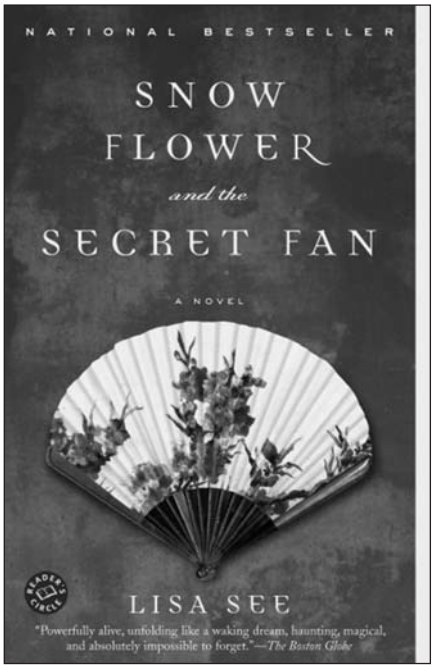
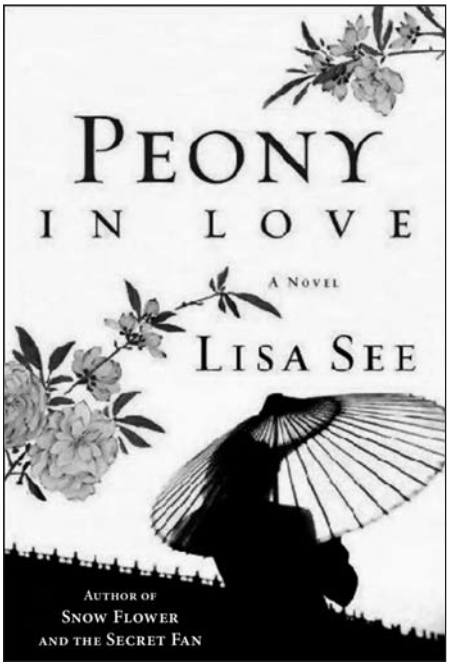
Pre-modern Chinese Women in Historical Fiction

The Novels of Lisa See

By Charlotte Furth





Lisa See. 2008 publicity photo.

Classroom teachers who take up the topic of women and gender in pre-modern China face a familiar set of problems. Although many excellent English language studies of women in Ming-Qing China have been published in the last two decades, most sources available to their feminist authors were the work of Chinese men.[1] Whether it is family memorabilia, informal essays and fiction, or didactic texts emphasizing moral virtues and exemplary conduct, the record is dominated by the voices of literati males; and even writings by women authors themselves reached the public only through the filter of the male kin who circulated and published them. This cannot escape notice in the classroom, and today's students quickly assume that the "traditional Chinese woman" was simply a victim of patriarchal oppression. Foot-binding still serves as a symbol of that oppression, certain to provoke horrified questions from the class, and to reinforce a general assumption that modern Westernized women have long been emancipated from the sorts of male domination Confucian norms imposed. Such readers believe too easily that all enlightenment came to China from the West, and as a corollary, that traditional women had nothing in common with modern women.

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Lisa See has written two historical novels that follow the best feminist scholarship on women in the Ming-Qing period by tackling these stereotypes. In *Snowflower and the Secret Fan* and in *Peony In Love,* she asks readers to imagine how a few such women might have found voices of their own within, rather than in opposition to, the Confucian social order, and how they found ways to self-fulfillment without flouting their culture's fundamental values.[2] To accomplish this task, she created two heroines who spent most of their days in the sex-segregated domestic "inner quarters" of their homes. Nevertheless, these heroines will stretch the contemporary reader's imagination: they are a a ghost and widowed matriarch.

Both of these unlikely protagonists have some literary education and express themselves in writing, connecting their stories to the historical issues surrounding the gradual spread of female literacy in China in the late imperial era. The last century of Ming rule, from the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, was a time of both weak government and of economic development, fostering social instability and cultural innovation. Printing costs were falling and commercial networks were expanding so that printed books, long available for elite consumption and classical scholarship, spread into vernacular and entertainment markets on an unprecedented scale. In this context, female literacy could become both a status symbol for gentry families and an avenue for "female talent" to express itself. It both encouraged mothers in scholarly households to serve as educators, and offered some women opportunity for more socially risky public recognition, mostly as poets. Beginning in the sixteenth century, controversies among elite moralists were less about whether girls should be educated, and more about the purposes that education should serve. Some husbands and fathers wanted women's learning, like the women themselves, to remain sequestered in the household. Others, more liberal, supported social mingling between the sexes. In this context, a libertarian connoisseur of "female talent" could easily pass for a libertine, and the fact that young women poets could be eroticized as sisters to the courtesan fueled both fascination and censure. These crosscurrents are essential to understanding the increasing volume of literary output by women that survives to the present—output that offers rare access to a verifiable female voice.

