
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Journey to the East: Things and Cultural Imagination in *Peony in Love*

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| ABSTRACT

Lisa See's novels have garnered widespread acclaim among American readers, owing to their captivating stories of Chinese women persevering through social upheaval and their rich, exotic cultural elements with Chinese characteristics. However, compared with other overseas Chinese works, there is little academic attention. The Chinese things that are central to the narrative and beloved by readers have, surprisingly, sparked minimal interest within the academic community. This paper examines the representational, structural, and thematic roles of the Chinese things in See's *Peony in Love*. It argues that things represent and reproduce an imagined China, drive the narrative forward, and shape the characters' gender identity. They are also endowed with significance beyond the text, which not only refers to the development of Chinese women in the feudal Ming and Qing dynasties, but also responds to the identity anxiety of Chinese-Americans in contemporary globalization.

| KEYWORDS

"Thing" Narratives, Lisa See, Overseas Chinese Literature, Chinese culture, *The Peony Pavilion*

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1. Introduction

Lisa See (1955-)’s reputation in contemporary overseas Chinese literature stems from her 12 novels that has been published so far. Her debut work, *The Golden Mountains* (1995), has drawn widely attention in the West. *Flower Net* (1997), *On Gold Mountain* (1999), and *Dragon Bones* (2003), set in contemporary China, are collectively known as the "Red Trilogy", among which *Flower Net* is nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe Award. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005) has been translated into 35 languages and adapted into a film, being released in nearly 40 countries and regions. Other works such as *Peony in Love* (2007), *Shanghai Girls* (2009), and *Dreams of Joy* (2011) have all topped the New York Times bestseller list. Growing up in the Chinatown of Los Angeles, America, See has been fascinated by Chinese culture since childhood. Her novels consistently weave together Chinese women, culture, and social events, thereby crafting a grand stage to tell Chinese stories. By combining macro historical narratives with micro individual life experiences, this Chinese American woman with one eighth of Chinese ancestry shows her mastery in depicting the resilience of ethnic individuals, especially women, in social transformation while highlighting Chinese characteristics.

Set in southern China during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, *Peony in Love* centers on Chen Tong, a young maiden deeply fascinated by *The Peony Pavilion* and longing for the sincere love depicted in the opera. Though she never meets her fiancé Wu Ren before marriage, they share a spiritual bond through their love for the opera. Tragically, Chen Tong dies at the age of seventeen from longing and the repression of feudal ethics, yet her spirit lingers in the mortal world to watch over Wu

Ren. Later, Wu Ren marries Tan Ze, another talented woman devoted to *The Peony Pavilion*. Tan Ze discovers Chen Tong's posthumous commentaries on the opera and continues her work, forming a spiritual connection across life and death with Chen Tong's ghost. However, Tan Ze passes away soon after marriage. Then Wu Ren marries a third wife, Qian Yi, who is virtuous and intelligent. Qian Yi organizes and perfects the commentaries left by Chen Tong and Tan Ze, eventually compiling and publishing the commentaries. Witnessing the legacy of their talent and devotion live on, Chen Tong's soul finally lets go of its obsession and finds peace.

From a character (human) perspective, *Peony in Love* is a deeply moving love story, one woven from longing, spiritual connection, and devotion that transcends life and death. Yet from the perspective of thing (non-human), the novel unfolds like an intimate miniature museum of ancient Chinese material culture. Its pages are filled with vivid depictions of traditional Chinese gardens, elegant furniture, delicate ornaments, and daily utensils, all brought to life with remarkable detail. These tangible things do not merely serve as background. Rather, they silently witness the joys and sorrows of the three talented women, preserve their thoughts and feelings, and carry the unique aesthetic and spiritual life of Chinese literati women in the late imperial era. In this way, the novel turns everyday objects into silent narrators, making the emotions and destinies of its characters feel more real, profound, and unforgettable.

2. Literature Review

Since their publication, See's novels have attracted extensive interests from readers in America. Her works have received praise in over 50 journals and websites, with *The Washington Post*, *Booklist*, and *Bookpage* being particularly enthusiastic in promoting her novels. In addition, in Amazon's annual bestseller list, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* once ranked 29th in the 2007 bestseller chart. Among the top 100 bestsellers in the Kindle version of Chinese historical novels, six of her works made the list (Liu, 2021, p. 123). All of these demonstrate readers' passion for these Chinese stories, especially those rooted in Chinese culture.

