



# Snow Flower and the Secret Fan

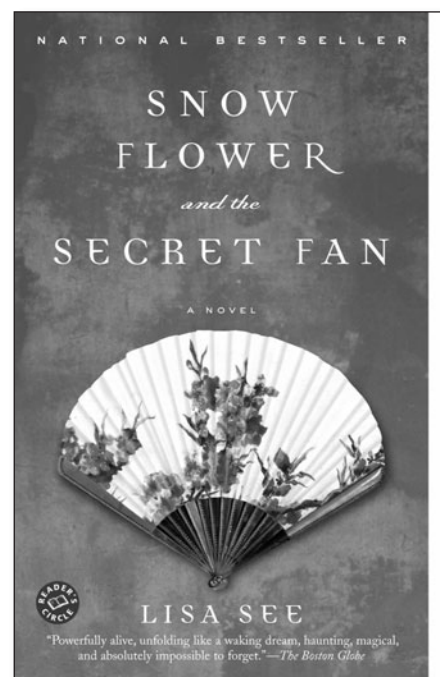
A Novel

Written by Lisa See

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Reading Level: 9th Grade

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“A nuanced exploration of women’s friendship and women’s writing in a remote corner of Imperial China.”

—Kirkus Reviews

## • note to teachers •

In *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, acclaimed author Lisa See offers a detailed and unforgettable narrative of female friendship set in rural China in the 19th century. Through her elaboration of key Chinese cultural rites and her examination of the symbolic and spiritual implications of these rituals and ceremonies to Lily and Snow Flower, the book’s protagonists, Lisa See exposes students to a world that will call them to interrogate their own values and cultural assumptions.

## • about the author •



LISA SEE was born in Paris, but grew up in Los Angeles, and spent much of her time in Chinatown. She is the author of the novels *Shanghai Girls*, *Peony in Love*, *Flower Net*, *The Interior*, and *Dragon Bones*, as well as the widely praised memoir, *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*. Her articles and book reviews have appeared in dozens of national publications. The Organization of Chinese American Women named her the 2001 National Woman of the Year. She designed a walking tour of Los Angeles Chinatown and wrote the companion guidebook for Angels Walk LA to celebrate the opening of the MTA’s new Chinatown metro station. She resides in Los Angeles, where she serves as a Los Angeles City Commissioner on the Pueblo de Los Angeles Monument Authority.

Author’s Website: [www.lisasee.com](http://www.lisasee.com)

Learn about the film *Nu Shu: A Hidden Language of Women in China*, by Yue-Qing Yang:  
[www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c473.shtml](http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c473.shtml)

## • about this book

*Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* grew out of author Lisa See's reading about *nu shu*, the phonetic written language used exclusively and secretively by women in Jiangyong County in the Hunan province of southern China. Her growing fascination with *nu shu* led her to visit Jiangyong County in the fall of 2002, where she learned she was only the second foreigner to have traveled to the isolated region. See's information-gathering about the women who communicated with one another through *nu shu* was further enhanced by her own intimate knowledge of Chinese culture, gleaned from a childhood spent in Los Angeles Chinatown. Coupled with her intensive field research, See's familiarity with many of the deeply-held beliefs of her female Chinese relatives has enabled her to render with exquisite verisimilitude the contours of a lifelong friendship between two 19th century girls in southern China.

At the age of seven, a girl named Lily is paired for life with a *laotong*, or "old same," named Snow Flower. Introduced to one another through the intervention of a self-interested match-maker, Madame Wang, Lily and Snow Flower initiate a relationship that is deeper and more lasting than a casual friendship. Their first exchange of a silk fan brings with it a message from Snow Flower to Lily written in *nu shu*, the private language Chinese women in the Hunan province use to communicate outside of the realm of men. Through their frequent visits with one another, their annual ritual pilgrimage to the Temple of Gupo, and their constant exchanges of embroideries and missives, Lily and Snow Flower come to know one another more deeply than most girls their age. And yet, with the aid of Madame Wang, Snow Flower succeeds in concealing from Lily the desperate truth about her family in Tongkou.

As Lily and Snow Flower marry out of their natal homes and into new families, Snow Flower's secret comes undone. Heeding the words of her mother to let no ugliness into her life, Lily remains faithful to her *laotong*, and continues their relationship. Together, they reflect on the complex nature of their arranged marriages, the joys and frustrations of early motherhood, and the difficulties of filial obligation. As the years go by, Lily and Snow Flower weather tragedies small and large, often finding themselves drawn more closely to one another. But when a terrible misunderstanding arises, their deep friendship experiences a challenge that may separate them forever.

