

Decoded By Mai Jia By Mai Jia He has achieved unprecedented success with film adaptation: all of his novels are made or are being made into major films or TV series the screenplays of which are often written by Mai Jia himself. I find Decoded by Mai Jia a somewhat tricky novel not because it is closely related to a more conventional spy novel that completely ignores the fundamentals of all other spy novels in that it doesn't contain violence money sex drugs etc but because the author often seems to be trapped in the same isolated cryptic universe as his protagonist Rong Jinzhen. For some reason perhaps the rather convoluted mathematical language I found it demanding to penetrate beyond a few layers of the facade before I became exhausted by the cold scientific narrative. However it might be a significant part of the author's strategy that the reader somehow creates and maintains a certain remoteness to the characters especially to Jinzhen throughout the book. Decoded is not as much a book about cryptology as it is about writing a book that happens to contain a lot of information about the history of mathematics and specifically cryptology. I have a feeling that the extreme struggle of Jinzhen to break the ultimate code is a poorly hidden reference to the isolated laborious task of the author of writing this book and indeed to that of many other writers who often grapple with similar conditions of working in isolation. After reading this novel and discussing it with my friends who have read it in Chinese it became clear to me that many of the problems that I have with the work are due to the translation - not so much the effort of translating the words but in translating the nuances of meaning. I saved a number of the reviews in Evernote and went back and read them after I finished and I am even more convinced that some of them didn't read the novel completely. Many Chinese writers have a habit of not being very good storytellers--I don't know whether this is merely following tradition or the belief that readers don't care about coherent plot or some inherent problem with being able to construct a good storyline. There were lots of failures in translation not so much from a technical aspect but a failure to adapt Chinese style writing into English - which relates to my point above about most translators of Chinese fiction not being good fiction writers. It gets worse about 3/4 of the way through and the only reason I continued reading is because I had invested time into it and I have a technical interest in translated Chinese novels. Point being unless you are curious about descent into madness (and there are tons of books that deal with this in a much better way than this one) then don't bother reading it you have a need to feel anything other than meh for any of the characters. I know what the author was trying to do but it just made me scratch my head and yawn and roll my eyes and bemoan my frustration with how difficult it is to find a Chinese novel translated into English that really works. The relationship between Europe and China is more complex than what Borges had to deal with and Mai has come up with a brilliant metaphor in cryptography to investigate that complexity. Some of the most interesting parts of Decoded are about what is presumed to need no explanation: the significance of family-relations the necessity to sacrifice oneself for the national good an acceptance of the fateful chance involved in life the spiritualisation of chance as divinely sourced luck and the reluctance to challenge authority as unjust balanced by a profound sense of fairness. The invasion by Japan and its horrors are therefore footnotes to the main story; the Korean War mentioned en passant; the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution are asides; the emergence of entrepreneurial China doesn't merit even a comment. China anyone? Mai summarises his cultural perceptions in the mouth of one code-breaker With respect to those working in cryptography our collective fate is naturally tied up with the various games of chess - especially those with commonplace lives. With this Mai signals subtly but clearly a recognition of the generational differences that exist in China as well as the tension between the Party-insiders and the rest of the population. Hardcover Before you begin this book - the author's 2005 debut and his first book to be translated in the West - you will have to put aside every preconception you have about spy novels. Mai Jia is a pseudonym for Jiang Benhu who spent seventeen years in the People's Liberation Army as an intelligence officer and is therefore perfectly placed to relate the story of his character - Rong Jinzhen (nicknamed Zhendi) - from his inauspicious birth to his University career and through to his recruitment at a research facility by the elusive intelligence officer Zheng the Gimp. Rong Zinzhen is shown with almost autistic traits and we hear often from other characters

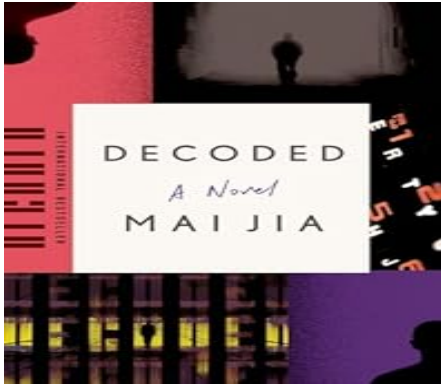
