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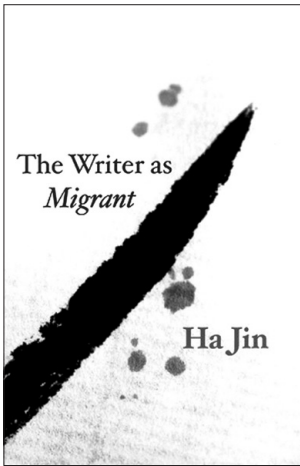
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## The Chinese American Writer as Migrant:

Ha Jin's Restive Manifesto

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Should writers who have left their native countries be spokespersons for the people left behind? Are those who abandon their native language guilty of betrayal and is the adoption of a foreign language necessarily a handicap? How do nomadic literati define their homeland? These are questions posed by Ha Jin in *The Writer as Migrant*.<sup>1</sup> On the surface this collection of his three Campbell lectures (delivered at Rice University in 2006) is a literary critique by an award-winning author on fellow transplanted writers who include C.P. Cavafy, Joseph Conrad, Milan Kundera, Lin Yutang, Vladimir Nabokov, V.S. Naipaul, and W.G. Sebald. Yet one can discern many parallels between Jin and the men of letters he discusses. Despite his avowal that writers should only write for themselves—independent of national allegiances—Jin is scrupulously heedful of his social responsibility and acutely sensitive to both American and Chinese critics. Notwithstanding his belief in putting down roots in the adoptive land, he engages in a *sotto voce* parley with his country of birth and strives to reach a transpacific audience.

The themes of *Migrant* resemble those explored in Salman Rushdie's "Imaginary Homelands" (1991) and Edward Said's "Reflections on Exile" (2000).<sup>2</sup> The first essay, "The Spokesman and the Tribe," uses the cases of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Lin Yutang to dispute the viability of spokespersonship and to affirm literature as self-validating. The second essay, "The Language

of Betrayal,” wrestles with the questions of whether writing in a second language amounts to sedition against one’s native country (a charge to which Conrad was subjected) and whether using a foreign literary medium inevitably constitutes a drawback (an insinuation Edmund Wilson made about Nabokov). The third essay, “An Individual’s Homeland,” draws on Cavafy, Kundera, Naipaul, and Sebald to explore four definitions of homeland: country of birth, adopted country, mother tongue, and an imagined habitat spun by the artist. Jin enjoins literary migrants to put aside nostalgia and just seek refuge in their verbal domain. Unlike Rushdie and Said, Jin often refrains from broaching volatile political issues affecting his own literary career; nevertheless, an autobiographical counterpoint is audible throughout his scholarly discourse.

The telling correspondences between Jin and the authors he invokes manifest themselves in his critique of Lin Yutang as spokesperson for China; in his reflection that writers can be “betrayed” by their country (particularly in his detailed account of a Polish critic’s attack on Conrad); in his comment on Edmund Wilson’s condescending advice to Nabokov; and in his discussion of Odysseus’s homecoming. In “The Spokesman and the Tribe,” Jin explicitly compares himself with Lin, who attempted to be his native country’s spokesperson—a role Jin now declines. In his view Lin’s novel *Moment in Peking* (1939) suffers as literature on account of the attempt to present the Chinese favorably to the Americans—resulting in a one-dimensional Pollyannaish portrayal of Modern China (17). Jin has shifted from considering himself as spokesman for the oppressed to defining himself as artist. When he published his first book of poems *Between Silences* (1990) in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen repression, he envisioned himself “as a Chinese writer who would write in English on behalf of the downtrodden Chinese,” but he soon recognized the “unfeasibility of the position” (3-4). He could imagine sundry populist objections: “Who gave you the right to speak for us . . . If you have not suffered together with us, you’ve just appropriated our miseries. . . . You sell your country and your people” (4). He now holds that writers must subordinate political causes to their craft.

