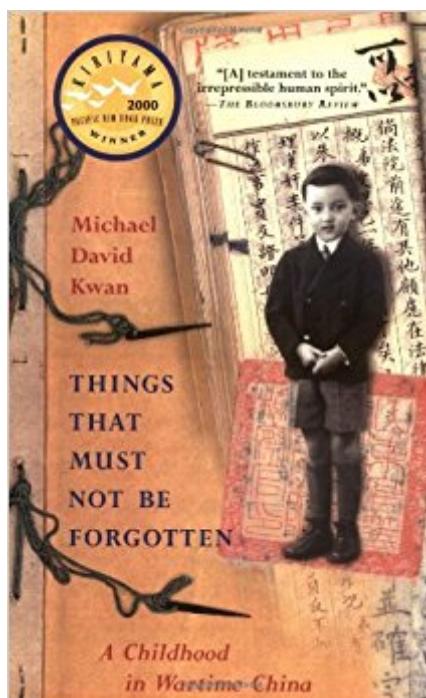


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# Things That Must Not Be Forgotten: A Childhood In Wartime China



## Synopsis

The Eurasian son of a Chinese railroad executive, young David lives in a world of privilege until World War II. His father serves the Japanese while secretly working for the Resistance. After the war, with his father imprisoned, he leaves the country at the age of twelve, unsure that they will ever be reunited. This memoir was awarded the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize for Nonfiction.

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## Customer Reviews

This powerful memoir by writer and translator Kwan (Broken Portraits) recounts his tumultuous coming-of-age in China during and after WWII. This straightforward and poetic work illuminates the contradictions of wartime as seen through the eyes of a child. Kwan is estranged from his Swiss mother as a young boy and goes from being raised by servants to the Englishwoman his father remarries. Although emotionally distant, Kwan's father, the wealthy administrator for China's railroads, was a model of honor to his family and country, and Kwan's story is as much about his father as it is about himself. After Japan invaded China, Kwan's father took a position in the pro-Japanese government in order to work for the Resistance covertly. As a half-caste, Kwan was tormented in school and, without friends, became a silent voyeur of the world around him. He took solace where he could find it, whether with his dog, Rex, in his tree house watching the neighbors, gardening with the owner of a local antique shop, catching crickets with his father's tenant farmer or through the rituals he performed as an altar boy. After WWII, there followed the battle between Communists and Nationalists, and, caught in the middle, Kwan's father was falsely accused and imprisoned for collaborating with the Japanese. Before Kwan was sent away to safety, his father

repeated his guiding tenet: "As long as you are true to yourself, you can't be false to anyone else." This engaging story of family, loyalty, patriotism and war shows how unforeseen events change people and how, in turn, they can reshape those events to survive and retain their imprint. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Kwan (Broken Portraits), who was born in China and lived there until he was 12 years old, describes in his memoir the tense urban atmosphere during Chiang Kai-shek's desperate grasp for power. The author, raised in an upper-class family, the son of a multilingual, Oxford-educated father and a Swiss-born mother, tells here of his painful experiences in a society that disparaged his biracial roots. China's political reality during his early years and the dangers his father risked in working for the Resistance became clear to him as an adult, enabling him to authenticate his memory of the character and tone of his youth. Winner of the 2000 Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize for nonfiction, this book is certainly a welcome addition to Chinese memoirs that, in recent years, have focused on the later experiences of Mao Zedong's reign, e.g., Yang Rae's *Spider Eaters* (LJ 4/15/97), Chen Chen's *Come Watch the Sun Go Home* (LJ 6/1/98), and Jaia Sun Childers's *The White-Haired Girl* (LJ 2/15/96). Peggy Spitzer Christoff, Rockville, MD Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. -- This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I was sent a copy of this book by my mum from Australia last year and only recently had the chance to finally read the book. It's no wonder that this book is an award winner (2000 Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize). Kwan keeps you riveted to his story, told through eyes of a young boy growing up in very turbulent times. In spite of coming from a wealthy family, it cannot save him from the terrors and turmoil brought to Northern China in the 1930s and 1940s, nor from the racial judgement passed on him for being half-Chinese and half-White. How Kwan manages to survive is quite amazing. He is abandoned by his own mother and faces major abuses at school. Then, war begins and he begins to witness the atrocities committed by the Japanese in China. Finally, after the Japanese are defeated, he nearly loses his father to the KMT government that his father has faithfully served through the resistance movement. He is not even safe from his own family, who try to use him as a means to extort his father for money that no longer exists. An absolute must read for anyone interested in China, the Japanese invasion of China, and a boy's coming of age.

An extraordinary story told with well controlled language and subtle understatements. The book

chronicles the lives in a privileged, but also marginalized, world where everyone is deeply enshrouded in his or her own loneliness : the western expatriates in China, the mixed-blood children like the author himself, the western women married to Chinese men but unable to summon any love for the country or its people, the well-cultured men ostracized by the society for their marriages to western women. Each of them, making good-intentioned efforts to connect, failed miserably because of their own deep-rooted prejudice, social barriers imposed by other people, or simply the uncontrollable historical whirlwinds. Outside this walled-in existence, a war is raging on with unimaginable callousness. The wall would eventually crumble down and the fineness of the Legation Quarter be swallowed by the brutal and rancid humanities of that era. Reminding us at times of Proust and Graham Greene, this remembrance of things past documents, in a hushed voice, an extraordinary age and all the human efforts to stay emerged in the midst of sweeping torrents. Warmth and friendship flicker from time to time in this vast emotional void : the author's attachment to his down-to-earth and understanding nanny Shu Ma, his natural bonding with the reticent peasant Xiao Hu, and the unusual and quiet friendship between the boy and the Japanese Admiral. Language in the last couple chapters slips a little bit and becomes less disciplined. But overall this is a wonderfully written memoir. Saddened by the news of the author's death couple weeks ago, I was especially grateful for the gift he left with us in the form of this book.

I bought Michael David Kwan's "Things That Must Not Be Forgotten" after reading a glowing review in the Washington Post. I was not disappointed. It is a moving, understated memoir about Mr. Kwan's childhood years starting shortly before the outbreak of World War II and ending as the Kuomintang was breathing its last in mainland China. Although young David was fortunate enough to be born into a wealthy family as a "half-caste" child of a Chinese father and a Swiss mother (who abandoned the family very early in David's life), he was never considered to be a true part of either the white and Chinese communities. The editorial reviews give a good overview of the content of the book and the increasing difficulties that David and his family endured under the Japanese and even more so under the corrupt Nationalist Chinese government. The narrative is brisk and engaging; it is probably the best work of non-fiction that I have read in quite some time. Sadly, on May 20th of this year Mr. Kwan suffered a fatal heart attack just two weeks before the official U.S.-publication of this book. We are all very fortunate that he was able to give us such a memorable farewell gift. "Things That Must Not Be Forgotten" won the 2000 Kirayama Prize for non-fiction, beating out such well-received books as Herbert Bix's "Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan," Helen Zia's "Asian American Dreams" and Chanrithy Him's "When Broken Glass Floats."

I read a review and an excerpt of this book in Toronto last summer, and waited anxiously for it to be published here in the States. I read it in two days, gulping it down excitedly; then I re-read it slowly, informed of the story but savoring the beautiful prose. I wrote Mr. Kwan a "fan letter," only to learn today in this forum that he passed away. I was hoping for a sequel.

One of the best book read, I could not put it down. Very touching and reflected a glimpse of wartime China through the eyes of a child. Wonderful!

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