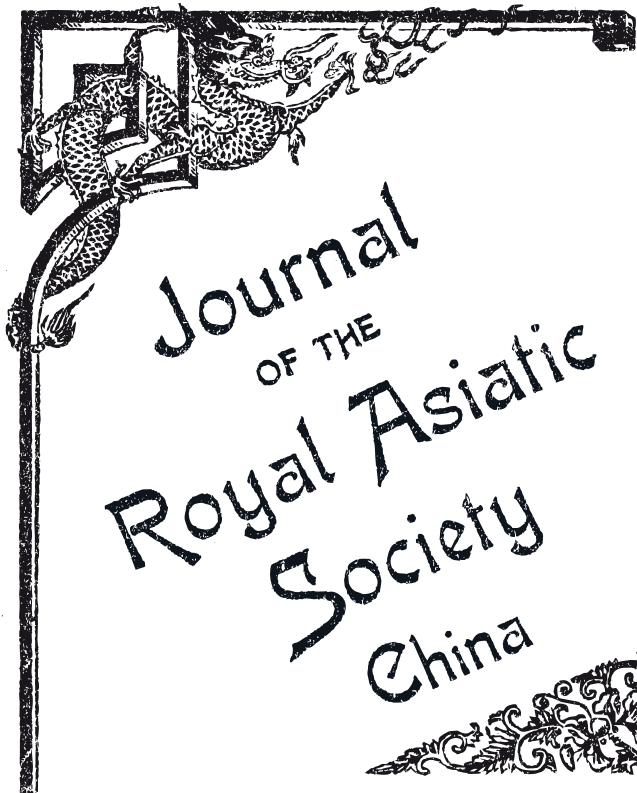

Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China

VOL 79 2019 No 1

Price 100 RMB

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The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China is published by Earnshaw Books on behalf of the Royal Asiatic Society China.

Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China

Vol. 79 No. 1, 2019

Editor
Tracey Willard

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Contributions

The editor of the Journal invites submission of original unpublished scholarly articles and book reviews on the religion and philosophy, art and architecture, archaeology, anthropology and environment, of China. Books sent for review will be donated to the Royal Asiatic Society China Library. Contributors will receive a copy of the Journal.

Library Policy

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www.royalasiaticsociety.org.cn

Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China
Vol. 79 No. 1, 2019

978-988-8552-71-9

EB 136

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Front Cover Image: Street Art in Georgetown, Malaysia, by Elizabeth Vines
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Designed and produced for RAS China by Earnshaw Books Ltd.
17/F, Siu Ying Commercial Building, 151-155 Queen's Road Central, Hong Kong

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BOOK REVIEW

Remembering Shanghai - A memoir of socialites, scholars and scoundrels

by Isabel Sun Chao and Claire Chao

(Published by Plum Brook, Honolulu, 2017)

Reviewed by Duncan Hewitt

Writing a memoir can sometimes seem self-serving, especially if the writer is not a household name – and the main title of this work may not inspire confidence that is has anything very original to add. Yet Isabel Sun Chao's tale of her family history and her upbringing in a wealthy Shanghai family in the 1930s and 40s – co-written with her daughter Claire – is an unexpected gem. A charmingly written – though sometimes tragic – story of a complex and illustrious family, it illuminates many aspects of life in Shanghai and China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and even fills in some details previously absent from English-language histories of Shanghai in that much mythologised era.

And though the book's subtitle, '*A memoir of socialites, scholars and scoundrels*', implies the kind of kaleidoscope that might be expected in any memoir of 1930s' Shanghai, what gives the work greater depth is the honesty with which the authors depict members of their own family as falling into all of these categories, scoundrels included. From the book's opening scene, in which Isabel Sun Chao returns to Shanghai from Hong Kong for the first time in some six decades at the age of almost 80, it is clear that she is determined to confront her past, and to draw conclusions from it. The detailed background research carried out by her daughter, and the family's wide-ranging connections in Shanghai society at the time, add to the book's resonance.

Isabel Sun (Sun Shuying) was born in 1931, to a wealthy family whose way of life epitomised the changes taking place in Shanghai at the time. She grew up in a 'Chinese architect's rendition of a Spanish villa' on Yuyuan Road in the west of the city, and attended nearby Christian schools – the McTyeire School on Edinburgh (now Jiangsu) Road, and later St Mary's Hall, where, like another famous alumna, Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), she developed a love of telling stories (and a loathing of mathematics). Her father, Sun Bosheng, who had inherited a family

fortune and established the bookshop and cultural district on the city's Fuzhou Road, harked back to the past, however – wearing a traditional scholar's gown, and spending much of his time poring over his collection of classical works of Chinese art. His own mother, a devout Buddhist who lived with them, presided over the family in austere fashion, insisting on strict rules at meal times, dressing Sun's older sister Virginia and brother Shufen in humble clothes, and schooling them in religious rites to improve the family's karma.

