

(In)Hospitable Languages and Linguistic Hospitality in Hyphenated American Literature: the Case of Ha Jin¹

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Abstract

In *Adieu to Emmanuelle Levinas*, Jacques Derrida observed that the author of *Totality and Infinity* privileged the term ‘dwelling’ over that of ‘hospitality’ although this work “bequeaths to us an immense treatise of hospitality” (Derrida [1997] 1999, 21). As interpreter of the concept of hospitality in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida also reminded us of the conditions of the host, as the one that gives asylum, while, at the same time, the law of hospitality, the law of the place (house, hotel, hospital, hospice, family, city, nation, language, etc.) become the delimitation where that host maintains his/her authority (Derrida 2000b, 4). More recently, Abi Doukhan has accounted for a dimension of the Levinasian hospitality, the *exilic* structure, which has been disregarded by many commentators of the Lithuanian-born philosopher (Doukhan 2010, 235).

In this paper, I intend to examine Ha Jin’s (a Chinese-born American migrant writer and one of the most successful Asian-American authors in current American fiction) exilic condition. Forced to remain in the United States after viewing on television the response of Chinese authorities to the demonstrations at Tiannamen Square in June 1989, Ha Jin has developed his entire literary career in English, a language that he learned after the end of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution. Writing in this language thus became “a matter of survival” (Weinberger 2006, 46), a safe haven to which this author retreated in an attempt to exile himself from Chinese, a language loaded with “a lot of political jargon” (Fay 2009, 122) and unsuitable for the representation of his fictional worlds.

I will be paying close attention to some of Ha Jin’s best known essays: “In Defence of Foreignness” and *The Writer as Migrant*. In this latter book, this Chinese-American writer delves into the Manichean relationship that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Lin

1 The research on this paper was supported by the project CEIPatrimonio, University of Almería.

Yutang, Vladimir Nabokov, V. S. Naipaul, among other foreign authors, had with the English language so as to justify his own decision to write in English. Having accepted being an outcast from his native language (Chinese), Ha Jin's adopted language (English) became, metaphorically speaking, a hospitable space in which he could secure a successful literary career at the expense of being accused of betrayal by both Chinese intellectuals and authorities.

Keywords

Bilingual creativity – hospitable vs inhospitable languages – hospitality – *hostipitality* – migrant writer – translation literature

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The question of language is critical—forcing the other to speak my language even as they ask for asylum is hardly hospitable.

—JUDITH STILL

Derrida and Hospitality

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1 Introduction

Chinese immigration to Gam Saan ('Gold Mountain,' used broadly in Chinese to refer to the western regions of North America) dates back to 1849, the year after James W. Marshall found gold at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California. In subsequent years, hundreds of Chinese arrived in America to work in the gold mines or to lay tracks for the Central Pacific Railroad's transcontinental line. Chinese women in California were almost totally absent at the time, and it is said that San Francisco became, for the Chinese community, "a colony of 'bachelors'" (Takaki [1993] 2008, 195). A natural disaster, nonetheless, changed the fate of Chinese immigrants in America. On April 18, 1906, an earthquake shook San Francisco, the ensuing fires destroying almost all municipal records. This disaster served as an excellent opportunity for many Chinese immigrants to bring their wives and children to the United States. According to US law, the children of American citizens were automatically considered US citizens, no matter where they were born (Takaki [1993] 2008, 202). Many of

those Chinese children came to America as ‘paper sons’ and ‘paper daughters’ as they forged—or purchased—birth certificates to be used as their ‘passport’ to America. However, matters were not as easy for these new immigrants as it might have seemed. Thousands of Chinese entering San Francisco were compelled to disembark on Angel Island and were placed in barracks at the immigration station there. One of these immigrants later recalled how “they locked us up like criminals in compartments like the cages in the zoo” (qtd. in Takaki [1993] 2008, 202). After their long journey from China, they sailed beneath the Golden Gate Bridge but were not in fact allowed to enter the country. Their forged papers, which should have afforded them a simple means of entering the US, became their worst nightmare. To be sure, inmates on Angel Island Immigration Station were not released unless they could convince the American customs authorities that their papers were legitimate. It is estimated that ten percent of those ‘paper sons’ and ‘paper daughters’ who landed on Angel Island were forced to return to China. For those who were detained, Gam Saan turned out to be a great deal less hospitable than the ‘Gold Mountain’ they had dreamed of back in China. The optimism invested in those forged papers by the Chinese immigrants turned out to be misplaced, and the documents themselves did not become passports, but rather a means of turning them into hostages in the new country.

