

# ■ Problematics of Translation in Ha Jin's Poetry: Poet, Critic, Translator<sup>1</sup>

Joan Chiung-huei Chang  
National Taiwan Normal University

## Abstract

Ha Jin's works bespeak an impressive linguistic creativity. Reconfiguring Chinese language through a nativized discourse of English, Ha Jin has translated, appropriated, and reconstructed Chinese linguistic norms and specifics into English-language literature in remarkable fashion. Studying Ha Jin's *Wreckage*, a reader with Chinese education will be ready to identify fragments of renowned Chinese classical verse. Thus the reader is invited to ponder: To what extent does Ha Jin draw his poetic inspiration from the corpus of Chinese literature? How shall we measure accredited creativity? How do we distinguish innovation from renovation, and do those distinctions change our reading of the poems? Although Ha Jin has written exclusively of the reality of Chinese politics and society (with *A Free Life* the only exception so far), this material does not obviate the possibility of reading his works as belonging to a tradition of US immigrant literature. In Ha Jin's poetry, the juxtaposition, interaction and fusion of classical Chinese verse and contemporary American sensibility can be telling. Which has been translated, the Chinese verse or the American sensibility? What has been

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**Joan Chiung-huei Chang** is Professor in the Department of English at National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan. She received her PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Oregon, USA. She published *Transforming Chinese American Literature: A Study of History, Sexuality and Ethnicity* (New York: Peter Lang) in 2000. She is the editor of the special issue of Asian American Literature, *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 29.11 (Taipei, 2001), *The Globalization of Comparative Literature: Asian Initiatives* (Taipei: Soochow University, 2004), and the special topic on Asian American Literature, *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 39.2 (Taipei, 2013). She has published essays on Asian American writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Henry David Hwang, Amy Tan, Shirley Lim, Milton Murayama, Ha Jin, and Chang-rae Lee. E-mail: joanchang@ntnu.edu.tw

<sup>1</sup> Author's note: a shorter version of this paper is published in Chinese in *Kuaguo Yujing xia de meizhou huayi wenxue yu wenhua yanjiu* 跨國語境下的美洲華裔文學與文化研究. Nanjing: Nanjing UP, 2011. 272-85.

(Received: 22 December 2013; Accepted: 14 April 2014)

transplanted and translated? Have the Chinese poetry texts, after being transplanted into the English verse, undergone a transformation of meaning and resurfaced with new significance corresponding to the complexity of Ha Jin's immigrant experiences in America? This paper aims to explore how Ha Jin's Chinese poetry texts show significance corresponding to the complexity of his immigrant experiences in America.

**Keywords:** Ha Jin, language, translation, *Wreckage*, Jacques Derrida, Walter Benjamin

A poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text.

—Louise Rosenblatt  
*Literature as Exploration*

It is not only the operation of translation that finds itself compromised; it is also the concept, the definition, and the very axiomatic, the idea of translation that must be reconsidered.

—Jacques Derrida  
“What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?”

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

—Walter Benjamin  
“Theses on the Philosophy of History,” IX

## I. Introduction

Ha Jin's works bespeak an impressive linguistic creativity. Reconfiguring Chinese language proverbs, metaphors and syntax through a nativized English style, Ha Jin has translated/appropriated/reconstructed Chinese linguistic norms and historical and cultural specifics into English-language narrative fiction in a remarkable fashion. As Hang Zhang observes, Ha Jin has employed a range of linguistic devices to “convey the particularities of Chinese political and social life” and has opened up new dimensions of “Chinese bilingual literature” through “his creative adoption of the English language, and the innovative recreation of the sensations of his native experiences” (306, 313).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Zhang's essay, “Bilingual Creativity in Chinese English: Ha Jin's *In the Pond*,” has provided ample examples of Ha Jin's applying of “Chineseness,” i.e., the linguistic norms and social values of Chinese culture, in his English works. Zhang divides Ha Jin's language innovations in Chineseness into eight categories: curse words and obscenities (e.g., “son of a tortoise”), address terms (e.g., “Comrade Old Shao”), proper names (e.g., “Great China Cigarette”), terms with a uniquely Chinese reference (e.g., “hot-water ticket”), politically loaded discourse (using political clichés to ironize and parody the traditional social context), metaphors and proverbs (e.g., “wear the same pair of trousers and breathe through one nostril”), and nativized discourse strategies (often closely related to the dominant political discourse of the day) and norms of written discourse (specifying characteristics of public discourse in China).

This observation may hold for Ha Jin's novels, but his poetry, which so far attracts very little research, should require a different analytical frame, specifically one that incorporates a focus on translation. Studying Ha Jin's poetry collection, *Wreckage*, a reader with a Chinese education will readily identify fragments of renowned Chinese classical verse, in translation and often with no indication of original texts, incorporated in Ha Jin's poems. Seeing that these translated fragments are always closely related to the poet's own original lines expressing his own sentiments, the reader is invited to wonder: To what extent does Ha Jin draw his poetic inspiration from the corpus of Chinese literature? By what features and criteria can we define and measure his creativity while reading his translation-plus-addition poetry? How do we distinguish innovation from renovation, and does this distinction change our evaluation of Ha Jin's poems?

