

## BETWEEN THE TRANSNATIONAL AND THE TRANSLATIONAL: LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND AUTHORSHIP IN MA JIAN'S NOVELS

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore the power exerted by the translator to form cultural identities and to build literary images that often overlap or blur national borders. The sinophone writer Ma Jian's identity is challenged both in terms of authorship and readership, as his public is a culturally undistinguished "western reader", and the translator *de facto* becomes the author. As a representative of the Chinese diaspora, he not only lives in a "deterritorialized" literary space, his novels also share a similar textual instability. Due to his bitter criticism of Chinese government and his internationally recognised role as a dissident writer, his works do not circulate in the People's Republic of China, and are mainly distributed thanks to the English renditions by Flora Drew.

**Keywords:** Translation. Identity. Narrative mode. Sinophone.

### LO SCRITTORE TRANSNAZIONALE E TRADOTTO: LINGUA, IDENTITA' E AUTORALITA' NEI ROMANZI DI MA JIAN

**Riassunto:** Il contributo analizza il potere esercitato dal traduttore nel formare identità culturali e nella costruzione di immagini letterarie che

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spesso si sovrappongono o sbiadiscono i confini nazionali. L'identità dello scrittore sinofono Ma Jian è messa in discussione sia sul piano del suo ruolo di autore sia in termini di lettori di riferimento della sua opera: il pubblico cui essa si rivolge è infatti un non meglio identificato "lettore occidentale", mentre la figura del traduttore si sovrappone de facto a quella dell'autore. Non solo Ma Jian, in quanto esponente della "diaspora cinese" contemporanea, vive in uno spazio letterario "deterritorializzato", ma anche le sue opere sono oggetto di una simile instabilità testuale. A causa delle sue acce critiche al governo cinese e al suo ruolo internazionalmente riconosciuto di scrittore dissidente, infatti, i suoi romanzi non circolano nel suo Paese di origine, la Repubblica Popolare Cinese, pur essendo scritte in lingua cinese e, invece, sono distribuite e conosciute essenzialmente grazie alla traduzione in lingua inglese di Flora Drew.

**Parole chiave:** Traduzione. Identità. Modo narrativo. Sinofonia.

## 1. Between Chineseness and Sinophony

The case of the Chinese expatriate writer Ma Jian 馬建 is an intriguing one. Although his personal story is not so different from those of many writers in the world who live and create outside their homeland, while keeping their minds and their literary creations focused on the homeland long after they had left it, nevertheless Ma Jian's relationship with his writing language and with translation is the result of a peculiar overlapping of identities and ideological issues. He is referred to by different definitions: "an international writer with Chinese characteristics"; "a Chinese writer with international characteristics", definitely not a "fully Chinese' writer, due to his clinch with the authorities back in the late 1980s" (Damgaard 2012, 177). On Chinese websites he is described as "an English writer that writes in Chinese".

Born in Qingdao (People's Republic of China) in 1953, Ma Jian has been living in England since 1997, but his literary production is still marked by an unwavering focus on Chinese society and on Chinese government misdeeds. Being a member of "the biggest intellectual diaspora in modern Chinese history" (Kong 2014, 126), he is one of the many writers who challenge the traditional

concept of *Chinese literature* and the conventional definition of *Chinese writer*. Ma Jian's literary endeavour is no less significant than his already over-exposed political position. From his first literary work, a collection of short stories, to his latest novels *Lamianzhe* 拉麵者 (The Noodlemaker 2002); *Rouzhitu* 肉之土 (Beijing Coma 2009) and *Yin zhi dao* 陰之道 (The Dark Road 2012), every single work by Ma Jian is imbued with a number of sensitive socio-political issues – such as human rights, Tian'anmen massacre, China's repressive demographic politics, environmental destruction in mainland China –, which apparently characterise him as a dissident or a political writer. It is hardly surprising that most of the few academic works devoted to him are based on a thematic analysis, and are mainly focused on the bio-political power of his fiction. However, one recent study by Shuyu Kong has finally shifted the critics' attention to Ma Jian's "intellectual nomadism" as an existential dimension of his creation, and on the position he has thus acquired in world literature. Moreover, a brilliant dissertation by Peter Damgaard also sheds light on the peculiar role played by Ma Jian as an "international writer", while Lucienne Loh frames his novel *Beijing Coma* in terms of a "post-colonial epic novel".

