



Women of the Silk

Gail Tsukiyama

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Sent by her family to work in a silk factory just prior to World War II, young Pei grows to womanhood, working fifteen-hour days and sending her pay to the family who abandoned her.

In "Women of the Silk" Gail Tsukiyama takes her readers back to rural China in 1926, where a group of women forge a sisterhood amidst the reeling machines that reverberate and clamor in a vast silk factory from dawn to dusk. Leading the first strike the village has ever seen, the young women use the strength of their ambition, dreams, and friendship to achieve the freedom they could never have hoped for on their own. Tsukiyama's graceful prose weaves the details of "the silk work" and Chinese village life into a story of courage and strength.

Women of the Silk Details

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From Reader Review Women of the Silk for online ebook

Gisela Hafezparast says

China has always fascinated me, it's culture, history and the sheer tenacity of it's people, especially those which have started from nothing. There is so much to learn and this book is yet another part of China which I had no idea about. Obviously everyone knows that China produces the best silk in the world, to which I am quite partial too when possible. But I hadn't realised that before the Revolution this was a female industry (apart, alas as usual from the owners) and the reasons why and how girls came to work in these silk factories is beautifully and often realistically described in this beautiful book. It depicts the hard life especially poor women lived and the culture which gave so few choices to them that being sold to the silk industry, could be one of the best chances life could bring! It always astonishes me how far China has come over the past 100 years. It is absolutely amazing. We all know about the cruelties and horror of the cultural revolution, but China's people endured so much even before that and they are definitely a race of survivors, especially it's women who seem to have always taken on the major burdens. The book stops just before the war when the Japanese are already roaming through China and I have to try and get the follow up book as soon as possible.

Highly recommend this book.

Diane says

Women of the Silk, was the debut novel written by Gail Tsukiyama, and first published in 1991. Ms. Tsukiyama is a new to me author.

Pei is one of the several Chinese daughters born to a poverty stricken fish farm family, dominated the father. She is the outgoing and curious child, and according to the fortune teller that her father takes her to, she is the "non marrying" type. When another girl is born to the family (who dies soon after), Pei's father decides her fate. He arranges to sell her to a motherly sort of woman called Auntie Yee who runs a home for silk workers. By doing this Pei's family will get paid for her work in the factory.

Initially Pei is hysterical when she realizes that she has been left at this strange place by her father. Before long she adjusts to her new life and actually begins to thrive. Pei finds that she is treated with kindness, and she forms a special bond with another girl named Lin. Pei and the other girls live together, work together, earning money for their families, and they form strong bonds accepting the fact that they will never marry, but instead will retire to spinsterhood at the age of 40.

The effects of war with Japan eventually touch the lives of everyone, and there are some tragedies which occur as this book covers a 20 year time span.

The author does a wonderful job with this coming of age story. The character of Pei was extremely well developed. I could feel the bond between the girls, as well as the emotional pain suffered by Pei. It was also interesting to learn about the silk process, and about China between 1919 and 1938. I plan to read more books by this author.

RATING - 4.5/5 - COMPLETED

Stephanie says

One of my students recommended this to me as one of her favorites, and I enjoyed it as well. It reminded me a little of one of my summer reads "The Blood of Flowers" which I liked even more than this. Reading about the silk factories of China in the 1920s-30s was very interesting, and I like novels that take me to new places. An easy and entertaining read.

Cortney says

This book had such potential, yet failed to deliver. It was a good book, yet it could have been better. The characters did not progress. I would have loved to get to know them better, to understand their struggles and to feel what they felt. Maybe it's the culture and they must remain guarded in fiction also. The synopsis of the book stated that it was about a strike at a silk factory in rural China in the 1920's and 1930's, but it was about so much more than that. This was the story of the young girls who were sold by their families into the life of working in the silk factories. Some of the girls were taken back by their families later to be sold in to marriage. Some of the girls chose to stay in the sisterhood, working in the silk factories for the rest of their lives, rather than enter marriage. And who could blame them? They were being given in marriage to men they didn't know and didn't love, possibly to be abused or mistreated for the rest of their lives. I was reading this at the same time that I watched part of a documentary on women in Afghanistan. I just wanted to scream, "Women are not commodities to be sold, bartered or traded!!!" The story of this book was so very interesting, but I think Tsukiyama could have taken it even further. The ending also left me deflated. I've heard that there is a sequel, but I will not be reading it.

