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Multisource Transwriting Study on the Chinese Female Characters in Ha Jin's *Waiting*

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Abstract

Multisource Transwriting refers to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural practices involving fragmented sources, where translating and writing are interwoven. Based on his military life on the northeastern border and his deep interaction with a military doctor's family, Chinese-American writer Ha Jin intricately transwrote Chinese famale's imagery in Waiting through the story of a military doctor, Kong Lin, struggling in eighteen-year emotional marriage. The misalignment between the signifiers of English symbols and the signifieds of Chinese culture in this text gives rise to translation, laying the foundation for discussions from the perspective of multisource transwriting. This paper takes Waiting as its research object and, relying on the theory of Multisource Transwriting, traces Ha Jin's fragmented sources for transwriting traditional Chinese women images and analyzes the transwriting relationships within them. The study finds that Ha Jin's creation was not based on a specific Chinese literary text but on multisource materials; translating and writing are interwoven, mutually interpreting and constructing each other as a gradient continuum of mutual expansion.

Keywords

Waiting, Ha Jin, multisource transwriting, Chinese famale image

1. Introduction

Ha Jin served for five and a half years in an artillery unit in the northeastern border region, and his military life provided rich material for his novel writing. Ha Jin created a series of China-themed short stories, including *Ocean of Words: Army Stories, Under the Red Flag, Waiting, The Bridegroom, In the Pond, Quiet Desperate, and Wreckage.* In 1996, Ha Jin won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction for *Under the Red Flag*; in 1997, he received the PEN/Hemingway Award for *Ocean of Words*; in 1998, *In the Pond* was named Best Book of the Year by the Chicago Tribune; and in 1999, *Waiting* won the National Book Award, followed by the PEN/Faulkner Award in 2000. Ha Jin's awards not caused

a sensation at the award ceremony in Manhattan, New York but also throughout the United States. His 200,000-word short story *Waiting* made it onto the New York Times bestseller list and was translated into 18 languages and distributed in 25 countries.

Ha Jin is the first Chinese international student writer to receive this honor in the 50-year history of the National Book Award. Before him, Maxine Hong Kingston was the only Asian American writer to have won this major award (Guo, 2001). The difference is that Kingston wrote about the lives of Chinese immigrants in the United States, while Ha Jin writes about people and events in China. He is also the third immigrant writer whose native language is not English to win this award in its 50-year history, the other two being Isaac Bashevis Singer and Jerzy Kosinski. The reaction of European and American critics, especially in the United States, to Ha Jin's winning the National Book Award for *Waiting* was first one of surprise. They found it incredible that a Chinese person who had only been studying and living in the United States for 15 years and was not yet fluent in spoken English could produce such a work. Subsequently, they praised the work extremely highly. They believed that *Waiting* transcended cultural boundaries, telling a story that felt like it was about a neighbor, making it increasingly engaging and one of the best novels they had read in a long time. Lisa See, author of *On Gold Mountain*, commented that it is an outstanding love novel. Ha Jin's understanding of the human heart and the human living environment transcends national boundaries and time. *Waiting* is an outstanding literary achievement. Kirkus Reviews described it as a seemingly simple story, told with exquisite precision and beauty. Ha Jin has established himself as a steadfast and great realist writer who continues to write in the postmodern era. Some critics even compared Ha Jin to Russian writers Anton Chekhov and Isaac Babel, while others believed that the language in Ha Jin's novels could rival the best prose of Henry James.

Zhao Yiheng, a Chinese scholar who graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, and now teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, remarked that the outstanding achievements of Ha Jin and François Cheng have been recognized by mainstream critics in the English and French literary worlds. Chinese culture has unmistakably extended into foreign languages: the intelligence and talent of the Chinese people, along with their ability to write in foreign languages, have flourished in this border area, becoming too dazzling to take in all at once. Ha Jin's awards indicate that the works of Chinese American writers have garnered attention from the American literary community, and behind these writers lies an increasingly powerful China. However, not all European and American critics praised Ha Jin for winning the National Book Award, and few domestic readers in China have read *Waiting*.

