

## **Language, Migrancy, and the Literal: Ha Jin's Translation Literature\***

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses translation literature in Ha Jin's writing. It starts by examining the obvious disjunction between subject matter and language in Ha Jin's writing. What is unique about Ha Jin is that his idiosyncratic use of English destabilizes some key concepts that are so relevant today, such as exile, diaspora, national identity, and language-based literature. Then, I venture to argue that he carves out a unique place in the field of émigré Chinese writing, and creates a form of what I would call translation literature. The literalness in Ha Jin's play with languages not only creates a defamiliarizing effect and a sense of humor for his readers, but also reveals the absurdity of imprisonment of a language. Laying bare the linguistic confinement and, by extension, political constriction caused by a language, translation literature foregrounds the importance of migration of languages and deterritorialization of them, and thus destabilizes the categorization of national literatures that is still largely based on linguistic determinism. In all, Ha Jin's writing provides us with a salient sample through which to reflect on literary production in an age so marked by border-crossings of all kinds.

### **Keywords**

Ha Jin, translation literature, migrancy, language, literal

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\* I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions for revision and, above all, for suggesting the term "translation literature."

A couple of years ago I was invited to deliver a guest lecture in a gateway course on Asian Studies at an American college. The text chosen for my lecture was a *Chinese* novel, Ha Jin's *In the Pond*. This choice, however, was not unproblematic. Though most of his works, especially his early ones, are directly concerned with mainland China, where he lived until the age of thirty, Ha Jin cannot so easily be labeled as a Chinese writer, for he is now an American citizen writing in English and publishing in the U.S. During my lecture, an American colleague, a professor of English, let us know his interpretation of the story. He claimed that it was essentially asserting the Confucian virtues of perseverance and resilience, and thought that the protagonist's success in getting the position he deserved exemplified the power of these traditional virtues. I was led to wonder whether this reading raises serious questions about the general problem of "understanding" Ha Jin's writing. Did the ambiguous "cultural identity" of this novel lead my colleague to emphasize, perhaps wrongly, its "Chineseness"? Did Ha Jin's language, which gave the appearance of having been translated into English from a Chinese original, thereby adding an authentic Chinese flavor, somehow contribute to this (mis)reading?

My central concern here will be Ha Jin's language, and the seeming disjunction between subject matter and language in his writing. Of course, émigré Chinese writing has a long history, and Ha Jin is working in a literary field which in the U.S. today is becoming increasingly crowded: current authors include Wang Ping, Liyun Li, Anchee Min and many others. Yet what is indeed unique about Ha Jin is that his English sounds like a direct translation of Chinese and, therefore, seems readily translatable back into Chinese. This idiosyncratic use of English is not simply a literary trick that a minority writer plays in order to survive in an alien linguistic environment; rather, it has complex implications that would eventually destabilize such current concepts as exile, diaspora, national identity, and language-based literature. Examining the ways in which these concepts are discursively refashioned by Ha Jin, I will argue that this author is carving out a unique place in the field of émigré Chinese writing by creating a special form of what I would call *translation literature*.<sup>1</sup>

In the first place, as mentioned above, Ha Jin's English sometimes looks like a literal translation from Chinese. This *literalness* in his play with languages, as I will

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<sup>1</sup> To draw the line between a non-native speaker's incompetence in English and one's deviation from idiomatic phraseology in translation literature can sometimes be tricky. In the case of Ha Jin's writing, there are some unfortunate misuses of English, which some reviews have singled out. But the author's intentional use of non-idiomatic English that characterizes his translational style is quite unique, and I will expound on how the latter differs from the former in what follows.

demonstrate in my close reading of *In the Pond*,<sup>2</sup> not only has a defamiliarizing as well as a humorous effect from the viewpoint of his readers, but also reveals the absurdity of being imprisoned within a particular language. Laying bare the cultural and political as well as linguistic confinements of a particular language, translation literature foregrounds the importance of the migration and deterritorialization of languages, and thus destabilizes that categorization of national literatures which is still largely based on the idea of linguistic determinism. Ha Jin's writing, therefore, enables us to reflect on literary production in an age so marked by border-crossings of all kinds.

### Undefined Terms: Migrant, Exile, and Diaspora

Modern linguistics reminds us that language sometimes "speaks who we are." For a writer, the language that he or she uses is inevitably a marker of his or her identity. But the language of a migrant writer like Ha Jin, who was born and bred in China but writes and publishes in the U.S. for English-speaking readers, is even more intricately intertwined with his identity. Ha Jin specifically chooses the word "migrant" to describe himself so as to "be as inclusive as possible," for this word "encompasses all kinds of people who move, or are forced to move, from one country to another, such as exiles, emigrants, immigrants, and refugees" (Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* ix). This very inclusive label already suggests difficulty faced by the writer in trying to define, not only his own experience but that of all those who move away from home, especially in an age marked by large-scale migration.

