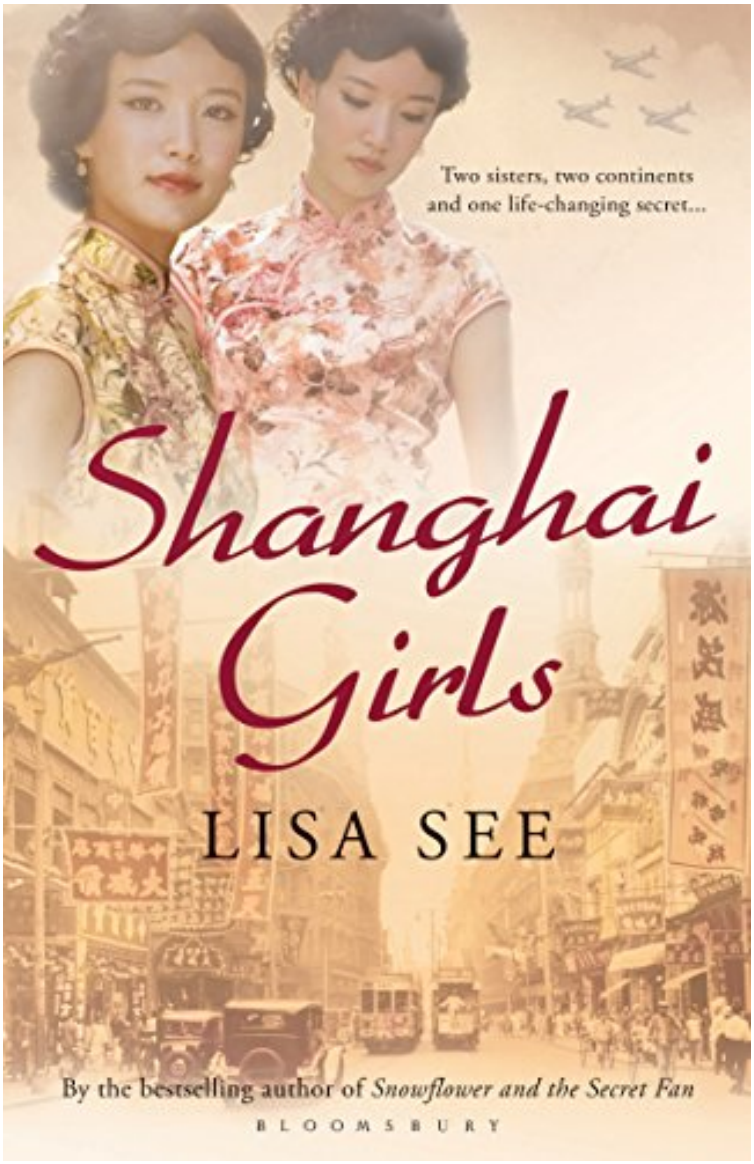
# Shanghai Girls






*Par Lisa See*
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[Online library] Shanghai Girls

**Par Lisa See : Shanghai Girls** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Shanghai Girls:

**Description :**

Prsentation de l'diteurShanghai, 1937. Pearl and May are two sisters from a bourgeois family. Though their personalities are very different - Pearl is a Dragon sign, strong and stubborn, while May is a true Sheep, adorable and placid - they are inseparable best friends. Both are beautiful, modern and living a carefree life ... until the day their father tells them that he has gambled away the family's wealth, and that in order to repay his debts he must sell the girls as wives to two 'Gold Mountain' men: Americans.As Japanese bombs fall on their beloved city, the two sisters set out on the journey of a lifetime, one that will take them through the villages of southern China, in and out of the clutches of brutal soldiers, and even across the ocean, through the humiliation of an anti-Chinese detention centre to a new, married life in Los Angeles's