The author's beloved mother "Muma", on the other hand, was very much a part of 'modern Shanghai', a fashionable socialite with a 'love of beauty and glamour, who spent much of her time shopping, dining or playing *mahjong* with her lady friends, and whose outgoing character and modern thinking led to clashes with her husband – and ultimately, to the break up of their marriage.

Behind Isabel's father's sober lifestyle lay a history of family scandal, involving his own father and uncle – two of the "scoundrels" of the book's title. They were the seventh and fourth sons, respectively of the family's patriarch, Sun Zhutang, who had risen from peasant roots in Zhejiang, via an apprenticeship as a servant boy, to pass the imperial exams. As a young civil servant in the 1860s Sun was propelled into the struggle against the Taiping rebellion. His contribution to the military campaign led the Empress Dowager Cixi to promote him, eventually to ministerial status, as the Qing dynasty sought to modernise. When he retired in the 1880s, Sun built a grand family home in Changshu, Jiangsu province – and also invested in building residential property for the area's growing urban middle class. He expanded his business to Shanghai, buying land and constructing many buildings on and around Fuzhou Road – the city's 'number 4 road' – near the Bund, and later becoming a successful banker and ship-owner.

Despite his success, Sun's fourth and seventh sons were to disappoint him; sent to Shanghai to manage the family fortune in the 1890s, they spent much of their time dissipating their inheritance on gambling and consorting with prostitutes. Having amassed huge debts, they forged a letter from their father, and succeeding in absconding with much of the wealth he had deposited in the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank on the Bund. Despite being grudgingly accepted back into the family some years later, "Number Seven", the author's grandfather, appears to have made little effort to endear himself to her grandmother, the daughter of a prominent general. Against her wishes, he brought

three concubines into the family home, and consorted with an 'untold number of mistresses in brothels and teahouses'.

The status of women is, not surprisingly, a significant thread in *Remembering Shanghai.* It highlights the traditional powerlessness of women in Chinese families, and society in general, but also provides a snapshot of the moment in Chinese history when women's status began to change, if only very gradually: the author's grandmother had shown signs of rebellion in childhood, insisting that her family unbound her feet at the age of ten. Although her feet 'remained deformed and pained her all her life,' she could at least 'walk more or less unrestrictedly'. And while she had an arranged marriage at the age of 14, not seeing her husband's face until he lifted her veil on their wedding night, and initially had little choice but to accept his philandering, she later asserted her independence: as soon as their son (Isabel's father) came of age and inherited some of the family fortune, she left her husband and moved with her son to Shanghai. She did later allow her estranged husband to move temporarily into the family's Shanghai home after he was kidnapped (see below) – but nevertheless studiously ignored him at communal meals. Later, in what the authors interpret as a gesture of female solidarity, she also allowed one of her husband's ex-concubines, who had become addicted to opium and lost all her wealth, to live with the family for the rest of her life.

Isabel's own mother also had to put up with womanising by her otherwise austere husband. But eventually, possibly after falling in love with another man, she rebelled, demanding a divorce, and moving out of the family home to a modern apartment building when Isabel was just eight years old. It was a bold move at the time – not least because a mother had 'virtually no rights' over her children if she divorced; the official settlement allowed her to see them three times a month – though Isabel would often visit her after school.

Still, Isabel and her three sisters received an upbringing that few Chinese girls could have dreamed of just a few decades earlier – with a bilingual education and a family chauffeur to take them on shopping and leisure trips. At 18, after finally passing her high school maths, Isabel began studying at Shanghai's St John's University. Evenings were spent at jazz bars like the Airline Club, where the Filipino house band even wrote a song about her, to lyrics composed by one of her admirers. Another male friend took her riding on his Harley-Davidson, bequeathing a photograph of Isabel, in leather jacket and

shades, astride the bike – just one of the many striking family pictures which, remarkably, survived to adorn this book.

Yet despite the many opportunities it provided, Isabel's childhood contained undertones of the brutality beneath the city's surface glamour that was famously depicted by Empire of the Sun author J.G. Ballard, who was born in Shanghai just a year earlier. In 1938, her grandfather was kidnapped from the Huizhong Hotel he owned on Hankou Road; he was only freed two months later after her father appealed to the city's leading gangsters and paid a huge ransom. And though, as Sun puts it, the bamboo fence around the family garden 'filtered out' many of the 'unsettling changes gripping China in the 1930s,' (she does not recall the notorious assassination of puppet government foreign minister Chen Lu, who lived two doors away, in early 1939), she saw the 'cruelty of the city' for herself at the age of 11: while on a tram journey, she and Virginia witnessed a brutal execution by the side of the road. And though the family managed to keep their home throughout the Japanese occupation – when many wealthy people's homes seized for military use – Isabel did come face to face with a Japanese officer who demanded to inspect their house; however he was apparently won over after she sang him a song in Japanese, and confiscated their neighbour's home instead.

