

The Weightless of History: *War Trash* and *The Vagrants*

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Abstract: Departing from textual readings and focusing on the representations of activism, this essay attempts to present *War Trash* and *The Vagrants* as Ha Jin's and Yiyun Li's literary endeavors to give presence to the "weightless" mass whose voices in modern Chinese history have been intentionally dismissed or silenced. More importantly, Ha Jin and Yiyun Li, both writing in an adopted language—English—have engaged actively through their historical fiction in a "war" against any socio-political and ideological machinery of oppression and violence which, in turn, crashes one emotionally, mentally, and psychologically. The essay is divided into four sections: the first section introduces the two most renowned Chinese American writers in contemporary American literature—Ha Jin and Yiyun Li. The second section searches through *War Trash* for Ha Jin's meaningful sleight-of-hand in fictionalizing and modernizing the "prison narrative". The third section follows *The Vagrants* to unveil Yiyun Li's carefully woven intertextuality and numerology. The last section looks back at Ha Jin's and Li's activism in their literary journey of, about, and beyond China.

Keywords: Historical fiction, representation, activism

1. Introduction

What's madness but nobility of soul

At odds with circumstance?

— Theodore Roethke, "In a Dark Time"

Having both learned English as a foreign language and published only in English, Ha Jin and Yiyun Li, two acclaimed contemporary Chinese American writers, have inarguably stretched our imaginative landscape to embrace seemingly alien/ Chinese yet universal experience. In his PEN/Faulkner Award winner *War Trash* (2004), Ha Jin captured that universal experience of survival in a fictional Prisoner-of-War's "memoir" as a young soldier in a Chinese Army during The Korean War (1950-1953). Depicting a different kind of war, Yiyun Li's award-winning debut novel *The Vagrants* (2009) initiated and concluded that universal experience with the executions of two 28-year-old women during The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Focusing on the opposite from one another, namely, life versus death, *War Trash* and *The Vagrants* are not just books on life or death under extreme social and political circumstances. As expressed in the line from Roethke's poem quoted to preface this section, extreme social and political circumstances depicted and revived in *War Trash* and *The Vagrants* are perhaps two darkest times in modern Chinese history. What is more damaging, however, is what political frenzy and

social madness has done to human beings for generations. In other words, Ha Jin and Yiyun Li have given literary presence to two important but under-represented periods in Chinese history, the aftermath of which still influence the politics and culture of the country, the livelihood and worldviews of its people. Revisiting different socio-political events in their historical fiction Ha Jin and Yiyun Li went beyond particular historical times to reflect on present situations in China and in the world. By choosing to write in English and not their mother tongue about crucial events in Chinese history, Ha Jin and Yiyun Li cross linguistic and cultural borders to represent untold stories and unheard voices. *War Trash* and *The Vagrants* request individual activism and collective effort in intercultural communication.

Drawn upon personal experiences, *War Trash* is dedicated to Ha Jin's father, a veteran of The Korean War, and Ha Jin himself joined The Chinese People's Liberation Army in 1969 at the age of 14. Yiyun Li, born in Beijing in 1972, four years before the end of The Cultural Revolution, was 17 years old during the 1989 Students' Demonstration in Tiananmen. Not coincidentally, *The Vagrants* is prefaced with a poetic quotation which commemorates the helpless mass. It is not incorrect for Li to literarily associate The Cultural Revolution with the 1989 students' pro-democracy movement, because both events were started and driven by enthusiastic youths—namely, the Red Guards in the former and university students in the latter. Having been a soldier in the Chinese army, Ha Jin not only understood but lived with Chinese soldiers' "fear of captivity", and the idea of dying is better than being captured alive. Having been fed by the news from the Chinese government about the Tiananmen demonstrators like people of her generation, Yiyun Li could only fathom the deep meaning of "sacrifice and political ambition"—to sacrifice the lives of many for one man's political ambition—after gaining an expatriate's distance.

