

The Deconstruction of Orientalism in Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls* in the Perspective of Discourse Analysis

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Abstract— *Shanghai Girls*, one of the masterpieces of contemporary Chinese American writer Lisa See, tells the story of two sisters who travel from Shanghai, China to live in Chinatown in the United States over a period of 20 years, depicting China and Chinese immigrants in a turbulent historical era. This study aims to explain the deconstruction of "Orientalism" in the novel by using discourse analysis: exemplifying and analyzing the use of words closely related to Chinese people and culture. The results of the study not only confirm the close connection between the novel's themes and Chinese culture and history, but also show Lisa's intention to counter "Orientalism" in her writing. Through my study of *Shanghai Girl*, I argue that the Chinese history and culture represented in Lisa See's novel reflect a mixture of an American writer's Chinese writing and personal experiences. Although only one-eighth Chinese, Lisa is passionate about Chinese history and culture. All the narratives about Chinese history and culture in the novel do not come from the author's uncritical imagination, but from the collection and research of a great deal of historical information. Lisa tries to use her language to describe the inner world of the characters as meticulously as possible, presenting an image of China that is different from the stereotypical, mysterious and demonized Orientalism.

Index Terms—China, Deconstruction, Lisa See, Orientalism, *Shanghai Girls*

I. INTRODUCTION

Lisa See is one-eighth Chinese, and although she grew up in the U.S., she has always insisted on her Chinese American identity. Lisa See's writing is more or less related to China, but the China she depicts is not the China of "Orientalism", and the symbols of the Orient are weakened by her. In the preface of her family biographical history *On Gold Mountain* (1995), she stated that "although I am not Chinese in physique or appearance I am Chinese at heart" [1], and that "I am Chinese at heart"[2]. Lisa See did a great deal of historical research and preparation before writing *Shanghai Girls*, in which Chinese people, Chinese culture, and Chinese history were not created by her imagination. She has made it clear in interviews that she will describe "the real Chinese culture, not make it seem strange or unfamiliar"[3]. Based on a close reading of the text of *Shanghai Girls* and with the help of discourse analysis, this paper tries to analyze how Lisa See constructs Chinese people, Chinese cities and Chinese culture with English language, so as to explore her deconstruction of Orientalism.

II. THEORETICAL BASIS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Orientalism

Orientalism is essentially a way of thinking. In the politics, economy and culture of the West, there has been a long-term accumulation of thinking that assumes and constructs the East as heterogeneous and otherized. It is also a kind of political power and cultural hegemony, in which the West attempts to control the East through political means, and misreads the East with the help of cultural exchanges and media tools, interpreting its own Orientalist complex. However, *Shanghai Girls* is different from the previous misunderstanding of the Orient by Westerners, in which China and Chinese people are no longer irrational, childish and passive.

B. Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis is a qualitative research method. Discourse refers to "the use and expression of language in a particular social context". The purpose of this paper is to use linguistic analysis to analyze the structure and meaning of the text of *Shanghai Girls*, to excavate and discover the content of the text, and to explore the different ways of interpreting the meaning and the ideological power hidden in the text. Linguistic-based discourse analysis focuses on language and the scope of language use, including the use of discourse structure, information structure, discourse types, chapter grammar, and discourse meanings in different contexts. Through a close reading of

Shanghai Girls, I pay attention to the power relations and ideologies embedded in the use of discourse, and discover the details of the deconstruction of "Orientalism" in the text of the novel, so as to break the suppression of Chinese culture by "Orientalism".

III. DE-ORIENTALIZATION OF CHARACTERIZATION

"We are twenty-one and eighteen. We are young, we are beautiful, and we live in the Paris of Asia." [4] (15) The women Lisa See describes in *Shanghai Girls* are brave and responsible. Lisa See's portrayal of women in *Shanghai Girls* as courageous and responsible, rather than the "weak and submissive" women of Orientalist perspectives, deconstructs the Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese women.

