

# **Waiting Study Guide**

**Waiting by Ha Jin**

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# Plot Summary

*Waiting* is a story of love in limbo and the lives it leaves on hold as Lin Kong, a doctor in the Chinese Army, battles cultural forces and his own uncertain heart in a quest for love's fulfillment.

As a twenty-seven-year old military medical student in 1962, under heavy pressure from his ailing mother and his father, Lin agrees to an arranged marriage. When he returns home to meet Shuyu, the girl his parents have chosen, he is horrified. Although she is a year younger than he is, she looks much older and Lin finds her singularly unattractive. As a young man in a China moving toward the Cultural Revolution, he is particularly repelled by her bound feet, an old-fashioned custom acceptable in his small village but mocked by his contemporaries in Shenyang City. Lin feels Shuyu is completely inappropriate and begs his parents to break the engagement, but they are adamant and he capitulates out of a sense of duty.

In the twenty years that follow, Lin is so ashamed of Shuyu that he never allows her to visit him at the military hospital in Muji City where he works. Lin sees Shuyu for only ten days each year, during his summer leave. Three years after their marriage, their daughter, Hua, is born, and Lin decides to remain sexually separate from his wife, even during his annual visit. He never sleeps with her again, yet Shuyu remains devoted, unquestioning, and uncomplaining, taking care of his parents and raising their daughter alone. Lin does not hate her, but he does not love her, and does not know what to do about the situation. He tries to treat her with the respect and kindness as one would a family member, but is physically and emotionally absent from his marriage.

In 1964, student Manna Wu comes to the hospital where Lin works as a doctor and teaches anatomy at the nursing school. Manna first becomes involved with young officer Mai Dong. She loves him but is hesitant to accept his marriage proposal at the time, as she is uncertain where she will be stationed after her graduation. She turns to her teacher, Lin, for advice, and he agrees it would be unwise to marry before graduating. Manna refuses to marry Mai Dong before his transfer to a distant location and he later breaks off their relationship, taking another woman as his wife.

Manna considers Lin a friend and their relationship develops. By 1967, Lin and the twenty-eight-year-old Manna have professed their love for each other, but they are cautious and proper. Affairs between military personnel are strictly forbidden and men and women are not even allowed to walk together outside the compound. Censure by party members will mean punishment and possibly the end of their careers.

By 1970, Manna is tired of waiting and Lin decides to end his marriage. For the next 13 years, he returns every summer as usual to Goose Village and asks Shuyu for a divorce. She always agrees and then reverses herself when they go to court. There is an unwritten rule that a man may divorce his wife without her consent after 18 years of sexual separation, and in 1984, Lin finally brings Shuyu to Muji City and divorces her. Lin marries Manna, they have twins, and Shuyu settles in the city with Hua.



Surprisingly, Lin achieves his goal only to begin finding Shuyu suddenly much more attractive and his relationship with Manna much more stifling. By the end of the book, Shuyu is happily certain he will one day return to her and Lin is once again wavering between two women; his own heart's desire is still an unsolved mystery.



# Prologue

## Prologue Summary

Twenty years into his marriage, Lin Kong returns to Goose Village to ask his wife Shuyu for a divorce, something he's been doing every summer for over a decade without success. Home for over a week and with only three days left, he keeps putting off asking Shuyu for a divorce, despite promises to his longtime sweetheart Manna Wu, a nurse in the military hospital where he works.

Lin finally asks Shuyu to go through with the divorce, and she agrees to comply. When they get to court, however, her brother Bengheng lodges a protest, she starts to cry, and the judge declines Lin's request. Then the family goes out to eat together and agrees to disagree about the divorce, as they do every year.

Lin returns to Manna, who is disappointed but not surprised. She suspected he would not try too hard this year. The next summer he will have been celibate with his wife for 18 years, and able to get a divorce without her permission. Manna and Lin argue, but that too, seems routine, part of a well-memorized script. Everyone involved has become quite used to the situation.

## Prologue Analysis

The prologue catapults the reader into the middle of a drama that has been in motion for many years, although it hints the situation may shift in the near future. The author introduces Lin Kong and the circumstances surrounding his marriage to Shuyu, a marriage he never wanted, even though he bears her no ill will. Shuyu is completely accepting of Lin although he has spent no more than ten days a year in her company since they were wed, they haven't slept together for seventeen years, and he's been asking for a divorce for the last thirteen years. Their only child, daughter Hua, is now a teenager.

The reader also meets Manna Wu, the woman who has been waiting for Lin most of her adult life and the one with whom Lin has actually spent the bulk of his daily life. Incredibly, their relationship is still chaste, as they are afraid of the political and professional repercussions of a forbidden affair between military staff members.

Here the author contrasts the landscapes and values coexisting during the years surrounding China's Cultural Revolution, from the rural old-fashioned village where Lin was born and Shuya still lives, to the "New China" of the cities and Mao's communist party. Although urban party members scoff at the "old ways," they have effectively created their own brand of social, sexual, and political restrictions.



# Part 1, Chapter 1

## Part 1, Chapter 1 Summary

Lin graduates from medical school and comes to the Muji City military hospital as a doctor. The hospital also runs a small nursing school, where Lin teaches anatomy and Manna enrolls as a student a year later. Manna is an energetic, athletic young woman, although at twenty-five, she is older than most of her classmates. Since the young women are nurses as well as soldiers, and not accepted for service without an exam to prove their virginity, they are considered "good girls" and young officers seeking a suitable girlfriend or wife often seek them out.

Manna meets young lieutenant Mai Dong and they begin a bashful courtship. Manna staunchly defends her virtue against her boyfriend's advances and he proposes marriage, but she is uncertain, since she does not know where she will be stationed after she graduates. She worries about people thinking she was already having a physical affair and that their disapproval could damage her reputation and advancement in the military hospital, which is very political.

Manna goes to her teacher, Lin, who advises her to be practical and not rush into things. She refuses to marry Mai Dong immediately, even after they learn he is being transferred. She promises to wait for him but will not set a wedding date, despite Mai Dong's anguished pleas. Manna is stunned when Mai Dong writes a few months later to tell her he quit the army and is moving back to Shanghai to marry his cousin. Devastated, she grieves for weeks. Although Manna is not unattractive, the hospital has so many younger female nurses that the competition is fierce. She finds few new suitors and none that appeal to her.

## Part 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

In this chapter, the author presents a glimpse of how ironically choices can alter destiny and how easily and unexpectedly things can change, despite plans to make prudent decisions. Manna wants to wait to marry until the conditions of her life are more certain, a decision that will lead to her waiting for someone else far longer than Mai Dong waits for her. This chapter also brings a recurring theme to the forefront: the unwillingness of the main characters to completely commit, even under the influence of passion. Manna and Lin both have a tendency to honor head over heart, something both her hesitation and Lin's advice illustrate.



# Part 1, Chapter 2

## Part 1, Chapter 2 Summary

Lin is rising in status at the hospital, as one of only four medical school graduates, ranked a captain, and earning a good salary. With no wife in evidence, many of the young women are interested and then disappointed to find he has a wife living in the country.

Lin and Manna now work together and continue to maintain the friendship they developed while she was in nursing school. Lin is considered a scholar and Manna trusts and respects him.

Manna is very impressed when she drops by to visit Lin and finds he has a bookcase full of unfamiliar titles. The hospital library carries only political and medical texts, since the Red Guards burned the novels and plays. Manna is surprised Lin's books were not confiscated, and learns that several officers secretly borrow from his collection, which she also begins to do. She helps him jacket the books to hide the titles, although later the hospital staff is ordered to hand in any book considered bourgeois in content. Lin does turn in a dozen of his books, most of them extra copies. Manna wonders why he would take the risk of keeping his books, but does not ask him about it and stops borrowing them.

## Part 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

Manna's fascination with Lin deepens as she discerns the slight rebelliousness expressed through his book collection. Borrowing and reading the books creates more of a bond between them, intellectually and as co-conspirators consuming literature frowned on by the party. Although Manna enjoys bucking the system just a little, again she shows hesitation when presented with the possibility of disapproval from her superiors, and chooses to do what seems safest.





# Part 1, Chapter 3

## Part 1, Chapter 3 Summary

In the fall of 1966, part the hospital's staff goes on a field-training exercise, a month-long foot march of 400 miles. They are not permitted to take any automated vehicles. Lin and Manna must go, and as they reach the snowy mountainous areas, the walk becomes more arduous. Manna and another nurse develop such serious blisters on their feet, they can barely walk.

Lin checks on all his nurses that evening, bringing them food and then treating the two nurses by piercing their blisters and leaving a piece of Manna's hair inside the wounds to keep them open and draining. The ladies ask him to stay and eat dinner with them. He refuses but later has a fantasy about doing so, musing about the days when rich men had multiple wives. Lin thinks of touching Manna's foot, which it seems he can still feel, warm within his hands. The next day, Manna is unable to walk, so Lin makes arrangements for her to ride in a horse-drawn supply cart. When she is able to stand on her feet, he carries her medical gear for her so she has less weight to bear.

## Part 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

Lin, a very serious yet kind and gentle man, rarely connects physically or emotionally with others. The appreciation of Manna and the other nurses for his medical ministrations warms him, and touching Manna while tending to her blisters shifts his perception of her as friend to that of a woman. He begins to start looking out for her, making sure she stays comfortable and healthy.



## Part 1, Chapter 4

### Part 1, Chapter 4 Summary

Returning to Muji, Manna finds her thoughts increasingly returning to Lin, to the point of obsession. Manna wonders about his personal life and like Lin, remembers and thinks of his hands on her feet, which fills her heart with emotion. She hears his wife has given birth to a baby girl, which upsets her, and then one day while taking a walk she sees Lin and another nurse strolling, talking, and skipping stones on a pond together.

Although the scene is completely innocent, Manna finds herself wracked with jealousy and decides she cannot let another girl take Lin away from her. She begins to make plans to become closer to Lin.

### Part 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

Like Lin, Manna's feelings have undergone a sea of change. Almost without noticing when and how it happens, she begins to feel a special connection to Lin and a proprietary interest in him. She resents his family ties and feels threatened by any attention, however innocent, paid to other women.



# Part 1, Chapter 5

## Part 1, Chapter 5 Summary

Lin is becoming aware of Manna's admiration, but feels conflicted. He notices that she looks older and less appealing since her break up with Mai Dong and wonders if he's really attracted to her. He dwells on his marital situation, envious of other couples who seem happy together. He does not blame Shuyu, who took care of his mother until her death and is now doing the same for his father. He does, however, try to be kind to Manna, especially after he learns she was raised in an orphanage and has no close relatives.

One day Manna leaves an opera ticket and a note telling him to go and enjoy the performance. He arrives to find her in the next seat. During the performance, she takes his hand and begins to stroke his palm. To his own surprise, he reciprocates and barely hears the rest of the opera, as they hold and fondle each other's hands. Afterwards, Lin is excited but unsettled. He rushes out alone after the opera and that night dreams first of operating on a heart patient with a woman who resembles Manna, and then of living in a comfortable home, happily married to a faceless wife.

Later, Lin runs into Manna, who asks him to take a walk with her that weekend. To his own surprise, he agrees, and as she walks away, notices her slim back and long legs. He entertains the thought that this could lead to an affair and decides to allow whatever comes.

## Part 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

Nurtured internally, Manna and Lin's feelings are now moving into the real world. Manna has clearly decided to make a move, and Lin is assaulted with worry about the consequences of acting on his desires and confusion about whether or not they really are his desires. His instinct is to withdraw yet he finds himself allowing Manna to pull him closer.

