

On the Writing of "Chinese lover" in Duras's Novels

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Abstract—Marguerite Duras created *The Sea Wall*, *The Lover* and *The North China Lover* at different times of her life, In these three novels, the "Chinese lover" presents a different image, evolving from the ugliness, obscenity and wretch of Mr. Nor into a handsome, elegant and confident new image which is the cognition and description of China's cultural reality in different historical period from 1950's to 1990's by the author. Restricted and limited by the stipulations of collective imagination belonging in the French culture, Duras also reveals the evolution of her own emotional trajectory. Consequently, Duras always attempts to beautify love experience in real life, which motivates the changed emotion of the "Chinese lover".

Keywords—Duras; Novel; Chinese Lover; Image

I. INTRODUCTION

In Margaret Duras's novel, "the Orient" has been one of the most favorable objects in her writing and description, which is associated with her cultural horizon. Moreover, it is inseparable from her life experience and the feeling of existence in the Orient. Consequently, the "Chinese lover", the Oriental elements, is always haunting in her novels. She has written the unequalled love story of a French girl and her Chinese lover time after time in her three important novels in her personal creation, including *The Sea Wall*, *The Lover* and *The North China Lover*.

In some of her biographical materials of early life, we can roughly determine that Duras attempts to truly reconstruct the early life of her and her family and in Indochina in these three novels, which makes the three novels with a strong color of autobiography. As one of the authors of Duras biography, Lara Adelaide illustrates that the three novels belong to her "loved autobiography writings" through the 12 years friendship with Duras.^[1]

What is peculiar and interesting is that the writing of the love story and the Chinese lover in the three novels demonstrates different features and images. Those three novels have raised attentions from some domestic researchers. By searching relevant literature, the current researches on these three works are mainly from the perspective of narratology, feminism, psychology and post-colonialism for interpretation and analysis. It has not been found the research conducted from the point of view of comparative literature image. At present, there are only two main articles of researching the lover's image under the description of Duras in the Chinese educational circles. One is Zhu Zhiling's "The Lover's Image under the Perspective of

Post Colonialism—from *The Sea Wall* to *The North China Lover*". The other one is Huang Xiyun's "An Image Myth —from *The Sea Wall* to *The North China Lover*". The two theses explore the "Chinese lover" image in Duras's novels from the author's cultural psychology and fail to involve other problems in different aspects, including the cultural tradition, collective imagination and other issues. However, this thesis tries to explore the writing on the "Chinese lover" image in the three novels of Duras from the perspective of comparative literature imagology and analyze cultural connotation and causes of change.

II. THREE LOVER IMAGES: FROM MR NOR TO PERFECT CHINESE LOVER

A. *The image of Mr Nor*

The earliest description of the emotion between the French girl and the Chinese by Duras is in *The Sea Wall* which is an autobiographical realistic works. It takes the French Indochina in early twentieth Century as the background and describes a common people migrate to the French colony. Mr Nor, the Chinese lover in the book, is wealthy in material. However, he is a desolate dandy in the spiritual world. He is muddleheaded, idle, obscene and cowardly in personality, but is lecherous. In the eyes of the heroine Susan, Mr. Nor has narrow shoulder and short arm who is fairly ugly. After meeting with Susan, Mr. Nor takes a fancy to Susan. Susan's family put their hopes on Mr. Nor according to their own way, even though Susan and her mother get no good impression from him. What they are fantasy about is his wealth. In this way, they can solve the economic difficulties in their family. Mr. Nor also understands Susan won't fundamentally fall in love with him. He just wants to use his property for the temptation of Susan. The description of Mr. Nor's image is finished mainly through the two times temptation to Susan. Firstly, he sends the phonograph to Susan to tempt her to open the bathroom door. Secondly, he attempts to send the ring so that he and Susan can go to town for a trip. Their relationship barely takes the exchange of substances as the conditions. If we say Susan gets what she wants in this superior relationship, then Mr. Nor gets nothing from this kind of relationship. The ugliness, pornography, shamelessness, indignity, and vulgarity of Mr. Nor becomes dreadful and disgusting.

