

Ha Jin's Ecocritical Irony in the Stylistic Analysis of the Personal Pronouns in "A Tiger Fighter is Hard to Find"

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Abstract This paper aims at showing how stylistics and ecocriticism, both being strongly 'centripetal' and 'interdisciplinary' fields, can cooperate in the exploration of a literary text. This is the case of a short story written by the Chinese-American writer Ha Jin. Also thanks to the help of the digital analysis, the paper mainly focuses on the stylistic analysis of the personal pronouns and of the narrator's point of view to show the stinging and subversive irony which pervades the narration of the vicissitudes of a Chinese TV film crew who is asked to shoot a scene where a muscular hero has to fight bare-handed against a real Siberian tiger. The analysis also aims to show how the story becomes the opportunity for the writer to depict the narrow frame of mind of the blind dictatorship of his homeland and its deplorable consequences on both humans and animals. Thus, the whole exploration, in the end, reveals the ecocritical lens through which Ha Jin narrates the story.

Keywords Ha Jin. Personal pronouns. Ecocriticism. Irony. Digital stylistics.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Brief presentation of the Author. – 3 Summary of the Short Story. – 4 Analysis: Introductory Considerations. – 4.1 Stylistic Analysis of the Personal Pronouns and the Narrator's Point of View. – 5 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

In his attempt to describe ecocriticism,¹ Warren argues that this discipline is particularly strong when it becomes 'interdisciplinary': "interdisciplinary focus suggests that new ways of knowing can emerge from disciplinary crossing" (Warren 2010, 771-2). In point of fact, the very nature of ecocriticism suggests that this discipline *has to* be interdisciplinary, especially when considering its definition: "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, Fromm, cit. in Garrard 2016, 61). Warren further reinforces his argument by adding that "the ecocritical impulse reaches into a host of areas, each of them vibrant with new knowledge, new ideas" (Warren 2010, 772).

Such "interdisciplinary focus" seems to be in agreement with contemporary stylistics, as the predominant characteristic of stylistics is that it is a "bridge discipline" (Leech [2008] 2013, 2), that is to say a discipline whose nature is strongly interdisciplinary in its foundations and in its applications (Montini 2020, 9).² Given that "stylistics is the study of style" (Montini 2020, 17) and style is "the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose and so on" (Leech, Short [1981] 2007, 1), the interdisciplinarity of contemporary stylistics is an epistemological strong point, especially when taking into account that one of its main objectives is "to define the meaning of a text and its interpretation" (Montini 2020, 11). Therefore, the multiplicity of approaches will provide a more accurate interpretation of a text which a singular perspective cannot ensure (Montini 2020, 11).³ Thus, what ecocriticism and stylistics have in common is their openness to other disciplines, approaches and knowledge.

In this article, an attempt has been made to carry out a stylistic analysis of a short story titled "A Tiger Fighter is Hard to Find",⁴ written by the Chinese American writer Ha Jin, in order to provide an ecocritical interpretation of this text. The objective of this paper is to re-

1 See the following articles and books for a more complete outline of ecocriticism: Garrard 2004; Gifford 2008; Corti 2013; D'Arcy Wood 2013; Oppemann 2014. Suggested reading on stylistics: Stockwell 2005; Burke 2014; Stockwell, Whiteley 2014; Sotirova 2016; Montini 2017, 2020.

2 "La stilistica inglese contemporanea si presenta innanzitutto secondo un'impolazione fortemente interdisciplinare nel suo statuto e nelle sue applicazioni" (Montini 2020, 9).

3 "Questo aspetto, però, anziché essere visto come una debolezza epistemologica, ne è un significativo punto di forza dal momento che, se uno dei principali obiettivi è definire il significato di un testo e la sua interpretazione, la molteplicità degli approcci servirà a comporre una 'verità' sul testo che una prospettiva unica non potrà garantire" (Montini 2020, 11).