Chinatown. Here they begin a fresh chapter, despite the racial discrimination and anti-Communist paranoia, because now they have something to strive for: a young, American-born daughter, Joy.Along the way there are terrible sacrifices, impossible choices and one devastating, life-changing secret, but through it all the two heroines of this astounding new novel by Lisa See hold fast to who they are - Shanghai girls.ExtraitChapter OneBeautiful Girls"our daughter looks like a South China peasant with those red cheeks," my father complains, pointedly ignoring the soup before him. "Can't you do something about them?"Mama stares at Baba, but what can she say? My face is pretty enough- some might even say lovely-but not as luminescent as the pearl I'm named for. I tend to blush easily. Beyond that, my cheeks capture the sun. When I turned five, my mother began rubbing my face and arms with pearl creams, and mixing ground pearls into my morning jook-rice porridge-hoping the white essence would permeate my skin. It hasn't worked. Now my cheeks burn red-exactly what my father hates. I shrink down into my chair. I always slump when I'm near him, but I slump even more on those occasions when Baba takes his eyes off my sister to look at me. I'm taller than my father, which he loathes. We live in Shanghai, where the tallest car, the tallest wall, or the tallest building sends a clear and unwavering message that the owner is a person of great importance. I am not a person of importance."She thinks she's smart," Baba goes on. He wears a Western-style suit of good cut. His hair shows just a few strands of gray. He's been anxious lately, but tonight his mood is darker than usual. Perhaps his favorite horse didn't win or the dice refused to land his way. "But one thing she isn't is clever."This is another of my father's standard criticisms and one he picked up from Confucius, who wrote, "An educated woman is a worthless woman." People call me bookish, which even in 1937 is not considered a good thing. But as smart as I am, I don't know how to protect myself from my father's words.Most families eat at a round dining table, so they will always be whole and connected, with no sharp edges. We have a square teakwood table, and we always sit in the exact same places: my father next to May on one side of the table, with my mother directly across from her so that my parents can share my sister equally. Every meal-day after day, year after year-is a reminder that I'm not the favorite and never will be.As my father continues to pick at my faults, I shut him out and pretend an interest in our dining room. On the wall adjoining the kitchen, four scrolls depicting the four seasons usually hang. Tonight they've been removed, leaving shadow outlines on the wall. They aren't the only things missing. We used to have an overhead fan, but this past year Baba thought it would be more luxurious to have servants fan us while we ate. They aren't here tonight and the room is sweltering. Ordinarily an art deco chandelier and matching wall sconces of etched yellow-and-rose-tinted glass illuminate the room. These are missing as well. I don't give any of this much thought, assuming that the scrolls have been put away to prevent their silken edges from curling in the humidity, that Baba has given the servants a night off to celebrate a wedding or birthday with their own families, and that the lighting fixtures have been temporarily taken down for cleaning.Cook-who has no wife and children of his own-removes our soup bowls and brings out dishes of shrimp with water chestnuts, pork stewed in soy sauce with dried vegetables and bamboo shoots, steamed eel, an eight-treasures vegetable dish, and rice, but the heat swallows my hunger. I would prefer a few sips of chilled sour plum juice, cold mint-flavored sweet green bean soup, or sweet almond broth.When Mama says, "The basket repairer charged too much today," I relax. If my father is predictable in his criticisms of me, then it's equally predictable that my mother will recite her daily woes. She looks elegant, as always. Amber pins hold the bun at the back of her neck perfectly in place. Her gown, a cheongsam made of midnight blue silk with midlength sleeves, has been expertly tailored to fit her age and status. A bracelet carved from a single piece of good jade hangs from her wrist. The thump of it when it hits the table edge is comforting and familiar. She has bound feet, and some of her ways are just as antiquated. She questions our dreams, weighing the meaning of the presence of water, shoes, or teeth as good or bad omens. She believes in astrology, blaming or praising May and me for one thing or another because we were born in the Year of the Sheep and the Year of the Dragon, respectively.Mama has a lucky life. Her arranged marriage to our father seems relatively peaceful. She reads Buddhist sutras in the morning, takes a rickshaw to visit friends for lunch, plays mah-jongg until late in the day, and commiserates with wives of similar station about the weather, the indolence of servants, and the ineffectiveness of the latest remedies for their hiccups, gout, or hemorrhoids. She has nothing to fret about, but her quiet bitterness and persistent worry infuse every story she tells us. "There are no happy endings," she often recites. Still, she's beautiful, and her lily gait is as delicate as the swaying of young bamboo in a spring breeze."That lazy servant next door was sloppy with the Tso family's nightstool and stunk up the street with their nightsoil," Mama says. "And Cook!" She allows herself a low hiss of disapproval. "Cook has served us shrimp so old that the smell has made me lose my appetite."We don't contradict her, but the odor suffocating us comes not

