

Language, Otherness, and Acculturation among Chinese Immigrants in the Short Stories of Ha Jin

by *Louis J. Parascandola and Rajul Punjabi*

Although Chinese-born author Ha Jin migrated to the United States in 1985, until he published the novel *A Free Life* (2007) and the short story collection *A Good Fall* (2009), none of his work was set in his adopted homeland despite the fact all of his writing was done in English. These two American-based works reflect the financial difficulties, troubled relationships, problems with language and other challenges of acculturation that many new immigrants, or the more inclusive “migrants” as Jin prefers to call such people, face (Jin *Migrant* ix).² This essay will discuss the sometimes turbulent but always fluid process of acculturation as reflected in three of his short stories – “An English Professor,” “A Pension Plan,” and “Temporary Love” – from *A Good Fall*. Ha Jin's depiction of the Chinese immigrants of Flushing in these stories provides a window into the successes and struggles of this diverse, complex, but relatively little explored community. They show the many “different kinds of American Dreams” that Ha Jin feels are sometimes still possible for Chinese immigrants, including himself, to attain (Varsava 21).

To understand Ha Jin's stories, it is necessary to provide some context for the Flushing, Queens, Chinese community which is the setting for the works.³ In 1645 Flushing was first settled by British colonists. It was

¹ The authors would like to thank Shondel Nero, Tiani Kennedy, Yani Perez, and Leah Jones for reading earlier drafts of this essay and the Office of Congresswoman Grace Meng, particularly Genevieve Morton, for providing statistical information on Flushing.

² Ha Jin defines “migrant” to encompass “all kinds of people who move, or are forced to move, from one country to another, such as exiles, emigrants, immigrants, and refugees” (*Writer as Migrant* ix). He views himself as exile, migrant, and immigrant.

³ We use Claudia H. Deutsch's borders to define Flushing: “The area, less than four square miles and bounded by Northern Boulevard to the north, Sanford Avenue in the south, College Point

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a quiet area, known for farming and nurseries, when it was incorporated as part of New York City in 1898. It soon became an enclave for residents largely of Irish, Italian, Jewish and German ancestry, but with a small Chinese population. Its bucolic setting led to the development of several parks, including Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, home of the 1939-40 and 1964 World Fairs. (Chen 30). The community was 97% white as late as 1960 (Zhou 57).

The Chinese population in Flushing began its expansion after the Hart-Cellar Family Unification Act of 1965, which greatly expanded the numbers of immigrants who could enter the country from non-European nations. Since then, it has rapidly grown. For example, census data show that between 2000 and 2010 the Chinese population in Flushing increased an astonishing 99%, rising to 33,484. Close to 90% entered the country during this century (Lin, 25, 32). The 2010 census data for ZIP Code 11355, the heart of Flushing, reveal that well over 50% of the inhabitants are Chinese. This zip code has the largest number of Chinese of any municipality in the United States (New York City Department of Planning "ZIP Code").

The intersection of Northern Boulevard and Main Street, near the Flushing subway stop, has become the business center and the hub of the Chinese community. One needs to understand the vast differences that exist within residents in Flushing's Chinatown as well as those in Manhattan's Chinatown to truly understand Ha Jin's stories. Rather than being a monolithic group, there are vast differences between Chinese immigrants in New York. Most of Manhattan's Chinatown residents have traditionally come from the southern Chinese province of Guangdong and are Cantonese speakers (Dept. of City Planning *Asians* 7). However, since the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965, greatly reducing quota restrictions in the interest of family reunification, many more Chinese immigrants have come to New York City, often settling in Queens and Brooklyn rather than Manhattan. The initial Chinese residents in Flushing were largely from Taiwan, and were Mandarin speakers who were generally better educated and more middle class than the predominantly working-class immigrants in Manhattan's Chinatown. The Taiwanese population expanded "in 1982 when the United States doubled Taiwan's immigrant quota to 20,000" (De Silva 2). These Taiwanese immigrants often did not want to move into the crowded Manhattan Chinatown, with immigrants whom they did not share political or economic backgrounds. As a result, Flushing's Chinese population now is made up of 11% who originate from Taiwan compared to only 1% in Manhattan (Lin 34). Some of the new Chinese immigrants

Boulevard to the west and Union Street to the east." "A Chinatown With a Polyglot Accent" *New York Times* (October 2, 1994): 1. The largest Chinatown in New York City is now the Sunset Park neighborhood in Brooklyn.

also came from Hong Kong, an area generally more affluent than most others from the Mainland, after Congress raised its quota of immigrants from 500 to 6,000 in 1986 and later to more than 20,000 (Reimers 103). As sociologist Min Zhou points out, “Compared with those living on the Lower East Side [of Manhattan's Chinatown], Flushing's residents had much higher levels of education and occupational status, lower poverty rates, and higher median household incomes” (58). Still, we must not be tempted to think of this population simply in terms of “the Model Minority.” “In New York City's Chinese adult population, the percent that did not have a high school diploma rose from 36 percent in 2008 to 38 percent in 2011, and was significantly higher than the citywide rate of 21 percent” (Asian American Federation “Profile of New York City's Chinese Americans” (2). The educational levels of these immigrants vary considerably as is demonstrated in Ha Jin's stories.

