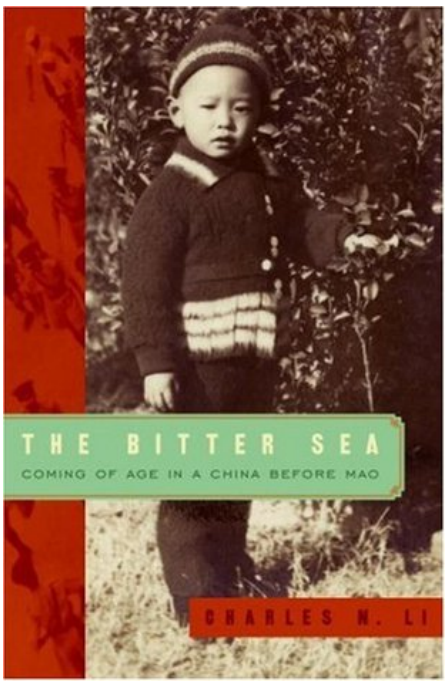

The Bitter Sea: Coming of Age in a China Before Mao

Charles N. Li

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> A haunting and illuminating true story of growing up in the turbulent early years of modern China

In this exceptional memoir, Charles N. Li brings into focus the growth pains of a nation undergoing torturous rebirth and offers an intimate understanding of the intricate, subtle, and yet all-powerful traditions that bind the Chinese family.

Born near the beginning of World War II, Li Na was the youngest son of a wealthy Chinese government official. By the time he was twenty-one, he had witnessed enough hardship, hope, and tremendous change to last a lifetime. Li saw his family's fortunes dashed when Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists came to power in 1945, transforming his father from a powerful official to a prisoner jailed for treason. He survived a year in a dangerous Nanjing slum and watched from his aunt's Shanghai apartment as the Communist army marched in and seized the city in 1948. He experienced both the heady materialism of the decadent foreign "white ghosts" in British Hong Kong and the crippling starvation within the harsh confines of a Communist reform school. He went from being Li Na—the dutiful Chinese son yearning for a harsh, manipulative father's love—to Charles, an independent Chinese American seeking no one's approval but his own.

Lyrical and luminous, intense and extraordinary, *The Bitter Sea* is an unforgettable tale of one young man and his country.

The Bitter Sea: Coming of Age in a China Before Mao Details

Date	:	Published February 5th 2008 by Harper (first published 2008)
ISBN	:	9780061346644
Author	:	Charles N. Li
Format	:	Hardcover 283 pages
Genre	:	Cultural, China, Nonfiction, Biography, Autobiography, Memoir, Asia, History, Biography Memoir

From Reader Review The Bitter Sea: Coming of Age in a China Before Mao for online ebook

Lori says

I really enjoyed reading this book. Although parts of it were harsh (due to real life stories and situations)I loved getting a perspective of China I've never had before. I can't say the writing style was utterly captivating - maybe that is just a cultural difference - so it wasn't always a "I can't put this book down" page turner, but I did really look forward to the times I could read it and loved getting to understand Chinese history better.

Wellington says

This is a captivating book about a boy and his relationship with his family (his father specifically) growing up in China before Mao. The book shows a tough life but a lot of tender moments. It has some fun anecdotes including tricking a "kidnapper" to fall into the latrine and piling dead flies in front of the principal's office.

And amazingly ... this could be the author's 4th language? Mandarin, Shanghaiese, Cantonese ... and then English? He has a handle on the English language better than most American writers.

Nytetyger says

I'm honestly not sure WHY this book was written; you get a glimpse into a Pre-Mao China, but only via the eyes of a person who was neither rich nor poor, and who wrote more of his personal feelings on the universe than letting us see the world around him. The setting was interchangeable with that of any city where the people were poor after WWII.

And, I must admit, the continual bad feelings between the author and his father made it feel more like a book written as a therapy excuse for the author coming to grips with his own feelings and less like something you should be sharing with the world.

Agreenhouse says

I chose this book because I love to read anything about modern Chinese history, but the book focuses more on a bitter father-son relationship. The question is how much bitterness was generated by the horrific historical circumstances and how much was plain old personality conflict. Li Nai was born during World War II, while his Chinese father worked as an important government official in the Japanese-occupied government -- kind of like the Vichy government in France. His father got jailed after the war ended by the Nationalists, so Li Nai and his family left their life of luxury for life in the slums. Interestingly, Li Nai fondly recalls his days as a street urchin, running around the streets with his friends. Eventually, the family reunites in Hong Kong, where his politically ambitious, cold-hearted father tries to make a comeback. His emotionally distant mother ends up leaving the father after 30 years to go live in a Christian seminary. So, I

guess with such a dysfunctional family, you could understand why he liked life on the streets.