from spilled nightsoil or day-old shrimp but from her. Since we don't have our servants to keep the air moving in the room, the smell that rises from the blood and pus that seep through the bandages holding Mama's feet in their tiny shape clings to the back of my throat.Mama is still filling the air with her grievances when Baba interrupts. "You girls can't go out tonight. I need to talk to you."He speaks to May, who looks at him and smiles in that beautiful way of hers. We aren't bad girls, but we have plans tonight, and being lectured by Baba about how much water we waste in our baths or the fact that we don't eat every grain of rice in our bowls isn't part of them. Usually Baba reacts to May's charm by smiling back at her and forgetting his concerns, but this time he blinks a few times and shifts his black eyes to me. Again, I sink in my chair. Sometimes I think this is my only real form of filial piety, making myself small before my father. I consider myself to be a modern Shanghai girl. I don't want to believe in all that obey, obey, obey stuff girls were taught in the past. But the truth is, May-as much as they adore her- and I are just girls. No one will carry on the family name, and no one will worship our parents as ancestors when the time comes. My sister and I are the end of the Chin line. When we were very young, our lack of value meant our parents had little interest in controlling us. We weren't worth the trouble or effort. Later, something strange happened: my parents fell in love-total, besotted love-with their younger daughter. This allowed us to retain a certain amount of liberty, with the result that my sister's spoiled ways are often ignored, as is our sometimes flagrant disregard for respect and duty. What others might call unfilial and disrespectful, we call modern and unbound."You aren't worth a single copper coin," Baba says to me, his tone sharp. "I don't know how I'm ever going to-""Oh, Ba, stop picking on Pearl. You're lucky to have a daughter like her. I'm luckier still to have her as my sister."We all turn to May. She's like that. When she speaks, you can't help listening to her. When she's in the room, you can't help looking at her. Everyone loves her-our parents, the rickshaw boys who work for my father, the missionaries who taught us in school, the artists, revolutionaries, and foreigners whom we've come to know these last few years."Aren't you going to ask me what I did today?" May asks, her demand as light and breezy as a bird's wings in flight.With that, I disappear from my parents' vision. I'm the older sister, but in so many ways May takes care of me."I went to see a movie at the Metropole and then I went to Avenue Joffre to buy shoes," she continues. "From there it wasn't far to Madame Garnet's shop in the Cathay Hotel to pick up my new dress." May lets a touch of reproach creep into her voice. "She said she won't let me have it until you come to call.""A girl doesn't need a new dress every week," Mama says gently. "You could be more like your sister in this regard. A Dragon doesn't need frills, lace, and bows. Pearl's too practical for all that.""Baba can afford it," May retorts.My father's jaw tightens. Is it something May said, or is he getting ready to criticize me again? He opens his mouth to speak, but my sister cuts him off."Here we are in the seventh month and already the heat is unbearable. Baba, when are you sending us to Kuling? You don't want Mama and me to get sick, do you? Summer brings such unpleasantness to the city, and we're always happier in the mountains at this time of year."May has tactfully left me out of her questions. I prefer to be an afterthought. But all her chattering is really just a way to distract our parents. My sister catches my eye, nods almost imperceptibly, and quickly stands. "Come, Pearl. Let's get ready."I push back my chair, grateful to be saved from my father's disapproval."No!" Baba pounds his fist on the table. The dishes rattle. Mama shivers in surprise. I freeze in place. People on our street admire my father for his business acumen. He's lived the dream of every native-born Shanghainese, as well as every Shanghailander-those foreigners who've come here from around the world to find their fortunes. He started with nothing and turned himself and his family into something. Before I was born, he ran a rickshaw business in Canton, not as an owner but as a subcontractor, who rented rickshaws at seventy cents a day and then rented them to a minor subcontractor at ninety cents a day before they were rented to the rickshaw pullers at a dollar a day. After he made enough money, he moved us to Shanghai and opened his own rickshaw business. "Better opportunities," he-and probably a million others in the city-likes to say. Baba has never told us how he became so wealthy or how he earned those opportunities, and I don't have the courage to ask. Everyone agrees-even in families-that it's better not to inquire about the past, because everyone in Shanghai has come here to get away from something or has something to hide.May doesn't care about any of that. I look at her and know exactly what she wants to say: I don't want to hear you tell us you don't like our hair. I don't want to hear that you don't want us to show our bare arms or too much of our legs. No, we don't want to get "regular full-time jobs." You may be my father, but for all your noise you're a weak man and I don't want to listen to you. Instead, she just tilts her head and looks down at my father in such a way that he's powerless before her. She learned this trick as a toddler and has perfected it as she's gotten older. Her ease, her effortlessness, melts everyone. A slight smile comes to her lips. She pats his shoulder, and his eyes are