Differences in language also distinguished the two groups. Though Mandarin and Cantonese (overwhelmingly the language in Manhattan's Chinatown) have a similar alphabet, the spoken languages are not mutually understandable. As one Flushing merchant explains, “it's like a chicken talking to a duck” (De Silva 2). Over time, new immigrants from various parts of Mainland China also settled in Flushing, bringing with them a diversity of regional languages and ethnic cultures and making it as densely packed as its Manhattan counterpart. However, unlike the earlier better-off immigrants to Flushing, a certain percentage of the newer immigrants were less affluent, with some “desperately poor” (Martin 29). One reason for these immigrants' struggles is their lack of fluency in English. As scholar Keyi Xu notes, “Low English proficiency is one major disadvantage that keeps some Chinese ... out of the job market's gate” (25). This language deficit is something that the Flushing Chinese often must confront even more than those in Manhattan as “there are more people speaking Chinese at home than [in] Manhattan Chinatown” (Lin 35).

Ha Jin first encountered the densely packed, booming Chinese community in Flushing while attending a conference there in 2005 (Lyden). Until that time, he, like most people outside of New York City, was unaware of this large ethnic enclave. The immigrants living there were not what Ha Jin expected. The Flushing Chinese immigrants Ha Jin met, as stated earlier, were not the stereotypical relatively poor Manhattan Chinatown immigrants. These new immigrants often raised the income level of the community. As their numbers increased, Flushing businesses “grew by 37.6 percent between 2000 and 2009, compared to 5.7 percent in the rest of the city” (Office of the State Comptroller “Economic Snapshot”). Ha Jin's Flushing characters show the full economic range of Chinese immigrants, from university professors to business people to

home health aides, yet regardless of the characters' financial position, legal status, or educational background, as reviewer Julia M. Klein states, "Jin depicts Flushing as an immigrant purgatory, a refuge bounded by danger. Here English is not yet the common language, deportation remains a threat and old-country obligations ... can impede fragile economic progress." It is an "insular community," one "so self-contained that residents never need to learn English" (Bolonik). Still, despite the ability to survive without English-language skills, all of Ha Jin's characters feel the necessity to improve their English in order to not be limited to their ethnic enclave, increase their economic opportunities and, in some cases, to assimilate into American society.

The desire of these immigrants to improve their English is not something that occurs only when they reach America; it mirrors the mania for the language that exists in their homeland, where English – along with Chinese and mathematics – is one of "three compulsory 'major subjects.'" Amazingly, there are more people learning English in China than there are Americans learning English in the United States. Nevertheless, language teaching in China largely consists of rote memorization of grammatical rules, which does not prepare many Chinese to use "the language proficiently in transcultural communication" ("China's English Fervor"). Thus, many of Ha Jin's immigrant characters are left to grapple with English once they arrive in Flushing whether they had studied the language in China or not.

Originally Ha Jin wanted to be a translator, and came to the United States in 1985 to improve his English language skills; however, after the Tiananmen Square protests and the harsh crackdown by the government in 1989, he decided he could not return to China to serve such a country. His plan to write in English was an attempt in part to distance himself "from Chinese state power." He also felt that "English has more flexibility"; it is more "plastic," "shapeable" than Chinese, allowing him to express himself in ways he would be unable to in his native language (Fay). The experience of writing in English, Ha Jin states, "changed me" (Fay). In some ways, it seemed more of an important step even than deciding to stay in America. As he states, "This linguistic betrayal is the ultimate step the migrant writer dares to take; after this, any other act of estrangement accounts to a trifle" (Jin *Migrant* 31). Thus, the problems with English many of Ha Jin's characters must endure may reflect some of the author's own lifelong struggles with the language.

