

An Exploration of Ha Jin's Cultural and Literal Capital Reflected in *Waiting*

Tan Jing (Corresponding author)

School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou College of Commerce

Guangzhou 510530, Guangdong, China

Received: July 3, 2023 Accepted: August 3, 2023 Published: August 11, 2023

doi: 10.5296/jsss.v10i2.21127

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/jsss.v10i2.21127>

Abstract

Ha Jin is one of the most important contemporary Chinese-American writers in American literary circles. His diaporic identity, on one hand, offers him the priority to observe and retrospect the two cultures. On the other hand, it makes his composition imprinted with strong features: unique narrative mode and skillful design, through which he exposes thoroughly human nature and probes into the intricacies of the heart. This essay intends to analyze how Ha Jin's cultural and literary capital has enhanced the theme of the novel *Waiting*. He is especially good at depicting everyday details in simple English with a Chinese flavor. By these detailed descriptions, he gives us insight into the lives of Kong Lin and Manna Wu which are mechanistic and dehumanizing. We can also see how an individual's fate is determined by everyday life from everyday details of the characters in the novel.

Keywords: Ha Jin, diaporic identity, cultural and literary capital, the theme of *Waiting*

Ha Jin is an award-winning Chinese American writer and one of the most important contemporary Chinese-American writers in American literary circles. His writings have received both popular and critical acclaim. Among his writings, *Waiting* is regarded as the most successful masterpiece which brought him fame and fortune.

1. A Brief Introduction to Ha Jin

Ha Jin was born in Liaoning, China in 1956, and he joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA) when he was fourteen years old. After serving six years in the army, he left for college. However, his college study ended soon after the Cultural Revolution began. When the national college entrance examination was renewed in 1977, Ha Jin passed the examination and became a student majoring in English at Heilongjiang University. He graduated from Heilongjiang University In 1981 with a Bachelor's degree majoring in English studies, and

three years later obtained his Master's degree in Anglo-American literature at Shandong University. The year after, he went to Brandeis University, America, studying for a doctorate specializing in British and American poetry. He remained in the United States after his completing his Ph.D. In 1999, Ha Jin published his English novel *Waiting* which won the PEN/Faulkner Award and the National Book Award, becoming the first Chinese-American writer who won the best fiction award of the NBA and the third non-native immigrant writer who won the award during the past fifty years. Besides *Waiting*, Ha Jin published other novels, poems and short stories. His range of subjects include culture, war, love and so on. His special experience while in the army in China left him a deep impression and became the source for his literary work. His writings are mainly about China and most of the events in his novels are based on his military career, which made his writing quite different from other Chinese American writers. Now, he is working at Boston University teaching Writing and Literary Creation and obtained a lifelong professorship.

2. A Brief Introduction to *Waiting*

Waiting draws its material from the Chinese society during the 1960 to 1980s when the Cultural Revolution was overwhelming and the Reform and Open policy was on the outset. This novel is based on a true story. The prototypes of the characters in *Waiting* are Ha Jin's parent-in-law's colleagues in military hospital. *Waiting* uses its slight, deceptively simple framework to reveal a wide range of truths about the human heart. The novel is set in northeast China in the years before, during and just after the Cultural Revolution, which not focuses on politics, but rather about how individuals try to find their happiness within the constraints imposed by society and authority.

Ha Jin structures the tale with a prologue and three equal parts of twelve chapters each. Lin Kong is a Chinese army doctor who is trapped in a traditionally arranged Chinese marriage that greatly embarrasses him. His wife, Shuyu, is an illiterate village woman with a withered face and bound feet. Therefore Lin Kong never feels any sense of passion and love toward her, although he still tries to stay loyal to his family. He is quite content with his static life until he falls in love with his colleague, Manna Wu, who is a nurse at the hospital. He seeks a divorce from Shuyu. Nevertheless, according to the regulations of the Chinese army, an army officer is forbidden to divorce without his spouse's consent until 18 years will have passed, only then he is free to marry again. So year after year Lin returns to his hometown to ask for a divorce, and each time he is turned down by the court. After 18 years have passed, Lin is finally permitted to divorce Shuyu and marry Manna. Yet the second marriage didn't bring him happiness and comfort as he imagined before. Their marriage becomes a great burden to him and frustrates him. Lin is almost torn down by his trivial family life, especially after they give birth to their twin babies. Manna has exhausted herself during those 18 years' painful waiting and is ultimately diagnosed with an incurable disease a few years after they got married. Lin Kong becomes suspicious of the value of human life, wondering how come his life turns out to be what it is and what the worth of waiting was. In the end of the story, he pays a visit to his ex-wife Shuyu, expressing his wish to reunite with her and their daughter. He asks them to wait for him and help him to raise their twin babies after Manna dies. Thus, the second round of waiting takes place.

Ha Jin vividly conjures the texture of daily life in a place where the demands of human longing must be in accordance with the consideration of tradition. In this novel, Ha Jin reveals the feeling of anxiety, helplessness, and confusion through the collapse of the protagonist's illusions.

