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Shanghai



Synopsis

In the 1920s and 1930s Shanghai was called "the whore of the Orient", home to gangsters and warlords, where nightclubs never closed and hotels supplied heroin on room service. It became the epitome of glamour, immortalized in books and films. With its bustling population of British, Chinese, Americans, French, Germans, Japanese and White Russians, its extremes of poverty and wealth, it appeared to straddle East and West. By the time the Chinese Communist takeover of 1949 had destroyed the illusion, Shanghai had passed into legend. This portrait of the city in its heyday combines first-hand accounts with extensive research and lively reconstruction.

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Customer Reviews

In a spellbinding portrait of Shanghai in the 1920s and '30s, English writer Sergeant (The Old Sow in the Back Room) digs past the familiar image of a vice-ridden Westernized enclave and uncovers a city of many identities. Her Shanghai is an oasis of native artistic experiment; an unregulated refuge for international business where children worked 14-hour days; the center of China's innovative film industry; and a cosmopolitan magnet that became home to White Russian merchants and aristocrats, Japanese jazz musicians, emigre Iraqi Jews and refugees from Nazi Germany. The sprawling narrative is structured around three traumatic historical episodes: the bloodbath of 1927, when Chiang Kai-shek's troops and his former Communist allies slaughtered each other; the Japanese invasion of Shanghai in 1932, which claimed 14,000 lives; and the 1937 outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. Sergeant, who has made frequent trips to the city since the end of the Cultural Revolution, interviewed dozens of current and former residents, both foreign and Chinese, and she integrates their colorful stories into her exceptionally vivid, informal chronicle. Photos. Copyright

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This was a gift for my 96 yr old mother who was raised in Shanghai during this same time period. She was delighted to receive it and when thumbing through it said it looked like it would be very good.

Best book about Shanghai Pre Communist take over. I highly recommend this purchase to anyone who has an interest in this fascinating city at its most exciting.

pretty good

Could not get into this book. Donated it to local LIBRARY It was not what I really wanted to read

In 1842, Great Britain's victory over China in the First Opium War opened Shanghai to foreign development and created a unique form of government that would give rise to both the spectacular successes and failures of the "most international metropolis the world had ever seen." Shanghai was a free city, where no visa or passport was required for entry. Foreign citizens whose governments had treaties with China benefited from "extraterritoriality" and were not subject to Chinese law but to the laws of their homelands. The city had fewer constraints. Unfettered by colonial law or obligations, Shanghai was governed by a Municipal Council of businessmen. It became the largest port in the Orient. In 1895, Japan brought industry to the city. By the 1920s and 1930s, Shanghai was a city of over 3 million people, the cultural center of China as well as a haven for "the dispossessed, the ambitious, and the criminal" from all corners of the globe. That is the heyday that Harriet Sergeant writes about in "Shanghai: Collision Point of Cultures 1918-1939". An economic center since the 1840s and an industrial center since the 1890s, Shanghai was as much a Chinese as a foreign city by the 1930s, a cultural center and hotbed of political thought. White Russians fleeing Bolsheviks had brought European arts to the city. Chinese academics and artists fleeing warlords or Nationalists brought both radical and traditional culture. It was the pride before the fall. In August 1937, China and imperial Japan went to war in Shanghai. The city never recovered from the destruction of its industries and effective occupation by Japan. In 1941, Japan seized it officially. In 1949, Mao's Communists marched in. But those who lived in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, when the city's legend was bested only by its reality, tend to recall it with awe. That persistent allure inspired Harriet Sergeant to seek out memories of that time -Chinese,

Western, and Japanese- on three continents. The memories of Shanghainese (Chinese residents) and Shanghailanders (foreign residents) bring the amazing contrasts and collaborations of Shanghai to life. A section is dedicated to each of 3 major populations: The White Russians, The British, and The Chinese, describing the history, experience, and impact of each population in Shanghai, from the lowliest paupers to the most extravagant wealth. The reminiscences of former residents from all walks of life never fail to fascinate. The author's astute assessment of the Shanghai businessman, the city's driving force, displays uncommon insight. The stories of Shanghai's populations are punctuated by chapters describing the city's battles in which the outside world encroached on its stubborn independence: the onslaught of Nationalists and subsequent purge of communists in 1927, the street battles between the Japanese and Chinese armies in 1932, and finally the arrival of the inevitable war in 1937. In her exploration of Shanghai between the wars, Harriet Sergeant presents a portrait of an extraordinary city and the people who made it tick as well as Shanghai's perspective on the world. China and Japan are viewed through Shanghai's eyes, not the other way around. Harriet Sergeant researched this book in the 1980s, so her occasional comments on modern Shanghai, though interesting, are dated. That leaves me to wonder what she would think of the city today, since Shanghai has enjoyed a renaissance. "Shanghai: Collision Point of Cultures" is a fairly rigorous but thoroughly enjoyable story of one of the world's great cities when its absurd independence and stunning heterogeneity made all things seem possible.

This is a work of exceptional richness and observation. Beautifully constructed and written -the author draws from conversations across the work, the most sensual yet critically insightful portrait of this strangely synthetic city. Having reviewed much of the literature of prewar Shanghai, Ms. Sergeant's work gives the most complete sense of life and death of the city and of the culture.

Through her skillful narration interspersed with rich vignettes, Sergeant delved into the fate, suffering and individual triumphs of 4 representative strata of the pre-World War II Shanghai society - the English (the snobbish old colonial master), the Japanese (nouveau rich old-colonial-slaves-turned-new-colonial-master), the White Russians (the royalist Russians abandoned by fate and humiliated by self-degradation), and the Chinese (downtrodden colonial slaves seemingly condemned to unending cycles of oppression from within and outside its own community) - in so doing Sergeant succeeded in vividly recreating the eerily exciting pulse and ambience an extraordinary city unique to the social, economic and political climate of its time. As a modernized China re-engages the world confident of its destiny on one hand and

betraying insecurity about its traumatic past on the other, Sargeant's work is an essential background reading for any foreigner with a serious interest in engaging China at a deeper level.

The most memorable part of this fine, absorbing account of pre-war Shanghai is the description of the horrific factory conditions in the Chinese- and Western- owned businesses there. Here are tales right out of Dickens! I realized, unfortunately, that the unsavoury reputation of modern China's horrible factories has a long and sad history. The description of girls from the chrome plating factories with "chromium holes eating into their arms" was particularly awful. The book is also full of interesting stories and anecdotes of all aspects of old Shanghai - the parties, social gatherings, etc, and carries on right up to the communist takeover (when newer and even more devastating things happened). Many interesting photographs. For anyone who's been to the city recently and seen how much of the pre-war architecture survives, this book will be a treat. The author gets a little lost at the end - perplexed (sarcastic?) at Europe's seeming abandonment of the place to the Japanese without a fight, though it seems obvious that London was more worth saving than a ruthless mercantile city like Shanghai - kind of a pre-war Hong Kong is what it was, and clearly from these pages not so much glamorous as crass. Well-worth the read, this book will give the reader much food for thought as to China's current direction and unhealthy work conditions. Must Peking try so hard to follow in the ways of its more ruthless ancestors? Another good description of Shanghai's interesting and horrible sides is W. H. Auden's and Christopher Isherwood's 1930's account, "Journey to a War."

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