Ha Jin's style of verbal and written communication is a significant focal point in many of the short stories, "An English Professor" in

particular.⁴ In this story, Rusheng Tang – a Harvard-educated immigrant from mainland China – teaches American Literature at a university in the United States. He is up for tenure and wrapped in the anxiety of what he believes is his impending rejection. There are a few different aspects of his identification as an outsider that contribute to his insecurities, one of which is the disconnect with his students in the classroom setting. When describing a conversation about a book where Tang felt that his students were not processing certain nuances of the text, Jin writes: “most times he felt as frustrated as if he were singing to the deaf” (138). Tang struggles with finding the right words to connect with his students. From the outside, the reader might deduce that this seeming barrier between him and his class is not about the language at all – perhaps the students have just not processed the text in the same way as their teacher. But art imitates life in this section, since learning to speak English was literally painful for Jin when he first began (Fay). The author found new pronunciations hard on his mouth and jaw, and Tang finds his difficulty in learning the language is a blow to his ego and his ability to express himself eloquently, making it difficult to connect with his students on a fundamental level: “He spoke English with a heavy accent and didn’t know how to praise a book or author that he didn’t like” (141).

While the class he teaches can sometimes be stimulating, Tang seems to believe that his students often misunderstand what he is teaching them. The possible miscommunication that separates himself from his students is heavy and daunting, as he has to “please them without revealing his effort” (139). Revealing the effort involved in his teaching would be like admitting that he is not fit to teach English, particularly at an advanced level.

Outside of the classroom, Tang’s discomfort turns into a seeming paranoia as he suffers through the process of applying for tenure. He submits what he believes is a strong application, with sufficient (yet not outstanding) evidence for his approval, so he turns it in to the committee though he still has doubts. To reassure himself, he reviews his file and finds his writing “clean and lucid” (140). This idea of keeping writing clear and uncomplicated speaks to the language of the story itself. While some critics wonder why Jin’s syntax in this set of short stories is somewhat simplistic (an issue that will be addressed further later in this paper), lacking bold stylistic flourishes, his technique may be a conscious decision to mirror this trapped status as a non-native speaker. There is a fear, as a non-native speaker, in taking linguistic risks. Just as Tang seems comforted by his file, he notices an error in his cover letter. His

⁴ Yingjian Guo observes that the story is patterned after an 18th Century classic of Chinese fiction, Wu Jingzi’s “Fan Jin Passes the Exams,” p. 17.

complementary closing reads “respectly” instead of “respectfully” (140). His mistake takes over much of the remainder of the story as readers get an intimate look at the neuroses of an immigrant who fears the fragility of his status as an American academic because of perceived innate language deficiencies.

Tang’s obsession over a mere typographical error, one that would not be overly worrisome to most native speakers, represents the concept of the immigrant’s constantly being seen as a fraud – undeserving of a permanent space in America. Here, tenure is the pinnacle, a symbol of that permanence. Others in his department are allowed to make simple mistakes because they are assumed to be native English speakers. Even though Tang goes through the hardship of learning the language, in his mind, he does not get the luxury of making such mistakes. There is an irony, of course, that his area of expertise is teaching the English language. He is therefore expected to have an even higher degree of competence in the subject to be able to teach it at the college level. Yet since he is not the “face” of an English-language speaker, let alone a teacher, of the language, he is looked at as suspect. He fears that his students and colleagues question his authority and his expected claim to mastery; therefore, every little error he makes is magnified in his eyes. He fears that they won’t see his mistake “as a mere typo or slip. It was a glaring solecism that indicated his incompetence in English” (140).

Part of Tang’s doubts lie in his perceived identity as an outsider. His struggle with identifying as the “other” because of his immigrant status forces him to view the world and himself through two lenses, similarly to how W.E.B. Du Bois describes the plight of African Americans. His theory of double consciousness involves, a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 364). While Du Bois, in his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), described racism toward black Americans, his theory can be applied to the immigrant experience in this story. The “amused contempt and pity” is a constant cloud over Tang’s head as he continuously envisions himself as the subject of ridicule by his colleagues at the university.

Even when Tang has done everything he can to bring himself to the same level of expertise and professional success as them, he feels that it is not enough. Jin writes, “Some of his tenured colleagues, especially the few who had begun teaching three decades before, had never published a book and so Rusheng felt he was in decent shape – his case should be solid” (138). Still, he has doubts. Tang’s thought process here implies a sort of “immigrant tax.” He feels that he needs to be a few miles ahead of other native English-speaking professors in order to prove his worth. This immigrant tax and the idea that he must adhere to strict guidelines in

order to fit in is also reflected in Ha Jin's direct and moderate language here – “lyrical, spare sentences” with no flourishes as some critics note – reflects Tang's “safe” choice as a professor (Bolonik). It seems he chooses what he thinks is a stable, secure career, once one achieves tenure, because of his fear of risks.