A. Pearl

"My face is pretty enough—some might even say lovely", (8) "As my father continues to pick at my faults, I shut him out and pretend an interest in our dining room." (9) "I consider myself to be a modern Shanghai girl... I don't want to believe in all that obey, obey, obey stuff girls were taught in the past." (10) The novel opens with Pearl as a girl who has the courage to speak out and express herself. She has a talent for language and is fluent in four languages—British English, American English, the Sze Yup dialect (one of many Cantonese dialects), and the Wu dialect (a unique version of Mandarin spoken only in Shanghai). Upon arriving in Chinatown, she was able to speak standard English and mimic the pronunciation of the Chinese English spoken in Chinatown. After being used by their father to pay off debts, Pearl and May try to escape the patriarchal gaze to pursue a brighter future, proclaiming loudly: "May and I will get an apartment. We'll earn our own way. We plan to determine our own futures." (25). Pearl's courage to express herself as an individual is different from the traditional weak and submissive women.

In the feudal patriarchal society of old Shanghai, most families would have been outraged that their daughters were taking pictures of artists and often spending the night out. There is no doubt that most traditional girls would never try what Pearl and May do. As models for posters of beautiful women, Pearl and May had to endure the misjudgment and scorn of others. Even their mother is mortified when she receives a poster of her daughters from a store. Seeing her daughters' pale legs and arms exposed, she could hardly contain her composure and "She cried and railed and yelled that we were embarrassing the Chin family by looking and acting like White Russian taxi dancers." (14)

Deep down, Pearl believes that she is modern and different from her mother who follows the "three virtues". She also believes that she can choose her own life. Instead, her hopes are dashed by her father's gambling debts. Their father traded them as goods to pay off his gambling debts. Pearl realizes that "I'm to be sold-traded like so many girls before me—to help my family." (29) There is no room for negotiation as Mr. Chin announces to the two sisters that he has made a deal for them. The two sisters that he had arranged their marriage and the ceremony would take place the day after tomorrow. Ignoring his daughters' rebuttal, he continued in a tone that brooked no argument: "I already told you, Pearl. You need to listen and you're going to do as I say. I'm the father and you're my daughters. I'm the father and you're my daughters. This is how things are." (24)

Pearl refuses to accept the arranged marriage and looks forward to a happy life with her beloved Z.G.. Unlike the girl in the Orientalist's mind, Pearl bravely opens her heart to Z.G.. She hopes that Z.G. will save them from the absurdity of an arranged marriage. Contrary to Pearl's romantic fantasies, Z.G. dissuades her by reiterating the essence of Confucianism, "You should marry the man. He sounds like a good match, and you have a duty to your father. When a girl, obey When a girl, obey your father; when a wife, obey your husband; when a widow, obey your son. We all know this is true." (33) Z.G.'s words infuriate and disappoint Pearl, who believes that this set of words belongs to traditional women like her mother, but herself: "I don't believe in any of that!" (33).

Trapped and helpless, Pearl tries to stay calm and find a way out. Obviously, given the dire situation they find themselves in, it is impossible for them to support themselves. Pearl teaches English three mornings a week to a Japanese sea captain, and in addition to their meager income, the sisters can only earn money by modeling for artisans. However, they can barely afford to buy clothes and shoes with their earnings. It seems they have no choice about their future. Forced to give in, Pearl and May finally make a concession.

When having to deal with an arranged marriage, before meeting Old Man Louie's son, Pearl and May choose their clothes, realizing that they are Chinese but American, so it might be better to wear Western clothes, but "It isn't to please them, but we can't ruin the deal either." (29).

At first the sisters resisted going to America, but when Shanghai fell into the war, the troubled sisters had no choice but to flee to America. At this time, Pearl did not really want to stay in America: "but going to America was never my dream. For me, it's just a necessity, another move after so many mistakes, tragedies, deaths, and one foolish decision after another." (82) What she felt in America was the drudgery of labor, the sense of loss, the sense of

wanderlust, the nostalgia for the past, and the intention of fleeing the country at any time.

When the sisters come to America, they are different from the submissive traditional Chinese women from the moment they name their newborn baby girl. When Old Man Louie, the feudal patriarch incarnate, discovers that the baby is a girl, he is disappointed and rejects it. He then tries to name the girl "Chao-di" or "Pan-di", which expresses his strong desire to have a grandson. According to the rules, newborns should be named after their fathers, grandfathers or other distinctive persons. So women and even mothers cannot name their children. However, the sisters insisted on naming the girl "Joy", which means happiness, and wished her a happy life in the future. In the end, the Qin sisters won the battle to name their child. This is not only a victory for the right to name, but also a manifestation of Pearl's independence and autonomy as a woman, deconstructing the image of the Chinese woman who is always in a state of dependence under the vision of Orientalism.

