

Cultural Transplantation in the novel *A Free Life* by Ha Jin

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Abstract

Ha Jin makes cultural transplantation possible in his works by aptly presenting Western literature, and he is able to make Chinese culture accessible to the English-speaking readership. Ha Jin's writings deliver to American monolingual readership in a non-intrusive way the culture backdrops that inform plot and characters. Ha Jin intentionally leaves a bridgeable culture gap to force American readers to make a more cognitive effort in reading. His success in writing relies mainly on his creative use of English and his effort to make culture translatable.

Key Words

Multiculturalism, transnational, transplantation, transcendental

Introduction

In this era of multiculturalism, increasing migration, and the Internet, cultural phenomena "exceed the boundaries of any single national territory"(Berry and Farquhar 4). Given the spirit of era and academic background of English Culture Studies, a cross-cultural study of transnational characters in Ha Jin can be more appropriate. To explore the transnational dimension of Chinese cultural phenomena is a way to find out his subjectivity in the cross-cultural communication."Transnational" is defined as different from "the rhetoric of universality and homogenization implied in the globalization." The term implies the existence of differences between boundaries of nation and culture. A transnational project "forge[s] connections across national borders." In a transnational space, "a variety of regional, national, and local specificities impact

upon each other in various types of relationships ranging from synergy to contest"(Berry and Farquhar 5).

Ha Jin's belief in universality and effort to transcend nation and culture, has been witnessed and demonstrated in his novels. Nonetheless, universality and transcendence cannot and should not deny the existence of a variety of specificities (i.e. Chinese and American cultural elements). Ha Jin writes for Western market. Thus in his novels certain Chineseness must be given up or appropriated in order to transform Chinese local specificities within the transnational. Ha Jin's transcendence can be better understood as the result of successful appropriation and transformation of Chinese cultural specificities within a transnational space. In addition, the cultural transplantation in his works makes apt use of equivalents between Chinese and English-speaking culture. In my view, transcendence (or universality) is a higher order while transnational is its basis. It is in treating Ha Jin's novels, in a cross-cultural perspective, as a transnational rather than a transcendental.

In his discussion in *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha states that "the very concepts of homogenous national cultures are in a profound process of redefinition there is overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities"(5). In the literary domain, English literature is increasingly created by a remarkably transnational, multicultural group of writers exploring many concerns including the effects of migration in the era of globalization, and correspondingly, the discipline of literary studies is undergoing a transnational turn. In this academic trend, to study literary representation and construction of cultural transplant in *A Free Life* by Ha Jin, an immigrant-themed novel by a migrant writer, is a timely effort.

As a Chinese immigrant novel, *A Free Life* breaks away from Ha Jin's previous works which maintain priority of Chineseness, with its subject matter being the life of a struggling but undaunted immigrant family. The novel starts with the occurrence of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident. In it, "Stocked with human flesh and blood" speaks to the military crackdown of Chinese authority on the movement appealing for democracy. "He soon left for a distant place, where he has lived secluded" suggests, the incident prompted the protagonist Nan Wu to decide not to return to China but to struggle to settle down in the U.S. with his wife and his son where Nan had been studying. Before the Tiananmen incident, Nan had arrived in the U.S to study for the PhD in Political Science and had originally planned to return to China after he graduated. The incident made him change his

mind, as he felt completely disappointed with the nation's politics. Quitting the PhD candidacy in Political Science, he lost his funding as the only monthly income of the family.

To survive and sustain his family in the new land, he switched from brains to brawn, doing odd jobs from security guard to busboy. Eventually he learnt to cook and brought his family from Boston down to Georgia where he and his wife start running a Chinese restaurant. That proves to be a turning point in their immigrant life. By way of unremitting thrift and toil, they possessed their own house with the mortgage paid off and some saving left. Towards the end of story, Nan sold the restaurant and retreated to a menial job that would allow him to write poetry in solitude - the dream he held fast for years. He is free at last. As Ha Jin's first immigration-themed novel drawing on some autobiographical elements, *A Free Life* might be read as a sequel of *The Crazy*, which ends with the occurrence of the incident when the protagonist makes his final attempt to flee China. If *The Crazy* depicts the crisis of Chinese male identity before the Tiananmen Square Incident, *A Free Life* unfolds the process of a Chinese male immigrant reconstructing his masculinity in the post-Tiananmen era in a transnational context in which culture is transplanted.

This to present how Chinese immigrant masculinity is incorporated and culture transformed in a transnational context. While it is important to acknowledge the usefulness of the *wen-wu* model for understanding masculinities in China, it is more intriguing to explore this question: to what extent the same model may be applied to overseas Chinese in a transnational, Western context. According to Louie, "the recreation or recovery of diasporic masculinity could be possible, ... if the *wen-wu* dyad is re-cast by diasporic men in a Western context" (qtd in Khoo 223). This implies that in the new context *wen-wu* could be modified by American masculinity discourses. The result must be a sort of hybridization, which is part of broader cultural hybridity or transnational subjectivity.

