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The Red Sun in Our Hearts

Ha Jin, *A Map of Betrayal*. New York: Pantheon, 2014. 280 pp. \$26.95.



On a recent trip to China, I spent an afternoon at the Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Center, a quirky independent museum in the basement of an uninspiring apartment complex. Inside was a wonderland of posters from the golden age of Chinese Communist propaganda art, works that bluntly illustrated ubiquitous tropes such as Mao's benevolent supremacy and China's unmatched agricultural production and technological prowess. Also on evidence was an ongoing critique of the West. Many posters were especially disapproving of Western intervention around the world, as in one showing a monstrous, green-skinned G.I. as imperialist aggressor in Korea, another depicting African Americans protesting their own government's involvement in Vietnam, or those claiming solidarity with Fidel Castro and a nameless North African in a tarboosh determined to drive out colonial presence in the region. These posters are so heavy-handed and grimly sincere that they have passed into the realm of historical kitsch. Yet a Chinese friend, who had come to the museum with me for the first time, and for whom official heavy-handedness and grim sincerity are not so remote in time, was slightly embarrassed and overly dismissive of the sentiments on display. We browsed a table with artifacts for sale, and I bought an English language workbook printed in 1969, during the height of the Cultural Revolution. As in the posters, there was a clear conflation of

fact and value, as in the fluid transition from empirical observation to ideological metaphor in this lesson: “The sun is red. The sun is bright. The sun is Chairman Mao. The sun is the Chinese Communist Party. We love Chairman Mao, the red sun in our hearts.”¹ As with the posters, the workbook was defined also by its anti-Americanism, confirming it as a pillar of the revolutionary movement: “All reactionaries are paper tigers,” English students learned in 1969. “U.S. imperialism is a paper tiger. Soviet revisionism is a paper tiger, too. They are common enemies of the world’s people. People of the world, unite! Down with U.S. imperialism! Down with Soviet revisionism! Down with the reactionaries of all countries!” (49–50).

These twinned dimensions of post-1949 China—its relentless promotion of Maoism and attendant excoriation of the West—compose part of the rich historical backdrop of Ha Jin’s new novel, *A Map of Betrayal*, which at bottom explores how difficult it is to exist between the mandates of the two antagonistic systems. Even the novel’s main character, Gary Shang, a Chinese spy embedded in the United States, admits to himself that “Chinese propaganda graphics” were “preposterous, some even farcical” (124–25). This seemingly minor recognition encapsulates the novel’s human dimension, for Gary will come to feel a conflicted and complex sense of loyalty as he works for thirty years as a spy on foreign soil. With this conflict, so familiar to readers of classic espionage thrillers in the tradition of John le Carré, Ha Jin breaks through the normally bipolar map of Cold War spy novels to include China, a third player that was always there but has not shone as brightly in the Western imagination as the Soviet Union.

Since the publication of his first book of poetry, *Between Silences* (1990), Chinese-born Ha Jin has written fourteen more books in English, including poetry and short story collections, novels, and a collection of essays. His most well-received novels are explorations of recent Chinese history and its effects on regular people: *Waiting* (1999), winner of the National Book Award, follows two lovers

1. *English, No. 1: Shanghai Secondary School Textbook* (Shanghai: Shanghai Primary and Secondary School Textbook Compiling Group, 1969) 20. (Translation of title and publication information by Lijuan Xu.)

