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Punishment and Power: A Foucauldian Analysis of Ha Jin's "Saboteur"

Introduction

"From now on, I shall continue to educate myself with all my effort and shall never commit this kind of crime again." – From Ha Jin's "Saboteur"

Power dynamics have created some of the most horrendous and lasting binaries recorded throughout history. The few who forcibly place themselves at the advantaged end of the binary tend to wield their power in ways that are detrimental to those on the disadvantaged end of the binary. These power dynamics have been studied by numerous scholars and philosophers including French philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault's work on institutional power in texts like *Discipline and Punish* provide detailed descriptions of hierarchies and positions of authority used in State institutions such as asylums, prisons, and even schools. There is no single aspect of human society that is not, to some extent, involved in a problematic power dynamic.

The effects of power dynamics are so prevalent that it is almost impossible to ignore their existence: even in the arts. One can find countless forms of these imbalanced situations in paintings, sculptures, theatre, and literature. In fiction literature, authors can infuse unequal hierarchies into their art by either creating entirely fictional scenarios that demonstrate a familiar power dynamic, or creating historical fiction that takes place in a real power dynamic. For authors like Ha Jin, historical fiction becomes the ultimate medium in not only telling extraordinary tales, but also in revealing the dark realities of these power structures.

Ha Jin, or Jin Xuefei, is a Chinese-American author who has published many works of historical fiction including novels like *War Trash* and short story collections like *The Bridegroom* stories. Much of his literature is especially impactful because of his personal experiences during and after China's Cultural Revolution. His work displays the unglamorized and raw realities of power dynamics within societies, and his documentary-style of writing lays out the plot in an almost clinical manner, further reinforcing the cruel nature of these specific systems. This essay will examine the particular power dynamics between the State and the citizen in Ha Jin's "Saboteur," a short story that takes place in China shortly after the Cultural Revolution. This examination will be executed through a Foucauldian lens, with a strong presence of topics like "Docile Bodies," "Panopticism," and "Complete and Austere Institutions" from his larger work titled *Discipline and Punish*.

Alongside Foucault, the work in this essay will also be supplemented by the existing scholarship of Ha Jin. Although none of the discovered scholarship made use of Foucault, there are patterns of topics relevant to Foucault's work such as Meiyi Chen's study of trauma theory and Jerry Varsava's analysis of power spheres in Jin's literature. Introducing Foucault's work to the existing Ha Jin scholarship will further develop and contribute to the current topics of institutionalized power dynamics. This paper will begin with a brief background of Jin and "Saboteur," followed by an examination of the imbalances of power in the story. This examination will be organized chronologically by the three main instances of State using their power against the citizen: arrest, imprisonment, and confession. The conclusion of the essay will summarize and emphasize how Jin's work further illustrates the issues of imbalanced power dynamics in a society.

There is great value in understanding the use of power dynamics in fiction literature. It is the kind of understanding that can lead one to critically look at their own place in society. Literature is often art imitating life, and for Jin's stories, that sentiment is profoundly accurate.

Ha Jin and "Saboteur"

Ha Jin's short story "Saboteur" takes place shortly after the Cultural Revolution in Muji City, China. Mr. Chiu, the main character, is a lecturer from Harbin. He is wrongfully arrested while traveling back to Harbin after his honeymoon. In order to be released from jail, he must "confess" to a crime that he did not commit. The crime in question is sabotage against the State. Throughout the story, Mr. Chiu experiences physical assault, neglect, and interrogation. He also witnesses the torture of his former student, Fenjin. All of these events change Mr. Chiu, turning him into a legitimate saboteur.

