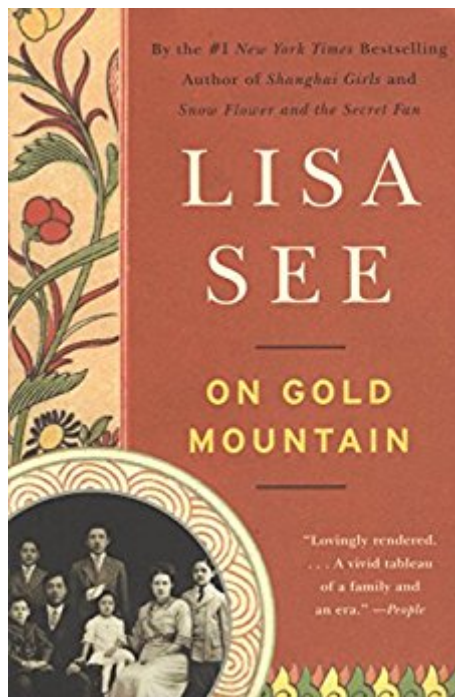




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On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey Of My Chinese-American Family



Synopsis

Out of the stories heard in her childhood in Los Angeles's Chinatown and years of research, See has constructed this sweeping chronicle of her Chinese-American family, a work that takes in stories of racism and romance, entrepreneurial genius and domestic heartache, secret marriages and sibling rivalries, in a powerful history of two cultures meeting in a new world. 82 photos.

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Customer Reviews

Superior tale of Chinese and Chinese-Americans in California from late 1800s railroad-building through four generations of struggle to the present day - an engaging historical account rendered delightfully personal through the stories Lisa tells in On Gold Mountain of her family history and her great grandfather Fong See and his journey to the West and sojourn on the gold mountain in Sacramento, San Francisco, and finally Los Angeles, where he founded a successful merchant dynasty and a family of many generations in and around mysterious Chinatown. Unique as a book written by one of several extraordinary "Caucasian" women who helped build businesses and make

homes for their Chinese families. Many images of early Los Angeles and Hollywood linger after the final page - little Lisa retreating to her grandparents house in Chinatown, Anna Mae Wong holding court in the See family restaurant, antique furniture rented to the studios for films. Now when we watch those old black-and-white movies set in Chinatown from the 30s through the 40s we're on the lookout for sets created from the riches of the See family antique shops. We grew up visiting LA's Chinatown often but, after reading Lisa's book, it's no longer "just Chinatown, Jake," and is now a whole new marvelous place peopled with folks we now know much better, at least in memory.

In 1867 Lisa See's great great grandfather arrived in America from China. As an herbalist, his services were in great demand by immigrant laborers. This is where her family history begins. Fong See, her great grandfather started making ladies underwear, married Ticie, a Caucasian woman before building a successful antique business. The family's story involves racism, romance, secret marriages and betrayals. Not only does *On Gold Mountain* tell the story of a family, it documents the history of America from the building of the railroads through the Great Depression into the post war boom of the fifties. That is a lot of territory to cover. The story is meticulously researched and Ms. See does a good job of keeping the reader's head focused on the family tree. There is a lot going on and people and places to keep track of. In some areas the story dragged on. I felt some parts were important to document for the family but maybe not so interesting to the average reader. I love Lisa See's fiction much more than this book, but I fully understand her desire to write it. In any event *On Gold Mountain* is a wide and sweeping history lesson in the people that help to make America the wonderful place it is. And I'm glad I read it. I learned so much.

This could have been an excellent book about an interesting family. It was a story of success against odds and is an important part of American history. The story of the Chinese experience in the United States, both opportunity and the impediments placed in their paths by repressive laws, are not as widely known as that of other nationalities, or at least not to me. However, the flow of the book about this exceptional family was hampered by repetitive pages filled with statistics and recitation of laws restricting activities of Chinese immigrants. It only needed to be presented once. In spite of too much information and detail, I would recommend it. The story of the founders of this family, Lettie and Fong See, is of larger than life characters, not easily forgotten. It was worth wading through the rest.

As a third generation Asian American, I believe that much is not really known about our immigration

and settlement in the U.S. mainland. In a fascinating story about the author's family that covers five generations, *On Gold Mountain* helps provide more depth to that immigration experience. With the background of slowly changing social attitudes in America, Ms. See uses the story of her family and their friends to provide a taste of the discrimination they faced from the time they arrived at the immigration center on Angel Island, to getting employment, and their treatment by the larger society. We also see the importance and downsides of ethnic communities, the influence of one's heritage, the implications of inter-racial marriages, what it means to be a visible minority and the many coping mechanisms used, and the impact of what is happening in Asia. Ms. See ends her book with a lot of data that to illustrate that much of what her family went through was experienced by many other Asian American families, but, to me, learning and the A-ha moments came from reading about the See family.

It was a bit of a struggle to stay with the story in the beginning to learn all the players and understand their names. An epic biography in all possible ways with an eye to history in each generation that formed the current Chinese American population among us today.

This Lisa See story is a historical retelling of her own family's history. There are shocking facts to be learned, amid relatively dull family business. However, I have thought of this book a thousand times since I read it, and I have shared the remarkable information contained on its pages. So, not the usually warm and intriguing stories I have read of hers before . . . but OH SO worth the time.

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