The reader also learns Manna is an orphan who was never adopted, without any close family. This fact is rarely mentioned in the book, and the details of her childhood or feelings about it are never revealed. However, we do know she has not been loved and valued in the ways most people experience, a likely influence on her perception of herself.



# Part 1, Chapter 6

## Part 1, Chapter 6 Summary

While Lin walks with Manna, they find themselves talking of things they would not dare discuss with others, including political and religious views unacceptable to the power structure at the hospital. They begin to spend all their free time together, although they do not touch or even hold hands again.

People begin to gossip and Lin is summoned by the vice-director of the hospital's political department to discuss the rumors. He is warned that his relationship with Manna could affect his future. Lin promises not to have a sexual relationship with Manna. When Lin tells Manna of the meeting, she asks him how he really feels about her, and he tells her he loves her, and that he would marry her if it were possible. The next day Manna is called in by the director and she makes the same promise to keep her relationship with Lin platonic. Despite their agreement, people begin to complain about Lin's behavior and appearance, and for the first time, he is not elected a model officer. Lin tries to satisfy the criticisms, cutting his hair when a section chief complains about its length, but he feels moody and depressed.

## Part 1, Chapter 6 Analysis

Lin and Manna begin to trust each other more deeply, which naturally leads to a deeper mental and emotional intimacy. Moved by this feeling, they finally declare their feelings for each other. It becomes clear that while they may be naturally timid, they are also not wrong about the negative political effect their relationship could have on their professional lives.



# Part 1, Chapter 7

## Part 1, Chapter 7 Summary

After much begging, Lin finally shows Manna a photograph of his wife. Manna makes fun of how old Shuyu looks, and of her bound feet. Although she is saying what Lin thought from the beginning, it makes him angry to hear it from her. Manna is relieved, feeling sure now that Lin's wife is unsuitable for him, and finally tells her friend, Haiyan Niu, about seeing the picture. Haiyan suggests that Manna go to bed with Lin, to cement her claim on him. Manna protests, but does begin to think about it.

Haiyan gives her the key to an apartment that will be empty over the weekend, and Manna asks Lin to meet her there. Lin is shocked and disapproving. He tells Manna a secret tryst is too great a risk to take, and that she should return the key immediately. Manna does so, but Haiyan implies Lin must not be much of a man, or he simply does not love Manna enough to risk anything for her.

## Part 1, Chapter 7 Analysis

Lin's angry reaction to Manna's derisive response to the way Shuyu looks is a classic case of how awful it can be to see one's own judgments expressed by another. Lin is looking into a mirror of his own beliefs, and not liking what he sees there. Manna, however, feels more hopeful and justified, since this allows her to believe she is only trying to end something that never should have been, which mirrors Lin's private thoughts.

Lin's rejection of Manna's suggestion that they break the rules by being alone together outside the hospital is significant, feeding Manna's first doubts within the relationship. She begins to wonder and worry about the true depth of his feelings for her.



# Part 1, Chapter 8

## Part 1, Chapter 8 Summary

Disturbed by Manna's proposition, Lin questions his own motives. Does he want to make love to Manna? Should he want to, no matter what the consequences? He decides a spiritual bond is more important than a sexual one. He also questions whether he is too rational, but decides he is doing what is best for the both of them. That night, he has an erotic dream about a woman, whose face, like that of the woman he dreamed of being married to, he never sees.

After he wakes up, Lin thinks about how he had often doubted his manhood until after his daughter was born, because he had never been passionately in love with a woman. That day, his roommates tease him about his dream, and thinking of the animalistic abandon it contained, he feels sickened by his own eroticism.

## Part 1, Chapter 8 Analysis

In this chapter, Lin reveals many of his ambivalent feelings, beliefs, and doubts about his sexuality. As in so many things, he seems to hold equal amounts of fear and desire, and to be constantly bouncing between the two. Lin is also extremely attached to his own image of himself as a rational, analytical person in total control of his drives and emotions. Nothing worries him more than the loss of control that sexual abandon represents.



# Part 1, Chapter 9

## Part 1, Chapter 9 Summary

Lin's father dies, leaving him the farmhouse out of gratitude to Shuyu, who cared for him until his death the same way she did for his wife before him. Lin sends money home for the funeral but does not return. He becomes withdrawn in the following months. Manna starts implying that he should now seek to divorce Shuyu, which is what he has been thinking, but he feels guilty about Shuyu and the hard life she has led because of him. After an acquaintance dies suddenly, and with the realization of how short life can be, Manna pushes the issue and demands that he divorce Shuyu or end their relationship.

Lin is conflicted, staying away from Manna but thinking about her constantly and feeling somewhat alarmed when she starts becoming more active with friends and activities. He feels caught in a vicious circle and wishes he had never met Manna, but had instead continued with his emotionally austere life. He keeps himself busy and decides he does not need a woman.

## Part 1, Chapter 9 Analysis

Whenever death appears, it raises questions and implications for the living. The death of Lin's father, in addition to the death of an acquaintance of his and Manna's begs the question, "Waiting for what?" which strengthens Manna's determination, but throws Lin into full retreat.



# Part 1, Chapter 10

## Part 1, Chapter 10 Summary

Manna and Lin attend a staff holiday dinner, although not together. Manna begins to drink heavily, which Lin admonishes her for, but she defies him and he feels humiliated.

Later, he goes outside and smokes a cigarette, still stinging from the rejection, but blaming himself and realizing he wants her most when it is impossible to have her.

Manna appears, embracing him and apologizing. He forgives her, and she reminds him she is a thirty-year-old virgin, asking him if he wants to make love to her. Manna accuses him of being a "fearful rabbit" and he agrees to take the blame for the situation, then helps her back to her living quarters, as she is very drunk. Lin is upset and embarrassed, but he decides to ask Shuyu for a divorce the next summer.

## Part 1, Chapter 10 Analysis

Although Lin feels safer without the complication of Manna, he is still attached to the idea of her being in love with him. When she moves further away from him, his fear of commitment is no longer an issue and his desire to be loved surfaces.





# Part 1, Chapter 11

## Part 1, Chapter 11 Summary

Home for his leave, Lin enjoys playing with three-year-old daughter Hua, who seems attached to him despite his absence most of the year. He loans money to Shuyu's brother, Bensheng, who agrees to thatch their roof as repayment. He and Shuyu have a rare laugh together when she tells him her brother needs the money because he was fined for sewing pigs' rectums shut so they would be fatter and heavier at market.

Lin begins to see how constantly hard Shuyu works, and how little money she spends on her own needs. She tries to give him money that she has saved out of what he has sent her. He sees how she feeds him and Hua and will not eat the dishes herself. She lives like a devoted servant, dutiful in all things, including cleaning and decorating his parents' graves, which he visits. Lin realizes she is a perfect country wife and no one in the village will ever support his reasons for wanting a divorce. He wonders if they could have learned to love each other if he had not had his career in the city, or if he could have two wives somehow. He also wonders if he would have been better off never meeting Manna.

Shuyu comes to him that night and asks to share his bed; she would like to have another baby, a son. Lin refuses her but realizes she does get lonely and that she is committed to being with him forever. He feels terrible about the situation and cannot bear to ask her for a divorce.

## Part 1, Chapter 11 Analysis

In this chapter, Lin wrestles with his conscience and plays the game of "what if?" If some other thing had been different, would the outcome have been different? Would it have been better?

Lin is stricken by the sadness of the situation for all concerned and cannot sort out whose feelings he is most responsible for: his own, Shuyu's, or society's. Here the reader gets a rare glimpse into Shuyu's own hopes and dreams. Typically, all her actions and words are generated in service of others, particularly Lin. In this passage, she actually asks for something she wants and talks about it with Lin, although she accepts his denial and rejection without further argument.



# Part 1, Chapter 12

## Part 1, Chapter 12 Summary

Manna is eager to know what Lin accomplished at home, but he avoids her for days until she confronts him. He tells her he couldn't bring himself to abandon his wife and small child that summer, and that he has no reason to do so that would satisfy the village court.

When Manna asks him what they are to do, he suggests they break up and not get in any deeper, which infuriates her. She says he has changed her social status at the hospital. Now she will not be able to attract another man and will be shamed if he drops her. Lin is worried but also pleased to think of Manna as bound to him. She will have to live as a spinster without him unless she is transferred to another hospital. A week later, he apologizes for not thinking of her, and says he will try to divorce Shuyu, but will not be rushed.

Lin goes home the next summer with a letter of recommendation from the hospital's Political Department, supporting him in his divorce. Manna is so encouraged she starts planning their life together after he leaves, buying things to set up housekeeping. Lin returns, dejected, and tells her he talked to Shuyu, but his brother-in-law, Bensheng, went berserk, threatening to come to the city and take army leaders to task for assisting Lin in spousal abandonment. It would create a scandal and ruin their chances for upcoming promotions. Manna finally agrees, and Lin says he will try for a divorce again later. They are both promoted, as hoped, and given a raise.

## Part 1, Chapter 12 Analysis

Manna is more prepared to take risks than Lin, but not necessarily more eager to do so. They both believe they still have time and that they can have what they want without sacrificing anything else. In this case, they put their careers before their love affair, and do get the immediate payoff they chose, providing evidence to themselves that waiting is sometimes the best thing to do.



# Part 2, Chapter 1

## Part 2, Chapter 1 Summary

Two years later, Lin's cousin Liang Meng, who is a widower, contacts him, asking for help finding a wife, as he would like to remarry. The previous summer, Lin had returned home and again asked for a divorce. Shuyu agreed, but when they got to court, she could not stop crying; she then changed her mind. Manna is disappointed, as always, and undergoing a personality change. She is becoming more quarrelsome with others as Lin returns to placidity. People call Manna a "typical old maid" and he feels badly for her, but doesn't know what to do other than try for a divorce again the next summer.

When Lin gets his cousin's letter, it occurs to him that Manna could find another boyfriend outside of the hospital. He decides he can let her go, that it would be best, and tells her about his cousin's letter. Lin says he is not suggesting that she choose his cousin, but tells her she should consider finding a boyfriend in another city. Manna surprises him by telling him she has thought of that, but it is not so simple, yet does ask him more about his cousin. Lin sets up a meeting between Manna and Liang Meng.

## Part 2, Chapter 1 Analysis

Lin tests both his own feelings and Manna's by giving her an opportunity to find another boyfriend. Although he seems unconscious of a deeper motive, he is not particularly thrilled to find Manna has had similar thoughts herself.

This is one of many times Lin will show discomfort when confronted with the fact that other people have their own internal dialogue and reality, just as he does. His uneasiness is not based on a denial of their right to have that, which he does not dispute. He is, however, uncomfortable with other people's unexpected thoughts or feelings, which make him feel blindsided.



## Part 2, Chapter 2

### Part 2, Chapter 2 Summary

Liang Meng comes to the hospital to meet Manna. Lin introduces them and the three of them go to lunch, where Lin inexplicably becomes somewhat surly. Liang has to return home because his daughter is ill, but returns a few days later. He and Manna spend some time together and he writes Lin later that he is very interested in her and would like to return to woo her.

Manna tells Lin she is not at all attracted to Liang, and Lin is secretly delighted. Manna insists Lin is the one she loves, and he is not to suggest looking for another man again. She writes to Liang, telling him she feels poorly and suffers from serious rheumatic heart disease, which apparently scares him off. Lin never hears from his cousin again.

### Part 2, Chapter 2 Analysis

Both Lin and Manna seem to want to know if their relationship is worth fighting for, or if they could be just as happy without each other. However, their exercise in finding that out seems half-hearted at best and they end up choosing each other again. Manna's fib to Liang about her heart condition foreshadows a future irony. It also points to a recurring word and symbol in the book, which is that of the heart, its mystery in terms of knowing one's own or anyone else's desires, and its fluctuating states of being, both emotional and physical.



