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Where Are We and What to Write?: An Interview with Professor Ha Jin

Li Zhenling Ha Jin

Abstract: In this interview, Professor Ha Jin not only shares his thoughts on such key terms related to overseas Chinese writing as cultural position, language, translation and tradition by looking back on his life experience and writing career, but also unfolds his writing concerns and strategies by examining his early writing on China and later works on immigration. Jin distinguishes exile from immigration, emphasizing the dynamic shifting between the two; he emphasizes the transcendental, inclusive and metaphysical aspects of migration, holding that migration is the universal condition of human life. Jin insists on the translatability of language, thinking that it is very important for migrant writers to make use of their “defect”, i. e. to build their mistaken or flawed English as their style, and being willing to exist in different languages and traditions. Jin believes in the universal aspects of his stories but argues that literature is by no means about type, but about individuality and peculiarity. Jin points out that overseas writers should give more attention to the frustrating experience of the new arrivals and gender issues among them rather than the obsolete theme of the American Dream and racism.

Keywords: overseas Chinese writing; migration; translatability; universality and individuality; the new arrivals and gender

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标 题: 身在何处? 如何写作?: 哈金教授访谈

摘 要: 在此次访谈中,哈金教授不仅通过回顾自己的人生经历和写作生涯,分享了他对文化立场、语言、翻译和传统等与海外华文写作相关的关键术语的思考,而且通过讲述早期的中国写作和后期的移民作品,披露了自己的写作关切和策略。哈金将流亡与移民区分开来,强调两者之间的动态转换;他看重移民的超越性、包容性和形而上层面,认为移民是人类生活的普遍状况。哈金坚持语言的可译性,认为移民作家应该利用语言“瑕疵”,把错误的或有缺陷的英语作为一种风格,并认为找到自身在不同语言和传统中的独特存在尤其重要。哈金认为写作应传递具有普遍性的概念,但不认可文学的典型化塑造,因为文学是关于个性和特殊性的呈现。他还指出,海外作家应该更多地关注新移民的挫折经历和其中存在的性别问题,美国梦和种族主义这些主题已经过时。

关键词: 海外华人写作;移民;可译性;普遍性和个体性;新移民和性别

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Exile, Immigration and Migration

Li: In the preface to *The Writer as Migrant*, your collection of essays, you wrote: “I view myself not only as an exile; I am also an immigrant.” How do you think of exile and immigrant?

Jin: Immigrants are those who volunteer to uproot themselves and restart somewhere, which means the past is very obscure and insignificant to them and they are willing to leave for new places and create new homes — the fabric of existence. For immigrants, there is no disruption between the past and the present, which can promise them the freedom to go back and forth between different locations. But exiles are different. They define their existence with reference to the old land and consequently, it becomes very difficult for them to put down roots in new places. They usually have a significant past which still asserts much pressure and force to the extent that sometimes they cannot get out of it and are prone to become nostalgic. What’s worse, that they are often forced to separate from their past and cannot make connection to what they are familiar with causes a lot of pain, which stops them from creating happy and meaningful life in new places, especially for those who come to another place in their middle age.

However, it is possible for an exile to become an immigrant. To be an exile can be a heavy issue because by definition it means one is banished from one’s home. But the idea of home is always in question. Either home is already somewhere, or one creates one’s own home somewhere else, like what an immigrant does. I am somewhere in between because I came to the States at the age of twenty-nine, which means a lot of things for me, including my mentality, have already been shaped. In that sense it is not very possible to create a brand-new self from my old one. That’s why partly I am an exile though I claim myself as an immigrant.

Li: By choosing the neutral word “migrant”, you claim that you place yourself in the context of human migration and thus are able to investigate some of the metaphysical aspects of a writer’s life and work. Would you say something about migrant and migration?

Jin: Migration is a universal condition of human life, including exile, immigration, and other types of displacement. Migration is even within countries, though as this type of migrants they are not sent to another country. If people visit different places, they will have the sense that they can choose where to live and where to have better life. An individual is entitled to choose his life, which serves as a reminder that human migration is one of the human rights and as human beings we are supposed to move. As a migrant, one takes migration as part of one’s existence; a migrant writer’s work should be done in the process of migration rather than after he is settled in a place.

And it is very important to bear in mind that migration is a possible site against parochialism. When people go to different places, they are in fact in contact with different groups and see different styles of life, which makes them begin to have different feelings and senses and encourages them to look beyond paradigms. In terms of those people who choose to live a very stable life in the land of their ancestors, I personally think they are mentally blessed. They of course have their limitations, but at the same time they gain security: certainty about things and no misgivings, which is a source of mental strength.

