

VETERANS VOICE

Forgotten Taiwanese Veteran's Memory of Compulsory Service

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Having withdrawn in utter defeat in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek militarized the island of Taiwan with the express purpose of retaking China. Compulsory military service of every able-bodied man, except Chiang's grandsons and those of the elite ruling class, had been implemented soon after. Averaging two to three years, such military service was either hailed as turning boys into men or scorned as a total waste of the best years of one's life. This rite of passage generation after generation symptomized Taiwan's repetition compulsion in the wake of Chiang's primary wound of having lost China or of Chiang as the primary wound, an abscess of obsession over recovering the mainland. Chiang embodies calcified homesickness over what one had, blind to what one has. A shared civic duty, compulsory service culminated the K-12 military-style education, particularly weekly classes of military drills that closed with the annual or biannual bang of target practice with World War II Mauser-style rifles that required a hard pull after each shot. Because of universal conscription, military service in Taiwan was such a collective experience among males that being a veteran was taken for granted. Only those who were not became subjects of interest and suspicion. The veteran status was barely acknowledged in Taiwan other than part of manhood in enduring and outgrowing life's discomfort. The Western divide between the civilian and the military failed to capture a society with built-in militarization whereby masculinity meant discharging many duties, including the obligation of military service. In the US, veterans formed a visible and vocal minority with such services dedicated specifically to them as Department of Veterans Affairs, VA Hospitals, discounts and complimentary fares, even their own automobile license plates, not to mention the national holiday of Veterans Day on November 11. Veteran Days is distinct from Memorial Day, the last Monday in May, in honor of military personnel who died while serving in the Armed Forces. Both national holidays differ yet again from Armed Forces Day, the third Saturday in May. Three days are reserved in the US for military personnel who are serving, who have been discharged, and who have died. Such government apparatus and annual rituals enact Winston Churchill's wartime speech: "Never was so much owed by so many to so few." Peace enjoyed by civilians is indebted to those who choose to serve. In contrast, only a Soldiers Day or Armed Forces Day of September 3 marked Taiwan's annual calendar. Neither was it a national holiday nor one for discharged personnel: it was for those currently serving in the military. The vast chain of Veteran General Hospitals across Taiwan, likewise, put the emphasis on the word in the middle, serving the general population with no special treatment for veterans beyond those few surviving octogenarian or nonagenarian *laobing*, Old Soldiers who had arrived in Taiwan in 1949. By this measure, real veterans were those who fought the Japanese and the communists in China; serving in Taiwan's peacetime were but "toy soldiers" and, subsequently, "toy veterans." Military service in peacetime was deemed routine, humdrum, devoid of searing traumas of violent conflicts. The invisible and silent majority unaware of itself as a majority, Taiwanese veterans had largely forgotten those "blank pages" in their lives, which rarely found expression in contemporary Taiwanese literature and film, let alone written in English by Taiwanese veterans. As one of the Taiwanese veterans who are forgotten in an amnesiac society, I write in remembrance of unforgettable shards of time: a high school military instructor who slapped my younger rebellious self; a nose that bled through the boot camp, joined by the left shinbone's hairline fracture; a fall from Military Police Company 213's upper bunk that swelled the right cheek to twice its size; an impaled left wrist as I scaled the anti-terrorist Special Forces barrack's barbed wire; the 1981 typhoons that barred my returns to the camp from weekend leaves with serious consequences and that continued to strand my nightmares to this day; and a few good men who stood me in good stead then and now. Absent public commemoration and group identity, I hereby present this veteran body and mind with waning memories of an ex-toy soldier.

Keywords: Taiwanese compulsory military service; memory; forgetting; trauma; healing

Having withdrawn in utter defeat in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek militarized the island of Taiwan with the express purpose of retaking China. Compulsory military service of every “able-bodied man,” except Chiang’s grandsons and those of the elite ruling class, was implemented soon after. Averaging two to three years, such military service was either hailed as turning boys into men or scorned as a total waste of the best years of one’s life. This rite of passage generation after generation symptomized Taiwan’s repetition compulsion in the wake of Chiang’s primary wound of having lost China or of Chiang as the primary wound, an abscess of obsession over recovering the mainland. Along with his generation, Chiang personified calcified homesickness over what one had, blind to what one has. One man’s compulsion, one million men’s conscription, which evokes the Tang dynasty poet Cao Song’s famous line “One General’s fame, tens of thousands’ dry bones.”