B. *The Image of the China lover*

After three to four decades of publishing *The Sea Wall*, Duras begins to rewritten the story of her own and the

Chinese. Under such circumstance, *The Lover* is created by her and enables her to win the Le Prix Goncourt and gain considerable fame. *The Lover* is a novel full of autobiographical color. The background of this work is basically the same with *The Sea Wall*. In Indochina, because of economic collapse, a white family gets poverty and constraints. The content still depicts a love story of a French girl and a Chinese. Different from *The Sea Wall*, *The Lover* is narrated in the first person. The image of the Chinese lover is shaped through the white girl's eyes and her narration. Similar with *The Sea Wall*, the Chinese lover is still faineant and rich second generation. As coward and weak he is, he is promiscuous in sex relations. However, he is absent from ugly. Under the influence of western culture, he is graceful, full of tenderness and persistent pursuit of love of freedom. Furthermore, he has a sense of dignity.

In this novel, the white girl has poor impression to Chinese people, including the Chinese lover. The white girl has associated with her Chinese lover for one and a half years. Their love is obsessed with desire -- material desire as well as sexual desire. Particularly, the money factor deeply gets involved in love. The lover "and" I "have always been in the struggle in the economy issue. What does he want is real love. However, she would rather allow him to believe their love is merely a bargaining since she desires for money. In this process, the Chinese lover seems to be indecisive and coward. The white girl has the affection to the Chinese lover by no means. My "mother" suspects the relationship between the Chinese lover and "me" by constantly beating "me". And "I" say: "no sense, absolutely, how can I have the Chinese to do that kind of thing. How ugly and weak he is" ^{[2]41}. This paradox is that "I" deny our love on the one hand, and show unintentionally the love to the Chinese lover.

However, the Chinese lover is really in love with the white girl. He requests his father to approve their love. After getting refused, he is painful. What makes him more miserable is that the white girl will return to France soon. At the end of the novel, after the girl backs to France many years later, he comes to Paris and gives her a call, "he said to her, his love to her is the same as in the past, he still loves her, he can't help loving her, and he will love her until she die." ^{[2]77} In this way, it differs from the debauchee of the merchant prince in *The Sea Wall* who is brazen-faced, shameless to love. Moreover, when he is insulted by the family of the girl, unlike the lover of insensitivity and blindness in *The Sea Wall*, the Chinese lover feels fear and wants to cry from the bottom of his heart, which also shows that he owns the sense of dignity. Consequently, the girls' attitude towards the Chinese lover turns from a deep aversion in *The Lover* to love in *The Sea Wall*. Through *The Lover*, Duras completes the first reconstruction of the Chinese lover's image.

C. *The Image of the North China lover*

In 1991, Duras wrote a new version of *The Lover*--- *The North China Lover* when she went to the end of life. The encounter of the two people in the novel is still on the ferry. The Chinese still owns a Leon Boley limousine. Discrepancy from the previous narrative, the French girl

gets an impression of the strong, bold, handsome and healthy Chinese image. More importantly, in *The North China Lover*, the French girl and the Chinese man get acquaintance and fall in love with each other which are free from the influence of money. Under the description of the author, the girl doesn't intend to get the Chinese lover's money for herself, but to help her mother in poverty and despair. The "lover" deeply understands the girl and feels painful about her. Furthermore, he is full of love to her and tries his best to materially help the girl's family. Duras deliberately writes an exotic love story. If the subject of *The Lover* is more than a story of a French girl and a Chinese, ^{[2]3} the theme of *The North China Lover* is completely a love story of a French girl and a Chinese man.

In *The North China Lover*, Duras creates a mirage of equal love. Throughout the novel, the Chinese has no name, the author uses words for the call of the Chinese lover: "Chinese of elegant costume", "Chinese from Manchuria", "tall Chinese", "Chinese", "that Chinese". The title of "Chinese" not stands for the discrimination and inferiority, but an expression of the appreciation and recognition.

In *The North China Lover*, Duras does shape with a completely different Chinese image from *The Sea Wall* and *The Lover*. The Chinese lover is handsome, strong, passionate, thoughtful, considerate, decadent and deliberate. The author mainly shows the Chinese lover's character through the sex of the French girl and the Chinese and two meetings of the Chinese lover and the girl's family. He in *The Lover* fails to overcome the psychological barriers of race by "slightly trembling" and is passive and under controlled in the sexual love. However, in *The North China Lover*, the "lover" is also some timid, but not for racial reasons, but because he is aware of too young the girl is. Therefore, he is active and considerate.

Although Duras depicts her Chinese lover with refined, cultured and graceful characters and lets the French girl and the Chinese lover have more emotional exchanges and dialogues, she finally does not let the French girl and the Chinese lover get together. Under her description, pure and sad and bleak as the hero's love is, the love is beautiful. Duras successfully molds an image of handsome, amorous, natural and unrestrained to the Chinese lover, which is intended to build up a love myth.

