

## BOOK REVIEW

### Three Books

Peony in Love: A Novel • A Thousand Miles of Dreams: The Journeys of Two Chinese Sisters • The Eighth Promise: An American Son's Tribute to His Toisanese Mother

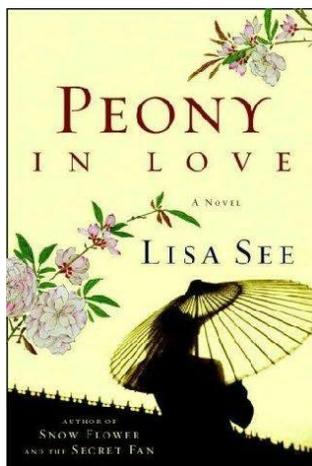
By J. F. Lo

*Peony in Love* : A Novel  
by Lisa See  
Random House, 2007

*A Thousand Miles of Dreams:  
The Journeys of Two Chinese Sisters*  
by Sasha Su-Ling Weiland  
Rowman & Littlefield (paperback edition), 2007

*The Eighth Promise: An American Son's  
Tribute to His Toisanese Mother*  
by William Poy Lee  
Rodale, 2007

These three books, all published in 2007, belong to three different genres: the historical novel, the family history, and the memoir. Yet a common thread runs through all of them: all three authors share a Chinese lineage, each narrative is in the first person, and a common focus is the lives of Chinese women.



a factual basis in history. In late 17<sup>th</sup> century China, three young women were the collaborators

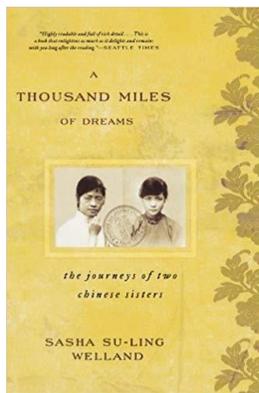
*Peony in Love* is the latest novel by Lisa See, whose earlier memoir *On Gold Mountain* recounted her family's Chinese immigrant history in California. This novel, which she characterizes as "a ghost story within a ghost story," also has

in their annotated edition of *The Peony Pavilion*, a tale of romantic love transcending mortality by the famous dramatist Tang Xianzu. This extraordinary 1598 play, involving dreams, premarital sex, and resurrection in defiance of parental authority and social convention, was a sensation among the literati, both male and female. Numerous literary critics responded with commentaries, including the three talented women, who had been successively betrothed or married to the same Hangzhou scholar Wu Ren.

In See's novel. Peony, the narrator, is a precocious and frail 15-year-old in a well-to-do family destined for an arranged marriage. Infatuated with a stranger (who is actually her fiancé Wu Ren) during a performance of the opera "The Peony Pavilion," she becomes totally absorbed in studying this poetic drama, begins scribbling her thoughts on the margins of the book's pages, and dies before her own wedding. Her restless ghost then takes control of Wu Ren's household and imposes her will on the two

women who later become his wives. Peony manipulates them so they will carry on her project of annotating the play, finally resulting in the completion and publication of *The Peony Pavilion with Commentary by the Three Wives of Wu Shan* (Wu Ren's sobriquet)— a notable feat during a brief period of female artistic flowering in the lower Yangtze Delta region.

See devotes considerable effort to detailing the cloistered life of middle-class Chinese women under the age-old male-dominated social system, under which unmarried girls were actually prohibited from reading or watching this particular play. In the second part of the novel, she shifts to the "ghost story" genre steeped in Chinese folklore and exercises fictional license, spinning a suspenseful but improbable tale of how the three women collaborated in their literary endeavor. Despite a tendency to dwell on the exoticisms of Chinese mores and practices of the time, the novel nonetheless succeeds in highlighting the universality of Chinese women's yearning to fulfill their potential and their dreams.

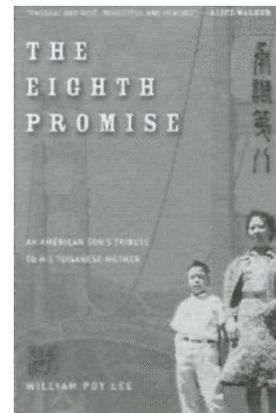


Fast-forward more than two centuries, to the era when China faced unprecedented challenges arising from contact with the West. *A Thousand Miles of Dreams* by Sasha Weiland is the result of extensive research arising from the author's curiosity about her maternal grandmother's life. The project led to a study of the two Ling sisters, whose upbringing in turn-of-the-century Peking and journeys to Europe and America took place during China's major political and social upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This book is a scholarly account of the discovery of family secrets and of genealogical reconstruction, presented with both literary skill and psychological insight. The older sister, Ling

Shuhua (1900 -1990), was a writer and artist who received both a classical and a modern education and became an early member of the budding new literary scene when the "New Literature Movement" caught fire after the 1919 "May Fourth" student demonstrations. Living mostly in Britain after World War II, she continued to write, teach, and paint until her later years. By temperament, ambition, and experience, she was the more colorful of the two sisters, and a larger portion of the book is devoted to her more complex life story. The younger sister and Weiland's grandmother, Ling Shuhao (1904-2006), was the product of the new Chinese educational system and won a coveted scholarship to study medicine in the United States. She worked as an obstetrician, married, participated in medical research, and retired early to live out the rest of her long life as an affluent American homemaker.

Weiland is an anthropologist who is also trained in Chinese studies, and she worked on this book alongside her doctoral dissertation on the contemporary art scene in Beijing. Drawing on family legends, personal visits and interviews, archival materials, and Ling Shuhua's writings in Chinese and English, Weiland also provides a solid historical context for the sisters' long lives. Her sympathetic and perceptive narrative greatly contributes to our understanding of the vicissitudes experienced by the small segment of privileged Chinese women during the century of transition.



*The Eighth Promise* is a son's memoir and tribute to his immigrant mother, presented in alternating chapters in the author's own words and transcriptions of his mother's voice. William Poy Lee's mother grew up in a farming village in Taishan (Toisan in the local dialect) County in the

Pearl River Estuary of Guangdong Province, and she experienced the horrors and privations of Japan's invasion and occupation during the 1930s and 1940s before immigrating to the United States. Starting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Taishan region had a tradition of sending its young men to work overseas. Their destinations included Southeast Asia as well as North America, where they participated first in gold mining and railroad construction and later in agriculture and the restaurant business, among other occupations. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, immigrants from Taishan constituted more than half of all Chinese residing in the United States. Now, like the Irish, fewer Taishanese live in their home county than overseas.

This historical background might account for the Taishan people's regional identity and loyalty to their homeland as well as the development of a unique ethos exemplified by the "Clan Sisterhood", described in the book as a support system offering active cooperation, social solidarity and moral reinforcement among the village women. After the post-WWII relaxation of U.S. immigration laws, Lee's mother married, moved to San Francisco, and raised a family in the city's Chinatown. While her eldest son William was growing up and trying to assimilate into American culture, she provided a strong anchor with her traditional values, practices and unconditional love. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, San Francisco was a major center of social and political upheaval sweeping through the nation, embroiling the youth of Chinatown and exposing the Lee family to unexpectedly difficult challenges.

Lee's own memoir is an honest and highly readable account of his journey of rebellion and self-discovery, which includes his abandonment of a career as a successful corporate lawyer, his reconnection with his family's past, and the new choices he has made for his future. A valuable contribution to the genre of diaspora literature, *The Eighth Promise* brings to light, through a son's eyes, the resilience and

adaptability of yet another segment of China's female population, whose strengths were forged in the timeless existential struggles against the harsh realities of the rural environment.