

In the Temple of High-Nosed Ghosts

UNLIKE THE AUTHOR, THE HERO OF HA JIN'S LATEST NOVEL SACRIFICES MUCH TO LIVE IN THE UNITED STATES

HAD NAN WU stayed in China, he would have been assured a job, a salary, housing of a sort, and medical care. But the protagonist of *A Free Life*—like the author of his story, Ha Jin—chooses the United States, and with it the time constraints inherent in making a living for himself and his family.

"I'm much more fortunate," says Jin (GRS'94), an Arts and Sciences professor of creative writing. "I didn't quit school. I didn't own and run a restaurant." Rather, he earned two degrees in China, a privilege made rare by the Cultural Revolution. Rarer still, as a graduate student of American literature he had access to books otherwise unavailable, including novels by Faulkner and Bellow. (His own books are banned in

China.) Jin entered a Brandeis Ph.D. program in English on scholarship in 1985 and five years later published his first book, a collection of poetry written in English. He sat in on fiction writing courses in BU's Creative Writing Program for two semesters to hone his English skills, and having completed his doctoral work, enrolled in the program.

Nan, on the other hand, manages to buy a restaurant after years of hard, menial work and thus must work even harder. Finally, he sells the restaurant, takes a job as a night watchman, with benefits that include the all-important health insurance for his family, and settles down to writing poetry. That is easier than writing fiction just because poems are shorter, says Jin,

Ha Jin, here in Boston's Chinatown, has published *A Free Life*, his first novel set in his adopted country, the United States.

but it almost never provides an adequate income or recognition. Nan has accepted failure.

In contrast, Jin has summers free to write, publish, and be recognized. He has published three volumes of poetry, three books of short stories, and five novels, garnering an array of major honors: the 1999 National Book Award (for the novel *Waiting*), a PEN/Hemingway Award (for the short story collection *Ocean of Words*), and two PEN/Faulkner Awards (for *Waiting* and his 2005 novel, *War Trash*). *A Free Life*, published by Pantheon, is a *New York Times* 2007 notable book.

In many details, Nan's story is typical of the stories of other immigrants, Jin's included. (Jin teaches the Literature of Migrants for undergraduate and graduate students.) Over the years, Nan grows away from the local Chinese community and from his parents, who have stayed in China. When he finally visits, almost everything there is strange and unsatisfying. Increasingly comfortable in English, Nan, like Jin and Nabokov and Conrad before him, chooses to write in his new language.

A Free Life ends with a group of Nan's poems, several about that decision.

Even if you're lucky and earn a
seat someday
In the temple housing those
high-nosed ghosts,
Do you really think they will
accept you
Just on the merits of your
poems?
Be warned — some of them, who
were once SOBs,
Will call you a clever Chinaman.

Nan has chosen life in "a
country without borders," with
all its possibilities. *A Free Life*
concludes,

You must go there, quietly.
Leave behind what you still
cherish.
Once you enter that domain,
A path of flowers will open
before your feet.

NATALIE JACOBSON McCracken

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