

The Escape in Trauma and Return for Belongings in *Shanghai Girls* Under the Historical and Social Background

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Under the social and historical context, the deep reasons of the two sisters escaping from their hometown and nation are discussed due to the social background, motivation, destination, route, which reflects people's yearning for a peaceful life and the excavation of their self-courage trampling of the iron hoof of war. That's a further sign of sisterhood. Then the personal attitudes and choices of the two sisters are analyzed as well as the return in various meanings, including the ultimate return of Pearl to the family after physical trauma, return to Chinese culture after dreaming of a "good life" in America, so as to pursue the essential return of the adopted daughter to China, etc. This kind of root-seeking exploration of the protagonists forces them to "return" in various meanings and connects the East with the West, which also symbolizes the attempt to merge their own ethnic identity. Chinese-American writers make a bold attempt to define and integrate their ethnic background of social history and make a bold attempt on the definition and integration of ethnic identity.

Keywords: social and historical context, escape, ethnic identity

Introduction

Shanghai Girls enriches the theme of immigrant literature and broadens the vision of Chinese American literature. More importantly, it records a period of history in the process of Chinese immigration with literary strokes. In the process of constructing female ethics, Lisa See highlights the oppression of women in a patriarchal society and the efforts of women to pursue self-consciousness and self-worth by narrating female stories and controlling narrative time. In the process of constructing the concept of family ethics, Lisa See shows that effective communication plays an important role in resolving family conflicts and realizing family harmony by narrating family stories and switching narrative perspectives. This thesis firstly introduces Lisa See and her main works, introduces the writing background of *Shanghai Girls* and the author's complex with China. Secondly, it discusses the escape of the two sisters in *Shanghai Girls* from the social and historical context. It points out that under the iron foot of war, people's yearning for a peaceful life and their courage are explored, which further reflects the sisterly affection. Thirdly, it discusses the personal attitudes and choices of the two sisters when they lived in American Chinatown, and the return in various meanings, including Pearl's final return to her family after experiencing physical trauma, return to Chinese culture after dreaming of a "good life" in the United States, return to the essence of returning to China in order to pursue adopted daughter. It is pointed out that the

root-seeking exploration of the protagonists forces them to “return” in various senses, and connects the east and the west, which also symbolizes an attempt to integrate their ethnic identity. The last part is the conclusion, which points out that Chinese writers try to reproduce a real period of time with the social and historical background, and make bold attempts to define and integrate ethnic identity.

Unique Writing Themes Under Social and Historical Context

In *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* (2005), Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck believe that the reader and the context—literary as well as ideological—perhaps constitute the most important new ingredients of contemporary narrative theory (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005). As early as 30 years ago, speech behaviorists pointed out, literary works are far from being self-reliant, self-contained, self-motivated, unrestricted by context and independent of the pragmatic attributes of “daily discourse”. It comes from a certain context, and like other discourses, literary works cannot be separated from context (Pratt, 1977). According to Shen Dan, context can be divided into two categories, one is “narrative context”, and the other is “social and historical context”. The former involves “narrative stipulation” or “genre stipulation” that transcends social identity, while the latter mainly involves ideological relations related to race, gender, class and other social identity. There are two different kinds of readers corresponding to these two kinds of context, “literary readers” is in corresponding to “narrative context” and “interpreters of text theme meaning” is corresponding to “social and historical context” (Shen, 2005). If we want to understand the literariness of Chinese American literature, we must understand the social and historical background of the history of Chinese immigrants, because some specific images, metaphors and themes can only be clearly recognized and understood in Chinese history, culture and tradition.

The social and historical context mainly refers to the social and historical status quo at that time, and the economic, political, cultural, consciousness, form and other aspects involved can be placed in the category of social and historical context. Paying attention to the social and historical context of the creation of Chinese writers will help us to better understand the purport and content of the writer’s creation, while paying attention to the social and historical context within the work can help the narrator or reader better understand the authenticity in that “fictional” space, or the fiction in the “real” space, better perceive the causes of the growth, transformation and development of the characters in the works, and promote the construction of the plot. Whether it is the interpretation of fictional novels or memoirs, they are inseparable from the social and historical context in which they are produced and created. Only by highlighting the special social and historical context in the works can we set the tone for the tension between the text, the characters and the readers, empathize with the readers and influence their judgment of events and characters in the novel.