drawn to her fingernails, which, like mine, have been painted and stained red by applying layers of red balsam blossom juice. Touching-even in families-isn't completely taboo, but it certainly isn't accepted. A good and proper family offer no kisses, no hugs, no pats of affection. So May knows exactly what she's doing when she touches our father. In his distraction and repulsion, she spins away, and I hurry after her. We've taken a few steps when Baba calls out."Please don't go."But May, in her usual way, just laughs. "We're working tonight. Don't wait up."I follow her up the stairs, our parents' voices accompanying us in a kind of discordant song. Mama carries the melody: "I pity your husbands. 'I need shoes.' 'I want a new dress.' 'Will you buy us tickets to the opera?' " Baba, in his deeper voice, beats out the bass: "Come back here. Please come back. I need to tell you something." May ignores them, and I try to, admiring the way she closes her ears to their words and insistence. We're opposites in this and so many things.Whenever you have two sisters-or siblings of any number or either sex- comparisons are made. May and I were born in Yin Bo Village, less than a half day's walk from Canton. We're only three years apart, but we couldn't be more different. She's funny; I'm criticized for being too somber. She's tiny and has an adorable fleshiness to her; I'm tall and thin. May, who just graduated from high school, has no interest in reading anything beyond the gossip columns; I graduated from college five weeks ago.My first language was Sze Yup, the dialect spoken in the Four Districts in Kwangtung province, where our ancestral home is located. I've had American and British teachers since I was five, so my English is close to perfect. I consider myself fluent in four languages-British English, American English, the Sze Yup dialect (one of many Cantonese dialects), and the Wu dialect (a unique version of Mandarin spoken only in Shanghai). I live in an international city, so I use English words for Chinese cities and places like Canton, Chungking, and Yunnan; I use the Cantonese cheongsam instead of the Mandarin ch'i pao for our Chinese dresses; I say boot instead of trunk; I use the Mandarin fan gwaytze-foreign devils-and the Cantonese lo fan-white ghosts-interchangeably when speaking about foreigners; and I use the Cantonese word for little sister-moy moy- instead of the Mandarin-mei mei-to talk about May. My sister has no facility with languages. We moved to Shanghai when May was a baby, and she never learned Sze Yup beyond words for certain dishes and ingredients. May knows only English and the Wu dialect. Leaving the peculiarities of dialects aside, Mandarin and Cantonese have about as much in common as English and German-related but unintelligible to nonspeakers. Because of this, my parents and I sometimes take advantage of May's ignorance, using Sze Yup to trick and deceive her.From the Hardcover edition.Revue de presseSee is a gifted writer, and in Shanghai Girls she again explores the bonds of sisterhood while powerfully evoking the often nightmarish American immigrant experience.USA TodayA buoyant and lustrous paean to the bonds of sisterhood.BooklistA rich workas compulsively readable as it is an enlightening journey.Denver PostThe glamour of prewar Shanghai is recalled in Lisa Sees deftly plotted Shanghai Girls.VogueSplendidMoreAn engrossing tale of two sisters.Time.comShanghai Girls is one of those books I could not wait to continue reading, because her characters' stories are so compellingly told.St. Louis DispatchAs in Snow Flower and the Secret Fan and Peony in Love, she has in her latest novel created ordinary women who, through willfulness and resiliency, accomplish extraordinary thingsSee, whose writing is as graceful as these 'beautiful girls,' pulls off another exceptional novel.Miami HeraldFrom the Hardcover edition.