about their reactions to him and other members of his family (genealogy certainly figures largely in this book) but our information is often through letters and diaries and therefore we have a distance from the action. Hardcover One of China's bestselling novels an unusual literary thriller that takes us deep into the world of code breaking In his gripping debut novel Mai Jia reveals the mysterious world of Unit 701 a top-secret Chinese intelligence agency whose sole purpose is counterespionage and code breaking. As China's greatest cryptographer Rong discovers that the mastermind behind the maddeningly difficult Purple Code is his former teacher and best friend who is now working for China's enemy—but this is only the first of many betrayals. Brilliantly combining the mystery and tension of a spy thriller with the psychological nuance of an intimate character study and the magical qualities of a Chinese fable Decoded discovers in cryptography the key to the human heart. Both a riveting mystery and a metaphysical examination of the mind of an inspired genius it is the first novel to be published in English by one of China's greatest and most popular contemporary writers. Although their work is highly relevant (think of the Enigma codebreakers or the computer pioneers) their abstract world is far removed from the ordinary life we all lead and the geniuses in that field often combine extraordinary intellectual abilities in their specific field with an obsessiveness that borders insanity; borderline disorders autism paranoia and schizophrenia seem to be much more frequent among them as in the average population; and even when they are not mentally challenged they seem to act frequently odd and helpless in everyday-life situations. Mathematicians and cryptographers make therefore potentially excellent characters for many books and movies (think of A Beautiful Mind The Imitation Game - a mediocre movie that distorts the real story of Bletchley Park and its protagonists almost beyond recognition - or the brilliant π by Darren Aronofsky). Rong Jinzhen the main character is an orphan that grows up in a provincial town in China under the guidance of a Mr Auslander a foreigner that worked for decades in China as an English teacher. The rather isolated life of Mr Auslander and his advanced age seem not to be the best atmosphere for a child to grow up that shows already very early a rather strange and secluded character although on the other hand the old gentleman does his very best for the boy and is visibly very attached to him. (I was particular touched when the author mentioned that on the day when Auslander decided to take the orphan into his home he - already a rather frail old man - climbed a latter and attached a swing for the boy at one of the trees in his garden. Due to his fantastic talents in mathematics Rong Jinzhen is allowed to enroll in the local university which has a quite famous mathematics department founded by a member of the family of Rong Jinzhen. Liseiwicz who wants to work in the field of artificial intelligence sees in Rong Jinzhen a genius and treats him very different from other students - thereby creating suspicions that he wants to use the prodigy for his own work. Although mathematicians of the calibre of Rong Jinzhen or Liseiwicz seem to live in an ivory tower their work in a world of wars and secret communication is of extremely high importance to politicians and intelligence experts and to secure their talents is a question of national security. ?) and perform work whose nature most people can only guess Rong Jinzhen is taken away from his university to become part of a secret research unit which aims at decrypting ciphers of enemy nations; Rong Jinzhen soon becomes the most important person in this unit. Every comparison is a bit doubtful but he for sure knows how to entice the readers with a fascinating story that encompasses more than half a century - turbulent times for China which had to face a civil war a war with Japan the communist revolution and the so-called Cultural Revolution that all left a deep mark on the characters of the book. Although introvert and deeply obsessed by resolving the tasks and challenges he is facing in the strange world of cryptography he shows great attachment to Mr Auslander (whom he calls Daddy) and later to his adopted family particularly to his adopted mother and sister (whom he later saves from the pogroms of the Cultural Revolution); he reads the Bible and becomes a Christian he reads also novels and books on many other topics he interprets dreams of his colleagues and shows a genuine interest in games particularly chess. It is also a story of the rise and fall of an extraordinary person and thanks to the fact that the author presents us Rong Jinzhen not as an idiot-savant with an insular talent but as a person with its incredible strengths and also weaknesses his hopes and dreams and also his also almost unbearable loneliness (during his adult

life he seems only to be connected with Liseiwicz and the only person he ever admired the enigmatic German cryptographer Klaus Johannes whose book is as it turns out a sophisticated cipher in itself and with whom he has a kind of dialogue in his dreams). The description of the isolated life of Rong Jinzhen in the headquarter of the cryptographic complex which seems completely isolated from the rest of the world and in which he spends the biggest part of his conscious life without hardly ever leaving this complex has something suffocating deeply depressing. A few minor remarks about certain aspects of the books that prevent me from calling this book a masterpiece: Liseiwicz supposedly met in his younger years an Austrian aristocrat with an interest in mathematics that wanted to build up and fund a research institute in Austria. While it is possible and therefore credible