Pearl's sister, May, as a Chinese actress, often played various roles that vilified the Chinese, for which Pearl often blamed her, believing that it was a shame for May to play such degrading roles for the Chinese. Later, Pearl witnessed this on a Hollywood movie set, where the Chinese were portrayed as yellow cab drivers, heavy smokers, prostitutes, and other bad characters: "Every single Chinese in this film is portrayed as backward," "We're made to gawk," "We're made to look bad," "We're made to giggle like idiots and show our teeth. Or they make us speak the worst sort of pidgin English." (181) Here Pearl's rejection and criticism of "Orientalism" is directly expressed. Pearl believed that American films were intentionally vilifying the Chinese.

B. May

May is not the direct narrator of the story, so her appearance is seen through her sister's eyes: "She's funny; She's tiny and has an adorable fleshiness to her" (12). In her sister's eyes, May is a pretty and very individualistic girl. May does not bow to authority and is brave enough to express herself to her dad, "Oh, Ba, stop picking on Pearl. You're lucky to have a daughter like her. I'm luckier I'm luckier still to have her as my sister." (10) When her mom can't accept the two sisters as beautiful-girl poster or calenda, May tries her best to explain to her mom, "We're making people 's lives more beautiful," "You should be proud of us!" (14)

Though May is spoiled by the love of her parents and sister, and knows and cares nothing about the outside world, she comes to her senses fully during the escape. After the Japanese left, she buried her mother and rushed her sister to the hospital instead of leaving her to die. May was pregnant at the time and she was terrified, but she still tried to help her sister out of danger. This eighteen year old girl pulled her sister all the way to the hospital in a yellow cart, her hands were blistered and skinned from doing so. After Pearl was discharged from the hospital, May arranged for them to go to Hong Kong. May shows such determination and calmness when the situation calls for her, even though she was once so pampered and diffident, and takes up the burden at the critical moment. Through May's autonomous growth and persistence in her belief in living, Lisa deconstructs the stereotype of the traditional Chinese woman who needs to be rescued from the Orientalist perspective.

After coming to live in Chinatown, the deconstruction of Orientalism is evident in May's quest for equal treatment and dignity. She did not believe that "innocence is a woman's virtue". She confidently embarked on a new commercial career and rose to prominence on the stage. She almost realized her dream of being a movie star, becoming famous for playing a whimsical cashier, a giggling but incompetent maid, or the stoic wife of a laundryman. In Chinatown, May actively reached out to people working in Los Angeles. She spends her days in elegant clothes and stylish hair, going about her business in cafes or any other clubs. May's American life is like a fish out of water; she is not living passively, but actively pursuing an exciting life of her own and realizing the value of her life.

C. The mother

Pearl and May's mother can be described as a traditional Chinese woman, who wraps her feet, follows her husband's orders and has no opinion. However, at the moment of the twist of fate, this mother shows strength, courage and wisdom, and this new image completely replaces the stereotypical image of Chinese women from an Orientalist perspective.

The first moment in the novel when the mother's image is reversed is: when the Green Gang attacks the Qin family, Mrs. Qin is the backbone at the critical moment. "I have their tickets", "I'll make sure they leave and the deal you arranged for my husband to honor his debts is completed." (54) At this moment, Pearl saw from her mother's face a strength she had never seen before. The mother declared decisively, "We're going to do what we can to save our lives". (59) When her husband suddenly disappeared, leaving his wife and daughters in a state of confusion, she once again fled from the mob with her daughters. When her husband is nowhere to be found and there is no hope of his return, Mrs. Chin realizes that there is no one else to rely on, and she calmly packs up what she needs to take with her on the road, and resolutely takes her two daughters with her. "She was like a gazelle who, under hopeless circumstances, still tried to save her calves from the lion." (255)

The second moment of image reversal for the mother in the novel is when Pearl and May and their mother encounter greedy Japanese soldiers on their way to escape, and the mother decides to face the bandits alone in order to keep her daughters' safe. When Pearl discovers that her mother has been raped, she cannot bear the humiliation and torture imposed on her. Before her death, the brave mother wants Pearl to forget everything and start a new life: "Just listen to me this one time ... and then try to forget... everything." (75). The mother is doing her last best to encourage Pearl to live, which shows her strength.

