FICTION

The cryptic mind

Li Gong ponders a translation of a Chinese novel on the world of code-breaking.

Bestselling novelist Mai Jia is alleged to have worked in cryptography.

An autistic boy is born out of wedlock, descended from a mathematical-genius grandmother who helped the Wright brothers to design their first planes. The boy is a maths prodigy himself, and eventually becomes the top code-breaker in the Chinese military — but is tormented by the psychological contradictions of cryptography. However implausible-sounding the story of Mai Jia's breakthrough 2002 novel *Jie Mi* (*Decoded*), this is a spy thriller grounded in subtle and difficult realities. Mai — one of China's pre-eminent writers — is alleged to have worked in cryptography himself. The battle in the reader's mind over whether this is florid drama or brutal realism is perhaps the primary and primal attraction of the novel, translated into English for the first time by Olivia Milburn and Christopher Payne.

Decoded: A Novel
MAI JIA (TRANSLATED
BY OLIVIA MILBURN
AND CHRISTOPHER
PAYNE)
Allen Lane/Farrar,
Straus & Giroux: 2014.

GRAYHAWK AGENCY

Decoded is written in the style of a film script, with rapid cutting between scenes and the reader thoroughly gripped by the characters' tribulations. It is also necessarily dressed up with copious references to mathematics — names of mathematicians, theorems, and encoding and decoding methods — and even includes a few formulae. Yet its main theme is human psychology, and especially the tortured psyches of those who, like protagonist Rong Jinzhen, spend their lives trying either to hide information or to crack the protective puzzles of their enemies. Rong's old tutor, for instance, writes to his former protégé, condemning decryption and cipher construction as "fundamentally anti-scientific, anti-intellectual ... a poison that mankind has developed to destroy science and a conspiracy against the people that work with them".

The translation is good overall, but there are a few fatal errors. For example, Mai takes a swipe at Chinese higher education, pointing out that a major problem with Chinese academics is that they start out as scholars and end their careers as government officials; he hints that they regard this path as

a most desirable and natural progression. As the translation has it, however, Chinese academics regard scholarship and officialdom as incompatible — the exact opposite of Mai's meaning.

Another lapse undermines a central tenet of the novel: the supposed accepted wisdom in cryptography that one person can only design, or crack, one good cipher at most. This is because cryptographers can be made vulnerable both by subconscious similarities in their own ciphers, and by the exposure of their specific code-breaking strengths when they crack other people's ciphers. Yet the English version translates this as it being impossible for one person to be both a cipher designer and a code-breaker. As a result, readers might not fully understand the tragedy of the story — that a man who successfully broke the enemy's sophisticated Code Purple goes mad at failing to break its successor.

With this and subsequent novels such as the 2003 *An Suan* (*In the Dark*, forthcoming from Penguin) selling in their millions and being adapted into high-profile television series, Mai has firmly established himself as the father of modern Chinese espionage thrillers. Critical acclaim for his work has included China's most prestigious book award, the Mao Dun Literature Prize.

So is Mai — the supreme storyteller of psychological warfare, intrigue and the

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human sufferings of alienation — a brave writer who unveils national security programmes and pinpoints untold human sacrifices in a secretive state? Or is he a commercial master who plays on the public's desire to

peer into a covered-up world in a country where media is officially controlled and pumps out content-free content every day? Is he exploiting the public's wish to believe that an outrageous, even over-dramatized story is the best vehicle through which to tell an untellable truth?

Even publishers had difficulty answering this question. As Mai relates in an appendix to a 2011 Chinese edition, he first submitted the manuscript of *Decoded* to two friendly publishing houses. Both editors quickly rejected his work. One thought the story too fake to attract interest; the other felt it was too real and sensitive, and could cause trouble for the publisher. Decoding Mai Jia's real intentions is perhaps the book's most perplexing challenge. ■

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Books in brief

The Extreme Life of the Sea

Stephen R. Palumbi and Anthony R. Palumbi PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS (2014)

Marine biologist Stephen R. Palumbi and writer Anthony R. Palumbi survey an impressive catch of extreme oceanic species, from the oldest to the deepest-dwelling. They are inspired guides, weaving evolutionary and geological backstories into accounts of wonders such as the exquisite architecture of sharks' teeth. And they pull no punches in depicting potential futures with devastated oceans dominated by “bacteria, jellyfish and tar-like algae”. A brilliant use of the rich store of research into Earth's largest habitat.

Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program that Brought Nazi Scientists to America

Annie Jacobsen LITTLE, BROWN (2014)

An ethical murk can hang over science in service to the state, as Annie Jacobsen reveals in this chilling history. Operation Paperclip united Nazi science and US cold-war interests, bringing 1,600 German technologists to the United States after the Second World War to work on intelligence and weapons research, despite protests from the likes of Einstein. Jacobsen focuses on 21 scientists, including rocket pioneer and Third Reich insider Wernher von Braun, and reveals disturbing evidence of Paperclip's legacy in US science and medicine.

Cancer Virus: The story of Epstein-Barr Virus

Dorothy H. Crawford, Alan Rickinson and Ingólfur Johannessen OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS (2014)

Fifty years ago, the discovery of a virus that triggers cancer in humans rocked the medical world. In this pithy, pacy study, the Epstein-Barr virus is biographized by three scientists who work on it — Dorothy H. Crawford, Alan Rickinson and Ingólfur Johannessen. Starting with the discovery of Burkitt's lymphoma in the 1950s and the isolation of the virus by Michael Anthony Epstein and Yvonne Barr in 1964, they follow its trail to effects in China and the labs where it has proven research gold for molecular biologists and geneticists.

The Wives of Los Alamos: A Novel

TaraShea Nesbit BLOOMSBURY (2014)

Behind the men behind the Los Alamos nuclear-research programme were women whose story has been waiting to be told. TaraShea Nesbit has done it lyrically in this novel. Written in the collective voice of “the wives” — international, often highly educated women — this chronicle of the Manhattan Project's secret wartime base in New Mexico unfurls as they lived it, distorted by necessary lies. Their strange existence as housewives, “calculators” or lab technicians forms a vivid foreground to the building of the bombs that finished the Second World War, with Nesbit deftly capturing the claustrophobic surreality of it all.

Ha!: The Science of When We Laugh and Why

Scott Weems BASIC BOOKS (2014)

Mirth, points out cognitive neuroscientist Scott Weems, is still something of a conundrum — but one well worth cracking. His journey through the jovial looks in turn at what it is, what it is for and why we should cultivate it. We encounter British psychologist Richard Wiseman's LaughLab and its findings (Americans laugh at insults; Europeans savour the absurd), the power of conflict and messy thinking, the speculation that atheists are funnier, the beneficial impact of laughter on pain tolerance, and more.