



## Wallet of Kai Lung

*Ernest Bramah*

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"Ho, illustrious passers-by!" says Kai Lung as he spreads out his embroidered mat under the mulberry-tree. "It is indeed unlikely that you could condescend to stop and listen to the foolish words of such an insignificant and altogether deformed person as myself. Nevertheless, if you will but retard your elegant footsteps for a few moments, this exceedingly unprepossessing individual will endeavour to entertain you." This is a collection of Kai Lung's entertaining tales, told professionally in the market places as he travelled about; told sometimes to occupy and divert the minds of his enemies when they were intent on torturing him.

## Wallet of Kai Lung Details

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Author : Ernest Bramah

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## **From Reader Review Wallet of Kai Lung for online ebook**

### **Matthew Gatheringwater says**

Like a fortune cookie, this book has a vaguely Far Eastern flavor, but its origins are in the West. Readers seeking authenticity should look elsewhere. Before you go, however, please consider that inauthenticity has not detracted from the lasting popularity of the fortune cookie...or Bramah's stories set in an imagined China.

The experience of reading these loosely interrelated stories was a bit like reading *Candide*, *Gulliver's Travels*, or some other picaresque satire, but Bramah's satire is less overtly political than that of Voltaire or Jonathan Swift. Bramah limits his most frequent targets to governmental bureaucracy and human avarice, which still leaves him with plenty of material.

The chief pleasure of this book is not satire or story, but style. Bramah's flowery Mandarin-inspired English is really the most fantastic element of the stories. I found I needed to be particularly alert to counteract the soporific effect of his convoluted sentences, and that quality alone has earned the book a place on my bedside bookshelf where I hope it will help me fight insomnia for years to come.

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### **Gwern says**

One reads this for the language on display by Bramah: the absurd sustained Latinate circumlocutions which forever perendinate and cunctate on expressing their simple sense. As far as that goes, it's quite an interesting exercise and the source of a number of parodic versions of China/Japan, I suspect. I am not sure how many people are up to an entire sustained anthology of this, though: the stories are relatively flimsy and one can drown in the prose while losing track utterly of the plot and personages, which certainly is not calculated to create charm nor cheer in the consumer.

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### **Chris Bubb says**

I picked this up a long time ago and finally got around to reading it recently, after seeing a recommendation of it from Charles Vess in "Rags and Bones". (Actually the recommendation was for "Kai Lung's Golden Hours", but I had this one so I thought I'd read it instead.) And...it was OK. Really a slog to get through. A bit of Bramah's faux-Chinese writing style goes a LONG way, and 252 pages of it felt like 500. I know some people really speak highly of the Kai Lung stories. I don't see it myself but they weren't horrible so...3 stars I guess. But I won't be reading another one.

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### **Wreade1872 says**

A sequence of short stories which are meant to seem as if translated from Japanese. Most of the tales focus on the poor but noble triumphing over the rich but corrupt. The later tales seem to hold a bit more humour than the earlier stuff and I really felt it improved as it went. I only read part of this and listened to the rest from Libravox.

Here's a little sample of the kind of writing you're in for: 'A sedan-chair! A sedan-chair! This person will unhesitatingly exchange his entire and well-regulated Empire for such an article'

I assume everyone will recognise this disguised Shakespeare quote which is attributed to a famous Japanese writer in one of the stories :lol . I actually wonder whether the entire book was written in normal English then parsed into this faux Japanese afterward.

Because it's supposed to be Japanese everyone is very polite which means a great deal of passive aggressive dialogue which I found quite entertaining. Overall probably a lot easier to listen to than read, I quite liked it especially the latter third.

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### **Stephen Brooke says**

I read the first two of Ernest Bramah's Kai Lung books quite a long time ago, when Ballantine reissued them as part of their fantasy line. When I reread them recently, I started with the second book, 'Kai Lung's Golden Hours.' All in all, I would have to say it is better than 'The Wallet of Kai Lung.' Lighter, funnier, better crafted, as well as having a cohesive (if throwaway) plot to pull together the stories.

But "Wallet" is still an entertaining book. The stories themselves exist more as a container for Bramah's words, his observations, the humorously roundabout language (such as his send-up of familiar lines from Shakespeare). There is not really much to them otherwise and such plots as they have are forgettable.

