

BOOKS

Review: 'Tomorrow in Shanghai,' by May-lee Chai

FICTION: A moving, well crafted collection of stories that explore the possibilities of creating human connection within the Chinese diaspora and beyond.

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The third story in May-lee Chai's collection "Tomorrow in Shanghai" is titled "The Monkey King of Sichuan." In it, two graduate school friends (Grace and Esther) reunite after many years apart and Grace reveals that she was sexually harassed by a famous professor when they were students.

Grace is Chinese; Esther is Chinese American. At one point, when Grace bitterly comments about how much power American women have, Esther recalls that their professor never pressured her for sex, and wonders if Grace is secretly angry with her because her American-born status exempted her from unwanted advances. The moment passes, but as the story ends Esther realizes that this is likely the last time she will see her friend, and that they can't use their shared experience to build a lasting friendship in the future.

This moment, like many others in "Tomorrow in Shanghai," deftly dramatizes the complicated ways that histories and identities intersect for members of the Chinese diaspora, in this case to create boundaries that forbid meaningful connection. A later story, "Jia," explores similar territory. When a young girl recalls the history that has led to the present moment, in which she and her white mother are fleeing her Chinese father, the dynamics of Chinese immigration and mixed-race marriages intersect to create an uncertain future for the family.

Not all the intersections in the collection lead to suspicion or instability. As in Chai's previous story collection "Useful Phrases for Immigrants," several of the book's eight stories offer the experience of displacement as a starting point for surprising new connections.

In "Life on Mars," a young Chinese immigrant to the United States begins to feel more at home after he has a brief, intimate encounter with a fellow male student. In "Hong's Mother" (which reads like a mirror-image of "Jia"), a second-generation immigrant from China creates a surprising bond with her white mother, even after the daughter has traveled to France to escape the confusion of her life in the U.S.

The first and last stories extend the book's concerns beyond the Chinese diaspora. The first story (also the title story) takes place entirely within China and offers no evidence that the characters have ever left. In it, a young Shanghai-based doctor looks forward to finishing an unwelcome assignment with small-town officials, with whom he thinks he has nothing in common. In the collection's final story, "The Nanny," Chai experiments with science fiction and imagines an older woman creating a new sense of family in a Chinese colony on Mars.

These two stories bookend this moving, well crafted collection perfectly, as they explore ways in which the human capacities for resilience and imagination, so obviously on display in immigrants' lives, shape our lives more broadly — and how essential they will be in determining forms of life in the future.

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Tomorrow in Shanghai

By: May-lee Chai.



BOB HSIANG PHOTOGRAPHY, STAR TRIBUNE

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