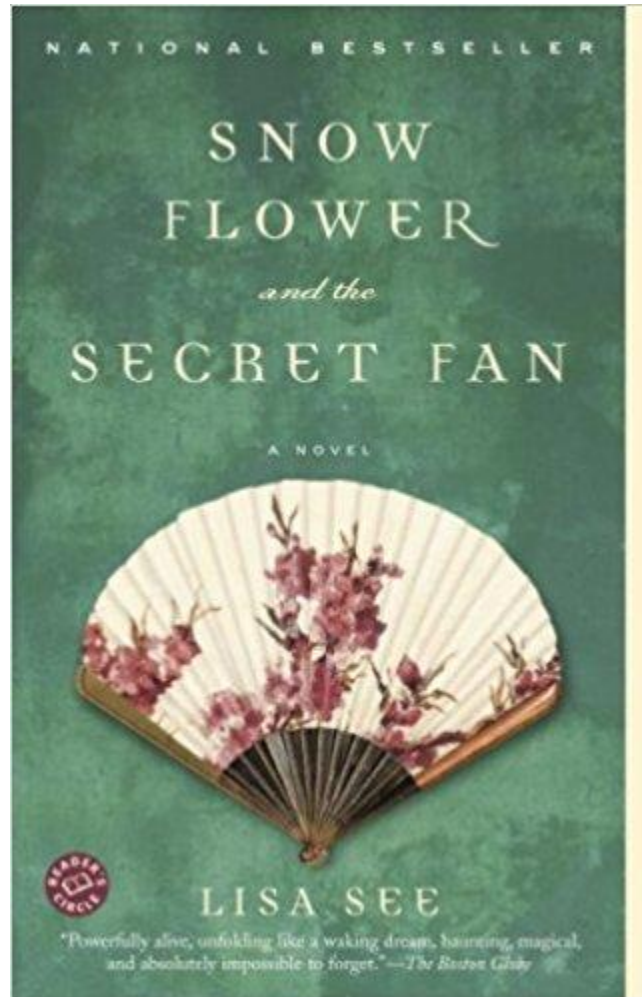


## The Power of Love in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*

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### Abstract

This essay will examine love as a theme of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and how its presence and absence affected women of 19<sup>th</sup>-century China.

**Keywords:** Lisa See, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *laotang*, Snow Flower, *nu shu*, deep-heart love.

*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*



Lisa See

Courtesy: <http://www.lisasee.com/about-lisa-see/>

The novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, by Lisa See, follows the life of two women in 19<sup>th</sup>-century rural China from the retrospective viewpoint of Lily, a widow with nothing left to lose. Lily grows up as a peasant girl with one unique feature - feet with potential. Due to her beauty and small feet that will ensure her with a more prosperous marriage, Lily is given a *laotang*, a “forever friend”, from a wealthy family with whom she will write *nu shu*- secret women’s writing- for the rest of their lives. Her *laotang* is called Snow Flower, and the two form a rare relationship for 19<sup>th</sup> century China - one that was meant to last a lifetime.

**Problems Faced – Difference in Experience**

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However, as life often does, all did not go as planned. Lily did successfully marry into a wealthy family and eventually became the most powerful woman in the city, whereas Snow Flower married beneath her and suffered heavily. This difference in experience affected both women more than either had imagined possible and eventually brought an end to their friendship. This bond breaking can be traced back to the lack of importance Chinese society placed on women and girls, and the love that was shown to them.

This essay will examine love as a theme of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and how its presence and absence affected women of 19<sup>th</sup>-century China.

### **Love – an Overarching Theme**

On the very first page of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* by Lisa See, Lily says “for my entire life I longed for love” (3). This one sentence makes love an overarching theme throughout the book, serving as both a reference point of growth and development, as well as a reason for why society, and Lily, acted as they did.

Lily had very specific ideas about love from an early age. She knew that it was difficult for others to love her because she was a girl, and therefore worthless. She knew that because of her sex, she could only win her family’s affection through obedience. She showed love towards her natal family through her obedience of filial piety, nothing more or less. She showed love for her husband and her in laws through service and obedience to them. She showed love for her daughter through “mother love”: training her daughter to be obedient so that she may become as well placed in society as possible. However, this love through obedience was not adequate to fill her longing for something more.