On the other hand, in critical discourse the term "exile" (rather than "migrant") is more often deployed, in a similarly inclusive fashion, to describe "anyone prevented from returning home" (Said 181),<sup>3</sup> and attempts have also been made to distinguish the nuanced connotations of related terms such as refugees, expatriates, émigrés, vagrancy, and diaspora.<sup>4</sup> More recently, and with the discursive shift to

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, I will focus on Ha Jin's first novel, *In the Pond*, which in my view most interestingly represents his "stylistic" use of English. This "style" continues to characterize his later works, although to varying degrees, including those depicting life in America such as *A Free Life* and *A Good Fall*.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Seidel's influential study of exile literature, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination*, is also based on this definition.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Aijaz Ahmad draws a line between forced and voluntary exile: "Exile usually has . . . a principle, and the principle prevents one from . . . denying the pain. Self-exile and 'vagrancy,' by contrast, have become more common amongst artists in every successive phase of bourgeois culture since the early days of Romanticism, and as the experience itself has been

“post”-theories, “diasporic” has become perhaps the most prominent term.<sup>5</sup> However, no particular terminology has attained discursive dominance in Chinese literary studies, and inter-related terms have been used more or less interchangeably.<sup>6</sup> This murkiness makes it even harder to clearly define the identity of a literary figure like Ha Jin.

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chosen with greater frequency, the sense of celebration . . . has grown proportionately” (158). Edward Said offers a more complicated differentiation:

Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. Refugees, on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word ‘refugee’ has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas ‘exile’ carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality. Expatriates voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons. . . . Expatriates may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions. Émigrés enjoy an ambiguous status. Technically, an émigré is anyone who emigrates to a new country. Choice in the matter is certainly a possibility. (181)

Nico Israel’s claim of the differences between exile and diaspora along the line of modern vs. postmodern is more theoretically-engaged yet more debatable:

In terms of contemporary literary and cultural studies, at least, ‘exile,’ perhaps most closely associated with literary modernism, tends to imply both a coherent subject or author and a more circumscribed, limited conception of place and home. Maintaining a stronger link to minority group solidarity and associated with the intersection of postcoloniality and theories of poststructuralism and postmodernism, ‘diaspora,’ by contrast, aims to account for a hybridity or performativity that troubles such notions of cultural dominance, location, and identity. (3)

A newly-published anthology entitled *Aftermaths* edited by Bullock and Paik, though more sociologically-oriented, provides us with the most recent studies of these terms in disparate fields and areas. For a general exploration of the subject in Chinese, see Liu Xiaofeng’s book, *Zhe yi dai ren de pa he ai* (The Fear and Love of Our Generation), especially the chapter entitled “Liuwang huayu yu yishixingtai” (Exilic discourse and ideology).

<sup>5</sup> Nico Israel views this change as “the movement from modernism to postmodernism, coloniality to postcoloniality” (3). He continues, “[E]xile is to diaspora as totality is to fragmentation, anxiety to schizophrenia, depth to surface, and exchange to flow” (8).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Gregory Lee uses “exile” to include a group of Chinese writers as disparate as Wen Yidou and Zhou Zuoren, who once studied abroad in the Republican era, and Duo Duo and Gao Xingjian, who live and write in foreign countries in the contemporary period. Leo Ou-fan Lee, in his essay on Chinese literary scenes in the late twentieth century, associates the sense of periphery and margin with the mentality of exile, that is, physical exile, self-exile, and diaspora. Oliver Krämer, when mapping contemporary Chinese exilic literature, makes further efforts to

Ha Jin was born in Heilongjiang Province, located in Northeast China and bordering the former Soviet Union. He came to the U.S. in 1985 to pursue a Ph.D. in English literature, planning to later return to China. What made him decide to stay in the U.S. for good, he explained, was the bloodshed in Tiananmen Square in 1989. It was also around that time that he decided to write in English—or, in his own words, to be “exiled to English”—in order to “preserve the integrity” of his works (Jin, “Exiled to English”). If he were to write in Chinese, he argued, he would inevitably need to deal with the censorship in China. Ha Jin was therefore, as he said, “exiled”—or more accurately, self-exiled. However, it was precisely the English language “to which” he was exiled, and this, paradoxically, made him less of an exile than would be a diasporic writer.

Belinda Kong, in her study of trans-border, Chinese-English cultural productions, sees Ha Jin as representing a “first-order diaspora,” for he is neither an exile nor part of a “second-order diaspora” (or an “inherited or transmitted diaspora”), but somewhere in-between (116). She contends that Ha Jin’s “unique intermediate position” is characterized by the discrepancy between his language choice and subject matter (215-16),<sup>7</sup> meaning that in effect language (un)determines Ha Jin’s identity as a writer. That is to say, the identity demonstrated or constructed in his writing is one that is unfolded in/as a process of border-crossing. Yet neither of these identities can be stable because of the language he uses—a “stylized” English that seems to have been literally translated from Chinese. What I call Ha Jin’s “translation literature” destabilizes this writer’s identity as a migrant, and may seem to free him from linguistic and ideological confinements.

This said, how can these two mutually-informed sides of the author’s identity be fleshed out within the field of literary taxonomies, which are still largely based on the concept of national literatures or, in more inclusive terms, national-language literatures?

