

Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal: A Novel*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2014. 280 pp. ISBN 978-307-91160-5.

With a National Book Award, two PEN/Faulkners, a Hemingway Foundation/PEN award, a Pulitzer nomination, three Pushcart prizes and induction to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Ha Jin is one of America's most lauded contemporary writers. Despite Ha Jin's claim that his recently released (November 2014) *A Map of Betrayal* is a work of fiction, and his assertion that any resemblance to any persons or locales in the story is merely coincidental, readers who are familiar with the story of convicted Chinese spy Larry Wu-tai Chin, know that it is a fictionalised reconstruction of Chin's life as a top Chinese spy in the CIA. While *A Map of Betrayal* grapples with a plethora of issues ranging from nationalism, patriotism to displacement and nostalgia, Ha Jin painstakingly chisels a morally bankrupt traitor – Gary Shang, into a sympathetic human being/victim/victimiser burdened with forces that are bigger than himself.

The narrator, Lilian, opens the novel with a cautionary warning from her mother Nellie, "Lilian, as long as I'm alive, you must have nothing to do with that woman" (Ha 1). The woman the emitted mother Nellie was referring to was her late husband Gary's Chinese mistress. Nellie's passing liberated the narrator from her promise to her mother, what follows is Lilian's reconstruction of her father's life based on the diary she got back from his mistress, her visits to China and time spent together with her extended family in China. Gary's multi-volume diary spans from 1948-85 – his entire espionage career. Like the transgressive narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, who breaks her silence and reveals her family secrets, Gary's daughter Lilian, a historian by profession, vows to tell her father's story "in my own fashion while remaining as objective as possible" (Ha 8). Delving into Gary's diary and her own research on the history of China and the United States during her father's tenure at the CIA, Lilian comes to the conclusion that her father had not only been "a betrayer but someone who'd been betrayed" (Ha 8). The result of Lilian's unflinching inquiry about her father's motives for espionage is his untold story of pain and longing, his bone-deep sense of loneliness and displacement in America, and his twisted and shifting sense of loyalties to both China and the United States.

Like the male protagonists in Ha Jin's other novels, *In the Pond* (2000), *Waiting* (2000), *The Crazy* (2004), *War Trash* (2005) and *A Free Life* (2009), through endless emotional, moral, political as well as historical whirlwinds, Gary Shang found himself in "precarious situations, forced to act within a moral vacuum" (Fay). What saddens readers most and is tragically ironic is how Gary's role as a Chinese spy was largely thrust upon him by circumstances.

Driven by hunger for food and shelter, Gary's saga of espionage began because he needed to survive and had to "take whatever is available" (Ha 15). Steph Cha laments about Gary's plight, "He may be a traitor and a superspy, but his tragedy is relatable, almost simple." Balancing precariously between historical facts and his creative imagination, Ha Jin paints a convincing picture of turbulent China in the middle of the 20th century, linking Gary's personal tragedy with the fate of China. Through Gary's compelling and provocative tale, Ha Jin offers not just a riveting page-turner with spiced-up ingredients of a chilling thriller – intrigue, deception, murder, sex and betrayal; he also makes his readers question the meaning of patriotism, personal and national loyalties, and the human cost of the Cold War.

In an interview with Sarah Fay in *The Paris Review*, Ha Jin poignantly talks about his own twisted sense of patriotism in his youth, "I couldn't imagine the world beyond the borders of China, like most young Chinese, I became very patriotic and believed in the righteousness of the revolution and the party." He goes on to say that in Chinese politics, "The country alone was deified" (Fay). Gary could not detangle himself from the emotional knot that bound him to his family in China nor curb his longing or sever his loyalty to his native land. Time and time again, Gary deified both China and his Chinese wife. To ease his homesickness, he even bought a house in Virginia that had a pomegranate tree in the backyard, a tree that reminded him of his home province. When he met his handler in Hong Kong, he felt right at home. Ha Jin writes,

Indeed he hadn't felt so alive for years, and there was a stir of joy in his heart that for the moment soothed the pang of homesickness. He gazed at the distant shoreline and the wooded hills, on which a few villas were shaded by shifting foliage and beyond which spread the land he had so often returned to in his dreams (161).

Gary was a guilt-ridden lonely soul shrouded by nostalgia for a homeland to which he was ordered not to return by his higher-ups, and a woman he deeply loved but had to abandon because of his assignment in the United States. Ha Jin writes, "For him, happiness lay elsewhere, and he could visualize it only in his homeland and in the reunion with his original family." "His mind was elsewhere, shadowed by the memories of his other wife" (Ha 135, 104). He was too numb to open himself up to another soul. Ha Jin's vivid capture of Gary's emotional turmoil, his at times sympathetic tone make one wonder how many of us who are uprooted from our native homes have felt the same chilling loneliness and nostalgia Gary was tormented by! Thus, Ha Jin makes issues of displacement, loyalty and loneliness not only political but also deeply personal.

In the same interview with Sarah Fay, Ha Jin admits that he lives "in the margin as a writer – between two languages, two cultures, two literatures, and

two countries. This is treacherous territory.” Gary, throughout his lengthy career at the CIA, also traversed dangerous terrains and went back and forth between his loyalties to China and the United States. Symbolic to Gary’s shifting positions/loyalties, Ha Jin masterfully adopts the plural narrative strategy to enable his readers move back and forth between China and the United States. What is unfolded before the readers is then a poignant tale of an isolated and lonely man straddling between two nations, two wives and a mistress, a man who was torn between his blind loyalty to his native land China and the love he claimed to have fostered for his adopted homeland the United States. Despite the many accolades he had received from the CIA, his marriage to an American wife, and his American citizenship, Gary never felt he belonged in America. He remained faithful to his idealised image of China – a country to which he had not been able to return for more than thirty years, adhering to the ancient Chinese adage and mentality, “Born a Chinese person, die a Chinese ghost.” Ironically, Gary failed to realise that as a special agent, the type that is often referred to by Chinese intelligence as “nails,” he was “more or less a goner” (Ha 19). “A nail must remain in its position... and rot with the wood that the nail is stuck in” (Ha 20). For Gary, though he longed to walk on solid, familiar ground in China, there was no point of return, no hope of coming home “with honor and glory” (Ha 126). He is banished by his “comrades” and his beloved China. bell hooks asserts in “Choosing the Margin as Space of Radical Openness,” “At times home is nowhere. At times one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation” (205). Unable to anchor his footing in his native land China and his adopted homeland the United States, Gary laments, “If only China and the United States had not been hostile nations so that he could travel back and forth easily. If only he could become a citizen of both countries, a man of the world” (Ha 159).

Though Ha Jin remains an engaging story teller throughout much of *A Map of Betrayal*, at times he is too engrossed in meticulously documenting a historical event rather than telling the story at hand. His plural narrative strategy loses its lustre when Lilian’s nephew Ben, a small-time Chinese spy, emerges, and when he attempts to capture too many of the social and moral perils of contemporary China. Ben’s story is just too unconvincing and too bland. As a writer who lives between two cultures, two languages, two literatures and two countries, Ha Jin’s English is laced with Chinese idiomatic expressions that only a person familiar with Chinese cultural and linguistic nuances would be able to appreciate. For example, “No fish can remain... unaffected by the water it swims in,” “You’re able to stoop or straighten up according to circumstances” and “Come home with honor and glory” (Ha 15, 126). Ha Jin shares Gary’s lament; like Gary, Ha Jin himself is both an insider and an outsider in both China and America.

Works Cited

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Chingyen Mayer
Siena College, USA