

Reviews

maidenhome

READING *MAIDENHOME* MADE CARLA MONTEMAYOR WONDER ABOUT HER OWN GREAT-GRANDMOTHER FROM CHINA. HAS SHE, AS DID THE CONTEMPORARY CHARACTERS IN DING XIAOQI'S NOVELLAS, FOUND HAPPINESS?

One fine day in the late 1800s, my great-grandfather, a cattleraiser in the hills of Ilocos Sur, a province in northern Philippines, came home from the lowland market with a young Chinese woman, a stowaway from mainland China. The two told no elaborate stories of courtship and elopements and the clan and community were naturally scandalized. But in the midst of whisperings and raised eyebrows, my great-grandfather and his young stowaway bride were married.

My great-grandparents had seven children, one of whom became my grandfather. But whatever happiness they may have shared was cut short. My great-grandfather was murdered, hacked to death by an irate neighbour in a dispute involving another woman. The whole family had to flee to safety. My great-grandmother herded her brood to the Visayas, a region of several islands in the middle of the Philippine archipelago, to save them from the bloody clan feud that followed her husband's killing.

The stories about my great-grandmother from China are rather vague. She was frugal, but she was also giving; stern yet loving. She single-handedly saw her children through the tumultuous turn of the century when a revolution was raging. But no one can tell me (and I don't know if she told anyone herself since she was not fluent in any Philippine language and was, as my mother puts it, quite taciturn in her old age) how she came to the country, why she left China, about her past, about her life before that fateful meeting with my great-grandfather.

Fast forward to the present. As a university student and militant activist in the '80s, I became familiar with Mao's *Red Book* and Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. Later, I discovered Charlson Ong's stories about Chinoy (colloquial for people of Chinese and Pinoy ancestry, Pinoy being the colloquial for Filipino). Too, I discovered mainland China movies starring the gorgeous Gong Li. This about sums up my exposure to Chinese literature and the arts. Which is why I instinctively grabbed Ding Xiaoqi's *Maidenhome* from a pile of books. I had been looking around for more contemporary fiction from and about mainland China, of the crucible that still is China today.

Maidenhome is a collection of two novellas and five short stories by writer Ding Xiaoqi who lives and writes in exile in Australia. The stories were written between 1986 and 1989. The stories are quite dated really, but still contemporary in that most of them are set in post-revolution and pre-Tiananmen China where Ding's women-protagonists struggle to shape their identities and futures in the shadow of a monolithic communist party, a China that is on the threshold of modernity. The '80s timeframe of most of the stories catches women in a society where Confucian structures and values overlap with women's liberation wrought by socialist ethos. Ding writes of women in this particular subculture—urbanized, educated, independent to some degree, venturing into non-traditional roles in the public sphere.

The uniqueness and beauty of Ding's stories lie in their intricate expositions of the inner workings of characters and relationships where the context is explicit, even insidious, i.e. the socialist regime and its attendant structures and values. Ding's emphasis and perspectives are on the individuals: Women living their everyday lives, confronting their unique yet familiar dilemmas, sorting out memories and longings.

Teeming with nuance and irony, Ding's stories offer multiple interpretations of women's realities and experiences. I gather this is called "psychological realist" technique, but who cares? You will not find in *Maidenhome* cathartic epiphanies about "womanhood," "freedom," or "love" in a socialist, Confucian world. There are no sweeping critiques about the malignant and resilient feudal and patriarchal order. Repressions, desires and realizations are presented within the logic of the narratives and, many times, in the absurdity of that volatile mix of ideologies and religions. Everything is in keeping with the sublime and the personal and, as the foreword says, the "life of emotions."

In "Maidenhome," the story from which the title of the book was taken, Qiaoyi, a 30-year old military nurse in the famed People's Liberation Army suffers from a suppressed inner turmoil when she strikes up an ambiguous, awkward romance with a patient at the same time that she is applying for Party membership. The novella spans 15 years of Qiaoyi's life in the military, isolated from the civilian community,

from her family, and from "ordinary" women. While she finds satisfaction in the highly structured army life, she suffers from a pernicious loneliness and gets pulled into different directions by the push and pull of conflicting values and her own personal judgements. The Party rewards selfless dedication and discourages romance, while her peers and the outside world stress happiness, ambition and, to a certain degree, "freedom."