IV. DE-ORIENTALISM OF LOCATIONS

One location is Old Shanghai and the other is Chinatown. They both have typical oriental colors and often appear in the literary works of Chinese American writers. However, Lisa See does not want to satisfy the Western imagination through the depiction of these two locations, but rather to present a de-"Orientalism" by contrasting these two oriental locations in the opposite direction. Lisa See uses the two cities as a backdrop to tell the story of the two sisters' changing fortunes, and thus both locations bear the traces of their lives.

A. *Shanghai*

The story of *The Shanghai Girl* begins in 1937 Shanghai. At that time, Shanghai was a fashionable, modern, colorful, but chaotic place where people of all kinds were mixed up. To Pearl, the main character, "The Shanghai I love is a fluid place, where the most interesting people mingle." (21)

For the Chinese living in a foreign land, China is the place they miss the most. Old Man Louie always tells Pearl: "The uncles are saving their money to go home. Everyone—including me—has the desire to return to China, if not to live then to die, if not to die then to have his bones buried there." (142) Women have the same idea. Pearl thinks: "I do all this because Shanghai and China are never far from my heart." (149) Her mother-in-law, who was kidnapped as a child and sold as a prostitute and eventually sold to Old Man Louie as his wife, also understands the truth: "I left China long ago. I long for it every day and suffer when she suffers. That's why I work so hard to raise money for China Relief." (168) She always emphasizes: "China is my home," "It will always be my home." (149)

It can be seen that in expressing the character's strong emotion towards their homeland, Lisa chooses "if not" to strengthen the tone and "always" as an adverb of degree with affirmative meaning.

B. *Chinatown*

Although Chinatown is regarded by Westerners as a typical Oriental place, it is a place where people are mixed up and cold and mercenary. The Chinese who live here do not consider it to be truly Chinese, and there are many instances in the novel where the characters express their disappointment and unacceptance of the place.

Los Angeles is "damp, dreary, and no match for the Bund in Shanghai" (26), so Pearl and May make plans to escape to New York or Paris. When Pearl steps into the "poor, dirty, and shabby" (119) home of her "Jinshan husband," she finally realizes that their Jinshan dream is nothing but an illusion. "China City isn't like Shanghai. It isn't like the Old Chinese City either. It looks a lot like the China May and I used to see in movies brought to Shanghai from Hollywood." (135) Through the protagonist Pearl's mouth, "China in Hollywood movies" conveys a rejection of Lisa's "Orientalism".

In 1950, the year mentioned in the novel, the relationship between China and the United States was very tense, and the U.S. government cracked down on all ideas and behaviors suspected of being sympathetic to the new Chinese government and the Red Ideology, and ideologically brainwashed Americans and Chinese in the United States. *Shanghai Girl* describes this extensively. It is mentioned in the novel that American movie studios would make films promoting the threat of communism, and American radios broadcasted anti-communist programs for years and years. In addition, as Chinese in America would be subjected to strict censorship and control. Many Chinese-owned stores closed down, and the Chinese lost their jobs and simply could not find a place to stay except in Chinatown. However, under the influence of this ideology, Chinatown was naturally subjected to even tighter regulation, where spies were planted to search for anything related to China, and subscriptions to *China Daily* and *China Construction* were considered illegal. Chinese people living in Chinatown had a harder time than ever before, and their mental pressure was enormous.

Through the contrasting depictions of Shanghai and Chinatown, I see Lisa presenting a relatively real China-Shanghai, and a Western-constructed China-Chinatown. Moreover, "Orientalism" is deconstructed through the differences in the protagonist's emotional attitudes towards the two locations.

V. DE-ORIENTALISM OF CHINESE CULTURE

The Chinese culture of *Shanghai Girls* is most notable for its "arranged marriages" and "preference for sons over daughters," both of which have often been criticized in previous literature as being distinctly Orientalist, but in this

work Lisa completes the deconstruction of Orientalism through the younger generation's opposition to the older generation's traditional concepts and practices.

