

**SECRET FEMALE BONDING IN CHINA :
A STUDY OF SELECT FICTION OF LISA SEE**

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DECLARATION

I, Lalremsiami Chhange, hereby declare that the subject matter of this dissertation is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form the basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for research degree in any other University/ Institute.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that “Secret Female Bonding in China: A Study of Select Texts by Lisa See” written by Lalremsiami Chhange has been written under my supervision.

She has fulfilled all the required norms laid down within the M.Phil. regulations of Mizoram University. The dissertation is the result of her own investigation. Neither the dissertation as a whole nor any part of it was ever submitted by any other University for any research degree.

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*Dated Aizawl
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Lalremsiami Chhangte

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Lisa See is an American writer and novelist. Born in Paris, she grew up in Los Angeles spending time with her Chinese relatives in Chinatown. Her educational background with a major in Modern Greek Studies taught her and made her enjoy the pleasures of thorough research that is the fundament of her novels. At first glance, Lisa See would not seem to be a likely candidate for literary voice of Chinese-American women. With her flaming red hair and freckled complexion, she hardly adheres to any stereotypical conceptions of what an Chinese American woman should look like, however, her familial background has given her roots in Chinese culture that have fueled her eloquent, elegant, and exciting body of work. See grew up in the Chinatown section of Los Angeles. Although she is only one eighth Chinese, her background provided her with a powerful connection to that fraction of herself. In an interview with Daniel Olivas, she stated:

I lived with my mom, but I also spent a lot of time with the Chinese side of my family down in Chinatown. My mom and I moved around a lot, but the Chinese side of my family basically stayed put. My grandparents lived in my great-great-grandmother's house. My aunts and uncles all worked in a store in Los Angeles Chinatown that had been in business since the 1890s. So in a sense, Chinatown was home base to me. It was the place that never

changed and that felt like home. Of course it's changed a lot by now, but I still have family there. I never thought too much about my identity. Who does, after all? But after I wrote *On Gold Mountain*, people started to ask me—and still do—“What are you, Chinese or American?” I know that because of how I look, I will always be seen as a bit of an outsider in Chinatown, but to me it's home. It's what I know. The same can be said for when I go to China. To me, it's just a bigger Chinatown—very familiar and comfortable, but again, because of how I look I'll always be considered an outsider. Then when I'm out in the larger white community in the United States, I look like I belong but sometimes I don't feel like I do. That world can seem strange and foreign to me. So in writing these books I'm also trying to figure out who I am. Where do I fit in? Here, there, anywhere, nowhere? This quest doesn't make it into the plots of the books. It's just a journey I'm on as a person. But I'm not unique in this. Aren't we all trying to figure out where we belong to some degree or another?

Her Chinese American family has a great impact on her life and work. Her books include *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese American Family* (1995), and the novels *Flower Net* (1997), *The Interior* (1999), *Dragon Bones* (2003), *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), *Peony in Love* (2007) and *Shanghai Girls* (2009), which made it to the 2010 New York Times bestseller list. Both *Shanghai Girls* and *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* received

honorable mentions from the Asian/Pacific American Awards for Literature. *Flower Net*, *The Interior*, and *Dragon Bones* make up the Red Princess mystery series while *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and *Peony in Love* focuses on the lives of Chinese women in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries respectively. Her novels have been sold in over forty countries; they have been on numerous of bestselling lists in New York and Los Angeles. She has been a recipient for many awards for most of her books.

One of the most invigorating and an award winning Chinese American writer striving to bring women's issues into the public discussion, See is a keen and perceptive observer of life. She fuses the humorous and the serious, life and death, strength and vulnerabilities as she explores human life from different angles, and the means of survival through finding voices, identities, history, culture by means of stories. Her first book, *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family* (1995), was a national bestseller and a New York Times Notable Book. While collecting the details for *On Gold Mountain*, she developed the idea for her first novel, *Flower Net* (1997), which was a national bestseller, a New York Times Notable Book, and on the Los Angeles Times Best Books List for 1997. *Flower Net* was also nominated for an Edgar award for best first novel. This was followed by two more mystery-thrillers, *The Interior* (2000) and *Dragon Bones* (2003), which once again featured the characters of Liu Hulan and David Stark. This series inspired critics to compare See to Upton Sinclair, Dashiell Hammett, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

In addition to writing books, See wrote the libretto for Los Angeles Opera based on *On Gold Mountain*, which premiered in June 2000 at the Japan American Theatre followed by the Irvine Barclay Theatre. She also served as guest curator for an exhibit on the Chinese-American experience for the Autry Museum of Western Heritage, which then traveled to the Family Discovery Gallery at the Autry Museum, an interactive space for children and their families that focuses on Lisa's bi-racial, bi-cultural family as seen through the eyes of her father as a seven-year-old boy living in 1930s Los Angeles. Also, she designed a walking tour of Los Angeles Chinatown and wrote the companion guidebook for Angels Walk L.A. to celebrate the opening of the MTA's Chinatown metro station. See serves as a Los Angeles City Commissioner on the El Pueblo de Los Angeles Monument Authority. She was honored as National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women in 2001 and was the recipient of the Chinese American Museum's History Makers Award in Fall 2003.

Lisa See began work on her first book *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*. This highly detailed family history charted the events that led her great-grandfather Fong See to become the godfather of her Chinatown neighborhood and the 100-year-old patriarch of her family. See interviewed close to hundred of her relatives while researching the book that both gave her a clearer portrait of how her racially mixed family developed and broke her into the publishing business.

Lisa See is best known for her *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* which was published in 2005 and became a New York Times bestseller. The novel won numerous awards domestically as well as internationally and at the same time solidified her position as a significant Chinese American writer. The novel is an exploration of Chinese culture and more specifically, the subordinate role of women in traditional Chinese culture. In order to write this novel, See had to travel to a remote area of China where she was told that she was only the second foreigner ever to visit – to research the secret writing invented, used and kept secret by women for a thousand years.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan traces nineteenth century Chinese culture, with special emphasis on the life of women, presented through the depiction of *footbinding*. This was a custom which began to be practiced in the 10th century, on young girls and women in China. The novel also narrates the presence of a syllabic script, *Nu shu* – a simplification of Chinese characters *Hanzi* that was used exclusively among women in Jiangyong County in Hunan, southern China and depicts the life of a woman from her birth to an elderly age.

The tradition of *Footbinding* also known as “Lotus feet” is the custom of applying painfully tight binding to the feet of young girls to prevent further growth. The practice possibly originated among upper-class court dancers during Imperial China, and spread in the Song Dynasty and eventually became common among all but the lowest of classes.(Dorothy, 34-35) Adopted as a symbol of beauty in Chinese culture, it became popular as a bound foot was a mark of

beauty and was also a prerequisite for finding a husband. It also became an avenue for poorer women to marry into money. Women, their families, and their husbands took great pride in tiny feet, with the ideal length, called the “Golden Lotus”, being about seven centimeters (three inches) long. This pride was reflected in the elegantly embroidered silk slippers and wrappings girls and women wore to cover their feet. Walking on bound feet necessitated bending the knees slightly and swaying to maintain proper movement and balance, a dainty walk that was also considered erotic to men (Dorothy, 56-60).

Nu-shu meaning “women’s writing” or “women’s script” was a special script invented and circulated only between women for a long period of time in Jiangyong, a small agricultural region located at the southeast of Hunan Prefecture, China. It was discovered in 1982 by a Chinese teacher from the South-Central China Institute for Nationalities, Gong Zhebing. This script was used secretly by local women and no man ever learned it. Gong had gone to Jiangyong to investigate the customs and culture of the locals. While there, he unexpectedly discovered this strange calligraphy that was based on Chinese, but at the same time almost totally different from it (Fei-Wen 43). The local women created an alternate written language because they were not allowed to learn the Chinese alphabets *hanzi*. Instead of remaining totally illiterate, they created their own language, a secret code between them that men were not allowed to learn. Jiangyong County was a land blessed with rich and fertile soil that promised its residents abundant harvest. Only men worked in the field while bound-foot village women were not permitted to work outdoors. They spent the whole day doing

housework in their inner chambers. Within these chambers, women loved to gather together with other female relatives, friends or neighbours. This was their female world; their own time, their own space, and their own limited freedom enclosed by the four walls of their houses. They made shoes, cooked, did spinning, sewing and embroidery together.

There was also two cultural practises in the Hunan province that acknowledged women's social bonds. One was *laotong* or "old sames" and the other was *laotang*. Chinese women commonly refer to each other as *Sisters*. A *laotang* relationship involves several young women and takes place when one is preparing for marriage. The bond or sisterhood would be dissolved upon marriage. After marriage, new sisterhoods could be formed between married or widowed women. The *laotong* on the other hand was a bond between two women. For Chinese women, the *laotong* or *old-Sames* relationship was the most valued friendship bond. This was an extraordinary and formal relationship. A woman could only have one *laotong*, and it was for life (Leung 43).

Often a *laotong* relationship would be formed when a marriage was contracted between families who were expecting babies. This was performed before the babies were born. If both children turned out to be girls against the hopes of their families, the daughters could be brought together as *laotong*. An intermediary, in some places a matchmaker, would form a *laotong* relationship between two girls, similar to an arranged marriage which See utilizes in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. The Chinese astrological profiles of the girls were

taken into consideration during the matching process. It was unusual for a *laotong* relationship to be broken. The relationship was made formal by the signing of a contract, which would be done much like a legal contract, using a seal. A *laotong* pair would develop a language to communicate between them that only they could understand, allowing them to send messages back and forth to one another.

Lisa See's remarkable fourth novel, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is set in the inner realm of women in 19th-century China. The novel depicts the repressive Chinese culture that does not value women, binds and breaks their feet to conform to an ancient idea of beauty, and then marries them to strangers. The only hope for a woman is to be married to an eldest son and become mistress of a household. Marriage to a younger son entailed a lifetime of servitude. Within these cages, secret lives and love takes root. This is Lily's story, told as she awaits the release of her death. The second daughter of a poor farmer, she gains status because of the perfection of her feet. When her toes are broken at age seven and curled under her feet to form tiny "golden lilies", Lily becomes a suitable candidate for marriage into a prominent family. To groom Lily for this move, a matchmaker arranges a traditional union of a different kind, a *laotong*. She pairs Lily with Snow Flower, a girl from a higher class. They become *laotongs*, "old sames", a friendship meant to be lifelong. The secret fan of the title provides the folds in which the girls write to each other in *nu shu*, the secret phonetic "women's writing" used by women in Hunan Province to communicate with each other.

In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), Lily and her friend Snow Flower are a *laotong* pair whose relationship is closer than a husband and wife's. Lily's aunt describes a *laotong* match this way: "A *laotong* relationship is made by choice for the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity (45). Though both friends are born under the sign of the Horse, they are quite different. Lily is practical, her feet firmly set on the ground, while Snow Flower attempts to fly over the constrictions of women's lives in the 19th century in order to be free. Their lives differ as well. Although Lily comes from a family of relatively low status, her beautiful feet earned her a marriage into the most powerful family in the region. Lily is later known as Lady Lu, the region's most influential woman and a mother to four healthy children. Although Snow Flower comes from a formerly prosperous family, she is not so fortunate. She marries a butcher, culturally considered the lowest of professions, and leads a miserable life filled with children dying and physical abuse beatings by her husband.

See had written three novels of mystery and intrigue set in China and a memoir of her Chinese-American family's history. She combines both genres in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. The unfolding of the lives of Snowflower and Lily is suspenseful as the women face natural and man-made dangers. The threads of intertwining families — the "natal" families into which Lily and Snow Flower are born and the dramatically different families into which they marry — are the tapestry of a true epic. In this novel, See presents a fascinating portrait of a time and place alive with beauty and brutality. Women see the world through the latticed windows of the communal chambers in which they spend most of their

adult lives, embroidering and weaving. What they literally stitch into the fabric are the *Nu shu* words with which they send messages under the male radar. In Lily, See has created a complex character whose strength is her greatest weakness as she grows from a pliant girl to a formidable woman. In Snow Flower, See has captured the plight of a free spirit born in the wrong time and place.

The novel depicts human suffering in many ways: the physical and psychological pain of *foot binding*; the suffering of women of the time, who were treated as property; the terrible trek up the mountains to escape the horrors of the Taiping Revolution; the painful return down the mountain trail with dead bodies everywhere. Some estimate that the number of people killed during the Revolution was approximately 20 million. The detailed treatment of the suffering which Lily and Snow Flower experience in their *laotong* relationship is a major aspect of the book. Lily's need for love and her inability to forgive what she considers to be acts of betrayal cause her to inflict harm on many people, Snow Flower most of all. Amy Tan called the novel "achingly beautiful, a marvel of imagination" (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*).

Peony in Love(2007) is a jarring historical novel set against the backdrop of 16th century Chinese opera, *The Peony Pavilion*. This book emphasizes the difficulty seventeenth century Chinese women had in achieving freedom and identity in a society that was both male dominated and rigid in its gender expectations. See, describes the novel as "a ghost story within a ghost story," narrates an earlier incarnation of literary tradition, in which thousands of women

in the Yangtze delta, usually wealthy and living in seclusion, published their writing, even supporting their families with the proceeds. See's novel is the story of how three historical women, Chen Tong, Tan Ze, and Qian Yi collaborated, in succession, to write *The Three Wives' Commentary*, a collection of their insights about love inspired by *The Peony Pavilion*. The opera's author, Tang Xianzu, was known as a promoter of *qing*, or deep emotions presenting sexual liaisons between unmarried lovers, and criticized the government. Eventually, "The Three Wives' Commentary" was published and received great acclaim, although moralists urged the burning of all copies because "only an ignorant woman could be considered a good woman" (*Peony in Love* 23). After the tumult it caused, the emperor issued proclamations curtailing the behavior and creative freedom of women, and thus things remained even until the Republic of China was formed, in 1912.

Aside from its erotic enticements, the opera is about young women of the seventeenth century and a heroine, Liniang whose experience they had not witnessed before. Like Peony in the novel, Liniang had a lover Liu Mengmei whom she met in her dreams and at the same time engaged to a man she had never met. In a society where women were denied a voice in all spheres of life, Liniang, a girl of sixteen chose her own destiny and died. However it was sad when she later realized that it was her lover that she was betrothed to. The only way they could be together was to fulfill her duties in her after life and she would be resurrected which she eventually did.

In a society that kept them cloistered, with their feet bound, even finding it acceptable for a husband to beat his wife to death if she did not fulfill her duties, many girls on the brink of adulthood and marriage let themselves waste away to death, believing that they could imitate Liniang's success in the afterlife. See depicts Peony's character as that of Liniang. She was betrothed to a man she had never met in her life when she was sixteen. Like Liniang, she had a secret lover Wu Ren, whom she met when her father staged *The Peony Pavilion* opera for her. Since she did not know that it was Wu Ren whom she was engaged to, she starved herself to death with the hope of finding her true love in her afterlife. See represents Peony's internal landscape as a ghost, incorporating details of ancient Chinese ritual and belief along with her description of inhabiting the souls of the two women who became wives to Wu Ren. As their "sister-wife", Peony guides their minds and hands in completing the annotations she started in the beginning of *The Peony Pavilion*.