Chinese Complex Constituting the Creating Theme And Breakthrough

The various expressions in Lisa See’s works shows that Chinese America writers can not get rid of some deep-rooted views and positions on Orientalism. Chinese American writers are a special group, born in the West, educated in the West, rooted in a strong Western culture, inevitably with orientalism colored glasses and selective expression of Chinese traditional culture (Aaronl, 2012). Therefore, Lisa See’s Chinese culture shows the world a long history of Chinese culture. On the other hand, objectively speaking, there is an inaccurate expression of words. In general, her creation realizes the construction and deconstruction of Orientalism, and the Chinese cultural elements achieve a combination of reality and fiction in her description. Lisa See’s creation is an artistic

crystallization of the profound influence of both Chinese and American cultures. Her American side can open a window for the non-Chinese speaking community to better understand Chinese and Chinese culture. And her Chinese side makes her describe real rather than exotic or unfamiliar Chinese culture.

Unique Thematic Development During the Process of Traveling in *Shanghai Girls*

Among all the Chinese American writers, Lisa See is one of the most popular novelist and the top best seller in the New York Times. There are many reasons why she writes stories about China, such as personal interest, curiosity about why her family is still continuing the Chinese tradition, and the exploration of the self, having a part of the Chinese population has a big impact on her, which readers may not understand (Aaronl, 2012).

Shanghai Girls, published in 2009, was launched by Random House and topped the New York Times bestseller list for 11 weeks. The story begins in 1937 in Shanghai—the “Oriental Paris”, with two beautiful sisters on the fashion stage, Qin Zhen and Qin May. Their portraits are widely seen in cigarette and cream advertisements, lunar calendar cards, and magazine covers. The elder sister, Pearl, is quiet and introverted, loves to learn, proficient in four languages. May is younger sister, who is lively and active, indulges in pleasure. Two girls do not know the evil of the world, the complexity of the society, the endless darkness hidden behind the neon lights in the prosperity.

Pearl is the narrator of the story bringing to the reader the symphony of the ups and downs of the fate of the two sisters. At the eve of Shanghai’s impending war, his father, who had lost all his wealth to pay off his gambling debts, arranged Pearl and May marry to “Golden Men—two sons of Chinese businessman in Los Angeles: Lu Sam and Lu Fern”. The two sisters can not disobey the father’s orders, they successively married in one day. The carefree life is coming to an end soon, and as they doesn’t want to travel across the ocean to the United States to spend their life with those who they don’t love, therefore, when Sam and Fern first returned to the United States, Pearl and May took the opportunity to tear up tickets and break the contract. Unexpectedly at this time the Japanese captured Shanghai, committing heinous crimes. The family fled away and traveled through warfare, difficulties, what’s worse, Pearl and her mother were humiliated in order to save May. After their mother’s death, the two sisters managed to escape from Shanghai, tossing and turning to board the passenger ship, drifting across the sea, then arriving in the United States, and being kept on Angel Island, California. In a hostile immigration detention camp, the two sisters suffered for several months before being allowed to enter the United States to reunite with their husbands. The new life in Chinatown in Los Angeles looks beautiful and is challenging for girls. Fortunately, the two sisters finally find their own goals.

The Escape in Trauma and Search for Peace in the Heterogeneous Homeland

In the study of post-classical narratology, it has gone beyond the pure text research, but combined the text with the context in which it is analyzed. Text in a specific social background, specific historical elements, is a certain social, historical and cultural atmosphere under the product. The author’s situation and the creative theme and spiritual theme reflected in the text are all self-conscious or unconscious expressions of personal life and his own ideology. Therefore, Lisa See’s own Chinese complex and her family’s history of immigrant struggle have defined a unique social and historical framework for the novel *Shanghai Girls*. At the same time, because of the conflicting needs of complex and content in the text, the creation of the strange psychology of life under the war background, Orientalism and Chinatown can more reflect the courage and strength of Chinese immigrants, as

well as the rise of self-improvement and persistence in all kinds of suffering. The most important purpose of the work is to resonate with the readers, and it is not difficult to see that bringing the reader to that era is the best way to resonate.