I can only attempt to compare the works of these two prominent Chinese American writers in contemporary American literature. Ha Jin, National Book Award writer, Guggenheim fellow, with the recent publication of *A Map of Betrayal* (2014) has 15 books—11 books of fiction, 3 collections of poetry, and one non-fiction—up to date, and Yiyun Li, winner of the 2010 MacArthur "genius" grant, has published 2 novels and 2 collections of short stories. Both learned English as a foreign language and published only in English, Ha Jin and Yiyun Li have inarguably stretched our imaginative landscape to embrace seemingly alien yet universal experience. In Ha Jin's *War Trash* and Yiyun Li's *The Vagrants*, that universal experience is the survival or death under the socio-political machinery of oppression which in turn damages man emotionally, mentally, and psychologically.

It is only fitting and proper to start the comparative analysis with a quotation that Yiyun Li herself has chosen as a preface for her highly-praised debut novel *The Vagrants* published in 2009. She quotes the following from W. H. Auden's 1952 poem "The Shield of Achilles": The mass and majesty of this world, all/ That carries weight and always weighs the same/ Lay in the hands of others; they were small/ And could not hope for help and no help came:/ What their foes liked to do was done, their shame/ Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride/ And died as men before their bodies died. This quotation not only reflects well on *War Trash* and *The Vagrants* but also provides a thematic framework for the following discussion. First and foremost is the war/anti-war plot, and how it fractures the essential component of a society—family. One way of reading *War Trash* and *The Vagrants* is through their unique

representations of social or historical events—with The Korean War (1950-1953) in the former and The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in the latter, both of which have shaped the Chinese history and culture during the second half of the twentieth century, just as The Trojan War (13th-12th BC) described in the poem “The Shield of Achilles” shaped the history of ancient Greece.

Another point of departure is through the increasing engagement of history with fiction, or vice versa. *War Trash* and *The Vagrants* are both historical fiction and fictionalized histories. Drawn upon actual historical and political events, *War Trash* is, in Ha Jin’s own words “a historical novel,” “a novel in the form of a nonfiction memoir” (Fay, 2012, p. 14; Johnson, 2006, p. 56). Likewise, *The Vagrants* is “a true story” with “history and memory at its most raw and brilliant” (Mukherjee, 2009, p. 47). Reading “The Shield of Achilles” as Auden’s critical response to Homer’s description of the scenes on the shield borne by the Achaean warrior Achilles in his epic poem *Iliad*, what Ha Jin and Yiyun Li did in their respective novels can also be understood as their personal but active and creative responses to ossified histories or hackneyed ideologies. Thus said, “The Shield of Achilles” is written in two different forms, two distinct voices, and therefore two very different pictures juxtaposing together. Interestingly but not at all coincidentally, Yiyun Li quotes only the long stanza of Auden’s poem which unfolds a bleak tapestry of the modern reality in contrast to the short stanza which paints a beautiful image of the bucolic and lost world. The absence of the short stanza and what it symbolizes not only suggests but also enforces its hidden or disrupted intertextuality and the imbalance of the dichotomy: past and present, ideal and real, heroic and opportunist, state and individual, honor and disgrace, democracy and secrecy, totalitarianism and freedom, etc. Hence the very act of telling and writing about these absent stories/histories of common and “small” (to use Auden’s term) people during great historical and political turmoil is activism re-(en)visioned and re-(en)acted when “being human was a sufficient reason for humiliation” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 83), and “words [...] put on paper would be enough evidence to warrant a death sentence” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 8).

Having Auden’s “The Shield of Achilles” in the backdrop and highlighting Ha Jin’s and Yiyun Li’s activism re-(en)visioned and re-(en)acted in their historical fiction, the following discussion will be divided into three sections. Namely, the first section searches through *War Trash* for Ha Jin’s meaningful sleight-of-hand in fictionalizing and modernizing the “prison narrative.” The second section follows *The Vagrants* to unveil Yiyun Li’s carefully woven intertextuality and intricate numerology. The last section looks back at Ha Jin’s and Yiyun Li’s activism in their literary journey of, about, and beyond China.