A. *Arranged marriage*

From Pearl's monologue "Footbinding was banned and women's lives changed. People in Shanghai now consider arranged marriages backward. Everyone wants to marry for love. In the meantime, we believe in free love." (19), it can be seen that in Shanghai at that time, a new culture had already been formed, and young Chinese people like Pearl no longer adhered to the old concepts. Arranged marriages and footbinding were no longer in line with the mainstream values of the time.

"I've arranged marriages for the two of you," (23) For Pearl, her father's words were incomprehensible: "I wish I could convey how absurd he sounds" (24) "Those feudal days are over. It's not like when you and Mama married." (24) These are the specific details of Pearl's opposition to arranged marriages in the original text, and the sentences such as "how absurd" show Pearl's determination and attitude to rebel against tradition, as well as Lisa's deconstruction of "Orientalism".

B. *Value males and belittle females*

In *Shanghai Girl*, the backward concepts of male superiority and patriarchy, which are left over from history, are depicted by the author to the fullest extent. Through letters, Old Man Louie's family learns that Pearl has given birth to a baby on the way, and naturally they are jubilant and excited. When Pearl and May arrived in the United States after all kinds of trials and tribulations, the in-laws did not even a greeting and comfort, they could not wait to open the baby's swaddling clothes to check its gender, when they saw that it was a baby girl, they were extremely disappointed, and did not care about the feelings of the daughter-in-law, complaining, if I had known that it was a girl would not be prepared for the full moon feast. Pearl names the baby Joy, but her father-in-law objects, arguing that a girl is not something to be celebrated and rejoiced over, and that the daughter-in-law should strive to give birth to a boy as soon as possible in order to carry on her husband's family's legacy.

Though these are facts that cannot be erased from the lives of the fictional characters, the younger generation, such as Pearl and May and Pearl's husband Sam, do not agree with these "ignorant and backward" ideas, and they see equality between men and women. The concept of "patriarchy" has been subverted by the younger generation. When Old Man Louie wants to name his child Zhao-di or Pan-di, Pearl once again voices a strong protest: "Apart from Old Man Louie's disappointment in Joy-and not in ten thousand years will I ever call her Pan-di". call her Pan-di." (123) Sam reassures Pearl that she doesn't have to obsess about having a boy: "People say a family is incomplete without a son, but I am happy with Joy. She is my heart's blood. "

VI. RESULTS

From the above discourse analysis, it can be seen that no matter from the characterization, the depiction of the story locations or the presentation of the relevant Chinese traditional culture, the wordings used in *Shanghai Girls* reflect a distinctive de-Orientalist character. I believe that Lisa See's portrayal of Chinese culture transcends the limits of ethnicity and binary political thinking. Although Lisa See is only one-eighth Chinese, she has always maintained her Chinese American identity and is obsessed with Chinese culture. Through her literary works, she provides a way for people in non-Chinese societies to understand China and Chinese culture. In *Shanghai Girls*, Lisa See employs a first-person perspective and the voice of a Chinese-American woman to allow the Orient to express itself. The Orient she writes about is no longer the Orient that has been misinterpreted by Westerners or the Orient that has been deliberately constructed. Thus, *Shanghai Girls* contributes to the dissemination of Chinese culture to a certain extent.

CONCLUSION

Through her novel-*Shanghai Girls*, Lisa See meticulously and sincerely presents a Chinese past, bringing readers back to the 1930s. The rise and fall of old Shanghai and the hardships of war-torn Chinese who went to the United States in the story are impressive. However, this kind of written China cannot present an all-encompassing and real development and change of China. Shanghai and Chinatown represent only the China that is closest to the Western world, and Pearl and May represent only the Chinese who are closest to the Western culture. If we only look at China from Shanghai and Chinatown, our vision is a bit narrow; if we only understand the Chinese people from the characters of Pearl and May, we are also too biased; Lisa's seemingly truthful writing undoubtedly has the limitations of the author's personal experience and the one-sidedness of her imagination of China. Therefore, I expect Lisa to portray more of the current China in her next works, to tell the story of modern China, to show the developing and changing China, and to let English-speaking readers all over the world have a better understanding

of China and its culture.

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