Clara says

Gail Tsukiyama's "Women of the Silk" is an interesting look into the lives of women who worked in the silk factories in China, in the early 20th century. Come to find out, this grueling labor actually gave these women a kind of freedom from traditional marriage roles, as they lived independently, off their own earnings. Tsukiyama follows a young girl, Pei, through to her years as a young adult, having been left without explanation at the silk factory by her father when she was little. Tsukiyama's writing style kept me rather emotionally aloof from the events in the book until towards the end when Pei decides to finally return home to see her estranged family whom she hadn't communicated with since she was left at the factory. Her return home, the descriptions of her homeland, and of her parents moved me a great deal. I appreciated Tsukiyama's delicate yet purposeful feminist lens on women's experiences in China at this time. She also subtly shows how gender roles damage both women and men, as Pei's father is often described as not having the ability or tools with which to express his feelings for his daughter or wife, because he has never been taught. This is a good read, quite fast, and make me want to pick up the sequel, "The Language of Threads."

Darcy says

Ugh. This feels like a novel with such potential--its a story about Chinese factory women in 1926. There's so

much that could be explored here about conflicts between family responsibility and individual choice, or the development of modern life versus tradition. Or even of working conditions in China during WWII. The book definitely *talks* about those things . . . but that's about all this book does--talk at the reader. The narrator simply finds it easier to tell the reader all about Pei, rather than come up with situations, events, or other characters that will demonstrate genuine emotional responses. As an example:

"The first few months were miserable for Pei. She missed her family terribly. Sometimes, after everyone was asleep, she let her tears flow freely, her face pressed into her pillow. She often fell asleep exhausted by grief."

Meh. This novel is incredibly dependent on this type of narration, in which the narrator generalizes Pei's actions and simply tells the reader how to read and respond to each scene. So boring. I'd be much, much more interested in this novel if Tsukiyama could have come up with some other ways of expressing Pei's grief beyond telling me "she often fell asleep exhausted by grief."

There are all kinds of other problems--gender relations are horribly romanticized, for example, with Auntie Yee's establishment and the silk sisterhood being figured as oases of femininity and female empowerment. Auntie Yee is incredibly understanding and humane, as compared with the villainous Chung who runs the silk factory. Pei's father never says a word and gives her away, while Pei's mother wastes away in self-imposed but passively rebellious silence.

I dislike this type of narration because it seems disrespectful to the reader, although I don't think that's why Tsukiyama writes this way. This kind of narration--in which the narrator tells the reader everything, in which events are predictable, and in which characters are barely sketched out--seems as though it simply doesn't trust the reader to be able to read "correctly." It seems especially problematic that a novel about female empowerment deliberately dumbs itself down for a female reader.

I'm sure other people have really enjoyed this novel and perhaps with good reason. The bits about the silk factory are really interesting and I wish Tsukiyama had explored that further. But this novel really didn't work for me. I even liked the concept enough to give the sequel a try, but gave up after three pages. Too bad.

Jordan says

If you are just starting with Gail Tsukiyama then I recommend starting with this book. Gail Tsukiyama is Chinese/Japanese American and her books take place mostly in China/Hong Kong around the second World War. This book, "Women of the Silk", tells the story of a young girl who lives in a world where daughters are married off and those that aren't go to work in the newly thriving silk factories. Contrary to the silk work being along the lines of forced labor it is actually an opportunity for these women to form a sisterhood of sorts and gain much personal independence and freedom. Unfortunately their lives are tragically interrupted by the Japanese invasion of China which for me as a "westerner" was quite interesting to read as I am familiar with the American war against Japan but not too familiar with all the Japanese invasions in the East and the atrocities committed. This is a fantastic read and will have you laughing and smiling one minute and completely aghast and crying the next.

