

## **Falling Into America: The Downside of Transnational Identities in Ha Jin's *A Good Fall* Holly E. Martin**

Typically in fiction, an immigrant character who possesses or develops a transnational identity throughout the course of a literary work is a character with an almost trickster-like ability for adaption. Sometimes a few hard intercultural lessons must be learned, but eventually the character fluidly moulds to the new culture, speaks several languages, celebrates traditions, and behaves like a native in two or more cultural environments. As Sucheng Chan states in the preface to *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture*, 'they revel in their in-betweenness, their hybridity, their flexible citizenship. They are free to shuttle, like astronauts, around the globe.'<sup>1</sup> Such characters epitomise the ideal, transnational protagonist. Of course, there is the occasional slip up, like Moon Orchid in *The Woman Warrior* who goes crazy from culture shock, but most characters in the end achieve a transnational flexibility. Not so with the characters in Ha Jin's *A Good Fall*. Because of poverty, discrimination, lack of education and exploitation, many of Ha Jin's characters fall under the category of immigrants Sucheng Chan refers to as transmigrants. Chan writes, 'The main beneficiaries of transnationalism are well educated and, in many instances, rich individuals who can work and invest wherever the best opportunities may be found.' Such people contrast with other migrants, 'transmigrants: contract workers and people without legal travel documents ... who are driven by poverty to risk their lives in order to earn a living outside their countries of origin ... necessity, rather than liberty, is the driving force.'<sup>2</sup>

In *A Good Fall* (2009), Ha Jin's newest collection of short stories, Chinese immigrants who have travelled to, or have long resided in, the Chinatown of Flushing, New York, find the underbelly of transnationalism. Ha Jin's characters are often poor transmigrants who discover that they continue to be tied to China in restricting ways they did not anticipate, and also realise that they might never be accepted, because of their race and in spite of their successes, as fully American. In some cases, they make extreme attempts to assimilate by physically breaking themselves in order to conform to U.S. notions of what constitutes an American identity. The downside of transnationalism, however, not only affects the transmigrants, but also some of the wealthier, well-educated immigrants whom readers would normally expect to develop a successful and versatile transnational identity.

*A Good Fall* consists of twelve short stories – all set in Flushing, New York. The multiethnic character of Flushing metaphorically parallels the transitional stage of the main characters, all immigrants from China, as they live in the in-between space of having left China, yet not yet having entered mainstream American society. Although not every story ends in despair (a notable exception would be 'A Composer and His Parakeets'), and some even end on a slightly positive note because of the

<sup>1</sup> Sucheng Chan and Madeline Y. Hsu, eds., *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2008) xii.

<sup>2</sup> Chan xii.

Holly E. Martin. Falling Into America: The Downside of Transnational Identities in Ha Jin's *A Good Fall*.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

possibility of a love relationship (such as 'The House Behind a Weeping Cherry'), on the whole, the characters suffer hardships and become disillusioned with the promise of America. Life in Flushing does not bring the material wealth or the freedom from obligations in China some immigrants are expecting; the new environment imposes its own harsh limitations that often, through crisis, mould a new, and sometimes unwanted, transnational identity for the immigrant.

As an 'in-between' place that is located in the U.S. but populated by immigrants who still have ties to their home countries, prefer to eat their home country cuisines, and speak their native languages, Flushing provides an apt setting for Ha Jin's characters who are in various states of transition from being Chinese to becoming Chinese Americans. As Sheng-mei Ma states in *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity*, 'Chinatown, a Western invention embraced by the minority for survival, is the closest a Chinese American can get to China.'<sup>3</sup> Many of the characters have names that indicate an American identity coupled with a Chinese heritage, such as Dan Feng, Eileen Min or Elbert Chang, but sometimes Chinese American characters, especially wives or girlfriends, are only given English first names such as Connie, Gina, Sherry or Cindy. These characters with English only names, as one might expect, are often more involved with American culture than those who retain their Chinese names, sometimes to the point where they have rejected their Chinese sensibility, and, consequently, clash with recent immigrants or family visitors from China.