Lynne Sharon Schwartz calls Ha Jin a "transplanted novelist" (26). Although he has written profusely of the reality of Chinese politics and society, this does not obviate the possibility of reading his works as belonging to a tradition of U.S. immigrant literature.<sup>3</sup> Ha Jin's poetry, in particular, features frequent allusions to classical Chinese verse, and the juxtaposition, interaction and fusion of classical Chinese verse with a contemporary American sensibility can be striking. But which has been translated, the Chinese verse or the American sensibility? What has been transplanted and translated? Have the Chinese poetry texts, after being transplanted into English verse, undergone a transformation of meaning and resurfaced with a new significance, given the complexity of Ha Jin's immigrant experiences in America? How have Ha Jin's three roles—as poet, critic and translator—complemented or contradicted each other? In this essay, poetic devices such as style, diction, or sound are not focal points. Instead, this essay would tackle with cultural aspects such as ideological implications or even national imprints, so as to investigate whether Ha Jin's Chinese poetry texts represent the complexity of his immigrant experiences in America as an individual and the Chinese diaspora as a whole.

## II. Examining Translation

Ha Jin has drawn great inspiration from Chinese history, culture and liter-

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<sup>3</sup> Ha Jin writes slowly but productively. Since his first book publication in the US, the poetry collection *Between Silences*, in 1990, he has published six novels, four short story collections, three poetry collections and one monograph, among which only *A Free Life* and some stories from *A Good Fall* have settings outside China.

ature for his writings. His poetry collection, *Wreckage*, deals exclusively with life in China. In a roughly chronological order, this collection records the “history” of imperial China from the first dynasty till the last. *Wreckage* gives us a range of variations on, or forms of, “translation” (see Appendix 1).<sup>4</sup> Even though Ha Jin’s note at the very end of the collection lists references which provide information on his poems, this list is hardly comprehensive, and the sources of many of the poems in *Wreckage* are not specified. Then, is it legitimate to examine Ha Jin’s poems within the analytical framework of “translation”?

Ha Jin’s poems prompt us to ponder on the ethics of translation where fidelity has long been situated at the center of the argument. How to distinguish a loyal and reliable translation? Where shall we draw the line between translation and *poiesis*? between imitation and creativity? between duplication and originality? Translated texts are not always easy to recognize. On some occasions, they are resurrected in a different language and in the name of “translation.” However, on others the texts are reincarnated in a different language in the guise of diverse siblings such as “parody, adaptation, collaboration, quotation, allusion, diverse codes of attribution, the utterance of common place matter, mnemonic storytelling”—to name a few examples from a list made by Gerald Bruns (115). There might be an inclination to adopt a form other than that of “translation” *per se* due to the common view of a translation as being secondary to the original; therefore, the above epithets could be euphemisms for translation, adopted for the sake of gaining more respect for the “originality” of the translated text. Nevertheless, it is mostly agreed that translation should be accredited with originality to some extent. As Siobhan Brownlie asserts, “all translation requires creativity to varying degrees” (326), but how shall we evaluate a translation when it claims a large degree of independence from the original text, acknowledging little or no sign of their kinship?

Before evaluating Ha Jin’s poetry, we would have to tackle questions regarding translation literature. First of all, how will we be able to describe his works? Are they “translated literature” in Gideon Toury’s sense, i.e., “target texts presented and/or regarded as literary translations” (38)? Or are they “semi-translations” or “quasi-translations” in Even-Zohar’s sense, i.e., literature

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<sup>4</sup> All of Ha Jin’s novels, short story collections and even his monograph have been translated and published in Chinese, but his poetry collections have different encounterings. So far, only one Chinese collection of his poems, *Cuo guo de shi guang* (*Time Missed*), was published. This collection is composed of Chinese translation of poems selected from Ha Jin’s three poetry collections and his novel *A Free Life*. Interestingly, none of the poems suspected of use and abuse of translation, as discussed or mentioned in this essay, are included in the Chinese collection. The “absence” of these controversial poems could be telling, legitimizing the examination of ethics and aesthetics of translation in Ha Jin’s poetry.

presented by its author not as a translation but as an original work (50)? For readers not familiar with classical Chinese literature, these questions might not occur. Since no clear distinctions are made by the poet between his translations of Chinese texts and his additions or inventions, these readers will think of these poems as original works. However, readers who are capable of recognizing the Chinese texts “in” the poems will face several challenges as regards their reading strategy. What sort of authorship should we grant to Ha Jin? In some poems he only translated *parts* of the original texts and then went on to expand upon or “adapt” them with varying degrees of “poetic license.” Is this because he thought the parts he freely adapted were too hard to directly translate? But then do we applaud his own creativity or note his weakness as a translator, or both? How much freedom or authority do we grant to a “semi-translator” in his choice of which parts to directly translate? Do we say the semi-translation risks being a misrepresentation of the original text because of its incompleteness? How much autonomy can a reader have in deciding his own reading strategy here? To what degree would readers’ interpretations depend on whether they read the poems as translated or original works? And would the already existing translation of all of Ha Jin’s works into Chinese become somehow a “recovery” of the original classical Chinese texts, or would it be something quite new and different? If we agree with Walter Benjamin that the task of a translator is to give the text an “afterlife,” then what kind of life has Ha Jin instilled into classical Chinese literature with his English poems that are to varying degrees a “translation” or “rewriting” of it?

To settle the above questions, we are faced with the archetypal duality of original and translation. Octavio Paz tells us in his “Translation: Literature and Letters” that the idea of the original is simply a myth:

Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation—first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase. (154)

Kenneth Rexroth supports the translator’s right of appropriating the original text and advocates that this transmutation should not be considered as violation but as “viable eccentricity” (173), “imaginative identification” (181), and a companion text to the original. Gerald Bruns also asserts that “to be original is to transcend the literalness of one’s antecedent texts by finding in them openings for further invention”; the translator “is not a textualist; rather, he aspires to the authority of his originals, and indeed may attain it—but with this difference, that his mode of aspiration or composition can no longer be the mode of original utterance or authorship, because it is necessarily an inter- rather than extralinear mode” (128).