The interpretation of this novel is constrained by two approaches: one is to view it as a construction of Orientalism, and the other is to view it as a realist novel with outdated techniques. The newest research on *Waiting in China* was published in *Education of the Era* in the year 2022. The scholar named Zhang Ye interpreted it from the perspective of narrative ethics, and discovered the novel's questioning of the fundamental human issues of tradition and modernity, love and morality (Zhang, 2022).

The present author believes that the negative criticisms mentioned earlier in China are somewhat biased. This article attempts to interpret Ha Jin's cultural and literal capital reflected in *Waiting* and analyze how his cultural and literary capital has enhanced the theme of the novel. The author of this article believes that Ha Jin has his own unique writing strategy in his creation. The English language used by Ha Jin to create this novel is highly distinctive, with strong Chinese characteristics. He is especially good at describing everyday details and has an eye for those details. Based on the abundant, convincing details of everyday life, the novel helps the reader get closer to the human soul and touch the innermost part of human emotion.

3. How Ha Jin's Cultural and Literal Capital Enhanced the Theme of the Novel

As mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, Ha Jin went abroad in late 1980s, after he witnessed several political upheavals taking place in China, and further his education there. Chen Aimin divided Chinese-American writers into two groups: writers like Jade Snow Wong, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Frank Chin and Henry David Huang are included in one group; while another group includes some new immigrant writers (writers who went to the States after the Great Cultural Revolution and wrote in English), like Ha Jin. The second group is regarded as the diaspora writers (Chen, 2008). In contemporary postcolonial studies, "diaspora" is defined more in relation to a sense of exile and a state of in-between, which allows the writer to have a flexible perspective, and leads to a syncretism of old and new aspects of self-identity. His diasporic identity, on one hand, makes him always have the feeling of vagabondism and guest, but on the other, enables him to stand on the margin of the two different cultures and offers him the priority to observe and retrospect the two cultures. For Ha Jin, a sense of exile is never a pleasant experience. While he stayed in Emory University, he struggled to keep his professorship, and his economic condition was far from satisfactory. In the interview with Chinese scholar Chen Aimin, Ha Jin is quite frank with his purpose of writing. To him, being an English writer is nothing more than claiming his existence and surviving in a foreign country, and to survive is apparently the biggest priority of his career (Chen, 2008). Compared with the writers of the first group, who were born in the US, Ha Jin is regarded as representing a more authentic voice on China and Chinese culture for western readers.

The identity of the diaspora makes his composition imprinted with strong features: unique

narrative mode and skillful design, through which he exposes thoroughly human nature and probes into the intricacies of the heart.

3.1 Simple English with a Chinese Flavor

Waiting is written in an uncomplicated style, using simple language. The language is plain, objectively precise and highly structured. As Ha Jin interviewed by He Xi in “An Interview with Ha Jin”, he said that “A writer should find his own position in language. If there were no difference between the American novelists and me, I would lose myself. As non-native writers, we must ask ourselves such a question: how can we enrich the English literature and form our unique style and genre? So sometimes I avoid writing something too “Americanized”, especially when the story is taken place in China”(He, 2006). A similar point of view was expressed in his speech made in New Jersey in 2003. He said that since the novel is based on military life in China, it is inevitable that Chinese would come to his mind when he wrote the dialogues. He needs to translate them into English and tries to make it natural and acceptable to the local readers. But he thought that blending Chinese into English is one way to enrich and replenish English. The dialogues between the characters are so straightforward and precise that they constitute a strong feature of its writing techniques. Let’s read the dialogue between Lin Kong and Shuyu when Lin Kong returned to the Goose Village from the city.

He asked, “Shuyu, is the money I send to you enough?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to give you more?”

“No.”

...

“You must need this,” she said and handed him the money.

“Where did you get that?”

“Saved.”

“How much do you have here?” (Ha, 2006,PP.92)

Throughout the novel, this kind of dialogues, brief and neat, can be found everywhere, which adds a special flavor to the novel. The novel begins with a simple sentence, “Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shuyu”^{[2]1}. The opening sentence sets the repetitive structure in motion and Ha Jin begins to tell the story in a calm and casual way. But at the same time, he keeps controlling the whole story very strictly and brings us to the inner world of the characters. Without absorbing plot or thrilling suspense, the novel never fails to provide the reader with an enjoyable reading experience.

Besides, the psychological world of the protagonist is always presented in simple English but with a powerful effect, full of emotional and ideological tension. At the beginning of the novel, after having a quarrel with Manna for the housework, Lin Kong reflected on his life on

the small hills. Here is what is depicted about his psychological activity:

As Lin calmed down, a voice rose in his head and said, Do you really hate her?

He made no reply.

The voice continued, You asked for this mess. Why did you marry her?

I love her, he answered.

You married her for love? You really loved her?

He thought a while, then managed to answer, I think so. We waited eighteen years for each other, didn't we? Doesn't such a long time prove we love each other?