Some characters find comfort in the familiarity of Flushing's Chinatown, finding in Flushing a sense of inclusion that buffers them from the more frightening cultural differences of New York City. Wanping, a young man in 'The House Behind a Weeping Cherry,' rents a room in a brothel. When asked by his landlady to drive prostitutes to their appointments, Wanping replies: 'All right, I can drive them around in the evenings, but only in Queens and Brooklyn. Manhattan's too scary.'<sup>4</sup> Dan Feng, a real estate agent in 'The Beauty,' finds in Flushing a connection with China while looking down from his office window at the 'fruit and vegetable stands under awnings. The sight reminded him of a closing market fair when people were leaving' (25). Later on in the story, Dan shows a town house to a couple who miss the comfort and familiarity of Chinese food, 'an old Taiwanese couple who planned to move to Flushing from Switzerland because they could find genuine Chinese food here' (32). And Dave Hong, a young man hired to tutor a teenage girl in 'Choice,' describes the comforting transnational character of the city and the familiarity of its Chinese aspects:

There were more pedestrians in downtown Flushing since the summer started, many of them foreign tourists or visitors from the suburban towns who came to shop or to dine in the small restaurants offering the foods of their left-behind homes. The store signs, most bearing Chinese characters, reminded me of a bustling shopping district in Shenyang. So many immigrants live and work here that you needn't speak English to get around. (50)

---

<sup>3</sup> Sheng-mei Ma, *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Ha Jin, *A Good Fall: Stories* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009) 197. Further references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

The Chinatown in Flushing, for some of the immigrant characters who wander through it, represents a concrete manifestation of their desires for the familiarity of home, while still offering the hope for a new life that comes with residing in the U.S.

Since Flushing offers comfort and a sense of inclusion to some newly arrived Chinese immigrants, some choose never to leave. However, others realise that to participate to a greater extent socially, and even more importantly, financially, in the U.S., they need to leave Flushing's urban center. Thus Flushing is not only transnational, but also the population is largely transitory, moving in and out of the city. Dave Hong, the young tutor, realises this fact about Flushing:

It was difficult to date someone in Flushing, especially if you wanted a long-term, serious relationship, because most people would work here in the daytime and then return home. Those living here didn't plan to stay for long. It was as if their current residences were merely a transitory step to someplace else. (54)

So while Flushing may provide an instant feeling of *almost* being at home in China, the monetary and other life-style possibilities (real and imaginary) that lure an immigrant to the United States are not, for many immigrants, ultimately achievable in Chinatown. While some do manage to get their start in businesses in Chinatown, once they have the finances needed, they expand to other more affluent areas.

As one might expect, immigrants to the U.S. continue to have ties to their homeland cultures. Him Mark Lai states in *Chinese American Transnational Politics*, 'When immigrants settle abroad, they generally maintain an interest in homeland affairs and often retain some cultural, economic, social, and even political ties.'<sup>5</sup> Often an immigrant will leave China even if his or her situation in China is not one of hardship, because of the lure of wealth to be found in the U.S. Xiaojian Zhao in her article on immigrants to New York from the Changle region of China, relates the story of a twenty-six-year-old restaurant worker in New York City, explaining why he decided to immigrate:

At that time everyone thought America was the place to get rich. My situation was not bad at home; I had an iron rice-bowl – a job paid by the city government. But my prospects were not so good. ... My mother never said that I had to leave, but she kept on telling me so and so had left and so and so had found a job in the United States. For my own future and the future of my family, I decided that going to America would be the best thing to do.<sup>6</sup>

Zhao also reports that though wages may at first seem sumptuous to newly arrived immigrants, living in the U.S. is costly: 'they also learned that it was hard to save if they wanted a comfortable place to live.'<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes the ties to those back home prove to be more inhibiting than comforting. A negative, often unwanted aspect of a transnational identity is the inability to avoid

---

<sup>5</sup> Him Mark Lai, *Chinese American Transnational Politics* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 2010) 9.