A shared civic duty, compulsory service culminated the K-12 military-style education. Students participated in weekly classes of military drills that closed with the annual or biannual bang of target practice with World War II Mauser-style rifles that required a hard pull after each shot. Because of universal conscription, military service in Taiwan was such a collective experience among males that being a veteran was taken for granted. Only those who were not veterans became subjects of interest and suspicion. The veteran status was barely acknowledged in Taiwan other than part of manhood in enduring and outgrowing life’s discomfort. The Western divide between the civilian and the military failed to describe a society with built-in militarization whereby masculinity meant discharging many duties, including the obligation of military service. In the US, veterans formed a visible and vocal minority with such services dedicated specifically to them as Department of Veterans Affairs, VA Hospitals, veteran discounts and complimentary fares, even their own vehicle license plates, not to mention the national holiday of Veterans Day on November 11. Veterans Day is distinct from Memorial Day, the last Monday in May, in honor of military personnel who died while serving in the Armed Forces. Both national holidays differ yet again from Armed Forces Day, the third Saturday in May. Three days are reserved in the US for soldiers still serving, already retired, or retired from life. Such government apparatus and annual rituals enact Winston Churchill’s 1940 wartime speech: “Never was so much owed by so many to so few.” Whereas peace enjoyed by civilians is indebted to those who choose to serve, gratitude hinges on the disproportionate ratio of many civilians versus few veterans. Should nearly half of any nation’s population be veterans, Churchill’s maxim falls flat on its face.

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Veterans General Hospitals across Taiwan, likewise, puts the emphasis on the word in the middle, serving the general population with no special treatment for veterans beyond those few surviving octogenarian or nonagenarian *laobing*, Old Soldiers who had arrived in Taiwan in 1949 and/or stationed in Kinmen (Quemoy) Islands during the August 23, 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis of heavy shelling. Veterans General Hospital took a great deal of liberty in translating its Chinese original *Rongmin yiyuan* (Honored Citizens Hospital). By this measure, real veterans or honored citizens were those who fought the Japanese and the communists in China and Kinmen; those serving in Taiwan’s peacetime were but “toy soldiers” and, subsequently, “toy veterans.” Military service in peacetime was deemed monotonous, humdrum, devoid of searing traumas of violent conflicts. The invisible and silent majority unaware of itself as a majority, Taiwanese veterans had largely forgotten those “blank pages” in their lives, which rarely found expression in contemporary Taiwanese literature and film, let alone written in English by Taiwanese veterans.

As one of the Taiwanese veterans who are forgotten in an amnesiac society, I write in remembrance of unforgettable shards of time: a high school military instructor who slapped my younger rebellious self; a nose that bled through the boot camp, joined by the left shinbone’s hairline fracture; a fall from Military Police Battalion 213’s upper bunk that swelled the right cheek to twice its size; an impaled left wrist as I scaled the anti-terrorist Special Forces barrack’s barbed wire; the 1981 typhoons that barred my returns to the camp from weekend leaves with serious consequences and that continued to strand my nightmares to this day; and a few good men who stood me in good stead then and now. Absent public commemoration and group identity, I hereby present this veteran body and mind with waning memories of an ex-toy soldier.

***Jiaoguan*, or Teacher-Officer**

In the name of its avowed mission of restoring the mainland, not to mention the reality of cross-strait political tension, Taiwan interpolated the society with militarization. Its educational system inherited that of the Japanese colonization (1895–1945), the harshness of which, including routine corporal punishment, was complemented by Nationalist *Jiaoguan*, or Teacher-Officer, military officers embedded in secondary and tertiary schools. A Teacher-Officer taught his own weekly Military Training classes and, in general, enforced school discipline. Pardon the sexist pronoun: I had never met a female Teacher-Officer since the Taiwanese secondary schools I had the fortune of attending were all gender-segregated. No longer in command of military units, deemed a light, cushy job before retirement, a Teacher-Officer was much hated by high school students who were themselves hormonally challenged. One Teacher-Officer’s midlife crisis clashed with this high schooler’s waywardness.