See is proficient in rendering the psychology of her characters, primarily that of Peony, who addresses us in a colloquial, accessible, first-person voice. "I lived a rarefied and precious existence, in which I arranged flowers, looked pretty, and sang for my parents' entertainment. I was so privileged that even my maid had bound feet" (*Peony in Love* 34). She writes not only of romantic love but of the love between mother and daughter. When Peony and her mother are reunited in the afterworld, her mother says to her,

I wrote out of sorrow, fear, and hate. You wrote out of desire, joy, and love. We each paid a heavy price for speaking our minds, for revealing our hearts, for trying to create, but it was worth it, wasn't it, daughter? (*Peony in Love* 45)

The author of several previous suspense novels set in China or with Chinese characters –See is a master storyteller, calling on her knowledge of history, myth, and current international events to craft intricate narratives that are at once edifying and evocative. In *Peony in Love*, she leads us on a literary adventure into the past that will have relevance to today's readers who value drama, accuracy, and the lure of the written word. As in her earlier works, See transports the reader to a distant time and culture steeped in rituals and superstitions. Her descriptions are so vivid — from the painful binding of women's feet to the beautifully dressed remains of a “lovesick maiden” to the ghosts who gorge on food offerings — that the most fantastic elements seem real. Peony's obsession with writing the critical commentary is a desire to be truly heard that also overtakes the poet's subsequent wives. In her author's notes, See says there is no evidence that the real woman on which Peony was based became a ghost. Even so, See has intricately stitched a haunting book. Peony's death is heartbreaking. The female writers who gasp for air are inspiring, as is the depth of a love that refuses to die, either on stage or in a young girl's heart.

Shanghai Girls(2009) covers the Japanese invasion of China, World War II, and China's civil war. Lisa See narrates the story through the eyes of Pearl

Chin, a modern girl born and raised in Shanghai, a “beautiful girl” who earns money with her sister by posing for painted advertisements for an assortment of products. Pearl is older sister to May, who is their parents’ favorite, who is more beautiful than Pearl, needier than Pearl, and less educated than Pearl. But despite their differences, they are best friends. Whereas her previous two novels, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*(2005) and *Peony in Love*(2007), took place in seventeenth and nineteenth century China, *Shanghai Girls*(2009), begins in Shanghai in 1937 and ends in the Chinatown of Los Angeles in 1957.

The novel opens with Pearl and May leading relatively carefree lives — the family has servants, they have new and modern clothes, and they are able to earn money to save for themselves. Unlike the women characters of the two previous novels, the two girls have grand plans for their futures; they do not have bound feet and they are neither subject to arranged marriages before their family crashes. But their world is turned upside down when their father tells them that he squandered all of the family’s money, including their earnings. To ensure that he and their mother can continue living in the family home, he has sold the girls to Old Man Louie, an American born merchant, to become wives to his younger sons and move with them to America. The two girls have no intention of becoming wives to men they are not acquainted with or moving away from the city they love. But when the Japanese invaded China, bombs are dropped on their beloved city and suffering runs rampant is everywhere, the girls have nowhere to go. Their family is disgraced, torn apart, leaving nothing but their bond to one another. *Shanghai Girls* runs the gamut of emotions. Pearl and May’s story is

heartbreaking and hopeful at the same time. It is a story of survival, moving forward when you have nothing and recognizing the importance of family, loyalty, duty, and honor. See touches upon cultural issues particularly with regard to gender and class - the harshness of the immigrant life, sibling rivalry, and racism and discrimination in the United States during and after World War II, among other things. Pearl's first person, viewpoint puts readers in the midst of the actions; the bombs falling on Shanghai, the sisters' fear as they enter a country completely foreign to them, and their frustration as they struggle with being "worthless" women according to Chinese culture.

The novel starts in cosmopolitan and style-conscious Shanghai - the so-called Paris of Asia - and switches quickly to Los Angeles during World War II, to a time of suspicions of Communist sympathies, forced confessions, confused offspring, "paper" sons, and roaming FBI agents. The sisters begin the novel as "beautiful girls" - models for those ubiquitous calendars from China that long intrigued See as a jumping-off point for a novel - and end up, for better or worse, in arranged marriages. The novel, *Shanghai Girls*, once again delves into forgotten history but this time remains closer to home: Los Angeles Chinatown. It is a story of immigration, identity, war, and love, but at its heart, *Shanghai Girls* is a story of sisters. Pearl and May are inseparable best friends, who share hopes, dreams, and a deep connection. But like sisters everywhere, they also harbor petty jealousies and rivalries. Publishers Weekly calls *Shanghai Girls* "excellent...an accomplished and absorbing novel," while Booklist has written that it's a "buoyant and lustrous paean to the bonds of sisterhood." (*Shanghai Girls*)

Tillie Olsen in *Silences* wrote:

You who teach, read writers who are women. There is a whole literature to be re-estimated, revalued... Read, listen to, living women writers; our new as well as our established, often neglected ones. Not to have an audience is a kind of death. Read the compass of women writers in our infinite variety. Not only those who tell us of ourselves as “the other half,” but also those who write of other human dimensions, realm (44).

When the world is looked at through the eyes of women one sees a world of systematic and prolonged oppression and subordination of women which are socially constructed and socially patterned phenomena originating from various sources such as property relations, distribution of income, goods and services, religious ideologies, social patterning of relationships like family and education. Civilizations from ancient to modern has been a product of a patriarchal society; the material basis of a society leads to the emergence of class system wherein men become owners and controllers of the production process and property while women are marginalized with little or no control over resources. Institutions in the society reinforce and sustain oppression and subordination of women.

Lisa See has always been intrigued by stories that have been lost, forgotten, or deliberately covered up, whether in the past or happening right now in the world today. In her novels, See resurrects the kinds of stories that often have been left untold, or, perhaps worse, inauthentically rendered. There is

nothing inauthentic about how she writes about childbirth, or the sometimes awkward intimacies shared by mothers and daughters over a lifetime.

The dynamics of gender inequality are correlated with the ideological principles held by the ruling regime. As the Chinese government began to re-assimilate themselves into the global community in the late 19th to early 20th century, it shifted away from conventional Confucian ideals and women's role in society changed as well. When Mao Zedong came to power and established the People's Republic of China in 1949 a transition in gender roles came about. Chinese women in the rural areas were given the liberty of moving out of the house and work in the fields along with her family, while women in the urban areas worked in factories away from their homes. This was indeed a remarkable transition from breaking away from the orthodox and conventional belief of absolute seclusion of women inside their respective house to moving out of their household and work outside. It was unimaginable in the feudal structure of Imperial China for women to venture out and do jobs as they were prohibited from holding any official position in the society. During Mao Zedong's rule women were required for their manual labour for farming and for urban industrialization. Yet, numerous constrains and prejudices are associated with the movement and working of women. This can be well illustrated from See's work *Shanghai Girls*. See is well aware of the plight of the Chinese women outside China especially of America and she brilliantly writes about them in *Shanghai Girls*.

Another aspect that See investigates through the female characters of Pearl and May is migration. Migration has been an integral part of Chinese history. The mechanism of migration involves a serious disembodiment of time and space at individual and social level and register the importance of space in human life and experience. In See's fiction we come to know of a developing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointment of Chinese people in America as they figure out their place in the world. Through the character of Pearl and May, See negotiates the daunting challenges the Chinese immigrants faced in America. The motif of migration is an inseparable part of Chinese American life, as seen through the characters. See endeavours to explore the complex dynamics of migration. Through them the idea of identity is consolidated with migration. Such migration rightly raises questions on the idea of identity and home.

Like other women of color, Chinese American women as a group have neither been included in the predominantly white middle-class feminist movement, nor have they begun collectively to identify with it (Chow289). Although some Chinese American women have participated in social movements within their communities or in the larger society, building ties with white feminists and other women of color is a recent phenomenon for Chinese American women. Since Chinese American women are a relatively small group in the United States, their invisibility and contribution to the feminist movement in the larger society may seem insignificant. See's work however resulted through the development of racial consciousness and is greatly reflected in her novel.

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Chapter II

CAN CHINESE WOMEN SPEAK?

Women, who constitute half of the world's population, are not a homogenous group; their lives vary depending on the place and society they live in as well as their ethnic origin, social class and religion. However, they share the same experience, that of female subordination, in a variety of ways according to the power of relations of their societies. Despite the many efforts – literary, social, economic, political etc – taken to ensure gender equity, promote women's rights, do away with oppression and raise the status of women, little has changed in the lives of women all over the world. Women unconsciously internalize oppressive, subordinate position and the normative structure that naturalize their subordination as inevitable and immutable. "Women," in the words of Jain, "have not learned to see themselves because the mirrors they look into do not reflect them. They reflect the male idea of a woman – whether married or single. The mirrors reflect the men in their lives – the fathers and the brothers who are out there in the open, while women are confined in long skirts, or long sleeves, or behind purdah or the "chilman" (Gender 1992: 51). The ideal woman is portrayed as self sacrificing, self-effacing, chaste, virtuous, shy, devout, non assertive and non-complaining.

In the introductory part of her famous feminist work *The Second Sex* (1949) French writer Simone De Beauvoir states "Now woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world

up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped. In no country is her legal status identical to man's, and often it puts her at a considerable disadvantage" (9). Traditional Chinese society has been male-centered. Sons were preferred to daughters, and women were expected to be subordinate to fathers, husbands, and sons. In *Of Woman Born* (1977), Adrienne Rich captures all the nuances of the traditional milieu when she describes patriarchy as

...the power of the fathers; a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which, by direct pressure – or through tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and division of labour ... men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male (57-58).

Far fewer women were educated than men, and many of their readings consist of books such as *Nü Xun (Advice for Women)* and *Lienü zhuan (Biographies of Notable Women)*, which instruct them to be subjects of men. In all the novels of See, patriarchy intrudes into every sphere of existence. It is an androcentric world where the man is everything and the woman is nothing; woman is part of man's possession, nothing more. In *Feminism and Post Modern Indian Women Novelist in English* (2006), Anita Myles defines woman as

... more a product of cultural norms and restraints rather than as a creation of nature (1).

Since woman is economically dependent on the man her psyche moves towards subservience. As time changed woman became more economically independent but the tendency of subordination in a male dominated society continued without apparent changes (4).

In semi-colonial and semi-feudal old China, women were for a long time kept at the bottom of society. It was not until the first half of this century that the Chinese Communist Party led the Chinese people to wage a great and profound national democratic revolution on this ancient land. The impact of the several millennia of oppression and devastation imposed by the feudal patriarchal system on Chinese women was exceptionally grave. In the political, economic, cultural, social and family life, women were considered inferior to men. This was profoundly manifested in the many ways. Women were deprived and oppressed in Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 CE). Confucianism was adopted as the government's state doctrine and China maintained a male dominated patriarchal society. Though patriarchy existed even before Confucius yet Confucianism was the root cause of the development of the patriarchal society in China emphasizing distinctions between the sexes and the roles they had to play in the society. According to the Confucian structure of society, women at every level were to occupy a position lower than men. These ideologies continued through the Tang Dynasty (618-907), and a woman was taught to obey her father before marriage and comply with her husband after marriage and later to their sons. In the rigidly formed and tradition bound society in China, women had to put up with severe rules which are made

just to suit the male demands. Further, during the Song Dynasty (960-1297), the Confucian scholars developed the patriarchal tradition with more restrictions and rules for the women, including foot-binding for young girls. Neo Confucian interpretations further reinforced male authority and rigid patrilineal customs particularly advantageous to men and disadvantageous to women. In China prior to the twentieth century, women were regarded essentially different from and were believed to occupy a lower position than men. Considered inferior to men; their whole lives were spent being subservient to the men in their families. Chinese women were completely debarred from taking active part in politics and were subjected to performing duties as a daughter, wife or mother inside the house; hence Chinese women were completely excluded from social and political life.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* argues that there is no 'essence' of a woman as such but is constructed by men and society. She also argues that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman," (Beauvoir 293) explaining that patriarchy takes advantage of sexual difference to condition women to become submissive and passive. She further argues that such stereotyping of women with roles to play in a society is instrumental in creating patriarchy. Women thereby accepted this stereotype and were thus the instrument of their own oppression. Women are pushed to their confinement and remain absent from taking active part in society. The home has long been considered the only area of activity for a Chinese woman. It was the place where she was to find satisfaction in the performance of her duties in the varied roles of a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law,

mother etc. Like Gerda Lerner, Uma Chakravarti believes that patriarchy has been a system of altruistic paternalism in which obedient women were bestowed certain rights and privileges as well as security. This paternalism simultaneously made the subjugation invisible and led to their complicity in it:

...while they participated in the process of their own subordination because they were psychologically shaped so as to internalize the idea of their own inferiority as they did elsewhere, ... they were also socialized into believing their own empowerment through chastity and fidelity; through sacrifice they saw themselves as achieving both sublimation and strength. Thus they created strength out of their inferiority and weakness; through a rich and imaginative mythology women were narcotized into accepting the ideology that genuine power lies in women's ability to sacrifice, in gaining spiritual strength by denying themselves access to power, or the means to it. Through the reiteration of cultural models in the mythology women believed that they had different and distinct power, a higher and more spiritual power, a power which would save their husbands from the worst fate and even absolve them of their sins. Working together, paternalism and cultural models of womanhood in mythology virtually erased subordination; it was thus much easier for women to be complicit in such a structure (Chakravarti 580).

Most Chinese women were deprived from receiving education as it was believed that education corrupts women. Within the confinement of four walls a daughter prepares for her marriage starting with the painful and agonizing foot binding, sewing, knitting and embroidering in the women's chambers. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1977) argues that patriarchy imposed strict norms and considered women inferior and it was considered ideal for women to remain submissive. She further goes on to describe the relationship between the sexes as basically a political arrangement, "whereby one group of person is controlled by another" (Millet 23). The practice of *footbinding* originated around 900 AD during the Tang Dynasty in China and was passed down as a prerequisite to marriage from mother to daughter across generations, and continued till it was finally banned in 1949 when the Communists came to power. Foot-binding also known as "*Lotus Feet*" was believed to be a mark of exceptional beauty in China. An indication of high class and wealth for women, the ideal length called the "*Golden-Lotus*" being seven centimetres (three inches) long. See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* brings to life the day-to-day doings of rural 19th century China, a time when girls had their feet bound and women lived mostly in seclusion. Almost everything girls take for granted today, running outside, wading barefoot in a stream, breathing fresh air and protecting the body ends for Lily at age six. According to See, the cruel, risky practice killed one in ten girls across China and left many more hobbled for life. Feet were bound to create "golden lilies," a pair of super-tiny feet ideally shaped like lotus buds and no longer than a thumb. See vividly re-creates the excruciating torment of the young girls forced to

walk on deformed feet for weeks. “I felt my broken toes under the weight of every step I took, for they were loose in my shoes” (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 27) notes Lily at age seven. Her toes were later bent back against her heel. Walking on bound feet necessitated bending the knees slightly and swaying to maintain proper movement and balance. This dainty walk was regarded erotic to men though the excruciating process caused physical agony even resulting in the death of many young girls. Chinese women had no social status as such; men have always looked down upon them as the weaker sex, as his property, servile to him and often treated them as an object of pleasure.

