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Abstract

Examines Ha Jin's use of Whitman in his 1999 novel *Waiting*, analyzing the effects of evoking Whitman in a novel set during the Cultural Revolution and finding the character of Whitman "an elusive figure who is not so easily contained in single-minded political interpretations."

THE PRESENCE OF WALT WHITMAN IN HA JIN'S *WAITING*

ROBERT D. STURR

IN THE INTRODUCTION to *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (1981), Ed Folsom observes that “so palpable is Whitman’s presence that it’s difficult for an American poet to define himself or herself without direct reference to him.”¹ This comment on the ubiquity of Whitman’s influence can be applied not just to poetry, but also to other literary forms and, more generally, the arts. Extending beyond the specific impact of his poetic innovations, Whitman has been (and remains) a symbol of self-exploration, free expression and social transformation to writers, painters, songwriters, filmmakers, and other artists who have sought to engage his legacy. His presence is, of course, not limited to the American context, as demonstrated in the recent publication of *Walt Whitman & The World* (1995), which updated the pioneering work of Gay Wilson Allen on Whitman’s international reputation. In their introduction, editors Folsom and Allen note the emergence of “radically realigned versions of Whitman, as his writing—translated into other languages and absorbed into other traditions—undertakes a different kind of cultural work than it performs in the United States.”² If we acknowledge the fundamental revolutionary impulse of Whitman’s poetic vision—especially in his celebration of the individual, calls for social equality, and promotion of a democratic ethos—then such “cultural work” is likely to take on different and even contradictory forms. In other words, in assessing Whitman’s influence on writers and artists in any cultural context, we should remember that his poetry has tended to be an *unpredictable* catalyst that lends itself to moments of revolution or reform—on a personal or collective level—that are never easy to predict or control.

The writing of Ha Jin offers a unique example of Whitman’s influence—one in which the invitation to celebrate radical individualism is juxtaposed with the traumatic legacy of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution. As a Chinese émigré who arrived in the United States in his late twenties, Jin is familiar with the “cultural work” of Whitman in both countries. Born in northeastern China in 1956, he came of age during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and served for five years in the

People's Liberation Army (PLA). While Whitman was celebrated in China prior to the Cultural Revolution as a "progressive" author, Western writers were routinely condemned and banned during the closed years of the late 1960s and early 1970s.³ Jin has stated in interviews that Whitman was secretly read in the PLA (even during the Cultural Revolution), and that he first saw a copy of *Leaves of Grass* in the possession of a junior officer that he knew when he served in the army. He was, as he has described it, "basically illiterate" at the time and could not appreciate the book.⁴

When universities reopened in the late 1970s, Jin was discharged and eventually earned bachelor's and master's degrees in English and American literature just when the study of Whitman was returning after twenty years of repression. This renewal of interest in Whitman coincided with Jin's acquisition of English and initiation as a scholar. His exposure came mainly through American professors at Shangdong University (where he completed his master's degree). He has noted that his "initial response was neither social nor political, but rather psychological. Whitman made me aware of some issues I hadn't thought of before, such as sexuality, the spiritual life, [and] different ways of writing poetry."⁵ Jin came to the United States in 1985 to work on a Ph.D. in modernist poetry and eventually decided to stay after the repression of students and pro-democracy activists in Tiananmen Square in 1989. He launched a career as a poet, short story writer and novelist, writing entirely in English despite being proficient in the language for less than ten years. Since 1990, he has emerged as a major author with the publication of two books of poetry, three short story collections, and two novels. His best-selling second novel, *Waiting* (1999), won the National Book Award, which brought additional critical acclaim and widespread recognition.⁶

Although not directly autobiographical, most of Jin's writing has focused on the Maoist culture of his youth. In two pivotal chapters of *Waiting* he uses a simple conversation about Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* to dissect and critique the uniformity of thought and suppression of individuality that typified Chinese society in the early 1970s. Jin reveals the paranoia that flowed from the Cultural Revolution as his characters implicitly acknowledge the danger of even being caught with a foreign book. The two main protagonists of the novel—Lin Kong and Manna Wu—are not especially political in the way that they think or speak, and so the use of Whitman as a symbol allows Jin to make a very simple point. Because they are so baffled and even frightened by Whitman, Lin and Manna are revealed as characters unable to connect with one another, unable to love.

Thus, in resurrecting the legacy and voice of Whitman, Jin invokes a spectre to haunt Lin and Manna. Whitman is more than an influence on *Waiting*; he appears as icon representing the pleasures of both free

expression and privacy that were lost under the deadening influence of Maoist philosophy. The presence of Whitman is connected, then, to the primary theme that animates much of Jin's writing: the enormous price that ordinary individuals were forced to pay in order to maintain the communist vision of continuing political revolution and class warfare. Jin repeatedly demonstrates how an unquestioning and stifling devotion to Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led to the obliteration of individuality and the private self. In contrast, Whitman stands for individual striving unencumbered by monolithic ideology. Such a portrayal is not an assertion of a purely American (or anti-communist) version of the poet (or one that denies political readings of Whitman's work altogether). Rather, Jin emphasizes Whitman's universality as a dynamic figure who has the power to inspire an individual's awakening, or at least to point the way toward greater freedom. As Timothy Wong has noted in reviewing Jin's short stories, his fiction "challenge[s] Marxist (or Maoist) political ideology not by declaring allegiance to some other ideology but by demonstrating again and again the complexity of human emotion which defies simplistic dogma."⁷

