

**“I think it’s really about us”:
Review of Lisa See’s *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*
& Wayne Wang’s Film Adaptation**

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Lisa See, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*

New York: Random House, 2005 (reprinted 2011)

ISBN: 0-8129-6806-9 \$ 10.20

London: Bloomsbury, 2007 (reprinted 2011)

ISBN: 1408821621 £ 7.99

***Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* DVD**

US: Fox Searchlight, 2011

ASIN: B0061US4H4 \$ 27.49

UK: 20th Century Fox, 2011

ASIN: B005KG4DWU £ 29.40

Although set in nineteenth-century China, Lisa See’s *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005, republished 2011) creates obstacles for neo-Victorian studies. Can – or should – this novel, which does not reference ‘the Victorian’ as such be incorporated into neo-Victorianism’s archive? Of course, this is another way of asking: in what ways is neo-Victorianism constructed by a version of the nineteenth century anchored to the geographical boundaries of the British Empire? An historical novel, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* opens with its narrator, Lily, reminiscing about her birth “on the fifth day of the six month of the third year of Emperor Daoguang’s reign” (p. 9), placing the beginning of the novel, as the foreword has to inform its primarily Western readers, in 1823 and its action well into the nineteenth century. In her old age, Lily is known as the “one who has not yet died” (p. 3); she becomes a potential vehicle for the neo-Victorian, an avatar of the nineteenth-century past that continues to haunt the present.

Neo-Victorian Studies
4:2 (2011)
pp. 191-202

Over the course of Lily's memories, only one historical event – the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64), a violent popular attempt to overthrow the Qing dynasty already weakened by Western concessions – disrupts her heavily domestic life, separating her from her family and forcing her briefly into the countryside to escape rebel forces. However, even stretching to find connections to the British Empire – for example, the strong influence of Christianity imported from the West on the leaders of the Rebellion – *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is barely touched by 'the Victorian' as we conventionally construct or recall it. Limited to a few references to the "outer realm" (p. 174) of history and the occasional appearance of opium, the tangential nature of 'the Victorian' in this book raises concerns about the ethics of appropriation and the potential for bricolage inherent in categorising a text as neo-Victorian with all the universalising assumptions that the term, especially the 'V-word', entails. Written by Asian-American authors to archive experiences and reclaim histories for primarily Asian-American readers, novels such as *Snow Flower*, Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), also set during the Taiping Rebellion, or Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1981) seem to question, if not resist, neo-Victorianism's gaze. What is lost and gained when we group such texts under the sign of 'the Victorian'?

Replete with the horrors and agonies of foot-binding, arranged marriages, tiger mothers, dragon ladies, submissive wives and worthless daughters, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is nonetheless a well-researched, if sometimes simplistic, depiction of sisterhood and femininity in rural China. See provides a touching but predictable 'herstory' of the enduring relationship between Lily, a "so-so-girl who lived with a so-so family in a so-so village" (p. 10), and Snow Flower, "well connected and well off" (p. 41), two girls from different backgrounds and villages in rural Yongming county, who are contracted to each other in childhood to be "laotongs" or "old sames" (p. 4). Even deeper than the companionship of "sworn sisters" (p. 22), a *laotong* match "is made by choice for the purpose of emotional companionship and eternal fidelity" (p. 43). Binding their feet on the same day, sharing the same birthday and astrological signs, with similar family histories and physical attributes, the girls are perfectly suited to accompany each other emotionally, but not always physically, through life. Despite the economic advantages of a *laotong* contract that revolve around influence, affiliation and alliance, it is nonetheless a relationship to

be cherished beyond the ties of marriage and family for what Lily calls “true-heart love” (p. 60). As Lily’s exquisitely bound feet allow her to marry into the affluent Lu family, causing her fortune to rise, Snow Flower’s begins to fall, her aristocratic bearing concealing a shameful family secret associated with another shared ‘Victorian’ codeword: opium.

Perfectly schooled according to “the rules set down in *The Women’s Classic*” (p. 109) that extoll submissive obedience and familial duty, Lily’s “plodding nature” is both attracted to and repelled by Snow Flower’s refinement, her “independent streak of the horse sign” and her ineffective rebellion against the customs and “boundaries of our preordained lives” (p. 57). However, See frustrates the reader’s desire for Lily or Snow Flower to break free of the stifling world of the “women’s chamber” (p. 23) where the daily lives of women, and much of the novel, unfolds. As she becomes Lady Lu, Lily retreats further and further into tradition and convention; self-negation becomes the only available form of self-expression in an overwhelmingly oppressive system. Even as she examines the dangers of childbirth for the “worthless branches” of daughters who “drain the family resources” (p. 59), she can still write without sarcasm or irony:

For these reasons I have told the young women who have married into the Lu family, and the others I eventually reached through my teachings of *nu shu*, that they should hurry to have a baby boy. Sons are the foundation of a woman’s self. They give women her identity, as well as dignity, protection, and economic value (p. 151).