Research on Ha Jin in China began in 2000. Professor Liu Yiqing from Peking University launched severe criticisms against Ha Jin and his novel *Waiting*. Over the five years from 2000 to 2004, only 11 articles related to Ha Jin's works were published in China. Among them, there were zero papers in 2002, and most of these were introductory articles about Ha Jin and his works published in newspapers. It was not until 2005 that academic papers with dedicated chapters discussing Ha Jin's works emerged in China (Xu, 2015). Subsequently, Ha Jin and his works gradually gained attention from domestic scholars, with

the number of relevant journal papers and dissertations showing an annual growth trend. From 2011 to 2012 alone, there were as many as 45 journal papers directly focusing on Ha Jin. Researchers have interpreted and analyzed the content and artistic characteristics of Ha Jin's works from multiple perspectives, mainly focusing on Orientalism, historicism, language, and narrative style.

This study holds that the relationship between translating and writing in Ha Jin's creative process, as an author with dual Sino-US cultural backgrounds, has not received sufficient attention. The specificity of Ha Jin's writing Chinese stories in English and his creative mode of foreign in form but Chinese in essence have brought about unique translation research issues. According to the theory of multi-source trans-writing proposed by Liu Xiaofeng (Liu, 2023), *Waiting* falls into the typical category of multi-source trans-writing. Starting from the perspective of multi-source trans-writing, this paper will explore the characteristics and relationship of translating and writing in the text by tracing the multi-source fragmented sources of Chinese female images in Ha Jin's *Waiting*, aiming to promote the international dissemination of Chinese culture and provide useful insights for the construction of China's image in the international community.

2. Origins of Multisource Transwriting

Li Defeng (2007, p. 4) pointed out in his introduction to translation studies that translation studies became an independent discipline starting with James S. Holmes' The Name and Nature of Translation Studies. However, this work only became known in 1988 and is regarded as the founding manifesto of translation studies. Although translation practice has a long history, translation studies is a relatively new research field. The study of multisource transwriting, a field long neglected in translation studies, was formally proposed by Liu Xiaofeng in 2023. Multisource transwriting refers to a language activity involving transwriting without a fixed original source text, in contrast to source-based translation, traditionally referring to translation from a specific original text to a target text (Liu Xiaofeng, 2023: 88). At present, research on multisource transwriting is still in its infancy, with relatively few studies available. Shi Chunrang (Shi, 2024) explored the theoretical basis of multisource transwriting from both diachronic and synchronic dimensions; studies on the relationship between translating and writing, such as Yang Qian (Yang, 2024), examined the translating-writing gradient continuum through the theme of hermitage in *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits*; research on translator subjectivity includes Liu Yutong (Liu, 2024), who analyzed Naitō Konan's subjectivity in transwriting Yanshan Chushui using a thick translation strategy, as well as Li Chunxiao and Zang Zimo (Li & Zang, 2024), who studied ethnic translation and explored Shapiro's subjectivity in transwriting The Gesar Epic from the three dimensions of language, style, and layout.

Xu Jun (Xu, 2003, p. 9) argued that to understand translation, it is necessary to first discuss the issue of signs. From the perspective of translation semiotics, Feng Quangong (Feng, 2022, p. 13) proposed that the most essential feature of translation is the conversion of signs. Liu Xiaofeng further pointed out that the cognitive framework of traditional translation studies is often limited to a single fixed source text,

whereas multisource transwriting breaks through this limitation. In some works, authors directly convert their thoughts about a certain culture into a language that does not belong to that culture. This conversion involves transforming intangible thought signs in the mind into tangible linguistic signs, with the source text not being a single fixed text but presenting dynamic and diverse characteristics of textual sources. However, multisource transwriting is not a new phenomenon; its history can be traced back to the dissemination and translation of ancient literary works. For example, ancient Greek literary works were translated into Latin via Arabic during the Middle Ages, even though their original Greek manuscripts no longer existed at that time. Lin Yutang wrote works such as *My Country and My People* and The Importance of Living in English. In the process of writing, he did not translate based on a specific Chinese text but directly expressed his understanding and insights into Chinese culture in English. That writing within translation and translation within writing is a typical example of multisource transwriting. Against this background, multisource transwriting, as a special translation phenomenon, has gradually come into people's view.

