

FEATURES | ON THE SCENE

On the Scene with Claire Chao

By [John Berger](#) | May 6, 2018 *Updated May 6, 2018 12:05am*



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Instead it grew into a multigenerational epic that starts with Chao's great-great-grandfather, a peasant who rose to a position of power and great wealth in 19th century China, and continues through generations of scholars, socialites, power brokers and ne'er-do-wells.

Chao's grandfather, Sun Bosheng, was stripped of his prized art collection and everything else he owned when the Communists came to power in 1949; he died during the brutality of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.

Chao, 55, grew up in Hong Kong but has lived in Honolulu for 20 years. She has been attending promotional events with her mother, Isabel Sun Chao, since their book, "Remembering Shanghai" (\$33.50 hardcover, \$18.89 paperback; [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)) was unofficially released at the end of 2017.

It went up on Amazon Tuesday.

JOHN BERGER: You mention seeing a 300-year-old painting taken from your grandfather's collection selling at auction for \$4 million. Jewish groups have been suing institutions for the return of artwork taken from Jewish art collectors by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. Has your family considered suing for the return of art taken by the Communists?

CLAIRE CHAO: No one in my family has had the heart to go after the pieces. Even if my grandfather was the last person to put his seal on a painting (showing his ownership of it at that time) a court could say that that doesn't necessarily mean that he was the last person to own it. I think our whole philosophy is really to move on.

JB: You and your mother went to see the remains of your family's home in Shanghai and met someone who remembered your father. When you returned several years later the man was gone but he'd left you a broken stone figure with your grandfather's seal inside it — the one memento of your grandfather's art collection that you have today. Do you have any idea why the man had saved it all those years?

CC: He thought that maybe someone might come back, and so he had someone hold it for us, but I don't think he thought of it as anything of value.

JB: What's next for you and your mother and the book?

CC: We're looking at a television miniseries.

JB: The book is written to make Chinese traditions easily accessible for non-Chinese readers. What is something about Chinese traditions that might surprise non-Chinese readers?

CC: I won't name names but I know (Chinese) families today where there are still two wives living under one roof.

"On the Scene" appears on Sundays in the Star-Advertiser. Reach John Berger at jberger@staradvertiser.com.



Lava eruptions and earthquakes rattle Hawaii island

By [Timothy Hurley](#) Posted on May 5, 2018

Madame Pele was working overtime Friday as Kilauea Volcano tormented Lower Puna for the second day in a row with a series of potent earthquakes and lava eruptions that claimed at least three structures in the Leilani Estates subdivision. [Read More](#)