

BOOK REVIEW

by Aileen Familara

**title:** *Dream of the Walled City*  
**author:** Fleischman, Lisa Huang  
**publication details:** Washington Square Press, New York, 2000  
**416 pages**

**H**ow does one balance one's idealism and the need for stability? Are these mutually exclusive states? How does a woman cope with a rapidly changing social environment? These and many other questions play out in *Dream of the Walled City*, Lisa Huang Fleischman's saga of a woman living in China in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In a period that saw the transition between Imperial rule to civil strife under the various warlords, to republican government under the Guomindang, and then finally the creation of a Communist state, the lives of individual citizens are caught up in society's maelstrom, blowing them towards different destinies. The novel follows the life of Jade Virtue, a woman born to a distinguished but impoverished family, as she resolves her own role in both private and public spheres.

The image of houses and architecture is a central metaphor employed by Fleischman, symbolising not just class identity but personal identity as well. Jade Virtue lives in different homes that signify her own changing social status and worldview. Decrepit and half-empty, ravaged by war, or elegant and surrounded by a peaceful garden, these homes mark her own sense of independence and identity.

**Idealism from Youth to Middle Age**

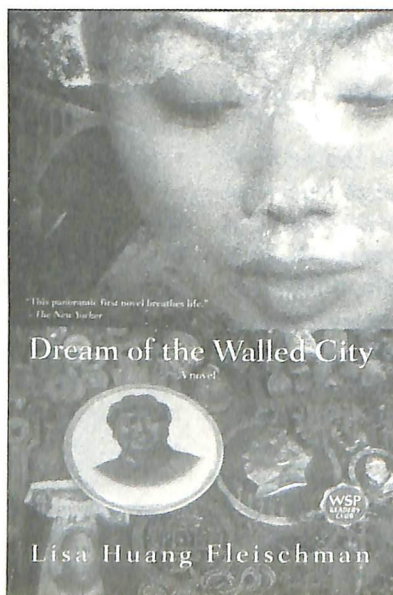
Jade Virtue is exemplary in many ways and timid in others. She marries into a more affluent family to help her own brother's advancement in the republican army, and suffers throughout a loveless and abusive marriage to an opium addict. We see the expectations of

filial devotion that society places upon her, as she struggles to serve husband and in-laws, even when the husband dies and the old couple become increasingly cruel to her in their dotage. Her mother helps her find strength and continues to guide her, a pragmatic and sensible influence on her life from then on.

She finds a quiet fulfillment in early widowhood, when she moves out of her in-laws' home to teach in an all-girls' school and tries to make a difference in her pupils' lives. She shares rooms with workers in the city's industrial district and is drawn into the militant politics with the prodding of her more idealistic friend, Xiang Jin Yu. She participates in discussions with fledgling revolutionaries, among them a young and already charismatic Mao Zedong. She joins the ranks of workers protesting an injustice committed in a cotton factory, and nurtures her idealism through her friendship with an elderly teacher.

A word must be said of the book's other significant character. Jin Yu is depicted here as a willful and intelligent young woman, an idealist and rebel, in comparison to Jade Virtue's more conventional character. Jin Yu is larger than life, running off to France to immerse herself in Europe's socialist movements, transforming into a government spy, leading a revolutionary army, and in the end executed for her beliefs.

Eventually, Jade Virtue's loyalties and affiliations begin to pull on her from every side. Her brother is a military commander and unwilling despot, her second husband a high-ranking-official in the provincial government. Meanwhile, she retains her friendships among the dissidents, especially Jin Yu, who has joined the Communist troops hiding in the mountains and is facing her own struggles within the party. Jade Virtue, on the other hand, settles into a comfortable life as a landowner, wife and mother. It is a sweet lull, marred only by the fact that she and





her husband have daughters but no sons, which she feels is an inadequacy that can only be helped by adopting an orphaned baby boy left behind from the rioting in Shanghai.

But then ripples of change are felt: the Japanese army invades China, the Guomindang come under constant resistance from the Communist groups and the open chaos of war tears families and friendships apart. Jade Virtue tries to keep her extended family together through famine, air strikes and dislocation, but in the end has to give up many things just to survive.

