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**The Myth of “Chinese” Literature:  
Ha Jin  
and the Globalization of “National” Literary Writing**

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The Myth of “Chinese” Literature:  
Ha Jin and the Globalization of “National” Literary Writing

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**Abstract**

This paper explores how Ha Jin’s English fictions provide us with a platform to rethink modern Chinese literature in the global context. His fictions on Chinese experiences call us to imagine a new notion of national literature. Ha Jin may not only subvert the national framework of literary studies and challenge the assumption that a literary text exists in stable or consistently identifiable form, but also urge us to rethink the coherence of modern Chinese literature in the broadest sense. The paper asks, through the case of Ha Jin, if a literary work written in another language be called “Chinese” or “national” in the age of globalization or flexible accumulation, and if literature can go beyond the ethnic-based model of identity. In modern tradition, literature always functions as the imaginary realm for the construction of the nation-state and narrates the shared experiences by a common language. But a more internationally involved China should be more receptive to the changing and diversified meanings of its new identity. Chinese emigrant writers who publish their literary works about China in English or French would only enrich the contemporary Chinese culture and develop its global influence. Precisely, Ha Jin’s English writing contributes an essential element for the development of a new imaginary Chinese nationalism in the global age, and offers new freedom to seek to redefine continuously the sense of Chineseness. The paper argues that the best contribution of Ha Jin works on the formal level rather than on the content of modern Chinese literature in the global context because the existence of his works circumscribes the limits and failure of the ideology of modern Chinese literature and lays bare its paradoxical mechanism.

What does it mean to speak of a “world literature” in the context of modern Chinese literary studies? Does it refer to the Chinese literature translated into a relatively global language, circulated and read worldwide? Does it actually denote the world recognition of modern Chinese literature, that is to say, the Nobel Prize or some similar internationally prestigious awards won by a Chinese writer? Could the question help us to reflect in reverse on a more crucial issue of what modern Chinese literature *is* in today’s globalizing world?<sup>i</sup>

In his *What is World Literature?* David Damrosch defines modestly that world literature, emerging from the numerous national and local literatures, “encompass[es] all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language. . . In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base. . . a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture” (4; author’s emphasis). Hence, the so-called world literature is everything about the circulation of literary works between their places of origin and the foreign lands where the works are presented, or translated, and consumed. That a work can enter into world literature, Damrosch elaborates, has to go through a double process: “first, by being read *as* literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin” (6; author’s emphasis).

Can what Damrosch says of world literature apply to the English writings of Ha Jin (b. 1956) whose works are not readily categorized as a national product of China? Can Ha Jin’s English works provide us with a platform to (re)think modern Chinese literature in the global context? To what extent might Ha Jin’s fictions call us to imagine a new notion of national literature in our contemporary world? To respond to Damrosch’s definition, we may have to tackle some questions first: What is the cultural point of origin for Ha Jin? Is it China from which his literary imagination originates? Is it the United States, where he began to write his first piece of creative work? Can the “home base” concept be appropriate to Ha Jin’s writings? If there is no “home

base” for Ha Jin’s work, what is the possibility for his writings to circulate beyond their so-called “original culture”? How do we understand the “original culture” that is assumed as the essential point of departure for world literature to emerge according to Damrosch? If Ha Jin’s work does not exactly belong to any place of origin, then can it directly enter into the realm of world literature?

Damrosch historically traces the idea of world literature to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), who was by no means a multiculturalist and whose concept of “world literature” (*Weltliteratur*) was always already permeated with strong implications of Eurocentrism. The Eurocentric ideology implicit in the present notion of world literature may, however, work for Ha Jin’s advantage, since he is writing in English as the lingua franca, a language globalized by Anglo-American cultural and linguistic hegemony. Even the contents of his works, predominantly about mainland China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and after, are relatively well received by American readers, precisely because they reflect American interest and match comfortably the American representation of the foreign culture—Chinese communist—in question. Far from erasing local literary and cultural characteristics as Steven Owen has said of Bei Dao’s verse as “world poem” produced under the mechanism of global economy, Ha Jin’s writings avowedly begin in the Chinese culture and experience, the Chinese political situation under the communist regime, and even in the Chinese language. What I mean by “Chinese language” here, of course, does not refer to the language Ha Jin literally uses in his works published in the US. Rather, it is the Chinese expressions he always intends to use in his English writing that make one believe that he may think in Chinese first and then translate his idea into English. In his prize-winning novel *Waiting*, readers can occasionally find Chinese proverbs written in English: “with money you can hire the devil to grind grain and cook dinner for you” (172); “a good man must never take liberties with his friend’s wife” (179); “a fresh rose