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differentiate the exile and the refugee: “It is interesting to note that in both classical European and classical Chinese cultures exile was intended as a punishment mostly for political crimes, and mainly imposed on members of the ruling class or other privileged citizens. Less privileged people, especially nowadays, are more often referred to as ‘refugees’” (164). In contrast, Shuyu Kong employs the term “diaspora” to discuss writings produced overseas, covering the entire early twentieth century.

<sup>7</sup> In the specific case of Chinese-English trans-border writing that Kong examines, an exilic writer, to put it in a reductionist manner, is one who writes on China in Chinese although he/she is living in a different language environment; a diasporic writer is one who writes on immigrants’ life in the U.S. in English.

## National(-Language) Literature, Nationalism, At-home-ness

Literary taxonomies, as Perkins reminds us, have never been innocent, for “a classification is also an orientation, an act of criticism” (62). Ha Jin is taken as an American writer largely due to the language he writes in.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, however, Chinese critics tend to embrace him into the community of Chinese writers (understandably with certain qualifications), mainly because of the subject matter he deals with and the Chinese sentiments his writings usually express. For instance, Shuang Shen reads his award-winning novel, *Waiting*, as “Anglophone Chinese literature,” and regards him as a “diasporic writer” (53, 61). Lo Kwai-Cheung, in his more provocative reading of Ha Jin, doubts the validity of both standards—“the common cultural origin” or “the common language” (i.e., Chinese culture or Chinese language)—commonly used in designating a literary work as being “Chinese.” In fact, while the inherent inconsistency of the concept of “Chinese literature” is exposed by narrative fictional writings such as those of Ha Jin’s, the old concept may redeem itself, in this globalized age, precisely through the recognition of its own discursive inadequacy. This is, for Lo, just what it means to read Ha Jin’s work “as part of modern Chinese literature” (69, 74).<sup>9</sup>

If these critics seek to give “Chinese literature” a more inclusive paradigm, one that can embrace non-Chinese-language writings, scholars of Asian American literature are attempting to incorporate Chinese-language literature into its own category, a sign of how competing nationalisms govern the way humanistic knowledge is organized.<sup>10</sup> Implied in both of these efforts at incorporation is, ironically, a sense of that linguistic determinism often found in literary studies. While still a vital dimension in itself, literary language functions as an essential property of literature and, more to the point, of *a* literature.

Although the conventional nation-based taxonomy has been profoundly challenged, then, the emerging discourse of Sinophone literature, which draws inspiration from Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone studies,

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Johnson, *The Very Telling*.

<sup>9</sup> Some critics are ambiguous about the issue. For instance, Timothy C. Wong, reviewing Ha Jin’s novel *War Trash*, writes, “Still, the enormous recognition he [Ha Jin] has received, the splash he has made among readers who are not tied directly to China, show that true equivalence of Chinese fiction and the fiction of the West . . . had not really occurred in the minds of non-Chinese readers.”

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* and He, “Chinese-American Literature.”

has gained much critical attention.<sup>11</sup> In its subversive formation the Sinophone discourse—which Shu-mei Shih defined as “a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries” (4)<sup>12</sup>—still clearly implies the centrality of the Chinese language, even though it may appear in disparate and democratic forms.<sup>13</sup> However, Ha Jin’s English works continue to be denied a room within this refurbished literary mansion.

Perhaps Ha Jin can be seen to fit the paradigm of what Tu Wei-ming calls the “Cultural China,” a China that is to be “examined in terms of a continuous interaction of three symbolic universes.” This expansive model—which includes mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore (the first universe); diasporic Chinese communities throughout the world (the second universe), and individuals who “try to understand China intellectually and bring their conceptions of China to their own linguistic communities” (the third universe)—seems to have solved the problem of language raised by such writings as Ha Jin’s (Tu 13-14). This inclusiveness may seem rather reductionist inasmuch as it can translate into the rough statement that, to be culturally Chinese, subject matter concerning China plays a more important role than the Chinese language. Still, in spite of its democratic spirit, this model risks creating a center where language and subject coincide. Consider the fact that Ha Jin is much less read in mainland China than in the U.S., especially in the original English. Although politics is, indeed, an important issue, language barriers also play a significant part.<sup>14</sup> This makes one doubt whether the periphery, in Tu’s model, can really function as a center.

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<sup>11</sup> David Der-wei Wang is one of the first scholars to promote Sinophone studies. See Wang, “Wenxue xinglü yu shijie xiangxiang” (“Literary Travel and World Imagination”) and “Huayuyuxi wenxue: bianjie xiangxiang yu yuejie jiangou” (“Sinophone Literature: Border Imagination and Cross-border Construction”). For other reflections on this concept, also see Carles Prado-Fonts, “Marginalization Inside-Out: Thoughts on Contemporary Chinese and Sinophone Literature.” For recent studies on Sinophone studies, see Shih, *Visuality and Identity*; Tsu and Wang, eds., *Global Chinese Literature*; and Shih et al., eds. *Sinophone Studies*.