### Civilisation in Transition

There have been many novelisations of recent Chinese history as seen by those who lived it, as there are books written by those for whom these events are already a generation or two away, and halfway around the world. This book is a hybrid of both—Fleischman is a second-generation Chinese living in the U.S. whose family experienced the historical events in China first-hand. She based this book as a semi-biographical account of her grandmother's life, who was a real-life friend to the historical Jin Yu and the other early Communists, and who was herself one of the few women who gained a foothold in provincial politics in China in the 1930s.

Fleischman went beyond her family's recollections of life in China, and did extensive research on this historical period encompassed by her tale. Her descriptions are very evocative, allowing us to see not just a country but a whole civilisation in transition. At the beginning of the story, the emperor is deposed, and a Republican government takes its place. The social order is churned and put through a wringer: landowning families sell their properties to the upstart and more prosperous merchant class. Later on, the school in which Jade Virtue teaches educates the daughters of the newly rich along with the daughters of the 'noble' families.

Two events exemplify the extent of transformation: Jade Virtue's first wedding to the spoiled scion of the Pan family, and her later marriage to civil servant Wu Guai Er. Formality and ritual characterises the traditional wedding, and Fleischman describes the engagement and wedding ceremonies as lavish affairs, with many of the rituals symbolising the bride's servility to her husband and in-laws. Later on Jade Virtue, already in her late 30s, marries again to a man whom she considers her equal. It is an austere ceremony in rented rooms, attended only by her immediate family and friends of various political stripes. In further contrast to Jade Virtue's marriages is Jin Yu's marriage to a fellow revolutionary, and how she adopts concepts of 'free love' among the rebel troops.

Another telling change is Jade Virtue's friendship with the servant girl Yong Li, who helped her survive abuse from her in-laws' and works for Jade Virtue's mother after they

abandon the Pan household. When Yong Li finally wants to start her own family, she asks Jade Virtue to acknowledge her status as a person. By this time the war has already eroded many markers of social class, and Jade Virtue regrets not having been more of a sister and friend to Yong Li, which she makes up for from that point on.

### Perfect Contentment

But Jade Virtue herself chooses to stay outside swirling circles of change. She watches and gives moral support as her pupils one by one grow up to participate in student demonstrations, flee from arranged marriages, or become doctors and civil servants. She attends political gatherings but doesn't carry the strength of her friends' convictions. Her idealistic husband tries to implement change in the government from within, but she chooses in this stage in life to acquire land and rent them out, to build a house, to tend her rose garden.

When she makes a secret trip to the mountain hideout of Jin Yu, her friend mocks Jade Virtue's neutrality and complacency. "What a perfect little woman you are, perfectly content in the domestic sphere, now that we have a man and infants to call our own." Jade Virtue replies by saying that she values only her friendship with Jin Yu and her love for her husband, and not the ideologies that they each represent. Jin Yu herself has left her husband and children to take part in the revolution.

There is a stark divergence here between Jade Virtue's personal and very private liberation struggle and Jin Yu's externalised idealism. The history of feminism has always been exemplified by individual struggles, but has the most impact if women were part of a larger movement, so that the gains of one become the gains of the others. It is up to the reader to agree or disagree with either Jade Virtue's or Jin Yu's perspectives—a difficult position if Fleischman wanted us to see her fictionalised grandmother as having lived a significant life. Furthermore, one even wonders why the author did not write a biography instead, since it certainly would have made the depictions of these women more sympathetic to readers.

This two-sided dilemma mirrors the conflicts women face in overthrowing their own burdens and oppressions. However, as Fleischman shows, the choices for women in many situations are often difficult to make. Sometimes survival itself becomes the only choice. ♪

*Aileen Familara creates websites, has dabbled in art and fiction-writing, and is currently losing sleep over computer games. She has a deep interest in Chinese history, and is hoping to write a book about Philippine-Chinese relations in the first millennium. Aileen is the Information and Communication Technology Development Officer of Isis International-Manila.*