



**BOOK CLUB  
KIT**

## A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I created Joan to explore, and to help me understand, the encroaching pressures on a person like her. She is an amalgam of my own ambitions and frustrations. She is a mirror of many of my peers. I did not start writing creatively until college, and the first characters that I created on the page were nameless, raceless, and sexless because I believed that I would be doing them a great disservice by giving them identities. With identity comes identity problems. Their enforced invisibility was undoubtedly an extension of my own.

The concepts that permeate my work are there because I live with them every day. There were long periods of my schooling when I could not escape hearing the word “sacrifice” and how much had been sacrificed for me to have the opportunities that I did. In return, I could not forsake those who had made that possible for me. I could not deviate from the plan.

What was the plan? The skill-based world of science used to be much more familiar to me than the world of writing. I was trained in STEM and for many years prepared myself for a career in medicine. I wavered in this regard, but Joan does not. In some ways, she is the person that I’d hoped to be—an ideal worker who thrives on work, embodies it completely, and never wishes to be disturbed.

Joan sits at the intersection of many experiences that I personally have found painfully confusing and angering. There is the Asian American experience, the immigrant experience, the woman-in-science experience, the mental health experience. Groups who are different are often labeled as such and feel the heavy expectation to

fit in. Fitting in is as it sounds: you must trim yourself down to fit a mold. Yet Joan has willingly done that to herself and integrated herself into the hospital because she admires the supposed meritocracy of it all. She believes that through this straight and steadfast path she can circumvent her other identities of being an Asian American woman, a child of struggling immigrants, a person with familial obligations and cultural roots. This is not true and cannot be true. Said another way, I created Joan to test her. There are obstacles already in her life that she has trained herself to ignore.

The novel’s concept and first drafts took place before the onset of the global pandemic. Afterwards, I found myself writing about a Chinese American ICU doctor in the light of a virus that has inflicted widespread disease and fear. I watched from the sidelines as my friends, these lauded model minorities and assimilation success stories, reported to their hospital posts, where they were questioned by patients and peers for their patriotism. In response, I felt an urgency to reflect on the contemporary upheaval and ugliness, which are not so much new as they are simply brushed aside by their sufferers out of a conditioned desire to not cause trouble. As a character, Joan is equal parts Asian American success and failure. She strives to never cause trouble until she does, and once trouble arrives, she must finally reckon with who she is.

A most heartfelt thanks for choosing *Joan Is Okay* for your book club. I’m thrilled, honored, and hope you enjoy the experience of getting to know her through your discussion.

**Weike**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Joan is a successful ICU doctor, a first-generation Chinese American, a daughter and sister, a workaholic, and a happily single woman in her thirties. How are these different parts of her identity in harmony with each other? How are they dissonant?
2. *Joan is Okay* takes place in 2019, in the months leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic. How does this timing influence the events of this novel? How would the book be different if set well before, during, or after Covid-19?
3. As Joan recalls memories from her childhood and her relationship with her parents, she notes that, “Berating is love, and here I was at 36, still being loved.” Discuss the family dynamics at the core of this novel. How do Joan, Fang, and their mother show each other love? What do they withhold or hide from one another? How does this dynamic change after Joan’s father dies, and by the time they are all in Greenwich together?
4. Joan thinks a lot about being Chinese-American outside of China. At one point she says she doesn’t consider herself too Chinese, and rarely goes to China to visit. In another instance, Joan reflexively apologizes to a nurse for speaking Chinese. Yet she also doesn’t feel that the phrase “Proud to be an American” really applies to her. Discuss how Joan grapples with her Chinese heritage and identity. What is important for readers to see within her internalized struggle?
5. *Joan is Okay* is filled with sharp, satirical humor. What scenes or moments made you laugh? What does humor add to the overall effect of the story?
6. Joan is a woman in a male-dominated workplace. How does that manifest through her relationship with Reese? How does she navigate this? How is she treated differently from her male peers? What did you think of the portrayal of Human Resources and corporate “wellness” initiatives?
7. “History repeats itself,” Wang writes. “Asians are often pitted against other Asians, and even citizenship can’t always save you.” How did this novel make you reflect on the treatment of Asian Americans in the United States, particularly in the wake of the coronavirus? How does this tie into Joan’s memory of the father and daughter buying the lottery ticket at the end of the novel?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

8. Wang writes, “The price of success is steep and I’ve never been able to distinguish it from the feeling of sacrifice.” Why do you think Joan equates success and sacrifice? Do you feel similarly? Why or why not? What does success look like for the different characters in this novel?
9. *Joan is Okay* depicts two different perspectives on the immigrant experience: Joan’s and her brother’s. Discuss how Joan and Fang each feel about being immigrants. Why do you think they react differently? How do they feel about each other’s paths? How does being an immigrant impact their life choices?
10. At the end of the book, Wang writes, “Home could be many things. It could be both a comfort and a pain. It could exile you for a little while but then demand that you return.” Where does home truly lie for Joan? What does home mean to you?
11. Though Joan’s father is a passive character in the book, he is still very much a significant player. Discuss the influence Joan’s father has on her character. To what extent is Joan changed (or not changed) by the grief she feels after her father dies?
12. How does *Joan is Okay* compare to the “classic” immigrant novel? Explain the role class plays in the story. What themes and expectations does this novel affirm and/or upset?
13. Discuss the characters: Joan, our protagonist, is very unique and striking, but so are many of the secondary and tertiary figures. How is Joan’s relationship to her father different from her relationship with her mother? How do Joan and her brother Fang compare?
14. What did you think about Joan’s relationship with her neighbors, particularly Mark? At first, he seems to be a foil for Joan, but he’s also one of the many forces in her life insisting her lifestyle is unsatisfactory. Why does Joan let him force his way into her life? What does it mean to have your sensibilities questioned in your own home?
15. Reading is often about finding empathy for others. Discuss the empathy you had (or didn’t have) for the characters in *Joan is Okay*. What did you take away from reading this novel?