Shortages of food and other necessities were also a constant problem through the war years. And while much returned to normal after the Japanese surrender in 1945, it was, of course, not to last. Isabel's first term at university coincided with the final surrender of the Nationalist government; a few months later, her father, without telling her, decided to send her to join her mother, who was now living in Hong Kong. Isabel left Shanghai by train in early 1950, thinking she was going on a three-week holiday – and did not return to the city again until she was almost 80.

She succeeded in building herself a new life, marrying another St John's alumnus, Raymond Chao, raising three children and working for many decades for the US Information Service in Hong Kong. Yet she could only watch, aghast, as her father's worst fears for the future were borne out. Her sister Virginia – the "best dressed student at St John's", and one of China's first air hostesses – had married George Kiang, a senior manager at the Shanghai Telephone Company. After the revolution, he was initially kept on by the new Communist authorities to train staff. Soon, however, he was sacked and denounced; the couple were forced to

give up their home, and moved back into the Sun family house. Kiang died months later, a broken man, of a heart attack at the age of just 33.

For the other family members who remained in China, life also became tough. Her urbane younger brother Shufen, a law graduate, was first assigned to teach politics in a middle school, then sent to the countryside to do manual labour, before being detained, tortured and beaten in the Cultural Revolution for refusing to chant Maoist slogans. His story had a relatively positive ending – after the Cultural Revolution he returned to teaching, and later wrote a series of books on 'old Shanghai', riding a wave of nostalgia to become a successful and respected author.

Shufen never wrote about his own suffering, however – like many people, he may have simply wanted to forget. Yet the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution is all too clear in Isabel's blunt account: their younger sister Shuquan, a high school teacher in Beijing, sent her son away to stay with her in-laws; the boy later 'watched in horror as Red Guards beat his elderly grandparents to death.' A favourite primary school classmate of Isabel's, who had grown up to become a professor of art and literature, was left 'drowning in a pool of his own blood' by teenage Red Guards.

But it is the fate of Isabel's own father, Diedie, that casts the longest shadow over the story. During the Cultural Revolution the last few servants were forced to leave the family home, and 20 strangers moved in. One of them, a seven-year old boy, found a hidden letter in which Diedie talked about his old life. The boy gave it to the Red Guards, who searched the house and found hidden artworks. The elderly man was detained by police for several months, before being sent home and ordered to sweep the lane every day. Soon he died of a stroke; Isabel and Virginia, living outside China, were unable to attend his funeral.

Isabel Sun does not, however, shirk the fact that the extremes of the situation pushed family members into some morally questionable choices: her sister Virginia never forgave their father for ordering her to leave the family home after her husband's heart attack, fearing that 'his son in law's untimely death might […] attract unwanted attention to the household'. Shuquan, meanwhile, turned away when she saw a fellow teacher being tormented by Red Guards in Tiananmen Square, for fear that she would meet the same fate.

Yet despite all this, the tone of Sun's memoir is philosophical: when Claire discovers that a painting by the Qing master Wang Hui,

seized from her father's collection during the Cultural Revolution, has been sold at auction for almost $4 million, Isabel seeks to 'banish resentment', adding 'either you have it or you don't, and we don't.' Later she muses: 'Perhaps pain and loss are the necessary consequences of a nation's progress; that's why I›ve let go of my family's material assets.' Claire adds that 'even the agents of our family's adversity were victims themselves,' and takes satisfaction in the fact that, while 'China's cruel history broke our family', at least her grandfather's cherished art works 'are treasured once again.'

The story is illustrated not just with photographs but also with drawings by a Hong Kong artist, and the narrative is punctuated by short interludes in which the authors explain aspects of Chinese and Shanghainese culture, from *qipaos* to Chinese characters, family relationships to *mahjong*, all clearly designed to make it accessible to the non-specialist reader. For Shanghai aficionados there is much to cherish too, with an array of colourful minor characters and subplots, from a chance encounter with movie star Butterfly Wu in a boutique at the Cathay Hotel, to the sad story of the beautiful "escort" who married Diedie's godson. There is also the dramatic tale of the decades-long feud between Isabel's godfather, Lu Xiaojia, the son of the military governor of Zhejiang, and Shanghai crime boss Huang Jinrong, which began when Lu heckled Huang's mistress, a singer, during a Peking opera performance.

Sun also provides a rare description of life at St Mary's Hall – attended not only by Eileen Chang but many other influential Shanghai women; this is timely, since some of that long-forgotten school's buildings have recently returned to centre stage, having been renovated during construction of a shopping mall on the school's former site near Zhongshan Park. Sun's accounts of her attempts to avoid getting up for breakfast, and how she unwittingly offended her maths teacher, bring the school vividly to life, as does her entertaining description of her American history and English teacher, Deaconess Evelyn Ashworth, whose nun's headgear 'resembled a giant wonton'.

Such observation is typical of a thoughtfully written story, which is accessibly and touchingly told – and represents a valuable addition to the canon of accounts of life in Shanghai in its sometimes glamorous, often brutal formative decades.

Duncan Hewitt's biography appears elsewhere in this volume.