Tang often uses the word “stupid” to describe the typographical error in his tenure application. The shame that he feels from his mistake is deep, and it seems that he has not just ruined his own chances at tenure, but his mishap also reflects the “stupidity” of immigrants who feel they belong in academia as non-native English speakers. He feels this despite his degree from Harvard, the gold standard of American universities. Tang's fears may seem paranoid to native speakers, but such doubts are not unusual for many non-native speakers, even ones who are considered experts in the language. Tang would clearly identify with Dr. Xiao-ming Li who narrates her struggles to gain tenure at an American university in her essay, “Writing From the Vantage Point of an Outsider/Insider.” She writes of how her colleagues dismiss her scholarship and of one classroom observer who excoriated her for making a few minor linguistic slips typical of a non-native speaker while teaching.⁵

Tang's isolation is further reflected by his lack of emotional connections to others. All of his focus seems to be on his two selves – the immigrant and the academic American. His alliance with a black female professor, Nikki, shows camaraderie with another outsider (139). Two people from marginalized groups in America serve as allies here, as she encourages him through his tenure application process. However, while she serves as a support system for Tang, Nikki is “just an associate professor, not powerful enough to swing full professors in the matter of awarding tenure” (141). Her status as a minority and as a woman reminds us that being the “other” in Tang's department inevitably means having a lack of real agency.

While we see a vague yet significant bond with Nikki, it seems that Tang cannot fully confide in his wife, Sherry, because the marriage is more than a union in his situation – it is a business partnership. Marital relationships in Jin's stories inevitably revolve around the economic compatibility of the partners. Sherry and Rusheng's marriage is partially based on the fact that he is a “rising scholar” (145). This implies that there is an element of commodification to his partnership with Sherry. The

⁵ Li's essay appears in *Non-Native Educators in English Language Teaching*, George Braine, ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999): 43-55. For more on the challenges facing and insecurities of many non-native teachers of English, see the other texts in Braine's edition as well as Enric Llurda, ed. *Non-Native Language Teachers: Perceptions, Challenges and Contributions to the Profession* (New York: Springer, 2006), and George Braine, *Nonnative Speaker English Teachers: Research, Pedagogy, and Professional Growth* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

nature of his job reflects a certain socioeconomic status that measures his worth as a partner. He does not open up to her completely about his tenure fears because this may bring shame upon their union and make him seem unworthy of her.

At the end of the story, Tang's reaction to being tenured is one of wild elation. He momentarily escapes the frightened self that he has lived in for the rest of the story. He says, "this can happen only in America" (153). Tang's sudden affection for America is the first we see in this story, which raises the question as to whether it is genuine or not. His behavior is taken as a drug-induced spiritual high by Sherry. Jin seems to play with gender stereotypes here as it is the male in the story, ironically, that has been reduced to hysterics. He is sweating and his wife and her brother have to give him Benadryl and put him to bed.

When Tang first gets home after realizing his folly, he plays jazz music to calm himself down. The music contains simple but powerful sentiments that are difficult to express in other types of American music. This genre of jazz may also reflect Tang's thought process throughout the story — seemingly jumping from thought to thought; however, though it seems chaotic at times, the music actually represents a complex, cohesive whole when listened to in its totality. It is something that the normally safe Tang would usually find unsettling, but in his brief moment of triumph, he finds comfort and understanding in a quintessentially American musical form now that he feels he has been accepted in the culture. Tang's brother-in-law, Molin, acts as a foil to Tang's character. He is a clarinetist - his "wild music," his eschewing of a steady job, and his laid-back demeanor are vastly different from Tang's (142-144). He is an aberration here as far as immigrants go, one challenging the idea of the "model minority"; Molin decides to embrace his position of marginalization. Molin's appearance — he wears "cutoff jeans and a red undershirt" (144) — also shows how he has not allowed his status as an immigrant to oppress or constrict him in ways that Tang does. Jin "reveals the stresses encountered by intellectuals" by "depicting [Tang's] lack of confidence, desperation and pain" (Guo 17). Molin's casual attire implies a more comfortable, relaxed and independent nature, one unafraid of being judged by others. Tang is only temporarily capable of feeling this way when he is accepted into mainstream culture through his tenure.⁶

⁶ The relationship between the two men in some ways mirrors that of the two brothers in James Baldwin's story, "Sonny's Blues" (1958). There the conservative, older brother, who is the narrator of the story, initially casts a negative eye towards his drug-addicted, piano playing sibling. However, when he hears Sonny play, he only appreciates the music, but for the first time he gains a sense of himself, his family and his heritage. James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," *Going to Meet the Man*. Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 103-141.