4 Ha Jin 2001.

veal what linguistic tools are employed by the writer in order to voice his sharp criticism of Chinese political narrow-mindedness. Special attention will be paid to the stylistic analysis of the most recurrent personal pronouns used in the short story. Moreover, apart from a political criticism against a specific regime which, as is shown in the story, is the very origin of all evils, this article aims at showing how certain aspects of Ha Jin's language contribute to an ecocritical critique. Ha Jin's political denunciation is also voiced through his ironic descriptions of clumsy attempts of a Chinese TV crew asked to shoot a muscular actor in the heinous act of fighting bare-handed a tiger.

Before entering the core of the analysis, a short presentation of the author and a summary of the short story with some introductory considerations about the symbolical importance of the tiger in Chinese traditional culture will be provided. Then, a stylistic analysis of the personal pronouns employed by Ha Jin, in particular those referring to the TV crew and the tiger will be proposed, as well as the narrator's point of view will be analysed. The stylistic analysis will be carried out with the aid of AntConc, a free text analysis application, particularly useful in data-driven analysis of text and key words. In the final part of this article, attention will be drawn to Ha Jin's use of irony in his short story when he presents the unfortunate consequences of dictatorship, specifically the objectification and victimisation of animals and humans. The acts of torturing and killing the tiger to fulfil the order from the local political institution in the name of the Chinese Communist Propaganda is seen as an ecocritical reading which reveals the distorted mechanisms at the basis of a solely anthropocentric view. Such reading is reinforced by the contribution of Derrida's philosophy which criticises the Western anthropocentric view according to which animals are objectified by humans.

2 Brief presentation of the Author

Ha Jin is the pen name of Jīn Xuěfēi, meaning 'Snow Flying'. He is a Chinese writer in English whose language has often been labelled as ironic, mostly for the effects produced by the literal translation of Chinese expressions into English with the consequent effect of plunging readers into the reality of some aspects of Chinese culture which he criticizes. It is typical of Ha Jin's style to translate Chinese metaphors, idiomatic expressions and toponyms to create an idiosyncratic narration which allows readers to actively perceive the feelings of his characters and understand their habits (Ibáñez 2016). Not always has his peculiar English been received in a positive way, since some critics define it as "crippled", or "shaky", (Messud 2000, Garner 2000, Tsai 2005) just for the same reasons for which he has been applauded as a brilliant example of bilingual creativity, or translation literature,

or, in other words, as one of the many expressions of literature currently appearing in global English (Ibáñez 2016; Haomin Gong 2014).

3 Summary of the Short Story

This story is part of a collection of twelve short stories titled *The Bridegroom*, all narrating, as most of Ha Jin's work, private happenings of common Chinese people. All the stories of the collection take place short before the end of the twentieth century, thus in a post-Cultural Revolution China. This book came out after his winning of the 1999 National Book Award for the novel *Waiting* (Vintage, 1999).

The story takes place in 1981 in a province of Northeast China and narrates the vicissitudes of a Chinese TV film crew who are explicitly asked to shoot a film where a renowned muscular actor, called Wang Huping and nicknamed Prince for his uncontested allure, has to fight bare-handed against a tiger. The real reason for this request, according to the political authorities, is to provide the audience with the "role model" "for the revolutionary masses to follow" (Ha Jin 2001, 54) by recalling Wu Song's legendary deeds.⁵ Wang Huping, in particular, soon becomes obsessed with the task of showing his virile strength by killing a tiger just like the ancient hero did (Liangyan Ge 2006, 40).

Everything starts when the director receives this command in a letter sent by the provincial governor's office. He is immediately puzzled as to how to accomplish the task of "strengthen[ing] people's hearts and instill[ing] into them the spirit that fears neither heaven nor earth" (Ha Jin 2001, 54).

The whole story is pervaded by the writer's irony. In a fictional context, irony comes "from the contrast in values associated with two different points of view" (Leech, Short [1981] 2007, 223); in particular, it may take place when the contrast is between an implied point of view stated in the narration and the one of the writer. The initial situation revolves around a sense of duty felt by the director and crew which prompts them to obey that order and the actual impossibility of complying with it given the evident unequal balance of strengths between a tiger and a man.