According to these views, Ha Jin is both a translator and a poet, appropriating Chinese literary or historical texts to compose metapoems that review the distant Chinese past while reflecting the Chinese but also American present. He answered an interview question regarding his poetry by saying: "Sometimes I started with a phrase or an idiom or an episode, but I couldn't just follow the history and had to leap from there. That was why I added my personal understandings and perceptions to make a poem" (Shan 144). In another interview about his writing on/of the immigrant experience in America he said: "Now the US has become the only subject that is meaningful. China has become history" (see Caswell). Then what new meaning could Ha Jin be instilling into these old Chinese texts, and how does his reference to ancient Chinese history reflect his current life in the US?

### III. Translating History, Culture, and Literature

Ha Jin, the translator-poet, is writing the past in order to inquire into the present. In *Wreckage*, none of the poems are exact translations of the original texts but all are further embellished with Ha Jin's self-created anecdotes or comments. Comparing the original and the translated/adapted poetry, we may be able to look for the causes of the poet's additions and subtractions, and therefore understand his sentiments as a migrant writer. Two poems from *Wreckage* have been selected for examination. The first one is "In Confucius's Class" (*Wreckage* 26; see Appendix 1), a poem describing the death sentence of Shao-zheng Mao 少正卯. Shao-zheng Mao was a contemporary of Confucius and a pioneering scholar of Legalism, one of the four main philosophical schools during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, roughly from 770 to 221 BC.<sup>5</sup> This poem relates how Confucius, after becoming the Police Chief of Lu State for only eight days, sentences Shao-zheng to death and has his headless body hung on the terrace "for three days / to feed rooks and warn wicked people" (ll. 30-31). The poem is *de facto* an integration of several historical records plus Ha Jin's own creation. The extent to which we read this poem as "historical translation" or as creative writing will play an important role in our understanding and interpretation of the poem.

The conversations between Confucius and his nameless disciple in the poem are obvious adaptations of two distinguished Chinese texts, *The Analects* 論語

<sup>5</sup> The other three are Confucianism, Daoism and Mohism, represented by Confucius, Lao Tzu and Mo Tzu. Legalism is represented by Han Fei-zu.

and *Xun-Zi* 荀子, a fact which clearly invites us to read this poem as speaking about an episode in Chinese history. However, according to several Chinese historical records this event happened seven, rather than eight, days after Confucius became the Police Chief.<sup>6</sup> If this disparity were just a minor error, we would still think it damaged the historical or historiographic validity of the poem, but only if we assumed the poet had been aiming at this kind of validity.

Another point concerns Ha Jin's controversial translation of *zhu* 誅 in the Chinese text as "to kill."<sup>7</sup> In fact, Confucius's sentence is one of the major controversies in the history of Shao-zheng Mao, and the central issue is that of the meaning of *zhu*. Even though in modern Chinese *zhu* means "to kill and to destroy," its import in classical Chinese is likely to have been based more literally on its two verbal roots, *yan* 言 for "language" and *zhu* 朱 for "destroy," and thus to have been "to give verbal admonition." According to the practice at that time, the eventual punishment would have been a reduction in either one's rank or one's wages, but not necessarily the death penalty. Furthermore, according to the legal system during the Spring and Autumn Period, "No physical punishment should be applied to government officials" '刑不上大夫,' a regulation made as a token of the respect people should have for educated people and intellectuals.<sup>8</sup> Confucius and Shao-zheng Mao were actually holding official posts at a similar level at that time, and we assume he would abide by this rule. Thus, it is improbable that Confucius would have sentenced Shao-zheng to death even if Confucius had grudges about Shao-zheng's drawing a larger audience to the lecture hall than he did.

Therefore we will wonder: Whether Shao-zheng is beheaded or merely admonished in Ha Jin's poem (depending on the translation), what sort of difference would this make for readers' "interpretation" of the poem, or in the "effect" of the poem on readers? Confucius was revered as "the greatest sage and the model teacher" in traditional Chinese culture, but is Ha Jin not making him a symbol of oppressive feudalism and an obstacle to China's modernization during

<sup>6</sup> The story of Shao-zheng Mao is recorded in several Chinese history texts, including *Xun Zi* 荀子 in the early Qin dynasty; *Hwai-nan Zi* 淮南子, *Shi Ji* 史記 and *Shuo Yuan* 說苑 in the Western Han Dynasty; *Lun Heng* 論衡 and *Bai-hu Tong* 白虎通 in the Eastern Han Dynasty; etc.

<sup>7</sup> The story of Shao-zheng Mao has actually given rise to several controversies. Besides the question of Shao-zheng's punishment, there is the mystery of the official titles of Shao-zheng Mao and Confucius, and the question of the veracity of the entire incident. See the essays by Xu Fu-guan 徐復觀 and Chen Yaosen 陳耀森.