Challenged to portray women's lives in Ming-Qing Confucian society and determined to imagine a woman's own account of such a social world, Lisa See has drawn upon two very different genres of female-authored texts to inspire her stories. *Peony in Love* takes up the mid-seventeenth-century voices of "lovesick" young women fans of a great romantic opera, *The Peony Pavillion* (*Mudan ting*), whose identification with its heroine inspired a rash of suicides and an avalanche of literati commentary. *Snowflower and the Secret Fan*, set in the nineteenth century in a remote mountainous corner of Western Hunan, draws upon a recently discovered local tradition of "women's writing" (*nu shu*)—a phonetic script in the local dialect used by unmarried girls to exchange poems and swear sisterhood. In *Peony*, a love-struck young woman's frustrations with an arranged marriage plays out in the city of Hangzhou, in China's lower Yangzi Delta, among the empire's wealthiest and most sophisticated cultural elite. *Snowflower*'s heroine, Lily, is a farmer's daughter, and her narrative of lifelong female friendship takes place in a remote provincial county where the rhythms of the agricultural seasons permeate everyday life and livelihood. If See wants her readers to engage imaginatively with the theme of female self-fashioning through the power of reading and writing—a theme that obviously resonates with her own work as a writer—she connects this universal theme not only to the historically remote world of China, but to very distinct social strata there.

After it was first produced in 1596, Tang Xianzu's *kunqu* (southern style) opera *The Peony Pavillion* quickly became a sensation.[3] It portrays a high-spirited young woman, Du Liniang, who falls in love in a dream with a man she has never seen, dies of longing, and then is miraculously resurrected by her mortal lover, demonstrating both that dreams can be real and that love can conquer death. A poetical and dramatic masterpiece by a Chinese contemporary of Shakespeare, lyrical and epic, bawdy and erotic, the opera combines a subtle Buddhist message with a daringly frank portrayal of romantic passion and an implied criticism of upper class marriage arrangements that served family alliances over conjugal intimacy.

The story of Peony, the heroine of See's novel, follows the path of this drama and of its real life devotees in seventeenth-century China. A young girl officially betrothed to a stranger chosen by her family, Peony sees the play performed at her father's mansion and then has an illicit tryst with an unknown young man from the audience. Longing for her lover, she writes her thoughts as commentary in the margins of her copy of the opera's libretto, and as the day of her arranged marriage approaches, she wastes away and dies. In death, she realizes that her secret lover was in fact the man to whom she was officially betrothed. As a ghost, she is free to haunt his two subsequent wives, and by channeling through them her obsession with the opera, she seeks to escape her invisibility as a woman and as a wraith, and to finally be recognized and heard by her lover and the world.

Although a ghost heroine may well appeal to today's readers of fantasy fiction, as a historical novel this is a bold and even risky effort to

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evoke a Chinese world of imagination. See draws upon the rich folklore of the supernatural in popular religion, and in particular, on "hungry ghosts." These are the phantoms of those who die outside the fold of kinship and whose forlorn wanderings will draw them to prey on the still-living souls who once wronged or neglected them. As a "hungry ghost," Peony can hide in the rafters, spy upon her lover's dwelling, possess his wife to orchestrate their sexual play, insist that her writings about the opera be publicly acknowledged, and persuade his third wife to arrange the "ghost wedding" ritual that will settle her restless spirit and at last unite her with him as her husband. In sum, by making *Peony in Love* a ghost story, See can liberate her heroine's narrative voice, freeing her from Confucian decorum so that she can express her resentments, her appetites, her jealousy, her longing and her loneliness—emotions that readers will recognize as universal. Confucian ladies were expected to be modest in expression, but ghosts could demand to be heard.

