



“Friendship or Romantic Love?”: Critically Adopting Queer Theory to Explore Laotong Relationship in Snow Flower Secret Fan

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Abstract. Snow Flower and the Secret Fan is a popular novel by American author Lisa See. The description of the Laotong relationship - an ancient Chinese relationship that bounded two unrelated girls together to form a for eternity as kindred sisters - has been widely discussed by the public. There exist two prevalent attitudes towards Laotong relationship - friendship and romantic love. Using the literature research method, this paper adopts queer theory to analyze the Laotong relationship through narrative in the book. This paper corresponds to the Queer theory in terms of the social environment in which the laotong relationship is located and its fluidity and argues that the relationship between Laotong is a emotion that arises in a unique cultural soil and does not belong to the binary classification of friendship and romantic love. In addition, the paper reflects on the use of queer theory by tracing the concerns of its inventor, Teresa de Lauretis, about its generalized use and by proposing a potential risk of its assimilation into queerness in non-Western cultures.

Keywords: Laotong · Snow Flower and the Secret Fan · Queer theory · Ancient Chinese women · Gender inequality

1 Introduction

Queer theory, the field of critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s in the western world, is considered a dominant theory that has broadly been associated with the study and theorization of gender and sexual practices that exist outside of heterosexuality [1] (Warner, Micheal). It is very familiar and beloved among activists and academics in sexual politics [2] (Li Yinhe). Later, its analysis scope extended from the western world to many non-western societies. For instance, Queering Asia analyzes Asian queer life by focusing on how queerness is constituted by conditions and flows within the geopolitically constructed region of Asia; The analysis of contemporary Indian queerness in the Book Criminal Love: Queer Theory, Culture, and Politics in India, adopts queer theory into Indian society.

Particularly, when it comes to Chinese society, the queer theory-based analysis starts to involve topics from multiple fields including classic literature [3] (Zhang Jia), such

as exploring the Ideology of queerness in Ancient China Using Queer Theory Journey to the West, one of the Four Great Classics in Chinese history [4] (Zhang Congcong), and films, such as using the queer theory to interpret the ups and downs of protagonists’ feelings in *Farewell My Concubine*, a film set in a politically tumultuous 20th-century China, from the early days of the Republic of China to the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, chronicling the troubled relationships between two Peking opera actors [5] (Cao Shuo, Wang Xueyang).

This paper focuses on queer theory applies to analyzing ancient Chinese relationship “Laotong” -a relationship that bounded two unrelated girls together to form a for eternity as kindred sisters, formerly practiced in Hunan province. Laotong is discussed in the book *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, published in 2005 by Lisa See, introducing the Laotong relationship (particularly in the Southern part of China) in the nineteenth century by focusing on a Laotong relationship between the two main characters Lily and Snow Flower. Starting from the study of the Laotong relationship in ancient China, this paper interprets the Laotong relationship in the book *Snow Flower Secret Fan* in the context of ancient Chinese culture by combining the exploration of the social environment and cultural elements of Laotong relationship, such as the female script, a script used only by women in the southern region of China, and foot-binding, an ancient Chinese custom of breaking and tightly binding the feet of young girls to change their shape and size.

The problematic awareness of this paper is to discuss the traditional Chinese Laotong relationship from the perspective of queer theory. Furthermore, this paper shifts to the reflection on the queer theory’s potential assimilation of cultural backgrounds due to the generalized use of queer theory, which sometimes discuss topics out of their cultural context. Finally, this paper sums up the conclusions and the insufficient of this study, and also suggests some opportunities to improve the research’s depth further.

2 Research Background

The ruling ideology of the era in which the Laotong relationship took place was Confucianism, which had extremely restrictive requirements for women. The principle set for women in Confucianism was Three Obediences and Four Virtues, which demands women obey their fathers, husbands, and sons, and be modest and moral in their actions and speech. Their activities were mainly restricted to their family. On top of that, Jiang Yong County is surrounded by five mountain ranges, making it relatively isolated from other communities. Xiahui River runs through the city from the northwest before turning northeast and eventually merging into the Xiangjiang River, providing abundant water resources for agriculture. These conditions created a sufficient prerequisite for the development of a unique culture. Under this background, Jiangyong women’s life had the following characteristics (Fig. 1).

2.1 Women’s Life in the Nineteen Century, Jiangyong Area

During the nineteen century, the rigorous patriarchal society where exists the idea of men are superior to women led to various cruel customs imposing on women. Particularly, in the Jiangyong area, located at the border of three provinces, unique customs for women were derived.