<sup>12</sup> In his review of Shih’s book, Sheldon Lu points out the ambiguity of the status of what she calls “continental China” in her paradigm.

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in the field of Chinese film studies, the term “Chinese-language film” also has begun to attract critical attention. See Lu and Yeh, eds., *Chinese-Language Film*.

<sup>14</sup> Extensive translation of Ha Jin has been carried out in Taiwan and Hong Kong; simplified Chinese versions of his works are also becoming increasingly available in the mainland in recent years.

Similarly, Anglophone-centered Asian American literature<sup>15</sup> also incorporates other national-language productions.<sup>16</sup> Situated between two centripetal forces with expanded territories, Ha Jin's China-related English-language writing occupies a unique place, one that destabilizes the notion of (a) "nationalism." If language functions as a significant cultural border-marker in the building of modern nations as imagined communities,<sup>17</sup> the disjunction between language and subject matter in Ha Jin's writing renders problematic the idea of national myth-making, a concept which ordinarily assumes the unity of national language, culture, and customs. Although the idea of a "cultural nation" does not demand linguistic unity, it cannot really accommodate writings like those of Ha Jin's. The latter's migrant writing, a term consciously chosen so as to circumvent ideological stereotyping, suggests what James Clifford calls a trajectory from roots to routes.

These post-discourses, with their characteristic terminology of border-crossing, mobility, heterogeneity and hybridity, do indeed debunk a simple sense of at-home-ness where the native tongue is emblematic of a nationalist impulse.<sup>18</sup> Home, in both its physical and its metaphorical senses, is another site where the

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Kim, Foreword.

<sup>16</sup> For Sheng-mei Ma and Shan Qiang He, shared sentiments and paradigms and themes concerning Asian American experiences, respectively, are what make immigrant and diasporic Chinese-language writings Asian American literature. As for "Asian American," Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, like Tu Wei-ming, explicitly takes *cultural* as the definitive term: "*Asian America*, a quasi-geographical term frequently used by Asian Americanists, refers to a cultural space with neither territorial claims nor state underwriting. To paraphrase that well-known aphorism on the distinction between a standard language and a dialect, one might say that Asian America is a 'cultural nation' without an army and a navy. The validity of 'Asian Americanness' as a culturally viable and vitalizing concept assumes—depends on—departure from the Asian origin and marginalization by its 'official' culture, as well as minoritization by hegemonic American culture" (144-45; emphasis in original). Similarly, the "cultural nation" of Asian America denies the core status of English.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, especially Chapter Two: "Cultural Roots." In fact, the myth of the correspondence between language and culture in Chinese nationalism has been challenged on at least two levels: the Sinophone discourse makes clear how the Chinese language operates on a supra-national level, while a range of minority ethnic languages still alive within China indicate a linguistic disparity at a sub-national level. For the latter, see Rey Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem."

<sup>18</sup> In his review of Ha Jin's recent collection of stories, *A Good Fall*, Todd Gitlin writes: "Homelessness is, increasingly, the human condition. It was not inadvertently that I called Jin a significant American writer. To be hyphenated, as he is, is one of the most common and formidable ways to be American." It is interesting to read Gitlin's definition of "homelessness" as a distinguishing feature of American literature against Lo's remarks on Chinese literature as a "centerless" institution.



issue of language in Ha Jin's writing gives rise to polemics. As a migrant, Ha Jin holds an ambiguous view of "home." He claims that

. . . for most migrants, especially migrant artists and writers, the issue of homeland involves arrival more than return. The dichotomy inherent in the word "homeland" is more significant now than it was in the past. Its meaning can no longer be separated from home, which is something the migrant should be able to build away from his native land. Therefore, it is logical to say that your homeland is where you build your home. (Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* 84)

For Ha Jin, then, "home is in the process of becoming, instead of [being] fixed in the past." In this sense, Ha Jin is not only an exilic intellectual standing against nationalism in Said's sense,<sup>19</sup> but also a diasporic writer, one who begins to construct a home in a new location, as David Palumbo-Liu maintains (355). Sympathetic with the position and perspective of Milan Kundera, Ha Jin regards nostalgia as being detrimental to one's powers of recollection, and therefore to one's perception of his past and acceptance of it as part of himself (Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* 71-72).

This partly explains Ha Jin's efforts, in many interviews, to distance himself from China and to be recognized as an American writer. He understands that the question of language is at the core of this process: "how to learn the language—or give up learning the language!—but without the absolute mastery of the language, which is impossible for an immigrant. Your life is always affected by the insufficiency" (Weich 179). But on the other hand, this attachment to the American life, at least in its linguistic dimensions, does not prevent him from "truly enter[ing] in[to] that Chinese world" in such works as *Waiting* (Weich 173). Or better yet, it enhances his ability to convey Chinese sentiments in a unique fashion.