<sup>6</sup> Xiaojian Zhao, 'The "Spirit of Changle": Constructing a Chinese Regional Identity in New York,' *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture* ed. Sucheng Chan and Madeline Y. Hsu (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2008) 222.

<sup>7</sup> Zhao 223.

obligations to those still in China, even as one is struggling to survive in the United States. Obligations to those back home can limit an immigrant character's choices, keeping him or her in thrall to an unpleasant, possibly even illegal job in order to satisfy the money demands that come from those back home. For the fictional immigrants in Ha Jin's *Flushing, New York*, life is hard – harder in some cases than it was back in China. In the opening story, 'The Bane of the Internet,' a young woman who has immigrated to the U.S. is hounded through e-mail by her sister who still lives in China and wants to buy a car – an expensive foreign car at that. The woman, who commutes daily from Brooklyn to Flushing for work cannot afford a car for herself, or even a down payment on an apartment.

My family always assumes that I can pick up cash right and left here. No matter how hard I explain, they can't see how awful my job at a sushi house is. I waitress ten hours a day, seven days a week. My legs are swollen when I punch out at ten p.m. I might never be able to buy an apartment at all. I'm eager to leave my job and start something of my own – a snack bar or a nail salon or a video store. I must save every penny. (5)

In spite of immigrating to the U.S., the young woman retains unwanted ties to China, as she has not succeeded in escaping obligations to those left back home.

A garment worker, Wanping, who as mentioned earlier lives in a brothel, works during the day ironing clothing to be delivered in Manhattan. He wonders how his American dream landed him in his present situation: 'Who would have thought I'd land in a sweatshop? My parents' last letter urged me again to go to college. But I couldn't pass the TOEFL' (198). Wanping's brother, still living in China, has just been admitted to veterinary school, and Wanping, as his parents expect of him, has to send three thousand dollars for his brother's tuition: 'If only I had learned a trade before coming to the United States, like plumbing, or home renovation, or Qigong. Any job would have been better than ironing clothes' (198). Wanping is all too aware that although he is expected to send money to his brother, as a veterinarian, his brother's life will likely be more fulfilling than his own. Like the young woman in 'The Bane of the Internet,' in spite of immigrating to the U.S., Wanping retains unwanted obligatory ties to China.

Wanping's three female roommates, however, face even more hardship than the restaurant or garment industry employees. They work as prostitutes to make enough money for their room and board and to pay off those that helped them get to the U.S. One of the prostitutes, Huong, an ethnically Chinese woman from Vietnam, is badly abused after Wanping drops her off at a hotel to meet a john:

On arrival she had found two men in the suite. They dragged her in before she could back out, and worked her so hard that she felt as if her legs no longer belonged to her. She had to take off her high heels to walk back to the car. She wept all the way home. She was sick the next day but wouldn't go to a clinic, as she had no health insurance. (203)

Huong wants to quit prostitution, but her parents still control her, even in the U.S. 'I often dream of going back, but my parents won't let me. They say that my little brother will join me here eventually. They only want me to send them more money. If only I could jump ship'

(215). In the stories in *A Good Fall*, several characters figuratively sell themselves to succeed in U.S. society, but Huong literally sells her body. The physical abuse she endures serves as a synecdoche for the physical and emotional pain suffered by unwary, poor immigrants at the hands of those who would exploit them. Sucheng Chan addresses these inequalities between economic classes as they affect immigrants, stating, 'The paradox inherent in transnationalism is that its celebratory stance camouflages underlying realities of immense exploitation, severe suffering, and gross violations of human rights.'<sup>8</sup>

Besides her parents' insistence that she stay in the U.S., Huong still owes money to the Croc, the Chinese gangster who brought her to the U.S. from Vietnam: 'I have to pay the Croc two thousand dollars a month. There's no other way I can make that kind of money. ... My parents paid up their fifteen percent in Vietnam, but I still have eighteen thousand to pay' (215). Huong worries that if she does not pay her debt, harm will come to her family in Vietnam.

