



The Porcelain Thief: Searching the Middle Kingdom for Buried China

Huan Hsu

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A journalist travels throughout mainland China and Taiwan in search of his family's hidden treasure and comes to understand his ancestry as he never has before.

In 1938, when the Japanese arrived in Huan Hsu's great-great-grandfather Liu's Yangtze River hometown of Xingang, Liu was forced to bury his valuables, including a vast collection of prized antique porcelain, and undertake a decades-long trek that would splinter the family over thousands of miles. Many years and upheavals later, Hsu, raised in Salt Lake City and armed only with curiosity, moves to China to work in his uncle's semiconductor chip business. Once there, a conversation with his grandmother, his last living link to dynastic China, ignites a desire to learn more about not only his lost ancestral heirlooms but also porcelain itself. Mastering the language enough to venture into the countryside, Hsu sets out to separate the layers of fact and fiction that have obscured both China and his heritage and finally complete his family's long march back home.

Melding memoir, travelogue, and social and political history, *The Porcelain Thief* offers an intimate and unforgettable way to understand the complicated events that have defined China over the past two hundred years and provides a revealing, lively perspective on contemporary Chinese society from the point of view of a Chinese American coming to terms with his hyphenated identity.

The Porcelain Thief: Searching the Middle Kingdom for Buried China Details

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From Reader Review The Porcelain Thief: Searching the Middle Kingdom for Buried China for online ebook

Steven Yenzer says

I loved this account of Hsu's exploration of his family's history in China, which is motivated by his interest in recovering potentially legendary porcelain that his great-great-grandfather's family buried during the Japanese invasion. It's a fascinating and sometimes funny account of modern China and also provides a solid 20th century history lesson.

Nicola says

The book is interesting, and the insights into China are great. There are some lovely historical tangents. I felt like the end was sudden and I also don't feel like it was finished, or rounded up properly which earns it three stars for an abrupt, slightly unsatisfying ending. But I think it's still worth a read for anyone interested in Chinese cultural history.

Sophie says

The Porcelain Thief is by an American-born Chinese who relocates to China in a bid to find out what happened to his ancestor's porcelain collection several decades earlier. He takes a job in Shanghai, working for his uncle's business, and painstakingly interviews his relatives to help him reconstruct some of the family history. The sections with his redoubtable grandmother are particularly fine – she leads him a merry dance, telling him so much about some things, so little about others.

The narrative switches back and forth from his travails in present-day China to the travails of his family in the previous century, but Hsu keeps the two in equilibrium and writes with clarity about Chinese history and Chinese porcelain. His account feels disconcertingly honest at times, to the point where he doesn't seem very likeable – his sexist comments on the dating scene in Shanghai, for instance; his ingrained hostility towards his cousin Richard (not a kindred spirit). This authenticity is the hallmark of the final section of the book, where there is definite bathos in a scene where the characters go digging up random sections of vegetable patch. Well worth reading, and full of interesting detail, but it does point up rather harshly the difficulties of pursuing this kind of quest.

Review first posted at <http://asianartbrief.com>

Melaslithos says

Disclaimer: I received a free copy of this book through Netgalley.com.

This is an interesting book, taking us through a journey of discovery with Huan Hsu, the writer. He takes us along his quest of his family china, which is also a quest to unknot the complicated and forgotten threads of

his family history. Actually, the china feels more like an excuse for all this, no matter how focused he might have been on the subject at the time.

So this book is not quite a treasure hunt as it is a memoir of his family during the last century, a very troubled one in China.

Unfortunately, I didn't learn much. The author writes well, and that's basically all that kept me entertained during this book. I think this book is perfect for people who don't know a single thing about China and who have never been there, as it is a very good introduction to the place and its history. But for someone like me, who has been living here for years, is a foreigner but with Chinese blood, has an interest in antiques (my family and I are more into bronze and gold work, but you can't miss knowing a few things about porcelains if you have only the slimmest of interest in China's culture and history), this book really doesn't bring anything. There's not enough in-depth analysis and knowledge for me to discover anything, and it's too much about the description and not nearly enough about the actions, that I didn't really get any thrill from it.

Basically, my main reaction throughout the book was "been there, done that". I guess I was not the right public for it. Or maybe I just had too high expectations for it.

