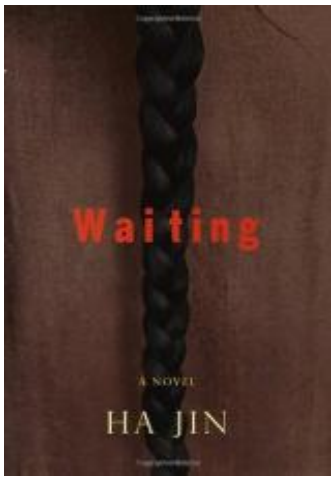
Waiting

by Ha Jin



About the Book

Winner of the 1999 National Book Award for Fiction!

In **Waiting**, PEN/Hemingway Award-winning author Ha Jin draws on his intimate knowledge of contemporary China to create a novel of unexpected richness and feeling. This is the story of Lin Kong, a man living in two worlds, struggling with the conflicting claims of two utterly different women as he moves through the political minefields of a society designed to regulate his every move and stifle the promptings of his innermost heart.

For more than seventeen years, this devoted and ambitious doctor has been in love with an educated, clever, modern woman, Manna Wu. But back in the traditional world of his home village lives the wife his family chose for him when he was young--a humble and touchingly loyal woman, whom he visits in order to ask, again and again, for a divorce. In a culture in which the ancient ties of tradition and family still hold sway and where adultery discovered by the Party can ruin lives forever, Lin's passionate love is stretched ever more taut by the passing years. Every summer, his compliant wife agrees to a divorce but then backs out. This time, Lin promises, will be different.

Tracing these lives through their summer of decision and beyond, Ha Jin vividly conjures the texture of daily life in a place where the demands of human longing must contend with the weight of centuries of custom. Waiting charms and startles us with its depiction of a China that remains hidden to Western eyes even as it moves us with its piercing vision of the universal complications of love.

Discussion Guide

1. Ha Jin has said that the idea for **Waiting** came to him when he read a newspaper story about a woman who described her husband as loveless: "She wished her husband could have an affair with another woman.... At least that would prove he was capable of love" *Atlanta Journal*, 15 Nov 1999, E1]. When late in the novel Lin realizes that "he had never loved

a woman wholeheartedly and that he had always been the loved one" (p. 296), do you think Ha Jin is calling attention to an individual problem -- his protagonist's passive temperament -- or a universal one?

2. Lin Kong is a man who seems to want to move beyond the values of traditional village life, with its familial bonds and rootedness. If marrying Manna Wu will bring him the more modern life he desires, one based on self-fulfillment and independence, why does he have such difficulty obtaining his divorce? Is he undecided as to what he wants? What does he stand to lose in giving up Shuyu? How do the choices he faces relate to similar ones faced by men and women in America today?

3. Geng Yang tells Lin, "You're always afraid that people will call you a bad man. You strive to have a good heart. But what is a heart? Just a chunk of flesh that a dog can eat. Your problem originates in your own character, and you must first change yourself" (p. 167). How insightful is this remark? Should Lin try to be more heartless with regard to his wife? How is the remark tempered by what you know of Geng Yang's character?

4. Ha Jin does not present Manna and Lin as perfect characters; what are their weaknesses? Could anyone, no matter how strong and forceful a personality, fare better than they did in the coercive social system in which they live? Does Ha Jin imply that people like Geng Yang can thrive only because they have no conscience?

5. In Western culture and in Freudian psychology, the goal of true adulthood is individuation, as well as the ability to realize one's desires through will and action. In the world of this novel, such ideals are considered corrupt and bourgeois. Is it possible for readers raised in this Western way of thinking to find Lin's passivity admirable? Do you find both Lin and Manna too childlike? Or are they simply trapped in a no-win situation?

6. Why is the situation so much more difficult for Manna Wu than for Lin? Should she have pursued other possible mates more aggressively? At the beginning of the novel, we're told that Manna is "almost twenty-six, on the verge of becoming an old maid" (p. 19). How sympathetic are you to her difficulty in finding a mate? The narrator has said that "Men and women were equal" in Maoist China (p. 37); do you find this to be the case in the novel, or is Manna Wu at a serious disadvantage?

7. How does the character of Manna Wu compare with that of Shuyu? Does Shuyu's traditionalism protect her from suffering the tug of neurosis that affects Manna Wu as time grinds on? Would you say that, especially after moving to Muji City, Shuyu is more free to enjoy her life than either Lin Kong or Manna Wu? Do both women really love Lin Kong?