Furthermore, for Ha Jin, home can also be understood in terms of Theodor Adorno's notion of linguistic and ideological confinement. Adorno's aphorism, "not to be at home in one's home," is largely based on the idea of a linguistic prison (39). Since the orthodox language is inevitably perceived as being dogmatic, the only

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<sup>19</sup> Said pits exile against nationalism as a way of understanding exilic conditions and the exile's power of resistance. However, he also gives the essay an ambiguously optimistic ending: "There is also a particular sense of achievement in acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be" (176-77). This statement seems most relevant to Ha Jin. But Said continues, "This remains risky, however" (186).

moral home available is found in writing—writing in another language, to be sure. Adorno’s metaphorical claim takes on a physical dimension in Ha Jin’s case. Ha Jin’s choosing to write in another language does, in effect, provide him with a fresh perspective and a new approach. But unlike Adorno’s, his choice is colored by multiple motivations—by “necessity, ambition, and estrangement” (GoGwilt). While estrangement is where much of this writer’s literary flavor and power rest, the necessity of escaping Mainland China’s censorship and surviving in an American academic world bring out his pragmatic side, and both of these dimensions are part of his ambition to become a great writer.

Ha Jin has been asked over and over why he writes in English, and he replies, “For survival.” This modest answer, he explains, refers to physical survival but also means “to exist—to live a meaningful life” (Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* 32). Ambitious as he is, Ha Jin aims at creating literary works that may “transcend time” rather than being merely a “spokesman of his tribe” (Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* 3-30). Of course, while his choice of English as the language of his novels simultaneously distances him from and brings him closer to China, so do his “Chinese” subjects both distance him from and attract his English-speaking readers. Writing “translation literature” as such, Ha Jin transgresses the boundaries of national literatures, challenging the linguistic determinism and imagined cultural unity that are so deeply embedded in the conceptualization of national literatures.

### **Translational Language and Transnational Passport**

Ha Jin notes that “the ultimate betrayal is to choose to write in another language.” Yet the question of how to turn a linguistic handicap to his advantage is the issue that most preoccupies him (Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* 31, 48). He frequently refers to two great precursors, Conrad and Nabokov, as exemplary figures who adopted English as their language of composition. Ha Jin attempts to identify the special qualities in their writing that gave them their status as masters of English literature. Among other features, he pays special attention to their prose styles. In Ha Jin’s view, Conrad’s English, “neutral as it is, has its unique strength and stark elegance. It often rises to the level of poetry” (Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* 44). Nabokov, on the other hand, tries to escape Conrad’s influence, and his ingenious and unconventional (ab)use of English makes his prose unique.<sup>20</sup> In my

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<sup>20</sup> Ha Jin writes, “In it [*Notes on Prosody*], Nabokov intends to correct, if not overhaul, English prosody by introducing into it the concept of skud and tilt.” “His [Nabokov’s] word games are of

view, Ha Jin has drawn much inspiration in his own English writing from Nabokov's strategy, not only as a solution to the Conradian plight—a plight originating from the necessity of not using one's mother tongue—but also as a way of going beyond the anxiety of influence when faced with both of these great literary forebears. This reference to Conrad and Nabokov also reminds us of Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of minor literature, in which the idea of the deterritorialization of a language is crucial. For Deleuze and Guattari, deterritorializing a language, that is, writing in such a way as to escape the symbolic structure of a master language and, thus, escape the latter's ideological confinement, has a more political than linguistic significance. Perhaps Ha Jin's translation literature, with its idiosyncratic use of both English and Chinese, can be placed in this literary genealogy that Deleuze and Guattari have mapped out.<sup>21</sup>

In what follows, I will be focusing on Ha Jin's first published novel, *In the Pond*, and looking at the ways in which his use of language turns his linguistic "self-crippling" to literary advantage by writing with "a different kind of sensibility and a slightly different kind of syntax, idiom, and style" (Johnson 57). In fact, the implications of his use of language go beyond the purely linguistic level, as Ha Jin himself modestly remarks. For here we must consider his view of the function of language in general, and his symbolic sense of constraint and mobility, as well as his identity as a migrant writer.

Many critics see exilic and diasporic writing as a compensatory reaction to an alienation from home, physical and/or spiritual. The longing for a homecoming that remains imaginary gives rise to a special narrative power that characterizes this form of writing. These critics usually note a "figure of rupture" (Seidel x), or a "discontinuous state of being" (Said 177), as an originary force in such novels. For instance, Michael Seidel defines an exile as "someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another" (ix). Similarly, James Clifford maintains that diasporic cultures mediate the experiences of "living here and remembering/desiring another place" (255). Necessary alienation empowers an imaginary return, while unfulfilled homecoming sustains the power of rupture.

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a different order, more exciting and more original—based on the misuse and distortion of words and grammar and often originating from mistakes" (*The Writer as Migrant* 45, 51).

<sup>21</sup> This genealogy of course includes Kafka, discussed in depth by Deleuze and Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. This Jewish writer who knew Hebrew and Czech, both of which were in a sense colonized languages and cultures, lived in Prague and wrote in German, the dominant or master language, the language of the Austro-Hungarian empire which included Czechoslovakia.