is planted on a cowpat” (186). The frequency of using Chinese expressions such as idioms and maxims is even higher in his earlier fiction, *In the Pond*. For instance: “I’m full of gas” (6); “it was impossible to recover the water thrown on the ground” (20); “if the devil expanded a foot, the Buddha would grow a yard” (20); “a mantis tries to stop a tractor” (33); “under heaven all crows are black” (35); “two small cadres...were wine vessels and rice bags” (35).

However, some critics argue that Ha Jin should be considered a bilingual writer, like Lin Yutang (1895–1976), Han Suyin (b. 1917), and Eileen Chang (1920–1995), and indeed Ha Jin is extensively involved in all the Chinese translation of his works published in Taiwan. That he begins his English writings in Chinese means he literally translates or integrates Chinese expressions in his English texts. Hang Zhang points out that, in Ha Jin’s *In the Pond*, the use of curse words (“son of a turtle” or “son of rabbit”); terms of address (“Young Shao,” “Brother Shao,” “Comrade Shao”); proper names (“Great China Cigarettes”); vocabulary (“hot-water ticket,” “fighting posts”); politically loaded discourse, metaphors, proverbs (“wine vessel,” “rice bags,” “breathe through one nostril,” “play the lute to a water buffalo”); and norms of written discourse are directly borrowed from Chinese. Thus, Zhang concludes that such usage of Chinese expressions in the English language demonstrates Ha Jin’s bilingual creativity and “may pave the way for the acceptance of other Chinese English-language creative fiction overseas and in China” (313).

I cannot be as certain about Ha Jin’s bilingual creativity as Zhang is, though it may be fashionable these days to celebrate bilingual, multilingual, and multicultural positions. Linguistic mixing or merging finds its way into Ha Jin’s English passages with strong Chinese overtones. But to look at it differently, the Chinese linguistic characteristics found in Ha Jin’s English writing remind me of the “Chinese accent” of the Chinese American chef and popular TV cooking show host Martin Yan. Yan has been accused of creating a fake Chinese accent in his English presentation of the TV program “Yan Can Cook,” in order to exoticize his Chinese

cuisine and to entertain his primarily white American viewers. Yan denies the accusation and defends himself by stating that since he went to the US when he was over eighteen, he could not shake his accent. Ha Jin also went to the US way after the age of eighteen (at twenty-nine he went to study for a PhD in English literature at Brandeis University). Unsurprisingly, he has a strong accent when he speaks English. As Dwight Garner, who interviewed Ha Jin for *The New York Times*, observes, “[Ha Jin]’s driving skills are almost as shaky as his command of spoken English—his Mandarin accent, with his hard ‘r’ sound, remains strong. . . . But watching him grapple with the intricacies of its spoken language. . . . is an experience that will startle anyone who first encountered his voice through his fiction. On the page, Jin has the kind of effortless command that most writers can only dream about” (38). Garner couldn’t help asking: “how can someone write English so fluidly, yet speaking it so haltingly? ‘I always give the same response,’ [Ha Jin] says. ‘On the page, I can spend all the time I need. I can be patient. I can work and work until I think I’ve almost got it right’ ” (41). The mastery of the adopted language was hard earned. Ha Jin’s command of English may be restricted to the realm of writing. His elegant style still owes much to the Chinese culture he comes from.