Far from espousing a formalist position, however, Jin still shares Lin’s belief in a writer’s ethnographic and historiographical mission:

Take the example of the Anti-Rightist Movement in China in the late 1950s. Millions of people suffered persecution, tens of thousands of intellectuals perished, yet not a single piece of literature with lasting value emerged from this historical calamity. . . .What was needed was one artist who could stay above immediate social needs and create a genuine piece of literature that preserved the oppressed in memory. Yes, to preserve is the key function of literature, which, to combat historical amnesia, must be predicated on the autonomy and integrity of literary works inviolable by time. . . .the writer should be not just a chronicler but also a shaper, an alchemist, of historical experiences. (29-30)

Jin sees literature as a cultural artifact that not only reflects but also forges culture; as a testimony that not only documents past events but also “evokes the reader’s empathy and reminds him of his own existential condition” (17). All his own novels, particularly *War Trash* (2004) and *Nanjing Requiem* (2011),<sup>3</sup> attempt to “combat historical amnesia.” What is left unsaid in his exaltation of literature is that its historiographical function can hardly be implemented in a country that polices and regulates publications, lest the underbelly of official history be exposed.

In “The Language of Betrayal,” close affinities also come through with respect to Jin and the migrant writers who are accused of being renegades for using a second language yet are “betrayed” by countries censoring their work; who are reprimanded for being sellouts by critics from their native countries or nitpicked by native English speakers for verbal infelicities. Charges of betrayal have likewise been leveled at Jin. Though he does not delve into his experience, the following passage carries distinct autobiographical undertones:

Historically, it has always been the individual who is accused of betraying his country. Why shouldn’t we turn the tables by accusing a country of betraying the individual? . . .The worst crime the country commits against the writer is to make him unable to write with honesty and artistic integrity. (31-32)

Jin made these points—with specific reference to himself—in an op-ed in the *New York Times*: “To some Chinese, my choice of English is a kind of betrayal. But loyalty is a two-way street. I feel I have been betrayed by China, which has suppressed its people and made artistic freedom unavailable. I have tried to write honestly about China and preserve its real history. As a

result, most of my work cannot be published in China.”<sup>4</sup> As Taiwanese scholar Te-hsing Shan wryly observes, “Among overseas Chinese writers, Jin has had the most awards and the greatest number of books translated into Chinese and banned.”<sup>5</sup>

Jin is surely thinking of himself in “The Language of Betrayal” when he both defends other authors’ adoption of a second language and deplores the control exerted by a given country over its native sons. In fact, this essay revolves around a couple of uncanny (albeit tacit) similarities between Jin and the two writers he particularly champions—Conrad and Nabokov. The first is between a Polish critic’s attack on Conrad and a Chinese critic’s denunciation of Jin. Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841-1910), “the grande dame of the Polish literary circle” (36), had accused Conrad of betraying his country by writing in English and of reducing his writing to the level of a peddler (37). Jin was lambasted in almost identical terms by Yiqing Liu, a prominent scholar and Professor (now emeritus) of English at Peking University, who attended a reading by Jin of his award-winning novel *Waiting* (1999) during her stay in Chicago. In a Chinese essay pointedly entitled “Trading upon Integrity” [“拿诚实作交易”] Liu fumes: “Jin has paid too high a price for his National Book Award, for which he has. . . bad-mouthed his compatriots and become an instrument of the U.S. media in vilifying China.”<sup>6</sup>

Jin’s staunch defense of Conrad against Orzeszkowa thus comes across simultaneously as vicarious self-defense:

Note that she only “read about”—not actually read—Conrad’s books and could not possibly know about the quality and content of his fiction. Worse, she presented him as an affluent man, which contradicts the fact that he was in dire financial straits at the time. In essence, hers is a collective voice, which demands the writer’s unconditional dedication and sacrifice but does not care whether he could survive in a foreign land. (38)