### **Deep-heart Love**

By stating that she longed for love her entire life, Lily implies that she never truly had it. This is contradictory to the claims she makes about her vast knowledge of the different types of love. For example, Lily states that she experienced “pity love, respectful love, and gratitude love” (5). However, once a deeper look is taken, what she truly longed for, was not just love, but what she calls “deep-heart love”.

Deep-heart love is different from the other types of love for numerous reasons. First and foremost, deep-heart love is different from the love she shared with her mother, husband, and children, because it was not founded in obedience. These relationships came with specific societal expectations. As a female, these relationships were formed on the presumption that Lily would obey her role as daughter, caretaker, mother, and lover, to the best of her abilities in order to uphold the family name and maintain or achieve high social standing. Therefore, since these relationships did not exist to support her, and she instead existed to obey the rules for her role in them, she could not be herself. While love could be found in these relationships, it is not the deep-heart love that she so craved, as she could not bring her whole self into them, and could only follow her duties as set by society.

### **Reason to Distinguish Deep-heart Love from Other Types of Love**

Furthermore, Lily distinguishes deep-heart love from the other types of love because deep-heart love is meant to be with one person, forever. The other relationships in which Lily experiences love are seen as temporary. As a woman, she leaves her natal home, and therefore cannot get too attached to her natal family. Her sons leave her for the “outer realm” to study or work. Her daughter leaves her and marries into her husband’s home. Her husband resides in the outer realm, until he requires her services as wife.

### **Laotang Relationship – How It Developed**

The only relationship that could transcend these boundaries that barricaded Lily from deep-heart love was with her laotang, Snow Flower. The nature of the laotang relationship was life-long and sacred. Far more sacred than even marriage- where concubines were allowed- but in the laotang relationship any other sworn sisters were forbidden. This made the laotang relationship permanent, unlike with family members. In addition, the premise of the laotang relationship was to communicate that a woman was learned and highly marriageable. But once established, the relationship itself had no purpose other than that of providing friendship. In this relationship, Lily found freedom. Here, Lily could bring her whole self, which she did, for the first twenty-three years of the relationship. Lily and Snow Flower could whisper and giggle at

jokes no one else would ever hear. They could tell stories no one else would care to hear, and share secrets they themselves were not prepared to hear.

### **Difference in Married Experience**

This vulnerability, alongside the lack of required obedience, is precisely what enabled deep-heart love to form between Lily and Snow Flower – they could be themselves, without societal convention dictating their every action. However, this is also what scared Lily. When Snow Flower and Lily got married, their experiences were vastly different. Lily married up and Snow Flower married down. Lily had a supportive husband, Snow Flower had an abusive one. When Snow Flower began to share what was really happening in her life, as a *laotang* should, Lily did not know how to respond. She had no experience in how deep-heart love worked when a loved one was struggling. She felt she could not find the adequate words to convey what she felt for her *laotang* and it scared her, so she fell back on what was comfortable: societal convention.

### **Pushing toward Obedience**

Instead of pushing through her feelings of awkwardness in the unknown realm of deep-heart love when the strength of their love was tried, Lily pulled away, and pushed Snow Flower towards obedience as that was all she was familiar with. Lily should have fought to support her *laotang*, and explore unconventional ways to empathize with her. This is what Lily refers to when she states that she did not value deep-heart love as she should have.

While Lily did not value deep-heart love in the only relationship where it was present, it is hard for me to blame her. Lily could not know what deep-heart love should look like, as she had no one to model it in her own life. She had never seen such a love in any other relationship, nor heard the pain that such intense love would require. Lily acknowledges this and states quite well that “it is hard to be generous and behave in a forthright manner when you don’t know how” (247).

It is easy to suppress half the population if they do not know how to support each other - this is how oppressive patriarchies have survived for so long. However, Lily shows us that it is

possible to learn deep-heart love and eventually share it with others in order to make amends and support those that need it most.

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#### Works Cited

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