

## ■ In the Ocean of Words: An Interview with Ha Jin

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### Abstract

Conducted in April 2008 via e-mail, this interview with Ha Jin explores various aspects of this first-generation Chinese American author who writes in English and has won a number of prestigious literary awards in the U.S. The issues covered include the difficulties of writing in a language other than his mother tongue, his literary ideas and system, his role as a poet and storyteller, the contents and characteristics of his poetry, his comments on his fiction (including his latest novel *A Free Life*), the relationship between craft and vision, the question of intellectual climate and censorship, the concepts of Chinese diaspora and Sinophone literature, his writing and publishing projects, and his observation of Taiwan as a site of cultural production in the Chinese speaking world.

**Keywords:** Ha Jin, Chinese diaspora, *Between Silences*, *Facing Shadows*, *Wreckage*, *Waiting*, *In the Pond*, *Ocean of Words*, *War Trash*, *A Free Life*, Sinophone Literature, Asian American.

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**Shan:** Your ancestors were from Shandong Province, China, but you were born and raised in Liaoning Province. Can you say something about your family background? How has it affected you as a person and as a writer?

**Jin:** My father was an officer, and we moved around a lot in the northeast of China. As a result, I don't have a sense of hometown. This has made me less nostalgic, unattached to any place.

**Shan:** Your original name in Chinese "Xuefei" ("Snow Flying") is quite poetic. How did you get that name?

**Jin:** When I was born, there was a big snow, a few feet deep, so my parents picked that name for me.

**Shan:** When did you choose "Ha Jin" as your pen name and why? Did you first have the Chinese pen name or the English one? Is your Chinese pen name with "Ha," not "Jin," as the surname a misnomer?

**Jin:** My first English poem, "The Dead Soldier's Talk," was accepted for publication by Jonathan Galassi for *The Paris Review*. My teacher Frank Bidart had read it to him on the phone, so there was no name attached to it. Later, Frank asked me what name I wanted to put to it. Because the poem was a bit political by nature and I was reluctant to let people know I had been writing, I said, "How about Ha Jin?" He said, "It sounds good, very concise." That was how it was chosen. "Ha" is the first character of the city "Harbin," where I went to college. "Jin" is my family name. I was unpublished in Chinese then, so my Chinese pen name is the translation of my English pen name.

**Shan:** You decided to join the People's Liberation Army to protect China from Russian invasion when you were not yet fourteen. What was the historical background then? When did you begin to question this kind of patriotism and look at the possible cowardice, as expressed in your poem "Promise?"

**Jin:** In a way, my going to the army was out of fear. A colleague of my father's once showed me how the Russians were poised to attack China—he drew a map and penciled out all the Russian missile units and mechanized divisions stationed in Mongolia. I understood that if a war broke out, nuclear weapons might be used. So I thought it would be better to die at the front than to be killed at home. Of course, as a young boy I was somewhat scared by war too, especially by the

possibility of being taken prisoner. To the Chinese, a POW was like a semi-criminal. The fear of that is reflected in the poem "Promise."

**Shan:** Could you say something about your life before you came to the U.S., including your educational background?

**Jin:** After serving for five years, I left the army, hoping to go to college. At the time, colleges remained closed because of the Cultural Revolution. I worked for three years at Jiamusi Railroad Company. Then in 1977, colleges were opened finally, and I took the entrance exams and got admitted to Heilongjiang University, assigned to be an English major. After I got my BA, I went to Shandong University to study for a master's in American literature, which I got in 1984.

**Shan:** What was your exposure to foreign literature during your undergraduate and graduate years? How was it related to the cultural, intellectual, and political climate at that time?

**Jin:** In my first two years in college, we mainly studied English. There were simplified books as reading materials, such as novels by Charles Dickens and Jack London, many of which carried Russian in them too, because the abridged books were made by the Russians originally. In early 1980s, American literature suddenly became very popular, and professors began talking about Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, though they mainly parroted views expressed in some critical articles published in Chinese journals, having no access to the books. Later, when I became a graduate student, we had American professors, who gave us books in the original, such as Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

**Shan:** When and why did you decide to come to Brandeis University for your Ph.D. degree? Why did you choose to write about Pound, Eliot, W. H. Auden, and William Butler Yeats for your Ph.D. dissertation? What effect has it had upon your own writing?

**Jin:** My professor Beatrice Spade introduced Brandeis to me, saying it was a good school. I applied to other universities as well, but only Brandeis gave me a scholarship. When I came to the U.S., I planned to return to my former job at Shandong University as a researcher in American literature, specifically in American poetry. It was assumed that I would study modern poetry. My dissertation topic placed me in the hands of Allen Grossman and Frank Bidart. They

both encouraged me to write poetry as well. In fact, I had a working relationship with Frank for several years, which made me more polished as a writer. We met weekly at a café in Cambridge and worked on my poems. I never took a poetry workshop, but my first teaching job was to teach poetry writing, so the experience with Frank became my only resource for teaching poetry writing.