The most interesting historical part of the book was his description of attending a thought-reform school in the 1950s in the mainland in order to gain access to a university. I never thought anybody would voluntarily return to China under Mao, but many ethnic Chinese had no where to go to make a future -- not British-controlled Hong Kong, nor Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, where anti-Chinese backlash destroyed businesses and homes.

The thought reform schools were incredibly creepy. Keeping people near starvation is a good way to control people. Also, Li Nai felt shock at seeing the quietness of the cities under Mao, the lack of street life and entrepreneurs.

The book is straight-forward and truthful, but not great writing. If you are interested in modern Chinese history, it fills in a few gaps and tells an interesting personal history. My own personal connection -- Li Nai attended Pei Zheng high school in Hong Kong. I taught at the affiliate school -- Pei Zheng Commercial College in China.

Maureen says

This is the story of a Chinese man whose father rose to political power as a collaborator with the Japanese. After his family falls from power, the author lives in the slums outside Nanjing, in Shanghai under the Nationalists and then Communists, in British Hong Kong, and in a Chinese reform school before he finally makes it to the States. Half history, half biography as he details his relationship with his father. I couldn't believe he survived it all, and the story was so gripping that I almost carried this library book on the plane home with me so that I wouldn't have to wait to finish it.

Luke Miers says

Bought this book on a whim for $5. I have no idea how it came to be published.

Rather than an on-the-ground exploration of life in pre-communist China it reads like the diary of someone who didn't get along with their father. Might have been cathartic to write, at least.

Louise says

There are many good narratives by survivors of this period in Chinese history. This short narrative, by the son of a player in the drama of 20th century China, is unique for its descriptions of the number of facets of Chinese life experienced by the author as a boy and young man.

Before leaving his teens he had lived in sheltered wealth and in the slums of Nanjing, in the freewheeling city of Shanghai, in various places in Hong Kong (including living through the exodus of refugees within 3 days of border closure) and in a "reform school" on mainland China. We learn about each of these through his descriptions and anecdotes.

The chapter on the "reform school" needs to be incorporated in larger annals of modern Chinese history. He tells how students who went back to their mother country to carve out careers in the "new China" were separated by previous country, how they lived, ate, swatted flies and received an education that did not need books. With student Mei's revenge, you forget the seriousness of his transgression for a moment because you just have to laugh out loud.

Most dramatic is the portrait of the author's father, whose high station in life resulted from his important role in the Japanese occupation. The advice he gives his son is like that of Machiavelli to the young Prince. In the beginning we have the child's eye view of how the family's good fortune during the Japanese occupation ended, and later the author's adult perspective on how his father became the man that he was.

I was surprised to see, at the end that the author credits Judith Regan for initiating the project and encouraging him in writing this book.

I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in 20th century China.

Sarai says

Product Description
Born near the beginning of World War II, Li Na was the youngest son of a wealthy Chinese government official. He saw his father jailed for treason and his family's fortunes dashed when Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists came to power in 1945. He watched from his aunt's Shanghai apartment as the Communist army seized the city in 1948. He experienced the heady materialism of the decadent foreign "white ghosts" in British Hong Kong and starved within the harsh confines of a Communist reform school. Over the course of twenty-one tumultuous years, he went from Li Na, the dutiful Chinese son yearning for a stern, manipulative father's love, to Charles, an independent Chinese American seeking no one's approval but his own. Lyrical and luminous, intense and extraordinary, The Bitter Sea is an unforgettable true story of a young man, his father, and his country.

I read this as an advanced readers copy and loved it. Charles' story is amazing, especially his time spent living off the streets as a young child and then his development into a man of learning in later years. Fascinating story, well-written and poignant.

Drew Clay says

I've always loved stories about people's lives and families. I especially have a soft spot for dysfunctional families - so this was right up my alley!

I liked how the author spoke to the turmoil in his personal life while weaving into the story the woeful events in Chinese history between the mid-thirties to early nineteen-sixties.

Good writing. Good descriptions. I learned a lot about Chinese culture, history, and one man's struggle.

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ben says

I struggled with this book for the entire first chapter. It felt cold and the author hits you with so much pain and despair without any context that I almost chose out of the book.

The book is really a great read on Chinese history, and a challenging look at father-son relationships from an extremely deep and intimate perspective. I was humbled by my individualism and arrogance by the end of the book by this man's humility and strength to overcome.

a solid read. in the end it only took me one day to finish it.

Liz Neale says

Interesting book.

J. says

Contrasted with the drama he sees all around him, Charles Li's autobiography is a quiet, solitary account of the upheaval in the China of 1944 onwards to the 1960s.