## • teaching ideas

Through its masterful examination of the interior and largely domestic lives of women in rural 19th century China, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* exposes some of the more fascinating and lesser-known aspects of life for the Yao ethnic minority in China. The book's story highlights many key issues of Chinese marriage, family, and kinship, that would make it an ideal text for a world literature, Asian studies, or comparative cultures course. Due to its focus on the life experiences of female characters, the book would also work well as a companion text in a course on feminism or gender relations.

As a memoir of historical fiction, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* would provide a useful textual counterpoint in the literary analysis of both classic and contemporary works of fiction, and it would be an ideal text in a comparative literature course. For example, reading Lisa See's novel in the wider context of coming-of-age works like *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, or *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld, would permit students to consider the ways in which radically different fictional narratives inhabit their settings through their use of vivid characterization, true-to-life historical details, and compelling plotting.

Set in a meticulously researched historical context that includes specific accounts of the Taiping Rebellion, the typhoid epidemic in parts of rural China, and the social problems of opium addiction, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* would also work well as a supplementary text in a history class that looks at trends in 19th century world history, and especially as a primary text in a course on Chinese history.

The book's focus on *nu shu*, the secret language used exclusively by women in Jiangyong County in southern China, suggests its inclusion in a course on linguistics or language theory. As the novel explores in its narrative the kinds of misinterpretation and misunderstandings that can occur through the use of a language grounded in phonetics rather than actual characters or words, students of languages would be able to consider *nu shu* in a wider context.

High school instructors may find the narrative's coming-of-age focus especially relevant for their students. As Snow Flower and Lily undergo profound developmental changes—from the beginning of their *laotong* relationship as innocent girls of seven to their transformation into young adults with significant responsibilities of their own—their individual stories would fit well in the context of classroom discussions of rites of passage. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* could also be read in the wider context of the classic literary bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel.

## • discussion and writing

1. At the beginning of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, the narrator reveals her identity as an eighty-year-old woman. (p. 3) How does the narrator's age impact your appreciation of the story that follows? What are some narrative advantages the author might have sought in relating her novel from the perspective of a character who is near the end of her life? In the course of reading the novel, to what extent did you remember that the voice of the narrator was one of an elderly woman?
2. In the chapter, "Footbinding," why do the diviner and Madame Wang make Lily feel "visible" for the first time in her life, and what does this newfound visibility suggest about Lily's dynamic with her parents? (p. 17) How does Lily's selection as a prospective *laotong* alter her status in the family?
3. How does the footbinding ritual that Snow Flower, Third Sister, and Beautiful Moon undergo serve as a metaphor for the nature of "mother love," as depicted in the novel? (p. 25) What explains the Chinese cultural associations of bound foot size and marriageability? In what regards does Lily's mother's behavior toward her daughters and niece suggest her own ambivalence about the foot-binding ritual?
4. In the chapter, "The Fan," how do the initial messages that Lily and Snow Flower send each other on the silk fan hint at the status of their families within their respective communities? (p. 35) To what extent does Madame Wang perpetuate a lie about Snow Flower by implying Lily's sense of unworthiness for her "old same"? What accounts for Madame Wang's behavior?
5. How are the intimacies that Lily and Snow Flower share during the Catching Cool Breezes festival conveyed through their exchanges in *nu shu*? (pp. 84-87) What role does language play more generally in the intensity of their connection? When Lily writes much later of Snow Flower, "I had a greater and deeper love for her than I could ever feel for the person who was my husband," (p. 119) how do you interpret the nature of that love in the context of this emotionally charged adolescent encounter?
6. In the chapter, "Truth," what does Lily's visit to Snow Flower's home in Tongkou after ten years of being bound to one another as "old sames" reveal? (p. 117) How does Lily feel about being deceived for so long, whom does she blame for this deception, and why? How does this scene set the stage for what happens between Lily and Snow Flower later in the novel?