This paper intends to explore a pivotal issue related to the translation and reception of Ma Jian's literary production as a transnational writer. This issue, in my opinion, has not been taken sufficiently into account: while, as Shuyu Kong states, Ma Jian is endowed with a "wandering spirit freed from any state and public commitments" (2014 131), paradoxically his "nomadic consciousness" (2014 140) is tightly connected to his sticking to his mother tongue even twenty years after settling in London. He keeps on writing his novels in *Hanyu* 漢語 (Mandarin Chinese), while most of his readers can access his works and receive his weighty message only or mainly through the English translation. Besides, the critics and scholars who analyse and discuss his novels in most cases refer to the English versions of his works, rather than to the original Chinese version.

Flora Drew, his wife and the main translator of his works into English, already shares the role of author with Ma Jian, not symbolically but practically, as most of the translations into other languages are now made directly from the English rendition, rather than from the original Chinese text<sup>1</sup>.

A meaningful and multiple shift or overlapping of identities is the result of this unavoidable translingual and transcultural process, and a great responsibility is placed on the process of translation itself. In the world literary arena Ma Jian is the author of a series of highly critical novels against Chinese dictatorial politics, but, on a linguistic and aesthetic level, how much of Ma Jian's powerfully implicit and symbolic style is effectively conveyed in the translation process? And who is the real target-reader of Ma Jian's fervent plea in favour of his abused countrymen and countrywomen?

I will demonstrate that while by "producing works in a non-native language" (via his wife's translation), Ma Jian "seem[s] to bypass the act of translation, subsuming it as a problematic within a larger project of cultural or self-representation" (Apter 2006, 99). By electing his personal translator's text as *the original one*, he accepts not only his identity but his mother tongue as well to be confined to a condition of exile. This condition is reflected in the experimental use of the voice and the perspective featured in his works. In the first part of this paper the clash underpinning the relation between Ma Jian's cultural and linguistic identity (Chineseness) and his existential condition as a diasporic (sinophone) political writer is discussed, whose works are mainly read and analysed through their English versions. Follows an outline of his profile as a "translational author", whose nomadic, dislocated identity finds its final place in a purely literary space. A weakening of his Chinese roots and of the aesthetic value of his style is the price he must pay in order to obtain a freer channel of expression. In the fourth section some examples will be provided

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<sup>1</sup> The only exceptions are the Italian translation of *Lamianzhe* and some short stories translated into French directly from Chinese.

of the role played, and the effect produced, by the translation in the process of trans-nationalisation of Ma Jian's novels. Finally, some evidence will be given of his use of narrative mode in his novels (narrator and perspective) as an allegoric device to represent his ambiguous, denied identity.

## **2. The reception of a transnational author and the writing space**

According to Shuyu Kong, the previous study of dissident Chinese writers, such as Gao Xingjian and Ma Jian,

has largely been conducted in the context of political dissidence and exilic writing against the Chinese Communist Party-State. This constrains, to a large degree, the possibility of exploring the broader meanings of their writing beyond the political dimension. (2014, 128)

Overemphasising the political issue embodied in Ma Jian's works somehow modifies his image as a writer and deeply influences the reception of his works, which, with some remarkable exceptions, are rarely read and studied from a more textual and literary perspective. This determines of course a certain publishing and editorial policy which I have described elsewhere (Pesaro 2013). While it is inconceivable to ignore the political implications and the political value of Ma Jian's novels, they should be analysed and appreciated also on the basis of their artistic value, by taking into account the contribution to world literature of the author's peculiar narrative style as well. It is exactly for this reason – the need to restore the literary meaning of his novels – that translation should be seen as a powerful tool in shaping the literary image of this writer, and that the effects of the translational process should be carefully examined in order to assess the real impact of Ma Jian's

literary style and narrative devices in the readers' mind as well as in the critics' analyses.