<sup>8</sup> This is similar to the "Benefit of Clergy" custom in England in the 16th century. Under English common law, any man who could read was considered a priest, and if arrested, could claim a right called "Benefit of clergy." This meant that if you killed a man and could read, you might go free with just a warning. The unlikelihood of applying the death penalty to Shao Zheng-mao is related in detail in Qian Mu's 錢穆 book.



the Cultural Revolution (1966-76)? The double-voiced discourse taking place in the two sets of parentheses in "In Confucius's Class"—an overt discourse in the conversation between Confucius and his disciple, and a submerged one in the interior monologue of the disciple—reveals just such a discrepancy between the public reverence toward Confucius and the private animosity toward the Great instructor, an animosity shown at various times in history including the Qin Dynasty (the emperor ordered that all Confucian books be burned) and, most obviously, the 20th century (beginning especially from the May Fourth Movement). In the first set of parentheses, Confucius is shown as a jealous, opinionated, bigoted and even violent person. Ha Jin in his monograph *The Writer as Migrant* states that "just as a creative writer should aspire to be not a broker but a creator of culture, a great novel does not only present a culture but also makes culture; such a work does not only bring news of the world but also evokes the reader's empathy and reminds him of his own existential condition" (17), and so the writer's creativity is necessary for the remodeling of the existing culture. Then, what *is* the new culture that Ha Jin has created out of this poem, and in which ways and to what degree has the poem aroused the passions of readers?

Another poem in Ha Jin's *Wreckage* is "A Childless Merchant" (*Wreckage* 61; see Appendix 7). This poem is an amalgam of two adaptations of Chinese stories on filial piety, an allusion to Li Po's poem, and Ha Jin's own invention. Lines 1-5 are adapted from a story about a contemporary of Confucius, Lao Lai-zi 老萊子, who famously dressed and behaved like a little child so as to entertain his parents and make them forget about their old age. Lines 7-8 allude to a poem by Li Po 李白, "Chang-gan Xin" 長干行, once translated in a creative manner by Ezra Pound as "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter."<sup>9</sup> However, unlike Li Po's and Pound's versions, which describe the play of a young couple, then children, who will get married when they are teenagers, Ha Jin's poem depicts the incompatibility between father and son. Lines 10-18 are adapted from a story about Han Bo-yu 韓伯愈, who sheds tears when he realizes that his mother has become aged and feeble. Ha Jin continues this story by having the father participate. Addressing his son "Rice Bag" (l. 20, *fan dai* 飯袋, Chinese slang for "a useless person," good for nothing but consuming food), the father makes it clear that the parental grudge against their son actually results from his infertility, for he has failed to beget offspring for the family. This echoes the

<sup>9</sup> Pound's line goes, "You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse" (l. 3). But Jean Elizabeth Ward (in *Tang Poets*) translates Li Po as saying "you, my lover, on a bamboo horse, / Came trotting in circles and throwing green plums" (ll. 3-4).

Chinese concept that “Among the three paradigms of filial impiety, begetting no descendants is the most condemnable.” In the final stanza the lines in parentheses, a dramatic monologue which functions something like the two interior monologues in “In Confucius’s Class,” show the son cursing his father and thus reveal his anger at him, his sense of being oppressed by the parents and their traditional (Confucian) rules. Fabricated out of two historical Chinese models of filial piety, the “childless merchant” of the title is cast as a filial son who always tries his best in his own way to please the parents but is never appreciated. The abused son’s internal monologue gives him (and the poet) a chance to speak out against the paranoid conservatism of traditional Chinese culture. Hence in the poem two representatives of unconditional filial piety in the ancient culture, Lao Lai-zi and Han Bo-yu, are transformed into an oppressed, rebellious son who bestializes his father as a “shiny bull” with a face like a “monkey’s ass” (ll. 9, 23-24).

Ha Jin’s translated poems spur many questions. What kind of afterlife has he transfused into these ancient texts of Chinese literature? In what ways does he powerfully, even violently critique the old and possibly obsolete Chinese ethics? What kind of revisions has he provided for the supposedly authoritative records in/of Chinese history? What kind of manifesto is he perhaps advocating through his eccentric historiography? In this regard, Jacques Derrida’s concept of *retrait* could be enlightening to Ha Jin’s translation. Derrida states:

. . . the word *re-trait* (a trait in addition to supplement the subtracting withdrawal, the *re-trait* expressing at once, at one stroke [*d’un trait*] the plus and the minus) designates the generalizing and supplementary return only in a sort of quasi-catachrestic violence, a sort of abuse I impose on language, but an abuse that I hope is over-justified by necessity of good, economic formalization. (Derrida, “Le retrait,” 78; translated by and qtd. in Brownlie 318)

Siobhan Brownlie elaborates on this:

The French word *retrait* usually means “withdrawal,” but *re-trait* with a hyphen brings out the meaning of “mark again” . . . Furthermore, “withdrawal” and “mark again” are more or less opposite meanings; getting language to express at once a meaning and its opposite is also a kind of abuse of language. The abuse is justified insofar as it results in a highly economical use of language, cleverly using existing linguistic resources. *Retrait* is economical because the single word expresses exactly the double movement that Derrida wants to express. (318)

Seeing translation through the perspective of *retrait*, for Derrida “a translation is both a reproduction and a transformation (use and abuse) of the meaning of the original” (319).

Stated in “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?,” translation is considered by

Derrida as a “sublime and impossible task” (“What,” 174), as “transaction and as transfer” (176), and it is “relevant” for

whatever feels right, whatever seems pertinent, apropos, welcome, appropriate, opportune, justified, well-suited or adjusted, coming right at the moment when you expect—or corresponding as is necessary to the object to which the so-called relevant action relates: the relevant discourse, the relevant proposition, the relevant decision, the relevant translation. (“What,” 177)

Derrida does not believe that “anything can ever be untranslatable—or, moreover, translatable” (178) because the “measure of the *relève* or relevance, the price of a translation, is always what is called meaning, the value of meaning, namely, what . . . is elevated about it, interiorizes it, spiritualizes it, preserves it in memory” (199). To Derrida, the issue is not about translatability or fidelity; instead, it is about relevance. In his view, translation is relevant only when it can *re-lève*, literally meaning “to re-elevate” and extensively meaning “to uplift, further, heighten, improve, aggrandize, and advance” the meaning of the original.