The difficulty with language and being an outsider – even in one's own community – is also at the center of "A Pension Plan." The story poses a number of challenges in its narration, which, while written in English, is told in the 1st person by a woman who knows only a handful of phrases in this language. Therefore, the author is left to convey the seeming disconnect between the language in which the narrator speaks and thinks and the language in which the story is written.⁷

The narrator, Jufen Niu, is a 48-year-old woman who works as a home health aide. Although she has been living in the United States for about a decade, she knows only five or six English sentences. In many ways, she is one of the most vulnerable of immigrants. The story does not indicate she has any family or friends nearby; she is relatively unskilled, and quite possibly undocumented. The firm where she works, a small agency operated by Chinese for Chinese customers, is typical of Flushing. As of 2012, "Nearly 90 percent of the area's businesses had fewer than ten employees, which was a much higher rate than in the State and the nation" (Office of the State Comptroller). The insular nature of such a job often ties workers even more closely to their place of employment and the community. To compound Jufen's predicament, she has limited English language proficiency. Studies indicate this is not unusual; [a]mong seniors who spoke an Asian language at home, the vast majority [93%] of seniors with limited English proficiency (LEP) spoke a Chinese dialect (Asian American Federation "Asian Americans in New York City" 42). As a single woman in her Chinese community, she is particularly open to victimization. When the story opens, we learn that she is happy to have her current job because she had been unemployed for three months (155). Undoubtedly, her poor English has severely limited her possibilities. Throughout the story, there is a direct connection between English language skills and economic prospects. As Ha Jin states, Jufen's tale "is not an uncommon story. So many people have been exploited by Chinese agencies because they can't speak English" (Jin qtd. in Bolonik). This exploitation because of language, as reviewer Colm Toibin observes, is inexorably linked with "the narrator's own struggle to achieve both dignity and gainful employment." In fact, Jufen's situation is all too typical of many elderly Asian immigrants whose "poverty rate for senior citizens, at 24 percent ... was significantly higher than 18 percent for all elderly New Yorkers" (Asian American Federation "Census Profile").

⁷ Odd or dated words such as "aped," "crone," "dope," and "chummy," for example, are used. There are also some seemingly awkward sentence structures, often with subordinate clauses that do not directly relate to the subject of the main clause: "Due to his willfulness about food, I decided to eat my own meal before feeding him" (157); "As for his pants soiled by fish blood, I'd wash them later" (159).

The narrator's current job involves caring for a 69-year-old ex-teacher, Mr. Sheng, who is now suffering "from a kind of senile dementia" (155). Again, such a job is typical in this community, which has one of the highest concentrations of senior citizens (15%) in the city (Office of the State Comptroller). Jufen cooks meals for him, bathes him, takes him on short walks, and generally provides companionship. It is fairly easy work until one day Mr. Sheng tells her that he loves her and begins to touch her in inappropriate ways. When she tells Minna, his daughter, the younger woman does not believe the accusations, so Jufen is forced to quit the position.

The struggle between the two women is intriguing. Minna clearly looks down on Jufen. Unlike Jufen, who is tied to the Chinese community because of the insularity of language, Minna, who is more skilled in English, is able to get better employment. She is also able to distance herself from the Chinese community, not believing in herbal medicine – the doctors who practice it are also marginalized in part "because of their poor English" (160) – and even marrying a white man, further helping her to assimilate into American society. The husband dislikes Mr. Sheng's "smell" and the Americanized grandchildren tend to shun the old man (163). Minna herself has no sympathy for Jufen, joking at her for thinking she is "indispensable" (166) and badmouthing her to Jufen's employer, Ning Zhang, which can be fatal in such a claustrophobic community, where gossip spreads quickly.

When Mr. Sheng refuses to eat until Jufen returns, Minna is forced, however, to approach Ning Zhang about Jufen's resuming her old job. During her brief period of unemployment, Jufen has taken small steps to try to rectify her low status because of her poor English by watching soap operas in English on television (166). Minna during this hiatus has also been working on her own plan: to have Jufen "marry" her father. This marriage would not be legal, but would involve Jufen's staying with Mr. Sheng though they would not have physical contact with each other (168). After struggling with the offer, Jufen ultimately rejects it when Minna draws up a contract in English which Jufen refuses to sign until she sees the agreement in Chinese (she had been cheated once before, signing a rent agreement written in English). Jufen refuses to accept the position because she is insulted when it is implied that Minna thinks she is a potential "gold digger" (170).

After seeing an old woman on the subway with bags of bottles she has collected for refund, Jufen realizes the sad fate that likely awaits her. It is little wonder given this situation that one study "indicated the suicide rate for Chinese women in New York is twice the national average" (Martin 30). Jufen also recalls an aunt who lost everything when the old man she had been caring for died. Realizing she needs some sort of

security, she asks Ning Zhang for a pension, which he refuses. In the story's final paragraph, Jufen decides that if she hopes to improve her life, it is necessary to learn English; it is her only means to possible agency. However, she is unsure of her ability to master the language: "To be honest, I'm not sure if I'll be able to learn enough English to live a different life, but I must try" (174). Language educator Bonnie Norton states in her theory of imagined communities that language learners often project themselves in a future situation where they have acquired skill in a target language. This can incentivize them and drive them to work harder to learn the language. However, the chances of an older immigrant, one probably not well-schooled in China and with limited resources to learn English, succeeding in her goal are slim, but she has little choice if she hopes to survive in America.