Believing that wifedom is an imperative for women, most Chinese girls count on following the traditional path for women, exemplified by their own mothers’ commitment to domesticity and to the primary roles of wife and mother, looking forward to adult status and security supposedly offered by marriage. Speaking about the importance on marriage. R.P.Sharma says,

Because marriage has traditionally defined ‘femininity,’ it continues to be the reference point for women. Women have been married. Women have plan to be married. Or women have to suffer from being married. The unmarried or unmarrying woman has to be explained or defined with reference to marriage because marriage is ‘emancipation’ or ‘fulfillment.’ It is a logical consequence of this patriarchal philosophy that ‘spinster’ and ‘old maid’ still continue to be the ugliest words in the language,

“implying rejection, the faulty product which nobody wants to buy, the flawed pot doomed to gather dust, left on the shelf” (89).

Chinese women had no right or voice when it came to marriage. In a traditional Chinese society, marriage is an alliance of two families after properly considering some mutual benefit for both the families. Most marriages were meant to fulfill the family's need and the socio-economic status of the potential mate. The arrangement of marriage involves negotiation of a bride-price. It was considered mandatory to meet the demands of the bride-price and usually gifts have to be bestowed on the bride's family. Women were mute spectators, subjected to arranged marriages and their sole duty was to produce sons in order to continue the family name. Usually the father decides the fate of a daughter and he had the right to fix her marriage without taking her consent. See has clearly pictured the fate of the Chinese women through her female characters. The mothers are helpless and they could only obey the rules in fulfilling the norms and traditions on marriages. Since they have no choice but to conform, they would push and force their daughters into what they believe would get their daughters' good marriages.

“You married out,” Mama said, in a way that seemed oddly detached. “You go to another village. Your mother-in-law is cruel. Your husband doesn't care for you. We wish you would never leave, but every daughter marries away. Everyone agrees. Everyone goes along with it. You can cry and beg to come home, we can grieve that you have gone, but you-and we-have no choice.

The old saying makes this very clear: ‘If a daughter doesn’t marry out, she’s not valuable; if fire doesn’t raze the mountain, the land will not be fertile’” (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 101).

They would bind their feet to get the perfect shape with the hope of raising their status in the society. Imagining that happiness for a woman may flow from *footbinding* as a child to marrying at seventeen is nearly impossible. That was when a matchmaker spies Lily's high-arched feet, which if broken, bound and reshaped properly will fetch a better-than-average husband. “A lovely face is a gift from Heaven, but tiny feet can improve social standing” (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 25) explains matchmaker Madame Wang. Lily’s mother promptly asks her to “obey and do what she want” after marriage. For instance, in *Peony in Love*, it is the mother of Peony who begged her to comply with the terms of the arranged marriage as she believes that it would raise her status in the society if she obeyed.

Getting young girls betrothed at a tender age was a common practice and normally young girls and women would be sold off as a wife, a concubine or a servant. Treated as a property and a commodity without any personal dignity of their own, Chinese women could take pride only if she gave birth to a son since “a marriage is not made by choice and has only one purpose-to have sons. (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 55)

My joy of moments before plunged into a black chasm. Even though I knew my mother well, I was not old enough to understand

that her sour words about me were part of her negotiation, just as many similar sentiments would be spoken when my father and my matchmaker sat down to discuss my marriage. Making me seem unworthy protected my parents from any complaints that either my husband's family or my *laotong's* families might have about me in the future. It might also lower any hidden costs they would have to pay the matchmaker and lessened what they would have to provide for my dowry (54).

On the contrary, if a girl child is born the mother as well as the daughter was considered unlucky and thereby she would fail to earn any respect from her household. If a woman fails to produce sons the husbands had the right to remarry or bring in as many concubines as desired. Polygamy was practised extensively and the Chinese men's practice of marrying more than one was in fact considered masculine and a sign of prosperity. Lily and Snow Flower's marriage in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), Peony's marriage in *Peony in Love* (2007) and Pearl and May's marriage in *Shanghai Girls* are all arranged marriages. Their marriages are more like business transactions.

Women conceived as a symbol of self-sacrifice, was taught not to protest but to accept, not to assert but comply; imprisoned within patriarchal enclosures, she had no choice, no voice. There were two cultural practices in the Hunan province which acknowledged women's social confinement; one was *Laotong* and the other was *laotang*. A *laotang* or "sworn sisters" relationship differs from a *laotong* pair. The "sworn sisterhood was made up of several girls and dissolved

at marriage”(*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 26). On the other hand, *laotong* was a type of relationship which bonded two girls together for eternity as kindred sisters. For Chinese women the *laotong* relationship was the strongest and the most cherished affinity of female friendship where they could refer to each other as sisters. The *laotong* relationship was meant for life and could not be broken. The one thing that Lily has to carry her through hard times is the bond of sisterhood. Early on, she had the companionship of her cousin, Beautiful Moon who passed away. As the novel proceeds Lily was chosen for something more special, a *laotong* relationship with the beautiful and privileged Snow Flower. “To have a *laotang* was very special indeed. I should have been excited, but like everyone else in the room I was aghast” (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 26).

Arranged much like a marriage between two young girls by a professional matchmaker, the *laotong* relationship allows intimacy between individuals who were not only treated as chattel but also eventually so maimed that they could not casually stroll outside their own family compounds for visits. To ensure its longevity, oaths were taken and annual visits promised and planned. Though as significant as marriage, it differs, as Lily's aunt explains, because it “is made by choice for the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity” (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 67). Their sisterly love was believed to be even closer and stronger than that between a husband and wife. The *laotong* pairs shared a very close relationship, usually getting their foot-bound together, sewing, knitting and making embroidery. “A *laotong* relationship is made by choice for the

purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, 45).

Pearl and May in *Shanghai Girls* may not exactly be a *laotong* pair as Lily and Snowflower. However the bond they shared, the sisterly affection offers them an environment of love and care that provides them with needed protection from the problems they experience in the outside world.

We hug, but there are no tears. For every awful thing that's been said and done, she is my sister. Parents die, daughters grow up and marry out, but sisters are for life. She is the only person left in the world who shares my memories of our childhood, our parents, our Shanghai, our struggles, our sorrows, and, yes, even our moments of happiness and triumph. My sister is the one person who truly knows me, as I know her. The last thing May says to me is 'When our hair is white, we'll still have our sister love (*Shanghai Girls* 88).

In essence, See uses their portrayal of sisterhood only to champion nurturing femininity. Rather than attack the patriarchal status quo, she offers female bonding as a new way for women to fit into the society and an escape from the patriarchal stronghold.

Women living in conservative culture dare not voice their feelings owing to the rigid code of conduct imposed upon them. Seen as a daughter, a wife or a mother and a “minor”, they have been indoctrinated to believe that man is born to

rule and woman to obey. They are expected to be “silenced voices, inhabiting the shadows cast by their fathers, husbands, the family home – silences and shadows which deny an individual her identity, make her anonymous”(Crane qtd. in Dhawan and Kapadia 51). They have been “veiled and remained unseen, silenced and, therefore remained unheard and marginalized, and hence remained unspoken of. For their sacrifice, stoic silence and submission they have been rebuked and rejected”(Saxena 79). Deborah Cameron in *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* points out a similar view, how social taboos and restrictions prevent women from speaking “even when it seems that women could speak if they chose, the conditions imposed on their lives by society may make this a difficult or dangerous choice. Silence can also mean censoring yourself for fear of being ridiculed, attacked or ignored”(4). Silencing was a means of oppressing women or trivializing their experiences, of not allowing them to express their innermost thoughts about what moves and sustains them. In the introduction to her work *Francophone African Women Writer: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (1994), Irene D’Almeida claims that silence is a representation of the “historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy, that form of social organization in which males assume power and create women an inferior status”(1).

The most important medium through which women were able to endure hardships and communicate with one another was the medium of ritual letters usually inscribed on the ribs of a beautiful fan. These letters were written in *Nu shu*, a phonetic script developed and used extensively by women. The *laotongs*

used *Nu Shu*, a secret language which was used exclusively by women of Hunan Province for about thousand years to communicate and exchange their feelings, usually written on a fan. “Men must never know that it exists, and men must not touch it in any form,” warns Lily’s aunt (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 45). This in fact became a medium by which the Chinese women wrote letters to their *laotong* pairs from their homes and also shared their thoughts and experiences without their husband’s knowledge. Most women were taught this secret writing during their binding days and they would write extensively about their pain and hardships, about their various experiences and would sometimes express them as poetry. It was through *Nu shu* that women appropriated the power of language which was denied to them, as also by expressing their pain and suffering through *Nu shu* to their *laotongs*, women subverted male hegemony and broke their “silence”. These letters or writings, created and practised by women countered the writing of their male counterpart. A voice totally unique, this was as also a script and form typically female, sustained and unknown for over a thousand years. Snow Flower and Lily are *laotongs* and shared their writings through *Nu Shu* in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. In a domain of patriarchal culture, the Chinese subaltern women were denied a voice and they could not oppose or retaliate to the various injustice and pain inflicted upon them.

Then it dawned on me that men throughout the country had to know about *nu shu* (women's written word). How could they not? They wore it on their embroidered shoes. They saw us weaving our messages into cloth. They heard us

singing our songs and showing off our third-day wedding books. Men just considered our writing beneath them. It is said men have the hearts of iron, while women are made of water. This comes through men's writing and women's writing. Men's writing has more than 50,000 characters, each uniquely different, each with deep meanings and nuances. Our women's writing has 600 characters, which we use phonetically, like babies to create about 10,000 words. Men's writing takes a lifetime to learn and understand. Women's writing is something we pick up as girls, and we rely on the context to coax meaning. Men write about the outer realm of literature, accounts, and crop yields; women write about the inner realm of children, daily chores, and emotions. The men in the Lu household were proud of their wives' fluency in *nu shu* and dexterity in embroidery, though these things had as much importance to survival as a pig's fart (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 109).

In her author's note, See discusses her discovery of *Nu shu* and her time interviewing the then 96-year-old (now deceased) Yang Huanyi, the last surviving original *Nu shu* writer. With the end of *footbinding*, See explains, the need for a secret written language died out. But without succumbing to didacticism, the

novelist notes the parallels with her own generation, how class and sexism persist in separating us, and how the desire to communicate and connect survives.

Lisa See has interestingly dealt with women issues in China. Her works mainly concerns the situation of Chinese women in the past and exposes the pathetic life of women in the seventeenth and early nineteenth century. Her protagonists Lily, Snow Flower and Peony are personification of the women during that period of time. See focuses on the domestic and social lives of women firmly grounding her novels in their struggles of self-assertion, claiming space within the restrictive enclosures imposed on their lives. Her women characters situated against culturally constructed norms that work to control them physically and objectify them sexually as symbols of male honour, reflect the ambivalent attitude of the males towards women. See presents, with insight and understanding, the dilemma which women faced subjugation in the guise of culture and tradition displaying remarkable social consciousness. See explores how Chinese women have bonded together through *footbinding*, *laotong*, *laotang* and *Nu shu* and has been able to find a voice of their own and thus speak out.

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Chapter III

FOOTBINDING : THE PAINFUL MEMORIES

Keep her barefoot and pregnant

- Old Chinese Saying -

Chinese women have deformed, mutilated, bounded, changed, manipulated, damaged, and altered their bodies not only to survive in the society, but also to satisfy the men erotically and sexually. Thus, one of the most painful ways in which women participated in and became bound to patriarchy was *footbinding*. *Footbinding* was a Chinese tradition of binding the feet of women that lasted for one thousand years. It evolved into a rite of passage into womanhood within the Confucian system, which valued female domesticity and textile arts. It spread its influence deeply into various fields of Chinese social life during the past centuries, such as music, dance, painting, literature, costume, and so on.

Van Gulik in *Sexual Life in China* mentions that the practice of *footbinding* “had the regrettable consequence that it put a stop to the great old Chinese art of dancing” (61) and pushed females after the Song period to improve their skill in singing and playing musical instruments. Scholars all over the world have been fascinated for further research. Ebrey in *Gender and Sinology: Shifting Western Interpretations of Footbinding 1300-1890* mentions that over the centuries, western authors have struggled to find adequate ways to explain this phenomenon (56). For most of them, *footbinding* is an extreme inhumanity for

women. In the feminist academic field, *footbinding*, together with veils of Islamic women and Sati in some Hindu communities, are regarded as typical patriarchal oppression in Eastern societies. Adrienne Rich uses *footbinding* twice as examples of two characteristics of male power: to control women or rob them of their children, and to confine them physically and prevent their movement. *Footbinding* was the way to introduce a young girl to the patriarchal power that existed and dictated her throughout her entire life. Although *footbinding* increased a woman's chances of marrying well, it was a violent act against women.

Footbinding usually begins when girls were between four and six years old; some were as young as three, and some as old as twelve. Mothers, grandmothers, or older female relatives first bound the girl's feet. The ultimate goal was to make them three inches long, the ideal "golden lotus" foot, though few individuals actually achieved that goal. The four smaller toes were tucked underneath, pulled towards the heel, and wrapped with bandages. Each time the feet were unbound, the bandages and feet were cleaned. Any dead skin, blisters, dried blood, and pus were removed. The process could cause paralysis, gangrene, ulceration and sometimes even death. Binding the feet continued for the rest of the girl's life. Decorative shoes and leggings were worn over the bandages and could differ with the time of day and occasion.

Though the exact origin of the practice is unknown, most agree that it began because of male erotic fascination with the shape and point of court

dancers' feet while dancing. Although *footbinding* started in the upper classes, it spread rapidly. In poorer families who could not afford the bandages or lack of labour associated with a hobbled woman, the practise was not done until the girls were older. Once a girl married, the bandages were taken off, and she reentered the workforce.

Bound feet were sometimes called a 'golden lotus'. It is well known that the lotus is bigger than many flowers. In *Snow Flower and the Secret fan*, the feet is referred to as "golden lilies" (25). Although *footbinding* is a very common phenomenon and important issue in ancient China, its history, especially its origin, is difficult to retrospect. A great deal of folk tales and academic schools claim that *footbinding* originated from different times in Chinese history, for instance, Xia Dynasty (2070 B.C. – 1600B.C.), Shang Dynasty (1600 B.C. – 1046 B.C.), Warring States Period (472 BC—221 BC), Sui Dynasty (A.D. 581 – A.D. 618), Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618 – A.D.907), and Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period (A.D. 907 – A.D. 960) (Gao 2007). The phenomenon that there are so many different opinions on the origination of the practise has attracted significant coverage from various researchers. Van Gulik believes that it is because Ming writers (A.D. 1368 – A.D. 1644)gave forced explanations to old literary references to women's feet, shoes and stockings, and thereby tried to prove that *footbinding* existed already in very early periods. He notes that these theories virtually have no foundation and must be disregarded. So it is possible that whereas previous Song (A.D. 960 – A.D. 1279) and Yuan (A.D. 1271 – A.D. 1368) writers took the correct historical view, during the Ming Dynasty the

tendency to ascribe all existing customs to high antiquity influenced Ming opinion on the history of *footbinding*.

