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Coming Distraction: Shanghai Girls

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Lisa See: *Shanghai Girls* is about two sisters who leave Shanghai in 1937 and come to Los Angeles in arranged marriages. Four things inspired me. First, I’ve been collecting Shanghai advertising images from the Twenties, Thirties, and Forties for many years. The so-called Beautiful Girls, women who posed for commercial artists, were right in the heart of the excitement in Shanghai. The charming and captivating life illustrated in advertisements is one thing, but I was interested in seeing what real life was like for those women. I also wanted to write about what it was like for Chinese women who came to America in arranged marriages. (We had a lot of arranged marriages in my family. I know how hard life was for the women.) Third, I wanted to write about China City, a short-lived tourist attraction in Los Angeles. And finally, I wanted to write about sisters. The sibling relationship is the longest that we’ll have in our lifetimes. A sister knows you your entire life. She should stand by you, support you, and love you, no matter what, but it’s also your sister who knows exactly where to drive the knife to hurt you the most.

For your earlier work *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, you did a great deal of historical research. Did you also do historical research for *Shanghai Girls*? What types of sources informed your writing?

Research is my favorite part of the writing process. I never know what I’m going to find. I live close to UCLA and I love to spend time in the Research Library stacks. But the real excitement comes from going to places—I go to every place I write about—and from talking to people.

I’ll mention two sources that “informed” the writing in *Shanghai Girls*. The first was going to Angel Island. As you probably already know, the Angel Island Immigration St
I also did lots of interviews. In *Shanghai Girls*, I’ve written about the Confession Program, which ran from 1956 to 1965. The government asked Chinese to “confess” their paper-son status. They were also encouraged to reveal the people they knew in their own families—fathers, sons, brothers, wives—who had come in using false status. But it didn’t stop there. People were also asked to name neighbors, business associates, and anyone else they suspected might be a Communist. There is still a lot of shame and embarrassment about what happened during the program. People don’t like to admit that they were targeted; others don’t want to admit that they confessed. And this can happen in the same family! I got some people to talk to me about what happened to them during those days. The stories were sad and very hard to hear. One man said to me, “There were a lot of suicides, a lot of suicides. It’s hard to remember these things because of the pain.” Another person said, “I don’t know that we’ve ever mentioned any of this to our kids.” He then added, “We aren’t dead yet, so we aren’t safe yet.” Interestingly, a whole other way to look at the Confession Program was as an amnesty program. When you change “confession” to “amnesty,” the connotations are very different, aren’t they?

The heroines of *Shanghai Girls* trace the same path that some of your own ancestors did when they came to the U.S. from China (though a few decades later). Did you draw on the experiences of your family—which you wrote about in *On Gold Mountain* (1996)—to imagine the experiences of Pearl and May?

Absolutely! My family traveled back and forth to China quite a bit, so they were passing through Angel Island pretty regularly all the way up until the Immigration Station finally closed. When I was working on *On Gold Mountain*, I was very fortunate to find at the National Archives over 500 pages of interrogation transcripts, photographs, boarding passes, and health certificates relating directly to my family’s experiences at Angel Island. I used a lot of that material for *On Gold Mountain*, but there was a lot I didn’t use until *Shanghai Girls*. Pearl and May’s interrogation scenes on Angel Island come almost verbatim from the file for Mrs. Fong Lai, the wife of one of my great-grandfather’s paper partners.

I’ve already mentioned that we had a lot of arranged marriages in my family. For example, back in 1932, my great-great-uncle took his family back to China in part to get wives for his sons. The oldest wife was about 25; the youngest was something like 14. They’d had servants in China, but they lived
like servants in America. In China, especially after Liberation, women’s lives and the culture changed rapidly, but in U.S. Chinatowns people held on to their traditions and beliefs. Chinese women in the U.S. led very difficult, traditional, closed in lives.

Finally, my fictional sisters come to Los Angeles Chinatown. My family has lived and had businesses in Los Angeles Chinatown for about 120 years. I really know the history, the people, the food, the streets, and the secrets. All of that I was able to give to May and Pearl.

