



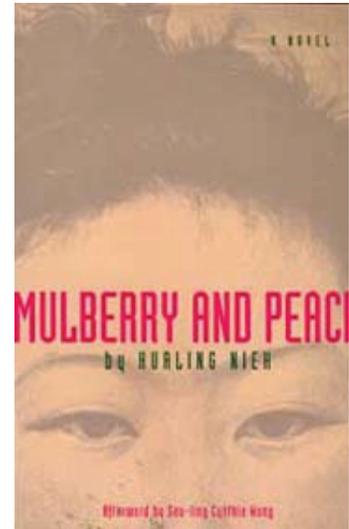
Voices from the Gaps

Mulberry and Peach by Hualing Nieh

Hualing Nieh's 1981 novel *Mulberry and Peach* describes the life of Helen Mulberry Sang, a Chinese woman living through many years of political unrest during the Japanese invasion of China, the Communist-Nationalist Civil War, Taiwan's White Terror, and the Vietnam War. As a partial result of the many stresses of living through this time period, Helen (or "Mulberry" as she prefers to be called) develops schizophrenia, and takes on a second personality named Peach. The book is organized into four parts, each containing one letter written by Peach to the U.S. Immigration officer from whom she is running, and one excerpt from Mulberry's diary. The letters to the Immigration officer are all written over the course of one year (1970). Each of the diary excerpts illustrates a distinct part of Mulberry's life, ranging in years from 1945 to 1970.

Rich in both historical and cultural information, *Mulberry and Peach* contains a wide variety of themes. The themes describe everything from Chinese culture to psychological identity. At the beginning of each section, there is a short description of all the characters involved in that part of the book and in some cases, these descriptions tell explicitly what the characters are meant to represent. Reading the descriptions helps clarify for the reader the themes being addressed in that particular section of the novel.

One theme presented in the book that of traditional versus modern Chinese culture. In Mulberry's first diary excerpt, written while traveling down the river to Chungking, traditional culture is represented through "The Old Man," and modern culture is represented through "Refugee Student." Both The Old Man and Refugee Student are members of the crew aboard the boat, and the contrast of traditional versus modern culture really shines through in the text. An example of this concerns a conversation about a shrine near where the boat was lodged. Refugee Student suggests that since no one has offered incense to the shrine, "It would be better if [they] tore it down." The Old Man snaps back immediately that Refugee Student "should be struck down by lightning for saying such a thing!" (Nieh, p. 33). It is interesting to watch these two representative characters butt heads with one another throughout the excerpt.



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Another theme addressed is political conformity versus nonconformity at the expense of freedom. During the 1940's, China was split between Nationalist and Communist Occupation. The more territory the Communist government gained in China, the more suspicious the Nationalist government became of citizens. They arrested anyone they thought might be involved with Communists. Mulberry's flight to Peking, even when it was under siege, occurred because "she was afraid of being arrested by the Nationalist government, . . . for her connection with some young people suspected of being Communist" (Nieh, p. 66). This was a struggle for many young people especially, during this time period.

Feminism was yet another theme explored in *Mulberry and Peach*. Throughout the book, Mulberry maintains a very active love life. This love life, which could almost be described as promiscuity, seems out of place for the time in which the novel is set. Mulberry goes on her way, sleeping with whatever man she finds entertaining at the moment. Her travels from place to place and man to man show her independence.

The organization of this book is one of its best assets. As mentioned earlier, the book contains four separate parts. The Prologue introduces us to the Man from the US Immigration Service whose character, despite being undeveloped, appears often throughout the story. The letters all take place in the present or very recent past, so the book drifts back and fourth between past and present. The diary excerpts follow chronological order, starting from when Mulberry is sixteen and ending when she is 41 and has converted completely to the use of her second personality, Peach. Once you reach the last diary excerpt, the book has come together and all the blanks from in between the 1970 letters and the 1945-1959 excerpts are filled in. The nature of this organization keeps us turning the pages, hoping to find the culmination of the story where the letters and the diary excerpts unite. This culmination does not come until the last page of the book, and leaves us feeling satisfied.

Much like the main character in her book, Hualing Nieh was born in China in 1925, moved to Taiwan, and then later moved to the United States. As a distinguished writer and teacher, Nieh was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976 and received the Award for Distinguished Service to the Arts from the Governors of the Fifty States in 1982. She is the author of 22 different fiction books in Chinese. *Mulberry and Peach*, like many of her other works, has been translated from Chinese into English. Although this translation appears at first to be a barrier to native English speakers, it soon becomes just another way to completely immerse oneself in the Chinese culture of the book.



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Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach* is a great source of information and entertainment for readers of any level. The characters, the historical and cultural themes, and the organization are all factors in this book's ability to keep the reader interested. In addition to these, adventure and romance are thrown into the mix. Overall, this moderately easy read is a great way to learn more about China during its time of struggle while at the same time enjoying the work of a very talented fiction writer's hand.

Reviewed by Julie Ofstedal