

Original Paper

The Shaping of the Other and the Speech of the Self—Interpretation of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* from a Imagological Perspective

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Abstract

Chinese American writer Lisa See's novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* focuses on the Yao minority in China, bringing the ancient and mysterious culture of nu shu to the world. This paper will combine the relevant theories of comparative literary imagological studies to explore Lisa See's portrayal of the complex image of "China" as the "Other" in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and the reasons for its creation. And then to unearth the image of "Self" reflected through the image of the "Other", that is, Lisa See's concern for feminism and her identification with her own identity as a Chinese American, and to further understand the relationship between the "Other" and the "Self".

Keywords

Imagology, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, nu shu

1. Introduction

Lisa See, who has one-eighth Chinese heritage, is one of the outstanding Chinese American writers. Born in Paris, France, she now lives in Los Angeles. Most of her works are set in China, with Chinese as the main characters. One of her representative works is *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, a novel set in Jiang Yong, Hunan Province, about the life-long friendship between two girls, Snow Flower and Lily. At present, the research on *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* at home mainly focuses on the following aspects: feminism, orientalism and cultural dissemination. And there are still relatively few studies from imagological perspective. Therefore, through the perspective of imagology, based on the interaction between the Self as the observer and the Other as the observed, this paper will analyze the image of China in the novel and the reasons for its creation, as well as analyze the image of the Self as reflected through the Other.

Formed in France, imagology is a relatively new discipline in comparative literature. The study of imagology in Chinese comparative literature began in the 1980s. Although imagology started late in China, domestic scholars have made a lot of achievements in this field. Imagological studies mainly focus on the problem of exotic images in literary works. However, contemporary comparative literary imagological studies no longer focus on the authenticity of the “image of the Other” and the degree of its deviation. “The focus on the “subject” is considered to be the most significant change in the tradition of contemporary imagological studies. It implies a fundamental shift in the direction of research: from focusing on the gazed side to the gazer side (i.e., the image-maker side)” (Meng, 2000). In imagology, the Other as the observed and the Self as the observer form an interactive relationship and influence each other. For example, in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, the image of backward feudal China is the Other shaped by the author according to her self-imagination, and the author’s concern for feminism and her recognition of Chinese culture can also be reflected through the representation of *nu shu* culture.

2. The Other in the Eyes of the Self

The “collective social imaginary” is the interpretation by a society of a different collective or social culture, the speech of one culture to another. And the image of the Other is shaped and constructed by the Self on the basis of the “collective social imaginary”. China’s image in the West has been in tatters since the 19th century, especially after China’s defeat in the Opium Wars. Western countries, centered on the West and using various Western systems as the standard, observed China with a superior stance. They no longer focus on the good elements of Chinese culture, but portray China with prejudice. In the eyes of the West, China has been reduced to a stagnant, corrupt old empire, the Chinese people are barbaric and backward, and Chinese traditions are an incomprehensible phenomenon of foolishness. And because the West has always dominated the discourse, this image of China has been perpetuated for a long time. Lisa See has lived in the United States for a long time and has been educated in the American culture. Therefore, the Western view of China will unconsciously influence her, and she will inevitably bring some sense of superiority of Western culture into her portrayal of China. This is also in line with the idea of “collective social imaginary”.

2.1 Backward, Feudal and Weak Image of China

2.1.1 Image of Pipe-Smoking Chinese People

At the end of the Qing Dynasty, China was flooded with opium smokers. Opium not only causes tremendous mental and physical harm, but also costs people a lot of money and brings a heavy blow to their families. In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Snow Flower’s father is a Chinese figure who addicted to opium. Snow Flower’s family once was the best in the county, her “family had everything—stunning clothes, plentiful food, lots of servants” (Lisa, 2005, p. 120). Her father used to be a good father who would take her on trips. But, when he started to smoke pipe, everything changed. He no longer cared about his family, he sold off more fields, pawned all the furniture, and even wanted

to sell Snow Flower for more money. Now, Snow Flower's house is always filled with a foul odor. "The sick sweetness came from the opium that Snow Flower's father smoked. And the other rankness, as you have probably guessed, came from his impacted bowels" (Lisa, 2005, p. 126). This foul-smelling, selfish, pipe-smoking Chinese man somehow fits the Western image of the 19th century "Sick Man of East Asia".

