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Tadpole tells her family's journey from China to S.F.

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Belle Yang

Children's author Belle Yang in 1967 with her father, Joseph, and mother, Linang. Photo courtesy of Belle Yang

When Carmel writer and artist Belle Yang was a little girl, she would keep her immigrant father company while he closed up at a hotel diner on Market Street.

"I look for dimes and quarters under the tables and in the cracks of the orange plastic seats, but mostly I find gum of all colors stuck underneath," she writes in "Hannah Is My Name," her new children's book. "On days when I can't find even a penny, Baba puts a dime in the middle of the floor when I'm not looking. I know he's doing it, but I pretend to be surprised because I don't want him to be disappointed."

"Baba," which means father in Mandarin, was the title of her first book in 1994, a seamlessly woven rendering in words and brilliant watercolors of the life story of her dad, Joseph Yang, in the tumultuous China of the 1930s and 1940s. Largely discovered by writer Amy Tan, who was left "gasping and sighing" over "Baba" (full title: "Baba: A Return to China Upon My Father's Shoulders"), Yang was also heralded by Maxine Hong Kingston as "our Isaac Bashevis Singer and Marc Chagall." Yang later wrote a sequel, "The Odyssey of a Manchurian."

Now, a decade after she first introduced readers to a faraway landscape peopled by the likes of Old Lady Lu, the healing witch, and Uncle Yu, the Yang family servant with big front teeth and a big, pancake face, Yang brings her family story home, to San Francisco, in "Hannah Is My Name."

"Hannah" is the story of every immigrant to these shores. But it is also based on the real story of the Yangs' first years in America, in a skinny green apartment building on Bush Street that she remembers stuck out in a block of gray buildings like "a lime Popsicle."

"The rules say no children in the building," Yang writes. "But when Jewel, the manager sees us, she says, 'Hmm, a little girl, huh? Well, just as long as she is quiet and doesn't jump up and down and disturb the folks down below. ' "

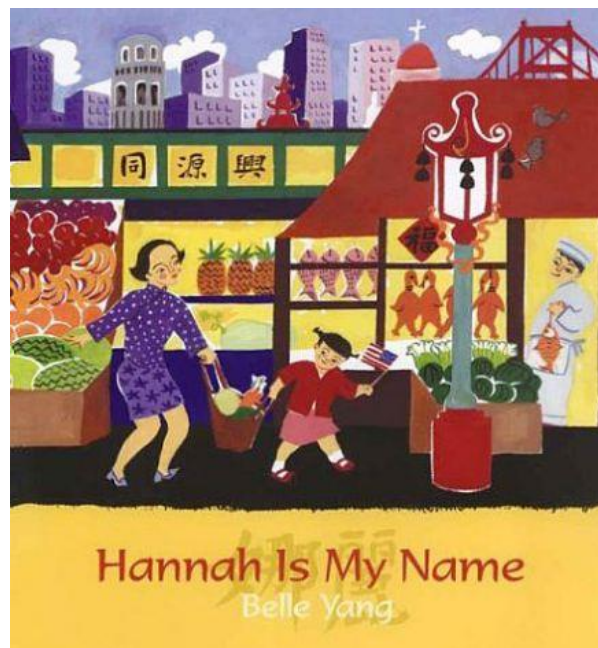
It's an overcast day when Yang drives up from Carmel with her best friend, the writer Allston James. Standing in front of 636 Bush St., near Chinatown, they peer up to the fifth floor, where she once lived.

"The managers, Earl and Jewel Wilcox, were wonderful people," Yang recalls. "They were really kind to us." So were others. "Sometimes, I would find an old teddy bear, the stuffing coming out, left at our front door. So somebody knew a child lived there."

This is Yang's first published book in five years; the last was her first children's story, "Chili-Chili-Chin-Chin," about a boy and his impetuous donkey.

Yang's hiatus was forced by an undiagnosed immune disorder that caused her 5-foot-6-inch frame to waste away to 80 pounds. She has rebounded under medical care and now, she says, "I feel back in the world with this book."

Becoming a children's author is "a nice irony," she says, given that her family was once too poor to buy children's books.



Yang's illustrations in "Hannah Is My Name" describe her experiences as an immigrant in San Francisco.

In "Hannah," Yang's father finishes up work and takes her to the old Woolworth's store at the cable car turnaround on Market and Powell streets.

"While Baba looks at the magazines, I read 'Curious George,' " Yang writes. "When it's time to go, Baba asks, 'Is that enough, Tadpole?' I nod and try not to look disappointed. I put the book back on the shelf."