## • discussion and writing (continued)

7. How does *nu shu*, the language of women, differ from *nan shu*, the language used by men? Why did men of this era deem *nu shu* insignificant, when women used it as their primary form of written communication? Why might two forms of language have evolved in this region, and what does this development suggest about gender relations in China during this era?
8. In the chapter, “Joy and Sorrow,” how do the births of their daughters affect Lily and Snow Flower? (p. 169) What do their children, Jade and Spring Moon, have in common? What does their determination to bind their daughters together as one another’s *laotong* reveal about their respect for cultural taboos, and what does it suggest about their characters?
9. How do severe drought and crop failure impact the Lu family? What motivates Lily’s husband to travel to Guilin, in the next province, to buy salt, and what do Lily’s misgivings about his departure reveal about her anxieties as a wife? (p. 175) To what extent do Lily’s responsibilities change when her husband is away from Tongkou?
10. How does the typhoid epidemic in Tongkou force Lily to embrace her complex filial obligations as mother, wife, and daughter-in-law? (pp. 176-182) How would you characterize the grief Lily feels about the disease’s effect on her natal family in Puwei? How does Lily’s behavior toward her children during the epidemic reveal her fatalist approach to life?
11. What do the burial rituals for Lily’s father-in-law, Master Lu, reveal about Chinese treatment of the dead? (p. 183) How significant are food and music in the observances? How do the rituals for the dead compare to the other important rites of passage described in the novel in terms of their emotion and pageantry?
12. In the chapter, “Winter,” why does Snow Flower’s husband insist on treating Lily preferentially during their sojourn on the mountain in Jintian? (p. 200) Why does Lily manipulate him in order to gain a larger portion of food? How does Lily reconcile her feelings about the nature of his profession and his brutal treatment of Snow Flower with his grief over the loss of his beloved second son?
13. How does Lily interpret Snow Flower’s final message to her on the fan? (p. 220) To what extent is she justified in her inferences? What prompts Snow Flower’s message to Lily, and how is Lily’s misunderstanding related to the phonetic structure of *nu shu*? How is this misunderstanding foreshadowed earlier in the novel?
14. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* makes use of traditional imagery throughout the novel to symbolize relationships and characters—mandarin ducks to symbolize the perfect harmony in the *laotong* relationship; imagery of birds and animals in flight to allude to Snow Flower’s true nature. How does the startling image of the loose bindings that Lily recalls during her public letter of vituperation connect with these more traditional symbols? (p. 229) What is loosening or coming undone at this moment in the novel?
15. In the chapter, “Into the Clouds,” how does Lily feel when Snow Flower’s daughter, Spring Moon, comes to her with news of Snow Flower’s illness? (p. 234) Given her long absence from her *laotong*, and the reasons for their alienation, why does she agree to come to Snow Flower’s aid? How do you characterize the behavior of Yonggang, the servant who secretly preserves Lily and Snow Flower’s fan and their other communications, despite being asked by Lily to destroy them years before?

16. Why do Lily's years of "sitting quietly" begin with the death of Snow Flower, and not the death of her husband, Dalang? (p. 247) What does her grief for her *laotong* suggest about the significance of this relationship in her life? Who do you think bears the responsibility for the collapse of their friendship, and why?
17. How does Lily seek to make amends for her letter of vituperation in her treatment of Snow Flower's descendants? What do Lily's efforts to arrange a marriage between her grandson and Snow Flower's granddaughter, Peony, reveal about her cunning? (pp. 250-251) Why does Madame Wang agree to go along with the match? Why does Madame Wang need to be in the scene?
18. Of Lily and Snow Flower, with whom do you feel more of a connection as a reader, and why? Given that *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* is narrated by Lily, to what extent can this novel relate the stories of both women equally? In what important ways would a novel narrated by Snow Flower read differently?
19. Snow Flower's sworn sister, Plum Blossom, accuses Lily of loving Snow Flower "as a man would, valuing her only for following men's rules." (p. 243) What exactly does she mean by this, and to what extent do you agree? How does her accusation relate to Lily's claim early in the novel: "I also waged something like a man's battle between my true nature and the person I should have been." (p. 5) How do the competing themes of masculinity and femininity collide in Lily's life?
20. How does the closing appeal of the book, in which Lily begs Snow Flower to hear her words and forgive her, alter your appreciation of the aims of the novel as a whole? (p. 253) To what extent might *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* be seen in its entirety as an extended apology from one friend to another?

## • suggested activities

1. The silk fan that Lily and Snow Flower exchange over the course of their *laotong* relationship contains notes written in *nu shu*, a phonetic language largely unknown to men. Have your students prepare essays that explore the importance of secrecy to rural women in 19th century China. Students will want to consider the significance of upstairs women's chambers, the tradition of footbinding, the meaning of *nu shu* in female society, and what these layers of concealment suggest about the dynamic between men and women in this social milieu.
2. Ask your students to consider the traditional Yao customs associated with arranged marriage, as depicted in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. Students should examine all aspects of arranged marriage and analyze their implications for the Chinese family. Their essays should include interpretation of the roles played by engagement, bride price, dowry, exchange of gifts between families, integral ritual elements of the ceremony and nuptial festivities, filial piety, *sanzhaoshu*, and *buluofujia*.
3. Students should already be familiar with the two Confucian ideals that Lily says "ruled our lives": the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues (p. 24). Ask them to apply these Confucian ideals in interpreting Lily and Snow Flower's behavior toward one another and their natal families over the course of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. Their essays should address the extent to which Lily and Snow Flower adhere to these Confucian beliefs, and also what their deviations from these moral values reveal about their respective characters.

