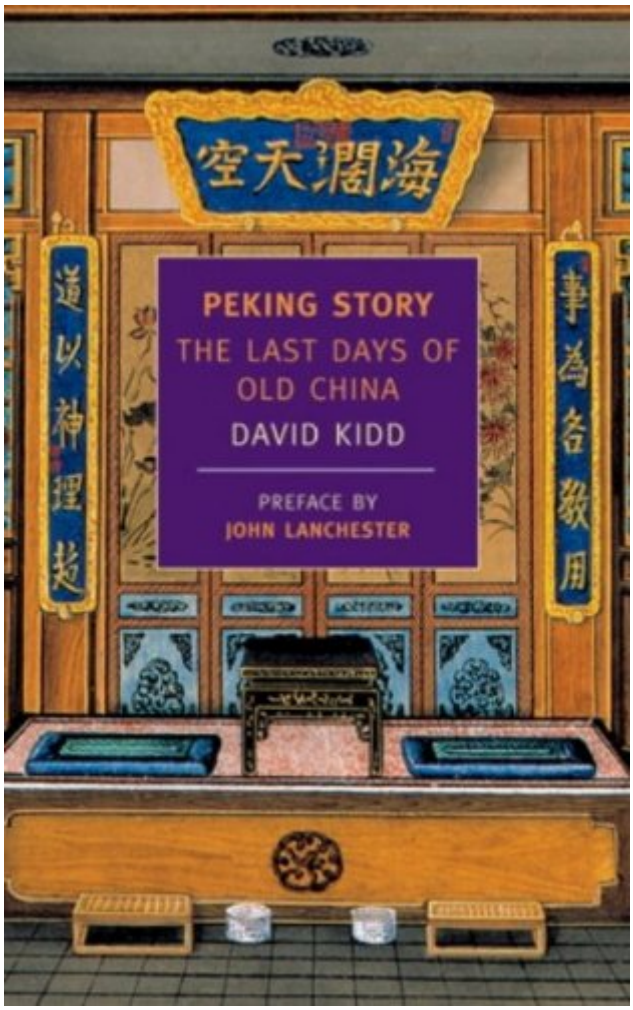
Peking Story: The Last Days Of Old China (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

For two years before and after the 1948 Communist Revolution, David Kidd lived in Peking, where he married the daughter of an aristocratic Chinese family. "I used to hope," he writes, "that some bright young scholar on a research grant would write about us and our Chinese friends before it was too late and we were all dead and gone, folding into the darkness the wonder that had been our lives." Here Kidd himself brings that wonder to life.

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Customer Reviews

"Peking Story: The Last Days of Old China" is a nonfiction gem that is at once educational, heartwarming, and heartbreaking. Made available in book form by the New York Review of Books, this slim volume brings together the lyrical writings of David Kidd, who went to Peking (Beijing) in the 1940s to teach English and then married into one of China’s wealthiest and most prominent families. Regrettably, before Kidd and his wife Aimee could settle into conjugal bliss, the Yu family’s patriarch died and Mao Zedong’s Communists began to mindlessly destroy the material, economic, and social underpinnings of a storied civilization. Kidd’s status as an American citizen allowed him

and Aimee to leave China in 1950 and relocate to New York, where he worked for the Asia Institute and she studied chemistry and physics. Separated in 1956, Aimee remained in the United States but Kidd relocated to Japan, opening a cultural studies center in Kyoto where he died several decades later.Kidd's book marches in chronological order but this is not a text that resembles that of a historian. Rather key developments are revealed in the context of family-oriented activities and accommodations to the Communist takeover. A most charming chapter, for example, is "Silver Pins and Blood-Red Skirts" which recounts how the Yu clan threw one last glamorous party at their compound. With marvelous details describing this costume party, the reader grasps immediately just how much has been lost in the elite's social life. A later chapter, "Dogs, Mah-Jongg, and Americans," drives home just how intrusive was the Communist reach into one's private life as family dogs were destroyed one by one. A later chapter recounts the fate of the Yu family after it has lost its palatial home and gardens. For me, this is an especially poignant as we find the book's most memorable character--Auntie Chin--in retreat at a Buddhist temple and, despite her advanced age, adjusting to diminished circumstances with more grace and resilience than her younger relatives.

One of my favorite authors is an Englishman named John Blofeld. I've read many of his books although not all of them. I stumbled upon this book by David Kidd and was amazed that Mr. Blofeld had a cameo in here (John Blofeld was also a member of Ian/Peter Fleming's circle of friends and was the inspiration for the villain in the James Bond series named without coincidence, John Blofeld.) I would also recommend reading "The City of Lingering Splendour" along with this title. The two books go hand in hand as they are about old Peking in its last days of Republican China.This book is a must read for anyone interested in China. If you want to understand what old China was like in the 20th century, read this book. Chairman Mao personally hated families like Aimee's and despised the superstition that many Chinese believed before the Communists took power. Anyone studying modern China should also read this book as well.

John Updike's comment on the book is perceptive, "Kidd's pieces have been a double illumination... intimate domestic lanterns shed light on the dark side of the moon...exotic and international aside, glow in their own skins, as art."David Kidd, a young American student is in Peking as the revolution comes. He marries into an illustrious but impoverished Chinese family. His wife is the daughter of the last chief justice of the Nationalist government's Supreme Court.The book is pieces of life observed, detached as he is a foreigner, perceptive and sad because he is connected to a family that is in the losing side after the wheel has spinned and stopped.The family lives in a decaying

compound, a garden with stones imported from all over China, evocative of the lifestyle and grandeur of "The Dream of the Red Chamber." There is a resilient and generous "Aunt Chin," who is like the matriarch of "The Dream of the Red Chamber."In instances, Kidd shows how the Yu family adjusts or gives in to the revolution. It is twilight for the family, and for others like them.There are chapters, not related to the family, but to the revolutionary society. In a drama presentation of the rehabilitation of Chinese society that the communist have brought, Kidd describes the audience. Students breathing such "rarefied air," that they project themselves into the fiction of the complete evil of the society overturned, that they froth in the mouth and become cataleptic or stone the actress portraying the villain. Some sketches would have been funny if you can forget your humanity and sympathy for those who suffer.Kidd writes in the simplest prose which lights his stories as harshly as the sun, or as softly and sympathetically as the moon.In the last chapter, he revisits this Chinese family after 30 years. They have been debased. Even the offspring look stunted. And yet, Kidd shows hope in the way the family receives him. He comments, "They were reminding me that they were still the Yu family, people of culture,... and that they were honoured that I had come to visit them after so many years and from so far away."The book is a gem. Like a prism, it breaks the single light in varieties of colors, and it is so satisfying.

David Kidd recounts his life in Beijing at the time of the Communist takeover. Married into a prosperous local family, Kidd witnesses his in-laws coming to grips with the reality of the revolution as they lose their income, their servants, and ultimately their sprawling mansion in the heart of old Beijing. Perceptive and humorous but also poignant and dramatic, Kidd’s nostalgic recollections read like the final act of a tragic play, the brutal crushing of China as exquisite and refined as Ming-dynasty porcelain cups, admired by his father-in-law. Kidd makes clear where his own sympathies are. He laments the destruction of old Beijing under by vulgar, tasteless and hypocritical revolutionaries, and the fate of the old mansion - its conversion to a sterile hospital for party cadres - symbolizes for him the sad fate of China, a patient, cured of external ailments yet spiritually dead.

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