In fact, this narrative, for all of its fantastical extravagances, is based on historical women, the three real life wives of the seventeenth century literatus Wu Wushan (1647–1704?). These women did indeed share an obsession with the opera *Peony Pavillion*, and wrote successive commentaries on the libretto that were eventually published under the title *Wu Wushan's Three Wives' Combined Commentary on The Peony Pavillion.* Theirs was a story of a first "wife," Chen Tong—a fiancé actually–who died before her wedding, and of the handwritten text onto which she poured her feelings as she lay dying, and which passed to the second wife, Tan Zi. Tan Zi also died, and a third wife, Qian Yi, inherited the manuscript and added her own reflections in a spirit of ghostly communication with both her predecessor wives and with the fictional heroine, Du Liniang.

For all three, Du Liniang was proof of the truth of the imagination and the reality of dreams, deserving of worship as a tutelary spirit hovering over their own lives. Qian Yi constructed a personal shrine to pay respects to Du Liniang as a spirit, and also conducted sacrifices to the spirits of her predecessor wives, who had after all died for love as Du had. It was reported, moreover, that Qian Yi and her husband were visited with identical dreams of Du, inspiring him to charge her with the composition of a ghost portrait of the heroine. In all these ways the writing of the *Three Wives' Combined Commentary* was intertwined with the personal history of this marriage, and of spouses who found in ghosts, dreams, and literature the resources to express *qing*—the intimate emotions of desire, passion, love—in relation to their own lives.[4]

In sum, *Peony In Love* departs from realistic narrative modes in order to connect readers to examples of the late Ming sentimental imagination. The novel also shows readers some seventeenth-century Chinese women who succeeded as writers at a time when, as See suggests in an afterword, "more women writers were being published in China's Yangzi Delta than in all the rest of the world."(275) In thinking about the "three wives" as authors, it helps to understand that "commentary" was not just a matter of glosses and footnotes. Rather, it was a respected mode of literary and philosophical criticism and appreciation that gave practitioners great freedom of expression, and that sustained communities of readers and writers. Both the respect accorded the genre and the social prejudices inhibiting creative women are also illustrated by the fact that when the printed book first began to circulate, many assumed that Wu Wushan was the actual author. In spite of the fact that prefaces and postfaces elaborated the full story of the text, it continued to be reprinted under the title that named him alone.

Peony In Love is in fact a very learned novel, and readers without much cultural background may find it difficult to read just for the story, which can seem extravagant and artificial to a novice, about women who have emotionally intense out-of-body experiences that do not connect to familiar social relationships. Peony can meet her dead mother and grandmother as a ghost in the afterworld, and learn their stories of Chinese female suffering during the wars of the Manchu conquest. She also can haunt a temple dedicated to a dead poetess, and overhear the conversations of members of a female poetry society who go there on an excursion. These inventive narrative devices allow See to do some compelling storytelling based upon historical records that show important aspects of seventeenth-century women's lives that took place outside the home. But while Peony, the free-wheeling ghost, is passionately portrayed, Peony's mortal lover, the scholar Wu Wushan, never really comes alive on the page. This makes it harder for readers to imagine one of the main issues inspiring the cult of qing—the desire for romantic love within Confucian marriage. In the end, then, *Peony in Love* may be more successful at communicating the connections between women's aspirations and literature than in capturing the emotional lives of women and men who dreamed of such unions.

By contrast, *Snowflower and the Secret Fan*, which was written earlier and reached the *New York Times* bestseller list, is closer to a conventional historical narrative. As an old woman, the protagonist, Lily, recalls her life history. Growing up as a prosperous farmer's daughter, her early days were spent with her extended family of kinswomen in the big upstairs chamber where all worked and passed the time, and where she prepared for her arranged marriage. To prepare for a desirable match required the bodily discipline of foot binding as proof of genteel rearing and sexual attractiveness, and the skilled labor of needlework to produce the embroidered shoes, clothing, and quilts that constituted a bride's dowry. The reader follows Lily through life cycle events marked by ritual ceremonies and domestic duties, from a girl's 'hair pining' celebration to betrothal, marriage, and motherhood, to the days of "rice and salt" filled with a housewife's round of tasks, and with the precautions and religious observances marking pregnancy, childbirth, and

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infancy. Given that death struck both young and old in nineteenth-century China, the cycle of Lily's life was also punctuated by funerals and mournings, not only for parents and grandparents, but also for young age mates and children.