caught in China's changing social and political landscape during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76); *War Trash* (2004), winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award, chronicles a Chinese soldier's experiences during the Korean War (1950–53); and *Nanjing Requiem* (2011) is set during the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, when Japanese troops committed atrocities against residents of that city. His short story collections *Ocean of Words: Army Stories* (1996), *Under the Red Flag* (1997), and *The Bridegroom* (2000) are set in the aftermath of the Sino-Russian border conflict of 1969, during the Cultural Revolution, and in contemporary China, respectively. In these and other works, Ha Jin, who emigrated to the United States in 1985, explores what he called in an interview in these pages his "major theme," "[t]he individual versus the state."² In his numerous books organized around this theme, Ha Jin has set himself a task comparable to the ones undertaken by politically savvy, U.S.-born writers such as Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon, all of whom have been habitually interested in the broad relationships among individuals and states but have largely overlooked China in their maps of the twentieth century. In *A Map of Betrayal*, by contrast, Ha Jin returns to the question of the individual versus the state and focalizes it through the Cold War, which allows him to offer a history of the period different from the ones found in Roth or DeLillo or Pynchon, an alternative view that explores the triangulation among the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

A Map of Betrayal is narrated by Lilian Shang, a fifty-four-year-old University of Maryland history professor whose first monograph was on "the U.S. role in the Opium War" (90) and who chips away at current projects such as "a paper on the depiction of Asians in Hollywood Cold War movies" (172). Lilian's late father, Gary Shang, has passed into espionage lore as "the biggest Chinese spy ever caught in North America" (3). The plot kicks off after Lilian receives Gary's multivolume diary, covering the years 1949 to 1980, during which he rose from low-level translator in a U.S. agency in China to a naturalized U.S. citizen and deeply embedded mole in

2. "An Interview with Ha Jin," conducted by Jerry A. Varasava, *Contemporary Literature* 51.1 (2010): 13.

the CIA's East Asia division. Lilian, ever the curious historian, decides to flesh out what she knows about her father by carefully reading his diary and searching for the few people left alive who might be able to round out his story beyond what was reported in the media. The action begins in 2011 on the East Coast of the United States but soon moves to China, where Lilian has a one-semester appointment at Beijing Teachers College. Once on Chinese soil, Lilian calls on her father's old handler, eighty-seven-year-old Bingwen Chu, and searches for his first wife, Yufeng, whom he was forced to abandon as he moved to Japan and then to the United States in order to maintain his cover. Formally, the novel alternates between chapters in the present day, which follow Lilian through the United States and China, researching her father's history as well as becoming involved with Chinese relatives whom she hadn't known about, and the historical chapters, labeled by year, that are based on Gary's diaries and detail his transformation from a modest clerk to a spy so consequential that Mao Zedong would remark of him, "This man is worth four armored divisions" (216).

This conceit allows Ha Jin not only to offer an alternative to the version of the Cold War dominated by the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, but also to show how the legacies of the PRC's first thirty years are everywhere visible in present-day China. Contemporary China is depicted in ways familiar to readers of novels originally written in Chinese, such as Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma* (2008), Chan Koonchung's *The Fat Years* (2009), and Yu Hua's *China in Ten Words* (2011). Just as these authors tackle issues including the continued crackdown on dissent in the years following the Tiananmen Square Massacre of June 4, 1989 (Ma Jian), or the rudderless materialism that obscures the lessons of the past (Chan Koonchung), or the disparity between urban wealth and still-crushing rural poverty (Yu Hua), so too does Ha Jin catalogue these and other facets of contemporary Chinese life. Thus in *A Map of Betrayal*, readers are informed of an ever-expanding police state ("The government was unlikely to send out the standing army to quell uprisings again, having learned from the fiasco of Tiananmen Square. That was why in recent years they'd been building a huge police force [2.5 million in total] and spent more on 'internal security' than on the military" [67]); of the moneyed classes that seem to have a monopoly on

rights as fundamental as untainted food (“[M]any powerful and wealthy Chinese had their own food supplies that came direct from restricted gardens and farms. Some officials even had hills sealed off so that they could grow tea unaffected by insecticides and have it harvested manually” [146]); and the great divide between China’s thriving cities and its rural inhabitants (“Clearly there were people who’d gotten a raw deal in the national economic boom. In some poor areas more villagers had uprooted themselves to make a living in cities, and they might never return to their native places. . . . in some regions in western China, entire villages were deserted” [53]).

