

HA JIN:

I wrote in English as a form of protest

ASUDDEN rainshower during early fall in Berlin prompted writers and literary figures from various countries to seek shelter under the author's tent. They stood close to each other in protection of the cold wind that blew across the tent, drinking and refilling their wine.

Last September, the Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin featured many names normally found in book racks, such as Elif Shafak, Kazuo Ishiguro, Roddy Doyle, Michael Cunningham, Wole Soyinka and Martin Amis, as well as Ha Jin, a literary figure from China, now living in exile in the United States. All day long, he was surrounded by journalists.

From more than 100 such luminary writers, Ha Jin may be the least among to be aware of his own stardom. Having produced collections of short stories and seven works of fiction, he has won a number of prestigious awards, among them the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and the PEN/Hemingway Award. His novel, *War Trash*, won the PEN/Faulkner Award, placing him in the same status as American authors Philip Roth and E.L. Doctorow.

Clad always in dark-colored hat, shirt over trousers, Ha Jin appears modest and sociable, willing to chat with anyone who came his way and asked

to be photographed with him. He was born as Jin Xuefei—meaning flying snow—in China's Lianing province, in 1956. Mao Tse Tung launched his Cultural Revolution when Ha Jin was 10 years old. He told *Tempo*, his recollections over that period were murky. "I just remember my mother being sent to hard labor because of some mistake, but I don't know what it was." Ha Jin also admitted to being confused and uninformed when all youths were told to register with the Red Army. "I wasn't even 14 years old when I became a member of the Red Army," he said.

Like his fellow literary figures, Ha Jin flew to the US not because of any major plan. "I got a scholarship from Brandeis University in the US after completing my studies on English Literature at Heilongjiang University and my masters degree from Shandong University," he said over breakfast with *Tempo* at Hotel Hecker's in Berlin, two weeks ago. It was at that time that the Tiananmen protests exploded on the scene, greatly upsetting Ha Jin, which only firmed up his resolve to live in the US with his family. He now teaches at Boston University and so far, has never been able to go back to his homeland because, "my request for a visa is always rejected." The following is Ha Jin's discourse with *Tempo* journalist, Leila S. Chudori.

TEMPO/LEILA S. CHUDORI (BERLIN)

Would you like to go back to your home country even though you describe China as a police state?

Of course. I've often requested for a visa to enter China, but it's always rejected. When that happens, I become sad and disappointed and the process of getting rid of that sense of sadness takes quite a long time. So I don't want to get a visa again just yet.

Why have you written your novels and your collection of short stories in English, your second language?

I was finishing my masters degree in the US when the Tiananmen incident broke. I protested sharply to the government over the bloody affair. As a result, I'm unable to go home. My passport has never been extended by the Embassy. Meanwhile, my child, who was then six years old, had joined me and my wife. We decided we could not allow our child to be trapped in this cycle of violence. That was our

initial reaction, following the Tiananmen incident. But, to be honest, I was not ready to migrate to the US. My initial intention was to come and study and I knew it was not easy to find work in America, particularly since my field is American Literature. This is a rare choice for Asian students. I would not be able to find work that was related to Chinese language, so I began to improve my English. I wanted to write in English. Another reason why I chose to write in English was because I felt that many expressions and words in Chinese language had begun to be distorted for propaganda purposes. They had become tainted and created delusions. This led to my decision in using English as a form of protest.

What is your opinion about the works of Mo Yan, written in Chinese language and which

was awarded the Nobel prize?

Chinese writers writing in Chinese language experience the same difficulty because the language is already distorted. It's very difficult to get out of that distortion. Here's an example, the words 'to report' in Chinese has many meanings. If we use 'to report', they can be distorted and taken out of context.

Initially, you expressed yourself through poetry. Why did you turn to fiction?

I didn't feel that the social and political issues of my characters could be fully expressed in poetry. That's why I began writing short stories, and later I wrote novels. I still write poetry in Chinese language, then I rewrite it in English. In poetry, I feel I can purify words from their tainted meaning and that's why I'm still able to write poetry in Chinese language. In fiction, the focus changes because we must follow our characters, we must think of the plot. And that's why I needed to write in English.

Your original name is Jin Xu. 靳叙.

What does it mean? And why did you change it to Ha Jin?

The meaning of my original name is 'Flying Snow'. To westerners, particularly in the US, it's difficult to pronounce the letter 'X' in my name. 'Xue-fei' should be read as 'Shue-fei'. Another thing, when I first wrote poems in English, it was about the Red Army, a political-themed piece I called *The Dead Soldier's Talk*. My teacher then, Frank Bidar, read it to Jonathan Galassi, editor of the *Paris Review*, by telephone. And *Paris Review* took it, just like that. The funny thing is that I have not put my name on that poem. So, I suggested that it be named Ha Jin. Ha comes from Harbin, a favorite city of mine, and Jin is my family name. I felt that name would be eas-

ier to pronounce by people. My teacher agreed. That was the first time my name Ha Jin was used.

What do you remember of the Cultural Revolution?

I was then 10 years old, so I didn't know much about politics. What really stuck in my mind was what happened to my family. I remember how my mother was sent to hard labor by the party because she was a low-level staff and committed I don't know what mistake.

Your novel, *Requiem Nanjing*, used a real incident involving Minnie Vautrin. Coincidentally, novelist Iris Chang also used the same figure and incident as the subject for the film *The Flowers of War*, directed by Zhang Yimou. What did you feel when you read or watched that film?

I wrote *Requiem Nanjing* before Iris Chang's novel came out. We wrote about the same incidents in Nanking. I purposefully refused to read Iris Chang's novel when it was published first because I didn't have any opinion about it. When both were published, then I read it. Our focus differed, mine was on the psychological torture experienced by the characters. That abominable Nanking affair took only two weeks, but the psychological and mental impact remains years after it happened.

You have a way of shocking readers, as in the first paragraphs of your novels *Nanjing Requiem* and *A Map of Betrayal*, of creating a sense of uncertainty because it feels like you begin in the middle of a plot. Why is that?

(Laughing) I learned (to do that) from Anton Chekov, who always said divide your story into two. Discard the first part of your story and begin from the middle. The middle part is usually the most dramatic part, or it begins to rise towards the climax. After starting from there, readers will feel our energy. And later on, there will be many chances to go back or do review scenes or dialogue about past events. That message from Chekov was what I held on to in almost all of my novels.

Which writer is closest to your heart?

All of the Russian classical authors: Anton Chekov, Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol. Today's authors...the early works of Haruki Murakami were good too, had beautiful sentences. He was able to present it well, but I had a problem with his story and structure. I own four volumes of Pramoedyana Ananta Toer's works. I just read the first and found it to be full of energy. ●