Ha Jin's translation-poems could be regarded as a demonstration of the Derridian *retrait* and “relevance” in two senses. First of all, in terms of culture, these poems are Ha Jin's reproduction and also his transformation of the classical Chinese stories, a fact which I believe is attributable to the evolution of his own migrant identity. Ha Jin has revealed in several interviews how he forced himself to switch the language of his creative writing from Chinese to English after deciding to immigrate to the US. To abandon writing in his native tongue and start to write in a second language was an agonizing conversion, compared by Ha Jin to be “a blood transfusion, like you are changing your blood” (see Thomas's interview). Indeed, it was a switch that he calls “a private tragedy” since he believes “a writer should write in his first language” (Shan 140), and that he would have become a better writer in his mother tongue. Ha Jin's endeavor to situate his writings in Chinese historical and cultural contexts could therefore be considered as a form of compensation, a means of redressing his “private tragedy.” As he confesses in *Wreckage*, “Although those poems are about Chinese history, personally there was the need to settle my account with China. In other words, I had some psychological need to take myself away from China by writing about its past. . . . The whole project was to investigate the dark side of the history with the guidance provided by words” (Shan 144).

Thus Ha Jin re-presents Chinese history so as to represent the banality and especially the brutality of ancient Chinese ideology; he “marks out” the demand for unconditional deference within the classical Chinese class hierarchy only to remark on its implicit superficiality and paranoia. Above all, by using Chinese

literature while abusing its authenticity, Ha Jin translates/rewrites/recreates so as to establish his unique authorship as an immigrant poet in America—a place where a critical attitude toward this sort of thinking, toward this and similar (not necessarily Chinese) traditional ideologies is commonplace. Brian Nelson points out the role of translator as cultural mediator: “Translation has a role to play, moreover, not only in ensuring mutual intelligibility between different ‘national’ languages and cultures, but also in the larger processes of cross-cultural hybridization that produce new and different types of identity” (361). Ha Jin has then partly but not entirely moved away from the corpus of Chinese literature and cultural traditions as the source of his poetic inspiration and creativity, has partly but not entirely “disclaimed” this (his) classical Chinese origin. Ha Jin has withdrawn/claimed his poetic inspiration from the corpus of Chinese literature and culture, but he has also withdrawn/disclaimed his creative writing away from the confinement in Chinese tradition.

Secondly, with regard to the Derridean *re-trait* and the relevance of translation, Ha Jin has constructed and also deconstructed the concept of “originality” in translation. Judged according to the conventional expectation that a translation must be faithful, he distorts factual records, misconstrues historical characters, and even overthrows the long-standing values embedded in canonical literary texts. Ha Jin’s *retrait* corresponds to Octavio Paz’s statement that “translation implies a transformation of the original” (154), Gayatri Spivak’s assertion that “[i]n every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible” (13), and Susan Bassnett’s point that “extreme faithfulness in translation will lead instead to extreme unfaithfulness” (397). *Wreckage* suggests the chaos of destruction or deconstruction, the scattered ruins of imperial China, the debris of its once-powerful ideology, but also the possibility of remixing or reconstructing—for instance, by blending East and West—that is implicit in this chaos, so as to “interiorize and spiritualize” the memory and recreate their meaning in Ha Jin’s immigrant life in the US.

#### IV. Native Informant and History of Angel

In hindsight, Ha Jin thus admits his past naivety in expecting himself to be a spokesman for Chinese people: “I viewed myself as a Chinese writer who would write in English on behalf of the downtrodden Chinese. . . . Little did I know such a claim could be so groundless” (*Writer* 3-4). Ha Jin as a writer evolved and let go of this hopeless ambition to speak for or represent Chinese suffering and hardship. By translating Chinese history, he managed to formulate a new

writerly identity for himself. Instead of being a native informant who assumes ethnic authenticity in his translation of Chinese culture and language for non-native readers of Chinese, Ha Jin translates Chinese literary works by appropriating, editing, rectifying, even remodeling and renovating the original texts. He has become what he has always expected of writers: "not just a chronicler but also a shaper, an alchemist, of historical experiences" (*Writer* 30).

Ha Jin is the translator, critic and poet of/in *Wreckage* and also its historian, for this "book" is a "poetic rendition of the Chinese history" (Shan 144). Like the angel of history in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," he is looking back at the original texts of Chinese literature in terms of the accumulated "wreckage" they have now become, at this time or point in history; but a clear perception of the irrational and bigoted, power-based dogmas of ancient Chinese ideology can better enable him (and us) to tackle the cultural, social, economic and political entanglements of the present. Like Benjamin's angel of history, Ha Jin is meditative and melancholic as well as prophetic.