However, it is surprising that despite the popularity among American readers, the academic community has largely overlooked See and her Chinese stories. So far, the topics discussed are primarily related to feminism and racism, and a significant portion of concerned studies gravitates toward See's most renowned novel, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. Douglas compares the female characters of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* with those of *White Snakes*, arguing that the two works offer a rich tapestry of narratives that illuminate the lives and challenges of Chinese women across various historical periods and social environments (2006). Similarly, two articles written by Cathleya (2007) and Nihay (2007) respectively discuss the gender conflict and racial discrimination against Chinese women in the same classic. These themes are also touched upon in Dalfia's "Being Powerless: Women's experience under Chinese Patriarchal Culture as Seen in Novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*", which examines the oppression of patriarchy in feudal China (2011). As for other novels, few academic articles can be accessible. In response to the huge difference between the popularity with readers and the number of research results, a critic expresses her confusion, "Lisa See's books are very different, but I have found them fascinating. I do not understand why she is so much less well known than Amy Tan or Maxine Hong Kingston. Perhaps the media only publicizes a few Chinese American women writers" (Douglas, 2006, p. 87).

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a close-reading methodology, with its analytical foundation rooted in "thing" narratives. Taking See's *Peony in Love* as its primary analytical text, the research draws textual evidence exclusively from the novel itself, while secondary academic sources are referenced to situate the findings within the broader scope of thing studies.

The object-oriented narratology developed by Ryan and Tang (2024) serves as the core theoretical framework. Rather than regarding objects as passive narrative backdrops or mere symbolic ornaments, Ryan and Tang's work emphasizes the objects' active and constitutive role in storytelling. They conceptualize objects not as static tools, but as dynamic participants that drive narrative progression, facilitate interpersonal connections, and embody key thematic ideas. This theoretical focus makes it especially suitable for analyzing *Peony in Love*, where tangible items like handwritten commentaries, the opera *The Peony Pavilion*, and courtyard furnishings are not peripheral details, but central to the novel's emotional resonance and thematic exploration. Additionally, Ryan and Tang's emphasis on how objects mediate human memories, desires, and identities offers crucial insights into the spiritual bond among the three female protagonists and the way their legacies are preserved through material objects. For supplementary analytical depth, Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) and the object-related theories put forward

by Brown(2002) and Latour(2005) are incorporated, addressing the material vitality of objects and the intricate interactions between human beings and the non-human realm.

This paper examines the Chinese things in the novel from three aspects: Representational things materialize elements with distinct Chinese characteristics, constructing within the text a concrete yet not entirely authentic imagined China that allows readers to perceive traditional Chinese culture. Structural things propel narrative progression, forming dynamic relationships of mutual construction and mutual influence with characters, thereby serving as the material foundation for gender identity and dismantling the subject-object binary opposition where humans dominate objects. Thematic things move from mere narration and form to achieve trans-temporal reflections on real-world issues such as Chinese-American identity, women's writing predicaments, and cultural integration through the restoration and reconstruction of history. From the perspective of "thing" narratives, it can be better explained why See's works with Chinese cultural elements are so popular among America readers, and how these Chinese things play a role in creating cultural experience, driving narrative development, constructing identity, and symbolizing historical context.

4.The Representational Things and Imagined China

The mimetic function is to introduce objects in the narrative to readers. It must be acknowledged that a considerable part of the narrative content is about objects. For one thing these stories are filled with a large number of non-humans, and for another it is from these stories, or more exactly, from the very form and language of the stories, that the representational power is produced. "The mimetic function consists of the mode of representation of objects, the 'how' that underlies all manifestations of objects, whether or not they fulfill another function."(Ryan and Tang, 2024, p. 31)

There are many objects with ancient Chinese characteristic reproduced through listing in *Peony in Love*. During Double Seven, the Qixi Festival in China during which girls worship the goddess of women and pray for their own ingenuity and dexterity, all the unmarried maidens of the narrator's family gather at the Lotus-Blooming Hall set up especially for women to hold the ceremony. The narrator describes the surroundings as follows:

"On the altar table, set up for the occasion in the Lotus-Blooming Hall, sticks of incense burned in **bronze tripods**, filling the room with a deliciously pungent odor. Piles of fruit—**oranges, melons, bananas, carambolas, and dragon eyes**—sat in **cloisonné dishes**. On one end of the table stood a **white porcelain bowl** filled with water and **pomelo leaves** to symbolize the ritual bath given to brides. In the middle of the table lay a circular tray—nearly one meter across—with a round center surrounded by six sections. The middle depicted **the Weaving Maid and the Cowherd**, with his buffalo wading nearby in the stream to remind us of the place the goddess had hidden her nakedness. The surrounding sections showed the Weaving Maid's other sisters"(See, 2007, p. 52).