Basically, there are two most influential viewpoints: Some researchers consider that a Lord (around A.D.479 – A.D. 502) cut golden paper into lotus' shape, spread it on the floor, and asked one of his concubines, Pan, to walk on the golden lotus with naked feet, so-called "every stride made a lotus" (*The history of Nan Dynasty*, quoted by Gao, 2007). Other scholars believe that this practice was introduced by Li Yu and Yao Niang around A.D. 937 – A.D. 978. Chinese art history relates how a great King Li Yu who was a dissolute poet and artist ruled over South China during the Five Dynasties. According to historians, the king once constructed a large model of lotus flower of over six feet high for one of his favorite concubines, Yao Niang and made her compress her feet with white silk bands "so that her pointed tips looked like the points of a moon sickle, and then had her execute his favorite dance on that lotus flower". (Van Gulik 216) Thus, Yao Niang, as explaining the origin of the custom, is represented in the act of winding the bands around her feet. Her bound feet excited such a general admiration, that not only other women in the palace, but also all other ladies in China started to imitate her. Since then, 'Lotus' had been a metaphor of women's feet.

Besides, some scholars argue that there are deeper cultural elements here behind the relationship between bound feet and lotus -- Buddhist statuary influences. In *The History of Footbinding*, Gao thinks that the body of Chinese traditional culture consists of the interactions among Buddhism, Daoism and

Confucianism. Because of the impact of Buddhism, the lotus has been regarded as the symbol of nobility and chastity by the Chinese people. The lotus plant grows in mud, but it does not gather any dust on its flowers and leaves. It is similar to women's feet walking on the floor that are clean and beautiful. In the Buddhist statues, Buddha usually stands on the lotus with naked feet. Therefore, Chinese refer to a 'lotus' to describe their gentility. At the very beginning, the aim of *footbinding* was simply for better dancing performance. In ancient China, when women danced, they usually wore a sort of special shoes with sharp points. As an artist, what King Li Yu did was just to replace dancing shoes with silk bands to make women's feet efficient for dancing. (Gao 1999)

The poem 'Pu Sa Man' written by the famous poet Su Shi in the Song Dynasty is seen as the first poem that eulogize bound feet (Yuan 18). Therefore, it is well agreed that since the Song Dynasty, *footbinding* has become a common fashion in China. However, at this time, *footbinding* is just for *strait* feet rather than *smaller* feet. (Gao, 2007) In "One More Comment on Women's Footbinding in Feudal China", Gao argues that the development of *footbinding* in Chinese female culture experienced three stages.

In the first stage (A.D.930s – A.D.1060s), *footbinding* evolved as a sort of dancing costume and only prevailed in limited groups, such as the dancers in the palace or whorehouses. Not hurting their feet or attempting to make it smaller, women just tightened their feet so that they could dance without dancing shoes.

In the second stage (A.D.1060s – A.D.1260s), *footbinding* became separated from dancing and developed as a fashion which prevailed among the

rich and served as an emblem of their stature in the society. During this period, women began to seek much tighter and smaller feet, but they did not really damage their natural structure and they could choose if they wanted to bind their feet up or not.

During the third stage (A.D.1260s –A.D.19th century), *footbinding* developed to its peak. It spread from the upper classes to the whole society. The aesthetic meaning in *footbinding* had weakened. It was not only a fashion and custom any more, but a crucial criterion for females, a very symbol of Chinese femininity. Women's feet were bound to be excessively small and pointed. In contemporary academic fields of Gender Studies like female history and Sinology, the definition of 'footbinding' usually indicates *footbinding* in the third stage of its development. Since the third stage, 'Golden Lotus' is no longer the metaphor of women's feet in poem and literature. It has become an honor for the outstanding bound feet, which are no larger than three inches. 'Golden' in this term means 'best' or 'perfect'. Golden lotus was just ideal situation difficult to be realized. The bound feet that are three to four inches are called 'Silver Lotus'. The bound feet bigger than four inches are called 'Iron Lotus' and would be ridiculed and despised. According to a document from the Qing Dynasty, one or two women in ten would die from *footbinding*, and seven to eight in ten would be injured.

In practice, there were different ways of binding feet and many styles of bound feet. With their mothers' (and/or their grandmothers') help and force, women started to bind their feet since they were three to seven years old, when

their bones were still soft and unshaped. The feet are “compressed by winding round them tight bands, so that the big toe is bent back, and the four others folded against the sole of the foot. The pressure is gradually increased, till the dorsum pedis is bent in a sharp angle. [...] In this way the bulk of the foot was transferred to the ankle, and the small part left below could be encased into a diminutive shoe”(Gulik 56). For a perfect ‘golden lotus’, ‘small’ is just one of the seven strict standards, others including slim, sharp, curve, fragrant, soft and shapely. Thus there are also diverse styles of bound-feet shoes. Bound-feet shoes are also called ‘lotus shoes’ or ‘bow shoes’. Its styles include high-heeled shoes, low-heeled shoes, warped-point shoes, boots and so on.

Besides bound feet, bound-feet shoes also play an important role in the footbinding culture. *Footbinding* is far from easy work. It usually takes several years and is one of the most crucial tasks for a female both during her girlhood and motherhood. The first lesson of *footbinding* for a little girl is to fear natural feet. Even before her feet are bound, the girls are taught by their parents some folk songs or children’s songs, which taunt at women with natural feet. By doing so, the adults convey an image to the little girls that the bound feet are ‘natural’ and beautiful, while big feet (natural feet) are ugly and ‘unnatural’. Thus, ever since their childhood, females are trained to fear, dislike and disdain natural feet. They regard natural feet women as monsters and dare not to get close to them. (Yang 2004)

There is a period before binding feet called ‘Chu Long’ or ‘Shi Chan’, meaning “trying to bind”. It lasts anywhere from several months to several years, in which mothers provide their daughters small and sharp pointy shoes to prevent their feet from growing naturally, thereby making them easier to bind later, forbidding her to move freely elsewhere. For Lily, the period lasted for five years before she got her foot bound.

Even while I was running freely with my brother, my mother had already begun making the long blue strips of cloth that would become my bindings. With her own hands she made my first pair of shoes, but she took even more care stitching the miniature shoes she would place on the altar of Guanyin-the goddess who hears all women tears. Those embroidered shoes were only three and a half centimeters long and were made from a special piece of red silk that my mother had saved from her dowry. They were the first inkling I had that my mother might care for me (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 19).

The day that a girl starts to bind her feet is a big day. There are different customs, even a special rite to celebrate it according to different areas and times in China. Sometimes the girl is asked to bite the toe of pig’s feet. Then her mother puts pig’s feet on a plate, walks around their home by holding the plate on her head, and prays to the goddess of bound feet to provide her daughter a pair of golden lotus. (Yang 56) In other cases, mothers kill a hen and pour its warm blood on the girl’s feet (Feng; Gao). For the girls, this is the rite that bids farewell to

their childhood and steps them into girlhood. The next period of binding feet would last several years. Young girls had to endure extreme pain for about three years to shape their feet. After that they still needed to rebind their feet once every three days to keep them in shape.

Mama washed my feet and rubbed them with alum, to contract the tissue and limit the inevitable secretions of blood and pus. she cut my toenails as short as possible. During this time, my bandages were soaked, so that when they dried on my skin, they would tighten even more. Next, Mama took one end of a bandage, placed it on my instep, then pulled it over my four smallest toes to begin the process of rolling them underneath my foot. From here she wrapped the bandage back around my heel. Another loop around the ankle helped to secure and stabilize the first two loops. The idea was to get my toes and heel to meet, creating the cleft, but leaving my big toe to walk on. Mama repeated these steps until the entire bandage was used; Aunt and Grandmother looked over her shoulder the entire time, making sure no wrinkles saw their way into those loops. Finally, Mama sewed the end tightly shut so the bindings would not loosen and I would not be able to work my foot free (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 32).

Footbinding was viewed as a rite of passage for young girls like Lily and Snowflower. It symbolized their willingness to obey, just as it limited the mobility and power of themselves, kept them subordinate to men, and increased

the differences between the sexes. It ensured their marriagability in the patrilineal Chinese culture and was a shared bond between themselves, their sisters, mothers, and grandmothers. They were “objects” that were also a prestige symbol, and the popular belief was that it increased fertility because the blood would flow up to the legs, hips, and vaginal areas.

Foot size would determine how marriageable I was. 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 my childbirth, as well as whatever misfortunes might lie ahead. My small feet would show the world my obedience to my natal family, particularly to my mother, which would also make a good impression on my future mother-in-law. The shoes I embroidered would symbolize to my future-in-laws my abilities at embroidery and thus other house learning. And, though I knew nothing of this at the time, 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. His desire to see them and hold them in his hands never diminished during our lives together, not even after I had five children, not even after the rest of my body was no longer an enticement to do bed business (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 44).

Footbinding came from males' aesthetic demands upon females. Then its aims changed greatly. An essential question is why did this custom developed in the non-humanistic direction and continued for almost one thousand years? Some researchers think the developing progress of *footbinding* was synchronous with the lifting of male status and the falling of female status in Chinese history. Others believe that it is synchronous with the progress that Chinese masculinity had gradually weakened. Hence, men had to make women more effeminate to keep them under control. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that *footbinding* is the extreme result of patriarchal oppression. See explores the overruling patriarchal oppression in the book and has shown how women were kept and made to follow the Confucian ideals. Lily and her sisters, her mother, aunt and grandmother in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Peony as well as her mother in *Peony in Love* and Pearl and May in *Shanghai Girls* right from their childhood were confined to these repression without a choice.

I also understood that two Confucian ideals ruled our lives. The first was the Three Obediences: "When a girl, obey your father; when a wife, obey your husband; when a widow, obey your son." The second was the Four Virtues, which delineate women's behavior, speech, carriage and occupation: "Be chaste and yielding, calm and upright in attitude; be quiet and agreeable in words; be restrained and exquisite in movement; be perfect in handiwork and embroidery." If girls do not stray from these

principles, they will grow into virtuous women (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 29).

This ideology is exposed in all the women characters in See's novels. The women in her novels had no choice but to submit themselves to what the society expects them to. See has clearly pictured how these ideals have been deeply implanted in the mindset of the women through her characters. Lily and her sisters in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* had no choice but to be submissive and accomplish what was in store for them, they could not escaped nor hide from the clutches of the oppressive patriarchal society..

All I knew was that footbinding would make me more marriageable and therefore bring me closer to the greatest love and greatest joy in a woman's life-a son. To that end, my goal was to achieve a pair of perfectly bound feet with seven distinct attributes: they should be small, narrow, straight, pointed, and arched , yet still fragrant and soft in texture. Of these requirements, length is most important. Seven centimeters- about the length of a thumb-is the ideal. Shape comes next. A perfect foot should be shaped like the bud of a lotus. It should be full and round the heel, come to a point at the front, with all weight borne by big toe alone. This means that the toes and arch of the foot must be broken and bent under to meet the heel. Finally, the cleft formed by the forefoot and heel should be deep enough to hide a large cash piece

perpendicularly within its folds. If I could attain all that, happiness would be my reward (*Snow flower and the Secret Fan* 31).

Footbinding could also be regarded as ‘discipline’ in terms of Foucault, which is a way of controlling the movement and operations of the body in a constant way. It is a type of power that coerces the body by regulating and dividing up its movement, and the space and time in which it moves. The disciplines are the methods by which this control became possible. In this sense, *footbinding* is such a discipline that was constituted and controlled by males but performed by females.

Generally speaking, both the Western and the Eastern researchers (the Chinese male researchers especially) have realized the close relationships between *footbinding* and sexuality. Women’s bound feet have played such a special role in Chinese sexual life. According to Zhang, the popular imagination holds that *footbinding* was primarily motivated by eroticism. He also believed the reason why *footbinding* was maintained for such a long time is its erotic attraction for Chinese men. Basing his understanding of *footbinding* on Chinese erotic painting and literature, Van Gulik finds:

Women’s feet being the center of her sex-appeal, a man’s touching those became the traditional preliminary to sexual intercourse. Nearly every Ming and later erotic novel describes the first advances in the same, uniform manner. When the prospective lover has succeeded in arranging a tête-à-tête with his lady, he never makes any attempt at physical contact for gauging her feelings, he

is not even supposed to touch her sleeve—although there is no objection to suggestive speech. If he finds she reacts favorably to his verbal advances, he will let one of his chopsticks or a handkerchief drop to the floor, and when stooping to retrieve it, he will touch the lady's feet. This is the final test. If she does not get angry, the suit has been gained, and he can immediately proceed without restraint to all physical contact, clasping her in his arms, kissing her etc. While a man's touching a woman's breast or buttock may be explained and accepted as an accidental mistake, no apology will be accepted for his touching her feet, and such a mistake invariably gives rise to the most serious complications (218).

He claims that the problem of the relationship between *footbinding* and sexuality can only be solved by approaching it from the psycho-analytical perspective, perhaps along the lines of shoe-fetishism. Thus he leaves this task to experts in sexology. In her essay "Bound Feet: How sexy were they", Hill Gates interprets the erotic significance of *footbinding* that "Chinese men were foot fetishists, people for whom bound feet and shoes had taken on agency" (60). Furthermore, she indicates fetishism within the context of sexuality in details:

In the realm of sexuality, fetishism implies a sexual focus on a body part—breast, hair, earlobes—or even inanimate objects—underwear, rubber clothing, leather—associated with bodies. These parts or things are perceived by the fetishist as attracting through its own

the agency with which human-like interaction is possible. The fetishist achieves sexual satisfaction not from the whole integral person but from a biologically irrelevant part or object to which history has given value” (60-61).

Some Chinese men surely fetishized bound feet, which is to say that they took bound feet (or bound-foot shoes) as objects sufficiently arousing as to serve as a complete partner. See has also depicted the fetishized feet in the first night of Lily’s marriage.

I shook my head and the little balls on my headdress shook and the silver pieces chimed prettily. My tassels parted and I saw that his eyes were cast down. He was looking at my feet. I blushed. I held my breath, hoping to still the tassels so he wouldn’t glimpse the emotions on my cheeks. I didn’t move and neither did he. I was sure he was still examining me. All I could do was wait (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 146).

However, one can argue that besides the factor of fetishism, *footbinding* played at least two more crucial roles within sexual life in ancient China. We know that the two central facts of footbinding are “that it caused prolonged agony and that at least half of the little girls forced to endure it had to be beaten into submission by their elders” (Gates 58). When little girls refused the torture and asked for the cause, they always got two main reasons. Firstly, it was for beauty and thus a better marriage and secondly it was not only for beauty, more

importantly, bound feet made and reminded women to be confined within their own spheres.

First, along with the development of *footbinding*, one of its essential and public aims is to separate the two genders and keep women within the private sphere. Actually, before the emergence of *footbinding*, there were many rules in the society to isolate the two genders. In some parts of the country, the men and women who were in one family could not use the same container to eat or drink, could not hang their clothes together in the same shelf, and could not touch the other's hand (Pan 46). *Footbinding* made this isolation superlative, in that it directly brought radical difficulties to female's daily life and actions. It is said that in some cases the feet were bound too small to walk. "Customs with little cost easily endure – different haircuts for boys and girls, distinctive hats for ethnic groups – but *footbinding* carried huge costs" (Gates 69). It is clear that the value underlying these huge costs was more essential for the patriarchal society at that time, that is in order to ensure the blood relationship and hence confirm the inheritor, virtue and chastity had been regarded more and more importantly for females.

Lisa See in her book *Snowflower and the Secret Fan* documented a story about the whole process in which a little girl had her feet bound by her mother. In this story, the mother and the daughter lived in a village named Puwei in Yongming County, the country of Everlasting Happiness.