The very last poem in *Wreckage*, "Departure," depicts the earliest group of Chinese students traveling across the seas to study in the US. It is a poem that brings Ha Jin, an American immigrant from China, back into the discourse of Chinese experience and connects him with other intellectuals in Chinese history. In "Traveling Mug" (see Appendix 2), the poet expresses himself metonymically through his own "white enamel" mug that over the course of many years got "nipped by Siberian snow / and baked in the smoggy heat / on the Yellow Plain" and also "thickened by auto exhaust / along the Atlantic coast" (ll. 3-5, 7-8). By touching on his travels through Mainland China, up to the Russian boarder and across the Pacific Ocean to the United States, the poem makes Ha Jin's migratory and transnational identity self-evident. Then in "Ways" (see Appendix 3), Ha Jin portrays the dilemma of being forced to decide between two choices: to go either right or left, echoing Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." However, with the enlightenment from Albert Lamorisse's "The Red Balloon," the poet is inspired to go upward and outward, singing the beautiful freedom (at least mentally or spiritually, or in our imagination) that a migrant could have in transcending existing options.

Ha Jin is a nostalgic writer, but he is also aware of the futility of retrieving the past. As a diasporic could never reclaim the home existing in his/her imagination even if he/she gets to go back to the homeland, likewise, a translator could never represent the original text no matter how faithful the translation intends to be. He asserts: "Faith or loyalty (to whom and to what?) is cheap and meaningless" (*Writer* 74). Ha Jin's translation poetry has helped to transcend the original significance of the Chinese historical and literary texts, and

demonstrated import that could only be materialized through diasporic experiences. It has become almost a literary signature that many American-born Chinese writers incorporate Chinese classical legends or texts into their writings as a strategy to manifest their Chinese American experiences and sentiments. If this signature helps these writers to authenticate an American identity furnished with ethnic traits, then Ha Jin, an immigrant writer from China, is not only contemplating on his American present but also scrutinizing his Chinese past. Like Benjamin's angel of history, Ha Jin is a Janus-like translator-poet, situating in the present and facing both the past and the future, who "is forever torn between a desire to look back at an original, to make whole what has been smashed, and to acknowledge the exigencies of the present. Translation as a practice is marked by this tension between an acceptance of loss and a desire for retrieval, between forgetfulness and memory" (Stephanides 113). *Wreckage* may give us the chaotic fragments of Chinese history and ideology but via a creative translation, a re-marking (*re-trait*) and transmutation that necessarily opens out, like the angel's wings, toward the future. *Wreckage* is actually neither the debris of Chinese history nor the remains of Chinese ideology; instead, it is a collection of creative translation, contributing to the reconstruction of Chinese American experiences, including both American-born and immigrant, and re-conceptualization of translation literature.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> To end this essay, I want to give my thanks to the constructive comments from one of the reviewers, saying that difference between some Chinese American literature and Ha Jin's works "points to some of the fundamental dissimilarities between Chinese American writers (second generation and beyond) and Chinese immigrant writers, hence begging a broader question: how do we situate immigrant literature in the academia—does it fall under the big umbrella of 'Asian American literature' or does it stand on its own? Answers to this question will necessarily influence our application of theoretical vocabulary and analytical frameworks, as well as how we contextualize and dissect the intercultural and inter-linguistic, not to mention transnational identity, politics inherent in immigrant writing."

## Appendices

### Appendix 1:

In *Wreckage*, Ha Jin has rewritten, revised, edited, and translated many of Chinese texts. The following are some examples of them. I am using the terms “collaboration, quotation, adaptation, allusion, mnemonic storytelling, translation” according to the definitions given by Gerald Bruns in his discussion of various forms of translation (115).

1. Example of poetry as collaboration: including and collaborating different texts in one poem.

Ha Jin, “In Confucius’s Class” ( <i>Wreckage</i> 26)	Chinese texts
<p>Master, eight days after you became the Police Chief of Lu State you had Shao-zheng beheaded. You’ve taught us never to do to others what you won’t have them do to you. Why did you not bestow benevolence on him? (I dare not be more specific. last summer Shao-zheng and the Master lectured at the same hour. Three times in a row people went to his talk and gave us an empty hall.)</p>	<p>「孔子爲魯攝相，朝七日而誅少正卯。」(荀況《荀子》〈宥坐〉)</p> <p>「己所不欲，勿施於人。」(《論語》〈衛靈公篇第十五〉)</p> <p>「孔子之門，三盈三虛……夫門人去孔子歸少正卯。」(王充《論衡》)</p>
<p>That’s a good question, young man. Bear in mind that a well-ordered state should winnow out five kinds of people: those who have acute, dangerous minds, those who behave peculiarly but refuse to reform themselves, those who utter false words and strive to justify them, those who write strange books full of recondite allusions, those who follow evil, thriving on it. Tell me, which one of the five kinds did Shao-zheng not belong to? Did he not deserve his end? Stopping a man like him will help our Tao prevail. (They left his headless body on the terrace before the Security bureau for three days to feed rooks and warn wicked people.)</p>	<p>「人有惡者五，而盜竊不與焉。」</p> <p>「一曰：心達而險」 「二曰：行闢而堅」 「三曰：言僞而辯」 「四曰：記醜而博」 「五曰：順非而澤」 「此五者有一於人，則不得免於君子之誅。」(荀況《荀子》〈宥坐〉)</p>

## 2. Example of poetry as quotation: citing Chinese texts

Ha Jin, "An Exile's Song" ( <i>Wreckage</i> 28)	Chinese texts
Skylarks are destined to fly away while sparrows infest the ground. Orchids and chrysanthemums fall before a hand picks them (ll. 1-4) ...	鸞鳥鳳皇， 日以遠兮。 燕雀烏鵲， 巢堂壇兮。(屈原《九章·涉江》)
Loyalty only breaks loyal hearts, I shall float away with the wind. (ll. 10-11) ...	懷信侘傺， 忽乎吾將行兮！(《九章·涉江》)
Birds have crossed the sea but will return to their old nests; foxes, when dying, point their heads toward the hills of their holes. (ll. 15-19)	楚鳥飛反故鄉兮， 狐死必首丘。(屈原《九章·哀郢》)

## 3. Example of poetry as translation: in the following example, the speaker of the poem is unidentified, with no reference to the Chinese poet Tu Fu.