On another occasion, Ha Jin discussed the distance between written and verbal languages, in an essay written in Chinese and published in *Today* magazine, founded and edited by Bei Dao and other Chinese exile writers. But he does not exactly talk about his English writing or literature in English in general. Rather, modern Chinese is the subject matter he is concerned about in his short essay. Ha Jin believes that some kind of separation between written and verbal languages is good for Chinese literature, as if he could draw experience from his distance to English. The vernacular language (*baihua*) movement promoting writing what one says, according to Ha Jin, could be understood as the reason why there hasn’t been a major poet in modern Chinese literature for the past two hundred years. Categorizing himself as an outsider

who writes only in English, Ha Jin optimistically envisions that the prevalence of computers and televisions in mainland China could contribute to the popularization and rejuvenation of the Chinese language. Seemingly feeling happy in his second language, he doesn't reveal if he will write fiction in Chinese in the future, though he clearly shows serious concerns about the development of the Chinese literary language. Like many diasporic Chinese writers and exiles who are willing to take up their "moral burden" though they have been away from home, Ha Jin is obsessed with China and things related to Chinese (that reminds us of C. T. Hsia's notion of the "obsession with China") and explains why all of his works so far focus only on his mainland Chinese experiences. As a matter of fact, Ha Jin's English works so far are committed to the narrative of the Chinese nation as the major source of his literary inspiration and representation.

Such distinguished "Chineseness" in Ha Jin's works poses another question that may lead us to one of Damrosch's qualifications of world literature: is Ha Jin's work read *as* literature, especially in the political context of the US? His utmost concern about history and stories that took place in mainland China easily places his works in the category belonging to the industry of writing Red China in the West. Over a few decades, the Western reading public has developed a taste for the stories about suffering in communist China. Many English publishers have released numerous stories and memoirs that chronicle family tragedies, emotional damage, political victimization, and sexual oppression by the Chinese totalitarian regime, to cater for the orientalist taste of the Western public. Many of these Chinese memoirs or stories written in English are rather successful commercially and sometimes critically in the West. Examples include Ruth Earnshaw Lo and Katharine S. Kinderman's *In the Eye of the Typhoon* (1980), Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro's *Son of the Revolution* (1983), Gao Yuan's *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution* (1987), Fulang Lo's *Morning Breeze: A True Story of China's Cultural Revolution* (1989), Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991), Anchee Min's *Red Azalea* (1993), Jan Wong's *Red China Blues* (1996), Pang-Mei Natasha

Chang's *Bound Feet and Western Dress* (1996), Jaia Sun-Childers' *The White-Haired Girl: Bittersweet Adventures of a Little Red Soldier* (1996), Adeline Yen Mah's *Falling Leaves: The True Story of an Unwanted\_Chinese Daughter* (1997), Rae Yang's *Spider Eaters* (1997), He Dong's *Ask the Sun* (1997), Zhu Xiao Di's *Thirty Years in a Red House: A Memoir of Childhood and Youth in Communist China* (1998), Hong Ying's *Daughter of the River* (1998), Meihong Xu's *Daughter of China* (1998), Anhua Gao's *To the Edge of the Sky* (2000), Aiping Mu's *Vermilion Gate* (2000), Ting-xing Ye's *A Leaf in the Bitter Wind* (2000), Nanchu's *Red Sorrow* (2001), and Liu Hung's *Startling Moon* (2001).

Not all of these Chinese writers were born or grew up in mainland China. For instance, Jan Wong was born in Canada, Natasha Chang is Chinese American, and Adeline Mah was born and brought up in Hong Kong, though they all write their China stories as if with first-hand experience. They generally provide Western readers the "inside perspective" of China, especially women's perspective, and they highlight the experiences of the China that has been in political and social turmoil during the twentieth century - primarily their personal experiences of the Cultural Revolution. These expatriate Chinese writers have to some extent become the spokespersons for contemporary Chinese history in the West. Their works are always consciously marketed or unconsciously classified more as family memoir, family saga, living social history, ethnographical document, literature of witness, or literature of trauma than sheer fiction or creative stories.

