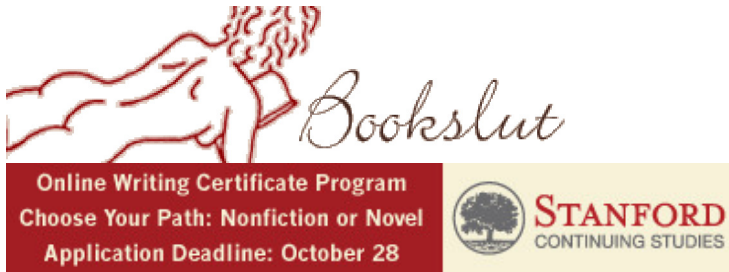


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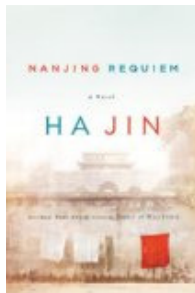
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An Interview with Ha Jin



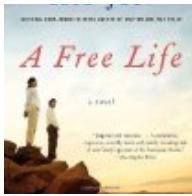
Ha Jin has lived through difficult, defining events: the Cultural Revolution in his native China, military service that began when he was a young teenager, immigration and subsequent separation from home and family. On the page, he has vividly reproduced the repression of the Cultural Revolution, the brutality of the Korean War, and most recently the horror of the Nanjing massacre. His literary reputation is built on tight, exacting prose that captures the minutiae of daily lives often trapped in challenging -- if not downright tortuous -- circumstances.



I admit to being quite surprised -- most pleasantly so -- to finally encounter Jin the writer in real time, when he answers his phone. He doesn't seem to mind at all that I've kept him waiting (shameless, I know!). He takes a quick moment to close the window of his office at Boston University, where he was once an MFA student and has been teaching literature and creative writing for almost a decade. His voice is welcoming and animated (and instantly forgiving). He laughs easily and often sounds like he's smiling. While his speech belies his Chinese mother tongue, his answers reflect the same spare precision that defines his writing.



Choosing English as his literary language set Jin on a deliberate journey away from China, and yet Jin remained attached to the China of his memories by recreating his birth country in his earlier titles, including his first three short story collections, [Ocean of Words](#) (1996), [Under the Red Flag](#) (1997), and [The Bridegroom](#) (2000), and his three first novels, [In the Pond](#) (1998), [Waiting](#) (2000), and [The Crazy](#) (2002). With [War Trash](#) (2004), Jin took a step away from China into Korea, with

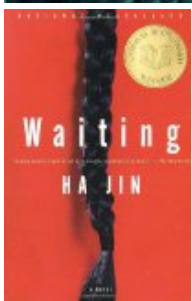


a brief prologue set in Atlanta.

His penultimate novel, *A Free Life* (2007), was Jin's first book to be set in his adopted land, and marks a clear delineation in his career. His opening dedication, "To Lisha and Wen, who lived this book," suggests similarities to Jin's own immigration story. His latest collection, *A Good Fall* (2009), continues his American observances.

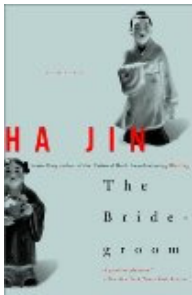


Now with his newest, *Nanjing Requiem*, Jin returns to a China before his birth. In an introductory letter, Jin announced his intent to reclaim American missionary Minnie Vautrin's heroism during the 1937 Nanjing massacre: "She suffered and ruined herself helping others, but she became a legend. At least her story has moved me to write a novel about her. If I succeed, my book might put her soul at peace."



While many were fleeing Nanjing as it came under Japanese attack, Vautrin opened Jinling Women's College to ten thousand mostly women and children and repeatedly risked her life to save refugees from the atrocities the Japanese military inflicted on Chinese civilians during the Sino-Japanese War. As if to distance himself from the unspeakable terror of the historic tragedy, Jin filters Vautrin's experiences through the perspective of her fictional Chinese assistant, who records both Vautrin's courage and her agonizing demise over the victims she couldn't save.

I felt that *Nanjing Requiem* had a different style from your previous titles... There's a jarring bluntness that doesn't appear in your other works. Was this intentional?



I think this kind of story requires a different kind of narrative. I didn't exactly design it this way, but this is a story that couldn't be entertaining or lighthearted. Yes, I was aware of the different style, but it happened automatically.

How did you keep nightmares at bay while you were writing *Nanjing*? Did you have a detox plan at the end of a writing day?

Not really. Because I spent so much time writing, it was hard to keep any distance. I tried to get distant from the book after I finished writing. But while I was immersed in it, I had no way to get out. It was actually a very depressing project.

And why Nanjing? How did you pick that subject?

It was a very important historic moment. And one of my granduncles was killed by Japanese soldiers, not in Nanjing, but in Shandong. It's hard to tell a story like that -- artistically it's very hard, very challenging. That was probably the main reason.

So this means you must enjoy challenges?

In a way, yes. The challenge here became an obsession. I gave up writing the book twice, but couldn't help returning to it. Each time, I was just feeling so bad, I couldn't do anything more. Then after a few weeks, I had to go back again; I felt like I wasted so much time.

Will you perhaps use your next book to balance some of the sadness you experienced while writing *Nanjing*?

Psychologically, yes. The new book is much lighter in style. I'm writing about present experiences, and it's not heavy at

all. The book will take years; I don't know when it will be done. Maybe two or three years still? I'm deep into it now.

When you gave up returning to China after Tiananmen Square, how did you decide to write only in your adopted language?

I wanted to create work only in English. I wanted to try and be a writer in English. I couldn't write in both languages at the same time; I felt it would be very hard to keep the integrity of the work if wrote in Chinese.

And you also adopted a pen name. Why?

In the beginning, I didn't want people to know I'd been writing. My first name begins with an X -- it's Xuefei -- and I think it's very hard to pronounce.

How did you decide on "Ha"?

It's from Harbin, my favorite city in China.

So what was that process first like when you began to write only in English? Did you think in Chinese first and then translate into English when your words appeared on the page? Or did you always create in English first?

I have to think in English first. I have to feel the emotions of the words as I write them. So I couldn't think in Chinese, then translate, although I think Chinese is always in the background. When my characters speak, however, they speak in Chinese, and sometimes they use Chinese expressions that I can't always translate completely.

If I have Chinese narrators, then I can't suppress their language completely. I have to just let them speak, and I pick up the most communicable elements. The English needs to come out fresh. How to keep that distinction is the hard part -- between the native versus non-native speakers. I can get lost easily.

I understand that you've started to translate some of your own works into Chinese. Do you think you might write first in Chinese someday?

Perhaps short pieces. Maybe. But long pieces, no. I have to live in the language, in the environment of that language, so a long piece would be very hard.

Do you still think in both languages?

Yes.

Do you dream in English or Chinese?

Both. When I get too emotional, then the Chinese comes up. In that sense, Chinese is still my first language.

Which language do you speak with your family?

With my wife, mainly Chinese. With our son, mostly English. It just happened that way. My son can speak Chinese, but he can't read it. We didn't ever impose a language on him. If I speak Chinese to him, he always answers back in English, so it's easier to just use English. With my wife, she couldn't speak English when she first came to the U.S. So she speaks half Chinese, half English with our son.

When you moved the setting of your writing from China to the U.S. for the first time in *A Free Life*, was that a decision you had to prepare for? Was it a conscious choice that you decided one day, "Now I'm ready to