



Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels • Claire Chao and Isabel Sun Chao

The Pearl of the Orient, the Paris of the East – Shanghai of the 1920s to 1949 has long captivated readers as one of history's great cities; it's been a first-choice setting for China fiction and non-fiction. Is there room on the shelf for yet another title? Yes, if the book is of sufficient quality and it offers something new. Such is the case with the magnificent *Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels*, written by Claire Chao and her mother Isabel Sun Chao. The book is a feast of winning elements; it's beautifully illustrated, well researched, written with charm, and the content is absolutely fascinating. The icing on the cake is its warm immediacy, helped by the authors' sunny dispositions and their storytelling skills, but also by the very fact that the mother (born in 1931) is still alive; as the glory days of Shanghai increasingly recede into the distant past with only a mere handful of living witnesses to the era, here we can reach out trace a living continuous thread from the present back to the 1930s.

Remembering Shanghai is a gripping family saga that spans from the late Qing dynasty until the present, with a primary focus on the fabled Shanghai of the 1930s and 1940s as seen through the experiences of Isabel Sun, the third daughter of six children. The family story is a rags to riches to rags story, one you would normally call the stuff of movies; but there is simply too much plot here, too many great characters – it would take a television series to do it justice. In fact, daughter Claire Chao is currently collaborating with a San Francisco-based filmmaker to develop a television drama series.

The Sun family story begins with Isabel's great-grandfather, Sun Zhutang, who rose from the position of servant to military leader. For his accomplishments in helping suppress the Taiping Rebellion, Dowager Empress Cixi rewarded him with the lucrative office of head of customs in Tianjin, the port city for Peking. Other official positions followed and he used his earnings wisely, investing in a shipping line, a bank, and property in Shanghai.

His success in business did not extend to family life. The two of his sons who survived into adulthood – No. 4 and No. 7 – were wastrels. Through a cunning scheme, they stole a fortune of gold from their father, and went into hiding. The betrayed father “removed the names of No. 4 and No. 7 from the family ancestor hall and took out full-page newspaper ads disowning them.” More subterfuge followed which would see No. 7 (Isabel’s grandfather) brought back into the family fold, but I won’t reveal the details here.

The escapades of the males in the family – their scheming, womanizing, interactions with the gangster underworld – provide plenty of memorable passages in *Remembering Shanghai*, but it’s probably the gutsy, independent women who stand out the most. Isabel’s paternal grandmother lived with Isabel’s family after leaving her husband (No. 7). She was – contrary to custom – unwilling to accept her husband taking concubines and visiting brothels. A generation later, divorce was still a rare option for women, but one taken by Isabel’s mother, a fashionable socialite who looked dimly on her husband’s extra-curricular activities. Isabel’s mother and father had little in common. She writes, “Growing up, we rarely saw our parents together.”

The father was a gentleman scholar and art connoisseur who had had a classical education and upbringing – the kind of Confucian education that had been the mainstay of scholar gentry for a millennium. An example of his being out of step with fast-changing times is shown in a wonderful anecdote about her teenage father taking exception to be called “Mister” instead of the more respectful “Young Master” by a salesman and slapping him. The salesman took Isabel’s father to court and the judge ruled in the plaintiff’s favor. The father paid a large fine, which was used to build a new street; the municipal authorities named it “Mister Street.”

Despite the family’s great wealth (they even had their own resident tailor), they were not immune to the political and economic chaos of the time, and behind the stories told through the sweet innocence of youth lies dark menace. Such is the case with an episode from the days when Shanghai was occupied by the Japanese. One day in 1941, when Isabel was ten, a Japanese officer came to the family’s residence. She was home alone (with the servants) listening to English songs on a forbidden radio. He ordered it to be turned off and requested tea with the young Isabel. They chatted and he taught Isabel – who he said was of similar age to his twin daughters back in Japan – a Japanese song. She picked up the song quickly and sang it beautifully.

The officer patted my shoulder. “Little Miss, you have done something of great benefit to your family today.”

I had no idea what he meant. How could learning a Japanese song help my family?

A few days later, the Suns learned the officer was going to confiscate a house further down the street and the poor family given three days to move out.

When the Communists seized power in 1949, Isabel was a “carefree and hopelessly naïve” eighteen-year-old who cared only about films, the latest fashion, and nightclubs. She was in her first year at St. John’s University and now old enough to go clubbing with her friends. Her father, however, could see that difficult times lay ahead. He sent Isabel to Hong Kong (where her divorced mother had moved to) for a “holiday.” Isabel would remain in Hong Kong and never see her father again.



The Communist takeover brought immense suffering to the Sun family (though the memoir highlights the positive and the dark episodes are not lingered over – this is no misery memoir). They lost their wealth and property, and prized artworks, and suffered the inevitable torture and humiliation. The famine years of the Great Leap Forward were the worst for many rural populations, but for city dwellers of good background Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was generally worse. And so it was for the Sun family members who stayed behind. The father was beaten and publically humiliated by Red Guards. He died in 1969 at the age of 75. Isabel's brother Shufen also suffered cruelly – nearly beaten to death on several occasions – but survived and made a stunning comeback in the post-Mao years by becoming a successful author.

Isabel first returned to Shanghai in 1978, and was so dispirited that she had no desire to return. Thirty years passed before her next visit, made in 2008 with then 46-year-old daughter Claire. The idea for the book came from this trip. They thought it would take a year or two but it ended up taking a decade, a testament to the amount of hard work and care that went into the book.

The memoir is written primarily from Isabel's perspective, often from a child's point of view. However, there are passages written by Claire dotted throughout the book; sometimes this is historical background on the family and other times more general pieces about Chinese culture and history. To signify the switch of authors, Claire's writing is in italics, which is my one complaint with the book; pages of eye-straining italics do not make for comfortable reading. Otherwise, the structure and design choices are excellent. Nothing has been overlooked. There's a glossary, a family tree, a map, a list of new and old place names, and a very thorough and generous acknowledgements section. And, oh, the illustrations – beautiful and so many of them (about 160 in total)! There are gorgeous photographs (such as the enchanting cover portrait of Isabel taken in Hong Kong when she was twenty-one), period postcards, and lovely watercolors specially commissioned for the book.

Throughout the book there are small choices and touches made here and there that the reader, too engaged in the story, will probably not notice but which those in the publishing business will appreciate. Take, for example, the problem of Chinese names for Western readers. In a multi-generational Chinese family memoir like this there are scores of Chinese names. Isabel uses "No. 4" and "No. 7" for the two brothers (her grand-uncle and grandfather), Sun Jingzhai and Sun Zhizhai.

Another thing I loved about *Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels* – and this is where other good books often fall down – is the way the story is wrapped up. Although the book's primary focus is "remembering Shanghai" in the old days, we find out – in just the right measure – what happened to the family in the latter years. There's a tendency for these books to end too abruptly, leaving readers wondering what happened to the author and other people we've met along the way.

Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels was self-published under the publishing house name of Plum Brook. That it was self-published is no reflection on the quality of this award-winning book. The authors went that route because any commercial publisher would have insisted on cutting back on the number of illustrations. It is available from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and various other retailers. This is a book where you should get a paper copy rather than the digital version; both the paperback and hardback are very reasonably priced considering the lavish illustrations and the quality of the printing.