Lex says

Quite obviously a first novel- not a great work of literature but entertaining. Everyone seems to go on about how empowering this book is to women, but I found that element of the novel limited in scope, since the only women who are successful completely reject men and those who don't are destroyed by their heterosexual realtionships. I like boys, damnit!

Sally says

Women of the Silk, Gail Tsukiyama's first novel, is well worth its strong reputation. We had the great pleasure of hosting the author at the Hayward Public Library in February 2009. As a member of the audience commented, readers can count on learning a lot from Tsukiyama's novels. In *Women of the Silk*, we follow the principal character, Pei, who is essentially abandoned by her family when she is a young girl, sent off to the nearest silk-making factory to earn a living that will help her family survive. Living and working with other young Chinese girls, Pei's life is chronicled over a period of almost 20 years, beginning in 1919 and ending 1938, when Japanese soldiers are sweeping across China and Pei is forced to leave the city of Yung Kee to seek safety in Hong Kong.

Tsukiyama's meticulous research on the historical period and customs of the women silk workers is well integrated in a moving account of this subculture of Chinese girls, and the deep bonds they form with each other. Separated from their families and from the promise of marriage, we learn that many of these girls chose, as young women, to make a lifelong commitment to the silk factory work. A respected alternative to marriage, the hairdressing ceremony became a milestone for Chinese women who chose to lead a life independent from men. A fascinating, touching novel, which I highly recommend.

Nicki says

This was a good story. I enjoyed the details of Chinese village life and the silk work. Yet, I couldn't help feeling that the characters lacked emotional resonance. They were somewhat flat, and at times both the feeling and the dialogue came across as forced and contrived. Tsukiyama made an effort to point out the bond of the "sisterhood" among the silk workers, but I would rather have *felt* that connection myself.

That said, it was not an altogether unengaging read. This is Tsukiyama's first novel so I'm inclined to believe that perhaps she was just finding her footing as a writer. I still plan to read the sequel to this novel, [The Language of Threads](#).

Jason Prodoehl says

This book really had me inside the world of rural China in the 1920s and 30s. It follows the life of a girl in a tiny village, and her life going to a small town to become a silk worker. I don't want to ruin any of it for you, so that's all I'll say. I found it very intimate and compelling. It was a real page turner. I was surprised to read

that this was Gail Tsukiyama's first novel. Excellent work.

Dawn (& Ron) says

Approaching this review has been difficult for me due to my confusion over this book. There was so much I enjoyed and learned from this book that this easily could have been a top read if only certain incidents didn't take me away from the book. This was my first buddy read and it brought a wonderful level of enjoyment to the read, thanks Jeannette! I loved the moving, poignant and empowering story of Pei and her sister silk workers, their simplicity and strength can't help but move you. Overall the compelling story of the silk workers, their triumphs and sorrows, their independence and freedom, is strong enough to entrance and transport the reader. And set during a time and place, early 20th century China (1919 - 1938), when equality for women was as strange a concept as man going to the moon, only adds to its spell. It is the yo-yo effect, of being yanked out of their lives that kept this from being a five star read.

Let me get the down side of the yo-yo out of the way so I can get back to the up side. Let's start with the most bothersome, the foretelling or predictability of events, such as deaths or occurrences, in a character's life. I'm not sure if this was intentional on the author's part or not but they certainly did not come as a surprise and were clearly foreshadowed. Despite this Tsukiyama's writing infused these passages with emotion, making you still care what happened, thus the yo-yo affect. I also found it tiresome to be repeatedly told a character's name and/or relation. On one page, for example, we have *Sui Ying's husband, Lau Chen*, then in the following paragraph, only four sentences later *her husband, Lau Chen*. I understand the difficulties for authors to make foreign names accessible to Western readers but this just seemed like overkill. Both Jeannette and I were confused about what the actual relationship was between two important characters and wondered if the vagueness was intentional or not. The last thing, which may have been an editorial issue, were that some of the cultural and foreign concepts unknown to most Western readers weren't described or elaborated upon; like grass widows, vegetarian hall and that giving birth condemned a woman to suffer in purgatory, while most others were detailed. A glossary of Chinese terms like jook, jong, cheong sam, the god Kuan-Yin and such would have been very helpful.