## Part 2, Chapter 3

### Part 2, Chapter 3 Summary

The next summer, Lin and Shuyu set out for divorce court as usual. In court, the judge is impatient with Lin and questions Shuyu, asking her if there is another woman, if she still loves him. She says that she does not know about another woman, but he certainly is a handsome man. She states that she certainly does still love him, and then breaks down in tears.

The judge grills Lin, who denies having a physical affair but admits to having someone in mind, who he would prefer as his wife. The judge says he must give the woman's name and all vital information for the case to proceed, and until then, he is to stay married and be good to his wife. A crowd of angry villagers, outraged by Lin's attempted disposal of his wife, which is led by her brother, Bensheng, has gathered outside. They have to be dispersed by the militia and later there is an article in the local newspaper, adding to Lin's embarrassment.

Lin's elder brother, Ren, comes to Lin's home for a visit and reproves him for trying to divorce the faithful Shuyu. Lin suspects that Bensheng, also behind the village scene and news article, asked Ren to come in support of Shuyu, and vows never to speak to him again. Nevertheless, Bensheng shows up too and they all eat dinner together. Later Lin remembers he intended to cut all ties with Bensheng, but forgot his resolve.

### Part 2, Chapter 3 Analysis

Lin is again unsuccessful in obtaining a divorce, but he is less angry and frustrated by that than most people would be, underlining his essential ambivalence on the subject. The reader can also see that whatever faults Lin may have, being a person who holds a grudge is simply not one of them. He is always willing to see the other person's point of view although he is much less willing to feel it. He is rarely angry with others for long.



## Part 2, Chapter 4

### Part 2, Chapter 4 Summary

Lin returns to the hospital to find out that a high-ranking officer has divorced his wife and is looking for another. He has asked the hospital to help, since he wants a nurse or doctor to care for him as he gets older. Since Manna is the most attractive of the "old maids" at the hospital, the political committee is thinking of recommending her. Director Ran Su talks to Lin first, who agrees it may be best for Manna.

When Lin and Manna discuss it, they agree this is a chance she cannot pass up. A liaison with Commissar Wei could open up a much brighter future for her, professionally and socially. Lin feels angry that Wei has the power to choose any woman he likes and somewhat disgusted by Manna, as he feels she is a little too eager to drop him for a man of higher rank. In contrast, he also feels relief at the idea of not having to ask for a divorce every summer and endure the wrath of the village. Lin teases Manna about her plans to meet the Commissar, but his teasing has a vicious edge and offends her. Lin promises not to joke about it again.

### Part 2, Chapter 4 Analysis

The concept of choosing another direction is again presented, but this time it ups the ante, highlighting a dilemma of choice that threads itself throughout the book: career and social status versus romantic love. Lin feels he must be practical but does not really like to see Manna doing the same. He is jealous and threatened, but cannot help but think how much easier it would be for him without Manna and the complications she adds to his life. We also see that Manna, although more committed to the relationship, does try to weigh the facts and think of her own well being, unlike the other woman in Lin's life, Shuyu.



## Part 2, Chapter 5

### Part 2, Chapter 5 Summary

The hospital leaders tell Manna to get ready to meet Commissar Wei and grant her leave to meet him at the hospital's hotel in Muji City. She is taken to the hospital by jeep and told to meet Wei in his suite. The commissar is a tall man in his fifties, gentle, intellectual, and very polite. Manna wonders why he and his wife divorced, since he seems well mannered and considerate. He asks her about books, and if she reads, and if so, what. She says she has not read for some time, but used to read fiction, and mentions several novels, then worries that they may be considered politically incorrect. Wei, however, approves of her taste and shows her a copy of *Leaves of Grass*, a book of poetry by Walt Whitman, which he loves. He lends her a copy and tells her to read it and tell him what she thinks about it.

The commissar asks her to go to a movie with him and she meets the young officer waiting to escort and protect him, Geng Yang, who almost crushes her fingers when he shakes her hand. Geng is a powerfully built man, wearing a pistol holster with bullets. At the movie *The Flower Girl*, a sad sentimental story about a blind Korean girl, many of the people in the theatre are overcome with emotion, including Manna, who starts to cry. Commissar Wei, who also tears up. Only Geng Yang shows no emotion, sitting straight, still and detached. The commissar apologizes for taking her to such a sad movie, but Manna tells him it was very good and she enjoyed it. He has Geng Yang accompany Manna back to the hospital.

During the drive, Manna asks Geng Yang why he was untouched by the film, and he tells her he has seen things that are more terrible. He tells Manna of an incident where nine men under his command were buried alive while trying to dig a vegetable cellar. Manna finds him somewhat intriguing, manly, and cool-headed, very different from any other man she has known.

### Part 2, Chapter 5 Analysis

Here Manna's world expands to entertain the idea of other men and other possibilities. Commissar Wei is not unacceptable to her, although the author paints a picture of a man who, like Lin, has some conflicting thoughts and feelings. As a high-ranking party official, his love for Walt Whitman's work indicates a broader perspective than his position would infer.

Geng Yang is also introduced, and he someone quite unlike anyone Manna has ever encountered. He is both off-putting and attractive to her, as she is by this time somewhat weary of Lin's wishy-washy tendencies. Geng Yang also represents the concept of fascination with the "other." Here this is the experience of someone whose psyche seems foreign to the observer. Manna finds it unnerving but exciting. Later, Lin

will react to the man in much the same way, and Geng Yang will come to represent the uncontrollable other for both of them, smashing many years of careful defensiveness with a single act of recklessness.





## Part 2, Chapter 6

### Part 2, Chapter 6 Summary

Despite his complicity before the fact, Lin finds himself very worried about the actual meeting between Manna and Lin, thinking of all the horrible stories he has heard about high-ranking officials and the women they victimize. Lin finds out Commissar Wei was pleased with Manna and wants to meet her again. The Commissar, it turns out, divorced his wife not because they were unhappy but because she had written a pamphlet criticizing a member of the Political Bureau and was deported to a remote area where she is "being reformed."

Lin is relieved to hear about the commissar's excellent manners from Manna. She tells him about the book she must read and Lin tells her to take reporting on it very seriously. Manna does not understand the poetry and asks Lin for help. Lin enjoys Whitman's work although he too is uncertain of its meaning. He is surprised that this book, with its references to sexuality and celebration of self, would be politically acceptable to the Commissar. He decides Manna should focus her report on grass as a symbol and the praising the working class in the poem.

Lin wonders at his own passivity in the face of losing the woman that has been his for so long. He tells himself he is simply a better man than most, "different from those animal-like men driven by lust and selfishness." Lin writes the report for her, and she sends it to the Commissar, but after three weeks, he has not responded.

People at the hospital are very impressed by Manna's status as Commissar Wei's potential girlfriend. Manna decides to learn how to ride a bicycle and has a collision with a pedestrian, then is slightly injured after running into a tree. The hospital leaders tell her to stop, fearing they will be blamed by the Commissar for not protecting her properly. Manna's special treatment ends when Commissar Wei finally contacts the hospital leaders to say he is no longer interested in Manna. He finds fault with her handwriting, saying he is preparing a book manuscript and needs someone with good secretarial skills to help him. Director Ran Su hears later that the Commissar was dating six women at the same time, and found another he preferred as his bride.

Lin wishes he had warned Manna about her handwriting, but is slightly pleased she will not be leaving him. Manna, of course, finds her social status plummeting again as people now gossip about how her rejection by Commissar Wei. She decides she will wait for Lin and no other, from that point forward.

### Part 2, Chapter 6 Analysis

Again, Lin and Manna make a stab at exploring life without each other. Although Manna finds Commissar Wei much more attractive than she did Liang, not only does she not make a personal effort to attract him, she hands the task over to Lin. The reader does

not miss the fact that Lin's passionless approach to life in general is unlikely to produce a literary report that will captivate or intrigue the Commissar.

The author also examines the effect and capriciousness of social judgment and opinion. As the chaste but long-suffering girlfriend of Lin, Manna is scorned and pitied. As the potential wife of a high-ranking official, she is protected and shown consideration, and so she now fully understands how her choice of men affects her own status. The reader is left uncertain whether Manna has chosen what she loves, or simply what she knows, but suspects that to her, they could be the same thing.



## Part 2, Chapter 7

### Part 2, Chapter 7 Summary

That spring, Lin contracts tuberculosis and is quarantined for treatment. Weak, coughing, and underweight, he is so ill he cannot go home for his leave that summer. Shuyu cannot read, so he writes her brother, Bensheng, telling him he is too busy to return. He does not want Shuyu to know he is sick because he knows she will worry. Manna visits Lin faithfully, although she is unhappy he will not be going home that summer to press again for a divorce.

Lin, still in the hospital, gets a new roommate, a tuberculosis patient whose reputation as a strong, unyielding officer is the subject of much discussion. Lin mentions the man, who he admires, to Manna. His name is Geng Yang, and Manna remembers meeting him the previous year, when he was working with Commissar Wei. Lin urges her to go see him. Geng Yang is surprised but pleased to meet Manna again. Lin tells him Manna is his girlfriend.

Lin and Geng become friends, and Geng often talks about women. Lin wonders how it is that Geng seems to know so much about women. Lin finds he has little to say on that subject and admires Geng's worldliness. Geng questions him about his relationship with Manna, and he admits that they have never had sexual relations. Geng seems particularly interested in the subject of her virginity, which Lin assures him is still intact. Geng Yang's bold language and attitude shock Lin, but he is also dazzled by his forthright masculinity. Lin tells Geng Yang the whole story about Manna and his unsuccessful attempts to divorce Shuyu.

Geng Yang tells Lin he should keep Manna as his mistress, but if he is determined to marry her, he should stop wavering and ruthlessly pursue his choice. He tells Lin he should break the rules and have sex with Manna, to shore up his determination. Lin dismisses that idea. Geng Yang tells him and Manna that he will help them figure out a way to get the divorce, and they both appreciate his support. Manna has already agreed to let the country judge have her name and personal information, despite the potential consequences for her career and reputation.

### Part 2, Chapter 7 Analysis

Manna and Lin are invigorated and strengthened by Geng Yang's direct, take-action approach to life, which seems to breathe new life into their plans to be together as man and wife.

The reader can also see the essential innocence and naivety of both characters. Despite their attempts to detect and shield themselves from the hurtful influence of others, they are not able to comprehend what they are not capable of themselves. Later, they and the reader will ask themselves why Lin did not question Geng Yang's

voracious interest in Manna's virginity, or why a man so interested in his own aims took such an interest in theirs.



## Part 2, Chapter 8

### Part 2, Chapter 8 Summary

Lin begins to recover rapidly, treated with an herbal drug that also heals his arthritis. He is soon well enough to be sent to an officer's political training program in Shenyang, where he went to college. Geng Yang has been discharged from the army and is waiting for his release from the hospital. The hospital director allows Lin, Geng Yang and Manna to leave the hospital grounds for dinner in a restaurant as long as the three of them stay together.

Geng Yang suggests that Lin buy off Shuyu to get his divorce. Lin does not think the money will move Shuyu, but believes he could probably bribe her brother, who she would listen to, to change his mind about the divorce. Lin decides to offer Bensheng 2,000 yuan, more than eighteen months of his salary.

Lin talks to Manna about his plan, telling her he has 600 yuan saved; he asks her what she has to contribute, but she is unwilling to share the cost. She tells him to forget about it if he does not have the money. She is afraid Bensheng will just take the money and then refuse to follow through with help. Manna seems somewhat insulted, and Lin feels ashamed, realizing it is customary for a man to foot the expense of bringing his bride home.