Ha Jin, "Reproach" ( <i>Wreckage</i> 35)	Chinese text
The country is broken, but mountains and rivers remain. (ll. 51-52)	「國破山河在」(杜甫《春望》)

## 4. Example of poetry as adaptation: With no indication of the identity of the Empress nor the reference to the original text, Ha Jin further dramatizes this historical episode in the next stanza by adding details, such as describing how people abuse the human toilet.

Ha Jin, "Human Pig" ( <i>Wreckage</i> 43)	Chinese text
The Empress had the concubine seized. They chopped off her hands, gouged out her eyes, seared her earholes, stuffed her with herbs to take away her voice, then dumped her into an outhouse (whose lintel still shows the words Human Pig, engraved on stone.) (ll. 6-13)	「太后遂斷戚夫人手足，去眼，燻耳， 飲瘡藥，使居廁中，命曰『人彘』。」 (司馬遷《史記》〈呂太后本紀〉)

## 5 Example of poetry as allusion: this poem is spoken by a nameless female voice, with no reference to the original text.

Ha Jin, "A Sewing Song" ( <i>Wreckage</i> 44)	Chinese text
They say, "A real man should be buried in a green hill or return home wrapped in a horse's hide." ..... Who has ever heard The dead can come back home? (ll. 5-8, 18-19)	「男兒要當死於邊野，以馬革裹屍還 葬耳。」(《後漢書》卷二四〈馬援列 傳〉)  「古來征戰幾人回」(王翰《涼州詞》)



6. Example of poetry as translation: The original Chinese poems has 89 lines, and Ha Jin has translated 56 of them in his poem.

<p>“Lament: After Cai Yan (2nd century AD)” (<i>Wreckage</i> 45-47)</p>	<p>The Chinese poem by Cai Yan (蔡琰〈悲憤詩〉): equivalent lines</p>
<p>1 From the north came the Huns, their swords and armor flashing. Wherever they reached, towns and cities were razed, bodies scattered on roadsides, vultures cawing and flapping like clouds. On their horses’ flanks hung men’s heads; behind their horses followed carts loaded with women and girls. They headed inland where roads were more mountainous.</p> <p>I looked around feeling my stomach ruptured. There were thousands of us, mothers and daughters separated; no one dared to talk or cry. My maid had been butchered the night before because she sobbed—too terrified to entertain the soldiers. Wrapped in a blanket, I begged heaven, “Please let me join her!”</p>	<p>來兵皆胡羌， 所向悉破亡， 斬截無孑遺， 尸骸相撐拒。 馬邊懸男頭， 馬後載婦女。 長驅西入關， 迴路險且阻。 還顧邈冥冥， 肝脾為爛腐。 所略有萬計， 或有骨肉俱， 欲言不敢語。</p>
<p>2 The prairie differs from our plain, Their customs are crude, nobody cares about good manners. They respect the strong and despise the weak and old. Sheep and cattle swarm around their yurts, so many of them that the herds look like hornets and ants.</p> <p>A chieftain had me summoned to his chamber and later made me his ninth wife. I was always half starved, Unable to eat foul cheese and raw meat. At night I heard the Yangtze murmuring; in the morning I watched the cloud drifting toward the Great Wall. Sometimes I followed them, winds throwing my robe up and shrieking in my ears.</p>	<p>邊荒與華異， 人俗少義理。 翩翩吹我衣， 蕭蕭入我耳。</p>

Whenever a visitor came from the south  
I'd rush to him, but he'd know  
little about my hometown.  
Although I had two sons with the chieftain  
I missed my parents —  
if I couldn't return alive  
I wanted to be buried  
in our family's graveyard.

3

Then the two countries stopped fighting.  
Our Emperor had pity on my father who  
had passed away, and he sent over  
jade and gold to ransom me.  
Hearing the news, I burst into tears.  
All the inland women said  
I was fortunate, the only one  
who could return. They envied me.

But freedom meant I had to abandon my children  
who were too little to understand.  
They held my neck and cried,  
“Where are you going, Mama?  
Is it true you're leaving?  
Will you come back?  
You were always kind to us,  
why did you change suddenly?  
We're still young and we need you.”

Their words threw me into a trance  
as though my heart had stopped.  
I embraced them and together we were wailing.  
The horses, stunned, wouldn't move,  
the wheels sinking into the mud.  
All the spectators were sighing  
while the dew on the road  
flickered like a river of tears.

The way home was a thousand miles long,  
too short compared with my love  
for my children, who enter  
my wordless dreams night after night.

4

My mother has disappeared.  
Our hometown no longer exists.  
Everywhere are white bones,  
houses and temples leveled in the grass.