Despite the fact that the tiger is a protected endangered species, the crew succeed in catching one enormous specimen thanks to a grant from the local administration office. The actor is scared, but,

⁵ Wu Song is the hero of a sixteenth century Chinese novel titled *Shuihu zhuan* recounting the adventures of one hundred and eight bandit heroes in the twelfth century. In the initial part of the novel, Wu Song succeeds in killing a tiger with his bare hands thus showing his virility and heroism (Liangyan Ge, 2006, 39-43).

nonetheless, the director convinces him to face the wild beast. The scene of the combat has to be necessarily shot in one take, and it requires two men with tranquillizer guns and a jar of liquor for Wang Huping, who is also given a cudgel. The tiger and Prince are soon involved in a ridiculous fight, revolving around cudgel blows and the tiger springing around. The actor manages to hit the animal only when it collapses under the influence of the tranquillizer.

Of course, the director is not satisfied with the shooting, but Wang Huping is nonetheless exulting convinced that he has killed it with his bare hands: "I killed him! I killed him!" (Ha Jin 2001, 58).

He is so hot-headed that he continues babbling about killing the tiger as the crew doctor gives him a sedative before clutching him, dragging him away and sending him to hospital for his frenzied comments. Despite the actor's mental state, a second shooting is done, but unsuccessfully.

The crew come to the conclusion that what is actually wrong is not the animal, but the actor and the only possible solution is to shoot the scene with a fake tiger, that is to say, someone of the crew wearing the skin of the tiger. The problem at this point is to kill a protected animal, but the director finds a way to do it after talking to a friend of his in the local administration. A soldier is called to kill the tiger without damaging its skin. Pieces of the animal are sold on the black market which supplies Chinese traditional medicine.

Meanwhile, Wang Huping is excited at the idea of fighting against a fake animal, without realising that there is no bravery in doing that. On the way to the set, Prince grins at the crew, gnashes his teeth and makes hissing sounds through his nose, while his eyes show ferocity. Seeing him in such state, nobody in the crew is available to shoot the combat scene against him.

Hoping to find a volunteer, the director offers an opulent eight-course dinner as a reward in a renowned restaurant. The crew truck driver, called Little Dou, accepts and wears the tiger's skin while Prince is invited to attack, but, of course, without the cudgel. Prince punches the truck driver-tiger incessantly while pitiful requests for mercy are coming from underneath the tiger's skin. Even though the fake tiger is motionless, Wang Huping goes on kicking its flanks, neck, head: "Kill this paper tiger! I'm going to finish him off!" (67). When the fight is over, he shouts out: "I killed another tiger! I'm a real tiger-fighter!" (67). Little Dou under the tiger's skin is taken to hospital wounded and unconscious.

The film production is completed at last, broadcast by some TV stations in the Northeast and the crew are promised a financial bonus in case the film receives an award.

The story ends with both the truck driver and Prince still hospitalized, but the one who actually seems to have suffered irreparable damage is Prince, who is sent to a psychiatric hospital for good.

While paying a visit to him, the narrator finds Prince's hands full of scars caused by punching sandbags. He tells Prince that there are over three hundred messages for him, but he does not specify that most of them are written by girls who are still in love with him and that he has been sent chocolates, raisins, fountain pens, and "even photos of themselves" (70). The narrator is puzzled by the whole story and wonders: "How come when a man becomes a poor wretch he's all the more splendid to the public?" (70). Prince will end his life deeply convinced, "like an imbecile" (70), that he is a real tiger-fighter.

4 Analysis: Introductory Considerations

The plot shows scenes of comicality, due to the evident irony of the writer when depicting the clumsy attempts of the crew to fulfil the absurd order from the local political institution issued in the name of a chauvinistic political attitude. Beyond a political attack against the Chinese Communist narrow-mindedness, there is also a clear ecocritical approach which shows the ill-fated consequences of violation against nature, embodied in the heinous act of killing the tiger to make the filming of the scene easier for the muscular actor.

In fact, the end of the story is bitter because none of the directly involved characters ends up happy. This is inevitable as the tiger is killed, and thus nature is violated. With a slight hint of comicality, Ha Jin shows that there is a sort of nemesis for this act of violation: the muscular actor, Wang Huping-Prince, is permanently hospitalized in a psychiatric ward. He is ridiculed by the narrator, who depicts him as an imbecile convinced of being a hero, a tiger-fighter. The truck driver, Little Dou, who has accepted to play the tiger only in exchange for an opulent lunch, needs a long hospitalization. Moreover, readers are not even told if the TV film wins an award or not.