Ha Jin is well aware of the orientalization of Chinese writers in the West—as he says, “[t]he American media sometimes portrays me as a dissident, as an exile, although I’m not sure I really am one” (Garner 41). But, in a way, Ha Jin may also benefit from the Western media’s pandering to people’s desire for the exotic things from a different culture and continent. Perhaps, even though Ha Jin writes in English only, his works draw attention precisely because of their cultural

differences, and he has not been seen as an integrated member of American literature in the general perception. In this sense, Ha Jin may also subvert the national framework of American literature and challenge the assumption that a literary text exists in relatively stable or consistently identifiable form. Does the nation-state concept still have a role to play in studying Ha Jin's writing? Ha Jin's works may make us rethink the coherence of modern Chinese literature in the broadest sense. Isn't such coherence rooted not only in a literary tradition that embodies certain cultural values and social ideologies but also in a common language (also implicitly suggesting common blood, common religion, and common customs and habits) that encompasses all literary texts produced in mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other diasporic communities? Could a literary work written in another language be called "Chinese" or "national" in the age of globalization or flexible accumulation? Can literature go beyond the ethnic-based model of identity? For instance, can *East Wind, West Wind* (1930), *The Good Earth* (1931), or *Dragon Seed* (1942) by Pearl S. Buck (1892–1973), the 1938 Nobel Laureate, who was the daughter of an American missionary and who lived in China for about forty years, be recognized as "Chinese" literature though they have long been criticized as Western orientalist discourse?<sup>ii</sup> But, if the orientalist content is set as the criterion to disqualify the nationality of a literary work, then how do we deal with the self-orientalizing Chinese novel such as Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baobei* [Shanghai Baby] (1999)?

The recent scholarship and translation of Chinese American literature in China and Taiwan put great emphasis on the common cultural origin rather than on the common language, of those "Chinese" literary works written in English by Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and other Chinese American writers (Lo). Undoubtedly, the affirmation of cultural nationalism constitutes a new strategy of reinventing the meanings of Chineseness in the changing environment of the globalizing world. Maxine Hong Kingston has talked in an interview about the reception of her novels in China when she was there in 1984 for the first time: "I read an early draft of *Tripmaster*

*Monkey* aloud to [the Chinese writers, poets and scholars], and they had it translated, and they read it. A poet told me that I was the only Chinese that was writing in the tradition of the *Dream of Red Chamber*. . . He said that I was writing in the tradition of the past. And, in part of the conference, they were telling us that there was a ‘roots literature’ movement in China—because in the Cultural Revolution they cut off the roots. So they had cut off their ties to the West, and cut off the bindings of feudalism, the imperial arts and all that. But then they weren’t left with anything. . . And I spent this lifetime working on roots. So what they were saying was that I was their continuity. . . But, God, I felt so terrific. Because they were telling me I was part of a Chinese canon. And here I was writing in English!” (Chin 93–94).

If the English literary works of an American-born Chinese who knows little Chinese and sometimes misunderstands Chinese cultural customs in her works could be considered “part of a Chinese canon,” by no means should Ha Jin’s works be excluded from the national system. Some may say that the inclusion of Chinese American literary works in the “Chinese canon” is simply an example of the outworn nationalist rhetoric that seeks to “colonize” China-related or Chinese-related literature while implicitly putting the Chineseness of China at the center and preventing it from being cut off from transnational cultural politics. Indeed, the hackneyed nationalist ideology could find new life precisely by assimilating foreignness or Western otherness into its own. In the tradition of modernity, literature always functions as the imaginary realm for the construction of the nation-state. Literary work symbolically gives form to represent the imagined community and narrates the shared experiences by a common language in order to convert all the sentiments into the material base for building a united nation (Jusdanis). But the sheer assertion of a cohesive, unified Chinese culture as created by its literature may not necessarily satisfy the nationalist ambition to anticipate a strong China in the new century. A strong Chinese nation-state that calls for new imagination in the era of globalizaton is expected

to actively interact with other nations, become more open to foreign cultures, play a larger international role and exert a more widespread impact on the world. A self-confident and more internationally involved China may also be more receptive to the changing and diversified meanings of its new identity. The pluralization or multiplication of Chinese cultural identity or Chineseness, rather than its centralization and homogenization, would become a very likely solution to handle the antagonism that inheres to the process of its modernization. Chinese emigrant writers who publish their literary works about China in English or French would only enrich the contemporary Chinese culture and develop its global influence. Examples are the English crime fiction writer Qiu Xiaolong (whose Shanghai Chief Inspector Chen series includes *The Death of a Red Heroine* and *A Loyal Character Dancer*); Dai Sijie (author of *Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise* and *Le complexe de Di*); and Shan Sa (whose novel *Porte de la Paix Celeste* won the Bourse Goncourt du Premier Roman, her second novel, *Les Quatre Vies de Saule*, was awarded the Prix Cazes, and her other works, *La Joueuse de Go* and *L'imperatrice*, were widely acclaimed in France). Because of the prevalence of Chinese diasporic cultures, modern Chinese literature may have an urgency to redefine itself no longer exclusively on the basis of Chinese language.