Liu, like the Polish critic who railed against Conrad without having actually read his work, apparently also had not fully read *Waiting* when she published her scathing critique; she based her attack primarily on what she deemed to be the Orientalist appeal of the novel: the allegedly anachronistic bound feet of a character, the picture of a man’s queue on the book’s cover, and the way the book was publicized in the *Chicago Tribune* (displaying images of both the bound feet and the queue). Like her Polish counterpart, Liu views Jin’s writing in commercial rather than contingent exist-

tential terms. As though in answer to Liu, Jin explains in *Migrant* that when he tells people he writes in English “for survival,” he is not just referring to livelihood: “To exist also means to make the best use of one’s life, to pursue one’s vision” (32).

The famous exchange between Edmund Wilson and Nabokov establishes another precedent for Jin. Wilson told Nabokov: “Do please refrain from puns, to which I see you have a slight propensity. They are pretty much excluded from serious journalism here.”<sup>7</sup> No less irksome to Nabokov was Wilson’s backhanded compliment—“Mr. Nabokov’s English almost rivals Conrad’s”—to which the Russian author retorted: “Conrad knew how to handle *readymade* English better than I. . . .He never sinks to the depth of my solecisms, but neither does he scale my verbal peaks.”<sup>8</sup>

Jin obviously recalls this exchange when he takes issue with John Updike’s lukewarm review of *A Free Life* (2007), a novel delineating the quotidian struggle of a Chinese immigrant who must support his family while striving to be a poet in America. “Ha Jin’s English in *A Free Life* shows more small solecisms than in his Chinese novels,” Updike opined.<sup>9</sup> In “The Language of Betrayal,” Jin has sided with Nabokov against Wilson when he argues that the Russian author’s verbal feats “are unique to a non-native speaker who has an alien perspective on English. . . . His word games are of a different order, more exciting and more original. . . .After Nabokov, who can say non-native writers cannot crack jokes in English” (51)? In another essay entitled “In Defense of Foreignness,” Jin couches his comments on Updike’s review in terms strongly reminiscent of his defense of Nabokov: “Once we enter a foreign terrain in our fiction, standard English may have to be stretched to cover the new territory. Ultimately this is a way to expand the capacity of the language, a kind of enrichment.”<sup>10</sup> What Updike considers “solecisms,” Jin contests, are deliberate coinage designed to render those Chinese expressions having no ready Anglophone equivalents. No mention of Updike’s review is made in *Migrant*, but Jin’s vindication of Nabokov can be read as an indirect rebuttal.

Jin’s personal experience as both immigrant and exile also colors the scholarly reflections in “An Individual’s Homeland.” Jin notes that although the title of Cavafy’s “Ithaka” alludes to Odysseus’s origin, in the actual poem, “Ithaka is a symbol of arrival, not of return” (62). Through his analysis of Cavafy’s poem and Homer’s *Odyssey*, Jin deliberates against nostalgia, which “often deprives [migrants] of a sense of direction and prevents

them from putting down roots anywhere" (63). After a prolonged departure, he adds, the ancestral land may have become foreign to the native—as in the case of Odysseus, who fails to recognize Ithaca upon landing: "His confusion originates from two facts: first, in his twenty years of exile, he has changed and so has his memory of his homeland; second, his homeland has also changed, no longer matching his memory of it. . . one cannot return to the same place as the same person" (66).

In dwelling on Odysseus's fraught homecoming, including the detail that most of the Ithacan citizenry (as Penelope's suitors) have turned against the hero, Jin may be registering his own estrangement from his native land. Nan—the male protagonist in *A Free Life*—expresses deep reservations upon visiting China after more than ten years abroad. He finds Beijing "hardly recognizable" and his home in Harbin even alienating: "How lonely he felt in his parents' home, as though he hadn't grown up in this very apartment. Perhaps he shouldn't have come back in the first place."<sup>11</sup> Jin himself attended Heilongjiang University in Harbin (hence the "Ha" in his choice of pseudonym). He told Shan in an interview in 2008 that the banning of all but one of his books in China has deterred him from visiting the mainland, and that when he applied for a teaching position at Peking University in 2004, he didn't so much as receive an acknowledgment.<sup>12</sup> One cannot help detecting autobiographical traces in both the novel and *Migrant*.