Feminist readers, in particular, participate in Snow Flower’s frustration with Lily and her parroting of – or interpellation into – patriarchal Chinese norms. What ultimately drives the two women apart, and here perhaps lies the novel’s relevance to contemporary post-feminist narratives, is Lily’s “man-thinking”: loving Snow Flower “as a man would, valuing her only for following men’s rules” (p. 243), Lily’s blindness fractures the novel’s articulation of sisterhood.

Lily’s reminiscences are written in *nu shu*, a form of writing invented by women for women, passed down from female elders to the girls in their families and villages. Based on phonetics, context and inference rather than the concrete pictograms of “men’s writing” (p. 153), *nu shu*

allowed women to communicate with each other without the education – and safe from the prying eyes – of men. Separated from each other by class and marriage, Snow Flower and Lily communicate via *nu shu* written on the folds of a fan, delivered over the years by servants and subterfuge between their households. Fearing interception and punishment, Lily and Snow Flower initially rely on “accepted formats and formalized words” (p. 150), cognisant of the fact that women of the household policed other women and that “men throughout the country had to know about *nu shu*. How could they not?” (153). However, as Snow Flower’s tragic circumstances reach untenable levels, she eschews the conventional rhymed couplets of *nu shu* etiquette for something approaching a heart-felt letter. At once, Lily realises that the “true purpose” of *nu shu*

was not to compose girlish notes to each other or even to introduce us to the women in our husbands’ families. It was to give us a voice. Our *nu shu* was a means for our bound feet to carry us to each other, for our thoughts to fly across the fields. (p. 160)

Unfortunately, the tragedy of the novel ultimately lies in the linguistic fluidity that *nu shu* also celebrates. As atonement for her misreading of Snow Flower, Lily becomes a scribe for illiterate women, copying down in *nu shu* “every sadness and complaint, every injustice and tragedy” (p. 5). Underscored by See’s note on how *nu shu* became almost “extinct” in the late-twentieth century and her research trip to China to interview the “oldest living *nu shu* writer” (p. 256), *nu shu* should be the form of communication that binds women together. However, its fragility as a form of self-expression cannot begin to compete against the misogyny of foot-binding, which Lily, as grand-dame of her village and out of misguided loyalty to her *laotong* contract, continues to inflict upon her daughter and even Snow Flower’s grand-daughter.

While Lily intimates that she has written an “official autobiography” (p. 252) as Lady Lu, it is her *nu shu* correspondence with Snow Flower that tells the true story of her life. Destined to be burned with her at her death as an offering to “those who reside in the afterworld” (p. 6), Lily’s *nu shu* narrative, like the supposedly lost letters of A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990) or Margaret Prior’s destroyed diary at the end of Sarah Waters’s *Affinity*

(2000), only adds to the ephemeral nature of the record of women's experience. Through its use of *nu shu*, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* aims to recover an alternate history of the Chinese nineteenth century for consumption in the West and by the West, including overseas Chinese readers, that tends to re-inscribe, rather than trouble, conventional roles and literary stereotypes of Chinese femininity and feminism. In the tradition of Tan and Kingston's exploration of mother-daughter relationships as an expression of the snarled entanglement of an inherited Chineseness, See turns the realities of foot-binding into an extremely problematic metaphor for ethnic feminism, without actually advocating any kind of feminist agenda for either of her heroines beyond sisterhood. Like Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* (1991), *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* offers lush Chinese exotica – much like Victoriana – that recreates a version of China that may be largely irrelevant to women in the present except for emphasising a safe distance between a supposedly liberated, usually Western(ised) *now* and an oppressive and culturally misogynistic, Chinese *then* that mutilated women to keep them immobile and submissive. Depending on how cynical one wishes to be, this can be read as one of the novel's weaknesses – the past remains racially, culturally and/or sexually Other – or, conversely, as one of its strengths – the distance from such an oppressive, backwards past foregrounds, instead, (Chinese) women's empowerment and increased agency in the present. While female oppression in the past is developed into a metaphor for a wider Chinese political oppression in the present, footbinding in *Snow Flower* feeds rather than dispels the notions of archaism and circumscribed freedom already stereotypically associated with 'China' by the West.

