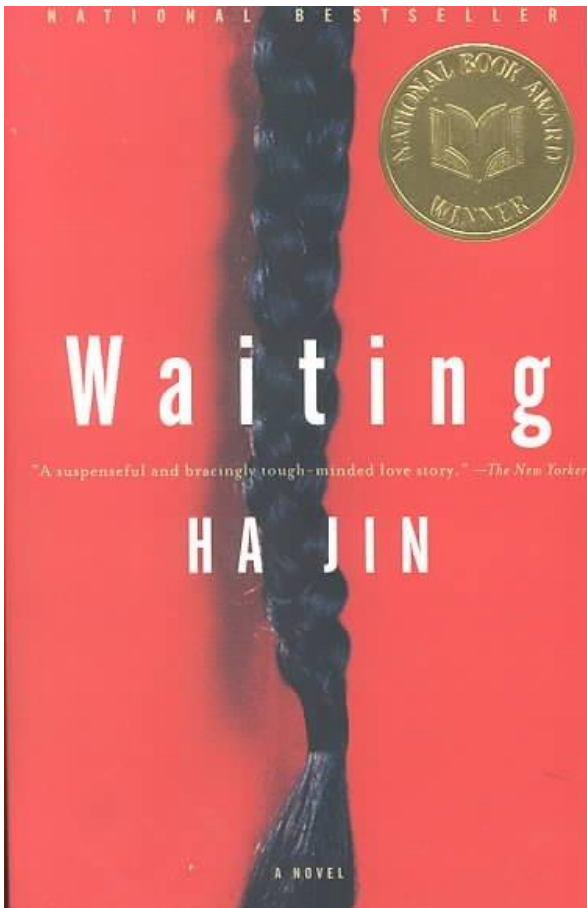


## About the book...



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.

## About the author... (<http://www.bookbrowse.com>)



Xuefei Jin, who writes under the pseudonym Ha Jin, was born in 1956 in Liaoning Province in northern China. His father was a military officer. In 1969, at only 14 years of age, Ha Jin joined the People's Liberation Army based at the northeastern border between China and the former Soviet Union.

While in the army he began teaching himself middle and high-school courses. After his military service ended, he taught himself English while

working the night shift as a railroad telegrapher in Jiamusi, a remote frontier city in the Northeast. During this time he followed the English learner's program, hoping "*someday to read Friedrich Engels' The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844 in the English original*".

In 1977, when colleges reopened after the Cultural Revolution, he passed the entrance exams and was assigned to study English. Although this was his last choice for a major, Ha Jin received a B.A. from Heilongjiang University and a Masters in Anglo-American literature at Shandong University. He came to the United States in 1985 to do graduate work at Brandeis University, supporting himself as a busboy in a Chinese restaurant and as a night watchman in a factory.

In 1993 he earned a Ph.D. in English from Brandeis. He intended to return to China after completing his dissertation, but after watching televised coverage of the Tiananmen Square massacre, he and his wife decided to make a life with their son in the United States, and when Jin couldn't find teaching work, he turned to writing instead, eventually finding employment at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

He has published two collections of poetry, *Between Silences* (1990) and *Facing Shadows* (1996), and two collections of short fiction, *Ocean of Words* (1996), which received the PEN/Hemingway award, and *Under the Red Flag* (1997), which won the Flannery O'Connor Award. *In the Pond* was published in 1998. His novel *Waiting* won the National Book Award for fiction in 1999, as well as the PEN/Faulkner award. He has also written the story collection, *The Bridegroom*, which won the Asian American Literary Award, and the novels *The Crazy* and *In the Pond*. In 2004 he published *War Trash; A Free Life* followed in 2007. He lives in the Boston area and is a professor of English at Boston University.

## **Awards**

Winner of the 1999 National Book Award for Fiction

## **Reviews**

### *Library Journal*

The winner of numerous awards for his short fiction and poetry, Emory English professor Ha Jin offers his first full-length novel. It tells the story of Lin Kong, an officer and doctor living in China during the mid-1960s. The novel spans 20 years and takes readers on

Kong's life journey. In the beginning, Kong follows the wishes of his parents, entering into a loveless arranged marriage and producing a daughter. Living separately from his family for the duration of his marriage, Kong falls in love with Manna Wu, a nursing student in the hospital where he works. For 18 years they remain friends but not lovers until Kong is able to secure a divorce from his wife. The author, a native of China, cleverly draws from his personal life in a Communist society to create a realistic story. Like fellow Chinese authors Pu Ning and Hong Ying, he illustrates the difficulties that one faces when living in an oppressed society. This touching story about love, honor, duty, and family speaks feelingly to readers on matters of the heart. A nice addition to most larger library fiction and Asian literature collections.

