



A Dictionary of Maqiao

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From the daring imagination of one of China's greatest living novelists comes a work of startling power and originality—the story of a young man “displaced” to a small village in rural China during the 1960s. Told in the format of a dictionary, with a series of vignettes disguised as entries, *A Dictionary of Maqiao* is a novel of bold invention—and a fascinating, comic, deeply moving journey through the dark heart of the Cultural Revolution.

Entries trace the wisdom and absurdities of Maqiao: the petty squabbles, family grudges, poverty, infidelities, fantasies, lunatics, bullies, superstitions, and especially the odd logic in their use of language—where the word for “beginning” is the same as the word for “end”; “little big brother” means older sister; to be “scientific” means to be lazy; and “streetsickness” is a disease afflicting villagers visiting urban areas. Filled with colorful characters—from a weeping ox to a man so poisonous that snakes die when they bite him—*A Dictionary of Maqiao* is both an important work of Chinese literature and a probing inquiry into the extraordinary power of language.

A Dictionary of Maqiao Details

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From Reader Review A Dictionary of Maqiao for online ebook

Jason Pym says

This book is an involving, vivid, occasionally funny portrait of a rural village told in the form of a dictionary. Each entry has the definition of a word from the local Maqiao dialect, and with it a new chapter of the story is told.

Aside from an entertaining story, the book is two things; an example of how Chinese village life is timeless no matter what political maelstrom is raging outside, and secondly a lamentation for the rich, earthy local languages lost to the bland functionalism of standard modern Chinese.

‘Maqiao: A little village, impossible to find, almost dropped off the map, with a few dozen households in the upper and lower village combined, a strip of land, set against a stretch of mountain. Maqiao has a great many stones and a great deal of soil, stones and earth which have endured through thousands of years. However hard you look, you won’t see it changing. Every particle is a testament to eternity...’

The story is the fictional account of an educated youth sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Local figures include the Communist party secretary, and there are occasional direct references to the Cultural Revolution (the narrator goes to paint Maoist slogans), however despite being the most intense political period of Communist China, this all feels like a thin veneer. Local life carries on as it has a hundred years ago, or a thousand years ago. Though there are variations on the tune, different families and different faces, and the titles of the leaders might change (Ming military governor, warlord, Communist branch secretary), for the local people life goes on. The personal, physical and spiritual struggles are the same as they ever were: People argue, go to work, get married, have affairs, have children, die. Superstitions thrive.

On language, the book in embodying a rich local dialect is itself a rallying cry for local culture. That is that the ties Maqiao people have with their land, their ghosts, and each other is uniquely manifest in their language. The book is a passionate denunciation of the linguistic standardisation through imposing a bland lingua franca: ‘Strictly speaking, what we might term a “common language” will forever remain a distant human objective. Providing we don’t intend exchange to become a process of mutual neutralization, of mutual attrition, then we must maintain vigilance and resistance toward exchange, preserving in this compromise our own, indomitable forms of expression.’

For historical reasons, up until a couple decades ago people did not move about much in China. Most people would be born, live and die in the same village, and this stability means that the country had a rich stew of dialects. So many and so rich that middle aged people where I live now can tell you where someone is from to within a few streets just by hearing them speak.

Mandarin Chinese, in the sense of a national, official lingua franca, has been around since at least the Ming dynasty (700 + years). But the intention of making it everyone’s first language has only come into effect in the last 70 odd years since the end of the civil war. In the 1950s it was made the language of instruction in all schools in both mainland China and Taiwan. In my experience, anyone who is middle-aged today has dialect as their first language. But the under-twenties, exposed to so much online media and the much more intense rigours of the modern education system, are at best bilingual.

There is another reason for the loss of local languages: Migration. Nowadays China is a much more mobile

country, intense redevelopment of towns and cities and urban migration means that families will grow up in a foreign language environment, so that Mandarin is the language they use with everyone – classmates, workmates, neighbours. So modern capitalism is just compounding the original plan of creating a true standard national language.

I love Han Shaogong's passion about local dialects, which is a cold way to label organic language that grows with living, human communities. It is a rallying cry for all that makes us human, and I love that he portrays Maqiao people in all their spite, pettiness and ridiculousness, all that make us human as much as our virtues. Unfortunately, I think he's wrong, our language is not 'indomitable' I think it's already part of the walking dead.