Angel Island Immigration Center, also known as “The Ellis Island of the West,” was in operation for thirty years until its closure in November 1940. The United States Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1942 and the detention center was never reopened as an immigration station. Decades after this infamous episode of Chinese immigration in America, Angel Island was scheduled for demolition in 1970 until a park ranger who was touring the building with a flashlight in his hand noticed the Chinese calligraphy on the walls. Inmates had carved angry and bitter poems onto the cell walls and floors. Other poems by those detainees expressed their fear and shame at being sent back to China, or their hopes of being released and thus finding new opportunities in America (Su *et al.* 1997, n.p.). The barracks where the inmates had been locked up for weeks or months were eventually restored, becoming a *memoria passionis* of the suffering of those Chinese immigrants.

Asian immigration to the US came in waves after the Second World War, and in the final decades of the twentieth century, many Chinese students were afforded the opportunity to continue their graduate education in American universities. One of those students, Ha Jin (1956-), arrived in 1985 to pursue his doctorate in American literature, having promised to return to China upon completion of his studies. Like many other Chinese immigrants, Ha Jin sought refugee status in the United States following the violent response of Chinese

authorities to the student protests at Tiananmen Square in June 1989. His decision to become a writer would be a difficult and painful one in that he had to abandon his native language and produce his works in English, the language of his adopted country. Alongside that decision came charges of treason for having renounced the Chinese language. As a migrant writer, as he views himself, Ha Jin has been a controversial figure, with his work both praised and attacked because of his particular use of English. On the one hand, the Chinese language for Ha Jin becomes a sort of *inhospitable* dwelling, in that he associates it with the Chinese repressive regime. On the other hand, English becomes both a *hospitable* and an *inhospitable* place for him, in that he has been confronted by the wrath of certain monolingual English readers who have reacted negatively to the hybrid nature of his fiction.

This chapter examines issues of hospitality and *hostipitality* in Ha Jin's literary production within a Derridean framework, paying close attention to Jin's distinctive use of language. As a migrant writer in the United States, he felt compelled to write in a foreign language, English, bringing about a kind of hybrid literature characterized by conspicuous linguistic features coming from his own cultural background. Following Paul Ricoeur's concept of linguistic hospitality, I intend to gain a better understanding of the hybrid nature of Ha Jin's fiction which may be labeled as "linguistic creativity" (Ibáñez 2016; 2017; 2019), a concept devised by Indian linguist Braj B. Kachru (1932–2016). The singular nature of his literature has enabled Ha Jin to carve out a niche for himself in current literary America. Bearing in mind how the politics of hospitality have emerged as a crucial element in political debate aimed at providing an appropriate response to the refugee crisis, and how Derrida, in *Monolingualism of the Other*, also pointed out that making a guest conform to the norms of the language of the host could be considered an act of violence—a point reiterated by Judith Still when she observed that imposing the host's language on the guest is hardly hospitable (Still 2010, 19)—one might well understand Ha Jin's exilic condition and his fiction's distinctive use of the English language. The ambivalent nature of his writing and the mixed reviews garnered by some early works may account for analysis that could be articulated within the framework of Derrida's notion of *hostipitality*, an approach which helps us to elucidate Ha Jin's own existence in the current American literary scenario.

2 Ha Jin, or the Linguistic Dilemmas of a Migrant Writer in the US

"As a fortunate one I speak for those unfortunate people who suffered, endured or perished at the bottom of life and who created the history and at the same

time were fooled or ruined by it" (Jin 1990, 2). Penned by a young Chinese Ph.D. student, these lofty words appear in the introduction to *Between Silences* (1990), Ha Jin's first published book of verse. Who was the designated recipient of these words? Was Ha Jin addressing all those downtrodden Chinese who had left their motherland behind, or else, was he referring to those who, like him, had ventured to come to America in search of a new life? Did he have in mind the sufferings and misadventures of previous generations of Chinese immigrants who became naturalized via Angel Island?