School uniforms were strictly regulated since they were but thinly veiled military uniforms. Going to school one dreary, chilly morning with my winter uniform still wet, I decided to put on a long-sleeved jersey under my short-sleeved summer school shirt. Nor did I have the school belt with its shiny copper buckle. I figured both irregularities would have been well camouflaged had I zipped up my school jacket all the way to my neck like a good boy. After over an hour and several bus rides, I arrived at the school front gate with a horde of students, only to be picked out by this much feared Teacher-Officer, a short man notorious for his flare-ups. For some unknown reason, he targeted me. Told to unzip my jacket for a uniform inspection, I stalled and asked why. Perhaps because of my tone, posture, or general attitude, he flew into a rage, physically unzipping my jacket to find my civilian belt, plus the short-sleeved shirt. He reached in to unbuckle the belt and pull it out in public, nearly dropping my pants. We tussled and he dragged me into the main office. Pushing me into the corner behind high metal cabinets, he slapped me roundly, repeatedly.

I am embarrassed to admit that I began to snivel. His boss, the high school's Director of Discipline, sauntered into the corner, clearly figuring out what had unfolded out of sight. He stared at me and snickered, before strolling away without a word. I cut school as a result. I feigned waiting for the bus every morning and then rushed downhill to a thick bamboo grove, where I spent the last three months of high school. For a city boy with no exposure to nature, those days were pure magic. I remember the shiny green poisonous snake slithering across the mountain path, while I watched, mesmerized. I loved lying amidst the dense bamboos to wait for the hawk gliding by, often with a snake twisting in its beak. I was dumbfounded once when lying supine on the ground, the green stalk of a small plant vanished into the earth. As if a sleight of hand by God, I realize now it was probably a mole or something feasting. This escape into nature to avert the struggle in school eerily reflected, even magnified, that struggle: the violence of eating or being eaten. The hawk in the sky, the snake on the ground, and the underground thing were engaged in exactly what that Teacher-Officer was doing: eating the weak to stay strong. Such irony informs the sequestering of the military from the civilian. War and peace, or warriors and the peace-loving civil society, are strange bedfellows, thrown together by humanity torn between survival and justice, carnivorous self-interest and manicured self-image. That Teacher-Officer's flat pan of a palm and his killer backhand gave me my first taste of soldiery—salty from tears and sweat, with a trace of blood, all blessedly bittersweet when aged.

The Fall

Do I suffer from quasi-PTSD from schoolground rather than battlefield? Such "friendly fire" came from authority figures at schools, at boot camps, and at several military units that I had the pleasure of serving, so much so that I prefer not to elaborate on the map of scars on my person, which, I am happy to report, are all fading now, barely

recognizable, a mere trace in my mind like a classical ink wash painting. Revisiting in such excruciating details brings me too close to experiences I would just as soon forget. In terms of reception, too much of a "bad" thing leads to reader numbing and compassion fatigue; it may even cause backlash of blaming the bad things on the messenger, especially when he is not one of us (i.e., the US), from elsewhere. Naturalized American citizenship, in the eye of "red-blooded" Americans, can turn against itself; to xenophobes in a Trumpinized, lobotomized America, it is a fake front, unnatural, de-naturalized. Such is the paradox of being in-between speaking into a void: Those who had served in Taiwan are not about to read this piece written in English and published in the US; those who do read this do not share my lived experience of Taiwan's compulsory service.

In view of the concern over compassion fatigue, let me just add that I had missed in the litany of "shards of time" quite a number of incidents. I was choked and pinned down, spread-eagle in a rather compromising position, on a pool table by a recruit who used to be a cement mason with a vise-like grip, while his buddies took their time slow-taunting me. That offense was no fragging, although my rank was higher. Nor was it anywhere near a statutory rape, but close to it in my limited social experience, given my flailing like a fish gasping for air. Having slept badly in such good company of the crowded barracks for weeks, I dozed off during my wee hour shift, during which a sidearm in the Company storage was stolen, a dereliction of duty deemed an egregious crime in a Taiwan where firearms were—and still are—banned, except in the military and law enforcement. The sidearm in question was a .45 Automatic Colt Pistol, standard issue in Taiwan's Military Police. The Battalion Chief Advisor, practically second-in-command in my unit of Military Police Battalion 213, swiped the pistol to teach his subordinate and my superior, my Company Commander, a lesson. My Company Commander had been repeatedly mocked as too nice and too lax by the Battalion leadership in public during roll calls. The Company Commander was summarily replaced after the gun theft; I would not wish to repeat his last words to me. His parting shot, along with the fact that I was neither locked up nor court martialed as threatened, led me to believe that the incident had not been reported to the higher-up. Strictly speaking, the sidearm was not stolen, but merely "on loan" to the Battalion Chief Advisor for him to make a point, who blithely returned it the next day.