Waiting and the Context of the Cultural Revolution

Although it has been described as a love story, *Waiting* is mainly often about the denial or suppression of love. Set in northeastern China from the 1960s to the 1980s, its focus is on the relationship between Lin Kong, an army doctor, and Manna Wu, a nurse. Lin is married as a result of an arrangement made by his parents years before so that his wife, Shuyu, might maintain his family's home in a rural village. Leaving that life behind, Lin settles into a very different, modern environment in an army hospital in Muji City. As an officer in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), he is a respected, scholarly figure among his peers. Accordingly, he is embarrassed by his wife and refuses to bring her to Muji City because of her bound feet, servility, and ignorance. He does not treat her as his wife during annual trips to his home village and regrets the obedience to tradition that led him to marry her in the first place. Instead, he slowly becomes attached to Manna. Legal restrictions, however, keep him from divorcing Shuyu without her consent. Moreover, army regulations (combined with the lack of privacy in the hospital) keep Lin and Manna from having an affair or even showing affection to one another. The dangerous political climate of the Cultural Revolution makes Lin extremely cautious even though Manna becomes increasingly frustrated with his passivity. They must wait with repressed feelings and denied passion for eighteen years until, according to the law, Lin can obtain a divorce without Shuyu's agreement.

As this summary indicates, the plot of *Waiting* is not directly concerned with the events of the Cultural Revolution. Jin has claimed in

interviews that *Waiting* is not an overtly political book, and it is true that the agony of political upheaval occurs offstage and outside the walls of the placid army hospital where Lin and Manna are stationed.⁸ Also, Jin clearly attributes part of the blame for their troubles on traditional Chinese cultural and social practices. However, the political climate created by Mao's vision of continuing revolution contribute enormously to the entombment of Lin and Manna in their unhappy relationship. Reviewers of *Waiting* have noted that it can be easily read as a political parable that dramatizes countless acts of self-limitation and self-censorship in response to a chaotic and frenzied time.⁹ We see in the limitations that Lin and Manna face—from both external authority figures and internalized habits of thinking—the personal and psychological consequences of the Cultural Revolution. These characters are, as Whitman says in his short poem, "To You," "walking the walks of dreams," kept from exploring or revealing their true selves.¹⁰

The "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" is typically discussed in political terms as the unfortunate result of a power struggle within the Communist Party and the Chinese government. Such explanations focus on debates over economic policy during the 1950s that led to a struggle over control of the CCP and government. Mao's use of political purges and accusations of corruption as a means to maintain power began during the early days of his leadership in the 1940s. By the time the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966, the communist revolution had almost completely evolved from a fight against external enemies into a cannibalistic struggle in which internal factions were labeled as "class enemies" as a way to enforce obedience and crush dissent.¹¹ Jin's accomplishment in *Waiting* is to dramatize the impact of these distant power struggles on the ordinary (and even intimate) aspects of individual lives.

Lin and Manna mention the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in an understated yet powerful exchange that takes place just as their relationship begins to flourish in 1967. Manna considers joining a political group within the hospital but is advised by Lin that "none of them really understands Mao Tse-tung Thought. They just waste their time arguing and fighting. So many people want to be a commander of some sort." While this seems like an intellectual critique, Lin reveals his underlying concern when pressed by Manna: "You don't have to fight with others to be an active revolutionary, do you?"¹² She is impressed and persuaded by his candor even as Lin immediately fears that he has been too open with his opinions. He intuitively knows the answer to his own question: the Cultural Revolution was entirely about defining and destroying "class enemies." He fears that even Manna might someday use his honesty against him.

In her history of the political, psychological and educational roots of the Cultural Revolution, Jin Ling points to the predominance of cat-

egorical and dichotomous thinking in the rhetoric of the movement. Ling explains that, to participants, the Cultural Revolution was considered “a movement of class struggle that meant the life or death of the People’s Republic It was seen to be a struggle between two classes: the proletarian class and the ‘class enemies’; and between two lines: the proletarian revolutionary line and the capitalist line. These two aspects of the struggle were to be represented not only in people’s behaviors but also in their self.” From the beginning of the communist revolution in China, individuals were defined by their class status and were expected not only to behave correctly but also to think entirely in class terms. During the Cultural Revolution that expectation intensified and proper behavior and class labels became a matter of life and death.¹³

The primary agents of the Cultural Revolution were the millions of young people, the Red Guards, who had been encouraged to rally around their “great leader” and heeded his call to save the country from rightists and other “bad elements” who would destroy the revolution. The Red Guards were primarily students ranging in age from their mid-teens to their mid-twenties who were rabidly devoted to Mao. When schools were closed in 1966, they went on a campaign to purge educational, cultural, political and other institutions of “class enemies.” Students turned against teachers, workers against bosses, and even children against parents. Party cadres were especially vulnerable as the young Red Guards achieved Mao’s underlying purpose of purifying governing institutions and establishing a renewed orthodoxy. According to historian Jonathan Spence, the Red Guards targeted anyone who dissented from their radical program of rooting out “the ‘four old’ elements of Chinese society: old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking.” They attacked those who tried to hold them in check, as well as anyone associated with western capitalism, religion, education, or culture. They publicly denounced and sometimes tortured millions of individuals for having engaged in “feudal” or “reactionary” modes of thinking. As the movement took shape, thousands were killed, pushed into suicide, or imprisoned. Over time, millions of Chinese were relocated to the countryside for heavy labor and brutal re-education.¹⁴