*Kirkus Reviews* \*Starred Review\*

A kind of Chinese Dr. Zhivago about a married army doctor who falls in love with a nurse during the Cultural Revolution, by Chinese exile Ha Jin (In the Pond, 1998, etc.). Starred-crossed lovers are the meat of tragedy the world over, and when political upheaval is thrown into the same pot, you're almost guaranteed a pretty substantial stew. The focus of misery here is Lin Kong, a Chinese physician who serves as an officer in the Revolutionary Army. While a medical student in the early 1960s, Lin is pressured into an arranged marriage by his elderly parents, who choose Shuyu, an illiterate village girl who's as plain as she is good-natured and who devotes herself wholeheartedly to providing every possible comfort for Lin and his parents. From the very start, Lin's heart is never in the marriage, and after the birth of their only child, Lin and Shuyu sleep apart. The situation is helped somewhat by Lin's army career, which keeps him posted at great distances from home and allows him only 12 days furlough a year. Eventually, though, the charade wears thin. Lin has fallen in love with Manna Wu, a nurse assigned to his hospital, and the two wish to marry. But for that a divorce is necessary, and divorce is the one request that Shuyu doesn't want to grant her husband. Even if she did, the Court probably would not comply since divorce is looked upon with deep suspicion by Party functionaries fearful of bourgeois self-indulgence. The only loophole available is a clause in the marriage code that permits divorce without spousal consent after 18 years of separation. So the years tick on, bringing Lin and Manna gradually closer to their happiness. But waiting has its price and in the end it becomes clear that it's been a high one. A deceptively simple tale, written with extraordinary precision and grace. Ha Jin has established himself as one of the great sturdy realists still writing in a postmodern age. Copyright 1999 Kirkus Reviews

*Publishers Weekly* \*Starred Review\*

Jin's quiet but absorbing second novel (after In the Pond) captures the poignant dilemma of an ordinary man who misses the best opportunities in his life simply by trying to do his duty as defined first by his traditional Chinese parents and later by the Communist Party. Reflecting the changes in Chinese communism from the '60s to the '80s, the novel focuses on Lin Kong, a military doctor who agrees, as his mother is

dying, to an arranged marriage. His bride, Shuyu, turns out to be a country woman who looks far older than her 26 years and who has, to Lin's great embarrassment, lotus (bound) feet. While Shuyu remains at Lin's family home in Goose Village, nursing first his mother and then his ailing father, and bearing Lin a daughter, Lin lives far away in an army hospital compound, visiting only once a year. Caught in a loveless marriage, Lin is attracted to a nurse, Manna Wu, an attachment forbidden by communist strictures. According to local Party rules, Lin cannot divorce his wife without her permission until they have been separated for 18 years. Although Jin infuses movement and some suspense into Lin's and Manna's sometimes resigned, sometimes impatient waiting they will not consummate their relationship until Lin is free it is only in the novel's third section, when Lin finally secures a divorce, that the story gathers real force. Though inaction is a risky subject and the thoughts of a cautious man make for a rather deliberate prose style (the first two sections describe the moments the characters choose not to act), the final chapters are moving and deeply ironic, proving again that this poet and award-winning short story writer can deliver powerful long fiction about a world alien to most Western readers. (Oct.) FYI: Jin served six years in the People's Liberation Army, and came to the U.S. in 1985.

## Literary Criticism

Title: Love and Sex in a Totalitarian Society: An Exploration of Ha Jin and George Orwell

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Full Text:

[(essay date June 2005) *In the following essay, Parascandola compares the portrayal of a totalitarian regime in Jin's Waiting with that in George Orwell's 1984, noting that a hope in the ultimate triumph of human complexity over dogma remains central to each novel.*]