Li: You also wrote that “the most significant literature dealing with human migration has been written on the experience of exile” while “immigration is a minor theme, primarily American”. Therefore, “a major challenge for writers of the immigrant experience is how to treat this subject in response to the greater literary traditions”. Can you elaborate?

Jin: When we look at literature, all the great founding works are in fact about exile. For instance, in West we have such great epics on exile as *Odyssey* and *Divine Comedy*, and in China we have such prestigious

exiled poets as Qu Yuan and Du Fu. All those are related to exile (inland exile) and have nothing to do with immigrants. Immigrant is a North American theme and evidently, we don't have many great literatures or great pieces of this kind.

Indeed, there are good and fine books written on immigrant experience, but it is still difficult to write immigrant experience in response to the greater tradition. Nabokov is an exception. He writes about exile, for instance in his book *Pnin*, which is also about immigrant experience. In that sense he responds to the greater tradition and forms his own aesthetics. Immigrants, especially earlier immigrants, mostly came as labors who were half educated or even uneducated to the extent that it is very difficult for them to develop that aesthetics. But now the situation is different, with the young generations eagerly looking for their own tradition.

I started with exile stories and then turned to write immigrant stories because the trajectory of my life is in that way, a way from exile to immigrant, and my work is a reflection of my life. In the beginning when I came to America, I didn't know anything except Chinese army and Chinese country life which were all I could write about. But gradually I began to and had to write about things outside China in a migrant context because these are what I know now. I cannot write about, for example, Changsha or any other city in China, because I haven't been there for a long time. Writing about how people live differently from their past is to examine how migration affects, changes or even transforms their life, which as a process is in many of my books.

To some extent, I exist in a margin between two languages and two cultures, where I gain my strength of writing and have my own space. In English, the mainstream writers do not write about margin because they do not have interesting stories to tell from it. If one is in a margin, one might have a different perspective and his take on things might be different, which means he hears things from different sides that can create interesting stories. However, it can also be a very limited position because if one always stays in a margin, one is less important to many people. I am not bothered by that because in a long run it is only the quality rather than popularity of my work that matters.

Translation, Language and Tradition

Li: You insist on the translatability of language. Could you say a little more about this view?

Jin: I do have the Chinese audience in mind when I write in English, which means if my works have been translated back into Chinese, the Chinese audience should find resonance in themselves. By saying this, I don't mean every detail I write, but refer to the spirit or a great sense of truthfulness of which I do feel the importance, though sometimes it may be an illusion. Otherwise, one could easily abuse the privilege of writing in a different culture about the people who can't read his story. Therefore, I do feel I have the sense of translatability as a standard.

Something can be gained in translation. Most translators are at the same time good stylists who would spend much time on the work and make the work look new in another language. By doing that, the work would be proliferated, becoming richer and richer in different languages — a process of reaching the world and becoming world literature. Chekhov is a much better writer in English than in Russian, because there are so many translations in which Chekhov has become an industry. Though Chekhov didn't write in English, in English his writings get improved and refined, becoming more polished than in the original. In every few years, there are new translations, which is a good phenomenon.

I gain much in the translation of different books of mine. *War Trash* in English and in Chinese is very different, with the latter more emotional. The Chinese translation of *A Good Fall*, of which I served as the translator, could give readers a fresh reading experience completely different from its English version. I always

have a sense of project, of how much time of my life should be given to certain work. I also wrote a preface to the Chinese translation of the book, which elaborates on something about the little China of Flushing and the big China, which is unseen in the English version. The little China of Flushing is more important to me because it contains my literary being. As a migrant writer, the most important thing is to tell my story in a meaningful and artistic way.

Li: You endorsed Conrad's neutral English and Nabokov's playfulness of words. To what extent do you think the two masters stylize your language?

Jin: In terms of English, it is very hard to learn from Conrad, whose English is quite standard and confined to dictionary. Also, he knew other languages, which means such foreign elements as Polish and French can get into his writing to make his English very vigorous. Nabokov is very different, who is more playful. It is very important for migrant writers to make use of their "defect", i. e. to build their mistaken or flawed English as their style. From this point of view, Nabokov's style is more accomplished than Conrad.

