

Book Reviews



Book Review

Michael David Kwan, *Things That Must Not Be Forgotten: A Childhood in Wartime China*, Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 2000, reprinted 2012, 240 pp. + xvi.

Telling stories of wartime China from the perspective of a Eurasian boy, Kwan's memoir reconstructs a lost China where unforeseen wars and revolution, international politics, and economic disorders in the 1930s and 1940s changed people's life courses as they carried on their patriotic struggle for survival. The 2012 new edition adds a preface by the author's son on his father's late years in China since 1980s, which presents the author's life story in a Chinese emotion *yeluo guigen* – fallen leaves return to the root of the tree. The book provides fascinating details on the lives of a Chinese family with a British housewife, their interactions with other Westerners, Eurasians, and Chinese folks. Kwan focused on how turbulent changes in China affected his coming-of-age, his family members and their friends. Through the inquisitive eyes of a biracial child in search for his identity at home, within the small Western community, and in Chinese society at large, Kwan presented the contradictions, brutality and ruptures in wartime China with fresh and humane touches.

The first eight chapters described the sheltered and privileged life of David's childhood. Born in Japanese occupied Harbin in 1934 as the youngest son to an influential railway administrator who worked underground for the Nationalist government, Kwan's Swiss biological mother jilted him, and he called his father's new British wife Ellen as Mother. Under his father's tutelage, David had lived with Anglo-Chinese friends in British Concession in Tienjin, developed friendship with a tenant farmer who engaged in guerilla activities in Beidaihe, and enjoyed the life of the Western community at the Legation Quarter in Beijing which isolated them from "war, disease, poverty and starvation." (p. 56) David was not immune to the suffering of ordinary Chinese through shared experiences of Japanese bombing, gunfight, and martial law, and interactions through shopping, sightseeing, and vacation breaks. First tutored by Chinese teachers then attended the International School, David grew up bicultural with the knowledge his father was a secret agent for the Nationalist government in Chungking. After the Pearl Harbor Incident, Japanese sealed the Legation Quarter and closed the International School. David attended a Chinese school briefly where he suffered from excruciating racism and bullying.

Chapters 9-16 told stories of David's years in Qingdao, a German Concession which changed hands from the puppet Nanking regime, to the restored Nationalist government, then to the Communist. David attended a Catholic School where teachers humiliated students and education was poor. He made friend with a Eurasian kid Shao whose soprano voice "was the glory of the choir" (p. 113), and became an altar boy. Father organized sports meet to defeat Japanese denigration that "Chinese are sick men of East Asia". Hiding from his tree house, David enjoyed watching the Japanese Navy admiral next door had afternoon tea with his wife, and enjoying their Western music from a gramophone. Ellen befriended with an Italian widow Maria Contini who ran an antique store. As the Pacific War intensified, the Kwans helped wounded resistance fighters, including an American airman Captain Perry. The bully Brother Wilfred was frightened to death by Japanese air raids, and the school headmaster Brother Feng who was thought to escape to the guerilla band actually survived by hiding in a cellar. Mayor Yue who had connections with the Chunking government secretly colluded with the Japanese.

When the Japanese surrendered, the privileged lives of the Kwans deteriorated. The National army backed by American forces seized property and assets from civilians: took away Maria's antique store, occupied half of the Kwan's house, and seized their and their bank accounts and house in Beijing. The coward Brother Feng and chameleon Mayor Yue became resistance heroes, yet David's patriotic father was under investigation because of his previous affiliation. Believing in Father's integrity, the family hired a lawyer Mr. Shi rather than bribe for his freedom. Mother worked as a secretary for US military base and had a close relationship with Captain Perry who now stationed with US marine in Qingdao. David's friend Shao lost his voice and developed close relationship with US marine, which brought him humiliation at school. As soon as Shao's father was released from detainment, they moved to Brazil. Lonely and unpopular, David joined Boy Scouts and became cynical and callous. When Civil War broke out in China, Captain Perry withdrew from Qingdao with US Marine, and Maria sailed for New York to be reunited with her son. Mayor Yue who lost his backing was sentenced to death as a corrupt official. As David's brother Tim who served the China's National Airline in wartime helped get Father out of prison, a cable from G2 in San Francisco confirmed that Father had been their liaison since the Japanese incursion. The family arranged David to study in Hong Kong before the Communist takeover.

Chapter 17 took us to Shanghai, David's last stop in China on his way to Hong Kong, where he witnessed the street smartness of local people, and how inflation and financial collapse affected people's lives. Interesting episodes unfolded complicated relationships among family members: his greedy brother Albert and his wife held the boy as a hostage to extort money. David's grandmother, the matron of a prominent gentry household favoured the boy

because of his familiarity with Chinese culture. Rescued by his cousin from Albert's control, David flew to Hong Kong at the age of twelve.

The book makes several contributions to the study of wartime China. First, it touches racial meanings of being Eurasian – seen as “half-caste” by Europeans, “foreign devil” by Chinese, and “evil imperialists” by a Japanese teacher. Second, it emphasizes on human suffering during the wartime by contrasting the earlier privileges of the Western Community in China with their unexpected endings – captured and killed by the Japanese, repatriated from Japanese prison camps, and reunited with family members elsewhere in the world. Third, it provides an alternative way to look at Chinese history in the 1930s to 1940s from a global perspective, and reminded people of less known history – the wartime puppet regimes and their collaborators, Japanese discrimination against Westerners, and the brief US military and marine presence on China's coast before the Communist takeover. The book portrays a gallery of vivid characters of all nationalities in wartime China, and captures the lure of a lost world.

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