This reading partly explains the charm and power of border-crossing writing, and informs some interpretations of Ha Jin's writing. In 2005, Ha Jin, taking up John William DeForest's concept of "The Great American Novel," raised in the Chinese journal *Jintian* (Today) the controversial idea of "The Great Chinese Novel," which got many Chinese writers involved in the debate. For Ha Jin, however, the realization of this ideal was beside the point; on the contrary, it was precisely never fulfilling it that would urge writers to continue to approach it. By the same token, Lo reads Ha Jin's *Waiting* as a manifestation of an existential paradox, that of an empowering non-fulfillment, formally emblematic of modern Chinese literature as an open institution in the globalized context (74-78). However, what is lacking in this sort of reading is the fact that it does not account for the power of alienation on a linguistic level.

Thus George Steiner's influential concepts of "bi-lingualism" or "multi-lingualism" may seem to be more relevant. Defying romantic theories of language which conceive it as a shaping force of, and essential means of access to, the otherwise unapproachable past, root of consciousness and ethnic quality, Steiner views the acquisition of any language, in the case of bilingualism, as a process of internalized inscription of a "foreign" language. Following Steiner, Nico Israel claims that "language itself is never *not* exilic or diasporic" (4; emphasis in original).

Ha Jin's stylish inscription of Chinese proverbs and idioms directly into English is one of the first things that catches readers' and critics' attention. Thus John Updike, reviewing Ha Jin's novel *A Free Life*, spots many "small solecisms" and says: "Unfortunately, the novel rarely gathers the kind of momentum that lets us overlook its language." Many of these solecisms, which "feel translated from the Mandarin," are in fact intentional on the writer's part, as they are meant to make clear the difficulty and awkwardness of the characters' linguistic as well as ideological transition from one culture to another. Such improprieties in the use of English are also found throughout Ha Jin's other novels, but perhaps the author never intended that his readers overlook them. For this is a strategy he uses to give his prose an unfamiliar flavor. In her detailed analysis of *In the Pond*, Hang Zhang applauds Ha Jin's linguistic innovations: "A specific 'Chineseness' in Ha Jin's writing is . . . best illustrated where the literary creativity appears in the form of lexical innovation and cultural metaphors. . . . Ha Jin's linguistic ingenuity seems to lie in the ability to blend the linguistic forms and semantics of Chinese and English to create a hybrid language of his own" (307). While it is in my view reductionist to say *Chineseness* is affirmed through Ha Jin's unique use of language, his linguistic

ingenuity as such has indeed given him a distinct style, and as a result has placed him in a unique position within the complex field of “Chinese literature.”

Much of the flavor of such brand-mark Chinese-English phrases as “[to] wear the same pair of trousers and [to] breathe through one nostril” (meaning “to be accomplices”) arguably comes from resorting to the literal. This makes Ha Jin’s English sound like a direct translation from the Chinese, and therefore to be readily translatable back into Chinese, which is a distinctive feature of translation literature (Jin, *In the Pond* 37).<sup>22</sup> Besides achieving the effect of estrangement or defamiliarization and making his prose feel very fresh,<sup>23</sup> this technique also accounts for much of the “across-cultural-boundaries” humor of the story (Weich 177). The strange curse words such as “son of a turtle” and “son of a rabbit” (Jin, *In the Pond* 32, 93), for example, add much to the comic effect and, perhaps the same thing, help to create a sense of absurdity.

In fact, resorting to the literal is also an infamous trick that the two main antagonists in the novel, General Liu and Director Ma, often use to give Shao Bin a hard time. In the beginning, after having been denied a new apartment in the work-unit housing project, Bin draws and publishes a cartoon of a six-story building entitled “Happy Is the Family with Power,” satirizing the corruption involved in the process of housing allocation. Liu, however, retorts to this criticism not by trying to prove his honesty but by picking out the “inaccurate facts” depicted in the cartoon: there never has been a single six-story building in their housing project, and calling all twenty-four families who will live in the new apartment complex one family, as the title indicates, is a serious critique of Communism, according to which ideology everything is shared including husbands and wives.

They play the same trick when Bin’s second satirical cartoon, targeting official bribery and the appropriation of funds in the New Year season, is published and arouses turbulence among the workers. In this cartoon, entitled “So Hard to Celebrate a Holiday!,” Bin draws, among other rare goods, pineapples and the official state wine, Maotai. To pacify the enraged workers, Liu and Ma once again

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<sup>22</sup> This feature of translation literature may raise questions regarding the distinction between works such as Ha Jin’s and those translated into English from Chinese. While Ha Jin’s works carry distinctively translational marks, translated works show varying degrees of original Chinese signs, depending on the translators’ predilections. In my view, most translators choose *not* to literally translate the original, particularly idiomatic phrases, which may help to distinguish this case from that of Ha Jin. When translated back into Chinese, Ha Jin’s works seem to have lost their translational flavor. As far as I know, few critical discussions of Ha Jin in Chinese show an interest in this linguistic aspect.