2. A Voice & A Story

*Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.*

— Alfred Lord Tennyson, “The Charge of the Light Brigade”

Like “The Shield of Achilles,” Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade” is another famous literary/poetic representation of a historical event, The Crimean War (1853-1856) to

be exact. The most memorable lines quoted above not only underscore the soldiers' sense of duty and obligation but also stress their bravery and patriotism. In contrast to Tennyson's "six hundred" British soldiers as a heroic collective, Ha Jin's *War Trash* foregrounds an individual soldier's inglorious experience of war, though the word "trash" in the title includes both the individual and the collective. Furthermore, the eponymous "war trash" are the Chinese army soldiers (called Chinese People's Volunteers) imprisoned in the United States and South Korean military prisons on Koje and Cheju Islands off the coast of South Korea during The Korean War (or better known in China as the War to Resist U.S Aggression and Aid Korea). Inspired by Dostoyevsky's *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* and dedicated the novel to his father, a veteran of The Korean War, Ha Jin's *War Trash* depicts an equally desolate picture of individual life in conflict with the reputation of the country. Composed of 36 chapters to represent Yu Yuan, the memoirist's three year POW imprisonment from 1951-1953, this imaginative fiction of a nonfictional memoir began with a short "Prologue" in which a 73-year-old Yu Yuan, a retired teacher of English explains the genesis of the book when visiting his son's family in Atlanta, United States.

The story starts with the exposure of Yu Yuan's secret mark—a long tattoo below his navel—by his American granddaughter when he was taking a nap one afternoon. When urging his grandson to think of becoming a doctor when he grows up, Yu Yuan remembered his life as POW in Korea and his life as a returned captive through China's tumultuous times—The Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, The Cultural Revolution during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as The Reform and Opening-up in the 1980s—and the lives that could be saved by doctors and nurses because they "follow a different set of ethics, which enable them to transcend political nonsense and man-made enmity and to act with compassion and human decency" (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 5). With the risk of making public his secret on the one hand, and his memories of the wasted lives in Korea and China on the other, Yu Yuan determines to complete a memoir that he had planned to write in his remaining eight or nine months' stay in the United States before going back to China. "I'm going to do it in English," this 73-year-old retired English teacher says, "a language I started learning at the age of fourteen, and I'm going to tell my story in a documentary manner so as to preserve historical accuracy" (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 5). He also hopes that one day his grandchildren—Candie and Bobby, and their parents—his son and Cambodian daughter-in-law "will read these pages so that they can feel the full weight of the tattoo on my belly. I regard this memoir as the only gift a poor man like me can bequeath his American grandchildren" (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 5). In the last chapter—chapter 36, we learn that another thing Yu Yuan determines to do in his remaining months in the United States is to get his tattoo removed from his belly; now that the memoir is completed, he does not need the physical mark anymore. He will always be marked by his words, "his-story" as Yu told us in the concluding paragraph "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" (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 350; emphasis added). The narrated I and narrating I come together in the ending sentence in this powerful imaginative work of fiction in the form of a memoir.

In so doing, Ha Jin puts *War Trash*—his first book set outside of China—along "two ancient and honorable Western literary traditions—the novel in the form of a nonfiction memoir, and the nonfiction memoir as prison narrative" (Banks, "View from the Prison Camp") and puts

