

Flowers of China

In this novel based on the author's own family history, Meilin and her son Renshu move through war-torn China and Taiwan in the 1930s and 1940s. Years later, in America, Renshu is reluctant to talk to his daughter about his past. We interviewed the author Melissa Fu to discover more.

***Peach Blossom Spring* is your debut novel – have you always wanted to be a writer, and did you always want to tell this particular story, inspired by your family history?**

I always loved reading. As a young girl, I would go to the library and get stacks of books and stay up all night reading. I remember my dad saying 'night time, won't go to bed, daytime won't get up!' I never thought I could be a writer – I secretly wanted to but thought I should do something more practical or scientific. I majored in English and Physics as an undergraduate, and I loved the reading and the writing about books. Writing for my own sake, writing stories to tell stories, really came when I trained to be a secondary school English teacher. Part of the philosophy of the programme was that teachers of writing should also have a writing practice. So we had a creative non-fiction class, which I really enjoyed. Although the teaching came and went, the writing stuck, and I've been focussing on it for the last ten years. As for this particular story, it grew out of a short story that I wrote about my dad's peach trees. I didn't know I would need to write a full novel about modern China to do justice to those trees!

How long did it take to research the book – did you travel to China and Taiwan?

At the beginning of 2018, I started researching the Sino-Japanese War and the experiences of my father's generation. I immersed myself in as much research as I could. After about two years of writing and research, I had a manuscript that my agent was able to sell. Then, as I worked with my editors, the story developed and deepened, prompting even more research. I did go to China and Taiwan on a research trip, which was marvellous. I'd never been to China before, as my dad never went back there. I had been to Taiwan as a small child, but my dad only went back there a handful of times. I was well into drafting, so I did as best I could to trace my characters' footsteps through Western China. I went on a trip along the Yangtze River, and I went to Taiwan.

In the book, Meilin tells folk stories to Renshu from an old scroll. Were these

stories based on traditional Chinese tales?

Yes, Meilin's stories are Chinese folk tales. You know, you don't remember the first time you hear a story, it's just in your consciousness. And some of them I found in collections of world folk tales. The tale Peach Blossom Spring, which lends its name to the title of my book, is the only folk tale I use that is attributed to an individual writer. It was written by the poet Tao Qian (375-427 CE). In the process of researching the significance of peaches and peach trees in Chinese culture, I came across this particular story. It struck me that it was like a microcosm of the bigger story I was telling in the novel.

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Sharlene Teo

When he moves to America from Taiwan in the 1960s, Renshu changes his name to Henry. Is this part of him reinventing himself as a different person?

Yes, I think that was part of it. It was very typical for Chinese students to take on a Western name, because the pronunciation of their Chinese names would have been different, and even the way they addressed each other would be different – the family name comes first. So, initially I think it was just finding a new name. But then he starts to see himself as a new person. His life as Renshu and his life as Henry are so different, and it's a real divide when he makes such a break.

Lily changes her course when she realises that she's only taking engineering to please her father. Do you think that some people live their lives for others?

Yes, I think so. I think I've done a little of that myself. It's complex, there are reasons why you do things for other people, you think it might be a gesture of love, appreciation or respect. But in the end, I don't know if it's sustainable – it wasn't for me.

Were there any other authors who inspired you when writing the book?

One of the books that made me think I could write this was *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* by the Chinese-Canadian author Madeleine Thien. It's quite different in many ways to my book, as her characters stay in China through the Cultural Revolution, all the way up to Tiananmen Square, and some of them go to Canada. My book, on the other hand, follows characters who leave China and see those events from afar. Still, Thien's book was the first novel I read about those major historical events that also told a very intimate story of individuals and relationships. Another book that I read early on and read again several times was *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang. It's non-fiction, and the three generations are similar. Jung Chang is a little older than I am, but her grandmother is a similar age to my grandmother, and her mother similar to my dad's age. Quite late in the process, I discovered *Birdless Summer* by Han Suyin. She was a mixed-race Chinese-Belgian physician, around the same age as my character Meilin, and these are her accounts of being in many of the same places as my characters. So that was amazing to find. There was also the memoir *The Great Flowing River* by a Chinese-Taiwanese author, Chi Pang-yuan. This was originally written in Chinese, and was only just translated in 2019. Her family came from the North of China. Like the characters in my book, they were funnelled first to the west of China, and then, ultimately, to Taiwan.



Peach Blossom Spring
by Melissa Fu
HB • Wildfire • £16.99
ISBN 9781472277534
Published 17th March