Ha Jin's literature pulls from the memories of his own past, and he strives to create work about Chinese life not often discussed or recorded in past literature. He lived in China both during and after the Cultural Revolution, so it comes as no surprise that much of his work focuses on the "State's domination of both the private and public spheres in modern, post-1949 Chinese society" (Varsava 128). At the age of fourteen, Jin participated in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (M. Chen 132). After five years of service, Jin went to college and became a Professor of English, a path that eventually brought him to The United States. The tragic elements in a number of his stories are bleak but beautiful and feel very personal. Meiyi Chen uses trauma theory in her work that analyzes how Jin's past trauma connects to his work. Trauma theory examines how one uses methods like writing or talking to heal traumatic wounds. These wounds can come from trauma that is personal, familial, war-based, or nationally-based. Although Jin never writes about himself directly, his tendency to "situate his characters as

ordinary individuals placed the midst of historical events" (C. Chen 1682) makes it feel like he is writing to heal the wounds on all levels of trauma from personal to national.

The realism of Jin's work also stems from his desire to create stories that make up for the low volume of literary works concerning certain moments in Chinese history. For example, when writing *Nanjing Requiem*, Jin strove to produce "a literary representation of that neglected tragedy from a creative writer's perspective…therefore…to fight against amnesia and injustice" (Shan 27). Jin's style of writing makes "Saboteur" feel less like a work of fiction and more like an insider's look into the real-life traumas experienced by Mr. Chiu. Mr. Chiu's trauma is derived from the instances of imbalanced power dynamics, with the first instance being his unjust arrest.

Arrest

"Comrade Policeman, why did you do this?" – Mr. Chiu from Jin's "Saboteur"

In many instances, the act of arrest could be seen as the State using their police force to properly maintain safety and order for the 'greater good' of the people. To arrest someone usually implies that the person has done something wrong, and they must be punished as a result. However, in stories like "Saboteur" and in many real-life instances, arrest as a means of enacting punishment can be misused and drastically abused. In Foucault's "The Body Condemned" he expands on the interconnectedness between State control and punishment, an interconnectedness also seen in "Saboteur." Foucault describes how systems of punishment are situated in the specific political economy of the body. Even if institutions do not use violent methods and instead use 'lenient' methods like confinement, "it is always the body that is at issue—the body and its forces, their utility and docility, their distribution and submission" (Foucault 172).

In many societies, but especially societies with oppressive State institutions, the body is both used as a force and seen as an object. Depending on one's place in a power dynamic determines the extent that the body is used and viewed. For example, if one is a police officer, they are used more as a body of force for the State to control the average citizen. If one is an average citizen, their body is more readily seen as an object, only used for force in the context of capital. During the time period in China when "Saboteur" takes place, there was an incredibly imbalanced and rigid hierarchy of power. Chinese citizens who were not high-ranking members of the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] were socially and politically superfluous, bereft of substantive political agency (Varsava 129). The Chinese State extended their control into all aspects of life (Varsava 132) during this time, thus creating a nation of citizens who were treated as docile bodies. Foucault coined the term "docile bodies" in his work aptly titled "Docile Bodies," which expands on the use of the body by an institutional power. A body is docile when it can be "subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (Foucault 180). Despite words like "improved" carrying some level of positivity and progress, the type of "improved" needed to maintain docile bodies en masse can be oppressive, violent, and cruel if those in power abuse their positions.

In "Saboteur," Mr. Chiu is arrested *because* of his lack of docility situated in a society that heavily enforces mechanisms of power and control over the body. Shortly before his arrest, Mr. Chiu and his new wife are eating lunch while waiting for their train back to Harbin. While eating, Mr. Chiu first notices two police officers who are also eating nearby. From time to time, the two officers "would steal a glance at Mr. Chiu's table" (Jin 3). He then observes a large statue of Chairman Mao, "at whose feet peasants were napping" (Jin 4). Mr. Chiu's first observations immediately highlight certain power dynamics. There is the power dynamic of the police force

and the citizen, where the citizen feels their presence and surveillance. Then, there is the power dynamic between the larger State institution and the citizen, a vastly imbalanced class-system where citizens are literally placed at the feet of the State. The large, metaphorical presence of Mao alongside the smaller, real presence of the police force creates an environment that is reminiscent of Foucault's example in "Docile Bodies" where he describes Napolean as an organizer of docile bodies. Although the head of power is not always *physically* present, the mechanism of power created through rigorous discipline allows the head of power to control the masses "without the slightest detail escaping his attention'" (Foucault 185).