Kate Baxter says

What a fascinating memoir involving a family myth resulting in the quest to ascertain the legitimacy of that myth. Along the journey, author, Huan Hsu, discovers his family's history through the memories of aging relatives. He explores Chinese culture through living, working and traveling within China and through conversations with many who have endured the myriad of revolutions encountered over the last few generations.

Hsu, is a gifted writer whose vivid descriptions of the landscape and his encounters place the reader directly alongside him. The historic detail of the Chinese porcelain trade is thorough and fascinating. The recounting of the Japanese invasion and the actions of corrupt leaders through various revolutions was factual and yet, disturbing.

The presumed vast treasures of the family's buried porcelain and coin were highly valued by Hsu's great-great-grandfather and represented his tangible legacy for his family. However, it appears that education is an equally important legacy of Hsu's great-great-grandfather as he made sure that daughters were as well educated as sons. Sadly, the cultural revolution, as noted in the story, penalized those who were educated and the gift was deemed a curse and could often threatened one's existence. Survival seemed all that mattered.

Michelle Jung says

I liked this exploration into ABC family history. There were many parts that I found challenging to follow and many characters that I could not keep track of. However, the author gives a very honest and personal description of his experience without trying to make himself seem too perfect. In fact, his descriptions of himself in many cases made him less likeable, but the honesty made this even more authentic. Recommend if you enjoy learning history!

Beth Cato says

I received this book through the LibraryThing Early Reviewers Program.

This is a rare case where reading this as a galley doesn't really give an adequate picture of the book. Hsu has penned a book that's part memoir, part genealogy quest, part history lesson on China. As he says at one point, trying to explain Chinese history is like trying to get a drink while drowning. The beginning of the book has placeholders for maps and charts, and that content would have helped immensely to understand the geography and the convoluted connections within Hsu's family (which often confuses and surprises the author as well).

Hsu is American-born and raised in Utah. He had to deal with frustrating comments from other people--the compliments on his English, the way he stood out in lily-white Mormon Utah--but also didn't fit in with his Chinese family. He was largely ignorant of the language and history. Even so, he's fascinated by stories of his mother's family and of the wealth of porcelain they once had, and he takes a job in China at a volatile uncle's company so he can find out more.

The beginning of the story is a bit whiny as he describes China as it is now (it sure doesn't make me want to travel to Shanghai), even as the content is intriguing from the start. Hsu brings a great perspective; readers are likely to be ignorant of China as it is now or was in the past, and I felt like I got to learn along with him. Once it started to delve into the past and the often contradictory stories within his family, it became a gripping book. Hsu isn't searching for buried treasure to get rich. It's more of a sense to recover something lost. His mother's family struggled through all the turbulence of the 20th century, from the Sino-Japanese War through World War II through communist and the horrible whims of Mao. His grandmother escaped some of the worst by being a teacher in missionary schools and then immigrating from the mainland, but other cousins were not so fortunate. The book does a good job of showing the terrible nature of Mao and what he put the people through, and Hsu with his American sensibilities struggles to understand how they endured. It's not just that the porcelain was lost. Almost all family pictures, books, and artifacts were also lost in immigration or through cultural purges.

There's also the historical thread about porcelain itself, how it was made and where, and how that industry has so drastically changed.

I liked the book much more as I read, even as I had to utterly give up on keeping track of who was who. I have trouble remembering names in English, so the similarity of the Chinese names--and that some people had a few names--was utterly confusing. Maps would have been an enormous help as Hsu travels all over China, and also describes where his family was and is now.

If you have any interest in China, seek for this book when it's out in March. At heart, it's about a genealogical search for self, and it's a fascinating journey.

Ron says

A very interesting read which gives a good overview of the last 150 years or so of China as experienced by one family and their descendants. From Amazon: A journalist travels throughout mainland China and Taiwan in search of his family's hidden treasure and comes to understand his ancestry as he never has before.

In 1938, when the Japanese arrived in Huan Hsu's great-great-grandfather Liu's Yangtze River hometown of Xingang, Liu was forced to bury his valuables, including a vast collection of prized antique porcelain, and undertake a decades-long trek that would splinter the family over thousands of miles. Many years and upheavals later, Hsu, raised in Salt Lake City and armed only with curiosity, moves to China to work in his uncle's semiconductor chip business. Once there, a conversation with his grandmother, his last living link to dynastic China, ignites a desire to learn more about not only his lost ancestral heirlooms but also porcelain itself. Mastering the language enough to venture into the countryside, Hsu sets out to separate the layers of fact and fiction that have obscured both China and his heritage and finally complete his family's long march back home.

