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## An Interview with Deanna Fei, Author of *A Thread of Sky*

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*Deanna Fei is author of A Thread of Sky (Penguin Press, 2010), a novel about three generations of women in a Chinese American family. Here, she talks with recent UC Irvine graduate Mengfei Chen.*

**Mengfei Chen:** What were some of your inspirations in writing the book? How did it begin? What experiences informed your writing?

**Deanna Fei:** *A Thread of Sky* is the story of a family of Chinese American women who reunite for a tour of their ancestral home. It was inspired by a trip through China's "must-sees" that I embarked on ten years ago with my mother, my sisters, my aunt and my grandmother — six strong-willed, complicated women herded together for two weeks on a package tour. I was struck by the dramatic possibilities of this set-up, as well as the questions it raised about home and identity, culture and authenticity, travel and migration, history and memory. The tour took place at the end of a year I'd spent studying Chinese at Beijing Normal University. I'd thought I was ready to move on to the next stage of my life: teaching in New York, studying creative writing. But a few years later, I hadn't stopped thinking about that tour. I started scribbling notes, and the characters began taking on lives of their own, completely apart from their real-life counterparts, and soon I was writing a novel.

I knew that in order to write about my characters' travels through China with the necessary depth and immediacy, I needed to return. This time, I went back on a Fulbright Grant, intending to stay for another year, researching contemporary Chinese history and soaking up modern life in Shanghai while making periodic trips to the cities on my characters' itinerary. I became so immersed in my research and writing that my stay eventually stretched to three years, during which my understanding of China continually evolved — and I expect it always will.

**MC:** One of the major themes in the novel is feminism in Chinese history. Why did you want to write about this topic? How did you do your research (sources, etc)? Did you learn anything surprising?

**DF:** Though they might not call themselves feminists, all six women in the novel are fiercely independent and have strived to make a difference in the world around them. Until this tour take shape, the American-born daughters of this family have always thought of these traits as being tied to their Westernization, but now they begin to trace it back to their grandmother and the story of feminism in China.

Their grandmother was once a leader of the Chinese feminist movement who garnered comparisons to such historical heroines as Hua Mulan and Qiu Jin. In my research, I read accounts of their lives as well as contemporary portraits of female leaders such as those in Wang Zheng's *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* and Xie Bingying's *A Woman Soldier's Own Story*.

What fascinated me was how an entire movement, a brand of feminism that many argue started earlier and spread wider than its American counterpart, had become obscured in history. In China, the conventional narrative is that feminism began with Communist liberation, when in fact a generation of activists had made huge inroads back in the 20s. Meanwhile, Westerners tend to see themselves as the standard-bearers of progress, particularly in terms of women's rights. I wanted to explore the life story of a woman whose contributions to modern China had been erased, even as she still carries the cause in her bones.

**MC:** How does history, personal and cultural, playing a role in the lives of your characters?

**DF:** In various ways, my characters have seen themselves as somewhat untethered to history, whether by dint of being exiles, immigrants, or American-born. Yet they are all haunted by it, in the form of war wounds, family secrets, genetics or simply sensing its shadow. In China, history just is; an ordinary person doesn't have to study it or return to it in order to feel it. But for the family in my novel, it's only when they embark on this tour that they begin to comprehend how their lives play out against the intersections of political and family history, Chinese and American history, that have shaped their present.

**MC:** Much of *A Thread of Sky* is set in China, yet it's also about Chinese Americans. What are some of the issues that you consider to be important for Chinese Americans of your generation?

**DF:** Whereas previous generations tended either to seek acceptance as assimilated Americans or to hold onto their Chinese identity as primary, I think my generation is eager to build a culture of our own. We're truly Chinese American — not just Chinese or just American — and we don't feel limited by the category. We might identify more broadly as Asian Americans, Americans of color, transnational Chinese or all of the above. Whatever the case, we seek to gain a lot more representation in "American" arts, politics, media and more.

**MC:** There is a growing appetite for writing on China. Is there anything that you think fiction about China offers readers that non-fiction or academic writing does not?

**DF:** That's an excellent question. I've relied on plenty of wonderful nonfiction and academic writing to deepen my own understanding of China, but fiction definitely has its place. China often tempts Westerners to make sweeping, oversimplified statements — for instance, Chinese culture is repressive, or materialistic or all about saving face. Sometimes this happens precisely because China is a place of such vastness and complexity that it's easier to make such statements than to convey true understanding; sometimes it's plain ignorance. Either way, when you combine this impulse with the fact that nonfiction and academic writing are often aimed at arriving at a definitive answer, at some inarguable conclusion, there's considerable potential for misunderstanding.

Fiction, by contrast, is aimed at exploration, not explanation. It's the province of nuance and contradiction. A good novel gives a sense of expansion, of a broadening and deepening view, but it also acknowledges that some things remain beyond our grasp. In this way, fiction can sometimes offer readers a truer perspective of China than other forms of writing.

That, at least, is my hope.

**Tags:** [A Thread of Sky](#), [Deanna Fei](#), [feminism](#), [fiction](#)