China's market economy policy of the late twentieth century bears witness to the craze for English throughout the nation. The language is ideologically invested as a magic wand that can open the door to a much brighter future for the longing Chinese population. The nationwide popularity of Li Yang's "Crazy English" did not happen by chance. In addition to being a commercial gimmick and entrepreneurial skill, Li's methodology of learning English - by shouting words and sentences out loud in a "crazy" manner - targeted at millions of mainland Chinese across the nation, is also an extravagant nationalistic expression. According to Li's self-promotion, learning English is a patriotic duty and a means of self-improvement, a way for China to gain "international muscle" and make money so that China can take over the three

major international markets of Japan, the US, and Europe. In this logic, Ha Jin's English writing is always already a part of international muscle reserved for the expansion and development of such new imaginary Chinese nationalism in the global age. Indeed, Taiwan officially has gone one step ahead to recognize the legitimate status of Ha Jin and Gao Xingjian by giving them awards and publishing and/or translating their works. China is seeking to transform itself into a powerful modern nation from the twentieth century onward, to gain international respect, so its literature shares the same national desire for such recognition. Sooner or later, China will see globalization as an opportunity for the revival and extension of cultural and literary nationalism, by developing "Chineseness" as a transnational project.

In contrast, Lucian Pye argues that "China is not just another nation-state in the family of nations;" rather, "China is a civilization pretending to be a state. The story of modern China could be described as the effort by both Chinese and foreigners to squeeze a civilization into the arbitrary, constraining framework of the modern state, an institutional invention that came out of the fragmentation of the West's own civilization" (58). Hence, Pye exclaims that "the miracle of China has been its astonishing unity" (58). In other words, Chinese national unity is not something to be taken for granted. Like all other nation-states, it is an imaginary produced by historical contingency. All that is required for a national unity to exist is that there must be a certain number of things in common in the group, such as customs, habits, or, possibly, a language. The association of language, literature, and nation, as Gregory Jusdanis states, is one of the hallmarks of European nationalist thought. So wrote Yiannis Psiharis, a Greek nationalist, "a nation in order to become a nation needs two things: to extend its boundaries and to create its own literature" (in Jusdanis, 46). Promoting a romantic notion of nationalism, Johann Gottfried Herder (1774–1803) claimed in his *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, "every nation is one people, having its own national form, as well as its own language" (in Smyth 11).

Language expressed in literature manifests the nation-forming project in which people can share their experiences as integrated members of such a unity. In modern Chinese literary history, the May Fourth Movement precisely represents the desire for a new language, the vernacular (*baihua*), which paves the path for the construction of a new nation-state, the alleged new China that differentiates itself from the old empire or dynasty.<sup>iii</sup> But the idea of nation based on a language always remains a problem. Not only does the literary language fail to constitute itself and the notion of nation as a coherent narrative, but it also works in an opposite way to reveal the contradictions on which a unity is built. The emphasis on the “modernity” of Chinese literature through its new language undoubtedly opens up the possibilities for elevating China or Chinese culture to a position equivalent to “world” status. However, the “modernity” at stake in Chinese literature has to be critically rethought, since the issue is inextricably tied up with Western imperialism and global capitalism.

“Modern” Chinese literature came into a “world” without any pre-existing Chinese national or cultural models to follow. The first practitioners of modern Chinese literature had to borrow all kinds of notion from the outside world and to operate within a context against which no predetermined role had existed for them. The European idea of nationalism and national literature thus became the available model of imitation. In the European fashion, Chinese literature with its self-designated modern mission is to narrate and give form to the emerging nation. The well-forgotten Paul de Man once said pointedly: “modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure” (148). What de Man characterizes as modernity is by no means restricted to the Anglo-Saxon context. Modern Chinese literature, and the inherent desire of modernity, has been dreaming throughout the twentieth century about producing its own unique modernity with the birth of a new nation. But could an alternative and separate modernity, in relation to the national literature, be possible?