Born in 1956 in Liaoning, in Northern China, Jīn Xuěfēi, who uses Ha Jin as his pen name, suffered the upheaval of Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966–76), during which high schools and universities were closed down and professors accused of spreading bourgeois and capitalist ideas among their students. When universities eventually reopened in 1976, Ha Jin, who had been educating himself in the army, enrolled as a student in the Department of English at Heilongjiang University. After graduating from Shandong University, he arrived in the United States in 1985 to pursue a doctorate in American Literature at Brandeis University. His initial intention to return to China after the completion of his graduate studies was frustrated by the violent response of the Chinese authorities to the peaceful student demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in June 1989. This episode, which Jin has always referred to as "the source of all the trouble" (Fay 2009, 118), compelled him to seek asylum in the United States, where he has remained ever since. He had neither considered living permanently in the US nor becoming a writer originally, and he began writing seriously in English only after the Tiananmen Square massacre. Today he is a renowned author, with a number of literary prizes under his belt, including the 1999 National Book Award for Fiction for his second novel, *Waiting* (1999).

His concerns about being a writer who uses the language of his adopted country has been expressed in *The Writer as Migrant* (2008a) as well as in the essay, "In Defence of Foreignness" (2010). The former is a volume composed of a series of lectures delivered by Ha Jin at Rice University in 2006. In it, he explores identity issues, his exilic condition as a foreign writer who writes in English, and themes that in part resemble those explored by Salman Rushdie in "Imaginary Homelands" (Cheung 2012, 2).

The first dilemma that an exile writer confronts is to determine the language in which he is going to work. In this regard, Stanisław Baranczak notes that "the exiled writer tries to write in the language of his adopted country" because of "his desire [...] to get his message across to a broader audience" (1989, 437). However, other reasons emerged beyond Ha Jin's immediate horizon. Firstly, the impossibility of having a substantial and sustainable Chinese readership in the United States; secondly, the banning of his work by the

authorities in mainland China²; and thirdly, the need to draw a psychological and linguistic border between himself and Chinese state power which, in his own words, became a matter of survival. In this vein, he has frequently said in interviews that he sees the Chinese language as full of complex jargon, with such linguistic items acting like formulas for public speech (Fay 2009, 122). “The Chinese language is very literary and highbrow,” he said in another interview, a language “detached from the spoken word” (Gardner 2000, n.p.). Conversely, “English has more flexibility. It’s very plastic, very shapeable, very expressive language. In that sense, it feels quite natural” (Fay 2009, 122). In a sense, this seems to express something about the hospitable condition of his adopted language, and also hints at his own estrangement from his mother tongue and its inhospitality.

In what follows, I will explore the issue of how languages—both first and second languages—become a migrant writer’s homeland (Jin 2008a, 61). I will also examine the Derridean dichotomy between hospitable and inhospitable language in Ha Jin’s *oeuvre*. I will then discuss Paul Ricoeur’s concept of linguistic hospitality, which he devised as a term to be applied to the field of translation, and that, in the words of Richard Kearney, “asks us to respect that the semantic and syntactic fields of two languages are not the same, or exactly reducible the one to the other” (2006, xvii). Ricoeur’s articulation of linguistic hospitality allows us to get a better understanding of the hybrid nature of Ha Jin’s work.

Based on these ideas, it is necessary to articulate the following notions within the field of hospitality.

- As a paradigm, we can say that any language potentially becomes an abode, a *dwelling*, a sort of shelter, as anticipated by Derrida.³
- As with any home, language is inhabited by *dwellers*, that is to say, speakers who may determine whether a *home* is hospitable or inhospitable. Bearing this principle in mind, it follows that Ha Jin determines the inhospitable character of his mother tongue as a result of its stiffness, and that it is “polluted by revolutionary movements and political jargon” (Jin 2009, WK9)
- Native speakers who inhabit a language can claim themselves to be *hosts* in that *dwelling* on account of their having been born within its confines. By

2 Indeed, with the exception of his award-winning novel *Waiting* (1999) and also *The Nanjing Requiem* (2011), a fictional narrative based on a historical episode set during the Japanese invasion of China, none of his works have been published in China. In spite of governmental censorship, Ha Jin has remained critical of the kind of self-censorship that a writer can impose on himself (Jin 2008b).