According to Xiaojian Zhao in 'The "Spirit of Changle": Constructing a Chinese Identity in New York,' Huong's large debt to those who smuggled her into the U.S. is not unusual: 'It cost in U.S. currency about \$20,000 per person in the late 1980s and \$30,000 in the early 1990s to be smuggled into the United States. By 2004, the price had risen to \$80,000, a 300 percent increase over twenty years.'<sup>9</sup> The agents who assist Chinese immigrants with entering the U.S. illegally, such as the Croc, are referred to as snakeheads (*shetou*). In *The Lucky Ones*, a book on the formation of Chinese America, Mae Ngai writes about a notorious snakehead who smuggled illegal immigrants into Queens, New York, who is now serving thirty-five years in prison: 'One of the most famous snakeheads is a woman named Cheng Chui-Ping, a Fujianese immigrant in New York's Chinatown who reportedly amassed \$40 million from smuggling immigrants into the United States in the 1980s and 1990s.'<sup>10</sup>

Other characters in *A Good Fall* also worry about harm coming to their families back in China because of actions they commit in the United States. In 'The Beauty,' for example, Dan threatens to make public Fooming's membership in the Communist Party, an accusation that would cause Fooming to be deported. Fooming begs Dan not to expose him, claiming he would renounce the Communist Party, as Dan has, but 'for fear of ruining his sibling's lives in China' (48). For many characters, obligations to those left in China reach forcefully into their American lives and keep them trapped in oppressive circumstances with little hope for a brighter future.

In 'Temporary Love,' we find another story about reinventing oneself and trying to break away from obligations to those in China. Lina and Panbin are immigrants living in Flushing while their spouses both still live in China. They form a living arrangement they refer to as 'a wartime couple,' a relationship 'referring to those men and women who, unable to bring their spouses to America, cohabit for the time being to comfort each other and also to reduce living expenses' (175). In spite of being married to other people, Lina and Panbin sleep together and live as a married couple, taking advantage of the fact that they are unknowns in the U.S. and no one knows or seems to care about their business. Although Lina

---

<sup>8</sup> Chan xii.

<sup>9</sup> Zhao 221.

<sup>10</sup> Mae Ngai, *The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010) 229.

accepts that they will have to separate once their spouses arrive, Panbin falls in love with Lina and wants her to divorce her husband, although he is unwilling to divorce his wife because of his son. Although Lina is also fond of Panbin, she has a more practical approach to the responsibilities of marriage: 'What we've done is wrong, and we ought to mend our ways, the sooner the better. ... I must take my heart back and tame it before Zuming comes. ... This has little to do with love. I'll try to be a good wife to him' (179). When Zuming arrives, Lina finds out that he knows all about her living with Panbin, and Panbin's wife learns of the affair as well. They both underestimated the transnational reach of gossip. Panbin's wife divorces him, but when Lina considers going back to Panbin, he wants nothing more to do with her. He blames their break-up on Lina's excessive, in his opinion, concern over relatives back in China: 'From now on I won't date a Chinese woman again. Just sick of it – every Chinese has so much baggage of the past, too heavy for me to share and carry. I want to live freely and fearlessly with nothing to do with the past' (193). To avoid such a problem happening again, Panbin intends to start a relationship with a Ukrainian woman he has met on the internet. Panbin fails to realise that one's past is an inherent part of who one is. Although an individual can change the country in which he or she lives, the immigrant's identity is transnational, and ties to the home country will always remain – some comforting, others vexing. As the young woman in 'The Bane of the Internet' discovers, family ties can reach across long distances: 'I used to believe that in the United States you could always reshape your relationships with the people back home – you could restart your life on your own terms. But the Internet has spoiled everything – my family is able to get hold of me whenever they like. They might as well live nearby' (5-6).