From a neo-Victorian perspective, it is tempting to link the crippling tradition of foot-binding to Victorian corsetry. The implicit eroticised relationship between Lily and Snow Flower certainly mirrors the pairings of women seen in Western neo-Victorian favourites like Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002). Furthermore, the stifling and limited quotidian of the "women's chamber" rivals the repressive domestic regimes in novels like Gaynor Arnold's *The Girl in the Blue Dress* (2009), while the stories told by the Chinese girls' embroidering of cloth for their dowries is reminiscent of the quilting metaphor deployed by Margaret Atwood in *Alias Grace* (1996). On the one hand, inviting such comparisons inevitably dismisses *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*'s ability to tell a specifically Chinese story,

albeit to a primarily Western audience, outside of China. On the other, perhaps the novel, consciously or not, engages with neo-Victorianism as a strategy to universalise women's experiences, flattening both 'China' and the nineteenth century into a location and an age of oppression for all women, everywhere. After all, See's stated goal for the novel is to illuminate the struggle of women during times of "political upheaval", whether "during the Taiping Rebellion so many years ago or today for women in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Sudan, or even right here in this country in the post-9/11 era" (p. 265). Like any neo-Victorian author, See reconstructs – and *mis*constructs – the nineteenth century for a particular purpose in the present; however, her journey back to the past cannot be separated from her journey 'back' to China. While this novel can fall under neo-Victorianism's purview, broadly interpreted, it forces us to confront the geographic and cultural boundaries implied by the 'V-word': the drive for feminist essentialism in the novel simultaneously masks and mirrors the quest to redraw the boundaries of neo-Victorian essentialism.

While See's novel may not respect the horizon of expectations of neo-Victorianism as a genre, the film version of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2011), directed by Wayne Wang, arguably does. Not content with making a historical movie, Wang, who also directed movies about the Chinese diaspora such as *Eat A Bowl of Tea* (1989) and *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), insisted that the script also contain a contemporary storyline using the same actresses that play Lily and Snow Flower set in present-day Shanghai. Universally panned by critics, Wang's decision supposedly made the film incoherent and puzzling or was treated as a downright violation of the original text. The contemporary plotline was deemed a 'Chick Flick' with the *L.A. Times* reducing the women's relationship to a "21st[-]century Sex in Shanghai-styled BFFs who've had a nasty falling-out" (Sharkey 2011). Viewed through a neo-Victorian lens, however, the film of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* gains a level of sophistication unremarked upon by critics.

Wang's film transforms the novel into a thoughtful act of memory and recovery: the nineteenth-century *laotong* relationship functions as a trauma that needs to be solved in the present if Sophia and Nina, the present-day heroines, are to move forward into the globalised future identified by the film. As the film begins, Nina (Li Bing Bing) is on the cusp of leaving for a career in New York. Her imminent departure, however, is

stalled by the bicycle accident of Sophia (Gianna Jun)— or is it a suicide attempt? Although estranged from Sophia, Nina is called to the hospital to find the other woman in a coma. Among Sophia's things, Nina discovers an untitled manuscript, the unfinished novel that will become *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. Sophia, a struggling writer, has been researching her family history, especially the life of her ancestor, Snow Flower, and her *laotong*, Lily. The story of Snow Flower and Lily has fascinated Sophia and Nina since they were children, inspiring them to enter into a modern day *laotong* relationship, swearing eternal sisterhood to each other by writing their *nu shu* contract and signing their Western names on the cover of their favorite Faye Wong CD. Borrowing a technique now associated with neo-Victorian texts such as *Possession* or Karel Reisz's 1981 adaptation of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Wang telescopes between the nineteenth-century past and the globalised present, drawing explicit parallels between the pairs of women. Both Nina and Lily, we discover through flashbacks to the nineteenth century and to the girls' early years in 1997 Shanghai, make the mistake of forcing impossible expectations onto their *laotong* partners, making life-changing sacrifices that their sworn sisters are unable to repay and passive-aggressively punishing them for their lack of gratitude. Nina embarks on a quest to find the ending of Sophia's novel, at the same time recovering the titular "secret fan" that will allow her to recover from the mistakes of the past.