Like her earlier epics, Yang's new book is full of brilliant colors and fanciful drawings as she tells the story of Hannah, whose nickname at home is Tadpole. Yang hopes the book will become a series recounting Hannah's child-size experiences in America, which are as contemporary as the stories of today's post-Sept. 11 world, where immigrants still yearn to become Americans.

Hannah's refugee parents, for example, wait anxiously for precious green cards from the government. When Mr. Choo, who helps new immigrants fill out paperwork, tells her mother there is nothing to do now but wait, Hannah, puzzled, asks, "Can't we make them with scissors and my green crayons?" As a first-grader at Commodore Stockton School, she struggles to learn the language from her kindly teacher, who cries one day when she tells the class a great man, Martin Luther King Jr., was killed.

As in her first two books, Baba, or Yang's artist-calligrapher father, Joseph, is a central figure.

"He loves the book," Yang said. "I think he feels proprietary about it, by virtue of being the storyteller."

The Taiwan-born Yang, who is single, lives with her father, who is now 76, and her 72-year-old mother, Laning Yang, in the family home on a "sunny slope of Carmel Hill" filled with her parents' blue and white porcelains, cloisonne, and the values and beliefs she says she once raged against but now embraces.



Chronicle / Paul Chinn

Belle Yang and her family lived in the apartment building in the background when they first immigrated from Taiwan. Celebrated author/artist Belle Yang has come out with a children's book about her own family's experiences as new immigrants in SF. Yang visited her old apartment building on Bush St. in San Francisco on 8/24/04. PAUL CHINN/The Chronicle MANDATORY CREDIT FOR PHOTOG AND S.F. CHRONICLE/ - MAGS OUT Photo:

PAUL CHINN

It's a sentiment expressed in the prologue of "Dreaming China," the conclusion of the trilogy begun by "Baba." Yang says the book, for which she is still seeking a publisher, is about a Chinese "King Lear" who divides his land for his four sons but loses all when Communists overrun it -- the same fate suffered by her own family in Manchuria.

Familial tales continue to tumble out of Yang. Now they are woven with her own very complex feelings about the land of her ancestors, where she lived for three years in the 1980s.

"I've had a love-hate relationship with China for a long time," she says.



Chronicle / Paul Chinn

Belle Yang stopped at the entrance to Chinatown at Bush and Grant Sts. during a recent visit. Celebrated author/artist Belle Yang has come out with a children's book about her own family's experiences as new immigrants in SF. Yang visited her old apartment building on Bush St. in San Francisco on 8/24/04. PAUL CHINN/The Chronicle MANDATORY CREDIT FOR PHOTO AND S.F. CHRONICLE/ - MAGS OUT Photo: PAUL CHINN

It was to China that Yang fled in 1986 to escape a sweetheart-turned- stalker. Already a trained artist -- she studied at Pasadena Art Center College of Design -- Yang found herself at Beijing's Academy of Traditional Chinese Painting, unlearning Western "one-point perspective" and shifting to the Chinese multiple perspectives of moving through landscapes much like a scroll.

But it was her travels through China that redefined her painting, from perfected brush strokes to bolder folk art, for which she is now known.

"It was freeing, much closer to my personality," Yang says. "In my exterior, I am quieter. But in my interior, I am somersaulting, loud, much more rambunctious."

Yang also perfected her Mandarin, a critical development that later helped transform her father's stories into books.

Yet she also found the experience of returning to China wearing.

"The duality of being Chinese, but not really Chinese," she muses. "Being American but not really looking like what the Chinese envisioned an American would look like. I remember having this fear that I would get run over in a traffic accident and die and no one ever really knowing who I was."

Also hovering over her were China's authoritarian constraints -- she'd bicycled past Tiananmen Square on June 2, 1989. The next day, there were only tanks and soldiers. Somehow, the government's crackdown on democracy melded into her own exile at the hands of a stalker. "I got so tired of everything," she recalls.

Within months, Yang returned to the peace of her Carmel home, where she painted and did calligraphy to find her own balance. She also began talking to her father, and, this time, really hearing. The result, "Baba," changed her life and those ripples continue, even now.

The idea for "Hannah" originated with a suggestion from Santa Cruz developer and publisher George Ow Jr., a longtime friend, that she consider doing a painting and writing a story about the Woolworth's anecdote.

Instead, she wrote a book.

"This one," she says, "came from the heart."

Belle Yang's readings for "Hannah," as well as some of her paintings at Pacific Grove's Hawk Fine Arts gallery, are on her Web site, www.belleyang.com. She will also read from her book as part of Litquake, a literary festival sponsored by The Chronicle, on Oct. 16 at the San Francisco Main Library. For more information, visit www.litquake.org.