Nowadays, everyone is talking about the alternate historical paths to alternative modernity, which is different from the hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model but determined by various unique national situations. But Fredric Jameson succinctly reminds us, “this is to overlook the other fundamental meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself. The standardization projected by capitalist globalization in this third or late stage of the system casts considerable doubt on all these pious hopes for cultural variety in a future world colonized by a universal market order” (12–13). One may argue that, even though there could hardly be any other modernity that is able to draw itself apart from the standard one, language is still the ultimate criterion to constitute the uniqueness of national literature. For China, is the vernacular language the legitimate representative of its modern national literature? It is always said that standard Chinese language as the major symbol of national unity is able to overcome the limitations of speech and hearing to unify regional peoples who cannot understand each other otherwise. But wouldn't a national literature based on the vernacular language write off the traditions of other dialect literatures and minority literatures, notwithstanding that the vernacular Chinese literature is supportively promulgating the ideology of Han chauvinism? Furthermore, many of the neologisms in the vernacular language do not have Chinese origins. They directly come from Japanese or are borrowed from Western translation instead. The development of the modern Chinese vernacular is never a natural outcome of Chinese literary tradition. It is more a rupture partially brought by the whimsical ideas of the May Fourth intellectuals as well as a hybrid product of a complex process of which literary works written in various dialects, the Ming and Qing novels, the Japanese technical literature and the nineteenth century essays, and translations of Western subjects all constitute the essential parts.

In other words, the vernacular literature that symbolizes the autonomy and unity of the new nation and Chineseness is more an appearance than an essence. What Ha Jin's English writing of

China stands for is, indeed, a new subject that begins to speak in the history of Chinese cultural nationalism. The vague and fluid idea of nation as represented by Ha Jin no longer stops at a fixed frontier but rather designates a kind of mobility that can shift, but not transcend, from one frontier to another, no matter whether a geographical or linguistic one. Admitting Ha Jin's English works as part of modern Chinese literature is not necessarily identical to calling for Westernization or Anglicization as a means of revitalizing Chineseness in the global context. On the contrary, what Ha Jin designates is the gap between appearance and reality. This gap not only indicates the incompleteness and inconsistency of the being and identity of modern Chinese literature, it also provides a solution to the problem because the gap itself is precisely the solution. It is the gap, rather than the closure, that offers new freedom to seek to redefine continuously the sense of Chineseness in the changing world.

Undoubtedly, Ha Jin does provide an interesting model, unlike that of Kingston, or that of Jung Chang, or even that of Pearl Buck, to rethink the instrumental conception of Chineseness in literature and culture in the globalizing environment. We not only can examine, through the works of Ha Jin, how the primordial myth of nationality is naturalized into something inherent and substantive, we can also, to an extent, complicate the nation-based and language-based approach to the study of Chinese literature. It is an opportunity for us to make a renewed endeavor to deepen our knowledge of all things "Chinese" and to make a commitment to the study of "Chinese" literature in a transnational, translinguistic, and global framework.

In Ha Jin's most renowned novel to date, *Waiting*, the obvious political meaning of the act, waiting, is of course that individual autonomy has been ruthlessly taken away by the authority: what one can do is to wait passively for things to come to him or her in an oppressive society. The story tells of a doctor in an army hospital, Lin Kong, who was married to Shuyu, an old-fashioned, bound-feet illiterate whom Lin never loved. Instead, Lin loved Manna Wu, a nurse in the same hospital. But for eighteen years, which included the Cultural Revolution, he

petitioned for a divorce; yet his request had been denied, not just because of Shuyu's refusal but also because of the hospital's inhuman and rigid rules. So Lin and Manna endured in order to make their love union legal. Instead of doing something actively to master his own life, the inaction of the protagonist Lin Kong could be understood as his internalization of the oppression by the totalitarian state. The passivity of Lin's waiting also conforms to the Western stereotypes of Chinese male as feminized, dependent, and passive.<sup>iv</sup> Lin Kong's whole life seems to be spent waiting: when at long as he receives his divorce and marries Manna, he finds himself too exhausted for love. Manna has become a mania for sexual love that Lin has difficulty adequately providing. What he has waited for all those years turns out to be a mirage, so his life is wasted. When the time of anxious expectations is over, how does one live in the aftermath? In a certain sense, it is waiting for the arrival of something that constrains one to a passive stance. If we don't look at the story from a sheer political perspective, we may find that *Waiting* tells us about the human attitude towards romantic love. We always have the illusion that it is prohibition, oppressive rules, social traditions, or some kinds of external obstacle that prevent love from being consummated or realized. But, looking carefully, we find that it is an artificial obstacle, or prohibition, that actually provokes people's romantic feelings for the love object.