III. REASONS: REALITY • TRADITION / IMAGINATION • EMOTION / COGNITION

The Chinese lover is the core position of the character system in *The Sea Wall*, *The Lover* and *The North China Lover*. The love story of the "Chinese lover" and the French girl described by the author plays a very important role to reveal the theme of the novel. Duras writes the three novels in different periods. The "Chinese lovers" emerge with some common images who are indulged in the eroticism, love ease and hate work in cowardly inferiority. In the novel, the "observer" is a western white people. The image of the "Chinese lover" is presented by "being watched". He is opposite to the white and is weird. In the oriental image, Duras projects some cultural values of the western society on the weird, endows the "Chinese lover" with natural

quality given by Westerners to the Oriental people of heterogeneous, backward, weak and lazy characters. In other words, the author writes the "Chinese lover" from the European perspective. Moreover, "every statement of the Orientalist or the white people do convey a clear understanding of the unbridgeable relationship existing in the white race and the colored or between West and East"^{[3]20}. With such description, a sense of national superiority stands vividly revealed on the paper.

Simultaneously, the writing of the love story and the Chinese lover in the three novels presents different features and diverse images. The author / narrator's attitude toward the "Chinese lover" also largely changes from hate to love. Therefore, why do great changes happen in the recollections of the past and the description of the lovers with different race by the white woman writer in novels? With some considerations, the real referent and cultural imagination, the writer's emotion and cognition are three very important factors.

A. Culture Reality

The image is "the expression of signified relation of the literature or rather than the non- literature existing in the disparity between two types of cultural reality."^[4] In other words, the exotic image in literary works is also a realistic description of the exotic culture. The "Chinese lover's" image of Duras's novels is without exception. It is also a description of cultural reality in China in specific historical period by the author. *The Sea Wall* was created in 1950's when the Chinese were very backward. Mr. Nor in the works is the representative of the dude in the old China. Through the portrait of this character, the works reproduce the old Chinese cultural reality. *The Lover* and *The North China Lover* were respectively created in 1980's to 1990's. In the wake of the reform and opening up, Chinese economy mushrooms and the comprehensive national strength significantly increases. China begins to play an increasingly important role in the international political arena. Westerners increasingly feel insecure and fearful since they believe that China- the rapidly rising power will threaten the West. In these two novels, the "Chinese lover" shows self-confidence and superiority mentally and intellectually in a certain extent. In this way, we can catch a sight of Chinese cultural reality in 1980's to 1990's. Duras has completed the building, remodeling and remolding of the "Chinese lover" haunting over her heart. At the same time, through the evolution of this image, she vividly demonstrates Chinese culture of her understanding in twentieth Century, emerging from the sinking to the rising power with the transition from tradition to modern.

B. Tradition / Imagination

Other image is closely related to cultural tradition and literary imagination. The exotic image can be divided into two categories including the ideology type and Utopia type." The ideology is the exotic image of reconstruction, fully abiding by the language of the society according to the social model, while the Utopia is the exotic image of reconstruction with the centrifugal language conforming to

the unique view of an author (or a group) to the dissimilarity."^[5] "The Chinese lover" is loaded with collective imagination of French society to China at that time and at that place, which belongs to the "social collective imagination".