2.1.2 The Low Status of Women

In *China through Western Eyes. the Nineteenth Century*, there are a number of depictions of the status of Chinese women in the family: "As soon as she was born she was recognized as a disgrace to the family. If she was not immediately drowned Then she was treated as a lowly animal, hardly seen as a human being A young girl is just a trade item, a commodity to be sold A newly married young woman in full dress is nothing more than a sacrifice to be offered" (Roberts, 1992). In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, women face the same difficult situation. When Lily was just a child, she realized that her mother didn't treat the same for her and her brothers. "She looked at me the way all mothers look at their daughters—as a temporary visitor who was another mouth to feed and a body to dress until I went to my husband's home" (Lisa, 2005, p. 12). And even after marriage, the status of women remains unchanged and they have to continue to obey. Like Lily said: "For the rest of my life I would be merely a guest in my husband's home—not the kind you treat with special meals, gifts of affection, or soft beds, but the kind who is forever viewed as a foreigner, alien and suspect" (Lisa, 2005, p. 112). For the women of that time, carrying on the family line was their only value, and only giving birth to a son could elevate their status. "Sons are the foundation of a woman's self. They give a woman her identity, as well as dignity, protection, and economic value" (Lisa, 2005, p. 151). Compared with the atmosphere of freedom and equality in the West, the repression and bondage of women in feudal China made China present a backward image.

2.1.3 The Corrupt Customs of Footbinding

In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, there is a great deal of depictions of footbinding. The footbinding is a kind of deformed aesthetic, which not only causes serious harm to women's bodies, but also makes them inconvenient to move, completely losing their freedom, and being reduced to the subordination of men. Lisa See's extensive portrayal of footbinding not only satisfies Western curiosity and voyeurism, but also reflects her sense of cultural superiority.

As a woman, whether or not she is footbinding and how well she is doing it will have a direct impact on her personal lifelong endeavors. "My small feet would be offered as proof to my prospective in-laws of my personal discipline and my ability to endure the pain of childbirth, as well as whatever misfortunes might lie ahead" (Lisa, 2005, p. 34). But the process of footbinding is painful and bloody. "A perfect foot should be shaped like the bud of a lotus. It should be full and round at the heel, come to a point at the front, with all weight borne by the big toe alone. This means that the toes and arch of the foot must be broken and bent under to meet the heel" (Lisa, 2005, p. 26). Completing the footbinding is only the beginning of the pain; they must continue to walk around until the bones in their feet break.

“Walking, my whole body trembled. By nightfall the eight toes that needed to break had broken, but I was still made to walk. I felt my broken toes under the weight of every step I took, for they were loose in my shoes” (Lisa, 2005, p. 30). Footbinding not only causes women great pain and suffering, but in severe cases it can kill them. “No one said I could die. It wasn’t until I moved to my husband’s home that my mother-in-law told me that one out of ten girls died from footbinding, not only in our county but across the whole of China” (Lisa, 2005, p. 25). In addition to the extensive descriptions of the pain of footbinding, the author also associates women’s small foot with lust, presenting a deformed and perverted image of the Chinese to Western readers. For example, “my feet would be something that would hold my husband’s fascination during the most private and intimate moments between a man and a woman” (Lisa, 2005, p. 34).

It is worth notice that footbinding is related to the Confucian culture of the Han ethnic group. However, the main characters in the book are all Yao minority, who are good at songs and dances, have stabilized until the end of the Qing Dynasty. Therefore, the Yao people do not fit in with the culture of footbinding. The author’s mistake may be caused by a lack of understanding of Chinese culture, but it may also be a way to show more of the worse habits of Chinese culture to Western readers and attract their attention.