**Shan:** When and why did you take a creative writing class at Boston University? What impressed you most about that program? Could you say something about the interactions between you and your teachers and classmates (for instance, Jhumpa Lahiri, the winner of the Pulitzer award, was your classmate)?

**Jin:** Leslie Epstein allowed me to sit in his class in 1990. Most of the stories in *Ocean of Words* were written in his workshop that year. Later, in 1992 when I was done with my Ph.D. at Brandeis, unable to find a job, Leslie let me enroll at Boston University as a regular graduate student. That year's class had Jhumpa Lahiri, Peter Ho Davis, Marshall Klimasewiski, and some more promising writers in it. Jhumpa was quiet in class, but we all believed she was going to be an excellent short story writer. I was in an odd position because my stories, most of them included in *Under the Red Flag*, were somewhat alien to my classmates, who sometimes didn't know how to read them. Jhumpa was among the few who understood them, and we have remained friends.

**Shan:** You first taught at Emory University as a poet. How did you feel when you beat more than two hundred competitors for that job? Why did you leave that university?

**Jin:** I was surprised that Emory University would give me the job. I guess I didn't make any mistake during my interviews. Also, I had a Ph.D., which most of the poets competing for the job did not have. More importantly, I had very strong recommendations. Emory was a pleasant place, and I had a good time there. Later, my son went to the Northeast for college, so we moved.

**Shan:** Now you teach creative writing at Boston University. What are the characteristics of these kinds of programs in the U.S.? How do you teach a program like this? How do you help your students with the works they write?

**Jin:** A workshop cannot help one become a writer, but it can speed up the process of learning the craft. To my knowledge, very few graduates from creative writing programs regret having taking the degree. It at least makes one a better writer.

In recent years, I teach mainly novella writing. We cannot teach how to write a novel in one semester, so the novella is meant to be a transitional form. We started from ideas, then outlines, and then the first draft. By the end of the semester, most of the students can have a relatively polished novella.

**Shan:** How does teaching, especially teaching creative writing, relate to your writing?

**Jin:** It takes the same kind of energy and time, so it is not always constructive. But a literary writer should have a regular income so that he can afford to fail commercially. Gradually I've got used to teaching and often enjoy it, especially when I see my students' progress. I also teach literature, which I like very much and feel nourished when I re-read a good book.

**Shan:** What did your first major prize, the PEN/Hemingway Award for Short Fiction in 1996, mean to you? How about other awards?

**Jin:** It didn't mean much other than helping me pass my fourth-year review at Emory. Awards are kind of accidental, depending on who the judges are and who have published books in the same year. We really should not take them seriously. A book has its own vitality, which nothing can frustrate if the book is strong.

**Shan:** I was told that you were also an early member of the Overseas Chinese Writing Association based in Boston. When was that? What about the situation of overseas Chinese writing at that time, and now?

**Jin:** I didn't know it was based in Boston. I have not been affiliated with that association, probably because I lived isolated in the South for nine years.

**Shan:** When and why did you decide to write in English, instead of in your mother tongue, Chinese? What were the difficulties you encountered? How did you overcome them? You often cite Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov as examples. How do they serve as your role model in this aspect?

**Jin:** After the Tiananmen massacre, I decided to immigrate. It took a year for me to decide to write in English. The major difficulty is uncertainty, having no idea whether I can survive or how far I can go. But I've gotten used to the uncertainty and can take it as a working condition.

Conrad and Nabokov opened the path for non-native writers in English.

They established a tradition for later comers, so there is nothing original in my endeavor. All depends on whether I deserve that tradition and whether I have enough luck, courage, and ability.

**Shan:** If you write in English out of necessity, it also seems to be an act of “luxury” or “extravagance.” Given your situation, how would you comment on this as “necessary extravagance” or “extravagant necessity?”

**Jin:** I don’t feel the “luxury” or “extravagance” at all. For me, to write is to suffer so as to find meaning for my existence. I have never encouraged anyone to write in English if that is not his first language. A writer should write in his first language. All the Chinese translators who have worked with me can tell that I could have become a better writer in Chinese if I had spent the same amount of time and energy in my mother tongue as I did in this language. I understand why Nabokov said that to write in English was his “private tragedy.”

**Shan:** In the Chinese symposium on Sinophone literature at Harvard University last December, you advised people to write in their mother tongue. Why this advice to your predominately Chinese audience? (In fact, your poem “To Ah Shu” also expresses the same idea.)

**Jin:** To write in another language is not just to make a few books. One should look for a place in the language and imagine what he or she can bring to the adopted language. In addition, such a writer will have to spend ten times more energy and time completing a work than if it is done in his mother tongue. That’s what Gao Xingjian said, which I believe is true. Also, one must have the stamina to endure all the frustrations and isolation. Taking all these into account, it is very, very hard to write literary works in an adopted language.