After the Opium War, the Europeans have possessed with the collective imagination to Chinese and the Oriental. The Chinese is ugly, coward and funny in their eyes, "Oriental people live in the East, living a life of leisure, who are obsessed in the Oriental despotism and indulgence"^{[3]134}. "The Oriental people seem to break all specification of sexual concept"^{[3]215}. Chinese love to smoke opium and are passionate about the polygamy and son on. It can be said that Duras obeys some maximum cultural reflections and reading tendency agreed by her own culture to categorize and stereotype the Chinese people in the three texts about the "Chinese lover", Mr. Nor in *The Sea Wall* is as ugly as a monkey in Susan family's eyes and has "a calf like stupid head", who has funny, stupid, despicable and coward characters. In *The Lover*, it seems that the "Chinese lover" is graceful without any morbidity, but the deep-rooted cowardice hidden in the cultural personality has performed to some extent. For example, his hands still have little shiver because of timidity when he notices the French girl on the ferry. In addition, Duras devotes considerable attention to depict sex scenes of the Chinese and the French girl. The description of the Chinese lover's body by the author is obviously Orientalized and categorized through the "perspective" of the white girl. The novel has repeatedly stressed on the thin and weak of the Chinese lover without muscles, mustache and male boldness. What does the author only appreciate is the Chinese lover's genitals and sex ability. In the eyes of Westerners, "the Orient- this place can make people find the sexual experience, which cannot be gained in Europe. Actually, all of European writers who write the Orient or travel European for pleasure after 1,800 years once have this idea"^{[3]246}. In *The North China Lover*, the author lays out the Chinese image mode in the heart of the Westerners by means of the white girl's mother imagine. In her view, Chinese are all from the opium house. The author mentions the Chinese lover smoking opium three times in the novel. Through smoking opium, Duras expresses suffering of the Chinese who can't seek after the love of the French girl on the one hand; on the other hand she depicts Chinese in categorization. The Chinese said: "this is part of our civilization, the White know nothing about it".^[6] Obviously, "opium smoking by the Chinese" is a stereotype as well as the eternally immutable characteristics of Chinese people in Westerners' minds. In fact, when the stereotype is mentioned, it has the opposite. That is to say, if the Chinese people love to smoke opium, it is equal to Caucasian do not smoke opium in an essential way. As far as the white see, opium smoking is lapsed, ridiculous and uncultured, which implicitly presents a constant standard and grade conducive to Caucasian.

Generally speaking, in the three texts about the "Chinese lover" by Duras, the author obeys the imagination and writing of Chinese image from the perspective of her own cultural tradition in *The Sea Wall* and *The Lover*. What's

more, she makes certain description of modeling and categorization, which belongs to the typical image of the ideology, while the image of the Chinese lover in *The North China Lover* has deviated from the cultural imagination of traditional France, showing the image of Utopia. The evolution of cultural personality of the Chinese lover also reflects that the collective imagination of French society to China in twentieth Century which is not unalterable but changes with the movement of time from the negative one of the original imagination to gradually tend to be positive of the collective imagination later.

C. *Emotion/ Cognition*

Other image is not completely restricted by the objective reality and social culture. It is also the manifestation of the subjective factor as well as the emotional factors. In the biography of Duras, Duras once had an affair with a Chinese man. Her relationship with the Chinese lover is close to the relationship between Mr. Nor and Susan in *The Sea Wall*. In the reality of the Duras, that affection is full of shame and misery. Suffering from family poverty, she has no choice but to contact with the Chinese people. Ugly as the Chinese people is, the Chinese people tempts her with the diamonds and money. Her mother regards her love as a transaction. Her brother takes the money from the Chinese people with filthy words to scold her. Moreover, she is in the degrading position by bargaining her own body. In Duras's heart, she is unable to endure her first love with the ugly and obscene image existing in the novel. Unfortunately, she couldn't bear to tell her readers that her first love is just for the sake of the wealth of others since this kind of behavior is similar with the bargaining of her appearance. All of those are clued in her diary. Therefore, "the universal and fundamental human weakness drives her to modify 'accidental' mistake and makes her first love become "romantics" [7].

IV. CONCLUSION

Duras presents different writings to the same story in the three novels, the next two texts have obviously implicated with the first one, forming a kind of intertextuality and repetition. They not simply repeat the story. The characters also have something in common – particularly, they are prominent in the "Oriental".

In the meantime, the texts mutually form certain subversion and dispelling. The images of the "Chinese lover" in *The Lover* and *The North China Lover* are twice transformed. The image evolves from small, ugly, wretched character of Mr. Nor in *The Sea Wall* eventually into the new image of tall, handsome, self-confident and elegant man with male charm in *The North China Lover*. Meanwhile, the property of money exchange of the "first love" also gradually disappears. Consequently, it turns into pure love, which is inseparable for the changed vision of Duras's own cultural field. Moreover, it reflects the strong cultural traditions -- the collective cultural conventions of French society to restrict and stipulate the writer. Therefore, the "Chinese lover" is increasingly far away from the historical reality of the Chinese. Nevertheless, we are getting closer to the true heart of Duras. What she tends to impress the readers is the lover, a lover of woman yearning, and a lover of romantic. As Dr. Huang Xiyun says: the transformation of the "Lover" image is actually the signifying expression of Duras's appetency. Just like the argument of Kristeva, we get up to the "desire in language" in *The Lover* and *The North China Lover*: the narrative discloses to us another truth at this point." [7]

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