According to Ang, diasporic identities are produced through creolisation and hybridization through both conflictive and collaborative coexistence and intermixture with other cultures (Ang 45). Sociologists have suggested that in the postcolonial world masculinity is ever changing and is mainly a hybrid discourse (Demetriou 337). If so, diasporic masculinities must be a sort of mixture, which is produced through negotiation and renegotiation between different cultures. In the case of protagonist Nan, it might be interesting to explore what impacts American culture and values have on the construction of his masculinity as an exile or immigrant, and in what way the reconstruction process breaks away from *wen-wu*

masculinity. Above all, we discuss how this trans-border formation process is symbolized in *A Free Life* if we perceive a literary text as a semiotic whole. Immigrant-themed novels such as *A Free Life* are "particularly apt to uncover the constructedness of gender and ethnicity," because "when we cross cultural boundaries, the provisionality of previously naturalized, smoothly functioning categories becomes suddenly visible" (Wong 13).

Although Chineseness is not as much a priority as that in Ha Jin's previous novels such as *Waiting*, there is a homeward-looking subplot parallel to this immigrant plot. In the novel, Ha Jin speaks sympathetically as much as critically of the diaspora community's (mainly Chinese intellectuals) insularity and unrelenting obsession with China's national politics. For example, as antitheses to the protagonist Nan, Baoyuan (an artist), Danning (a writer), and Manping Liu (a scholar in Political Economy) did not choose to remain in the U.S after the Tiananmen Incident. Although they had been democratic activists and antigovernment dissidents staying in the U.S when the Incident happened, they later returned to China, making compromises with the government, remaining silent on the sensitive issues, and leaving behind focus on mundane concerns. Their transformations represent those seen in the 1990s among Chinese intellectuals as a whole.

Those transformations are closely related to the ethos of China towards the end of last century. The 1990s' China, so-called China of the post-Tiananmen era, is characterized with patriotism and commercialization. In 1990s, after suppressing the democratic movement, the Party launched efforts to promote patriotism and 'state-of-the-nation education' (guoqing jiaoyu) targeting mainly workers and the youth (Barme 212). However, the nationalist sentiment was more linked to rapid growth in economy and less result of the official propaganda of socialist ideology which had been regarded obsolete. The 1990s also saw China embark on the process of integrating itself into globalization. "The new agenda shared by both the state and popular culture is the creation of a strong 'socialist market economy,' an economy that will ultimately catch up with those of the advanced countries in the West" (Lu 30-1). The rapid growth in economic power is accompanied by the rise of consumerism and commercialization, which in turn gave rise to a new wave of nationalism as a response to global capitalism.

As Geng Song observes, "One of the most important factors behind the emergence

of nationalist sentiment in post-1989 China, however, has been the impact of globalization on Chinese society, filtered through the marriage between the Male Images in Contemporary Television Drama Serials" 413). Song discusses in details how nationalism and commeralization informs us of understanding contemporary Chinese masculinities, claiming, "Forms of masculinity are indeed the political ideals they had pursued to becoming increasingly hybrid in a globalizing China and have been influenced by the nationalist quest for Chineseness and a stronger China as well as the commercialization of mass media and the dominance of consumerist values in society" (Song "Chinese Masculinities Revisited: Male Images in Contemporary Television Drama Serials" 426).

To summarize from the above analysis, it is understood that there is some tensions in the narrative between Nan and his fellow Chinese intellectuals. Nan remains and settles down in the U.S. while others come back to China. Correspondingly, throughout the novel Nan attempts to sever his ties with China or Chineseness while his friends are in the yoke of nostalgia and Chineseness. Nan is independent in the U.S, surviving by selling his brawn (i.e. working menial jobs and running his own restaurant) and fulfilling his literary pursuit in the end. In contrast, his compatriots finally stoop to work for power and money back in China, leaving behind their artistic aspiration and political ideals. Overall, Nan is transplanted to the new western culture beyond patriotism and Chineseness symbolized by politics to humanism and universalism symbolized by poetry. He is in a spiritually ascending movement while his fellow intellectuals retrograde and deprave spiritually though wealthy materialistically. The intellectuals' life is the miniature of the whole community and an allegory of the nation in the 1990s. It is well evident that China is depicted as a place of spiritual decadency as opposed to the U.S as a possible place of spiritual redemption. As we read towards the end of the story, Danning has a chance to visit the U.S. again on a conference and in Nan's company goes to a church. There they join the Sunday's service, after which Danning says he is not a Christian but "he [the priest] made me feel better, much better. I'm cleaner now"(602). It is in America that Danning finds himself cleaner. In multiple places, Nan explicitly debunks and criticizes the dark side of Chinese culture and the political system, which in Nan's eyes are the source of Chinese emasculation and loss of humanity.

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