The real victim is the tiger, a majestic wild male Siberian specimen, the real prince of nature, who is first encaged, then tortured, and killed in the end. The crew, a synecdochical referent for humans, ends up as proper nature exploiters: not only do they capture, torture and kill the tiger, but, appallingly enough, trade its body parts on the black market. All this in the name of an absurd order framed in the Communist propaganda of those years, whose aim is to convince people of the rightness of a narrow-minded political conviction.

Wang Huping ends up in a psychiatric ward, where he pathetically goes on practising kung-fu. The film is probably not going to win any award. This is an inevitable ending of this story, especially if we contextualise the story inside a Chinese frame with all the symbolisms the tiger bears in ancient Chinese traditional culture. As a matter of fact, in China the tiger is considered the king of all wild animals, representing a powerful and untamed Yang masculine energy. Its fierce

appearance is associated with the elements of sun and fire, of rage and, very importantly, it is considered the symbol of universal balance and justice, and capable of driving off demons (Eberhard 1986, 362-4). According to ancient Chinese popular tradition, the tiger was so sacred and feared by people that its very name was considered as a taboo (Eberhard 1986, 362-4): harming a tiger implies chaos and the collapse of the universe. By extension, being traditionally the king of wild animals, the tiger in this story embodies nature which is violated by Chinese totalitarianism that has overthrown the ancient harmony of Chinese cultural tradition and has objectified nature.

4.1 Stylistic Analysis of the Personal Pronouns and the Narrator's Point of View

From a stylistic point of view, a further dose of comic effect is provided by the use of the personal pronouns in the story, which contribute to focussing on the narrator's point of view and explain the real frame of mind of Wang Huping, Prince, or the fake "tiger-fighter".

A fruitful starting point when exploring a text from a stylistic point of view is to analyse what it foregrounds, that is to say, what in that text 'deviates' from the linguistic norm. Moreover, a stylistic analysis has to be necessarily "rigorous", "retrievable" and "replicable" (Simpson 2004, 3-4), that is to say transparent in its procedures, based on objective data and textually grounded (Montini 2017, 12-13). For a stylistician, any other way of analysing a text runs the risk of being bizarre and biased. Since the process of interpretation is always a gap-filling process (Eco 1995, 49), we may assert that stylistics provides an objective kind of analysis.

At this point we are going to concentrate on the use of personal pronouns in the text, with particular reference to the first persons 'we'/'I' and the third person masculine object pronoun 'him', which are the most frequently occurring pronouns in the short story employed in the short story to narrate the vicissitudes of the TV crew.

Starting any text, thus not necessarily a literary text, with a personal pronoun is a device used by writers to plunge readers into the plot immediately, 'in medias res', thus avoiding any kind of introduction. In this way, readers' attention is promptly activated (Wales [1990] 2016, 260). Ha Jin's short story starts with the personal pronoun 'we', referred to the film crew and to the narrator, who, in this way, is understood to be a member of the crew directly involved in the story. When we process the text with a digital tool, such as