I appeared to be a mere pawn in this power play, a weak point that the Battalion leadership sought to exploit. I was told later that the Battalion's top brass examined the roster of night shifts closely before lights-out and then converged in the Battalion Commander's quarters drinking late into the night, as though waiting for my shift. I would not put it past the Battalion Commander and the Battalion Chief Advisor to cook up such a scheme. Both were graduates of Taiwan's Political Warfare Officer Academy in the tradition of Commissars and Secretariats of the Soviet Union Communist Party, a system acquired by then President Chiang Ching-kuo, son of Chiang Kai-shek, during his

hostage years in Moscow from 1925 to 1937. Unlike commanding officers trained at the Republic of China Military Academy, equivalent to West Point, these Political Warfare Officers were seen as less suited to command troops than propaganda, psych-op, and mind control. Was this pilfering designed to gain leverage over my Company in Battalion 213? Come to think of it, did the Battalion leaders instigate the cement mason, or instigate a chain of "Masonic" events to instigate the mason?

Conspiracy theories aside, losing a weapon was so heinous that it earned me, among other "plums," a late-night visit to Lao K, a *laobing* or old-time Master Sergeant with the perk of living by himself on a trailer left on what used to be the US military base on Zhongshan Road in Taipei. "K" implied knock or hit, so this specter-like monstrosity loomed over me that night when I stepped into his trailer. What Lao K did was a mere tap on the wrist, so to speak, telling me to pull myself together on grounds that we "mainlanders" should stick together vis-à-vis the majority of Taiwanese soldiers. I was saved on account of Lao K's racism. Having survived the lion's mouth without a scrape, I still crumbled under duress, especially my worsening insomnia. Plagued by anxiety and disturbing dreams, I tossed and turned so badly one night that I fell from the upper bunk, smashing my face. I heard a deep grunt as if all the air expired from somewhere, followed by keening from someone. Only moments later did I become conscious enough to realize I was the one who cried out, the burning on my right cheek and chest unbearable.

The fall culminated the pressure built up by the routine at Military Police Battalion 213 stationed at the north end of Zhongshan Road, near the Taipei Zoo and The Grand Hotel. As a Corporal, I was responsible for automobile patrol with a driver and two soldiers. There were five under-the-street pedestrian tunnels on that section of the thoroughfare. Our job was to cruise and park near each tunnel and walk in formation in a rather ritualized, affected manner through the tunnel and back. This would somehow protect our President and Command-in-Chief Chiang Ching-kuo, whose residence lay north of the Grand Hotel. This show of force, this stylized catwalk through the tunnel, gave Taiwanese military policemen the moniker of "toy soldiers." Good for looks only, like fashion models. In Taiwan's sultry summer, these models' uniforms revealed layers of white circles around the armpits and the back, sweat dried up at different times, leaving behind salt prints. Inside the uniforms were heat rashes one could not scratch for appearance's sake. After daytime shows, night shifts either from midnight to 2 a.m. or 2 to 4 a.m. always kept me up all night. As a *cainiao* (literally, "Green Bird" for rookies), I was given the worst shifts for consecutive nights until I cracked. Were the Battalion Commanders working in cahoots on shift assignments to strain the Company to the breaking point in order to oust the Company Commander through me? Was my accident of losing a pistol, falling from the upper bunk, planned and orchestrated by puppet masters? Am I shifting personal responsibility by resorting to conspiracy theories,

circumstantial evidence notwithstanding? So unsettling to look back, none the wiser despite the pain.

Let me cushion the fall through the distancing strategy of a Chinese poem I published in 1987, subsequently included in *Sanshi zuoyou* (*Thirty, Left and Right*), my 1989 poetry collection from Taiwan's Shulin Press. That distancing is achieved in part through the metaphor of Wu Cheng'en's sixteenth-century classic *Journey to the West*, a novel imagining the Tang dynasty monk Tripitaka's adventure to India for Buddhist sutras. Tripitaka was escorted by three monstrous disciples led by the half-human, half-beast protagonist "Monkey," surnamed "Sun." "Old Sun" or "The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven," as Monkey loved to call himself, wreaked havoc in heaven, only to be subdued by the Buddha. The Buddha wagered that Sun the Monkey would never be able to step out of his palm. Turning his magical somersaults non-stop for thousands and thousands of miles, Monkey believed that he had reached the edge of heaven with five soaring peaks. True to his animal instinct for territorial marking, Monkey signed his self-designated title "The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven" and urinated at the foot of the peak before turning back. Monkey was aghast when he discovered that his signature and discharge lay at the ball of the Buddha palm. Monkey was punished for five hundred years crushed under Five Element Mountain that stood for the Buddha's five fingers. Hence, the Chinese saying: "You can't flee from my palm," the equivalent of the English expression "you're under my thumb." Excerpts are translated below:

Pre-Journey to the West

1. The Days Crushed under the Mountain
Edging along the stiff cliffs on the banks of
Zhongshan Road
A tortoise crawls in slow-motion
Astride on top is Old Sun
Fastened down real tight
By a snowy white helmet
Emblazoned with two black letters: MP

In the rapid rush of cars
Where would Old Sun be ferried to
Fuxing Bridge and the Grand Hotel
Circling between the Buddha's joined palms
Slower than reincarnation
Five tunnels
Disembark, march, surveil
Any hot chicks
...
No way to get out from the center of the palm
Old Sun might as well leave behind a couplet
At the dark and damp corner under Fuxing Bridge:
The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven Seven Three Three Eight
Peeking around to make sure no one's coming
The steaming stream of pearls veers off
Rolling over the shiny black boots
Old Sun, vanquished, purifies

The Venerable Buddha Palm
 With this devout brew of the loins
 ...
 Old Sun would rather be a wandering ghost
 Ripping off the spell sealing this mountain
 Breaking out of this demonic palm
 Would rather drift on forever in the foreign land
 Than shut and buried in this tomb
 Nearing the MP barracks on Zhongshan Road
 The vehicle vanishes into the shadow of a red-brick wall

All Military Police barracks in Taiwan had red-brick walls. "Seven Three Three Eight" is military jargon for, possibly, "all units return to base." Although as the Corporal who communicated in codes with the headquarters on each patrol, I no longer remember what it meant. Be careful of what you wish for, even metaphorically speaking in poetry, for I did journey to the West and "drift on forever in the foreign land," no longer on the Buddha palm, but under the white thumb.

Ah Bin

My compulsory service would have fared as the darkest hours of my life had I not met my dear friend Ah Bin. But for the great leveler of military service, I would have never met Ah Bin across the social divide. I was a mainlander from the city; he a Hakanese from the remote Hsingchu mountains. I attended college in Taipei; he a professional school majoring in mechanics. I resented delaying my advanced studies overseas after college; he volunteered for the toughest training as a commando that required lengthening the span of service. I had been plagued by migraine and an overactive immune system and countless other health issues since childhood—no bone spurs, alas, for deferral; he felt bad physically—absent dopamine released by exercise—had he not done his daily run from Linkou to Guishan at the minimum. I embodied *wen* in the classical split of *wenwu*, literary-martial, except my mind was riddled with strife and angst; he *wu*, except his temperament was sensitive and exceptionally discerning.

Our paths crossed in the anti-terrorist Special Forces headquarters of the Military Police stationed in the former US military base in Linkou. Owing to my English proficiency, I was transferred there as a language instructor. Supposedly, commandos there would be trained in the global lingua franca, but when I got there, I was assigned duties of a clerk, copying mountains of official documents and selling instant noodles and red bean buns on the side. My chagrin on the first day of the new job was written on my face, much to the bemusement or disdain of team members. Yet a tall muscular guy dropped by the office and asked if I had settled in, whether I still needed anything. I thought about it and replied: "a basin and a pair of white sneakers," thinking nothing of it. Yet he produced the two items later that day. "The basin is a bit beat up," he said, "but it'll tide you over these few days." My translation into Standard English did not do justice to his Hakanese-inflected Mandarin. This charted

the pattern of our lifelong friendship. Loyal and generous to a fault, Ah Bin has always been my comrade, although thousands of miles apart.