One of the police officers eventually throws a bowl of tea in Mr. Chiu and his wife's direction, soaking both of their shoes and feet. Before any dialogue starts, Jin is tightening the tension between the main power dynamics in the story. However, Mr. Chiu does not initially fear approaching the officers. Since Mr. Chiu is an English professor and Communist Party member, he believes that the power dynamics between the two sides are slightly more balanced, thus protecting him from being treated like a "common citizen" (Jin 8). As described earlier, for a system to operate in a way that gives the State total control of the people, certain disciplines must be enforced. A critical discipline is the scale of control, where the State maintains infinitesimal power of every aspect of one's body, including one's gestures, attitudes, and movements (Foucault, 181). The moment Mr. Chiu decides to stand up and address the two officers, he challenges the disciplines of control and docility.

When Mr. Chiu first addresses the police officers about the offence, they both deny Mr. Chiu's claim and say he must have done it to himself. This scene is Mr. Chiu's final opportunity to silently back down—become docile—but he instead challenges their authority: "'Comrade Policeman, your duty is to keep order, but you purposely tortured us common citizens. Why

violate the law you are supposed to enforce?' As Mr. Chiu is speaking, dozens of people began gathering around" (Jin 5). As soon as a cowed begins to gather, the two officers seize Mr. Chiu. They handcuffed him and accused Mr. Chiu of being a saboteur and disrupting public order. When Mr. Chiu tries to resist by holding onto a table, an officer smashes his hand with the butt of a gun. Although his wife is present, she is too terrified to move or speak: the crowd also neither says nor does anything to help Mr. Chiu, despite being witnesses to his unjust arrest. This level of inaction is a product of docility and what Lu Zhang describes as an extreme form of collective cultural unconsciousness. Much like Foucault's docile bodies, when power is highly concentrated, that power becomes the sole means for an individual to secure an identity; therefore, the collective cultural unconsciousness becomes a way to discipline and repress people's thoughts (Zhang 164). Mr. Chiu is consequently dragged away to jail, introducing the second instance of imbalanced power dynamics: imprisonment.

Imprisonment

"In other words, your release will depend on your attitude toward this crime." –The police chief from Jin's "Saboteur"

1. Panopticism and Interrogation

Imprisonment is a popular form of control and punishment that Jin recognizes and utilizes in his stories. For instance, Jodi Kim analyzes Jin's inclusion of Prisoner of War (POW) camps in his novel *War Trash*, and how Jin's use of POW camps emphasizes that these extremes in authority can create institutions "not bound out of ordinary law…but out of a state of exception and martial law" (578-579). In Kim's case, the POW camp was controlled by intersectional influences between the United States and Korea. The violent atrocities that take

place in *War Trash* and in the real-life camps can be executed in ways that are not deemed criminal because settings like POW camps constitute "a new and stable spatial arrangement" where certain juridico-political order can be suspended (Kim 580).

This "spatial arrangement" that Kim speaks of is similar to Foucault's discussion of panopticism, which is a key element in systems of imprisonment. Any system that imprisons people, whether it is a POW camp or a jail, manipulates and controls the environment to fit the needs of the party in control. Panopticism is a mechanism of discipline that creates a subtle and more omnipresent means of control, such as arranging spaces in a certain manner to enable full observation of bodies. This mechanism requires "compact hierarchical networks" that use disciplines such as hierarchical surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment, and classification (Foucault 209). Tactics like panopticism allow those few individuals in places of authority to wield "a power that insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied" (Foucault 209). In the imbalanced power dynamic of the prison or jail system, panopticism may not be as overt as brute physical force, but it is essential in the process of breaking down an individual, as Mr. Chiu finds out.