3 “I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me” (Derrida [1996] 1998, 1).

- the same token, non-native speakers are regarded as *guests* in that home, and they can merely aspire to receiving a welcome in the *dwelling*.
- Lastly, following Derrida’s articulation of hospitality, the final inclusion of the *guest* in the *dwelling* is contingent on the acceptance of the *host*, who has the right of admission into his home. As Tahar Ben Jelloun observes, the *guest* usually “makes me confront myself” while he or she also “teaches me what I am” (qtd. in Manzanas Calvo 2013, 108). Thus, the *host* may decide to welcome the newcomer as a guest, or else to impose a set of rules as a prerequisite for guaranteed hospitality. One of the most frequent rules the guest has to abide by is that of language. Judith Still has noted that “the question of language is critical—forcing the other to speak my language even as they ask for asylum is hardly hospitable” (2010, 19). In this sense, such an imposition, which may include overt violence, entails stripping the guest of his or her own identity, what becomes, in the words of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, an act of “cannibalism” (Rosello 2001, 31). Once the imposition is established, the *guest* may be forced to obey those rules, or else carve out a niche for himself or herself within that *dwelling*.

In his articulation of the theory of hospitality, Derrida is concerned with those who become absolute strangers in a foreign land: displaced persons, exiles, rootless, nomads, or deportees. Such people always experience two types of nostalgia: for the dead and for their own language. In this respect, Derrida argues that exiles have in their mother tongue their ultimate homeland, their final resting place (Derrida [1997] 2000a, 87–89). I argue that Ha Jin is a member of this group, in that, in his exilic condition, he wrestles with the idea of whether or not English is the appropriate vehicle for his literary production. Having decided to become a *guest* in a new home, he becomes aware of his condition and the implications: the acceptance of the host’s rules.

The initial decision to abandon his mother tongue, so as to embrace the seeming hospitality of his adopted language, generated hostile sentiments from many speakers of Chinese. Hosts of the writer’s native language accused him of betraying his own country, language, and people. In this regard, Ha Jin explains:

Yet the ultimate betrayal [for a writer] is to choose to write in another language. No matter how the writer attempts to rationalize and justify adopting a foreign language, it is an act of betrayal that alienates him from his mother tongue and directs his creative energy to another language. (Jin 2008a, 31)

At the outset of his literary career, Ha Jin was faced by a moral choice which would eventually seal his fate as a writer in America: either to remain close to

his own cultural and linguistic background or else to adapt his writing to be more 'digestible' to those in the new home. In order to support his claim, Ha Jin reminds us of other writers who, just like himself, suffered Derrida's condition of *hostipitality* in the English language dwelling. One of the best-known cases is that of Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), the Polish writer cited by Ha Jin as the founding father of the migrant-writer literary tradition (2010, 461). Conrad, who saw himself as a foreigner taking refuge in England, faced overt criticism by both hosts of his mother language and those of his adopted home, English speakers. Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841–1910), a Polish novelist and leading writer of the Positivism movement, lambasted Conrad's literary production, accusing him of the desertion of both country and mother tongue:

And since we talked about books, I must say that the gentleman who in English is writing novels which are widely read and bring good profit almost caused me a nervous attack. When reading about him, I felt something slippery and unpleasant, something mounting to my throat...Over the novels of Mr. Conrad Korzeniowski no Polish girl will shed an altruistic tear or take a noble decision. (qtd. in Jin 2008, 36–7)

Orzeszkowa's accusations were basically threefold: firstly, she accused Conrad of deserting his native country, Poland, when he emigrated to England. "He should have remained in Poland," quotes Ha Jin from Orzeszkowa, "and let his creative talent serve the Polish national cause" (2008a, 37). Secondly, she considered that writing in English instead of doing it in his native language was an act of betrayal to the Polish people. Finally, Orzeszkowa believed that making money out of it reduced Conrad to the level of a peddler, "which in turn will make the writer's work insignificant to his own people" (2008a, 37).