himself in the company of great writers in the history of literature—Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe* (1719)) and Oscar Wilde (*The Ballad of Reading Goal* (1897)) to name a few. When talking with Dwight Garner, Ha Jin mentioned that he started *War Trash* in 2001 as a short novel, and “fear” is the impetus for this novel, the fear of captivity. Drawn upon his personal experience in The Chinese People’s Liberation Army, Xuefei Jin (Ha Jin’s legal name) joined the PLA in December 1969 when he was not yet fourteen; he has to lie about his age and also, he could join because his father was an army officer. “Because when I was a soldier in the Chinese Army, most of the soldiers were afraid of captivity more than death” (Banks, “View from the Prison Camp”). Despite the narrator’s plain language and monotonous tone, faithful to the documentary manner of historical accuracy, the poetic core of *War Trash* can actually be traced back to Ha Jin’s first book of poetry *Between Silences: A Voice from China* published in 1990, two years before he received his PhD from Brandeis University. In the first part “Towards a Battlefield” of *Between Silences*, Ha Jin describes in poetic languages life in the Chinese army, among which the poem “Promise” is the most autobiographical. In “Promise”, a mother asks her son the new soldier going to serve in the border area between Russia and China to promise her: “If you are caught by the enemy,/you must never give up, and never/betray our country and our people./Please promise me.” (Ha Jin, 1990, p. 15). Comforting his mother not to worry, the new soldier confesses: “For many years I couldn’t promise, Mom./I was not sure whether I could endure/the wolfhounds the Russians would set upon me/if I refused to tell what they wanted to know” (Ha Jin, 1990, p. 16).

The poetic essence of honor, loyalty and patriotism in “Promise” is extended and made complicated in *War Trash* by a first-person account or accusation of cruelty, repression, and deprivation. The Chinese POWs were mistreated by their American and South Korean guards and military administrators. Once imprisoned, the Chinese POWs are divided into two warring units: those who are loyal to Communist China and want to return to mainland China and those who are loyal to National China and wish to be repatriated to Taiwan. As a cadet from the Huangpu Military Academy whose principal had once been Chiang Kai-shek in the Nationalist regime, Yu Yuan, a non-Communist party member, “has never been so cheerful” that “[t]he Communists had brought order to [the] country and hope to the common people” (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 7). Yu Yuan is trapped in the middle; he has no particular loyalty to either side. His only idea of surviving and returning to mainland China is to take care of his widowed mother and his fiancée Tao Julan. Since Yu Yuan speaks English, he has become important to both his fellow prisoners and their US and South Korean captors, serving the role of an interpreter. Taking a fake name “Feng Yan” during his imprisonment (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 53), Yu Yuan has to find a way to survive in the chasm among three perilous groups—the Nationalists, the Communists, and the Captors, all of which take turns to court, bribe, bully, and torture him as a consequence of the rise and fall within the prison system.

A pro-Nationalist prison camp leader had an anti-Communist slogan tattooed on Yu Yuan (Feng Yan) right below his navel to extinguish his hope of returning to Communist China. If he wants to go back to mainland China, he has to take part in the pro-Communist activities and cannot stand aloof. “Either you become their friend or their enemy. The Communists don’t believe anyone can remain neutral” (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 122). When he reported this unnerving anti-Communist tattoo to the Communist leader in prison, Yu Yuan was told not to remove it

because he is needed to deal with the Americans, and a tattoo like his can help him to work for the Communist cause in the power struggle of the prison. As the prison-exchange negotiations in Panmun-jom go on, the pressure on Yu Yuan about where to return increases. In the end, Yu Yuan chose mainland China because of his mother and his fiancée; as a result his anti-Communist tattoo was reformed to be an anti-US slogan during his stay in the Repatriate Center. It is also during his stay in the Repatriate Center that he heard from his fiancée's brother about the death of his mother and was told not to marry Julian because he is "a disgraced captive" now and their marriage can only bring shame and burden to Julian (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 344). The two individuals whom Yu cared about and on whom all his decisions were made do not exist anymore. Life's cruel joke on Yu Yuan has not even started to end yet. He was publicly humiliated during The Cultural Revolution and had to make himself a buffoon in order to save his neck. More fortunate than most of his repatriated fellow POWs, Yu Yuan had learned not to "regret [his] fate" (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 348). However, he could never "recover [his] equilibrium" until his anti-US tattoo is removed in the United States when visiting his son (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 348).