2.1.4 The Prevalence of Feudal Superstitions

In the novel, the author also incorporates a lot of elements of feudal superstitions unique to China. Before the footbinding begins, the family will ask a diviner to pick an auspicious day. They also give red-bean dumplings to girls who are about to have their feet bound. They believe that will “help soften our bones to the consistency of a dumpling and inspire us to achieve a size for our feet that would be no larger than a dumpling” (Lisa, 2005, p. 25). And pregnant women will go to the temple to pray for a son, and before they leave, they will take a pair of baby shoes from the goddess’s altar. Because in Yongming County, the word for “shoe” sounds the same as the word for “child”. And when Lily’s mother-in-law becomes seriously ill, Lily drops her own blood into the porridge her mother-in-law is drinking, hoping it will bring about a miracle. Generally speaking, these uniquely Chinese superstitions are more in line with the backward image of China in the Westerners’ mind.

2.2 Ancient, Mysterious Image of China

In the eyes of Westerners, China is an ancient and mysterious oriental country. In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Lisa See depicts many folklore peculiar to the Yao ethnic group, which to a certain extent satisfies the West’s curiosity about China.

In addition to the introduction of *nu shu* and *laotong*, the novel also shows the unique marriage customs of the Yao people as well as traditional festivals. For example, three days before the bride is to be married is the Day of Sorrow and Worry. The female elders and sworn sisters of the bride will cry and sing to express their dismay and blessing for the bride. The third day after the wedding, female representatives of the bride’s relatives and sworn sisters will bring the “third-day wedding book” and gifts such as cakes and sweets to the in-laws’ home. After all wedding ceremonies, the bride must

return to her own home and will not be able to stay in her husband's home until she is pregnant. This phenomenon is called *buluo fujia* in Yao customs. What's more, there are also many festivals such as Catching Cool Breezes, Ghost, Birds, and Tasting festivals.

The closed and remote Yao villages, the mysterious and complicated marriage customs, and the unique Yao festivals are all elements that fit well with the Western imagination of the mysterious East.

3. The Self as Reflected in the Other

"The Other and the Self are in a dialogical relationship, and in examining and speaking of the Other, the Self is also implicitly spoken of" (Liu, 2008). Therefore, it is important to examine the Other comprehensively and objectively, and through the Other to uncover the self-image behind it. In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, China is portrayed by Lisa See as an image of the Other, and in other hand, the author's own image can also be reflected through the image of China.

3.1 Lisa See's Focus on Feminism

In an interview with Lisa See, she has said, "Women make up half of the world's population, and I agree in my heart that women can hold up half the sky. Motherhood is special, only women can be mothers. Sisterhood is unique. In fact, all sisterhoods are unique, especially because of the bond that accompanies them throughout their lives" (Chi, 2020). One of the most prominent features in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is the author's in-depth exploration of female friendship. In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, according to local custom, unmarried girls will have several sworn sisters, and when they get married, this relationship will also stop. However, "a *laotong* relationship was completely different from a sworn sisterhood. It involved two girls from different villages and lasted their entire lives" (Lisa, 2005, p. 22). "This is a joining of two hearts that cannot be torn apart by distance, disagreement, loneliness, better marriage position, or by letting other girls—and later women—come between you" (Lisa, 2005, p. 52). In Madame Wang's witness, Snow Flower and Lily became *laotong*. They had a fun time together learning how to do housework and preparing for marriage. After their marriage, they continued to maintain a close correspondence, exchanging information about their recent situation—their marital status, the birth of their children, etc. They boldly expressed their feelings and encouraged each other when they were in trouble. Due to Snow Flower family's decline, Lily's mother-in-law has stopped their relationship more than once, but even at the risk of disobeying her mother-in-law, Lily did not give up Snow Flower, but secretly met each other. In their hearts, this sisterhood is irreplaceable, even their husbands can't compare. However, due to living in a patriarchal society, Lily realizes that the only way to make a better life for herself is to be submissive and accepting. Her mind is gradually corrupted by the patriarchal ideology, and she begins to hold herself to the rules of the patriarchal society, and gradually becomes a model for the patriarchal society. When Snow Flower confides in her about the pain in her marriage, she just takes a male standpoint and advises her to be tolerant, which leads to misunderstandings between them and the later breakdown of their relationship. By focusing on the cultural phenomenon of *laotong*, Lisa See

expresses her affirmation of female friendship and her complaint against the persecution of women in a patriarchal society.