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) is another example of this sentiment of *hostipitality*. Prior to his determination to switch to English, Nabokov had written extensively in Russian, a language that he considered to be in the process of extinction. When he eventually determined to switch from Russian to English, he found the process to be "extremely painful," just "like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion" (qtd. in Jin 2008a, 48). Though recognized as a genuine writer in American literature, Nabokov was nevertheless admonished in *The New Yorker* by Edmund Wilson, the American literary critic, for the abundance of solecism in Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* and his excessive use of literary puns, which Wilson regarded as "awful" (Jin 2010, 462).

As Judith Still reminds us, hospitality is about letting the Other into oneself. This assertion brings about a sort of apprehension or invasive attitude on

the guest's part which affects the host's self. As a result, the host's response to this occupation of the home could be to 'turn' against the guest, while his/her generosity may depend on a series of duties to be fulfilled by the newcomer (Still 2010, 13). Abiding by those (language) norms and rules imposed by the host may impair the foreign writer's capacity. In this respect, Ha Jin contends that the writer's creativity may be affected and his linguistic abilities crippled. As might be expected, in his exilic condition, the migrant writer can never aspire to match his literature to that produced by a native speaker. Ha Jin recalls that when he began to study English at university in 1977, he, just like many of his classmates, found it difficult to recite phrases that "twisted your tongue, your muscles" and that made those students go to the clinic regularly to get painkillers (Gardner 2000). Later on, when he decided to become a writer in his adopted language, he was aware of the difficulty and of the great tradition of non-native writers producing their works in English:

At the time, I thought about this and realized it would be very hard, but in the English language, there is a great tradition where nonnative writers became essential writers. I was aware of that tradition and thought my success would depend on whether I had the ability and the luck. (Varsava 2010, 8)

When non-native speakers arrive as *guests* in a language, and are thereafter forced to obey the rules imposed by the *hosts*, they must accommodate themselves to the dwelling, find a shelter in their new home, and strive to sidestep unwelcoming rules as best they can. Being aware of his linguistic prowess, the exiled writer who has adopted a literary language has a particular goal: to reach the wide readership denied to him at home. In many cases, success may be achieved by means of cultural nativization and an adaptation of the author's linguistic traits into the new home.

Ha Jin affirms that it took him almost a year to decide to follow in the footsteps of Conrad and Nabokov (Jin 2009, WK9) and adopt English as the language of his literary production. Having taken this decision, however, he laid claim to hybrid forms of writing within the newly monolingual home. "Hybrid authors are torn by a complicated dilemma," argues Vidal Claramonte, "whether to use the strong language or that of their minor culture as a creative weapon" (2014, 246). Ha Jin thus embarked on a process of readjustment in the English dwelling which enabled him to carve out a niche for himself in the language, to found a new abode without asking permission from the host.

As might be expected, Ha Jin's claims garnered hostile reactions from hosts of his mother tongue and also from hosts of his adopted language. King-Kog

Cheung reveals how Ha Jin's *Waiting* was upbraided by Yiqing Liu, a prominent Professor of English at Peking University, for its content and its Orientalist appeal (Cheung 2012, 5). Furthermore, despite the visions of freedom and self-realization that Ha Jin might have projected for himself after his decision to write in English, reviewers of his literature have objected to its hybridity. Just as Edmund Wilson had previously admonished Nabokov for his fondness for word games, Nancy Tsai disparages Ha Jin's *Chineseness* and his tendency to include Chinese proverbs and idioms as well as to provide translations from his mother tongue for the sake of adding an exotic touch to his fiction. In her view, the pages of Ha Jin's novel *Waiting* "abound with Chinese expressions, idioms, and clichés translated into English and hammered into the sentences like nails" (Tsai 2005, 58). As a defender of the monolingual use of the English language, Tsai accuses Ha Jin of the transgression of language rules, and she painstakingly singles out a number of (mis)translations in his award-winning novel. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Tsai's position is highly questionable in terms of her penchant for correctness in the use of grammatical rules, in that they leave no room for other (un)grammatical varieties of English (Ibáñez 2016, 203).⁴