But why care? Mandarin is part and parcel of everyone getting a decent place to live and enough to eat, it seems like a small price to pay. But now that people are comfortably well off, they do start to talk about what's been lost. Dialect is inseparable from local culture, when he talks about language he's talking about both, that dialect words are often the only terms available for certain foods or customs or descriptions. And the loss of these dialects is much like seeing multinational shopping malls stamping local business into the dust. I recently travelled through four different cities in four provinces, all not only had the same shopping malls with the same shops (Starbucks and McDonalds of course, but also Clarkes Shoes and Debenhams), they even had multiple identical shopping malls right next to each other. And after a week of feeling the elation of seeing shiny things I ended up drained, like a human Matrix battery, spitting out my pathetic little pay check to feed the corporate machine. And so even though Han Shaogong wrote this in the 1990s, before the rise of the shopping mall, he is writing about the symptom of the same disease.

From the Afterword: 'In 1988, I moved to the south of South China, to Hainan Island on China's southernmost tip. I couldn't speak Hainan dialect and, furthermore, I found their dialect very hard to learn. One day, going to the market with a friend to buy food, I spotted a fish I didn't know the name of, and so asked the salesman, a local. He said it was fish. I said I know it's fish, could you please tell me what fish? "Sea fish" he said, staring at me. I smiled and I said I know it's sea fish, could you please tell me what-sea-fish? He stared even more, seemingly impatient: "Big fish!"...

'Hainan has the largest coastal area in the country, countless fishing villages and a fishing industry with a long history. It was only later I discovered they have the largest fishing-related vocabulary of just about any people anywhere. Real fishing people have set vocabulary, have detailed, precise expressions and descriptions for all the several hundred types of fish, for every fishy part, every fishy condition, enough to compile a big, thick dictionary. But most of these cannot be incorporated into standard Mandarin... When I speak standard Mandarin with the local people, when I force them to make use of a language they're not very familiar with, they can only fudge their way through with "sea fish" or "big fish".

'I almost laughed at them. I almost thought they were pitifully linguistically impoverished. I was wrong, of course... [Their] babbling, gabbling gibbering crying jabbering was concealed behind a linguistic screen that I couldn't penetrate, was hidden deep in a dark night that standard Mandarin had no hope of illuminating. They had embraced this dark night.

'This made me think of my hometown. For many years I've studied Mandarin. I realize this is necessary, it's necessary in order for me to be accepted by neighbours, colleagues, shop assistants, policeman, and officials, to communicate through television and newspapers, to enter into modernity. It's just that my experience in the market buying fish gave me a sudden jolt: I'd been standardized. This implied that the hometown of my memories had also been standardized, that every day it was being filtered through an alien form of language – through this filtering it was being simplified into the crude sketchiness of "big fish" and "sea fish,"

withering away bit by bit in the desert of translation.'

There are many accounts and stories of the Cultural Revolution that describe the bleak horror and endless catalogue of atrocities, this is not one of those. In fact, I have read enough of that now that I tend to avoid those books. The point in setting it during this time is to say that even in the most extreme circumstances, people's ties to place, to each other, and the crystallisation of this in language cannot be erased. It is somewhat depressing that rampant capitalism is destroying what communism could not, but at least the comforts capitalism brings are making people reflect on the loss.

On the translation: Lovell does a lovely job, and it can't have been easy. She walks the line of making the village feel familiar and real, without losing the 'Chineseness' of it all. A pleasure to read.

Miriam Kool says

Ik dacht tijdens het lezen af en toe dat ik deze toch wat hoger zou gaan raten, maar uiteindelijk toch niet. Het idee is leuk, een roman over het leven in een Chinees dorpje in de vorm van een woordenboek. Maar de uitwerking kan me niet echt bekoren. Het verzandt te vaak in encyclopedie-achtige beschrijvingen die niet boeien, waarmee het geheel erg vermoedend wordt om te lezen. er blijft een enorme afstand tussen de personen die in het boek voorkomen, waardoor je ook nooit echt de interesse voelt om verder te gaan. En eerlijk gezegd heb ik ook gewoon heel wat sterkere en mooiere romans gelezen over deze (al enigszins uitgemolken) periode uit de Chinese geschiedenis, waarbij de meerwaarde van dit boek voor mij nul was.

Sherry Fyman says

This is as close as I could come to sitting down with someone displaced during the Cultural Revolution and finding out what daily life was like to be dropped hundreds of miles away from everything you know into a culture that is foreign in every way. We don't learn much about the narrator but learn tons about life in a rural community culturally cut off from the rest of the country and world. Life here is truly nasty, brutish and short. Outsiders are viewed with mistrust. Women are written out of the language.

Bjorn says

Having a sense of humour doesn't mean being able to tell jokes. Humour is the ability to play with the expected. Which is never more apparent than when authority tries to tell people what to think.

