

# GAIL TSUKIYAMA

"Enlivened with an engrossing richness of detail, it provides a revealing look at the life and customs of China."

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Book Review

## WOMEN OF THE SILK

A Novel

WOMEN  
*of the*  
SILK



GAIL TSUKIYAMA



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**ALSO BY GAIL TSUKIYAMA**

**Praise for Gail Tsukiyama and Women of the Silk**  
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TO MY MOTHER,

*who taught me to embrace the past*

Wind, light and time ever revolve;  
Let us then enjoy life as best we can.

—Tu Fu, “The Winding River”

## Chapter One

1919

*Pei*

Her first memory of pain was an image of her mother. Pei was three or four the first time, and the same thing that had happened then was happening now. Her mother's moans almost woke her from this daydream, but she squeezed her eyes shut, and could see her mother's silk painting with the five white birds on it. Three of them were perched upon branches of white blossoms, the other two in flight. It was the only beautiful thing in their house, and Pei could see it even in her darkness. When she asked too many questions about it, or about anything else, Pei's parents became angry. Her father made a clicking sound with his tongue, and her mother would say her mind wandered too far from home. So Pei tried hard to keep very quiet like her sister, Li.

Her mother's moans grew louder. When Pei opened her eyes she could see, in the light of the flickering candle, her father sitting by the door. His long legs were spread out, one crossed over the other, as he stroked the thin hairs on his upper lip. She glanced at Li, who sat quietly in the corner mending some tattered clothing, as she always did in the evenings.

Pei's mother was in the next room, separated from them by a heavy, dark curtain she had had up for as long as Pei could remember. The midwife, Ching, was with her. The moaning and heavy breathing continued, as Ching whispered words of encouragement. The last time this had happened, her mother had become thin again, and they had a new baby sister.

That little sister cried and cried. No matter what Pei's mother did, the baby would not take her milk. For days her mother cradled the baby in her arms, walking from one end of the room to the other, until she formed a narrow path in their dirt floor. Her father bought herbs for a broth from an

old woman in the village. It smelled of burning leaves as it boiled, but the baby refused to take it down. Soon Little Sister lost all strength to cry and simply lay stonelike in her mother's arms. Not long after that, Pei's father took Baby Sister out of the house, and when he returned looking sad, like a defeated animal, it was without her.

"Where is Baby Sister?" Pei asked.

"She has died of sickness like the other one," her father answered. "It would have been different if they had been sons."

Pei's mother stood swaying slightly back and forth. Her clothes were unkempt and her hair strangely out of place. There was something cruel about the fine lines that moved from her lips as she pressed them tightly together. Never once did her mother cry, but Pei knew something was wrong, that she was in great pain, even when her mother nodded her head in agreement with her father.

Her mother's moans grew more desperate. Pei knew that that meant another baby would soon come. It was only a few steps from the table to the curtain, and Pei moved quietly so she wouldn't disturb her father. When the last baby sister came, they were not allowed to enter her mother's room for a month. This was so they would not anger the gods. But she couldn't see the gods being angry at her for taking a small peek.

Pei lifted the curtain. Candles shone from each side of her mother's bed. The tiny space seemed suffocating with the smell of sweat and burning wax. There were candles close by Ching, who bent over, telling her mother to push. "Push now, Yu-sung, push, yes, yes and now breathe." Her mother was on the bed, a large wooden board covered with a thin mat, half-lying, half-sitting against the wall, her knees pushed up, her legs spread open. Underneath her legs was a large piece of brown paper, which Ching constantly straightened as her mother pushed against it. Her mother moaned louder and let out a small cry when she pushed down as Ching instructed her. When she let her head drop back down, she breathed in rapid pants as Pei had heard dogs do when they were thirsty for water. She wondered if her mother might want some water, but even as Pei tried to speak, no voice would come from her opened mouth. Pei was frightened by her pain. Her mother looked so tired and sick, her fingers tearing at the cotton netting which hung down to keep the mosquitoes away. Then once more her mother

raised herself, and pushed with a renewed strength. She let out a small cry and pushed again.

“Yes, Yu-sung,” said Ching. “There is the head, the baby comes, the baby comes!”

And there between her mother’s legs Pei could see the baby’s head emerge. It was a dark, wet, ugly thing, sliding out so slowly with each push. She wanted to step forward and see more, but her legs felt weak. When Pei turned around to share this with Li, she saw that Li had her eyes closed tight, even as her hands continued mending the cotton trousers.

“The baby comes face up,” Ching said, in a worried whisper.

In the next moment the baby’s entire head appeared, with tiny dark lines for its eyes and mouth, and a flat, small nose. Ching cupped the back of its head, and with another push, the rest of the baby’s body quickly followed, along with a lot of blood and water.

“It is a girl, Yu-sung,” Ching said softly, examining the baby. The new baby sister let out a loud, clear cry. Ching clipped the cord attached to the baby with a small, sharp knife, and tied it. “She appears well.” Ching wiped the baby and placed her in Pei’s mother’s arms. Her mother looked exhausted, and so sad, but she accepted her fifth daughter with a tired smile.

Then before she could move, Pei felt the strong grip of her father’s hand, taking her arm and pushing her to the side. At first she was terrified that he would punish her for looking, but then Pei saw that he really didn’t even notice her. With him, he brought the heavy scent of smoke and sweat into the thick heat of the small room.

“Is it a son?” he demanded.

No one answered. Pei turned to Li, who was looking down at the dirt floor. Ching busied herself with cleaning up the remains of the birth, wrapping it all in the brown paper to be buried in the earth as Pei had seen her do before.

“Why?” she had asked Ching the last time.

“Because it is dirty,” Ching answered, placing the bundle gently into the hole she had dug.

“Why is it dirty?”

“Because it is,” Ching said. “And we must spare the gods the sight of it. Someday you will understand.”

When her father looked down at the baby and saw that it was healthy, he removed the blanket she was wrapped in. But when he saw that the baby

hadn't the requirements of a son, he made that clicking sound he always made when he was displeased, and left the room. Pei quickly moved to one side so he wouldn't see her.

Her mother rewrapped the baby and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"The next one will be a son, Yu-sung, you just wait and see," said Ching.

"There will not be a next time," her mother answered.

### Yu-sung

For a month after giving birth, Yu-sung stayed with the baby in the confines of their house. During this unclean period she did not bathe or wash her hair. This was done to spare the highest god, T'ien Kung, the sight of them: From the village herbalist, Ching bought herbs for soup, and Yu-sung ingested an array of strengthening tonics.

As always, her third daughter, Pei, asked too many questions. All during the month Pei wondered why Yu-sung could not go outside anymore, and what would happen if she did. It was always Pei, with all her curious ways, whom Yu-sung worried about most.

"But why would the gods not want to see a baby?" Pei asked.

"Because we are unclean," she answered.

"And you will be clean after a month?"

"Yes."

"Was I unclean as a baby?"

"Yes."

"But why is everything dirty?" Pei insisted.

"Because everything to do with the birth is unclean, even for the month afterwards. Now go!" she said, pointing toward the door so Pei would go outside. "And you must help Ba Ba during this time and not ask so many questions!" Yu-sung reminded Pei again and again, as Pei lingered at the table, her finger tracing small circles on its surface.

The month Yu-sung spent in the house felt very long. After the births of her other daughters, she was always occupied with their dispositions. Even the two who had since gone on to the other world had kept her busy. But this girl child they named Yu-ling spent so much of the time sleeping.

After the first week, Yu-sung scrubbed everything from top to bottom. Then she grew restless and disturbed that she could not be outside helping