If a physical return to one's native country proves disappointing, as it does for Nan, the mother tongue can make a migrant feel virtually "at home." Citing a passage from Kundera's *Ignorance*, in which two Czech expatriates are erotically aroused upon hearing their native tongue, Jin observes: "In the context of the novel, this is a moment of revelation: they find that their real homeland actually exists within their own beings. . . . To the two lovers, a hotel bed is more essential than a city or a country. Symbolically, the emigrants' need for their native land is called into question" (74).

Whether or not inspired by Kundera, Jin discloses in his preface to the Chinese edition of *A Good Fall* (2009)<sup>13</sup> that by translating this collection of short stories into Chinese he has tried to alleviate his own homesickness:

In the past I had always stressed that nostalgia is a futile emotion because people should move forward. After I gave a talk

about eight years ago, an elderly lady came up to me and said with a smile: "You won't be saying that when you are sixty." She turns out to be correct. Now in my fifties I am feeling a little homesick. . . . I have infused this self-translated text of mine with a measure of such sentiment, using my native language to erect a small "villa"—a way station, as it were, in my extensive odyssey.<sup>14</sup>

In the United States Jin is nevertheless writing primarily for an English-speaking audience. He seems to be mulling over his own predicament when he notes in "An Individual's Homeland" that for some writers, "the mother tongue is an unavailable 'home' . . . and their survival may lie in another language. . . . The underlying principle is how to survive as an artist while making one's art thrive" (79-80).

The three interconnected essays in *Migrant* all suggest that the art of writing must override other considerations. "The Spokesman and the Tribe" asserts that "a writer's first responsibility is to write well" (28). "The Language of Betrayal" counsels a writer to "do everything to find his place in his adopted language" (59). "An Individual's Homeland" posits that wherever one is located, nothing is more important than "making one's art thrive." Jin contends that writers devoted to their art must abstain from spokespersonship, distance themselves from a native country that throttles creativity, and invest in a new "homeland"—be it an adopted country or a verbal refuge. Yet he concedes: "no matter where we go, we cannot shed our past completely" (86).

What strikes me upon reading the trio of essays by Jin is indeed the indelible imprint of his Chinese past. It is evident in his social commitment, his notion of the nation-state, the subject matter of his poetry and fiction, his conformity to Chinese cultural expectations, his preoccupation with homeland and with translation (especially into a writer's native language), and his indirect critique of the Chinese literary establishment. One is again reminded of Nan, who at one point wished to dissociate his family from the old country completely; but later "it was clear that China would never leave them alone. Wherever they went, the old land seemed to follow them."<sup>15</sup>

The old land is certainly lurking around the corner for the author as well. Its presence suggests that even someone who vows to "stand alone, as a writer" (28) cannot extricate himself completely from his cultural legacies and insulate himself from current geopolitical realities. Jin remains susceptible to the



ethos, judgment, and approbation of his motherland. Inculcated since his youth about the social function of literature, Jin has not entirely jettisoned such a doctrine in order to embrace the opposite extreme of art for art's sake, or the stance that writers speak only for themselves; his re-vision of the writer's role from that of spokesperson to that of memorialist still sets a premium on public responsibility. Taught to venerate New China as a sacrosanct entity, Jin continues to be haunted by its looming shadow. The narrator in Kundera's *Ignorance* observes: "the Communist countries hurled anathema at emigration, deemed to be the most odious treason."<sup>16</sup> In reversing the charge of an individual betraying a country to that of a country betraying the individual, Jin still adheres to the notion of a monolithic nation; his preoccupation with betrayal attests to the tenacious grip of the Chinese regime. His reluctance to refer to himself and his work directly in *Migrant* is also in keeping with Chinese cultural expectations, such as self-effacement and reticence about personal struggle and accomplishment (though I offer a further reason for his autobiographical restraint later). Despite his attempt to turn his back on China, it remains the primary setting and inspiration of his fiction. (*A Free Life* and *A Good Fall* are the only exceptions to date.) Even *Migrant* exudes an exilic rather than immigrant sensibility. Beneath the restive energy and the determination to "move forward" is a keen sense of rejection by his country of origin.