But what is amazing about Conrad is that he creates the universal space of ocean, which is shared by all the human races. He influences a lot of writers and established a tradition, writing about the island, the body of water, and these that are far away from the West. Even Naipaul learns from him what can be written about. By definition, his fiction becomes international and gains its uniqueness, where readers may find excellent narratives about the global, the cosmos, travels and migration.

Li: Because of the Chineseness of your work, and also your self-translation of your work, some critics call you a bilingual writer, instead of an Anglophone writer. What type of writer do you think you are?

Jin: I don't write fiction in Chinese, though I translate some and write essays as well as poetry in Chinese. Chinese is part of my past and I am not willing to abandon it. Therefore, I take the title of a bilingual writer as a compliment because it's part of myself. On the one hand, there are diasporic writers, Ma Jian for example, who want to stay in Chinese only; on the other hand, there are some other writers who would not do anything about Chinese and their work has never been made to be translated into Chinese though they grew up in Chinese tradition. These different attitudes towards Chinese language is far from mine, though they are fine as personal choices. I am a person who tries to be able to exist in both languages and to make shifts between two different languages. I grew up in China and all my best years were spent there. There is no way for me to cut the link and sever the past, which takes much energy and needs courage. It is also true to say that I am writing in English about China and Chinese migration, with the literary influence predominantly from Chinese and Russian tradition, which may be a good try of categorization.

Russian literature has been always a big profit for me and I read Chekhov and Tolstoy from time to time. But in recent years I keep learning things from some migrant writers like V. S. Naipaul and Ruth Praver Jhabvala. For instance, *A Map of Betrayal* in terms of its form is mainly influenced by a famous novel called *Heat and Dust* by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, an English writer who is German or Jewish origin living in New York. Naipaul has a great influence on me who has inspired me to form my sense of literary tradition in a contemporary and modern era. In addition, I have claimed in different interviews that I am a Chinese American writer without a hyphen, which is also fine for me partly because it defines my cultural situation, too.

Universality and Individuality

Li: What do you have in your mind when you write China from, not only a geographical, but also linguistic and cultural distance?

Jin: In the beginning, in my early books like *Ocean of Words* and *Under the Red Flag*, I felt as a Chinese writer who wrote unique stories that other Chinese writers couldn't write. Even in China, those places in my fiction like the countryside, remote places, and the army unit on the border are exotic in a way, which makes my stories unusual. At that time, I didn't know anything else in the outside world. But there are always universal aspects of my stories of China and I always emphasize this dimension. It can be the way or the observation of life since we all experience the process of aging, struggle with work, daily existence, worries, anxieties and happiness. Though all these are about human emotions and different people can have different perspectives, at the core or bottom we share the same qualities and problems, which are universal.

There are also constant chaos, loss, collision, displacement, contradiction, uncertainty, instability and transition in my stories, which is the migration part I insert. When people go to new places and make acquaintance with those who have different values, perceptions and cultures, they may feel lost and have no idea about how to act and what to follow, what is valuable for themselves and for others, and what they may bring to their new life. As a consequence, chaos and disorder appear since values and references from a certain place are not applicable in another place.

I also present moral issues in my stories, through which I may examine humanity carefully. There is a story in *Under the Red Flag* called "Resurrection" in which a man castrates himself. Because of his affair with his sister-in-law, the leader pressures him to write a pornographic confession, which he could not do, and he resurrects himself by committing castration. The leader and the man have different moral values and stances, thus making different choices, which shows the complexity of humanity. However, gradually I feel I could write things beyond China and *War Trash* is a transition, which is set in different countries and in which the character moves around, being an outsider and insider at the same time and always stepping aside and reflecting on different situations.

Li: Some commentators have observed that the Chinese women and men in your fictions are not typical or standard representations of the Chinese. What do you think of "typical"?

Jin: When we use the word "typical", it very often means a type. Literature is by no means about type, but about the individuality and peculiarity. There is good literature and bad literature, and writers always try to make and create the best. That writers create characters does not mean they really know their creation. Instead, the creation is related to the creator's perception, understanding and feeling of life and the world, as well as his sense as an author.

It is noticeable that there are evident differences between my writing of China and Mainland Chinese writers' writing of China. Although I am writing in a different language, there is always a sense of presence — historical presence. The other thing is that I look at things differently and may offer different perceptions with the eyes of overseas Chinese. Things which are trivial and uninteresting for some may be interesting from my perspective. For instance, in *A Free Life*, Nan Wu is very happy to go to supermarket after he just had an argument with his wife simply because at the supermarket, he can enjoy free coffee and a free muffin. This is what life looks like for the majority, which consists of small things making people happy for every moment and I would like to be the one who captures those moments.

