

SHANGHAI SECRETS

DISCUSSION GUIDE



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In 1935, Shanghai was a treaty port with quarters controlled by the French, the Germans, the British, and the Americans. Think about what that meant for the culture of the city, which had a reputation as an international playground. What happened in Shanghai stayed in Shanghai. How do you think cities like Shanghai might have influenced Chinese perceptions of the West?
2. The lead character in the Charlie Chan movies was played by a Swedish actor, Warner Oland, in what today would probably be called “yellowface.” Think about the depiction of Chinese characters in Western films over the years, from Charlie Chan, to Dr. Fu Man Chu, to Short Round (*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*). Have things changed?
3. Alexandra Romanova once claimed to be the Princess Anastasia. Why do you think that she might have been believed? Why did the world want to believe that Anastasia survived? Why did she become such a romantic figure?
4. In this book, Milton is faced with the reality of communism under Stalin, which shakes his ideals of the workers’ revolution. Consider the ideals of communism against the reality played out in Russia. What are the differences between Russian and Chinese communism? Has the reality of a situation ever shaken your long-held ideals?
5. Edna Higgins and Rowland Sinclair are clearly very close. He is deeply in love with her, and though she seems to have feelings for him, she will not allow their relationship to move beyond friendship. Are her fears of losing her own self by becoming someone’s wife, understandable? What would being Mrs. Rowland Sinclair have meant in 1935? Have things changed? Do you think she should just marry him anyway?
6. Why do you think Emily “Mickey” Hahn was so determined to become an opium addict? What do you think she meant by the “real China”? Was it the “real China”?
7. Alastair Blanshard is in Shanghai to look into the past of Wallis Simpson for the British. Are there similarities between the manner in which Wallis Simpson was treated in the ‘30s and the way in which the British media is treating Meghan Markle now?
8. Rowland’s refusal to deal with the Japanese and the Germans is based on his personal politics—he will not deal with the Nazis, regardless of what it costs. Have you ever been in a situation in which your personal ethics have had financial consequences? Did it make you think twice? Consider how trade has been weaponized over the years by and against regimes and the consequences it has had against the citizens of those regimes. Is it an effective weapon? Is it a fair weapon?
9. Clyde is charged with returning the bones of Danny Dong’s grandmother to China. Where would like your remains to reside? Is it important? Why?