### Part 2, Chapter 8 Analysis

Geng Yang's practical suggestion of using money to grease the wheels of Lin's divorce also brings up a very tangible and uncomfortable question for Lin and Manna. How much is it worth to them, really?

To Manna, it is demeaning for her lover to ask her to help bear the cost of loving her, and even Lin feels ashamed later. This shows the power of old belief and customs, something that all of China at this time professes to be extinct. Even to modern soldiers, these customs and beliefs still hold emotional power. Lin and Manna still have deeply-held beliefs, as most cultures do, about how women are valued and paid for, the financial exchange of love between men and women, and who does the paying. In Manna's case, her feeling of being under-valued is already well developed, as Lin has never seemed to be willing to do anything extraordinary to be with her. She finally draws a line on how much more of that she will accept.



## Part 2, Chapter 9

### Part 2, Chapter 9 Summary

Manna meets Geng Yang, who is preparing to return to his home. She agrees to come by that evening and pick up two books he borrowed from Lin, who left two weeks ago for Shenyang. During their conversation, Geng Yang exudes a predatory sexuality that Manna finds somewhat exciting. She wishes Lin could be a little more like him, more masculine and passionate.

When Manna gets to the infectious diseases ward, it is almost deserted and Geng Yang has been drinking. He begins flirting with her, telling her he knows she is interested in him, that he can see it in her eyes. He taunts her about her virginity, saying Lin isn't even man enough to make her his mistress and doesn't know how to handle women. He says he wonders if Lin is bisexual. Manna is deeply offended and tells him to stop speaking like this, but Geng Yang instead overpowers and savagely rapes her.

When he finally lets her go, she runs home, where she wonders what to do next. She is afraid no one will believe her, that since she went to his rooms willingly and there are no witnesses, that he will deny her charges and say she tried to seduce him. She blames Lin for making friends with Geng Yang and telling him she was a virgin. Sick and vomiting, trying to scrub her body clean and remove any semen that could cause pregnancy, her skin begins to prickle and sting all over, like an attack of hives. With no one to turn to and afraid of her roommates becoming suspicious, Manna muffles her sobs and falls asleep from exhaustion, unable to reach a decision about reporting the rape.

### Part 2, Chapter 9 Analysis

Although Manna has wished Lin to be more passionate and committed in his desire for her, and even compared him to Geng Yang, she was not prepared for Geng Yang's brutality and certainly was not asking to be raped. Yet in a reaction common to rape victims, Manna questions her fault in the matter and imagines others doing the same. Both she and the reader feel like they should have known.

Geng Yang has always made it perfectly clear that he believes success lies in dominating a situation and never allowing pity or other emotions to deflect him from his goals. Her assessment that he would simply deny rape charges or turn her virtue into question is probably completely accurate. Geng Yang never displays any nervousness or worry about what she might do. Predators choose their prey carefully; he knows that he is not troubled by any feelings of guilt, accountability or defensiveness and that Manna is. He is confident that he can easily overwhelm her in any situation, including a confrontation with authorities.



## Part 2, Chapter 10

### Part 2, Chapter 10 Summary

The next morning, Manna lies and says she is ill from a food allergy, and waits for Geng Yang to call and apologize. When she hears he checked out early that morning, she realizes he planned the rape to coincide with his departure. Now he is gone, along with any possibility of gathering evidence from him or the crime scene.

Manna goes to her only friend, Haiyan, who is now married, and tells her what happened. Haiyan tells her she thinks it is too late to report Geng Yang and too difficult to prove that it was not date rape, which is not taken seriously unless the man admits to the crime. Haiyan advises Manna to keep quiet, although she should someday tell Lin, who is compassionate and will understand. Haiyan promises to tell no one.

With Lin gone for two more months, Manna torments herself with the possibility she might be pregnant. She begins stealing drugs, to build a cache of sedatives she plans to use to kill herself if she discovers she is pregnant. Finally, her period arrives, late, but the flow is so unusually heavy she suspects she has been internally injured.

### Part 2, Chapter 10 Analysis

When Geng Yang does not call to apologize, Manna fully realizes the kind of person she is dealing with, a heartless, fearless criminal who has successfully committed a crime. She goes to her friend only to have confirmed what she fears, that society will blame the victim and help him get away with it.

Manna has tried everything and given up much to obtain the security of a partner she can turn to when she needs someone to love and support her. Yet, here she is at the most traumatic juncture of her life, alone as always. It is not Lin's fault for being away, but it is both of their faults that she is not in a position to summon him home. Manna is at least spared an unwanted pregnancy by a man who has raped her, but her fear that she has been physically injured internally echoes a larger truth; she is indeed internally injured, in ways she may never fully realize.



## Part 2, Chapter 11

### Part 2, Chapter 11 Summary

Lin returns to find Manna aged dramatically. She is miserable, withdrawn, and unkempt, seemingly caring about nothing. He knows something has happened but she denies it and avoids him. Finally, she tells him that Geng Yang raped her, apologizing for going to his room and asking him to forgive her. When Lin doesn't respond, she becomes angry, shouting at him and accusing him of thinking her cheap because she is no longer a virgin, blaming him for telling Geng Yang that she was. Lin tells her he is so dazed, he cannot think. Because there are others about, they agree to meet that evening.

As the day progresses, Lin becomes increasingly angry with himself, knowing that if he had married or been engaged to Manna, this would not have happened. He feels that he is partially responsible; he is a weak man whom has failed to protect his woman. He knows Manna needs physical and mental treatment to recover but is unsure what that is, as it was a topic not covered in medical school.

Lin tells Manna that night that they need to report the rape to the hospital director, Ran Su. Lin does not trust Haiyan to remain silent and wants Manna to be able to receive medical and psychological assistance. Manna fears what people will say and do, although Lin feels it better to report it themselves than to allow people to gossip if Haiyan leaks the truth, but relents in the face of Manna's obviously unbearable distress.

Lin begins spending large amounts of money, buying Manna special foods and herbal medicines. Manna is grateful and pleased, healed by his attention and caring. She begins to feel her soul and spirit returning.

### Part 2, Chapter 11 Analysis

As often happens, the worst of circumstances brings out the best of people, and a strong positive aspect of Lin is his innate compassion. It is the one emotion Lin is familiar and comfortable with, and it is in those instances where it is called upon that he responds most quickly and decisively.

Despite its horrific overtones, the aftermath of Manna's rape brings about one of the most beautiful and gentle chapters in her relationship with Lin. Finally, Manna feels loved and cared for. After many far less uplifting circumstances, here the author demonstrates love's potential to bring about deep healing.





## Part 2, Chapter 12

### Part 2, Chapter 12 Summary

Manna runs into Ran Su one day, and his greeting is so forced and uncomfortable, that she instantly realizes he knows about the rape. Worse, his wife, Mrs. Su, who is mentally ill after losing a child to drowning, begins to shout degrading curses at Manna whenever she sees her. Manna feels violated anew, this time by betrayal. Haiyan confesses to Lin that she told no one but her husband, who promised to keep it secret, but got drunk one night and leaked the story. Haiyan feels terrible, but Manna cannot forgive her.

People make no further effort to treat Lin and Manna as other than husband and wife, which Manna finds disrespectful. She decides there is now absolutely no choice for her other than Lin, and consoles herself that things worked out as they did because they are fated to be together. She will wait as long as she has to, and does, as summer after summer Lin journeys to the country judge in Wuija Town, always returning still married to Shuyu.

Manna and Lin hope the rule of allowing a marriage to end without the wife's consent after eighteen years of conjugal separation will be relaxed. Their hopes are dashed when a majority of the Party Committee leaders refuses to loosen the restriction, although it is not a law, but a matter of custom. Lin and Manna grow heavier and grayer and more wrinkled, while oddly, Shuyu, who always looked decades older than her years, does not. She now looks more like Lin's older sister than a relative of a previous generation.

The years come and go, and while Manna and Lin do get pay raises, they are never again promoted. Ran Su becomes the hospital commissar. Commissar Wei dies in prison, jailed for his connections to the Gang of Four, a group of former party leaders whose political eviction signals the end of the Cultural Revolution. In 1984, with eighteen years of separation behind him, Lin summons Shuyu to the hospital. He is taking her to the court in Muji City, and will divorce her whether she agrees or not.

### Part 2, Chapter 12 Analysis

As Part 2 draws to a close, the story suddenly picks up speed, covering a lot of ground and tying up loose ends. Previous chapters have detailed the events of days, weeks, or months; this chapter spans years. Manna is treated roughly by society after the rape incident becomes known, and is further isolated from all others but Lin by the betrayal of her only friend, Haiyan, who let the secret slip. Manna and Lin settle into a routine of living as they have always lived, waiting for Lin's divorce, working the same jobs, and planning the same plans.



Beyond them, the world is changing. Others rise in position or fall from those they held. The Cultural Revolution is no longer a revolution but an institution attracting its own criticism and counter-resistance. Much of what Lin and Manna have known and lived by has changed, and the one thing that has not - Lin's marital situation - is about to. This chapter leaves a country and a couple poised at the edge of a rapidly changing landscape.



# Part 3, Chapter 1

## Part 3, Chapter 1 Summary

Shuyu arrives at the hospital, where, as Lin had always predicted, everyone is amazed to see a woman under seventy with bound feet. People stare and Lin refuses to be seen with her. Shuyu starts to have trouble with her back and receives treatment at the hospital, where the nurses treat her kindly, knowing she will soon have no one. This is Shuyu's first experience outside her village, and she is amazed at the comforts and ease of city life. The nurses question her about Lin, but she always sings his praises and never faults him.

The nurses beg her to show them her bound feet, but Shuyu explains that only her man can see them, that that's why feet were bound, to make them a treasure only for a husband. She tells them about enduring the process that started when she was seven, and how her mother told her that since she was ugly, small feet were her only chance at being desirable enough for marriage. Shuyu did not remove the bindings no matter how agonizing the pain, because she was convinced smaller feet would make her more attractive to her future husband. When the nurses ask her how Lin liked her tiny feet, she admits she does not know; he never saw them.

Lin sends Shuyu, who continues to accept and obey everything he tells her, to a beauty shop to get a haircut. The people in the barbershop are amazed at how different Shuyu looks with short hair; she looks ten years younger. Sympathies begin to shift to her position, as they agree she is not bad looking, just overworked and without any knowledge of how to dress or wear makeup. They agree that Lin is heartless and does not deserve happiness at the expense of Shuyu's. Lin and Shuyu's relationship sparks intense scrutiny and curiosity. Some of the younger officers actually spy on them, to see if it is true that they do not sleep together. They peek in windows and listen at doors, verifying that Lin and Shuyu do indeed live like brother and sister.

## Part 3, Chapter 1 Analysis

Shuyu's old-fashioned appearance initially attracts all the negative attention Lin always feared it would, but once people get to know her, their derisiveness turns to curiosity, and then sympathy. Shuyu, never expecting any kindness and grateful for anything she does receive, is never defensive, except on Lin's behalf, and seems unaffected by the scrutiny and intrusiveness of the city people who find her so unusual. She fits in far better than Lin ever imagined, and in fact, people feel sorry for her and critical of him. She does disgrace him in the eyes of others, but not in the way he expected.

In this chapter Shuyu tells a horrific story about the process of foot binding in her usual matter-of-fact way, yet the reader, as well as the audience in her story is struck by the most sorrowful fact of all. Shuyu has spent most of her childhood in unbearable pain, all



in hopes of capturing the love and admiration of a man. Her sacrifice did not fulfill but thwarted her dream, as she ended up with a husband who detested her bound feet and wouldn't even look at them. Shuyu's story is a heartbreaking example of self-inflicted, needless suffering, but in many ways it is no different than what Lin and Manna have done. They have both bound their hearts in an effort to be more pleasing and acceptable to others. It did not work at all for Shuyu and has not worked well for them.



