



## Waiting Alone

独自等待 *Dúzì děngdài*

Dayyan Eng 伍仕贤 (*Wu Shixian*), 2004

107 min

Stars: Xia Yu 夏雨, Li Bingbing 李冰冰, Gong Beibi 龚蓓苾

**Best First Feature** (Beijing FF), Official Selection (Tokyo International FF; Thessaloniki IFF; Hawaii IFF).

**Best Actor** (Beijing FF).

Set among Beijing's affluent and energetic youth culture, this exuberant romantic comedy follows a young man in his mid-20s, a partner in an antique shop and aspiring writer, who finds himself smitten by a young actress who seems to be the woman of his dreams, but is giving him ambiguous signals about her feelings toward him. At the same time he remains deaf to the potential of his 'buddy' relationship with the sister of his best guy friend. As he attempts to win over his dream woman, he battles with his own (often adolescent) insecurities, reels from the consequences of his own ineptness, and follows (or not) the advice of his close circle of friends.

What might at first appear to be just another boy-gets-girl plot is saved by some unexpected (but credible) twists and turns in the story line, the completely engaging performance of Xia Yu in the lead role, and an entirely satisfying but unconventional ending. Made for millennials by one of their own—a 'cross-cultural kid' without nationalistic or political baggage—director Dayyan Eng rides the wave of China's official embrace of cinema as pure entertainment. As of 2017, *Waiting Alone* remained the highest rated romantic comedy by Chinese audiences and critics, and a continuing favorite of Chinese millennials (八零后 *Balinghou*). Despite 'inside' jokes and references that endear it to its domestic audience, this movie is an easy cross-cultural winner.

### Main Characters

**Chen Wen** 陈文 aka **Wenzi** 文子. a happy-go-lucky but insecure young man in his mid-20s or so. He is co-owner of a small antique shop in Beijing, but really wants to become a horror writer and so often slacks off on his responsibilities to the shop.

#### **Wenzi's buddies:**

**Li Liang** 李亮, Co-owner of the antique shop and Wenzi's oldest friend. Liang's dream is to become a major antique dealer, and he wishes Wenzi would take his responsibilities to the shop more seriously.

**Zhang Lin** 张琳, Liang's girlfriend.

**Li Jing** 李静, Liang's younger sister and Wenzi's high-school classmate; she is now studying graphic design. Wenzi thinks of her as his sister.

**Du Haitao** 杜海涛, plays the guitar and has formed his own band. He professes to admire the 1930s Shanghai gangster boss Du Yuesheng 杜月笙 (aka Big-Eared Du) with whom he shares a family name.

**Jia Yaosan (San)** 三儿, an assistant to a TV sound engineer.

**Liu Na** 刘荣, San's girlfriend.

**Sun Zi** 孙子, he goes by the name of the author of the well-known classic *The Art of War* (6<sup>th</sup> C BCE), but nobody knows his real name—or what he does for a living, although he is suspected of running a pirated DVD ring.

**Liu Rong** 刘荣, an aspiring young actress. Wenzi has fallen hard for her, but she responds with mixed signals.

**Da Ming** 大明, Wenzi's wealthy rival for Rong's affection.

**Ian**, a half-Chinese English teacher (played by the director), and a bass player in Haitao's band.

**A Customer at the shop:** A cameo appearance by Chow Yun Fat.

### Chinese Millennials (八零后 *Bālíng hòu* 'after the 80s')

This is the first generation to be born after Deng Xiaoping 邓小平's 1978 economic reforms and 'opening up' (改革开放 *gǎigé kāifàng*), and also the first to be born under the so-called one-child policy (1979-2015).<sup>1</sup> Without

<sup>1</sup> "So-called" because during most of this period exceptions were made for rural couples (more than 50% of the total population at the time), ethnic minorities (approximately 8.5% of the population), parents of disabled and deceased children, and multiple births. The law is

siblings, they grew up as the center of attention of two parents and four grandparents—the 4-2-1 situation—which led many to refer to them as the ‘spoiled’ generation, or ‘little emperors and empresses’. Their outside world was that of China’s race toward affluence and urbanization; manic consumerism; relentless architectural demolition and construction; China’s celebrated entrance into the global community (WTO in 2001 and the 2008 Olympics on the horizon). At the turn of the millennium they came of age in a booming wild-west economy that presented them with a plethora of career paths but with little meaningful direction from their elders, who had lived most of their lives in an “iron rice bowl” (铁饭碗 *tiěfǎnwǎn*), and grown up with brothers and sisters. The world China’s millennials must navigate is filled with many downsides, including the looming responsibilities of caring for aging parents absent siblings to share the burden, and runaway housing costs that require either postponing marriage or entering a ‘naked marriage’ (裸婚 *luǒhūn*, i.e., without the material basis of a house/car/lavish wedding)—but none of these concerns intrudes into the world of *Waiting Alone*.

