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## ARTS

### Another "Tale of Two Cities"

By Eric William Schramm

Characters in novels are not always composed of flesh and blood. Paris and London played roles in Dickens' famous novel "A Tale of Two Cities." In her novel "Shanghai Girl," Vivian Yang links the "characters" of Shanghai and New York City with the experiences of Sha-fei, the novel's protagonist.

Navigating the political complexities of communal living as the child of an "enemy of the people," and building on the cosmopolitan pedigree of Shanghai's past, made manifest in her, Sha-fei learns the sophistication and drive that will lead her to a successful life in New York City. Yet, her journey to becoming the first Asian American political appointee, is fraught with experiences of poverty, sexism and racism.

"Shanghai Girl" is not Sha-fei's story alone, though. Besides Sha-fei's account of her journey, Yang has also added the narrative voices of two men who compete for the young woman's affections. An old friend of Sha-fei's father, Gordon Lou is a Chinese-American businessman who has connections to the Chinatown gangs. And Edward Cook is a young American lawyer who has a strong proclivity for all things Asian. While the story of this trio begins in Shanghai, it culminates with a murder and Sha-fei's political appointment in New York.

While Yang sets up several challenges for her protagonist, Sha-fei remains unfazed in her will to succeed in the United States, the "Golden Mountain."

"['Shanghai Girl'] is a celebration of democracy. This person went through persecution, yet she still had the opportunity to succeed," said Yang.

Yang stresses that the novel is a dramatization sprinkled with autobiographical elements. Yang was born in Shanghai in the 60s. Her descriptions of Sha-fei's early life are memorable because she draws on her own personal knowledge of Shanghai, the climate of suppression at the close of the Cultural Revolution and China's openness in the 1980s.

By the age of 23, Yang was teaching English and journalism at Shanghai International Studies University, her alma mater, and working as a freelance print and broadcast journalist. But, the lure of United States was strong, and she left China to study

in the United States. She received a Master's degree in Communications from the Hugh Downs School of Communications from Arizona State University. She then moved to New York, and, in the early 1990s, immersed herself in writing classes at Columbia University and in writing workshops at the fledgling Asian American Writers Workshop. It was in these workshops that Yang began "Shanghai Girl."

However, the current novel does not resemble the two drafts that preceded it. Yang persisted as all writers intent on becoming successful must do. After adding the two male narrators on the suggestion of workshop participants, Yang completed "Shanghai Girl." In 1995, her hard work was rewarded as the New Jersey State Council on the Arts awarded Yang a 1995-1996 Literature Fellowship based on an excerpt from the novel. Notably, of seven recipients of the Fellowship, Yang was the only one for whom English was not their native language.

Yang's use of three such diverse narrators is unique among the work of contemporary Asian American writers. Yang points to Gordon as being especially unique portrayal of a Chinese American.

"Gordon is an accidental American. He couldn't return or didn't want to return to China after the Communists gained power. He is Chinese but forced to live in the United States. He is confused and so is his value system," said Yang. "This type of character has not been portrayed. I want to draw attention to the different layers of Asian Americans."

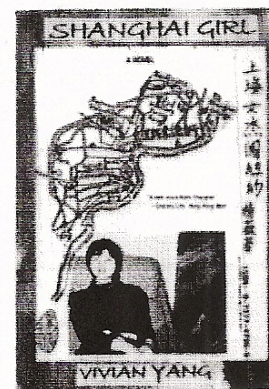
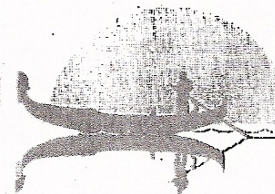
What further makes Gordon unique is that he aligns himself with the Republicans rather than the Democrats, the favorite party of many Asian American. This type of political awareness is also what Yang would like people to take from the novel. She would like to see more Asian Americans involved politically as well as recognized for their political participation by mainstream society.

Yang knows how politics and other issues can overwhelm novels. "I'm trying to tackle a number of issues while making sure the novel is entertaining."

To read the first chapter, view the contents or buy a copy of "Shanghai Girl" for \$16 (ISBN: 0-7377-4796-8) visit [www.xlibris.com/ShanghaiGirl.html](http://www.xlibris.com/ShanghaiGirl.html). Or call Xlibris at 1-888-795-4274.



Vivian Yang



\* Artist Profile \* "Shanghai Girl"