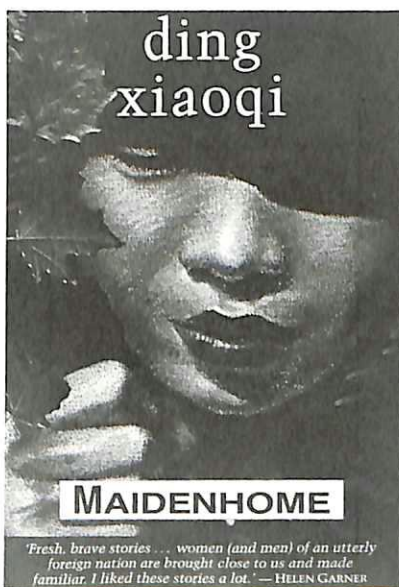
Ding has provided her main character with a fine, subtle personality carefully conditioned by her environment, yet still poignantly human enough to be bombarded by doubts and secret yearnings. Qiaoyi's political commissar advises her not to "ruin her future" and assures her that "when the time comes, even if you are not thinking about marriage, the Party will be thinking of you." The irony of this statement does not hit her until much later.

In the end, Qiaoyi marries another officer in the army, a man she barely knows but one whom the Party approves of. It is, for all intents and purposes, an arranged marriage like the feudal marriages of old. Qiaoyi takes her notebook of songs and retrieves a note from the man she gave up for the Party. Ding writes, "It was the only thing (Zhu) had given her and all this time, she had treated it like a song lyric." This is the "life of emotions" where the tragic, sweet, tender, sad, comical and traumatic blend together seamlessly, and where there is no space for the absolute.

In another story, "Indica, Indica," a 17-year old girl is sold into marriage without her being aware of what this actually means. Her new family is affluent, treats her well and makes her sleep with them on one big bed. One night the family conspires to put her next to the eldest son (her husband) who forces himself on her.

The story, which climaxes in this violent act, is not told in a dark, painful manner. Ding seems to favour texture and textual subtlety. But her reader does not come out less pained. By allowing the flow of the narrative to be interspersed with the girl's memories of childhood, Ding lets the emotion grow. At the end of the story, the young girl meets an older woman, a party cadre, who is aghast about the

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arranged marriage and the big communal bed. The cadre asks, "Are you homesick?" The girl points to an Indica flower abloom and sings, in her mind, a childhood ditty: "Indica, Indica./Not afraid of wind/Not afraid of rain."

The third novella in the book, "The Other Woman," is set in a more cosmopolitan milieu, among Beijing's culturati. It is about a budding playwright and her complex affair with a married poet. The story unfolds in two

voices. In one, Keke, the playwright tells of her domestic and artistic life. Particularly hilarious is Keke's artistic condition where her co-artists over-analyse her works, authoritative apparatchiks mangle her work and comrades ask her to do "self-criticism" when she blows her top.

Keke's affair with the poet is related in the third person, as if it were about a different woman all together. And why should she not when, indeed, she is constantly tormented by a relationship everyone considers to be immoral. ("Had she become a bad woman?") In turn, her married lover betrays her with his own duality: He denounces the shortcomings of the oppressive regime, yet affirms women's oppression when he tells her that "women are preordained to be married." Finally, Keke understands her lover's deception, and she wonders about her counterparts in the West in a manner that instantly connects a reader, who wonders in turn about Chinese women today.

There is no doubting Ding's implicit rejection of the sociopolitical and ideological status quo: The omnipresent Party that supplants the patriarchal, Confucian family that dictates upon all aspects of a woman's life. But the main strength of *Maidenhome* lies elsewhere. Ding has given us complex female characters who find themselves at the intersection of self and society, and are therefore unsure about so many things, except their desire and search for their own space. A space that they hope would be free from the pervading political order, the oppression of men, and the old prejudices of family and friends.

My great grandmother had very little in common with the central character in "The Other Woman." But when Keke, after her tragic affair with her lover, tells herself that "happiness is an island that you cannot find in a map no matter how hard you look," I thought of my great-grandmother who crossed an ocean to leave China, and whether she had found happiness in these islands. ☺

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