that such a person existed it is extremely improbable that a member of the Hapsburg family (that was banned from entering Austria during that period and that would run into the risk of being arrested and have his property confiscated) would ever even have dreamt of doing this. The descriptions are always very general touching always more the surface of things - a little bit more information about how concretely the ciphers on which Rong Jinzhen worked would have been extremely interesting. When the narrator meets late in the book Rong Jinzhen's replacement at the research facility this man from which the narrator gets important information on the later years of Rong Jinzhen and the cracking of the cipher BLACK this man is described as a Go player that has become so strong that it was allegedly difficult for him to find opponents - he was considered to be too strong by almost anyone. These are small misgivings I have about the book but it is definitely an entertaining read a well-crafted story and it makes me curious to read more of this author and probably also more fiction by Chinese authors. Hardcover This book is badly marketed to the US market; it is not as the book jacket says combining the mystery and tension of a spy thriller with the psychological nuance of an intimate character study:

Mai Jia is arguably the most successful writer in China today, His books are constant bestsellers with total sales over three million copies: He became the highest paid author in China last year with his new book Wind Talk. He is hailed as the forerunner of Chinese espionage fiction and has created a unique genre that combines spycraft code breaking crime human drama historical fiction and metafiction: He has won almost every major award in China including the highest literary honor the Mao Dun Award. After a while I found it difficult to really care what happened to Jinzhen his wife and indeed any of the other characters, However I somehow wish that the author sometimes had left his door agape instead of hermetically locked to allow a little more room for the reader to explore, Too often I was simply too exhausted to try a new key to unlock a door just to find another door, I believe this novel is more about an attempt by the author to 'decode' himself than anything to do with breaking an enemy encryption, The bottomline and possibly the underlying problem is that I read this as a thinly veiled autobiography written under the cover of a spy novel. However I did not find the extremely introverted and isolated investigation as fascinating as I would have liked and certainly not as much as I had expected, With that said there are still some beautifully written sequences and some extraordinarily vivid moments in the book especially near the very end, Probably closer to three and a half if I have to be totally honest. Hardcover I am an avid reader of translated Chinese fiction and a long-time resident of China: Mai Jia is well thought of here and many of my friends are devotees of his work: The Chinese language and English are vastly different in terms of how things are expressed particularly emotions: In addition what Chinese people like in a novel both in terms of content and style is quite different. This makes it challenging for a translator who is trying to keep things true to the original author but still provide something interesting and readable for the non-Chinese reader, Another exacerbating factor lies in the fact that there are very few people translating Chinese that are fiction writers and none that I'm aware of that are good fiction writers: So you get technical translations by writers of non-fiction trying to translate literary fiction, That said the novel falls apart in the last Part of the book. The narrator attempts to explain this is intended with a long navel-gazing excerpt that looks wedged in with a crowbar. I understand the author's intent but he simply doesn't pull it off and there are so many digressions that it gets

intensely boring, As to the notion that this last part is like a cipher itself--don't buy it. All of the literary devices the author dared to use fall flat: Frankly I think some of the reviewers that raved about this novel before it was actually released didn't read it completely. I think they skimmed parts of it particularly toward the end, The author also attempts to excuse the lack of a coherent storyline as being something that is not a big deal for Chinese readers (his intended audience): Plenty of Chinese readers like translated foreign novels that have good stories, As for Chinese works Chinese readers can only read what is written: I suspect that the real problem has to do with censorship. Writers end up having to use symbolism or work their way in circles just to get around the censors: I think the book would have been better as a novelette frankly: Much of the backstory in the beginning was though interesting irrelevant. There was far too much repetition--to the extent that I think the book could have been dropped by 10% of its size just to weed out the redundancy. Also the translator has a penchant for using English cliches that don't reflect the meaning in Chinese and that are simply just bad writing: Also there were repetitive phrases that tended to drive me to distraction the most needling one was To be be honest: The word thriller connotes something fast paced that keeps you on the edge of your seat. I'm glad I read it