The restaurant and garment industries provide jobs for newly arrived immigrants because they only need to speak Chinese and, in restaurants, they are familiar with the cuisine. But, because the workers have few alternative options, working conditions are harsh and wages are low. With little opportunity to better their circumstances, these backbreaking jobs all too often reflect the immigrants' broken hopes, especially when they encounter discrimination based not only on race, but also on class. Hongfan Wang in 'Shame' was advised by his professor to see New York if he 'wanted to understand America' (121). As Hongfan works delivering material to sweatshops and finished goods to upscale stores in Manhattan, he gets a good glimpse at the class structure of the urban U.S. As Hongfan discovers, the poor garment laborers work under difficult conditions, yet painstakingly care for the finished garments so they will be in optimum condition for consumption by the rich. Hongfan's delivery schedule clearly illustrates the exclusion of the poor from the 'good life' and serves as an analogy to the broader inequalities in the economic class structure of the U.S.

A few characters in *A Good Fall* do well financially and socially, especially if they have learned English, and would not be considered transmigrants. But, even English and a good job are no guarantees of success in the U.S., because a character cannot distance him or herself from a Chinese identity. Being visibly Chinese in a race-conscious society can forever peg a character as a 'foreigner,' no matter how long the character and his or her ancestors have resided in the U.S. Rusheng Tang, an English professor up for tenure in the story 'An English Professor,' nearly suffers a mental collapse when he realises he signed his letter to the department tenure committee, 'Respectly yours' (140). Rusheng obsesses over his error:

People wouldn't treat it as a mere typo or slip. It was a glaring solecism that indicated

his incompetence in English. If he were in science or sociology or even comparative literature, the consequences of the mistake would have been less dire. But for an English professor, this was unforgivable, regardless of his sophisticated use of various methodologies to analyze a literary text. (140)

The implication of 'An English Professor' is that no matter what his or her accomplishments, a Chinese immigrant can never escape the perception of his or her 'otherness,' a perception that perpetually connects him or her with China. At any moment he or she could be tripped up by a simple mistake – one that would not be made by a native speaker – and a minor infraction of language or decorum could lead to disaster. Even Rusheng Tang's name serves to underscore his omnipresent Chinese identity and perpetuates the stereotype of a Chinese American as still locked into an exotic and foreign past. His last name, Tang, calls to mind the name of the classic Chinese Tang dynasty (618-906 A.D.), one of traditional China's most glorious periods, and his first name, Rusheng, at least as a homophone, indicates a student of Confucianism. So in spite of his efforts to excel in American society, Rusheng remains marked as 'foreign' by his language mistakes, his physiology, and his historic name.

Dan Feng, the real estate agent in 'The Beauty,' demonstrates how prosperity can mould an assimilated identity that separates one from his or her Chineseness. Dan sees himself as completely Americanised, but he has drawn from some of the worst traits in American culture. He puts great value in physical beauty and looks down on the Chinese immigrants living in Flushing. He is materialistic and dreams of getting a home in Forest Hills, an upscale residential area.

Although quite thoroughly Americanised, aspects of China intrude upon Dan's life in ways that even he does not realise. His wife, Gina, is known as a beauty in the community. Dan himself is also considered quite handsome, and is often complimented on his looks. To his chagrin, however, their daughter, Jasmine, is homely, which leads Dan to consider that his daughter may not be his: 'Their baby was homely, with thin eyes and a wide mouth, and took after neither Gina nor himself. Gina was tall and lissome, having a straight nose, double-lidded eyes, a delicate mouth, and silken skin' (28). Although Gina is of Chinese heritage, some of her 'good-looking' features resemble Caucasian traits, especially the straight nose and double-lidded eyes. Possibly her daughter Jasmine might have been considered homely even if she were born in China, but unfortunately, looked at with the Caucasian standard of beauty her parents admire, she cannot help but fall short.