The most devastating aspects of the Cultural Revolution took place from 1966 to 1977 as the movement pushed China toward anarchy. Consequently, Mao sent students back to schools (or sent them to the countryside to work on communes) and authorized both the army and workers’ organizations to restore order. Between 1969 and 1976 there was less large-scale violence, but Mao had achieved strict ideological control and ordinary citizens remained fearful. This paranoia, self-doubt, and self-censorship lurks on the edges of Ha Jin’s novel. Lin’s decision to avoid a sexual affair with Manna is not a matter of prudishness, but is, in fact, a reasonable and potentially life-saving choice. He is aware of what is required to survive even though he and Manna reside in a rela-

tively sheltered and safe environment. Lin is a familiar presence in political meetings and even delivers carefully crafted lectures on Chairman Mao's writings. On the outside he is a paradigm of revolutionary virtue. Yet, he resists joining political groups, maintains a secret personal library, and avoids situations that require an unscripted opinion. He is aware that factors beyond his control could easily lead to his downfall, such as accusations about his family or class status. Pushing for a divorce could lead to a public investigation of his character, and, as a PLA officer expected to uphold the highest standards of rectitude, his fall would be precipitous. When he and Manna become an acknowledged couple, people talk, but because they both "were Party members and had a clean family background, the revolutionaries in the hospital didn't accuse them of harboring a reactionary motive."¹⁵ Lin is determined to keep it that way.

Commissar Wei's Passion for Whitman

Lin's ability to avoid potentially dangerous situations ends when Commissar Wei, a high ranking party official, becomes interested in Manna Wu. During Wei's first meeting with her, he surprises her by asking, "Have you read *Leaves of Grass*?" He then offers to loan her his well-worn Chinese translation of Whitman's poems. This conversation takes place in the early 1970s, after Lin and Manna have become an acknowledged couple in the hospital but also in the period when Lin cannot bring himself to push Shuyu for a divorce. Feeling guilty and a little ambivalent about his relationship with Manna, Lin halfheartedly helps when she has opportunities to meet men whom she might marry. Such is the case with Commissar Wei, who asks that the hospital administration arrange for him to meet a suitable woman because he has recently been divorced and is seeking a new wife. Wei surprises Manna when he pulls his copy of *Leaves of Grass* out of his brief case. In taking the yellowed book, she sees the image on the cover of a "lean foreign man in a tilted hat . . . with one arm akimbo, the hand almost invisible, while his other hand was in his trouser pocket, as though he were trying to conceal his hands."¹⁶ This picture (the frontispiece from the 1855 edition) is as strange to Manna as the author's name. She immediately notices both the openness of Whitman's stance and the secrecy surrounding his hands—two qualities that mark him as both bold and dangerous in the political environment of the times.

In loaning her the book, Wei reveals his passion for Whitman: "This is a remarkable book of poetry, and the poems are so robust and brave they include everything. In a way they form a universe. I've read this book four times." For a moment he is lost in thought—in private feelings of inspiration that, by their nature, must always remain secret. However, in a revolutionary culture that demands not just proper be-

havior but also orthodox thinking, Commissar Wei puts himself at risk with his admission to Manna. As if suddenly remembering his position, he recovers from his reverie and offers the standard political reading of Whitman as a progressive American writer who, if read properly, might be useful in a socialist culture: “Of course, it was written last century when American capitalism was still developing. In fact, the optimism in the poetry reflects the confidence and progress of the time. Nowadays no American poet can write like this. They have all degenerated in the rotten capitalist society, without the rising spirit anymore.”¹⁷

Even this quick explanation—which is rooted in 1950s Chinese readings of Whitman—is not enough to make the discussion of Whitman safe. Commissar Wei goes on to explain to Manna that he became interested in Whitman because he studied under the translator of his edition while he was a university student. He describes him as “a well-read man, a true scholar,” and notes that he died in 1957 of pneumonia. He adds that “with his problematic family background, he could hardly have escaped becoming a target for political movements.”¹⁸ Wei delivers this cryptic observation with a grave face as he slips into memory, but Manna understands his meaning. As Xilao Li has noted, “not only was the voice of Whitman strangled, but also almost none of the living translators of Whitman and the poets who bore his influence were able to escape criticism and chastisement for having praised a euologist of bourgeois democracy.”¹⁹ It is not enough for Wei to present Whitman in the right light; the mere possession of an American book could lead to trouble. He tells Manna that a few copies are available in university libraries, but the fact that he owns one himself, as a party cadre, marks Wei as a potentially dangerous (and therefore vulnerable) intellectual.