What distinguishes *A Map of Betrayal* from other Chinese novels of this type is Ha Jin’s deft analyses of the relationship between China and other countries, principally the United States. In this way, the novel is a different animal from those works set exclusively in China and aimed at Chinese readers: this is a book about the relationship between the two countries aimed at American readers (or at least Anglophone readers), in a move unusual even for Ha Jin, who only recently has begun to set books in the United States, with the novel *A Free Life* (2007) and the short story collection *A Good Fall* (2009), both of which are about Chinese immigrants in the United States. In *A Map of Betrayal*, the Cold War proves an ideal framework for writing about the multidimensional relationships engendered by traversing national and ideological boundaries because that conflict so often prioritized the political over the personal, even when the supposed core of American-style democracy against Soviet and Chinese Communism was a valorization of individual autonomy.

Indeed, one of the most immediately compelling aspects of *A Map of Betrayal* is that Ha Jin investigates aspects of the Cold War not normally counted as among its most important or consequential, at least by Western observers. For example, the novel connects events relatively unknown in the States, such as the 1955 Chinese attack on the Taiwanese-controlled Yijiangshan Islands, to the more familiar Cold War frame. Gary learns about this campaign due to his work at a U.S. cultural agency that “is actually an intelligence unit in disguise” (13); he is hired as a translator for the Americans after an officer in the Eighth Bureau (part of the PRC’s state security apparatus) urges him to work there with an eye toward passing

intelligence back to Chinese authorities. From this vantage point, Gary is positioned to learn about Cold War relationships in their public and covert complexities. Thus in regard to the attack on the Yijiangshan Islands, Gary first “believed the Communists had scored a complete victory, but politically it was a disaster. Within ten days of the battle, the U.S. Congress passed the Formosa Resolution and granted Dwight Eisenhower the power to protect Taiwan and its adjacent islands against invasion from the People’s Republic of China. The legislation made the liberation of Taiwan much more difficult, if not impossible” (78). If Gary becomes a pivot between the United States and China, his privileged access to information allows him—and Lilian, and thereby the reader—to understand the ways in which the Cold War put pressure on China’s domestic and foreign policy decisions. Although from a U.S. perspective China often seemed geopolitically isolated after 1949, Ha Jin reminds us that this was not quite the case. Drawing on both obvious examples of China’s involvement in global affairs, such as the Korean War (which was noted as a victory for the Chinese), to less well-known incidents like the assault on the Yijiangshan Islands or the near-war with the Soviet Union in the late 1960s, *A Map of Betrayal* is invested in challenging the conventional wisdom that the People’s Republic was sealed off from Cold War politics prior to the détente marked by the Ping Pong diplomacy of the early 1970s.

Throughout the novel, the Cold War is focalized through Gary himself as he passes information, filtered through his own interpretations and analyses, to his superiors in China. It is through Gary that readers learn the Cold War was more important to China than is sometimes supposed, if only because Mao often measured his country against the perceived successes of the United States and the Soviet Union. As Lilian parses her father’s continuing motivations for spying, she writes: “Through handling the information, Gary could see that his motherland was an underdog compared to the two superpowers. Although in 1957 China produced its first bomber and jet fighter, modeled on the MiG-17, the country was largely in shambles” (96). Elsewhere she notes how the Cold War masked from the United States other issues urgent inside China, such as the Great Famine (1958–61), caused by Mao’s Great Leap Forward, which diverted energy away from agriculture and into projects like

steel production expressly to keep up with Western powers; by 1959, "The Chinese government propagated this slogan nationwide: 'Surpass the UK in ten years, catch up with the USA in fifteen'" (123). During the Great Famine, Gary often expresses amazement that the demands of the Cold War distract the world from what is happening in China, a figuration that challenges the narrative that such disasters went relatively unnoticed only because Mao had sealed off the country: "It bewildered him that the catastrophe in China had drawn so little international attention. Indeed, the world tended to be galvanized by more inflammatory events. In the fall of 1962 the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the cusp of a nuclear war" (156).