Jufen's condition reflects the fate of many immigrants caught in an indeterminate space, no longer belonging to their native land but not fully assimilated into their new home. She is not part of the world of older immigrants such as Mr. Sheng or of younger, more affluent ones, like Minna, who can integrate more easily into American society. She tends to identify in many ways with the old world, being bound to that world through cuisine, language, and cultural beliefs, readily recalling the folk songs Mr. Sheng sings. Although she does not know of the efficacy of the herbal medicines Mr. Sheng takes, she acknowledges that they can be beneficial, noting "he would grow animated for hours" after ingesting them (161).⁸ Nevertheless, she is no longer in China and not part of the older generation of immigrants who can cling to the traditional ways. She does not have the same family and community bonds that she had in China, where an older person might turn for support. In this new land, she becomes more assertive. Rather than docilely accepting Mr. Sheng's sexual advances, she forcefully rejects them. She speaks up for herself, giving "Minna a piece of [her] mind" (166). She refuses to accept a sham marriage with a man whom she does not love, tamping down her feeling that "it was foolish to take love into account when offered a marriage" (170). She demands a raise and ultimately even a pension to provide for her old age, so she does not have to be dependent upon others. She realizes that the only way she can achieve her goal of economic independence is through learning a sufficient amount of English. Unlike one successful restaurant owner in Manhattan's Chinatown who was able to brag about not needing to learn English because he was "too busy making money" (qtd. in Martin 30), Jufen, like most immigrants, does not

⁸ Many Chinese immigrants in Flushing, particularly the elderly, turn to traditional medical clinics and apothecaries, even if they are illegal. See, for example, Sarah Kershaw "City Shuts Unlicensed Clinic Catering to Chinese Immigrants." *New York Times*, 17 August 2000, B1+.

have the restaurant owner's skills or financial resources and needs English language skills in order to eke out even a marginal living in America.

The question of language in "A Pension Plan" is different than, but just as central to, the story as it is in "An English Professor." If it is difficult for an older immigrant such as Jufen to learn minimal English skills, it is perhaps equally difficult for a better-off Chinese speaker like Rusheng Tang to master English as a college professor. But what may be the most difficult task is for the non-native speaker to be a creative writer, particularly at a high level, in English. In *The Writer as Migrant*, Jin considers rare non-native English figures, such as Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov, who have managed successfully to write major works in English. According to Jin, these authors are motivated to write in another language by three factors: "necessity, ambition, and estrangement" (*Migrant* 33). Jin cites the Harvard University scholar Stanislaw Baranczak, who warns that, at best, the non-native author can "finally attain a fluency and glibness that makes him sound almost like a native writer. But literature is something more than glib writing." To transcend "glibness" and write great literature, an author must be allowed to experiment with and even "violate" language. However, as Baranczak states, the non-native writer (similarly to Tang as a teacher of English) is not allowed such license: "if an outsider does it, it's called malapropism" (*Migrant* 50-51). The only path open for non-native writers to succeed is by doing what seems to be almost impossible: to "imagine ways to transcend any language" (*Migrant* 60).

This is the dilemma that Ha Jin, as a non-native writer of English, faces. He is often brought to task for his own usage of English and not allowed the right to "violate" language that all writers need to be able to do in order to achieve literary greatness. Any seeming infelicities of style are not attributed as conscious attempts by the author to capture the thought processes of his characters, but are considered flaws in Ha Jin's own writing, caused by his non-native English. Heller McAlpin, for example, writes that "Jin's prose (and particularly his dialogue) is baldly direct, without flourish, without nuance." It is not considered that Jin is deliberately trying to reflect the safe, secure lives most of his immigrant characters such as Jufen and Tang are struggling to attain. Ironically, it is precisely this struggle with English in an American setting that is at the very center of this otherness.

Ha Jin tries to capture the "otherness" of his Chinese American speakers not by having them speak "Chinglish," nor does he employ Standard English, which is again not appropriate for them. Instead, he takes a far more challenging tack, to plumb their interiority and try to express their "slightly foreign and absolutely accessible" language to an

English-speaking audience (Bolonik).⁹ As a non-native English speaker, Ha Jin comes to the language with an open mind. For him, all words and phrasing are available equally in English. This results in language that may occasionally sound unusual to the native speaker's ear. However, Jin, as someone who has undergone the same language learning process as his characters, is able to provide us with an insight into the workings of the non-native English speaker's mind. The language that he utilizes reflects in some cases his own ongoing (likely lifelong) turbulent engagement with English. It also demonstrates his ambitious attempt to provide an English voice to speakers who have limited skills in the language. His efforts to capture this voice are evidenced in the stories throughout *A Good Fall*. As Jin himself acknowledges, this attempt is still a work in progress, one that undoubtedly will become more "authentic" as he himself further refines his English skills and continues to experiment with the language of his American-based Chinese-born characters.