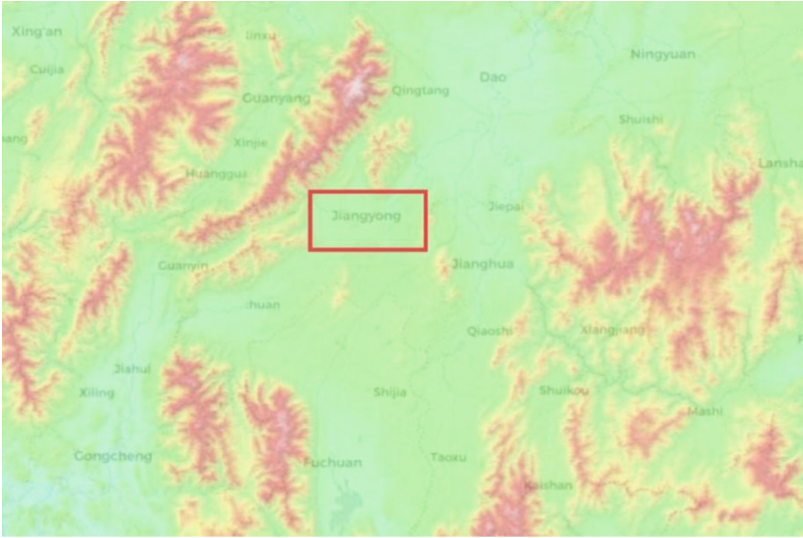


Fig. 1. Topographic map of Jiangyong County, accessed 12 December 2022, <topographic-map.com>

2.1.1 Foot Binding

Foot binding was a Chinese custom to break the feet of young girls (usually beginning at the age of four to five) and bind them tightly to change their shape and size. Because of the breaking of the toe bones, foot-binding was a painful practice, resulting in limited mobility for women.

Unlike women in the central nomadic northwestern, and southern hills regions in China, women in the Jiangyong area are under the custom of foot binding. Due to the limited mobility for Jiangyong women, young women (also known as upstairs girls) were assigned roles in housework and needlework. They usually stayed in the upstairs rooms which were specially set for women's activities including learning to sew and to write and sing Nu Shu, a syllabic script exclusively used by Jiangyong women, before they were married out [6] (Wang Junzhen).

2.1.2 Nu Shu

Due to the inferior social status, women were not able to have normal education as men did. Under such circumstances, Jiangyong women invented a special script Nu Shu. Since men's disdain for this women-exclusive text, Nu Shu was able to evolve in a relatively permissive environment. It became a media for women to recount their bitterness and thoughts with each other, functioning as a tool for catharsis and consolation [6] (Wang Junzhen) (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Nu Shu, accessed 12 December 2022, < <https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/556755185.html> >

2.1.3 Laotong Relationship Among Jiangyong Women

Laotong is a type of relationship in Chinese culture formerly practiced in Jiangyong county that bonded two girls together for eternity as kindred sisters. It is unlike the sworn sisterhood—consisted of girls of similar age who perform activities together in the upstairs room and which would dissolve after one girl was married out. Instead, Laotong is a lifelong relationship where one woman could only have one Laotong, and is socially acknowledged. To be Laotong, two girls had to undergo a rigorous matching process, usually required at least eight similar characteristics, such as the same date of birth and same-size bounded foot. Laotong communicated with each other through messages written in Nu Shu, and gather up on specific festivals.

2.2 Lisa See and Her Novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*

Born in Paris in 1955, Lisa See has only one-eighth Chinese and does not speak Chinese, but she has always insisted on her Chinese identity, studying Chinese culture and writing Chinese stories. In the mid-1970s (during Cultural Revolution), a piece of Nu Shu script was found in an old woman’s clothing while traveling on a train, by which the world was astonished by this women-exclusive script. See immediately became obsessed with it as well. Since limited information could be found in the US, See came to Jiangyong county, Hunan province, China, where she met the oldest Nu Shu writer and learned about Jiangyong women’s life in ancient times, driving her to write the novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*.

Published in 2005, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* depicts the life of two women in an ancient Laotong relationship in the Jiangyong area, revealing the ancient Jiangyong culture and women’s life. It is more than a novel based on fantasy, but also a work done with field study.

2.3 Western View of Laotong in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan has gained wide attention from both Chinese and western society. The prevalent social perception of the Laotong relationship in the book

was labeled as a lesbian relationship. Some studies use methods including lesbian studies and queer theory to analyze Laotong in the book [7] (Dewi Devita Puspa). In the online community, Laotong is often introduced as an ancient Chinese lesbian relationship and this view is more prevalent when it comes to the film version [8] (Youku).

2.4 Queer Theory (Note: This Part Mainly Refers to Li Yinhe, *Queer Theory*)

Originating in the 19th century, the queer theory was a revolutionary theory that quickly became beloved by the academic world and has been used extensively. The word “queer” is an umbrella term that covers all people who can not find a place in the sexual norms—cisgender and heterosexual. Queer theory is therefore a theory for the queer community, a position outside of the mainstream culture. Subsequent main propositions of queer theory will be discussed in the paper.