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Nedra says

Thanks to Goodread I got the book for free

Amanda says

Under the guise of hunting for his family's long-lost, and valuable porcelain collection the author takes a step back into his family history, and that of China.

Huan Hsu is an American-born Chinese who had little interest in his family history, but became preoccupied with tracking down a lost hoard of valuable imperial porcelain that his great-great-grandfather had buried when the Japanese were advancing to his village.

His research took him to China - where he struggled with the language, the people, the customs and with prying some history out of his ancient grandmother.

This not-particularly-sympathetic look at modern China, it's more recent history, and the story of it's glorious and largely lost imperial porcelain is an engaging read and sheds light on some Chinese customs (like the production of fake goods) that many of us find difficult to understand.

Worth a read.

Susan says

I've read many China memoirs and Chinese history narratives, so was excited to see a new take in Huan Hsu's "The Porcelain Thief." I was drawn in from the very beginning and felt like I was parting with a good friend when the book ended. Hsu is a fabulous writer. I love his honesty and his bluntness when things don't go according to plan in China. And he weaves in Chinese history that makes it fascinating even for those who know how things turn out along the way. I found myself laughing, crying, and wanting to slam my fist down in frustration as he trekked through China in search of his great-great grandfather's lost porcelain. But there is so much more to his story than that. It's also a personal journey in search of identity and acceptance.

He writes about many family members, so the family tree at the beginning is helpful. My favorite characters besides Hsu include his colorful uncles Richard and Lewis, along with his cousin Andrew. Huan Hsu's great-great grandfather would be very proud of this book.

Susan says

The recent TLS review lamenting lack of scholarship got this book all wrong. It is about a young man's attempt to understand China as he tries to find his family's stash of porcelain.

Douglas says

Thanks to Goodreads and Crown Publishing for the advance copy. There has been much written in recent years about the emergence of China and the changing culture and its impact on the global economy. As with any change, it's vital to understand the history and background that lead to the current evolution. So many have done this with detailed historical analysis and broad, high-level observations. But, what about the story through the eyes and life of one individual?

Huan Hsu tells the story of emerging China through his own family history and in context of both Western and Eastern cultures. If you really stop to think about this, it's a pretty incredible feat. To tell the story of an individual life in context of a society that values the collective.

Hsu's writing took a bit to get used to. For one thing, he comes across as a bit static at first and a touch self-aggrandizing. Born and raised in Mormon Utah as a first generation Chinese American, he arrives in China as an employee of his uncle's tech company, but his true mission is to locate or find out what happened to his ancestor's valuable porcelain collection. Before he can even begin this task, he must first learn the language, culture, and intricate family nuances. I said that he came across as a touch haughty because he initially is resistant to these changes and the work in general. He approaches it as almost pesky barriers at first.

Without giving too much away, Hsu evolves and learns to appreciate his history, culture and the journey to uncover his past. Turns out, he's not static, but dynamic, and he quickly evolves in his appreciation and love for his roots.

Hsu is a superb writer. His voice is unique, personal, and quietly powerful. I look forward to a positive critical response to this. I haven't seen this on any preview or anticipated books of the year lists, but I think it has great potential to be a surprise success, and if given the proper buzz, a bestseller.

A good literary companion book would be *To Live*.

Jeani says

I have mixed opinions about this book. I liked how the author added Chinese history as a way to put his family's story into context, both in terms of dates and how the bigger picture affected his family personally. After finishing the book, I was put off by the likelihood that the compelling details of his great-grandfather

burying his valuables were imagined and not necessarily real. Also, the multi-page details of the personal stories of distant family members didn't add much to the story and slowed down the story. I did find the author's research on porcelain history interesting, as well as his views and insights on Chinese culture.

Freya Stewart says

an interesting book which gives a good insight into Chinese history from a personal point of view and was told in a conversational easy to read style. However this book could be very confusing with regards to who is whom as many members of his family are referred to by their familial name (akin to auntie or grandma) but not distinguished as to which auntie it is that he's talking about. Also as I've seen mentioned in reviews before the ending is quite disappointing as there is no concrete answer as to whether the family's porcelain is still there or not. A great look into history and to learn more about porcelain but is the sort of book that would benefit from you making notes while reading it.