Reluctant Abandonment in Trauma and Unconscious Depression in Identity

Shanghai Girl does not just stay in the description level of historical details, but reproduces the historical reality that people may experience and feel during the historical period from 1937 to 1957 through the perspective of the narrator Pearl and the experience of the two sisters. Although Pearl and May are fictional characters, they are representatives of many real characters who may have similar experiences with them, acting as real characters in the historical context. The story of the sisters is not so much a story of personal struggle with fate as a portrayal of the fate of the country and nation reflected in the historical events described in the works.

The escape of the two sisters is not only forced by personal life dilemma, but also prompted by the social and historical environment. When the two sisters returned from a party with friends, the father made a cruel announcement that he had arranged marriages for the two of them...The ceremony will take place the day after that (See, 2009, p. 38). The two sisters heard the remark and refused to carry out their engagement, but when they heard that everything was gone, they knew the marriage was inevitable because even though they may look and act modern in many ways, but they couldn't escape what they were: obedient Chinese daughters (See, 2009, p. 42). As a result, forced by debt, the two sisters married Lu's two sons. Although at first, Pearl thought they could sign the papers, their "husbands" will leave, and life would go on as before, ...she would wait until her husband leaves the country, claims desertion, and get a divorce. Then Z. G. and she would get married (See, 2009, p. 47). But as things went on, after the humble wedding, Pearl and May found that Dad had lied to them, and her husband Sam had told her they had to go to America within three days. It can be seen that the two sisters had to reluctantly agree to leave Shanghai. The root cause of Pearl and May's discomfited escape is the change of personal life and the dilemma.

After that, the outbreak of Japan's invasion of China is the social and historical background, the two sisters had to flee under such circumstance. After Japan's incessant airstrikes in Shanghai, the mother and daughters fled to Hong Kong in hopes of finding a ship to escape from a war-torn city. But they encountered the Japanese army during fleeing, mother protected their daughters and caught humiliating death, in order to save mother and protect sister, Pearl was deeply traumatized. After the two sisters arrived in Hong Kong, they met the leader of the Qing Gang accidentally. This time the sisters had to make up their minds to go to the United States, what they concerned about was they just made great effort to stay out the Qing Gang's net and stayed ahead of the Japanese (See, 2009, p. 12). Like Pearl said at the end of Chapter Eight,

Many people wish to go to America. Some will do anything to get there, but going to America was never my dream. For me, it's just a necessity, another move after so many mistakes, tragedies, deaths, and one foolish decision after another. (See, 2009, p. 12)

It can be seen that both sisters fled from their own, which is caused by mistakes, fate, times and tragedies. In this escape from personal fate and national survival, the feelings of Pearl and May are the pillars that support them to move on, and the deep feelings of sisters enable them to survive the constant trauma and suffering and to face life in the future with hope, as Pearl thought,

All lay and I have left is each other. After everything we've been through, our tie is so strong that not even a sharp knife could sever it. All we can do now is continue down the road we're on, wherever it takes us. (See, 2009, p. 12).

Surviving for Peace and Striving for the New Life

An immigration setting was set up on Angels Island in 1910 and began to imprison Chinese who tried to enter the United States. Chinese people who have come to the United States for different purposes have to wait for a long screening, quarantine, etc. on Angel Island to be subjected to strict cross-examination. But some of the inspectors are desperate to repatriate. Even some Chinese have committed suicide in their long wait and torment. In *Shanghai Girls*, after a 21-day trip on the ocean, Pearl and May were detained on Angel Island for six months, and after being designated by the prosecutor as “further investigation”, they repeated the same thing every day. The mental torture caused by the feeling of being forgotten day after day is far greater than the body, and the strength and courage of the protagonist Pearl are highlighted in this desperate situation. At the same time, the interrogation of immigration officers also showed personal wit, Pearl made the coaching book hidden in her feather hat, careful to avoid from the immigration officer’s “language trap”. More importantly, confronting May’s pregnancy, one was in secret pregnancy and the other pretended to be pregnant to hide the fact. We read that women on Angel Island are very reluctant to shower because nearly everyone there is afraid of the ghosts of the dead, who, without proper burial rites, refuse to leave the nasty place where they died (See, 2009, p. 140). The undead on Angel Island is associated with the debilitating, desperate breath left by the abused Chinese here, as time seems to have stagnated and detainees are waiting for the afterlife. No matter how much helplessness and pain Pearl and May experienced on Angel Island, the two sisters succeeded in giving birth to their common daughter—Joy, and finally got permission to San Francisco to begin their peaceful life in their minds.