An obstacle or barrier is necessary to inflate the tide of romantic feeling to its fullest. Human beings always erect conventional barriers in order to be able to "enjoy love" and to make passion last longer. A comparison here may illustrate my point better. Perhaps Lin is a Chinese version of Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's (another English writer of Asian origin) *The Remains of the Day*. Aren't both of them to some extent the prototype of an "ideological servant" who never questions his role in the rigid system and never opposes his boss even when the leader makes obvious mistakes? That is to say, both Lin and Stevens do not think but obey. Being a representative of a conforming Chinese intellectual, Lin never uses his independent thinking to

question the institution (his parents, family) or the power (the leaders in the hospital). *The Remains of the Day* seems to imply that there is something suppressed or hidden behind the ideological machine: the unspoken passion or the secret love between Stevens and Miss Kenton - they are too obedient to the social codes to manifest their true feelings in order to find personal happiness. Stevens even invents many self-imposed rules in order to escape from his own passion and desire.

In *Waiting*, Lin and Manna appear to be more outspoken in their passions for each other. It is only the absurd and inhumane rule (Lin has to be separated for eighteen years in order to get divorced without his wife's consent) that prevents them from realizing their love. But simple political interpretation of the two novels cannot capture the gist - instead of accusing the rigidity of the system that represses human passions, it would be better for us to understand the nature and place of love in the institution. It would be unhelpful to search in Stevens for some hidden love or passion that cannot come out because of his professionalism and the social rituals - indeed there is nothing behind his appearance of decent Englishness. All his "love" is in the social codes, in his ideal of dignity. If Stevens loves Miss Kenton, he loves her only from the view of submission to the rules and ethics of their profession - as a competent servant, Miss Kenton would sometimes cast doubt on the profession but then again she subordinates herself to it; it is her sporadic resistance that attracts Stevens. If Miss Kenton loves Stevens, she loves him only for his stiffness and his submission to the system; if Stevens were to change, Miss Kenton might quickly abandon him and would look down on him in the same way that she despises her husband who leaves the institution for her; it is Miss Kenton who actually functions as a support of the institution and who cannot put up with being outside it—at the end, she chooses to return to the institution of the family for the sake of her daughter and her future grandchild (Salecl).

In the same light, *Waiting* only appears to be a novel of two people in love who are unable to pursue their happiness because of the rigid and oppressive social values under which they live.

In fact, the external constraints of the society and the fact that Lin is married produce the conditions for romantic love to develop. Manna for Lin is more valuable precisely as an inaccessible love object; this is why he has no intention of realizing his relationship with her in any sexual form. Lin refuses to sleep with Manna before their marriage, not because pre-marital sex is indecent and will ruin their future; rather, his dream about sex is far more exciting than real sex (72), and his strange vision of enjoying polygamous bliss (42–43) reveals to us that the best way to enjoy such pleasure is to keep his women as virtual rather than real.

For romantic love to arise, the real person needs not (or had better not) be present. Lin tells Manna: “I love you, but we cannot be together. I’m sorry” (60). Probably we should understand this as: “I love you *because* we cannot be together; I’ll be sorry if we consummate our love.” Love becomes romantic and titillating because of the suffering it involves. Falling in love for Lin is a fresh experience, but it is also the recognition of his ideal image about himself (as compassionate, sacrificing, decent, dignified, etc.). Lin submits to the social and political codes to maintain Manna as the inaccessible love object that sets his desire in motion - this logic enables us to understand why Lin becomes so disappointed when he marries Manna and has sex with her at the end. Throughout his life, Lin perceives his married life with Shuyu as a necessity to which he must submit because society expects it of him, and at the same time he can see the “innocence” and “purity” of Manna in a distance. However, what is most disappointing for Lin at the end is that he recognizes that there is nothing “beyond” the institutions and the social codes that have suppressed him throughout his life.