Given this background, the character of Commissar Wei is, at first, symbolic of a more accepting time when Whitman was enthusiastically read as an inspirational and revolutionary figure. In *Whitmanism, Imagism, and Modernism in China and America*, Guiyou Huang describes two major periods of influence before the Cultural Revolution silenced discussion. The first occurred during the May Fourth Movement of the 1920s, when young intellectuals and writers found in Whitman a model for new forms of expression. Whitman’s embrace of vernacular language and his rejection of prosodic rules were especially appealing to Guo Moruo, a poet, dramatist, historian, and paleographer who was among the most ardent popularizers of Whitman’s verse. Although a variety of literary groups (both inside China and among overseas exiles) vied with one another to best express the revolutionary spirit of Sun Yat-sen (at first) and the Communist Party (later), Whitman was widely read, discussed and praised by almost all of them.²⁰

Huang asserts that the second major period of Whitman influence coincided with the long military struggle against Japan and the ensuing civil war between communist and nationalist forces. Whitman’s writing

was mined for heroic or martial pieces (*Drum-Taps* was a popular source). In 1949, the same year as the founding of the People's Republic, Chu Tunan, the leading translator of Whitman up to the 1980s, produced *Selections from Leaves of Grass*. It was expanded and revised for a 1955 edition. By then the Korean War, among other factors, created hostilities between the United States and China and led to a less receptive environment for Whitman. The purges and reform campaigns within the CCP and government that led to the Cultural Revolution a decade later had already begun. Huang notes that there was a sudden decline in articles, translations and poems inspired by Whitman after 1959.²¹

Commissar Wei, who is described as a man in his fifties, would have attended college and first encountered Whitman in the 1930s. Jin implies that his volume of *Leaves of Grass* comes from the period of the first major translations in the 1940s and 50s, but Wei's description of his teacher does not fit the career of Chu Tunan, who survived the Cultural Revolution. Jin has also clearly stated that the translator is a fictional character.²² However, Chu Tunan was (like many intellectuals connected with the Ministry of Culture) severely persecuted and removed from his various posts during that period. In defining Whitman's poetry as a "universe" unto itself, Wei stands as a reminder that during the early decades of Whitman's influence in China, contradictions in tone, emphasis, and even meaning flourished (and were accepted) among those who loved his poetry. To poets within the May Fourth Movement, Whitman was attractive as an individualist and iconoclast. To others, Whitman's anti-authoritarian and anti-elitist emphasis on democracy was appealing. Some communists eventually came to elevate him as the poet of collective struggle. These readings sometimes merged but were also at odds. Nevertheless, they all flowed from the radical energy and vision that exists in Whitman's poetry, and Wei's excitement is a reminder of the power and diversity of Whitman's early impact in China during the first half of the twentieth century.

The contrast between Wei's youthful enthusiasm and his cautious recommendation to Manna Wu is striking. If we take him as a reminder of the previous welcoming of Whitman in China, then naturally his presence as a party official during the Cultural Revolution raises questions about his character. How can a lover of Whitman serve as a high-ranking cadre during such a destructive and repressive period? Jin has suggested that Wei represents a certain type of PLA officer or party official who could be "literary, cunning, passionate, arrogant, and at times idealistic."²³ In exemplifying this type, Wei is filled with contradictions that express the inherent conflict between a love for Whitman (or any free poetic expression) and surviving (or even thriving) during the Cultural Revolution. For example, he is described by Ran Su, the hospital administrator, as "a well-educated man" and an "eloquent speaker," and he impresses Manna with his "natural manners" and the fact that he is

“such a good listener.”²⁴ Yet, Wei’s ability to simply demand that the party administration in the hospital supply him with a potential candidate for marriage suggests, as Lin thinks, that he can easily abuse his power and rank. Moreover, Manna is told that the Commissar has recently been divorced and is, in essence, interviewing women to replace his first wife. The coldness of this situation is confirmed when Manna is taken to see him at an army hotel that had once been a Japanese brothel. It is unclear whether their first meeting is about courtship or merely procurement.

As Jin reveals more, Wei is clearly seen as working within a treacherous political system, but the possibility remains that this environment has not, in fact, distorted or destroyed his sense of compassion or humanity (symbolized by his love of Whitman). Like Whitman in the 1855 frontispiece, Wei is both open and secretive. After allowing the possibility that he has merely discarded his first wife to linger for a while, Jin eventually reports that Wei’s wife had been denounced as a counter-revolutionary. Still, was the divorce a matter of survival or a calculated move for advancement? At first, Wei apparently does not select Manna because, as she is told by his aide, her handwriting was not good enough—as though the whole process was, in fact, a job interview. She later learns that Wei had been choosing among a number of women and had simply decided to marry someone else with a stronger political profile.

The last word on Commissar Wei comes at the end of the novel’s second section, which concludes the narration of events from the Cultural Revolution and its immediate aftermath. It is the news that in 1981 Wei died in prison where he had been held because of his connection with the notorious Gang of Four. Jin underscores the absurdity of the push for political purity during the Cultural Revolution by lumping together Wei, who is perhaps a gentle, scholarly devotee of Whitman, with those radicals like Mao’s widow, Jiang Qing, who remained unrepentant about the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and their attack on everything that was foreign and bourgeois. While it is possible that he belongs in their company, Wei seems tragically miscast in this group. He remains as a mysterious figure who never fully comes out from behind the avuncular and cultured mask presented to Manna.