"Never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity. You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and

then we shall fill you with ourselves" (256). This is the chilling message told to Winston Smith, the protagonist of George Orwell's *1984*, by the Party tout, O'Brien. The danger presented to the individual human spirit by a totalitarian society is a major theme in Orwell's oeuvre and also in the writings of contemporary Chinese novelist, Ha Jin (birth name, Jin Xuefei).<sup>2</sup> Several critics have noted parallels between the writings of these two authors. For example, in speaking of Ha Jin's short story collection, ***Under the Red Flag***, (1997), Robert D. Sturr remarks on the "clear reminder of the Orwellian resonances in Jin's writing" (190). Bill Delaney, commenting on Jin's novel ***Waiting*** (1999), winner of a National Book Award, makes the case that "the author reminds the reader of such Western works as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (802). Despite such tantalizing references, however, no one has attempted thus far to explore fully the connection between the two authors, to probe the nightmarish visions of the future presented in Orwell's totalitarian societies as opposed to the much closer memories of Ha Jin's past in Mao's China. What links are there between these different yet hauntingly similar dystopias depicted by the authors? This essay will attempt to answer this question by studying what are perhaps the two seminal works by the writers: Orwell's *1984* and Ha Jin's ***Waiting*** particularly by focusing on the subjects of love and sex in the novels.

Perhaps the first thing that needs to be done in comparing these books is to provide a working definition of totalitarianism. In his classic study of the Chinese Communist Party, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power* (1962), Chalmers Johnson describes a totalitarian government as one "committed to the wholesale reorganization of society under conscious direction from above, and that it has enlisted all the institutions of the society (particularly the state) in the service of this single aim" (11). Orwell, "a writer committed to a democratic and communitarian socialism," was frightened by the "oligarchic collectivism" (Harrington 432) he saw manifested in Russia, in the increasingly radical English socialism (Ingsoc in the novel), and in China (represented in the novel as Eastasia. Interestingly, China's Communist Party emerged victorious in 1949, the year the book was published). The extreme version of such a society exists in *1984*, where the state "seeks power entirely for its own sake" (Orwell 263). ***Waiting*** set in part during the Cultural Revolution in China beginning in the mid-1960s, reflects "a decade of turmoil and civil strife that drove the country to utter chaos and the brink of bankruptcy. [...] Poignantly, the Cultural Revolution turned out to be anticultural, anti-intellectual, and antiscientific" (Hsu 703). The question remains in *1984* and ***Waiting*** what the impact of such state-driven, anti-humanitarian societies (and in fact any system designed for complete power) will have on individual freedoms, especially as manifested in the basic human emotion of love.

The earliest memories of Winston Smith, by his best estimate thirty-nine years of age, are of his parents, victims of one of the early purges in Oceania's troubled history. He was particularly struck by the separation from his mother when he was about ten or eleven. Though the details of this traumatic event are sketchy in his mind, he knew "that in some way the lives of his mother and his sister had been sacrificed to his own. [...] His mother's memory tore at his heart because she had died loving him, when he

was too young and selfish to love her in return" (30). Perhaps it was this early experience of one of the noblest, most enduring gestures of humanity, the love of a mother for her child, that has made Winston seem a misfit in the dehumanized world of *1984*. It is this example of love that makes Winston dangerous, someone who must be made "sane." For in this society, any love not directed toward the Party, Big Brother, must be crushed. Any expression of individuality rather than group think makes a person "a minority of one" (249), which to the Party amounts to lunacy.

It is love of family (or at least "filial duty," the legacy of Confucianist society) that leads 27-year old Lin Kong, the protagonist in *Waiting*, to take a bride. With his mother, who is on her deathbed, pleading with him to marry Shuyu, the woman she has found for him, Lin reluctantly agrees. However, for the citified Lin, trained as a doctor, this rural girl with bound feet is unacceptable, a freak of what seems to him a bygone era. After his parents' death, he believes he will quickly "disentangle himself from this loveless marriage" (9). Such, unfortunately, was not to be the case.

Winston's marriage to Katherine was also loveless. The two had "been together about fifteen months. The Party did not permit divorce, but it rather encouraged separation in cases where there were no children" (Orwell 66). The problem with Katherine, for Winston, is her complete passivity. In language that has led some to consider Orwell a misogynist, Winston thinks of Katherine as an empty vessel waiting to be filled by the Party: "She had not a thought in her head that was not a slogan, and there was no imbecility, absolutely none, that she was not capable of swallowing if the Party handed it to her" (66). Most horrifying, though, is her submissiveness in bed. Despite Katherine's complete disinterest in the sexual act, "[t]hey must, she said, produce a child if they could" (67). Katherine is the model Party woman. Sex is completely dead in her and she only engages in the act because of procreation. Indeed, the Party is well aware of the subversiveness of sexual desire. The Party knows that "[t]he sexual act, successfully performed, was rebellion. Desire was thoughtcrime" (68). In *1984*, "permission [to marry] was always refused if the couple concerned gave the impression of being physically attracted to one another" (65). Luckily for Winston, there is no issue from his marriage. Thus he is able to separate, though not divorce, from his wife. He no longer even knows if she is alive.

