

chinese characters

Writers from China's diaspora

Vivian Yang

She's lived in Hong Kong, Australia and the US, but the only place Vivian Yang can imagine writing about is Shanghai. The city in which she was born and grew up dominated her first novel, *Shanghai Girl*, and plays an equally large role in her work-in-progress.

And the best place to write about Shanghai, Yang says, is New York. After eight years in Hong Kong, she returned to New York four months ago with her husband, an executive at financial ratings agency Standard & Poor, and their daughter, Katie, 12.

Yang learnt to write in New York by constantly redrafting *Shanghai Girl* and studying creative writing at Columbia and New York Universities. But New York also makes her think about the two cultures she's juggled since leaving the mainland in 1986. "New York is a migrant city much like Shanghai," she says.

After studying English Language and Literature at the Shanghai International Studies University, Yang worked as a journalist for *China Daily*, a broadcaster and teacher before

completing her master's degree in Intercultural Studies at Arizona State University.

Shanghai Girl (released in 2001) is an autobiographical tale of assimilation in New York and Shanghai, narrated by a young Chinese woman, a Chinese-born American businessman and a white American lawyer.

"I want to write about being between cultures because that's what I am," says Yang. "I want to write about marginal people. The new novel will deal with inter-cultural and inter-racial relationships." Yang is reluctant to say much about her next work, other than that she hopes to take the finished draft to as many people as possible. "I'm looking forward to workshopping it with the much larger writing community in New York and, hopefully, releasing it into a much bigger market."

The action will take place in the French district of Shanghai. It will be narrated by a woman looking back to Shanghai of the 1970s – before the economic boom and western influx.

In the hope of showing that assimilation is more than a question of east meeting west, Yang will set a large part of the

novel in Hong Kong. "In Hong Kong, so many people are ethnic Chinese, but they're not Chinese passport-holders. That's what makes the place so interesting. Hong Kong has many sub-groups. Within the Cantonese community are the western-educated and the non-western educated. Then there are the mainland refugees. So, what is Hong Kong? It's a diverse concept, and Hong Kong's literature hasn't really grasped that."

Yang's family has been in Shanghai for several generations. Her great-grandfather, Li Fihao, was finance minister twice during the 1920s.

"I still know Shanghai well," she says. "My family has a deep connection to the city. I've moved from country to country, but I didn't leave China until I was 26. China is still the essence of me. That makes me different to a lot of ethnic Chinese and ethnic Asians writing in English today who emigrated or were educated overseas. I have a stronger sense of being bi-cultural than a lot of those people."

"I'm not as culturally and linguistically tuned in to the



west as a lot of writers working in English. It's an ongoing challenge and a big part of my life. So, I'd say that, if I continue to write what I know, I'll be writing about these kinds of issues."

Although articulate in English, Yang is candid about the limitations of her prose. But that's good for her novels, she says. Her doubts are the kind shared by all writers – not just those who come late to the English language – and Yang says the real meat of her writing are the issues more than the polish on the words.

"Writing is a tough field and no one is forcing you to keep going," she says. "But persistence is the only way I know. Some writers can do lovely flowing sentences. They can manipulate the language well while writing about bland things. I try to focus on the content. I don't have the luxury of lapsing into flowery language. That's my challenge, but it also means that I have a lot of material to write about in China."

Yang says it's too early to find a common thread to the literary style of writers from the Chinese diaspora. "But thematically I'd say you can identify similarities in writing about adapting to a new culture. The way the gap from your culture makes you wrestle with your identity. You see a lot of people writing about these kinds of topics."

"I have a lot in common with Asian authors overseas. Being outside your culture, that daily struggle of assimilation brings a lot of people together. It's an experience that makes many want to write about it to make sense of it. It's also a good situation for a writer – it makes you a keener observer."

Alister McMillan