“Conning at Peril”: Lin Kong’s Paralyzed Reading of Whitman

If Commissar Wei stands as a symbol of the lost legacy of Whitman in China, Lin Kong’s paralyzed, self-denying reading of “Song of Myself” represents the psychological damage caused by the Cultural Revolution. Manna perceives Wei’s loan of *Leaves of Grass* as a test because she must describe her reaction in a letter when she returns the book. Ironically, she asks the man she loves to help her impress the man she might marry. True to his character, Lin represses his initial feelings of

jealousy and actually comes to enjoy the task. His inability to understand Whitman underscores the unnaturalness of the pleasure he derives from helping Manna impress Wei. He is a little too eager to help Manna, and just as he does so often in the novel, Lin throws himself into reading in order to escape painful realities or difficult decisions. When he begins the project he cannot understand why he doesn't feel worse about Manna's possible marriage to Wei. Jin exposes Lin's self-satisfaction and thus subtly undermines his passivity: "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."²⁵ Lin is indeed reasonable and gentle, but his reasons for not holding on to Manna are linked to fear, powerlessness, and the unfamiliarity of love more than to nobility of spirit.

Lin's efforts to interpret Whitman initially come across as a parody of the study groups organized to promote Maoist thought to the masses. They were ubiquitous during the Cultural Revolution, and individuals were expected to attend and actively participate. Meetings emphasized uniformity of thought and so they involved memorization and recitations (rather than discussion). The underlying meaning of texts studied was predetermined, and groups were led to proper conclusions by their political instructors.²⁶ Lin participates in hospital study groups and can readily recite passages from Mao. Given this context, when he turns to *Leaves of Grass*, he is profoundly troubled that he "couldn't understand assuredly" what the poems mean. The indeterminacy of Whitman's poetry is unacceptable. To him, *Leaves of Grass* is "a bizarre, wild book of poetry that had so many bold lines about sexuality that it could be interpreted either as obscenity or as praise of human vitality." More troubling is the fact that "the poet's self seemed to verge on a kind of megalomania that ought to be condemned."²⁷ This line is a sarcastic reminder of the dominance of the cult of Mao. To Lin, however, contradictions inherent in Whitman, particularly with respect to sex and individuality, seem so completely contrary to Maoist orthodoxy that he is completely at a loss.²⁸

Yet, he reasons that "on the whole this must be a good, healthy book; otherwise the commissar wouldn't have let Manna read it."²⁹ This is ironic on a surface level because even though Wei's motives are unclear, they certainly have little to do with promoting healthy political thinking. In a deeper sense, Lin is correct but not for the reasons he might think. *Leaves of Grass* is, in that moment, a healthy book that symbolizes a truly revolutionary spirit; however, such a spirit is contrary to the repressive atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution. The book is healthy, but the times are not. Because it has been recommended by an authority figure who presumably represents right-thinking, Lin knows that it cannot be ignored. He is also painfully aware of the risks of committing words to paper. Like Sheng, a character in Jin's short story,

“Winds and Clouds over a Funeral,” Lin knows all too well that “disaster always comes from the tongue.”³⁰

Silence in the face of particular political questions was taken as a sign of rebellion and counterrevolutionary thinking. The practice of political criticism—of the behavior of others as well as one’s own actions and thoughts—was also mandatory. Just as in any indoctrination meeting, Lin knows that he must say something. Yet, Whitman is slippery. He asserts in “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,” “these leaves conning you con at peril, / For these leaves and me you will not understand, / They will elude you at first and still more afterward, I will certainly elude you, / Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold! / Already you see I have escaped from you.”³¹

Lin’s solution is predictable. In writing Manna’s report, he avoids all mention of “sexuality and self-celebration” and instead focuses on “A Song for Occupations” because of its celebration of the working class and the proletarian spirit. Lin finds that the part on workers flows easily “because there was a pattern to follow. He just lists what those brave and diligent people did in the poems and emphasized that workers and farmers were basically the same everywhere.”³² This reading subtly shifts the emphasis of the poem away from a balance between the sameness and individuality of Whitman’s subjects and asserts, instead, a collective striving that implies uniform thinking. Lin’s celebration of the radical equality of the individual occupations expressed in Whitman’s poem is undercut by the fact that he is writing to please his superior—a man with enormous power over individual lives. Jin’s genius in all of his writing about Chinese culture during the 1960s and 1970s is the exposure of an obsession with rank and power. He repeatedly demonstrates how the leveling, socialist rhetoric of the Chinese revolution gave way to an insidious hierarchy that was built upon dehumanizing labels.³³

Lin ends his report in much the same way that Wei showed two different faces to Manna Wu. He explains Whitman’s symbol of the blade of grass as one that encompasses “the essence of heaven and earth, yin and yang, the soul, the living and the dead, celebrating the infinity and abundance of life.” This sentiment, as vague as it sounds, gets at the complexity and multiplicity of Whitman’s poetic voice. Yet, in the next line, Lin tidily sums up the significance of the image of the grass in a different, limiting way: “In brief, it was a very progressive symbol, charged with the proletarian spirit.”³⁴ In returning to his script, Lin imposes a rigid political meaning on Whitman that tragically denies his own desires and experience. In the same way that he feels constrained from saying anything unscripted about the book, so does Lin—as years go by in the novel during which he remains unable to marry Manna—slowly lose his ability to appreciate and enjoy the “abundance of life.”