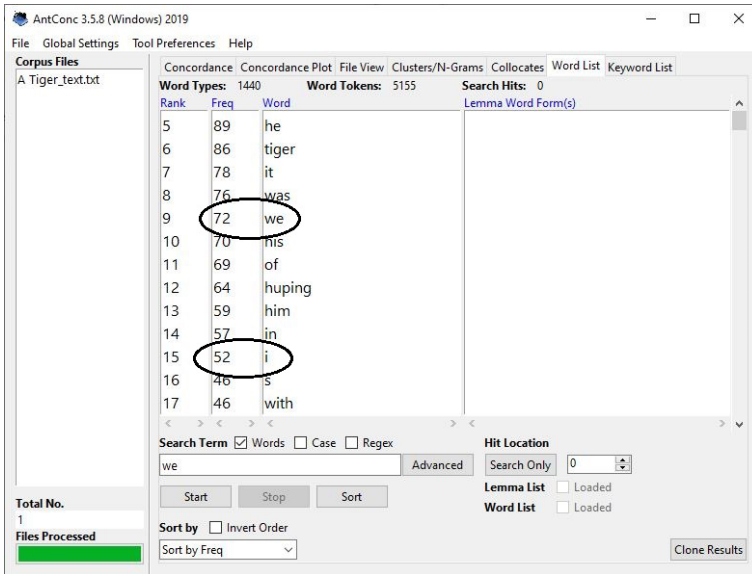


Figure 1 Word list resulting from the word processing of the story

AntConc,⁶ we notice that this pronoun is more frequent than 'I', despite the fact that the story is told by a single narrator: he is the narrator and, at the same time, the member of the TV crew, as well as the accomplice in their wrongdoings. As a matter of fact, in the text 'we' is present 72 times, while 'I' is present 52 times [fig. 1].⁷ It must be added that 'I' not only refers to the narrator - who speaks only 16 times in the first person singular -, but to any other character who speaks in the first person singular throughout the text, that is to say also Wang Huping/Prince, Secretary Feng (the prop master), Director Yu, Old Min (the man who refuses to play the role of the tiger), and Little Dou (the truck driver who accepts to play the part of the tiger). Therefore, the dominant personal subject pronoun is 'we': this detail conveys that the narrator feels personally engaged in what is happening to the film crew. The narration is subjective, told through the eyes of one narrator who feels deeply involved in the vicissitudes and in the wrongdoings of the TV crew.

⁶ AntConc is a free text analysis application which can be used for the analysis of single or multiple text files, especially concerning a data-driven analysis of text and keywords (<https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antcon/>).

⁷ The text is 5018 words long.

The fact that the most frequent personal pronoun in the story is 'he' is not very meaningful as regards the interpretation of the text, since all the characters – even the tiger – are male. This fact explains the high frequency of this pronoun, which appears exactly 89 times.

Nevertheless, even though the narrator feels involved in the vicissitudes of the crew, during the narration he gradually becomes definitely aware of the foolishness of the whole matter, despite the fact that since the very beginning he has been a little sceptical, even though curious, about the shooting of a real combat between a tiger and a man: "I stood behind a large elm, hugging my ribs" (Ha Jin 2001, 58), he says at the first shot, and "I had my doubts" (63) at the proposal of shooting the film with a fake tiger. He is doubtful about the realistic effect of shooting a film with a man wearing a tiger skin:

I thought that we couldn't possibly get a skin identical to the real tiger's. After I expressed my misgivings, people fell silent for a long time. (64)

He also becomes gradually detached from the tragi-comical development of the story when he states "I avoided looking at him" (65) referring to Wang Huping's bizarre behaviour before facing the fake tiger. Nevertheless, he does not desist from being critical about the foolish expedient of a fight between Little Dou/tiger and Wang Huping – who is overexcited at this point:

I said, 'If he cripples Little Dou, it'll cost us lots.' – 'Don't put such jinx on us!' the director snapped at me. I held my tongue. (67)

However, he stops making objections and, adopting a passive attitude, quickly falls silent. What is left for him to do, at the end of the story, is paying visits to the presumed tiger-fighter and his victim, just to report on the bitter ending of this crazy enterprise.

Perhaps the most interesting piece of data emerging from the Word List as a result of the digital processing of the short story is that the most frequently used noun is the noun 'tiger'. As a matter of fact, this noun recurs 86 times, that is to say it is the most meaningful noun in the story [fig. 2]. It is worth noticing the personal pronoun attributed to the wild animal throughout the narration: everybody refers to the feline with the personal pronoun 'it', apart from Huping, who always uses the objective personal pronoun 'him': this feature is a further indication which reveals that the tiger is objectified throughout the short story. According to English grammar rules, the pronoun 'it' is preferable for animals in general, especially when nobody is involved with them on an emotional level. The personal pronouns 'he'/'him' and 'she'/'her' are used to address animals when somebody is emotionally involved with them, as if they were equated

