

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Having withdrawn in utter defeat in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek militarized the island of Taiwan with the express purpose of retaking China.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 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 that festered with the obsession of recovering the mainland. This shared civic duty 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 system with built-in militarization whereby masculinity meant discharging many duties, including the obligation of military service. Veterans existed everywhere in Taiwan so much so that they were invisible. A case in point: the vast chain of Veterans General Hospital across Taiwan 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 mere toy soldiers, hence toy veterans. Military service in peacetime was deemed routine, droll, devoid of searing traumas of violent conflicts. 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 forgotten, I write in remembrance of unforgettable shards of time: a high school military instructor who slapped my rebellious younger self; a nose that bled through the boot camp, joined by the left shinbone's hairline fracture; a fall from the upper bunk that swelled the right cheek to twice its size; an impaled left wrist as I scaled the 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. On this body and mind bore veteran inscriptions, fading memories of an ex-toy soldier.

#### Short Bio

Sheng-mei Ma is Professor of English at Michigan State University in Michigan, USA, specializing in Asian Diaspora and East-West comparative studies. He is the author of nine books: *Off-White* (2019); *Sinophone-Anglophone Cultural Duet* (2017); *The Last Isle* (2015); *Alienglish* (2014); *Asian Diaspora and East-West Modernity* (2012); *Diaspora Literature and Visual Culture* (2011); *East-West Montage* (2007); *The Deathly Embrace* (2000); and *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (1998). He is also the co-editor of four books, including *Transnational Narratives in Englishes of Exile* (2018), and the author of

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