



# Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels

*Claire Chao*

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## **Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels** Claire Chao

Outstanding Memoir winner and Book of the Year, second place, awarded by the Independent Author Network.

A high position bestowed by China's empress dowager grants power and wealth to the Sun family. For Isabel, growing up in glamorous 1930s and '40s Shanghai, it is a life of utmost privilege. But while her scholar father and fashionable mother shelter her from civil war and Japanese occupation, they cannot shield the family forever.

When Mao comes to power, eighteen-year-old Isabel journeys to Hong Kong, not realizing that she will make it her home--and that she will never see her father again. Meanwhile, the family she has left behind struggles to survive, only to have their world shattered by the Cultural Revolution. Isabel returns to Shanghai fifty years later with her daughter, Claire, to confront their family's past--one they discover is filled with love and betrayal, kidnappers and concubines, glittering pleasure palaces and underworld crime bosses.

Lavishly illustrated and meticulously researched, Remembering Shanghai follows five generations from a hardscrabble village to vibrant Shanghai to the bright lights of Hong Kong. By turns harrowing and heartwarming, this vivid memoir explores identity, loss and the unpredictable nature of life against the epic backdrop of a nation and a people in turmoil.

## **Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels Details**

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# From Reader Review Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels for online ebook

## Kenzee says

\*I won this book in a GoodReads Giveaway\*

I really enjoyed this book. If I had to pick a family solely on the level of interest they'd generate if I ever wrote a memoir, the Sun family with their colorful past and array of interesting characters would certainly be high up on my list. I thought Claire (and Isabel) did a wonderful job capturing both the beauty and ugliness that was living of Shanghai.

The illustrations were beautiful. And while I'm sure they won't be to everyone's liking because they do interrupt the story, I also liked the information inserts. I for one enjoyed learning about Chinese history and culture. Having the information displayed alongside a personal narrative really worked for me.

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## Nianci Li says

I particularly appreciate the two distinct voices in the book, Claire's voice as a researcher and Isabel's coming-of-age narrative. They are independent yet strengthen each other in this co-authorship.

I'm fond of the gentle and authentic perspective into the history. I enjoy the family saga via the lens of an innocent girl so much that I almost forget it is after all set against the wartime, a disturbing age when the family is disunited. This challenges my usual perception of any unrest in history. That it is not just casualty illustrated by numbers, power struggle by political parties, or territory resettlement by countries. Remembering Shanghai provides me an alternative to understanding history through individual lives, especially rare in the eye-witness account of a young girl, a fortunate position indeed. The Third-born daughter in the family, Isabel experienced neither the strict discipline under Qinpo growing up nor the social instability during the cultural revolution. Yet she witnessed and vicariously experienced the drastic change through her family. There is a sense of mission in her recounting the history, which convinces my belief in opposite duty shared by the survivor and the fortunate in their collective memory of history. The survivor must forget, in order to move on; whereas the fortunate must remember, in order to embrace the ever-changing reality.

I cherish the forgiving tone throughout the book, as well as the lovely illustrations and reader-friendly chapter breaks—those information pages come in perfect timing as my eyes are getting tired from reading. Love it! That said, I wonder whether all the tactic is to soften the grisly aspect of that history, putting a rose-colored lens on us readers. This approach reminds me of another famous Hong Kong author Xixi (1938–), who is known for writing the vicissitude of Hong Kong through ordinary people and their daily-life struggles. Optimistic individuals in declining era.

In short, admirable work indeed!

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## Joanne L Pating says

This book was easy to read and I learned a lot about old Shanghai. I can definitely recommend!

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## Meghan says

Having been interested in modern Chinese history since my Junior year of high school, I was intrigued when I saw the title of this book while browsing through Goodreads giveaways. I recognized the big-picture historical events from school: Opium Wars, Kuomintang, Cultural Revolution. The family history of *Remembering Shanghai* allowed me to see how these events affected people on a personal level. If I had to give one critique it would be that the vocabulary used to tell the story was often peppered with words that might not be accessible to persons whose first language is not English.

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## Pat says

I received a free copy of "Remembering Shanghai, by Isabel Sun and Claire Chao through the "Good Reads First Reads Giveaway."

This is a beautifully illustrated, sincere and revealing autobiography of an attractive and well off family in Shanghai. Although not its main theme, there is considerable information about that country and its culture. These are intelligent and fascinating individuals responding to dramatic political changes.