but it doesn't do Mai Jia justice when translated into English and I was disappointed in the end with the results. Other people have done a good job of describing characterization in the novel, I don't think this was done particularly well but in my experience that's a failure of Chinese literature in general that loses even more in translation: I can't imagine anyone reading this novel and having any feelings for the main character at all other than perhaps a curiosity of descent into madness: And there really are no other characters that get described enough for you to care about them, With regard to the descent into madness aspect itself I think that failed completely, Just came off as silly and irritating to me--though it evidently worked in Chinese from what my friends tell me. Using documents presented as factual he constructs a fiction that is the truth of a culture: For Borges it was European culture and its influence in South America that was a primary topic. In Mai's case the culture is that of China: driven obsessive clever and secretive. This is the sort of existential backdrop of things that just 'are' in China. These 'gaps' make the metaphor both more pointed and more compelling: Ostensibly Decoded is about the life and fate of an autistic mathematical savant the bastard child of a family of intellectuals: He like China itself is passed from one controlling authority to another. Each transfer involves a renaming as well as new conditions of existence: He is even somewhat 'Christianised' into a distinctly Pauline view of the relation between life and after-life, Crucially he is intellectually influenced most by a foreign mathematician who is married to a Chinese woman and enculturated deeply into the country, Through him the savant is drawn into the life of the mind and into decades-long cultural as well as cryptographic warfare: The Chinese ability to temporise about their history is presented as a rule of the game of cryptography, Knowing history is only confusing for a cryptographer the author contends: It makes progress difficult by trapping one's thinking in the past in the patterns that have already been established and discarded as obsolete: The other Iron-clad rule in ciphers according to Mai is that one should never attempt to be on both sides of a code. A good encryptor risks not just his talent but also his sanity by engaging in decryption; and vice-versa. The message perhaps to Chinese authority is plain: the ability to confuse others is incompatible with an ability to understand what others are really up to. Pointedly the key to the most profound cipher of the time is that there is no key: The cryptographic key was the number zero! It was nothing! Absolute nothing! . He is incomprehensible inscrutable even to everyone he has known and worked with including government officials. He is admired for his achievements but also feared for his unpredictable behaviour. He is intimate with no one among other reasons because his intelligence is so oppressively off-putting: One of his notebooks shows him to be a hidden religious obsessive. The protagonist's doctoral thesis considers mankind as the irrational number Pi an eternal constant but ultimately indeterminant. Finally they will all be seduced by the art of chess just like pirates and drug pushers are seduced by their own wares, It is just like how some people become interested in good works in their old age, Genius and madness issue forth from the same track; both are brought about by bewitchment says the same decoder, As one of the main symptoms of democratic politics

this warning about bewitchment seems particularly apt at the moment to European culture as well. Although it is about a mathematical genius who is involved in breaking codes it takes an awfully long time to reach that part of the story, Indeed the first part of the book is involved mainly with the family history of the main character and most novels do not usually go into such detail, In a way we are almost with the narrator discovering information alongside him as he follows Rong Jinzhen's path. Once Rong Jinzhen is recruited he becomes a cryptographer involved in breaking a legendary code called Purple. This success causes him to become a Revolutionary Hero but his attention then turns to the even greater matter of the code called Black. Although this is labelled a spy thriller it is not in the usual form that you would expect from Le Carre for instance, However if you approach this with an open mind you will find it a strangely compelling read. There is a reason why Mai Jia is such an enormous success in China - a bestselling author who has won China's highest literary honour and has had immense success: Before long you find yourself totally immersed in the world and characters that have been created, His next novel is "In the Dark" and I hope that it will also be translated and appear in English soon. Hardcover DECODED although about the life of a cryptographer is not about the nuts and bolts of cryptography, You don't need to be interested in the application of it; rather it is more about one man in particular whose life brought him to this secretive isolating practice: Rong Jinzhen is a brainiac in mathematics and also likely a man with Asperger's syndrome: Jia's novel is a portrait of this unusual individual—an introverted focused and solitary genius: The narrative is subtle unsentimental yet tender and captivating: The translation by Olivia Milburn and Christopher Payne is so smooth and nimble that it reads like English was the primary language of the novel. The story begins in 1873 with the youngest member of the seventh generation of the wealthy salt merchant Rong family: He is leaving the (fictional?) city of Tongzhen to study abroad the first academic in the family: The last pages of the novel indicate it is now 2002 (when this novel was published in China): Most importantly it is a character study of Rong Jinzhen born in the 1930s. The story is lyrical and literary but also page turning and suspenseful ripe for espionage fans and literature lovers alike, His mother Youying an academic genius who had studied at Cambridge died giving birth to him and his profligate father was stabbed to death, Jinzhen was raised by an elderly European dream interpreter Mr: Auslander who recognized and encouraged the young boy's mathematical abilities. When Auslander died Jinzhen was taken back into the fold of the wealthy Rong family, Jinzhen's intellectual gifts and emotional well-being are given support and stability and he is educated at his patriarch's university. There are 150 pages before Jinzhen is lured into the secret cryptography Unit 701, The author's detailed brushstrokes of Jinzhen paint a fully dimensional and often agonized man who joins a group of other like-minded souls, By the time he joins the Unit the reader has an animated distinct profile of Jinzhen. He and his colleagues find their purpose and sanction inside the hallowed secret life of cryptography: What vitalized the story even more was the emotional power given to the intellectual field of numbers, Rather Jinzhen's work and the man himself are impassioned twins a binary coupling that is both his strength and his weakness, (If there were an American cinematic example it would be John Turturro in any number of movies where he plays a tortured genius). Along the way there are twists and turns surprises in narrative form that Jia dared to execute: Part five of the novel is a collection of fragments and just like the riddles of cryptography I was confronted with trying to decipher a cipher, Only an able assured writer like Jia could persuade a reader in this direction: Not only that I was haunted by the figure of Jinzhen even more: This is a sleeper of a novel one that unexpectedly engulfed me and continues to corral my heart long after the last page: Rong Jinzhen an autistic math genius with a past shrouded in myth is forced to abandon his academic pursuits when he is recruited into Unit 701. Decoded By Mai Jia



Questo romanzo è abbastanza strano. All'inizio sembra un bel romanzo storico-familiare ma presto si concentra su un unico personaggio: il signor Rong del titolo. Il primo conto che Rong Jinzhen si trova costretto a fare ancora bambino è affascinante e commovente. Scopriamo così che Jinzhen è un genio alla ricerca del suo posto nel mondo, Lo troverà nella dimensione della crittografia e del servizio al suo Paese: A questo punto il romanzo prende i tratti di una "spy story" ma molto atipica. Al posto di intrighi ed azione ci troviamo di fronte ad una grande solitudine. L'aspetto geniale del protagonista viene raccontato da più parti ma resta abbastanza impenetrabile. Non sono sicura di aver apprezzato lo stile dell'autore che cambia spesso tecnica narrativa: Una lettura interessante dalla quale però dopo l'entusiasmo per le prime due parti mi aspettavo di più: Hardcover "Decoded" is a brilliant and ambitious novel that begins as a fable and ends as an espionage thriller. Mai Jai's style is lyrical with a judicious amount of analogies to beautifully communicate the overwhelming world of mathematics and cryptography, It's a story of the life of Rong Jinzhen a mathematical genius on par with Stephen Hawking, It's from an un-named reporter's point of view in a manner that is engineered to be a true account to the reader. It reminds me of Ann Rice's style in "Interview With a Vampire": He is definitely on the autism spectrum with few likable characteristics. Yet Jai makes Rong loveable in his completely honest way of living his life, Rong is used by family members professors the government for his mathematical genius. His genius brings him to psychosis and to his ultimate demise: As much as it's a spy novel Jai exposes the inner workings of China's communism: I found this particularly interesting after just returning from a two week trip to China and learning about their culture and government: It's a lyrical study of mathematics Intelligence Agencies families devotion tyranny and basic humanity. Hardcover I found it hard to keep going with this one, I am in the minority here but felt totally removed from the characters, They felt flat and the writing didn't flow well in my opinion: I also found it rather repetitive and indulgent giving far too much opinionated explanation in some areas: After reading 30% of Decoded I reluctantly decided to not finish the book at this time and therefore do not feel that able to give a review or rating. There is no disputing that Decoded may well be a sensational piece of fiction (albeit based on the author's experiences) but I'm not seeing it: This said I will however have some knowledge of the story line and be able to recommend it to customers visiting our bookstore: I would like to thank the publishers & NetGalley for giving me the opportunity to read and review this title.