In 1970, the young intellectual student Han Shaogong was sent to the tiny village of Maqiao, where not much has changed since the emperor's days. But this was the cultural revolution and everything was to be made new: city-dwelling weaklings would become good workers, and in the process help turn the farmers into good socialists. So when he's not working the fields or the mountains, Han gets to teach the farmers to recite Mao quotes in proper, modern Chinese. But of course, to do that he first needs to understand their dialect, which isn't easy - you'd think the whole village was speaking backwards! "Awake" means "stupid", "expensive" means "young", "respect" means "punish", "hick" means "city boy", "democracy" means "chaos"... woops, sorry, some of those are modern Chinese. But anyway.

25 years later Han has grown to an accomplished novelist and puts together this fiction about life in Maqiao (any similarity between that name and Macondo is surely a coincidence) before, during and after his visit, in a form he's borrowed from Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being: A dictionary of the Maqiao dialect*, where every chapter heading is a different word he needs to explain, at once making up a part of the ongoing story and an explanation for why that particular word has that particular meaning in this particular place. And of course, he doesn't present it all in alphabetical order like a proper dictionary; alphabets - especially the Chinese one, where words can be spelled several different ways, each of which gives them a different meaning - are arbitrary, after all. So instead he arranges them in a different order, to tell a very entertaining story of the people who make up the village, full of serious gallows humour and with an amazing cast of characters - none of which seem to fit neatly into the categories his standardised Maoist vocabulary tells him they belong to. And 25 years later, as a Chinese intellectual with his head full of Western books, he can't help but draw parallels between his outsider status then, and the different but similar one he faces today.

In 1986 I visited an "artists' colony" in Virginia, USA; that is, a center for artistic creation. The word "colony" kept making me uncomfortable. Only later did I realize that many Westerners in countries that used to have a large number of colonies don't associate the word with murder, fires, rape, plunder, opium smuggling and other things that the people in former colonies think about when they hear it. [To them] the colony is an outpost for the noble, a field camp for heroes.

...says the man who was sent to the countryside to teach them how to think in a new age. All words, all concepts, mean different things depending on by whom, when, where and how they're spoken. What starts in a small village in inner China becomes a cross-section of the world where battles are increasingly fought with words and ideologies rather than brute force - defeating someone is one thing, changing their minds is another, even Mao knew that. And as burlesque, angry, sentimental or hilarious the stories of the hicks... sorry, that word doesn't work here... in Maqiao get, the subtext of how we control and are controlled by language runs through everything in a way that's both very similar to and completely different from what a writer like Herta Müller does. Orwell was wrong; Big Brother's doublethink will always, through usage, be knowingly or accidentally subverted into triplethink.

A Dictionary of Maqiao, as a deconstruction of the idea of ideological revolution (whether Maoist or capitalist) imposed from outside, knows better than to offer simple problems or solutions. Instead Han creates a very entertaining chronicle where both the characters and the underlying themes float like a river of rice gruel, blood, sweat and shit, always leaving new layers of sediment and breaking through every attempt to dam it, yet always clear enough to see the bottom and calm enough to reflect the person reading it.

Andrew says

Where to even start with this? Who knew books like this even existed? First, how many Chinese novels have you read (and I ain't talking about those overseas-Chinese novels about how they can't truly connect with their grandparents) for starters... despite the fact that nearly 20 percent of humanity identifies as Chinese in some meaningful way. Now, let's look at how fucking insane the structure of this book is, a dizzying collage of stories all of which are this sort of folk sociolinguistics of the people of one remote area of China during and after the Cultural Revolution. Shit on me, I was consistently disappointed I couldn't read Chinese, seeing as how this was like one gigantic, brilliant linguistic pinball game, even in translation, and given the richness of how Chinese characters are structured, I'm guessing this is better than Joyce in the original.

Richard Thompson says

I have read and enjoyed several traditional Chinese novels -- The Water Margin, The Scholars and The Dream of the Red Chamber, all of which are written in episodic fashion -- loosely connected stories with some commonality of plot, character and theme, but without a coherent story arc in the sense that is typical of Western novels. A Dictionary of Maqiao uses the form of a dictionary as a way to organize a novel with a traditional Chinese structure around very modern themes of language, culture and discourse that are hard to imagine existing outside of a universe that includes Wittgenstein, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and the rest of the Post-Structuralist gang. The people of Maqiao create unique meanings for their words that are simultaneously informed by traditional Chinese rural society, Chinese communistic rhetoric, the universe of post-colonial modernity, and the unique personalities of specific interesting and eccentric characters who populate the town. It is both specific and general and provides the foundation for a mythology that defines the town as modern, backward, boring and fascinating all at once. Sometimes it bogged down a bit, and I didn't absolutely fall in love with any of the characters, but overall it is a stunning and unique piece of writing that deserves high praise.

