

REMEMBERING SHANGHAI BOOK CLUB GUIDE



1. The book opens with Isabel and her daughter, Claire, revisiting Isabel's Shanghai home, setting the scene for a shared storytelling that follows. How does this authorial pairing reflect larger themes about family, mother-daughter relationships, and legacy?
2. Isabel was raised in a traditional environment, but 1930s and '40s Shanghai was a time of turbulent change. How did Isabel and her family—siblings, parents, grandparents—test conventional expectations regarding religion, gender, marriage and dress?
3. Isabel's Muma is described as a great beauty, whose “effortlessly feminine” air is influenced by Western ideals. Contrast her makeup and dressing routine with the footbinding culture of Qinpo's generation. How do Isabel and Claire both further the cause of female liberation that their ancestors were not privy to, and what specific changes occurred in China to allow these changes?
4. Consider the role of fate in the book: from Diedie's *jiannu* birth year to Claire's uncanny connection to her grandfather's art.
5. How did the interstitial chapters about Chinese culture (e.g. the history of mahjong, “loan words,” *qipao*, etc.) enhance your reading experience and understanding of Isabel's world? What was the most interesting thing you learned?
6. How do the illustrations and photographs throughout the book bring to life the Isabel's stories and memories?

7. How do the political changes taking place in China directly and indirectly impact the Sun family over the generations? Consider what happens to Diedie especially with regard to the turns his life took upon Mao's ascension.
8. Shanghai is described as a city "born of vice". Revisit your favorite passages and moments that illustrate the glamour of the city. Is this the impression of Shanghai you had prior to reading the book? How did the descriptions of Shanghai change or confirm your own impressions of the city?
9. Toward the end of the book, Isabel questions whether leaving Shanghai was the saving grace for herself, Muma, and Virginia, as compared to Diedie's fate. What does this suggest about the changing mores of Chinese society and of the world at large regarding mobility and independence? Consider how Isabel describes Hong Kong as having a "can do attitude".
10. Discuss Isabel's relationship with her sister, Virginia. At what points in their lives were they closest? Consider the significance of the palm reader refraining from telling Virginia's destiny.
11. Was there a point in your reading where you felt that Isabel's and Claire's voices and stories converge, either in the real time of the narrative (around 2008, when they visited Shanghai together) or in the book as a synthesis of their work together?
12. Did you read the book as a documented record of a family, or as a more personal experience or scrapbook? Are those categories mutually exclusive? Recall Isabel's statement that "my memories found me" when she returned to Shanghai with Claire in 2016, and discuss the role played by memory in writing this book.
13. How does the book illustrate the meeting of Eastern and Western culture for Isabel and Claire? Which mores have a greater effect on the women during their journey to (re)connect to their shared past, especially vis à vis Claire's uncanny connection to her grandfather's art collection?
14. Have you ever embarked upon a journey through family history with a relative in the way that Claire does with Isabel? What was your experience, and how did it impact your perspective of your family and overall culture?
15. Is there another character in the book whose point of view you would have liked to have heard and, if so, why?



Book clubs discussing Remembering Shanghai in Honolulu and Shanghai