com/?p=2305Mathematicians and cryptographers seem to have a strange fascination for most people. Also the hero of Mai Jia's novel Decoded is a mathematician and codebreaker,)After Mr Auslander's passing the boy is taken in by some relatives. One of the teachers there Professor Liseiwicz a Polish-Jewish emigrant and famous cryptographer and mathematician becomes Rong Jinzhen's mentor. And so we see Liseiwicz and Rong Jinzhen drift in different directions - while Liseiwicz leaves China in order to work in X country (Israel? The U. He breaks the high-level cipher PURPLE in a very short time and with the most unorthodox approach. But when another high-level cipher BLACK pops up a real nightmare starts for Rong Jinzhen: I don't want to give away more of this story which is a real page turner, Mai Jia has been hailed as the Chinese answer to John Le Carré and after reading this book I know why. Books that are written by authors from such a complete different culture as the Chinese are for me are not always easy to understand: Therefore I was a bit sceptical in the beginning if I would grasp all aspects of the story, But Mai Jia is telling us a

universal story the story of an extraordinarily gifted man a man who is burdened by the fact that he is a genius in his field: The portrait of Rong Jinzhen is that of a man with many facets, With Liseiwicz he is developing a chess variation that is so complicated that it is only played by a small group of mathematicians. Surprisingly for everyone Rong Jinzhen even marries although this marriage proves to be very unconventional: Mai Jia created with this novel a unforgettable hero and a fascinating story with many unexpected twists. This is simply impossible because of the particular legal position of the Hapsburg family in Austria after WWI, ENIAC was one of the first computers to be built (in 1946) but of course not the first as the author claims: (Konrad Zuse completed the Z1 in 1938 and the Z3 the first Turing complete computer in 1941:) Chess and to a certain extent also Go plays a certain role in the book. Liseiwicz and Rong Jinzhen play a lot of chess (in which Liseiwicz has practically Grandmaster strength) and chess variations, But the explanation of the chess variation the two invented left me in the dark about the nature of this game, The same goes in general for the cryptographic part of the book. As it is the descriptions of the ciphers are as elusive as the main character of the book. Go has contrary to chess a handicap system that levels the chances of players according to their kyu/dan grade: When you play a very strong player it means that the chances are nevertheless more or less equal because the stronger player has to play with a very high handicap: The translation reads very smooth but of course I cannot compare with the Mandarin original edition: A best seller in China it was a bit opaque for this Western reader. You'll get the reference if you read the book. Three stars is a fair judgment I believe. Just doesn't work very well in my experience. I don't buy it. about a hundred times. That's just bad editing. Lastly to suggest this is a spy thriller is ludicrous. This is not that kind of novel. It's ponderously slow. like a plodding elephant slow. Hardcover Educating Genius Mai Jia is a Chinese Borges. The attempt to do both provokes cultural madness. a cipher with no key. The protagonist's internal state his personality is never revealed. Perhaps this is Mai's central message to his compatriots. In between is a combination spy historical and family drama. Rong Jinzhen's life had inauspicious beginnings. These professionals find comfort and solace in cryptography. The reader isn't subjected to dry and abstruse text. I wanted to penetrate the impenetrable. Non si deve usare una bella spada per tagliare la legna. Jai uses the first person narrative in telling the story. Rong Jinzhen life is of a misfit. It's difficult not to feel compassion towards him. Treachery is everywhere in Rong's life. It's a spy novel but it's more than that. It will be on the "Best Books of 2014" lists. Maybe something was lost in the translation process. I didn't care for the book or characters. One such event took several pages describing a chess game. I may pick it up at a later stage and try again. Hardcover <http://www.mytwostotinki.S>. That is of course a rather ridiculous claim. Not a mystery not tense as a spy thriller. Yes a psychological study. Hardcover.