Lin's marriage to Shuyu is not so "fortunate." Ironically, he seems to be a victim of both the new Maoist-tinged rules and the vestiges of the old Confucian system, being caught in the war between these often disparate worlds. Although for eighteen years Lin has not had sexual relations with his wife, an early encounter did produce one girl. Hsu. Thereafter, "[w]henver he was home [essentially his vacation period of 12 days when he would annually seek a divorce], he would sleep alone in his own room. He didn't love her; nor did he dislike her. In a way he treated her like a cousin of sorts" (Ha Jin 9). Despite this platonic relationship, Lin is unable to get a divorce because of Party laws designed to protect the exploitation of women. Even if Shuyu had been willing, her brother, Bensheng, would not allow this dishonor and its incumbent family shame to his sister, at least, perhaps, without a substantial bribe which Lin was unwilling to pay. The

power of the brother-in-law is a clear reminder of the old familial order. Yet, the Communist state, while attacking this same patriarchal order, replete with concubines and other male "comforts," also offers little sympathy for Lin: "This was a new society, in which nobody should find his happiness on another person's suffering. Besides, a married man ought to be duty-bound and must not be allowed to do whatever he wanted, or else families would break up and society would be in chaos" (211). Shuyu has served Lin's family faithfully--a model wife under Confucianism--looking after his mother, father, and child, and she could not just be cast aside according to the rules of the old system. Yet Lin is also chastised for not following the Maoist order: "[you are] a revolutionary soldier and a son of a poor peasant. [...] You have forgotten your class origin and tried to imitate the lifestyle of the exploiting class" (125).

Despite their loveless marriages, Winston and Lin are not without their sexual desires. Winston, to relieve himself, has occasional dalliances with prostitutes, including one with "an old woman [toothless], fifty years old at least" (69). These encounters with proletarian women, whose sexual behavior is not governed by the Party, were, no doubt, driven by Winston's own repressed anger at the state as well as his raging hormones. In addition to these encounters, Winston also has a sadistic sexual dream of raping a young dark haired woman at work: "He hated her because she was young and pretty and sexless, because he wanted to go to bed with her and would never do so, because round her sweet supple waist, which seemed to ask you to encircle it with your arm, there was only the odious scarlet sash, aggressive symbol of chastity" (15). Lin, too, has repressed sexual dreams dripping with Freudian overtones about his "mistress," Manna Wu. He fantasizes of how "[h]e copulated with her for a long time until exhaustion overcame him and he lay down alongside her" (73). But in his waking hours he struggles with these longings because as a distinguished member of the Party he feels he must "control [his] desire" (71). Even when Manna makes arrangements for them to be alone together, he is afraid to act, thinking that they will be "dealt with as criminals" (68).<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly enough, when Winston and Lin get involved in their first real relationships after marriage, it is the women who initiate the action. When Winston first notices Julia, the dark haired woman described above, he hates her, suspecting her of being a member of the Thought Police. When he realizes that she has been following him, his initial impulse is to kill her. He does not grasp that she has been sizing him up, waiting for the right moment to slip him a note declaring her love for him. It is Julia who not only has to make the first move but to decide every step of their affair. It is she who arranges their brief moments together when they can make their plans. And it is she who plans, "with a sort of military precision," their assignation in the country (115). After having sex, Julia, who is a regular volunteer in the Junior Anti-Sex League, tells him she has had sex "scores of times [...] always with Party members" (125). Instead of being repulsed, Winston declares his fervent love for her. Her corruption and desire excite him. "That was above all what he wanted to hear. Not merely the love of one person, but the animal instinct, the simple undifferentiated desire: that was the force that would tear the Party to pieces" (126). Simple human passion is, in Winston's mind,

the one thing that cannot be controlled. That is the reason why Winston feels the only hope for the future lies in the proles, the 85% of the population who are outside the Party's direct control. "The sexual puritanism of the Party was not imposed upon them." For that reason, "[p]roles and animals are free" (72). To find sexually decadent Julia, a woman who adores sex and who is a member of the Party, and who is capable of corrupting others within the Party, exceeds Winston's wildest dreams. Now, Winston can begin to believe that the Party might truly be destroyed.