## RECIPES

### Congee or zhou 粥

Congee is the English word (with Portuguese and Tamil origins) for a comfort food that I've known all of my life. In Chinese, we say zhōu 粥 or xī fàn, 稀饭: liquified rice. Congee can be plain or cooked with protein. The protein can be anything you have around: ground pork, shredded chicken, sliced white fish fillets. I have even made congee with prosciutto. To speed up congee production, use an Instant Pot.

#### Ingredients:

- White rice
- Chicken stock or broth
- Protein of choice
- Fish sauce (if using fish fillets)
- White pepper
- Scallions
- Various accompaniments (see Step 5)

#### Instructions for 3–4 servings:

1. Wash ½ cup of rice and add 4 cups of water, 2 teaspoons of chicken stock concentrate (or 2 cups of chicken broth plus 2 cups of water), and 1 tablespoon of sliced ginger.
2. Cook in the Instant Pot on porridge setting for 25 minutes. Then wait 15–20 minutes for pressure to release.
3. For a fish congee, turn the Instant Pot to sauté setting, high. Add washed fish slices to congee and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. For pork or chicken congee, sauté the protein in another pan first, drain the fat, then stir into the congee.
4. For a fish congee, add 1 teaspoon of fish sauce (or more, to taste). For all congees, add white pepper and salt to taste, then garnish with scallions.
5. Serve with accompaniments. Accompaniments can include pickled cucumbers, pickled bamboo (pickled any vegetable really!), fermented tofu, dried pork jerky, dried seaweed, salted peanuts, or peanut butter.



Photo source: [www.pressurecookrecipes.com/instant-pot-chicken-congee](http://www.pressurecookrecipes.com/instant-pot-chicken-congee)

# RECIPES

## Chinese Holidays—and What to Eat

There are many Chinese holidays, but the following are the four main ones and their respective foods, which can also be eaten year-round. Nowadays, mooncakes, tāng yuán, and qīng tuán can be bought from stores. Zòng zi recipes are often passed down within families and can vary greatly by region and taste. Nián gāo is the easiest of these dishes to make and there are many variations of it online, including both the steamed and sautéed kind.

**Mid-Autumn Festival, 中秋节 zhōng qiū jié**, is to celebrate harvest time in the middle of autumn, when the moon is at its fullest and brightest.

- EAT: Mooncakes, yuè bing 月饼: a round or square pastry with lotus paste or red bean in the center.

**Dragon Festival, 端午节 duān wu jié**, is to celebrate the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar, traditionally a month of bad luck. The celebrations are meant to keep these bad fortunes at bay.

- EAT: Zòng zi 粽子: a savory or sweet rice cake wrapped in bamboo leaves.

**Lunar New Year, 农历新年 nóng lì xīn nián**, is to celebrate the new year according to the lunar calendar. This is by far the most important holiday of the year, and families travel great distances to be together.

- EAT: Tāng yuán 汤圆: a round, small rice ball filled with lotus, red bean or sesame paste, served in a hot, sweet broth.  
Nián gāo 年糕: the literal translation is new year cake, typically sweet and steamed. Sautéed nián gāo is savory and cooked with meat and vegetables.

**Tomb-Sweeping Day, 清明节 qīng míng jié**, is to commemorate the deceased by visiting their tombs, cleaning them, and making ritual offerings.

- EAT: Qīng tuán 青团: a round, green rice ball, usually with a red bean paste center, and served cold out of the respect for the deceased.

# COCKTAILS

## Penicillin

Penicillin was an antibiotic discovered by Scottish physician Alexander Fleming in 1928. The drink was created by New York bartender Sam Ross in the mid-2000s.

Ingredients:

- 2 oz. blended scotch
- ¾ oz. lemon juice, freshly squeezed
- ¾ oz. honey-ginger syrup\*
- Garnish: candied ginger

Instructions:

1. Add the blended scotch, lemon juice, and syrup into a shaker with ice, and shake until well-chilled.
2. Strain into a Rocks Glass over fresh ice.
3. Top with the Islay single malt scotch.
4. Garnish

\* **To make the honey-ginger syrup:** Combine 1 cup honey, 1 6-inch piece of peeled and thinly sliced ginger, and 1 cup water in a saucepan over high heat, and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium, and simmer 5 minutes. Place in the refrigerator to steep overnight. Strain with a cheesecloth.

Source: [liquor.com/recipes/penicillin/](http://liquor.com/recipes/penicillin/)

## Cure for Pain

There is no real cure for pain, but here is a good attempt from the bartenders at Death & Co in New York City.

Ingredients:

- 1¼ oz. rye whiskey (~100 proof)
- ¾ oz. bourbon
- ¾ oz. sweet vermouth
- ½ oz. tawny port
- ½ oz. white crème de cacao
- 1 splash Campari
- Garnish: orange twist

Instructions:

1. Stir the rye whiskey, bourbon, sweet vermouth, tawny port, white crème de cacao, and Campari with ice in a mixing glass.
2. Strain over an ice cube into an old fashioned glass.
3. Garnish

Source: [Death & Co: Modern Classic Cocktails, With More Than 500 Recipes](#) (2014)