The writer in exile, who already displayed a nomadic spirit long before leaving his country for political reasons, as well as a tendency to "deterritorialise" himself from his country and from his own literary environment, is indisputably perceived as a dissident writer. His main aim is to denounce to a Western audience rights-abusing practices in his homeland, through the voice of his translator. On the one hand, he does not belong to China anymore, as English has become the main language and vehicle for his ideas and his stories, and most of his readers are not Chinese, or at least expatriate Chinese. As is the case with many other authors in exile, Ma Jian's works are no longer part of his own national literature – supposing this concept is still a meaningful one in the globalised era of "sinopolyphonic" literature (Zhang 2014) – and can rather lay claim to the higher but blurry status of world literature.

[He] write[s] primarily in Chinese, [his] works are still banned in mainland China, and [his] influence in world literature has been enlarged through translation of [his] works. (S. Kong 2014, 127-128)

Thus, Ma can be defined through the relatively new category of *sinophone*<sup>2</sup> writers. Although Chinese is his writing language, for spatial and ideological reasons he cannot be called a Chinese author in the traditional sense.

Besides, this label also implies that a *sinophone* author always represents, to a certain extent, a counter-discourse against the centralising and hegemonic Chinese ideology. The author's target audience, then, might be different, considering both the linguistic and political impediment to the dissemination of his/her literary and

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<sup>2</sup> "I coin the notion of *Sinophone* to designate Sinitic-language cultures and communities outside China as well as those ethnic communities within China, where Sinitic languages are either forcefully imposed or willingly adopted." (Shih 2013, 30)

cultural message: “Deprived of the possibility to address his books directly to a Chinese speaking audience, Ma Jian has gradually constructed his model-reader as a ‘western reader’.” (Pesaro 2013, 171) In other words, his mission is now that of making westerners aware of the darkest sides of China’s authoritarian capitalism.

However, at the aesthetic level, his novels are still infused with Chinese cultural-specific elements and traditional references, which are supposed to be understood and appreciated better by a Chinese reader. The most striking effect of this paradox is that many of these elements undergo an unavoidable process of domestication or simplification in the English rendition.

In *Beijing Coma*, many excerpts drawn from the *Shanhaijing* (The Classic of Mountains and Seas), an ancient Chinese narrative at the crossroads between geography and fantasy, are interspersed within the novel as the reminiscences of the protagonist Dai Wei, who is lying in a coma after the Tian’anmen massacre:

…… 法鸪山上/有一只白嘴红抓的鸟/是炎帝的女儿淹死在东海里转生的/它的名字就是它的叫声：精微 精微……/它天天衔着树枝和石子 飞去填着东海。(Ma 2012, 581)

On Faju Mountain lives a bird with a white beak and red claws. It is the reincarnation of Emperor Yandi’s daughter who drowned in the East Sea. It cries out “Jingwei, jingwei”, so people call it the jingwei bird. Every day, it picks up twigs and stones from the mountain and drops them into the East Sea, trying in vain to fill it up. (Ma 2014, 632)

The ending of *The Dark Road* – the story of a couple of peasants persecuted by Chinese officials for infringing the one-child policy – is an example of the “hallucinatory realism” praised by the Nobel

Prize committee in relation to Mo Yan<sup>3</sup>. When the protagonist Meili finally gives birth to her baby on a precarious boat, she looks at the tiny body:

“看他，像电脑里的太空精灵，……”美黎喃喃地又说，“看，老二，多美丽的黎明，那些白色婴灵从天而降了，像撒豆子，比女娲抛的还多，可一落到地下就消失了。”“没有下雪，今天是三月九日，春天，看，太阳出来了。”老二看到美黎的大腿之间如一片绿色湖水，脚趾苍白如莲。(Ma 2012, 334)

“But why is he so green?” Meili says. “He looks like one of those green aliens in the computer games... Ah, look over there, Kongzi! What a beautiful dawn! White infant spirits are falling from the sky, like beans scattered by Goddess Nuwa, but as soon as they touch the earth they vanish.” “White beans? – do you mean snowflakes? Your mind’s playing tricks on you. It can’t be snowing. Today is March the 9<sup>th</sup>, the first day of spring. Yes. I can see the sun is about to come up.” Water begins to lap over Meili’s legs. Her white toes rise above the surface like lotuses on a green lake. (Ma 2014, 359-60)

This scene is endowed with a lyrical sharpness, which is often found in Ma Jian’s novels. The English rendition, though equally powerful, changes some details, trying to disambiguate what is implicit in the source language. The 太空精灵 (literally “space elves”) become ordinary “aliens”, and the whole sentence “White beans? – do you mean snowflakes? Your mind’s playing tricks on you.” is added in the translation, in order to let the readers decode the delirious words of the dying Meili, but depriving the text of its original incoherence.