有客從外來，  
聞之常歡喜。  
迎問其消息，  
輒復非鄉里。  
感時念父母，  
哀嘆無終已。

慕我獨得歸

當復棄兒子。  
兒前抱我頸，  
問母欲何之？  
「人言母當去，  
豈復有還時？  
阿母常仁惻，  
今何更不慈？  
我尚未成人，  
奈何不顧思？」  
見此崩五內，  
恍惚生狂痴。  
號泣手撫摩，  
哀叫聲摧裂。  
馬爲立踟躕，  
車爲不轉轍。  
觀者皆歔歔，  
行路亦嗚咽。

悠悠三千里，  
何時復交會？  
念我出腹子，  
胸臆爲摧敗。

既至家人盡，  
又復無中外。  
白骨不知誰，  
縱橫莫覆蓋。

Where is home?	
Accompanied by my shadow I walk along the mossy streets that have no human sounds. Only wolves cry in the distance.	煢煢對孤景，  出門無人聲， 豺狼號且吠。
I climb up the mountain. At the summit my soul seems to be flying away.	登高遠眺望， 神魂忽飛逝，
How slow this life is! Can it ever shed grief?	人生幾何時， 懷憂終年歲！

7. Example of poetry as mnemonic storytelling: retelling stories in the Chinese poems.

Ha Jin, "A Childless Merchant" ( <i>Wreckage</i> 61)	Chinese text
I put on a dappled cape and carry A tureen of turtle soup to their home. A fifty-year-old, I grovel at  my parents' feet and cry like a baby to make them happy. But they don't think I'm funny,  so I begin to play horse riding a bamboo chair in the yard and chanting "My Papa Is a Shiny Bull"  Mother slaps me, claiming the soup is too bland (her taste buds are gone). I'm stunned, then burst into sobs.  She says, "You never cried when I whacked you before, why sniveling like this?"  "Mommy, your hand used to hurt, but now I don't feel a scratch. I'm so sad you are old."  Father says, "That's why we want a grandson. Rice Bag, when can you give us one?"	「常著五彩斑斕之衣。為嬰兒戲於親側。又常取水上堂。詐跌臥地。作嬰兒啼以娛親。」(元代郭居敬《二十四孝》〈老萊子彩衣娛親〉)  「郎騎竹馬來，遶床弄青梅。」(李白《長干行》)  「體念母親情至忱，母極輕重甚關心；一朝知母力衰退，頓起心酸淚濕襟。」(韓伯愈《續二十四》〈挨杖傷老〉)

(If only I dared to spit  
in his face, red and hairy  
like a monkey's ass!)

### 8. Example of poetry as allusion

Ha Jin, "Equality" ( <i>Wreckage</i> 78)	Chinese text
<p>... chrysanthemums have cloaked the city in gold. Their scent drenches every street, but their petals are frosted, too dull to fetch the butterflies that are all gone, frozen in grass. ..... The rebel commander vows that someday when he becomes a god, he will rewrite the rules of nature to make this flower unfold together with apple blossoms. (ll. 3-8, 11-15)</p>	<p>「滿城盡帶黃金甲」 「沖天香陣透長安」(黃巢〈不第後賦 菊詩〉)  「颯颯西風滿院栽， 蕊寒香冷蝶難來。」(黃巢〈題菊花〉)  「他年我若為青帝」  「報與桃花一處開」(黃巢〈題菊花〉)</p>

### Appendix 2: "Traveling Mug" by Ha Jin

Enamel mug, my dumb companion  
for more than thirty years.  
You were nipped by Siberian snow  
and baked in the smoggy heat  
on the Yellow Plain  
Now you sweat in the humidity  
thickened by auto exhaust  
along the Atlantic coast.  
I dropped you many times  
but thought little of loss.  
Your jutting rim is peeling.  
Your green exterior has darkened.  
On your white inside  
eight scars rust your base.  
Still you take daily use,  
sturdy like new.  
How indifferent you seem  
to any conclusion,  
Never at home in a niche.

### Appendix 3: "Ways" by Ha Jin

Two ways lie under my feet with different promises.  
One leads to an orchard full of pears and apricots,  
and the other to a gallery which has a movie-room.

Since my mind cannot make a choice between the two,  
 each of my legs follows its own will.  
 I see my right foot walking vigorously on the right way  
 and my left foot marching confidently on the left one.  
 By having taken both ways  
 I have turned my head into a red balloon  
 which pursues an upward way.

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## 由哈金詩作談華人離散及文化翻譯

### 摘要

哈金喜歡把玩中英文不同的語言特色，在創作中將兩者合而為一。他以本土化的英語論述重塑中文的諺語、譬喻與句構，翻譯、挪用並重組中文的語法，創造出饒富中文色彩的英語創作。閱讀哈金的詩集《殘骸》（*Wreckage*），受過中文教育的讀者很容易就可以發現詩中有許多中國古典詩詞的翻譯及改寫。作品中的詩人引述古典詩詞，以抒發個人情懷，而讀者不禁會思考：哈金的詩作源頭到底有多大的成分是來自中國文學？我們能夠依據哪些特點以及哪些標準來辨識所謂的創意？我們要如何區分「創新」與「改造」？而這樣的區分是否會改變我們對於哈金詩作的解讀與評斷？在哈金的詩作中，對中國古典詩詞的引述與對美國現今情境的感觸，二者或並置、或融合、或相互對照、或互相影響，這其中透露著何種訊息？被翻譯的是什麼，是中國詩詞還是美國情感？被移植的又是什麼，是文學還是文化？當中國的詩文被翻譯成英文、移植至美國之後，意義是否會有所轉化？是否會因應哈金複雜的美國移民經驗而呈現出某種迥異於以往的新義？而哈金的三重身份——詩者、評者、譯者——是彼此互補或彼此衝突？而這種種文學、文化再現，又訴說了何種華人離散的意涵，這些將是本文討論的重點。

**關鍵字：**哈金，語言，翻譯，《殘骸》，德希達，班雅明