## • vocabulary

Some Chinese words and phrases used throughout *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* include:

- *Baba*, an affectionate term for one's father
- *buluofujia*, the customary physical separation of newly married couples until the wife gives birth to her first child
- *cash*, an ancient type of coin used in China
- *congee*, a traditional Asian breakfast food consisting of rice porridge
- *feng shui*, an ancient Chinese system of aesthetics grounded in astronomy that strives to pair human-built environments with locations that have perfect *qi*, or energy—literally “wind and water”
- *laotong*, literally “old same,” a friendship between two girls from different villages arranged according to the unique details of their dates of birth, birth order, and family backgrounds, meant to last their entire lives
- *nu shu*, a secret phonetic language used by women in the Jiangyong County of Hunan Province in rural southern China
- *sanzhaoshu*, literally “third-day wedding book,” a gift of letters presented to the bride by her female friends on the third day of her wedding ceremonies
- *teng ai*, mother love
- *yang*, from Confucian Chinese philosophy—symbolic of all that is high, male, light; usually paired with *yin*
- *yin*, from Confucian Chinese philosophy—symbolic of all that is low, dark, female; usually paired with *yang*

## • beyond the book

### 1. Taiping Rebellion

Though it does not play an essential role in the early part of Lily and Snow Flower's relationship as each other's *laotong*, the Taiping Rebellion dramatically impacts them as adults, as they endure terrible hardships together brought on directly by the conflict. Ask your students to research the history of the rebellion in order to better understand the social forces at work in China at this time. In the course of their research, students should find out more about Hong Xiuquan, the leader of the Taiping rebel army, as well as his concept of the Heavenly Kingdom and the central aims of his sociopolitical movement. Why do Snow Flower and Lily get stranded in Jintian between the Imperial troops and the Taiping rebels? How does their predicament reflect the incredible losses sustained by millions of Chinese during this civil revolt?

### 2. Typhoid

Shortly after her husband's departure to seek his fortunes in salt in Guilin, Lily struggles with her children and her husband's family to survive the local typhoid epidemic that engulfs Tongkou. Ask your students to read more about the disease, its causes, and its impact on populations in other parts of the world during the 19th century. How does Lily's approach to keeping her family safe reflect her own instinctive sense of scrupulous hygiene? To what extent does she endanger her family by ministering to the needs of her mother- and father-in-law?

### 3. Opium

Snow Flower's father's addiction to opium leads to the ruin of his family, and the collapse of Snow Flower's hopes of making a good marriage match. Have your students research the history of opium use and distribution in China, paying attention both to the recreational use of the drug, its social effects, and the manner in which opium became a major source of international trade for the Chinese. Given the widespread recreational use of opium, why is Snow Flower's father's condition such a source of profound shame to his family? Students will want to examine the historical underpinnings of the two Opium Wars in 1840 and 1858, and consider how global regulation of the drug affected Chinese culture in the 19th and 20th centuries.

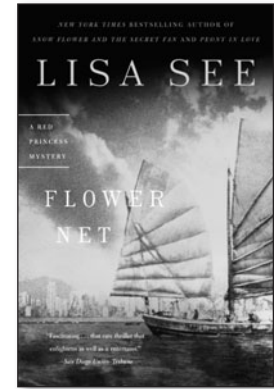
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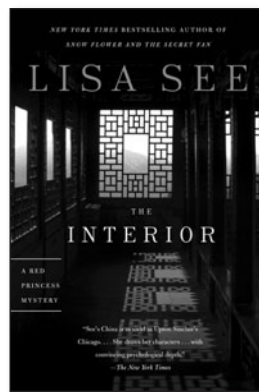
*On Gold Mountain* (1996)



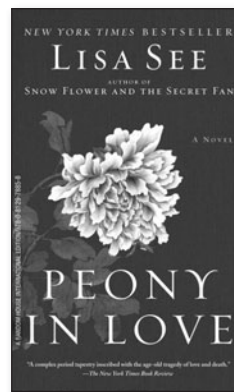
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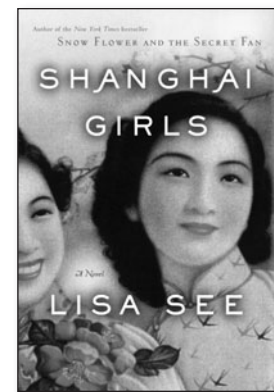
*Flower Net* (2007)



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• other works of interest

*Barbarians*, Robert Carter

*Love in a Fallen City*, Eileen Chang

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*Nu-Shu: A Hidden Language of Women in China* (documentary), Yue-qing Yang

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*Pavilion of Women*, Pearl S. Buck

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*The Hundred Secret Senses*, Amy Tan

• about this guide's writer

This guide was prepared by JULIE COOPER, a writer from Bainbridge Island, Washington. A graduate of Harvard University, Oxford University, and the University of Washington, Julie has taught beginning and advanced fiction writing at the University of Washington, and works as a freelance writer of educational materials and reading group guides for several major publishers.

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