The real problem with Jasmine, however, seems to be that her looks remind her father of his Chinese heritage, which he has come to see as ugly. He wants to avoid connection with his heritage and, therefore, imagines that his wife has been unfaithful and the child has no connection with him. For Dan, Jasmine is a 'racial shadow,' defined by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong as a phenomenon that occurs in Asian American literature when

a highly assimilated American-born Asian is troubled by a version of himself/herself that serves as a reminder of disowned Asian descent. The racial shadow draws out mixed feelings of revulsion and sympathy from the protagonist, usually compelling a painful reassessment of the behavioral code which has thus far appeared to augur full acceptance into American society.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 92.

Although Dan was not born in the U.S., the ‘racial shadow’ phenomenon fits his relationship to his daughter. When Dan discovers that his wife has had plastic surgery in order to look the way she does, he must accept that Jasmine is his, and in turn, that he is still of Chinese heritage regardless of how Americanised he has become. Dan’s daughter forces upon him an unwanted transnational identity, whereas Dan would prefer to be accepted as fully mainstream American.

After the crisis of discovering his wife’s secret, life returns somewhat back to normal, but Dan’s acceptance of his heritage is still reluctant, as shown by the fact that he can no longer fully accept his wife because of her original ‘homely’ features, nor his daughter because of her appearance. He stays away from home more, and finds pleasure instead with the female masseuses in the bathhouse. Dan has attempted to fulfill U.S. society’s expectation of assimilation into the mainstream, but at a high cost. He has had to distance himself from his own wife and daughter, because they symbolically embody the Chineseness he himself has sought to erase.

Although Dan’s reinvention of himself as an American takes assimilation to the extreme, other characters, even more drastically, reinvent themselves when they come to the U.S. by physically cutting or breaking themselves. Dan’s wife, Gina, literally reforms herself physically by undergoing plastic surgery to make her look more appealing according to a Caucasian standard of beauty. She also changes her name in order to distance herself from her past. When Dan accuses her of deceiving herself, she answers, ‘No. I love my beauty. It’s the best thing America gave me’ (45). Explaining her name change, she says, ‘I felt I became a new person and wanted to start afresh’ (46).

The grandchildren in ‘Children as Enemies,’ also seek to change their names, wanting to seem more American. They complain the English-speaking children cannot pronounce their names. The boy, Qigan, says, ‘Lots of them call me “Chicken”... If I didn’t come from China, I’d say “Chicken” too.’ The girl, Hua, complains, ‘Nobody can say it right and some call me “Wow”’ (77). The ridicule has caused a crisis in the children’s lives, and they seek to resolve the dilemma by changing their names in hopes of changing themselves enough to gain acceptance by their peers. Qigan becomes ‘Matt’ and Hua becomes ‘Flora,’ much to their grandparents’ dismay. Although the parents accept the new names, and even help the children rename themselves, the grandparents, quite accurately, see the change as a rejection of them and of their heritage.

The reader might criticise Dan and Gina in ‘The Beauty’ or the grandchildren in ‘Children as Enemies’ for turning their backs on their Chinese heritage, but their attitudes must be viewed against the backdrop of a U.S. society that has a history of, and continues to, look upon Chinese Americans as unassimilable foreigners. In *Chinese American Transnational Politics*, Him Mark Lai writes about historical discriminatory laws in the United States aimed at cutting-off or severely restricting Chinese immigration:

The Chinese in America encountered white racism soon after they first arrived in California in large numbers. Local, state, and federal governments also demonstrated unwillingness to accept Chinese people as equal partners in American society through the passage of discriminatory laws. In 1882 this hostility culminated in the passage of the first Chinese Exclusion Act. For the next sixty-one years, Chinese faced highly restrictive entry conditions and, regardless of social class and place of birth, were



often subjected to prejudice and discrimination in America.<sup>12</sup>

Although there has been fundamental change in racist attitudes against the Chinese in the United States since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attitudes toward Chinese Americans still put them in an untenable position. As Andrea Louie writes in her chapter titled 'Searching for Roots in Contemporary China and Chinese America,' 'On the one hand, the assimilation model prescribes that Chinese Americans must identify strongly with their U.S. roots; on the other hand, racial politics codes them as perpetual foreigners.'<sup>13</sup> Louie continues this line of analysis in her book, *Chineseness across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States*. In this book she not only reiterates that 'American-born Chinese Americans are defined within U.S. society through their Chineseness,' and that 'they are cast as perpetual foreigners,' but also makes the case that 'achieving status as a true "American" is attached to racial and class background in addition to legal citizenship.'<sup>14</sup> Therefore, in conjunction with race, social class plays a significant role in the type of transnational identity an immigrant will be able to form, because class also influences how other citizens of the U.S. view Chinese immigrants, or even long-time Chinese American citizens, in regard to belonging within American society. The current Multicultural trends in the U.S. further complicate the issue of a Chinese American defining him or herself as 'American' by demanding that Chinese Americans not only fully embrace being American, but, contrarily, 'they are [also] expected to have and display their Chinese "culture" in this era of multiculturalism.'<sup>15</sup> The effect of these contrary expectations puts both Chinese immigrants and Chinese American citizens into an identity quandary:

Chinese American culture is defined within U.S. multicultural politics as a form of inherent and immutable difference from U.S. mainstream culture, whatever that might be. Chinese immigrants have been portrayed as unassimilable and incapable of being democratic or civilized. They have thus been marginalized and excluded from mainstream American society and its political, economic, and cultural realms. An emphasis on such inherent differences is used to criticize Chinese Americans as 'less American,' while at the same time forcing them to adhere to China and Chinese culture, about which they know little.<sup>16</sup>

While most of the stories in *A Good Fall* chronicle the hardships of life for immigrants in the U.S., perhaps worst off in the collection of characters is Ganchin, the protagonist of the title story 'A Good Fall.' Ganchin, a monk from a Gaolin Temple in China, works as a kung fu instructor in a temple in Flushing. Despite working at the temple for more than two years, Ganchin has never been paid his salary. He becomes sick, and the temple head, Master Zong, fires him for no longer being able to perform his job. When he asks Zong for his money, Zong replies, 'We've provided lodging and board for you. This is New York,

---

<sup>12</sup> Lai 52.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Louie, 'Searching for Roots in Contemporary China and Chinese America,' *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture* ed. Sucheng Chan and Madeline Y. Hsu. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2008) 204.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Louie, *Chineseness Across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004) 24.

<sup>15</sup> Louie, *Chineseness* 24.

<sup>16</sup> Louie, *Searching* 203.

where everything is expensive. As a matter of fact, we paid you a lot more than fifteen hundred a month' (222). Zong also retains Ganchin's passport, saying, 'I can't let you have your papers if you stay on illegally. From now on you're on your own, and you must move out tomorrow. I don't care where you go. Your visa has expired and you're already an illegal alien, a lawbreaker' (222). Too ashamed to return home without money, Ganchin is stuck without means and with no place to go.