The nineteenth-century scenes of the film unfortunately offer a truncated and much abridged version of the novel. The customs and interiors that make up women's domestic lives are beautifully shot, but the intricate power dynamics of the "women's chamber" are lost. The speed with which the film moves through the events of the novel is maddening and predictably angered many of See's loyal readers: the brutal foot-binding chapters of the novel, for example, are rendered almost tame by the rapacity of Wang's story-telling. Wang's version of the Chinese nineteenth century, like many neo-Victorian heritage films, is deceptively colourful and remarkably free of dirt and deprivation in stark contrast to the often gray, urban grittiness of the contemporary Shanghai scenes. Yet the nightlife of Shanghai with its avant-garde nightclubs and neon-lit urban landscapes easily outshines the vibrancy of heritage and makes a convincing argument that the global cosmopolitanism that Nina and Sophia inhabit as adults can offer a post-feminist alternative to the nineteenth-century past. While it remains

unclear at the end of the movie whether both women will settle there, Shanghai is depicted as a metropolitan space, full of mobility and exhibiting an easy relationship with East-West transculturation. Combining the heritage genre with the ‘Chick Flick’ narrative confused many critics desiring one or the other and unable to reconcile Wang’s approach. The *L.A. Times* finds the past a “rich, ancient world both exotic and erotic” where “Wang should have stayed all along” (Sharkey 2011), while the *Chicago Tribune* locates *Snow Flower’s* “ideal audience in those who enjoyed the movie version of *Julie and Julia* [2009], but really only liked the modern-day stuff about the blogger with the less-than-riveting domestic crises” (Phillips 2011). The disjointed nature of the film, however, begs important questions: what should be the role of China’s past, with its conventional storyline of suffering and triumph, to the women in the film struggling to find love, negotiate interracial relationships, and balance personal ambition with filial duty? Should nostalgia transcend the contemporary politics that underlie any film about the New China: the growing gap between urban elite and rural peasants, the violation of human rights, the oppressiveness of the Communist state and its control over private life, especially the lives (and bodies) of women?

To this end, a significant addition to the film version is Sophia’s aunt, Claire (Vivian Wu), a jet-setting museum curator who introduces the girls to the history of foot-binding and *laotongs*. Claire has assembled examples of *nu shu*, many of them from her own family, for a multi-media exhibition provocatively entitled “Never Bind”. An obvious nod to the film’s diagnosis of the present’s relationship to the past, the “N” of the neon sign flickers on and off as the exhibition nears its launch date. Claire’s stewardship of the past facilitates the various acts of recovery that Nina must enact if she is to recover from Lily’s betrayal of Snow Flower, unconsciously repeated in her childhood with Sophia. As a curator, Claire’s character also suggests that the nineteenth-century past is best relegated to the safe space of the museum where *nu shu* can be decoded by computer programmes for tech savvy youth. The film also offers another alternative, namely the past can be used as lived history and not fetishised or enshrined, as it literally is by Sophia who has hidden the fan, along with the ending of her book, in a makeshift shrine to her deceased father.

Criticism can and has been launched against Wang’s simplistic comparison of past and present. Indeed, his juxtaposition of the girls’ foot-

binding with a scene of Nina rubbing her feet after a day of wearing high heels is heavy-handed at best. Wang has been accused of being presentist in his approach to history, angering critics with his insinuation that viewers cannot appreciate the Otherness of the past without making it about the present, an argument that Sophia seems to support in her announcement, “I’m writing a book. It’s about *laotong*, the old days. But I think it’s really about us” (Wang 2011). Implied in such critiques also lies the accusation that those inhabiting the New China, including overseas Chinese, have lost access to their cultural heritage.¹ Without dismissing these valid critiques, I want to suggest that Wang’s adoption of a neo-Victorian framework is perfect for exploring Shanghai and post-feminism as essentially anachronistic spaces. Viewing *Snow Flower* in this light places the film in the company of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001) or the graphic novel *Tamara Drewe* (2008) – rather than *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002) or *Bridesmaids* (2011), two films often rolled out in comparison to *Snow Flower*. Both of the former are popular post-feminist texts that explicitly incorporate the nineteenth century as a means of exploring how contemporary feminist politics are both liberated from, but also complicit in and informed by the narratives of the past. In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, the audience is often treated to visual and textual juxtapositions of old and new: from the vantage point of her high-rise apartment, Nina can look down on a flowered sedan chair sedately traveling to a wedding on the street below; Claire refers to Sophia’s hated stepmother as “Cixi Tai Hou” (Wang, 2011), the Dowager Empress (1835-1908) who rivaled Queen Victoria in power and surpassed her in ruthlessness. To further foreground time out of place, Wang deploys techniques that would be familiar to most neo-Victorianists: at the end of the film, Nina looks out of her window to see a visually stunning tableau of Snow Flower and Lily embroidering against the backdrop of Shanghai’s bustling, postmodern Bund. The two women gaze back at Nina and the audience with looks of recognition and possibly forgiveness. Then turning their backs on Nina, the two women – perhaps apparitions – look out at Shanghai and the future. The ending of the film is a visual argument for the possibility, perhaps even the necessity, of what might be called ‘disposable’ pasts.