Although the suffering of Pearl and May has a profound personal connection with China’s family and national history, their suffering also reflects the experience of the Chinese scattered in the United States. In war and social unrest in the 20th century, China’s suffering forced many Chinese to face the uncertainty of crossing the Pacific Ocean. All they had was a dream to live a peaceful and prosperous life. In the increasingly peaceful life of the United States, the relationship between Pearl and her husband is increasingly harmonious by overcoming psychological trauma, and eventually gives birth to a child. Through continuous efforts, Pearl finally realized self-reliance, self-liberation and the pursuit of the main position, and successfully handled the relationship between the heart and the outside world. May engaged in the profession of an actor and get rid of family constraints. Through the description of the peaceful life, after the two sisters arrived in Chinatown, the author intends to use these experiences to further express the theme of courage and resilience of Chinese people in the United States.

The Return in Illusion and Reality

In the Japanese bombing, Shanghai has become a place full of refugees, like quicksand instability. Pearl and May were forced by the gang to leave Shanghai for the United States and lost their homes. In the United States, the two sisters found that the expected wealthy husband was poor, dirty and shabby. Husbands, like other Chinese, are third-class citizens of the United States, living at the bottom. This group of discrete people are not recognized by the mainstream American culture. Without respected, they can only live in Chinatown or nearby, which is different from their imagination. Pearl and Sam plan to buy a house, no bank is willing to give Chinese loans, real

estate agents refused to show them the house. What's more, the community residents jointly write a petition to refuse any Chinese move into their community.

Chinatown seems to be their home, but there's no way to give them a sense of belonging. Chinatown is not the same as Shanghai, but of Chinese flavor. It's what Americans think of as China, reflecting ignorance of real Chinese culture, history, and taste. Everyone in Chinatown looks like a refugee, with a sense of loss, drift, restlessness, and an irrepressible nostalgia for their past life as the most portrayal of their mental state. In the novel, two fires hit Chinatown, Christine Sterling has no desire to rebuild China City. Convinced the fire was the result of arson, she no longer wants to re-create her ideas of Oriental romance in Los Angeles. It shows that the spirit of return to traditional culture, return to China, is bound to be the disillusionment of dreams. The American homeland, which symbolizes the sense of belonging in the minds of the discrete, can not be realized. As Pearl and May thought they had dark moments when they thought they'd never be able to go home because of the Japanese. After the war ended, they had their hopes revived that one day they might go back for a visit, but this feels different. It feels permanent (See, 2009, p. 330).

The real home in the hearts of the separated is home to China. Pearl and May's father-in-law claimed to be an American, but in his heart he still identified himself as Chinese and China as his real home, but he didn't bring his family back to China. His second son, Charlie, saved enough money and, after the Japanese were driven out of China, returned to his hometown to live comfortably. But under Chiang Kai Shek's regime, inflation and prices skyrocketed, Charlie was soon penniless and could only return to America. After the war, Pearl and May had rekindled hope, but as China had closed its doors, they felt they would never return. Nor is Lisa See content to let the narrative of the novel stay in memory in a nostalgic way, but let the American-born daughter Joy re-establish material ties with her mother's birthplace through a trip from the west to the east.

At the end of the novel, Pearl boarded a plane to China, but her purpose was to take her daughter who left home for China back to the United States, and did not want to give up being an American after all the hardships. Discrete people in the novel are doomed not to find the real home.

Conclusion

Because of her ethnic identity, Lisa See has a lot of books about immigration, and *Shanghai Girls* is no exception, through the perspective of Pearl to explore specific circumstances at a particular time.

In her works, Lisa See writes the experience of returning to her hometown, which enables Chinese-American writers to consider the relationship between American national identity and the hometown of Chinese immigrants, and the special relationship of personal family life. When reading her works, readers will find that memories and stories are directly related to the experience of "rootless", which is often not restricted by the political and social environment. The root of this experience is the unsatisfactory living environment of the motherland, such as the destructive historical events like the Japanese Aggressive War and the family disaster. But after fleeing, the Chinese immigrants found that the dreamland was only a spiritual sustenance, and the real Chinatown life was full of repression and discrimination, which led the Chinese to find various ideological returns to support the rootlessness and ethnic marginalization in the discrete life.

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