Mr. Chiu is dragged into the Railroad Police Station and immediately stripped of his belt and thrown into a cell that has a single, small window facing the prison yard. In the cell, Mr. Chiu attempts to calm himself by remembering that the Cultural Revolution recently ended, and the Party had been "propagating the idea that all citizens were equal before the law. The police ought to be a law-abiding model for the common people" (Jin 6). When Mr. Chiu is finally taken to the Interrogation Bureau in the jail, he sees the officer who assaulted him. The officer points at Mr. Chiu with his fingers in the shape of a gun and smiles. This action is in contrast to Mr. Chiu's earlier thoughts of the police force being "a law-abiding model for the common people,"

and instead highlights the disparity between the dynamics of citizen and officer. The action does not require any words or physical harm, but it reminds Mr. Chiu that he is being watched. Once Mr. Chiu arrives to the interrogation room, he is shocked to find that there is already a folder with a stack of papers about his case. This folder is placed next to the chief of the bureau. There is a moment where he nervously wonders if the State has been watching him all this time (Jin 7), reemphasizing panopticism tactics in places of confinement. Little details like the officer's gesture and Mr. Chiu's file placed next to the chief assist in the jail's panopticism tactics. Now that Mr. Chiu is imprisoned, the institution constantly stresses upon his mind that his body is nothing more than an object of observation: he is vulnerable.

The chief of the bureau treats the entire interaction with Mr. Chiu as nothing more than standard procedure of business. Like a machine, the chief reads off a form asking Mr. Chiu basic facts about himself. This indicates the system's continued categorization of Mr. Chiu. Along with surveillance of all bodies as a collective, penitentiaries also use panopticism as a "system of individualizing and permanent documentation" (Foucault 219). When the chief is finished asking Mr. Chiu questions, he states that Mr. Chiu is guilty of sabotage and has failed to be a model citizen for the masses (Jin 7). This scene directly connects to Foucault's description of penitentiaries in "Complete and Austere Institutions" being a system that "seems to express in concrete terms the idea that the offense has injured, beyond the victim, society as whole" (Foucault 215). When Mr. Chiu objects to this charge and claims innocence, the chief places the blame instead on Mr. Chiu, stating: "'Stop bluffing us…We have seen a lot of your kind. We can easily prove you are guilty. Here are some of the statements given by eyewitnesses'" (Jin 8). To Mr. Chiu's horror, the statements from the supposed eyewitnesses all support the claims of the officers, solidifying Mr. Chiu as a "criminal" in the eyes of the State.

In this moment, the power dynamics are completely imbalanced to the advantage of the police who represent the State. When the chief states that they have seen a lot of *his kind* (Jin 8), the side of the power dynamic in control has firmly classified Mr. Chiu into the category of saboteur, or from a Foucauldian perspective, a delinquent. In Jin's story, the use of "saboteur" appears to be interchangeable with Foucault's "delinquent." Foucault distinguishes a delinquent as one not categorized by the act of the offense, but as one's life that determines their guilt (Foucault 219). This categorization "must be specified in terms not so much of the law as of the norm" (Foucault 221). By "othering" Mr. Chiu outside of the norm and into this supposed "kind," he becomes a threat to society, which hierarchical power dynamics like the police State use to justify their methods of control. The chief then tells Mr. Chiu that he will only be released if he confesses to his crimes, thus admitting his classification as a saboteur. Mr. Chiu's actions become frantic, and he passionately refuses to admit to any crime, demanding an apology. Along with his fear of further imprisonment, he begins to feel sharp physical pangs due to his acute hepatitis. His hepatitis is briefly mentioned in the beginning of the story, but the more Mr. Chiu feels the force of the situation, the more his hepatitis symptoms become evident. The police chief smiles at Mr. Chiu's cries for justice, blows cigarette smoke in his face, and coolly states: "We are pretty sure you will comply with our wishes" (Jin 9). When the chief signals the guards to remove Mr. Chiu from the interrogation room, Jin writes that the two guards "stepped forward and grabbed the criminal by the arms" (Jin 9). Even before Mr. Chiu has succumbed to the coercion of the State, Jin indicates with his use of the word "criminal" that the classification has already taken place.