Li: Would you talk about *Waiting*, a masterpiece of writing on China?

Jin: It is a kind of *1984* in the sense of its emotional or sexual aspect, a novel about revolutionary destruction from inside, hence a deep inside story. It took me a long time to figure out what happened to Lin Kong, the protagonist. He is kind, generous and intelligent but could not love to the extent that in the end, Lin Kong realizes that he has become a "superfluous man" — a big idea in Russian literature. He uses that phrase because of his familiarity with Russian literature. But in terms of the sentiment and psychology,

Waiting is a Chinese book in deep. And in terms of style, taste and aesthetics, it turns out to be very European.

I also created a fictional locality in the novel, which is called Muji City modelled after Jiamusi of Heilongjiang Province. When I worked on *Waiting*, I needed a city, a small city on the river that has an army hospital. I knew Jiamusi didn't have an army hospital but in Yanji, the capital of Yanbian, there was a big army hospital. I therefore combined the two cities and created a new place. After *Waiting*, I realized that I still had materials for more stories, which took me to write a book of short stories (*The Bridegroom*) in order to continue to make use of that locality. Muji City in my stories should be very distant and remote, appearing as a border city in Heilongjiang where has the tradition of *Chuangguandong*, with different kinds of migrants and the ambiance of primitiveness. Apart from the city center, I also wrote about its countryside area and villagers. In *The Bridegroom*, people in Muji City are mostly migrant workers who belong to a unique group with a different quality of life.

Li: What's your opinion about the concept of home?

Jin: Home is an emotion, not an entity, which means people have someone who cares about and loves them. There is always a metaphysical dimension in terms of home. A scientist or artist may have another level of home — home in their work. It is therefore clear that home is not related to a specific place but more like an individual feeling. If one is attached to a place and thinks it as a good and nurturing place, surely that can be one's home. But the truth is that many people don't have that feeling about their environment throughout their life.

For me, writing is a way of life, where I find or hope to find my home. I keep reminding myself that writers' writing career has a very limited time during which they must read great books, write and emulate without interruption. What matters is not how many books they publish but an issue of quality and of writing good books in which they tell interesting and impressive stories. But that takes time, depending on how many years and how much they would like to give to their writing — the home they choose to live.

The New Arrivals and Gender Reconstruction

Li: From *A Free Life* onwards you've turned to write mainly about the Chinese immigrants in America. What does this turn mean to you and what do you have in your immigrant stories?

Jin: It means I write something I know about, telling story based on immigrant experience. This turn is more related to my personal existence, a natural process without deliberate efforts. It is worth mentioning that many of my immigrant stories are set in the Chinatown of Flushing, New York. In order to get familiar with diasporic communities there, I went to Flushing many times, walking around and sometimes staying there for one day or two, when I was working on the stories. There are four or five Chinatowns in New York, some of which are much bigger and more popular than Flushing. But at that time when I wrote the stories, Flushing was very new, with many new arrivals, which impressed me most.

Because of Flushing, I intended to write a collection that pursues certain unity. That's how *A Good Fall* was made, in which all the stories are set in Flushing and write about the right beginning when the immigrants come. I put many efforts to present the hybrid landscape of Flushing in my stories, where a life stranded between the past and the present is unfolded in front of readers. Loneliness, personal struggle, among others, happen on the new arrivals, no matter which culture and which place they originally belong to. Flushing is now different, gradually becoming a haven for different groups of comers, immigrants, and exiles rather than for new immigrants only. It is big now, like a city or a big county in China with all kinds of local foods, full of the

potential to cultivate new types of stories.

As new arrivals, some of my characters are often having dreams about their homeland. They find it difficult to clarify their past for the reason that it is already part of their life and blood. Different emotions are entangled to make emotional problems a major concern in my stories. Starting a new life in a foreign country can be frustrating, as my stories show. But this frustrating experience is more common among Chinese immigrants partly because their languages and cultures are too alien from the west. For Indian immigrants, for instance, it is less difficult to tackle these issues because they grow up in English environment and are familiar with Western culture in many ways.

Language is a big issue. Many Chinese in the States write in Chinese for many years and only write in Chinese to the extent that they don't speak any English simply because it is too hard to learn, so do some Russian immigrants. Solzhenitsyn, the famous Russian writer, didn't speak any English in the States and waited for his day to return to Russia. The last day before he left for Russia, someone interviewed him and found out with surprise that he couldn't speak in English. Russians have a deep attachment to their homeland, which can explain why a large number of Russian exiles and writers returned, especially when the Soviet Union collapsed. In many ways this tradition is similar to that of the Chinese who also have deep attachment to their roots.