Perhaps, to appropriate this logic to understand the issue of Chineseness arising from Ha Jin’s English writings, I do not actually look for a real alternative that deviates from the norm. Neither do I simply say that there is a flaw or crack in the edifice and identity of modern Chinese literature built on a common language. It is commonplace to say that national literature is always

already an ideological construct that imposes its coherent narrative on the complex and fragmented realities. Rather, the narrative of modern Chinese literature is far from being coherent and consistent. It is precisely because of its inconsistency or incompleteness that could perform its ideological function at its full strength. That incompleteness or fault may generate hopes and fantasies that there would be something out there to be sought in order to fill the gap. Multiple, different meanings can ultimately get hold of the issue of Chineseness and saturate it with perfect sense one day. It is believed that the being of modern Chinese literature can be successfully recuperated by the continuous signifying chain. Indeed, I'm not simply saying that Chineseness in the new global context evolves toward greater complexity, and the cost levied on each individual belonging to this imaginary community will also change accordingly. On the contrary, I argue that the best contribution of Ha Jin works only on the formal level rather than on the content of modern Chinese literature in the global context. Ha Jin does not expand or open up the horizon of modern Chinese literature, nor does he enrich its content. Rather, the existence of his works circumscribes the limits and failure of the ideology of modern Chinese literature and lays bare its paradoxical mechanism. Chineseness could only be a fascinating object precisely when it is not so accessible and when it is beyond easy reach. If Chineseness is not blocked by some obstacle, i.e. English in Ha Jin's case, it could easily vanish, and lose its ideological grip. What appears an obstacle is effectively a positive condition of possibility. The radical dimension of Ha Jin is that he undermines and reconstructs Chineseness from within, though appearing in a foreign and external form. Ha Jin plays neither the external nor the internal role in modern Chinese literature.<sup>v</sup> The right place for Ha Jin is located where the interior coincides with the exterior: he is the best exemplification of modern Chinese literature circulated and well recognized as "world literature" in the global age, although, in its language, he is a "false" example, foreign to it.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Roland Robertson reminds us that the roots of globalization run extremely deep, and it is by no means a new phenomenon in our world: “Human history has been replete with ideas concerning the physical structure, the geography, the cosmic location and the spiritual and/or secular significance of the world. . . movements and organizations concerned with the patterning and/or the unification of the world as a whole have intermittently appeared for at least the last two thousand years. . . Even something like. . . the ‘global-local nexus’. . . was thematized as long ago as the second century BC. . . However,. . . it has not been until quite recently that considerable numbers of people living on various parts of the planet have spoken and acted in direct reference to the problem of the ‘organization’ of the entire, heliocentric world” (54).

<sup>ii</sup> Tu Wei-ming’s “Cultural China” concept has already explored the fluidity of Chineseness and suggested a Chinese imaginary community composed not only of cultural and ethnic Chinese living in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and overseas communities throughout the world but also of “individual men and women, such as scholars, teachers, journalists, industrialists, traders, entrepreneurs, and writers, who try to understand China intellectually and bring their own conceptions of China to their own linguistic communities” (13–14). In this definition, Pearl S. Buck would belong to this community, though her “Chineseness” is not marked by race, ethnicity, territoriality, and language.

<sup>iii</sup> In 1928, Hu Shi (1891–1962) traced the origins of vernacular language to the Zhou Dynasty of the twelfth century BCE and identified a linguistic trend that ran through the history of the Chinese language. However, the scholars of the People’s Republic of China claimed that the movement in favor of vernacular language only began at the end of the nineteenth century with the first demand to abandon the classical language (*wenyan*). They considered this trend an integral part of the general awareness developed in China in the transition from a feudal to a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society (Masini 112–13).

<sup>iv</sup> Ha Jin has intensively explored and depicted such a “weak” image of the Chinese male in the intellectual characters in his latest novel, *The Crazy*.

<sup>v</sup> At this point I do not agree with Huang Canran, who identifies Ha Jin as an outsider of Chinese literature and argues that Ha Jin’s strength is his exteriority to the China complex.