

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Novel & Short Story Winner – 20th Annual Minnesota Book Awards

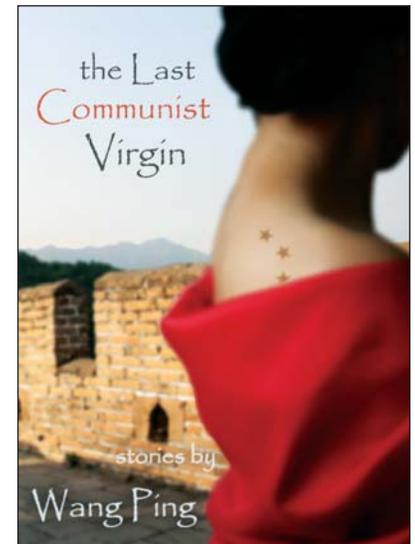
***The Last Communist Virgin* by Wang Ping**

Coffee House Press

Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards/The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.

SUMMARY:

From the restaurants of New York's Chinatown to the retail emporium of Bergdorf Goodman, and from remote Chinese military outposts to the streets of Beijing, Wang Ping's stories open a window into the rapid transformations of an ancient culture. This is a book about love in a fast-changing world: love for the people and the land from the west and the east, love for the new and the old, the real and the imaginative, and the prevalent technology and the soul within each person.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the book's main themes?
 2. Did the book change your views about China and the Chinese people?
 3. How has the author tied the seven stories together? Do all of the stories work well as part of a collection?
 4. Who is your favorite character, and why? What characters did you find hard to like, and are there any for whom your feelings changed as an individual story or stories developed?
 5. The author is also a writer of poetry. In what ways is her poetic voice present in the stories?
 6. What role does humor play in the stories? What parts of the collection made you laugh or smile?
 7. What struck you as most sad or disturbing when reading the book?
 8. What surprises did you experience in reading the stories?
 9. The collection was edited and set to go to press when the author received the inspiration for the final story, "Maverick." What is the significance of the final story, and why do you think the author felt compelled to end her collection with it?
 10. How are the challenges of writing a collection of short stories different from those of writing a novel? Which would you find easier to write?
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A CONVERSATION WITH WANG PING:

Q. What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

I wrote this book because of the rapid changes in China and the world that are causing the extinction of so many things, including cultures. My love for my old home, China, and my new home, America, were also inspirations for *The Last Communist Virgin*.

Q. What research did you undertake in writing *The Last Communist Virgin*?

I made many trips to China where I had the opportunity to do interviews with the workers and peasants. Macalester College, where I teach, has made it possible for me to take six trips to China. These opportunities have inspired and informed my writing, and I am grateful for them.

Q. How long did it take you to write this book?

A third of it was written ten years ago, another third three years ago, and the last third very recently.

Q. What do you like most about *The Last Communist Virgin*?

I love the voices and forms. I was adventurous in writing this book.

Q. What do you hope readers take away from this book?

I want to remind my readers that things come and go, but love goes on.

Q. How and when did you first decide you wanted to be a writer?

I got into a writing class at Long Island University in New York by mistake – a great and fortunate mistake, I might add. I sat down in the class and wrote my first story, and I haven't stopped since.

Q. What do you most enjoy about teaching?

I love the human interactions I have with my Macalester College students, and it is rewarding to experience my students getting better and better. My teaching also pushes me to grow as a writer, because the things I preach to my students are often the hardest things for me to do well.

Teaching also gives me a break from my own writing, which I have found to be a good thing. I used to complain that teaching didn't allow me enough time to write, but I've discovered that my stories and poems are percolating, even when I'm not sitting at the computer. For me, it is a good thing to not be actively

writing all the time; to have spaces between poems and stories.

Q. How do you most enjoy spending your time when you are not writing?

I love physical activities, which are good for my mind. Flamenco dancing, yoga, martial arts, figure skating, hiking, and cross country skiing are some of my favorites. Tennis is a new hobby of mine, and I've been focusing a lot of time on my photography.

ABOUT WANG PING:

Wang Ping was born in Shanghai and grew up on a small island in the East China Sea. After working in the fields of a mountain village commune, she attended Beijing University. Wang left China in 1985 to study in the United States where she earned her PhD from New York University. She is a frequent visitor to



China, and teaches at Macalester College. Wang is a versatile writer who has written poetry, short stories, a novel, and non-fiction. Her recent published work includes:

The Dragon Emperor: A Chinese Folktale (children's), 2008

The Magic Whip (poetry), 2003

Of Flesh and Spirit (poetry), 1998

For additional information about the author and her work, visit www.wangping.com/.



The Minnesota Book Awards is a statewide outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Office of the Mayor of Saint Paul and the Saint Paul Public Library. Visit us online at www.thefriends.org.

Reading guide production supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a Federal agency that fosters innovation, leadership, and a lifetime of learning; and the Minnesota Department of Education/State Library Agency, with funding under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA).