Building on this, Liu Xiaofeng (Liu, 2023, p. 90) further proposes that the series of studies focusing on the activities, results, and impacts of the research object multisource transwriting can be termed multisource transwriting studies or multisource transwritology in a disciplinary sense. The source texts of multisource transwriting may involve relationships such as multiple texts to a single text, fragmented texts to a single text, or synthesized texts, processed through mental activity, from multimodal texts to a single text. Multisource transwritin, exists as a transitional zone between source-based transwriting and pure writing.

Waiting, set in 1970s China, transwrites in English the love-hate entanglements between Kong Lin, an internist, his wife Liu Shuyu, and his lover Wu Manna, a nurse. Essentially, this work is not a traditional translation based on a Chinese original; rather, it is an English multisource transwriting by Ha Jin, integrating his own life experiences, knowledge of Northeast China's folk customs, and insights into Chinese local culture. Ha Jin's father was a soldier, and he himself had extensive exposure to military life. From his wife, he heard a story about a military doctor who waited 18 years to divorce his wife, only to marry a female nurse, yet their married life turned out to be unhappy. The military doctor and nurse in the story were colleagues of Ha Jin's wife's parents at the hospital, and this story became the prototype for Ha Jin's *Waiting*. Ha Jin's upbringing, background, experiences in China, and observations in the United States laid the foundation for his creation.

At that time, western perceptions of Chinese women were still riddled with stereotypes, feudal and ignorant, such as foot-binding, lacking freedom and self-awareness, polygamy, husband-centeredness, arranged marriages, and embodying a meek temperament. *Waiting* objectively reflects the lives and fates of Chinese women, creating vivid female images that are both brave, free, and resilient—rather than merely enduring hardship passively or conforming to the stereotype of being gentle, courteous, and yielding. Based on this realistic portrayal of Chinese women, *Waiting* achieved success, earning Ha Jin

recognition and affirmation from mainstream American literature, who regarded him as one of the great writers who persist a realist path in the alienated postmodern era.

Ha Jin's *Waiting* can indeed be considered a typical case of multisource transwriting. This study focuses on the female images in *Waiting*, tracing the multiple fragmented source texts within the work, and explores the mutually explanatory and constructive gradient continuum relationship between translating and writing in *Waiting* by examining Ha Jin's multisource transwriting practices based on sources such as Confucian thought, folk customs, and traditional values in China. The following sections will trace and discuss the fragmented source texts of female images in *Waiting*.

3. Tracing the Source Texts of Multisource Transwriting for Female Images in *Waiting*

Liu Xiaofeng (2023, p. 89) points out that the scope of multisource transwriting includes specific or abstract wholes or parts of humanistic elements such as the image, language, culture, customs, ideology, and values of the target country, as well as natural elements such as mountains, rivers, clear skies, organisms, vegetation, and seasonal climates that have been written in the local language. During his life in China, Ha Jin accumulated a profound understanding of Chinese culture, and *Waiting* contains rich transwritings of Chinese cultural materials, with numerous multisource transwriting source texts a *Waiting* tracing and exploration. This paper will excavate these source texts from Ha Jin's personal experiences, folk customs, and traditional values.

3.1 Multisource Transwriting of Personal Military Experiences

Ha Jin served for five and a half years in an artillery unit in the northeastern border region. His military life provided abundant material for his novel writing, and he was well-acquainted with the military's moral constraints and institutional discipline. These personal experiences became an important source for Ha Jin's transwriting of the personal image of the female protagonist, Manna Wu.