2.4.1 Inclusiveness and Opposition to Strict Classification

Queer theory welcomes and appreciates the differences in a broader picture of sexual and social diversity. In the challenge to the strict classification of gender and sexual orientation, Judith Butler’s act theory is of special significance. It proposes that people’s gender and sexual orientation are expressed through performance, a kind of “doing”, rather than through essence, a “being”. Since queer theory believes sexuality is a complex combination, people in the queer community identify themselves simply as “queer” instead of lesbian, gay or bisexual.

2.4.2 Fluidity and Challenge to Traditional Homosexual Culture

The famous queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggested that the binary classification in some cultures, such as the division of homosexuality and heterosexuality, is in fact in an unstable and dynamic relationship. This notion of fluidity questions the homosexual identity itself. The queer theory does not view sexual identity as fixed, but fluid and in constant change.

3 Results

With the arrival of a silk fan on which Snow Flower has composed a poem for Lily of her self-introduction written in nu shu, their friendship is sealed and they become “Laotong” at the tender age of seven. As the years passed, through famine and rebellion, they reflect upon their arranged marriages, loneliness, and the joys and tragedies of motherhood. The two find solace, developing a bond that keeps their spirits alive. However, a misunderstanding arose due to Lily’s misreading Snow Flower’s nu shu script—Lily mistakenly read that Snow Flower had sworn sisters, which was not allowed in Laotong relationship. Thus, their lifelong Laotong relationship suddenly threatened to tear apart.

This paper explores the Laotong relationship in Snow Flower and the Secret Fan through the lens of queer theory. Most of the existing interpretations of the Laotong relationship stay in the binary classification of friendship and romantic love, without questioning the classification system.

It argues that the Laotong relationship is a complex synthesis arising from the bondage of women in ancient Chinese society and the unique culture of the Jiangyong area due to its relatively isolated geographical location. It has a nature of being difficult to be classified into existing categories and fluid characteristics. In addition, this paper also provides reflections on the consequences that have arisen with the extensive application of queer theory. When applying queer theory to different cultural contexts, ancient Chinese culture in this paper, the multiplicity of sex should be highlighted. This paper looks back at the original intent of Teresa de Lauretis, the inventor of queer theory, to raise awareness of the risks of using queer theory where differences are neutralized.

3.1 Romance or Friendship?—A Fluid Relationship that Can Not be Classified

A series of contradictory characteristics have been shown in the laotong relationship of Lily and Snow Flower—Exclusiveness and the lack of sexual attraction.

“If Lily becomes a laotong, she won’t have sworn sisters.”

[10] (Lisa See, p. 52).

Sworn sisterhood is a kind of friendship between unrelated women, where a woman can have more than one sworn sister, and this friendship ends after one gets married. However, Laotong are exclusive to each other. Once a woman has a laotong, she will not be able to have sworn sisters or another laotong. Lily and Snow Flower’s laotong relationship broke down completely due to Lily misreading the Nu Shu written by Snow Flower on the fan - she misread “friends” as “sworn sisters”. Lily felt great pain since then because she thought their relationship was over. According to Rubin Zick, “the conception of romantic love included 3 components: affiliative and dependent need, a predisposition to help, and an orientation of exclusiveness and absorption” [11] (Rubin, Zick). This exclusiveness did not present even in Lily’s marriage—she found several concubines for her husband herself—creating support for the statement that laotong is a romantic relationship.

However, there does not seem to be much sexual attraction in laotong relationships, backing up the statement that laotong is a kind of friendship. A night of Lily and Snow Flower writing the Nu Shu characters on each other’s bodies with fingers was the closest they ever came to sexual attraction.

“I took time to look at her body: the slenderness of her neck, the small mounds that formed her breasts, the flat expanse of her stomach that was as inviting as a new piece of silk waiting for embroidery stitches, the twin hip bones that protruded sharply, below that a triangle identical to my own, then two slim legs tapering down until they disappeared into her red silk sleeping slippers.”

[10] (Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, p. 93).

In ancient times of Jiangyong culture, most women went through foot-binding at an early age (usually at the age of four to five). Carrying life-long disability, Jiangyong women had limited mobility, restricting their area to the upstairs room, a room made especially for women to have activities such as learning to sew and to write and sing Nu

Shu. In this circumstance, women barely had a chance to have direct interaction with men. Another Jiangyong tradition was the marriage custom of living with the mother's family—the new wife comes to the husband's home at night and returns in the morning and is able to live in the husband's home until pregnant with her first child.

These customs revealed the segregation of ancient Jiangyong men and women, increasing the possibility of having situational sexual behavior—including situations where a person's preferred sexual behavior may not be possible, so rather than refraining from sexual activity completely, they may engage in substitute sexual behaviors—among women. In other words, the sexual attraction between Lily and Snow Flower stems from the sexual repression formed by the gender segregation of men and women, rather than a lesbian relationship. After Lily and Snow Flower both got married, their sexual attraction naturally disappeared.