The author excels at showing a woman's worth, she clearly illustrates the confining, limited options of being born female along with the hard choices faced by parents.

"How often Yu-sung (Pei's mother) had wished one of them were a boy, something Pao (Pei's father) could be proud of, something of value."

"Too much knowledge will only lead to heartaches for a female."

Tsukiyama has a graceful hand in expressing and making understandable the feelings and motives of her characters, from Pei's parents, Pei finding herself, to the sister silk workers standing up to their boss. The events of the strike, based upon real events, are so visual and potent as they face their omnipotent boss, Chung, who looks down on them as less than human.

"Your nothing but failures, female dogs who have just thrown away any luck you could have had in this life!"

The author was also able to make the small experiences of life memorable and touching, like receiving the gift of a phonograph player and trying the "white devil" dances or when Pei learns the power and strength of staring back.

All of this is deftly interwoven against the backdrop of China's political struggles and Japanese aggression and atrocities. The book finishes with hopefulness and yearning amidst the uncertainty and questions of Japan's ongoing invasion of China .

"The Japanese moved like locusts, devouring cities in rapid succession."

I think the best way to sum up my experience reading this book is to say it is like sitting down to enjoy some *nien kao*, a sticky sweet cake for New Years celebration. It is delightful, filling and yummy even though it can get a bit messy and gooey at times.

Jessica says

Got it off my grandmother's back porch when she was getting rid of a bunch of books, but was sad to find it not really worth reading. Very surface-level story, too many cheap tricks and gimmicks, too many questions left unanswered.

It could have been a great novel! in the hands of another author. Tsukiyama's knowledge of the history of silk factories and the Japan-China conflict of the 1930s is clear - and the historical information woven into the story was interesting. But having a novel range over such a wide span of years is dangerous if you can't keep the reader emotionally involved in the characters. In this novel, there were some very obvious hints about the main character's sexuality in one paragraph in one chapter... left unanswered... the next chapter took place like four years later... and this theme was Never elaborated!!! Why bother introducing information that's going to make your readers go "omg! really?", hungry for further detail, and then never give it. That and the fact that several characters were introduced very flatly, only so they could be killed off later and the reader meant to mourn their 'tragic' deaths. Randomly killing characters is not drama and tragedy - it's lazy, like she didn't know how else to move the story along and make the reader sad.

Not recommended, except maybe for a young reader who needs an easy intro to more adult themes, or someone interested in the historical context obviously. If you want tragedy over a long lifespan of a character, read some Garcia Marquez.

Claire says

This book should have been a nonfiction book presenting the silk factories. The plot and characters seemed to exist only to illustrate an aspect of Chinese history or factory conditions or options in 1920-30s China for women.

I am intrigued by the hair dressing ceremony wherein women could choose to become a member of the sisterhood of silk workers, an alternative to arranged marriages. A parallel ceremony to marriage; the choice as permanent. Like secular nuns.

Even if the factories allowed women to escape family and marriage, even if it allowed them to send some support home, it is not a good excuse for running a sweatshop, and this factory did become/was always that--hence the strike. However, the strike was unconvincing; the results too easy. I have read about the labor movement's beginning in the US of A, and I must confess that I am now interested to learn to what extent there was a parallel movement in China, and if indeed it was that much easier than in the US.

There seemed an abrupt shift from isolated rural to involvement with the Japanese invasion. While it was abrupt, it may have reflected the awareness of the rural people as the fighting moved closer to them. So I have mixed feelings about the ending. There were slight hints earlier of trouble up north. The entrance of difficulties still felt sudden and intrusive. Maybe war is like that.

Marie says

After recently hearing Tsukiyama speak in person, I decided to go back and read her novels in order. This is an excellent first novel, about the lives of women in China working in the silk trade. I loved it! Excellent story of women's friendship.