For example, when describing good girls in the eyes of men in the story, they are defined as virgins, and those with a broken hymen would be eliminated during the physical examination: "since every young woman recruited had to go through a physical exam that eliminated those with a broken hymen." Manna Wu did not fiercely resist the rules; she remained within the framework of systems, abiding by regulations such as the ban on romance and obedience to the collective. On one hand, she was a conformist; on the other hand, her image transcended mere compliance. While being disciplined, Manna secretly kept collected badges and love letters from young men in a sandalwood box, guarding her simple pursuit of beauty and cherished memories of past emotions through instinctive means. These fragmented descriptions of women, though trivial in the grand narrative, form the core of her image as an individual with self-awareness.

In Ha Jin's transwriting of the 1970s, he constructed the female protagonist's sense of rules and self-awareness, revealing that even in oppression, individual women persist in asserting their selves through subtle means. Manna Wu's image is precisely a microcosm of the struggle between survival environment and individual women.

3.2 Multisource Transwriting of Folk Customs and Traditions

China's indigenous traditional ethics, cultural norms, and values also serve as a source of inspiration for Ha Jin's love novels. For instance, the inclusion of discussions gender relations in the book constitutes Ha Jin's critical multisource transwriting of Chinese love morality and ethics, constructing images of Chinese women who are both forbearing and resilient. A case in point is Ran Su's statement in the scene depicting the rape of the female protagonist Manna Wu:

Example 1 (Original Text):

"Manna, I think it may be too late now. It will be very hard to prove that you didn't have a date with him unless Geng Yang admits the crime himself. You know a date rape is rarely treated as a rape."

In traditional culture, a woman's body symbolizes family honor and moral order, and loss of chastity is regarded as a heavy stain. This perception was further reinforced in this context. As a nurse, Manna's purity was not merely a reflection of personal morality but was also tied to the purity of the overall. Thus, public opinion tilted toward the assumption that a woman's improper words or actions were the cause of the incident, rather than the perpetrator's guilt. Ran Su's remark that it would be "very hard to prove" essentially acquiesces to this underlying logic: under the cognition of "guilty until proven innocent," a woman who had any private contact with a man could be automatically labeled as "indecent," and the violence she endured was seen as "deserved retribution."

In the highly organized, male-dominated space, women's voices were already faint. The premise that "only if Yang Geng confesses himself" places Manna's pursuit of justice entirely at the mercy of the perpetrator's conscience, with no effective channels for appeal provided. This instantly solidifies Manna's image of "forbearance."

Through this plot, Ha Jin accomplishes a critical multisource transwriting of love morality and ethics. Instead of directly replicating the dogmas of traditional ethics, he exposes how these ethical norms are weaponized to oppress women through specific dialogues and events. In traditional love ethics, constraints such as feeling arises from affection, yet stays within ritual are often imposed more heavily on women. When Manna mustered the courage to pursue love, she already broke free from the norm that women should passively wait. The subsequent predicament of being unable to prove innocence after the rape further underscores this tension.

Example 2 (Original Text):

He even apologized to her for having considered their relationship only from his point of view. Despite being torn between Manna and his family, he assured her he would try to divorce Shuyu again in the future. But he needed time and could not rush. She agreed to wait with patience.

In the Northeast Region of 1970s China, love and marriage often required organizational approval, and personal emotions had to submit to collective interests. Against this backdrop, her love for Lin became the brightest and most significant part of Manna's life—the most concrete manifestation of her longing for happiness. Clinging to this relationship was, in essence, her way of seizing hope for escaping

oppression and realizing her personal worth. Her optimism served as a spiritual weapon against the stifling reality.

Her close relationship with a married man carried enormous risks in the hospital where she worked at the time, risking gossip and even jeopardizing her chances of promotion. Maintaining open contact with Lin—dining together, walking, attending meetings—required extraordinary courage and determination. She was not pursuing a secret affair but, in a way, "semi-publicly" challenging unwritten social norms to defend her right to love.