**Shan:** If you were to start your writing career over again, would you write in English or Chinese?

**Jin:** I would write in Chinese, but that is impossible in China if one wants to write honestly and to preserve the integrity of one’s work. Maybe I would prefer to live somewhere outside China and write in Chinese, provided that I didn’t have to worry about my livelihood. In short, I would feel much more at home in my mother tongue.

**Shan:** Your collections of poems were published earlier than your short-story

collections. Did you first try your hand at writing poetry?

**Jin:** Yes, I started as a poet. If I wrote in Chinese, I might write poetry only.

**Shan:** Your first collection of poems, *Between Silences: A Voice from China* (1990), was included in the Phoenix Poets Series edited by Robert von Hallberg and published by University of Chicago Press. The other two collections, *Facing Shadows* (1996) and *Wreckage* (2001), were published by Hanging Loose Press in New York. Why were your collections published by the two publishing houses? Would you say something about poetry publishing in the U.S. in general?

**Jin:** The first book was accepted by Alan Shapiro, who was the Phoenix Poets Series editor and a visiting poet at Brandeis. I didn't know the significance of having a book published by the University of Chicago Press, because I planned to return to China. Unlike American poets, I did nothing to promote the book, so it didn't sell. When I submitted my second manuscript to the same press, it was turned down thanks to the poor sales. I sent the manuscript practically to all poetry publishers in the United States, and fortunately Hanging Loose accepted it. Since then, they have published my poetry books. I noticed that there are more small poetry presses now. It used to be very difficult to publish a volume of poems. John Ciardi once said that if a creative writing program in every decade had one graduate who published a poetry book (not by a vanity press), that program was a success.

But there are also some established poets who can have their books published regularly and have wonderful careers. Most poets teach in the United States. Teaching is a good profession for poets.

**Shan:** Your preface to the first collection of poems begins with a quotation from Lu Xun, "Silence, and silence—either you erupt in silence, or you perish in silence." The first poem ends with silence and the last poem says, "Since my poems strive to break the walls / that cut off people's voices, / they become drills and hammers." Do you regard your writing, especially your first collection of poems, as your endeavor to break the silence imposed on the downtrodden (Chinese) people in general, and yourself as a beginning non-American poet in particular?

**Jin:** At the time, I believed I was a Chinese writer speaking for the downtrodden Chinese. I was naive, though sincere in my own way.

**Shan:** Could you comment on some of the characteristics of *Between Silences*, such as the use of autobiographical elements, the dramatic monologue, and the second person addressee?

**Jin:** I feel so distant from that book now. At the time I was writing a paper on George Herbert's poetry. I was in the phase where I was opposed to lyricism in poetry, which I believed had enervated contemporary Chinese poetry. That partly explains why I used so much dramatic monologue. As for the second person addressee, that was the quality of lyricism that I kept. When there is an immediate listener in a poem, the audience is automatically excluded from the poetic speech, only supposed to overhear the poem. This is the basic voice structure of the lyric.

**Shan:** There are two Chinese translations for the English title *Between Silences*, as 沉默之間 (in your preface to the Chinese edition of *Ocean of Words*) and 於無聲處. Which one is closer to the original intention of your collection of poetry?

**Jin:** I prefer the first one. The second one echoes too much of Lu Xun.

**Shan:** Why did you dedicate your second collection of poems, *Facing Shadows*, to your teachers Grossman and Bidart? What specifically did you learn from them?

**Jin:** From Grossman I learned to enjoy the intellectual rigor and scholarship in poetry. He was my professor at Brandeis, also an accomplished poet. From Bidart, I learned the craftsmanship—how to finish a poem. He is known as one of the best craftsmen in the United States besides being a very original poet.

**Shan:** *Facing Shadows* turns primarily to the Chinese living in the United States. How would you regard it as an expression of the diasporic Chinese?

**Jin:** Those poems were written in the period of confusion and frustration. Those feelings were not confined to myself. A lot of Chinese felt lost after the Tiananmen tragedy. In a way, the book marks my beginning to search for my bearings in the United States.

**Shan:** A number of the subject matters treated in your poems also appear in your fiction. For instance, the Chinese subjects in *Between Silences* appear in your



stories about China and those in *Facing Shadows*, such as “A Child’s Nature,” appear in *A Free Life*. How did you decide which should be treated in poems or stories? How do different genres affect your treatment of the similar subject?

**Jin:** After I finished the first poetry book *Between Silences*, I realized that there were still some materials left, which could be more effective if put into fiction. I began to read Isaac Babel and learn how to write stories about the Chinese army. That is why there are thematic similarities between the poems in *Between Silences* and the stories in *Ocean of Words*. As for “A Child’s Nature,” that episode is so close to my heart that I just used it for the novel *A Free Life*. Again, some immigrant Chinese had similar experiences. Recently a couple in Grand Rapids, Michigan, told me that they’d gone to Los Angeles to pick up their five-year-old son and gone through the same thing.