Manna Wu and The Role of Love in Revolution

In his famous 1942 *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art*, Mao spoke of the need to make sure that “literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy.” He proposed a model for revolutionary cultural activities that would lend support to the proletariat while exposing the “duplicity and cruelty” of the enemies of the people. He urged that formerly bourgeois writers and artists must “undergo a long and even painful process of tempering” before they could properly depict and inspire the masses. Prior justifications of art rooted in abstract or universal theories were to be replaced by the realities of the class struggle. “Now as for love,” he wrote, “in a class society there can be only class love; but these comrades are seeking a love transcending classes, love in the abstract and also freedom in the abstract, truth in the abstract, human nature in the abstract, etc. This shows they have been very deeply influenced by the bourgeoisie. They should thoroughly rid themselves of this influence and modestly study Marxism-Leninism.”³⁵

In *Waiting*, Jin turns Mao’s advice on its head. His story displays the duplicity and cruelty of a stifling proletarian culture that is suffocated by the art and rhetoric of class struggle. In the character of Manna Wu, Jin presents precisely the sort of ordinary person who is meant to be inspired by the literature that Mao describes, but her reaction is to resist art that denies individual humanity, vision, and love. She is initially timid in the exchange involving Whitman. When Wei loans her the books she immediately worries that she won’t understand the poems and “might make a fool of herself” when writing her report. Later, when she asks Lin for help, she says that the few poems she did read “didn’t make sense to me.”³⁶ Yet, Manna is amazed and impressed by the passion Whitman inspires in Commissar Wei, and so she intuitively admires the poet, even if reading and writing about him are frightening.

As a companion to this response, Jin offers another moment in which Manna responds to a poem by Mao. Several chapters before her encounter with Wei, Manna agrees to meet Lin’s cousin, Liang Meng, who has been recently widowed and is also interested in finding a new wife. When they talk for the first time during a walk in Muji City, their awkward conversation predictably shifts into a banal discussion of the weather and the sights of the city. Yet, when Liang asks Manna why she doesn’t notice the beauty of the mountain visible in the distance to the southwest, her true feelings emerge. In a veiled reference to the complex and sometimes treacherous political and social environment of the hospital, she replies that ““you just forget that the mountain is there and so awesome. You’re too mindful of things and people around you.””

Misreading her emotions, Liang tries to impress Manna by reciting Chairman Mao's poem, "Snow," in which he praises China's mountains and rivers that "have inspired innumerable heroes to compete for them."³⁷ Manna laughs at his pretentiousness as well as the awkwardness of the moment.

The values of the Revolution—collective struggle, devotion to the party, unity of thought, and self-sacrifice—are a part of Manna's life, but she also holds back a private self that stands apart from the words she is expected to know and recite. She is not interested in the celebration of "innumerable heroes," but wishes, instead, for true love. Her disinterest in Liang is comic—a blind date gone wrong—but the episode is also a painful reminder of the frustration she feels in not being allowed to marry Lin. The Cultural Revolution was fueled, in many respects, by the frustration and limitation of personal desire and ambition. Jonathan Spence has described the frustration that was at the heart of the activities of the Red Guards:

For years the young had been called on to lead lives of revolutionary sacrifice, sexual restraint, and absolute obedience to the state, all under the conditions of perpetual supervision. They were repressed, angry, and aware of their powerlessness. They eagerly seized on the order to throw off all restraint, and the natural targets were those who seemed responsible for their cramped lives.³⁸

Manna is not a participant among the Red Guards, of course, but this description fits her situation. For those who did become involved, acting collectively in moments of mass hysteria and cruelty, their individual frustrations could, for a time, be released. The cost, however, was enormous—not just in lives that were lost or disrupted, but also in psychological terms as individuals were forced to retreat into themselves and to avoid any situation that required a revelation of true thoughts or feelings.

The unlikely introduction of Walt Whitman into such a climate allows Jin to use the iconography of the 1855 frontispiece—which is really all that Manna comes to know of Whitman—to suggest that there are other ways to express and release desire. In his analysis of literary responses to the Cultural Revolution, Jianguo Chen argues that poetry and fiction have the potential to respond to mass inhumanity by insisting on the preservation of personal experience and memory—by using individual characters to represent an alternative to the lock-step thinking of ideologically-driven movements and institutions. "The essence of literature," he writes, "is the expression of memory, especially individual memory of a phenomenal life, one which refuses to be mediated institutionally."³⁹ Jin helps readers to understand the humanity, both in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, of characters who seek to avoid the inhumane choices imposed during the Cultural Revolution, particularly in the betrayal of family and friends. While the historical answer to Lin's

question, ““you don’t have to fight with others to be an active revolutionary, do you?”” is, sadly, yes. The inclusion of Whitman in *Waiting* allows Jin to offer a belated objection to the cruelty of the Cultural Revolution.