I did teach one memorable English class to the anti-terrorist unit one night after their grueling daylong training of long-distance running, weightlifting, Taekwondo, Judo, hand-to-hand combat and sparring, marksmanship, parachute jumping, scaling and repelling, counterterrorism operation such as accessing a hijacked airplane, and whatnot. This class had been perhaps the high point of my teaching career before it even started in the US for some forty years. I rounded up a cassette tape recorder with a tape of popular songs, considered to be oldies now, including Tom Jones's "I'm Coming Home" and "Green Green Grass of Home." As I translated the latter's lyrics, the class was enraptured by a song all could hum to, but never realized how apposite it would apply to their condition of semi-incarceration:

The old hometown looks the same
 As I step down from the train
 ...
 Down the road I look and there runs Mary
 Hair of gold and lips like cherries
 ...
 The old house is still standing tho' the paint is
 cracked and dry
 And there's that old oak tree that I used to play on
 ...
 Then I awake and look around me
 At four grey walls that surround me
 And I realize, yes, I was only dreaming

When I got to the recitative of "Then I awake ... four grey walls around me," an aboriginal commando burst out: "F—! That's me!", a sentiment the class echoed, nodding and clapping one another on the back. Having volunteered for the elite unit, they had signed up for a lengthier military service than mine. They would stay within the walls dreaming of "Mary" long after my discharge. The identification between the teacher and the students at that session was complete, for both saw themselves as "doin' their time." For decades, I thought that on this Tom Jones album, there was the 1973 track "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree," which turned out to be by Tony Orlando and Dawn. I am only certain that I had played and translated that song as well that night. The vivid imagery of the intended's yellow ribbons welcoming the returnee struck a chord, judging from the students' "oohs" and "ahhs" from the class.

I made a terrible blunder on that occasion, though. I translated the "oak tree" in both songs as the maple, never having seen one in subtropical Taiwan and, moreover, in metropolitan Taipei with scarce greenery. Ah Bin raised his hand and politely demurred, but I rushed headlong into the next line. The very first-time teaching English, I was not wont to admit mistakes. Ah Bin was right; I was wrong. Old oaks and maybe maples, apples and oranges, East and West,

poetic inexpressibility and scholarly objectivity, forgotten Taiwanese veteran and (de)naturalized American citizen, I had, upon my discharge, embarked on lifelong malapropism, professional ventriloquism, splicing two lives into one with the “stepmother” tongue of English. I was not alone in this double life. Ironically, son of a Welsh coal miner, Tom Jones affected a southern accent in his country songs and a black accent for tunes like “Detroit [pronounced DEE-troy] City” (1967) to tap into human nostalgia for home and love amidst the tumultuous 1960s and 70s. This cultural palimpsest suggests that a Welshman’s homecoming to American heartland’s “Mary” and “oaks” resonated with a class of Taiwanese soldiers who were worlds apart in a mid-summer night’s dream in 1981, so precious because it was so fleeting.

Ah Bin’s gift of basin belonged to part of Taiwanese military personnel outfit, to be issued by each unit, theoretically. At the boot camp in 1976, trainees lined up their basins filled with water each night outside the barracks, so they could, at the sound of reveille, dash over to wash and brush themselves in the few minutes allotted to personal hygiene. My morning nosebleed never failed to turn the whole basin of water incarnadine. It would magically stop when the unit assembled for the morning roll call. The body had a way of adapting until it could not. White sneakers were Special Forces’ standard footwear, the dot that completed the full body question mark of black cap and sportswear. The question was this: Why would the Military Police dress its elite Special Forces in a way that evoked Nazi “Blackshirts?” “Blackshirts” was indeed the Taiwanese commando unit’s nickname plied by commandos and their commanding officers! I witnessed the electrifying atmosphere when they had looked forward to a weekend showing of the 1978 *Good Guys Wear Black* featuring Chuck Norris, for the Caucasian martial arts master was seen as an honorary member by virtue of his attire.

After my discharge, I went overseas for advanced study in Anglo-American Literature in the Midwest. Ah Bin followed to Washington, D.C., as a guard and representative of Special Forces at what used to be the Taiwan embassy and the ambassador residence at the Twin Oaks in Cleveland Park Historic District. Since the diplomatic ties were switched from Taiwan to China in 1979, they were no longer ambassadorial, but security of personnel and property continued to require trustworthy supermen like Ah Bin. During his first tour of duty in D.C., he took the Greyhound bus from the nation’s capital to Bloomington, Indiana, and stayed one night before heading back because he only had a weekend leave. When he purchased an automobile, he drove approximately 1,250 miles round trip to bring me a new TV because I told him that graduate students were too poor to afford it. “How did you ever find my school apartment?” I queried since he had never asked for direction. “I remember that strange-looking bell tower,” he rejoined, “at the top of the campus, right next to your apartment.” Evidently, last

time he came via the Greyhound, he paid attention to Metz Carillon made of steel and concrete like UFO from the outer space. That was Ah Bin, man of few words and a lot of heart.