**Shan:** Several of the poems in *Facing Shadows* deal with the Tiananmen massacre and its aftermath not long after that incident. How did you come up with those poetic treatments of that tragedy?

**Jin:** I wrote a lot about the aftermath of the tragedy and used just a portion of it. It is a painful experience. Though we didn’t undergo it personally in Beijing, it changed so many lives in the United States. It still hurts me because it has shaped my destiny. I wanted my poems to preserve those memories, emotions, and the individuals’ points of view.

**Shan:** A lot of “dreams” and “shadows” appear in *Facing Shadows*, including your dissatisfaction with the American dream, a theme treated later in *A Free Life*. How did you choose to face these dreams and shadows?

**Jin:** Shadows in this case mean darkness. In the wake of the Tiananmen massacre, I often had bad dreams, most of which took place in China. Gradually, I realized that it was impossible for me to return, and I began to accept my situation as an immigrant. As for the American dream, I am not satisfied with the popular version of it, because some immigrants did not come to this country just for a house and two cars. There is always something metaphysical in my understanding of the American dream, which ought to have something spiritual in it.

**Shan:** In “To Ah Shu” you mention that you were disillusioned after hearing Czesław Miłosz, Joseph Brodsky, Gary Snyder, and Robert Bly reading their poems and would “prefer to stay home, reading Chekhov.” And “I Sing of an

Old Land” reminds me of Walt Whitman. Who are your favorite writers? What have you learned from them?

**Jin:** The persona of the poem is not me, so his disappointment with the writers he mentioned is not my disappointment. Personally, I worship Anton Chekhov, who is a kind of saint. I also love Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevski, and Nikolai Vasilevich Gogol.

**Shan:** In the Prologue to *Wreckage*, you quote from Adrienne Rich, “I came to explore the wreck. / The words are purposes. / The words are maps.” And this collection of poems deals exclusively with Chinese history, especially its dark side, in a roughly chronological order. In the note at the end of the volume, you enumerate the books which provide these historical materials. Why did you decide to explore the wreckage of Chinese history, so to speak, in the third volume of your poems? How do the words in this volume serve as your “purposes” and “maps?”

**Jin:** 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 quotation from Adrienne Rich was meant to signify that the whole project was to investigate the dark side of the history with the guidance provided by words.

**Shan:** In your poetic rendition of the Chinese history, you sometimes added your own invention. For instance, in “Between a Lamb and a Dog,” you re-wrote the famous Chinese story of “Taking a Deer for a Horse.” Would you comment on the relationship between the original and your poetic rendition?

**Jin:** 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. A poem cannot be about nothing. In the Chinese poetic tradition, we emphasize that poetry was written about events, as Bai Juyi’s “wei shi er zuo” (poetry starts with events [爲事而作]) instructs. I got “events” from history.

**Shan:** You sometimes mention Li Po and Tu Fu in your poems. What do these ancient Chinese poets mean to you?

**Jin:** I love Li Po and Tu Fu. When I was young, I memorized many of their

poems. That was a kind of self-education that to some extent shaped my literary sensibility.

**Shan:** How do your English readers respond to your poems generally?

**Jin:** My poetry got good reviews, but I am known mainly as a fiction writer. Some of my poems have been anthologized, and occasionally I run into someone who likes my poetry.

**Shan:** Have your poems been translated into Chinese? Has there been any feedback from your Chinese readers?

**Jin:** The Hong Kong poet Huang Canran (黃燦然) translated five or six of them. Other than that, few of them have been translated, so I haven't heard any feedback.

**Shan:** It's been seven years since your last collection of poems was published. When do you plan to have your next collection published? By whom?

**Jin:** I added a small volume of poems to *A Free Life*. It took a lot of effort for me to write those poems. So far I have no plan for my next poetry book.

**Shan:** When you write fiction, do you start with the story, the character, or the theme?

**Jin:** Most times with the story.

**Shan:** Many of your stories are based on real people and events. How do you incorporate them into your artistic artifice, especially when you are dealing with such gigantic human tragedies as the Korean War in *War Trash* and the Tiananmen massacre in *The Crazy*?

**Jin:** I wanted to describe my characters as individuals, mostly ordinary people, and place them in some historical events and see how they act in the situation. The characters must come alive on the page, which is more difficult than anything else. As for the events, they serve as the context.

**Shan:** *War Trash* is dedicated to your father, "a veteran of the Korean War." At the end of the story, you list more than twenty books which provide you

with the information about the events and details. How do you combine your personal family history with a collective history?