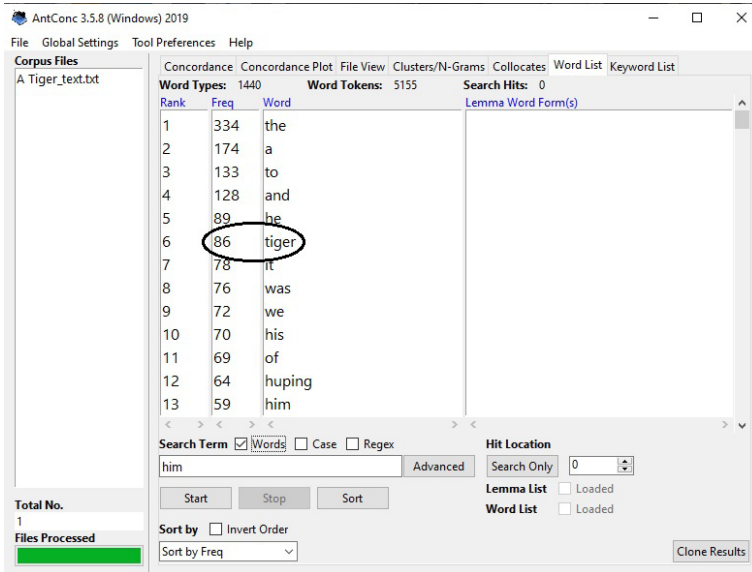


Figure 2 Occurrence of the word 'tiger' resulting from the digital text processing

with humans for this reason. Wang Huping always refers to the tiger with a pronoun which is proper for a person. This can be considered a deviation from the norm, thus it foregrounds the text and, for that reason, it deserves further analysis. For the crew the tiger is always 'it', which means that the animal is being objectified, while for its opponent only the animal is always 'him', thus 'he'. This could be explained if contextualised in Prince's delirium, which makes him feel that he and his opponent are at the same level, as if the animal were a man, hopefully as muscular as he is. It is clear that the more powerful the rival is, the more powerful the one who defeats him is, especially when, for Wang Huping, the real issue at stake is Wu Song's emulation and, consequently, a proof of virility. However, just for this reason, and in this context, the distorted representation of Wang Huping's rival creates a comical effect, created by the narrator particularly through accurate juxtapositions of images of Prince's exultation for being convinced of having killed the tiger, and of the pitiful reaction of the people around him [tab. 1].

Prince is exulting for having been chosen to fight against a tiger for his masculine poise. However, the narrator does not spare pitiful details on the uneven struggle between the feline and the actor from the very first shot by ridiculing Wang Huping's immediate reaction

Table 1 Juxtapositions regarding Wang Huping's behaviour and the reactions to it

Wang Huping's behaviour	Other people's reactions to Wang Huping's behaviour
"I killed him! I'm the number one tiger-fighter!" Huping shouted. (58)	People ran up to him and tried to calm him down. (...) The medic poured some water into the bowl and took out a sedative tablet. He made Huping take the medicine. (58)
(...) to our astonishment, he burst out singing like a hero in a revolutionary opera (...). (59)	Two men clutched Huping's arms and dragged him away while he was babbling about plucking out the tiger's heart, liver, and lungs. (...) "He's punch-drunk." (59)
Whenever someone came into sight he'd shout "Hey, I killed the tiger"! (59)	We worried about him, so we called in a pedicab and sent him to the hospital for a checkup. (...) the diagnosis was mild schizophrenia. (59)

at the tiger's attack. Prince identifies himself with the Chinese legendary hero, Wu Song, still the outcome of the clash is indecorous:

With a crack the front half of the cudgel flew away. Huping dropped the remaining half, just as Wu Song does in the story. The beast rushed forward, reached for Huping's leg, and ripped his pants, then jumped up, snapping at his throat. (58)

The descriptions of the fights between Wang Huping and the tiger enhance a perception of absurdity regarding the whole adventure, which consequently, casts an ironic light on the events as seen by the narrator.

Addressing the tiger using the pronoun 'him' paves the way for the last feature of the story which deserves special attention, namely the way Wang Huping refers to the fake tiger.