Li: I remember in some of your interviews, you mentioned *Waiting* as a love story is influenced by a few Western novels. Can you tell me more about *A Free Life*?

Jin: I would say Tolstoy, because of whom I wanted to do a big narrative. *A Free Life* is a big book, in which one of the major themes is the American Dream. But I don't like big narrative anymore, tending to write books like *A Map of Betrayal*, in terms of form and narration, and also *The Boat Rocker*, which are small books but represent a different kind.

Americans talk about American Dream but they put it in a concrete material world with frequent references to cars, houses, and something of this category. In fact, the American Dream has more meanings than that. The early immigrants came here because they wanted to see this "Eden" or promised land; they moved to the Western world in order to find the "Garden". In this sense, there is a spiritual dimension in the American Dream — a kind of quest, which is important and precious because it turns the American Dream into something that one always looks for rather than what one already realizes. As the protagonist says, "such a dream was not something to be realized but something to be pursued only". In American literature the great American novels also contain ideas or myths surrounding the American Dream. But as for how it exactly looks, nobody can tell. It's something there, a goal that is beyond everyone's reach.

Unfortunately, many new arrivals are not intellectuals but workers or labors, whose American dream must be secular because they carry less the spiritual dimension of culture, let alone the religious dimension. That's also why I say in the previous text that immigrant literature can be very limited and minor. People always tend to think that a genius is created by historical forces but in fact, it is by accident — an accident that someone arrived and had the talent to change the American landscape.

I mentioned very little on the subject of racism in my work of immigrants. It is true that racism is everywhere, but nationalism is more dangerous because many troubles are compounded by the nationalistic point of view. Many Chinese immigrants worry about anti-Chinese sentiment but ignore the fact that it is not caused by race but by a nationalistic sentiment among American natives, namely, the so-called patriotism. Nan Wu in the novel does not have the consciousness of race and in the beginning he even does not know what "colored people" is, which is common, especially for the new arrivals. Many of the Chinese do not feel any form of inferiority because they were better educated than the average Americans. Nan received good education

back homeland, even though he could not make full use of it in America. Therefore, for Asians race is not a major issue and American society on the whole is very welcoming to Asians, especially Asian women, most of whom are easygoing instead of aggressive, hardworking and very family-centered, which is visible in the story. The white people are eager to have family with Asian woman, which makes them feel the security of home.

By contrast, Asian men are very much prejudiced for different reasons. It's very subtle, not about color only, and there are other sentiments or prejudices which are more disrupting than race. That a colored person who speaks English well can make a difference; knowing how to argue and sue others also makes differences. It is annoying that some Chinese have the mentality that they can buy everything with their money, which cause much prejudice among the Americans, especially churchgoers or religious people. All these indicates the absence of race in the play of bias or prejudice.

Li: The name Nan (男) means "male" or "martial man" in Chinese, but in English it suggests "a female, like Nancy and Nanny and Nanette" to others. Nan's surname Wu is a homophone of "无" in Chinese, which means "none". What do you suggest of Chinese masculinity?

Jin: It refers to the diminished masculinity, which is a problem for Asian man and also why most Asian men are viewed as not masculine enough. A memoir written by a writer I know, whose mother was Korean and father was German, was rejected by the publisher because no reader would read a memoir written by an Asian man. In the end he had to publish it as a novel. On the contrary, *The Woman Warrior* was originally read as a novel, but at the last moment was published as a nonfiction. For Hong Ying, her *Daughter of the River* was published in Chinese as a novel, but in English as a memoir. It is clear that the white people are more interested in Asian woman. Among the new arrivals it becomes common that woman supports man, goes out of home and works harder than man.

In traditional Chinese culture, men always assume superiority. But once they are here in a new country, everything is different and even diminished to the extent that they often get lost. In other words, everyone gains the opportunity to reconstruct or rebuild themselves, not only masculinity or femininity, but also self-hood, style of life, sense of values, system of references. Otherwise, it's very hard to survive. The process of negotiating survival and writing career for most immigrant writers is also a way of reconstructing themselves, when they have to figure out how to support themselves and make a living first to the extent that some of them have to temporarily give up writing or even stop pursuing artistic dream eventually. But for some others, the desire to create is so strong that it can override anything.

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