The generation gap plus the absence of siblings—together with the ubiquity of cell phones, social media, and digital sophistication—has led this generation to unusually close bonding with peers and cousins, in addition to nourishing a nation-wide generationally-shared millennial culture that prioritizes self-centered and pragmatic approaches to personal happiness, against the grain of traditional predeterminism by family/government. *Waiting Alone* narrates this core struggle: how *bāilínghòu* individuals must invent their own lives—and themselves—by themselves (with a little help from their friends). We see this played out in the main characters of *Waiting Alone*: their creative entrepreneurialism, relaxed consumerism, the trajectories of their various paths toward finding love and happiness, and above all, Wenzhi’s naïve but indomitable optimism about the future.

Director: Dayyan Eng aka Wǔ Shìxián 伍仕贤 (b. 1975, Taiwan)

An American citizen born of Chinese and Iranian parentage, Dayyan Eng is a ‘cross-cultural kid’ who grew up in Taiwan, Australia, Canada, Macau, China, and the US<sup>2</sup>. In China, he is classified as a foreigner. Eng began film studies at the University of Washington, and finished his undergraduate work in the directing department of the Beijing Film Academy (北京电影学院 *Běijīng Diànyǐng Xuéyuàn*). He got his start directing television commercials aimed at Asian and international markets, and *Waiting Alone* (2004) was his first feature film. Eng is reportedly the first American to write and direct an approved independent Chinese feature film in China, and is the only foreign member of the China Film Directors’ Guild.

#### Stars

After his first film role in 1994, **Xia Yu** (b. 1976, Qingdao 青岛, Shandong 山东 Province) was inspired to study drama and since completing studies at the Central Academy of Drama (中央戏剧学院 *Zhōngyāng Xìjù Xuéyuàn*), he has acted in a number of award-winning films and TV roles. The winner of five “Best Actor” awards, Xia is unquestionably one of China’s hottest young male actors.

The female leads, **Li Bingbing** and **Gong Beibi**, are currently the top young actresses in China, and any film starring the two of them is destined to be a box-office hit. Since 1999 Li (b. 1973, Wuchang 五常, Heilongjiang 黑龙江 Province), who studied at the Shanghai Theatre Academy (上海戏剧学院 *Shànghǎi Xìjù Xuéyuàn*), has played a variety of roles in a dozen critically acclaimed internationally-released films in addition to several Hollywood blockbusters. She has also founded and committed to several environmental and charitable causes. Gong (b. 1978, Fujian 福建 Province), a graduate of the Central Academy of Drama (中央戏剧学院 *Zhōngyāng Xìjù Xuéyuàn*), has also played in a variety of award-winning films and popular TV series.

#### Related Film

**Wished** 反转人生 *Fǎnzhuǎn rénnshēng* (‘reversing life’), Dayyan Eng (伍仕贤), 2017.

A fantasy romantic comedy by the same director, with the same lead star, also highly rated and award-winning. An ineffectual insurance salesman is targeted by a mischievous and sexy Earth Goddess who offers to grant 19 out of all the wishes he has made since the age of six – without warning and at the time of her choosing. The often scatological humor is generally of an adolescent male type, and although set in Beijing, this stylish movie and its clichéd plot could be set anywhere in the glitzy modern globalized urban world—thus universalizing the film’s audience appeal but unnecessarily eradicating its cultural roots. IMHO: *Waiting Alone* is the better film in all respects.

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more properly referred to as the “Population and Family Planning Law”; its text can be found on the Internet and is included as an Appendix in *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother: Stories of Loss and Love*, Xinran 欣然, 2010, Nicky Harmon, tr.

<sup>2</sup> See Munib Rezaie, “Eng and the Entertainment Film in the People’s Republic of China,” CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.2 (2013). Purdue University Press.