**Most of your other books have been set in China, but this book returns to the U.S.-where much of On Gold Mountain took place. What about the story or time period of Shanghai Girls brought you back to the U.S.?**

I've always been interested in the push and pull of immigration. What pushes people out of their home countries? War, prejudice, persecution of one sort or another, famine, the desire to get rich and make a better life. What pulls people to a new place? The hope for freedom or the desire to have a better life for yourself and your family. The fact is that we all have someone in our families who was scared enough, brave enough, or crazy enough to leave their home countries to come here.

The timeframe for Shanghai Girls has several of these elements: Shanghai was at a fascinating moment in 1937. Shanghai was at the height of decadence, the Paris of Asia, and all that. It was a place people wanted to be. It had great pull. It was a place people went to, not left. But everything began to change when the Japanese invaded. There are several reasons why Pearl and May flee China, and this is one of them. Again, this was a very specific moment in Shanghai. (After 1937, Shanghai went through a long period of decline. Even after Deng Xiaoping inaugurated the Open Door Policy in 1979, Shanghai still languished. It wasn't until 1992, when Deng gave his emphatic support for Shanghai to become a once and future financial and commercial center, that things began to change...and very rapidly.)

Once my sisters get to Los Angeles, they are also in an interesting moment. Old Chinatown had been torn down, and two new Chinatowns—China City and New Chinatown—opened with great fanfare. People may know Chinatown, but hardly anyone remembers China City. China City was a tourist attraction developed by Christine Sterling, who also developed Olvera Street, a Mexican marketplace here in Los Angeles. Mrs. Sterling started both of these projects during the Depression as a way to give poor immigrants a chance to start small businesses. Chinese City was intended to look and feel like an "authentic" Chinese city. It was one square block surrounded by a miniature Great Wall. Inside it was built from the leftover sets from the filming of The Good Earth. The people who worked there were required to wear Chinese costumes. Those who came to visit rode in rickshaws and nibbled on Chinaburgers. China City was also home to the Asiastic Costume Company, where movie studios rented props and costumes, and also hired Chinese extras to work in films. I think it’s safe to say that China City wasn’t terribly authentic, but it did have a lot of charm. And it’s really lived on in the memories of the people who worked there. My great-great-uncle had a shop there. His children—my cousins—have wonderful memories of playing and working in China City.

I also wanted to write about the Confession Program, which I talked about earlier.

**In On Gold Mountain, you write that the book grew partly from a desire to preserve your family’s history. But in your subsequent novels, you have returned to China again and again. What keeps you coming back to it as a setting and subject?**

I don’t look at it as “returning to China again and again.” Rather, one book has led to the other in a very organic way. Three paragraphs in the penultimate chapter of On Gold Mountain led to Flower Net. Once the characters in the mysteries were established, one idea led to another in those too. There was a line in the penultimate paragraph in Snow Flower and the Secret Fan that let me understand how I could write Peony in Love. I'd been thinking about the true story of the three wives for years, but there was something that the character of Lily said that just clicked in my mind. I can tell you that the book I'm working on now never could have happened without Shanghai Girls. So it's definitely been a natural progression.
At the same time, other things drive me: personal interest in a subject, curiosity about why we followed or continue follow certain traditions in my family, and a desire to understand and know myself. This last part is really about exploring who I am and what I know. Obviously, being part Chinese has had a huge impact on me. But what does that even mean? Not to you or readers, but to me.

Finally, why not write about China? It’s beautiful. It has a rich and deep culture that very few people—even Chinese!—understand or know fully. The country accounts for a quarter of the world’s population. It’s a global economic superpower. With all the stresses in the world, we need to know more about China, not less. I’m doing what I can to help others learn about China not in an academic essay but through stories. It’s through fiction that we connect to real people and by extension to the shared human condition. I’m interested in finding the universals through the uniqueness that is China.