Waiting defined the era, and Manna's patience was a survival wisdom honed by her generation through long years of hardship. Yet she channeled this era-specific resilience into pursuing personal feeling，highlighting the uniqueness of her character. Under the circumstances of the time, a woman could hardly overturn an organizationally approved marriage through her own efforts. Manna's initiative did not lie in directly confronting the system but in maximizing her persistence within the narrow space allowed by the system: maintaining her relationship with Lin and *Waiting* for an opportunity.

In the specific context of this novel—where individualism suppressed, discipline strict, and life monotonous—Manna's image stands out as particularly moving and full of tension. She is not merely a homewrecker or a love-obsessed woman. Through Manna, Ha Jin not only portrays a love story but also profoundly reveals how an ordinary woman, in an era of disempowered personal fates, strives to claim a modicum of happiness and dignity with all her passion, courage, and resilience. Her *Waiting* is a silent yet powerful indictment of the era and a testament to the indomitability of human nature.

3.3 Multisource Transwriting of Confucian Classics

In transwriting the image of Liu Shuyu, a traditional rural woman, Ha Jin repeatedly translates and references Confucian thought and family values from traditional Chinese culture, transcribing how Chinese cultural concepts construct and shape the image of Chinese women. In depicting Liu Shuyu, Ha Jin translates and interprets the custom of foot-binding and the Confucian philosophy of "the mean" (zhongyong), as exemplified in the following:

Example 3 (Original Text):

In addition, she had bound feet and sometimes wore black puttees.

Example 4 (Original Text):

"Shuyu, can we talk about the divorce?" Lin asked his wife after dinner.

"All right," his wife said calmly.

"Can we go to town tomorrow?"

"All right."

"You always say 'all right,' but you'll change your mind afterward. Can you keep your word this time?"

Ha Jin's inclusion of foot-binding is far more than an exotic detail. Its transwriting function is multi-layered: he translates and writes foot-binding from its Chinese cultural context into the English narrative, turning it into a culturally charged symbol with striking impact. These mutilated feet are an indelible cultural inscription on Liu Shuyu's body, silently speaking to her origins, the old rural world she

represents, and the patriarchal aesthetics and discipline she endures. Her body itself is a carrier and product of traditional culture.

Foot-binding symbolizes fragility and suffering, yet Liu Shuyu endures it daily, wrapping and supporting her feet with black puttees. This hints at the core of her image: a resilience forged in extreme vulnerability. Her strength lies not in denying this inherent fragility but in acknowledging and bearing it.

Liu Shuyu's response to the divorce request perfectly embodies how Confucian "zhongyong" (the mean) manifests in the behaviors and daily lives of ordinary people, especially traditional women. What Ha Jin transwrites is not a philosophical concept but the behavioral patterns governed by it. In Confucian thought, "zhongyong" emphasizes achieving harmony—maintaining balance, avoiding extremes, and restraining intense emotions. Faced with her husband's sharp, pressured questions, Liu Shuyu's reply is always the calm "All right." This is not genuine agreement but a form of extreme emotional management and tactical silence. She defuses direct conflict and maintains superficial "harmony" with the most neutral, non-confrontational words.

Her "zhongyong" is not cowardice but a profound, defensive form of resistance. As Confucius stated, The noble person does not contend, and Laozi urged, Softness overcomes hardness. Liu Shuyu understands this well. She does not argue, accuse, or directly refuse; instead, she resists through her persistent, unchanging presence and compliance. She makes each of Kong Lin's advances feel like hitting cotton—with no force to land. Kong Lin's frustration "You always say 'all right,' but you'll change your mind afterward" precisely confirms the effectiveness of her "zhongyong-style" resistance: she successfully traps his divorce plans in endless *Waiting*.