No, time may prove nothing. 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 (Ha, 2006, PP. 367-368).

The author decomposes the psychological activities of the characters here into communication and debate between two different voices. This way of dialogue directly displays the psychological contradictions and conflicts of the character, which is not only straightforward and full of three-dimensional sense, but also full of emotional and ideological tension, giving readers a strong spiritual shock and reflection.

3.2 Description of Everyday Details

Ha Jin is considered as a realist novelist. He is praised for his insisting on a realistic writing while the major trend of creative writing seems to pursue a fashionable, postmodern, and often incomprehensible style by the judge panel of Pen/Faulkner and the National Book Award. As we can see from the description of Lin Kong and Shuyu's appearances:

In fact Lin looked quite young for his age. He was in his late forties, but he did not seem like a middle-aged man. Despite the uniform, he resembled an official more than an officer. His pale face was smooth and handsome with a pair of black-rimmed glasses on his straight nose. By contrast, his wife Shuyu was a small, withered woman and looked much older than her age. Her thin arms and legs couldn't fill up her clothes, which were always baggy on her. In addition, she had bound feet and sometimes wore black puttees. Her dark hair was coiled into a severe bun on the back of her head, giving her a rather gaunt face. Her mouth was sunken, though her dark eyes were not bad-looking, like a pair of tadpoles. In every way the couple did not match (Ha, 2006, PP.6).

Judging from the above description, it is easy to notice that the main characters such as Lin Kong and Shuyu are the people whose outlooks and personalities are easy to be identified with common Chinese in our lives. They appear to be realistic and convincing to the Chinese readers, not bringing forth as much a sense of disgust and nonsense as the characters in Ha Jin's short stories. Most characters are portrayed as usual people with normal human merits and defects. Therefore, *Waiting's* character portrayal is indeed a positive literary virtue.

Ha Jin confirms that, “the focus of his works is on the person, the inner life, the life of the soul and how that change, how the emotional life is affected by time and also by environment”¹. He is especially good at expressing this theme through everyday details and has an eye for those details. He thinks that the abundant, convincing details are the basis of a novel and only through the detailed description, can it get closer to the human soul. He admits that his writing intends to touch the innermost part of human emotion. “I won’t make up many details for my novel. To me, the most important thing is how to compile them”².

The novel details the story of his eighteen-year-long effort to divorce Shuyu and marry Manna. The chief attraction of this novel is the care with which Ha Jin recreates the atmosphere of life, showing us how ordinary people conduct their lives under conditions which we would find “intolerable”. In Chapter 11, Ha Jin paints a touching picture of life in Goose village, where Lin Kong enjoys the simple food and pleasures of village life as well as being at home with his daughter, Hua.

Though Shuyu and Lin slept in different rooms at night, enjoyed being at home, especially playing with his daughter. He liked the home-cooked food, most of which was fresh and tasty. The multigrain porridge, into which Shuyu always urged him to put some brown sugar though she wouldn’t take any herself, was so soft and delicious that he could eat three bowls at a meal without feeling stuffed. The eggs sautéed with leeks or scallions would make his belches redolent of the dish even hours later. The steamed string beans seasoned with sesame oil and mashed garlic gave him a feeling of ease and freedom (Ha, 2006, PP. 88).

4. Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Ha Jin gives readers many opportunities to see the rural world and its cultural systems untouched as yet by the Cultural Revolution. By these detailed descriptions, he gives us insight into the lives of Kong Lin and Manna Wu which are mechanistic and dehumanizing. We can also see how an individual’s fate is determined by everyday life from everyday details of the characters in the novel.

Though the story was set during the Cultural Revolution, which might arouse the western readers’ curiosity, Ha Jin kept distance from this topic. He didn’t touch the eventful happenings of society in that particular era. Instead, much is focused on the description of Lin Kong and Manna’s inner world and their trivial activities. According to Ha Jin, it is man who plays the decisive role in his own fate, whether it is a sad one or a happy one. His careful choice of details to illuminate the ironies of his characters’ lives gives power to a narrative about people who have no individual power. With his excellent writing skills, he presents a vivid picture of life’s circle of the ordinary person, which is made up of the limitations of the individual, interpersonal relationship and the whole social environment. He succeeds admirably in bringing to life characters whose whole concept of what it means to be a person

¹ From Powells: <http://www.powells.com/authors/jin.html>

² From Youyin: <http://www.youyin.com/hexi/yy2699-50-103.html>

is diametrically opposed to our own, making humans out of people who live lives of structure, not of choice. Through Lin Kong's fate, we can not help thinking about our own fate: we live our own lives. We have to make our own choices in our era, like Lin Kong. If we were him, would we be more determined than him or weaker than him? To what extent can we become an authentic person? The truth of life is embodied in such a simple love story and the details of common daily life, making this novel a compelling and powerful one.

About Authors

Tan Jing (1981-): an associate professor of Guangzhou College of Commerce. Her research interests include British and American literature and English teaching.

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