What Jin says of Cavafy's "Ithaka" also applies to his own transpacific odyssey. He points out that although the Greek poet changes the symbolic meaning of Odysseus's homeland, the title still carries with it the entire "cultural baggage":

The beauty and the subtlety of the word "Ithaka" resides in its mythological resonance, which evokes something in the past in the traveler's origin—something that has shaped his imagined destination. Although he finally reaches his Ithaka, his arrival cannot be completely separated from his point of departure, because his journey was effected by the vision of a legendary city whose historical and cultural significance constitutes part of his heritage. (62)

In Jin the inalienable heritage often takes the form of a nagging if contradictory desire to decry the ideological constraint of contemporary China and be read and cherished by readers in his natal country. Although he considers the belief that "success means

much more if it is appreciated by the people of one's native land" to be irrational (65), he cannot brush the notion aside completely. Although he acknowledges that finding one's place in an adopted language may involve sacrificing the mother tongue, he maintains it is still important to borrow "its strength and resources" (60). It matters to him that a work, when "rendered into different languages, especially into the language spoken by the people the author writes about. . . still remains meaningful" (59). Apropos of Chinua Achebe's criticism of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—about the novel not speaking to Africans because they are not treated "as normal human beings"—Jin writes: "Imagine what kind of work it would become if the people it portrays could accept the story as literature that speaks also to them. The novella would grow into a masterpiece of universal significance and appeal" (59). His comment would seem to convey his own unspoken yearning to be endorsed by Chinese readers.

One also perceives an oblique analog when Jin relates that Conrad declined honorary degrees offered by Oxford and Cambridge, and a Knighthood. "What he really wanted was the Nobel Prize," Jin remarks, "to mend the division within his identity. The Nobel Prize would also have brought honor to the Poles and therefore would have redeemed him from the guilt for his 'desertion' of Poland" (34). Jin, who has implicitly set his life and work alongside international luminaries such as Conrad, Nabokov, Kundera, and Naipaul (thereby establishing a migrant pedigree of sorts), may be revealing his own vaulting ambition. Like Max Ferber, the artist and Holocaust survivor in Sebald's *The Emigrants* whom Jin discusses at length, Jin may have taken solace in the conviction that "he belongs among the great, and this sentiment sustains him spiritually" (82). Global recognition would also be a means to mend his inner division.

The breach in Jin is caused not only by his emigration and his Anglophone writing but, above all, by official censorship and the cold reception—at least till 2011—of his poetry and fiction in China. In a country where the media and the arts are still enlisted to serve politics, writers must tread dangerous waters when they tackle delicate topics such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Cultural Revolution, or the Tiananmen Incident. When Jin complains about the absence of any literature depicting the Anti-Rightist Movement in the late 1950s, he is all too aware of the ongoing political pressure perpetuating this silence. His criticism of Lin Yutang's sanitized portrayal of China is, I believe, also an

indirect indictment of the current Chinese government's effort to promote a positive national image at the expense of honest cultural production. In an article entitled "The Censor in the Mirror," Jin openly states that "it's not only what Chinese Propaganda Department does to artists, but what it makes artists do to their own work"—turning themselves into the eponymous censors.<sup>17</sup> Jin himself was told by his Chinese editor in 2004 that he cannot publish *The Crazyed* (with the Tiananmen Incident as backdrop) and *War Trash* (about the Korean War) "owing to the sensitive subject matter." After his collection of short stories *Under the Red Flag* (set during the Cultural Revolution) was rejected by the Shanghai censorship office in 2005, his editor abandoned the project of publishing his work in China altogether.<sup>18</sup>

