

Life and works of ha jin



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“ In short, he must be loyal only to his art.” This is a quote from Xuefei Jin, otherwise known as Ha Jin, a Chinese-American author born in 1956 in China to a father who was in the military. Ha Jin began volunteering for China’s army, also known as the People’s Liberation Army at the age of fourteen. Eventually, Jin began to study English and literature, moved to the United States of America in the year 1985 to continue his linguistic studies, and he almost moved back to his home country China a few years after moving to the states but decided to stay due to the conditions that China had which were ideals opposed to which Ha Jin had possessed. With the Cultural Revolution happening in China, Ha Jin would not have been able to comfortably publish his writings if he had gone back to China and he would have possibly received a lot of hate if he did. China’s Cultural Revolution has had an everlasting influence on Ha Jin’s writings and still do to this day.

The Cultural Revolution in China lasted from August of 1967 to August of 1977 and became a Chinese Political Movement due to China’s Communist Party’s chairman Mao Zedong wanting to “ renew the spirit of the Chinese Revolution” (Lieberthal 1). In wanting to renew the spirit of the Chinese Revolution, Mao Zedong shut down all of China’s schools and had the Red Guards attack things that were considered to him “ bourgeois”. The Red Guards were student militants who were founded by Zedong after he shut down their schools. These militants attacked those who opposed communist ideals including teachers, intellectuals, or even ordinary people who were suspected to oppose communism. The Red Guards wanted to promote communism more than it had already been promoted at the time and did so by any means they found

necessary. Many people were even kicked out of cities in an attempt to urbanize those areas and the innocent people's conditions would be as extremely bad as being raped, beaten, or tortured.

Ha Jin first moved to the United States of America in the fall of 1985 where he had first arrived in Boston where he would attend Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts to study American Literature which he had been fond of for a long time. Jin had previously earned his Bachelor and Master of Arts Degrees in China and traveled across the globe to pursue his Doctorate Degree in English. “‘ There is a unique American smell that hits you when you arrive here’, he says. ‘ It is very sweet, like chemicals or a kind of perfume. It makes you sick for a while.’ Jin had flown from Beijing, a student visa stuffed into his pocket, to study American literature at Brandeis University. ‘ I know people who came here from Asia and vomited for days. They couldn’t even brush their teeth because the water smelled so different’”(Garner 1). This quote comes from a New York Times article in 2002 that shows that the United States seemed like a whole new world to Ha Jin coming from China. It was a whole new atmosphere with new people, new places, and new cultures. However, it was much better than what he would have experienced back home in China. Even after China’s Cultural Revolution had come to an end in 1976, Ha Jin felt unsafe/unsure on a potential return to his homeland because he feared that he would be criticized for his non-communist writings.

While spending time in America, Ha Jin wrote his first novel titled *Waiting*, a historically fictitious story about a doctor in the Chinese army named Lin Kong who had an arranged marriage to a loyal woman named Shuyu whom

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he had lost interest in and had asked for a divorce when he had met an educated woman by the name of Manna Wu. Despite having a daughter with his wife, Lin still has a great interest in Manna. By the culture in which Lin Kong had lived in, he would be greatly criticized for getting with a woman who he was not married to or even just getting divorced for that matter. This setting reflects the principles that most of the people of China followed at the time during the 1960s, which was not very supportive of divorces, affairs, or anything along those lines. Eventually, Lin Kong and his wife Shuyu decide to finally get a divorce in 1984. After the era of extreme criticism in China, Lin marries the girl he had fallen in love with long ago, Manna Wu, and they have twin children. However, Lin starts to see Shuyu as more attractive after the separation that they both had and starts to lose interest in his second wife, who he thought would be the one for him. Shuyu is confident that Lin will eventually come back to her, and Lin is once again in a personal dilemma in which he can not decide which woman he wants to be with. His love life remains a mystery and he is waiting to make his next decision. This novel is greatly influenced by his experiences with China's Cultural Revolution and those tragic experiences as well as writing this book in English, which is not his first language, helped Ha Jin come up with and write this novel which earned him the National Book Award for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction as well.

Another notable work by Ha Jin is *Ocean of Words*, a collection of short stories based on Eastern warfare, originally published in 1996. These stories take place near a China-Soviet border during the 70s where tensions were high between China and the Soviet Union. These stories are also historically

fictitious, written by Ha Jin, and are about the experiences that military personnel endured during this historical era. These stories are intertwined with China's Cultural Revolution, making it somewhat easier for Ha Jin to descriptively and accurately describe the conditions in which army personnel would endure in the situations written about. This collection holds various stories about what it was like at the time where the tensions were high between China and the USSR and gives the audience various and different, memorable characters thanks to the amazing writings and narratives by Ha Jin himself. These short stories in the collective widely known as *Ocean of Words* helped Ha Jin receive a PEM/Hemingway award in 1997 for being such a great form of fiction right before the 21st century had begun.

Another great aspect of Ha Jin's career as an author is his extensive work with poetry. In the website poetryfoundation.org, they honor and recognize the great works of Ha Jin in the poetry field. A few examples of poetry books written by Ha Jin are *Between Silences* in 1990, *Facing Shadows* in 1996, and very recently *A Distant Center*, published in 2018 (according to poetryfoundation.org). Ha Jin uses poetry in many ways, but especially to speak and express his feelings and thoughts on his life as a former member of China's People's Liberation Army. Although Ha Jin is not the best writer of poetry, or even in any writing in general due to him not always have spoken English, he still captures his emotion and thought in his poetry and is able to truly speak on topics that most people who experienced the same things that he experienced may not express or have the capabilities or knowledge of expressing as he has earned throughout his long life.

Throughout growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution and volunteering in China's People's Liberation Army only at the age of fourteen, to going to universities in China to earn his Bachelor of Arts Degree and Master of Arts Degree in English and literature, to moving to Boston in the United States of America to pursue his Doctorate Degree in English, to writing great stories such as *Waiting* and *Ocean of Words*, to all of the awards he has earned for his fictitious writings, and even starting to write poetry, creating books worth of them with titles such as *Between Silences* (1990), *Facing Shadows* (1996), and *A Distant Center* (2018), Ha Jin has proven through his long career of writing novels, short stories, and poems that he is a man who is able to speak with honesty about the experiences that people like him went through during China's Cultural Revolution. It was a very harsh time for all the people of China who lived and died during this dangerous and extremely violent era in the Eastern world. For all of the people who fortunately survived and for all of those who unfortunately did not survive, Ha Jin truly creates clear, thorough, and extensive writings for his audience members to learn about his experiences and feel what he may have felt during China's Cultural Revolution which has had an everlasting influence on a great amount of his writings and still do to the present world that we all live in today in 2019.

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