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OCEAN OF WORDS: ARMY STORIES

By Ha Jin

205 pp. Zoland Books

A six-year veteran of the People's Army of China, now a poet and Emory University professor, Ha Jin offers in his first fiction collection a compelling array of stories powerful in their unity of theme and rich in their diversity of styles. Set along the Chinese-Russian border, the tales range from the droll sketch of an affectionately derided delicate young soldier in "Miss Jee" to the painfully iconoclastic "A Lecture" in which an old soldier reveals the ugly truth of Mao's Long March now falsely gilded in Red Chinese memory. Warily eyeing enemy Soviet troops from watchtowers, these soldiers believe, "They were barbarians and Revisionists, while we were Chinese and true Revolutionaries." But what these characters are truly revealed to be is achingly human. Whether nurturing lifelong grudges against the Russians, aiding vagabond neighbors who once betrayed them or witnessing the slaughter of an ox, these men strung along a forbidding landscape swell into a national group portrait of a people struggling to keep their basic humanity buckled within the stiff, unnatural belt of Maoist ideology, like the young men in "Too Late" and "Love in the Air" who dare not reveal their love for young women. In "A Report," a divisional commander demands that a songwriter whose lyrics remind soldiers of their mothers' love be brought before a military court for subversion. In the warm title story, a young soldier's interest in books inspires mistrust in everyone except a sage divisional director who alone knows that the sword is impotent and soulless without the pen.