

Summer 2001

Book Review: Shanghai

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Recommended Citation

Kempf, Andrea, "Book Review: Shanghai" (2001). *Library Papers and Presentations*. 13.
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BOOK REVIEW

SHANGHAI

By RIICHI YOKOMITSU

Translated with a postscript by Dennis Washburn. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001. 241 pages, \$45 (hardcover), \$18.95 (paperback)

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Andrea Kempf

In his heyday, in the 1920s and 1930s, Riichi Yokomitsu was referred to as *bungaku no kamisama* (a god of literature), and Japanese critics regarded him as equal in stature to his contemporary, novelist and Nobel Laureate Yasunari Kawabata. Today, although many Western readers know and enjoy Kawabata's works, Yokomitsu's name is virtually unknown. Now, however, through the auspices of the University of Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies, Yokomitsu's novel *Shanghai*, serialized in Japan from 1928 to 1931, has been deftly translated into English by Dennis Washburn, an event that will surely develop new interest in the author.

Shanghai examines the lives of several expatriate Japanese living in that Chinese city during the 1920s. The men are all involved in commerce. Sanki, the novel's main protagonist, is a bank clerk; his best friend, Koya, is a timber merchant; another friend, Yamaguchi, an architect; Koya's brother, Takashige, the director of a cotton mill. The women work in the so-called floating world of easy sex and dubious liaisons. For example, the manipulative Oryu and the hapless Osugi are employed at a bathhouse, and the seductive Miyako is a dance-hall girl. One slip, and the women are likely to join the ranks of hard-core prostitutes like the Russian "migr"ls who walk the banks of the river looking for customers. Yokomitsu describes Shanghai as a cosmopolitan city that is a heady mix of frenzied economic activity and political fanaticism swirling together in a pressure-cooker that is likely to explode at any minute. In fact, that is precisely what happens when Chinese workers go on strike at the Japanese-owned mills. It is this 1925 strike that forms the background for much of the novel's action.

Although Yokomitsu was the leading proponent of a literary aesthetic called "New Sensation," which is clearly defined and discussed in the translator's informative postscript, it is his political agenda that is particularly interesting to today's readers. Like the ill-fated protagonist of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *An Artist of the Floating*

World, Yokomitsu put his art in the service of Japanese militarism. He was a Pan-Asianist who believed that "only Japanese militarism possesses enough power to rescue the subjugated East." Thus, Shanghai with its foreign concessions became his symbol of Western imperialism subjugating Asia. In varying degrees, all of his male Japanese characters espouse the cause of Japanese nationalism. While the architect Yamaguchi debates Pan-Asianism, Koya actively intrigues to destroy the foreign competition for his Japanese lumber, and his brother, Takashige, is willing to shoot into a crowd of rioting workers in order to protect Japanese interests. Sanki even fantasizes that if he is killed in the riots, his death will be a patriotic act, rallying his countrymen to the task of ridding Asia of Westerners, and the young man's idealistic passion for the beautiful Chinese Communist organizer Fang Qui-lan symbolizes his desire for a united Asia.

Set against this background of political intrigue are the author's images of the city—the beggars, the opium use, the fetid river, the desperation of the Russian refugees, the crowds of rioters, the currency speculation, the cheapness and squalor of life. The imagistic style of "New Sensation" is almost cinematic in its movement from one scene to the next, in its panoramic view of the city, in its shifting points of view. It is not difficult to imagine *Shanghai* as a film. Then, too, the sensual interior lives of the protagonists juxtaposed against the external political realities enhance the texture of the novel. Much of Yokomitsu's literary theory intentionally opposed the rhetoric of Marxist proletarian literature. Interestingly, one of the best-known novels about Shanghai in 1920s is Andre Malraux's *La Condition Humaine* (Man's Fate), a textbook novel of socialist realism that describes the lives of the very revolutionaries who instigated the textile mill strikes. Read together, the novels complement each other, for they both dramatize the extremes of life in Shanghai during chaotic times. While *Shanghai*, like *La Condition Humaine*, was an eminently politically correct novel for its particular time and place, its racism, ethnocentrism, and militant imperialism may be off-putting for contemporary readers. That would be a shame because the novel's sweeping depiction of a city that no longer exists as it did in the 1920s is a masterful and compelling recreation of the past.

Andrea Kempf is a professor and librarian at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas, and an alumna of the East-West Center's Asian Studies Development Program. She is a regular reviewer of fiction for *Library Journal* and was named LJ Fiction Reviewer of the Year - 2000.

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