Hence, a question arises within the hospitality framework: are we entitled, as native speakers of a language, to possess the 'home' and impose *our* rules on newcomers? A negative answer to this question might indeed lead us to reconsider our position as hosts. In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida had already wondered about the relationship between a language and its speakers: "But who exactly possesses it [a language]? And whom does it possess? Is language in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession?" (Derrida [1996] 1998, 17). If Derrida was right in his claim, we must also admit that the host does not *own* a language as he himself or herself is first and foremost a guest *within* the language, and the home itself does not belong to him or her.

3 Finding a Middle Position: Paul Ricoeur's Linguistic Hospitality

In their study of Junot Díaz's short story "Invierno," Ana María Manzanás and Jesús Benito turn to Paul Ricoeur's concept of 'linguistic hospitality' which they see as "an apt term that reminds us that the Other does not come alone, but has verbal and narrative baggage" (2017, 134). Although Ricoeur did not

4 On similar lines, John Updike reviewed Ha Jin's novel *A Free Life* and established that this novel, held in the United States, contains "more small solecisms than in his Chinese novels" (Updike 2007, n.p.).

fully expand this concept in his philosophical works, he defined linguistic hospitality in the following terms:

Just as in a narration it is always possible to tell the story in a different way, likewise in translation it is always possible to translate otherwise, without ever hoping to bridge the gap between equivalence and perfect adhesion. Linguistic hospitality, therefore, is the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home, one's own dwelling. (qtd. in Kearney 2006, 16)

Linguistic hospitality permits the cordial exchange between the guest and the host, thus allowing the creation of a sort of interwoven fabric of language. Furthermore, the articulation of this concept may also account for the hybrid nature of translation, language or literature. Following Ricoeur, Scott Davidson reminds us that the translator becomes an intermediary between two masters, the author and the reader, as he or she is always caught up between the dialectics of fidelity and betrayal (2012, 3). Along the same lines, the migrant writer has to strive to incorporate into the host language what he brought along with him from his mother tongue. "As the host welcomes the guest," Manzanas and Benito argue, "a parallel process unfolds where the dominant language assumes the mastery over the immigrant language transformed into a precarious guest language" (2017, 135).

The concept of linguistic hospitality, therefore, can be borrowed in this study as it may help us elucidate Ha Jin's adaptation to this new abode. Just like those writers who are in a liminal linguistic and cultural situation in America (Chicanos) or in Africa (writers in Nigeria who use English as a second language), Ha Jin found himself adjusting his language and literature to his new dwelling, the English language. He does not assume his role as that of being a hostage in the new dwelling, but claims that he deserves a 'room' within the 'home' of the English language (Jin 2010, 465–67). This process of adaptation, however, takes its toll. One of the consequences is Jin's willingness to sacrifice accuracy in order to make his work accessible to his (Western) readership (Oh 2006, 422). "The writer living in exile," claims Stanisław Baranczak, "has no choice but to make this work lose some of its original flavor—that seems an obvious price to pay" (1989, 431).

Just as Conrad and Nabokov had previously struggled to find a place in the literature of their adopted language, Ha Jin, as a migrant writer, aims to carve out a niche for himself in his newly-adopted dwelling. In his determination to write in a foreign language, and as a result of his diffidence with English, he favors a literature with conspicuous cultural elements from China and

salient linguistic features of Chinese that make us reassess linguistic and mental boundaries. However, unlike practitioners of hybrid literature, such as the cases of Latino writers who either incorporate *ad hoc* untranslated expressions or render literal translations from their mother tongues, Ha Jin exhibits a bilingual creativity that enables him to produce a new type of writing that some critics have called “translation literature” (Gong 2014; Ibáñez 2016, 2019). Indeed, what monolingual reviewers of his work regard as linguistic flaws or literal renditions from the writer’s mother tongue may be considered conscious linguistic literary recreations aiming to maintain the characters’ linguistic difficulties in their new habitat as well as to present a reflection of the ideological transition from one culture to another (Gong 2014, 158). To be sure, Haomin Gong affirms that although some unfortunate misuses of English have been singled out by reviewers, “the author’s intentional use of non-idiomatic English that characterizes his translational style is unique” (2014, 148).