The characters in "Temporary Love" may on the surface seem very dissimilar to Jufen in "A Pension Plan," but there are some connections between them. Unlike Jufen, the lovers Lina and Panbin are in a relationship and have not only each other but also their spouses in China. In addition, they seem to have a level of money (Lina has saved forty thousand dollars), education and job skills that Jufen lacks. Furthermore, they are younger (Lina is 31 and her husband, Zuming, is 33). Jufen is constantly lamenting that if she were younger, many things, including learning English, would be easier for her. However, despite these differences there are similarities between the characters. For one, they are all lonely, separated from their families, and more or less bound to the local Flushing Chinese community. And while the characters' level of knowledge of English is never directly mentioned in "Temporary Love," one gets a sense that the potential of all of the characters in the story is somewhat circumscribed by their lack of knowledge of the language. We are told, for example, that Lina's husband brings brand new dictionaries of English "useful to both of them" (181). English is said to be his "main obstacle" to success in the business world (188).¹⁰

⁹ This is, in some ways, similar to the process Amy Tan describes in "Mother Tongue." She imagines a "translation of [her mother's] Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure." Ironically, this sometimes results in the "broken" or "fractured" language Tan derides.

¹⁰ There are also issues of Ha Jin's English language usage in this story including some quirky sentence phrasings and language choices such as somewhat dated words like "snitched" and "tattled." Still, most of these phrasings and word choices occur in the dialogue rather than through the 3rd person narrative voice employed in the story. The differentiation between the English used by the narrator and the characters in the story suggests that Ha Jin wanted to emphasize the "Chinese-ness" of the characters (Wu). However, even the dialogue of the characters shows less of this non-native language than in "A Pension Plan," – but more than in "An English Professor" –

Lina and Panbin are “a wartime couple” (175). Separated from their spouses back home, they make practical arrangements to cohabit, “to comfort each other and also to reduce living expenses.” It is a very mercantile arrangement, a “partnership” (176) similar to the decision that prompted Jufen, at least briefly, to consider living with Mr. Sheng. The title “Temporary Love” is in fact ironic since there is no real love involved in the story; the relationship between Lina and Panbin is like taking “a roommate with benefits” simply to cut expenses. The couple, like all of Ha Jin's immigrants, is driven by practicality not emotion, making decisions based largely on finance. The arrangement here is “temporary” since it is supposed to end the moment that one of their spouses joins them in America. It is a written agreement of “mutual convenience” (177). It is hard to imagine a document spelling out the terms of an adulterous relationship in American society, but for the immigrants in all three stories discussed, everything must be defined legally, demonstrating the level of distrust of their new environment. Ironically, they try to gain this security through written English, a language of which they have little mastery.

It is hard enough for new single Chinese immigrants to find companionship in America.” Loneliness becomes even worse for married couples who are separated. The decision to come to America, done for economic reasons, is not without cost. In “Temporary Love,” it “leads not just to [the partners'] separation but to a break with their culture” (Moore). It results here in an adulterous affair, the separation from spouses, the disintegration of families. These are some of the potential costs that come with immigration. It is something Ha Jin himself understood well since when he came to America he was separated from his wife for a year and a half and his son for an additional two and a half years (Fay). Nonetheless, such separations are not an uncommon facet of immigrant life though such separations are unfathomable for most native-born Americans.

When the story opens, Lina is preparing dinner for Panbin. It is interesting that this is the first meal she has ever prepared for him though she has been living with him for a year. Even this meal is only made to soften the blow that she will be leaving him because of her husband's imminent arrival in America. There are ominous signs before the dinner

reflecting how language is not as much of a concern in this story, and also that the characters have somewhat better English language skills than Jufen. The weaker the character's English is in the story, the more “fractured” is the language Ha Jin uses, not only in that character's dialogue but in the language of the narrative voice as well. For an overview of some non-native English writers, including Ha Jin, who write in English, see William Grimes, “Using the Foreign to Grasp the Familiar” *New York Times*, 26 April 2014, C1+.