Manna Wu, in *Waiting*, was a nursing student in the army hospital where Lin Kong was teaching anatomy. The young women who worked in the hospitals "were 'good girls.' That phrase meant these women were virgins; otherwise they could not have joined the army, since every young woman recruited had to go through a physical exam that eliminated those with a broken hymen" (21). Manna Wu is pursued by Mai Dong, a man from Shanghai who longs for her sexually. Her constant rebuffs only stir his passion further until finally he proposes to her. Such a marriage, though, is "impractical." When she graduates she could be stationed to any remote outpost, especially if the party suspects there is any physical attraction between the couple. "Besides," she thinks, "a marriage at this moment would suggest she was having a love affair; this would invite punishment, the lightest of which the school would administer was to keep the couple as separate as possible. In recent years the leaders had assigned some lovers to different places deliberately" (25). Manna turns to Lin at this point for advice. He confirms her reservations about accepting the proposal, and Manna asks Mai Dong to wait a while. Mai Dong returns to Shanghai, and soon, despite his promises to the contrary, marries a girl back home. Now "almost twenty-six, on the verge of becoming an old maid" (29), she looks over her bleak prospects. She cannot seek an enlisted soldier as only officers can have girlfriends or boyfriends. Soon Manna and Lin turn to one another for solace for their loneliness. When they go to the opera, "a hand landed on Lin's left wrist. He wiggled a little but didn't withdraw his hand. [...] Gently her fingertips stroked his palm, as though tracing his hair and head lines. He touched her hand and felt it was warm and smooth, without any callus. How different her palm was from Shuyu's" (51). Later, he passively thinks "[i]f this leads to an affair, so be it" (54).

Winston lets a room in an antique shop where he and Julia are able to maintain their affair. There he learns that Julia, now twenty-six, "had had her first love affair when she was sixteen, with a Party member of sixty who later committed suicide to avoid arrest" (131). While Winston sees their affair as an act of rebellion, Julia sees it largely in terms of physical pleasure. She is too pragmatic to believe she will ever be able to marry Winston. Julia's behavior has contributed to charges of Orwell's misogyny. Daphne Patai calls her "a rebel 'from the waist downwards,' as Winston comments; she is motivated by love of pleasure--sexual pleasure--and is totally uninterested in the political dynamics of the society that oppresses her. Orwell invites the reader to view Julia in a largely negative way and to contrast her lack of seriousness with Winston's heroic attempt to understand his society" (68). Taking such a perspective, however, risks misreading the character and, indeed, Orwell's intention.



Although Julia has little interest in hearing Goldstein's forbidden book criticizing Big Brother, her actions are subversive in their own way. Although she does not set out consciously to undermine the Party, her sexual attitudes strike at the heart of the Party, which seeks to eradicate all acts of passion. "Unlike Winston, she had grasped the inner meaning of the Party's sexual puritanism. It was not merely that the sex instinct created a world of its own which was outside the Party's control and which therefore had to be destroyed if possible. What was more important was that sexual privation induced hysteria, which was desirable because it could be transformed into war fever and leader worship" (133). As Blu Tirohi rightly points out, "[w]hereas Julia might only seem to be a threat to those in power if she could inspire others to rebel, her genuine power lies in her 'deviant' behaviour: sexuality directed for her own pleasure and not towards the Party." "Goodsex" in the novel is defined as intercourse with the intent of procreation; anything else is a serious breach of Party policy. Her sexuality holds up a mirror to the hypocrisy and corruption within the Party, and she actively uses her sexuality to further the corruption of those in power. Even her secret use of lipstick and wearing a dress, rather than making her merely "a sex object for a man" (Patai 71), is an act of defiance since it reverts to a domestic arrangement long dissolved by the Party. Surely it would be punished severely once discovered.