Once it has been ascertained that no man is capable of facing a tiger, let alone bare-handed and blindly driven by a sense of obedience and vanity, the only solution which seems to be left is killing the tiger and using its skin for a human actor to play a fake tiger. Despite his mental disorder, Wang Huping is called to fight against a pitiful tiger puppet and his behaviour leaves the readers amused:

On the way, Huping grinned at us, gnashed his teeth, and made hisses through his nose. His eyes radiated a hard light. That spooked me, and I avoided looking at him. (65)

Convinced of being on the cusp of definitely conquering the longed title of tiger-fighter, Prince states, thinking of what is expecting him: "I'll whip him!" (65) and "Kill this paper tiger! I'm going to finish him off!" (67).

The narrator's ironic tone is further enhanced by the use of the personal pronoun 'him', even though Prince refers to his rival as a 'paper tiger' being unaware that this time he is not going to fight a real animal. It is clear that his mental state prevents him from being able to actually distinguish between the real wild beast and the unlucky man playing that role.

There is more to it. Under the skin of the wretched tiger, as readers are perfectly aware, there is a truck driver, Little Dou, and the very adjective 'little' conveys a lot about the pitiful mission with which Prince is entrusted.

When analysing the use of the personal pronouns, we notice that the narrator addresses Little Dou/tiger by using the pronoun 'it', and not 'him'. Only Prince insists on 'him', but readers are well aware of his madness and of the fact that he does not know that his opponent is a fake tiger. This is, perhaps, one of the pivotal points which reveals Ha Jin's critical lens, through his narrator. This deviating use of personal pronouns, especially the use of 'it' for a human, foregrounds the text and unveils the bitter irony of the Chinese writer. An irony which, playing with the distorted vision of humans and animals, turns into ecocriticism whose ultimate target is both the stubbornness of Chinese Communism and the ill-fated consequences of violation against nature.

As a matter of fact, among the twelve stories which form the collection titled *The Bridegroom*, this is the only story which provides an evident vein of harsh ecocriticism. Ha Jin's stinging irony is subversive and clearly reveals the writer's political view of contemporary China.

The act of killing a tiger, above all for all that this animal represents in Chinese traditional culture (Eberhard 1986, 362-4) is vile and appalling and it is accomplished only to obey a political order and satisfy the director's thirst for success. The victims of such blind obedience are first of all the tiger, but also all the crew in their mad attempt to carry out the order issued by the authority. Wang Huping and Little Dou are the characters who are affected the most. The only possible consequence, human failure, is suggested at the end of the story when the two characters are hospitalised.

Applying the principles of Derrida's philosophy, further ecocritical interpretation of this text can be achieved. Even though the French author's analysis, in particular the one carried out in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* (Derrida 2006), regards Western philosophy, we can attempt to extend his thought and employ it as a key to interpret Ha Jin's short story. What equates the Western philosophy to the Chi-

nese Communist attitude described in the story is the relationship between humans and animals based on strength and subjugation which characterizes the anthropocentric view of life and the Communist propaganda action. According to Derrida, all Western philosophy is to be read as strongly anthropocentric. Going back to one of Kant's statements, Derrida reflects on how deeply "human", and exciting for humans, is the impulse of fighting and, consequently, for taming what humans consider 'inferior', subjectable, such as animals can be. According to the French philosopher, men always fight an inner clash against "non-human animals", which are reduced to play sparring partners. Such a vision is inevitably catastrophic because it is based on an unbalanced distribution of power between humans and the rest of the living beings. This causes a total chaos since the subjugation and objectification of "non-human animals" inevitably harms humans too.