Amy says

"Is history nothing but a war of words?"

"All language is just language, and nothing else; no more than a few symbols describing facts, just as a clock is no more than a symbol describing time."

The narrator's personal dictionary to a village called Maqiao reads like fables in each dictionary entry. Han Shaogong uses the slipperiness of language and dialect to both attempt to pin down truth and to suggest that reality is perhaps forever out of that sort of definition—good or evil, right or wrong, contemptuous or admirable.

I'm reading Anthony Marra's The Tsar of Love and Techno at the same time, and the two read in a surprisingly similar way—the authors are both masters of the last-sentence grenade, slipping quietly in at the end of paragraphs to turn the sense of the preceding ideas upside down.

Ch?u T??ng Kí says

Mua quy?n này t? h?i 2014 mà ?? m?i m?i ??c, hình nh? do h?ng thú nh?t th?i v?i b? c?c. B?o là ti?u thuy?t mà chia ?? m?c nh? t? ?i?n th?t l?i còn có c? ch? Hán ngay bên c?nh (?áng ti?c là ch? ph?n th? xem ch?ng h?i?u g?i l?i còn kh?ng có phi?n âm, kh?ng bi?t b?n g?c có phi?n âm kh?ng nh??). Sách ??c ?? v? gi?c ng? cu?i c?ng l?i hay qu? kh?ng d?t ???c. Ban ??u m?nh ??c m?t l?o nh?ng th?y h?i ép b?n chuy?n qua ??c m?t ng?y m?t m?c, b? b? b? t?i gi? :)). Thích nh?n v?t Diêm T?o, c?ng thích Thi?t H??ng. Lúc ??c ?o?n Thi?t H??ng c? ngh? t?i Mai Di?m Ph??ng dù ch? có nét quái n?o gi?ng =)).

John Armstrong says

Han Shaogong's A Dictionary of Maqiao, originally published in Chinese in 1996 and translated into English by Julia Lovell in 2006, is not only the best novel I've read in the last few years but also an absolute miracle of translation. The translator had great admiration for the book and approached the author for permission to translate it into English. She relates his response as, "I am very happy that you wish to translate the book, but I'm afraid it will be terribly difficult."

She was not sure exactly why he thought it would be "terribly difficult", but an obvious reason is that it is a book about language, and not simply language but non-standard-language. Specifically it's about the language of Maqiao, a village in northern Hunan, that differs from standard Chinese (Putonghua, Mandarin) not only in vocabulary and pronunciation but also in worldview.

The book takes the form of a journal written by an "educated youth" sent to the country to work with peasants in the latter part of the Cultural Revolution (something that Han experienced directly), but it's organized into a dictionary of dialect words used in the area he moved to, that is, Maqiao. The author explains the origin of the words as best he can and gives examples of situations where they are actually used, which are effectively vignettes of Maqiao life. But he doesn't stop there. Rather he goes on to use the words he's introduced in accounts of other words – that is, in other vignettes – similarly to the way a language textbook will introduce some new vocabulary items in some chapter and then use them periodically in later chapters.

You might imagine that the author is simply peppering the speech of his characters with dialog words to add "local color", but this is not the case. The journalist/narrator uses the words himself, sparingly but pointedly, as if it is only by using Maqiao words that he can properly describe what he sees and feels in Maqiao. And the words aren't just any words, dialect or not, they're words that one way or add to or go beyond normal language, like "streetsickness" which refers to the visceral disorientation that country people feel when they visit large cities or "scattered" which means dead but not necessarily totally gone.

Dictionary of Maqiao is definitely about language, but it's also about culture and human nature. It reminded me, apart from its special interest on language, of another one of my favorite books, Yang Kwi-ja's A Distant and Beautiful Place (original title The People of Wonmi-dong). Both share episodic structure, focus on a single place remote from the outside world but impacted by it, distinctive characters who are observed over time, and finally, a warm appreciation of ordinary people, complete with their faults and foibles. But where Yang's books stays anchored in the world it describes, Han's rises above its world and explores, modestly but incisively, deep philosophical questions as to the nature of language, culture and the human condition. I give Dictionary of Maqiao two sets of five stars, one going to the author for a great book and the other to the translator for a great translation.

Rowland Pasaribu says

During the Cultural Revolution, Han Shaogong was one of seven Educated Youth sent to the hamlet of Maqiao in northern Hunan, which consisted of "forty-odd households, about ten head of cattle, and pigs, dogs, chickens, and ducks, with two long, narrow paddy fields hugging its perimeters". His observations of people and customs and language during the six years he spent there form the basis for his novel A

Dictionary of Maqiao.