Linda Lpp says

I was caught up in the story from the beginning. The lives of rural impoverished Chinese were sparse and lacking in physical and interpersonal relationships. Emotions were not expressed, and the males drove the family unit's lives and very subsistence.

Early in the story when introduced to Pei, I was drawn to how her young life dramatically changed. Throughout the book she dealt with the odds that challenged her. She seemed to crave more emotional acknowledgement from those she knew, but did manage to experience such in her friend Lin especially. While some may

negatively critique this book, I prefer to comment on what was presented, and how it affected me. I got a strong sense of Pei's turmoil, and how she managed to keep sight of her dreams.

Kate says

2.5/5stars

This book was FINE. I gave it a 50% (2.5/5) rating because I liked about half of this book.

This story tells the tale of a young girl named Pei who lived in a time in China when young women were either married off or sent to work in factories. As a child Pei was predicted to be 'loved by many' and it couldn't be said for certain whether or not she'd settle down and actually marry. So, she was sent away to work in a factory just before WWII began.

One of the things I liked so much about this book was the history lesson about girls in China during WWII. Before 2016 when I began reading Asian literature taking place in China/Japan/Korea during WWII I'd never heard of things like comfort women, the Massacre of Nanking, and the many MANY attacks and raids in China. In American schools we learn solely about Pearl Harbor, and the attacks Japan took against us and

how they helped Germany - we never got to learn what happened over in the East, so this book was a wonderful history lesson.

I also liked the sisterhood and importance of friendships in this story.

But, overall, this book was just quite BORING in my opinion. I have read another of Tsukiyama's books and this is the exact reason I didn't quite love it as much as I could have. Although her books are short and her writing is very easy to fly through, I also feel almost no emotion while reading her stories. I don't ever really care when something big or emotional happens, because I feel very detached from the characters and story due to the writing.

So while there were good elements, this book just didn't pack the emotional punch I feel like it probably should have due to the writing.

Leigh says

I just love this woman's writing! Everything she says is like a poem and the beauty is so evident in the small parts like when she describes the preparation of food or the city sights and smells as the character goes on a walk through town. Her stories capture emotions and you feel like you have a co-pilot seat in experiencing the character's transformation. The character development is such that you actually miss these people you're reading about once the book is over. I would love to read more by this author and highly recommend this book to anyone who enjoys a great hero's journey tale. Warning: This book does lead to cravings for dumplings and sweets!

Connie says

A fortune teller made the prediction that eight-year-old Pei would never marry, convincing her silent father that the young Chinese girl would only be a drain on the impoverished family's resources. She was sent to work in a silk factory with her wages returning to her family each month. Motherly Auntie Yee ran a home for the young girls working in the silk factory, and a sisterhood developed among the lonely girls. In the early 20th Century marriage often included long hours farming, beatings from husbands, and supervision by unfair mother-in-laws in the patriarchal society. So while the hours were long at the silk factory, many women chose to remain unmarried and employed there because they had some independence and money. The Japanese invasion of China caused an upheaval in the lives of Pei and the other silk workers, and forced them to run to safety.

The author has a Chinese mother and a Japanese-American father (from Hawaii), and she was raised culturally Chinese. She wrote a quiet book with Chinese culture, history, and the details of silk thread production woven into the plot. Pei and her friends are endearing characters, and I cared about their outcomes as I read the story. 3 1/2 stars.

Kelly says

I loved every word of this book! Historical fiction at its best, the last book that touched me in the way

Women of The Silk did while reading was A Thousand Splendid Suns. This is the first book I've read by the author and must say her writing style and ability to transport you back in time/in to the characters is good.

The message in this book is sisterhood, girl power, fighting for rights and survival of the fittest in times of austerity. All set in a time and culture when women were married off with little choice. The women of the silk did not marry by choice, or were deemed as not marriage material by their families so forged an alliance together.

All the characters are likeable and come across well, I loved Chen Ling so feisty and strong when gearing the women up to fight for better working conditions.

There are sad moments, highs and lows in this book but nothing is predictable.

Would I recommend? Yes to historical fiction lovers. Would I read this author's work again ? 100% yes I'm a fan.