As the years go by, Gary moves from an American enclave on Okinawa to Virginia, where he marries, has a child, becomes a naturalized citizen, and works his way up in the CIA to become a decorated translator and analyst. Because of this unusual position, Gary is seen as an expert on China by his colleagues in the CIA, and as an expert on the United States by his superiors in China. This dual expertise means that Gary is uniquely positioned to analyze the meanings of particular actions taken by either government. He repeatedly makes the point that "he was a strategic agent, not a petty spy specializing in sabotage or stealing technology" (107), and so what is important is his ability to analyze, to draw connections and understand subtlety. With this idea, Ha Jin explores terrain found in some other spy novels, in which the agent is analogue to the writer. After all, Gary's is a world of betrayal ("he'd been not only a betrayer but also someone who'd been betrayed" [8]), language Ha Jin has used previously to articulate the special position of the immigrant writer; as he writes in his nonfiction work *The Writer as Migrant* (2008):

The antonym of "betrayal" is "loyalty" or "allegiance." Uneasy about those words, the migrant writer feels guilty because of his physical absence from his native country, which is conventionally viewed by some of his countrymen as "desertion." Yet the ultimate betrayal is to choose to write in another language.³

3. Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008) 31.

Like the spy, the migrant writer abandons her native language and her native country, an act of betrayal made all the more vexed as the migrant comes to appreciate and even love aspects of her adopted home. And just as the writer's task is not merely to observe life—to gather intelligence—but to analyze and interpret it, so must the spy learn, as Gary says, "the task of analyzing the information, and then comes the challenge of how to make the best use of it" (141).

As Gary grows more adept in his analyses, so too does he become rooted in the United States, and his perspective, of course, changes drastically, away from viewing the United States as only an imperialist paper tiger. Whereas the fresh-faced translator "wanted to see his country unified soon so it would be more powerful in fighting imperialism and colonialism" (27), the older CIA employee weeps openly when John F. Kennedy is killed (180–81) and defends himself during his trial by insisting, "I am an American and love this country like every one of you" (260). More significant than his newfound affection for the States is Gary's sense that his dual expertise has actually benefited both countries. He argues that his spying ironically led to "mutual understanding" between the two countries, and Lilian agrees, writing: "In short, it was he who had helped bring the two countries together to shake hands like friends. For that kind of diligence and dedication he should be recognized as a valuable citizen, if not decorated with laurels" (260). It is not clear here whether Lilian thinks her father ought to be recognized as a "valuable citizen" in China or in the United States, or in both, an ambiguity that underscores the legal impossibility of being loyal to two countries at the same time, a double bind that the writer may be able to transcend.

Despite Ha Jin's claim that "the ultimate betrayal is to choose to write in another language," a writer can survive, and perhaps even thrive, while having conflicted loyalties and writing in a language the majority of people in his home country cannot understand. While the spy works to both subvert and strengthen states, only to be ultimately and inevitably crushed by them, the writer's interpretations and analyses allow him to serve as expert and authority. Such writerly intelligence, combined with his meticulous historical sensibility and knack for describing the subtle ways in which the

state can become embedded in the heart, has helped Ha Jin develop the most distinctive voice writing about China (and the world) in contemporary letters: his slow-burning moral outrage indicts the darker dimensions of the modern state as well as the lies, great and small, that we all tell ourselves to survive. Especially in an age when reverent images of Edward Snowden share shelf space with Mao and Che Guevara in Beijing's tourist alleys, *A Map of Betrayal* has much to tell anyone interested in the language of betrayal, in the legacies that the United States and China have inherited from the Cold War, and in the not-so-simple question Lilian Shang raises to her Chinese nephew, who is eager to sacrifice himself for the homeland: "On what basis should a country be raised above the citizens who created it?" (151).

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