2. Detention and Corporal Punishment

With the power dynamic fully in favor of the State, Mr. Chiu is forced into solitary confinement. While in confinement, he "[begins] to have a fever, shaking with a chill and sweating profusely" (Jin 9) and suspects the anger of his emotions caused a relapse in his hepatitis. Although Mr. Chiu is ill, he is not given medicine. No one comes to attend to his aliment, but there is a single light in the cell, enabling the guards "to keep him under surveillance at night" (Jin 9). Mr. Chiu's status as a professor places him into a Foucauldian delinquent category as one with "'intellectual resources above the average intelligence that we have established,'" but who has been perverted by "'a dangerous attitude to social duties,'" thus requiring "isolation day and night" (Foucault 221). Although Mr. Chiu's physical health begins to decline, he decides to try and make the best of his situation by staying calm. Oddly enough, this tactic temporarily works for Mr. Chiu. He learns to accept his situation, and even admits to sleeping well and having a restful day in the hope of getting out and receiving an apology from the guards. The surprising moments of calm and relaxation that Mr. Chiu experiences in isolation are similar to those of the masochist described by Lorrain Markotic, who analyzed Jin's novel *Waiting* from the perspective of masochism.

According to Markotic, masochism is associated with the restrictions of contractual agreements and the body locked in an intense process of waiting (Markotic 26). In this moment of waiting, Mr. Chiu is no longer furious, and his cries for justice cease. He chooses to suspend the reality of the situation because he remembers a letter sent to his friend from Chairman Mao, which states "'Since you are already in here, you may as well stay and make the best of it'" (Jin 11). He also calms himself down by imagining the apology letter he will receive from jail when he is released and exonerated from his false crime. By suspending his reality, giving in to his

imagination, and succumbing to his current punishment, Mr. Chiu is exhibiting masochistic-like actions (Markotic 30), and he momentarily reverts back into a docile body.

This brief moment of respite disintegrates when he hears moaning from outside of the jail cell window. When Mr. Chiu manages to look outside, he is horrified to see his former student and lawyer, Fenjin, who is "fastened to a pine, his wrists handcuffed around the trunk from behind" (Jin 11). Mr. Chiu assumes that his wife sent Fenjin to help get Mr. Chiu out of jail. When he asks a guard what happened, the guard tells him that Fenjin's predicament was caused by Fenjin insulting the officers for Mr. Chiu's wrongful arrest. Fenjin is left there in the heat, and the sight brings forth a wave of nausea in Mr. Chiu's stomach. He turns away so can think of a way to ask for help, but he suddenly hears a scream from the yard. One of the police officers who arrested Mr. Chiu is standing over Fenjin. Mr. Chiu now must bear witness to the further suffering of his former student. While still bound and weak from the heat, Fenjin's nose is pinched, he face slapped, and a bucket of water poured over his head to prevent total heatstroke. In Foucault's work, the institutions of power aid in imbalanced power dynamics, but he mainly focuses on the nineteenth-century and onward, which move away from the more brutal and physical forms of punishment to punishments like detention and surveillance.

However, he does mention that "with feudalism, at a time of development, we find a sudden increase in corporal punishments—the body being in most cases the only property accessible" (Foucault 172). Although "Saboteur" is not technically set in a feudalistic time period, it is set in a time period of development, when China is transitioning from the Cultural Revolution and experiencing "profound tension felt in contemporary China—a tension between the nation's enriched cultural past and an erratic present" (Ge 40). In this jail, the police use both corporal and corrective forms of punishment to enforce their position of power in the dynamic

between State and citizen. The bodies of Mr. Chiu and Fenjin are nothing more than bodies that are directly "involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon [them]; they invest [them] …torture [them], force [them] to carry out tasks…to emit signs" (Foucault 173). While Mr. Chiu witnesses Fenjin's torment, he grips the steel bars of the jail window until his fingers turn white (Jin 13). Both are powerless in their own way; both are locked into the same power dynamic of obedience and submission. It is not long after Mr. Chiu watches Fenjin's torture that the guards enter Mr. Chiu's cell once again to bring him back to the interrogation room, introducing the final instance of imbalanced power dynamics: confession.

Confession

"What if I refuse to cooperate?" "Then your lawyer will continue his education in the sunshine."