The surgical pain of erasing words on the surface of the skin acutely disturbs Yu Yuan to uncover his hidden painful memories. One of the cruel facts is that "the POWs had already been written off as a loss" by their country once they were captured, and were "pawns" used to embarrass the enemy during the prisoner-exchange negotiations and now these surviving "war trash" become "dregs of society" (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 345). Knowing both the Nationalists and the Communists well by now, a wise Yu Yuan tells the truths about these two sides and the reasons why they treat the POWs differently. It was the desperate straits of lacking in manpower in their army that forced the Nationalists to value their prisoners much more. "By contrast, the Communists wanted [the POWs] back mainly to save face" (Ha Jin, 2004, p. 317). Saving face of the country is more important than the lives of these war-torn individuals. Both *War Trash* and *The Vagrants* examine important historical moments in China where "the country cannot be violated for the sake of the individual" and when "the individual was treated as a screw or a small cog in the revolutionary machine" (Fay, 2012). These individuals are either trash or vagrants, human beings without a voice, silenced and forever living on the edge of a society that is always ready to write them off.

3. Season of Spring & Season of Sorrow

... Suffering is one very long moment.

We cannot divide it by seasons.

— Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

The Vagrants starts symbolically on "the spring equinox"--March 21, yet to Teacher Gu and his wife, their unspeakable sorrow and suffering would not be affected by "the changing of seasons" (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 3). Carefully structured with twelve chapters in three parts, Li begins the story of *The Vagrants* with the execution of a 28 year old woman Gu Shan on March 21, 1979, and ends with the execution of another 28 year old woman Wu Kai 40 days later on May Day 1979. The death of a young beautiful woman has never ceased to be a poetic topic in literature. However, Li has masterfully portrayed these two deaths

poetically tragic and politically necessary. The executions of Shan and Kai are “put on display for other people’s political ambitions” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 229), and the pre-execution denunciation ceremonies serve to “frighten all mischievous monkeys into obedience” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 332). The time is March 21, 1979, three months after Deng Xiaoping’s Socialism with Chinese Characteristics advocated on the third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee in December 1978 and three years after Mao Zedong’s death (in September 1976) and the collapse of the “Gang of Four” (in October 1976). Born in Beijing in 1972 four years before the end of The Cultural Revolution and growing up with China’s rapid economic privatization in the 1980s, Yiyun Li would associate the significance of 1979 with other milestone socio-political event that happened in China in the last year of a decade: the first students’ democratic movement in 1919, the founding of the new Communist China in 1949, the Tiananmen Square demonstration in 1989, and the fact that *The Vagrants* was published in 2009 is also not a mere coincidence.

In history, the end of a decade often forecasts a new beginning of an era, as the 80,000 residents in Muddy River hoped, “full of love and progress” and “of national policies to develop technology and the economy” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 10). Unknown to the residents of Muddy River is that during the next two decades, China would skyrocket to become the world’s second largest economy and has built the world’s fastest train. Equally unsurprising to the residents of Muddy River, even after twenty years “China can make people suddenly disappear” (Ramzy, 2011, p. 30). Misnamed after a river, Muddy River is a 10 year old industrial city 700 miles from Beijing. Heavily populated with old and new migrants from villages near and far, Muddy River is any Chinese provincial city. Ironically, the “changing of seasons” suggested by March 21—the first day of spring—“spring after ten long years of winter” comes unexpectedly slowly to Muddy River (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p.3, 10). In fact, seasons or chapters are arranged purposefully to indicate a disruption in nature, literally and figuratively. If twelve chapters are twelve months in a year, then these twelve chapters should be divided into four parts with each part consists of three chapters suggesting one season. However, there are three parts in the book and first part has six chapters. Each part focuses on one Chinese holiday—Spring Equinox, Ching Ming, and May Day, that is, March 21, April 5, and May 1. In this sense, the whole book centers around only one season—spring, “the season of sorrow” (Wilde, 1905, p.1), which comes with the news of a death sentence instead of the sprout of life. Flanked by two executions in 40 days, the people of Muddy River are interconnected with one another through Shan’s death, and always through fear, secrecy, betrayal, and yet not so rarely through small acts of kindness.