**Jin:** Although my father fought in the Korean War, he almost never talked about it to me. His unit was encircled by the UN army for nine months, but they managed to find a gap and return to the Chinese lines. I served in the Chinese army and stayed in a Korean village in Yanbian. That gave me some firsthand knowledge of the place and the people—their customs, life, and culture. *War Trash*, in the form of memoir, was meant to be an individual's story. Of course, once such a story is told with authenticity, it begins to give out collective resonance.

**Shan:** Some of your stories are quite gloomy, and others have comic touches. You once said that it's more difficult to write comedy than tragedy. Can you elaborate on that by citing your works as examples?

**Jin:** Meaningful comedy can bring out laughter while making the reader think and even become unsettled. It takes a more mature mind to find something funny in a tragic situation. My first novel, *In the Pond*, is a tragic novel in essence, but it is a comedy in its presentation. Some people even say it's a farce. But it is a serious piece of fiction about spiritual imprisonment.

**Shan:** You also mentioned that it's very difficult to write a good short story and that even the reputation of such a great Chinese writer as Lu Xun is based on a handful of his short stories. Among your short stories, what is your favorite one? And why?

**Jin:** "Resurrection" in *Under the Red Flag*. The story carries to the extreme the tradition established by Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q."

**Shan:** Among all the characters you created, who is your favorite one? And why?

**Jin:** Pingping in *A Free Life*. She is lovely and vivacious, and also tough.

**Shan:** Your fiction has won a lot of prestigious literary awards in the United States. You are a first-generation Chinese American, but such a feat is unparalleled even among most native writers. In *A Free Life*, one of the characters says to the protagonist striving to be a writer that he is too ambitious in trying to accomplish in one generation what takes three generations to accomplish. Would

you tell us the strenuous effort you have put into writing and share with us some of your experiences?

**Jin:** Every novel takes at least thirty revisions to finish. In the case of a short story, it takes more than that. On the galley of *A Free Life*, I worked six times. That is why I don't encourage people to write in a foreign language. So much depends on how much you can endure.

**Shan:** In addition to dealing with the Chinese diaspora, a term which appears several times in *A Free Life*, you also have a chapter on Dalai Lama being challenged by some Chinese nationalists. It seems that your representation of Dalai Lama and the Chinese nationalists' challenges foreshadows the situation happening right now.

**Jin:** I do believe that Dalai Lama is a peaceful man. I met him in Atlanta with a group of Chinese students. He said clearly that he had never sought the independence of Tibet. The mainland government should seize the opportunity and have conversation with him. What will happen if he passes away? The younger generation of Tibetans will be much more aggressive and harder for the Chinese government to deal with.

**Shan:** Your books have been reviewed widely and you have toured around the country to promote your books over the years. What are the responses from your American reviewers and audience in general?

**Jin:** It varies from book to book. I should say that on the whole, people like my books. But I am not a best-selling author. I am a literary writer, so my books have not been bestsellers.

**Shan:** *Waiting*, your first fiction translated into Chinese, was published in Taiwan in 2000, just one year after it was published in the United States and won several prestigious awards. What's the story behind the translation and publication of this work, which heralds a series of the Chinese translations of your fiction?

**Jin:** In fact, if I remember it right, China Times bought the Chinese right to *Waiting* even before the English original was published. My experience with China Times has been very pleasant. Whenever a book is to be translated, there will be a deadline for it, so I cannot do the translation myself. Usually my friends translated them. He or she finished some chapters and sent them to me. I went

over the translation, made some corrections and suggestions, and then mailed the pages back to the translator. So far, it has been like that.

**Shan:** Your prefaces and afterword to the Chinese translations are of special interest to me. For instance, you write prefaces for *Ocean of Words*, *Under the Red Flag*, *The Bridegroom*, and the afterword for *The Crazy* in which you reveal some of your innermost ideas and feelings that are absent in the English versions. For instance, in your preface to the Chinese version of *Under the Red Flag*, you point out explicitly that structurally this collection of short stories is deeply influenced by James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and that you want to provide not only a picture of an era, but also "an ethnographic moral history" of that small town. Can you elaborate a little bit more on the influence of *Dubliners* and *Winesburg, Ohio*? On the other hand, how does your writing of *Under the Red Flag* help you understand Joyce and Anderson?

**Jin:** First, in that tradition, the writer has to start every story as part of a book. The stories will eventually help and strengthen one another, each providing a context for the rest. Second, the final representation of the place and a group of people should be selective but must give a comprehensive impression. Above all, every story must be able to stand on its own. So far, I have been working in this convention. My new book of stories, *News of Arrival*, is similar in design, though the stories are all set in Flushing, NY. I appreciate the supreme artistry of Joyce's *Dubliners*, especially the poetry and verbal energy. By comparison, *Winesburg, Ohio* has some uneven stories, but in the book even those make each other more meaningful and more interesting.

**Shan:** Can you say something about your expectations of your Chinese target audience? You visited Taiwan in September 2001 when the Chinese translation of *The Bridegroom* was published. Did you find any discrepancy between your expectations and your encounters with your audience there?

