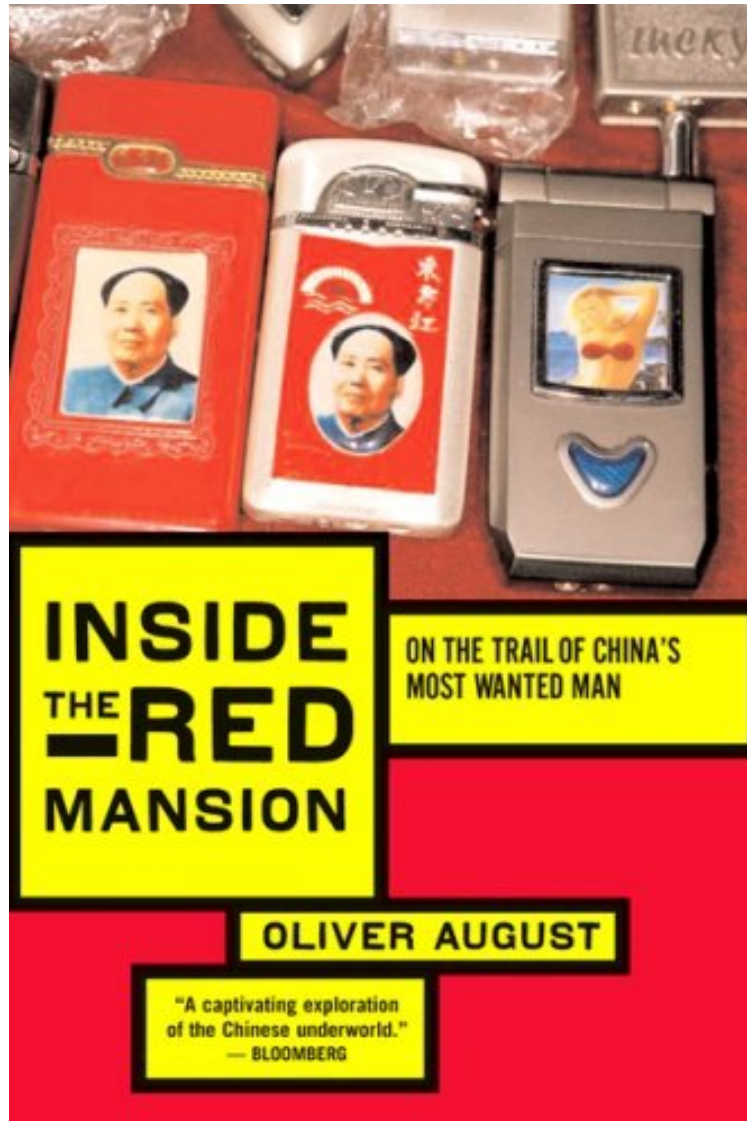


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Inside the Red Mansion: On the Trail of China's Most Wanted Man

Oliver August

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Oliver August : Inside the Red Mansion: On the Trail of China's Most Wanted Man before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Inside the Red Mansion: On the Trail of China's Most Wanted Man:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Interesting and often amusing account of peak PRCBy HowardA highly enjoyable snapshot of the nature of a city of peak PRC around 2000, when the country was going from achievement to achievement in an atmosphere of optimism and positivity as everyone was getting richer. The focus on Lai Changxing is particularly interesting and indeed prescient as the extreme corruption of the country was tolerated when it felt like the tide was lifting everyone but now, as things tighten up in China and terms like ghost town and non-

performing loan are part of every discussion of the macro picture, corruption is becoming an ever-more sensitive topic with a closely controlled official narrative. A great read for anyone who has lived in or is just interested in China and how it all really works over there. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A journalist's sleuthing in entrepreneurial China By Carolyn Bloomer Compelling narration by London Times Beijing correspondent who became obsessed by Lai Changxing, a wheeler-dealer whose activities eventually brought over 400 others (including many officials) to trial of which 14 were sentenced to execution on corruption charges. Lai was eventually denied asylum in Canada and extradited to China in July 2011, several years after this book ends. To those of us familiar with Fujian Province and the city of Xiamen, this is especially fascinating, as it shows an inside of Xiamen that academics, official visitors, and tourists never contact. To those unfamiliar with Xiamen it gives a very representative in-the-trenches picture of ways in which contemporary Chinese people creatively deploy entrepreneurial serendipity and governmental laissez faire to accrue wealth and construct social identities in a runaway economy. August is a good storyteller, and travelers and China hands alike will recognize the way in which "inscrutable" encounters often eventually reveal themselves to be utterly rational - once you know "the other side of the story". Students of Mandarin, or those with some knowledge of the language will appreciate the way August brings to bear popular phrases and metaphors that connect to broader facets of Chinese culture. As a cultural anthropologist and scholar of China, I have a few dissatisfactions. I wished for a more precise chronology of when August was in Beijing presumably doing what the Times was paying him to do, versus when he was in Xiamen. More problematic is the ambiguity of his facility with Chinese language. He went to China cold -- yet he proceeds through the narrative as if he has basically mastered the language; occasionally he mentions having an interpreter, but most of the time it's as if the language is completely transparent. As someone who's studied Mandarin for more than 20 years, I have difficulty believing that after only a few months a normal person could achieve the level of fluency August seems to have acquired - and yet, beyond brief descriptions of his first two worthless language teachers, he never seems to devote any time at all to studying the language. (Compare Deborah Fallows' recent book DREAMING IN CHINESE, which is a very realistic narrative about learning to communicate in Mandarin in China). Another problem is the comfortable camaraderie August seemed to consistently enjoy with many of his "informants" - the truth is: no matter how accepted one may feel, one's foreignness in China never completely disappears in the way it seemed to for August, particularly among the working and rural classes with which he often associated. He seems like an honest bloke, but as an educated reader, I would have liked these opacities to have been made more transparent. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Inside the Red Mansion By Jan Dash I was confused at first by Oliver August's title for this book. I thought it was going to be about a classic Chinese book variously translated as Dreams of a Red Mansion, Inside a Red Chamber, etc. Instead the story of this book is a metaphor about how the Communist Chinese party has adapted to recent economic change and all the logical incongruities involved. The main character is Lai Changxing, a self-made billionaire by means of smuggling and shady enterprises before the Chinese government went after him. Why did the government let his illegal activities go on for so long? Because modern China is not a country ruled by law (despite what they say). The government allows laws to be bent/broken so long as there are plenty of bribes all along the way. At any stage the government feels free to reign in the relaxed laws and kill off the people behind them as criminals. This way the Party never has to say they made any mistakes or they changed their minds. They turn a blind eye to illegalities so long as the bribes continue lubricating the breaks, and if it gets out of hand at any point, the perpetrator can be punished without regret. The book is very readable and makes many of the seemingly illogical actions of the Chinese Government more understandable. There is also a very good feeling of place because the descriptions of the people and places are superb. I read this book from the library and then bought a copy from because I wanted to own it. I can recommend it to anyone who has the slightest interest in Modern China.

The notorious gangster Lai Changxing started out as an illiterate farmer, but in the tumult of China's burgeoning economy, he seized the opportunity to remake himself as a bandit king. A newly minted billionaire of outsized personality and even greater appetites, he was a living legend who eventually ran afoul of authorities. The journalist Oliver August set out to find the fugitive Lai. On his quest he encountered a highly entertaining series of criminals and oddball entrepreneurs and acquired unique insight into the paradoxes of modern China. Part crime caper, part travelogue, part trenchant cultural analysis, August's page-turning account captures China's giddy vibe and its darker vulnerabilities.