Patai points out that *1984* "incorporates the notion that sex deprivation is at the heart of a totalitarian society" (71). This dynamic is also present in ***Waiting***; indeed, the relationship between Lin and Manna is based on abstinence. Although everyone thinks of Lin and Manna as a "couple," they must promise that they "will have no abnormal relationship [i.e. sexual intimacy]" (59), until Lin gets divorced. Hence, the title "Waiting." This waiting lasts eighteen years, the legal time required before a man can get a divorce without needing his wife's consent. They maintain this relationship for all those years, never even touching hands again after the initial encounter. Thus, though they declare their love for one another, they are unable to share each other physically as Julia and Winston are. As Party members, they are incapable of giving even the appearance of impropriety. Yet it is the women who suffer more than Lin in the "absurd impasse" created by this loveless triangle (Kinkley 579). He manages to settle into a "comfortable and passionless lifestyle." (Sturr 191), even, to assuage his guilt, making several half-hearted attempts to set up Manna with different men. Yet she, because of her age and position and desire for Lin, is unable to have a successful arrangement with any of these men. Eventually, Manna's vulnerability results in her being brutally raped by a man who knows she cannot report it because the shame would be put on her.

Winston and Julia know that their happiness cannot last. They fully believe they will be captured one day, but they are confident that no matter what they will never betray one another. After their eventual arrest, however, this resolve will be tested. O'Brien warns Winston that "[w]e have cut the links between child and parent, and between man and man, and between man and woman. No one dares trust a wife or a child or a friend any longer. But in the future there will be no wives and no friends [...]. There will be no love, except the love of Big Brother" (267). Although beaten down, Winston boldly declares, "I have not betrayed Julia" (273). But when confronted with his worst fear, being attacked

by rats, Winston finally screams, "Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her" (286). Julia has similarly betrayed Winston. When they meet each other again, they are completely devoid of feeling for each other. It is then that the Party has won its final victory over Winston. Shorn of any feelings, stripped of the last vestiges of his humanity, squeezed empty, as O'Brien had warned, Winston gains the final frightening "victory": "it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother" (297).

After waiting all these years, Lin and Manna are finally able to marry, but "Manna turned out to be a passionate lover, and her passion often unnerved Lin" (245). Lin found himself no longer attracted to the forty-four year old woman with "flaccid flesh on her stomach and arms, [...] soft breasts, and the small crinkles on her throat" (246). Unlike the sex between Julia and Winston, which is seen as liberating, Lin literally fears for his health. When he finds out that Manna is pregnant, he tries to convince her to have an abortion, but she refuses. Lin begins to "wonder whether he cared for this married life, which was so tedious, so chaotic, and so exhausting" (257). After Manna has twins, Lin begins to question if he loves them enough to give up his life for them. He also questions his love for Manna, who has developed a life-threatening heart condition, and he recognizes the absurdity of his situation. "Actually, [he thinks] you never loved her. [...]. In fact you waited eighteen years just for the sake of waiting" (294). Lin realizes his own selfishness, "that he had never loved a woman wholeheartedly and that he had always been the loved one" (296). In the end, he too betrays Manna, just as Winston had betrayed Julia, when his own self-interest is jeopardized. Despite his desire to return to Shuyu, he can't leave Manna because "he would have been weighed down with remorse if he had abandoned his family to seek his own happiness" (299).

Both *1984* and ***Waiting*** show what existence in a stifling society can do to emotions. In *1984* the desire of the Party is to stamp out love and especially sex, turning this pent-up passion toward Big Brother. The goal is to make one "free" by giving up individual identity: "if he can make complete, utter submission, if he can escape from his identity, if he can merge himself in the Party so that he is the Party, then he is all-powerful and immortal" (Orwell 264).

Totalitarianism can deaden emotions, but can its victory be complete? Both novels, despite the bleakness of their political landscapes, offer some sense of hope. Big Brother has defeated Winston, but has it truly won the war? Winston had hoped the proles would someday rise. Perhaps they will. That possibility, despite O'Brien's derision, is never completely laid to rest. It is also not conclusively shown that the Brotherhood, the alleged group of resisters, does not exist. O'Brien states that for Winston its existence will always "be an unsolved riddle" (260). In the twisted world of Oceania one is even uncertain that O'Brien is not secretly part of the resistance. He had advised Winston that if caught he would be on his own. Perhaps O'Brien is the ultimate double-agent and his betrayal of Winston is just a clever cover. Such a seemingly absurd suggestion is not inconceivable given the enigmatic nature of the book. Perhaps even if O'Brien is the fanatic he appears, when enough people like Julia and Winston exist, the Party will be

overthrown. As long as there is one rebel spirit, one spark of human emotion, the Party is not safe. As Patrick Reilly states, "[t]he text is summoning us to a struggle that is not yet lost. It is we, here and now, who will decide that outcome: Winston's future fate depends upon our present action" (127).

