, and to Jeehyun Lim for recommending sources on *War Trash*. I am grateful to the special issue's co-editors Tina Chen, Josephine Park, and We Jung Yi, the managing editors Akash Belsare and Siting Jiang, and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback and assistance with this article.

[1] In 2005, *War Trash* won the PEN/Faulkner Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. As Steven Yao notes, Jin's overall oeuvre displays a "belief in a decidedly traditional liberal humanist universalism," which serves as the "validating principle behind his distinctive realist style" (115). He argues in "'A Voice from China': Ha Jin and the Cultural Politics of Anti-Socialist Realism" that Jin's humanism "accords with the prevailing mainstream liberal multiculturalist ideology of the American literary establishment and its politics of 'recognition'" (116).

[2] A Chinese journalist, Zhang Zeshi, whose work is cited in a bibliography at the end of *War Trash* as a historical source, pursued litigation against Jin's publisher but reached a settlement out of court; further controversy arose in online discussions in 2008. In discussing the plagiarism charges, Jing Tsu considers the complications posed by the act of translation, arguing that the incident poses a "challenge to the practice and theorization of translation" (108), while Xie Xinqiu proposes reading *War Trash*, with all of its references and allusions, as a "historical metafiction" that aims to preserve history through a creative process (36).

[3] In this sense, Yu Yuan functions in *War Trash* as a Cold War "friendly," a figure who aids the U.S. military despite his status as a racial other or enemy. For an analysis of the figure of the "friendly" in the Korean and Vietnam Wars and his role in the "provisional and weak alliances" within the superpower rivalries of the Cold War (6), see Josephine Nock-Hee Park's *Cold War Friendships: Korea, Vietnam, and Asian American Literature.*

[4] This brief commentary is the only gesture the novel makes toward acknowledging nonalignment as an available political position within the Cold War bipolar conflict. The more recent novel *The Snow Hunters* by Paul Yoon (2013) takes up the same historical predicament as *War Trash*, but centers on a North Korean prisoner of war who chooses not to repatriate after the Korean War, instead settling in the "third country" of Brazil.