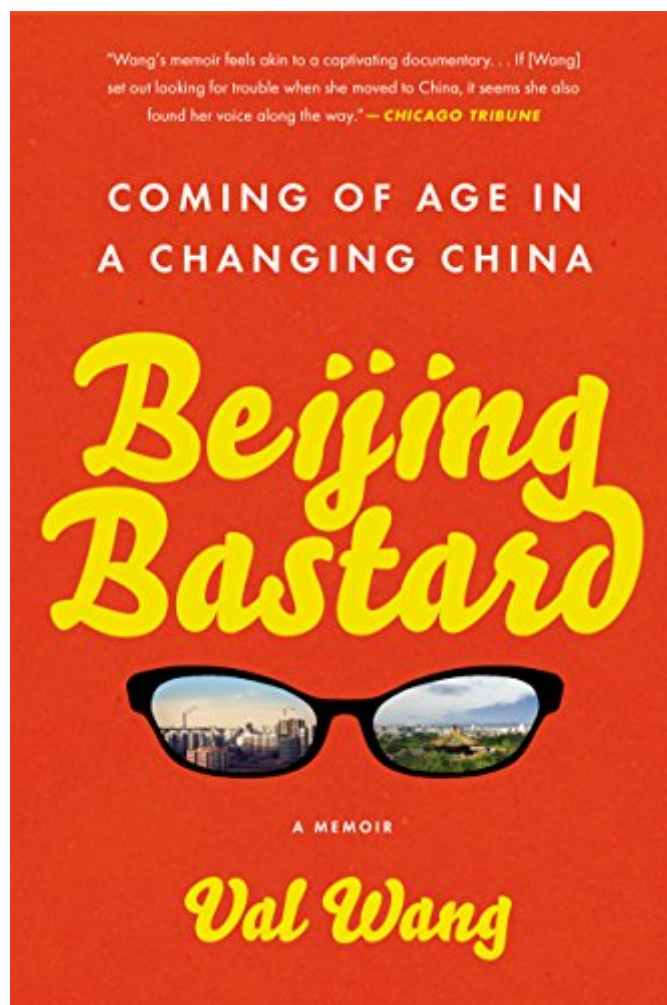


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Beijing Bastard: Into The Wilds Of A Changing China



Synopsis

A humorous and moving coming-of-age story that brings a unique, not-quite-outsider's perspective to China's shift from ancient empire to modern superpower. Raised in a strict Chinese-American household in the suburbs, Val Wang dutifully got good grades, took piano lessons, and performed in a Chinese dance troupe until she shaved her head and became a leftist, the stuff of many teenage rebellions. But Val's true mutiny was when she moved to China, the land her parents had fled before the Communist takeover in 1949. Val arrives in Beijing in 1998 expecting to find freedom but instead lives in the old city with her traditional relatives, who wake her at dawn with the sound of a state-run television program playing next to her cot, make a running joke of how much she eats, and monitor her every move. But outside, she soon discovers a city rebelling against its roots just as she is, struggling too to find a new, modern identity. Rickshaws make way for taxicabs, skyscrapers replace hutong courtyard houses, and Beijing prepares to make its debut on the world stage with the 2008 Olympics. And in the gritty outskirts of the city where she moves, a thriving avant-garde subculture is making art out of the chaos. Val plunges into the city's dizzying culture and nightlife and begins shooting a documentary, about a Peking Opera family who is witnessing the death of their traditional art. Brilliantly observed and winningly told, *Beijing Bastard* is a compelling story of a young woman finding her place in the world and of China, as its ancient past gives way to a dazzling but uncertain future.

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Customer Reviews

Really captured the feel of a westerner living in Beijing during the late 1990s.

What an amazing read!!!!

Memoirs are not autobiographies but rather a shorter, snapshot look at a particular part of the author's life. The best memoirs are those who capture that segment of life in a beginning, middle, and end. Val Wang, in her memoir, "Beijing Bastard: Into the Wilds of a Changing China", brilliantly writes about her post-collegiate life in Beijing and how she experienced her life changing along with those larger changes within Chinese society at the same time. Val Wang is the American-born daughter of parents who had emigrated from China to the United States when they were young. The parents - whose own parents bought into the dream of the US - raised Val and her older brother in a traditional home, stressing the values of both education and modest living. But Val didn't want to merely conform to her parents' dreams; she wanted to forge her own. In the late 1990's, after graduating from college, Val moved to Beijing (after a short stint in another Chinese city) to make her way. She wasn't the first post-graduate ex-pat to try living in a foreign country and she surely won't be the last. What Val Wang learned in her five or so year stay in Beijing is the subject of the memoir. Wang had extended family in Beijing and began her stay in the city living with them. She soon learned that the housing of her relatives definitely wasn't what she was used to in the United States. Quite a bit of the book is about Chinese housing, which is an interesting subject in Val Wang's talented hands. The reader might not know the intricacies of the housing stock and housing market, the first of which took physical blows and the second took financial blows in the pre-2008 rush to make the city ready for the Olympic games. She begins her stay in one home that will be wrecked and ends it in an apartment that may not be waiting long for the wrecking ball. How does a young woman, who wants to be a film-maker after watching an independent documentary called "Beijing Bastards", make her dream come true. She's somewhat hampered by not having production experience or contacts within the Beijing film crowd, but takes a series of temporary, then permanent jobs with alternative newspapers. She begins shooting a documentary, using

borrowed equipment, about a family of actors at the Peking Opera but never completes it; the dynamics between her and the family of performers is not good. Val does "this" and "that", she meets and befriends interesting people, including one woman who lends her a camera and editing equipment. But she realises she's ready to go home to the US after 9/11. Val Wang had changed in her five years in Beijing and she had watched as the city changed with her. Not much stays the same for either young woman or the city she's adopted. But she's matured and her relationships with her family in the US - once so fraught with misunderstanding - go through a material change. Her memoir is a wonderful look at an extended family and a changing society, as told by a young and talented writer. By the way, if you're looking for another funny, perceptive, well-written memoir, take a look at Nancy Bachrach's "The Center of the Universe".

In contrast to another reviewer's opinion (that 4-5 star reviewers are likely to be the author's friends or relatives), I find this book quite humorous and amusing. As a Chinese immigrant myself, I can relate to the stories the author tells. There are moments of questionable writing styles and confusion over the timeline of the narrative, but the humor and storytelling more than makes up for these detractions.

I lived in China at the same time as Val Wang, and while I didn't get as deep into the culture as she did, she paints a riveting and authentic portrait of the culture at that time, especially from an ex-pat's perspective. I thoroughly enjoyed this book and it gives the reader a perspective on an aspect of culture in China that most people don't get to see.

I didn't know a lot about Beijing. And now I feel like I know more thanks to Val Wang taking me with her through her journey. I can relate to her voice and her insights.

Maybe the four others who reviewed this book with five stars were friends and relatives of the author. I have read many memoirs of life in China by Americans. This has to be the most pointless, repetitious and self-absorbed book of them all. None of the people the author meets come alive. Her friends are slackers. She claims to want to be a film maker, but does nothing serious to reach her goal. I quit reading on page 280 (of 340 pages). I just couldn't make myself read the rest. Oh, I forgot to mention that the writing itself is lazy and careless.

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