In Ha Jin’s literary production, examples of this accommodation to his new home abound. His bilingual creativity manifests itself through different linguistic processes, namely, the nativization of cultural aspects and contexts, the nativization of rhetorical strategies, such as similes and metaphors, and the transcreation of curses, proverbs, and idioms.⁵ Regarding the nativization of those elements in his fiction, Ha Jin has argued that they are not literal translations from Chinese but adaptations of his Mandarin-speaking characters: “in most cases,” he explains, “I altered the idioms some, at times drastically, to suit the context, the drama and the narrative flow” (2010, 466).

There are many examples in Ha Jin’s fiction which reveal conspicuous traits of the exclusive use of the English language and that confirm this accommodation into his new home. Indeed, I would like to highlight some of the most noticeable from two short stories. The first is “Winds and Clouds over a Funeral,” a narrative included in his second collection of short stories, *Under the Red Flag* (1997), and “probably the best rendering of a faithful representation of Chinese tradition, language and culture” (Ibáñez 2016, 206). It explores the struggle between the millenary tradition of Confucianism and the new tradition that Maoism introduced into China. Linguistic and cultural elements alien to Western readers proliferate throughout the entire story and Ha Jin takes pains to tailor this tradition to his new cultural abode.

Set in a small commune in rural China during the years of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, “Winds and Clouds over a Funeral” is the story of the death and burial of the mother of Ding Liang, the chairman of the commune. On her

5 I am indebted to the taxonomy established by Braj B. Kachru in *The Alchemy of English* (1990) which I also borrowed for an article on Ha Jin’s bilingual creativity (Ibáñez 2016).

deathbed, Ding had promised his mother that he will never allow her body to be cremated, even though, as a politician, he knows that authorities forbid the burial of the dead in the ground, this as a way to preserve the land for the future generations. Cultural contexts and concepts are nativized by both narrators and characters in the story. The whole commune is divided into two factions, those who support Ding and those who want to see him fall. At one point, Ding is suspicious of the loyalty of those men who support him. Feng, one of his closest friends, tells Ding: “Loyal words jar on your ears—[like] bitter medicine is good for your illness” (Jin [1994] 1997, 53). This simile is a homely adaptation from a Chinese expression which can be interpreted as “frank criticism is hard to swallow, though it may come from your own comrades.”⁶ As mentioned above, the author saw fit to adjust this simile to his Western readership since the expression has no suitable counterpart in English.

Another example of the nativization of rhetorical strategies can be found in the following metaphor: “from now on *all the guns must have the same caliber*” [my italics] (Jin [1994] 1997, 61). This metaphor is used by Ding to exhort his comrades to adopt a unified approach so as to make their story credible. The original saying may carry a historical reference dating back to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). At that time, China imported ammunition from different European countries, which made it impossible to have a unified system of weaponry, and the metaphor indicates that the use of different calibers prevented the Chinese armies from sharing ammunition stocks (Ibáñez 2016, 213).

In the same story, Sheng, one of the protagonists, is referred to as being a prudent man. The narrator comments that “[h]is experience in the army had taught him that *disasters always come from the tongue*” [my italics] (Jin [1994] 1997, 64). The italicized expression is Ha Jin’s personal rendition into English of the Chinese idiom, “illness enters by the mouth,”⁷ a proverb that warns against the danger of having a loose tongue and the trouble it may cause. Being one of the oldest and richest languages in the world, Chinese has an ample stock of proverbs and idioms the majority of which cannot be translated directly into English. However, through these peculiar homely adaptations into the English language, Ha Jin accommodates what the linguist Braj B. Kachru describes

6 The Chinese expression is “zhōng yán nì ěr, liáng yào kǔ kǒu” [忠言逆耳，良药苦口] which translates as “truthful words sound bad to your ears, just as the good medicine tastes bitter.” All translations from this point on have been provided by the author with the help of an online dictionary (chinese.yabla.com).