Nu shu is another highlight of this novel. As a link between the *laotong*, *nu shu* takes various forms; it can be written on paper, on a fan, or sung through songs. *Nu shu* is the only writing system in the world created and used by women. It has been passed down only among women to express their truest feelings. As the author writes in the text: “It was not to compose girlish notes to each other or even to introduce us to the women in our husbands’ families. It was to give us a voice. Our *nu shu* was a means for our bound feet to carry us to each other, for our thoughts to fly across the fields as Snow Flower had written” (Lisa, 2005, p. 160). In a male-dominated society, women are deprived of their voice, they do not have the right to education, and all their time and energy are spent on serving their in-laws and having children. “The men in our households never expected us to have anything important to say. They never expected us to have emotions or express creative thoughts” (Lisa, 2005, p. 160). In this circumstance, the emergence of *nu shu* can be regarded as women’s revolt against the patriarchal society, and they are speaking out for themselves in their own way. *Nu shu* can also bring a touch of solace to women’s repressed lives, and become a way for them to communicate with each other and express their emotions.

Both *laotong* and *nu shu* embody the rebel spirit of Chinese women who are in the face of oppression. With their own wisdom, they constructed a spiritual world that belongs only to women, and at the same time showed the world the unique feminist consciousness of the Orient. Lisa See’s writing about this cultural phenomenon not only shows her sympathy for the tragic fate of Chinese women and calls for more attention to women’s issues, but also reflects her concern for feminism.

3.2 Lisa See’s Identity as a Chinese American

Lisa See has acknowledged her Chinese American identity in public many times. Since the age of three, Lisa See was fostered by her mother at her grandparents’ house in Chinatown due to her parents’ divorce, and since then, Chinese culture has been deeply rooted in her heart. She said, “I experienced Chinese culture, Chinese traditions, Chinese food. We had Chinese weddings, Chinese funerals, Chinese full moon wines...I grew up surrounded by people who, even though they lived in the big city, were still peasants in the south of China at heart” (Chi, 2020).

In 2000, Lisa See accidentally came into contact with the culture of *nu shu*. In order to ensure the authenticity of her work, she specialized in Hunan Province. After crossing dirt roads, horse-drawn carts, riding sampans, and walking on foot, she finally arrived in Jiangyong County, where she met the last heir of the *nu shu*. Her Chinese American identity has made Lisa See obsessed with Chinese culture, and in order to unravel the veil of the mysterious culture, she has traveled thousands of miles to China in a serious and rigorous manner. This not only reflects her respect for Chinese culture, but also her recognition of her own identity.

In recent years, with the successors of *nu shu* passing away one after another, and *nu shu* becoming useless in modern society, the *nu shu* culture is gradually facing the fate of disappearance. By writing

about the culture of *nu shu*, Lisa See recreates the splendor of *nu shu* in that era, letting more and more people understand this ancient and mysterious special word, which is of great significance for the propaganda and protection of *nu shu*, as well as for the exchange of the world's cultures.

4. Conclusion

By analyzing the image of the Other and the Self in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, it can be seen that the Self and the Other are in an interactive relationship. On the one hand, the Self shapes the Other. Due to the influence of western culture and values, Lisa See unconsciously has some prejudices when she portrays China, which is an ignorant, backward and mysterious ancient oriental country in her writing. On the other hand, the Self can be reflected through the Other. Through the description of *nu shu* and the friendship between Snow Flower and Lily in the novel, we can see Lisa See's concern for feminism, her sympathy for Chinese women's sufferings, and her identification with her own Chinese American identity.

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