**Jin:** I have never expected anything from the audience, but I was moved by the readers in Taiwan who took my books as serious literature. That was something unexpected.

**Shan:** As a writer, what do you think about the intellectual climate in Taiwan, China, and the United States?

**Jin:** The world is getting smaller and smaller. The United States still has the

infrastructure of democracy and intellectual freedom. I stayed in Taiwan briefly, though I follow the news. Taiwan has a democratic system, so there is the freedom of exchanging ideas and information. In contrast, artistic freedom is still limited in mainland China, and this limitation has hamstrung most Chinese writers there.

**Shan:** From your own experience, how would you evaluate the role of Taiwan in the Chinese-speaking world in terms of cultural production? What are Taiwan's vintage points in terms of cultural, intellectual, and political climate?

**Jin:** Taiwan has the freedom of speech and publication that is somewhat absent in China. Also, I have found that some people in Taiwan are very savvy about the culture and life in the broad world. In other words, Taiwan is much more sophisticated in mingling with the world culturally than China. When we talk about arts, nothing but individual talent matters, but talent emerges almost accidentally, so we cannot speak about it with reference to a group. Taiwan, however, does have the environment that nourishes arts and intellectual exchange.

**Shan:** What's your general impression about contemporary writers in Taiwan on the one hand, and those in mainland China on the other? And how do they differ from English and American writers in general?

**Jin:** Writers in Taiwan seemed more skilled and more sophisticated with the nuances of Chinese, whereas the writers on the mainland seem more ambitious and more daring. The Chinese writers strive to create literary works that can match the growing power of the country, but this takes time and talent. Talent is an individual thing and has nothing to do with a country's development at all. A country is simply lucky if it happens to have more literary talents or one or two geniuses in one generation. As for the writers in English, the United States writers still dominate the scene. There are also the writers of the Indian background, who are a powerful group and produce a lot of significant works.

**Shan:** With the exception of *A Free Life*, all your stories deal primarily with Chinese subjects, ranging from the Sino-Russian conflicts, the Cultural Revolution, the Korean War, and the Tiananmen massacre, especially the dark side of the land where you came from. It can be clearly seen that you try to break silence and find voice for the unrepresented or underrepresented people in China. Since you write in English and your target audience is English-speaking

people, how do you avoid the risk of orientalizing or self-orientalizing in your representations?

**Jin:** I never had a sense of audience, though I do have a sense of how much the English ear can take. Whenever I start working on a book, I will have some literary models, the great masterpieces, which I hold as a standard. Of course, I cannot reach that high, but that prevents me from sinking too low.

**Shan:** As a writer, you attempt to deal with your subject matters squarely. Yet, no one can escape from politics, especially in mainland China. That's why some people read your stories as political or national allegories. What's your response to this kind of reading?

**Jin:** I cannot make them change their minds, especially considering that my books are not available in mainland China. Time will sort this out and give a fair answer. My job is just to write well.

**Shan:** *A Free Life* is your first novel about the Chinese American or the diasporic Chinese in the United States. It appears to be the most autobiographical of your works, especially if we look at the protagonist Nan Wu and his family. How long did it take you to finish this huge book? How would you compare and contrast this novel to works produced by such Chinese American writers as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan?

**Jin:** I conceived the project in 1992 when I saw a book of poems self-published by the owner of a small Chinese restaurant in Waltham, MA. The man was a recent Hong Kong immigrant. The writing of the novel started in 2000. It took me almost seven years to complete. This novel is told from the point of view of the first-generation immigrants. That is the main difference from Maxine Hong Kingston's and Amy Tan's works. In every American family, at a certain point of time, there must have been someone who had Nan Wu's kind of experience, overwhelmed and awestruck by this big land.

**Shan:** What's special about *A Free Life* is that Nan Wu's poems are attached at the end of the story so as to complement the narrative text coming before them. What effects do you intend to achieve? Does this arrangement have anything to do with *Dr. Zhivago* you mention earlier in the text?

**Jin:** I knew that the poetry would remind people of *Dr. Zhivago*, but there



was no way for me to cut corners. I had to show that Nan Wu was talented and that his talent was stunted and frustrated by the immigrant process. Yes, coming to the end of the story, he has reached some kind of spiritual ascendance, which cannot but be expressed in his art. That was why I had to add the poems.

**Shan:** Your works are deeply rooted in China and its people. As a practicing translator myself, I know it's very difficult for a Taiwan translator to fully grasp the linguistic nuances of your works. That explains why your Chinese translators all originated from China. Your first Chinese translator is Jin Liang (金亮). How did he become your translator in the first place?

**Jin:** Jin Liang had never translated anything before. He interviewed me once and then wrote an article on *Waiting*. I was impressed by the rhythm and strength in his language, so I called him and asked him to translate the novel. Later, his wife got ill and he could not continue to translate anymore.