–Mr. Chiu and the police chief from Jin's "Saboteur"

In order for a body to be docile, one must use discipline to create a body that is utilitarian and obedient. The implementation of "disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination" (Foucault 182). If one is not docile, those in power and authority will discipline them further to guarantee the submission of forces and bodies (Foucault 211). The discipline can either be corporal or imprisonment, which covers "both the deprivation of liberty and the technical transformation of individuals" (Foucault 216). Depending on how the individual is classified (offender or delinquent) determines the specific methods of punishment that they receive. If one fully submits to the side of the power dynamic in control, they are fully docile, and in extreme cases, brainwashed.

Sunny Xiang analyzes some tactics of discipline and control in Jin's novel *War Trash*, and she describes brainwashing as a "finely tuned mechanism that inscribes ideological scripts onto blank brains. This inscriptional mechanism operationalizes a symbiotic relation between speech and writing" (Xiang 78). Based on Xiang's own research juxtaposed with Jin's *War Trash*, the "most powerful weapon in the brainwashing arsenal was said to be the confession" (Xiang 77). In order for a body to be brainwashed, it must first be disciplined into a state like a blank disc (Xiang 79) that can impressed upon. This description is very similar to Foucault's description of a body as "formless clay" or a machine that can be constructed (Foucault 179). If a body needs to be a blank disc or formless clay in order to be docile, then the confession could be seen as the final mechanism used to fully submit the body and the mind.

When Mr. Chiu takes a seat in the interrogation room, the chief casually says to him, "You may have seen your lawyer. He's a young man without manners, so our director had taught him a crash course in the backyard" (Jin 13). Using the word "taught" coincides with the notion of punishment being a form of "treatment" (Foucault 224). When Mr. Chiu questions if they fear the newspapers discovering their use of physical abuse on Fenjin, the chief brushes off any concerns of reproach: "No, we are not…What else can you do? We are not afraid of any story you make up. We call it fiction. What we do care about is that you cooperate with us. That is to say, you must admit your crime" (Jin 13-14). The police chief makes it clear that Mr. Chiu's position in the power dynamic renders him completely helpless. His words will be met with dismissal or suspicion. In Agatha Frischmuth's analysis of Jin's novel *Waiting*, she utilizes a quote from Jin, describing the restriction of one's voice in China During and after the Cultural Revolution: "In China, you don't just say what comes to mind. Very often, you have to lie

survive…It's dangerous to speak honestly…The country cannot be violated for the sake of the individual" (qtd. In Frischmuth 110).

Mr. Chiu is in a similar position where he must comply with the request of the State, including compliance through silence. When he asks what will happen if he refuses to cooperate, the chief makes it clear that Fenjin's "education" will continue upon his refusal (Jin 14). This act of threating the punishment of a third party was prevalent in post-1949 China, where guilt-by-association was used as a tactic to keep individuals in line (Varsava 137). Mr. Chiu becomes enraged, and a wave of physical pain washes over him. He can feel his hepatitis attacking his body just as he can feel the State attacking his freedom and Fenjin's wellbeing. However, he does not show his pain or his anger. He sits silent and motionless, prompting the chief to reveal a pre-written confession for Mr. Chiu. All he has to do is sign, thereby submitting himself to the will of the State power.

As Mr. Chiu puts pen to paper, his mind screams out "'Lie, lie!'" (Jin 14), but he pushes his agency and truth to the side for the sake of himself and Fenjin. The police institution's methods of discipline and punishment finally yield their desired outcome, and Mr. Chiu is now classified on record as a criminal, a delinquent, a saboteur. As soon as Mr. Chiu signs his confession, the chief smiles and informs him that he is free to go. The combination of rage and physical illness make it nearly impossible for Mr. Chiu to move. He can barely walk out to the yard to meet Fenjin, and "In his chest he felt as though there was a bomb" (Jin 15). As soon as they leave the police station, Mr. Chiu notices a tea stand, and orders two bowls of black tea for himself and Fenjin (Jin 15). Once they finish their bowls, Mr. Chiu proceeds to drag Fenjin from one food stall to the other, eating only small portions at each establishment. He says nothing the

entire time except repeatedly uttering through his teeth “If only I could kill all the bastards!” (Jin 16).