Confucianism values "rectifying names" (ming zheng yan shun) and "restraining oneself to return to ritual" (ke ji fu li). For Liu Shuyu, the title of wife is her most vital identity and source of dignity. All her actions—serving her in-laws, caring for her children, and guarding her marriage with silence—fulfill the rituals Confucian culture assigns to her. Her resistance is within the system; by becoming its most extreme model, she defends her position, putting Kong Lin who seeks to disrupt the system by demanding a divorce in a moral and public opinion bind.

Yet Ha Jin does not reduce her to a mere victim. He successfully translates and rewrites the core of traditional Chinese culture he understands—not just its special customs, but its deeper philosophy and behavioral patterns—into a vivid, credible, and unforgettable literary figure. Western readers do not merely see a spectacle in foot-binding; through her behavioral logic of "zhongyong," they grasp the cultural depth and complexity behind this spectacle.

By transwriting foot-binding, Ha Jin defines Liu Shuyu's cultural identity and historical coordinates; by transwriting "zhongyong," he reveals the core behavioral patterns and values rooted in that identity. Together, they depict Liu Shuyu as a complex female figure—both a product of traditional culture and a bearer of remarkable vitality and resistance within it. She is not a flat symbol of the old era but an individual with dignity and strength, operating within her own cultural logic.

4. Analysis of the Relationship between Translating and Writing and the Translator's Subjectivity in *Waiting*

In multisource transwriting, translating and writing may manifest as two sides of the same coin, interpenetrate, or even form a gradual continuum of mutual interpretation, mutual construction, and mutual expansion (Liu, 2023, p. 89). In *Waiting*, Ha Jin's portrayal of the northeast living environment fully embodies this complex transwriting relationship. In constructing the triangular romance between Kong Lin, Wu Manna, and Liu Shuyu, Ha Jin translates elements such as Chinese regulations, customs, ethics, and values to shape and interpret the image of Chinese women pursuing love and adhering to their selves.

Drawing on his years of in-depth observation and understanding of Chinese military life, Ha Jin deeply integrates observations and understandings of Chinese culture (translating) with literary creation of love stories (writing) in the text-generating process, forming a distinct Ha Jin-style transwriter subjectivity. When creating characters and plots, Ha Jin purposefully translates a large number of representative Chinese elements into the narrative, which are intertwined with and inseparable from the novel's plot creation. For example, he incorporates Chinese social elements such as foot-binding, arranged marriage, filial piety, the mean (zhongyong), institutional constraints, and local customs to transcribe the image of Chinese women in the 1970s, demonstrating the interweaving, mutual interpretation, and mutual construction between Ha Jin's *translating and writing*. Here, it is argued that the multisource transwriting process of Ha Jin's *Waiting* involves not only language conversion but also an interweaving of culture, history, and the trans-writer's subjectivity. Furthermore, Ha Jin's *translating and writing* are intertwined and inseparable, forming a gradual continuum of mutual interpretation, mutual construction, and mutual expansion. Their mutual expansion helps Western readers gain an in-depth understanding of the customs and changes in 1970s Chinese life and rural society.

Despite Ha Jin's efforts to present a real China, since multisource transwriting is not based on a single fixed source text, information distortion is inevitable in Ha Jin's creation and the back-translation of Chinese versions. This leads to the simplification or neglect of subtle understandings when converted into English, making it difficult for back-translated Chinese versions to fully restore the original context. Such information loss may weaken the cultural connotations of the work and affect Western readers' comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

By tracing the fragmented source texts related to the female images of Wu Manna and Liu Shuyu in the multisource transwriting text *Waiting*, this paper interprets how Ha Jin integrates Chinese cultural elements, Confucian thought, local customs, social norms, and philosophical ethics into a Western narrative framework, conveying an Eastern love story through Western language. It is hoped that this study will provide new cases for research on the mutually interpretive and constructive relationship

between translating and writing in multisource transwriting, as well as for multisource transwriting studies and translation studies.

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