The 'China' of Ernest Bramah is, of course, not the real China, anymore than Tolkien's Middle Earth is the real Europe. It is a fantasy realm—one worth visiting.

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### **Mel says**

I found nice and quite cheap copies of all the Kai Lung books at a second hand book shop last month. As someone whose interested in all things Chinese, and western interpretations of China, I thought I had to get them all. This book was originally written in 1900 and for its time is quite remarkable. It is totally the opposite of the Sax Rohmer books. Here while often humorous the author seems to genuinely like Chinese culture. Currently it's debated if he ever went to China before writing the novels, there are quite a few details he gets wrong in his stories (like someone sitting for the regular exams getting a military posting). But the details he does get right are so much more than I was expecting, random correct Chinese words thrown in untranslated, Buddhist dieties, actual places, immortality, etc etc. (the village where the storyteller tells his story is called Wu wei (wu wei meaning without action and being the fundamental principle of Taoism something little understood by most Europeans in 19002). It is written in quite a ridiculous style of parody of the self-effacing perceived Chinese style. At times this can be a bit confusing but other times it's very funny. The book is made up of short stories told by a Chinese storyteller. There were stories about a man who accidentally turned himself into gold (the longest and probably the best in the collection) a man who goes to murder the village mandarin as he's evil only to have it turn out to be his father, a man who goes through misfortune after misfortune but ends up in charge of the examinations, another man whose very unfortunate and gets chosen to participate in a ritual where the Emperor ploughs (an actual ritual I was quite surprised that Bramah had known about). The closest thing I can think of for these books is the Van Gulik books, but rather than mysteries we have comedy and social satire. (One story he transposes Shakespeare to China and has his storyteller try and discredit that the Chinese Shakespeare actually wrote his sayings by saying they came from an earlier dynasty - though this is the only instance of anything so European that I realised). I'm

looking forward to reading the rest of the books in this series and glad I found them.

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### **Steve says**

This one defeated me; 30% and I jumped ship. The prose proved to be too dense, getting in the way of the story. This may be just because of the time in which it was written, however I have happily read Conan Doyle, who was a contemporary of the author, so I don't think that is a complete excuse. Having said that, the tales are certainly imaginative and evoke an interesting vision of China (although quite how accurate a vision is another matter).

So, two stars because it couldn't keep me interested enough to wade through, but there were glimpses of what other people see in it.

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### **Lucy says**

This was one of my the favourite books of my father's family in the 1920's and 30's. So I'm ashamed to say that I found it really hard to follow, and though it was very readable I have little clue what it was about....thus does family intelligence etiolate over the generations...so I am going to give it another go, slowly and carefully, and maybe take notes.....

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### **Steven says**

I am both a confirmed Sinophile and a rabid lexicaphanicist (i.e., I take unholy glee in big words) but I found this book to be a disappointment. Bramah does an incredible send-up of genteel Edwardian perceptions of Old Cathay, but a parody of a counterfeit just doesn't float my boat. Yes, Bramah's depiction of the florid circumlocutions of Chinese courtesy is nothing short of brilliant. But after the first 30 pages of florid circumlocutions I found them to be maddeningly in the way of the flow of the story. As much as I enjoy loquacious grandiloquence, story must come first.

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### **Kristen Page says**

The world needs more characters who must maintain their reputations for keen and polished sentences. And who doesn't love a character who's thrown into a class of circumstances greatly differing from anything which he had ever sought?

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### **Usfromdk says**

This book contains many hilarious laugh-out-loud passages, but is also somewhat difficult to read due to the sentence structure and the 'stilted' language. I found it highly enjoyable, but this is not an easy read; you need to concentrate to make sense of the often very long and roundabout sentences.

I have added a couple of sample quotes from the book below:

"Yin journeyed towards the centre of the island where the rock stood, at every step passing the bones of innumerable ones who had come on a similar quest to his, and perished. Many of these had left behind them inscriptions on wood or bone testifying their deliberate opinion of the sacred rock, the island, their protecting deities, and the entire train of circumstances, which had resulted in their being in such a condition. These were for the most part of a maledictory and unencouraging nature [...] [a] practical-minded person had written: "Retreat with all haste to your vessel, and escape while there is yet time. Should you, by chance, again reach land through this warning, do not neglect, out of an emotion of gratitude, to burn an appropriate amount of sacrifice paper for the lessening of the torments of the spirit of Li-Kao," to which an unscrupulous one, who was plainly desirous of sharing in the benefit of the requested sacrifice, without suffering the exertion of inscribing a warning after the amiable manner of Li-Kao, had added the words, "and that of Huan Sin.""