## Part 3, Chapter 2

### Part 3, Chapter 2 Summary

The night before their court appearance, Lin and Shuyu have a talk. Lin wants Hua to also come to the city and get a job. He coaches Shuyu to tell the judge she wants him to find his daughter a good job. He offers her a slice of melon, and she refuses, still in her mode of saving the best of everything for him. In the mess hall the next morning, Lin sees Manna, who has been staying away from him and keeping to herself since Shuyu arrived. Later, he realizes that he has not missed seeing Manna, but convinces himself that is no reflection on their love for each other.

At the courthouse, all goes quickly, smoothly, and effortlessly. After so many years, Lin has his divorce in less than half an hour. Shuyu stays in the city, moving into another room in the dormitory, and the hospital leaders get Hua (who is still in the country) a job at the Splendor Match Plant. Lin writes a letter to Hua, who has become increasingly distant over the years, begging her to come. Hua writes back, saying she prefers to remain in the country. Lin suspects interference from Bensheng, and even Shuyu calls their daughter "a stupid egg." At Manna's suggestion, he takes his leave and goes back to Goose Village for his daughter.

### Part 3, Chapter 2 Analysis

Lin's divorce is nothing if anticlimactic, and now that his goal of marrying Manna is in sight, he is already detaching from her. Ironically, the process of separating from his former family is bringing them closer to him than they have ever been. Lin wants Shuyu to stay in the city and Hua to join her there.



## Part 3, Chapter 3

### Part 3, Chapter 3 Summary

Lin arrives in Goose Village to find Hua, who is now eighteen, and cooking up donkey meat for her Uncle Bensheng. His only donkey died and he is trying to make some money back selling the carcass, wheeling and dealing with the villagers in Lin's house. Lin tells them he has come for his daughter, and Bensheng and Hua insist that they are still one family and ask him to come eat with them. Hua has been staying with her uncle's family. Although Lin is irritated with Bensheng, who has caused him so much trouble with his interference over the years, he realizes he might need his help to sell the property in Goose Village and bring Hua back to the city.

At dinner, Bensheng tells Lin there is a prospective buyer, but he wants to pay much less than what Lin wants for the house and furnishings. The next day Lin talks to Hua and discovers she has a boyfriend, which he had feared. She tells Lin that she is in love, although her boyfriend, now in military service, thinks she should go back to the city with her father. He has said he will join her when he is discharged from the navy.

Lin is able to negotiate a deal and sell his house. He gives Bensheng some money, and plans to leave him the farm tools and family plot. Lin's brother, Ren, comes to take the animals and household items. Bensheng becomes very upset when he finds they also took the farm tools Lin had intended to give to him. Later that night, Bensheng shows up drunk, creating quite a scene. Although he is always complaining, this time it is not all about what he can get out of Lin; Bensheng is truly bothered at the thought of losing his niece. He and his wife are childless and think of her as a daughter. Later, Bensheng's wife comes to take him in hand, but he is so drunk, Lin has to carry him home on his back.

### Part 3, Chapter 3 Analysis

Lin ties up his loose ends in the village, including his relationship with the troublesome, quarrelsome Bensheng, who reveals himself as a man who does have feelings besides greed and jealousy. He loves his niece, Hua, and is truly sorry to have her leave. Carrying Bensheng home on his back, Lin feels the load become heavier and heavier. The task seems to represent the difficulty Lin has always experienced living up to his family obligations and his ties to the village where he was born.



## Part 3, Chapter 4

### Part 3, Chapter 4 Summary

Hua likes her job at the match plant, the easiest work she has ever done for more money than she's ever made. When the factory gives her a dormitory room, she and Shuyu move out of the hospital to live in town. Lin helps them set up housekeeping, and with Hua's job and Shuyu's alimony, they are as well off as most people in the city.

Lin and Manna begin to prepare for marriage. They are allocated a one-bedroom apartment they clean and fix up. Lin begins buying foods and luxuries needed to entertain their wedding guests, most of it black market, and bicycles around town trying to get a television set for their new home, something he doesn't have a coupon for. Manna, unfortunately, is sick with a bad cold.

The wedding day finally arrives, and the ceremony is held in a hospital conference room. It is well attended by the hospital's staff and their families. The hospital director presents the couple to the people, has them bow three times to the Party banners and a portrait of Chairman Mao, and then pronounces them married. The couple is asked to sing a song, which they do poorly, as Manna still has a cold and Lin is not a singer.

The party that follows is loud and chaotic, with children running around and an officer setting off a firecracker. Commissar Ran Su approaches Lin and Manna, telling them to love and cherish each other, and saying "Don't forget yours is a bitter love." Manna is so touched by his words, she begins to cry and cannot compose herself. Lin finds someone to take her home, but must stay to play host to their guests.

Haiyan and her husband Honggan, who Lin and Manna have never been able to forgive for spreading the story about Manna's rape, stop to chat with Lin after Manna leaves. Honggan, much to his wife's distress, brings up the subject of Geng Yang, who he recently read about in a magazine. Geng Yang has prospered and become a very wealthy man. Lin, tired, makes conversation and watches the others dance. He wonders how Manna is doing at home and thinks how completely bored he is by his own wedding.

### Part 3, Chapter 4 Analysis

Lin and Manna's marriage ceremony mimics the quality of his divorce hearing. It is the culmination of decades of self-denial, and the long awaited goal falls completely flat. Neither Manna nor Lin feel any true happiness, and they are perhaps uncertain what to do next, after building their lives and personalities around striving, not having. The author's treatment of what should be the high point of their lives suggests the old adage, "Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it."



## Part 3, Chapter 5

### Part 3, Chapter 5 Summary

Manna is a demanding and passionate lover, and she wears Lin out. He gets tired and actually does not have that much experience. They make love for half an hour every night, or an hour if they do not have to get up early to clear the roads with the other workers.

While Manna, despite her previous trauma with Geng Yang, is enjoying herself and making up for lost time, Lin is exhausted, feeling old and thinking that she looks old, too. He has pain in his foot, which he attributes to too much sex affecting his kidneys, but he feels obligated to please Manna. He is losing so much weight, people are noticing his condition and teasing him.

After making love following lunch one day, Lin falls into an exhausted sleep, and doesn't go back to work until a nurse comes to get him for a key that is needed. That night he tells Manna that they are no longer young, people are talking, and they need to save some energy. Manna says she knows it is bad, but "I can't help myself. Something's eating me inside, as if I won't live for long and have to seize every hour." She admits her blood pressure is getting very high, and they agree to settle down and protect their health. That night, they sleep peacefully for the first time since their marriage.

### Part 3, Chapter 5 Analysis

Somewhere along the way, the fire Manna and Lin tended for so long flickered out. There is a feeling of right place, maybe even right person, but wrong time. Lin has long told himself that he could not bond to Shuyu because she was an inappropriate mate for him. Now he realizes he has difficulty with intimacy no matter who his partner is.

While Manna's sexual appetite seems to rage, a feeling arises within her like a person stuffing themselves with goodies in reaction to a long deprivation rather than from any true hunger. She has paid with her youth for this intimate relationship and she means to have it, but her excesses are wearing them both out.





## Part 3, Chapter 6

### Part 3, Chapter 6 Summary

Lin is curious about a locked box Manna keeps, which she finally lets him see. She has two-dozen Chairman Mao buttons and some old love letters from her first boyfriend, Mai Dong. She allows Lin to read the letters. He finds he is eager to do so; he has never seen or written a love letter. Reading Mai Dong's desperate, tender words to Manna, Lin realizes he has never experienced intense feelings for any woman. He mentions Mai Dong's great love to Manna, but she says she hates her former boyfriend for jilting her. Lin wonders why she keeps the letters if she feels that way.

Three months into their marriage, at forty-four, Manna is pregnant. They begin to sleep separately, as Manna is worried sex will affect the pregnancy. Lin is concerned about her. She has an occasional heart arrhythmia and high blood pressure. He tries to persuade her to have an abortion, but she is determined to have a baby. It is a difficult pregnancy, as she suffers from prolonged morning sickness and intense capricious cravings. Lin runs all over town trying to find the foods she wants. Manna reads about childbirth and parenting, and concentrates on preparing for the baby, hoping for a boy.

Hua visits and tells her father Shuyu is happy about the baby, because she says it will make their family larger, which Lin finds strange. Shuyu still sends food for Lin with Hua, who will only give it to him if Manna is not there. Lin buys Hua a bicycle and a watch, things Manna knows Hua could not afford herself. Manna says nothing but she is never enthusiastic about seeing her stepdaughter. Lin thinks about how peaceful his life was before marrying Manna and wonders if things would have been better had they married fifteen years earlier. He wonders if he likes being married, which he finds wearing and chaotic.

### Part 3, Chapter 6 Analysis

Although Manna may have given up on romantic love, she has not forgotten it, evidenced by her careful storage of Mai Dong's love letters for all these years. For Lin, the big surprise is not the intensity of emotion Mai Dong felt for Manna, but his own realization that he has never felt that way himself.

A newly married man with a family on the way, Lin tries to be a good husband, but emotionally, he is withdrawing from the family he now has while growing closer to the one he ignored for so long. The author delineates again one of Lin's core problems, which he needs distance to appreciate. What he thinks he wants in theory is rarely what he can abide in practice.



## Part 3, Chapter 7

### Part 3, Chapter 7 Summary

Lin goes to his office after dinner to prepare for a chemistry class he is teaching to a group of female orderlies. Manna is unhappy, wondering why he cannot stay home to study. She begins to worry about their relationship. He seems too enthusiastic about being away from home and from her.

Manna starts to turn things over in her mind, such as the way Lin seems irritated with her at times, pushed beyond patience. She has consulted with other women about their celibacy during her pregnancy, but they and the books she has read agree that is best for the baby. Besides, Lin seemed quite happy to move to another bed, but that thought worries her as well. She decides she will hold on to her husband no matter what.

The next night, Manna follows Lin to the medical building. She hears laughter and following the sound, finds the windows looking in on a lecture room where he is talking to a group of young women. They are paying rapt attention to Lin's chemistry lesson and he looks happy and engaged. One of them is a beautiful young woman who was transferred to the hospital to break up her affair with a senior officer. Manna is overcome with jealousy.

When Manna runs into Ran Su the next day, she finds out that Lin was not ordered to teach the class, but volunteered after the group of orderlies approached him and asked him to help them study for their exams. Manna berates him for leaving a pregnant wife alone at home to spend time with other women, and for not asking her before taking on the class. Lin tells her she is being unreasonable, she runs to their bedroom to sulk, and he leaves as usual to teach the class.

The next night, all seems normal. Lin returns home at the usual time for dinner, and while they are eating, tells Manna he had a talk with Ran Su about women. He says Ran Su told him he was in the wrong and did not understand women, that, "a woman couldn't live long without attention and love." When Manna says that it is not true, mentioning nuns, Lin says they have the attention of the monks, and they laugh together at their little joke. Lin tells Manna he would not have agreed to teach the class if he had had any idea she felt so strongly about it, and she says that they should make their decisions together, as a team. He cuts the class back to two days a week, and prepares his lessons at home in the evening. Manna is mollified but she still feels depressed on the nights Lin teaches his class.

### Part 3, Chapter 7 Analysis

It is now Manna's turn to feel disappointment in her dreams. She not only has the husband she wanted, she is having the baby she had given up hope for. However, as a wife, she senses Lin's withdrawal from her, attributing it to a desire to be with other

women. She becomes jealous and possessive, but Lin, surprisingly, does an about face and takes steps to appease her. Her worst fears assuaged, Manna relaxes, but still feels the old fears and doubts about Lin's devotion to her.