Except for three terrible months in the fifth year of Emperor Xianfeng's reign, I have spent my life in upstairs women's rooms.

Yes, I have gone to the temple, travelled back to my natal home, even visited Snow Flower, but I know little about the outer realm. I have heard men speak of taxes, drought, and uprisings, but these subjects are far removed from my life. What I know is embroidery, weaving, cooking, my husband's family, my children, my grandchildren, my great grand children, and *nu shu* (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 3).

They were confined to their own chamber and were made perfectly aware of staying in their given boundaries.

I knew I would spent almost my entire life in a room like that. I also knew the difference between *nei*-the inner realm of the home and *wai*-the outer realm of men-lay at the very heart of Confucian society. Whether you are rich or poor, emperor or slave, the domestic sphere is for women and the outside sphere is for men. Women should not pass beyond the inner chambers in their thoughts or in their actions (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, 28-29).

Indeed, *footbinding* was a system to make the parents and husband much more confident of a woman's chastity before and after marriage. To this point, *footbinding* is just one of the procedures of constructing women as baby-making machines.

Secondly, from the private aspect, there was a 'public secret' held by Chinese males, atleast in the upper classes, especially in the male intellectuals. Of

course, this secret could not appear as an answer to the little girls from their parents. Maybe the girls had never known it when they endured the pain from *footbinding*, until they became wives. This public secret is that *footbinding* is a procedure to artificially construct another sexual organ for a female besides her breasts and vulva. Ai Lian Sheng argues in his essay 'The Principles of Pleasure within Footbinding':

Women's footbinding is quite cruel. It is well known that the reason for footbinding is because men philandered with women during the hierarchal period. However, people do not know that women themselves, after footbinding, would increase uncountable pleasure on their passion (qtd. in Gao 114).

Literators wrote a great deal of articles to describe their pleasure while playing 'Lotus' before making love. They also argued that females with bound feet can get more passion by the games of 'Playing Lotus' as well, and can achieve orgasm easier and sooner. Hence, the bound feet came to be considered as the most intimate part of their body and the most powerful centre of sex-appeal. Hence, *footbinding* is a procedure to create a sexual idol to fulfill men's erotic interests.

In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault argues that the body is the object and target in power relations, and the purpose is to discipline the body in order to ensure the continuity of society. Thus he suggests that individuals are under surveillance and regulations that are most often subtle, and that by means of those regulations modern institutions

individuate bodies according to designated tasks so as to create socially docile and profitable individuals. Therefore, disciplinary methods that are employed in schools, hospitals, armies, homes as well as prisons and mental institutions, are the tools of the collective forces aiming to “obtain an efficient machine”(Foucault 164) through habituating the internalization of surveillance. See’s *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, lends itself to a Foucauldian analysis of bodies that enter into the machinery of power that “explores [the body], breaks it down and rearranges it” (Foucault 138). See’s novel revolves around this Foucauldian theoretical framework with the aim of presenting how an individual suffocates under the pressure of disciplining regulations.

In conclusion, the painful custom “*footbinding*” controlled women's lifestyles and roles in the Chinese society during one thousand years. Binding women's feet to the point of crippling confined them to their home. This practice showed that in the Chinese family, the woman belonged in the house and had no place in the outside world. Women were bound to patriarchy in the state society. Women were destined to be mother, wife, lover and friend. If a woman were unfortunate to become unmarried, she was then prepared through *footbinding* in order to become subservient to her father or whoever is the patriarch in the family, who would take care of her for the rest of her life. In the same way, the world outside of the house -business world-, belonged to the men who earned money for the family. In addition, *footbinding* and the cult of the exemplary woman were the manners to maintain the Chinese culture, customs, identity, and traditions; to keep the boundaries of hierarchy, gender, and sex; and to rectify

language. However, women's bodies were the sites for both commercial and sexual consumption. Chinese female bodies had been used successfully by men to perform the task often impossible crisis in order to idealize loyalty and integrity. As a result, *footbinding* and the desirable female body were publicized, visible, and fetishized in order to push the nation into a further stand. Finally, the pain endured during the early years would later prepare a woman for the rigors of adult life that includes childbearing, rejection of one's self, and pleasing the husband.

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Chapter IV

BONDING IN SILENCE: *NU SHU* AND *LAOTONG*

Much has been written about the Chinese Confucian rhetoric underlining gender difference and hierarchy and inclusive of female secondariness and seclusion. Gilbert and Gubar has pointed out in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that women are doubly repressed by patriarchy. “Women have not only been excluded from authorship but in addition they have been subject to (and subjects of) male authority.”(Gilbert & Gubar 11) From the earliest of times, girls had been taught through the Confucian Classics that they were not the sun nor the heaven or the lightness of the day. These Classics had cosmologically enshrined those most basic of equations- of yin and yang, of earth and heaven, of moon and sun and of day and night- with female and male. In *Changing Identities of Chinese Women*, Elisabeth Croll mentions that though “originally conceived as complimentary, such oppositions were early arranged in a series of hierarchical relationships juxtaposing superiority with secondariness, authority with obeisance and activity with passivity”(12). One scholar of classical China wrote:

Woman’s place in the classical canon was not determined by the fiat of any supernatural force or piety, but rather by the Confucian certainty that order and harmony were supreme values and that only on hierarchy were they preserved (qtd in Croll 13).

The repressive environment of the Chinese women in their rigid society has encapsulated them in building a bond that lasted a lifetime. Lisa See has brought out the oppressive Chinese patriarchy and the bond that women shared over this tragic situation in her notable works like *Snow Flower and the Secret fan* and *Shanghai Girls*. Two cultural practices in the Hunan province that acknowledged women's social confinement; one was *Laotong* (Old sames) and the other was *Laotang* (Sworn sisters). Making preparation for marriage might involve a *Laotang* relationship among several young women and they would commonly refer each other as "sworn sisters". In fact, Lily's elder sister in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* has five sworn sisters.

... and the five of them clustered together in a corner. The girls were all from Puwei, which meant that they could assemble often, and not just on special gathering days such as Catching Cool Breezes or the Birds Festival. The sisterhood had been formed when the girls turned seven. To cement the relationship, their fathers had each contributed twenty five *jin* of rice, which was stored at our house. Later, when each girl married out, her portion of rice would be sold so her sworn sisters could buy gifts for her. The last bit of rice would be sold on the occasion of the last sworn sister's marriage. That would mark the end of the sisterhood, since the girls would have all married out to distant villages, where they would be too busy with their

children and obeying their mother-in-law to have time for friendship (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 115).

The sworn sisters had a bond that nothing could break. Though different from a *laotong* relationship, the bond does not differ much. Developed among several young girls before their marriage, the sworn sisters shared intimacy and love amongst them. It is a form of escape from the clutches of the oppressive patriarchy. While, on the other hand, *laotong* is a type of relationship which bonded two girls together for eternity as kindred sisters.

A *laotong* relationship is made by choice...when we first looked in each other's eyes in the palanquin I felt something special pass between us--like a spark to start a fire or a seed to grow rice. But a single spark is not enough to warm a room nor is a single seed enough to grow a fruitful crop. Deep love--true-heart love--must grow (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 46).

For Chinese women the *laotong* relationship was the strongest and most cherished affinity of female friendship where they would refer to each other as “old sames”. It was meant for life and could not be broken as their sisterly love was believed to be even closer and stronger than that between a husband and wife. **“Snow Flower was my old same for life. I had a greater and deeper love for her than I could ever feel for a person who was my husband”**(*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 119), Lily draws the intimacy of her relationship with Snowflower. The

laotong pairs shared a very close relationship, usually getting their foot-bound together, sewing, knitting and making embroidery. In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* Lily's aunt describes the formation of a *laotong* match as: "the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity(57). This is recognition of the importance of women's supportive relationships, which helped them endure hardship over their lives.

We, Miss Snow Flower of Tongkou Village and Miss Lily of Puwei Village, will be true to each other. We will comfort each other with kind words. We will ease each other's hearts. We will whisper and embroider together in the women's chamber. We will practice the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues. We will follow Confucian instruction as found in *The Women's Classic* by behaving as good women. On this day, we, Miss Snow Flower and Miss Lily, have spoken true words. We swear a bond. For ten thousand *li* we will be like two streams flowing into one river. For ten thousand years, we will be like two flowers in the same garden. Never a step apart, never a harsh word between us. We will be old sames until we die. Our hearts are glad (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 68).

A *laotong* relationship would be formed when a marriage was contracted between families who were expecting babies. This was done before the babies were born. If both children turned out female against the hopes of their families, the daughters could be brought together as *laotong*. An intermediary, in some places a matchmaker, would form a *laotong* relationship between the two girls, similar to that of an arranged marriage. The Chinese astrological profiles of the girls were considered during the matching process. It was unusual for a *laotong* relationship to be broken. The relationship was made formal by the signing of a contract, which resembled a legal contract with the use of a seal. The *laotong* pair Lily and Snow Flower is arranged by a match-maker Madame Wang. The pair after undergoing a number of scrutiny were found a perfect match.

Lily and Snow Flower were born in the year of a horse, in the same month, and, if what both mothers have told me is true, on the same day and in the same year as well. Lily and Snow Flower have the same number of brothers and sisters, and they are each the third child- Lily and Snow Flower are of identical height , of equal beauty, and, most important, their feet were bound on the same day (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 52,53).

The concept of sisterhood particularly *laotong* is believed to be an essential ingredient of a good marriage. Lily's marriage also cemented as she has the perfect *laotong*. "This *laotong* relationship will give her added value and show

people in Tongkou that she is worthy of a good marriage into their village. Since the bond between two old sames is forever and does not change with marriage, ties with people in Tongkou will be further cemented and your husband –and all of us-protected” (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 58). The *laotong* pairs would develop a language to communicate between them that only they could understand, allowing them to send messages back and forth to one another.

In a domain of patriarchal culture the subaltern Chinese women were denied a voice. They could not oppose or retaliate to the various injustice and pain inflicted upon them. Snow Flower and Lily shared their feelings and experience extensively through *Nu shu* on a fan. Chinese women had no other medium to voice their thoughts or share their pains but by writing through *Nu shu*. The cultural conditioning of the Chinese women was such that they failed to realize their social, economic and political rights as a human being. In her novels, Lisa See narrativises the real life and experiences of Chinese women. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is set in a remote nineteenth century China. The novel depicts the touching story of the two *laotong* pair Snow Flower and Lily amidst the gruesome experience of *footbinding*, marriage, motherhood and the Taiping Revolution that totally disrupted the life of both Snow Flower and Lily.

In prehistoric China, women were barred from any standard education. Education of a man was a very good investment that would be rewarded if one day he would become a government official and was able to bring glory to his ancestors. But the education of a woman was considered to be the most

extravagant luxury. Women did not need to know how to read and write since their main role in society was to be virtuous wives and caring mothers. It was even considered better if a woman did not know much, as she would not be able to defy any man, especially her husband. Therefore, there was never any formal education for women until the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) and only those parents who were rich enough to “waste” money on the education of their daughters would hire private tutors for their girls. They did this because the inculcation of basic literary knowledge and the proper mannerisms of “how to be a lady” would make their girls better brides in the future. Women from poor and working class families usually remained illiterate.

Even though poor women were deprived the right to receive any standard education, they still found a way to subvert the patriarchal hegemony. They created their own language – *Nu shu*; as of now, it is the only written language developed by women that has been discovered in the world. *Nu shu means* “women's writing” or “women’s script”. It was a special script invented and circulated only between women for a long period of time in Jiangyong, a small agricultural region located at the southeast of Hunan Prefecture, China.

Nu shu was discovered in 1982 by a Chinese scholar named Gong Zhebing while studying the Yao ethnic group in southern China. Gong learned about the female-specific writing system from a male informant, whose deceased aunt was a *Nu shu* user in Jiangyong County, located near the borders of Hunan, Guangxi, and Guangdong areas. Upon further investigation, Gong discovered that younger women knew little of this script and that older women had stopped using it during

the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), when *Nu shu* was condemned as “witches’ writing.” With the aid of a retired local official named Zhou Shuoyi, who did a preliminary investigation of *Nu shu* in the 1950s while compiling Jiangyong’s post-Liberation cultural history, Gong not only found a piece of cloth on which was a written *Nu shu* biographic lament, but he also located some women who could actually write in this script. Soon after, the female-specific writing was popularised to the outside world.

Although it was primarily considered a written system, *Nu shu* required performance in the form of singing or chanting, making it compatible with the local women’s oral tradition, namely *nuge*. Indeed, singing was the first step toward becoming *Nu shu* literate, because users had to match sounds with the written graphs; after mastering the ability to read the texts, it was easier to learn how to write the script. Before becoming fully proficient as a writer, a woman would approach and transmit written *Nu shu* as oral *nuge*. After becoming proficient, she could transcribe *nuge* into *Nu shu* text. As a result, a hierarchy existed among *Nu shu* women; there were those who could read and write, others who could only read, and still others who were limited to singing and listening to *Nu shu* stories. *Nu shu* differs from *hanzi* (the Chinese alphabets) in two major ways, one graphic and one linguistic. Firstly, whereas *hanzi* characters are square, *Nu shu* characters are rhomboid shaped, using arcs, oblique lines, and slender strokes. Secondly, *hanzi* ideographs represent meanings while *Nu shu* characters may represent sounds as well as meanings – in the *Nu shu* system, words that sound the same in the native dialect could be written the same way. Its phonetic

characteristic made *Nu shu* much simpler to learn than *hanzi*, because it could be followed easily during a song performance. Therefore, no formal classes were required; women could learn *Nu shu* or *nuge* while doing needlework together or while participating in the singing sessions that were part of wedding ceremonies. At the same time, *Nu shu*'s dialect basis had encapsulated its circulation within a relatively small, if not hidden, or confined chamber, adding a mysterious undertone to this female-specific script. This mysterious tone is reinforced by the still unknown origins of the writing.

According to legend, *Nu shu* was invented between C.E. 1086 and 1100 by a woman named Hu Yuxiu, who was sent to the Imperial Palace to become a concubine of the emperor not for her beauty but because of her reputed literary talent. A *Nu shu* allegedly written by Hu describes her palace life:

I have lived in the Palace for seven years.

Over seven years,

Only three nights have I accompanied my majesty.

Otherwise, I do nothing....

When will such a life be ended, and

When will I die from distress? . . .

My dear family, please keep this in mind:

If you have any daughter as beautiful as a flower,

You should never send her to the Palace.

How bitter and miserable it is,

I would rather be thrown into the Yangzi River (Fei-Wen 425).

Lonely and distressed, Hu wanted to send messages to her home, but her status as an emperor's concubine was a barrier. According to legend, she invented the *Nu shu* script as a means of getting around the court guards and censors, because the script only made sense when chanted in the Jiangyong dialect. Hu's legend perfectly captures the spirit of *nu shu* as a vehicle for expressing lamentation. But like many folk-tales, this story cannot be confirmed, as no documents have been found to verify it. The earliest historical account of *nu shu* found to date was written in 1931, it was described as "fly-head-like tiny scripts" that "no man can read" (Fei Wen 245). As for the original handwritten *Nu shu*, most older copies were destroyed by Japanese soldiers during World War II or by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. More recent ones were burned or otherwise destroyed after the deaths of their owners, because most families failed to see any value in keeping them. Through *Nu shu* or *nuge* performance, women not only learn about each other's hardships but also may have gained glimpses of their own reflections or refractions. *Nu shu* or *nuge* became the space where a woman's life vision met with that of another and where the self and other were infused.

