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Modern East Asia Essay #4

Ishikawa Tatsuzō creates disparate perceptions of China and the Chinese through the eyes of fictional Japanese soldiers in *Soldiers Alive*. In fact, a distinction is made by these soldiers between that which is China and that which is Chinese; the broader, overarching aspects of China's culture are revered, whereas the Chinese as a people are denigrated as wartime enemies. This difference in treatment is illustrated at numerous points throughout Ishikawa's book.

"The four hundred million people of China are as serene as the Yangtze River," Hirao said reverently to Kondō, his fellow soldier. "China will never perish."¹ Though Ishikawa does not continually refer to China as a nation, the references made portray the nation and culture as based on a great past, even through the eyes of the Japanese soldiers. Hirao's speech comes as he and Kondō are exploring a Chinese mansion; he finds a sundial in the house which both deem to be "a great find."² Symbolic of the influence of China on their lives, the sundial is indicative of the higher learning that China has been associated with for hundreds of years. Hirao keeps the sundial, using it "to savor the mental framework of the Chinese gentleman,"³ a conception based on his perceptions of the traditional culture of the nation of China. He is not reflecting upon an image of an individual Chinese gentleman that he has met, but rather what he interprets it means to be a Chinese gentleman, thus basing this conception more broadly upon his notions of China's traditional culture.

¹ Ishikawa Tatsuzō, *Soldiers Alive*, trans. Zeljko Cipris, (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 142.

² Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 141.

³ Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 168.

Additionally, through his example of the Japanese soldiers acquiring Chinese silver dollars as souvenirs for fifty-sen,⁴ Ishikawa illustrates the soldiers' attraction to China as a culture and nation. In fact, traditional Chinese culture is so revered that Ishikawa posits, "at least some of the Chinese culture would make its way to Japan along with the returning units. The war was certain to bring about a sort of merging of the two countries."⁵

While the portrayal of China is largely positive, the soldiers make a distinction between the nation and its people. The soldiers are fighting against the Chinese, thus giving way to more complex relationships as they have more contact with the Chinese on an individual level, as opposed to the broader conception of China as a nation.

Throughout *Soldiers Alive* there are numerous instances of Japanese brutality to the Chinese – both soldiers and women alike – such as the women senselessly murdered by Kondō and Hirao,⁶ the killing of a Chinese kitchen boy who stole sugar⁷ and Lance Corporal Fukamauchi Saburō's beating of a Chinese captive.⁸ To the soldiers, these Chinese are visible enemies that they can fight and kill, though in some cases the Chinese have supported the invading Japanese soldiers. Still, they are merely "dogs"⁹ to be shot down. The Chinese are the enemies and, according to the Japanese mentality, "If that's [brutally shooting a Japanese soldier] what the Chinese have in mind, we'll kill them all. We'd be idiots not to wipe them out!"¹⁰ Even the Chinese horses, though better suited for

⁴ Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 170.

⁵ Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 183.

⁶ Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 89, 116.

⁷ Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 124.

⁸ Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 166.

⁹ Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 102.

¹⁰ Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 136.

battle than the Japanese-trained horses, are abused and mistreated as the soldiers “seemed incapable of feeling any affection for the horses of an enemy nation.”¹¹

Still, while the brutality that the Japanese express towards the Chinese seems rather straightforward, Ishikawa presents evidence of more complicated relationships. Within the Japanese unit, several Chinese serve as cooks. Though subordinated to the Japanese, the dedication and skill of these Chinese make the soldiers “suddenly apologetic about having killed many of their brethren,”¹² a response dramatically different than the displays of brutality. According to Ishikawa, the circumstances of war made the Chinese and Japanese draw closer together out of sympathy, as “[b]oth the soldiers and the Chinese yearned for human company,”¹³ speaking in broken conversations which seemed to offer some comfort, despite the language barrier.¹⁴ Still, even in moments of such friendly interaction, the soldiers “could not quite overcome their contempt for the Chinese, so stubbornly and deeply was it rooted in their hearts.”¹⁵

Ishikawa paints a complex picture of both China and the Chinese through the eyes of Japanese soldiers. For years so much of China’s traditional culture has been revered, leaving the soldiers with a positive impression of the overall nation, despite their wartime status. Instead of fighting China, the soldiers are fighting the Chinese enemy, giving way to a more complicated relationship. The Japanese soldiers must balance the brutality of total war which they are inflicting upon the Chinese with their own need for human contact. Thus Ishikawa’s picture of the Chinese is more difficult to examine and explain than that of China.

¹¹ Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 112.

¹² Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 94.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ishikawa, *Soldiers Alive*, 127.

¹⁵ Ibid.

should be three (3 pages) long, double-spaced, one-inch margins, 12 point type with proper citation format. The paper is due at the beginning of class on Friday, April 14.

Discuss the portrayal of China and the Chinese in *Soldiers Alive*.