This talented author teases us into wanting to know more about their country. Chinese names may confuse us occasionally, but over all, this book is one exceptional blend of art and family history.

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## Sarina says

Through no fault of its own, *Remembering Shanghai: A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels* wasn't my cup of tea. I liked it best when Isabel recounted her memories. Unfortunately for me, Isabel's narrative was often interrupted by general information pages and information of her ancestral history. I say "interrupted" because it took me out of the memoir experience.

This book is best for people who know close to nothing about Chinese culture. Someone who is familiar with the culture may be distracted by the page-length explanations of what a qipao is, Chinese ancestral names, binding feet, naming based on birth order, etc. As I'm somewhere in the middle of those, the explanations gave new information at best and were a distraction at worst.

I didn't enjoy this book as much as I was hoping I would. Maybe I will return to it sometime in the future to find that I can appreciate it more with age.

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## **Jennifer says**

There are so many ways to tell a family story, and so many ways to tell history, and yet Claire and Isabel Sun Chao have somehow discovered a refreshingly new way to narrate the past. The five generations of relatives, friends, lovers, business partners, and everything between depicted here together form a chorus of voices that breathe music into a side of Chinese history I never knew about. Full of glamour and suffering, artistic flourish and squandered dreams, *Remembering Shanghai* is a story we'll all nevertheless relate to because of its deep sense of humanity and self-discovery, reflected in the way this mother-daughter pair so seamlessly interwove their shared, yet separate, stories of home.

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## **Debbie Funakawa says**

Exquisitely written and illustrated, Claire Chao's book draws the reader into a culture and time rich in its history yet honest in its reflection of her family's trials and tribulations. It is captivating with its real life narrative that reads like a drama. I highly recommended the book to anyone who enjoys reading about the Asian culture. The book is a piece of art--a wonderful gift for family and friends.

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## **Lea McKenna says**

I received a copy of *Remembering Shanghai* by Isabel Sun Chao and Claire Chao as a giveaway in return for an honest review. I enjoyed the book! It gives a look into the lives of several generations of a family in Shanghai, with the focus on the 1930's and 1940's. In addition to the descriptions, there are photographs and hand-drawn illustrations that add to presentation of information. The book consists of chapters that relate individual snippets that look at the life and culture of the time. I learned a great deal about the culture. There is a glossary at the back of the book to help with any terms that might cause confusion. This was an enjoyable read!

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## **Reader Views says**

Reviewed by Kimberly Luyckx for Reader Views (2/19)

"*Remembering Shanghai*" is a collection of stories written by mother and daughter, Isabel Sun Chao and Claire Chao. It describes the time leading up to the Communist take-over of China and its subsequent years. Based on Isabel's young life growing up in the coastal city of Shanghai, the compilation is both personal and historic. While the country's rebellious changes swirled all around her, the wealth of Isabel's family and the fortified enclave in which she lived served as a cocoon. The surrounding Shanghai mini metropolis was filled with European and American influences. These manifested in the permissive, western style of Isabel's mother yet contrasted greatly to the traditional and more austere ways of her Buddhist grandmother.

This book presents a time of turmoil with foreign occupation and warring parties changing the culture of China and the city of Shanghai. The volume has many italicized paragraphs that contain Claire Chao's commentary on Isabel's experiences. Her research adds to the depth of the memoir by providing important political and historical background. And yet, it remains the personal account of a family who stayed

connected to its roots despite the relocation and detachment of its branches.

There is quite a bit of drama in this book that reminds me of a riveting television series like “Upstairs Downstairs.” Its subtitle, “A Memoir of Socialites, Scholars and Scoundrels,” is justified with thrilling tales involving prominent celebrities and academics, high-ranking government officials and mobsters whose lives and behaviors directly affect the Sun family. At the same time, it highlights the political turmoil that significantly affected the country and Shanghai as a whole.

Representing the perfect combination of historical fiction, memoir and novel, this publication is informative yet personal and filled with wonderful descriptions of cultural dress, attitude, food, art and architecture. It is helpful to have the family tree diagram as a reference. In my opinion, this is the best kind of historical account - one in which the writers have directly experienced - with just the necessary personal photos to complement the piece. Adding great flavor to Isabel’s narrative are the cultural sidebars that present topics such as foot-binding, Chinese letter writing, foreign influences, birth order importance and the art of mahjong to name a few.

