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By Angilee Shah

My redeye flight from Singapore to Shanghai in August was timed purposefully before the Olympics ended, but my route was planned meticulously to avoid the big Olympics events.

Before the trip I likewise scoured the library of the Singapore school where I teach for fresh (or at least fresh to me) narratives on China—the kinds of simple but expansive journeys that unabashedly take young explorers “beyond the headlines” and spark awe-inspiring careers. I’d already read Peter Hessler’s Oracle Bones and I was looking for more.

(My friend Anka was tasked with writing about life in China, and I was tasked with accompanying him with my camera. I was looking for some inspiration.)

I accumulated a large stack of books—history, nonfiction, travel guides, memoirs—and sifted through them. Oliver August’s 2007 Inside the Red Mansion quickly rose to the top. The subtitle is “On the Trail of China’s Most Wanted Man” and the prologue opens the story with a fearless madam charming customers at a dubious nightclub in Xiamen. Forgive me, but it was an easy choice.

And August’s book did not let me down. Red Mansion’s intrigue and fantastical true-life characters keep the work suspenseful from page to page. Sometimes memoir, sometimes suspense novel, it is a well-crafted and compelling non-fiction narrative that traces the author’s search for a fugitive tycoon in China. To find the man, August, in essence, follows his money. He goes to the homes he bought, the clubs where he drank, and the skyscrapers he built.

There is a lot of struggle in the book, and not just between the infamous Lai Changxing and the government that hunted him. August is clearly a determined reporter (see chapter 14, where he describes how he returned to the office of a bored, low-level official every few weeks for over two years), but the book’s most driving force is August himself. Will he find Lai’s bordello, the mythical Red Mansion? Will he see with his own eyes the darkest secrets of China’s boomtown economies? Will he find Lai, and by extension the basic paradoxes of life in modern China?

I won’t spoil the ending here (I’m guessing August would not appreciate my giving anything away), but I will say that his China journey was a fulfilling choice for someone interested in the less
accounted-for elements of rapid developments in China’s big cities. But, it seems, it’s near impossible get to the story fast enough to actually see it unfold. The pace keeps long-form writers squarely in the past-tense, or in August’s case interviewing side-characters and peering into the furnished rooms of abandoned buildings. The most compelling story is the one about how August catches up.

For further reading, check out these reviews of *Inside the Red Mansion*:
“The Player,” by William T. Vollmann at *The Los Angeles Times*