Translating the Chinese Diaspora

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Yan Ge, *Elsewhere*. Scribner, 304pp., $27 cloth.

The title of Yan Ge's latest short story collection, *Elsewhere*, evokes the contradictions inherent to the immigrant experience: if one is elsewhere, one cannot be home, even if the elsewhere one has chosen is a place that one may have idealized in the past. For many of the characters in Yan's stories, particularly those who find themselves alone in a foreign land, the feeling of always wishing to be elsewhere (no matter where they might happen to live) captures a state of longing that appears to be the most permanent fixture of their interrupted lives.

It's a familiar sentiment for many individuals who identify with the far-flung members of the Chinese diaspora, a group produced by successive waves of immigration following the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the surge in international student enrollment in U.S. and U.K. universities starting in the 1990s, and—more recently—the viral stories of Chinese immigrants crossing the southern border from Mexico to the U.S. in search of lives free from CCP intervention after mass Covid lockdowns. Yet as the foundational premise of Yan's book, the wish to find oneself elsewhere forms the basis of a seemingly infinite number of plot permutations.

A graduate of the University of East Anglia's MFA program, Yan Ge writes stories that skirt the formulaic requirements of workshop fiction while still exhibiting some of the features of high cultural pluralism defined by Mark McGurl in his 2009 book *The Program Era*, namely, a merging of multicultural subject matter with the intense devotion to literary craft that renders an author's prose worthy of recognition by their professors, publishers, bespectacled readers, and award panel judges further down the line. In her case, Yan remains committed to representing Chinese cultural particularities to a global audience that skews white and Western, but she is primarily focused on the emotional turmoil that accompanies immigrants like her on their journeys to the West.

Following in the footsteps of other Chinese diasporic writers such as Ha Jin and Yiyun Li, Yan first started writing in English in 2016—but unlike many of her contemporaries who first found fame in the Anglo-American literary world, Yan had already established herself as the author of five novels in China. Her maturity as a storyteller is evident from the virtuosic range of the stories, which span centuries and cross continents, yet are united in their treatment of their Chinese diasporic subjects as perpetual wanderers who find themselves in a brave new world and must confront the people in it.

Neither a story cycle nor a straightforward collection, *Elsewhere* contains several loosely linked stories that share either a central character or a diasporic location. Taken as a whole, Yan's book is perhaps best understood as a meditation on the centrality of literature and language in mediating each of our encounters with the world in all its strangeness. Many of the stories share a commitment to exploring the necessity of translation in a globalized age—not necessarily as a tool to facilitate cosmopolitanism, but rather for individuals to navigate their disorienting new environments.

This theme is especially apparent in stories that feature Chinese immigrants who have recently arrived in the West. In "Stockholm," for example, the narrator is a writer and new mother who flies to Sweden to participate in a literary panel attended by "twenty people in the audience, mostly senior citizens" (a description that surely resonates with those of us who have presented at academic conferences). After the event, an audience member asks the narrator to identify her favorite Chinese word—to act as a translator of her own culture—and she in turn confronts the temptation of infidelity while pumping the breast milk her body insists on producing nonstop after giving birth. Characterized by a confessional tone, this story exhibits documentary impulses that feel auto-fictional, even if its plot is invented.

Other stories reimagine ancient Chinese history. In "Hai," Zixia, a disciple of Confucius, converses about the brutal death of his mentor Zilu, who was betrayed by an unknown party, and comes to

realize that the House of Confucius has become corrupted by greed and inequality before he himself is framed for the murder. Though these stories appear to have little in common, they share an overlapping concern with exploring how narratives—both in spoken form and as texts proliferating between cultures—can radically alter our experience of reality, especially in times of personal duress.

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Hardship, betrayal, and alienation are far from the only modes of existence detailed in the collection. The opening story, "The Little House," obliquely explores the psychic aftermath of the 2008 Szechuan earthquake by imagining a new communitarian ethos that emerges soon after the natural disaster. The story's first-person narrator, a poet who goes by Pigeon, takes shelter with fellow artists who have pitched a giant red tent in a square, where they indulge in sumptuous meals and casual sex in defiance of the death surrounding them. Both before and after she joins the collective, Pigeon is a reader of Camus's *The Plague*, and when she meets a man nicknamed Six Times, they exchange their views on fiction:

> Six Times wandered over and sat down beside me. "What are you reading?"
>
> I showed him the cover.
>
> "Camus," he said. "Interesting. Do you like him?"
>
> "He's all right," I said.
>
> You should read Marquez," he said. "*Love in the Time of Cholera* is a better choice."