In this final moment of Mr. Chiu’s story, Jin switches to the perspective of Fenjin, who is shocked by the rage that distorted Mr. Chiu’s face. He also takes note that alongside the rage, Mr. Chiu’s face is equally transformed because of his jaundiced face covered in dark puckers: it is the first time Fenjin finds Mr. Chiu to be an ugly man (Jin 16). The story concludes with an account of a mysterious hepatitis outbreak in Muji city infecting over eight hundred people and killing six people, including two children (Jin 16). Mr. Chiu’s story is one of abuse of power and forced compliance. The traumas of arrest, imprisonment, and confession shape Mr. Chiu into a hybrid of docile body and vengeful reactionary. He complies just enough to avoid further discipline, but he leaves jail with the vicious intent of the criminal he was falsely accused of being. In a short span of time, the same people in power whom he felt would treat all citizens equally by law (Jin 6) ripped away his freedom, his health, his agency, and transformed him into a real saboteur.

The Saboteur and the Delinquent

“If he were able to, he would have raised the entire police station and eliminated all of their families.” –from Ha Jin’s “Saboteur”

In Foucault’s work “Illegalities and Delinquency,” he examines the unintended phenomenon of institutions like prisons *creating* criminals, or delinquents, instead of *correcting* them. In imbalanced power dynamics like that of the State and the citizen, where the State strives for total control and docility, this result rattles the system. According to Foucault “Prisons do not diminish the crime rate: they can be extended, multiplied, or transformed” (226). These prison systems can create delinquents by “imposing violent constraints on its inmates” and abusing the

power that these institutions wield (227). Reflecting on the story of Mr. Chiu, the traumas he experienced at the hands of the State transformed him into the very saboteur that they falsely accused him to be. He was never a saboteur, a delinquent, or even an offender before his arrest; however, Mr. Chiu was also not docile. He stood up to the police officers who threw tea at he and his wife, and he later stood up to the chief who attempted to coerce Mr. Chiu into a false confession. But it was his lack of docility that caused his arrest, physical assault, detention, surveillance, and the witnessing of his former student's torture.

The use of disciplinary methods such as punishment, supervision, and constraint (Foucault 177) unwillingly pushed Mr. Chiu into a state of complete docility. He surrendered to the desires of the police, and by confessing to a crime he did not commit, took his place on the disadvantaged side of the power dynamic. It was what he had to do to keep himself and Fenjin alive. Once free from the oppressive walls of the police institution, the feeling of injustice took over his body tenfold, and instead of the police "correcting" his behavior, his character became "habitually angry against everything around him; he [saw] every agent of authority as an executioner" (Foucault 228). Even those who were innocent were not spared from his vengeance as he plagued the city with hepatitis. Although certain power dynamics may never cease to exist in society, it is clear that when a power dynamic is too imbalanced or an abuse of power exists within a power dynamic, the consequences can be severe.

Conclusion

Ha Jin's "Saboteur" is a troubling story about the realities that can take place if an institution obtains too much power over the people. In order for a power dynamic to be beneficial for a society, it must not be constantly imbalanced nor abusive. By examining the story with a Foucauldian lens, Mr. Chiu's arrest, imprisonment, and eventual confession become

studies of what can happen when institutional powers that represent the State like the police force gain the capability of "writing their own history" at the expense of the citizens they claim to protect. This fact is made even more apparent when one remembers that Jin's literature enters into the realm of historical fiction; the narratives that Jin creates are reflections of his own personal and nationally-based traumas from his life in China during and after the Cultural Revolution. He also writes to fill in the gaps of all the undocumented histories of China during that time in history. Although Mr. Chiu as a character is a work of fiction, the location, the time period, and the imbalance of power are all based on reality, making the narrative realistic enough that Jin's "Saboteur" mirrors many of Foucault's philosophies in *Discipline and Punish*. This analysis, if anything, shows the value of one understanding the dynamics of their own society. If left to the whims of those in power, the balance of dynamics that surround the lives of the citizens can easily tip to the advantage of the State. The understanding of one's surroundings can potentially prevent a society from reaching the extremes of oppressions in the past. Knowledge, after all, is power.

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