All of this is woven into the story, supported not only by Lisa See's scholarly research, but also by her easy familiarity with the world of her own Chinese grandmother and other female relatives in Los Angeles, and her visits to Jiangyong County, Hunan, home to the last surviving Chinese women proficient in writing "nu shu."[5] Her heroine, Lily, tries to be a proper woman according to the precepts of village society. She enjoys what Chinese call a "good fate"—marrying well, bearing healthy sons, and living to be respected as Lady Lu, wife of a well-to-do farmer, merchant, and community leader, and mother of a son who becomes a successful degree holder.

What makes her life material for storytelling are the unusual female social customs surrounding "nu shu" script in Jiangyong and a few neighboring counties in rural Hunan. As researched by anthropologists, the exchange of poems and letters between women in "nu shu" may have been one of many local manifestations of minority-inflected gender practices found throughout Chinese southern and southwestern highlands. But "nu shu" was not obviously identified as minority in origin, and supported highly structured friendships that encouraged romantic intimacy between "sworn sisters" analogous to culturally-approved visions of marriage. The script was used to write down some of the songs women sang on significant ritual occasions, and in the exchange of highly stylized, yet deeply felt, letters and poems in which young women affirmed their lifelong devotion and fidelity to one another. Unlike the products of elite "female talent" of the urban elite discussed in *Peony*, this form of female literacy was ignored by the larger society and attracted no public circulation; its texts were often buried or burned with the writer, and only a few twentieth-century samples survive.

See has used the theme of "nu shu" to create a women's rural world parallel to, but not actively at odds with, the presumed normative Confucian social order. Unlike *Peony*, *Snowflower* is about endurance, acceptance, and survival, not about protest or rebellion, even ghostly. An intimate friendship is at the emotional center of two women's social worlds, which brings them their deepest love and helps them cope with the burdens of their family lives. It is a friendship marked by secrets, not only the "secret" writing system which excludes males, but the personal secrets Snowflower keeps and Lily allows to stay hidden, until their intimacy is worn away by years of things unsaid. It is also a story of women and social class, as Lily's marriage raises her up in society, while Snowflower's pulls her down. Readers are presented with subtle character studies of two women who take different paths to satisfy their desires for love and their drives for social acceptance, and will want to reflect carefully on whether Lily's retelling of her life story is an act of atonement.

Historical novels succeed as entertainment by creating appealing characters who are psychologically accessible to today's readers. Inevitably, the first person narrative voices of these two heroines, Peony and Lily, may sound quite modern to scholars and teachers— they are comfortable with personal detail, frank if discrete about sexual matters, even explicit about the pain of foot binding (a topic about which the historical record is thunderously silent). Overall, they speak their private thoughts uninhibited by the traditional virtue of "sincerity" where, as Confucius taught, the goal is "to follow one's heart's desire without transgressing what is right." But this makes them plausible as heroines who can help suggest some universal truths that pre-modern women share with women today. A reader may be reminded of today's preoccupations with anorexia (Peony) and with lesbianism (Lily and Snowflower). But a thoughtful feminist reading could also lead to reflection on how women today continue to accommodate male privilege in their pursuit of love and their desire for social position. And in the sphere where historical novels can shine—creating a setting scrupulously faithful to what can be known about a past time and place—both novels are exemplary. Paperback editions of each come with a readers' guide with questions for discussion, and essays and interviews where See explains how she used scholarly research, travel in China, and personal experience to help craft her story. ■

NOTES

1. Landmark studies include: Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (University of California Press, 1993); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford University Press, 1995); Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford University Press, 1997); and Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (University of California Press, 2007).
2. Lisa See, *Snowflower and the Secret Fan* (New York: Random House, 2006), and *Peony In Love* (New York: Random House, 2008).
3. Tang Xianzu, *The Peony Pavillion (Mudan ting)*, translated by Cyril Birch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).
4. See Judith T. Zeitlin, "Shared Dreams: The Story of the Three Wives' Commentary on *The Peony Pavillion*" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54:1 (July 1994), 127–179.
5. See Lisa See, *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred Year Old Odyssey of a Chinese-American Family* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995).

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