7 The Chinese expression is “bìng cóng kǒu rù, huò cóng kǒu chū” [病从口入，祸从口出] and can be literally translated as “illness enters by the mouth, trouble comes out by the mouth.”

as “the wit and wisdom of the ancestors [...] passed on to new generations” (Kachru 1990, 168).

The final example that I would like to examine here is from “The Bridegroom,” a short story included in the eponymous collection published in 2000. This is a tragicomic tale about Beina, an extremely unprepossessing young girl to whom Baowen, a very good-looking young man, proposes; she ultimately marries him. A few months after the wedding, Beina finds out that her husband is homosexual, a crime seen as a bourgeois issue and, as such, one that is punished severely by the Chinese authorities. When Baowen proposed to Beina, villagers could not help but gossip about how lucky the girl was. One of those villagers uses an idiomatic expression to refer to the situation: “a fool always lands in the arms of fortune” (Jin [1999] 2000, 92), conveying the idea that such an ugly girl had found the best match she was ever likely to have. This phrase is simply an adaptation of a Chinese expression which may be rendered more directly into English as “the fool’s luck.”⁸ The narrator has adapted it for Western ears by attributing god-like connotations to the concept of ‘fortune.’ In this sense, Ha Jin is almost equating a concept taken from his Chinese background with another one found in the Greek and Latin traditions, as Fortuna was a Latin goddess, corresponding to the Greek goddess Τύχη. The protagonist, thus, falls in the arms of the goddess of Fortune.

These are just a few examples of how Ha Jin’s fiction supports the idea that hybridity challenges monolingual views of language while, at the same time, calling into question the rules that the host imposes on the guest. The foreign writer takes possession of the home by adding new features she or he brings along, a step that might be regarded by many home dwellers as both an invasion of *their* language as well as a threat to the monolingual character of the home. The hybrid nature of such writers’ literary production seems to confirm one of the main ideas expressed by Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other*—that we, as speakers, do not *own* a native language. Indeed, bearing this principle in mind, it follows that, as home dwellers, our habitat is not ours: “My language, the only one I hear myself speak,” affirms Derrida, “is the language of the other” (Derrida [1996] 1998, 25). Since we never speak only one language, monolingualism never does exist, and Derrida wonders if there is nothing but plurilingualism ([1996] 1998, 21).

“As hospitality evolves into hostility,” Manzanas and Benito remind us, “the guests metamorphose into hostages” (2017, 134). Chinese immigrants who

8 The Chinese expression is “shǎ rén yǒu shǎ fú” [傻人有傻福] and can be translated as “fortune favors fools.”

came to the United States as ‘paper sons’ and ‘paper daughters’ arrived in California in the hope that they would be welcomed into a hospitable land, yet they found that their forged documents rendered them hostages. The passing of the Magnuson Act, signed in December 1943, permitted Chinese nationals already residing in the US to become naturalized citizens for the first time since the Chinese exclusion act of 1882. It also marked the end of decades of discrimination against and segregation of Asian Americans in the United States. The Tiananmen Square incident in June 1989, still shrouded in mystery after three decades thanks in part to the government’s efforts to obliterate the disaster and its consequences, also marked the lives of many Chinese students who refused to return to their country. Ha Jin was forced to remain in the US and ended up becoming a prolific and successful writer in his own right. Like many other hyphenated writers in America, Ha Jin challenges monolingualism. According to Vidal Claramonte, these hyphenated authors, “understand language as a political instrument, as part of a cultural representation process in which the construction of meanings demands the participation of the reader and forces him or her to make an interactive textual transcoding and to rethink his or her own identity as cross-cultural” (2014, 250). Alongside the creation of a hybrid language, Vidal Claramonte affirms that these writers cultivate linguistic difference while, at the same time, refuse to “live in” one language and to embrace only one identity. Ha Jin’s *oeuvre* is characterized by his bilingual creativity and is paving the way for new forms of literature in the United States.

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