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<sup>3</sup> Official Nobel Announcement, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/accessed July 3, 2017](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/accessed%20July%203,%202017).

Besides, the choice made by Ma Jian himself of having his books translated from English into other languages makes this domestication process deeper, often creating an even further distance from the original Chinese text. In other words, what is being translated in Italy (with the only exception of the Italian translation of *The Noodlemaker*), France, Spain and Germany are Flora Drew's texts, and not the Chinese prototexts.

According to the writer, the new space which has been created by this unavoidable shift from his country to the West, from the Chinese language to the target language (English), is the only literary space Ma Jian can conceive for himself, as we read in this interview:

[...] the space of writing. This space is entirely your own; there is nobody that reviews it, and there is nobody who has set foot there before. [Only after this space] is entirely your own will you be able to experience the possibilities of literature. (Damgaard 2012, 142)

By means of such a shifting process, along with a space for free writing, the writer acquires a new identity, which defies ethnic, geographical and even cultural borders.

In the new millennium, while many literary exiles have returned to China or given up their creative writing completely, others have turned their once-temporary exile into a permanent existential state. Writers and poets such as [...] Ma Jian find that living abroad not only provides them with a creative space sheltered from political censorship and the more beguiling temptations of the market, but also gives them an alternative perspective on literature, identity and their homeland. (Kong 2014, 127)

Due to the translational process, what is left in-between is a third, linguistic and identity-building space, made up of immaterial hints, which have to be transformed, explained or just evoked by the process of translation.

### 3. Becoming a “translational” author

What is a “translational author”? This concept can be defined as a writer who needs to be translated in order to be an author, and who shares with his/her translator his/her authorship. In Apter’s words:

[a] translational author – shorn of a singular signature – is the natural complement, in my view, to World Literature understood as an experiment in national sublation that signs itself as collective, terrestrial property. (2013, 15)

Since his earliest works, but especially with his first novel *The Noodlemaker*, the fierce attacks of Ma Jian on both Maoism and the current Chinese government’s policies have become popular with a western audience. In particular, his two latest novels, respectively on the Tiananmen incident (*Beijing Coma*), and on the effects of the ruthless implementation of the Chinese one-child-policy (*The Dark Road*), directly expose two of the most brutal scandals in Chinese recent history.

The brilliant English translations by the author’s wife Flora Drew are the result of a process which goes beyond a linguistic transfer and an ordinary translational act, and which rather involves a complicated psychological, ideological, and cultural negotiation between Ma Jian’s subjective literary style and cultural background, and the audience’s horizon of expectation, wisely re-constructed by the translator. The metatext thus acquires an independent identity perfectly consistent with the effect expected by the author of the prototext, yet, undeniably

different from the prototext itself. The writer is widely recognised for his translated texts rather than for the source text. That is why he acquires the status of a translational author, who shares his authorship with the translator. It is precisely this new status that allows the writer to enter a larger literary dimension that exceeds the borders of his/her own personal identity and of his/her writing language.

When considering the authoritative opinion expressed in several academic works about the reception of Ma Jian's novels as part of world literature, one must note that translation is key, which in this case allows the author to acquire such a transnational identity. At the same time, he acquires a translational and translingual identity which does not always perfectly overlap with his writing identity. Ma Jian, as a politically engaged writer, wishes his novels to be read by a wide audience, and to convey his political message. However, like any writer who aspires to a broader recognition of his work and thought, he is also the product of his own writing, his literary style, use of metaphors, syntax, rhythm, and imagery. It is up to the craftsmanship of the translator to reproduce or reinvent all these elements in the target language.