Although Pigeon's praise for Camus is equivocal at best, Yan indirectly suggests that reading Camus functions as a coping strategy for Pigeon, allowing her to reach a state of calm that is unavailable to

her by any other means, including the hasty seduction Six Times enacts after he gives her the reading suggestion. What is left in the wake of the disaster, Yan suggests, is a series of choices about which distractions one might pursue to forget about the inevitable random tragedies waiting for us all. Weighed against other options, literature at least provides a more durable form of consolation.

Another lead story in the collection, "Shooting an Elephant," features a young Chinese woman, Shanshan, who finds herself struggling with the grief of a miscarriage after moving to Dublin with her workaholic husband, Declan. Declan is also a George Orwell fan so enamored with the writer's work that he arranged their honeymoon to Myanmar, where Orwell spent five years as a policeman during the waning days of the British Empire. Memories of the disastrous honeymoon briefly subside in Ireland. When she first arrives, Shanshan finds that "her anonymity soothed her," but she is also perturbed by the feeling that "anyone could turn to her at any moment and start a conversation about practically anything." Her lurking concern about her inability to maintain her own privacy—and by extension to secure herself against unwelcome intrusions—ultimately extends to her marriage. As she copes with the unresolved trauma of her miscarriage, Shanshan starts to read Orwell's 1934 novel *Burmese Days*, the same book her husband read aloud just before she suffered the miscarriage during their honeymoon, but Declan stops her:

> He hauled the book out from underneath
> her arm. "Why are you reading this?"
>
> She knew what he meant but she had no answer.
> Instead she said: "I thought he was your favorite writer."
> The Burmese woman looked down at Shanshan from
> the cover, a sarcastic expression on her face.
>
> "It doesn't matter." Declan shoved the book back on the top
> shelf of the bookcase. "You should focus on getting better."

For Shanshan, literature functions as a way—perhaps the only way—of feeling intimate with others—both Orwell and his readers (in this case, the husband who has grown estranged). At the end of the story, the couple reconciles after Shanshan crafts her own identity in Ireland by finding work as a translator, while she reads Orwell in her spare time as a way of becoming reacquainted with her husband. She makes her way through all of Orwell's books, but skips over the essay "Shooting an Elephant." We learn that Orwell's graphic description of the elephant's death was the text that Declan read to Shanshan when she was recovering in the hospital: "In a low and slightly hoarse voice, he had read to her how Orwell had pulled the trigger of the rifle, aiming the first bullet a few inches in front of the elephant's earhole." The visceral nature of Orwell's description,

delivered by a husband who has yet to come to terms with his own loss, coupled with Shanshan's acute knowledge that she—like the elephant—has suffered an involuntary form of violence, primes her to return to Orwell. Through her encounter with the English writer, Shanshan reaches a new understanding of how the miscarriage has impacted her, transforming it from an undeserved corporeal punishment to a shared experience of suffering.

The usefulness of language as a tool for dissolving the barriers between the self and the other is made most apparent in one of the most memorable stories in the collection, "How I Fell in Love With the Well-Documented Life of Alex Whelan," in which the narrator Claire—another Chinese female immigrant in Ireland—becomes infatuated with the posthumous social media persona of Alex, a young man she meets briefly at a movie screening before friending him on Facebook, only to discover that he commits suicide a few hours after accepting her friend request. Digging through his old Facebook posts, Claire discovers one dated from November 8, 2016 in which Alex unexpectedly catalogues "things we take for granted: A pint of Guinness. Packed and prewashed spinach. Eight bananas from Costa Rica for one fifty…Short stories of Kafka…Globalization. Rationalism. Freedom. Life." As she wavers between categorizing his words as banal

or profound, Claire realizes that it is only because Alex is dead that "every word and paragraph, every line of code, and every algorithm looked solemn and prophetic." Was Alex taking on the role of a Facebook prophet by forecasting the end of his own life, alongside the demise of globalization under Trump? Did he really regard Kafka's short stories as functionally equivalent to a bunch of imported bananas? As Claire searches for the answers to these impossible questions, she comes to realize that text may supplant physical intimacy in delivering unfettered access to another person's thoughts and emotions.

Yan suggests that the power of language lies in its abilities to bring us closer to overcoming our biggest source of pain: our isolation as individuals trapped in our own separate bodies. For diasporic subjects, this isolation is only intensified by the experience of being perceived as a foreigner, which leads to a longing to be elsewhere, if only in another person's head. Language, then, is the medium of communication best equipped to deliver a modicum of relief from the inherent loneliness of life in the internet age. It's only fitting that this relief may arrive in the form of a Facebook post we read only to forget as we scroll down and redirect our monetized attention to the next block of words from a person we may not even know in real life. ▲