The objects mentioned in above narrative, such as bronze tripods, cloisonné dishes, and the circular tray painted with the Weaving Maid and the Cowherd, all have distinct Chinese characteristics, while the fruits and pomelo leaves listed are rich in southern China style. The objects are only employed as a backdrop here. They no longer appear again in the following text, so the narrator only provides a simple list without detailed description. Roland Barthes divides narrative functions into three levels, namely the functional level, the behavioral level, and the narrative level (1989, p. 9). These objects neither drive the development of the story at the functional level, nor become the "actant" in Greimas' sense at the behavioral level. They only appear as static accompaniments. However, they are of great significance at the narrative level. By listing objects, the narrative focus shifts from individual thing to the overall state of the hall, whose purpose is not just to provide information, but to "be parceled out into discrete impressions and where the variety can be savored" (Belknap, 2000, p. 36). As a result, the space is presented as a miniature museum, and the objects are juxtaposed with each other, making the scene of the women celebrating the Double Seven come to life. Readers can not only have a glimpse of the festive life of aristocratic women in China south of Yangtze in the late Ming Dynasty, but also feel the traditional cultural atmosphere created through Chinese things.

5.The Structural Things and Thing-Based Identity

Things can connect different narrative levels, or serve as the driving force for plot development. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett examines how the vitality of everyday objects, such as trash, food, and metals, can influence human behaviors and social structures through their own characteristics (2010, pp. 39-93). Moreover, things themselves are part of human identity. "A man's Self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes

and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions"(James, 1983, p. 297).

In *Peony in Love*, Peony, the narrator, and *The Peony Pavilion*, the thing, form a bond of shared life. When Peony sees Du Liniang confined to the house for life on the opera stage, learning the discipline of feminine virtues, Peony feels great sympathy (See, 2007, p.11). This sense of shared suffering transforms into an intangible inspiration after watching the scene where Liniang boldly pours out her heart and pursues love. Before her secret rendezvous with Wu Ren at the Riding-the-Wind Pavilion, Peony hesitates, but Liniang's determination ultimately prompts to summon her courage and enter the pavilion to meet her beloved. As a sheltered young lady, Peony's body is trapped within the confined space of the mansion, while *The Peony Pavilion* provides her spirit with vast space for free growth. Liniang's dream in the garden further triggers Peony's renewed perception of her own environment, causing her to completely deviate from her original life trajectory and realize the root of the lovesickness that both she and Liniang suffer:

"I've come to believe that part of lovesickness comes from this conflict between control and desire.....as women we have to think about how to make our husbands happy by being good wives, bearing sons, running our households well, and being pretty so they don't become distracted from their daily activities or loiter with concubines. We are not born with these abilities. They must be instilled in us by other women. Through lessons, aphorisms, and acquired skills, we are molded...and controlled" (See, 2007, p.75).

The stagnation of love in reality ignites Peony's creative passion. Peony begins to introspectively examine the "qing", love and passion in Tang Xianzu's sense, within her heart and records it as commentary on *The Peony Pavilion*. However, the manuscript is ultimately burned by her mother and servants. With emotion losing its material vessel, Peony can only die amidst the grief of her destroyed work and her longing for Wu Ren. Latour's Actor-Network Theory proposes that objects cannot replace human agents in acting, yet it is necessary to incorporate non-human elements into the consideration of participatory action alongside humans, enabling them to act together as a sustainable whole (2005, p.72). In the first half of the novel, every step of Peony's journey, from awakening to writing and to the destruction of her manuscript and her death, involves the joint participation of humans and objects. Liniang's persistent pursuit of free love awakens Peony's awareness of and resistance to her own boudoir predicament. Subsequently, as Liniang's life trajectory of falling ill from passion and dying for love gradually overlaps with Peony's life experiences, the symbiotic subjectivity of human and object further stabilizes. Their fates reflect and empower each other. Ultimately, however, this shared life between human and object proves unable to subvert patriarchal oppression, heading toward the tragedy of both object and person being destroyed.

Yet the physical annihilation instead facilitates the symbiosis of human and object to complete the leap from the real world to spiritual and cultural inheritance, transcending the boundaries of individual life and achieving the mutual construction of textual life and human life. After Peony's death, her soul does not dissipate but continues to propel the completion of *The Three Wives' Combined Commentary* through possessing Tan Ze and Qian Yi. Her emotions and creative desires merge into her commentary on *The Peony Pavilion*. When *The Three Wives' Combined Commentary* is published, Peony's name, Chen Tong, is listed first among the editors. Her story spreads widely, allowing her individual life to break through the limitations of the physical body and achieve eternity within the text. Just as Du Liniang returns to life after death, the narrator also achieves the resurrection of life value through the text of *The Peony Pavilion*. On one hand, human life continues through objects; on the other hand, objects are animated through human practice.