Concluding his tour, he went back to Taiwan and retired but was immediately called back by Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Fredrick Chien’s wife. Chien’s tenure in D.C. from 1983 to 1988 roughly coincided with Ah Bin’s. Ah Bin, a veteran then, returned for his second tour of duty. Respectfully addressed as “the Ambassador” by Ah Bin and his colleagues, Chien (or his wife, rather?) must have appreciated Ah Bin’s talents to the extent that he (she?) would reinstate Ah Bin in spite of his civilian status. Chien published the third volume of his memoirs in 2020. I wonder in that tome of a book on his long and distinguished career in politics, did Chien recall my friend, whom he recalled through his wife to active duty? With his wife in charge of the Twin Oaks’ “domestic” affairs, was Chien—the diplomat in the Foreign Service—even aware of Ah Bin’s existence? In his reminiscences of Great Men in China, Taiwan, the US, and elsewhere, did the Great Man expend a page, a paragraph, a word or two on little people “downstairs,” such as the one who climbed and trimmed the Twin Oaks’ centuries-old trees, without proper tools like a pair of safety goggles, on his days off pro bono, a branch swinging back, smashing into his eye? Ah Bin was no marksman since. The body’s map of scars was shared by many in Taiwan, if unregistered or sublimated by the mind.

During my year-long stint teaching at Providence University in Central Taiwan from 2012 to 2013, Ah Bin often called me to deliver fresh vegetables from his garden in Northern Taiwan. With military precision, he called me shortly before he exited the highway near the university, summoning me to meet him at the university front gate. No matter how many times I beseeched him to call before he got on the highway an hour before his arrival, he remained as unyielding in his routine as his loyalty over decades. In the subtropical island, insecticide was used to prevent bug damage on vegetables. Ah Bin neither used insecticide nor were his cabbage, cauliflower, cucumber, tomato, and Kohlrabi ever infested with bug bites, the result of his picking off garden pests every morning without fail. Before the end of my chair professorship, Ah Bin gave me two Volvo baseball caps of the Swedish automobile company, from which he retired in 2019. They were perfect for summer yard work in Michigan, in addition to covering up on bad hair days. I guess I am still faking it after all these years: summer school uniform in winter; Volvo cap to hide greasy, unkempt hair; not quite a veteran posing as one; not quite not a veteran for whom you, my secret sharer, may not vouch. As ungrammatical and un-American as it sounds, the triple negative of “not quite not ... not” captures well a toy soldier’s compulsory service once repressed subconsciously by the toy veteran and now recollected voluntarily. In Memoriam Corporal Ma Sheng-mei, Taiwan Military Police, Summer 1976, 1980–1982.

Epitaph into Epigraph

To lay to rest my past life as a conscript in Taiwan, I chose three moments in time. I hid from the high school Teacher-Officer's palm in the bamboo grove, which only returned me to the naked truth of violence. The fall at Battalion 213 was sublimated poetically, which foreshadowed an exit from the Buddha palm into the grip of white academe. I concluded with Ah Bin almost as a *deus ex machina* to make right this prolonged trauma. Lifting myself thrice by means of nature, poetry, and bonding, this fabric of memory is but a construct, a story I tell myself, retrieved from a lifetime ago on the other side of the Great Water. In such fragments of recall, how much of my military service did I capture and how much did I subconsciously elide? This is even when I have willed it into existence across language, culture, and ideology barriers. Out of the seventy-four lines of "Pre-Journey to the West," I only translated thirty-three lines, less than half of the

original poem, despite a dense preface on the mythology of Monkey. What is the percentage of thirty-three lines in the corpus of poems on my years in the military? What is the proportion of my compulsory service that has been rendered in this piece? What is the weight of my compulsory service in the totality of my life? Arguably, my academic career in the US is as much a lifelong goal as a denial of the bleakness of the past. I have never touched on my military service over forty years and a dozen scholarly books in an academe that deems such matters immaterial, if not alienating, otherworldly. Nearing the end of this journey to the West, I now bear East to see, as Tony Orlando sings, "what is and isn't mine." Nothing, perhaps, but at least these words of mine would soil the Great Man's hand, unless they are also forgotten.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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