Meaningfully enough, Ma Jian's concern to overcome linguistic barriers by having his "reference copy" written in English as a *lingua franca* (through his wife's translation) is shared by many Chinese mainstream scholars and writers, although with totally different aims. On the one hand, according to him, assigning the role of reference text to the English version allows him to express his discontent and his criticism against China in a freer way. On the other hand, in the opinion of some mainland China scholars and writers, it is legitimate and advisable to promote Chinese literature through translation, in order to make significant Chinese works be part of world literature and to spread Chinese civilisation outside China:

[...] translation has also changed its traditional role from translating foreign culture and literature into Chinese

to translating Chinese culture and literature into other languages, mostly into English, as this language is the most popular one and actually functions as the major international language, especially in academic circles. In this way, people of other countries can read and appreciate excellent Chinese cultural products through the intermediary of translation or by means of English. Even when our Western colleagues have really mastered the Chinese language, it is still difficult for them to understand the nuances of Chinese culture and the subtleties of Chinese aesthetic spirit. So for the time we can more effectively communicate with the international community using the English language, the most popular international working language, by means of which we can translate and introduce our excellent cultural products to the world. (Wang 2008, 83)

This leaves us with the apparent clash between an anti-state, subversive use of translation, and its opposite use for nationalistic and self-congratulatory aims.

As a matter of fact, both Ma Jian, with his translational choice, and some Chinese academics, seem sceptical towards the possibility for western readers (and translators) to be really able to grasp the Chinese cultural essence, and they seem to believe that the Chinese language is fundamentally unfathomable in its deeper meanings and nuances<sup>4</sup>. However, at the same time, they are confident they are able to convey the subtleties of their own culture and language by translating Chinese texts themselves or by writing them directly in English. In the case of Ma Jian, what we have is not a self-translation, but a translation made by his closest companion in life. So, albeit for different reasons, all these authors have pragmatically established English as the most suitable language, and translation as the most convenient practice in order to gain a wider audience.

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<sup>4</sup> “[... Amy] Tan proposes that certain concepts are specific of Chinese culture (or, as she puts it, ‘Chinese people’), and therefore can only partially be translated. As a result cultural misunderstandings inevitably arise between Chinese and non-Chinese.” (Teng 2005, 68)

In other words, translation is contradictorily perceived as reliable in some cases (when its aim is to spread Chinese civilisation or, in the case of Ma Jian, the writer's authentic meanings), and as not "safe" enough in other cases, considering that Ma Jian insisted on having his novels translated into other languages from English and not from Chinese:

Except for the Italian rendition of *Lamianzhe* (Ma Jian's only work that has been translated directly from Chinese), all his other texts in Italian and French have been translated from English, thus they all are "second derivative" texts of Flora Drew's English translation. The problem is that there is no such animal as a "Western reader": notwithstanding all the homogenisation effects due to cultural globalisation, we can assert that both the way an Italian (or French) translator translates and the way an Italian (or French) reader reads a text are reasonably assumed to be different. (Pesaro 2013, 171)

This paradox leads to the fact that the higher Ma Jian's position in world literature, thanks to the English translations of his works, the blurrier his image as a Chinese writer. However, what really happens to the text undergoing this process? What changes are implemented in order to suit the western target-readers' expectations, to let them fully understand Ma Jian's literary and political project?

#### **4. Translation strategies**

Undeniably the translation strategy adopted by Flora Drew tends to enhance the political message of the text, by focussing on the main target-readership, a western audience whose cultural background might not be fully adequate to receive a culture-specific text.

Among the changes made to the original text in order to convey the meaningful messages embedded in it, for the English translations of Ma's novels the following translation strategies have been adopted:

- explication of implicit logical links and of narratological devices
- neutralisation or simplification of some culture-specific elements which might prevent the western reader from understanding and appreciating the core meaning of the text (terms and expressions characterised by cultural and ethnic diversity such as names, idioms, and toponyms);
- omissions and additions of small or larger portions of the text in order to avoid redundant or over-specific descriptions or, in the latter case, in order to provide useful information related to the social context.

I will just give a few examples of these domesticating strategies. Ma's latest novel *The Dark Road* tells the odyssey of Meili and her husband, a couple of peasants persecuted because of the strict one-child policy. In the beginning, the main characters and the village from which the peasants flee in order to avoid punishment at the hands of state officials are vividly presented through very dramatic scenes. In the English translation some details of the rural setting and Meili's attitude to her parents-in-law are slightly overlooked to make the reading smoother. The main translation strategy is a shift from the implicit to the explicit.

美黎的床和对面沙发以及地上都坐满了村民，她坐床里面小心地盖着腹肚，但脖子之上的红嘴唇没能逃过岳母的眼。她估计岳父也知道了 (Ma 2012, 11)

Distraught residents of the village sit crammed on Meili and Kongzi's bed, on the sofa opposite and on the floor. [...]