6.The Thematic Things and History Rebuilding

In addition to functioning as an integral component of the textual narrative structure, objects also bear referential significance pointing beyond the text itself. "Objects fulfill a thematic function when they receive a meaning, either explicitly stated in the text or reached by the reader through an act of interpretation, that transcends common knowledge of their nature and cannot therefore be predicted on the sole basis of their identity"(Ryan and Tang, 2024, p. 53). Such thematic objects transcend their role as mere narrative elements, elevating into core carriers of narrative meaning, and thus serving as symbols for abstract themes, emotions, or values within literary works.

To put it back to its historical context, *Peony in Love* employs literary creation to reconstruct the compilation history of *The Three Wives' Combined Commentary*, centering on a response to the phenomenon of women's creative predicaments during the

Ming and Qing dynasties. Rather than discussing female individuals in an isolating way, the author reconstructs the awakenings and creative aspirations of numerous young maidens who live under the shackles of feudal ethics through the creation practices of the three wives, Peony, Tan Ze, and Qian Yi. Since its publication, *The Peony Pavilion*, despite repeated bans and revisions, has maintained unabated popularity. Part of the reason is that it first allows a sixteen-year-old maiden to autonomously choose her love in a feudal society where women are expected to follow the Three Obediences and Four Virtues, thereby touching upon the gender hierarchy in the then society. Consequently, the opera causes widespread sensation nationwide, particularly in the region south of Yangtze. Batches of young women measure their own experiences against the life trajectories of dramatic characters, hoping to pursue true love and freedom just like Du Liniang. From this perspective, *The Peony Pavilion* serves as a crucial gateway for them to access literature, leading numerous young maidens to immerse themselves in reading and commenting, infusing their passion and will to rebel into their manuscripts. In doing so, *The Peony Pavilion* leaps from a mere opera text into a material vehicle for female self-expression, laying a solid foundation for a female commentary community predominantly composed of lovesick maidens.

However, when Confucian rites and teachings struck back, these women's commentaries are listed alongside *The Peony Pavilion* as banned materials. In the then environment, women's creation faces multiple constraints. On one hand, the dictum "lack of talent in women is a virtue" stigmatizes female writing, burdening it with accusations of unchastity and transgression; on the other, printing and distribution channels are male-dominated, and even completed women's manuscripts rarely obtain legitimate publication opportunities. Many works are lost due to prohibition and destruction, submerged in the long history of male official. However, by imagining and reconstructing the three wives' writing and publication, *Peony in Love* gives a window to the creative predicament and resistant spirit of the Ming-Qing female writers.

It is within this imitation and reconstruction that the materiality of literature comes alive. Brown argues that "The question of things becomes a question about whether the literary object should be understood as the object that literature represents or the object that literature has as its aim, the object that literature is" (2003, p.3). As objects, literary works serve both as material carriers of meaning and as material practices interacting with the reality through narration. Their thingness manifests both in physical form and in the representation and reconstruction of the real world. Thus, fictional creation can be presented as a substantial force intervening in history and reflecting reality. As Lisa See observes, "We usually hear that in the past there were no women writers, no women artists, no women historians, no women chefs, but of course women did these things. It's just that too often what they did was lost, forgotten, or deliberately covered up.....they were part of a much larger phenomenon" (See, 2007, p.275). The novel's representation of *The Peony Pavilion* and the history of women's creation during the Ming-Qing period from a modern Chinese-American perspective thereby transcends its mere historical context, accomplishing both profound critique of a historical phenomena and trans-temporal reflection that points toward contemporary reality.

7. Conclusion

Peony in Love presents the multiple narrative functions of Chinese things such as *The Peony Pavilion*, Chinese buildings and ornaments, thus establishing a trans-temporal, cross-cultural discourse that connects history with reality, and the East with the West. Objects not only construct tangible traditional cultural fields through imitation and representation, but are also endowed with agency, participating in narrative advancement, reshaping female subjectivity, and even rewriting mainstream history. Ultimately, through the contemporary translation of historical things, these novels examine universal issues such as women's cultural inheritance and creative predicaments, responding to Chinese-American women's pursuit of constructing multicultural identities within the context of globalization.

Future research may extend these insights by investigating the narrative agency of material objects in other works of Chinese American literature, exploring how writers across different periods represent traditional Chinese artifacts, architectural spaces, and cultural objects to negotiate gender, memory, and cultural identity. Comparative investigations into diverse diasporic contexts could further uncover shared patterns and distinctive expressions of materiality in cross-cultural storytelling, enriching scholarly understanding of how things mediate historical trauma, cultural inheritance, and identity formation in a globalized world.

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