<sup>23</sup> “Making the sentences fresh” is a titular phrase from an interview with Ha Jin. See Johnson.

blame Bin for slander, because the pineapple is such a rarity in the North at that time and Maotai is such a luxury, one that even citizens of their rank can hardly come by.

What makes these scenes so comical and/or absurd is the fact that they seem to turn a blind eye to the metaphorical and symbolic meanings of words and pictures. An intangible force seems to constantly bring these words and pictures down to the level of something very literal, physical, fundamental, primitive. Arguably, Liu and Ma's clownish physical abuse of Bin, as a result of their failure to resolve their own polemics, is symbolic of their linguistic abuse. It does not surprise us that the brutal force—"the only one *language*" they know (Jin, *In the Pond* 96; emphasis added)—both sides resort to culminates in aiming at and hurting the lower parts of their bodies. This quality of literalness, in the case of the two villains, signals an abuse of language and/or of sense so violent that it extends it to absurdity; yet, for the author, it represents a deterritorialization of language, a displacing of it from its symbolic structure, an attempt not only to make his translation literature stylistically unique but to test the political potential of such an exercise in linguistic migrancy and ideological transgression.

Over against Liu and Ma's abuse of words, Ha Jin's character Bin seems to cherish a traditional belief in the power of words from the outset. He is initially encouraged by a remark of Han scholar Wang Chong's (27–c.97 A.D.): "the true scholar's brush must encourage good and warn against evil" (Jin, *In the Pond* 8). Assuming the role of a conscientious intellectual, Bin wields his brush (instead of a pen) to fight against Liu and Ma, those symbols of evil. On many occasions, he does exhibit artistic talent and his words do produce certain effects. But the ineffectiveness of words, and of *his* words in particular, becomes obvious soon enough. Liu and Ma intriguingly sidestep the thrust of Bin's attacks by turning to the literal. What makes the situation more interesting, however, is that in these cartoonish scenes their credulous audience, Bin not excluded, easily takes their linguistic abuse. However, it turns out that as long as Bin speaks *their* language he will get along and even thrive. This is exactly what happens at the end: he accepts their job offer as a cadre in the department of propaganda, working as a mouthpiece for their faction, and therefore is promised the apartment that he has been asking for.

In this discursive battle we see the resort to the literal functions of language and thus a sense of a fundamental slippage in/of language. This linguistic slippage or reduction renders, in a rather grotesque manner, accepted morals irrelevant and ossifies its own symbolic. Ha Jin's playful language, while demonstrating creative linguistic possibilities, thus exhibits the novelist's serious skepticism about

language itself. This skepticism is emphasized again in a more satirical fashion at the end of the story, when Bin, himself a victim of linguistic abuse, gives a dramatic and emotional “performance” of the charges directed against his abusers, believing that “words alone were merely clever creatures, which tended to arouse suspicion” (Jin, *In the Pond* 148). Here Ha Jin’s innovative and comic use of language paradoxically implies his recognition of the brutality of language, which, not surprisingly, brings to mind the political brutality of those who use this language.

However, Ha Jin’s trans-border language is often accompanied by a sense of linguistic constraint that seems to be ubiquitous in his novels. Critics have noticed the theme of constraint in his writing.<sup>24</sup> In *Waiting*, for instance, what keeps Lin Kong and Manna Wu waiting for eighteen years for the consummation of their marriage is, ironically, an old military rule, whose origin is no longer clear yet whose arbitrary power remains. Everyone is stuck in this linguistic, more than logical or conceptual, prison while no one seems to care to challenge it. Likewise, in *A Free Life*, a story about Chinese immigrants’ struggles in the U.S., Nan’s assimilation into the American life, as Updike in his review points out, begins with a linguistic assimilation. Freedom is, first and foremost, a linguistic freedom.

In *In the Pond*, this sense of constraint is conveyed through the depiction of the temporal and spatial fixations in Bin’s daily life, and it is nowhere more conspicuously manifested than in the titular metaphor of the pond. This pond, no more than “a pee puddle” (Jin, *In the Pond* 114), traps not only Bin but Liu and Ma as well, and in fact has as its ground the iron rice bowl system then in practice. On the one hand, “They [Liu and Ma] couldn’t fire him [Bin], because he was a permanent worker in a state enterprise and didn’t have to renew his contract as a temporary worker would” (Jin, *In the Pond* 19); but on the other hand, Bin cannot leave this enterprise without the permission of its officials, who are in charge of and indeed totally control their workers’ lives. It is based precisely on this understanding that both sides, stuck in this pond without any clear exit, enact on the stage a series of farcical performances. The final resolution is, in County Secretary Yang’s words, “to keep him [Bin] in our pond” (Jin, *In the Pond* 169).

This discursive prison signifies the strong sense of social immobility that is prevalent in Ha Jin’s novel. Bin is able to gain enough capital to be bought off simply because one of his allies has powerful relatives in Beijing, the headquarters of political power, whose direct intervention into the case, it turns out, virtually changes his opponents’ minds. This stark hierarchy of power, which places tight

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Johnson 62.

restrictions on the social life and movements of its citizens, is of course not uncommon in China. Bin is lucky this time to have access to and gain assistance from the center of power. Still, the fact that he needs national grain coupons and an official letter, among other things, in order to make his trip to Beijing indicates the difficulties inherent in this border-crossing of power.