**Shan:** You point out that Wang Juei-yun's (王瑞芸) translation of *Under the Red Flag* is both accurate and vivid, while Jin Liang adds something robust and cheerful to his translation of *The Bridegroom*. And you were also involved in their translation. What's your degree of involvement? If we accept Walter Benjamin's idea of translation as an "afterlife," what different afterlives do your stories enjoy as a result of different translators' endeavors and your involvement?

**Jin:** We were always under the pressure of a deadline and could hardly enjoy such an afterlife. My job was to make sure that nothing was too far away from the original. At times, I also added words or changed some expressions to insure that the Chinese was genuine.

**Shan:** The Chinese translation of *Ocean of Words*, done by you and your wife, was published after Jin's and Wang's translations. And the next two translations are done by other people. As a self-translator you enjoy more authority, at least theoretically. Yet, in your preface to the Chinese version, you are not even satisfied with your own translation. What's the difference or difficulty in expressing yourself in English and in Chinese?

**Jin:** We just didn't have the time to make everything polished. Sometimes my English has a bit of playfulness, which is not easy to render as well. In short, the Chinese versions cannot be as polished as the originals.

**Shan:** Both of us attended the Sinophone literature conference last December. How would you define Sinophone literature? Would you include or exclude the literature produced in China as part of Sinophone literature? Is there a center for this literature? How would you regard the Chinese translations of your works as Sinophone literature?

**Jin:** I am not an expert in this. I feel that we should keep the category as wide as possible so that there will be enough space for works that emerge unexpectedly. All literature written in Chinese should be included and all works dealing with Chinese experience with depth and complexity, regardless of in what language they are written, should be included as well. If there is a center of such literature, it should be where we can find most of the significant works.

**Shan:** After writing in English for decades, Chin Yang Lee (黎錦揚) wrote a collection of short stories in Chinese with the help of an English-Chinese dictionary and got it published in Taiwan. Do you have any plan to write your work directly in your mother tongue?

**Jin:** No, I have to concentrate on my survival in English. Life is too short for me to change back and forth. I am still more at home in Chinese than in English, though.

**Shan:** How many of your works have been translated into other languages? How about their reception in various linguistic and cultural contexts?

**Jin:** Probably around thirty languages. I haven't kept track. Maybe more than thirty, considering that some individual pieces published in literary magazines, even though my books are not yet published in the languages. I believe that my works are best received in Germany, probably because they are somber and serious. They are also well received in some Latin American countries.

**Shan:** How would you compare the reception of your works in the English-speaking world and the Chinese-speaking world?

**Jin:** I think that people in the diaspora like my books, though some Chinese have some misgivings about them partly because most of my books are not available there. As for the English-speaking world, there are some readers who follow my writings. But I am still in the process of becoming a writer of a peculiar kind—every book is a departure.

**Shan:** It might not be too far from facts to say that if Gao Xingjian's works had not been published in Taiwan, we do not know whether he would have been awarded the Nobel Prize. Yet some of his books are still being banned in China. Since you write about some highly sensitive subjects, how many of your books are banned in China? How would you comment on censorship?

**Jin:** All are banned except for *Waiting*. That makes me uncomfortable to go back to visit. People don't have a comprehensive sense of what I have been writing. In addition, some so-called literary scholars, encouraged by the authorities, spread negative words against my writings. I feel misrepresented, but I usually don't pay much attention to them. I have to focus on my real battlefield, the English world.

**Shan:** Have you ever been back to China since you left in 1985? Do you have any plan to go back in the near future? What would you most like to do if you go back?

**Jin:** I haven't gone back. In 2004, I did apply for a job at a major university, but got no response. I guess I am a kind of persona non grata. I would love to travel alone in China, or with a friend or two, and do everything privately, but that will seem unlikely.

**Shan:** Can you say something about your role as a poet and storyteller?

**Jin:** Poetry depends a lot on impulse and luck, whereas a story can be structured and written out doggedly. Writing prose makes me feel more like a writer, since I can do it every day. But I have to wait for a poem to strike.

**Shan:** How do you maintain your remarkable productivity? Do you have any special working habit?

**Jin:** When I teach I cannot write anything new, so summer and winter vacations are essential to me. I write drafts in the summer and winter so that I will be able to edit and revise them during the semesters.

**Shan:** You describe writing as a work of labor. You also stress the importance of patience. Would you please elaborate on these?

**Jin:** This is especially true with fiction—the more time you put into a story, the

better it gets. A long patience will make a big difference, and it is often a test of a writer's ability.

**Shan:** You emphasize the importance of having a good story. How would you define a good story?

**Jin:** It should have a lot of life in it and can invoke the sense of the essence of life. It can move people and make them think about life. Ideally speaking, after reading it, some readers may feel their lives were enriched slightly.