Ganchin reinvents himself out of necessity and, ultimately, by accident. His changes are at first gradual. After being kicked out of the temple by Master Zong and left destitute, he talks to his friend, Cindy, an American born Chinese. Cindy asks Ganchin, 'Why not return to this earthly life?' (224). Ganchin, unable to consider any occupation other than being a monk, replies, 'But I've never worked outside a temple and don't have any skill. I'm useless here.' Cindy suggests that he continue teaching martial arts outside of the temple, but Ganchin says, 'for that I'll have to know some English, won't I?' (225). He is unable at this early stage in his misfortune to conceive of changing himself. Slowly, though, he begins to make compromises necessary for his survival. He begins to eat meat and seafood, because 'it was hard to remain vegetarian when he had no idea where he would have his next meal,' and he has to rely on leftovers his friend brings him from a restaurant (227). Although Cindy seems overly optimistic about the U.S., as her Americanised name would imply, she continues to encourage Ganchin to change: 'You can always change. This is America, where it's never too late to turn over a new page. ... Except for the Indians, nobody's really a native in the United States. You mustn't think of yourself as a stranger – this country belongs to you if you live and work here' (231). More realistic than Cindy, Ganchin resents the lies he was told about the opportunities he would find in America without revealing the hardships. He resolves that if he ever returned to China 'he would tell the truth – the American type of success was not for everyone. You must learn how to sell yourself there and must change yourself to live a new life' (232).

As a result of his desperate situation, Ganchin makes the decision to commit suicide. In an airport bathroom, after escaping an attempt by Master Zong to deport him against his will, Ganchin throws his monk robe into a trash can. He leaves a message for Master Zong at the temple, telling him to 'say prayers and make offerings for my soul tomorrow morning before sunrise,' indicating his intent to kill himself (235). He attempts suicide by jumping off of a five-story building:

He started running, up and up, until he hurled himself into the air. As he was falling facedown, somehow all the years of training in martial arts at once possessed him. His body instinctively adjusted itself and even his arms spread out, swinging to ensure that he wouldn't hurt himself fatally. With a thump his feet landed on the ground. 'Ow!' he yelled, thunderstruck that he had just cheated death. A tearing pain shot up from his left thigh while his right leg twitched. (238-39)

Doctors, media people, charities, lawyers and politicians all rush to Ganchin's aid, suing the temple and turning Ganchin into a celebrity. His attorney, Mr. Mah, ironically states, 'This is America ... a land ruled by law, and nobody is entitled to abuse others with impunity' (240). This statement is only true for Ganchin, of course, after he becomes a known celebrity. As a poor, destitute and abused illegal immigrant, Ganchin was on his own. Now because of his fame, Ganchin will avoid deportation, be granted asylum, and perhaps marry a citizen. He

will be rich. Ganchin has accidentally found a way to 'sell himself.' The disturbing conclusion, however, indicates that in order to succeed in mainstream America, Ganchin does not just have to change; he has to break himself, literally smash up who he used to be. He survives the fall with help from his Chinese martial arts skills (as he briefly plays the role of a stereotypical Chinese hero), and he sells his story.

The story of Ganchin and the evil Master Zong at first seems to fall into an Orientalist pattern of portraying the Chinese. Sheng-mei Ma in *The Deathly Embrace* comments on such portrayals, writing, 'Such comic strips as *Flash Gordon* and *Terry and the Pirates*, featuring contradictions of the evil Fu Manchu and the farcical, virtuous Charlie Chan...set up the naked prototype of Orientalist embrace: demonisation and domestication of the other.'<sup>17</sup> While the story 'A Good Fall' does demonise Master Zong, and Ganchin is eventually 'domesticated,' what stands out most in the story is the hypocrisy of American society in first ignoring the plight of the exploited immigrant, and then profiting from the immigrant's story, selling it as a lucrative commodity.

A transnational identity, as has been shown, is not the panacea for fictional characters in a globalised world. While some, with high levels of education and resources, do become well-adapted, flexible, bicultural citizens, many flounder both financially and culturally. Those who are poor and uneducated can become trapped, overburdened by obligations to those back in China, thus proving easy targets for exploitation. Those who do reinvent themselves, become bicultural, and pursue financial well being, find that even apparent success does not guarantee full acceptance within U.S. society – leading some to try drastic physical alterations in order to assimilate. Despite developing a transnational identity, many successful immigrants, such as Dan Feng and Professor Tang, live with the fear that at any moment he or she could be exposed as the unassimilable 'other.'

---

<sup>17</sup> Ma xx.