Both the book and the film contain extra-textual material from and about Lisa See, in which her anxieties over her Asian heritage and Western appearance – essentially an anxiety about Chineseness and whiteness – are

prominent. See's insistence on her immigrant heritage and her continued ties to Chinatown in Los Angeles are juxtaposed against the story of her research for the novel, during which she was only the "second foreigner" (p. 256) to enter Jiangyong County in rural China. The DVD extras also feature interviews with the producers of the film: Wendi Deng Murdoch, who earned the title "tiger wife" when she slapped the face of the man who lobbed a pie at her husband during the *News of the World* phone-hacking hearing, and her business partner, Florence Sloan. Both women are prominent Asian-American media moguls with equally prominent media mogul husbands. Like its director and producers, the stars of *Snow Flower* – Chinese actress Li Bing Bing, cross-over actress Vivian Wu, leading Korean actress Gianna Jun, with appearances by veteran Asian actor Russell Wong and a cameo appearance by Australian actor Hugh Jackman, who serenades Sophia in Mandarin – lend the film a pan-Asian tone. In many ways, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* keeps company with the chaotic, masculine kung-fu comedies *Shanghai Noon* (2000) and *Shanghai Knights* (2003), in which global superstar, Jackie Chan, plays an imperial guard of the Forbidden City who immigrates to the American West and embraces the 'American dream'. Furthermore, if (British) imperialism is encoded into the 'V-word' as cultural memory, as I have argued elsewhere,² then perhaps we will see a proliferation of Chinese reinventions and reclamations of 'the Victorian' like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *The Warlords* (2007), two films that adapt the nineteenth century as a strategy to negotiate a version of pan-Asian identity and collaboration that both celebrates and occludes the rise (again) of China.³

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan clearly interrogates the arguably rather narrow concept of what constitutes 'the Victorian' in contemporary culture and criticism, but it also aims to expand the equally narrow cultural and geographical understanding of 'Chinese'. Even with its noticeable flaws, it is evidently a heritage film for what Nina/Lily calls a "world that is always changing", presenting the nineteenth-century past as a "shared history" (Wang 2011) – one that can encompass and celebrate 'Chinese' women as diverse as Nina and Sophia, Lisa See and Wendi Deng Murdoch.

Notes

1. The film critic for *The Economist*, for example, seemed appalled by *Snow Flower's* back and forth, finding the contemporary storyline evidence of the present's unseemly self-obsession: "the message is that workaday bourgeois concerns need to be spiced up by the horrors of a more turbulent time in order to be interesting on screen. But the dual narratives also belittle the past. They imply that previous lives don't matter unless they illuminate our own" (Anon. 2011). Across the board, film reviewers, primarily from Western media outlets, were insulted by Wang's neo-Victorian move.
2. Please see my forthcoming monograph, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (Continuum, 2012).
3. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* remains a popular *wuxia* film appealing to global audiences. Set in China and engaging with Chinese mythology, its nineteenth-century setting, however, may be unrecognisable to Western viewers. Directed by Ang Lee, its cast and production team were from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and China. Based on a true crime story, *The Warlords* is also set in China during the Taiping Rebellion. Like *Crouching Tiger*, *The Warlords* is a pan-Asian collaboration: its internationally-known leading men are Jet Li, Andy Lau and Takeshi Kaneshiro from China, Hong Kong and Japan respectively. Both films express Chineseness as a transnational identity yet simultaneously generate new, often uncritical, myths of China.

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Snow Flower and the Secret Fan. Prod. Wendi Murdoch and Florence Sloan. Dir. Wayne Wang. Perf. Li Bing Bing, Gianna Jun. DVD. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011.