**Shan:** Your wife Lisha and your son Wen are the first readers of your works. You dedicated most of your works to your wife and *In the Pond* to your son. What kind of help do they offer?

**Jin:** Wen used to read my books, but not anymore. He has a lot of graduate work to do. Lisha's English is not good enough for her to comment on the language, but she can tell me if a story is true or not. She never minces her words if she doesn't like something. Most times, she is right.

**Shan:** So far you have published eleven books and won a number of prestigious awards. Looking back on your career both as a human being and as a writer, how would you categorize or periodize it?

**Jin:** I have felt as if there had been some force bigger than my own that drove me to complete the books. My teachers always had more confidence in me than I had in myself. This is another reason I do not advise people to write in an adopted language. They may not have my kind of luck of having great teachers.

**Shan:** What is your current writing project? What is the nature of your next book (to be published by University of Chicago Press)?

**Jin:** The Chicago book, *The Writer as Migrant*, is coming out in the fall. It is a book of three lectures I delivered at Rice University two years ago. Currently I am working on a collection of stories, *News of Arrival*, mainly about Chinese immigrant experience and all set in Flushing, NY.

**Shan:** How would you identify yourself—a first-generation Chinese American writer writing in English, a Chinese-American writer with a hyphen, an overseas Chinese writer, a Chinese writer in exile, a writer of the Chinese diaspora, an

immigrant writer, or just a writer?

**Jin:** A Chinese American writer. Of course, a writer in my situation can have several hats, and I don't mind wearing more than one.

**Shan:** You remind me of Edward W. Said's idea of the writer and intellectual as someone with critical consciousness, linguistic competence, and the courage to speak truth to power. What do you think about your own role as a writer and intellectual?

**Jin:** I must speak truth, must fight forgetfulness, and must pay attention to the less fortunate and the have-nots. I must try to stand above any country.

**Shan:** As a winner of so many prestigious literary awards in the United States, what's your advice to future writers?

**Jin:** Write with more vision and write your heart out.

**Shan:** In the symposium on Sinophone literature, you said that although techniques are important, what is of ultimate importance is "yan jie" (眼界) or "vision." Why?

**Jin:** Vision originates from a writer's ambition. Techniques can be taught, but vision is hard to teach. Once a writer has a big vision, he is more willing to take pains and to do everything to fulfill his art.

**Shan:** You have a high respect for Russian writers. What kind of vision do they provide you?

**Jin:** The concern for small people, the abundant sense of life, and the sacredness of humanity.

**Shan:** You ask people to establish their own literary system. What are the major components of your own literary system?

**Jin:** Most times, this varies book from book. Basically, I would say the great Russians and ancient Chinese poetry. But I would situate myself within the tradition of Conrad and Nabokov, so these two giants are part of my literary heritage too.

**Shan:** You were elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2006. I read somewhere that in your speech prepared for that occasion, you focused on literature and immortality. Why did you choose this topic for that occasion?

**Jin:** I didn't give a speech on that occasion. I was invited to deliver a series of lectures at Rice University. The Chinese community in Houston asked me to give a talk to the Chinese writers there. I picked the topic "Literature and Immortality" and spoke about it briefly. I believed it was one of the central topics in literature and has been shunned by most Chinese writers, so we should face the real issue now.

**Shan:** You had the rare opportunity to write for the opera *The First Emperor* which was premiered in the Metropolitan Opera, New York in December 2006. This is a very different medium and requires a lot of cooperation. Could you share with us some of your experiences?

**Jin:** I was not good at the collaborative project at all. I was not even on the production team. It was like making a movie, and I was just one of the workers. Tan Dun (譚盾) and I did work hard on the libretto, but I felt as if I was working in the dark because I couldn't envision the final product, which was beyond our control. Fiction is a private form, while opera is a public form. I am more suitable to work in the private space.

**Shan:** What do you think is the nature and function of an interview?

**Jin:** To reveal some inner workings of the interviewee's mind and to share some peculiar information unavailable in formal writings.

## 辭海中的好兵： 哈金訪談錄

### 摘要

本訪談於二〇〇八年四月進行，受訪者為一九八五年自中國赴美，於一九九〇年代初決定以英文創作並迭獲美國文學大獎的哈金。訪談的內容頗為廣泛，如以非母語創作之艱辛，受訪者的文學理念與文學系統，其作為詩人與小說家的角色，詩作的內容與特色，對於自己小說創作的評論(包括二〇〇七年底甫出版的長篇小說《自由人生》)，文學創作中技藝與眼界的關係，知識氛圍與檢查制度的問題，華人離散與華文文學的觀念，寫作與出版計畫，以及台灣於華文世界文化生產中之地位等。

**關鍵字：**哈金，華人離散，《沉默之間》，《面對陰影》，《殘骸》，《等待》，《池塘》，《好兵》，《戰廢品》，《自由人生》，華文文學，亞裔美國人。