Li’s heightened sensitivity toward the smallest details and her conscious arrangement of dates and numbers has made *The Vagrants* a masterpiece of the forgotten and the unknown. It all begins with the execution of Gu Shan, who turned 28 years 3 months and 7 days old on March 21, 1979, and who remained silent throughout the book as symbolized by her severed vocal cords, and whose story has to be told by others. For her mother Mrs. Gu, Shan was “a healthy, strong and beautiful girl” who “loves leather shoes” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 55, 6), and for her father Teacher Gu, Shan was the educated youth who could “recite poetry from the Tang dynasty since she was very young” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 53), for Nini’s father Shan was “a leader of the Red Guard” who kicked his wife’s belly when she was “eight

months pregnant with Nini” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 63). Old Hua and Mrs. Hua were also “among the ones Shan had whipped and kicked in a public gathering in 1966” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 83). For Shan’s boyfriend who turned her letter of doubts about Chairman Mao and his Cultural Revolution, Shan is a necessary and efficient sacrifice to ensure his joining the army. For Teacher Gu’s school party secretary, Shan was the unrepentant prisoner “sentenced for her slander of [the] Communist cause” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 102). For Kai the news announcer “the throat and tongue for the party” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 192), Shan was a former classmate and above all, a “heroine” who “spoke out against a corrupt system with courage and insight” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 229). For everyone in Muddy River on the first day of spring in 1979, Shan was the ex-Red Guard turned counterrevolutionary whose pre-execution denunciation ceremony they were required to attend. Among the attendees, there is seven-year-old Tong (the same age as Yiyun Li herself in 1979), who “longed to be one of the first to join the Communist Young Pioneers” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 27), and that longing has been fulfilled at the end of the book by selling out his own father, who now has “deafened ears, broken skull, and forever-paralyzed body” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 329). Kai’s husband Han who initiates Shan’s kidney transplant to a top official for the future of his political career in the end has to divorce and denounce his wife just to save himself and also to deprive his son of the memory of a disgraceful mother.

Unfortunately, Han and Kai’s family is not the only one crushed and crumbled by the totalitarian system. Teacher Gu and Mrs. Gu, disillusioned by their first marriages and disheartened by the execution of their only child, have to come to terms with the fact that family is flimsy; personal is political. Serving as an education expert in a Nationalist government, Teacher Gu was married to a mathematics professor working as a secret messenger for the underground Communist Party. Their marriage ended in three years leaving him wondering for the rest of his life “if [she] were assigned to marry [him] by [her] party leaders for [her] Communist cause” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 228). Being the most knowledgeable person in the novel, Teacher Gu is also the most passive and perceptive. It is through him that Yiyun Li comments on the wretched lives of an authoritarian society—“what marks our era [...] is the moaning of our bones crushed beneath the weight of empty words. There is no beauty in this crushing, and there is, alas, no escape for us now, or ever” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 228). They are “all sufferers in their despicable pain” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 312) living one day indistinguishably from the next until “everybody dies” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 7).

Bleak and depressing as it is, the novel comes to a seemingly content dénouement with justice partially fulfilled and happiness somewhat achieved. Happiness lies with Old Hua and Mrs. Hua giving up their home to “[go] back to the vagrant life” hoping to visit their seven daughters before “their final exit from the world” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 285). Both orphans themselves, Old Hua and Mrs. Hua found “in their wandering lives as rubbish collectors” seven deserted baby girls (as trash) whom they were forced to give up later because the government told them “[they] were not the legal parents” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 43). Leaving with them is the twelve year old cripple Nini “who had been disowned by her parents” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 336) and who would come back in seventeen years for Bashi—the only one who loves and cares for her—after he serves a prison sentence for a crime he did not really commit. The vagrants of the title are not only Old Hua and Mrs. Hua but those helpless masses “trapped

in specific place and a specific historical moment” (Knox, 2010), whose lives lay in the hands of others; they “died as men before their bodies died” (Li, 2009, *The Vagrants*, p. 1) because their self-respect, pride, and humanity have been crushed under the forces of conformity, conspiracy, and tyranny of The Cultural Revolution.