In light of such insistent rebuff, his latest novel—*The Nanjing Requiem* (2011)—may be seen as an attempt at reconciliation. Because the novel deals with a harrowing historical event that predates the current regime, Jin is able to preserve history through literature while slipping under the radar of official censors. This novel has been published simultaneously in English and Chinese to favorable reviews in China. Perhaps a conciliatory overture had already been made in *Migrant*, in which the elusive references to Chinese politics may be symptomatic of self-censorship and in which the dissident tone is far less strident than in most other essays and fiction of his, though one can still pick out discordant notes between the lines.

My analysis of *Migrant* suggests the text can be read in different registers: as a scholarly exegesis of writers from diverse shores; as a literary manifesto or a set of criteria applicable to Jin's work specifically and to migrant literature in general; as an indirect autobiography reflecting Jin's own beliefs, travails and aspirations; and as a circuitous remonstrance against Chinese censorship. He sets himself apart from Lin Yutang and Solzhenitsyn by abdicating spokespersonship and undertaking to preserve history through art. His defense of Conrad and Nabokov doubles as an apologia—by an author vulnerable to the slings and arrows from both East and West—against charges of betrayal and linguistic deficiency. His shifting definitions of "homeland" signal his effort to inure himself against a native country that has banned most of his books and to anchor his creativity elsewhere. Yet Jin cannot help looking homeward: his refrain about the primacy of literature is also a muted political plea for artistic freedom in China. For all his misgivings about nostalgia

he persists in unburying the history of his motherland and entertaining a figurative return. The wistful note remains perceptible in his resounding credo: “Only literature can penetrate historical, political, and linguistic barriers and reach the readership that includes the people of the writer’s native country” (22).

## Notes

1. Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); the book will be referred to as *Migrant* and citations from it will be noted parenthetically in the text.
2. Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin, 1992): 9-21; Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2000): 137-149.
3. Ha Jin, *War Trash* (New York: Vintage, 2005), and *Nanjing Requiem* (New York: Pantheon, 2011).
4. Ha Jin, “Exiled to English,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2009: WK9.
5. 单德兴 (Shan Te-hsing), “辞海中的好兵: 哈金访谈录” [“The Good Soldier in Cihai: An Interview with Ha Jin”], *In the Company of the Wise: Conversations with Asian American Writers and Critics* (Taipei: Yunchen Wenhua, 2009): 20; my English translation.
6. My English translation; 刘意清 (Liu Yiqing), “拿诚实作交易: 哈金和他的小说《等待》” [“Trade Upon Integrity: Ha Jin and His Novel *Waiting*”], *中华读书 (Zhonghua Dushubao)*, June 14, 2000: BF26.
7. Quoted in Jin, *Migrant*, 50.
8. Simon Karlinsky, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, revised and expanded edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979/2001): 283n, 290; quoted in Jin, *Migrant*, 92n.
9. John Updike, “Nan, American Man: A New Novel by a Chinese Émigré,” *The New Yorker*, December 3, 2007: 101.
10. Ha Jin, “In Defense of Foreignness,” Andy Kirkpatrick, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishness* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 466.
11. Ha Jin, *A Free Life* (New York: Vintage, 2007): 530, 560.
12. Shan, 41.
13. Ha Jin, *A Good Fall: Stories* (New York: Vintage, 2009).
14. Ha Jin, 《落地》 [*A Good Fall*] (Taipei: China Times Publishing Company, 2010): 7; my English translation.
15. Jin, *A Free Life*, 235.
16. Milan Kundera, *Ignorance: A Novel*, Linda Asher, trans. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003): 17.
17. Ha Jin, “The Censor in the Mirror,” *American Scholar* 77 (Autumn 2008): 26-32.
18. *Ibid.*, 26-27.