Lin, on the other hand, has been so trained to follow the Party line that he is afraid to deviate from it. He cannot defy family obligations in refusing to marry Shuyu nor societal obligations in giving himself to Manna. Even when he finally does marry Manna, it is more out of duty than love. In the end, he will likely go back to his first wife, but not out of love; indeed, he is incapable of any real sense of love or loyalty. He is emotionally dead: thus, with his stunted growth, waiting becomes the natural order to him. His denial of his own needs, bordering on masochism, becomes normal. He realizes "he had never spent a day with a woman he loved wholeheartedly--no, there had not been such a woman in his life and that emotion had been alien to him. Yet one thing he was certain about now: between love and peace of mind he would choose the latter. He would prefer a peaceful home" (303). Lin is a tragic figure, with not a rebellious bone in his body, who has lost all sense of himself. Ironically, the novel ends with the same feeling of waiting with which it began: "Manna is waiting, only now, she awaits death; Shuyu is waiting, hopefully, as ever, for her husband to return; and Lin is waiting: for love, liberation, or perhaps an inner revolution that, Ha Jin implies, is the only real basis for cultural enlightenment" (Linda Simon qtd. in Sturr 192). Unfortunately, he does not know how to initiate this "inner revolution."

In the end the Party has crushed Lin, just as it has defeated Winston. But in a way, Lin's defeat is even more complete than Winston's since he was never able to rebel against it momentarily as Winston had done. He does not need to be brought to the fearsome Room 101 as Winston had to be taken for indoctrination. Of his own volition Lin is waiting impatiently to show his subservience to the Party. When Manna dies there is little sense that Lin, will be able to assert his independence enough to not return to Shuyu. Lin, like many intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, is a man without a home, unable to adapt to Mao's China or to return to a feudal past. The result is a paralyzing stasis.

Though the Party in **Waiting** is not savaged in the way it is in *1984*, not presented in such a palpably monstrous manner, its behavior is as insidious as that of Big Brother. The Party rules in the name of the people and justifies all its actions in their name, but "[s]ince Marxists do not concern themselves with humanitarianism, all manner of cruelty and viciousness may be committed in the name of the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat, all with an easy conscience and innocence" (Xizhe 212). The Party rules so completely that it permeates all levels of thought and action. As Francine Prose comments, "[t]hroughout the book, tender private dramas are enacted against the coarse backdrop of party ideology" (9). Lin bows meekly under its weight. It is the manipulators of language who are among the most dangerous to the leaders of a totalitarian regime because by making people think and feel they challenge the status quo. Therefore, it is not surprising that language is seen as a threat in these books. An entire team is

employed to create Newspeak in 1984 in an attempt to reduce the range of expression and, hence, thought. Books published before 1960 are destroyed and those published after are tightly controlled by the Party. Reading Goldstein's book, the subversive work challenging Big Brother, is punishable by vaporization. Books, in **Waiting** even some relatively innocuous foreign novels, are also seen as dangerous. Not surprisingly, Ha Jin's own novels have met the same fate and are banned in China, for as critic Timothy Wong notes, a writer such as Ha Jin "challenge[s] Marxist (or Maoist) political ideology not by declaring allegiance to some other ideology but by demonstrating again and again the complexity of human emotion which defies simplistic dogma" (qtd. in Sturr 188). This is the lesson displayed repeatedly in the novels. It is interesting that Winston's first ostensible act of resistance is the purchasing of a diary. Even without writing a word in it this is seen as a rebellious act, one which must be hidden from the Party or else risk vaporization.

Undoubtedly, Orwell, had he lived in his fictional Oceania, would have been a much sought after prize by the Thought Police. That is the final irony in 1984. a book, like **Waiting**, filled with irony: "If Oceania comes, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will disappear down a memory hole; if Orwell is right, he will not be read" (Reilly 126). But Orwell was betting, if only subconsciously, that his vision of the future could be prevented. Thus far, the simple fact that his book remains well-read is ample demonstration that the world of 1984 has not yet come to pass even if it also serves as an ominous reminder that someday that dawn may yet arrive.

