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Susan Blumberg-Kason / 18 September 2018 / Non-Fiction, , Reviews

“Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels” by Claire Chao and Isabel Sun Chao





If there is a place and time in China that appeals to English readers more than others, it's pre-1949 Shanghai. The Paris of the East, Queen of the Orient, and the City that Never Sleeps are just a few of its monikers from the 1920s until late 1940s. Because 70 to 80 years has passed since then, fewer and fewer people are around to share stories from that era.

Mother and daughter, Isabel Sun Chao and Claire Chao, have recently penned *Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels*, a family narrative that spans the late Qing dynasty (turn of the 20th century) until just after the Cultural Revolution (post-1976), with the bulk of the story taking place during Shanghai's heyday in the 1930s and 40s.

Isabel Sun was the third daughter (out of six children) of Diedie (Sun Bosheng) and Muma (Fei Baoshu). She grew up in Shanghai during the 1930s and 40s and her godfather had dealings with legendary underworld leaders like Pockmarked Huang and Du Yuesheng. Isabel's father was the son of a man who embezzled his own father's riches before reforming his ways and teaching his son to appreciate education. As a result, Diedie became one of China's most renowned art collectors before the 1949 revolution, losing it all during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s.

But what stands out isn't the scandals involving the men, but the strength and independence of Isabel's mother and grandmother. Her grandmother, whom she called Qinpo, was born in 1879 and lived with Isabel's family after Qinpo left her husband. Back then, women did not leave their husbands and divorce was all but unheard of. It was completely normal—and even expected—for men of means to not only take concubines, but also mistresses. Wives had no recourse when their husbands brought other women home for good. Isabel writes about her grandmother's unhappiness in her marriage:

Qinpo may have been the official wife but, as a woman, she was powerless. Her protests failed to have any effect on her husband. She watched in silent fury as Yeye [her husband and Isabel's grandfather] acquired three concubines—of whom the first and third were sisters—and consorted with an untold number of mistresses in brothels and teahouses... Divorce wasn't an option, so Qinpo simply refused to have anything further to do with her husband.

Qinpo was strong-willed as a young girl, too: when her family bound her feet when she was five, she put up such a fuss that her family let her take the bindings off at the age of ten. Although her feet never fully recovered and gave her trouble her whole life, it was still much better than having bound feet for decades like most women of her era. (Foot-binding wasn't abolished until after the turn of the century, or when Qinpo was in her mid-twenties.)

Following in her mother-in-law's footsteps, Isabel's Muma (mother) divorced her husband when divorce was possible in China, but still very unusual. Even though it was the custom for fathers to be awarded sole custody of their children after a divorce, Muma couldn't remain married for the sake of her children.

During World War II, Muma made a daring journey from Shanghai to Chongqing just after the Nationalist government moved to the latter. For reasons of propriety, Muma traveled with an older woman, but at one point the older woman turned on Muma, selling her to an older man in the town where they took refuge for a night. This transaction happened in the middle of the night as Muma slept soundly and was unaware her traveling companion had left their room. Money was in short supply and there was a war on, but the callousness is still shocking. As it (fortunately) turned out, Muma had a secret connection in Chongqing who arranged for her rescue just before her new “husband” claimed her at the inn.

Muma eventually made her way to Hong Kong. In 1950, months after the Communists declared victory over the Nationalist government in the civil war, Diedie arranged for Isabel to visit Muma for a few weeks in Hong Kong. In a clairvoyant move, Diedie and Muma planned for their daughter to escape China before the real crackdowns against the bourgeoisie began. The rest of the family, including Diedie, two sisters, and a brother were left behind in China. Isabel went on to work for the US Consulate for more than three decades.

Isabel’s and Claire’s stories thus also shed light into 1950s Hong Kong, particularly in the new communities settled by Shanghai immigrants. Few books in English have discussed this change in Hong Kong as it moved from an agricultural community to an industrial one. Shanghai immigrants are a large reason for the latter, bringing their expertise in business and manufacturing.

The book extends to other members of the family, notably Isabel’s brother, Sun Shufen, who died in 2005. In the mid-1990s, there was a renaissance in China of literature, film, and television series set in pre-1949 Shanghai and Sun. was one of the best-known Chinese authors during this rebirth. Isabel and Claire devote a considerable portion of the end of the book to Sun’s work and his part in changing how modern Chinese view old Shanghai.

The book is written from Isabel’s point of view and every so often Claire provides historical background in passages written in italics, whether these are integrated into the story or as one-page stand-alone cultural essays about something like foot-binding or Chinese words inspired by the English.

The book is also filled with colorful illustrations of Shanghai long ago and old black and white photos. Few pages go by without an illustration, photo, or reproduction of an old advertisement or postcard, all of which add to the atmosphere.



Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels, Claire Chao, Isabel Sun Chao (Plum Brook, May 2018)

Susan Blumberg-Kason is the author of *Good Chinese Wife: A Love Affair with China Gone Wrong*.

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