## Part 3, Chapter 8

### Part 3, Chapter 8 Summary

As Manna's pregnancy progresses, she is cranky, resentful, and possessive. A little short of her ninth month, she goes into labor and they make their way to the hospital, where the labor progresses rapidly. Lin is completely out of his element, and unsure what to do, even though he is a doctor. He tries to remember what he read in a textbook about childbirth twenty years earlier.

Haiyan, who is now an obstetrician, arrives to deliver the baby. She assures Lin that Manna is doing fine, and sends him to get something to eat. In the mess hall, Lin cannot decide whether he is happy about the baby, whose arrival is taking him by surprise. He has terrible heartburn and cannot finish eating. He returns to the medical building, where Manna is screaming, and Haiyan tells him the baby is coming faster than expected. Manna screams at him, blaming him for her pain and repeatedly calling him "Miser!" Lin is puzzled by this, then remembers the two thousand yuan he asked her to help him raise to pay off Bensheng so he could get a divorce, ten years before. Lin is stunned to realize she has harbored this resentment all this time. He leaves and goes into the bathroom, where he argues with himself about whether or not it is true that he valued the money more than love and could have somehow raised the cash himself. Then Manna would have been a younger mother, childbirth would have been easier, and she would not be holding this grudge against him.

Lin returns to Manna, who shrieks curses at him and calls him names. Haiyan explains to him that this is very common during childbirth and that he should stay, as Manna is frightened and needs him with her. Lin shakes his head and leaves the room. He feels sorry for himself, wondering why he has to go through this when he never wanted a baby. Suddenly, he hears crying, and goes in to discover he has not one son, but two - twins. He is disgusted by their shriveled, newborn appearance. Manna is already apologizing to him for her words, telling him she thought she was not going to make it. Nurses pack Manna up and carry her home, while Lin carries the babies, uncertain whether or not he cares about his sons or will ever be able to love them.

### Part 3, Chapter 8 Analysis

Lin's reaction to the birth of his sons is similar to most of his reactions to anything primal or messy in life; it disturbs and sickens him. Despite the fact Manna is the one in labor, he feels sorry for his own burdens, which are increasing with the obligation of two more children.

Lin is engaging in his perpetual fantasies once again, of how he could be happy or things could have worked better if only some other detail would have been different, in this case, timing. Now he is convinced they should have married sooner, not that he

does not fully blame himself for the fact that they did not. To the reader, it is becoming increasingly clear that no matter how things change, these are the same people with the same set of problems that set the relationship in motion. Those unresolved issues continue to follow them no matter where they go.

## Part 3, Chapter 9

### Part 3, Chapter 9 Summary

Lin and Manna settle in to taking care of their new babies, but Manna is not doing well. She is very weak, suffers from heartburn, and has difficulty breathing. She has another cardiogram, and this time, it indicates the presence of a condition beyond a simple heart murmur. Lin is shocked and keeps the news from her for awhile. When he finally tells her, she seems unconcerned for herself, but makes him swear he will take care of their babies and never abandon them if she dies.

The new parents name the twins River and Lake, over Lin's protestations that the names are too common, but Manna says boys will be easier to raise with common names, and that the element of water represents life and an enduring flexibility. Visitors come, bringing nourishing food for Manna, and congratulating Lin on his extraordinary good fortune. Since the 1970s, couples have been allowed only one child, and now Lin has two sons and a daughter.

Manna's health continues to fail, and meanwhile, they are undergoing the constant walking, holding, endless comforting, and sleepless nights of any new parents. Meanwhile, the boys are growing rapidly and putting on weight, until the hired nurse, Juli, takes them out for a walk one cold day, to see a group of criminals being paraded through the streets. When they return home, the twins look blue and have loose bowels.

The babies are diagnosed with dysentery, and are very ill. Now Lin feels his heart changing, as he watches them stuck with needles to prevent dehydration. He realizes he does love his babies and wishes he could take their place. Despite treatment and medications, the twins' health continues to fail. When Hua visits, she bursts into tears at the sight of their condition, and reminds Lin of an old village remedy for loose bowels, purslane stew. When Lin tries to buy it, he finds that no herbal medicine store carries it in the city. Another treatment is finally successful at killing the bacteria responsible for dysentery, but the twins continue to have diarrhea and the doctor decides they have some kind of nervous disorder that she can't treat. She tells the nurses they will have to let nature take its course.

Hua comes back and tells them that Shuyu says they should feed the babies mashed taro root with white sugar and egg yolk, something she did for Hua, who had almost died of dysentery herself when she was five. Nothing worked but the taro recipe Bensheng had gotten from an old doctor in Wujia Town. Doubtful, but with nothing left to lose, Lin tries it, and to everyone's amazement, the twins improve immediately and are completely cured within two days.



## Part 3, Chapter 9 Analysis

Years ago Manna made up a heart condition to discourage an unwanted suitor. What once seemed a lie now seems like prophecy. Manna is a woman whose matter of the heart is now manifesting in a failure of the physical organ. Lin grows closer to his children through their illness. It is always easiest for him to connect to others through compassion or pity. As he watches them decline, he finds the feeling of any father for his children, wishing he could suffer in their place.

Shuyu proves herself again to be single-minded and unselfish in her allegiance to Lin, providing a cure for his sons' illness that his own modern medical practice could not. This episode brings the reader's attention to how the old ways sometimes return to offer solutions that modern rationality and knowledge cannot provide. The author also offers the reader another perspective on Shuyu, as a woman who is not old-fashioned and ignorant, but is instead possessed of natural wisdom and grace.



## Part 3, Chapter 10

### Part 3, Chapter 10 Summary

With their sons well and sleeping through the night, life becomes much more peaceful for Lin and Manna, who now have time to relax a little in the evenings and watch some television. One night they are watching a show called "To Get Rich Is Glorious," about people who successfully answered to Party's call to start embracing a communist brand of capitalism, something that had been illegal just a few years before. Manna is grating turnips and Lin is reading when she lets out a moan, unable to answer when Lin asks her what is wrong. The reporter has just introduced another rich, successful communist: Geng Yang.

Manna is outraged at the sight of Geng Yang, rich, healthy, and full of himself. Lin comforts her, putting his arms around her, and it evokes both the pain of her previous experience and the comfort that Lin brought her. She feels deeply grateful for his presence and support, and finally unleashes all the tears she left unshed over the rape incident.

Manna and Lin begin sharing a bed again that night, although she is tortured by nightmares. She dreams of Geng Yang kidnapping her babies and pushing them out into a lake in wooden shoes, while her old boyfriend, Mai Dong, cheers him on. She dreams of throwing stones at them, accidentally punching and awakening Lin, who comforts her and goes back to sleep. Manna lies awake wondering what her dream meant, why Mai Dong was represented as someone as hateful as Geng Yang, and why Lin had not appeared to rescue his family.

### Part 3, Chapter 10 Analysis

Manna and Lin slip into a relatively peaceful and contented period of their life, only to have it disrupted by the image of Geng Yang in their living room. Worse, he has taken advantage of the loosening of the same restrictions that he never really bowed to but that Manna and Lin so often chafed under, to become rich, successful, and happy.

Manna is understandably upset, and Lin responds to her tenderly, drawing them closer together than they have been for some time. Manna's nightmares continue, peopled with the men she has known in her life, and reminding her of what has happened with every man she ever trusted. They have hurt her, abandoned her or just not been there to protect her.





## Part 3, Chapter 11

### Part 3, Chapter 11 Summary

Manna's health and heart condition are worsening. Her doctor tells Lin he cannot understand why her disease has progressed so rapidly, but there is little left to do for her. He advises Lin to keep her as happy and quiet as possible. Lin tries to keep the severity of her illness secret, but the truth circulates and Manna soon hears about it. Lin is dismayed by her reaction, one of calm acceptance, as though she does not care or value her life anyway. As time passes, she becomes increasingly temperamental and childish.

Lin takes over most of the housework, including the laundry, something Manna had always done for him, or Shuyu. He is losing weight, worn out, and grateful when Hua visits to help and bring the babies gifts. Hua loves her two little half-brothers, and drawn together by the babies, she and Manna become much closer. Manna tells Lin she wishes she could have had a daughter like Hua.

Manna returns to work, but only part-time. One Sunday morning, Lin goes to the hospital mess hall to buy a dish, leaving the rice on to cook. Distracted by a conversation, he returns home to find the rice burned and smoking. Manna tears into him, calling him an idiot for leaving the rice boiling, sweeping the bowl off the stove and breaking it on the floor, with food scattered everywhere. The babies start to scream and Lin storms out, voicing his frustration. "I hate her! I hate her!" he said to himself."

As Lin calms down, he begins to examine his feelings for Manna, thinking about if he loves her, or if he ever loved her. He is forced to acknowledge that what he has waited for all these years is not what he wanted after all, and that he only wants what he thinks he cannot have. He remembers Manna as a sweet, alluring young woman, and realizes the waiting changed her, too, and that she, never knowing true love, blinded herself to the situation, making herself believe that Lin did love her. In fact, he admits to himself, he has never wholeheartedly given love to any woman, that he has never been the one that loves, but always the one who is loved.

Lin decides he must fulfill his obligations, since Manna is dying. He returns home, where he finds her crying and contrite. He feels compassion for her frail condition and accepts her apology with kindness, but finds it an effort.

### Part 3, Chapter 11 Analysis

Although Lin has been flirting around the edges of his predicament for years, now there is no looking away. It hits him full force that he has lived a half-life, pretending to have feelings he has never known. The whole thing has been a sham, and he is the major perpetrator.



While Lin may be short on the ability to achieve a close relationship, he is able to show basic kindness and consideration, so he decides to stick by Manna. Yet even as Lin acknowledges the obligation and his decision, he feels the noose grow tighter. He is trapped in the part he has played for so many years, and it is not about other people, circumstances, or bad luck. It is about him and his distaste for true intimacy, coupled with his selfish desire to receive love without returning it.



## Part 3, Chapter 12

### Part 3, Chapter 12 Summary

Lin is beginning to have fantasies of escape, of running away from home and starting a new life under an assumed name, but knows he could never run away from his guilt. Manna generously suggests Lin take some gifts of food to Shuyu for the upcoming holiday of Spring Festival and find out how she and Hua are doing. Lin does want to see how they are, although he has heard from Hua that Shuyu's sciatica is better and she enjoys her life in the city, although she sometimes misses her home in the country.

Lin finds their rooms inside the match plant dormitory house, and peers through the window at the domestic scene displayed inside. Mother and daughter are making pies, singing, looking happy, and content. He feels emotion stirring in him, and remembers a story about a man who had divorced his wife, and had a stroke while visiting his former family many years later. He decides to leave the duffel bag with the gifts he brought, but it falls from where he places it, making a noise that brings Hua to the door.

Hua and Shuya are thrilled to see him, bringing him in and making him cozy and warm. He sees how well they do without him, and thinks of how unnecessary he is. He also thinks that while he has never spent a day with a woman he loved completely, what is much more important to him is peace of mind, and that he would happily trade love for a peaceful home.

Hua and Shuyu feed him dinner, telling him news about Bensheng, who cried with envy upon finding out Lin had two sons. They begin to drink from a bottle of wheat liquor Bensheng brought when he visited. Lin drinks heavily and becomes sentimental, apologizing to Shuyu for the hurt he brought her and calling her "sweetheart." Shuyu believes he is at last speaking his heart to her. Lin tells her that Manna cannot live for long, says they are still one family, and asks Shuyu to wait for him. She promises she will, and that she will help him with the twins when Manna is gone. Lin passes out and starts to snore, so Hua calls Manna to tell her he is too drunk to make it home that night.