Derrida claims that "non-human animals" are prisoners of anthropocentric views: such interpretation well explains why Little Dou, wearing the tiger's skin, becomes "it" to everybody, as the stylistic analysis has proven. Little Dou, in the role of the fake tiger, is 'reduced' to the state of a "non-human animal", consequently he is addressed with the pronoun of "it" by the TV crew, and only Wang Huping, with his mental disorder, refers to him by employing the pronouns "he/him. It can be argued that the crew admire the tiger for its majestic aspect. However, adopting Derrida's framework, they are convinced that it is at their disposal, no matter if that implies killing the feline, just because of the fact that it is an animal. Applying a Derridean lens, the superiority to animals that humans feel is the real reason why Wang Huping keeps on beating the fake tiger with unwonted fury, as the following examples from the text show: "Huping struck its head with his cudgel [...] striking its back and head" (Ha Jin 2001, 57) and "I'll whip him" (65) are some of the expressions referred to the fight against Prince and the real tiger and, later, the narrator describes the actor's fury against the fake animal:

"Huping leaped on its back and began riding it around, shouting, "Kill!" Gripping its forelock with his left hand, he hit the tiger hard on the head with his right fist. "Oh, Mama!" the tiger squealed. "He's killing me!" (66).

And also:

"Huping was slapping the tiger's face and spat on it as well."(67)

Such cruelty towards both the real tiger and the fake one, goes beyond Prince's madness, as it represents the expression of repressed rage of humans against "non-human animals".

Ha Jin's story tackles the specific situation of a dictatorship and its absurd expressions of stubbornness and violence. As a matter of fact, this short story depicts the vicious mechanisms which inevitably emerge in contexts of dehumanisation, or, better, objectification. We can notice Wang Huping's instinctive rage, under the false appearance of gentle manners (thanks to which he has been given the nickname Prince), as the extension of the brutality of the dictatorship which he obeys and which is blindly violent, no matter if against people or nature.

In the end, this blind stubbornness is embodied in the absurd order written in the letter, in the servile obedience of the crew director, in the wilfulness of most members of the crew to continue the shooting, in Wang Huping's arrogance, as well as in the cruelty against the tiger and against Little Dou. The victims are all the characters of the story: not only the tiger, or Prince and Little Dou, but the whole crew who hope for an award which will never arrive. Even the narrator is a victim as he ends up simply going to pay visits to the two broken fighters. The linguistic strategy employed by Ha Jin of making the narrator use the pronoun 'we', rather than 'I', makes it clear that the narrator is as a member of the TV crew who is an accomplice in the crime against nature. The narrator, therefore, takes active parts in the objectification of nature. In this way, Ha Jin depicts the narrator and the crew as perpetrators of Chinese Communist totalitarianism which, given its nature, exploits the other as a means to reach an objective without worrying about him/her. In this story, Ha Jin has adopted an ecocritical lens to point his finger against the chains of the Cultural Revolution and that is evidently shown by the writer's irony employed to describe the TV crew's clumsiness which pervades the narration and that culminates in the final part where the narrator ends up by visiting the two 'fighters' in the hospital. The narrator, thus, is portrayed as a tormentor for joining the TV crew through the use of personal pronoun 'we'. Yet, he is also a victim when he is depicted as incompetent for not having been able to openly rebel against the crime.

5 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to employ a stylistic exploration as a method of analysis to emphasise an ecocritical perspective and the writer's ironic vein in the commentary of a political story which points an accusing finger at the unfortunate consequences of blind dictatorship on both humans and animals and which reduces them both to the position of victims. The analysis started with the exploration of the use of the pronouns employed by Ha Jin to refer to the tiger and to the narrator to show both the focus of the narration and the

victimization of humans and animals. The synergy between the stylistic analysis and the ecocritical reading has unveiled the distorted and unlimited mechanisms which are at basis of an unfettered anthropocentric view. Such condition inevitably has an impact on human beings and nature, which is violated by humans. The tiger is always reduced to 'it', notwithstanding the fact that its part is performed by a human. The only person who refers to the animal with the pronouns 'he/him' is the schizophrenic Prince. The tiger is exploited to the advantage of the Chinese Communist propaganda: the ancient harmony which saw the tiger as a supreme symbol of energy is broken and none of the members of the film crew is safe. The two fighters, Prince and Little Dou, end up pitifully due to the fact that they have presumed to tame and kill the tiger, that is to say nature. Not even the narrator ends up happy: his passive involvement in the vicissitudes of the film crew, his being definitely 'we' with the crew, bestows on him the minor role of assisting the two fighters, who are both hospitalised.

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