Meili is perched on the end of the bed, her hands carefully crossed over her belly. She suspects that Kongzi's parents have guessed that she's pregnant. (Ma 2014, 7)

In the Chinese text Ma Jian describes in a very allusive way a red mark on the woman's neck, as a trace of her physical relationship with her husband. This mark is in her eyes a dangerous clue for her parents-in-law, but her pregnancy is not explicitly mentioned. The English version instead gives an overt explanation of Meili's being afraid that her parents-in-law already know she is pregnant.

Another series of changes concern names, quotations and culture-specific details that are neutralised or modified during the translating process. Such is the case of some characters' names, which are simplified or changed: “孔慶東Kong Qingdong” becomes “Kong Qing”; “孔維Kong Wei” becomes “Kong Wen”. In a strongly political passage, the male protagonist (a teacher and Confucius' seventy-sixth heir) quotes an expression used by the Confucian thinker Mengzi “tianshi dili renhe” 天時地利人和 (“favourable climatic, geographical and human conditions”, Ma 2012, 148), pairing it with the idiomatic form “qian huhou” 欠火候 (need longer cooking). These elements are erased in the metatext and replaced by a simple “We wouldn't achieve anything” (2014, 153).

These changes do not affect the message of the text, nor do they obscure its cultural background, but they contribute to a general simplification, avoiding redundancies and what is perceived as unnecessary local details. While the Chinese reader immediately grasps their allusive meaning, a westerner would just find too strange their “exotic” specificity.

## **5. A de-territorialised identity: the dual perspective and the fourth-person narrator**

Translation strategies like the ones I have just described tend to de-territorialise the Chineseness expressed in the prototext, for they

enforce the distance between the translational author and his root identity. This distance, as well as Ma Jian's exclusive relationship with his own language, is also metaphorically signalled by his taste for elaborated narrative devices: in all his novels he makes wide use of a de-familiarising narrating strategy, as the narrating power is always entrusted to dual or split voices, or to a split observer's viewpoint.

In *The Noodlemaker* it is through the dialogues between a writer and his friend, the blood donor, and, in the last episode, between the writer and a "civilised" dog, that the gloomy scenery of contemporary Chinese society is depicted, while in *Beijing Coma* the decomposed mind of the comatose protagonist works as the main narrating perspective mirrored by an internal perspective on the man's inner body. Finally, *The Dark Road* presents an external narrator and a double internal/external perspective. Beyond the apparent attack against a world that perpetrates its brutal oppression over women and children, these two perspectives also represent the voice of a marginalised (exiled) author who recovers his centrality by means of literature and translation.

The author's self-de-territorialisation is represented both in *Beijing Coma* and in *The Dark Road*. If we remain on the level of the plot, the main characters of his novels are a fictional and symbolic reflection of Ma Jian's own "de-territorialised" identity: the protagonist of *Beijing Coma*, Dai Wei, is a victim of the 1989 Tiananmen shooting by the Chinese army, who lies in bed for ten years in a half-conscious state; therefore, the narration is split into two main threads where the protagonist's mind perceives itself as though it were outside the body. This dual narration relates both the detailed memories of his past until the fatal day of June 4, and the internal experience of his mind exploring from outside the comatose body as if it were a fabulous land.

I suggest that this splitting of the narrating subjectivity plays a twofold role by epitomising a dual identity: primarily, it is connected with Ma Jian's exile and his split literary identity. As Damgaard puts it, in the novel: "[h]is escape becomes inward,

as he travels through his body ‘like a submarine through the sea of red-brown cells’” (2012, 137). The whole structure of the novel is based on a split perspective. The powerful image of the decomposition of the mind/body has been sharply interpreted as a metaphor for China by Loh – “the condition of China in a twilight zone suspended between life and death” (2013, 391) – and by B. Kong – “Ma paints Dai Wei as a Gregor Samsa figure, his room, like his body, ‘a corpse that’s rotting from within (564)’” (2012, 203). Nevertheless, I believe that this image powerfully reflects Ma Jian himself as a marginalised author:

Dai Wei is just a stinking, dying body without any physical faculties of a human being. He cannot have any social interaction or social participation in China’s current society. As marginal as the author Ma Jian, who is completely invisible, whose works are banned, and whose temporary presence is tightly monitored in China, Dai Wei does not exist to any other Chinese people except his mother, and there only as an unbearable burden. (Zhai 2014, 115)

In addition, this also hints at a dual literary aspiration or double authorship: as a translational writer Ma Jian creates his novels, but it is Flora Drew’s words that will move readers’ minds and emotions. His allegorical, sometimes lyrical and sometimes epic style has to be reproduced and somehow reinvented by the voice of the translator, which in turns becomes the “other self” of the author.

