

Lucky Find, Engaging Read

The Bitter Sea: Coming of Age in a China before Mao
by Charles N Li

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Reviewed by Mel Riley, Friday Book Group

When I stumbled across *The Bitter Sea* in a Lucky Plaza bookshop one wet afternoon, I never realised what a rare treat our Friday Book Group would experience.

This is a haunting and illuminating true story of a Chinese son seeking a distant father's love and how a parent's political ambition took precedence over family. This exceptional memoir traces the early life of author Li, beginning in the late stages of World War II on through to the complete domination of mainland China by its Communist overlords.

Li was born in 1940 to a harsh, punitive father and an emotionally distant mother. Hyperactive and curious, the lonely little boy was forbidden to go outdoors, and his only companion was his wet-nurse. Li recounts how quickly his childhood life of privilege was transformed when his father went from being a powerful government official to a political prisoner when the Nationalists came to power.

With his father in prison, Li gains a degree of freedom and camaraderie when his mother moves the family into a Nanjing slum. But he is soon sent to live with his spinster aunt in Shanghai, where he attends school and witnesses the spiralling collapse of the brutal and incompetent Nationalist government.

It's not long before the regimentation of life under the Communists leads Li and his aunt to flee to Hong Kong, where Sheng-wu, his father, has been exiled. Li is reunited with his parents, but the fighting continues, this time within the family. His father seems distant and cruel. Then one day, without warning, his mother leaves.

Li spends most of his teen years seeking his father's love and approval. After he graduates from a prestigious high school in Hong Kong, he agrees to return to Communist China to attend preparatory school – something Sheng-wu desires as a means of testing the political waters for himself.

Upon entering China, Li is greeted by a cadre member and escorted to a 'reform school' where he is to be re-educated in political thought as well as prepared for the entrance exam for university acceptance. He must endure 'self-criticism and mutual criticism' sessions and endless hours of political study.

Eventually, the fiercely independent Li fails the final exam and realises that his father and the school have manipulated him. Disconsolate and malnourished, Li returns to a more vibrant Hong Kong. With his mother's help, he slowly establishes a life as a tutor and student and begins to plan his eventual emigration to America.

The author goes from being Li, a dutiful Chinese son yearning for a harsh, manipulative father's love, to Charles, an independent Chinese-American who seeks 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 the countries that shaped him, and the one that let him become himself.

Mel Riley moved to Singapore from Australia in 2008 and has recently joined FOM. She never misses the Monday Morning Lectures and is a member of FOM's new Friday Book Group.