The next morning, Lin returns home with a crashing hangover. Manna scolds him a little for drinking too much but is relieved to have him home safe. Now a warm domestic scene unfolds within his own home, with Manna preparing food and putting up decorations, the babies laughing and playing, and Hua coming by for a visit, bursting with happiness.

When Hua gets a moment with Lin, she tells him Shuyu is very happy and waiting for him to come back to her, that she plans to come by and see the twins later in the year. Remembering now the things he said the night before, Lin feels miserable and embarrassed. He tells Hua to take care of her mother and tell her not to wait for him. Hua says they will always wait for him, and while that bothers him, it pleases him, too.



He hears Manna outside greeting someone, and notices how full of life her voice still sounds.

## Part 3, Chapter 12 Analysis

Suddenly, Lin seems to forget everything he learned in his moment of self-revelation. Frantic to escape his duty to his dying wife, he starts unconsciously setting up the same scene he's played for most of his life, but now he's the characters generate the reverse emotions in him. He is sure that Manna will not live much longer, so he has a potential out. Still, rather than contemplate the single life that seems to suit him better, he is instead already cultivating Manna's replacement. Now Manna is the unwanted wife, and he wishes he had stayed with Shuyu instead.

When Hua forces him to consider that he might have to someday make good on his promise to return to Shuyu, he feels equally uncomfortable with that. Lin tries to wiggle out of the certainty of his declaration and notes to himself that Manna still sounds like she has some life left in her. Despite Lin's very sincere attempts to discern and break his long-established pattern, its pull and the familiarity it offers is simply too great to resist.

Lin is right back where he started, using each of these women to keep the other at bay, each of them always his excuse for not committing to the other. They have simply switched places, and now Shuyu waits as Manna did before her. Lin also waits, as he always has, for happiness, contentment, and some magical mix of circumstances that will finally allow him to live and love with authenticity.



# Characters

## Lin Kong

Lin Kong is a doctor in the Chinese Army who escaped the traditional country village where he was born through his education as a doctor. By the time he graduates from college, China's Cultural Revolution is on its way, with the greatest opportunity for advancement offered within the military.

Lin's life as a doctor in a city military hospital takes him far from his home and its more traditional ways. He is not eager to return, especially after his arranged marriage to a countrywoman he is unable to love or accept. He centers his life on his career and intellectual pursuits. Lin is a kind, calm but cautious, and dispassionate man who secretly longs for more personal fulfillment but seems unable to handle the risks and emotional toll of committing to his desires. Living within a framework of political and social belief that demands sacrifice of the individual for the collective good, Lin sometimes chafes under the restrictions, yet seems to mostly accept them. He wants to have control over his destiny, but he has such difficulty with personal decisions that rules and regulations provide comforting guidelines and limitations.

When Lin meets nurse Manna Wu, a woman he feels he could be happily married to, it sets up the ongoing battle between his dreams of personal fulfillment and his desire to stay detached and safe, both politically and emotionally. He constantly wavers between those two points, at times wanting to move forward with Manna, at others withdrawing and even trying to cut off the relationship. When a number of years pass and they are finally allowed to marry, he finds the flesh and blood reality of his dream far more disturbing than he ever imagined. Lin finds himself yearning for what he tried so hard to rid himself of, the peaceful, contained life with Shuyu that he previously rejected.

## Manna Wu

Manna Wu is a nurse in the Chinese Army, who meets and works with Lin in the Muji City military hospital. Manna was orphaned as a toddler and has no close relatives. Brought up in the city, Manna is China's modern woman, with education and a career beyond service to home and family.

When Manna meets Lin, she is attracted to his polite and considerate friendship. When she is jilted by her fiancy, Mai Dong, Lin's advice and support become more important to her. Manna is not a beauty but not unattractive, and when she finally falls in love with Lin, she seems more willing than he is to move the relationship forward, although she is not without her own fears about the cost. Manna also resents the personal restrictions that strict political views impose, but seems unwilling to challenge them.

Manna, after a few unsuccessful attempts to bond with potential mates, waits patiently for Lin for close to two decades, at times resenting the lack of unrestrained passion and



adoration she would like to experience. Like Lin, she is surprised when she finally gets her man and the family she always wished for, only to discover it does not bring her to the happy conclusion she envisioned. When Manna becomes very ill with a terminal prognosis, she seems relatively unconcerned, as though her life means little to her. She is often bad-tempered and childish, indulging herself in the emotional release of disappointment she mostly denied herself during her years of waiting for Lin.

## **Shuyu Kong**

Lin's wife through an arranged marriage, Shuyu has grown up in the country, unaware and unaffected by the new political views in China. She is a traditional woman with four-inch bound feet that she suffered greatly to achieve in hopes of getting a husband. She has always known she is not attractive, and is unfailingly grateful for her marriage. She remains devoted to Lin, even through years of virtual abandonment, rejection and hardship. Shuyu always does her duty, with the more traditional viewpoint of Chinese women of uncomplaining hard work and servitude to home and family.

## **Hua Kong**

Lin and Shuyu's only child, Hua barely knows her father by the time she is eighteen, yet Lin always has great affection for her and eventually brings her to live closer to him. She is caught in the middle of the shifting climate of China, brought up in a country village but coming to the city to work at a factory as a young woman.

## **Bensheng Liu**

Bensheng is Shuyu's brother, a traditional country villager somewhat known for his greed and selfishness. Bensheng is offended by Lin's attempts to divorce Shuyu and later move her and Hua to Muji City, and shows considerable cunning in his attempts to block Lin's efforts, although he always apologizes later.

## **Mai Dong**

As Manna's first suitor, Mai Dong is an impetuous, passionate young man. When he is transferred to the Russian front, he wants to marry Manna immediately and is heartbroken at her decision to wait. However, he soon finds a way out of the army, which he hates, and it involves marrying his cousin so he can establish residency in Shanghai.

## **Commissioner Guohong Wei**

Commissioner Wei is a high-ranking party official and another potential husband for Manna, but their relationship never really gets off the ground. He displays an oddly



eclectic taste in literature, despite the fact he divorced a wife who was exiled for her rebellious political views. In an unforeseen twist of fate, his relationship with hard-line party members who fall out of favor as the Cultural Revolution wanes and evolves eventually lands him in prison.

## Geng Yang

Military officer Geng Yang meets Manna while accompanying and protecting Commissar Wei. Predatory, masculine, and cold, he is known for his stern and unyielding leadership in battle. He is completely ruthless as a commander and as a man.

Geng Yang reenters Manna's life after contracting tuberculosis and being hospitalized with Lin, who also has the disease. They become friends, and Geng Yang's attempted seduction and then rape of Manna is the highest point of drama in the novel. Geng Yang later goes on to become rich and famous in increasingly capitalistic China, rubbing salt into Lin and Manna's wounds.

## Ran Su

A political committee leader at the hospital, Ran Su climbs the ladder professionally throughout the years and eventually become the hospital's director. It falls to Ran Su to chastise and warn Manna and Lin throughout the years about their relationship, which is not sanctioned by the leaders. Yet he is kind and understanding, at times trying to gently intercede on their behalf.

## Haiyan Niu

Manna's only real friend, Haiyan is bolder than Manna, advising her to sleep with Lin to cement their relationship. Later, they become estranged when the man Haiyan marries lets slip the story of Manna's rape by Geng Yang, something she tried to keep secret. Haiyan is the only person besides Lin Manna has ever really trusted, and her perceived betrayal ends any attempt by Manna to meet emotional needs outside of her relationship with Lin.



# Objects/Places

## Goose Village

Goose Village is a small community in rural China, where Lin was born and raised, and where his wife Shuyu and daughter Hua remain for the bulk of the story. Isolated from the political activism of the cities, the villagers retain much of their traditional customs and beliefs.

## Muji City

Muji City is the city where Lin lives all but twelve days of the year while married to Shuyu, and is the site of the military hospital where he and Manna work.

## Wujia Town

A small town eighteen miles west of Goose Village, Wujia Town is the county seat and setting for the court where Lin and Shuyu travel every summer for years in pursuit of a divorce, and where the county judge always denies Lin's suit.

## Muji City Hospital

Muji City Hospital is a military hospital where Lin and Manna work, and a compound that not only treats patients, but also houses the people who work within its walls. It is an insular community of its own, and as a military hospital, the doctors and nurses are considered soldiers, subject to the political rules and regulations of the time.

## Heart

As a word denoting the soul and a physical organ, the heart is a recurring symbol in the book. Main characters Lin and Manna constantly talk about knowing and following their hearts. Manna uses a diagnosis of heart disease to discourage an unwanted suitor, and later does develop a serious heart disorder, a symbolic representation of the damage caused by an affair of the heart that went unfulfilled for too long.

## Books

Literature, particularly that not approved by the Communist Party, comes up as an issue several times in this novel. Lin has a secret collection of books that Manna also reads for a time, and Commissar Wei asks Manna to read and report on Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The books are an indication of some deviation of thought from the





more rigid party beliefs of the time, although the characters never voice those thoughts or oppose their political structure in any other way the reader is aware of.

## Herbal/Folk Remedies

Herbal remedies are a representation of "old ways" versus new and more modern methods, and Lin heals from tuberculosis only after taking an experimental herbal remedy. Later, his twin sons will also suffer from an ailment that modern medicine cannot cure; they only recover after he administers an old village recipe given to him by Shuyu.

## Casket

The casket is a small locked chest where Manna keeps, along with buttons depicting Chairman Mao, her love letters from Mai Dong. In a very allegorical way, Lin, curious, is given the key by Manna, but when allowed to read her letters, he realizes only that he has no understanding of the emotions they contain.

## Food

Food often appears as a sign of affection, nurturing, or luxury. Shuyu is constantly preparing some traditional meal for Lin. When Lin visits his parents' graves, she makes customary dishes to be left at the gravesites. Shuyu saves the best of every meal for Lin when they are together, as she always has. When questioned about Lin's treatment of her by hospital nurses, she brags that she eats meat or fish every day, offering this as evidence that she is well provided for.

When Manna is sick or emotionally hurt, Lin often shops for and shares special foods difficult to obtain at the time, like pears and other fruits. He also goes to great lengths to procure special foods and treats for their wedding guests.



# Themes

## Knowing and Trusting Self

Although Lin Kong faces formidable social and political pressures as he tries to form a committed relationship with Manna Wu, the greatest conflict he encounters comes from within. In a way, the obstacles he faces regarding what he thinks he might want are immaterial, for he never seems to know what that really is. This ambivalence drives the story, as everyone, Lin included, waits for him to decide. Lin is certainly aware of his conflicting feelings about Manna and intimate relationships in general. No one pressures him more than he pressures himself in a sincere and constant attempt to know and uncover the course of action that will bring him lasting joy. Yet for all of his introspection and at times unsparing evaluation of himself, Lin is never certain about what would make him happy. He does learn that he can justify anything, pro or con, and that all the intellectual pondering in the world exercises the mind but often fails to uncover the deeper and more subconscious motivations of the heart. The heart, however, speaks through emotion, and that is something Lin simply does not trust. Like most people, he has been taught to reason his way through life. When that does not work, he is at a loss. He allows life to lead him along, until eventually his stated goal comes about almost by default. Once more, he finds himself in the position of knowing only what he does not want and who he is not.