8. Why does Ha Jin choose Walt Whitman's **Leaves of Grass** as the book given to Manna by Commissioner Wei? Does the book, which celebrates democracy and the self, indicate that Commissioner Wei is not a model revolutionary? Do you accept the idea that Manna's handwriting wasn't up to his expectations, or do you think that her "report" on Whitman was too cautious? What do you find most comical about Manna Wu's date with the commissioner?

9. While the political background of the novel underscores the reality of an ongoing Marxist revolution, the personal issues focus more upon what might be considered "bourgeois" concerns, like the desire for a fulfilling domestic life with its attendant personal and sexual comforts. Do the personal desires of Lin and Manna necessarily conflict with the ideals that Mao Tse Tung's revolution has thrust upon the Chinese people? How do you respond to the description of their wedding ceremony, in which they bow three times to a portrait of Chairman Mao?

10. It is a romantic notion that true love will survive all sorts of trials and separations. While Manna and Lin are together in a sense, the fact that their relationship cannot be a sexual one surely constitutes quite a long trial and separation. Are you surprised at Lin's feelings when they finally are married? What do you find comical about the long-awaited sexual encounters between Manna and Lin?

11. When Lin leaves the house in a rage after Manna scolds him for burning the rice, a voice in his head tells him, "Actually you never loved her. You just had a crush on her, which you didn't get a chance to outgrow or to develop into love.... In fact you waited eighteen years just for the sake of waiting" (p. 294). Is this a moment of real insight in the novel, devastating as it is?

12. What is most remarkable about the scene in which Lin, standing in the snowy darkness outside their window, watches as Shuyu and his daughter prepare dumplings (p. 301)? Why is this sight both nostalgic and painful for him?

13. The narrator doesn't reveal much about Shuyu's feelings; why not? What does Shuyu most desire? Why does she seem to be in such control of her own emotions, as contrasted with Manna? Is it surprising that she remains generous toward Lin even after he is married to Manna?

14. Ashamed of the things he said to Shuyu while drunk, Lin tells Hua, "Tell her not to wait for me. I'm a useless man, not worth waiting for." She responds, "Don't be so hard on yourself, Dad. We'll always wait for you" (p. 308). Does Lin deserve this unwavering loyalty from his first wife and daughter? Do the traditional values which he tried to escape in divorcing Shuyu triumph after all?

15. Many critics have commented on the affinity between the work of Ha Jin and that of such nineteenth century Russian writers as Turgenev and Chekhov, who also wrote about ordinary people caught up in times of wrenching change, and about communities in which simple peasants come into conflict with more sophisticated, modern and complex characters. How are the peasants in **Waiting** represented, and how are they different from those who are more educated and ambitious?

16. Much of this book is given up to what happens while its characters are waiting. How does Ha Jin overcome the danger of stasis, and the reader's impatience, in constructing the novel? How would you describe the structure and pace of the plot?

17. What do you notice about the way Ha Jin describes the physical details of everyday life like food, housing, clothing, people's bodies? How does the material culture of this novel differ from that of America? Do you feel that, because Ha Jin is consciously writing for an American audience in his adopted country, such details have greater resonance?

18. Ha Jin has not returned to China since he left in 1985; in 1990, he made a commitment to write and speak solely in English. Speaking of that decision, he says, "There was a lot of fear. It's like changing your body, to write in a different

language. And it wasn't just a matter of finding an audience, it was a matter of survival -- I have a family to support. Finally I decided to write in English, absolutely uncertain of whether I could do it. I'm still uncertain! In the end, though, every project is a risk, not just the language. And that's true for every writer" [From "A conversation with Ha Jin," by Mary Park, amazon.com]. How would you characterize the style in which this novel is written? If you have read the work of Vladimir Nabokov or Joseph Conrad, two other emigré writers who adopted English as their literary language, how would you compare Ha Jin's use of the language?

Author Bio

Ha Jin left his native China in 1985 to attend Brandeis University. He is the author of six novels, four story collections, three volumes of poetry, and a book of essays. He has received the National Book Award, two PEN/Faulkner Awards, the PEN/Hemingway Foundation Award, the Asian American Literary Award, and the Flannery O?Connor Award for Short Fiction. In 2014 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Ha Jin lives in the Boston area and is a professor of English at Boston University.

Critical Praise

"Compassionate, earthy, robust, and wise, Waiting blends provocative allegory with all-too-human comedy. The result touches and reveals, bringing to life a singular world in its spectacular intricacy."

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