“*I Sing of an Old Land*”

A similar objection, written in response to the brutality of the Tiananmen Square massacre fifteen to twenty years after the Cultural Revolution, can be found in “*I Sing of an Old Land*,” a poem that appeared in Jin’s second book, *Facing Shadows* (1996).⁴⁰ This volume of poems was his first opportunity to publish work that focused on his decision to stay in the United States. He explores not just anger, but also regret and guilt at his own youthful enthusiasm for Maoist doctrine and at the passive way in which he slipped into exile (unlike others who were persecuted for their views). In other poems, such as “*I Woke Up—Smiling*,” which explores the alienation of exile, and “*A Child’s Nature*,” which depicts the arrival of Jin’s young son from China, Jin makes his anguish apparent but avoids direct criticism of the Chinese government (and people). In “*I Sing of an Old Land*,” he mimics Whitman’s voice, which allows for a more direct expression of emotion. The poem offers an undiluted lament for China and his own lost heritage. He imitated Whitman not to adopt a new poetic method but to borrow a more powerful method of expression—a full-throatedness in response to the silence of his Chinese self. Borrowing Whitman’s presence allowed Jin to say what previously could not be said.

“*I Sing of an Old Land*” begins with images of a ruined China:

I sing of an old land
where the gods have taken shelter underground,
where the human idols eat human sacrifice,
where hatred runs the business of philanthropy,
where blazing dragons eclipse the wronged ghosts,
where silence and smiles are the trace of wisdom,
where words imitate spears and swords,
where truth is always a bloody legend.⁴¹

In its repeated use of “where,” Jin’s poem echoes Section 33 of “*Song of Myself*,” but the thematic thrust of Whitman’s poem has been reversed. Whitman declares that “*I am afoot with my vision*” and then offers a series of images of a fertile American landscape. He asserts that “*I understand the large hearts of heroes, / The courage of present times and all times.*”⁴² In contrast, Jin sees only desolation, hatred, and silence in the “old land.” Unlike Mao, he does not see “innumerable heroes” contesting for the possession of China. He argues instead that the China he knew had slipped into the practice of self-deception: si-

lence stands for wisdom and truth is “bloody legend.” In this landscape, ordinary individuals pay a heavy price for a purified revolutionary struggle. As the soldier who narrates another of Jin’s poems, “Marching towards Martyrdom,” says with bitter sarcasm, “It was so easy to become a martyr, / and there were so many ways.”⁴³

While Whitman continues Section 33 by imagining himself standing alongside heroic figures and sharing in their triumphs, Jin moves on in his second stanza to the consequences of escape and exile:

I join those who fled and returned,
 who disappeared in other lands
bearing no hope but persistence, no honor but the story,
 no fortune but parents and children,
singing a timeless curse,
a curse that has bound us together
and rooted us deep in the wreck
 of our homeland.⁴⁴

In his poem, Whitman embodies the courage of two sympathetic and heroic figures: the wounded runaway slave and the old artilleryman. Jin, in contrast, touches an old map and imagines in general terms the landscape of China, even as he struggles to place himself there.

The fourth stanza of “I Sing of an Old Land” opens with Jin’s dream “of suffering together with my people, / of being understood and useful,” but these thoughts are combined with the dream “of my children refusing my land / so they will not repeat my life.” The poet dreams of identifying as closely with his countrymen as Whitman does with his, but this is done not to affirm a triumphant vision of self merging with a transcendent national identity. To the contrary, the speaker of Jin’s poem merges a broken self with a decaying nation. As much as the narrator misses the “old land,” he wishes to break his family connection. The poem closes with lines that reflect the contradictions within Jin’s Chinese identity:

I weep for the old land,
for its vast narrowness,
for its profound stupidity,
for its chaos and tenacity,
for its power to possess those of my kind
to devour us to nourish itself
to seize our hearts and thoughts
and mix our moans with songs—
songs of monstrous grandeur
and merciless devotion,
songs crazed by the cycle of that land.⁴⁵

These lines indicate that Walt Whitman has not merely been an influence on Ha Jin's life, education and career; Whitman has provided a voice and persona to say things about China that are hard or dangerous to express.

The spectre of Whitman that enters into *Waiting*—the striking figure who stares out at Manna Wu—is an elusive poet who is not so easily contained in single-minded political interpretations. By resurrecting Whitman following the period when he had been banished, Jin is able to successfully humanize his characters while also interrogating and critiquing the culture he once knew. The rejection of a revolutionary poet by a society that claims to be revolutionary underscores the inhumanity of the Cultural Revolution. It also reminds us that the “cultural work” of Whitman has not always been (and still is not) welcomed by those in power. Nevertheless, as Jin's writing demonstrates, the revolutionary spirit of *Leaves of Grass* can serve as a catalyst for the recovery of lost voices. In the preface to his first volume of poems, *Between Silences: A Voice from China*, Jin claimed that he was a “fortunate one” who could “speak for those unfortunate people who suffered, endured or perished at the bottom of life” during the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁶ That is what he achieves in both *Waiting* and “I Sing of an Old Land.” In adopting the voice of Whitman, he is free to seek and express truth.