4. Re-(en)visioning Activism in a Different Tongue

because countries are in our blood and we bleed them
— Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, “Learning to love America”

Publishing his first book of poetry *Between Silences: A Voice from China* when he was still a PhD student at Brandeis University, Ha Jin states in the “Preface” that he considers himself as a fortunate Chinese who would write in English on behalf of “those unfortunate people who suffered, endured or perished at the bottom of life and who created the history and at the same time were fooled or ruined by it” (Ha Jin, 1990, p. 2). As the title explicates, this first book, and more to come, is Ha Jin’s attempt to give a voice to these unfortunate and downtrodden people in and beyond China. After over three decades of living and publishing in the United States, Ha Jin still considers “Chinese his first language” (Fay, 2012) yet writing in English does give him “a lot of flexible room” to “abuse the language” with “a different kind of sensibility and a slightly different kind of syntax, idiom, and style” (Johnson, 2006, p. 57). Aware of the fact that he has not returned to China since 1985, Ha Jin sees himself now more of an immigrant short-story writer “in the margin [...] between two languages, two cultures, two literatures, two countries”, a Chinese American writer who “would feel more at home if [he] wrote in Chinese,” but since he has been “writing in English for so long he can’t switch” (Fay, 2012). Like Ha Jin who has never written fiction in Chinese, Yiyun Li states that English is her first language in writing and most of her thinking is also done in English. “Over the years, my brain has banished Chinese. I dream in English. I talk to myself in English. And memories...are sorted in English,” she confesses (Li, 2017). Furthermore, she also confidently expresses that even when she writes about China from a distance, it is still possible for her to enter the Chinese world from any place because human nature is the key.

Both having learned English as a foreign language and published only in English, Ha Jin and Yiyun Li are actively making use of the room or spaces in the English language to revisit different political periods in their historical fiction about China, yet they went beyond the historical past to reflect on present situations in China and in the world. History, therefore, is not only a mirror to remind us of what happened before, but also “a nightmare” from which human beings are “trying to awake” (Joyce, 1961, p. 34). Envisioning history as a burden that debilitates humanity and represses the sensibility of the modern being, both Ha Jin and Yiyun Li turn to writing as a blessing complement to history for self-knowledge. Since history is “a semi-science” and “a kind of art” (White, 1978, p. 27), history writing embraces selective documentary facts and artistic representations. Hence, history is better understood as a mode of thinking and a way of representation. If as a way of representation, history’s written records and documentary facts are gruesome nightmares, then absences in history surely suggest something even worse.

Ha Jin and Yiyun Li have filled in those absences in history imaginatively in their fiction for a more complete and better knowledge of the past. *War Trash* and *The Vagrants* are only two single examples in Ha Jin's and Yiyun Li's literary endeavors to give presence to the absent "weightless" mass whose voices in modern Chinese history have been left out or written off. In this sense, Ha Jin and Yiyun Li have engaged actively through their history-writing in a "war" against any socio-political and ideological machinery of oppression or violence which crashes one emotionally, mentally, and psychologically. As Shirley Lim quoted at the very beginning of the section powerfully puts it: "countries are in our blood and we bleed them," Chinese American writers Ha Jin and Yiyun Li are given the sensibility of two countries, the advantage of two languages, and the weight of two cultures. Whether *War Trash* and *The Vagrants* are set in China or not, Ha Jin and Yiyun Li question the meaning of human existence, and more significantly they depict particular human conditions in history that transcend national borders.

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