I admire the easy transition between the past and current time periods. The seamless segue from Isabel’s memory to the present-day makes for a stimulating read. It demonstrates a perspective and adds depth to the stories. I love the detailed comparisons that point to the degradation of Shanghai’s age of opulence. When Isabel revisits her childhood home, her description confirms the prestige of the building despite the years of deterioration and exploitation incurred.

“Remembering Shanghai” is a book whose composition has been carefully prepared - from its elegant prose to its intricate illustrations and attractive photography. It presents itself like a museum artifact. It is an extraordinary effort to present a significant piece of Chinese history that also tells a captivating personal tale. Its authors, Isabel Sun Chao and Claire Chao, devoted a great deal of time to hone their masterpiece and it shows.

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### **Kathy says**

This is the best book I’ve read in years! And I don’t just say that because I was privileged to teach Claire Chao when she was a student at the Hong Kong International School. The writing is exquisite. The illustrations and photos bring the story to life. It will touch anyone who has wished to understand the lives of their ancestors.

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### **Dick Reynolds says**

Although it’s called a memoir, this book is also a work of art and a fascinating bit of history. The authors are mother and daughter, Isabel being the mother who was born in Shanghai in 1931. Claire was born in 1961 when the family lived in Hong Kong.

Isabel’s father moved to Shanghai in 1913 when she was an infant, the only child of prosperous parents.

During Isabel’s younger years, Shanghai was a haven for the displaced: Russians fleeing Bolsheviks, Jews fleeing Nazis, Communists in hiding and refugees seeking shelter. The city even had two different electrical systems with 110 volts on the French side and 220 volts in the International Settlement.

In the late 1920s the Kuomintang were hunting down the revered Communist revolutionary, Zhou Enlai, who

was hiding in Shanghai.. The leader of the Kuomintang was Chang Kai-shek. The Communists eventually took over in October 1949 when Chairman Mao Zedong declared the nation as the Peoples Republic of China. Chang Kai-shek and his citizens escaped to Formosa which is now Taiwan.

Japan invaded China in the late 1930s before the start of WWII. One of the things they did was to ban the use of radios by Shanghai residents, a crude attempt at blocking American broadcasts by such luminous “enemies” as Bing Crosby. After the war Isabel recalled her love of watching American movies. Some of her favorites were Gone with the Wind, The Adventures of Robin Hood, Kismet, and All This and Heaven Too starring Bette Davis.

Isabel and Claire wrote different parts of the book but Isabel is the principle author. The text shown in normal English characters is Isabel’s narrative while those sections in italics are the results of Claire’s research. The book is a fascinating bit of history, populated with photographs of family members along with colorful sketches of street scenes, buildings and historic paintings. There is also a family tree diagram and a glossary of Chinese words with their English translations.

This is a wonderful and highly unusual book, a valuable addition to the personal library of anyone who is interested in the history and customs of China.

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### **lisa says**

Riveting! This debut is an engrossing and unique look Chinese twentieth century history from the cultural revolution to modern times told through five generations of an elite (and colorful!) family. Told from the perspective of Isabel Chao who was raised in glamorous Old Shanghai by her daughter Claire Chao, this intimate portrait offers a first hand look at the untold story of China - ranging from glamour, cruelty, heartbreak, betrayal to triumphs and resilience. This unique and beautiful family portrait that offers title is perfect for a book club, and anyone interested in Chinese culture or looking for a engrossing story. I love this book!

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### **C says**

I received this fascinating historical read as a Goodreads giveaway. As the author recounts her upbringing in Shanghai, she provides color to the history and culture of China through her relationships, encounters, and life experiences.

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### **Ccdemaio says**

Claire Chao and her mother tell the tale of her mother’s life in Shanghai and subsequently Hong Kong. I like how I feel as though I am in Old Shanghai when hearing about Isabel’s life as a child. Shanghai is a vibrant Chinese city with an international flair and when she goes back as an old woman with Claire you can really feel how much it has changed. While the artwork is charming and the “info” pages may be helpful to many, I found them a bit pedantic. Granted, I have lived in Asia for eighteen plus years so perhaps they would not be so to someone uninitiated to Asian history and culture. Overall, the tale is told in an enchanting way, with two clear voices, Isabel’s and Claire’s. Well done!