"In his conscientious desire to administer a pure and beneficent rule, he not infrequently made himself a very prominent object for public disregard, especially by his attempts to introduce untried things, when from time to time such matters arose within his mind and seemed to promise agreeable and remunerative results. In this manner it came about that the streets of Fow Hou were covered with large flat stones, to the great inconvenience of those persons who had, from a very remote period, been in the habit of passing the night on the soft clay which at all seasons of the year afforded a pleasant and efficient resting-place. Nevertheless, in certain matters his engaging efforts were attended by an obvious success. Having noticed that misfortunes and losses are much less keenly felt when they immediately follow in the steps of an earlier evil, the benevolent and humane-minded Chan Hung devised an ingenious method of lightening the burden of a necessary taxation by arranging that those persons who were the most heavily involved should be made the victims of an attack and robbery on the night before the matter became due."

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### **Debbie Zapata says**

Have to give up on this one after just a few pages. I liked the idea of the book more than the way the book was written.

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### **LeahBethany says**

This collection of short stories had a few bright moments but overall, I found it slow and hard to get through (with a lot of re-reading involved to try to understand what the author was trying to convey). The first story was brilliant but the rest of the stories were just more of the same and the shine came off...

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he gets wrong in his stories (like someone sitting for the regular exams getting a military posting). But the details he does get right are so much more than I was expecting, random Correct Chinese words thrown in untranslated, Buddhist dieties, actual places, immortality, etc etc. (the village where the storyteller tells his story is called Wu whei (wu wei meaning without action and being the fundamental principle of Taoism something little understood by most Europeans in 19002).

It is written in quite a ridiculous style of parody of the self-effacing perceived Chinese style. At times this can be a bit confussing but other times it's very funny. The book is made up of short stories told by a Chinese storyteller. There were stories about a man who accidently turned himself into gold (the longest and probably the best in the collection) a man who goes to murder the village mandarian as he's evil only to have it turn out to be his father, a man who goes through misfortune after misfortune but ends up in charge of the examinations, another man whose very misfortunate and gets chosen to participate in a ritual where the Emperor ploughs (an actual ritual I was quite surprised that Bramah had known about). The closest thing I can think of for these books is the Van Gulik books, but rather than mysteries we have comedy and social satire. (One story he transposes Shakespeare to China and has his storyteller try and discredit that the Chinese Shakespeare actually wrote his sayings by saying they came from an earlier dynasty - though this is the only instance of anything so European that I realised).

I'm looking forward to reading the rest of the books in this series and glad I found them.

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### **Quiver says**

Interesting insight into the culture he describes, but at time the language is too cumbersome. English was not meant to be written and read in that fashion for more than a few lines...

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### **Kris says**

An ornate molasses of finely crafted words poured over deft, spritely, witty tales. Old school fantasy writing with nary a monster to be seen.

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### **Elizabeth says**

I found this on Project Gutenberg and read it because Peter Wimsey loved it. It's definitely amusing, and surprisingly free of racism for it's time period. I find that a little goes a long way though, and I would definitely take this one story at a time.

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### **Valerie says**

I first had a go at the Kai Lung books because I liked their cover designs on my parents' bookshelves. I wasn't impressed. Then I got to reading Dorothy L Sayers' works, and I noted that she WAS very impressed. Impressed enough to quote from them repeatedly. So I thought I must have missed something, and went back.

Nope. I still wasn't impressed. I slogged my way through them, in case they improved within. Still nothing. I could see this sort of thing done well. I think of Lem's Cyberiad, for example. I just didn't like the way it was done in the Kai Lung books. A matter of personal taste, perhaps?

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### **Mckinley says**

I found this a bit long winded and after the first story of the Transmutation of Ling. Not my thing.

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### **Richard says**

This shouldn't work. You shouldn't be able to make a collection of stories with forgettable plots, a vaguely defined setting, and non-existent characterization be interesting. Because to do that, you'd have to make it compelling purely on the level of the individual sentence, and that is a ridiculous goal.

Ernest Bramah accomplishes that goal, and it is a joy to watch him do it.

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