In fact, Bin's previous attempts to resort to superior and external powers, such as by writing a letter to Secretary Yang and publishing cartoons in municipal and national newspapers, have been invariably thwarted. His failure to traverse the power hierarchy is linked to his linguistic limitations within its/their discourse. The two cartoons that Bin has published in newspapers are taken by Liu and Ma in literal terms so as to bypass their moral deficiency. What further makes Bin's charge impotent, however, is the spatial disadvantage of the medium of the newspaper when this is set against those physical meetings at which he is usually attacked. The externality of the force—media in foreign provinces—that Bin turns to, in his case, makes the written words (and signs) seem rather fragile, whereas the confronting presence of the spoken words in those meetings gives them an abusive power that dwarfs his psyche.

This symbolic portrayal of the hierarchy of power that Ha Jin's writing often deals with is in sharp contrast with the linguistic mobility that his use of language exhibits and which his migrant status provides. Or, to put it another way, Ha Jin's linguistic mobility, reinforced by his identity as a migrant writer, renders his description of discursive constraints even sharper. Shuang Shen, in her reading of *Waiting*, implies a connection between the sense of historical and social shackling exhibited in Ha Jin's characterization, especially that of the female characters, on the one hand, and his own struggle as a diasporic writer on the other (61-62).

Ha Jin's choice to write in English was, in the first place, an attempt to avoid the political and social constraints that he thought he would encounter should he have written in Chinese. The destiny of his works in China, in fact, shows that he was right.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps his early experience in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China has played a role in shaping his views on social and personal freedom. His frustration with the role that the PLA played in Tiananmen directly led to his decision to emigrate, as well as to the production of *The Crazed*.

Finally, Ha Jin's linguistic innovations, with their transnational and translational features, foreground the medium of language and make self-referential

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<sup>25</sup> Ha Jin wrote in "The Censor in the Mirror" about how a Chinese press had planned to publish Chinese translations of his works, but changed its mind due to the sensitive subjects these works dealt with. He expressed his frustration with this "self-censorship" in China.



reflection possible. Steiner, theorizing multilingual cross-fertilization, claims that “every act of communication between human beings increasingly takes on the shape of an act of translation” (19). Ha Jin’s readily translatable language is arguably an eloquent manifestation of Steiner’s argument. This seminal form of translation is most productively practiced in migrant writing. Eric Hayot, investigating what he calls “immigrating fictions,” compares this form of trans-border writing to translation inasmuch as both involve a critical process of mediation, which functions in terms of the distantiating “Brechtian sign.” In “immigrating fiction” we could say that by definition “the fiction, like the Brechtian actor, never renounces its claim on the process of the novel; like the customs officer, the literary agent, and the coyote, it demands its cut in the transaction,” and this appropriately describes Ha Jin’s writing, whose unique language reminds readers of the very process of crossing-over, linguistic, cultural, and discursive (Hayot 601-04; emphasis in original). While a translator usually conceals his/her role of mediator, playing the part of an absent presence, Ha Jin is more self-reflective and auto-referential.

In a sense, then, Bin is a caricature of Chinese intellectuals, and Ha Jin may have his own image in mind when depicting this figure. For both of them, there is a clear sense of inescapability from the discursive prison of their respective conditions as Chinese living in, or coming from, China. Although Ha Jin has on many occasions denied any autobiographical orientation in his writing (Johnson 56), self-reflection is indeed an important dimension of his literary creation. At the end of the story, Bin recites in front of Mr. Chai these lines, translated from Russian, by the Russian Poet Sergei Yesenin (1895–1925):

Oh, the language of my countrymen  
Is alien to me all at once.  
I am a foreigner in my own town. (Jin, *In the Pond* 145)

Obviously, Ha Jin is also referring to himself as a migrant Chinese writer. Linguistic alienation, signifying a sort of discursive exclusion, renders his identity problematic and ambiguous. His trans-lingual writing is necessarily a gesture that foregrounds the writing itself, and thereby invites our reflection.

## Conclusion

Just as there are many forms of border-crossing, the paradigm of Chinese literature is itself complex and multiple, a sort of spectrum within which Ha Jin

continues to carve out a unique space. His English-language writing on China-related subjects poses more questions than it can answer, given the vast discursive space of the writing itself. Language as a vital dimension of cultures still plays an important part in literary taxonomies today, and continues to shape people's view of literature. At the same time, border-crossing and cross-cultural/linguistic fertilization are practiced on an increasingly larger scale in this age of globalization. Under these conditions, Ha Jin's trans-border writing of translation literature serves as a striking example, one which makes us reflect on the nature of literary creation at this historical juncture. It can only be hoped that his works will be translated *back* into Chinese in Mainland China, and that the growing international impact of these English-language texts leads to further debates on the critical issues of national literature, global identity and linguistic mobility.

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