This takes the ostensible form of a dictionary or encyclopedia, with over a hundred "entries" named after Maqiao terms or idioms; the prologue claims these were originally in alphabetical order, but in fact they follow each other in a logical sequence and are much closer to short stories than reference material.

The vignettes and stories in *A Dictionary of Maqiao* jump around chronologically: most are set during the narrator's time in Maqiao, but there are also episodes from a return visit many years later and from meetings with Maqiao residents elsewhere, as well as the explorations of earlier history. The narratorial perspective also changes: there are pieces in the third person, but in others the narrator intrudes, through first-person presence or commentary, and in some he plays a central role.

Despite its pointillist rendering and lack of a central plot, *The Dictionary of Maqiao* is an effective novel. It is centred by the community of Maqiao, following key individuals within it, the relationships between them, and the working out of their stories, over a span of decades. Twenty or more figures feature prominently: Party Branch secretary Benyi; his wife Tiexiang, daughter of beggar king "Nine Pockets"; the stonemason Zhihuang and his ox "Three-Hairs"; landlord's son and "traitor to the Chinese" Yanzao, and his "poison woman" grandmother and younger brother Yanwu; the ascetic dropout "Daoist Immortals"; and many more.

Shaogong devotes several entries to Maqiao's place in the historical record, going back into deep history and myth. More recent times are remembered by the villagers — the warlord period, the bandit leader Ma Wenjie, and the events in 1948 when the communists took control — but these are subject to different and changing interpretations. *A Dictionary of Maqiao* doesn't focus on politics, however. The effects of the Cultural Revolution and the sending of urban elites into the countryside are depicted rather than described, and comments on bureaucracy, Western stereotypes of Chinese politics, and so forth are mostly incidental.

Sociolinguistics provides the strongest recurrent theme. Shaogong explores the way language, and in particular lexical choice, marks social status, moulds the way people think, and reflects the forms of social control. (He never succumbs, however, to the lure of a naive linguistic determinism.) And he highlights the ways in which Maqiao dialect diverges from standard Mandarin — a translator's note mentions that five entries were omitted because they were dependent on untranslatable puns. *A Dictionary of Maqiao* is not an ethnography, with stories that have been selected and quite likely exaggerated for effect. But it is a powerful demonstration of just how different a remote rural village can be — or, for the Western audience of this translation, of the diversity of China.

A Dictionary of Maqiao is skillfully arranged to provide motive force, with far more momentum than a collection of short stories. And despite the sometimes dark subject material, its overall tone is light, with some detachment provided by the framing. The result is a gripping read.

Kitty says

What an intriguing and unusual book! I recommend this to anyone interested in language and/or Chinese history.

William says

Unique postmodern structure plays out with linguistic insight and hilarious storytelling, -the story of a Chinese village is told through dictionary entries of their unique vernacular.

Leonie says

It was very beautifully written and the story got richer and better the more I read. It has deepened my understanding of Chinese society and even though the stories are fictional I think they can represent lives that have and are lived. Having that said, the plot didn't really pull me in and even though it was beautiful I felt my mind wander after reading for a while so it took long to finish.

Wendy G says

This is one of the many books I chose based on the title; I was not disappointed. "A Dictionary of Maqiao" is a novel about a fictional village in rural China and the ways in which the people used language to resist, transgress, and mock the current political climate. The backdrop is the Down to the Countryside Movement, which was a component of the Cultural Revolution in China. Young, urban, college-educated people were sent en masse to rural villages to learn the real and valuable work of the peasant class. The narrator of the book is one of those urban youth sent to Maqiao. What he has produced is a glimpse of rural China, the outrageous characters there, and their clever use of language. I really enjoyed this book.

?Laura says

This was such a unique book; part novel, part short story collection, part memoir, part treatise on language and culture. The author was one of the "Educated Youth" relocated to the countryside, specifically the village of Maqiao, in the 1950's as part of Mao's Cultural Revolution. The author presents his somewhat fictionalized experiences in Maqiao as vignettes, each revolving around a particular word, name, or phrase from the Maqiao dialect. Through these we are introduced to a cast of eccentric and entertaining characters and grow to appreciate the unique culture of the village. There is a rough chronology to the entries, so that by the end we are able to feel some degree of resolution. This is just such a smart book; by turns humorous and heartbreakingly touching and poignant. My favorite entry was "This Him", which explains the two different words for "him" in the Maqiao dialect: "qu" or "this him" and "ta" or "that him". It is unexpectedly touching and poignant, as was this book as a whole.