Born into the affuent surroundings afforded to a father who was a member of the collaborationist Nanking regime under the Japanese, the author was tought a practical, confucian code that distanced him from his actual situation. History swept the cars, mansion and servants away with the onslaught of the Nationalist movement of Chiang Kai-shek. From here onwards the family finds itself on the wrong side of everything, and our narrator finds himself progressively more alienated at each development.

The first two-thirds of the book conveys that sinking feeling, the sense of being on the wrong side of history, something infinitely complex for a child on his own to metabolize. The boy gets occasional guidance from the father, but the advice is cryptic & distant at best. "*Rule Number One: Keep everyone else in the light while you yourself remain in shadow*."

Pretty much cast adrift and left to his own ideas, occasionally the boy gets a lift, as when stumbling onto a treasure trove of popular culture, a mashup of east and west in happy agreement:

In order to avoid unpleasant encounters, I had to find a place in that flat to hide after school and made myself as inconspicuous as possible on weekends. A tiny room at the back of the flat, used as storage space, provided me a surprisingly beneficial escape.
Originally intended as a bedroom for a second servant, the little room now housed books that did not belong to mainstream literature in the Confucian framework, books that did not deserve the title of classics. They were "lowbrow" books--novels folklores, mythologies, opera librettos, travel books, ghost stories, martial-art legends, even American magazines such as National Geographic and Life. Father had never assigned any of those books for me to read. After all, Confucius had decreed twenty-five hundred years ago that any written work other than poetry, philosophy, history, and didactic essays was to be dismissed as "sreet talk and alley gossip." But to me, the lowbrow books in that little room offered suspenseful diversion and fascinating

information...

Across the breadth of the book the young man moves from Nanking to Shanghai and eventually away to the British Colony of Hong Kong, essentially part of a family of political exiles. When time for University comes around, Li is urged by his father to repatriate to (what by now is the Maoist mainland of) China, advising that the progressive marxist regime would reward his efforts and welcome him as a native son.

It is here that the narrative finds its voice, and the pace quickens perceptibly. Met at the border by a grey-suited Comrade Zhu, a nervous Li is taken inland on a train.
As the train pulled into Guangzhou Station he told me, "I am going to hand you over to a special school established for students who returned from overseas."
"But I am not from overseas," I protested. There isn't a sea separating Hong Kong from China. Just a small river."
"Well, we include Hong Kong and Macau in the 'overseas' category at this point in time," he said officiously, dismissing my protest. "But of course, they are without a doubt an integral part of our motherland. You know *that we will take them back."*
"What will I do in the special school for students returned from overseas ?"
"You will undergo thought reform."

From here a story that was somewhat detached becomes entirely visceral. Life is turned around drastically for young Li. And life in the 'reform' of Mao's pogroms was as ridiculous as it was harsh. Even more amazing than the flyswatting "Campaign To Exterminate Pests" undertaken by millions of chinese is the logic used to support and police the effort. More than reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's trial and sentencing guidelines in Alice In Wonderland, the Party has inexplicable ways & means. There is a mindbogglingly funny scene in which intellectual Student-Comrade Mei stands up in Mutual-Criticism-Self-Criticism class, to confess that he has often dreamed erotic scenarios at night in the study compound, involving Teacher-Comrade Ziu, she of the shapeless uniforms and asexual affect... and a very colorful confession it turns out to be. Student-Comrade Mei is promptly redirected and his student days are terminated.

There is an astringent quality to humor when it is in the grip of state-socialism, a bitter tang that is unforgettable when told in narrative form. Like Witold Gombrowicz's expressionist novels, Charles Li has chapters in his account of the Cultural Revolution that are benchmarks of just that, the extremist self-denial and delusion during the era giving way to the ludicrous. Convention and civility are twisted into unrecognizable shapes, and humanity forgets itself. There is something here that is turning out to be one of the unfortunate dramatic hallmarks of Twentieth Century literature-- the senseless inhumanity that results from humanity's efforts to rebuild a social contract-- inevitably contravening the fairness and practicality it sought to re-establish.

Becka says

Descriptive coming-of-age story that focuses on familial relations, mainly between the author and his father. Scattered in are socio-cultural tidbits about Chinese culture and history that I found enlightening, but the book primarily serves as a memoir of Dr. Li's life prior to moving to the United States as a college student. Dr. Li is a linguistics professor, which may explain some of his lovely metaphors and aptitude for vividly evoking scenes, whether it is the slums of Nanjing or his time in Maoist reform school. This is one of my favorite nominees for the APALA literature award so far.

Charles Kim says

Required Reading for All Immigrant Children

The Bitter Sea will surprise you with its candor and historical insight into pre and post WWII China and Hong Kong.

More importantly it will personalize the spirit of the times through the authors biographical perspective through the story of his own life.