No one knows exactly when this women's script was invented. The number of *Nu shu* characters has not been confirmed until recently. The Central-South University for Nationalities claims that *Nu shu* is a written language that contains around 2,000 characters with "no spoken counterparts". These women created an alternative written language because they were not allowed to learn

Chinese. Instead of remaining totally illiterate, they created their own language, a secret code between women that men were not allowed to learn. Jiangyong County has always been blessed with rich and fertile soil that promises its residents abundant harvest. Only men worked in the field. Bound-feet village women were not permitted to work outdoors. They spent the whole day doing housework in their inner chambers. Within these women's chambers when men were out, women loved to gather together with other female relatives, friends or neighbours. This was their female world; their own time, their own space, and their own limited freedom enclosed within the four walls of their houses. They made shoes, cooked, did spinning, sewing and embroidery together. When they worked, they loved to sing folk songs or recite simple poems. A strong companionship developed between them. They would then make pledges in front of god and swear that until the end of their lives, they would treat their female companions as well as or even better than real sisters. Together they would share both fortune and misfortune. This tradition was called "sworn sisters," which meant women bound not by blood, but by vows. The practice of sworn sisters played a very important role in the invention and dissemination of *Nu shu*. In fact, a lot of *Nu shu* materials produced were letters written by sworn sisters. When these women gathered together to work, they soon found that they needed to express something in words, such as their own thoughts, desires, happiness, sorrows and hopes, all written in their letters to each other, the simple stories and songs they created. So, *Nu shu* was born and then passed on through generations within these women's chambers. There was no scholar in the establishment of this

new script. There was no real teacher or school to pass it on through generations. It was created by some village women who were poor and illiterate.

The transmission of the script was rather primitive, as well. For ages, grandmothers educated granddaughters and mothers taught daughters, usually orally. Some girls learned it from friends or relatives. Women who were very skilled at *Nu shu* could even make a living by teaching other girls the script. Once girls learned the script, they could utilize the language to communicate with their companions. They wrote letters to each other and made their vows during the practice of sworn sisters. They composed verses and songs. They wrote *Nu shu* in their prayers and chants to god. They wrote *Nu shu* on fans and they would even embroider their work on handkerchiefs, cloths and quilts. There were also competitions of *Nu shu* writings between women during festive events and the winner would be given great respect. A woman with the knowledge of *Nu shu* was believed to enjoy a higher status in the society. And when a woman died, her *Nu shu* works would be buried with her in the belief that she could bring her works to her next life through reincarnation.

Nu shu was not carved out just by the imagination of these women. Although these women were not literate, some of them must have known some Chinese alphabetical characters (*hanzi*). These women might have learned the Chinese alphabets informally from their own male families members. As, *Nu shu* resembles the Chinese alphabets, though a little bit different, the concept of the Chinese alphabets could have been influential in the creation of the *Nu shu* script.

The most crucial distinction between *Hanzi* and *Nu shu* is that *hanzi* is ideogram, while *Nu shu* is a phonogram that represents the local dialect. More precisely, it is basically a phonogram mixed with some ideograms. As for the shape of characters, *hanzi* is boxier, like a square, while *Nu shu* is rather wispy and cursive; written in a more elegant way. Apart from all these differences, *Nu shu* is written from top to bottom and from right to left, the same as *hanzi*. The practice of burying the works of *Nu shu* with their authors might sound interesting to people just learning about the language, but this practice incurs as well as a lot of loss during the dissemination as the remains of the materials available now are rare and has made the study of the script much more difficult. As *Nu shu* was written in the women's chambers, the writings reflect what was going on inside these chambers as well. In other words, the world of the village women is reflected in these writings.. Most of the collections available today are letters written to sworn sisters, simple songs and stories, *Sanchaoshu* and *Jiejiaoshu*.

Sanchaoshu is a cloth booklet full of *Nu shu* songs and poems written by mothers or sworn sisters to a newly married woman. *Jiejiaoshu* though not a booklet for marriage is comprised of the commitments made by sworn sisters. They swore in front of god and recorded their pledges in red paper. It is literally a book of vows. Since the power of the patriarchal Confucian culture was so overwhelming for thousands of years, its beliefs became rooted in the consciousness of the people. Even some *Nu shu* writers could not rid themselves of its influence. Various works include patriarchal values, such as how a decent woman should behave and what she should not do in order to remain virtuous. It

is inevitable that those values are found in *Nu shu* because the women were brainwashed by the whole environment and social norms surrounding them. It all becomes a part of themselves that they think and behave accordingly to certain patterns subconsciously (Leung).

Facing patriarchal culture and its orthodox language, women created something by and for themselves. They were expressing themselves by their own female script, not by the masculine *hanzi* that were made by and tailored perfectly to the needs of men. With *Nu shu*, women were acquainted with their independent souls and inner strength, even though they were considered not able to think and feel as a human being in old China. There is a clear projection of their tears and joy, hope and despair. Grievances against the unfair male-governed social system is also evident. In writing to other women, they could express their resentment and bitterness against male oppression at a time when they were so unable to fight for their own rights and respect. The content of *Nu shu* even extended to the outside world of politics, as long as it affected their households.

Sadly, as important as *Nu shu* was to Jiangyong women, it soon lost its value when the liberation of women began in the early twentieth century. The roles for women began to improve. Schools were built for both boys and girls. Women were then allowed to be formally educated and learn the Chinese alphabets. Fewer women learned *Nu shu* after this formal education began and the secret female script became disregarded. Even more disastrous, *Nu shu* was listed as an evil feudal leftover during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and a lot of

materials were destroyed. Women who had *Nu shu* knowledge were seized and condemned. A lot of old women died after this nightmare. Those who survived the ordeal were too frightened to mention *Nu shu* again. According to Professor Endo, there are only three women left in the region who still know this script. They are Yang Huanyi who is 95 years old, He Yanxin and He Jinhua who are both sixty - two years old. It is difficult to comprehend what would become of this graphic writing after the eventual death of these old heiresses. Moreover, it is sad that the younger generation today is not eager to learn this script since there is not much use for it, except for scholarly purposes. *Nu shu* has become a dead language. Recently the Hunan Province government announced a new plan to preserve this cultural legacy. If this happens, maybe this precious script will be maintained. Also, this distinctive female script was never acknowledged in imperial historical archives such as gazetteers, and it was unknown to the outside world until the 1980s, just as it was becoming extinct.

How many beautiful women die sad and with misfortune;

How many of them shed tears throughout their lives...

We read *Nu Shu*

Not for official titles, not for fame,

But because we suffer.

We need *Nu Shu* to lament our grievances and sentiments
of bitterness...

Each writing and each phrase is filled with blood, nothing
but blood.

When reading it,

No one would say, “It is truly miserable” (Fei-Wen 10) .

This verse was written by a village woman named Cizhu, who was born in the early twentieth century in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, southern China. As were the majority of peasant women born in the oppressive Chinese androcentric communities, Cizhu was denied access to education where she could learn official Chinese *hanzi* characters. Accordingly, she was nearly denied the opportunity to be an active subject who wrote history. But, unlike women in other Chinese rural areas, she was able to learn a script developed by the women of Jiangyong who had preceded her, a script that was incomprehensible to men, called *Nu Shu*, or “female writing” (Fei-Wen 422).

The female specificity of *Nu shu* as a woman’s ‘secret’ writing is erroneous according to Fen-Wen Liu. He says that in rural Jiangyong, *Nu shu* was widely visible and audible – used by women of almost every age and on various occasions. In fact, it was meant to be heard and shared through chanting or singing. But men paid very little interest to the script, let alone made any effort to become literate in the characters. In other words, although *Nu shu* may have empowered women by allowing them to express themselves and exchange viewpoints with one another, it is also an evidence of women’s failure to gain understanding or recognition of men. According to Fei-Wen Lu, the failure of gaining men’s interest in *Nu shu* clearly illustrates the women’s position in the society at that point in time. Lily in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* also believed the language to be a secret from men until she entered her husband’s family. She

was surprised to see that the “secret women’s writing wasn’t much of a secret”.

(200) She also stated :

Then it dawned on me that men throughout the country had to know about *nu shu* (women's written word). How could they not? They wore it on their embroidered shoes. They saw us weaving our messages into cloth. They heard us singing our songs and showing off our third-day wedding books. Men just considered our writing beneath them. It is said men have the hearts of iron, while women are made of water. This comes through men's writing and women's writing. Men's writing has more than 50,000 characters, each uniquely different, each with deep meanings and nuances. Our women's writing has 600 characters, which we use phonetically, like babies to create about 10,000 words. Men's writing takes a lifetime to learn and understand. Women's writing is something we pick up as girls, and we rely on the context to coax meaning. Men write about the outer realm of literature, accounts, and crop yields; women write about the inner realm of children, daily chores, and emotions. The men in the Lu household were proud of their wives’ fluency in *nu shu* and dexterity in embroidery, though these things had as much importance

to survival as a pig's fart (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 89).

The negligence of men towards the *Nu shu* script made the relationship of Snowflower and Lily easier and free. Even though they were forbidden to meet each other the men paid no attention to the letters she wrote or received. This again reveals how low men considered women in old China that they do not even care about their narrative.

The custom of “sworn sisters” where women organised themselves into groups developed their own language and system of writing. *Nu Shu* enabled them to communicate even dissenting statements amongst themselves. “Sisters, as you know, also have a unique relationship. This is the person who has known you your entire life, who should love you and stand by you no matter what...” (*Shanghai Girls* 163). *Nu shu* substantiates the appropriation of a female space denied to women within the male paradigm. Fei Wen explains that through *Nu Shu* women communicated amongst themselves and voiced their feelings and experiences.

Voice, according to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, is “sound made when speaking or singing; expressing ideas, feelings, etc.; put into words.” This chapter concludes with the reference to the innumerable kinds of voices that are detected in the fictional works of See. Voice in feminist writings encapsulates women’s (and men’s) diverse experiences with gender in society and, in the struggle for change in patriarchal society, it is a means of asserting the self. In the context of the study, the voices of women are

found in *Nu shu* and *laotong* or the concept of sisterhood. These voices traces the female journey from ignorance and naivety to experience and selfhood. They range from protest, anger, pliant and weak.

Aspiring to recuperate women from the periphery to the centre, make the invisible experiences visible, give voice to the voiceless and change the degrading view of women, See has sought to recognize woman's voice through the secret narrative, *Nu shu* and "sisterhood" as a powerful mode of resistance against the rigid Chinese patriarchy. The *laotongs* used *Nu shu* to communicate and exchange their feelings, usually written on a fan. This in fact became a medium by which the Chinese women from their home wrote letters to their *laotong* pairs and also shared their thoughts and experiences without their husband's knowledge. Most women learnt this secret writing and they would write extensively about their pain and hardships, their various experiences would sometimes be expressed as poetry. Through *Nu Shu*, women appropriated the power of language which was denied to them, as also by expressing their pain and suffering through *Nu Shu* to their *laotongs*, they subverted male hegemony.

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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Women are defined not by the struggling development of their brain, their will or their spirit, but rather by their childbearing properties, and their status as comparison to men who make, and do and rule the world (Iyer qtd. in Prasad 266). According to Margaret Atwood, as far as women are concerned, “It is difficult to say where precisely, or to say how large or small the effect of water on light is a distortion, but if you look long enough eventually you will be able to see me”(qtd. in Kaur 85). Nevertheless, women have striven to create spaces, however big or small, for themselves as expressed by See in her novels. See is writer at work with the complex nature of feminine situation. It is expedient to centralize one’s focus on the predominance of sexual politics and woman as a traditional scapegoat and sexual stereotype, among other parallel issues, as a source and instigator of the female imagination (Inder Singh qtd. in Kaur 86).

With the emergence of feminist theories that paved the way for a critique of the negative, conventional portrayal of women, comes the break to reinterpret and reevaluate the same, to explore socio-cultural problems, patriarchal institutions of marriage and family and gender issues. Deeply aware of the intrusion on women’s rights, See grieves on the suppressive patriarchal nature of Chinese traditional culture. She expounds female oppression – the dilemma of women and the tribulations of bound footed women, and protests against

subordination to men, victimization by men in all domains such as familial, religious, political, economical and social. She also projects her awareness of the factors that bind and subjugate women keeping in mind what Ellen Morgan has said: ‘Feminist Criticism should, I believe, encourage an art true to women’s experience and not filtered through a male perspective or constructed to fit male standards’ (qtd. in Eagleton 237). See’s representations and explorations of the lives of women are deeply personal, even intimate issues within her protagonist’s socio-political milieu. She displays her writing skills authentically understanding that “The arts must help people understand what female experience is, ‘what it’s like, what you think, how it operates. What it feels like to be us’” (Millet, qtd. in Eagleton 237). See writes to break down the barriers that deny women the power and privileges men enjoy, and aims at recognizing and understanding that inequities exist, redressing that inequity whether social, religious or economical. She does her best to help reclaim and rediscover what she considers as the rightful status of woman ignored under patriarchal domination.

Lisa See’s novels chronicle the history of the Chinese women with particular focus on the bound foot women and their secret language. Portraying the effect of the practise of *footbinding* on the lives of women, she reveals the extent of human capacity for brutality, compassion and resilience. See artfully projects women caught in the oppressive hold of tradition and their predicaments in the crisis they faced. The responses to such situations is reflected in the explanations by Lily, a bound foot woman, about her sufferings when she was a girl “When I knew I couldn’t suffer another moment of pain, and tears fell on my

bloody bindings, my mother spoke softly in my ear, encouraging me to go one more hour, one more day, one more week, reminding me of the rewards I would have if I carried on a little longer,”(*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 45). The excruciating process of *footbinding* is illustrated in Lily’s situation.

Tears coursed down my face as Mama led me back and forth across the women’s chamber. I heard myself whimpering...We three girls were nearly paralyzed from our physical torment, yet our trial had barely begun. Even with empty stomachs, we vomited out our agony...But as the hours passed a new kind of suffering overtook us. Our feet burned as though they lay among coals of brazier. Strange mewling sounds escaped from our mouths” (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* 35).

Many young girls could not endure such physical agony and therefore many of them died during such *footbinding*. In the novel Lily’s third sister died due to *footbinding* and a resultant blood poisoning. The painful episode of *footbinding* is explicitly captured by See in *Peony in Love* and *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*.

Besides being a gripping story, See’s novels deal with the oppressive hold tradition has on women. She narrates the oppression and constraints that govern even a girl child’s life in a Chinese patriarchal society. From Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 CE) Confucianism was adopted as the government’s state doctrine and China maintained a male dominated patriarchal society. No doubt patriarchy

existed even before Confucius yet Confucianism was the root cause of the development of the patriarchal society in China. Confucianism emphasized the distinctions between the sexes and the role that gender played in a society. According to the Confucian structure of society, women at every level were to occupy a position lower than men. These ideologies continued through the Tang Dynasty (618-907), and a woman was taught to obey her father before marriage and comply with her husband after marriage and later to her sons. In a rigidly formed and tradition bound Chinese society, women had to put up with severe rules which were made to suit male demands. Further during the Song Dynasty (960-1297), the Confucian scholars developed the patriarchal tradition with more restrictions and rules for the women, including *footbinding* for young girls. Neo Confucian interpretations further reinforced male authority and rigid patrilineal customs. In the process, women were the worst sufferers as the social norms and moral codes were framed to be particularly advantageous to men and disadvantageous to women. In her famous work *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone De Beauvoir states :

Now Woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped. In no country is her legal status identical to man's, and often it puts her at a considerable disadvantage (9).