Being viewed from the perspective of queer theory, the laotong relationship has a characteristic difficult to be categorized - it contains qualities of both romantic love and friendship - and is a relationship formed in the unique culture of the ancient Chinese Jiangyong area: laotong is a spiritual partner without sex behavior, and in the unique culture of the Jiangyong area, they use Nu Shu to achieve spiritual resonance, which does not belong to the current LGBTI+ classification. Since "queer" covers all people who are marginalized by the dominant powers, suppression of patriarchal society, in this case, is applicable to the laotong relationship. Moreover, the seemingly sexual attraction disappeared after Lily and Snow Flower got married, demonstrating a fluidity in sexual orientation. Interpreted with queer theory, the queerness of laotong is reflected in the resistance to be categorized and the fluidity of sexual orientation.

3.2 Reflections on the Generalized Use of Queer Theory Marginalizing Non-Western Queer Culture

Although queer theory is an effective tool for queer analysis, it should be aware that queerness should always be discussed in its cultural context. According to the inventor of queer theory Teresa de Lauretis, queer theory might displace differences between sexual minorities and even lead to non-mainstream queer people suffering the fate of forced marginalization. She feared that this terminology would deconstruct the discourse and the constructive silence of gays and lesbians, which defeats the original purpose of her proposal to emphasize the specificity of each of the gays and lesbians [11] (Heller, p. 46). Her concerns are reasonable. After "queer" has been reclaimed as an umbrella term for LGBTI+ communities, its use seemed to expand to cover all groups of people that tend to be marginalized—age, race, nationality, and religion, etc. However, marginalization takes place in another form—cultural marginalization. While Lauretis raised concerns about marginalization, it is limited to the marginalization of gays and lesbians. This paper originally focuses on queer theory's marginalization of culture.

There still exists a dominant figure in queer theory—white, male, gay, and the word "queer" even became synonymous with this figure for a time, detached from the original intention. In 2010, American gay columnist Dan Savage organized a campaign called "It Gets Better" in response to a wave of suicides among young queer teenagers at the time. The campaign described the bullying, harassment, discrimination, and violence they faced as teenagers, as well as the good life they have now. These narratives constructed

a set of internal norms of homosexuality: Male, white, healthy, handsome, wealthy, and talented. It seems that only by having these elements can one be a happy queer [12] (Li Lixing, p. 7).

Facing a relatively isolated geographical environmental culture and the multiple constraints of women, the unique Laotong relationship stemmed from the Jiangyong culture of ancient China. The specificity of the Laotong relationship is not found in other cultures, and queer theory has not discussed this type of female relationship that arises from the particular soil of Chinese culture. If we do not emphasize this specificity and make clear the difference between this relationship and the commonly perceived queer figure, we risk failing to comprehend the concerns, proposed by Lauretis, that queer theory can be overly inclusive.

Lauretis, as a white American women’s scholar, saw the marginalization of lesbians but has yet to see the marginalization of Third World cultures. For instance, in the book *Criminal love?: Queer Theory, culture, and politics in India*, the author admits that queer theory still largely comes from the West to them, for they have yet to develop an indigenous queer theory of their own in India [13] (Rao and Raj., Preface). Therefore, when adapting queer theory to individual analysis, one should be aware that the discussion should not be conducted outside of the indigenous context, for it risk being stereotyped by the mainstream mindset derived from the prevalent use of queer theory.

In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Lisa See provides enough historical and cultural context of Laotong relationship, which make the book more than a work of literature, but a reference-worthy work. Therefore, when using theories to analyze Laotong relationship, it cannot be separated from its cultural context.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explores the Laotong relationship through the lens of queer theory by analyzing the narrative of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. It views Laotong out of the existing binary system of friendship and romance by stressing its fluid characteristic of inability to be classified. Moreover, this paper raises awareness of the risk of generalized use of queer theory may risk marginalizing non-Western queer culture, ancient Chinese Laotong culture in this case, by presenting the commonly regarded mainstream figure—male, white, gay—of the queer community.

The innovation of this paper lies in the analysis of the ancient Chinese Laotong relationship from the perspective of queer theory and the reflection on cultural marginalization caused by the misuse of queer theory. Through the analysis of the Laotong relationship shown in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, this paper provides a new case from a cross-cultural perspective for the reflection and development of queer theory.

However, this paper acknowledges the limitations of the study, as well as Suggestions for further study. References are mostly historical materials and texts, and this paper mainly adopts the literature research method. In the future, field research can be used to further understand the unique culture of the Jiangyong region where Laotong derived. Furthermore, this paper may promote complementary and reflective approaches to the multicultural aspects of queer theory.

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