In *The Dark Road* this double identity is even clearer, and it seems as though a mystical reunion of the two sides occurs, which reconnects the writing aspiration to the translating performance. Another effective metaphor here is the one that compares women’s reproductive power to the primordial force of literary creation. The main character of the novel, Meili, the mother, embodies Ma Jian’s rebellious attitude towards the Chinese government, and also his profound meditation on the fragility of the human condition. In

addition, we find a poetic embodiment of the writer's meditation on the mystery of existence and his nomadic spirit in the "fourth person narrator" (Ma 2012, 339), as Ma Jian calls his device in the novel: the unborn baby's point of view.

Meili is the main focalising character, although the story is told by an extradiegetic third-person narrator. Moreover, Ma Jian experiments with a different narrator: scattered across the text we find many passages highlighted in italics, describing emotions and scenes as perceived by the unborn baby, the fourth-person narrator.

我也创造了第四人称，让灵魂以双重视角存活着，并穿越现代，去寻觅传统的出生之地。(Ma 2012, 339)

[I also created a fourth-person narrator, letting the infant spirit exist with a dual viewpoint, to be able to pass through the modern times and to search for the birthplace of tradition.<sup>5</sup>]

In my opinion, this narrative technique of the dual perspective actually expresses Ma Jian's shifting identity in a highly literary way. He "translates" the writer's condition of exile through the powerful allegory of a mother who wants her infant to be born into a better world, just as the writer wishes his literature to be displayed in a freer country:

小说《阴之道》讲述了一位手无寸铁的母亲与一个国家的抗争，做为妈妈的美黎甚至连认字都困难，她唯一的财富就是生育，但子宫恰好掌握在政府手里。于是我们发现，母爱也许成了唯一的抵抗。当这个超生之家流亡到了拆解电子垃圾的天堂镇时，她再次怀上了胎儿，但胎儿拒绝出生在被化学污染，被计生迫害的人间地

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<sup>5</sup> The translation is my own, as the two passages are drawn from the Chinese afterword of *Yinzhidao*, which has not been translated in the English edition.

狱。她便决定用子宫保护着它，等待合法返回出生之地。(Ma 2012, 338)

[The novel *The Dark Road* narrates the resistance of a defenceless mother against her country. Meili is a mother for whom even reading is difficult, her only wealth is the ability of bearing children, but her uterus is just controlled by the government. Therefore we discover that perhaps maternal love becomes the only form of resistance. When this family, which has exceeded the targeted birth rate, wanders to Heaven Township, where e-waste is disassembled, she gets pregnant again, but the foetus refuses to be born in such a hell on earth, polluted by chemistry and frightened by the one-child policy. So she decides to protect it in her uterus, waiting to go back to a legal place to deliver it.]

## **6. Conclusion**

Like the infant spirit, the writer's spirit finds its way within the protective womb of literature. In his physical and linguistic exile, Ma Jian finds comfort in the re-creative power of translation. What I have demonstrated here is the influential yet contradictory role of translation in shaping Ma Jian's profile as an international writer, and in constructing his new and liberated identity, a new linguistic space where his political ideals and social criticism find an adequate space and a satisfactory audience. At the same time, through the internationally acknowledged authoritativeness of the English language, translation manipulates and transforms the writer's literary identity by making his authorship overlap with the translator's. The final text and the style of his novels are therefore the result of this transnational and translational process, which is artistically and symbolically epitomised by the writer himself through the narrative devices of the split perspective and multifocalisation.

The case analysed in this paper is also representative of a general trend in Chinese contemporary literature and scholarship, namely the growing expectations of both writers and intellectuals in terms of adjusting and improving the position of Chinese culture (no matter its political orientation) in the global framework of world literature.

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