She further explains that even though women's rights are imprecisely recognized, long-standing habits continue to manifest in various customs. Before Beauvoir in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* garnered much excitement among women. She strongly attacked the social and economic system that failed to provide equal opportunities for women in the field of education, politics and economics. She raised her voice to demand women's education and their protection by laws.

The practice of *footbinding* reveals that the Chinese society is gender biased. See's characters Lily and Snowflower in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Peony in *Peony in Love* and Pearl and May in *Shanghai Girls* are all voiceless and virtually inconsequential and are confined to the society's norms and traditions. The Chinese women had no right nor voice when it came to marriage. A traditional Chinese marriage is an alliance of two families after proper consideration of mutual benefit for both the families. Most marriages were meant to fulfill the family's need and the socio-economic status of the potential mate. The arrangement of marriage involved negotiation of a bride-price. It was mandatory to meet the demands of the bride-price and gifts had to be bestowed on the bride's family. Women were mute spectators and their sole duty was considered to produce sons in order to continue the family name. Usually the father decided the fate of a daughter and it was the right of a father to fix his daughter's marriage without taking her consent. The betrothal of young girls at a tender age was a common practice and normally young girls and women would be sold off as a wife, a concubine or a servant.

Treated as property and as a commodity without any personal dignity of their own. Chinese women took pride only if she could give birth to a son. On the contrary the birth of a girl child was considered unlucky and thereby the mother would fail to earn any respect from her household. Lily and Snowflower (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*) are victims of the practise of *footbinding* and arranged marriages and Peony (*Peony in Love*) is also betrothed to a man she has never met in her life. The same goes for Pearl and May (*Shanghai Girls*) who were subjected to arranged marriages to pay for their father's debts. The characters in the selected texts of See may be of different period of time, yet, they all share the same subjugation and are all victims of the oppressive Chinese patriarchal society.

See portrays an 'essential world of women where men are present only by the power they wield over their wives and daughters' (Myles 77). Her women, buried under the heavy yoke of traditional mores, suffered but subsisted because they had the aptitude for survival through it all. Her novels reflect the women's struggle to reclaim the meanings of their own bodies and subjectivities. They undergo an awakening into a consciousness of their own bodies and their indigenoussness and are strong reflections of the Chinese women who have awakened and come to terms with the culture they lived in. The secret bond that they shared through the secret female narrative *Nu Shu*, *laotangs*(sworn sisters) and *laotongs* (old sames) are projections of the awakening and consciousness that developed among the women in the rigid patriarchal society.

In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Snow Flower, a girl born on the same day though to a richer family, and bound to Lily by formal oaths of eternal friendship were a *laotong* pair. Lily and Snow Flower adore each other, enjoying the rare freedoms of their times together as children, sharing annual temple festivals and maintaining the connection until Snow Flower dies. Custom permits them only occasional meetings and even these are reduced by the Lu family's refusal to let Lily stay in touch when Snow Flower marries a man considered to be polluted, a butcher. But Lily and Snow Flower communicate by means of a fan on which each writes messages, often conventionally expressed yet rich with deeper meanings comprehensible only to themselves. They write in *Nu shu*, a wispily delicate phonetic script adapted from Chinese ideographic characters — a script used only by women. Its flowing lines could be woven into cloth or embroidered onto slippers as well as written on fans. Women sang *Nu shu* songs and wrote *Nu shu* stories and poems. In Lily's life, those connections like the communications are often flawed. And for all that she learns from the refined Snow Flower, Lily fails to spot some basic human weaknesses, or to recognize them for what they are. People can communicate, she learns, but they can also deceive. Fully incorporating its historical and philosophical underpinnings into lively, at times heartbreaking prose, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* deals with timeless issues while evoking a forgotten era. How we learn to understand those we love, and what we can and cannot forgive, are great themes for any novel, even one without such a rich gender history subtext. Looking back with both affection and regret, Lily is a narrator who can bring these themes alive for us.

From many generations in China the concept of men's superiority and that of women's inferiority had gradually become so deeply entrenched in society and culture that the women effortlessly accepted their 'men-ordained' roles. The Chinese women remained socially and politically absent and it would be justified to call them subaltern, as they remain in the margins and have no voice. The term 'Subaltern' came from the writings of Antonio Gramsci who declared that the subaltern was the subjected underclass in a society on whom the dominant power exerts its hegemonic influence. The group was formed under the tutelage of Ranajit Guha who argued that the study of the subaltern condition would be based on caste, age, gender, office, or any other way, but not limited to class. Subalternity could be analyzed as the marginalized or 'other' figure as their essence is under shadow. They remain invisible in the space of center or main stream. A woman's true identity is smothered by the ubiquitous, all pervasive, dominant and oppressive patriarchal culture which pushes and assigns her a place away from the centre to periphery to a margin of existence. See's female characters could be categorized under the term "subaltern" as they were marginalized in all spheres of life.

In the domain of patriarchal culture, Chinese women like the subalterns were denied a voice. They could not oppose or retaliate to the various injustice and pain inflicted upon them. Chinese women had no other medium to voice their thoughts or share their pains but by writing through *Nu shu*. The cultural conditioning of the Chinese women was such that they failed to realize their social, economic and political rights as a human being.

For women, *Nu shu* is a way of flying under the radar of tradition, linking them to other women who share their experiences and longings. Through *Nu shu*, women appropriated the power of language which was denied to them, as also by expressing their pain and suffering through *Nu shu* to their *laotongs*, they subverted male hegemony. Fei-Wen illustrates as:

a script developed by Jiangyong women, a script that men could not read, called *Nu shu*, or “female writing.” For centuries, Jiangyong women had been using *Nu shu* to write in verse form the sisterhood letters, biographic laments, wedding literature, prayers, folk stories, and other narratives that documented their experiences and articulated their feelings. In contrast to the female-specific *Nu shu* a term that refers both to the script and to the literature written in it Jiangyong women called official hanzi characters *nanshu*, or “men’s writing” (1).

He further explains that through *Nu shu* women communicated amongst themselves and voiced their feelings and experiences. They thus developed this secret writing even though access to education was denied to them.

The female characters in See’s fiction undergoes various degrees of psychological transformation. From enduring the agonizing pain of footbinding, the physical pain of giving birth to many children, domestic violence, rape and physical assault, they also endured the devastating effects of war and migration. The experience of being a Chinese woman is multifaceted and even traumatic.

Various traumatic events engulf these Chinese women; a psychological trauma enters the psyche which becomes inseparable from their memory. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) elaborates the term 'trauma theory' through the discussion on Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where he unfolds the pattern of suffering which is, "inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals"(1). The episode of rape faced by Pearl during the Japanese Invasion in China haunts her entire life, Snowflower does not fail to relive the memory of her abusive husband banging her head on the kitchen floor, Snow Flower and Lily witnessed months of suffering and death during the Taiping Revolution, Peony becomes a 'love-sick maiden' and fasts to death.

All the protagonists of See's texts develop in their own way. Though cursory reading portrayed women conforming to traditional life, on closer examination they subverted their oppression into becoming the ever growing strong women. For instance, Snowflower may constantly be physically and verbally abused by her husband, yet she strives to keep her husband and family intact. Peony, on the other hand may appear to be a hungry ghost, yet is still the one who fulfilled her husband's wishes even after her death. Pearl and May, though were victims of war as well as physical and verbal abuse, yet managed to hold their family together. Also they were the ones who saved their father from disgrace. See has exposed the strength of a woman in spite of everything that tears them apart.

The Chinese women in See's fiction also exemplify the strong bond of female relationship. In a time of hardship and turmoil it is the strong bond of

female friendship that gives comfort and support. This female friendship is also a source of power for women to get rid of their painful past and seeking their individuality. As Gilligan notes, “The ideal of care is...an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone”(Different Voice 62).

As Rose Weitz points out “in the case of women, an awareness of femaleness and identification with other women can lead to an understanding of gender power relations and the institutional pressures and socialization processes that create and maintain these power relations” (Chow 285). The Chinese women aware of their femaleness, formed a relationship amongst themselves which resulted in strengthening the bond they shared. The *laotong* pair Snow Flower and Lily’s bond of friendship was stronger and closer than it was with their husbands. Peony’s spirit and her husband’s two other wives shared a close bond and she calls them sister-wife. Pearl and May are not only sisters but are closest of friends, they go through great pain and suffering together during the Second Sino-Japanese war and supported each other as immigrants to the U.S. Thus, the female characters in See’s novel share a strong bond of friendship, sisterhood and motherhood. Lisa See does not seek to silence or displace male voices but rather portrays secret female bonding as a form of objectifying their victimization in creating their own space.

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**SECRET FEMALE BONDING IN CHINA :
A STUDY OF SELECT TEXTS OF LISA SEE**

ABSTRACT

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In this study, focus is given on the issue of “secret female bonding” in China through the practise of “footbinding” as well as the secret female narrative “*nu shu*” as reflected in the texts of Lisa See. Texts chosen for close study are: See’s *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), *Peony in Love* (2007) and *Shanghai Girls* (2009).

Lisa See is an American writer and novelist. Born in Paris in 18 February, 1955, she grew up in Los Angeles where she spent a lot of time with her Chinese relatives in Chinatown. Although she is only one eighth Chinese, her upbringing provided her with a powerful connection to that fraction of herself. Coming from a long line of writers and novelists, her familial background has given her roots in Chinese culture that have fueled her eloquent, elegant and exciting body of work. Moreover, her educational background with a major in Modern Greek Studies taught her and made her enjoy the pleasures of thorough research that is the fundament in her novels.

Her books include *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*(1995) and the novels *Flower Net*(1997), *The Interior*(1999), *Dragon Bones*(2003), *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*(2005), *Peony in Love*(2007), *Shanghai Girls*(2009) and *Dreams of Joy*(2011). *Shanghai Girls* made it to the New York Times bestseller list. Both *Shanghai Girls* and *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* received honorable mentions from the Asian/Pacific American Awards for Literature. *Flower Net*, *The Interior*, and *Dragon Bones* make up the Red Princess mystery series, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and *Peony in Love* focus on the lives of Chinese women in the nineteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively. Her novels have been sold in over forty countries; they have been on numerous of bestselling lists in New York and Los Angeles. She has received awards for most of her books and was honored as National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women in 2001.

In semi-colonial and semi-feudal old China women were deprived and oppressed. From Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 CE) Confucianism was adopted as the government's state doctrine and China maintained a male dominated patriarchal society. Though patriarchy existed even before Confucius yet Confucianism was the root cause of the development of the patriarchal society in China emphasizing on the distinctions between the sexes and the roles they have to play in a society. According to the Confucian structure of society, women at every level were to occupy a position lower than men. These ideologies continued through the Tang Dynasty (618-907), and a woman was taught to obey her father before marriage and comply with her husband after marriage and later to their sons. In a rigidly formed and tradition bound society in China, women had to put up with severe rules which are made just to suit the male demands. Further during the Song Dynasty (960-1297), the Confucian scholars developed the patriarchal tradition with more restrictions and rules for the women, including foot-binding for young girls. Neo Confucian interpretations further reinforced male authority and rigid patrilineal customs particularly advantageous to men and disadvantageous to women. In the introductory part of her famous feminist work *The Second Sex* (1949) French writer Simone De Beauvoir views "Now Woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped. In no country is her legal status identical to man's, and often it puts her at a considerable disadvantage." (Beauvoir 9) She further explains that even though women's rights are imprecisely recognized, long-standing habits continue to manifest in various customs. Before Beauvoir in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist manifesto *A Vindication of the Right of Women* garnered much excitement among women. She strongly attacked the social and economic system that failed to provide equal opportunities for women in the field of education, politics

and economics. She raised her voice to demand women's education and their protection by laws.

In China prior to 20th century, women were regarded essentially different from and were believed to occupy a lower position than men. Considered inferior to men; their whole lives were spent being subservient to the men in their families. Chinese women were completely robbed from taking active part in politics and were subjected to performing duties as a daughter, wife or mother inside the house; hence Chinese women were completely debarred from social and political life. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in English argues that there is no 'essence' of a woman as such but is constructed by men and society. She also argues that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman,' (Beauvoir 293) explaining that patriarchy takes advantage of sexual difference to condition women to become submissive and passive. She further argues that such stereotyping of women with roles to play in a society is instrumental in creating patriarchy. Women thereby accepted this stereotype and were thus the instrument of their own oppression. Women are pushed to their confinement and remain absent from taking active part in society. The home has long been considered the only area of activity for Chinese women. That was the place where she was to find satisfaction in the performance of her duties in the varied roles of a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother etc. Most Chinese women were deprived from receiving education as it was believed that education corrupts women. Within the confinement of four walls a daughter prepares for her marriage starting with the painful and agonizing foot binding, sewing, knitting and embroidering in the women's chambers.

The practice of foot binding originated around 900 AD during Tang Dynasty and the practice was passed down as a prerequisite to marriage from mother to daughter across generations, and continued till it was finally banned in 1949 when the communists came to power. Foot-binding also known as "*Lotus Feet*" was believed to be a mark of exceptional

beauty in China. An indication of high class and wealth for women, the ideal length called the “*Golden-Lotus*” being seven centimetres (three inches) long. Walking on bound feet necessitated bending the knees slightly and swaying to maintain proper movement and balance. This dainty walk was regarded erotic to men though the excruciating process caused physical agony even resulting in the death of many young girls. Chinese women had no social status as such; men have always looked down upon them as the weaker sex, as his property, servile to him and often treated them as an object of pleasure. Similarly, Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1977) argued that patriarchy imposed strict norms and considered women inferior and it was considered ideal for women to remain submissive. She further goes on to describe the relationship between the sexes as basically a political arrangement, “whereby one group of person is controlled by another.” (Millet 23)

Chinese women had no right or voice when it came to marriage. In a traditional Chinese society, marriage is an alliance of two families after properly considering some mutual benefit for both the families. Most marriages were meant to fulfil the family’s need and the socio-economic status of the potential mate. The arrangement of marriage involved negotiation of a bride-price. It was considered mandatory to meet the demands of the bride-price and usually gifts have to be bestowed on the bride’s family. Women were mute spectators, subjected to arranged marriages and their sole duty was to produce sons in order to continue the family name. Usually the father decides the fate of a daughter and he had the right to fix her marriage without taking her consent. Getting young girls betrothed at a tender age was a common practice and normally young girls and women would be sold off as a wife, a concubine or a servant. Treated as a property and a commodity without any personal dignity of their own, Chinese women could take pride only if she can give birth to a son. On the contrary if a girl child is born the mother as well as the daughter was considered unlucky and thereby she would fail to earn any respect from her household. If a woman fails to produce

sons the husbands had the right to remarry or bring in as many concubines as desired. Polygamy was practised extensively and the Chinese men's practice of marrying more than one was in fact considered masculine and a sign of prosperity.