## Duty Versus Personal Fulfillment

Lin marries Shuyu out of a sense of duty to his parents. Later, he is not as forceful as he could be in divorcing her, because he feels obligated to her for all her hard work and devotion. Later, when he begins to tire of his relationship with Manna, he feels incapable of jilting her after all the years she spent waiting for him. He puts off whatever he thinks he might want at the time in deference to the other person's feelings, getting himself trapped deeper and deeper in a pit of obligation. He unwittingly makes things worse by allowing others to invest more years in him while he continues to procrastinate.

Lin is a man who feels his responsibility towards others but he is much less clear on his responsibility to himself or how much weight to give it. It is only when he thinks Manna is ending the relationship that he feels any pure desire for her love. It is only after his divorce that he brings his former family closer to him, both geographically and emotionally. He rarely sees that it is his own sense of debt that gets in the way of him ever truly giving to anyone. It is only when temporarily freed from his sense of duty and obligation that he is able to do so.

## Lives are Lived in Every Moment

Both Manna and Lin are focused on the past and future, with the balance of their thoughts leaning towards one or the other perspectives. Rarely are they living the



moment before them. As they observe what happens, they immediately either link it to the past or project probabilities into the future. Manna and Lin are always waiting to start living fully, to reach the Promised Land of contentment and fulfilled purpose.

The problem with waiting for life to begin is that it is happening the whole time anyway, as Lin and Manna eventually do learn, but too late to change their habits. They force themselves to deny the power of the present moment for so many years that when they finally get to the tomorrow they have dreamed of, it is completely anticlimactic. In every "now" they are still doing what they have done, worrying about the future and regretting the past.

## Irony

Shuyu submits to unspeakable self-abuse imposed by her culture in order to create the tiny feet she is convinced are her only hope for capturing the love of a man, only to find herself with a husband who finds them disgusting.

Manna bows to both society's and her lover's sense of propriety, remaining a virgin until the time she can be with the right man in the right way. Manna's virginity becomes to her what Shuyu's bound feet were to her, something special saved for her husband. That all becomes immaterial when she loses her virginity in a brutal rape committed by a man to whom her purity has no value other than novelty.

Lin tries for years to disentangle himself from a woman, only to gravitate to her once he finally gets free. He longs for the family he left even as the family he wanted and now has becomes an increasingly unbearable burden. Lin and Manna wait decades for permission to do things such as walk alone together outside the hospital compound. Most of these things are no longer prohibited by the time they finally marry.

China ushers in a new age of comrades and communism, only to end up establishing a new political and military elite, and eventually, a longing for more individual gain and return to some of the traditions of the past. The Cultural Revolution intended to free workers from oppression by the ruling class simply created a new ruling class, and those who benefited most from their association with the party were eventually punished for its excesses. *Waiting* is a richly ironic and cautionary novel, as the author paints a portrait of sacrifice and denial that unwittingly brings about the opposite of what was envisioned or feared.

# Style

## Point of View

In *Waiting*, author Ha Jin uses the third-person narrative style to tell the story of Lin Kong, a military medical doctor in the Chinese Army, and his unfolding relationships with the women in his life. The voice of the omniscient (all-knowing) narrator in this novel describes the action primarily by entering the thoughts and perspectives of the main characters, Lin and his long-time girlfriend and intended wife, nurse Manna Wu.

When Lin or Manna is present, the reader becomes privy to their inner worlds, with every thought and feeling described in exquisite and sometimes excruciating detail. Most of the story is told from one of their perspectives, and when they are interacting with each other, the reader enters the viewpoint of one observing the other. When Lin and Manna are not present, the narrator switches modes, objectively describing events or what other characters are saying and doing. At those times, the reader is left to imply what the related circumstances mean or how other characters might think or feel through the evidence of their words and actions. The reader spends far more time in the inner dialogue of the main characters than in any outer conversation, listening to the everyday back and forth of human thought as it ponders meaning or reacts to the outside world. While most narratives take the reader into the hearts and minds of the characters, this is emphasized to an unusual extent in this novel, where the vast majority of the story takes place within the main characters rather than in their surrounding environment.

## Setting

*Waiting* takes place in China over a period of twenty-two years, from 1962 to 1984, which coincides with the years surrounding and including China's Cultural Revolution, launched by Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. Within that political climate, adherence to Maoist concepts is mandatory, with severe consequences for those who deviate in thought or action. The political emphasis is on the creation of a non-elitist communist culture run by a central government authority, which favors the good of all the people over that of the individual. By the end of the book, the Cultural Revolution has waned and shifted, allowing more westernization and a less repressive environment for individual gain. However, the love affair between doctor Lin Kong and nurse Manna Wu begins and largely plays out in a culture of social rules and regulations that are different, but no less strict, than those that preceded them.

Most of the events of the story take place in Muji City, where Lin and Manna work together in a military hospital. Once a year, Lin visits his wife and daughter in Goose Village, the rural community where he was born.



*Waiting* is a story that occurs within a time and place in history, but an important feature of this novel is its emphasis on the inner experience of its characters. Although the political climate and culture Lin and Manna find themselves in does influence their decisions and choices, it is a condition they simply accept and adapt to without much thought or criticism. The primary setting of *Waiting* is really the inner landscape of its main characters, focused on their personal lives, in direct contradiction of the Cultural Revolution's edict that collective thought and advancement takes precedence over that of the individual.

## Language and Meaning

Author Ha Jin uses simple, direct language to tell his story. Born in China, the author learned English as an adult, but the text of *Waiting* is easily understood and flows naturally.

*Waiting*, which won the 1999 National Book Award for fiction, specializes in the rhythm and pattern of the inner voice, that constantly chattering observer carried within the mind of every human being. This is the voice in every head that notices, comments, reacts, judges, weighs, and argues in a seemingly endless loop that transcends language and is immediately recognizable to the reader.

## Structure

*Waiting* is divided into a prologue and three parts of 12 chapters each. The prologue starts the reader off shortly before the point in time where the book will end, as the main character, Lin Kong, takes a long look back at the events that have brought him to where he is now. It is a synopsis or framework for the story that is about to be told. The rest of the story is told in a linear narrative, filling in the details of the relationship between Lin and Manna, until Part 3. This final section picks up where the prologue left off, with Lin's divorce from Shuyu finally in the works and his marriage to Manna soon to follow. Part 3 then describes the next few years of their lives, as they settle into their new roles.

*Waiting* is not written in the typical pyramidal fashion, where the rising action of the plot leads to a climactic turn of events and resolution. Instead, author Ha Jin lets the story unwind in the way a typical life would, with the action rising and falling cyclically throughout the book. The book leaves the reader not at the end of anything, but looking toward the beginning of yet another cycle in the life of Lin Kong and the women who love him.



## Quotes

"Hard as she tried, she couldn't stifle the thought of him. Night after night, similar questions kept her awake until the small hours. At times she felt as though his hands still held and touched her right heel; so sensitive and so gentle were his fingers." Part 1, Chapter 4, page 44

"As she was walking away, for the first time he noticed she had a slim back and long, strong legs. She turned around and gave him another smile, then quickened her footsteps toward the Medical Ward. He said to himself, if this leads to an affair, so be it." Part 1, Chapter 5, page 54

"In his heart he felt for Shuyu, who had never lived an easy day since their marriage, but he didn't love her and was unwilling to spend the rest of his life with her. He wanted a marriage based on love and a wife whose appearance wouldn't embarrass him in the presence of others (to his mind, Manna would be a fine choice)." Part 1, Chapter 9, page 76-77

"Why can't you wash your hands of this woman? Why do you allow her to clasp and yank your heart like an octopus? You are so cheap that the more distant she is from you, the more you're attracted to her. Enough of this insanity! You must pluck her out of your chest, or she'll eat up your insides like a worm." Part 1, Chapter 10, pages 83-84

"Her words made him realize that his wife must have been lonely when he was away. He hadn't thought she had her own ideas and feelings. More worrisome, she never doubted that they would stay together for the rest of their lives." Part 1, Chapter 11, page 96

"She went on, 'In the matter of love, I ought to follow my heart. Even birds may not become mates if you put them together in a cage, not to speak of us human beings.'" Part 2 Chapter 2, page 119

"His answer to the questions and doubts was that he was a better-educated man, reasonable and gentle, different from those animal-like men driven by lust and selfishness." Part 2, Chapter 6, page 153

"She wished that Lin could be a little more like him, or that the two men could exchange some of their traits so that both their characters would be more balanced. Lin was too much of a gentleman, good-tempered and studious, with little manly passion." Part 2, Chapter 9, page 176

"Oh, I'm so sorry. If only I had known him better. I should've taken precautions after he said a heart was just a chunk of flesh." Part 2, Chapter 11, page 192

"My heavens, for two years I'd weep in pain every night. In the summer my toes swelled up, filled with pus, and the flesh rotted, but I dared not loosen the binding. My mother'd



whack me with a big bamboo slat if she found me doing that. Whenever I ate fish, the pus in my heels dripped out. There's the saying that goes, 'Every pair of lotus feet come from a bucket of tears.'" Part 3, Chapter 1, pg. 206

"Is this what love is like? he asked himself. No wonder people say marriage is the death of love. The closer we are to getting married, the less attached I feel to her. Does this mean I don't love her anymore? Don't be a fool. She and I have waited for each other for so many years. Now it's time to be united." Part 3, Chapter 2, page 214

"He couldn't help imagining what this home would have been like if Manna and he had gotten married fifteen years earlier. At that time she had been such a pleasant woman that he had always believed he would be a happy man once he married her. But now she was so different and rather boring. He realized how suffering had changed her." Part 3 Chapter 6, page 256-257

"Her peevish face often reminded Lin of what she had said the day after their wedding, 'I wish you were paralyzed in bed, so you'd stay with me all the time.' Is this love? he would wonder. Probably she loves me too much." Part 3, Chapter 8, page 266

"Let me tell you what really happened, the voice said. All those years you waited torpidly, like a sleepwalker, pulled and pushed about by others' opinions, by external pressure, by your illusions, by the official rules you internalized. You were misled by your own frustration and passivity, believing that what you were not allowed to have was what your heart was destined to embrace." Part 3, Chapter 11, page 295

"Sweetheart, will you wait for me? I'll come back to you soon. We are still, still one family, aren't we? Don't leave me. Manna's going to die in a year or two. Oh what - what should I do about the twins?" Part 3, Chapter 12, Page 306

"Tell her not to wait for me. I'm a useless man, not worth waiting for." Part 3, Chapter 12, page 308



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the parallels between Lin's life and the political cycle in China during the time of the novel. How does his desire to leave Shuyu for Manna and then his eventual dissatisfaction with Manna and awakened interest in Shuyu mirror the experience of the Chinese people before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution? How do the two women represent the differing cultures within China at the time?

Explain how the strict rules and regulations of military conduct both restrict and protect Lin. Do you think his relationship with Manna would have been different if their society had embraced them as a couple?

Which is more prevalent throughout the book, internal dialogue or conversations with other people? Explain the effect on the reader of being taken deeply into the thought process of the main characters and the conversations they have with themselves. Does this allow the reader to merge more fully with the character or narrator? Does knowing so much about the thoughts of Lin and Manna make them more likeable and sympathetic as characters, or less so?

Lin believes for most of the book that he would be happier married to a woman like Manna. When he is not, he believes it does not work because they waited too long. If they had married fifteen years sooner, do you think their marriage would have been more successful? Why or why not?

What do you think the author is trying to convey about the balance between careful patience and the refusal to risk through action? Do you think Lin and Manna had other choices? Were they victims of circumstance?

Geng Yang is a cruel, ruthless individual who prospers. Lin and Manna try to be considerate and cooperative, yet constantly struggle. Why do you think the author introduces the character of Geng Yang and what does he represent?

How does the author's minimalist approach to the description of external settings, circumstances, and objects shift the focus of the story?