¹¹ See Sarah Kershaw, “They Call Her the Chinese Cupid: With New Immigrants, Fierce Competition to Find Them Spouses” *New York Times*, 2 March 2002, B1-2. See also Christina Mbakwe's “Flushing's Lonely WeChat Sisterhood.” *ForeignPolicy.com*, 3 February 2016.

that their relationship will soon end: the drizzle outside, the suicide bombing reported on the television. The unexpected meal is an odd enough occurrence that Panbin asks whether this is “a special day...[a] holiday” (176). Panbin, despite learning of Zuming's arrival, wants to renege on the agreement and for the affair to continue. Lina, though declaring this is impossible, fears that she will be unable to resist Panbin if he comes to her bed (though they regularly have sex together, they have separate rooms). Still, “despite her fear of self-control, she longed to have that intense intimacy with Panbin for the last time” (177).

Lina is determined “to become a faithful wife again” (177) when her husband reaches America. Somehow, she believes it is possible to turn on and off being “faithful” depending on the situation. Nevertheless, soon after Zuming arrives, he lets Lina know that he's aware of the affair and has been for some time. He is not, however, angry, but is very pragmatic, trying to use the relationship to his advantage, pressuring her through her guilt to pay for him to go to an MBA program. Again, there is no mention of love or loyalty by either party, only self-interest. Indeed, Panbin is the only one who ever mentions love, and that is because he is not threatened with the dilemma of having to choose between his wife and his mistress. When he is asked by Lina if he'd be willing to divorce his wife, he says no because he does not want to lose the connection with his young son. Lina says her own feelings toward Zuming have “little to do with love” (179). Guilt and shame rather than love and loyalty are the major motivators in the story. Lina had earlier bought Zuming a digital camera out of guilt after calling Panbin “laogong (hubby)” (177) while making love to him. Relationships, as with everything else in these stories, revolve around money and materialism, using a situation, including a wife's affair, for one's own self-interest. Lina is also concerned that Zuming will disclose the “affair to her in-laws and thus [bring] her parents to shame” (186).

Despite their problems, Zuming and Lina stay together for practical reasons. They have sex, which she does not enjoy, a couple of times a week. She feels “he must despise her” (189) and she decides that she is unwilling to have children with him. Meanwhile, they never discuss their feelings towards one another and she believes he is making plans to leave her for another woman.

When Zuming is to go to New Orleans to study, Lina wants to start the arrangement again with Panbin. But his wife in China has also found out about his affair (she has been having an adulterous relationship of her own in China) and gets a divorce and custody of their child, causing Panbin to decide he does not want an involvement with any more Chinese women. He meets Olga, a Ukrainian woman, online and plans to go to her country to meet her. The story again ends ambiguously: “She wasn't sure how serious he was about Olga or whether he'd bought the plane tickets

for Kiev. Maybe he couldn't help but act out of character. Whatever he might do, she hoped he wouldn't make a fool of himself" (194). One is left unclear about the outcome of the marriage of Lina and Zuming or the relationship between Panbin and Olga.

The story, of course, highlights the pain of separation from their spouses and families. The decision to separate is one usually brought about by economic necessity. It is often impractical or even impossible for families to migrate as a group, bringing about a long period of separation, which can easily lead, as in this story, to break-ups of families. Still, there are often few options for immigrants if they wish to gain economic advancement for themselves and their families. However, such separations can lead to marital tensions and estrangement from one's family.

After writing his two American-based books, Ha Jin returns to a more familiar setting in his novel *Nanjing Requiem* (2011). One wonders if the issues of the English language might have been a factor in prompting the return of his subject matter to the land of his birth. It is also interesting to read in interviews with Ha Jin how he laments his inability to now compose directly in Chinese. Like Jufen in "A Pension Plan" he feels he is too old to learn a new language skill. However, in his case it is not learning a new language but learning to write creatively in his native tongue: "I've been doing it in English for so long I can't switch" (Fay). Therefore, Ha Jin is now translating his English works into Chinese (ironic because he initially came to the United States to improve his skills translating Chinese into English). One wonders who the audience for this work will be since all of his writings except the heavily censored National Book Award-winning *Waiting* (1999) are banned in China. As Jingjian Guo observes, "Ha Jin pours his nostalgia into the translation and tries to build what he imagines as a 'villa' in his mother tongue, the Chinese language" (14). This reflects what Jin himself describes as "treacherous territory" since he dwells "in the margin as a writer – between two languages, two cultures, two literatures, two countries" (Jin qtd. in Fay). He is the ultimate insider/outsider, not quite Chinese or American, not even fitting into the heterogeneous Chinese population in Flushing. Thus Ha Jin himself, albeit at a much higher level, must constantly negotiate the nebulous terrain of language, like millions of other immigrants. This is reflected in the many levels of language skills used by the characters in his Flushing stories. It is part of the ongoing acculturation process all immigrants face.

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