There were two cultural practices in Hunan province in past centuries that acknowledged women's social confinement; one was *Laotong* and the other was *Laotang*. *Laotong* is a type of relationship within Chinese culture, which was practised in Hunan, which bonded two girls together for eternity as kindred sisters. For Chinese women the *laotong* relationship was strongest and most cherished affinity of female friendship and they would refer to each other as *Sisters*. The *laotong* relationship was meant for life and could not be broken and their sisterly love was believed to be even closer and stronger than that between a husband and wife. The *laotong* pairs shared a very close relationship, usually getting their foot-bound together, sewing, knitting and making embroidery. Preparation for marriage involves a *Laotang* relationship among several young women and they would commonly refer to each other as sisters. "A *laotong* relationship is made by choice for the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity. A marriage is not made by choice and has only one purpose — to have sons."(*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, 45) This is recognition of the importance of women's supportive relationships, which helped them endure hardship over their lives. The *laotongs* used *Nu Shu*, a secret language which was used exclusively by women of Hunan Province for about thousand years to communicate and exchange their feelings, usually written on a fan. This in fact became a medium by which the Chinese women wrote letters to their *laotong* pairs and also shared their thoughts and experiences without their husband's knowledge. Most women were taught this secret writing during their binding days and they would write extensively about their pain and hardships, about their various experiences and would sometimes express them as poetry. Through *Nu shu*, women appropriated the power of language which was denied to them, as

also by expressing their pain and suffering through *Nu shu* to their *laotongs*, they subverted male hegemony. These women's writings, created and practised by women as countering the writing of their males, a voice as also a script and form typically female, sustained unknown for over a thousand years, is totally unique in the whole world. Snow Flower and Lily are *laotongs* and shared their writings through *Nu Shu* in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. In a domain of patriarchal culture the Chinese women like the subalterns were denied a voice. And they could not oppose or retaliate to the various injustice and pain inflicted upon them. Snow Flower and Lily shared their feelings and experience extensively through *Nu Shu* on a fan. Chinese women had no other medium to voice their thoughts or share their pains but by writing through *Nu Shu*. The cultural conditioning of the Chinese women was such that they failed to realize their social, economic and political rights as a human being. In her novels Lisa See depicts the real life and experiences of the Chinese women. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* set in a remote nineteenth century China details the touching story of the two *laotong* pair Snow Flower and Lily amidst the gruesome episode of footbinding, marriage, motherhood and the Taiping Revolution that totally disrupted the life of both Snow Flower and Lily.

In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), Lily and her friend Snow Flower are a *laotong* pair whose relationship is closer than a husband and wife's. Though both born under the sign of the Horse, their lives are very different. Lily is practical, her feet firmly set on the ground, while Snow Flower attempts to fly over the constrictions of women's lives in the 19th century in order to be free. Although Lily comes from a family of relatively low status, her beautiful feet earned her a marriage into the most powerful family in the region. Lily is later known as Lady Lu, the region's most influential woman and a mother to four healthy children. Although Snow Flower comes from a formerly prosperous family, she is not so

fortunate. She marries a butcher, culturally considered the lowest of professions, and leads a miserable life filled with children dying and physical abuse by her husband.

The novel depicts human suffering in many ways: the physical and psychological pain of *foot binding*, the suffering of women of the time, who were treated as property; the terrible trek up the mountains to escape the horrors of the Taiping Revolution, the painful return down the mountain trail with dead bodies everywhere. The detailed treatment of the suffering which Lily and Snow Flower experience in their *laotong* relationship is a major aspect of the book. Lily's need for love and her inability to forgive what she considers to be acts of betrayal cause her to inflict harm on many people, Snow Flower most of all. Amy Tan called the novel "achingly beautiful, a marvel of imagination."

See's *Peony in Love* (2005) emphasizes the difficulty seventeenth century Chinese women had in achieving freedom and identity in a society that was both male dominated and rigid in its gender expectations. The book is about Peony and her unforgettable journey of love and destiny, desire and sorrow. The book is based on actual historical events, back to seventeenth-century China, after the Manchus seized power and the Ming dynasty is crushed. Steeped in traditions and ritual, this story brings to life another time and place—even the intricate realm of the afterworld, with its protocols, pathways, and stages of existence, a vividly imagined place where one's soul is divided into three, ancestors offer guidance, misdeeds are punished, and hungry ghosts wander the earth. Immersed in the richness and magic of the Chinese vision of the afterlife, transcending even death, *Peony in Love* explores, beautifully, the many manifestations of love. The book addresses universal themes: the bonds of friendship, the power of words, and the age-old desire of women to be heard.

See's novel *Shanghai Girls* which is set in 1937 in Shanghai and later in Los Angeles tells a story of two sisters who have raged against time, rules and convention of her family

and society. Shanghai was considered the Paris of Asia, with wealth and glamour and home to millionaires and beggars. Pearl and May are modern in their approach and outlook and worked to earn money to support themselves. They wore western outfit, spoke fluently in English and partied late night with their European and American friends. See aware of the changing scenario of the Chinese society very well encapsulates this transition and the role and experience of modern Chinese women in China and in America. Pearl and May epitomise the modern and independent Chinese woman trying to make a mark of their own. Both are extremely ambitious, earning money by doing modelling, posing for advertisement and also for magazines and both shared the same dream of marrying the person they love and have a happy life. But their world is turned upside down when they learn that their father had sold them off to Old Man Louie, a Chinese American merchant living in Los Angeles. Initially both sisters refused to marry the sons of Old Man Louie but their father orders them to do so. Pearl and May both tries to explain their father that they did not want to marry an unknown person and that they have the right to choose their husband. But their father who maintained a very orthodox outlook likes to quote the proverb from Confucius that goes, “An educated woman is a worthless woman,” (*Peony in Love*, 3) he had no consideration and thereby forced them into marriage. Pearl and May’s father was an example of the typical Chinese father who claims to be modern yet he was dominating and had no regards for his daughters.

The female characters in See’s fiction had undergone various degrees of psychological transformation. From enduring the agonizing pain of foot-binding, the physical pain of giving birth to many children, domestic violence, rape and physical assault and the devastating effects of war and migration. The experience of being a Chinese woman is multifaceted and even traumatic. Various traumatic events engulf these Chinese women; a psychological trauma enters the psyche which becomes inseparable from their memory. Cathy

Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) elaborates the term 'trauma theory' through the discussion on Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where he unfolds the pattern of suffering which is, "inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals. Perplexed by the terrifying nightmares of battlefield survivors, the repetitive re-enactments of people who have experienced painful events." (Caruth 1) The episode of rape faced by Pearl during the Japanese Invasion in China haunts her entire life, Grace does not fail to relive the memory of her abusive father banging her head on the kitchen floor, Snow Flower and Lily witnessed months of suffering and death during the Taiping Revolution, Peony becomes a 'love-sick maiden' and fasts to death and Joy encounters numerous difficulties during China's Great Leap Forward; she is plagued with hunger, hard labour and a dominating husband.

The Chinese women in See's fiction also exemplify the strong bond of female relationship. In a time of hardship and turmoil it is the strong bond of female friendship that gives comfort and support. Esther Ngangling Chow an Asian American writer in her book *The Development of Feminist Consciousness among Asian American Women (1987)* stated that gender consciousness has developed among the Asian American women and this has resulted in the articulation of speaking their own minds. Rose Weitz further pointed that "in the case of women, an awareness of femaleness and identification with other women can lead to an understanding of gender power relations and the institutional pressures and socialization processes that create and maintain these power relations" (Chow 285). The Chinese women became aware of their femaleness and that resulted in strengthening the bond they shared to a great extent. The *laotong* pair Snow Flower and Lily's bond of friendship was stronger and closer than it was with their husbands. Peony's spirit and her husband's two other wives shared a close bond and she calls them sister-wife. Pearl and May are not only sisters but are closest of friends, they go through great pain and suffering together during the Second Sino-Japanese war and supported each other as immigrants to the U.S. The female characters in

See's novel share a strong bond of friendship, sisterhood and motherhood. Perhaps in a society where women are kept at the margins they found their solace in another woman's comfort and love.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces Lisa See as a writer and her role as a voice within Chinese American literature. It focuses on how her roots has somehow defined her as a prominent writer among the Chinese American writers. This is brought out by a detailed explanation of her family background and its influence on her. The historical background of the selected texts are also given in this chapter mainly because it briefly traces the glimpses of the women's condition in the history of China. It shall attempt to showcase the writer's interest in foregrounding the suffering of Chinese women in terms of being marked as the 'Other' – something that must be discarded, deprived, and disposed off in order for men to achieve and maintain social dominance. This study will include a brief historical outline of the primary texts selected and situate theories related to the proposed statement.

Chapter 2: Can the Chinese women speak?

This chapter focuses on the multifaceted and traumatic experiences of Chinese women and their survival under hostile and psychologically debilitating conditions. It examines how See has illustrated the complexities of being a woman in China in the texts for study. Pearl S. Buck's in his classic novel of Chinese life *The Good Earth* narrates how female children when born were referred to with contempt and disappointment as "slaves".(Buck, 34). Also the court historian Pan Chao has stated "Let a woman modestly yield to others. Let her respect others. Let her put others first, herself last. Should she do something good, let her not mention it. Should she do something bad, let her not deny it. Let her bear disgrace; let her even endure when others speak or do evil to her. Always let her

seem to tremble and fear....If a wife does not serve her husband, then the proper relationship between man and woman is broken.”(qtd. in Buck 56)

The concept of men’s superiority and that of women’s inferiority was so deeply entrenched in society and culture that the women effortlessly accepted their ‘men-ordained’ roles. The Chinese women remained socially and politically absent and it would be justified to call them subaltern, as they remain in the margins and have no voice. The term ‘Subaltern’ came from the writings of Antonio Gramsci who declared that the subaltern was the subjected underclass in a society on whom the dominant power exerts its hegemonic influence. Subalternity could be analyzed as the marginalized or ‘other’ figure as their essence is under shadow. They remain invisible in the space of center or main stream. A woman’s true identity is smothered by the ubiquitous, all pervasive, dominant and oppressive patriarchal culture which pushes and assigns her a place away from the centre to periphery to a margin of existence. “Othering” is a term, advocated by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (2001) which refers to the act of emphasizing the perceived weaknesses of marginalized groups as a way of stressing the alleged strength of those in positions of power. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) argued that men are able to mystify women. This mystification and stereotyping made women accept their ascribed role, which made them instruments of oppressions. All the Men and Women are constantly engaged in this Subject-Other relation where the Man is the Subject and the Woman the Other. It is based on this myth of the woman as inferior Other that gender inequalities are perpetuated in society. In one of her seminal essays titled *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak claims that the female as a subaltern cannot speak. In the novels selected for this study, See considers the position of Chinese women in male-dominated societies in China. The subaltern Chinese women were subjected to racial and patriarchal forces that had manipulated their subjectivity and silenced their voices. See introduces the agents of silence as a patriarchal culture.

Spivak's ideas provide a valuable theoretical framework through which the subalternity of Chinese women comes to light.

Chapter 3: Footbinding : The Painful Memories

This chapter gives a detailed account of the practise of footbinding. The pathetic practise of *foot-binding* is given a closer look from different perspectives. It is analysed in a way that it existed solely for men's pleasure as they were once considered intensely erotic in Chinese culture, and a woman with perfect lotus feet was likely to make a more prestigious marriage. However, the pain and agony they went through to get their foot bound made the bond between the mother and the daughter stronger.

When I knew I couldn't suffer another moment of pain, and tears fell on my bloody bindings, my mother spoke softly into my ear, encouraging me to go one more hour, one more day, one more week, reminding me of the rewards I would have if I carried on a little longer. In this way, she taught me how to endure — not just the physical trials of footbinding and childbearing but the more torturous pain of the heart, mind, and soul. (*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, 123)

Women with unbound feet were considered ugly and unworthy of marriage. These values were internalized to a large extent by women themselves, who generally cooperated in the crippling of themselves and the young girls in their family. As See has rightly said, "We're told that men are strong and brave, but I think women know how to endure, accept defeat, and bear physical and mental agony much better than men." (*Shanghai Girls* 228)

Footbinding is nothing but the code of the feudal system, the symbol of the patriarchal oppression of Chinese women. Susan Greenhalgh in her article *Bound Feet, Hobbled Lives: Women in Old China* pointed out that footbinding was the most brutal symbol of the

subjugation of Chinese women that involved a grotesque mutilation of the foot which resulted in great agonizing pain.

Chapter 4 : Bonding in Silence : *Nu Shu* and *Laotong*

The concept of *sworn sisters* or *laotong* and the secret female narrative *nu-shu* with reference to the texts is explored in detail. In ancient China, women were deprived of any standard of education. Education of a man was a good investment that would bring glory to his ancestors while the education of a woman was considered to be an extravagant luxury. Women were illiterate since their main role in society was to be virtuous wives and caring mothers. It was even considered better if a woman did not know much, as she would not be able to challenge any man, especially her husband. Christie K.K. Leung elucidates “Women did not need to know how to read and write since their main function in society was to be virtuous wives and caring mother. It was even considered better if a woman did not know much, as she would not be able to challenge any man, especially her husband.” (qtd. in Caruth 40).

The custom of “sworn sisters” where women organised themselves into groups developed their own language and system of writing, *Nu Shu* which enabled them to communicate even dissenting statements amongst themselves. “Sisters, as you know, also have a unique relationship. This is the person who has known you your entire life, who should love you and stand by you no matter what...” (*Shanghai Girls*, 163) This chapter further digs into the roots of *Nu-shu* and its significance in Chinese history. It also substantiates the appropriation a female space denied to them within the male paradigm. Instead some Chinese women in Jiangyong located at the southeast of Hunan Province created their own language- *Nushu*. It was a special script invented and circulated only among women for a long period of time. Fie-Wen Lui illustrates that *Nushu* or “female

writing” was a medium where Chinese women shared their letters, prayers, folk stories, poems etc. He further explains that through *Nu Shu* women communicated amongst themselves and voiced their feelings and experiences.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter sums up the whole research addressing the subjugation as well as the subversion of women in China. Although the texts covers different decades, the novels are a clear documentation of the women in Chinese patriarchal society. The female characters in these novels do differ in relation to their respective time periods. Yet, the similarities between these women enforce the idea that the difference of a century has not erased the struggles women faced in the society.

As Rose Weitz has stated “in the case of women, an awareness of femaleness and an identification with other women can lead to an understanding of gender power relations and the institutional pressures and socialization processes that create and maintain these power relations.” (Chow, 285) The chapter concludes with the Chinese women becoming aware of their femaleness and this has resulted in strengthening the bond they shared. The *laotong* pair Snow Flower and Lily’s bond of friendship was stronger and closer than it was with their husbands. Peony’s spirit and her husband’s two other wives shared a close bond and she calls them sister-wife. Pearl and May are not only sisters but are closest of friends, they go through great pain and suffering together during the Second Sino-Japanese war and supported each other as immigrants to the U.S. Thus, the female characters in See’s novel share a strong bond of friendship, sisterhood and motherhood. Lisa See does not seek to silence or displace male voices but rather portrays secret female bonding as a form of objectifying their victimization in creating their own space.

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