In **Waiting**, too, there are signs of hope as well as warning. Jeffrey Kinkley points out that "Ha Jin creates authentic socialist rural and urban backdrops, then lets phantoms from the past intrude more sparingly and with greater shock effect" (580). Just as Lin slips back and forth between urban and rural worlds, Ha Jin laces his portrait of the new Communist world with elements of a past system that may have receded but has never fully gone away. The past, such a visible presence in both novels, is not dead but is constantly encroaching on the present and, even more threateningly, on the future. And just as it is manipulated by the present rulers, it is ultimately the greatest enemy facing them in each book. Despite the best efforts of the totalitarian systems to control it, there is a sense that the relentless march of the past cannot be completely quelled. Perhaps that is, in fact, the best hope for the future, that at some perhaps distant date these dictatorships, too, may just be memories in the cold annals of history.

## Notes

1. Thanks to Jeffrey Kinkley for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. Orwell, like Ha Jin, used a pen name. His birth name was Eric Blair.
3. The fear of deviating from conventional sexual morality is also present in Ha Jin's short story collection, *The Bridegroom* (2000). Sexual deviation "is often seen as more

than just the violation of a moral code; it is also considered a dangerous assertion of individual will that threatens political order" (Sturr 192).

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### Discussion questions (<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/>)

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?

## Multimedia

"Ha Jin" Available through YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HngXkeZ8Zfg>

## Further Reading

*Under the red flag: stories* by Ha Jin

The winner of the 1996 PEN/Hemingway Award for Fiction and three Pushcart Prizes presents twelve stories set during China's Cultural Revolution, tales of moral degeneration and ideological cruelty that won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction.

*Red Azalea* by Anchee Min

*Red Azalea* is Anchee Min's celebrated memoir of growing up in the last years of Mao's China. As a child, she was asked to publicly humiliate a teacher; at seventeen, she was sent to work at a labor collective. Forbidden to speak, dress, read, write, or love as she pleased, she found a lifeline in a secret love affair with another woman. Miraculously



selected for the film version of one of Madame Mao's political operas, Min's life changed overnight. Then Chairman Mao suddenly died, taking with him an entire world. A revelatory and disturbing portrait of China, Anchee Min's memoir is exceptional for its candor, its poignancy, its courage, and for its prose which Newsweek calls "as delicate and evocative as a traditional Chinese brush painting."

## **Readalikes**

*Cloud Mountain* by Aimee E. Liu

Hope, an English tutor, meets Liang Poyu, a Chinese student, in Berkeley, and although Hope is engaged to someone else, she decides to marry Liang even though mixed marriage is illegal at the beginning of the 20th century.

*Wild Ginger* by Anchee Min

A story of desire during the time of the Cultural Revolution follows Wild Ginger, who becomes a national model for Maoism, which prohibits romantic love, forcing her to make a difficult decision when she falls in love with a young man.

*The Moon Pearl* by Ruthanne Lum McCunn

Follows the lives of three young girls in nineteenth-century China after they pledge never to take on the traditional roles of wives or nuns.

*Inheritance: A Novel* by Lan Samantha Chang

In 1931, abandoned after their mother's suicide, the young Junan and her sister, Yinan, make a pact never to leave each other. The two girls are inseparable—until Junan enters into an arranged marriage and finds herself falling in love with her soldier husband. When the Japanese invade China, Junan and her husband are separated. Unable to follow him to the wartime capital, Junan makes the fateful decision to send her sister after him. *Inheritance* traces the echo of betrayal through generations and explores the elusive nature of trust.

*Under Fishbone Clouds* by Sam Meekings

Challenged by the Jade Emperor to gain understanding about the human heart, the Kitchen God observes the relationship between Jinyi and his wife, Yuying, from their early romance through old age, a love that is shaped by the Cultural Revolution and other challenges.

*The People's Republic of Desire* by Annie Wang

The world of contemporary China and its unique blend of traditional Chinese culture, Communist rule, and the encroachment of Western influences comes to life through the lives and loves of four professional women in modern-day Beijing.

*Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by Sijie Dai

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, two boys are sent to the country for reeducation, where their lives take an unexpected turn when they meet the beautiful daughter of a local tailor and stumble upon a forbidden stash of Western literature.

*The Vagrants* by Yiyun Li

In 1979 Muddy River, a provincial Chinese city, the Gu family struggles to deal with the imminent loss of their daughter, Gu Shan, about to be executed as a counterrevolutionary, while their neighbors deal with the realities of life in China. In 1979 Muddy River, a provincial Chinese city, the Gu family struggles to deal with the imminent loss of their daughter, Gu Shan, about to be executed as a counterrevolutionary, while their neighbors deal with the realities of life in China.



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