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NOTES

- 1 Ed Folsom, “Talking Back to Walt Whitman: An Introduction,” *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom and Dan Campion (Minneapolis: Holy Cow, 1981), xxi.
- 2 Ed Folsom and Gay Wilson Allen, “Introduction: ‘Salut au Monde!’,” *Walt Whitman & the World*, ed. Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), 2.
- 3 Xilao Li, “Walt Whitman in China,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 3 (Fall 1986), 5-6.
- 4 Ha Jin, interview with Dave Weich, *Powells.com Interviews*, February 2, 2000; December 7, 2000 <<http://www.powells.com/authors/jin.html>>. Ha Jin, e-mail interview with the author, March 20, 2002.
- 5 Ha Jin, e-mail interview, March 20, 2002.
- 6 Jin's short fiction in *Ocean of Word: Army Stories* (1996) won the PEN/Hemingway Award, while the collection *Under the Red Flag* (1997) received the Flannery O'Connor Award. A useful overview of Jin's life and career can be found in Dwight Garner, “Ha Jin's Cultural Revolution,” *New York Times Magazine* February 6, 2000, sec. 6:38+.
- 7 Timothy C. Wong, Review of *Ocean of Words: Army Stories*, by Ha Jin, *World Literature Today* 71 (1997), 862.

8 In an interview conducted after a reading at Powells Books in Portland, Oregon, Jin stated that “politics is only a context” for *Waiting* and that its “focus is on the person, the inner life, the life of the soul and how that changes, how the emotional life is affected by time and also by environment.” Ha Jin, interview with Dave Weich. However, in other published profiles, he has suggested a stronger political message. In an interview with *Virtual China*, he noted that the novel examines the way that “revolution makes people unable to love each other.” Ha Jin, interview with Alexa Oleson, *Virtual China*, November 19, 1999; December 7, 2000, <http://virtualchina.org/archive/leisure/features/1119-hajinfinal.html>.

9 See, for example, Francine Prose, “The 18-Year Itch” [review of *Waiting*], *New York Times* (October 24, 1999), 7:9.

10 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader’s Edition, ed., Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 233.

11 Jonathan Spence provides an overview of this struggle in chapters 20 and 21 of *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990).

12 Ha Jin, *Waiting* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 55-56.

13 Jing Lin, *The Red Guards’ Path to Violence: Political, Educational, and Psychological Factors* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 20.

14 Spence, 606.

15 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 58.

16 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 144.

17 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 144.

18 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 145.

19 Xilao Li, 6.

20 Guiyou Huang, *Whitmanism, Imagism, and Modernism in China and America* (Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania: Susquehanna University Press, 1997), 39-44.

21 Huang, 44-46.

22 Ha Jin, e-mail interview, March 20, 2002.

23 Ha Jin, e-mail interview, March 20, 2002.

24 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 135, 143.

25 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 153.

26 Jing Lin, 61.

27 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 152, 153.

28 In this reaction, Lin confirms what James E. Miller Jr., has described as one of the hallmarks of those who have traditionally responded negatively to Whitman: “his political-sexual-spiritual themes are so inextricably interwoven that the reader feels the power of the whole but often concludes (usually later) that the power comes from an individual part and is contaminated by the intermixture of undesirable elements that should be rejected” (“Whitman’s Multitudinous Poetic Progeny: Particular and Puzzling Instances,” *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994], 188-189).

- 29 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 153.
- 30 Ha Jin, "Winds and Clouds over a Funeral," *Under the Red Flag* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 153.
- 31 *LG*, 116.
- 32 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 153, 154.
- 33 Five official "Red Categories" were used to define and rank good members of the proletariat, while seven "Black Categories" were used to tar those considered to be enemies of the people. Intellectuals—a category that might include men like Wei and Lin—were eventually included as an additional black category during the Cultural Revolution. See Jing Lin, 3.
- 34 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 154.
- 35 Mao Tse-tung, "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art," *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 70, 74.
- 36 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 145, 152.
- 37 Ha Jin, *Waiting*, 117.
- 38 Spence, 606.
- 39 Jianguo Chen, "Against Silences: The Cultural Revolution and Literary Memory," *The Conscience of Humankind: Literature and Traumatic Experiences*, ed. Elrud Ibsch (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 166.
- 40 The title of the poem echoes one of Whitman's inscriptions, "As I Ponder'd in Silence," which includes an exchange between the poet and a phantom that is "[t]errible in beauty, age, and power," and filled with "[t]he genius of poets of old lands." It demands that Whitman sing of the "theme of War" and of "[t]he making of perfect soldiers." Clearly this is not the poet's aim, but, rather than remain silent in front of this terrible face, his pondering leads to the response that he is equipping his readers for war, but the battle is "[w]aged in my book," the field is the world, and the struggle is for the "eternal Soul." *LG*, 1-2.
- 41 Ha Jin, "I Sing of an Old Land," *Facing Shadows* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 1996), 19.
- 42 *LG*, 61, 66.
- 43 Ha Jin, *Between Silences: A Voice from China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 18.
- 44 Ha Jin, "I Sing of an Old Land," 19.
- 45 Ha Jin, "I Sing of an Old Land," 20.
- 46 Ha Jin, *Between Silences*, 2.